



Code Name: Ghost

Author: *Delta James*

Category: Romance, Adult, Crime And Mafia, Thriller, Suspense

Description: I thought my divorce would set me free. Instead, it put a target on my back.

My ex-husband, a high-level administrator with Interpol, is tangled in a dangerous web of arms deals and criminal alliances. When I uncover his secret, I become a liability—and hunted. Desperate and out of options, I make one last call for help to Cerberus, and land in the arms of the man I thought died a decade ago.

Nick Ryeland. Ghost. The one man I never stopped loving.

He's not the soldier I remember. He's darker now, both in secrets and desires, with scars that run deep and a protective streak that borders on possessive. Nick is part of Cerberus, a private security firm with ties to a discreet lifestyle club where trust, control, and connection are everything. It's there, hidden behind locked doors and luxury, that I'm told I'll be safe.

But danger is never far behind and neither is the heat between us. As we run from the enemies closing in, every moment together unearths feelings I tried to bury. Nick says he'll protect me. That I belong to him.

I want to believe him.

I just hope trusting him won't get us both killed.

Welcome to Club Opus Noir. Where shadows conceal secrets, passion blurs the lines of control, and love can be the most dangerous risk of all. Dive into this pulse-pounding romantic suspense series featuring elite Cerberus operatives, high-stakes missions, and unforgettable second chances.

Total Pages (Source): 77

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:40 am

1

NICK

Pirate Encampment

Horn of Africa

Ten Years Ago

The chains bite into my wrists, the rusted metal cutting into raw flesh. The sting barely registers anymore, lost in the constant, agonizing ache of my body breaking down. The stench of sweat, blood, and rotting wood clogs my nose, suffocating the small, sweltering room they've kept me in for the last—what? Two days? Three? My sense of time is as fucked as the rest of me.

The pirates have been relentless. They've used fists, boots, knives, whatever they could find to get what they want out of me. Names. Intel. Weaknesses.

They haven't gotten shit.

I won't break.

The metal door screeches open, rusted hinges grinding against each other like nails on a chalkboard. The dim lantern light from the hallway spills into the room, casting long shadows. I don't look up. I don't have to.

I know their leader's footsteps by now—soft but sure, the steps of a predator who enjoys playing with his food. Abdi Warsame, one of Somalia's most ruthless warlords, steps inside, his sharp eyes raking over me.

“You look terrible, Ryeland,” he says in English, his voice thick with his Somali accent. He crouches, bringing himself to my level. “You are a dead man walking. The world already believes you are gone. Why fight this? Why not make it easy on yourself and we will end your pain?”

I laugh, the sound hoarse and bitter. “Because you're the one who's already lost.”

Warsame chuckles like we're old friends. “You are very brave, my friend. But you and I both know that bravery dies quickly in a place like this.” He reaches into the folds of his robe and pulls out a knife, the serrated edge glinting in the low light. “Perhaps I carve the truth from you instead.”

I meet his eyes, my gaze steady. “Do your worst.”

His expression doesn't change, but the shift in the air is immediate. The guards tense, anticipating violence. Warsame leans in close, so close I can smell the tobacco on his breath.

“The only reason you are still breathing is because I find you amusing,” he murmurs. “That ends today.”

He straightens, nodding to the two men flanking him. One of them moves forward, a thick wooden baton gripped in his hands.

I brace myself.

The first strike lands across my ribs, sending a white-hot explosion of pain through

my side. I don't make a sound. The second follows, slamming into my thigh. The third cracks against my shoulder.

I grit my teeth, sucking in short, shallow breaths.

Warsame watches, waiting for me to fold. When I don't, he sighs and turns toward the door. "Break him."

Then he's gone.

The guards waste no time, pulling me to my feet.

A fist crashes into my jaw, snapping my head to the side. Another blow slams into my stomach, forcing the air from my lungs. My vision swims, pain radiating through every nerve ending. I don't resist—I let my body go limp, let them think I'm fading.

It's exactly what I need them to believe.

I count their steps, track their positions, and wait for the right moment.

Then I move.

I twist hard, ignoring the fire in my muscles, and wrap the chain of my restraints around the throat of the closest guard. He chokes, his hands flying up in panic, but I pull tighter, using what little leverage I have. His body convulses, jerking as he struggles, but his strength drains fast.

The second guard shouts, scrambling for his weapon.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

Too late.

I use the dying man's momentum to launch myself forward. My elbow connects with the second guard's throat in a brutal, crushing blow. He staggers, gasping for air.

I don't give him the chance to recover.

With a savage pull, I yank his knife from his belt and drive it into his gut. He lets out a gurgled cry before collapsing, blood pooling beneath him.

I don't stop.

The first man goes still in my grip. I release him, letting his body slump forward. My hands shake from exhaustion, but I don't have time to feel it. I yank the dead man's keys from his belt and unlock my shackles—the metal clattering to the floor.

I'm free.

My legs protest as I stand, weak from days of captivity, but I push forward. I strip one of the bodies of his rifle, check the ammo. Good enough.

I step over the corpses and move toward the door.

The hallway is dimly lit, shadows stretching long against the walls. I know this compound. I memorized its layout the moment they dragged me in here. I need to reach the northern exit—there's a supply shed there, a place to regroup, to plan my next move.

My team is gone—every last one of them slaughtered in an ambush we never saw coming.

I should be dead, too. I will make them pay.

I slip through the corridors, silent as death. There are voices ahead, laughter, the indistinct murmur of men who don't know they're about to die—all of them.

I move fast, bringing the rifle up and firing in quick succession. Two go down instantly. The third reaches for his weapon—I shoot him in the kneecap, then put a bullet between his eyes before he can scream.

I keep moving.

The air thickens as I near the exit. I smell the ocean, the distant scent of gasoline. My heartbeat is steady, my hands sure.

Almost there.

I press against the last door, listening. Nothing. I push it open, stepping out into the humid night. The compound's outer wall looms ahead. Just a few more steps and I'll be outside—one step closer to freedom.

Then I hear it. The unmistakable click of a safety being switched off.

I freeze and turn around slowly. Three red laser dots paint my chest.

Fuck.

I lift my head slowly, meeting the eyes of the men waiting for me. They're not pirates—at least they're not dressed in the ragtag way of most of Warsame's men.

They're dressed in all black—no insignia, no markings. Just shadows wrapped in Kevlar. One man steps forward, his face obscured by night vision goggles and the balaclava he is wearing.

“Nick Ryeland,” he says, his voice smooth, with a heavy French accent I can't quite place. “Your pathetic attempt to escape has failed. Although I suppose technically you escaped those idiot pirates. But you will not escape me. You've got two choices: put the gun down and come willingly, or we'll drag your sorry ass back for further questioning.”

I scan the area, calculating. I'm outnumbered. Outgunned. There's no way I can escape this time, but if I submit, perhaps there will be another chance. Slowly, I lower my rifle. The lead operative gestures to his men. They move in, weapons raised, closing the distance. I'm ready to do whatever I have to do in order to survive without betraying my country, but then something slams into the back of my skull and pain detonates behind my eyes. The world tilts, and everything goes black.

The metallic tang of blood fills my mouth, sharp and unrelenting. My head throbs with every pulse of my heartbeat, a dull, persistent reminder that I'm still alive—though not for much longer.

The ropes binding my wrists cut into my skin, slick with sweat and blood. My swollen left eye is shut, my ribs protest with each breath, and I feel the deep gash on my thigh seep warmth down my leg. One man in Kevlar stands in front of me gripping a jagged knife, playing with me like a toy.

“You are stubborn,” he says in his French accent, his voice filled with amusement.

I don't answer. My throat is raw from screaming, from the hours of beatings, from the dehydration clawing at me like a living thing.

But I don't beg. I never will.

He steps closer, pressing the flat of the blade against my cheek, dragging it down slowly until it rests at my throat. "Your team is dead. Your country has forgotten you. No one is coming."

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

He's wrong.

I grit my teeth, keeping my expression unreadable, though the pain lancing through my body is enough to drive most men insane. But they trained me for this. SEAL training didn't just prepare me for combat—it prepared me to die with dignity.

And yet, when I let my mind drift for even a second, it doesn't go to my fallen teammates, or the mission gone to hell.

It goes to her.

Cherise.

I close my eyes, inhaling the scent of salt air that isn't there. My mind conjures up the memory as if it were yesterday—the warmth of the California sun, the way the waves rocked the sailboat, and how fucking beautiful she looked under the setting sun.

She was laughing, her green eyes bright with mischief as she leaned over the rail, letting the wind whip through her dark hair.

“Nick Ryeland, are you drunk?” she had teased, watching as I fumbled with the small velvet box in my pocket.

“Not yet.” My voice had been steady, but my pulse had raced with something foreign, something terrifying and exhilarating all at once. “But I might be in a few minutes, depending on how this goes.”

Her smile faltered slightly, realization creeping into her expression. “What are you...”

I’d dropped to one knee right there on the deck, the movement making the boat sway slightly. Her breath hitched as she looked down at me, her hands trembling at her sides.

“You drive me insane,” I had admitted, my lips tugging at the corner in a way I knew made her crazy. “You argue with me about everything. You hate when I take control. And you have this frustrating habit of always being right.”

She had laughed, but there were tears in her eyes.

I’d flipped open the small box, revealing the diamond ring I’d spent months agonizing over. “But I love you, and I don’t want to spend another second of my life without knowing you’re mine. Marry me, Cherise.”

She had stared at me, completely still, the ocean air whipping around us as if time itself had stopped.

Then, without warning, she had launched herself at me, sending us both sprawling onto the deck.

“Yes,” she had whispered, her lips pressing against mine. “Yes, you overbearing, insufferable man. I’ll marry you.”

I had slid the ring onto her finger, watching as it caught the last rays of the dying sun, and thought—for the first time in my life—that I had everything I could ever want.

But I never made it down the aisle. Now, trapped in this godforsaken hellhole, I realize I never will.

He drags the blade up, pressing just enough to let me feel the sharp bite of steel. “Tell me what I want to know, and I will make your death quick.”

I chuckle, a rough, broken sound. “I’d rather you work for it.”

His eyes darken, his grip tightening. I brace myself for the pain, for the last cut that will end this, but then... the world explodes.

Gunfire erupts from the jungle outside, rapid and merciless. The crack of automatic weapons cuts through the humid air, followed by the distant roar of an engine—a chopper.

The man's head jerks up, his expression flickering with panic. Another burst of gunfire rips through the night, and then the whole goddamn roof shakes as a deafening blast detonates just outside.

I don’t hesitate.

With the last reserve of strength I have left, I lurch forward, catching the man off guard. My legs are weak, my body screaming in protest, but I grit through it. I twist my hands, ignoring the pain as the rope slices into my skin, and hook my boot around his ankle.

He stumbles, and in that half-second, I strike.

I slam my bound hands against his throat, crushing his windpipe with the sheer force of my body weight. He gurgles, his knife clattering to the ground as he claws at his throat. I kick him hard in the ribs, sending him sprawling, and snatch the blade from the dirt.

Even though my hands are still tied, it doesn’t matter.

I drive the knife into his neck.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

The blood spurts, hot and fast, and I don't stop until the fight leaves his body.

Panting, I wrench the blade free and use it to saw through the ropes at my wrists. The second I'm loose, I grab the rifle from the cooling body and turn toward the door.

I make it two steps before the night explodes again.

A chopper sweeps in low, its rotors kicking up dirt and debris as it hovers just beyond the compound's walls. The men outside scream in confusion, their weapons useless against the sheer force of the assault.

And then two figures drop from the bird, moving with lethal precision.

Robert Fitzwallace. Sawyer Barnes. Cerberus.

The first shot takes out the sentry at the main gate, his body crumpling before he even registers what's happening. The second figure—Sawyer—moves like a ghost, cutting through the remaining hostiles with calculated efficiency.

I stagger forward, my vision blurring, my body fighting to stay upright.

Sawyer's gaze locks onto mine, his expression unreadable beneath the night-vision goggles. "Jesus Christ, Ryeland."

"Thought you were dead," Fitzwallace adds in his Scottish brogue, stepping over a corpse as he slings his rifle across his chest.

I let out a ragged breath. “So did I.”

Sawyer extends a hand, his grip firm as he hauls me to my feet. “We’re getting you out of here.”

More gunfire erupts behind us, but the chopper is already lowering, its side door open, waiting.

“Move!” Fitzwallace orders.

I don’t have to be told twice.

We sprint for the chopper—well, they sprint, kind of dragging me between them—the gunfire turning to distant echoes as I haul myself inside. The second we hit the metal floor, the pilot lifts off; the jungle disappearing beneath us.

I lean back, breathing hard, my vision swimming.

Cherise.

Her name is the last thing I think before the darkness takes me.

2

NICK

The steady beep of a heart monitor is the first thing I hear when I claw my way out of unconsciousness.

The second is the distinct scent of antiseptic and something richer—aged whiskey and fresh-cut tobacco. A mix I’d recognize anywhere.

I pry my eyes open, blinking against the soft glow of a lamp illuminating a room far more luxurious than anywhere I have a right to be. I know before I even sit up that I'm in England, tucked away in the private estate of Lord Nigel Pedersen, a man who deals in power like other men deal in currency.

I shift, and pain lances through my ribs, a reminder that I'm not out of the woods. I ache in ways I cannot describe—my captivity has permanently scarred my skin and soul. I'm alive, but I shouldn't be.

The heavy wooden door swings open, and I don't have to turn to know who it is. Robert Fitzwallace—Fitz—walks in, dressed in a pressed button-down and slacks, the picture of calm authority. He's holding two tumblers of whiskey, offering one to me before taking a seat in the leather armchair beside my bed.

"You look like hell," he says, taking a slow sip.

I snort, pushing myself up against the headboard with a wince. "Feel like it too."

He studies me for a moment, his gaze sharp, assessing. "You shouldn't be alive."

"Tell me something I don't know."

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

The silence between us stretches, thick with unspoken words. I know what's coming before he even opens his mouth.

"I want you in Cerberus," Fitz finally says, setting his glass down. "We're going after the bastards who killed your team."

My fingers tighten around the glass in my hand. The rage is there, buried beneath layers of exhaustion and grief, but it's still burning, still waiting. "And if I say no?"

Fitz leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "Then you go back to whatever's left of your life. Except there isn't one, is there?"

My stomach knots. I already know where he's going with this.

"Cherise," I say, the name scraping against my throat.

Fitz nods. "If you think she's safer with you than without you, you're more of a fool than I thought." His voice is even, but there's steel behind it. "The second the wrong people find out you're still alive, she becomes leverage. Or collateral damage."

My grip tightens, my knuckles going white. I'd planned to go back to her. I'd clung to that thought when I was bound and bleeding in that pirate camp. She was my anchor, my only reason to keep breathing. But Fitz is right.

"She thinks I'm gone, doesn't she" I ask, the words tasting like acid.

Fitz nods. "She's safer that way."

It's a gut punch, the kind that has nothing to do with physical pain. But I force myself to push past it, to think like the operative they trained me to be.

"Cerberus," I say instead, steering the conversation away from the thing I can't afford to dwell on. "You really think you can take them down?"

Fitz smiles, but it's not an expression of amusement. It's the type of smile a predator gives right before it strikes. "We don't think. We know. It may take time to get them all, but we will."

I weigh my options. I can go back to the Navy, get debriefed, and fight my way through all kinds of bureaucratic bullshit before I can even think about revenge. Or I can get Fitzwallace to use his influence, get me mustered out, join Cerberus, go off-book, and take justice into my own hands.

It's not a choice.

I exhale slowly. "Can you work some kind of magic with the Navy?"

Fitz nods. "It's already done. You'll need to send them a report, but I've cleared it with the powers that be. They will quietly muster you out with an honorable discharge. It'll be buried deep and classified."

I let out a humorless laugh. "I didn't think you had that much pull."

Fitz's eyes sparkle with merriment. "You'd be surprised."

I drain the rest of my whiskey, setting the glass aside. "When do we start?"

He grins, the expression sharp and ruthless. "As soon as you're ready."

I glance down at my healing wounds, the bruises that haven't yet faded—a reminder of what was taken from me.

“I'm ready.”

* * *

The debriefing is a formality, a check-the-box exercise to ensure I'm still loyal to the flag before they let me go. They ask questions they already know the answers to, and I give them the answers they're looking for—just enough to satisfy their curiosity without painting a full picture.

Yes, I was the only survivor of my unit. Yes, I was taken prisoner. No, I didn't break.

The rest, the things I left out—the way I'd carved my way through that camp, the bodies I'd left behind, the raw, unrelenting drive to see them burn—those were for me.

The paperwork is signed—my discharge finalized. Just like that, Lieutenant Commander Nick Ryeland is no more.

Cerberus doesn't do ceremony. There's no swearing-in, no pomp and circumstance. Fitz and Sawyer meet me outside the Pentagon, a black SUV idling at the curb.

Fitz hesitates, laying his hand on my arm. “Do you want to see her one more time? She's here in town for a conference.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

I think about it for a moment. “No. That part of my life needs to be dead to me. Best I just keep moving forward.”

Sawyer leans against the passenger door, arms crossed, his ever-present scowl in place. “I’m not sure that’s the best move, but it’s your call.”

“Yeah, it is.” I slide into the backseat, stretching out my sore muscles as Fitz gets behind the wheel. “What’s the next move?”

Sawyer glances back at me. “We hunt.”

The car pulls away from the curb, and we head to a private landing strip and board a private jet. As we take off, I watch the ground drop away, leaving my old life behind. I should feel something—relief, closure, maybe even purpose. But all I feel is the cold, steady pulse of resolve.

They took everything from me. Now, I’m going to take everything from them. But no matter how much I tell myself I made the right choice; there’s one thought I can’t shake.

Cherise.

I see her in my mind’s eye—her green eyes filled with fire, her body curled against mine in the dead of night, the way she whispered my name like it was the only thing in the world that mattered.

She thinks I’m dead.

And maybe, for her sake, I need to stay that way. Because if I ever saw her again, if I let myself touch her, claim her the way I once had, I wouldn't be able to let go.

And right now, I have a war to fight—one I don't plan on losing.

* * *

CHERISE

San Diego, California

Ten Years Ago

The knock at the door hits me like a bullet—hard, direct, already fatal before I even open it.

Two men in uniform stand on my porch. Their faces are blank, practiced. Their backs too straight, their hands too still. I already know.

“Ma’am, may we come in?”

I don't want to let them. I don't want the words. I don't want the world they're about to deliver—the one where he's gone.

“We regret to inform you that Lieutenant Commander Nicolas Ryeland was killed in action...”

Everything after that fractures. My breath. My heartbeat. The air. The sky. The floor beneath my feet. It all shatters, and I fall straight through.

* * *

Lyon, France

Eight Years Ago

The rain starts just as I step off the curb, a soft, insistent drizzle that coats the cobblestones in slick silver. I curse under my breath and fumble with my umbrella, which, of course, decides now is the perfect moment to snap.

"Allow me."

The voice is smooth. Polished. French, with just enough gravel to make it interesting. A large black umbrella appears over my head, and I glance up—heels pausing mid-step.

He's taller than me. Impeccably dressed. Expensive suit. The sort of confident smile that says he's used to being listened to. And those eyes—dark, unreadable, but searching me like he already knows the answers.

"Thank you," I manage, shifting my tote higher on my shoulder. "Seems Lyon weather hates me."

"On the contrary," he says, falling into step beside me. "I'd say the weather's just done me a favor."

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

I laugh, surprised by how easy it is. "Do lines like that usually work?"

He tilts his head, amused. "Only when they're true."

We walk in silence for a moment, just long enough for the air to thicken with something... heavier. His presence is magnetic, a little too poised. A little too smooth. But I have always been drawn to dangerous things dressed in velvet.

"Do you live in Lyon?" I ask.

"I do. I work with Interpol." He pauses. "What about you? Student? Artist? Or just someone who hasn't figured out yet that this city is more bite than beauty?"

"Maybe a bit of all three."

He chuckles. "I like that."

We stop at the corner; the light blinking red. He doesn't move away. He just waits, umbrella still shielding me, gaze still anchored on mine.

"I'm Hector," he says, holding out his free hand.

"Cherise."

"Lovely name for a lovely mystery." He takes my fingers in his—warm, firm, deliberate. "I hope this won't be the last time we meet."

I smile, a little caught off guard by the pull I feel. By how easy it is to believe him.

Looking back, I wonder if that was the moment I should've turned away.

But I didn't.

* * *

Paris, France

Two Years Ago

The Parisian night drapes itself in velvet, the city's golden lights shimmering off the Seine as I step onto the red carpet leading into the grand gala. The event is being hosted in the Palais Garnier, its ornate façade towering over us, a testament to its history of luxury and power. I should be awed, but instead, I feel like I can't breathe.

The diamonds circling my neck feel like a noose and the dress like a second skin that I can't wait to shed. Hector's hand is a vice around my arm, his grip firm but deceptively light—his grip promises consequences if I step out of line. That bureaucratic smile—the one that convinces people he's charming instead of a man who collects secrets like currency—is curved on his lips.

"Cherise, behave," he murmurs, leaning in just enough for his breath to tickle my skin. "I expect you to be gracious. Tonight isn't about you."

Of course not. It never is.

I swallow back the nausea that rises, plastering on a neutral expression as we step into the marble-lined foyer. The air hums with conversation, champagne glasses clinking, laughter bubbling over the soft strains of a classical quartet. It's a room full of

power—diplomats, dignitaries, old money, and newer, dirtier fortunes draped in designer couture.

The gala is a celebration of Jordan James-Fitzwallace, known simply as JJ, and her relentless efforts to combat human trafficking. The woman is a legend, a one-woman guardian angel rescuing women from the darkest corners of the world—the ones governments conveniently forget, the ones taken by men who see them as nothing more than a commodity to be traded, sold and used in any way they see fit.

I should admire her, but all I feel is resentment curling in my stomach. No one saved me—not because they didn't care, but because no one knew I needed saving. I'd gotten too good at pretending. I wore the illusion like armor, and no one ever saw the cracks.

No one even sees me as someone who needs saving.

Hector tightens his hold as he leans toward a group of men dressed in sleek black tuxedos, their uninhibited laughter a stark contrast to the tension gripping my spine. He releases me long enough to shake hands, his voice dropping into polished French as he begins networking. I take a deep breath, silently counting down the hours until I can escape.

That's when they catch my eye.

A cluster of men in Navy dress uniforms, their crisp white jackets standing out in the sea of dark suits. Their presence shouldn't unnerve me. They're just men, here like everyone else. But my vision tunnels, and suddenly I'm somewhere else—another time, another place with men in white uniforms shattering my world.

Back in the present, the memory slams into me like a fist to my gut. I wrap my arms around myself, struggling to shake it off. Nick is gone. No amount of staring at those

uniforms will change that.

I turn sharply, desperate for air, and collide with a woman.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

“Whoa,” she says, steadying me before I can stumble. “Breathe, sweetheart. You look like you just saw a ghost.”

I blink up at her. Jordan James-Fitzwallace.

She’s stunning—poised and confident, her eyes sharp with intelligence. She’s in an emerald-green evening gown, but there’s nothing delicate about her. The way she carries herself, the way her gaze sweeps the room, tells me she’s used to being in control.

“I—sorry,” I murmur. “I wasn’t looking where I was going.”

JJ studies me, and I know instantly that she sees too much.

“You don’t want to be here, do you?” she asks, voice pitched low enough that no one else can hear.

I don’t answer. I don’t have to.

She glances toward the group of men Hector is talking to, her gaze flicking back to me with a new kind of scrutiny. “Is it safe for you?”

The question knocks the air from my lungs.

“What?”

“Are. You. Safe?” JJ enunciates each word, her eyes locking onto mine.

I open my mouth to say yes. To tell her Hector isn't like that. That he's important, that I have no reason to be afraid, but I don't. Because Hector isn't safe, and I don't know why, but JJ already sees it.

She gives a quiet sigh of understanding. "Not all abused women are taken by terrorists."

The words dig under my skin, hitting raw nerves I've spent years burying. She isn't just talking about the women she and her husband's organization, Cerberus, rescue. She's talking about me.

Before I can think of a response, she pulls a sleek black card from her clutch and presses it into my hand.

"My personal number," she says. "If you ever need help, call me."

I stare at the card, my pulse hammering against my ribs. "Why are you doing this?"

JJ's expression softens, but there's steel beneath it. "Because I've seen your face before, sweetheart. On too many women. If you ever decide you want out, I'll make sure you get the help you'll need."

I swallow, forcing myself to meet her gaze. "I don't need saving."

Her lips twitch slightly. "Don't you? Besides, it never hurts to have a backup plan."

Hector's voice cuts through the air like a knife. "Cherise."

I stiffen as he strides toward me, his easy charm laced with warning. His gaze flicks to JJ, sharp and assessing. "I see you've met my wife."

JJ doesn't flinch. "We were just chatting."

Hector slides an arm around my waist, his grip too tight, his fingers digging into my ribs. "Cherise, come," he says smoothly. "We have important people to speak with."

I nod, not trusting myself to speak, and allow him to steer me away. But as we move through the crowd, I can feel JJ's eyes on me. Watching. Calculating.

Hector leans down, his breath warm against my ear. "I hope you weren't embarrassing yourself."

I force a smile. "Of course not."

"Good." He brushes his lips against my temple—a show for the crowd, nothing more. "You know how much I hate being disappointed."

I nod, knowing all too well. I slip the card into my clutch, my fingers shaking.

Because for the first time in years, someone saw me. They saw the truth. And that terrifies me more than anything.

3

CHERISE

Paris, France

Present Day

I press my back against the headboard of the hotel bed, gripping my cell phone like it's the last solid thing in my world. My pulse beats erratically, a hammer against my ribs, refusing to settle. It's only been a few days, but I'm on the run with no way to get out of France. All I have is a small bag with a few clothes, my French and American passports, the file and flash drive I removed from Hector's safe, and all the cash I could put my hands on. If I use a credit card or my passport, he'll find me—that's part of his job—tracking people. I'm not safe. Not even close.

The faint hum of traffic in the 20th arrondissement of Paris filters through the cracked window, muted and distant—like a world I used to belong to but now watch from behind a pane of glass. It feels surreal, like I've slipped into a different life, a cruel joke where every step I take leads me deeper into a nightmare.

I close my eyes, but the memory crashes in like a tsunami.

Lyon felt colder that evening, the damp air pressing against my skin as I unlocked the door to the house I once called home. The scent of Hector's cologne was subtle but suffocating—woven into the very walls. He never changed it. A testament to his arrogance, his obsession with control.

I moved fast, barely breathing, as I made my way to his study. The mahogany desk gleamed under the dim glow of the streetlights filtering through the windows. I knew exactly where he kept the safe, hidden behind the bookshelf, cleverly concealed beneath a false panel. Hector was meticulous, but not infallible.

I crouched, pressing my fingers against the tiny indentation at the edge of the shelf, feeling for the release latch. A soft click sounded as the panel shifted. The safe was old, a model I had memorized the combination of years ago. My fingers moved on instinct, spinning the dial. Four numbers later, the lock released.

Inside, several stacks of cash, as well as my U.S. and French passports, sat atop a stack of documents. I grabbed some of the cash and both of the passports, about to close the safe, when a name on one of the files made my pulse stutter.

René Vallois, the notorious arms dealer. I'd become obsessed with the man. For someone who was supposed to live and work in the shadows, he seemed perfectly comfortable living in the light.

Fear and nausea coiled in my belly. I shouldn't look. I shouldn't look. But my hands betrayed me, reaching for the file, flipping it open.

At first, it was nothing more than financial records—wire transfers, offshore accounts. Then, photos. Blurry surveillance images of men exchanging crates and armed guards stationed at a private airstrip. Notes scribbled in Hector's precise handwriting.

And then, the actual proof.

A signed agreement between Hector and René Vallois, detailing arms shipments disguised as Interpol asset seizures and attached to it a flash drive. Hector wasn't just laundering money—he was supplying high-powered weaponry to one of the most

dangerous arms dealers in Europe.

My breath left me in a silent gasp.

I had been married to this man. Slept beside him. Trusted him... and he was a traitor.

The sound of footsteps behind me turned my blood to ice.

"You shouldn't be here, Mrs. Pardo."

I spun, my heart slamming against my ribs.

A man stood in the doorway. Not Hector. But someone just as dangerous... one of Hector's men.

He was tall, dark-haired, wearing an expensive suit that did nothing to soften the menace rolling off him. His eyes flicked to the open safe, then back to me.

"Put the file back," he ordered, his tone smooth. Controlled.

I forced my voice to stay even. "I know who you are, and you need to move out of my way."

He chuckled, the sound low and knowing. "That's not how this works. René doesn't like when people go poking around where they don't belong. And Hector? He won't be pleased to know his ex-wife has been playing detective."

René. His name wrapped around my throat like an invisible chokehold, squeezing the air from my lungs. I've read too many articles about him. Seen too many news stories on his dealings around the world.

I took a step back, angling my body toward the desk. He saw it, his gaze sharpening.

"Don't make this difficult, Cherise."

The way he said my name sent a shiver down my spine. He wasn't bluffing. If I didn't leave here now, I wouldn't leave at all.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

Holding onto the file and the flash drive, I moved fast, reaching for the heavy paperweight on the desk and hurling it at his face. He dodged, but it gave me the opening I needed. I sprinted past him, my heels slamming against the hardwood.

He caught my wrist, yanking me back hard. I gasped, twisting, my knee connecting sharply into his groin. He let out a strangled curse, his grip loosening just enough.

I didn't hesitate.

Grabbing the nearest lamp, I swung it straight into his head. The crash of ceramic exploding filled the air, and he crumpled to the floor.

I ran.

Down the hallway, out the front door, lungs burning as I tore through the streets. I didn't stop, didn't look back, disappearing into the night.

I knew what Hector was capable of. Knew that if his men caught me, I would just disappear. I'd never even make it to the headlines. No one looks for someone who no one knows is missing. I had no choice.

I should never have stepped foot back in that house. I knew better. But I went anyway, convinced I could slip in, grab my passports and some cash, and leave without incident. That was the plan—quick, clean, no complications. But life doesn't give a damn about plans.

The peeling walls of this hotel room feel smaller by the second, like they're closing

in, suffocating me under the weight of my own choices. Or maybe it's fear. The kind that grips tight, relentless, refusing to let go.

A few days. That's how long I've been running. A few days of an anonymous hotel—always looking over my shoulder—changing my name, my hair, everything, just to stay ahead of the men who want me dead.

But deep down, I know I can't outrun them forever. I know I need help, but I have no way of getting out of France without Hector finding me.

I stare at my phone; the screen blurred from the contact of my fingertips. There's only one person left who might be able to help me. Someone I met a while back at a party. Someone who recognized the look of a woman who was in a desperate situation but had no idea how to get out of it.

Jordan James-Fitzwallace, or as she likes to be called, JJ. The name alone sends a pulse of something sharp and electric through me. It's funny, but I've kept her card with me—protected and hidden. Instinct, I guess. Some part of me knew I'd use it someday. That day is now.

I take a steadying breath, dial her number on the card she'd slipped me that night at the gala, and press the call button. It rings. Once. Twice.

"JJ," a woman answers.

"Hi. It's Cherise Pardo. I need your help." I say. My voice is small and unsure.

"Finally! I was wondering when this day would come. Let me put my husband on."

"No, JJ. I'd rather deal with you."

“Okay. I can understand that, but we’re going to need Cerberus’ help. Are you safe? The first step is to make sure your location is secure?”

“I...I think so. For now. I’m in a hotel room in Paris.”

“Where?”

“The 20th arrondissement. A cheap hotel. They didn’t ask for identification.”

JJ chuckles. “No, they wouldn’t in that section of Paris.”

“I also got a burner phone and destroyed my old phone before leaving it in Lyon. I’ve read enough romantic suspense novels to know that I needed to do at least that much.”

“That’s smart.”

The praise is a balm to my weary mind and soul.

“Fitz is saying Hector already has people looking for you,” she continues. “So, let’s change the game up and, as my friend Olivia, the sword fighter, says, put the little bastard on his back foot. Fitz is writing me notes. You’re to stay in your room—don’t leave for any reason. Don’t answer the phone. Don’t answer the door. Don’t look out the window. Do you need food or anything else?”

“No, I picked up some bread, cheese, salami, fruit and a box of auburn hair dye before I came here.”

“Good. For the next forty-eight hours, keep yourself isolated—don’t see anyone, don’t talk to anyone, don’t even open your door or your curtains. We’ll have tickets and new identification slipped under the door of your hotel. The ticket is for the train

to Monte Carlo.”

“Monte Carlo?” I ask, confused.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

“Cerberus is opening their newest satellite office there. No one knows about it. They’ve been keeping a very low profile. Do you think you can do all that?”

I’m not sure and I hesitate, saying nothing.

“Cherise. Do. You. Understand?” she asks. “If you’re not up to it...”

“Yes, I understand, and I can do this... I have no choice.”

“We can figure out something else...”

“No. I can do this.”

“Good. If you need anything, you call this number.”

The line is silent, and I wonder if she’s hung up on me.

“Cherise, are you still there?” asks JJ.

“Yeah, I’m here.” I’m now terrified that I’ve involved my new friend in my disaster of a life.

“We’re going to get you to safety. Okay? We’ve got you, I promise.” JJ tells me and I’m instantly relieved and determined to be my own savior. In the background, I hear JJ’s husband tell her to get off the phone, as it’s not safe for me to be on any phone for any length of time. “Okay, Cherise. We’ve got to hang up, but call if anything happens, okay?”

I nod, even though she can't see me. "Okay. Thank you, JJ."

"Always," she says and then the line goes dead.

Late in the afternoon the next day, someone slides a thick manila envelope under my hotel room door. When I look out through the peephole, I don't see anyone in the hallway, but I don't open the door either.

I pick up the envelope and tip the contents onto the bedspread. Inside are my new identification papers—including a passport—along with colored contact lenses, train tickets to Monte Carlo, a small key, a timeline with detailed instructions, and a photo of a logo labeled Opus Noir.

I'm instructed to place all of my belongings—save the clothes on my back—in a plastic bag to dispose of at the train station. The key is to a locker where I will find new clothing that will identify me to the Cerberus operative meeting me in Monte Carlo.

I wonder how I will recognize the operative. I smile as the answer to my question is at the bottom of the timeline. My contact will be a tall man with a muscular build and a ball cap with the Opus Noir logo. I laugh at my disappointment that we won't have some secret code phrase.

I breathe a sigh of relief. I'm in expert hands. This is really happening and for the first time in weeks, I allow a small bit of hope to settle in my stomach.

* * *

Today's the day. I rise from the bed, grabbing my bag and moving toward the bathroom mirror. My reflection stares back—haunted eyes, sharp cheekbones, hair now a deep auburn instead of its usual chestnut brown. Not the best disguise, but it'll

do. I can explain away the difference in hair color by telling anyone who asks that I wanted a change.

I reach for the contacts included in my care package, which will turn my usual green eyes into icy blue ones. A small difference, but one that might buy me a few extra seconds if I run into the wrong people and will get me through customs.

I walk out of the hotel and don't look back. I paid for my room in advance with cash when I checked in. My new identity is in place, a forged passport tucked safely in my bag, and my train ticket to Monte Carlo secured. Now, I just have to make it there alive.

The train station is a swarm of bodies, voices blending into a cacophony of languages—Italian, French, English. I keep my head down, shoulders hunched, slipping between clusters of travelers as I move toward the locker, retrieve the clothing waiting for me there, and slip into the restroom to change. Once I have on my new clothing, I walk out, disposing of my old clothing in one of the trash bins as I make my way to my platform.

I can feel the paranoia sinking in. The phantom sensation of eyes watching me. Every scrape of a shoe against tile, every flicker of movement in my peripheral vision, makes my pulse spike. I step onto the train, sliding into a seat near the back, my gaze tracking every single person who boards after me.

The businessman in the navy suit, scrolling through emails. The mother with two restless children, adjusting their coats. The older woman reading a paperback, her lips moving slightly with the words. None of them are a threat.

Then, a man steps into the car. Dark hair, expensive suit, and sunglasses. He moves with controlled ease, scanning the rows as he walks. I go rigid. My grip on my bag tightens. He keeps moving, passing by without a glance in my direction. I force

myself to breathe. Not every well-dressed man is an assassin. Not everyone is hunting me, but I can't take chances.

The train lurches forward, and I settle in, pressing my fingers against the cool metal of the window frame. I have eight hours until Monte Carlo. Eight hours to convince myself that making that call to JJ was the right thing to do. But then, what else could I have done?

By the time the train pulls into Monaco's Gare de Monte-Carlo, exhaustion has settled into my bones. The station is sleek, modern, carved into the cliffs above the glittering city. A world of wealth and excess stretching beyond the platform.

I step onto solid ground, my bag slung over my shoulder, eyes sweeping the terminal. I don't feel anyone following me and for a second; I think maybe I've won a minor victory, but then, I feel it.

A shift in the air. A presence behind me. I turn—fast, ready to run, and collide with a broad, unyielding chest. Strong hands close around my arms, steadying me. Keeping me in place. I see the ball cap, but then my breath catches when I see a ghost. I don't have time to question what is happening because my knees begin to buckle as everything fades to black.

4

NICK

Monte Carlo, Monaco

Cherise. Recognition slams into me harder than any bullet ever has. The moment she crashes into me, I react on instinct.

She's not exactly the way I remember—of course she isn't. Time's carved lines into both of us, and we've earned every single one. But it's her. God, it's her. But the eyes are wrong—she had green eyes and now they're blue—colored contacts, maybe? But the mouth is the same with its full lips that used to ruin me with a single smile. Her body's leaner now, more honed. There's strength there—coiled muscle beneath worn fabric. She's no stranger to survival anymore.

But it's the scent that unravels me. Vanilla and something warm, earthy, uniquely hers. A scent I thought I'd buried with the man I used to be. It crashes into me like memory and grief and hunger all at once.

She stiffens in my arms, then goes completely still. Limp.

Too still.

She's unconscious or close to it, and every part of me snaps to high alert. But under that, tangled beneath the instinct, is something darker.

How did it come to this? How did she end up here, mired in a world of shadow and violence?

I died for her or tried to. I let the world think I was gone to keep her safe from the life I was forced to choose, from the enemies I made. And yet here she is, wrapped in the danger I swore she'd never know.

Did she choose this, or was it thrust upon her? How did the woman I would've burned the world down to protect end up back in the fire?

Now's not the time to ask. Not the time to stare. Not the time to bleed for the choices I made.

The train station is too exposed. Too many people. Too many goddamn eyes. If Hector's men are watching, they could be closing in. I don't hesitate. Bending, I lift her, securing her against my chest, and move through the station with controlled precision. The crowd barely registers her unconscious state—this is Monte Carlo, after all, where excess and bad decisions are as common as the sea breeze.

My SUV sits parked outside in a secure lot. I lay her across the back seat, checking the locks before pulling onto the road. She stirs, a soft murmur leaving her lips, but she doesn't wake. Good. She needs the rest, and I need to get her to safety before she starts asking the questions I don't want to answer.

Cerberus headquarters sits above Opus Noir, a front that serves both as a profitable venture and a perfect cover. The club's security is second to none, and no one gets inside without clearance. When I pull into the private underground garage, Logan Radcliffe is already waiting.

"Jesus, Ryeland, you were supposed to escort her, not kidnap her," Logan quips, arms crossed as he eyes Cherise in my arms.

"Shut up and open the damn door," I bite out.

Logan grins but swipes his keycard, leading me to the elevator. The ride up is silent, save for the steady hum of the machinery. By the time we reach the floor where the Cerberus' offices are, Cherise is stirring, her lashes fluttering as she blinks up at me, dazed.

I push open the heavy oak door to one of our privacy suites and carry her inside. The room is opulent, the deep crimson walls warmed by the golden glow of chandeliers. Plush leather furniture fills the space, along with a four-poster bed draped in dark silk. And in the corner—a St. Andrew's cross, an elegant display of polished mahogany and steel.

I set her down gently, but the second I step back, her eyes snap open, and she bolts upright.

Her gaze locks onto mine.

For a beat, silence stretches between us, thick, unspoken words hanging in the air like ghosts. Then, before I can move, she launches herself at me.

I don't stop her.

Her palm cracks against my cheek, the force of the slap sharp and precise. My head barely moves, but the sting burns.

"How dare you," she hisses, her breathing ragged.

I don't flinch. I don't speak. I let her fury wash over me.

"I stood at your grave," she seethes. "I grieved for you, Nick. I shattered for you. And

the whole time, you were alive?"

Her voice breaks on the last word, and something inside me twists.

"I didn't have a choice."

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

She lets out a broken laugh, shaking her head. "The hell you didn't! You let me think you were dead!"

I take a step forward. She backs up, but I don't let her escape.

"You weren't supposed to grieve for me forever," I say, my voice low, rough. "You were supposed to move on."

Her eyes glisten, her chest rising and falling with each uneven breath. "Move on? You were my everything, Nick. And you let me mourn you like a fool."

She fists her hands at her sides, as if fighting the urge to hit me again. I almost wish she would. I'd rather take her anger than the raw, aching hurt I see in her eyes.

"You were better off thinking I was gone," I tell her.

She scoffs. "Better off?" She gestures wildly. "Do you have any idea what that did to me? How it destroyed me?"

I do. I fucking do.

Because I spent every night picturing the way she must have crumbled when they told her. I imagined the way she cried, the way she curled up in bed, alone, thinking I was never coming back. Until today, I wasn't.

She takes a step forward, her face inches from mine. "Tell me," she demands, her voice softer now, but no less dangerous. "Look me in the eye and tell me why."

I don't lie to her.

"They weren't finished with me," I say. "The men who took me, who killed my team—they were still out there. Fitzwallace and Cerberus took me in, gave me the chance to take them down. I stayed dead because it was the only way to keep you safe."

Her expression flickers, like she wants to believe me but can't.

"So, what now?" she whispers. "You come back after years, expecting me to just... what? Forgive you?"

"No," I say. "I expect nothing. Remember, you came to us, not the other way around."

That stops her for a moment as she searches my face, her own unreadable. Then, before I can stop myself, I reach for her.

She doesn't move as I cup her jaw, my thumb tracing the line of her cheekbone. Her lips part, just slightly, and I feel the way her breath hitches.

I lean in, close enough that I can taste the warmth of her skin, close enough that if I wanted to, I could claim her right now. For a moment, I think she's going to let me.

But then—she brings her knee up and sends my balls back into my body cavity. I hiss and take a knee, one hand cupping my balls.

"No," she says, her voice trembling. "No way do you get to kiss me like nothing ever happened."

I exhale slowly; my control razor thin. "Cherise..."

"No," she snaps, turning her back on me. "I need space."

I don't argue. I'll back off.

For now.

Cherise is still angry. I'm the one who may never father children and she's staring at me like she wants to set me on fire.

I let her. I take the fury in her gaze, the way her breath shudders with barely contained rage. I deserve it. Every ounce of it.

"Say something," she demands, her voice raw. "Tell me why, Nick. Why did you let me believe you were dead?"

I exhale slowly, dragging a hand through my hair. "Because if I hadn't, you would be."

She flinches, but she doesn't back down. "That's a load of bullshit."

I step closer. She stiffens, but I don't stop. I make her tilt her chin to meet my eyes. "The men who took me were Somali pirates, and not just some random warlords. They were connected—mercenaries, arms dealers, ghosts who don't leave loose ends."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

I shake my head before I continue. "When Cerberus pulled me out, they weren't finished. Some of them scattered, some burrowed deeper, but they weren't gone. If they had known what you meant to me, they would have come for you. At best, you would have been leverage, but more likely collateral damage. You would have been killed by them, and it wouldn't have been a painless death."

Her eyes widen slightly. She wants to argue. I can see it in the way she presses her lips together, the way her body vibrates with the need to push back. But she doesn't, not yet.

"That's the real reason I stayed dead," I continue. "Not because I didn't love you. Not because I wanted to disappear. But because if I had let you know I was alive, if I had let you in, you would have been at risk, and I wasn't willing to take that chance."

She shakes her head, laughing without humor. "How very noble of you—not to mention convenient. You really expect me to believe that you did this for me?"

"It wasn't just about you," I admit, my voice low. "I wanted vengeance. The men who tortured me, who slaughtered my team—I needed to make them pay, and if I had let you know I was alive, I wouldn't have stopped hunting. I would have hesitated, but I wouldn't have stopped, and that would have meant leaving you alone and unprotected."

She glares at me, her body vibrating with restrained emotion. "So what, you thought I'd just move on? That I'd find a nice guy and live my life in blissful ignorance?"

I say nothing.

She laughs again, sharp and bitter. "Well, congratulations, Nick. You got what you wanted, at least partially. I moved on—right into a marriage with a man who turned out to be a monster."

My blood turns to ice.

"What?" My voice is low, lethal.

She steps back, her hand going to the small leather bag at her hip. "Hector. My ex-husband." She spits the word like venom. "At first, I thought he was just the bureaucrat he pretended to be. But little by little he tried to destroy me. I was nothing more than a prop for him in social situations and somebody he could fuck whenever he liked. Over the years, I started noticing things. Inconsistencies. Conversations that didn't add up. And then I found this."

She pulls out a small flash drive and holds it up between two fingers.

I don't move, don't breathe. "What's on it?"

Her gaze hardens. "Proof. That Hector and a man named René Vallois are in business together. That certain people within Interpol aren't just investigating Vallois, they are working with him. Or at least, Hector is."

A slow, dark fury unfurls inside me. Vallois. The man is a goddamn cancer, infecting everything he touches. And Hector—this bastard, this piece of shit—had his hands on Cherise and in Vallois' dealings the entire time?

I reach for the flash drive, but she tries to yank it back. I'm faster. I take it from her, wrapping my fist around it.

"Give that back," she demands.

“No.”

“I want to know what happens next.”

I stare at her, seeing more than just the woman I once loved. She’s changed. She’s harder, sharper. There’s no trace of the innocent, soft-hearted woman who used to melt under my touch, and I realize I’m responsible for that. My decisions, though they were right, had started a chain of events that had destroyed that innocence.

I start to say something—something raw, something real—but I think better of it. Instead, I let out a slow breath and nod.

"You're safe here," I say finally. "I'll see that this gets to Fitzwallace. We'll decide the best way to proceed. But for now, you don't go anywhere. You don't contact anyone. Hector is looking for you, and if he has even the slightest clue that you're here, he'll send men. They won't get to you, but a lot of civilians could get caught in the crossfire."

She narrows her eyes. "And what if I don't want to stay?"

I step forward again, backing her against the edge of the bed, my voice dropping to a low command. "Then I make you."

Her breath hitches, but she doesn't move. She doesn't try to shove me away. And just like that, the fire that had always burned between us reignites, scorching, impossible to ignore, but I have to ignore it... at least for now.

But first, I need to deal with Vallois. And I need to make sure that Cherise—my Cherise—stays alive long enough for me to claim what's mine again.

I turn, the flash drive burning in my palm, and head for the door.

Behind me, Cherise watches.

5

CHERISE

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

The next morning, I feel more like a prisoner than someone Cerberus is trying to protect. Nick's office feels colder than the Monte Carlo weather outside, or maybe it's just him. He leans against the edge of the massive mahogany desk, arms crossed over his chest, watching me like I'm a puzzle he's already decided isn't worth solving. There's nothing soft in his posture, no sign of the man I once knew.

I sit in one of the leather chairs opposite him, hands folded in my lap, knuckles white from the pressure, and force myself to meet his gaze. It's harder than I want to admit. It feels like standing in front of a firing squad, but I make myself do it. I've come too far, risked too much, to falter now.

He's changed. The lines around his eyes are deeper, and the scruff on his jaw makes him look harder, more dangerous. His shoulders are broader, his chest thicker, and the sheer physicality of him is overwhelming. Muscles ripple beneath his dark sweater, and when he shifts, it feels like the entire room bends around him.

But it's the eyes that do me in. Hazel with flecks of gold, sharp and unyielding. I used to get lost in them, back when they softened for me. They don't soften now.

"Start talking," he says, his tone even but razor-sharp.

No greeting, no pleasantries. Just that low, commanding voice that drags me back to a time when I would've done anything to keep him looking at me.

I clear my throat, pulling myself together. "As I told you, Hector is involved with René Vallois. Hector has been laundering money for Vallois through Interpol's accounts for years, and now he's facilitating arms shipments disguised as Interpol

seizures. Weapons that should have been intercepted are ending up in René's hands, and he's selling them to God knows who."

Nick doesn't react, not a twitch, not a blink. He's listening, but his face is a blank canvas.

"I didn't know. Not at first," I continue, my voice steady despite the pounding of my heart. "But after the divorce, I went back to the house to get my passports. That's when I found the files. Wire transfers, surveillance photos, contracts... proof that Hector and René have been working together. I didn't mean to dig. I just..."

"Stumbled onto it?" His voice cuts through me like a blade.

"Yes," I say quietly.

His jaw tightens, but he doesn't interrupt again.

"I was getting ready to leave when one of René's men showed up. I barely got out of the house alive," I admit. "Since then, I've been running. I can't go to the police—someone has either bought them off, or they are too scared to pursue someone like René. They've tried to grab me twice already—once in Lyon and once when I was on the train from Lyon to Paris. They're not going to stop."

I pause, swallowing the lump rising in my throat. "I need your help, Nick. Cerberus is the only thing standing between me and..."

"Death?" he finishes for me.

"Yes," I whisper. I stand, unable to stay seated under his gaze, and I refuse to let him loom over me. I stifle a laugh. "You're no Jedi knight, but I fear Cerberus is my only hope. I'm out of options."

His jaw tightens, his gaze unrelenting. For a moment, the room is deathly silent. He doesn't move. Doesn't speak. Just stands there, watching me with those hazel eyes that still seem to burn for me.

“Hector and René will kill me if they get the chance, and if they don't, I'll live every second knowing what they've done—what they're going to do—because I didn't try to stop them.”

I straighten, forcing my shoulders back as I rein in every damn thing Nick makes me feel. The anger. The pain. The undeniable pull that still crackles between us like a live wire.

He studies me, his gaze trailing over every inch of my face like he's dissecting my words for truth. Then, without a word, he crosses to the desk and plugs the drive into his laptop. The room is still as he scrolls through the files, his expression unreadable. The screen casts a faint blue glow across his features. Each click echoes in the quiet, sharp and deliberate. After what feels like an eternity, he closes the laptop and turns to me.

“If this is legitimate,” he says, his voice softer but no less commanding, “you're not just running from René. You're a walking target for half the criminal networks in Europe.”

I exhale shakily. “I figured... that's why I called JJ.”

He shakes his head, running a hand through his sandy brown hair as he stands and comes around to the front of his desk. For the first time, he looks like he's wrestling with something.

Leaning against the desk again, he crosses his arms over his chest. “Let me be clear, Cherise. You've started a ball rolling that will only get bigger as it picks up speed.

There's no way to exclude you, so from here on out, you play by my rules. No arguments, no questions, no stunts. You don't question my methods, and you don't make any moves without my approval. You do exactly what I tell you when I tell you to do it. Understood?"

"Yes," I say quickly, relief washing over me.

"If you don't, you'll be out. Cerberus will keep you protected, but you won't have a hand in bringing Hector down, other than providing us with the information you took from his safe."

The air between us feels charged, like something unspoken is pulling us together and pushing us apart all at once.

"I understand," I whisper.

He turns away, fingers flying over the built-in console lining the far wall. A few keystrokes and his laptop illuminates the screens, filling them with intelligence feeds—satellite images, encrypted messages, and security footage tracking Hector and Vallois' last known locations.

His voice is calm, controlled. I don't remember him being this way before everything went to hell.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

“I want to make sure you understand...”

I don't even let him finish. “I do. I've said that...”

“If you're staying, we do this my way,” he interrupts.

Silence stretches between us. I glare at his back, but when I speak, my voice is soft, measured. “Okay.”

He turns then, and the weight of his gaze pins me in place. Daring me to back down.

“You need to be very sure of that answer, Cherise. I'm not the same man you knew.”

His words slice through me, but I don't flinch.

“I'm not the same woman you once knew either,” I say, my voice steady, even as something flickers behind his eyes. Recognition. A silent acknowledgment that the past we left behind is dead. “But I understand.”

He shifts his attention back to the screens. “Hector's been moving erratically. He's covering his tracks, but he's also desperate. My team has eyes on a few of his men. Logan is already running intercepts on his accounts. We'll have something solid soon.”

“And Vallois?”

Nick meets my gaze, his expression unreadable. “He's untouchable. For now.”

My stomach knots. “Which means I’m not safe.”

“No, you’re most definitely not.”

And then he moves—closes the space between us in two strides, invading my world, my air, my sanity.

"But you will be."

My breath catches. I feel the moment of hesitation, the moment I realize just how much control I’m surrendering by trusting him. I should be afraid. I should tell him to go to hell. Instead, I do something far more dangerous.

“I never stopped loving you, Nick.”

His whole body goes rigid. For a fraction of a second, something raw flickers across his face, something dangerous, reckless, unguarded—but it’s gone before I can name it.

“I don’t want to hear that,” he grits out. “This isn’t the time. I can’t let it mean anything.”

Except we both know it does.

He exhales slowly, watching me, weighing the distance between what we were and what we are now. Then he turns back to the screens, issuing his next command without looking at me.

"Activate full surveillance on Hector Pardo. I want every conversation, every movement tracked. Vallois is a phantom, but we don’t stop digging until we find the chink in his armor." He pauses before adding, "And double the security around Opus

Noir. They'll be looking for Cherise. I have her in the club right now."

A female voice—his assistant, perhaps?—speaks calmly through the comms. "Already on it."

Nick cuts the feed, then turns to me with that same unreadable expression. "Welcome to the game, Cherise."

My lips part, my breath catching as I realize just how deep I'm in. How far past the point of no return I already am.

My heart pounds, but I hold my ground. "You think this is a game? This is my life, Nick, and you don't get to act like I don't exist."

He's pissed. I can tell he's barely reining in his irritation. "I need to act like a professional. I need to keep you alive, Cherise. You don't have to like me to be grateful for that."

My jaw tightens. "Grateful?" I scoff, heat flashing through me. "You think I should be grateful that you're treating me like just another day at the office? Grateful that you let me think you were dead for ten years?"

His expression darkens, and then he moves again—closing the distance between us in an instant.

I suck in a breath as he towers over me, the scent of him, the sheer force of his presence a visceral assault on my senses.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

"I've already told you why I did what I did," he says, his voice low, controlled. "There was no other choice."

I stare at him, unflinching. "Bullshit. You'll have to forgive me for not falling at your feet. While you've known I was alive, your miraculous resurrection is a bit new to me. You'll have to give me time to adjust."

Tension crackles between us, thick, electric, unbearable.

Nick's voice drops to a whisper against my ear. "You want a fight, Cherise?" His breath is warm, steady, deliberate. The way I used to love. The way that used to make me shiver. "Careful what you wish for. You might not like how I win."

My throat works around a swallow, but I refuse to back down. I won't give him the satisfaction.

"You looking to get kneed in the balls again?" My voice is sharp, unwavering. "The fact is, Nick, you already lost a long time ago."

Something in his gaze shifts, sharp and lethal.

It shouldn't hit him like a blow. But I see it—the flicker of something real before he locks it all down. The part of him that still remembers what we used to be.

He straightens, rolling his shoulders, shaking his head.

"Prepare yourself, sweetheart," he murmurs, voice dripping with promise. "You're in

my world now."

I blink. "What does that mean?" I ask, suspicion curling in my chest.

"Opus Noir is more than a cover for Cerberus here in Monte Carlo. It's a lifestyle club to which I belong."

He steps back, his expression cool, assessing.

"You want answers? You want my help? You want to be more to me than just another assignment?" His lips curve into something dark, something knowing. "If you want that... if you're staying, you'll act as my new sub."

I stiffen, my mouth parting. I shouldn't be surprised. Nick was always dominant and liked control. Even so, he's now suggesting I will be his submissive partner? "Excuse me?"

"You heard me." He moves behind his desk, grabs a garment bag, and tosses it into the chair next to me. "We can't move you to a safe house until after dark. You're going to need something more appropriate to wear in order to move around the building without sticking out like a sore thumb."

I unzip the bag, pulling out a corset, thong, and collar. My fingers curl around the fabric, my pulse hammering at the base of my throat.

"So that's it? You're giving me a collar and calling it protection?"

Nick arches a brow. "Would you rather I put you back on a train to Paris?"

Of course he wouldn't. But I don't answer. He lets the question hang in the air between us.

I glare at him, but I see the way his gaze tracks my every reaction—the way his pupils darken, the way his jaw clenches. He's pushing me, waiting for me to fight him on this.

I don't give him the satisfaction.

He walks me toward the security office—a much smaller space filled with computers and no windows—his presence a solid heat against my back.

"I'll give you a little privacy," he says, voice dropping into something dark and low. Commanding. "You have ten minutes to make yourself presentable." He pauses. "Unless you'd rather I dress you myself."

"That won't be necessary. I can do it myself," I say as I snatch up the bag and storm past him, disappearing inside, relieved to find he has already cleared the room.

I exhale sharply the moment I'm alone, my hands gripping the bag tight.

What the hell have I just agreed to?

6

NICK

Cherise is here. Yesterday I put her up in one of Opus Noir's privacy suites, which is not ideal. I wonder fleetingly if she noticed the St. Andrew's cross in the room or even understood its purpose.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

Today it feels like a lifetime has passed, although I know it's only been ten years. She's seated in a chair across the desk from me. She's here. She's alive, and she's standing in my world, looking like she's seconds from bolting.

I lean back to listen to her version of how she got herself into this mess. It pretty much confirms what we've been able to find out. Hector Pardo is a traitor and a bastard of the first order, and Vallois is a cancer that needs to be eradicated.

I shouldn't be affected by her; shouldn't let the memory of how her body once felt beneath mine creep into my being like an insidious whisper. But my mind is a traitor, bringing back the scent of her skin, the way she used to melt for me with the slightest command.

She shouldn't be here, yet she is.

I inhale, slow and measured, before pushing off the desk. I can't afford distractions. Not with Vallois moving weapons through Monte Carlo like the rat bastard he is. How the fuck did she get messed up in all of this?

We have a brief and awkward conversation. I find myself crossing my arms and leaning back—I try to catch myself. Exhibiting body language that hints that I may feel a need to defend myself isn't good, but I can't seem to stop. I confirm for Cherise that she's in danger, but that we'll keep her safe. I also let her know from this point forward, she's not in control. I am. I lay down the ground rules to which she agrees. I don't think she realizes fully the chain of events she set in motion. She may well find following my rules is not as easy as she believes it will be.

She was pissed yesterday—she had a right to be. Today, the anger seems to have given way to fear. That's good. Maybe she'll listen to me and do what I tell her. If she does, she might just survive whatever's coming. She may not realize it, but her actions have ignited a firestorm. I only hope I can keep her from getting burned.

I see the way her throat moves as she swallows, the way her body responds to me even when she's trying to hold her ground. That part hasn't changed. Neither has the way I want to push her past those defenses, past the polished façade she's spent years perfecting.

But first, I need to deal with the people trying to kill her.

* * *

I've changed into my leathers before I lead Cherise onto the dungeon floor, the chandeliers casting a golden light that refracts off mirrors and polished mahogany. Plush velvet seating curves around low tables where men and women drink expensive whiskey and watch the night unfold.

Cherise stays close to my side, her body humming with the awareness of where she is, what this place represents. The corset I chose for her fits like a glove, a dark, sapphire blue that brings out the storm in the colored contacts. The thong offers little in the way of leaving anything to the imagination.

Interesting that her sex is well-groomed. I wonder if Hector allowed her some curls, or did he insist on being bare? I know which one I would have insisted on. The outfit borders on indecent—because I want them to look. I want every man in this club to know she belongs to me.

She hasn't said a word since we entered, but I feel her gaze on me, the heat rolling off her in waves.

I pause by the bar, my fingers grazing the small of her back. "Stay close."

She snorts, but she obeys.

Good girl.

Logan Radcliffe, formerly with British Intelligence or MI-6, steps from the shadows with the effortless precision only the English ever seem to master. His tailored leathers are immaculate—of course they are—and he surveys Cherise with a raised brow and a flash of dry amusement.

"So this is the notorious ex-fiancée," he muses, voice smooth as single malt and twice as sharp. "Must say, mate, she's a damn sight more intriguing than the files suggested."

Cherise stiffens; her spine straightens. "I'm right here, you know."

Logan chuckles—even that seems to have an English accent—but I cut him off with a look. "Cherise, you're a sub in a lifestyle club. You don't speak to Doms in that manner. Do it again and I'll put you on high protocol."

"What's that?"

"It means you don't speak until your Dom, that would be me, tells you to." I turn back to Logan. "Status on Vallois?"

His expression hardens. "He's been maneuvering, quietly. Word is, he's about to secure himself a new supplier."

I nod. "Keep your eyes on him. I don't like how fast this is escalating."

Cherise shifts beside me, arms crossed. "You're talking like this is a war."

I glance down at her. "That's because it is. And lose the attitude,"

Her breath hitches, but before she can say anything, a familiar figure steps into view.

Valentine Duret—one of Vallois' men.

His gaze locks on Cherise, curiosity flickering behind the smooth façade.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

I react without thinking. My hand slides to the back of Cherise's neck, fingers threading into her hair as I pull her flush against me. "Kneel," I murmur against her ear. "Spread your legs and bow your head so Valentine doesn't get a good look at your face."

She tenses. "Nick..."

"Now."

A heartbeat of hesitation. Then, she obeys, sinking gracefully to her knees. A perfect, beautiful submission. Jealousy flashes through my brain. Where did she learn that? Had Hector taught her? Valentine raises a brow but says nothing, moving past without stopping. When I'm sure he's gone, I release my breath and look down at Cherise. Her chest rises and falls, her lips parted, her pupils blown wide.

I extend my hand. She takes it, but the way she looks at me when she stands tells me everything. I may have just played my role to perfection, but so has she.

Opus Noir hums with life around us, a slow, indulgent pulse of whispered commands, moaned responses, and the unmistakable crack of leather meeting skin. The scent of warmed leather and exotic perfume lingers in the air, mixing with the low thrum of music that keeps the energy just below a fever pitch.

Cherise stays close, her eyes scanning the lounge, taking in the world she's just been dropped into. She's bracing for something—what exactly, I'm not sure. Maybe for me to push her into submission, or maybe for me to humiliate her or make her feel owned. But that's not how this works, not unless the sub wants it that way.

Submission isn't taken. It's given, and right now, she doesn't know what the hell she wants.

She crosses her arms, her voice sharp. "So, what now? You parade me around like your new prize?"

I glance down at her, my expression unreadable. "I don't parade and you're not a prize." I lean in, lowering my voice just enough to make her breath catch. "But if you keep looking at me like you want a fight, I'll be happy to put you on your knees, shove a ball gag in your mouth and show you what losing feels like."

Her pulse flutters in her throat, but she doesn't move away—a challenge. No problem, I accept. I slide a possessive hand to her lower back, guiding her forward. She stiffens slightly but doesn't resist.

Good girl.

We move deeper into the club; the sound of a flogger being used draws her attention to the raised platform at the center of the dungeon floor. A woman is bound to a St. Andrew's cross, her wrists and ankles secured, her body writhing as each stroke of the flogger lands across her back and thighs. The Dom wielding it is precise, controlled. His strikes are more caress than punishment, his sub's cries laced with pleasure, not pain.

Cherise inhales sharply. I watch her closely. She's fascinated. Curious. And giving off signs of arousal—her scent, her dilated pupils, her flushed skin.

Her chest rises and falls, her lips parting as she watches the way the woman's body absorbs each strike, the way she melts into the sensation, offering herself freely.

I lean in, my lips brushing her ear. "Breathe, Cherise."

She shudders, snapping out of whatever haze she'd just fallen into. "I—what?"

I chuckle, knowing exactly what's happening. "You liked that."

She huffs out a breath, her cheeks flushing. "That's not..."

"Don't lie to me." I grip her chin, turning her face toward mine. "Not here. Not when I can see exactly what you're thinking."

She tries to look away, but I don't let her.

"You want to know how it feels?" I ask, my voice low, intimate.

Her breath catches. "I don't..."

I tilt her chin up gently, forcing her to meet my eyes. "One word, Cherise... if you want out, I'll walk you out of here and hand you over to the authorities. No questions. No judgment."

"Hector is the authorities—at least part of them," she whispers, voice tight.

I exhale slowly, letting the tension bleed off. "All right," I say, quieter now. "Cerberus will protect you."

"I don't want Cerberus to protect me," she says fiercely. "I don't know them. I know you. I need you to protect me."

Something inside me twists, something I thought I'd buried a long time ago. I nod once, steady and certain. "Then you do it my way. You trust me. You follow my lead."

Something flickers across her face—fear, defiance, a decade's worth of grief and hope colliding. But underneath it all, I see what matters most: she still trusts me. She always has.

"Fine," she says, barely above a whisper.

Page 20

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

I slide my fingers over the column of her throat, feeling the rapid flutter of her pulse. "Good girl."

Her pupils dilate at the praise.

I lead her toward the platform, stopping just at the edge where the Dom is finishing his demonstration. The audience murmurs their approval as the scene ends, the submissive's body still shivering from the impact, her eyes glassy with pleasure.

I turn to Cherise, my fingers tracing the delicate line of her arm. "Your turn."

She inhales sharply; her gaze snapping to mine. "Nick?"

"Trust me."

Her hands clench at her sides, and I know she's fighting herself. But then, with a slow, measured breath, she nods.

I step onto the platform, my presence commanding immediate attention. The crowd stills, eyes tracking my every movement.

Cherise stands before me, hesitant but proud, her chin lifted in defiance even as she submits.

I reach for the flogger, testing its weight, making sure she watches the way I handle it.

"Turn around and take hold of the cross," I instruct. She hesitates only a second before obeying. I loosen her corset, and she grasps at it as it begins to fall away. "Hands on the cross or I'll put you in restraints facing the audience."

"Bastard," she hisses.

"Good girl," I murmur again, just to see her reaction. Her breathing falters.

I move behind her, letting the leather strands whisper over her shoulders, her back, not striking yet—just letting her feel the anticipation, the possibility.

"Nick," she murmurs, her voice unsteady.

"Shh," I soothe. "Let me show you what this can be. Let me help you get rid of the tension that is riddling your body. Let go." And then I strike. Not hard. Just enough to awaken her skin, to send a sharp, tingling heat radiating outward. She gasps, her body tense, but she doesn't pull away.

Another stroke. Firmer this time.

She shudders, her lips parting, her body swaying toward me instead of away.

I let the flogger drag over the back of her thighs, watching her tremble. "Still with me?"

She nods; her voice breathless. "Yes."

I lean in, letting my breath brush her neck. "Good."

The next strike lands perfectly across the backs of her thighs, and she moans before she can stop herself. Her reaction is immediate. Raw. Pure need.

And fuck, I feel it too. My blood is on fire, my cock already hard at the sound of her surrender.

I drop the flogger, spinning her to face me, my hands gripping her waist, pulling her against me. Her pupils are blown wide, her breath shaky.

"You feel it now, don't you?" I murmur.

She swallows, her fingers gripping my shirt. "I—I don't..."

I catch her chin, tilting her face up. "Don't lie to me, Cherise."

Her chest heaves, and for a second, I think she'll deny it, but then she licks her lips, her body betraying her. "Yes," she whispers.

And just like that, I know. She's mine—at least for the duration of the fight. I surprise myself as the thought crosses my mind: if I play my cards right, if I can keep her alive, maybe for much longer than that.

CHERISE

The chilly night air bites at my skin as I slide into Nick's Range Rover, the silence between us as thick as the shadows outside. My body hums, every nerve ending still alive from our time at Opus Noir. Even now, the sensation of leather kissing my skin lingers, the phantom ache of the flogger's strikes sending shivers down my spine. I cross my arms, wrapping them tightly around myself, but nothing can still the storm raging inside me.

He hasn't said a word since we left the club, his focus locked on the dark, winding road ahead. His jaw is set, and the dim dashboard light catches its sharp line.

I want to speak, to say something, but I can't find the words. How do you articulate the whirlwind of emotions crashing through you? The overwhelming vulnerability, the unexpected desire, the infuriatingly undeniable pull toward the man sitting just inches away.

I glance at him, at the way his hands grip the wheel, strong and controlled, veins prominent beneath tanned skin. Those hands had wielded the flogger with precision, coaxing sounds out of me I didn't even recognize as my own.

"You're awfully quiet," I finally say, my voice softer than I intend.

He doesn't look at me. "Because I'm thinking."

"About what?"

“About how much more complicated my life just got,” he replies, his tone clipped.

I bristle, turning my gaze to the window. The city lights fade as we leave Monte Carlo behind, replaced by the dark expanse of the countryside. “You’re the one who insisted on putting me on that cross.”

“And you’re the one who asked for my help. You fainted into my arms with a traitor and an arms dealer gunning for you. Besides, you trusted me enough to obey,” he counters, his voice low, steady.

My cheeks flush, and I’m grateful for the darkness. “That doesn’t mean I don’t have questions.”

He glances at me briefly, his hazel eyes sharp, unreadable. “Tonight’s not the night to have this conversation. Besides, questions won’t keep you alive, Cherise.”

“Maybe not,” I admit, my fingers gripping the hem of my jacket. “But ignoring what happened tonight won’t, either.”

His grip on the wheel tightens, but he doesn’t respond.

The silence stretches, thick and suffocating, until the Range Rover slows, turning onto a narrow dirt road. The headlights sweep across a small, secluded house overlooking a cliff that drops down into the Mediterranean Sea, its windows dark and unassuming.

“This is it?” I ask, breaking the silence, not convinced this shack could protect a cow from the rain, and my voice shows it.

“Like many things, looks can be deceiving,” he says, pulling to a stop and cutting the engine. “It’s safe, and that’s all that matters.”

He steps out without waiting for me, his broad frame moving with a quiet authority that grates on my nerves even as it reassures me.

I follow, the crunch of gravel beneath my heels the only sound in the stillness. The house looms ahead, a stark contrast to the opulence of Opus Noir. Here, there's no polished mahogany or glittering chandeliers. Just cold practicality.

He unlocks the door and steps inside, flicking on the lights. From the outside, the place looks like a rustic stone cottage tucked into the cliffs above Monte Carlo—weathered shutters, ivy-covered walls, and a chimney that curls smoke like something out of a fairytale. But the interior is a different story.

Warm. Clean. Quietly luxurious. A leather couch faces a low-burning hearth, and a modern kitchen stretches along one wall—sleek steel appliances and a butcher block island in sharp contrast to the exposed beams overhead. Two doors lead off the main room, likely bedrooms, all of it designed to project quiet charm.

But what sets it apart—what makes it Cerberus—is hidden beneath our feet.

Nick crosses to a panel tucked into the back wall and presses his thumb to a biometric pad. A subtle beep. Then the floor-mounted lift clicks to life, concealed beneath the braided rug. The elevator hums low, ready to descend into the heart of the real safe house—the subterranean operations center Cerberus runs off-grid. Secure. Hardened. Invisible.

This is no cottage. It's a command post in disguise.

“You'll sleep in the first room on the right,” he says, his voice all business as he sets his bag down on the couch. “I'll take the other one.”

I linger near the door, my arms crossed. “That's it? No debrief? No explanation for

what happened tonight?”

He straightens, turning to face me. “What do you want me to say, Cherise? That it was a mistake? That I regret every second of it?”

The heat in his gaze pins me in place, and my breath catches. “No,” I whisper. “I just... I don’t know how to process what I’m feeling.”

His expression softens for the briefest moment before the steel returns. “You don’t need to process it right now. You just need to survive.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

“And what about you?” I demand, stepping closer, the words spilling out before I can stop them. “Do you feel nothing? Is it all just a calculated move to you?”

His jaw tightens, and he takes a step toward me, his presence overwhelming. “You think I don’t feel it? That I don’t hear every sound you made tonight replaying in my head like a broken record? That I don’t...” He cuts himself off, exhaling sharply.

“You don’t what?” I press, my voice trembling.

He shakes his head, his expression unreadable. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to me,” I insist, my chest tightening. “Because right now, I feel like I’m drowning, and you’re the only one who knows how deep the water is.”

He stares at me for a long moment, his hazel eyes searching mine. Then he steps back, the distance between us as palpable as a closed door. “Go to bed,” he says, his tone leaving no room for argument.

“Nick...”

“Goodnight, Cherise,” he interrupts, already moving toward the kitchen.

I watch him go, frustration and something deeper twisting inside me.

He doesn’t look back, pulling out his comms device and speaking softly into it. “Team Alpha, this is Ryeland. We’re in for the night. Maintain perimeter patrols and check-in every hour.”

I turn away, heading into the room he designated as mine. The door closes behind me with a soft click, and I lean against it, my heart pounding.

The small room is bare—a queen-sized bed, nightstands, and an antique dresser that someone repurposed. This is a stark contrast to the luxury I'm used to, but looking around, I realize I like this better.

I sink onto the edge of the comfy bed, my head in my hands as if I can hold back the tears that are threatening to fall.

Nick is right about one thing: I don't have time to process what I'm feeling. Not when there are men hunting me, not when Hector and René are still out there, plotting God knows what. But that doesn't stop the memories from flooding in, vivid and inescapable.

The way Nick's voice wrapped around me, commanding and sure. The way his hands guided me, firm but never cruel. The way my body responded, helpless against the tide of sensation he unleashed.

I lie back, staring at the ceiling, the faint hum of the safe house's generator filling the silence. I don't know what tomorrow will bring. I don't know if I'll survive long enough to see the end of this. But one thing is certain.

Nick is more dangerous to me than any weapon Hector or René could wield.

And I don't know if I have the strength to survive if he walks away again.

* * *

The room is dark and cold, the type of cold that seeps into your bones no matter how tightly you wrap the cozy warm comforter and quilt. I roll over for the fifth time,

clutching the pillow like it's some anchor tethering me to sanity. Sleep eludes me, refusing to provide even the smallest reprieve from the storm swirling inside my head.

When I finally drift off, it's not the peaceful escape I crave. Instead, I'm swept into something far more dangerous.

I'm back on the St. Andrew's cross, the leather straps snug around my wrists, my heartbeat echoing in my ears. The air is heavy, charged, the hum of whispered commands and muted cries surrounding me like a cocoon. But in this dream, it's only us. Nick's presence fills the room, his voice low and commanding, his touch electric.

"Breathe," he says, his fingers brushing over my skin, igniting something deep and primal.

I obey without thinking, the sound of my breath mingling with the subtle creak of the leather restraints. His hand trails down my back, deliberate and controlled, sending shivers through every nerve ending.

"You're mine," he murmurs, his voice a whisper against my ear. "No one touches you but me."

The possessiveness in his tone should terrify me, but it doesn't. Instead, it sinks into me, settling in a place I thought was long forgotten. Had I ever even recognized it before?

And then his hands are on me, rough and warm, grounding me even as I feel myself slipping. His palms press firmly into my skin, one sliding down the curve of my spine, the other tangling in my hair. A gentle tug tilts my head back, baring my throat.

"You have no idea how exquisite you look like this," he says, his voice dipping

lower, rougher. His lips graze the shell of my ear, hot breath teasing the sensitive skin, and my body arches instinctively toward him.

The leather strands of the flogger glide over my skin, not striking, just brushing. It's soft, tantalizing, a promise of what's to come. I feel the heat of his body close behind me, the faint scrape of stubble against the nape of my neck as his mouth finds my skin. He presses a kiss there, slow and deliberate, before trailing his lips down to my shoulder, his teeth grazing just enough to make me gasp.

"Tell me what you want, Cherise," he murmurs, his voice a dark caress that leaves me trembling.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

I try to speak, but the words catch in my throat. Instead, I pull against the restraints; the leather creaking under the strain, my body desperate to reach him, to feel more of him.

His hand slides around my waist, fingers splaying over my stomach as he pulls me back against him. I can feel the hard press of his body, the undeniable evidence of his desire, and it sends a jolt of need straight to my core.

“You want this, don’t you?” he asks, his lips brushing against my ear.

“Yes,” I whisper, the word slipping out before I can stop it.

“Say it louder,” he commands, his hand moving lower, teasing along the edge of my panties.

“Yes,” I say again, my voice stronger this time, laced with desperation.

“Good girl.” The praise wraps around me like a warm blanket, and I shudder, my body completely at his mercy.

The flogger drags down my back, the cool leather contrasting with the heat of his hands. And then it strikes—not hard, just enough to send a sharp, delicious sting radiating through me. I gasp, my fingers curling into fists as the sensation fades, replaced by a warmth that pools low in my belly.

“Perfect,” he murmurs, his hand trailing up my side, brushing just beneath the curve of my breast. “You’re doing so well. I’m so proud of you.”

He strikes again, this time lower, the leather kissing the backs of my thighs. My moan fills the space between us, unrestrained, and I feel him smile against my neck.

“You like this,” he says, not a question but a statement.

“Yes,” I admit, my voice shaky but certain.

“Then let go for me—surrender—submit,” he croons, his lips capturing mine in a searing kiss. It’s possessive, demanding, his tongue teasing mine as his hand moves lower, slipping beneath the waistband of my panties to my core.

I cry out against his mouth, my body arching as he finds my nub, his fingers exploring, teasing, driving me to the edge.

“You’re mine,” he says again, his voice a growl that vibrates through me. “Say it out loud.”

“I’m yours,” I whisper, the words tumbling out without thought, without hesitation.

He claims me with another kiss, and for the first time in what feels like forever, I let myself fall completely. Into him, into this. Into the fire he ignites within me.

And then I wake, my breath ragged, my body still trembling. The room is silent, the cold air brushing against my flushed skin, but the memory of his touch lingers, vivid and inescapable.

I press a hand to my chest, trying to steady the wild beat of my heart, but it’s useless. Nick has always had the power to unravel me, and now, even in my dreams, he wields it with devastating precision.

The first light of dawn filters through the small window, and I swing my legs over the

side of the bed, deciding there's no point in trying to rest any longer. I need to face him.

I dress quickly, throwing on the jeans and sweater I pulled from my bag last night. As I step out of the room, I catch the faint sound of keys clicking. The soft glow of a laptop screen illuminates Nick's profile, his broad shoulders hunched slightly as he types.

For a moment, I stand there, watching him. The lines of his face are sharper in the dim light, his jaw set in that same determined way I've seen a hundred times before.

I should hate him for being so composed, for acting like none of this affects him. But I can't. Because deep down, I know the truth. It does affect him. He's just better at hiding it than I am.

"Morning," I say softly, stepping into the room.

He doesn't look up. "You're up early."

"Couldn't sleep." I cross the room, leaning over his shoulder to look at the screen. "What are you working on?"

"Reports." His voice is clipped, but he doesn't stop me from invading his space.

Names, dates, and locations, some highlighted in red, fill the document on his screen. My gaze skims over the details, something tugging at the edge of my memory.

"What's that?" I ask, pointing to a line near the bottom of the page.

"A shipment manifest," he replies, his tone distracted.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

“No,” I insist, leaning closer, my hair brushing against his shoulder. “That name—Charles Fortier. Hector introduced us once.”

Nick’s fingers pause over the keys, and he turns slightly to face me. “Where?”

I straighten, pulling back as I try to piece it together. “I don’t remember the specifics, but Hector also mentioned something about Fortier handling logistics for one of René’s deals. It was just an offhand comment, but I remember because Hector rarely talked shop around me.”

Nick’s gaze sharpens, his hazel eyes locking onto mine. “And you’re just now mentioning this?”

“Don’t you dare snap at me. It didn’t seem important at the time,” I snarl, crossing my arms. “I didn’t exactly have the luxury of sitting down to analyze every little thing Hector ever said to me.”

He pinches the bridge of his nose. “You’re right. I’m sorry. What else do you remember?”

I close my eyes, willing myself to focus. “Hector was planning a meeting with someone. In Nice, I think. It was supposed to be low key, just the two of them, but Hector mentioned needing extra security.”

“Do you remember when?” Nick is typing as fast as I’m talking.

I shake my head. “I don’t know. It was before I left Lyon.”

Nick curses under his breath, his fingers flying over the keyboard again as he pulls up a satellite map of the area around Nice. He zooms in on a small, nondescript building near the edge of town.

“That café is one of René’s secure locations,” he mutters. “If Hector was meeting him in Nice, it means they’re planning something big.”

“What do we do?” I ask the words out before I can stop them.

He looks at me, his expression hard. “We do nothing. My team will handle it.”

“No.” I step closer, refusing to back down. “I can help. I know how Hector operates. I know his tells, his patterns. You need me.”

“What I need,” he says, his voice low and dangerous, “is for you to stay out of the way. To stay alive, Cherise.”

“Dammit, Nick!” I grab his arm, forcing him to look at me. “You can’t just shut me out. This isn’t just about you. It’s my life on the line.”

His jaw tightens, and for a moment, I think he’s going to push me away. But then he sighs, running a hand through his hair. “Fine,” he says reluctantly. “You want to help? Then start by telling me everything you know about this meeting. Every detail, no matter how small.”

I nod, sitting down beside him as I try to recall everything Hector ever said about René, about their operations.

For the first time since this nightmare began, I feel a spark of hope.

We might actually have a chance.

* * *

The city of Nice stretches out before us, a glittering web of streets and buildings hugged by the Mediterranean. The sun is merciless, bouncing off the pale stone facades and baking the world in an oppressive heat. I shouldn't notice things like this. Not when I'm sitting in Nick's Range Rover, my heart hammering like a trapped bird, every nerve ending braced for what's coming.

The lead we uncovered this morning has brought us here, but my gut churns with unease. Hector and René don't make mistakes, and they sure as hell don't leave trails unless they want someone to follow them.

"You're quiet," Nick says, his voice a low rumble that fills the small space of the car. His hazel eyes flick to me briefly before returning to the road, scanning for threats.

"I'm thinking," I reply, trying to sound calm even as my fingers dig into the leather seat.

"About?"

"About why we're here."

"We're here because it's one of the places listed in the file. We have to start somewhere," he says matter-of-factly.

"That's it? We just pick a spot?" I squeak, hating the way my voice sounds.

"Do you have a better suggestion? It's not like we can call the staff and ask if a notorious arms dealer makes deals inside their establishment. For all we know, he just likes the food..."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

“But the question is, why here? Couldn’t it be a trap? Wouldn’t they be more concerned about who might overhear them?” I ask, incredulously. My heart feels like it’s trying to claw its way out of my chest. This sounds like a terrible idea.

Nick’s hands tighten on the steering wheel. “I thought of that, but with the noise level in a place like this, it’s hard to hear yourself think, much less what is being said two tables away. But you do get points for thinking about those kinds of things. We are going to have to take a minor risk. If you’d rather not come along...”

“I didn’t say that...”

He grins. “We need to get ahead of him. Vallois underestimates me. Always has.”

“You sound like you know him and are looking forward to it,” I mutter, crossing my arms.

He glances at me again, the corner of his mouth tilting ever so slightly upward. “Our paths have crossed before. You’d be surprised how much I enjoy pissing off men like René. Even better is breaking them and their organizations.”

“Isn’t that supposed to be Interpol’s job?”

He gives me a half grin. “I would like to point out to you, your husband, Hector, is part of Interpol.”

“Ex-husband. And not everyone in Interpol is a rotten apple.” I counter defiantly. Had he not let me think he was dead all those years ago, neither of us would be here right

now. Instead, we'd be sitting on our back porch watching our two point five kids and a dog run around the backyard playing.

The GPS interrupts my wayward thinking, instructing us to take a sharp left. Nick follows the directions without hesitation, the Range Rover's engine growling as we weave through the narrow streets of Old Town. The buildings here are close together, their pastel colors creating a labyrinth that feels both picturesque and suffocating.

The café is tucked into the corner of a busy square. It looks like any other spot in Nice, but it makes me uncomfortable. There is something wrong. My body hums with the instinct to run, every muscle taut with anticipation.

"Stay here," Nick orders as he pulls the SUV to a stop near the edge of the square.

"Like hell I will." I unbuckle my seatbelt, meeting his sharp glare head-on.

"Cherise," he growls, his voice laced with authority. "I need you to listen to me. We agreed."

"And I need you to stop treating me like I'm made of glass," I fire back. "I'm not staying in this vehicle while you walk into whatever this is. Besides, wouldn't I be safer with you?"

His jaw tightens, and for a moment, I think he's going to argue, but then he nods, his eyes darkening. "Fine. Stay close. Don't speak unless I tell you to, and if anything goes wrong, you do exactly as I say."

"Understood," I say, my voice steady despite the adrenaline coursing through me.

We exit the vehicle together, moving through the bustling square like shadows. Nick's hand brushes against my lower back, guiding me, grounding me, even as his

eyes scan every face, every corner.

The café is small and unassuming, its outdoor tables half-filled with tourists sipping espresso and locals chatting in rapid-fire French. It's almost too perfect, too normal, and my stomach twists. Nick moves with a predator's grace, his body coiled and ready, his presence commanding even in the casual chaos of the square.

Inside, the air is cooler—the noise muffled. We find an empty table near the back, Nick positioning himself so he can see the entrance and the entire room. His laptop is out in seconds, a discreet device that connects to Cerberus's network with a few keystrokes.

“Anything?” I whisper, my eyes darting to the café's other patrons.

“Not yet,” he replies, his voice low and even. “But they're here.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I can feel them,” he says simply, his eyes never leaving the screen. “This isn't my first rodeo.”

The minutes drag by, but the café's cheerful chatter does nothing to calm the storm building inside me. And then I see it—a man outside the window, lingering just a little too long, his gaze sweeping the square before disappearing into the crowd.

“We need to move,” Nick murmurs, already closing his laptop.

“Why?”

He gives me a look I am sure has turned people to stone. “Because I said so.”

We slip out of the café, blending into the throng of people as best we can. Nick's hand finds mine, his grip firm and unyielding, pulling me through the crowd with a singular focus. My pulse pounds in my ears, my senses hyperaware of every sound, every movement.

Then I hear it—a shout, sharp and guttural, followed by the unmistakable sound of boots on pavement. They made us.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

“Run,” Nick commands, and I don’t hesitate.

We dart through the streets, the cobblestones slick beneath my boots, the air filled with the cacophony of startled voices and pounding footsteps. Nick’s grip never falters, his strength propelling me forward even as my lungs burn with exertion.

A bullet chips off the side of a building just to the left of us. How can that be? I didn’t hear anything. I stumble, a gasp escaping my lips, but Nick pulls me upright, his body shielding mine as we duck into a side street.

“Keep moving,” he growls, his tone leaving no room for argument.

We reach the Range Rover in a blur of movement, and Nick all but throws me into the passenger seat before sliding behind the wheel. The engine roars to life, and we tear down the road, the tires squealing as we take a sharp turn. The chase spills out into the countryside; the streets giving way to open fields and winding roads.

“They’re gaining,” I say, glancing in the side mirror. A black SUV is closing in, its grill flashing like the jaws of a predator.

“Not for long,” Nick replies, his voice calm, almost amused. He floors the accelerator, the Range Rover leaping forward with a ferocity that matches his own.

The SUV keeps pace, its occupants firing at us from the windows. It’s nothing at all like on television or in the movies. It’s terrifying. Nick swerves, the bullets missing by inches, his hands steady on the wheel. My heart is in my throat, the adrenaline a toxic cocktail that leaves me both terrified and exhilarated.

“Hold on,” he warns, and before I can ask why, he veers off the road, the Range Rover bouncing over uneven terrain as we plow through a field.

The SUV follows, its bulk struggling to match our agility. Nick uses it to his advantage, weaving between trees and rocks with a precision that borders on reckless. The world is a blur of green and brown, the sound of gunfire and shattering branches filling the air.

Finally, we reach a narrow ridge, the ground dropping away sharply on either side. Nick doesn’t hesitate, the Range Rover skimming the edge as he pushes it to its limits. The SUV isn’t as lucky; its driver miscalculates, the vehicle skidding and flipping over the edge with a deafening crash.

I exhale shakily, my hands gripping the dashboard as Nick slows, the adrenaline still coursing through me.

“Are you hurt?” he asks, his gaze sharp as he glances at me.

“No,” I manage, my voice hoarse. “You?”

“I’m fine.” He reaches over, his hand brushing my arm in a gesture that feels both protective and possessive. “I’m glad you’re okay, because this isn’t over.”

He drives us back to safety, the world slowly settling into a tense quiet. But even as the danger fades, the memory of his dominance, his strength, lingers, wrapping around me like a shroud. I don’t know what’s more terrifying—the men chasing us or the way Nick makes me feel like I belong by his side, no matter the cost.

* * *

The safe house door clicks shut behind us, the sound echoing in the silence like a

gunshot. I jump and Nick's hand reaches out to steady me. My legs feel like jelly, my breath comes in shallow bursts, and my heart hasn't stopped racing since the chase. The adrenaline is still coursing through me, making every nerve in my body hum with an unbearable energy I can't shake.

Nick's movements are controlled and deliberate, the predator in him still alert. He tosses his bag onto the couch and runs a hand through his hair, his muscles rippling beneath his fitted shirt. I want to say something—thank him, yell at him, anything to break the electricity that seems to crackle between us—but the words catch in my throat.

"Sit," he says, his voice low, a command that brooks no argument.

"I'm fine," I manage, though my legs betray me as I sink into the nearest chair.

He levels me with a look that pins me in place. "You're not fine. You've been running on adrenaline for hours. Sit, breathe, and don't argue."

"I said I'm fine," I snap, though even I can hear how unconvincing I sound.

Nick's eyes narrow, his hazel gaze cutting through me like a blade. He crouches in front of me, so close I can see the faint stubble on his jaw, the way his lips press together as though he's holding back a storm.

"You're shaking," he says softly, his hands bracing on either side of the chair. His tone is gentle, but the command is still there, simmering beneath the surface. "Look at me."

I don't want to. If I meet his eyes, I'll fall apart. But I do it anyway, because defying Nick isn't something I'm capable of right now. His gaze is intense, unwavering, and I hate how much it grounds me.

“I need you to listen to me,” he continues, his voice like a tether pulling me back to reality. “What happened today? That wasn’t luck. You kept your head. That means something.”

I blink, the unexpected praise throwing me off balance. “It doesn’t feel like it.”

“Because you’re too busy doubting yourself,” he counters, his hands moving to grip the arms of the chair. “Stop it. You’re alive because you’re stronger than you give yourself credit for, Cherise.”

The knot in my chest tightens, and I look away, unable to handle the weight of his words. “I didn’t do anything special.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

“You survived,” he says simply. “And you kept me alive, too.”

That pulls my gaze back to his, my heart stuttering in my chest. “You don’t mean that.”

“I don’t say things I don’t mean, Cherise,” he replies, standing and offering his hand to pull me to my feet. His grip is firm, steadying, and I hate how much I need it.

For a moment, we just stand there, the space between us charged with something I can’t name. His hand lingers on mine longer than necessary, his thumb brushing over my skin in a way that sends a shiver down my spine.

“Thank you,” I say finally, my voice barely more than a whisper.

He steps back, breaking the connection and leaving me feeling untethered. “Get cleaned up. I’ll check the perimeter.”

I nod, grateful for the excuse to escape, and head to the bathroom. The mirror shows a reflection I barely recognize—my hair disheveled, my cheeks flushed, my eyes wide and haunted, but more alive than I’ve ever felt before. I splash cold water on my face, hoping to wash away the memories of the chase, the fear, the way Nick’s touch lingers on my skin.

By the time I step out, he’s back, his laptop open on the small kitchen table, a glass of whiskey in his hand. He doesn’t look up as I approach, his focus on the screen.

“What are you working on?” I ask, leaning on the table and taking a sip of his

whiskey.

He looks up, quirks an eyebrow, and grins. “Figuring out what our next move is.”

I take a step closer, peering over his shoulder. The screen is filled with data—maps, intercepted messages, images of Hector and René that make my stomach churn.

“You think they’ll come after us again?” I ask, my voice softer now.

“That’s a given,” he says, his tone matter-of-fact. “It’s only a matter of time. You’re a loose end to them.”

I nod, swallowing hard. “So what do we do?”

His gaze finally lifts, locking onto mine. “We stay ahead of them and we don’t make mistakes.”

I’m not sure why his words hit me so hard. Maybe it’s the way he says them, so certain, so unyielding. Or maybe it’s the realization that, for all his strength, Nick is just as vulnerable as I am. He just hides it better.

I move closer, drawn to him in a way I can’t explain, until I’m standing right beside him. My hand brushes against his shoulder, pretending to study the screen but acutely aware of every inch of space between us—or lack thereof.

“Do you ever stop being in control?” I ask, the question slipping out before I can stop it.

He turns his head slightly, his eyes meeting mine. “No.”

The single word shouldn’t make my heart race, but it does. I hate how much I crave

the safety of his control, how much I want to surrender to it, if only for a moment.

“You can’t control everything,” I say, my voice softer now.

“Maybe not, but I can control enough to keep us alive,” he replies, his gaze dropping to my lips for a fraction of a second before returning to my eyes.

The air between us shifts, heavy and electric, and I swear the room feels smaller. I don’t know who moves first—him or me—but suddenly, I’m pressed against the table, his body crowding mine, his hands braced on either side of me.

“You’re playing with fire,” he says, his voice low, almost a growl.

“Maybe I like the heat,” I whisper, unable to look away from him.

His eyes darken, his jaw tightening as if he’s fighting some internal battle. For a moment, I think he’s going to kiss me, and my breath catches, anticipation flooding every inch of me. But then he steps back, breaking the spell. “Go to bed, Cherise.”

The command is sharp, final, and it cuts through me like a blade. “Nick...”

“Goodnight,” he says, already turning back to his laptop.

I watch him for a moment, frustration and something deeper churning inside me. But I know, I remember, better than to push him when he’s like this. With a huff, I retreat to my room, the door clicking shut behind me.

I lie on the bed, staring at the ceiling, my body still thrumming with unspent energy. The memory of his touch, his voice, lingers, a cruel reminder of everything I can’t have.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

As my eyes drift shut, my body begins to recover from the adrenaline rush. Does he feel it too? The pull, the heat, the way our worlds seem to collide every time we're near each other.

Whatever happens next, one thing is certain: Nick Ryeland is a fire I can't help but run toward, even if it burns me alive.

8

NICK

The next morning, I'm up early. Sleep never really came—too much happening, too fast in some ways, too damn slow in others. In the safe house workspace, data scrolls across the monitors in cold, relentless lines. And the more I see, the clearer it becomes. It's worse than I thought.

Hector Pardo isn't just dirty—he's a full-fledged traitor.

I lean back in my chair, rubbing a hand across my jaw as I scan the decrypted files Logan pulled from Hector's personal server. Years of illicit transactions, weapon shipments rerouted under the guise of Interpol operations, intelligence leaks sold to the highest bidder. All of it feeding directly into René Vallois' network.

Cherise was telling the truth. I shouldn't feel relief at that, but I do. Because it means I was right to let her in. It also means she's in more danger than I originally thought.

“Are you seeing what I'm seeing?” I ask Logan on the phone.

“Christ,” Logan mutters. “This isn’t just corruption. This is full-blown treason.”

“I know,” I nod, even though there’s no one to see, barely acknowledging the obvious. My mind is already working through our next steps, calculating how much time we have before Vallois or Hector realize we’re on to them.

Cherise’s file—her escape, the evidence she stole—it’s all here. She was careful, but Hector must have realized what she took. She’s not just a loose end. She could be the death of him, literally.

Logan exhales. “We need to take this to Interpol...”

“No.” I cut him off before he can finish that thought. “We don’t know who’s compromised.”

There’s a sigh on the other end of the line. “So, what’s the play?”

The sound of footsteps crossing the floor alerts me that Cherise has entered the room. She comes to stand behind me clad in one of my assistant’s fitted sweaters and a pair of black leggings. The fire from the night before has faded into something quieter, something cautious, and fuck me, I feel it.

I don’t want to feel it. I don’t want to look at her and remember how her body molded to mine when I cradled her on my lap up in the lounge at Opus Noir after our all-too-brief session. I don’t want to remember the way she gasped when I touched her, the way her pupils went dark with need when I told her to kneel.

I want to remember the years of silence. The way it felt to wake up one day and realize I could never go back. But my body doesn’t give a damn what I want.

I push back from the desk, finishing my phone call with Logan. “Get a full decryption

on the rest of those files and get me an updated tracker on Vallois' movements. If he's got a deal coming up, I want to know before it happens."

I end the call. Cherise has moved across the room and is standing by the window, her arms wrapped protectively around her. I stride toward her before I can second-guess myself. She hears me coming, turning just as I stop beside her. "You were right," I say, keeping my voice level. "Hector's deeper in this than even I thought."

She takes a deep breath. "I didn't know, I swear." There's no satisfaction in her voice, no I-told-you-so. Just exhaustion. She looks up at me then, her green eyes wary. "What happens now?"

I don't answer immediately. Instead, I step closer, letting her feel the space between us shrink. "Now, Cerberus does what Cerberus does best. We take them down."

Her lips part slightly, her breath shallow. I see the flicker of something in her gaze—something vulnerable, something she's trying to hide.

I reach out, cupping her chin between my fingers, forcing her to hold my stare. "But that means you follow my lead, Cherise. Your life—hell, our lives—both depend on it. No more arguing. You do what I say, when I say it."

Her throat moves as she swallows. "And if I don't?"

My grip tightens just slightly, enough to make her breath catch. "Then I'll make you."

Her pupils dilate; she's aroused. I can tell she hates how she responds to me, but she doesn't pull away. I release her just as abruptly, stepping back. "Take it easy," I say, my voice rougher than before. "We move on Hector and Vallois soon."

She exhales shakily, nodding. But as she turns to leave, I catch her wrist, holding her still.

I lower my voice, just for her. “I truly thought I did what was best, Cherise, for the both of us.”

She looks up at me, and for the first time since she walked back into my life, I see something break in her expression. “I don’t doubt it,” she whispers, and then she’s gone, leaving me standing alone, my chest tight, my fists clenched.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

She shouldn't be able to get under my skin this way, but she does—she always did.

* * *

That night we go back to Opus Noir. Cherise stands beside me, watching the room with a wary fascination that she's trying desperately to mask, but I see right through her. I always have.

Tonight, the club hums with a darker kind of energy. The main dungeon is quieter, more exclusive. This isn't for the casual voyeurs who come for a taste of the lifestyle without truly understanding it. This is for the initiates, the experienced, and the ones who crave the deeper layers of control and surrender.

I guide her through the club, my hand firm at the small of her back. She's dressed the way I told her to be—an emerald-green corset hugging her curves, a delicate lace thong underneath that offers the barest hint of modesty. She hadn't fought me on it this time. That alone tells me more than she realizes. She's resisting less.

Good. because tonight, I intend to teach her something very important.

"Why are we here?" she asks, her voice even, but I catch the slight hitch in her breath.

I lead her toward a private room, where a heavy crimson curtain separates the space from the rest of the club. "Because you need to understand how this world works. You need to know the kind of man I am now."

Her gaze flickers to mine. "I already know what kind of man you are."

I push the curtain aside and guide her inside. "No, sweetheart. You don't."

The room is intimate, dimly lit, designed for control and submission. A St. Andrew's cross stands against one wall, a padded bench sits in the center, and an array of tools—floggers, cuffs, restraints—hang neatly on display. The air is thick with anticipation.

Across the room, a Dom—Matthias Varenne, one of Opus Noir's most respected trainers—stands with his sub, a petite brunette named Alina. She's bound at the wrists, her body relaxed in anticipation.

Cherise tenses beside me, eyes flicking between the couple and me. "Why are we watching this?"

"Because I need you to see what trust looks like."

Matthias moves with practiced precision, trailing the falls of a soft flogger down Alina's back. She shivers but doesn't flinch. When he finally strikes, her head tilts back, her mouth parting in pleasure, not pain.

I lean into Cherise, my breath a whisper against her ear. "She's not afraid, is she?"

Cherise swallows. "No."

"Because she trusts him." I brush my fingers down her arm, feeling the slight shiver that runs through her. "That's what submission is, Cherise. It's not about pain. It's about giving up control and knowing you're safe."

She inhales slowly, as if she needs to remind herself to breathe.

"Come here."

She turns to me, suspicion warring with curiosity. "What?"

I take her hand, guiding her to the padded bench in the center of the room. I don't force her. I don't have to. Her body follows on instinct, even as her mind fights the pull.

"I'm not binding you," I murmur, my hands resting on her hips. "I'm not even restraining you. All I want is for you to trust me."

Her pulse jumps against her throat. "And if I don't?"

I tighten my grip, just enough to remind her who's in control here. "Then you walk away. But we both know you won't."

I ease her down onto the bench, guiding her until she's settled on her knees, her arms resting against the cushioned surface.

"Close your eyes."

"Nick..."

"Close. Your. Eyes." I repeat.

She hesitates, then obeys.

Page 30

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

Good girl.

I move behind her, running the leather falls of a flogger down the exposed skin of her back. Not striking. Just letting her feel the weight of it as she shudders.

"Breathe," I command softly.

She does.

I trail the flogger lower, across the curve of her ass, between her thighs. Her body is taut, waiting for something, bracing for it. I give her what she's waiting for.

The first strike is featherlight, barely more than a whisper against her skin. She gasps, her fingers curling into the cushion. The second is firmer.

Her back arches.

"Still with me?" I ask, my voice low.

"Yes."

I reward her with another.

Her body hums beneath my touch, instinctively seeking more even as she fights the surrender.

"Good girl," I murmur, dragging my hand over the warmed skin where the flogger

landed. She trembles at the contact, her body betraying her once again.

I lean over her, my chest pressing lightly against her back. "Now, tell me what you're feeling."

She hesitates, her breath coming fast. "I don't know."

I smile against her ear. "You do. Say it."

She swallows hard. "Alive."

That wasn't the answer I was expecting. I pull back, studying her. Her eyes are still closed, her lips parted, her body buzzing with the aftermath of submission. She's beautiful like this.

And I am completely fucked. I step away before I do something I can't take back. "Come with me," I say quietly and lead her up to the lounge, taking a seat and moving a floor pillow between my legs, nodding to it.

She doesn't have to be told. She sinks onto the pillow and rests her head against my thigh. She needs to feel this. To understand what submission really is. That it isn't weakness. It isn't about losing control—it's about giving it, and for the first time in the dungeon, I see her do just that.

She shifts slightly, finding a more comfortable position, never moving her head. I stroke her hair with my hand, absently. She finally looks up, her green eyes filled with something I don't quite expect. Curiosity. "Say something," she murmurs, her voice hoarse.

I take my time before I respond. "You liked that."

A shiver runs through her, barely perceptible. "I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to."

I watch as she swallows, her throat working, her mind trying to piece together what just happened between us. She's overwhelmed. She's exhilarated. And she has no idea what the hell to do with those emotions.

Which is exactly why I have to stop this.

I stand, more slowly this time, scrubbing a hand through my hair to steady myself. "Cherise... we can't let this go any further."

Her brow pulls together, confusion flashing across her face. "What?"

"This," I say, motioning between us, between whatever this current is that keeps pulling us closer, tighter. "It has to stop. Before it costs us both more than we can afford."

Her mouth parts, disbelief softening the anger that's starting to rise. "Excuse me?"

"You're not getting dragged deeper into this," I say, my voice low but firm. "You did enough bringing me the intel. You did more than enough surviving everything they threw at you. Let me handle it from here."

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

She lets out a brittle laugh, one that cuts deeper than she knows. "Right. Because I'm just supposed to disappear while you charge in and fix everything?"

I step closer, not in anger but something closer to desperation, careful to keep my hands at my sides because if I touch her now, I won't stop. "You don't know what's waiting out there, Cherise. This isn't just about information anymore. It's about survival. Yours."

Her chin lifts in defiance, and God, she's beautiful when she fights. "You don't get to decide that for me."

I take a deep breath, willing her to hear the truth I can't quite say out loud. "I'm not doing this because I don't believe in you. I'm doing it because I do. Because losing you again would finish me."

The words slip out before I can pull them back. Her eyes widen, just slightly, but I press on before either of us can get swallowed by what hangs between us.

"You're involved because you were brave enough to stand up. Brave enough to come to me. But it's my job to keep you breathing. It always has been."

The fire in her gaze falters, just a fraction, but enough that it nearly breaks me.

"I'm not trying to lock you away," I say, voice thick. "I'm trying to give you the chance to live. To be free of all of this."

She holds my stare, her breathing uneven. Her body says she wants to fight me. But

her heart—her heart’s breaking right there with mine.

I force myself to turn away first, breaking whatever invisible tether keeps us locked together. Cherise doesn’t argue. She just trails after me in silence, her footsteps light but steady, like she’s walking through a door she knows she can’t close again.

The drive back is quiet. Heavy. She keeps her hands folded tightly in her lap, staring out the window at the darkened streets, the lights of Monte Carlo blurring past like ghosts. I keep my eyes on the road, jaw locked, muscles aching with the need to say something—anything—but knowing that words won’t fix this. Not now.

She deserves better than the half-truths and the walls I keep shoving between us.

By the time we reach the safe house, dawn is just a ghost on the horizon. She disappears into the guest room without a sound. In the hallway, I stand for a long minute after the door clicks shut, my hand pressed flat against the wood, willing her somehow to hear everything I’m too much of a coward to say.

I should leave her out of this. I know that. But when morning comes and the mission calls, she’s there—already dressed, already ready, like she made the choice for both of us.

And maybe I hate myself for how much I need her standing beside me.

9

CHERISE

The Mediterranean sun blazes against the glittering waters of the Nice marina, painting the scene with an almost surreal beauty. Super yachts gleam under the golden light, bobbing gently in their berths, and the scent of salt fills the air. It’s the

kind of place where wealth cloaks the shadows, where secrets are traded over champagne and caviar.

Nick parks the Range Rover a safe distance from the marina, his movements as precise as ever. He hasn't spoken to me since last night except for some one-word answers all day, and he doesn't speak now as we step out of the vehicle, but his body radiates purpose, every inch of him coiled and ready.

"Stay close," he says, his tone low, almost a growl, as he pulls a duffel bag from the backseat. Another short sentence. This is getting ridiculous, but now is not the time to bring it up.

I nod, trailing behind him as we move toward a small café overlooking the docks. The bag slung over his shoulder looks casual enough, but I know it holds the tools that will give us eyes and ears on the luxury yacht anchored near the far end of the marina.

Inside the café, Nick claims a table near the window, positioning himself so he has a clear view of the docks. He gestures for me to sit, his hazel eyes scanning the area, sharp and unyielding.

"What's our plan?" I ask watching him set up his equipment.

"My plan is," he says, pulling a tablet from the bag and powering it on. The screen flickers to life, displaying a live feed from a drone hovering discreetly above the marina. "Hector and René are meeting on a yacht named Elysia. It's anchored at berth twenty-four."

I lean in, the faint scent of his cologne teasing my senses as I focus on the screen. The Elysia is a stunning vessel, all sleek lines and opulence, but it might as well be a fortress. Armed guards patrol the deck, their movements precise and calculated.

“And what exactly are we looking for?” I ask, keeping my voice low but emphasizing my intent to be involved.

“Anything that confirms their plans,” he replies, ignoring my comment, his gaze never leaving the screen. “Hector doesn’t move unless he’s certain he won’t get caught. That means he’s using something—or someone—to cover his tracks.”

“Diplomatic immunity,” I murmur, the words slipping out before I can stop them.

Nick’s eyes flick to mine, sharp and questioning.

“It’s what Hector always bragged about,” I explain. “He used to laugh about how easy it was to exploit the system. If René’s involved, they’re probably leveraging someone with a diplomatic connection.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

Nick doesn't respond immediately, his attention shifting back to the tablet. "That's exactly what we need to confirm."

He hands me a set of earpieces and a small microphone. "Put this on. You'll hear everything I hear, but keep your voice down unless absolutely necessary."

The earpiece fits snugly, and the microphone clips discreetly to the collar of my shirt. Nick adjusts his own equipment with practiced ease, his fingers deft and sure.

"Let's move," he says, his voice clipped as he rises from the table, grabbing the duffle bag.

We make our way to the edge of the marina, blending into the crowd of tourists and locals. The drone feed on the tablet gives us a bird's-eye view of the yacht, but Nick's focus remains razor sharp as he scans the area for threats.

We stop near a small kiosk selling overpriced sunglasses and souvenirs, using it as cover while Nick sets up a long-range listening device. The equipment is sleek and sophisticated, its directional microphone aimed precisely at the Elysia.

Voices crackle through the earpiece, muffled at first, but gradually becoming clearer.

"...shipment is scheduled to move through Monaco in three days," René's voice says, his French accent thick but unmistakable. "The diplomatic crates will pass through customs without inspection. It's all been arranged."

"And the payment?" Hector's voice, smooth and cold, cuts through the static.

René chuckles, the sound grating. “Already transferred. Half now, half upon delivery as usual.”

My stomach tightens as I listen, the implications of their words sinking in. Smuggling weapons through diplomatic channels isn’t just bold—it’s catastrophic. If they’ve pulled it off as often as we now believe, there’s no telling how much damage they’ve caused.

“This isn’t just arms-dealing,” I whisper, barely audible over the comms. “They’re planning something bigger.”

Nick doesn’t respond, his jaw tight as he adjusts the microphone. His silence speaks volumes, though. He’s processing, calculating, already planning our next move.

Then I see him. A man in a tailored suit, his dark hair slicked back, steps onto the dock near the Elysia. My breath catches in my throat as recognition slams into me like a freight train.

“Dammit,” I hiss, ducking behind Nick.

“What?” he demands, his eyes snapping to me.

“That’s Sergei Kozlov,” I say, my voice trembling. “He worked with Hector. He knows me.”

Nick’s expression darkens, and he glances toward the man. Sergei’s gaze sweeps the area, sharp and searching, and I feel a chill run down my spine.

“We need to go,” Nick says, already packing up the equipment.

“But the meeting...”

“In case you missed it, we’ve got no backup here,” he snaps, his tone brooking no argument. “Besides, we have enough for now.”

I follow him as he moves quickly but calmly through the crowd, his presence a shield against the rising panic threatening to overtake me. The earpiece crackles with fragments of conversation—Hector and René discussing logistics, payment, contingencies—but I can barely focus on the words.

By the time we reach the Range Rover, my heart is pounding, my hands shaking. Nick throws the duffel bag into the backseat and starts the engine, his movements precise and controlled.

“What happens if Sergei saw me?” I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

“He didn’t,” Nick says, his eyes scanning the rearview mirror as he pulls onto the road. “But we’re not taking any chances.”

The drive back is silent, the tension in the Range Rover palpable. My mind races with what we overheard, knowing that Sergei is here, that he’s involved.

“We need to act on this,” I say finally, breaking the silence. “If Hector and René are using diplomatic immunity, we have to find out who their contact is.”

“I will,” Nick says, his voice clipped. “But not tonight.”

His words feel like a dismissal, and frustration bubbles up inside me. “You can’t just brush me off, Nick. This is serious.”

“And you think I don’t know that?” he snaps, his gaze flicking to me briefly before returning to the road. “This isn’t a game, Cherise. One wrong move, and you’re dead.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

“I know that,” I say, my voice rising. “But sitting back and waiting isn’t the answer.”

His grip on the wheel tightens. “We’ll act when the time is right. Until then, you need to trust me.”

Trust. The word hangs heavy in the air, and I hate how much I want to give it to him. But trust has never come easy for me, and Nick isn’t exactly making it any easier.

I cross my arms, staring out the window as the city blurs past. “Fine. But if Sergei saw me...”

“I said he didn’t,” Nick says firmly. “And if he did, he won’t live long enough to do anything about it.”

The cold certainty in his voice sends a shiver down my spine, but I don’t argue. Because as much as I hate to admit it, I know he’s right.

By the time we reach the safe house, exhaustion has settled over me like a heavy blanket. Nick doesn’t speak as he parks the Range Rover and retrieves the duffel bag, his movements efficient and methodical.

Inside, the air is cool and despite that, the safe house is a stark contrast to the chaos of the marina. Nick sets the bag down on the couch and begins unpacking the equipment, his focus unwavering.

“I need to go through the audio,” he says, his voice calm but firm. “There might be something I missed.”

I nod, sinking into the chair across from him. The adrenaline from earlier has worn off, leaving me drained and raw. But I can't stop thinking about what we heard, about Sergei, about the danger that feels closer than ever.

"Nick," I say quietly, my voice cutting through the silence.

He looks up, his hazel eyes locking onto mine.

"I'm not backing out of this," I say, my words steady despite the fear gnawing at me.

"You might not want me here, but I'm not leaving until this is over."

He doesn't respond, his gaze unreadable. Then he leans back in his chair, shakes his head, then goes back to his laptop.

* * *

The safe house feels smaller tonight, like the walls are pressing in. The buzz of the earlier op in Nice hasn't left my veins, but the energy has shifted. It's not adrenaline anymore—it's something darker, sharper. I can still hear Hector's voice crackling through the earpiece, René's slimy chuckle, and the unmistakable mention of Monaco and diplomatic crates.

And Sergei. His face flashes in my mind like a warning light, and I grip the edge of the counter in the small kitchen to steady myself. He didn't see me. Nick said so. But the fear is still there, coiling in my gut like a venomous snake.

I glance toward the living room, where Nick is still sitting at the table, his laptop glowing in the dim light. His posture is rigid, his focus locked on the screen as he analyzes the surveillance footage. He hasn't said much since we got back. Hell, he hasn't said much to me since Nice.

Something inside me snaps. “You’re treating me like a liability,” I say, the words tumbling out before I can stop them.

He doesn’t even look up. “What are you talking about, Cherise?”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about,” I fire back, crossing the room to stand in front of him. “You’ve been trying to sideline me since this whole thing started.”

His hazel eyes finally lift, sharp and assessing. “I’m trying to keep you alive. There’s a difference.”

“Is there?” I fold my arms, meeting his gaze head-on. “Because from where I’m standing, it feels like you don’t trust me to handle myself.”

“Maybe that’s because you’ve managed to put yourself in this situation and you’re not prepared for it,” he counters, his voice calm but laced with steel.

I laugh, the sound bitter. “Oh, I’m sorry. Did I ruin your perfect plan by showing up when you wanted me to believe you were dead? By being the one who brought you the intel you’re using to stop Hector and René?”

His jaw tightens, and he stands, towering over me. “Don’t twist this into something it’s not. You ended up here with Cerberus because you called JJ, which means Fitz had no choice but to get involved. You were in over your head.”

“Over my head?” I hiss. “I think I’m lucky I still have my head. They want me dead.”

“Take it easy, Cherise. I’m on your side. A lot has happened to you. You’re in deeper than you ever dreamed. You’re not trained for this. You’re not equipped to deal with what’s coming.”

“You bastard,” I say, taking a step closer. “What gives you the right to decide what I can or can’t handle?”

“Because I’m trained for it. Have been my entire life. And I’m the one who’s cleaning up your mess!” he barks, his voice finally breaking through his icy control.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

The words hit like a slap, and I feel the sting deep in my chest. “My mess?” I echo, my voice trembling with anger. “Is that how you see me? As some burden you’ve been forced to carry?”

His expression shifts, something flickering in his eyes, but he doesn’t answer.

“Say it,” I whisper, stepping so close our breath mingles. “If that’s really how you feel... then say it.”

His jaw tightens, a flicker of something raw flashing across his face before he looks away. For a moment, the silence stretches, heavy with everything he doesn’t want to say. Then he forces the words out, low and rough.

“You think this is about you? About me?” He shakes his head, the movement small, almost like he’s trying to shake something loose inside himself. “It’s bigger than that, Cherise. Bigger than either of us.”

He meets my gaze, and the look in his eyes guts me—like every word costs him more than he can afford to give.

“If anything happens to you...” His voice catches for half a second before he steadies it. “It won’t just break me. It’ll bury everything I’m fighting to protect. My team. Innocent lives. The mission.”

He exhales, slow and heavy, like the weight of protecting me is something he can barely carry—and letting me go would kill him even faster.

The truth of it lands heavily, but I don't look away. I can't.

"I didn't ask for any of this," I say, my voice trembling but steady. "But I'm in it. With you. Whether or not you like it."

His gaze softens just enough. Enough to tell me I haven't lost him—yet.

"That doesn't mean you're ready for it," he replies, his tone softening just enough to make me want to scream.

"Why do you care so much?" I whisper, my voice barely audible.

"Because you matter to me, dammit. You always have. I've never stopped caring, Cherise."

The words hang in the air, and for a moment, I can't breathe. I want to believe him, but the pain of the past—the betrayal, the years of silence—it all rushes back, threatening to drown me.

"You have a funny way of showing it," I say, my voice shaking.

"I didn't have a choice," he says, his tone laced with frustration. "I had to leave, Cherise. Had to. Do you have any idea what that did to me?"

"Do you have any idea what it did to me?" I snap, my anger flaring again.

The room falls silent, the weight of my words hanging between us. He looks at me, his hazel eyes searching mine, and for the first time, I see the cracks in his resolve.

"I don't want to lose you again," he says finally, his voice barely more than a whisper.

My chest tightens, and I take a step closer, my anger giving way to something softer, something more dangerous. “Then stop pushing me away.”

His eyes drop to my lips, and for a moment, I think he’s going to kiss me. My breath catches, the space between us electric.

But then he steps back, the mask slipping back into place. “I need to get back to work,” he says, his voice colder now. “We’ll figure out our next move when I’m done. Why don’t you make us something to eat?”

I watch him turn and walk away, the sound of his footsteps echoing in the quiet safe house. My fists clench at my sides, frustration and longing warring inside me.

Nick might be the most infuriating man I’ve ever known, but he’s also the only one who makes me feel like this—alive, seen, and maddeningly out of control.

As I retreat to my room dismissing the thought of food right now, one thought lingers in my mind: if he thinks I’m going to back down, he doesn’t know me as well as he thinks he does.

* * *

I’ve spent the last hour pacing my room, replaying the argument with Nick over and over. His words replay like a scratched record.

The heat of anger from our fight hasn’t cooled, but beneath it is a deeper frustration—one born not just from his dismissiveness but from the truth laced in his confession. He’s right. I’m not trained for this. But I’m also not weak, and I refuse to let him treat me like I’m some damsel in distress.

The thought of proving myself to him fills me with determination. But it’s more than

that. I'm tired of the walls between us, the constant push and pull, the unspoken tension that feels like it's ready to snap at any moment. If I want him to trust me, I have to take the first step.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

The realization both terrifies and excites me. I've never been good at giving up control, but with Nick, it's different. It's not just that he demands it—it's that, deep down, I want to give it to him.

I take a deep breath, pulling myself together. My hands tremble slightly as I open the door and step into the hall. The house is quiet—the only sound is the faint hum of the generator. Nick's door is slightly ajar, the soft glow of a lamp spilling into the hallway.

I hesitate for a moment before opening his door, my heart pounding in my chest, a mixture of anticipation and apprehension coursing through my veins.

He's sitting on the edge of the bed, a glass of whiskey in his hand. His shirt is unbuttoned, revealing the hard lines of his chest, and his gaze is fixed on the floor. He looks up the moment I step inside, his hazel eyes narrowing.

"What are you doing in here?" His voice is low, controlled, but there's an edge to it.

I close the door behind me, leaning against it for support. "I need to talk to you." My voice is steady, belying the turmoil within.

"We've said more than enough for tonight," he replies, his tone defeated.

"No," I say firmly, stepping closer. "We haven't."

His eyes track my movements, his expression unreadable. "Cherise, I don't have the patience for another fight."

“Good,” I say, standing directly in front of him. “Because I’m not here to fight.”

He sets the glass down on the nightstand, rising to his full height. His presence is magnetic, pulling me toward him even as I try to keep my composure.

“Then what are you here for?” he asks, his voice a soft growl, his broad shoulders enhancing an aura of dominance that both intimidates and excites me.

I meet his gaze, refusing to back down. “To prove to you that I trust you.”

His jaw tightens, his hazel eyes searching mine. “Be careful what you’re offering, Cherise.”

“I know exactly what I’m offering,” I say, my voice steady despite the storm raging inside me.

He takes a step closer, his hand brushing against my cheek. His touch is gentle, but there’s a fire behind it, a promise of something far more intense. “Careful, Cherise. There’s no turning back once you cross this line.”

“I know,” I whisper, my voice hoarse with emotion. “That’s exactly what I want.”

Without another word, he steps closer, his hand gently caressing my jaw, his touch feather-light, but it sends a jolt of electricity through my body. I close my eyes, savoring the sensation as his fingers explore.

“Take off your clothes,” he says, his voice low and commanding.

My breath catches, but I don’t hesitate. I reach for the hem of my shirt, pulling it over my head and letting it fall to the floor. My jeans follow, leaving me standing before him in nothing but my lace bra and panties.

His gaze darkens as he steps closer, his hand trailing down my arm. “Naked, Cherise.” He steps even closer, his body a mere breath away from mine.

I swallow hard, my hands trembling slightly as I reach behind me to unclasp my bra. It falls away, leaving me bare from the waist up. I pause, feeling vulnerable yet empowered, before sliding my panties down, stepping out of them and standing before him completely naked, letting the cool air brush against my skin.

Nick’s eyes roam over me, taking in every inch of my exposed body. The intensity in his gaze makes me feel both vulnerable and powerful, like I’m standing on the edge of a precipice, ready to fall.

“Come here,” he says, his tone soft but firm.

I step closer, my pulse racing as he reaches for me. His hands rest on my hips, his touch grounding me.

“Do you know what you’re asking for?” he murmurs, his lips brushing against my ear, sending a shiver down my spine.

I nod, my breath coming in short gasps. “Yes,” I whisper, my voice trembling.

He pulls back slightly, his hazel eyes locking onto mine. “If you do this, there’s no going back.”

“I don’t want to go back,” I say, my voice stronger now.

“Then we’re on the stoplight system. Green means everything is good; yellow means you need a break; and red means stop. I have rights to play at Opus Noir, which means I get tested every three months. I don’t want to worry about pregnancies...”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

“I’ve just had my annual physical and I’m clean, too. I haven’t been with anyone except for Hector in years, and I’ve been on birth control since I was a teenager. I really don’t want you to have to use a condom.”

For a moment, he just stares at me, his gaze so intense it feels like he can see straight into my soul. Then he nods, his hands sliding up my sides, his thumbs brushing against the curve of my waist, before reaching up to cup my breasts and flick my stiffened nipples with his thumbs.

“Then kneel,” he commands, his voice low.

I drop to my knees without hesitation, my body responding to him instinctively. I find myself face-to-face with the hard line of his cock pressing against his fly. The cool floor presses against my skin, but all I can focus on is him—his voice, his touch, the sheer presence of him.

He fists my hair, tilting my head back to meet his gaze, which is a mixture of desire and dominance. “Good girl.” His lips trail down my cheek and he claims my mouth in a searing kiss.

The praise washes over me, leaving me breathless. His mouth devours mine, his tongue invading, demanding and possessive. I hear myself moan. My hands instinctively reach up, gripping his thighs, my nails digging into his pants as his kiss deepens.

Breaking the kiss, Nick trails his lips down my neck, his breath hot against my sensitive skin.

He steps back slightly, his hands moving to his shirt. He shrugs it off, revealing the hard planes of his chest and his sculpted abs, the defined lines of muscle that make my mouth go dry.

“Hands behind your back,” he instructs, his voice steady.

I obey, clasping my hands together and sitting back on my heels. The position thrusts my breasts at him and makes me feel exposed, vulnerable, but also empowered.

Nick circles me slowly, his fingers trailing over my skin as he moves. His touch is light, teasing, but it sets every nerve in my body on fire.

“You’re mine now, Cherise,” he says, his voice low and possessive. “Every inch of you belongs to me.” He growls, leaning over, his finger sliding down my spine and trailing through the cleft of my ass. I shudder as it all comes back to me—the way he made me feel, the way he made me come undone, the way I reveled in his touch.

“Yes,” I whisper, the word slipping out before I can stop it, my voice hoarse with desire.

He kneels in front of me, his hand cupping the back of my neck as he pulls me closer. His lips brush against mine, soft at first, then harder, more demanding.

His kiss deepens, his tongue teasing mine as his hand moves to my waist, pulling me against him. I can feel the heat of his body, the sheer power of him, and it leaves me trembling. I understand why it’s called dominance now. But given some of the reading I’ve been doing, it no longer frightens me, nor do I find anything weak in the prospect of submitting.

He pulls back slightly, his lips brushing against my ear. “You’re not allowed to hide from me anymore, Cherise. Do you understand? Not your body, not your desires. I

want it all.”

“Yes,” I whisper, my voice barely audible. “I’m yours.” It should be terrifying to admit that, but it isn’t. I feel the years fall away.

He stands, pulling me to my feet with him. His hands trail down my body, exploring every curve, every inch of exposed skin, guiding me to the bed and giving me a gentle shove. There is no ask in how he handles me, only the unspoken promise that I will feel his dominance in a way that makes me come alive again. I realize now I’ve spent most of my adult life sleepwalking.

“Lie down,” he says, nodding toward the bed.

I do as he says, my heart pounding as he moves to join me. His hands are everywhere, his touch both commanding and tender. He doesn’t rush, taking his time to explore me, to learn every reaction, every sound I make.

His fingers continue their exploration, tracing the outline of my sex, but stopping just short of giving me the release I crave. My breath comes in short pants, my body trembling with anticipation.

“You’re so wet,” he murmurs, his voice thick with desire. “So ready for this.”

I whimper, my hips rising off the bed, seeking his touch. He chuckles, his fingers finally slipping between my folds, stroking me with a slow, deliberate rhythm. I cry out. I can’t help myself.

“That’s it, baby. Let me hear you. Let me feel how much you want to submit to me.”

I moan, my body arching into his touch, my hand clutching at the sheets of the bed. His fingers work their magic, bringing me to the brink of ecstasy, only to pull back

and start the torment over again.

“Please, Nick,” I beg, my voice still hoarse. “I need you inside me.”

With a low growl, he shifts his body, removing his pants and hovering over me before settling himself between my thighs. I close my eyes.

“Open your eyes. I want to see you. I want you to see me.”

My eyes flutter open, meeting his intense gaze as he slowly enters me, filling me with his hardness. He’s bigger than I remember, or did I just get used to Hector not being very well endowed? He takes it slowly, pushing forward so that I feel him taking possession of me. He draws back until only the crown is inside me before thrusting back in.

A strangled cry escapes my lips as he begins to move, his thrusts slow and deliberate, each one sending waves of pleasure through my body. His eyes never leave mine, his expression a mixture of desire and possessiveness.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

“You feel so good, baby,” he groans, his voice strained. “Just like coming home.”

I feel it too. My hands grip his shoulders, my nails digging into his skin as I try to match his rhythm. He grasps my hips in a way that allows him to cup my ass. He holds me steady as I try to move with him.

“No, baby. I do the fucking. You’re the one who gets fucked. You don’t come until I give you permission.”

I writhe beneath him; he’s given me no other choice. He begins to thrust harder and faster. The pleasure builds inside me like a bowstring pulled taut and ready to snap. His face hardens as he begins to pound into me, making me cry out and clutch his biceps as I try to keep from being overwhelmed by everything he makes me feel.

“Come for me,” he commands, his voice hoarse. “Let me feel you around me.”

His words are all it takes to send me over the edge. I cry out, my body convulsing around him, my orgasm ripping through me with an intensity that leaves me breathless. He follows soon after, his body tensing as he empties himself into me, his low growl filling the room.

We lay entangled, our hearts pounding and our bodies glistening with sweat. I turn my head, my eyes meeting his, and see the satisfaction and possessiveness in his gaze.

“Mine,” he whispers, his lips brushing against my temple.

My body is still trembling with the aftershocks of pleasure. “Yours,” I agree, my voice soft and satiated. For the first time in years, I let go of everything—my fears, my doubts, my need to be in control—and simply let myself feel. I am free.

Nick rolls from me, pulling me against his chest as he wraps an arm around me. His hand brushes through my hair, his touch soothing, but it doesn’t calm the storm inside me. Because even though my body feels sated, my mind is anything but.

I glance up at him, my heart twisting at the sight of his relaxed expression, his guard down for the first time since we reunited. I should feel safe. I should feel secure knowing that I’ve proven my trust in him. But all I can think about is whether my feelings for him are clouding my judgment, and whether he feels the same. He spoke words of ownership, of possession, but not of feeling.

As I drift off to sleep, his arms still wrapped around me, I question whether or not giving him my trust was the smartest thing I’ve ever done—or the most dangerous.

10

NICK

Cherise is still asleep, her body curled against mine, her breath slow and even. I should move. I should get out of this bed. I have things I should be doing, but I can’t. Not yet.

Her scent lingers on my skin, a mixture of her natural sweetness and the remnants of our night together. My arm is draped over her waist, my hand resting possessively against her belly. She’s warm beneath my touch, her body relaxed in a way I haven’t seen since she walked back into my life.

I hate how right this feels. This is exactly the type of distraction I can’t afford.

My fingers tighten slightly against her skin before I force myself to pull away. I roll out of bed, careful not to wake her, and grab my pants from where they were discarded on the floor. My movements are controlled, efficient, and I'm fully dressed before I allow myself to glance back at her.

She's asleep. Finally. Her breath is slow and even, the curve of her body curled toward where mine was like she trusts I'll still be here when she wakes.

That's what terrifies me.

The room is quiet, but my mind isn't. I should be scanning intel, finalizing the next steps, reviewing risk variables—but all I can do is stare at her. Memorize the curve of her jaw, the barest furrow in her brow that never quite disappears, even in sleep. Like some part of her never stops bracing for a fight.

I drag a hand down my face and exhale slowly, careful not to wake her. Because if she opens her eyes, I'll lie. I'll tell her I'm fine. That she belongs here. That this is a mission like any other.

But it isn't. She isn't. And that's the problem.

She makes me hesitate. Not in the field—not yet—but in my head. I find myself accounting for her in every exit plan, every breach strategy, every goddamn worst-case scenario. I've never operated with that kind of variable. I've never let anyone be that variable.

It's not her fault. Hell, she's stronger than most operatives I've worked with. Sharp. Resilient. She knows what we're up against and hasn't blinked once.

But I have. Quietly. When she's not looking.

Because if something happens to her... I won't be able to compartmentalize it. I won't be able to lock it in a box and keep moving—that makes her the most dangerous thing in my world.

I whisper it into the dark, like whispering it makes it less real.

"You being here... it changes everything."

She shifts slightly on the bed, lashes fluttering against her cheeks, but she doesn't wake.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

I lean back against the wall, scrubbing a hand down my face, voice dropping to a whisper meant only for the dark.

"I don't move the same," I admit. "I don't think the same. Every decision, every step—it's not about the mission anymore. It's about you."

The words feel raw in my throat, but I force them out, needing the truth between us even if she's not awake to hear it.

"You're not just part of the risk now, Cherise. You are the risk. You're the reason I'll start second-guessing, the reason I might hesitate when I can't afford to."

I close my eyes for a moment, feeling the ache of it settle deep in my bones. I lean down, pressing a kiss to her shoulder, breathing her in. Vanilla and something that always manages to punch through the noise in my head. She smells like a memory. Like before.

Before war. Before Cerberus. Before I learned to disappear into shadows so deep, I forgot what daylight looked like.

She murmurs something unintelligible in her sleep and burrows deeper into the bed. I want nothing more than to get undressed and crawl back in beside her, allowing my arm to tighten around her. Possessive. Fierce. Fuck. I'm already too far gone.

But I shove that urge down, and I know—when she wakes, I won't tell her any of this. I'll keep moving like nothing's changed. Because she needs strength, not conflict. Control, not doubt. She needs the Ghost.

But in this quiet moment, in this quiet space where no one can hear me fall apart, I let the truth bleed through: I love her.

And that love? It's the most dangerous exposure of all.

Cherise is tangled up in something that's bigger than either of us, and I'm in too deep to ignore the obvious. I have to keep her safe—even from myself.

I step out of the bedroom and into the living area, the safe house silent except for the faint hum of the security system. My laptop sits on the table, still open from the night before. The screen casts a dim glow against the shadows.

I don't hesitate before pulling up the encrypted line. Logan answers within seconds.

"It's bloody early," Logan grumbles, his voice rough with sleep.

"It's late," I counter, already scanning the new data he's uploaded. "What have you got?"

"Enough to make me rather glad it's not my arse on the line," Logan mutters. "We've tracked one of René's secondary supply depots—a warehouse out in La Seyne-sur-Mer. Security's tight, but nothing we haven't danced through before."

"Who's running it?" I ask, my fingers flying across the keyboard as I pull up satellite images of the area.

"Charles Fortier," Logan replies. "Vallois' logistics manager."

The name sends a ripple of recognition. Cherise mentioned him before, and he was in the surveillance reports Cerberus has compiled over the last few weeks. Fortier is more than just a logistics manager. He's the one making sure René's shipments get

where they need to go without raising red flags, which means he's valuable.

"We'll need him alive," I say.

Logan chuckles. "That's the plan, isn't it? In and out—quiet, quick, surgical. No fireworks unless absolutely necessary."

I nod, already thinking ahead. "Get your team prepped. I want eyes on every exit and full control of their comms before we make a move."

"Consider it done."

Logan hesitates for a moment before adding, "There's something else."

I glance at the screen. "What?"

"Interpol," he says, his voice turning grim. "We've been tracking internal activity, looking for any unusual access points in their database. Someone's been pulling files—covering Hector's tracks, rerouting intelligence reports and whoever it is, they have high-level clearance."

I go still. Shit. Interpol's got a mole.

It shouldn't surprise me. Corruption isn't new, especially in a system as large as Interpol. But if someone on the inside is protecting Hector and René, it means we're working against an enemy we can't see yet, and that makes this entire operation twice as dangerous.

"Do you have a name?" I ask.

"Not yet," Logan admits. "But I'm close. Whoever it is, they're good—masking their

activity behind dummy accounts, rerouting signals through international servers, but they slipped up. There was a breach in one of Interpol's restricted archives two days ago, flagged by an AI security system before they could cover their tracks completely."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

I pull up the log he just sent me, my eyes scanning the data. “What were they looking for?”

Logan exhales. “You.”

My fingers pause over the keyboard.

“What?”

“They accessed everything connected to you—Cerberus, Opus Noir, past missions, classified files. If I had to guess, I’d say they’re trying to find out how much you know.”

A slow burn of anger coils in my gut. This isn’t just about Cherise anymore. Someone inside Interpol is watching me, and that means they know I’m coming for them.

“Keep digging. I want that name, Logan.”

“You’ll have it,” Logan replies evenly. “But Nick... tread carefully. If someone with that level of clearance is shielding Hector, they won’t think twice about throwing you to the wolves to keep their hands clean.”

“Let them try,” I say, my voice cold. “I’m not so easily disposed of.”

I end the call, my mind already working through the implications. Whoever the mole is, they have resources and access to information I shouldn’t have to worry about.

They're playing a long game, manipulating Interpol's system to shield Hector and René, and now they're watching me.

I can't afford mistakes, which brings me right back to the issue I've been trying to ignore.

Cherise.

I glance toward the bedroom door, still slightly ajar. The woman lying in that bed is a complication I don't need, a distraction I shouldn't allow. The problem is, I already have. She's not just an asset. She's not just a loose end I need to tie up. She's Cherise—the woman who I walked away from to keep her safe. When I did, something shattered in me I never thought could break. The woman who, despite everything, still owns a part of me I can't take back.

I close my eyes, inhaling deeply before releasing a slow, measured breath.

I can't let her get in the way of this. I won't. Because if I do, I might not survive what comes next... and neither will she.

* * *

The room is silent except for the rhythmic tapping of my fingers against the desk. Cherise sits across from me, curled into the corner of the couch, arms wrapped around herself like she's holding something in. She's been doing that since last night—since I took her, claimed her, made her mine again in ways I never should have allowed. She never should have allowed. I've had years of training in D/s and I never play with newbies or tourists. My guess is Cherise is both.

Now, I have to be the one to draw the lines. I shouldn't have touched her. I shouldn't have let her get back under my skin. But fuck if I don't want to do it again.

She shifts slightly; her gaze flicking toward me before darting away. She knows I'm watching her. She always does.

"We need to talk," I say, keeping my voice steady, controlled.

She rubs her arms like she's cold, but I know better. She's bracing for whatever I'm about to ask. "About?"

"Hector's inner circle. I need names, Cherise."

She stiffens, just enough for me to notice. "I already told you about Fortier. And Sergei."

"That's not enough," I say, leaning forward, resting my elbows on my knees. "I need to know who else Hector trusted. Who had access to classified intel? Who was in the room when deals were made?"

She shakes her head. "Hector was careful. He didn't talk in front of me, not about real details. He had people, but he never let me see their faces if he could help it."

"Did he ever mention names?"

She bites her lip, thinking. "There was one... François something. I never got his last name, but he worked with Hector a lot. I heard his name when Hector thought I wasn't listening."

I file the name away, already making a mental note to have Logan run it down. "Anyone else?"

Cherise hesitates.

I narrow my eyes. “Cherise.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

She sighs. “There was a woman. Juliette Morin. She was an attaché to some diplomat—Hector never said who—but she was always around when he came back from ‘business trips.’ She knew things, Nick. She wasn’t just some mistress.”

Juliette Morin. That’s a name I know.

I push up from my chair, pacing. “If she’s connected to the diplomatic channels Hector’s been using, we need to find her. Fast.”

Cherise nods, but she’s distant now, staring at nothing.

“Talk to me,” I say, softer now.

She blinks, like she’s remembering I’m here. “It doesn’t matter.”

I cross the space between us, crouching so I’m at her level. “Everything matters.”

Her eyes flash, something wounded hiding behind the walls she’s thrown up. “You really want to know?”

“Yes.”

The words seem to have to claw their way out. “You’re asking me to dig through the worst years of my life. To remember every moment I spent trying to convince myself that I wasn’t suffocating, that Hector wasn’t breaking me piece by piece.”

I inhale slowly, forcing my hands to remain at my sides. “Tell me.”

She laughs, but there's no humor in it. "Hector never needed to hit me, Nick. He was smarter than that. He made me feel like I was nothing without him. Like I should be grateful he let me stay, let me breathe in his world. Every time I questioned something, he reminded me how easily I could be replaced. How I was just another accessory to him."

My gut twists—the bastard.

"I lost myself," she whispers, her voice shaking. "And I let it happen. I let him take me apart."

I reach for her before I can stop myself, gripping her wrist, pulling her close enough that she has to look at me. "He didn't take you apart, Cherise. He didn't break you. You got out."

She shakes her head. "I don't feel like I did."

I tighten my grip, just enough to make her feel it. "You're here. You came to me. That means you fought your way back." Her lips tremble, and I know she's close to breaking. I lift her chin with two fingers, forcing her to meet my gaze. "He doesn't own you anymore, sweetheart. He never did."

She stills for a moment, and I think she's going to fall into me. But then she straightens, pulling herself back together.

"I just... I don't want to be that weak again," she whispers.

I bite back a snarl. "You were never weak. Hector manipulated you. Controlled you. But he didn't break you, Cherise. And I swear to God, I'll make sure he never gets the chance to try again."

A silence stretches between us, filled with memory and loss.

Then she whispers, “Why do you care so much?”

I freeze. Because I don’t have a simple answer to that question. Why do I care? Because she was mine, once. Because I spent years wanting her, only to realize that want was nothing more than grief in disguise. Because when she looks at me like this—like I’m the only person in the world who can make her feel safe—I know I’ll burn the world down to keep her from being afraid.

I lean in, my lips just brushing her ear. “Because you matter, Cherise. You always have.”

She shudders, and for the first time since she walked back into my life, I let myself believe she might actually learn to trust me again. I wonder if I can do the same. But trust won’t keep either of us alive.

I step back, running a hand through my hair. “We need to get moving. I’ll have Logan track down Juliette Morin. You stay here.”

She glares, fire flashing in her green eyes. “Nick...”

“No,” I cut her off. “This isn’t a debate, Cherise. You stay, you keep your head down and let me handle this.”

Her lips press into a thin line. “You think you can just decide that for me?”

“Yes.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

She shakes her head. “You don’t own me.”

I step into her space again, close enough to feel the heat radiating from her skin. “Don’t I?”

Her breath catches, and I see the war playing out in her eyes. She hates how easily I unravel her. But she loves it, too.

She swallows hard. “It’s not fair to use last night against me.”

I drag my fingers through her hair, letting them rest against the back of her neck. “You’re mine to protect.” She trembles. I lower my voice, my lips just brushing hers. “I will burn the entire world down before I let anyone touch you again.”

11

CHERISE

I’m not staying behind.

I don’t care how commanding Nick sounds, how hard his gaze cuts through me like he’s already made the decision. I didn’t escape Hector, run for my life, land back in the orbit of the one man who could shatter me, just to sit on the sidelines while they plan to take down my ex-husband.

Leaning forward, I plant my hands on the table between us. “You need me on this mission.”

Nick doesn't even blink. He just stares, unreadable, his body still as stone. The energy rolling off him is dangerous, coiled like a predator about to strike.

"No," he says simply.

One word. That's all I get. Like he thinks the matter is closed.

I grit my teeth. "You're making a mistake."

Logan enters the room and goes to stand near the window with his arms crossed, lets out a low whistle. "Gotta say, mate, she's got balls."

Nick's head snaps toward Logan, and the look he gives would turn most men to dust. But not Logan—he just grins and rocks back on his heels.

I seize the opening. "You said Hector has a pattern, right? That he only moves when he's certain he won't get caught? Well, I know those patterns better than anyone. I lived with him. I can tell you what he'll do if he thinks he's being watched, what he'll say if he's onto you. If you take me with you, I can do that in real time."

Nick exhales slowly, the sound measured, controlled. But the muscle ticking in his jaw tells me he's anything but calm.

"I don't normally take civilians on ops," he says, voice low.

"That boat has sailed."

Nick doesn't answer right away. He just watches me, and I can feel him assessing, recalculating. I refuse to back down. He's the one who said I wasn't weak.

I lower my voice. "You keep saying you'll protect me. That I need to trust you. But

trust is a two-way street, Nick. You want me to follow orders? Fine. I'll do it. But you need me as much as I need you. You want to bring these bastards down? You're going to have to slip a knife in their ribs. Going in guns blazing is just going to get a lot of innocent people killed."

"She has a point," says Logan.

Nick growls, but I continue, "I'm safer with you than some place holed up where they can find me while you and Logan are out playing hero. If I'm not part of the solution, you're not just keeping me safe—you're keeping me trapped in a gilded cage, powerless. And regardless of how luxurious the surroundings are, I won't do that again."

A muscle ticks in his cheek. He glances at Logan, then back to me. I hold my breath.

Then he gives me the smallest nod. "You follow my orders without question." His voice is sharp, final. "If I say run, you run. If I say hide, you disappear. If I say you don't speak, you don't make a fucking sound. Understood?"

The air between us crackles, something electric surging beneath the command in his voice. I should be nervous. Should feel boxed in by the absolute authority he just laid down.

Instead, I feel something very different—something hotter.

I swallow hard and nod. "Understood."

Logan lets out a low whistle. "Bloody hell. This'll be a right laugh, won't it?"

Page 42

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

Nick shoots him another look before returning his focus to me. “Gear up. We leave in twenty.”

He turns on his heel and stalks out, not looking back.

* * *

We enter the casino and Nick stops, surveying the room.

“Stop fidgeting.” His voice is low, a command wrapped in silk and steel, brushing against the shell of my ear from where he stands behind me.

I freeze, spine straightening under his gaze. His presence is heat at my back, steady and unmoving. Unshakable.

“We’re just gathering intel,” he murmurs, the words precise. “You’re here to be seen, not heard. A visual asset. Fortier doesn’t know Nick Ryeland and Nikolai Beaumont are the same man. They call me the Ghost for a reason.”

“But he’s met me before.”

“I know,” Nick says, his tone even. “It’s a calculated risk. But to someone like Fortier, you’re a detail. A polished ornament. If he recognizes you at all, it’ll be vague—pretty company, not a strategic threat.”

He steps closer, his fingers brushing the line of my bare shoulder, adjusting the drape of the green silk strap. “You belong to me tonight. Let him believe that. Let him look

and see something he wants, and know it's already claimed."

My breath catches, and I let my hand fall to my side. The air between us hums—charged, electric, thick with a tension I don't dare name. Not here. Not yet.

But I feel the truth settle between us like a live wire: I'm not just a pawn in this game. I'm the piece Nick intends to use very, very deliberately.

His fingers brush the back of my neck, adjusting the diamond collar he snapped around me five minutes ago. The diamonds are real, but not the sentiment. It's not real, just an expensive prop, but the possessive weight of it feels all too real.

"Remember the rules," Nick murmurs, his lips just inches from my ear. "You're here as my submissive, which means you act like it. You speak when spoken to. You let me lead. And if anything goes sideways, you let me handle it."

I meet his gaze in the mirror, my reflection a study in defiance despite the glittering collar at my throat. "I don't need you to handle me."

His grip tightens slightly, enough to make my pulse race. "You will follow my orders, Cherise. If you can't do that, I'm pulling you out now."

Heat flashes through me—not just from his dominance, but from the raw energy radiating off him. I know this isn't about the role we're playing tonight. This is about him trying to control the one thing he can't—me.

I exhale slowly, forcing myself to relax against him. "I'll follow your orders," I say, my voice softer.

His fingers linger at the nape of my neck for a moment before he lets go. "Good girl."

Damn him for how much that praise affects me.

Nick straightens, stepping back as he adjusts the cuffs of his black suit. The dark fabric molds to his body, every inch of him exuding power and control. No one would doubt that he belongs in a place like this—Cerberus has prepped him well for this world. He looks like a king stepping into his domain.

And me? I look like the woman who belongs to him.

* * *

The casino's private lounge is dimly lit, the glow of chandeliers casting golden reflections over the polished marble floors. This isn't the bustling floor where tourists throw away their fortunes at blackjack tables. This is the domain of Monaco's elite—billionaires, criminals, and power brokers who strike deals worth millions over aged scotch and a well-placed bet.

And tonight, one of those deals involves René Vallois.

Nick's hand is firm on the small of my back as he guides me through the space, his touch a silent warning to play my role.

I lower my gaze, my lashes sweeping down as I lean slightly into his touch. It's not hard—I feel the heat of his body, the possessive way he maneuvers me through the crowd, keeping me close enough that no one doubts exactly what I am to him.

His.

I shiver.

From the corner of my eye, I spot two men seated at a private table near the back of

the lounge. One of them, a tall man with silver at his temples and a sharp European cut to his suit, lifts his glass to his lips as he surveys the room. His gaze lingers on me for a beat too long.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

Nick notices. His fingers tighten slightly at my waist, his thumb pressing against my hipbone in a silent command.

Ignore him.

I let my body relax into Nick's, letting him shield me from view as he leads me deeper into the club.

A hostess dressed in a slinky black dress intercepts us near the entrance to the private rooms. "Monsieur," she purrs in a thick accent, obviously recognizing him. "Your room is ready and has been prepared to your specifications." Her gaze flickers to me, then back to him, a knowing smile curling her lips. "Shall I send in the staff?"

"No." His grip on me tightens. "We won't be needing an audience."

A flush creeps up my neck. The way he says it, so cool and commanding, sends a shiver through me.

The hostess leads us toward the back, where a hidden doorway opens into a suite that looks more like a high-end private dungeon than a casino lounge. The lighting is moody, the furniture sleek, the walls adorned with implements designed for pleasure and pain.

Nick doesn't hesitate. He strides inside, pulling me with him, and the door clicks shut behind us.

I whirl to face him the second we're alone. "You didn't mention we'd be doing this in

a damn sex dungeon.”

His lips twitch, but he says nothing as he unbuttons his jacket. “It’s the safest place to talk. René’s men won’t bat an eye at what happens in here, but if they hear anything that sounds like business? That’s a problem.”

I fold my arms. “So what now?”

Nick doesn’t answer. He just steps toward me, closing the space between us in a slow, deliberate movement. His fingers trail up my bare arm, making my breath catch.

“Now,” he murmurs, “we put on a show.”

I swallow hard.

Nick’s touch drags down, fingers skimming the side of my ribs before settling at my waist. His grip is firm—possessive—his body heat bleeding into mine.

“What kind of show?” I whisper.

His lips tilt at the corner, his breath brushing against my temple. “Nothing you can’t handle, sweetheart.”

I suck in a breath as he lifts my wrist and guides it behind my back. My other wrist follows, and before I can react, the cool bite of leather cuffs circles them, locking together in a way that steals the air from my lungs.

He tilts my chin up with two fingers. “You trust me?”

The question shouldn’t make me weak. But it does.

“Yes.”

His gaze darkens. “Then let go.”

His hands are on me, adjusting my stance, pressing me flush against him so that my bound arms press against the sharp lines of his suit.

I feel the moment the door opens. The shift in the air, the faintest creak of wood, another person stepping into the room.

Nick doesn’t acknowledge them right away. He keeps his attention on me, his fingers brushing the nape of my neck, his lips grazing my temple in an intimate display of ownership.

Then, casually, he glances up.

“Fortier.” His voice is smooth. Cool.

I force myself to stay still, my pulse thudding in my throat as I listen.

“I was told you wanted a private moment,” Fortier says, his voice accented and sharp. “Seems I was right.”

Nick’s fingers stroke my spine, just enough to make me shiver against him. “You know me. I like to mix business with pleasure.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

Fortier chuckles. “And the pleasure?”

Nick’s lips hover near my ear. “Mine.”

My knees nearly buckle.

“Is that what you wanted to discuss?” Nick drawls, finally pulling back enough to look at Fortier. “Or are we getting to the part where you tell me what Vallois is up to?”

The conversation shifts. I don’t move. I can’t. I play my part, my body flush against Nick’s, my wrists bound, my breath unsteady. And as I listen, I realize something terrifying.

I don’t know what’s more dangerous—the game we’re playing right now... or how much I never want it to end.

* * *

Nick’s fingers tighten around my nape, keeping me exactly where he wants me—pressed against him, my bound wrists resting against the small of my back. His body is a solid wall of heat, his scent wrapping around me like a dangerous lure. The room isn’t silent, but it might as well be. I barely hear Fortier’s response over the blood rushing in my ears.

I should be focusing on the mission. On gathering intel. On remembering that this is all for show.

Instead, all I can think about is the way Nick's touch ignites something deep inside me, something I don't know how to control.

"Convince me she belongs to you," Fortier murmurs, a smirk evident in his tone.

A flicker of something dark passes through Nick's expression. His hold on me tightens ever so slightly, a warning I don't entirely understand until he speaks.

"You doubt me?" His voice is smooth, unshaken, but there's an edge beneath the words.

Fortier lifts a shoulder. "Vallois never trusts a man who doesn't know how to keep a woman in line."

My stomach clenches.

Nick exhales slowly, his breath feathering over my cheek. "Then watch carefully."

Before I can react, he spins me, pressing me against the padded bench behind us. My wrists are still bound, my breath catching as his hands bracket my hips, his broad frame caging me in.

I don't get a chance to protest.

His lips find my throat, a slow, deliberate drag of heat and possession that has me sucking in a breath. His teeth scrape my pulse point, sending a shudder through me.

He's playing a role.

We're putting on a show.

I repeat the words in my mind, but my body doesn't get the message.

Nick's hands skim the slit of my dress, parting the fabric and exposing my thigh. His palm skates over my bare skin, moving higher, teasing, but never giving me what I suddenly, desperately need.

"This one has a smart mouth," he murmurs for Fortier's benefit, his voice a low, gravelly drawl. "But she knows who she belongs to."

With a deliberate slowness, he reaches into his pocket and produces a small, sleek ball gag I hadn't realized he possessed. It's in my mouth and secured in place with deft fingers before I can even muster a thought. The combination of his words and the gag sends a jolt of heat coursing through me, a sensation both foreign and electrifying.

Nick shifts, his muscular thigh pressing firmly between mine, forcing them apart just enough to remind me of the fragility of my control. My breathing becomes ragged and uneven, and I can't suppress the way my body instinctively responds to him—to the raw dominance in his touch, the unspoken promise woven into the way he holds me immobile.

My pulse pounds like a relentless drumbeat in my chest.

Nick's breath is hot against my skin as his lips trail up to my ear. "You want to keep playing with fire, sweetheart?" His voice is a deep, intimate rumble that only I can hear.

I don't answer. I can't.

His fingers tighten possessively at my waist, sending a thrilling shiver down my spine. "Then burn," he whispers, a challenge wrapped in seduction.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

His hand glides up, up, until his palm cups me through the delicate, whisper-thin lace of my panties. A startled gasp escapes my lips, and my body jerks instinctively, but his hold is unyielding. He brushes his fingers over the lace, his touch a featherlight caress, while his body remains a solid anchor against mine.

A shiver cascades through me, the heat pooling low in my belly turning molten, threatening to consume me.

Nick's lips graze the shell of my ear, the faintest touch that sends a thrill through my entire being. "Be still or I'll strip you naked, put a butterfly on you and put those pretty nipples of yours in alligator clamps."

It's not a threat. It's a test—one I know I'm on the brink of failing.

He applies the slightest pressure, just enough to make me squirm, to make my body yearn for his touch, and I swear I can hear the wicked grin in the silence. My head falls back against his shoulder, my breath escaping in soft, uneven gasps as his fingers toy with the lace, teasing the very edge of my resolve.

"Perfect," Fortier murmurs approvingly, his voice a smooth purr of satisfaction. "Now I believe you."

Nick stills, his presence shifting in an instant to something more controlled, more composed, the moment snapping like a taut thread. I come undone with a muffled cry; the sound trapped behind the gag.

He gently strokes my sex one last time before his hand withdraws, leaving my entire

body thrumming with an unfulfilled need, my pulse hammering wildly in my throat. I don't even realize I've made a sound until Nick's thumb brushes tenderly across my bottom lip, a silent acknowledgment of the charged moment we've shared.

He turns me slowly, keeping one possessive hand on my waist as he faces Fortier. "Satisfied?"

Fortier chuckles. "I should've known better than to question you."

Nick doesn't smile. He never does. Instead, he lifts his chin, his presence effortlessly commanding. "Then let's talk business."

* * *

The operation is a success—at least, that's what the intel says. Nick gets Fortier to hand over everything: shipment manifests, encrypted contact chains, secure drop locations. No threats, no weapons, no blood spilled. Just quiet pressure, a low voice, and the brutal calm of a man who knows how to take control without raising his hand.

By the time Nick leads me out of the club, the mission's over. The job is done. And I still don't know exactly why it worked. He didn't flash credentials or twist an arm. All he did was show Fortier what true dominance looks like—and somehow, that was enough to make a man like Fortier fold.

Nothing feels finished. Not the heat still coursing through me. Not the way my skin hums with the memory of his touch. Not the unspoken question that lingers between us.

He says nothing as the valet brings the Range Rover around. Nick's movements are clipped, controlled, but I feel it in the way he grips the wheel, the way his jaw ticks as he stares straight ahead as he pulls away from the entrance.

He's just as affected as I am. The realization makes something reckless twist inside me.

"Nick..."

"Not now," he says, driving us into a dark corner of the casino's parking lot and parking.

I cross my arms, heat prickling over my skin. "You can't just ignore what happened in there."

His knuckles tighten on the wheel. "Watch me."

My body still feels branded by his touch, and now he wants to pretend it didn't happen? Like I didn't nearly fall apart in his hands?

Anger and something deeper curl inside me. "You crossed a line."

His hazel eyes snap to mine, dark and dangerous. "I did exactly what needed to be done."

I don't know if I want to slap him or straddle him. I opt to straddle him.

My pulse pounds. My body hums. And then I do something reckless—I unbuckle my seatbelt and crawl across the center console, shoving into his space, my breath uneven.

"Then finish it."

His breath stills. "What?"

I grip the collar of his shirt, yanking him closer. “You want to play games, Nick? Fine. But I’m not walking away from this, pretending you didn’t just make me come undone in front of another man.”

His pupils dilate. “And pretty spectacularly, sweetheart. You soaked my hand through your panties. By the way, from now on, those are not allowed unless I specifically request them.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

Without warning, he grabs my hips, pulling me onto his lap in a fluid, controlled movement that steals the air from my lungs as he fists my hair and brings my face down to his. Nick's mouth crashes over mine.

It's not a kiss. It's a war.

Teeth. Tongue. Heat.

I whimper against him, my fingers diving into his hair as he grips my ass—squeezing my cheeks—and dragging me against him so I feel every inch of how what he did to me affected him tonight.

“Be careful what you ask for,” he growls against my lips. “You might not survive it.”

I bite his bottom lip in response, dragging my nails down his chest. “What if I don't want to survive?”

He starts to say something, stops and then groans, his hands sliding beneath the fabric of my dress, hiking it up until my lace-covered center is pressed directly against the hard ridge of his cock. He grasps the delicate panties and yanks them off, bringing them to his nose as he inhales deeply. The rough feel of the metal zipper on his fly drags against my aching core, making me gasp.

Nick grips my jaw, forcing me to meet his gaze.

“This changes nothing,” he says, his voice rough.

I arch against him. “Then stop.”

His fingers tighten. “I can’t.”

His lips crush mine again, his hands leaving bruising trails of possession over my skin. The mission might be over. But whatever this is between us is only just beginning.

12

NICK

The windows of the Range Rover are tinted, and it’s dark, but they start fogging up fast. The streetlight glow filters in through the windshield, just enough to catch the glint of sweat on her collarbone, the red bloom of her flushed skin, the need in her eyes...

She’s in my lap, straddling me, bare and wild and furious. Her panties lie torn on the floorboard, shredded in a moment that wasn’t about patience or grace. This isn’t soft. It’s not tender. It’s battle lines being drawn, and I never liked losing.

Her nails dig into my shoulders—a bite, not a touch—and I know she’s still angry. Good. She should be. But she’s also soaked, her hips grinding against me like she’s trying to punish us both with pleasure. She’s still wrecked from earlier—from the scene in the private playroom, where I made her come in front of a man who was never allowed to touch her. I can feel the aftershocks in the way she trembles, the way she clings.

And still, she’s fighting me.

“You’re still mad,” I murmur, my voice low, rough with satisfaction. My hand skims

up her thigh, brushing the slick skin there. Her breath catches. Her body always tells the truth, even when her mouth lies. “But you can’t deny what you want, can you?”

She snarls, her eyes sharp and wet with frustration. “You think you can just do whatever you want to me? Slap a ball gag in my mouth and make me come in front of that guy, like I’m your...”

“My what, Cherise? Submissive?” I finish, voice cold, even. “Like we were on an op, and I needed you to play your part?”

My fingers tighten around her thigh, locking her in place as I lean in. My lips brush the shell of her ear, deliberate. Dominant. Dangerous.

“You loved it, Cherise. You loved how I pushed you. How I made you feel. You loved the way he watched you fall apart for me.”

Her breath shudders, body betraying her with a small, involuntary thrust of her hips. I feel the war happening inside her, but she’ll never win—not when it comes to this. She may not yet want to admit it, but she is submissive... and I’m her fucking Dom.

I drag my palm up her torso, under the edge of her dress, until it cups her breast through the lacy material. Her nipple is already tight, aching for attention. “Admit it,” I growl. “You want more. You want me to do it again. You want me to take you, fuck you, dominate you—not just for the job. Not just for show. For real.”

Her hand flies—a slap across my cheek that cracks through the Range Rover like a whip—but I don’t flinch. I don’t stop. Because her head falls back, her lips part, and a moan escapes her.

Yeah. That’s what I thought—she’s fighting herself and losing.

I grab the back of her neck and pull her down into a kiss—hard, hungry, with a clash of tongue and teeth. My hand snakes between us, fingers sliding through her slick heat. She gasps, biting my lip, and I groan as I feel how ready she is.

“Say it,” I rasp against her mouth. “Say that you want me to fuck you, right here, right now. Say that you want me to take you. Own you. Make you mine.”

Her eyes blaze, half anger, half need. Her hips rock harder against my cock, rubbing, seeking, desperate.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

“I...” Her voice catches. “I want you to fuck me. I want you to take me. To dominate me. To make me yours...” A beat. “At least until this is over.”

My smile is slow, feral. “Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

I unzip, freeing my cock, thick and ready, and grip her hips. In one thrust, I’m inside her, and we both break—a shared cry swallowed by the confined space, raw and electric and too fucking real.

I slam up into her again and again, each thrust savage and deep. The Range Rover rocks with our rhythm, the scent of sex thick in the air, the leather creaking beneath us. Her nails rake my back. Her moans rise louder.

I fist her hair and yank her head back, my mouth brushing her ear again.

“You are not allowed to scream, Cherise,” I grit out. “Do it, and I’ll tie you down the second we’re home and edge you all night. Then I’ll let you suck me off and you’ll get nothing.”

Her body trembles at the threat. No—the promise.

She bites her lip, swallowing her cries, but I feel the pressure building in her, the urgency, the surrender.

“Nick,” she whimpers, hips moving frantically now, chasing it. “Oh, God. Nick, please...”

I speed up, relentless, pounding into her until I feel her tighten around me, body locking, her climax crashing over her with a muffled scream into my shoulder. I capture her cry with my mouth, swallowing the sound as I thrust one final time and come hard, my release spilling deep inside her.

She collapses against me, breathless and trembling, her head tucked under my chin. I hold her there for a moment, letting the world come back into focus. Letting the storm inside me settle—for now.

I ease her back into the passenger seat, buckle her in like she's fragile—even though we both know she's anything but. I zip myself up, adjust my seat, and glance at her—flushed, dazed, thoroughly fucked.

Then I reach between her legs, palm resting against her slick heat, thumb brushing gently over her clit. She jerks, breath hitching again.

“You’re mine for the duration of this op,” I murmur. “Don’t forget that.”

Her gaze snaps to mine, clear and defiant despite the wrecked state of her body. “I’m not yours, Nick,” she whispers. “I’m my own. And I always will be.”

I grin—dark, dangerous, knowing. “We’ll see about that.”

Then I lean in and kiss her again, slow and possessive, staking my claim.

* * *

Cerberus safe house

Just Outside the City

of Monte Carlo, Monaco

The hidden ops room below the main safe house hums with a low, electric quiet—the kind that settles after an op goes sideways but before the storm slams back in. Only it wasn't the op that had gone sideways, but my feelings about Cherise, who is upstairs asleep.

I lean over the glowing array of monitors, fingers flying across the backlit keyboard as I sift through the raw data stream. Satellite pings. Traffic cams. Encrypted call intercepts. The sting earlier tonight yielded more than expected.

Too much, in fact.

“Logan,” I call without looking up.

Footsteps echo behind me as Radcliffe enters, his presence always sharp, always too controlled. “Please tell me we didn't burn this safe house,” he says, looking at the screen for intruders. “Fitz will kill us if we did.”

I shake my head. “We didn't. But look at this.”

A grainy still from a security camera on Rue Lafayette fills the main monitor. A man in a dark coat, profile barely visible—except for the ID we've already confirmed. Agent François Duval.

“Duval?” Logan leans in, frowns. “He's Interpol. Upper clearance. Paris division.”

“Was Interpol,” I correct. “Until he walked straight into Vallois' orbit and handed over the target dossier. He had the clearance level to access internal flags on the sting.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

Logan lets out a low whistle.

“More than that,” I say, bringing up the corresponding audio file. I boost the gain and isolate Duval’s voice.

“She’ll run to Ryeland. He’ll protect her. It’s what he does. I think it’s hard-wired into his DNA.”

Logan stiffens. I don’t move. Can’t afford to. Not when everything I’d locked away starts cracking beneath the surface.

“They’re using Cherise to get to you.” His voice is quiet, but I catch the undercurrent—accusation. Warning.

“She’s not working with them,” I say.

“I didn’t say she was. But Vallois knows you. He knows how to bait the hook. She’s the perfect lever—familiar, vulnerable, emotional. You’re already in too deep.”

I finally look up. “That wasn’t your call, Logan.”

“Bullshit. We’re Cerberus. Everything’s our call when it risks the op.”

My jaw tightens, and the words land with more truth than I like. I walk to the console and pull up a secondary log—one I haven’t shown him yet.

It’s from earlier tonight. Cherise’s name pops up twice—once tagged to surveillance

footage outside Opus Noir, once connected to a digital trail I thought was clean.

“She was tracked here before we brought her in,” I admit. “They were watching for her. Her comms were clean, but her old nursing license profile pinged when she used a street kiosk in Milan. It set off a silent alert tied to an account under Vallois’ holdings.”

Logan curses. “And you brought her right into headquarters?”

“I didn’t have a choice.”

“No?” he challenges, stepping closer. “Or did you just not want to leave her behind?”

I don’t respond. Because I can’t lie—well, I can, but I won’t... not to Logan.

“She’s not the same woman. She’s stronger now. Smart. Resourceful. But she’s also a liability—because she’s mine.”

The words hang there, heavier than I intend.

Logan arches a brow. “Yours.”

I turn away. “Don’t twist it.”

“You don’t get to play both sides of the leash, mate. Either she’s a civilian and we bench her, or she’s on this op and we treat her like any other asset. No more personal stakes.”

He doesn’t understand. He didn’t see the look in her eyes after the scene in the playroom. The way her body responded—not just to the pleasure, but to the trust. She gave me that. Without question. Without a fight.

I close my eyes briefly, running a hand through my hair. “They want me to break protocol. They want me reactive, off balance. And yeah, she’s the fastest way to get there.”

“So pull back,” Logan says, voice clipped. “Step off. Let me run point from here. You can’t think clearly when she’s in your bed and in your sights.”

“She’s not in my bed.”

A beat of silence as Logan quirks his eyebrow at me.

“Okay, she is, but that’s beside the point.”

Before I can say more, the elevator whirs and I see Cherise step into it, heading down to us. The door opens, and she walks to where we’re sitting. She walks in barefoot, wearing one of my black dress shirts and nothing else. Her hair’s still damp from her shower. She stops when she sees Logan, eyes flicking between us.

“I couldn’t sleep. Did I interrupt something?”

I exhale through my nose. “We’re done here,” I tell Logan.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

He studies her, then me, and leaves without a word.

She closes the door behind him, brows drawn. “Bad timing?”

“No worse than any other. What do you want, Cherise?”

Her eyes soften, but she doesn’t smile. “Hector and Vallois know, don’t they? That I’m here.”

I nod. “They’ve known probably since Milan.”

She steps forward; arms crossed. “So, I’m what? Bait?”

“Not necessarily,” I say, crossing the room to her. “But you are the reason I’m playing a different game.”

Her breath catches as I stop just inches from her. “That doesn’t sound very professional.”

“It’s not.” I tilt her chin up. “But I’ve stopped pretending that this is about business.”

Her lips part, the air between us shifting. “What now?”

I look at her—really look. “Now we use it. We leak intel. Give them just enough to believe you’re vulnerable and I’m reckless. Let them come to us.”

She leans into me, voice low. “And in the meantime?”

I cup the back of her neck, my grip firm. “In the meantime, you’re going to listen. Obey. Let me protect you the only way I know how.”

She tilts her head back, pulse fluttering beneath my thumb. “Even if I fight you?”

I brush my lips against hers, not kissing—just claiming. “Especially if you fight me.”

And when she presses into me, when her mouth finally meets mine, I know I’m already in too deep... and I don’t give a damn.

We head back upstairs where she paces—barefoot, long legs flashing beneath the shirt. She looks soft, almost delicate in this light. But I know better.

Cherise Pardo is anything but delicate.

“I’m not hungry,” she says, when I set a plate on the small table by the window.

“You’ve barely eaten.”

“I’ve had enough of being told what to do.”

I lean back against the frame of the door and cross my arms. “Have you?”

She freezes. Turns. Her eyes meet mine—challenging, sharp.

“This isn’t the playroom, Nick. You don’t get to bark orders and expect me to kneel.”

I let the silence stretch, let the moment hold until her defiance falters just a fraction.

“You’re right,” I say, stepping toward her. “This isn’t the playroom. And out here, I’m not interested in games. I’m interested in staying alive. In keeping you alive.”

“I didn’t ask for protection.”

“No, you asked for help. You called JJ. You stepped into Cerberus space. That makes you mine now, whether you like it or not.”

She opens her mouth, but I don’t let her speak. I close the distance, crowding her without touching, letting her feel it—the authority I carry, the control I never truly relinquish.

“You don’t get to spin in circles and ignore what this is. You’re being hunted, Cherise. And it’s time you consider Hector might not just want you dead—he might want you seen.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

She blinks. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?” She recoils as a nasty thought occurs to her. “You think I’m working for him?”

I shake my head. “Not knowingly. But Vallois and his people have known I was alive for a while and working for Cerberus. Earlier this year, I was in Chicago, but by the time they knew, I’d moved on. They call me the Ghost because, like most spirits, I move through the ether undetected.”

Cherise stares at me. “They used me as bait.”

I nod. “I think Hector knows you—knows what you’d do when pushed. After the party in Paris, he had to have known you’d reach out to JJ, which means you’re reaching out to Cerberus. They had to have known threatening you would flush me out into the open.” I pause, watching her jaw twitch. “They were counting on it.”

“That’s not the same as me being a willing pawn.”

“Doesn’t have to be. He used your instinct against you. You’re loyal. Emotional. You put your trust in the wrong man once—he’s banking on you doing it again.”

Her eyes flash, bright and furious. “You mean you.”

I don’t flinch. “Maybe.”

She shoves past me, grabbing the edge of the table for balance, her breath coming too fast.

“You really think I’d knowingly lead them here? That I’d walk into your life after ten years just to set you up?”

I move behind her, placing a hand on the table next to hers. “I think Hector’s a manipulative bastard with reach. I think he planted just enough fear in you to get you running. I think you walked right into his narrative without realizing it.”

“I don’t deserve this,” she whispers, staring at the plate I set down earlier. “I didn’t ask for any of this.”

“You don’t deserve to die either,” I reply quietly. “But that’s what will happen if we don’t stay ten steps ahead of him.”

She turns, and this time, there’s no fire—just exhaustion. Hurt. But her voice still holds.

“I loved you. I mourned you. And now you’re looking at me like I’m a liability you regret taking on.”

“I don’t regret you,” I say. And I mean it. Every word. “But I do regret not telling you who I was becoming before I left. I regret I didn’t get to teach you the difference between trust and submission. I regret not seeing this coming.”

She stares at me, lips parted, then presses her fingers against her mouth like she’s holding in something she doesn’t want to say.

“Tell me,” I demand.

“You’re the only man I’ve ever trusted enough to give myself to,” she says quietly. “That scares the hell out of me.”

“It should.” I reach out, wrapping my hand gently around her neck, not squeezing—just holding. Grounding. “Because I don’t take it lightly. When you kneel for me, when you let me in—it means something. To both of us.”

She nods once, eyes dropping.

My phone buzzes from the console near the bed. I don’t move at first. I want this moment—this sliver of raw honesty—to linger.

But the second buzz carries a unique three-beat pattern. Not a call. Not a message.

A security alert.

I step away and tap the encrypted screen. A single line appears, untraceable, scrambled through five relay points. The name at the top sends a jolt through me.

DuBois, S.

Cherise watches as my posture shifts. “What is it?”

I read the message once. Then twice.

They’re closer than you think. Don’t trust the doors that open too easily.—S.D.

I stare at it, committing every word to memory before the message deletes itself.

Page 51

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

Sophie DuBois isn't a woman who panics. She's a French cop out of Lyon with deep ties to Cerberus, clean record. If she's sending a warning, it means the play is already unfolding.

And we're standing in the middle of the board.

"Nick?" Cherise steps forward.

I look at her, really look. Everything we've been trying to keep from spilling over? It's about to flood.

13

CHERISE

Nick stands across the room, tall and quiet, his body humming with restraint. His fingers twitch once at his side before stilling. That little movement tells me everything. He's on edge. Has been since we walked into this place. Since the sting... since Fortier... since me.

I pad toward him slowly, the cool floor biting at my bare feet, the oversized black shirt I stole from him brushing my thighs. He watches my approach like a man tracking an incoming storm.

"You're still wound tight," I murmur, my voice barely more than a breath as I step into his space, close enough to feel the heat radiating off him. My fingers hover just above his chest, not touching yet, waiting for that final invitation. The air between us

hums—charged, dangerous, filled with all the things we haven't said. I see it in his eyes, that dark flicker of need he keeps buried under layers of control. He's holding on by a thread, and we both know it's about to snap.

He doesn't answer. Just lifts his gaze to mine, dark and unreadable.

"Let me help," I whisper.

His jaw ticks, the tension in his body vibrating just beneath the surface. "This isn't the time," he says, but his voice betrays him—low, tight, full of strain. It's not a rejection. It's a warning. A final barrier he doesn't have the strength to hold much longer.

I close the distance, press my palms to his chest. His heart pounds beneath my hand like a war drum. "Then tell me when it is," I say, tilting my head back to meet his eyes. "Because I'm tired of you pretending you don't want this as badly as I do."

His hand comes up, fingers brushing the edge of my jaw, slow and possessive. He cups my face, thumb grazing my cheekbone.

"You're dangerous when you're like this," he murmurs. "Soft. Willing. Beautiful."

"I'm yours, Nick. You already claimed me in front of a man who could've gotten us both killed. Don't pretend this is something you can ignore."

Something shifts in his eyes. He moves with the speed and predatory grace of a wraith. In a blink, I'm off the floor, in his arms, my legs wrapping around his waist as he walks us across the room like he owns the very ground we move over. Every step is measured, predatory, his grip sure and commanding, as if surrendering to him is the only option that ever existed. My breath catches as I cling to him, heart hammering in my chest, the silk of his shirt brushing my bare thighs, igniting my skin. The

movement is effortless. Controlled. Possessive. Dominant.

He places me on the bed; the mattress dipping beneath me, but he doesn't let go. One hand pins my thigh to the sheets. The other curls around my throat, thumb resting against the rapid flutter of my pulse.

"You want to surrender?" he asks, voice low, rough, like gravel laced with heat. "Then say it—say the words so I can take what's already mine."

My breath hitches. "Yes."

His gaze darkens. "To me."

His voice is like velvet-wrapped steel, and it sends a fresh wave of heat surging through me. He holds my gaze, daring me to look away, but I don't.

"To you... only to you."

His grip tightens, fingers pressing into the sides of my neck with deliberate control—not painful, but firm, a claim as much as a question. "And the rules?" His voice wraps around me like a velvet leash, coaxing obedience with nothing more than tone.

My breath catches, thighs clenching, nerves crackling with anticipation. He doesn't move, just waits, dominance etched into every line of his body. The weight of his control settles over me like an impenetrable veil, inescapable and wanted.

My body arches into him instinctively. "Yours."

He groans low in his throat and captures my mouth with his. It's not a kiss. It's a taking. His tongue claims me, his body presses down, every inch of him demanding.

His knee parts my thighs, spreading me wide as he settles between them.

“Don’t move,” he growls, dragging his mouth down my neck. “Hands above your head.”

I obey.

The shirt I’m wearing rides up as he pushes it higher, exposing my breasts. He palms one, thumb teasing the nipple until I whimper.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

“So fucking responsive,” he murmurs, dragging his thumb along the slick heat between my thighs. “Every inch of you, mine to command, mine to ruin, mine to worship.” His voice is rough silk, layered with heat and control, and the way he looks at me—like I’m the most exquisite thing he’s ever had the right to claim—sends a rush of molten need spiraling through my core. “Say it,” he demands, his eyes locking onto mine, fierce and unyielding. “Tell me who you belong to.”

“You,” I gasp, my voice breaking on the edge of a moan. “I belong to you.”

His groan is low, primal. “Damn straight.”

I nod, biting my lip, my breath catching as his hand trails lower. My legs tremble—not from fear, but anticipation—as his fingers graze the inside of my thigh with slow, deliberate strokes. Each pass ignites a fresh surge of heat under my skin, the pads of his fingers coaxing soft shudders from deep within. He doesn’t rush—he studies me as he touches, savoring every reaction, every tremble, as if memorizing the exact path to undo me piece by piece.

“No panties this time,” he notes, pleased. “Learning quickly.”

I grin. “Figured you’d confiscate them again.”

His grin is wicked, intoxicating, lethal. “Damn right I would.”

Two fingers slip into me, slow and firm, curling just right to stroke that devastating spot deep inside. My back arches instinctively, a cry tearing from my throat as fire licks up my spine. I claw at the sheets; the pressure building fast, uncontrollable, as

his fingers work with unerring precision. Each deliberate curl sends another bolt of pleasure spiraling through me until I'm trembling beneath the weight of it.

"Nick," I gasp, but it's more a plea than a protest.

He leans in, voice velvet and iron. "Feel how you open for me. How your body begs. You were made for this. For me."

And when he adds a third finger, stretching me just enough to sting, I break again—louder this time, breathless and utterly undone.

"Good girl," he breathes.

The praise undoes me.

He moves lower, mouth tracing the path his fingers took, until I feel his breath against the heat between my legs. Then his tongue—hot, skilled, relentless. My fingers clutch the sheets above my head as he devours me.

I shatter. Hard. My cry is swallowed by his mouth as he kisses his way back up my body, his fingers still buried deep inside me, working me through every tremor.

"More," I beg.

He doesn't answer. He just flips me over, dragging my hips up until I'm on my knees, face pressed to the pillows. His hand comes down, a firm smack to my ass, followed by a soothing stroke.

"You don't get to come again unless I say."

I whimper. "Yes, Sir."

He groans behind me, low and guttural, as the rasp of his zipper cuts through the quiet like a warning. The rustle of fabric follows—a whisper of anticipation—and then I feel the blunt, heated press of him against me. His hand slides along my spine, not gentle, but claiming, holding me in place as he takes a moment to savor it.

“Stay still,” he commands, the growl in his voice sending a shiver down my back. “I want to feel you fall apart around me.”

The anticipation coils tighter, my pulse pounding in my ears, and when he finally thrusts into me—one long, unrelenting stroke—I cry out, the sound caught between pain and exquisite pleasure. He doesn’t give me time to adjust. Doesn’t need to. Because my body is already his, primed and open, desperate.

“Just like that,” he breathes, his fingers digging into my hips. “So goddamn perfect.”

He sets a pace that’s fierce and consuming, and I brace myself against the bed, the slick slide of our bodies filling the space between breathless moans and the wet, rhythmic slap of skin on skin. With every thrust, he pushes deeper, harder, as if trying to erase the distance that ever existed between us.

He leans over, wrapping an arm around my waist to pull me tighter against him, and I feel his breath against my ear as he growls, “Mine.”

A moment later, he thrusts inside me, one long, deep stroke that makes me cry out.

“Fuck,” he hisses. “So tight. So wet. You were made for me. You were always mine.”

He sets a rhythm that’s hard and punishing, one hand tangled in my hair, the other gripping my hip with bruising intensity. Every thrust pushes me closer to the edge, but I bite my lip, remembering his command.

He leans over me, voice dark against my ear.

“Come for me.”

I let go.

The orgasm crashes over me, white-hot and devastating, pulling a raw cry from my throat as every muscle in my body tightens, then releases in a wave of liquid heat. I convulse around him, wrung out and undone, the intensity splintering through me like wildfire. My fingers claw at the sheets, seeking something to anchor me as I fall apart completely. Nick's low, guttural groan rips free as he thrusts once, twice more, and then he follows me over the edge—hips jerking, rhythm breaking, his release spilling deep as he collapses over my back, bracing himself on his forearms.

For a moment, there's nothing but our ragged breathing, the heavy press of his body, and the slick warmth between us. Then he gently lowers us both to the mattress, curling his arms around me from behind, holding me close as the tremors fade.

He holds me there, breath ragged. He turns me around, his lips soft against my forehead.

"You destroy me," he murmurs.

"You put me back together," I whisper.

For a long time, we lie there tangled in silence. No mission. No threats. Just us.

* * *

I wake to the scent of him on my skin.

It's subtle at first—leather and smoke and something darker, something uniquely Nick. It clings to my bare shoulders, curls beneath the collar of his shirt that's bunched around my waist and wraps itself around me like the memory of his hands.

My thighs ache, the tender kind of sore that whispers every time I shift. My pulse still hums low and slow, like it hasn't yet decided if it's ready to return to normal. I stretch beneath the sheets, muscles protesting, body deliciously wrecked, and the memory of last night presses into every cell like a brand.

I should feel sated. I should feel safe. But I don't. Not completely. Because the man responsible for every shattered moan, every bruising kiss, every unraveling touch—is still lying beside me.

Nick's arm is slung low over my waist, anchoring me to the bed like he means to keep me here. Like I belong here. Like last night wasn't just about dominance and submission or covering up the adrenaline of a dangerous op.

It felt like more... a whole lot more, and that scares the hell out of me.

His breathing is steady and deep. His chest rises and falls in a rhythm that speaks of exhaustion—not just physical, but emotional. A rare kind of vulnerability I don't think he lets anyone else see. I study him in the soft morning light. The faint crease between his brows. The pale scar beneath his bottom lip. The shadow of stubble on his jaw.

I could stay. Let him pull me back in, hold me there until the weight of the day forces us both to move. But something prickles at the back of my neck. A pulse of restless energy. A whisper of defiance. A need to remind myself that I'm not just the woman he brought back to life in a Monaco safe house.

I'm still Cherise fucking Pardo.

I ease from beneath the sheet, careful not to wake him. His fingers twitch once where they'd curled around my hip, like his body feels the loss before his mind does, but he doesn't wake.

His shirt, rumpled, warm from the night, and saturated with his scent brushes my thighs, sleeves too long, fabric worn and soft. My legs ache with each step, but I don't stop.

The elevator hums quietly as I descend. Each level down, my resolve hardens. I'm not sneaking around. I'm not running away. I'm reclaiming something. A sliver of agency. Of purpose. Of control.

When the doors slide open into the ops room, the glow of monitors greets me first. The silence comes next. Well... mostly silent.

Logan's alone at the console, sleeves rolled, tie abandoned somewhere hours ago, a porcelain mug in one hand and a scowl aimed at the glowing screen like it's just insulted his mother. He doesn't glance up when I walk in. Doesn't need to.

"Morning, sunshine," he drawls, tone drier than the Sahara. "Didn't think we'd see you upright before noon."

I step into the ops room like I belong here. The scent of sex and Nick's voice still echo in my head, clinging to my skin.

"Sorry to ruin your expectations."

His gaze flicks over, slow and assessing. Hair tousled. Nick's shirt hanging off one shoulder. Legs bare. His eyes narrow—not with disapproval or lechery—but with calculation. Like he's trying to solve for X and I've just rewritten the equation.

“You’re alone,” he says. Not a question. Just a statement, loaded and precise.

“Wasn’t planning on staying that way.” I stroll to the monitors, ignoring the burn of scrutiny between my shoulder blades. “Came to check the sat feed. See if Vallois’ supply corridors are holding. Any new traffic pings near Lyon?”

One eyebrow lifts, mildly impressed. “You speak fluent ops now, do you?”

I shoot him a sidelong glance. “Was that a compliment?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

“Hardly.” He sets the mug down with a dull thunk. “It was a warning.”

My fingers freeze just above the desk’s edge. “Let me guess. This is where you tell me I’m a liability.”

He stands—slow, deliberate, arms folding like shutters closing over a view. “No. I’m telling you, I don’t give a damn who you’re shagging.”

I narrow my eyes. “Could’ve fooled me.”

“I care,” he says, stepping forward with that quietly lethal MI6 grace, “that you came to us half-shattered, looking for cover—and now you’re wrapped round Ryeland like seduction was the mission brief all along. Like you were running your own op from day one.”

My spine goes rigid. “Excuse me?”

“What are you playing at, Cherise?” His voice stays low, but the steel cuts deeper for it. “You here to dismantle Vallois? Make Hector bleed? Or is this some twisted revenge plot dressed in lingerie and a collar?”

“I’m not...”

“Because from where I’m standing, it looks like you’re using the man who had himself be declared dead to keep you safe. One moment you’re crying, the next you’re riding him like it’s your job. Pick a lane.”

He's in my space now, close enough that I can smell the coffee and cold fury coming off him. But I hold my ground. I don't flinch. I won't.

"What do you want?" he demands, tone dropping to something dangerous. "Truly. Deep down. What's the endgame here, love?"

"I want to scorch the bastards who tried to disappear me," I snap. "I want Hector begging. I want Vallois bankrupted and bleeding. And I want to stop being treated like a bloody chess piece."

His mouth twitches. Not a smile. A warning. "Even if it gets Ryeland killed?"

The question doesn't echo. It lands—quiet, final, brutal.

I breathe, slow and hard. But I don't look away. "Not pertinent. He's already been dead once. And if we die trying to do this, at least we died for something that fucking matters."

14

CHERISE

Logan's stare sharpens, flint and frost, more challenge than question—like he's daring me to flinch. "Because that's the game we're in now, sweetheart. You came charging into our world with fire in your eyes and vengeance dripping off your tongue, and you don't get to pretend there's no fallout. Not with him. Not with any of us."

I flinch—just the barest dip of my shoulders, a subtle drop of my eyes—but it's enough. Logan sees it. Of course he does. Like a predator scenting blood, he closes in, eyes narrowing with surgical precision. Suddenly, the air between us feels razor

thin. One misstep, one breath too sharp, and it'll all come apart.

“You think I’m a distraction.”

He huffs. “Distraction? No. You’re a variable he can’t mitigate. And Nick Ryeland lives and dies by control. You upset the balance, Cherise. You make him hesitate. You make him hope.”

He takes another step, close now, voice dropping lower, dangerously calm. “And when this op inevitably goes sideways—and believe me, it will—he won’t be calculating. He’ll be reacting. And that’s how good men die.”

I cross my arms, grounding myself in the only truth that’s ever kept me standing. “You think I’m weak. That I need rescuing. That I’m the type of woman who crawls into the nearest bed for safety or leverage. You’re wrong. The fire didn’t break me. It forged me.”

Logan’s expression doesn’t shift, but something in his gaze flickers. The smallest tic. “Then prove it.”

He leans back, just enough to give me space but not enough to relieve the pressure. “Tell me this isn’t about Nick. Tell me you’re not using him to rewrite a story you couldn’t survive the first time.”

I stare him down. “Feels like maybe I’m not the only one who underestimated me.”

He scoffs, raking a hand through his hair. “Bloody hell,” he mutters, accent roughening with frustration. “You two are a bloody time bomb. Either you’ll win this war, or you’ll light the match that brings the whole damned house down.”

Then his gaze cuts toward the elevator—toward where Nick probably is. He doesn’t

say the rest. He doesn't need to.

But I do.

"I love him," I say, quiet but clear. "And not because he saved me. Because he sees me. All of me."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

Logan doesn't blink, but something in his jaw ticks.

"Let's just hope that's enough," he mutters, turning away and picking up his mug again like nothing happened. "Because if it's not... we'll all be ash."

I hear it before I see it—the soft ding.

Nick.

The elevator doors slide open with a soft chime, and Nick steps into the ops room like gravity bends around him. Everything inside me braces. My breath stalls in my chest. Logan glances over his shoulder but doesn't speak. Neither do I.

Nick's gaze sweeps the room in one cool, calculated pass—first Logan, then me. His eyes linger when they land on me, taking in the shirt I'm still wearing, the tension in my shoulders, the heat still clinging to the air like something happened and neither of us has said it out loud yet.

I expect fury. Reprimand. That low growl he uses when he's two seconds from dragging me back upstairs and reminding me who's in charge.

But instead... I get stillness.

Nick doesn't raise his voice. Doesn't accuse. He just closes the distance with that unshakeable calm that always throws me off more than his anger ever could.

When he stops in front of me, his fingers slide gently behind my neck—warm, firm,

anchoring me with a single touch. It's not punishing, not possessive, but it carries weight. Like a signal. Like a tether made of skin and trust, reminding me exactly who I belong to and who's still in control, even without a single word.

Just there.

"Didn't expect you up so early," he says quietly, but there's something behind the words—something layered and watchful. It's not just surprise. It's assessment. Like he's cataloging every flicker in my posture, every edge in my voice, measuring if this is independence or rebellion. A heartbeat passes before he speaks again, but I feel the weight of his silence like a test I didn't realize I was taking.

I lift my chin, forcing my voice to stay even despite the tight coil of tension still knotted in my spine. "I needed space to think," I say, the words sharper than I intended, more armor than explanation. My pulse skips, waiting for the reprimand I half expect—but all I see in Nick's eyes is that maddening, patient calm that unnerves me more than any fury ever could.

His thumb brushes just beneath my ear—slow and deliberate, the barest hint of possession in the gesture.

"I would've given it to you," he says, voice pitched low, rich with that dangerous calm that always seems to settle over him when I expect the opposite. There's no anger, no heat—just quiet understanding threaded through something heavier. Something that feels like a promise.

My throat tightens. I know he means it. Knows me well enough to realize that even silence, when it comes from him, can feel like sanctuary. But the way his eyes pin mine now? It's not silence. It's a vow not to pull away. A vow to see me—even when I don't want to be seen.

His gaze flickers over my face, lingering there for a beat too long—like he’s reading the cracks I can’t quite seal shut—then drops to the subtle tremble in my hands, the one I thought I was hiding. The kind of tremble that betrays more than fear. It exposes the weight of everything I’m holding back—adrenaline, defiance, need. And he sees all of it. Not just the tremble, but the war waging just beneath my skin. His eyes darken, not with anger, but with something deeper. Something that says, I see you. I see all of you. And I’ve got you.

Then he turns, eases himself down into the chair I’d been hovering behind, and without a word—without asking—pulls me gently into his lap.

My knees hit his thighs, and I freeze for half a heartbeat. Not because I’m embarrassed. But because everything about the moment is so deliberate—so commanding in its calm, so unshakably certain. Like his quiet control has wrapped itself around me in front of God and Logan and a wall of high-tech surveillance equipment, and he’s making one thing perfectly clear without saying a word: I belong to him. Here. Now. In this war room. In this mission. In this life, he lives in the shadows. And whether or not Logan likes it, I’m not just in the room—I’m part of the equation.

His arm slides around my waist, guiding me against his chest like this is exactly where I belong. And I feel it—that quiet reinforcement. Not punishment, not humiliation. Just... clarity. I’m here. I’m still his. And he’s not letting the room, or Logan, or the mission, take that away.

Across the table, Logan watches without comment. His expression doesn’t change, but there’s a flicker in his eyes—curiosity, maybe. Or wariness.

Nick leans forward slightly and taps a few keys on the terminal. “What did I miss?”

Logan clears his throat. “We confirmed Duval had help. Someone inside Monaco PD.

A leak in the surveillance chain, probably embedded months ago.”

Nick’s body tenses beneath me. “Confirmed?”

“Not by name. But we pulled intercepted comms. Whoever helped him is high enough to redirect field ops. Too precise to be a fluke.” Logan pauses, then hits a key. The main screen flickers, loading a string of raw intercepted data. “Alias used is Rouge Zero. No visual. No ID. Just encrypted bursts from a burner we haven’t traced yet.”

“Local or international?” Nick asks.

“Monaco jurisdiction,” Logan confirms, his voice clipped. “Internal Affairs has their hands tied—too many eyes, too much risk. If we go through official channels, we’ll lose the element of surprise. Which means we need to root them out ourselves—quietly—before they realize we’re hunting and cover their tracks.”

I glance between them, pulse tightening. “You think they’re still feeding Vallois?” My voice is steady, but the weight of the question lingers in the space between us, pressing into the already-fraught air. Because if Logan’s right, and there’s a mole inside the Monaco police—someone actively undermining Cerberus from the inside—then it means we’re not just being hunted. We’re being watched.

“We don’t think,” Logan says. “We know.”

Nick exhales through his nose, then turns his attention to a second screen. “Pull up the comm scrub overlay.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

I follow his line of sight, only to realize he's opening a fresh ops panel on the side of the display. "Here," he says, and nudges the monitor toward me.

My brows lift. "Me?"

"You said you wanted in." He nudges the keyboard toward me, the corner of his mouth lifting just slightly—not a smirk, but something more dangerous. More deliberate. "So get in. Prove you're more than a survivor. Show me you're a threat."

He gestures to the screen, fingers gliding over the interface. "This is our communications scrub filter. Set the geofence to a ten-kilometer radius around Opus Noir, timestamp it for the two hours after Fortier bailed. Then match the encrypted fingerprint patterns against what we caught last night from Rue Lafayette. If Rouge Zero was on the move, we'll see where they bounced."

I stare at the interface—sleek, cold, humming with a kind of intelligence that feels just beyond reach. The nested menus and streaming code blur like a language I've only half-learned, studied in shadows and silence, watching from the edges of Hector's world. I absorbed more than I realized over the years. Enough to follow pieces of it. Enough to suspect. But this? This is different. This is real.

The cursor blinks like a dare. Like it knows I've been bluffing.

Nick's heat is at my back, his arm anchoring me in place, strong and steady around my waist. I can feel the weight of his belief in me, and it's terrifying.

"You're serious?" I whisper, voice tighter than I mean it to be.

His hand traces a slow line up my side, firm and reassuring, not demanding—centering. “I wouldn’t have put you here if I wasn’t,” he says, voice quiet but absolute. No room for debate. No cracks in the foundation. He’s not just backing me—he’s betting on me.

I hesitate, fingers poised just above the keys. “I’m not trained for this. Not the way you are. Not the way Logan is.”

Nick doesn’t argue. Doesn’t soften. “No, you’re not. But you’ve been watching for years. You’ve seen how these bastards move. You know how Hector thinks. You got close without letting it break you.” His voice lowers, more intimate now. “You’ve been surviving in their world longer than any of us have. That’s what makes you dangerous.”

And just like that, something sharp and hot cuts through the fog of doubt. I’m still unsure. Still scared I’ll fail. But now there’s a thread of belief running beneath it—mine, not his.

I press the first key.

The system responds. Lines of code flicker to life, filters engage. Digital trails burst across the screen like spiderwebs spun in real time. Information flares brightly across the display, and for once, it doesn’t feel like chaos. It feels like progress.

Nick watches my hands. “That’s my girl,” he murmurs.

I swallow hard, heat blooming low in my stomach.

I don’t look at Logan, but I can feel him watching—his presence a silent pressure behind me, sharp and assessing. It scrapes along my spine like a blade still sheathed, not yet dangerous, but waiting. There’s no sound, no comment, just the weight of his

gaze as I type, every keystroke echoing louder under the scrutiny. It's not distrust exactly. It's wariness. A waiting game. Like he's measuring not just what I can do, but what I'm going to become.

Nick keeps his hand steady on me, his voice calm as he guides me through the next layer. "Once the scan completes, you'll get a heatmap. From there, we can flag any locations where traffic intersected Vallois' known drop points."

I nod, muscles tight with focus, nerves on fire. Because for the first time since this nightmare began, I'm not just running. I'm not waiting to be rescued. And if this scan turns up even one new thread to pull—one that helps take Hector or Vallois down—then it's worth every second of doubt I've carried since the moment I stepped into Nick Ryeland's world.

He leans in slowly, the scent of him wrapping around me—leather, spice, and something darker, something that feels like home and danger all at once. His breath fans warm across my cheek as his lips graze my temple in a whisper of a kiss, not meant for show, not even for comfort. It's possession in its quietest form. A vow. A claim. And a reassurance that even here, surrounded by uncertainty and judgment, I am exactly where I'm meant to be—with him.

"You're doing fine," he whispers, the words brushing against my skin like silk over steel—gentle in delivery, absolute in meaning. His hand doesn't move from my waist, a constant pressure grounding me in the moment, tethering me to the belief that I'm no longer just a survivor clawing her way through shadows. I'm a weapon. I'm not being shielded from the storm. I'm part of the damn strike team.

The scan completes with a soft chime. She exhales, hands still hovering over the keyboard like she's bracing for another layer to crack open. Her focus hasn't wavered once, even with Logan practically breathing down her neck and that data storm rolling across the screen.

She's steady; she's mine. And that's exactly the problem.

"Print it," I tell her, voice low. "Then get some rest."

She hesitates, just a beat, then nods. "You'll wake me if anything comes through?"

"I won't let you miss it."

Her eyes flick to mine—no hesitation, just trust. Then she's gone, long legs, bare feet, my shirt brushing the backs of her thighs, and the scent of sex and adrenaline trailing behind her.

The moment she's out of earshot, I feel Logan's stare cut in like a scalpel.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

“You’re either getting clever in your old age,” he mutters, “or entirely fucking reckless.”

“I know what I’m doing.”

“Do you?” He taps the monitor with a knuckle, eyes narrowed. “Because that woman just danced through a labyrinth of encrypted traffic like she was born to it, and we both know there’s sod all about that in her CV. Your instincts are sharp, mate—but instincts paired with a hard-on tend to cloud the obvious.”

I ignore him. The screen flares red—three intersecting pulses along the consulate corridor, staggered inside a ten-minute window.

“Pull the cameras. All of them.”

He’s already ahead of me. Logan slides a flash drive across the desk. “Three blocks off Rue Grimaldi. Two nights before Fortier made his entrance. I scrubbed the footage twice before I trusted it.”

I plug it in. Let the video spool.

A black SUV. Passenger door. A woman steps out—tall, gloved, cigarette pinched between manicured fingers. Her face is turned from the camera, but I don’t need it. I know that walk. That chilled elegance. The calculated arrogance in every step.

Juliette Morin.

Logan nods once. “Confirmed. Identity matched on second pass. Officially she’s clean—diplomatic attaché turned freelance logistics consultant. But we ran her vector through the Cerberus archives. She’s been skirting Vallois’ circles for years.”

“And Fortier met her here?”

“Six minutes later,” he replies. “Brief meeting, no physical exchange. But the timestamps line up exactly with the relay pings we caught last night. She’s not a handler. She’s the bloody gatekeeper.”

I lean back, jaw grinding. It lines up. Too clean. She’s not just running cover. She’s the access point—the one with hands on the valves flooding illicit shipments through diplomatic channels.

She’s due for a visit.

“Set up a meeting,” I say.

Logan raises an eyebrow. “With what name? You show up as Nick Ryeland, she’ll vanish before you finish saying bonjour.”

I stare at the freeze-frame of her on the screen. Impeccable posture. Designer coat. Eyes like polished knives.

“Not Ryeland,” I murmur. “Beaumont.”

Logan stills, arms folding slowly. “Back to that persona, then. Cracking open the monster vault, are we?”

“Juliette plays status like poker,” I say. “She’ll sniff out a Cerberus asset in a heartbeat. But a corrupt fixer with a penchant for control and no leash? She’ll take the

bait.”

His eyes narrow further. “And Cherise?”

“She’s coming.”

A sharp breath. A scoff. “Of course she is. Because bringing your not-so-innocent tagalong into an op involving a woman who’s likely seen her before while you channel your inner psychopath? Positively inspired.”

“She’s not a tagalong.”

“No,” Logan says flatly. “She’s a bloody complication. That’s the difference between us, mate—you see an asset. I see the reason this whole thing goes tits-up.”

I look back at the screen. To the still image of Juliette. Let him doubt. I don’t have that luxury. Not anymore.

I don’t take the bait. Instead, I pull up the encrypted drive with Cerberus’ dormant aliases and input the retrieval string. Beaumont loads on the second pass—complete with offshore accounts, tailored intel, and a forged criminal record deep enough to make Monaco’s security services flinch.

Beaumont’s wardrobe is already here. The file was prepped for a fallback op six months ago, but I never deployed it. Now it’s our in.

I close the terminal and head upstairs.

Cherise is stretched out across the bed, but not asleep. One of her knees bent under her, head tilted, eyes focused. The lamp casts gold over her skin, making her look dangerous and delicate all at once.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

“Don’t you know how to take a break?” I ask.

She glances up. “If you saw what I saw on that overlay, you wouldn’t be sleeping either.”

“I saw it.” I cross the room, drop the file and printout in front of her. “I need you dressed in something sexy. Something tight. Expensive. Red. There should be something in the closet that works.”

Her brow lifts. “Where are we going?”

“To meet the woman greasing Vallois’ diplomatic wheels.”

“Juliette?”

I nod.

She doesn’t answer right away. Her expression shutters, jaw working. She opens the file and freezes when she sees the surveillance still.

“I’ve seen that coat,” she murmurs. “She wore it in Prague. Hector took me to a conference, and she showed up halfway through the night. Never touched a drink. Never flirted with anyone except him.”

I fold my arms. “They were involved?”

“Not officially. But she had a way of orbiting men with power. Never directly. She

didn't want the spotlight. She wanted the leash."

That tracks. Juliette's the kind who doesn't bend unless she's the one doing the tying. And if she's providing cover for Vallois and Hector, she'll expect deference—unless she thinks she's in the presence of someone who could take it from her.

"You're bringing me because she'll recognize me," Cherise says.

"No," I reply, stepping closer. "I'm bringing you because if she's anywhere near as smart as she thinks she is, she'll want to challenge you. She'll want to test what you mean to me."

"And what do I say when she does?"

"You don't." I brush her jaw with my knuckles, slow and firm. "You wear the collar, you let me lead, and you make her think you'd bleed for me."

Her pulse kicks under my touch. "And would I?"

I meet her eyes. "We're not answering that tonight."

She doesn't push—just goes to get changed

By the time I reach the secure closet and pull the suit bag marked for Nikolai Beaumont, the shift has already begun. The Nikolai Beaumont identity has been buried for almost six years. The French-tailored suit still fits like a glove, and the silver-capped cane rests against the wall like an exclamation point. Nikolai Beaumont. Former oil magnate turned mercenary fixer. A ghost like me—except darker. Louder. The kind of man who makes powerful people nervous for all the wrong reasons.

Cerberus built him with layers: Swiss bank accounts, burner numbers, custom passports, a profile full of violence and vice. Dominance was his reputation. Ruthlessness was his currency.

It's not a mask I enjoy wearing anymore.

Everything from the cut of the blazer to the cufflinks screams tailored arrogance. Power without conscience. Control without remorse. This is the persona Juliette will recognize. Who she'll respect. Who she'll fear.

I fasten the shirt collar, clip the watch onto my wrist—the same timepiece I took off a trafficker in Marseille five years ago. Cerberus gave me the option to turn it in. I didn't.

It belonged to a man named Albert Viers. One of Cerberus' first big takedowns. Arms broker. Human trafficker. Monster with a lawyer's smile. The kind of man who smiled while auctioning off lives. We buried him six feet under a vineyard in Spain after pulling his network apart cell by cell. I kept the watch—not because I wanted a trophy. But because sometimes, when you need to become the monster to kill one, you wear his skin.

Cherise appears in the mirror behind me, dressed in blood-red silk, heels that could kill, and a diamond collar around her throat. Her eyes meet mine.

She watches me in the mirror as she fastens the last earring. "You want to give me more information on this alias, or are we improvising?"

"Nikolai Beaumont," I say, adjusting the cuffs. "Eastern European money, forged in war and washed in oil. Cerberus uses him to get through doors that refused to open for anyone else. He's a fixer. Arrogant. Ruthless. Unapologetically dominant."

Her lips curve slightly. “So... not much of a stretch?”

I stalk toward her slowly and stop behind her. My hand glides down the side of her thigh, tracing the slit in the fabric until I reach bare skin. She doesn’t flinch. Doesn’t break eye contact with me in the mirror.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

“Difference is,” I say, fingers grazing the lace edge of her thigh-highs, “Beaumont doesn’t care about the people he breaks. He collects them. Mounts them like trophies.”

She reaches behind her and threads her fingers into my hair. “And what do you do, Nick?”

I lean forward, pressing a kiss to the base of her neck. “I make sure the ones I break always beg me to do it again.”

Her breath shudders. “Good. Because I don’t plan on kneeling for anyone else.”

I adjust the watch one final time... time to become the man I used to be.

* * *

Back in the ops room, Logan whistles when we walk in.

“Thank you,” says Cherise with a nod.

“Who says I was whistling at you, dollface?” he teases.

Cherise chuckles as she looks over his shoulder at the monitor showing Juliette.

“She won’t be easy to pin down,” she says. “She hides behind credentials, position. You come at her head-on, she’ll bury you in red tape and throw her diplomatic badge on the table.”

“We don’t need her out in the open,” I say. “We just need her in motion. I want to tail her. Track her contacts. We flush her out the moment she goes to meet Vallois.”

Logan folds his arms. “You think she’ll go herself?”

“She’s been close to every shipment,” I reply. “She’ll want to see the next one pass clean.”

Cherise steps forward, scanning the logs. “You said this footage was two nights before the casino?”

“Yes.”

“Then she’s already started setting up the next leg. If she’s still here, she’s waiting for confirmation that Fortier didn’t burn her.”

Logan whistles low. “So we give her exactly that.”

I nod. “Feed her controlled intel. Make her believe Fortier kept his mouth shut. She’ll relax. Move faster.”

Cherise’s fingers drum lightly on the console. Her body’s tight, coiled in a way that tells me she’s still processing.

I lean in behind her again, brushing my lips against the shell of her ear. “You okay?”

She tilts her head back slightly. “You mean, am I okay talking about Hector’s other woman?”

My hand curls around her hip. “I mean, do I need to bend you over this desk and remind you who you belong to?”

A flush creeps up her neck. “You think that’ll help?”

I smile against her skin. “I think it’ll refocus you.”

Logan clears his throat rather pointedly. “Bloody hell. Could you at least wait until I’ve left the room before launching into foreplay?”

Cherise snorts softly, but doesn’t move away from me.

“Go prep surveillance routes,” I say without looking at him.

Logan mutters something under his breath and withdraws.

When we’re alone, Cherise turns in my arms, her palms settling against my chest. “You meant it, didn’t you? Earlier. About reminding me.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

“I always mean it when I say I’ll put you where I want you.”

“Even if we’re in the middle of a war?”

“Especially then.”

I slide my fingers through her hair, tugging gently until she tilts her face up to mine.

“You’re mine, Cherise,” I say, voice low and rough. “And no ghost from your past, no diplomat with a badge, no ex-husband with a death wish is going to change that.”

She presses a kiss to the corner of my mouth. “Then give me something real to do. Make me part of the next move.”

“You already are.”

Her eyes narrow slightly. “Not just as bait.”

“No.” I lean in until our foreheads touch. “As a threat.”

She grins, slow and dangerous. “Now you’re speaking my language.”

I step back, brushing a knuckle down her cheek. “Then give me a moment to put the final touches on, ma petite soldate. Then we’ll go hunting.”

Because the game’s changed. We’ve got a name, a face, a weakness.

Logan returns, dragging a hand through his hair as he paces the ops room behind me.
“You’re sure about this?”

“No,” I say. “But Juliette won’t talk to anyone she doesn’t think can get her out. Fortier gave her just enough fear to stall. I’m going to offer her relief.”

“She’s dangerous,” Logan warns. “Arrogant. Smart. You slip for a second, she’ll eat you alive.”

I don’t answer. I’m already too deep in the headspace.

“Tell me again why you need her?” Logan continues. “We can pull her records. Freeze her assets. Hit her with a blackout protocol.”

“She’s not a soldier,” I say. “She’s not stupid enough to fight. She’ll retreat unless I walk into her den wearing fangs.”

Logan shakes his head. “And Cherise? You’re absolutely sure about this?”

“Yes.”

“Nick...”

“She knows Juliette’s tells. Knows the look in her eye when she’s trying to play innocent. She’s not just cover. She’s leverage.”

He leans on the console, glaring at me. “And if Juliette recognizes her as Hector’s ex-wife?”

“Then I put Cherise on her knees and remind the room who she belongs to.”

Logan snorts under his breath. “You’re not even pretending to be impartial anymore.”

I ignore him, because he’s right. I’ve stopped pretending. Time for Cherise and me to go.

I find her in the kitchen, looking out of the window toward the sea.

“Do you still sail?” she asks.

“I do, as a matter-of-fact. I’ve been thinking about putting a boat in the marina and living there.”

“Promise me that someday, we’ll sail off into the sunset—not necessarily forever...”

Page 61

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

I step behind her and slide my hand along her jaw. She leans into the touch without speaking. “I promise, but not today. Today, we’ve got a job to finish.”

She doesn’t look away from the window. “Figured,” she says as she turns to me with a smile. “You only ever touch me like that when you want something complicated.”

“I always want something complicated.”

That earns me another smile. “So, remind me, my main job?”

I move around her and lean against the counter. “Beaumont’s consort. Decorative. Controlled. But I need more than a pretty submissive on my arm. I need you watching Juliette. Every breath. Every flicker in her voice.”

Cherise’s lips part, just slightly. “You’re trusting me?”

“That’s a given. I’m starting to think your instincts are better than mine,” I admit.

Her brow lifts. “That an admission of weakness?”

“No.” I grip her chin and make her look at me. “It’s an admission that I don’t want you out of my sight.”

Her breath catches. I don’t let her look away.

“I need you with me,” I say, low and certain. “Not just for the role. Not just because you know her. But because I want you there.”

She searches my face, but I give her nothing else. Just truth, naked and cold.

“Then let’s give Juliette a show she won’t forget.” She says with finality.

16

CHERISE

The gown fits like sin—dark ruby silk molds to my curves, the corset bodice cinching my waist until my heartbeat thrums loud in my ears. It catches the low light of the villa with each step, stilettos striking marble like the beat of something ancient. Something dangerous.

Nick walks beside me, silent and composed, his presence a magnetic pulse I can feel under my skin. He’s dressed in a suit that screams wealth and violence, every line of it tailored to intimidate. His watch glints under the sleeve, his cufflinks catching the light. But it’s not the clothes that make him dangerous tonight.

It’s in the precision of his movements, the sharpness in his eyes that no longer softens when they meet mine, the way his voice carries weight with every syllable like it was carved from stone. This isn’t the Nick I shared a bed with. This is the ghost Cerberus built in the dark—the one who can charm diplomats with a smile while plotting their destruction behind his eyes. The one who walks like every inch of the ground owes him something. The one who doesn’t ask for trust—he demands it. And the part of me that should be afraid... isn’t. It’s fascinated. Ensnared.

Nikolai Beaumont.

I’d seen flashes of this version of him before, in the way he moves when he takes control, in the way his voice drops when he’s giving an order. But this? This is something else entirely. This is Nick, stripped of softness. Calculated. Cold. Deadly.

And the scariest part isn't that I'm afraid of him.

It's that I'm drawn to it.

Drawn to the chill precision in his stare, the controlled power in every breath he takes. Drawn to the game we're playing—a game where my silence is a weapon, my submission a statement. And maybe it should scare me, this seduction by danger, but it doesn't.

I feel eyes on me the moment the black velvet rope is pulled aside.

The villa is draped in shadow and money—deep leather chairs, mirrored walls, gold-edged glassware. The clientele is Monaco's elite: old wealth, old blood, old secrets. Eyes linger on Nick as he leads me in, one hand low on my back, the other tucked into his pocket like this is his throne room and we're not just here to negotiate—we're here to dominate.

A hostess leads us to a private area, the kind shrouded in privacy screens and steeped in soft shadows, where whispered power plays out like theater. Nick sits down first, stretching out with the ease of a man who knows the room bends around him. I follow, slipping in beside him—not across. I sit close enough that our legs brush, his hand resting lightly on my thigh, my shoulders angled toward him. It's not an accident. It's a statement. A warning. A claim. It says I'm his, and he doesn't have to say a word to prove it.

Then she arrives.

Juliette Morin is everything I remember and worse—elegant, ruthless, and wrapped in silk and subtext. Her beauty is the kind that's been sharpened into a weapon, and the moment she walks in, the temperature of the room drops. Her presence coils around us like a noose, delicate but unrelenting, and every step she takes hums with

intent. She's not just here to negotiate. She's here to measure the depth of our control—and the cost of hers.

She wears ivory silk, her hair swept back in a chignon that belongs in a royal portrait, and her heels could double as weapons. She moves like the world owes her something—and she's already decided she's going to collect.

Her gaze slides over me like I'm just another accessory—elegant but forgettable. Cool. Dismissive. Then it hits Nick, and everything about her shifts. Her posture straightens. Her expression sharpens. The pause is subtle, but the weight of it lands like a trigger being pulled. Her eyes linger, not with warmth, but with calculation—recognition wrapped in curiosity, showing that she's already revising her plan.

Her smile blooms like poison. “Monsieur Beaumont,” she purrs, slipping into her chair across from us like she owns the table. Her accent is Parisian-polished and razor sharp. “I was told you were dead.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

Nick doesn't blink. His gaze is steel, calm and unmoving. "That's the idea. You know what they say about the rumors surrounding someone's death," he says, like it's already been written in blood and signed in shadow. The line isn't a bluff. It's a warning dressed as charm, a reminder that resurrection isn't always about redemption—sometimes, it's about revenge.

She laughs softly, the sound low and indulgent, like it belongs in a boudoir more than a battlefield. Her hand flicks up, graceful and deliberate, and a server appears as if summoned by magic. "Then let's drink to your resurrection," she purrs, the edge of the words curling like smoke.

The subtext isn't lost on me. She's not toasting survival. She's probing it. Testing how far Nick's willing to go to convince her that Nikolai Beaumont isn't just alive, but reborn in something darker, sharper, more capable of burning her entire empire to the ground.

Juliette studies me now. Longer. More pointed. Her gaze skims over the curve of my throat, the collar that gleams beneath the soft lighting, then settles on my eyes like she's trying to place a name she almost remembers. "And you brought a pet," she says, not condescendingly. Just... assessing. Curious. Calculating. Like she's flipping through a mental Rolodex of women Nikolai Beaumont might keep on a leash and wondering if I'm merely decorative or dangerously functional.

"I never travel without what's mine," Nick replies, his fingers drifting along the back of my neck, pausing just below the collar. The heat of his touch sets my nerves alight. I force my face to remain neutral, submissive. Silent.

“Charming,” Juliette murmurs. But her smile is a mask. And I see it slip for half a second when Nick leans back and folds one arm around my waist.

The conversation starts politely. Trade routes. Allegiances. Rumors. But every word is laced with barbs, every phrase a test. Nick dances through it like a predator, charming and coiled, while Juliette matches him step for step.

“You always had a taste for rare things,” she says, sipping her wine and eyeing me over the rim.

“Only the ones that bleed for me,” Nick says, calm and dangerous.

Juliette’s smile doesn’t falter. But her pupils flare.

I stay quiet, a spectator in silk and shadow. I watch her fingers curl a little too tightly around the delicate stem of her wineglass—elegant but not relaxed. There’s tension in the motion, a flicker of something feral beneath her poise. When Nick casually mentions Vallois, she shifts, legs crossing, then uncrossing, in a motion too precise to be unconscious. Her smile never falters, but her body gives her away. Her gaze keeps flicking to my collar every time Nick touches it—measuring, weighing, wondering what kind of woman lets herself be claimed so publicly and what it means about the man who holds the leash.

She sees the power shift; watches it unfold in real time as if she’s no longer the center of gravity at this table. She realizes Nick isn’t seeking her validation—he’s pulling her into a game where he already knows the outcome. Where every glance, every touch on my skin, is designed to draw her in and disarm her without a single blade unsheathed.

She wants to test him. And me. To see who flinches first. To gauge whether my silence is submission or strategy, whether Nick’s grip on me is real or performance.

Every glance, every subtle shift of her posture, is a question loaded with explosives—and she’s watching to see who lights the fuse.

Juliette leans forward and lets her fingertips drift across my thigh, a featherlight touch that carries the weight of a dare.

Nick moves like smoke—fast, lethal, quiet. One second Juliette’s fingers are gliding over the silk of my gown, and the next his hand is wrapped around her throat. It’s not brutal. It’s not theatrical. It’s clinical. Possessive. A silent strike that shatters the moment with all the weight of a warning shot fired inches from the heart.

“Do not touch what is mine again,” he murmurs, his voice a slow blade wrapped in silk. “I will not warn you again.”

Juliette doesn’t flinch. But her pupils dilate, a subtle shift that betrays more than she intends. Then, with deliberate poise, she smiles—slow, dangerous, delighted. A smile that speaks of secrets and darker appetites. “I see the rumors are true,” she murmurs, her voice velvet-wrapped steel. “You are every bit the monster they said you were. And perhaps a bit more interesting than I was led to believe.”

Nick releases her like he’s straightening a cuff—measured, precise, without hesitation. No drama. No flare. Just absolute, unquestioned control that says everything without a single word. The air between them still hums, charged and electric, but he’s already moved on—already reasserted himself without breaking a sweat.

Juliette sits back, composed once more. But something’s shifted. This isn’t just a power play anymore. She’s impressed. Aroused, maybe. But mostly? Intrigued. She lifts her glass in toast, her voice silk and invitation wrapped in smoke. “You should come to my villa tomorrow night. A small gathering. Just friends. No names. No recordings. Just... stories,” she purrs, her gaze locked on Nick like she’s already

imagining what kind of tale he'll bring—and what kind of ending she might write for herself.

Nick clinks his glass to hers without blinking, his voice a low purr edged in danger. “We wouldn’t miss it.”

The words are smooth, but his hand doesn’t leave my thigh. His thumb draws idle circles, possessive and grounding. Juliette holds his gaze for a breath too long, her smile lingering like smoke—uncertain whether she’s won a battle or just been invited to a bigger war.

I don’t move. I don’t speak. But beneath the table, my fingers tighten subtly against Nick’s knee. Not because I’m afraid. But because I understand exactly what’s happening now.

This isn’t seduction. It’s strategy.

And just like that, the next move is on the board.

The trap is set.

* * *

Back at the safe house, I strip off the dress in silence. The corset unlaces with a whisper of defiance, the ruby silk puddling at my feet. I stand there in nothing but heels and the heft of everything that just happened. The scent from the club still clings to my skin. So does the memory of Juliette’s touch. Of Nick’s hand on her throat. Of the tension he never let slip.

Nick leans against the doorframe, quiet. Watching. Always watching. His eyes are unreadable, but the intensity behind them burns hot—tracking every breath I take,

every inch of bare skin, like he's trying to memorize the moment before it slips away. There's no smile. No soft reprieve. Just the steady weight of him standing there, silent, dangerous, and mine.

I don't give him a chance to speak. "Am I just a prop to you?" I ask, my voice taut and laced with something I can't quite name—anger, maybe, or vulnerability sharp enough to cut. "Or do you actually see me? The woman who didn't just wear your leash but owned it. Who knelt when you told her to, not because she had to—but because she chose to. The one who played her part so well she could've fooled even herself. Do you see her, Nick? Or is she just another tool in your kit?"

The silence between us stretches like a live wire, thrumming with heat and unsaid truths. My breath is shallow, chest rising and falling as I wait—not for comfort, but for clarity. For the edge I know is coming, the steel he always wears like unseen armor when the world needs reminding who he is.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

Then Nick moves. He pushes off the doorframe in a smooth, predatory glide, closing the distance between us in two quiet, deliberate steps. He says nothing at first, doesn't soften the moment or offer an explanation. His eyes are on mine, unwavering and ferociously calm.

He gives me a command. "On your knees," he says—not loud, not cruel. Just calm. The command doesn't raise its voice because it never needs to.

My pulse skitters, breath catching halfway in my throat. That voice—it threads through me like a promise, like a chain. Even so, I hesitate. Not out of fear. Not even out of rebellion, but because I need to know what this is.

He doesn't waver. Doesn't explain. Just waits—quiet, dominant, radiating control like heat off a blade. Steady. Unflinching. Giving me space to choose while making it clear there is only one choice that will satisfy us both—and it's the one that binds us tighter, not frees me.

My knees hit the floor—slow, deliberate, reverent. Not because I'm surrendering to the illusion, but because I'm embracing the truth. This isn't an act. This isn't a performance. This is power in its purest, most dangerous form—chosen, claimed, and willingly given.

The moment stretches between us, heat coiling like smoke beneath my skin. I feel the weight of his gaze, the gravity of what this means—not just for tonight, not just for the game we're playing, but for everything we are. This isn't just about control. It's about trust. It's about seeing and being seen and when he steps in front of me, gaze molten with something possessive and raw, I hold my chin high, even as I kneel.

I'm not less. I'm not broken. I'm his, and I'm exactly where I'm meant to be.

He watches me the whole time, and the look in his eyes doesn't say obedient. It says equal. It says you belong here. It says I see you. And in that moment, I believe it.

The marble floor is cold beneath my knees, but I don't flinch. I don't break his gaze. My heart hammers in my chest, and something inside me settles—like I've finally remembered who I am. Who we are.

He doesn't see a prop. He sees me... and he's never letting go.

17

NICK

She's still on her knees when I close the distance between us, her breath shallow, chest rising and falling in the slow rhythm of anticipation. The collar gleams against her throat, the ruby-red silk dress abandoned at her feet. The air between us crackles with restraint. Not hers. Mine.

I circle her slowly, fingers brushing the top of her head as I move behind her. She doesn't follow me with her gaze. Good girl.

"Naked."

She rises gracefully to her feet and obeys without hesitation. What little she has left on slips from her body like she's shedding expectation itself. When she is naked and waiting, I press my hand to her lower back.

"To the bed."

I don't raise my voice. I never need to. My control is threaded into every syllable, a leash she's learned to follow without ever feeling bound. That's the paradox of us. She kneels, but never from weakness. She submits because she's stronger than anyone who ever tried to control her. And I see her.

That's the damn problem.

When she stretches across the bed, I follow. Leather cuffs secured to the headboard wait in silence. I attach one to each of her wrists, then to each of her ankles. She doesn't flinch. A blindfold slips into my hand.

"Do you trust me?"

She nods, voice low. "Yes."

"Say it."

"I trust you, Nick."

I slide the blindfold over her eyes. Then I wait. I let her feel the silence. The anticipation. I know what it does to her, what it does to that mind of hers. She's already cataloging every sound, every brush of air, every shift of weight in the room. Her body arches at the whisper-soft touch, breath hitching.

"Still?"

"Yes," she breathes.

My palm smooths over her ribs, down her stomach. Then nothing. I don't touch her again for a full minute. Two. Maybe more. She whimpers. The sound is fragile, craving.

Then she speaks. "Nick... please."

"You want release?"

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

"Yes."

"Then listen."

I settle beside her, fingers tracing the line of her collarbone. Slow. Deliberate.

"I walked away because I had to. Cerberus recruited me. Fitzwallace understood that the threat from those who had held me wasn't just to me alone, but to you as well. He knew that in order for both of us to survive, I needed to become someone else. I needed to forget the man who held your face in his hands and dreamed about a life with you."

She shudders. Her knees draw up instinctively, but the cuffs keep her open, stretched, vulnerable.

"Why?" she whispers.

I lean in, my voice a breath against her skin. "Because focusing on those who had all but destroyed me and having some kind of control was the only thing keeping me alive. If I had stayed with you, Cherise... I would have broken. And I couldn't afford that."

My fingers trail down her hip, slipping between her legs.

"You never broke," she says.

I push two fingers inside her. Wet. Tight. Ready. She gasps, hips lifting.

"No," I growl. "But I never healed, either. I wasn't ready to... not until you walked back into my life. And now you're mine."

I fuck her with my fingers in slow, unrelenting thrusts. Not fast enough to push her over, but deep enough to make her squirm.

"You won't come until I say."

"Nick... please..."

I twist my fingers, angle them up.

"You want release? You beg. You give me the truth."

Her lips part. Her voice is barely a whisper. "I—I still love you. I never stopped. Even when I thought you were dead. Even when I hated you."

"Even as you married and built a life with Hector?" I ask, trying to keep the bitterness from my voice.

"Especially then. I tried to bury you deep in my memories, but I held those memories dear and when they began to burn the brightest, they lit my way back to you."

I groan, low and deep. When I pull my hand away, she cries out.

"Not yet."

I move down the bed and replace my fingers with my tongue. I lick her slowly, every stroke precise, a command.

Her hips buck.

"Still."

She moans, breath ragged.

"Please, Nick... please... I need?—"

"You need what?"

"You. Please, I need to come. I can't... I can't hold it."

I bite gently at her inner thigh. "You will."

Then I take her again with my mouth, one hand gripping her hip, the other covering her ribs to keep her still. I work her mercilessly until she's thrashing, moaning, begging without words.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

"Now," I command.

She breaks. It crashes through her like a storm. Her cry is muffled against her arm, body arching high. I don't stop. I keep going until she's sobbing, wrung out and trembling, and then I push her over again.

Only when she collapses fully do I unclip her wrists, pull the blindfold off, and cradle her against my chest.

She doesn't speak at first. Just breathes. Shaky. Spent. Real. Her hand clutches my shirt.

"That," she whispers, "was not just control."

"No," I say. "It was a promise."

I brush her hair back, press a kiss to her forehead.

"There's something you need to know... I never stopped thinking of you, either. I never let go of the dream that someday we would find our way back to each other."

She tenses slightly. Not fear. Instinct. "There's something else, isn't there?"

"Logan got a hit on your old license."

She pulls back just enough to look at me. "My nursing license?"

I nod. "Interpol flagged it. Two days ago. Black file access. Not standard. Not even high-clearance. This was deep ops—off the books, eyes-only. A directive that doesn't officially exist."

Her eyes widen. "What does that mean?"

"It means someone with serious access authorized a termination protocol."

"You mean..."

"Yes. It was a hit order, Cherise. Signed under a black directive."

"Does Interpol authorize executions?"

"Not so much authorize as obey orders to turn a blind eye."

She goes still.

"But I'm not in Interpol. I never was."

"You were in their system. The moment you resurfaced, someone tagged you."

Her voice is quiet. "Hector."

"Maybe. Or someone who owes him. Either way, you're not just a ghost from his past. You're a threat."

She pulls the blanket tighter around herself, gaze hardening. "Then it's time we start acting like it."

I wrap my arms around her again and whisper her name like a vow.

Because I know what comes next. We're not just the hunters anymore. We're among the hunted. And the kill order has already been signed.

* * *

I watch her sleep like a man marking coordinates—every breath she takes, every shift beneath the sheets, every vulnerable inch of skin that isn't already mine. Her body's wrecked from what I did to her, and she needed every second of it. So did I. Not just because I needed to take control, but because I needed to give her something real. Something that stripped both of us down to the bone-deep truth.

The room still smells like us. Sex. Sweat. Submission. Her knees are bruised, thighs trembling even in rest. But she didn't break. She begged, yes. Whispered my name like prayer and plea. But she held.

And I finally let go.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

I told her things I've never said out loud. About why I walked away ten years ago, why I vanished instead of risking her getting caught in the blast radius. I talked while she was blindfolded, while she was bound, while her body trembled with need and denial, held at the edge until she sobbed with it. I told her about control—how it's the only thing that's ever made the world make sense and how losing it with her is the one thing that's never felt like failure.

She heard every word. And when I let her come—finally, completely—it wasn't about power. It was about the truth. About letting her know, without question, that she's not a means to an end. She's the goddamn reason I'm still breathing.

I step away from the bed, drag on a pair of black pants, and head toward the far corner of the suite where the op terminal waits in low light. The secure line blinks. I already know who it is before I answer.

“Talk,” I say.

Logan's voice comes in clipped. “We've got a problem.”

“Define problem.”

“Juliette Morin. Dead. One of Vallois' security team found her in his private villa outside Cap d'Ail. She didn't just die—she was made an example of.”

My pulse drops into a slow, lethal rhythm. “How?”

“Her neck snapped; her throat punctured with a diplomatic pin. Instant. Precise.

Clean, except for the message.”

“Shit.”

“She was still wearing her dress from last night. No signs of a struggle, no defensive wounds. She let them in.”

“Anyone else on-site?”

“Only staff. All clean so far, but someone got to her. Someone close. She was silenced.”

I grind my jaw. “Which means Vallois is either cleaning house—or someone higher just took her off the board.”

“Exactly.”

“Pull all the footage. I want eyes on every approach vector around the villa. Private cameras. Traffic cams. Satellites. I want it burned to ash.”

“Already on it.”

I kill the line and stare at the screen for a long second. Juliette was many things—opportunistic, manipulative, cold—but she wasn’t reckless. If she got herself killed, it means someone just torched a loose end before it started unraveling. She was supposed to be the one pulling strings. Covering tracks. Managing logistics.

So why do I feel like she was just a pawn?

Cherise stirs behind me. I hear the rustle of sheets, the soft intake of breath. When I turn, she’s sitting up, the blanket falling low on her back, baring the scratches I left

last night in a moment of possession I didn't bother to temper.

She looks at me like she already knows something's gone sideways. "What happened?"

I step closer, crouch beside the bed, and brush the hair from her face. "Juliette's dead."

Her eyes widen, but she doesn't flinch. "Vallois?"

"Maybe. Or someone he works for. Logan said she was found outside his villa. No signs of a fight. Executed and with a diplomatic seal pin stabbed into her neck."

She exhales slowly, tension bleeding into resolve. "They're cleaning house."

"Yeah."

She pulls the surrounding sheet, but it's not about modesty—it's armor. "She was high level. If they're willing to take her out, we're closer than we thought."

"Maybe too close."

I sit on the edge of the bed, let my hand slide across her back, fingers trailing over the bruises I put there. "We thought Vallois and Hector were running the show. But this... this feels bigger. More organized. Like they're just fronts."

"You think someone else is pulling the strings?"

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

I nod. “Juliette’s not the kind of target you kill unless you’re trying to silence more than gossip. This is a cover-up. Professional. They used her and threw her away the second she became a risk.”

She doesn’t blink. “So, we hit back. Expose the whole damn nest.”

There it is. That fire. That refusal to flinch when the darkness deepens. It’s why I brought her in. Why I didn’t bench her after Paris. She doesn’t break—she sharpens.

I slide my hand under her jaw and tilt her face up. “If we do this, there’s no going back. We won’t just be ghosting one man. We’ll be unraveling a network that’s been protected by diplomatic immunity, money, intelligence assets.”

“I don’t care.” Her voice doesn’t shake. “I’m done watching monsters pull strings from the dark. If I’m going down, I’m dragging them with me.”

My chest tightens. “It’s not just about risk. It’s about trust. Because the deeper we go, the fewer people we’ll be able to count on. Cerberus won’t be able to shield us forever. And once we cross this line...”

She places her hands in mine. “We’ve already crossed it, Nick.”

She’s right. We have. Every time she slipped into that collar. Every time she knelt when I asked and fought when I needed her to.

I lean in, press my lips to her forehead. “Then we burn it down together.”

She shakes her head, voice low. “They wanted me silent. That’s what this is about. They think I know too much. I’m not sure if I do or not, but Hector can’t control me anymore.”

“No,” I say, voice sharper than I intend. “It’s more than that. They want to erase you. Which means you were closer to something than even you realized.”

She blinks. “What?”

“You were his wife. You saw many things: names, invoices, shipments routed through shell companies. You don’t need to remember it all—just the fact that you had access is enough to get you flagged.”

She lets out a short, bitter laugh. “So, I was dangerous and didn’t even know it.”

“Which makes you even more dangerous now.”

Her eyes snap to mine. “Then let’s stop running. Let’s hit back before they try to finish the job.”

I stare at her for a long second. Then nod once. “We start with Vallois. We find out who gave the kill order, and we expose every name on the list.”

Her fingers tighten around mine. “We go all in.”

A new message pings the ops line. I grab the encrypted tablet and unlock it.

Logan’s voice comes through, tight and grim. “We’ve got a clean shot from the villa’s external camera. Confirmed ID on the body. It’s Juliette. No mistake.”

“How fresh?”

“Less than three hours. The kill was precise. No forensic trace left behind. Whoever did this knew what they were doing.”

I exhale through my nose. “Looks like the guest list just got shorter.”

18

CHERISE

Juliette Morin’s death doesn’t feel real until I see the freeze-frame still of her body on the surveillance monitor—head tilted back in an unnatural position, blood dried in a delicate line down her throat where the diplomatic pin pierced her. A warning. A message. A clean, silent kill meant to send shivers through the bones of anyone foolish enough to think they could outplay Vallois.

I don’t shiver. I breathe. Long and slow—anchored by the weight of what I now know and the man standing just steps away, a silent promise in human form. The image of Juliette’s lifeless body is a warning, but it doesn’t send me running. It solidifies something inside me.

I know exactly what kind of man arranges that kind of execution. It’s not just about power. It’s about performance. About showing your prey that you’re already in their shadow before they even see the blade.

Juliette was dangerous. Arrogant. Complicit in every dark deal she brokered. And still—she didn’t see it coming. That’s what chills me to the core. Not just her death, but the precision of it. The message in blood that even someone as ruthless, as connected, as careful as Juliette... was disposable. That’s the reach we’re up against.

Nick moves through the ops room like a storm locked in a body. Quiet. Intent. Watching him work is like watching violence take shape in real time, beautiful and

terrifying. He doesn't bark orders. He doesn't pace. He assesses. Strategizes. Plans. His presence anchors me, even as the world around us slips deeper into shadows.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

Nick stands in front of the operations terminal, arms crossed, jaw set, his silhouette cut sharp against the blue glow of the screens. Logan and the others move like ghosts through the room, collecting fragments—satellite sweeps, encrypted comms, digital crumbs scattered across the ether. Cerberus operatives loyal to Fitzwallace send whispers from the shadows, piecing together a map, but it's like trying to catch smoke. Every lead fades before it sharpens. Every thread breaks before it connects. Nick doesn't speak, but I can feel the pressure building behind his stillness—the storm just beneath the surface, coiled and waiting for the right flash point.

I take a breath and step closer, thoughts turning over like puzzle pieces in my mind.

"When Hector hosted events in Lyon," I say, voice low but firm, "he always booked them with six-day gaps. Never seven. Never five. Six. He always said it gave him some breathing space. He used Corsica once. He said he liked it, as it was discreet and not under the same microscope as Monaco."

The second the words leave my mouth, I see it land in Nick's eyes, sharp and certain. The dots are connecting faster now, a pattern rising out of static. Corsica isn't just a possibility.

Nick's gaze shifts to me instantly. "Corsica?"

I nod. "He called it a buffer zone. Said the consulate routes were barely watched because they weren't 'prestigious enough to warrant concern.' If he and Vallois are relocating, and Juliette was silenced for being too close to the logistics..."

"...then Corsica's the next waypoint." Nick's voice is a growl of agreement, low and

lethal. His eyes don't leave mine as he says it, and I realize he's not just agreeing with my conclusion. He's already there—mentally mapping exits, flank points, contingencies. My memory didn't just help; it confirmed a kill zone.

He turns to Logan. "Pull every satellite vector in and out of Corsican airspace in the last twelve hours. Cross-check with port activity and private charter logs. I want every cargo manifest flagged."

Logan doesn't question it. He just moves... fast.

Nick looks back at me. His hand brushes the small of my back—not to guide, not to claim. Just... contact. Grounding—not me, but him—like he needs to feel me there, the same way I need him.

I exhale, heart still hammering. "Juliette thought she was insulated—too vital, too connected to ever be considered expendable. But that kind of arrogance? It always creates a blind spot. She was so focused on managing the threats around her, she never saw the one aimed from within."

"She was wrong. And so is Vallois if he thinks Corsica—secluded, diplomatic, quiet—can hide him from what's coming. We see him now. We know where he's headed. And we'll be waiting."

The edge in Nick's voice doesn't scare me. It steels me. Because I know what's coming next.

War.

* * *

The comms unit flares to life behind us—secure, encoded, but familiar. A quiet beep

precedes the flicker of the screen, illuminating the dim room with Cerberus insignia before shifting to the sharp, weathered face of Fitzwallace. He looks like he hasn't slept in days—jacket off, sleeves rolled, jaw clenched with barely leashed urgency. Nick doesn't hesitate. He swipes to accept the call and leans in, his posture steel and shadow, ready for whatever comes next.

"I just got word," Fitz says without preamble. "You've ID'd Corsica."

Nick nods once, slow and sure, then turns toward the screen. "We're moving now," he says. A declaration. A line in the sand.

The blue light from the monitor throws sharp shadows across his face, highlighting the lines etched deep from years of violence, loss, and calculated silence. For a moment, no one moves.

Then Logan's already shifting into motion behind him, barking quiet commands through an earpiece, while I stay frozen, heart pounding, because I understand what just happened—Fitzwallace gave us the green light.

Nick doesn't even flinch.

"I can have field operatives in place within twelve hours," Fitzwallace says, the words clipped but measured, like he already knows what Nick's going to say before he says it.

Nick doesn't blink. "We don't have twelve hours."

The silence after those five words is deafening. Even Logan stills across the room.

Nick folds his arms, his body radiating lethal resolve. "Juliette's execution wasn't a message—it was a trigger. Vallois is cutting his ties, accelerating the exit plan. If we

stall, we lose him. Possibly forever.”

Fitzwallace exhales through his nose, muttering something unintelligible before straightening. “Then you go in with what you have. But you won't have much in the way of backup or Cerberus air support. You'll be in shadow territory. We have no field operatives in close proximity...”

“Understood,” Nick replies, calm as ice.

Fitz's eyes shift to me. “And her?”

Nick doesn't hesitate. “She's in. This window exists because of her. She's not just part of this op—she's part of the outcome.”

Fitz's brow furrows. “You're certain?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

“You’ve tried to sideline JJ in the past,” Nick reminds him, his voice low but edged with steel. “And we both remember how fast she dismantled your contingency plans and ran her own op out from under you.”

The corner of Fitz’s mouth twitches, but he doesn’t argue. “We’ll start backfilling. Operatives will be on standby for extraction and cleanup, but until then... you’re ghosts. No paper trail, no protection.” He pauses, gaze locked on mine. “Cherise. There are very few people I trust in this world with full operational autonomy. Nick is one of them. That trust now includes you. Don’t let that go to your head—but don’t waste it either.”

My spine straightens. “Understood.”

Fitzwallace nods once, then severs the connection. The screen goes dark.

Nick steps closer, his voice low, barely more than a breath between us. "Still want in?"

His eyes hold mine—not commanding, not coaxing. Just open. Raw. And it wrecks me more than if he’d barked an order.

I don’t hesitate. “More than ever,” I say, my voice steady with something deeper than determination. It’s resolve. It’s ownership. It’s the sharp, blistering truth of who I’ve become—and who I choose to be next to him, no matter the cost.

He nods once, jaw tight. “Gear up. We leave in twenty.”

* * *

The prep is fast. Surgical. Logan sweeps the room one last time, his movements sharp and efficient as he confirms comm relay frequencies and uploads decoy files into the surveillance grid. Every action buys us a few more seconds of ghost status.

Nick moves to the far wall, where a steel panel slides open to reveal the embedded weapons cache. Inside, rows of matte black gear gleam under the recessed lighting—tactical sidearms, compact comms rigs, spare burner phones, modified flashbangs, and two subcompact submachine guns.

He selects a lightweight pistol for me, placing it in my hand—sleek with a balance that sings in my grip. I test the weight instinctively, flicking the safety catch and letting the grip settle into my palm like it was always meant to be there. It's not just a weapon. It's a declaration. One that tells me I'm not a bystander in this war—I'm part of the line they're going to regret crossing.

"Safety's off," he says quietly. "If you aim, you shoot. No second-guessing. You remember how to use a gun?"

I check the mag, pull back the slide with a clean snap, then let it settle into place before slipping the weapon into the holster at the small of my back. My voice is calm. Steady.

"I remember."

His eyes hold mine a second longer, then he nods. Once. Sharp. Satisfied.

Logan passes us both burner IDs, complete with forged diplomatic credentials. My alias is listed as a cultural attaché for a shell nonprofit. My French is good enough to pass, especially if I keep the words clipped and the tone disinterested.

Nick shrugs into a sleek gray blazer over a Kevlar-embedded shirt, concealing two knives at the small of his back and a collapsible baton inside a false seam of his coat. He clips the earpiece in, syncs it to the local signal scrambler, and turns to face me.

"Last check," he says.

I tug on gloves, zip the suit up to the collar, and test the mic embedded at my throat.

"Operational and silent," Logan confirms from the console.

Nick scans me once—his gaze razor-edged and thorough, cataloging every detail like he's already five steps into the op. Not just checking for visible threats, but for something deeper: my steadiness, my resolve. The room around us fades into static, all background to the intensity between us. When he steps closer, close enough for his breath to whisper over my cheek, he doesn't speak at first. Just lifts his hand and brushes his knuckles down the length of my arm—a touch so brief it could be mistaken for nothing. But it isn't. It's a signal. A grounding.

"Whatever happens," I say, thinking of the gun holstered at the small of my back, "I want Hector to know it was me."

Nick nods once, and I see the flicker of pride behind the steel in his eyes—an emotion that never softens his edges but sharpens them, like I'm another weapon he's counting on. He says nothing else, doesn't need to. The pride in his eyes isn't just about my readiness. It's about the choice I made—the same one he's making by letting me come with him. Not as cargo. Not as leverage. But as someone who can hold the line beside him when it matters most.

The van hums low beneath us, dark and insulated against the world outside. It's parked along a coastal bluff, high enough to catch a signal but far enough to stay invisible. Cherise sits behind the main monitor, eyes locked on the infrared feed like she was born for this. There's calm in her posture. Stillness. But I can feel the electricity running under her skin—a live wire of anticipation and restraint, kept tight because she knows her role tonight isn't at my side with a gun, but behind this screen with a sharper weapon: her mind. Her fingers flick across the console, adjusting contrast filters and field angles, feeding me clean eyes while my boots prepare to walk into hell.

She wants to be in the field. Wants to bleed for this. But I didn't bring her to kill. I brought her because she deserves to see the reckoning. Because what we do tonight isn't just justice—it's truth dragged into the light, and I want her to witness it. To know that when the ghosts come calling, they don't leave shadows behind. Only silence.

Logan's voice crackles over comms. "Perimeter is clear. We're set."

"Copy."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

I turn to Cherise and lean in close, the world narrowing down to her breath and mine. My hand slides to the back of her neck—steady, deliberate—not harsh, but claiming. A reminder. A tether. Not just of who I am, but of who she is to me.

"Stay here. Monitor all channels. If I call for backup, you follow protocol."

She nods. "Yes, Sir."

The title hits my bloodstream like fire. Not because I crave control for control's sake, but because she chooses to surrender to me—even here, surrounded by live feeds and encrypted chaos. Her obedience isn't submission to command. It's devotion wrapped in steel. And in this moment, she's not just mine. She's my anchor in the storm I'm about to unleash.

I lean in, brush my lips against hers. "Eyes up. Mind sharp."

She grins, fierce and focused. "Cut the head off. I'll keep the body from twitching."

Damn right.

I push off the console, grab my kit, and step out into the night.

The compound sprawls across the hillside north of Ajaccio, perched like a predator watching the sea. It's a fortress dressed as luxury—white stone walls, faux-Mediterranean charm, and a private runway that hums with the quiet arrogance of untouchable wealth. On paper, it's a leisure estate owned by a shell corporation linked to Vallois' logistics front. In reality, it's a hardened node in his trafficking

pipeline.

Floodlights sweep the outer perimeter on a twenty-second cycle. Motion sensors guard the southern fence. But every system has its blind spot. We found ours in the maintenance tunnel that runs beneath the eastern wing—a relic from when this place was a vineyard. A forgotten route turned point of entry.

Gated. Walled. But not impenetrable. Not tonight.

Logan meets me at the breach point, crouched behind the outer wall, eyes scanning every shadow like they might come alive. The moonlight barely touches his gear—matte-black tactical vest, silenced pistol holstered low, throat mic already activated. He doesn't need to speak to tell me he's locked in. Focused.

We're on our own. Logan and I have danced this edge before—silent, brutal, surgical. We move as one, thought and muscle fused by years of dirty work no one else will ever know about. The maintenance tunnel is invisible to everyone but us, and Cherise, watching from the ops van, the only one who sees the ghost trail we leave behind—just two flickering blips on her screen, making their way toward the head of the snake.

That tunnel—dug for vineyard irrigation decades ago—hasn't seen daylight in thirty years. It's barely wide enough to crawl through, let alone fully rigged. Damp. Claustrophobic. Every breath tightens in your lungs the deeper you go, and one wrong move means an alert tripwire, a crumbling wall, or a buried motion sensor from when Vallois turned this vineyard into a fortress. We mapped it inch by inch, betting on this relic being overlooked.

But every inch inside is a gamble. We pass rusted piping that could shear flesh. The only light is the dull red from our shoulder rigs—enough to see the rats, but not enough to alert the cameras. The tunnel brings us beneath the eastern retaining wall, a

blind spot not even Vallois' top security consultants flagged. The crawl ends behind the reinforced server room—a vault disguised as a wine cellar, the heartbeat of his logistics command.

We're not just infiltrating a building. We're threading a needle inside a kill zone. And we've only got one shot before the entire house of cards folds in fire and steel.

We crouch in silence for another beat, listening—ears straining for footsteps, for the crackle of radio chatter, for the sharp bite of a mistake we can't afford. The low-frequency hum of internal comms jammers buzzes faintly against my earpiece, confirming the perimeter is live but not encrypted. Vallois is arrogant. Worse, he's complacent. He believes the estate's isolation and his so-called diplomatic immunity are armor enough. That the ghosts hunting him tonight are just myths.

He's wrong.

Every second we're in this tunnel, the risk multiplies. Tripwires disguised as utility lines. Pressure sensors rigged to the stone floor. A single dropped breath too loud could trigger a silent alarm. We're balanced on the edge of a live wire with soaked boots and loaded guns, and the only reason we're not dead yet is because we've made a career out of surviving moments like this. But that doesn't make it less dangerous. It makes it surgical—deadly in both directions.

I glance at Logan. He nods once. That's all we need.

Time to make Vallois bleed.

“You ready to cut the head off this snake?” asks Logan.

I slide the bolt back on my suppressed sidearm and nod. I'm not sure I've ever been more ready for anything.

"You've got a fifteen-minute window before the next aerial sweep," says Cherise over the comms. "Everything is locked, internal signals scrambled. You have a green light."

She's learned the lingo quickly. It's as if she has always been part of the team.

"Moving now," I say.

We move fast, fluid, practiced. My boots hit the inner stone of the courtyard without a sound, but every step feels like walking across a minefield. This place may wear the trappings of wealth and indulgence, but underneath it's all teeth—trip lasers, reinforced entry points, biometric scanners embedded in doorframes. One wrong move and we don't just die—we disappear, no questions asked. But for me, this time, there's more at stake. This time, I would leave Cherise behind to carry on alone. So many years wasted. I vow to myself that after tonight, I won't ever have to say that again.

I hold up my hand to stop Logan. He arches an eyebrow in question, but I ignore him. "Cherise?"

"I'm here Nick."

"I love you."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

Logan rolls his eyes.

"You picked one helluva time to tell me that, but I reject your declaration."

I'm a bit stunned. "You what?"

"You heard me. I reject your declaration and refuse to respond until you're standing right in front of me to tell me in person."

Logan chuckles softly. "Oh, I do like her. You tell him Cherise."

"Bring him back to me, Logan."

"You can count on me," Logan responds, then turns to me. "So can we go kill the bad guys so you can go claim your lady love?"

"Shut up," I grumble.

The main house looms like a sleeping beast—silent, still, but seething beneath the surface. Every stone in that estate hides something lethal. It's too quiet, too calculated, and that's how I know it's primed to kill. Low lights flicker in the eastern wing—the supposed wine cellar that's nothing but a front. Our target isn't a collection of rare vintages. It's a command nexus buried deep beneath the earth, lined with reinforced steel, anti-surveillance tech, and kill switches designed to erase its existence in under sixty seconds.

Inside that cellar is Vallois' real kingdom—his fortress of cables and coded cruelty.

The servers down there run hot with secrets—shipment logs, diplomatic cover routes, encrypted identities. They pulse with every lie he's sold under the illusion of immunity. That place isn't just a nerve center. It's a coffin waiting to be sealed—and if we make a wrong move, we'll be the ones buried with it.

We're not kicking down a door tonight. We're threading the needle through a kill box. Every step forward is a bet against death, and we're holding a hand built on muscle memory, strategy, and vengeance. The danger isn't just real. It's hungry. And it's watching for one mistake.

We're about to carve the truth out of the dark—but if we fail, we won't get the chance to scream.

Minimal guards? Maybe. But the kind Vallois hires are more like silencers than sentries. They don't patrol—they stalk. Quiet, lethal, bred for kill orders with no hesitation. They won't issue warnings or call in alarms. If they catch so much as a whisper of our presence, we won't be cuffed or interrogated. We'll be dropped where we stand. No identification. No retrieval. Just a bullet to the head, our bodies buried in unmarked earth beneath a villa that serves five-star wine to war criminals. Every step forward isn't just risky—it's a countdown. One misstep, one camera flicker, one misplaced breath, and we're ghosts for real.

I tighten my grip on the pistol and breathe through it, steadying the tremor in my pulse as the cold metal presses into my palm. Every breath is deliberate now—measured, silent. One wrong move down here and we're not just compromised—we're dead. No heroics. No second chances. Just a bullet between the eyes or a pressure mine underfoot. The danger is real, tangible, stalking just beyond every heartbeat. I close my eyes for a split second, not to pray, but to sharpen. To remind myself this is what I was built for. The risk is why I'm here.

This is the part where most men flinch. We're not most men.

We breach clean—but it's a razor's edge. Two guards stationed at the east corridor, each armed with suppressed submachine guns and encrypted comms rigs. We take them down fast, simultaneous shots to the throat and temple, dropping them before their fingers twitch near a comm button. They die without a sound, but every step past their bodies carries the promise of retribution.

No alarms yet. But the air is thick with a heavy silence that means something's watching. We don't linger. Don't breathe too deep. Just move, low and fast. Because even a clean breach doesn't mean safety—it means borrowed time. And we're seconds from being overdraft.

No mess, but the danger is rising with every breath.

When we hit the cellar door, I signal Logan to hold. He nods, understanding immediately—but there's no mistaking the silent exchange between us. The air hums with danger, thick as the sweat at the back of my neck.

I go in alone.

Because that's the only play that doesn't get us both killed.

This door isn't just an entry point. It's a threshold. Beyond it lies the man responsible for orchestrating the darkest corridors of this operation—trafficking, laundering, sanctioned movement of untouchable cargo. Vallois isn't some thug in a tailored suit. He's a tactician. And if he's cornered, he won't hesitate to bring the entire room down with him.

My hand tightens around the grip of the pistol. Every sense is sharpened. Every footstep measured.

The hallway behind me is still, but I feel the charge—Logan holding just outside,

ready to move in if things go sideways. And they will. That's the nature of moves like this. They don't end clean. They end fast—or not at all.

One last breath. One last thought of Cherise, waiting in the van, tracking our every step with eyes as sharp as her mind. She's the reason I'm still breathing. The reason I can afford to walk into this darkness.

Then I breach.

The door doesn't creak. It doesn't resist. It swings open into a world carved from rot and steel and power. And I walk straight into the jaws of the beast, because I've already made peace with the risk. I don't just need to survive. I need to win. I will win.

Vallois doesn't look up when I enter—not right away. He's hunched over a satellite feed, sipping from a crystal glass, framed by a thousand bottles of vintage rot and the illusion of untouchable power. The room is cold, air-conditioned to preserve his rare vintages, but I can feel the heat building—the kind that comes from proximity to a man who knows he's hunted. The monitors behind him flicker with intelligence chatter: comm logs, cargo manifests, biometric scramblers, facial match protocols—all feeding into a pipeline of immunity he believes still holds.

He doesn't realize the wolves are already inside his den.

The moment stretches, the sound of my boots scuffing stone the only announcement of my arrival. He finally looks up, and in that instant—when his eyes meet mine and widen in disbelief—I see the crack in his armor. The chill is no longer environmental. It's fear, and it slices through the pretense like a knife.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

He's armed only with ego and distance—neither will save him now.

"Turn around," I say quietly as I insert the device into his computer that will allow Cherise and Cerberus to download all the information contained within.

Vallois doesn't even flinch when I speak. The blood drains from his face as he turns to face me. Not because he recognizes my voice. But because he believed it was a voice he'd never hear again. The voice of a ghost. He recognizes all that's behind that voice. There will be no negotiation—only judgment and execution.

"You... you are supposed to stay dead," he whispers.

"I hear that a lot." I step closer, gun lowered but ready. "Where is Hector?"

He swallows. Tries to calculate. "If you kill me, you'll lose everything."

"Cherise, sweetheart, are you downloading all of this?"

"Absolutely," comes the serene reply. Her voice, too, gives Vallois pause as the illusion of invulnerability slips away from him.

He wavers—his jaw working, knuckles white against the edge of the table—then he cracks, the bravado bleeding out of his voice like air from a punctured lung. The danger coiled in the room finally slices through his composure, and whatever illusions he clung to collapse. His shoulders slump, sweat slicking his temple. This is no longer a negotiation. It's survival. And he knows it.

"Marseille. He's prepping the next shipment. Biometric clearance reroutes are already in play. After that, he's gone. Ghosted. Just like you."

I step in, press the muzzle to his knee. "And the network? Who's really running it?"

He hesitates. Just for a second. But a second in this room is the difference between walking out and bleeding out. My response is instant—I drive the butt of my sidearm into his gut, low and brutal. He crumples, gagging on air that won't come, eyes wide with the realization that his stall might've cost him any chance of surviving this night.

Here, surrounded by servers that hum with blood money and burnable secrets, hesitation is lethal. And I don't reward weakness when we're walking a line that could collapse beneath our boots at any moment.

"You think I'm bluffing?"

"It's not me," he gasps. "I handle logistics. I arrange the corridors. The real power... they're untouchable. I don't even know names. Just directives. Encrypted contacts."

"Then give me the directives. Give me the logs. Now."

He nods frantically. "The black case. Left side. Access key is printed. You can?—"

I pull the trigger—one round. Between the eyes.

Vallois slumps forward with a sickening thud, his skull colliding with the mahogany desk hard enough to echo. Blood seeps out in a slow, spreading pool across the glass, thick and dark like ink spilled on a death warrant. There's no cinematic gasp, no cryptic whisper. Just a final, brutal silence. No fanfare. No last words. Only the sharp, lingering certainty that this man's death just painted a target on our backs. And we're already deep in enemy territory.

I retrieve the black case and pop the latches one by one. The interior gleams with a hardened tablet and analog backups—printouts, encrypted drives, and a miniature keycard reader. I scan the logs, each line of code a signature of Vallois' operation. Every file confirms the scale—trafficking corridors rerouted through diplomatic channels, shipments disguised as humanitarian aid, and biometric shadow protocols tied to flagged medical IDs. Cherise's name isn't there—but it could have been. Might still be.

Logan steps in behind me, the muzzle of his weapon sweeping the dark corners before lowering. The burn marks on his vest from earlier breach dust make him look like he clawed his way out of hell. His voice is a whisper, meant only for me.

"We're not just poking the bear, Nick. We're taking out its spine."

I nod, not because I need confirmation, but because he's right. One mistake, one delay, and the network adapts. Our window isn't closing—it's already slicing down like a guillotine.

"Corsica node is dead," he says into the comms. "No more rerouting from this end. But they'll feel this. They'll come hunting."

"Good. Burn the comms center. Wipe it all."

He nods and disappears into the hall.

I exhale slowly, then tap my comm.

"Cherise."

Her voice clicks in, steady and ready. "Status?"

"Target neutralized. Data acquired. We're moving."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

"Understood. I'll prep the exfil."

By the time I reach the extraction point, the night is carved in smoke and fire. Smoke curls from the east wing like a serpent rising from a pit, thick with the stench of scorched silicon and burning rot. The comm servers are ash—obliterated in the controlled blast Logan set while I secured the black case. Every connection Vallois used to mask his operation has turned to vapor. But we paid for it in silence and risk.

We return the way we came, emerging from the shadows—faces tight, rifles drawn, eyes scanning the perimeter even as we load into the van with practiced urgency and efficiency. No alarms. No encounters. But it was close—too close. The last sweep skimmed our window by less than ninety seconds. One mistimed breach, one faulty detonation, and we'd be chalk outlines in a firestorm dressed as a villa.

Back in the van, Cherise waits, eyes sharp. She reaches out, laying her hand on my thigh. Her touch saying more than words and grounding me back in the world. As Logan slides the door shut, I cast one last look back. There's no celebration. Just firelight reflecting in Cherise's eyes as she watches the burn. This isn't victory. It's survival laced with a promise: we're not done yet. Not even close.

"I'm waiting," she says quietly.

I grin; Logan laughs as I shake my head. "I love you."

She takes my face in her hands. "I love you too."

Logan makes a gagging sound. "And I think I may throw up."

"Shut up, Logan," Cherise and I say in unison before I put the van in gear, and we drive away—only fire and silence in our wake.

* * *

The screen flares to life.

Fitzwallace. His face is stone. But his voice carries something heavier. "Well done. All that's left is the last cleanup and that weasel Hector. Interpol would rather not have any of this ever see the light of day. There will be no inquiries. Do you need backup?"

I glance at Logan and Cherise. "No. We've got this."

"Then you're on your own. If you can get this shut down, we'll have reshaped the landscape. Permanently. And more than that, we'll have the undying gratitude of Interpol."

"Understood."

The call ends. I stare at the dark screen.

One node gone. One monster dead. Only Hector is left.

I shake my head. "We end it where it started."

20

CHERISE

Marseille, France

24 Hours Later

The sun is setting pale and thin over Marseille, casting long, golden streaks across the harbor. It shouldn't feel familiar—not anymore. Not after everything that's happened, but it does. The scent of brine and diesel, the distant clang of metal on metal, the voices bouncing off stone alleyways like they're echoing from another life. We had a home here once; one of many homes we owned. Tried to have a life. Tried to be a wife. A partner. Tried to be safe... to live my life.

Our entry into Marseille yesterday was quiet—surgical, even. No Cerberus backup, no visible footprint. Just three forged identities, burner comms, and a clean drop into a city I once tried to call home. Logan handled the logistics, securing us rooms above a shuttered tailor's shop tucked between two forgotten alleys. The place smells faintly of cedar and dust, the type of scent that disappears the moment you stop noticing it. Sparse, functional, unremarkable. The walls are thin; the floors creak in the corners, but it's safe. Contained. And for now, it's ours.

The day has been spent tracking Hector, my ex-husband, across Marseille, until we finally found him holed up on a sleek, sterile yacht moored at one of the outlying piers in the Vieux-Port—the same one he used to vanish for days at a time. I never set foot on it during our marriage. It was reserved for 'business' and the kind of extracurriculars that shredded any remaining illusion of fidelity. Just another betrayal in a long list. Another reminder that, to Hector, our marriage was never a bond—it was a transaction. A useful lie wrapped in vows he never intended to keep.

Nick keeps a steady hand at the small of my back as we move through the narrow side streets, blending into the evening bustle like we belong here. Every gesture is deliberate—his presence more than just protective, it's commanding. Each quiet directive he gives, every flick of his eyes, draws me deeper into the mission. Not just as an observer, but as a partner who knows her place in the plan. Logan stays a half block ahead, eyes sharp behind mirrored glasses, sweeping the crowd and murmuring

into his comm link as he updates our perimeter checks. We're a unit. Tight. Focused. And I'm right where I'm supposed to be.

"You're clear," Logan says over comms. "Target location confirmed. Yacht moored right where Cherise said it would be. Same vessel from the intel drop. He's onboard."

Nick doesn't break stride. "Confirm security," he says, voice low but commanding, gaze already scanning the far end of the dock. He doesn't look at Logan, doesn't need to—the question is a formality. It's the stillness in him that grabs me, that cold, relentless calm he wears like armor. Like nothing surprises him anymore. Like he's already calculated a dozen ways this could end and is prepared to face every one of them.

"Four guards on deck. Two visibly armed and two in tailored clothes pretending to be crew. No civilians. They look like they're waiting for something."

"His final shipment before disappearing. We make our final approach in one hour," Nick says, steering me back to the surveillance van in the harbor parking lot.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

We've found him—Hector. The man who once stood beside me in a church, looked me in the eye, and vowed to love, cherish, and protect me. The man who promised me forever.

All lies. Every. Single. One. Of. Them.

Instead, he berated, insulted, threatened, belittled, and dismissed me as if I didn't matter. And for a time, I believed him. Little did I know I was only being used as bait to draw out a man from my past. Hector was supposed to love me, but all I was to him was disposable.

I met JJ that night at the gala—dressed in borrowed confidence and barely holding together the threads of my composure—and she gave me a flicker of hope I hadn't realized I was suffocating without. Just a glance, a card, a quiet question—‘Do you need help?’—and something inside me cracked open. For the first time in years, I felt seen. Not by a man who wanted to own me, but by a woman who saw through my performance and gave me the first breadcrumb out of the dark.

That night started the ball rolling. It led me to finding Nick and bringing us back together again in ways I never could have imagined. My ghost from years ago came back to life. Most would kill for the opportunity to have a loved one come back from the dead... I am not too proud to say I feel guilty for feeling so lucky.

The harbor is quiet this time of year. The tourists are fewer, the locals used to ignoring the power players that drift in and out of their port. No one looks twice at the sleek, white yacht that glints under the dying light, its name painted in expensive black script. It's one of many, just another power player flaunting their status. It's not

the smallest or the largest, which says a lot.

I wait behind the wheel of the surveillance van, eyes fixed on the monitor. The feed is clean—no glitches, no interference. I watch Logan melt into the shadows of the dock's west side, a flicker of movement with a mission behind it. Nick comes from the east, all coiled purpose and lethal calm, every step calculated. Their coordination is effortless, a testament to muscle memory and battlefield trust. My heart lodges in my throat, beating against bone, but I keep it hidden. My hands rest steadily on the control panel, not because I'm calm—but because I have to be. Because they need me focused. Because I'm done being afraid.

Logan is in position. He's crouched low near the gangway, one hand on his weapon, the other adjusting the comms loop tucked discreetly behind his ear. His voice cuts in like a wire drawn taut, tension running through every syllable. "East flank is blind for the next ninety seconds. If we're going, it has to be now."

"Copy."

Nick moves, and he's a force of precision. The takedown of security is fast—lethal and flawless. He comes in low from the blind side, sweeping the legs out from the first guard with brutal efficiency, the man hitting the deck before his brain has time to register the strike. A silenced shot takes out the second, a clean center-mass hit that drops him like a marionette with cut strings.

Logan appears on the port side like a phantom, neutralizing the third guard with a chokehold so swift it leaves no time for resistance. The fourth panics and bolts, but he doesn't get far—Nick fires, one suppressed round into the back of his head, which sends him tumbling into the water. The splash barely registers before the yacht is silent again. No alarms. No shouts. Just the eerie quiet of a war already won.

Nick and Logan enter the luxury lounge like predators closing in. The space gleams

with marble and indulgence—an opulent haven now tarnished by the blood of Hector’s security detail. A symphony of violence unfolds with ruthless precision, the chaos orchestrated and executed so cleanly that it barely qualifies as noise. Nick and Logan make brutal and lethal work of all those who surround Hector and those he works for.

Hector Pardo, dressed in a linen shirt too crisp to match the fear in his eyes, stands cornered near the glass bar, hands twitching at his sides like he’s calculating an exit that doesn’t exist.

Nick steps into the frame of the tapped security feed, a silhouette of lethal calm. The air is thick with finality. He doesn’t shout, doesn’t posture. He simply speaks, his voice low and resolute.

"Put your hands where I can see them." There’s no room for misinterpretation. Not anymore.

Hector does as he’s told, but his eyes—those eyes I once looked into and saw a future—are already lying. Already calculating. He lifts his chin, that polished confidence slipping back into place like an old suit of armor. "You don’t have to do this," he says, voice slick with the same manipulation he always used. "We can make a deal. I have contacts, money, insurance. Whatever you want—just say it. I can disappear. You never have to see me again."

"I want silence." Nick's voice is lethal.

I’m already moving before I realize it, leaving the van and storming down the dock, my boots hitting the boards with too much force to be stealthy. Logan steps into my path, hand outstretched, but I shoot him a look—sharp, unwavering. He steps aside without a word to me, but I hear him over the comms.

“Incoming. You owe me a beer.”

I need to see Hector—need him to look me in the eye and see that I’m not the woman he broke. Not anymore. I want him to see who I’ve become. I want to watch the fear dawn in his face when he realizes it’s not Nick who will end this. It’s me.

Logan lets me pass without trying to restrain me. He just watches with that unreadable calm I’ve come to know. But when I reach the lounge Nick shifts his position. Not aggressively, not with force, but with precision—putting himself between me and Hector, like a shield he refuses to lower. It’s protective, yes, but also possessive. It’s a reminder: I’m his, and no matter how this ends, no one touches what belongs to him unless he allows it.

Hector’s eyes widen when he sees me. "Cherise, baby, you don’t have to let him..." His voice is laced with that same syrupy condescension I remember too well—weaponized affection sharpened by years of manipulation. But there’s fear now too, buried just beneath the surface. It curls in his posture, in the way his gaze darts to Nick and then back to me, like he’s trying to decide which one of us is the real threat. He doesn’t realize—yet—but it’s me.

I cut through his pathetic rambling with a voice colder than steel. "I only want to know one thing, Hector. Why?"

"Why, what, baby?" Hector's voice is sickeningly sweet.

"Why did you spend our entire marriage trying to get close to Nick? Did you always know he was alive? Was it all just a long con? I want the truth, Hector. Why him? Why go through me to get to him?"

Nick remains silent, but his eyes are locked on Hector with a sharp, unblinking intensity. There’s no threat in his posture, no visible tension in his stance—but the

weight of his focus is suffocating. He's waiting. For truth. And he wants it as much as I do.

"Baby, I don't know what you're talking about." Hector lies right through his teeth.

Nick's jaw flexes, his patience unraveling thread by thread. He lifts the gun, slow and deliberate, and presses the barrel against Hector's temple. His voice drops to something colder than ice—controlled, lethal.

"Call her that again, and the next sound you'll hear will be your skull hitting that wall. Now answer her fucking question."

Hector lifts his hands higher, palms out in a mock gesture of surrender. He takes a breath, eyes narrowing as he looks at Nick. "Your team was too close to the edge of something none of you understood," he says, his voice oily. "You didn't even realize how close you were to exposing the entire corridor. We had to test the perimeter. See if the leak was real." He huffs a bitter laugh. "You wouldn't fucking break. We tried everything. Interrogation, deprivation... threats." He flicks his eyes to me. "Even her."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

Nick's jaw clenches, but he doesn't move. Hector shrugs. "You're a tough bastard, Ryeland. That much I'll give you. I would've cracked. Hell, most people would've. But you just disappeared behind those dead eyes. Wouldn't let us in. Not once."

My stomach churns. But there's a fierce heat in my chest, too. Nick never broke. Even when I thought he had. Even when he let me believe he was dead. He was still protecting me. Still fighting.

Pride explodes in my chest. Nick was true to his country and his team, never giving up the intel, no matter how much he was tortured. Now I get why he let me think he was dead. He'd already been through hell and back, and he was just protecting me.

"You used me all these years just to get at Nick." It's a statement, not a question, but Hector nods.

"I did." He smiles and tweaks his head towards Nick. "It worked, didn't it?"

"You already survived him. We're here to finish this," Nick says as he looks to me for the briefest of moments, but it was enough of a window for Hector. He moves swiftly. Stupidly. Desperately. I see him reach for the pistol I always knew he had hidden under any desk he ever owned.

I don't hesitate and pull my weapon and shoot, aiming straight for the heart, just like in the movies, but this is all new to me and the shot lands center mass. The recoil snaps up my arm, but I don't flinch. Hector starts to collapse, and I think for a moment that it's over, but Hector doesn't know he's dead yet and raises his gun, aiming not at me, but at Nick.

I shoot again, and this time, I hit the mark. Hector glances down at his chest and crumples with a shocked gasp. I'm glad he had time to realize that I was the one who took him down without thinking twice. He falls to the floor and doesn't get up.

I don't move for several seconds. I just stand there, watching as the man who tried to own me bleeds onto the white marble and polished teak floor.

"Clear," Logan says after a moment.

Nick doesn't speak. Just takes the gun from my hand and guides me back off the boat.

* * *

Cerberus safe house

Outside of Monte Carlo, Monaco

The safe house is quiet. Tucked into the edge of a cliff, windows flung wide to the endless sound of the wind kissing waves and gulls calling overhead. I sit on the edge of the bed, still in my tac gear, the adrenaline ebbing from my veins like the tide pulling back from the shore. My hands rest in my lap—scarred, steady, and stained with a finality I never thought I'd live to see. They aren't shaking. Not even a tremble, and that, more than anything, makes my chest tighten.

Because it means I'm not in shock. I'm in control.

Nick kneels in front of me, his hands steady as they settle on my thighs, grounding me with nothing more than the quiet strength of his presence. "Breathe," he says, his voice low, coaxing, like a tether anchoring me to the here and now.

He strokes my hair, slow and rhythmic, like the world hasn't ended and we're

allowed this quiet moment. He says nothing when the first tears slip down my cheek—doesn't hush them, doesn't ask for more from me. He just gathers me in his arms and holds me like he's willing to carry every shard I've been shattered into and piece me back together without question.

I press my forehead to his, exhale, and let it all fall.

21

NICK

The sea is calm tonight, a seductive hush that wraps around us like satin. That rare, haunting calm that follows a storm—the kind that doesn't just cleanse the world but rewrites it. Above, stars spill across the Mediterranean sky like scattered diamonds on black silk, glowing soft and low, as if even they've surrendered to the stillness. And for the first time in what feels like forever, I inhale without bracing for blood, betrayal, or battle.

This isn't silence born from loss. It's peace—earned, stolen, sacred. It hums in the curve of the wind, in the gentle rise and fall of the sea beneath us, in the soft memory of her kiss still ghosting across my skin. For once, I breathe not as a soldier, not as a ghost—but as a man finally stepping out of the shadows and into something dangerously close to freedom.

Cerberus has gone dark... for now. Hector is dead. The Marseille corridor is dust. Vallois' empire—once a gilded labyrinth of diplomatic immunity, shadow funds, and weaponized shipping routes—has collapsed. One by one, we dismantled his fronts, burned his safe houses, and bled his network dry until nothing remained but fear and fallout. What he built over decades, we unraveled in days. Not with armies. With precision. With resolve. With the truth. The intelligence we passed to Fitzwallace set off a chain reaction across three continents—indictments, asset freezes, and

diplomatic recalls. The corridors Vallois built have crumbled. The empire is dead.

And Hector? He was the final knot, the last loyal string. Now severed. Now silent. No more shadows clawing at our heels. We did what no one else was willing to do. We pulled the whole damn web down, strand by strand, until the predators at the center had nowhere left to hide.

And now?

Now we vanish too... at least for a little while.

Cherise sleeps below deck, wrapped in linen and the sort of stillness that only comes after storms. Her breathing is slow, a soft rhythm that calls to something in me more primal than peace. I sit at the helm, the sky a velvet canopy above, stars winking like secrets. One hand rests on the wheel, the other around a half-empty glass of bourbon, its warmth chasing the last of the ghosts from my blood.

The coastline shrinks behind us, swallowed by horizon and distance. We dropped off the grid two days ago—no trail, no comms, nothing but ocean and open sky. The wind brushes across my skin like her fingers do—gentle, searching, addictive. The sea beneath us cradles the hull with each rise and fall, and it feels less like escape and more like absolution.

Here, we are not fugitives. Not shadows. Just a man and a woman suspended in this small, floating world of salt, moonlight, and second chances.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

We haven't talked about what's next. Not in detail. But we don't need to. For the first time in years, I'm not being hunted or hunting. No orders. No enemies lurking in dark corners. Just the soft rhythm of the sea, the warmth of her body wrapped in the memory of our last kiss, and the knowledge that—for now—this peace is ours. She's below deck, skin still warm from mine, the scent of salt and sex lingering in the linens. Her moans still echo in my head, low and reverent, and I carry them like a prayer. For the first time in a very long time, I'm not waiting for the next mission. I'm just here—alive, sated, and with her.

I hear the soft creak of the cabin hatch and then the whisper of bare feet across the teak deck, a sound I'd recognize in any storm or silence. She's wearing one of my shirts—too big, the fabric clinging to her curves in the warm sea breeze, sleeves rolled to her elbows, the hem skimming the tops of her thighs. Her skin is kissed by moonlight, flushed from sleep and something more primal, and her hair is loose, a wild halo of dark waves catching the wind. She looks like temptation incarnate—freedom, firelight, and every fucking thing I've fought for wrapped into one devastating silhouette. She doesn't speak at first. Just moves toward me like she belongs in the space between my heartbeat and my next breath—and God help me, she does.

She steps behind me, the heat of her body a slow burn against my back, and in that instant, something in me loosens. The ache I've carried for years—the icy edges honed by war, loss, betrayal—softens under her touch. It's not just lust that coils low in my gut; it's the weight of knowing she's real, here, with me. Her presence settles into my bones, into the places the ghosts used to haunt, and I feel not just aroused—but anchored, whole, deeply and dangerously alive.

As her arms slide around my waist. Her cheek presses against my spine, and I can feel the curve of her smile, the soft brush of her breath through the fabric of my shirt. I cover her hands with mine, not just to anchor her—but to keep from coming undone. Her palms fit perfectly against me, warm and certain, and I lean into her, needing the press of her body, the weight of her affection like gravity. She doesn't just ground me—she claims me, in that quiet, sensual way that unravels every defense I've ever built. And I let her.

"You're thinking too loud," she murmurs against my spine.

"Comes with the job," I say. But my voice is softer now. Calmer.

She walks around, slides onto the bench beside me, and leans her head against my shoulder. The sea stretches out in front of us, endless and unknowable, but for the first time, I'm not trying to read it. I'm just here, with her.

Her fingers slide under my shirt, trailing the faint scars along my ribs, mapping me like territory she already owns. I tilt my head and brush my lips across her temple, slow and deliberate, until she turns her face to mine and captures my mouth in a kiss that starts soft... and deepens with every breath.

She climbs into my lap with a slow, sultry grace that steals the breath from my lungs, straddling me, hips pressing into mine. Her mouth trails across my jaw, my throat, every touch a question she already knows the answer to. I curl one hand into her hair and the other onto the back of her thigh, gripping tight as I pull her closer.

"Promise me something," she whispers, voice a husky tremor against my skin. "When we've had enough of the shadows, we'll sail off into the sunset. Just us. No missions. No enemies. No ghosts. Just peace."

I tip her chin up, look into her eyes, and say the only words that matter.

"That's a promise I intend to keep."

We sit like that for a long time, her body pressed into mine, her warmth sinking through skin and bone until I can't tell where she ends and I begin. The boat rocks gently beneath us, a cradle of teak and sailcloth swaying in rhythm with the slow tide and our slower breaths. The sea doesn't just hum—it breathes, a sensual whisper that curls around us like a silk sheet, cool and infinite. Her fingers trace lazy patterns over my chest, each touch an invocation, a reminder that I'm not just alive—I'm wanted. Desired. Loved. And for once, there are no shadows at our backs. No danger sharpening the edges of our silhouettes. Only stars above us. Only her sighs melting into mine. Only this: the stillness of her heart beside mine, and the quiet, aching promise that we've made it through the fire... together.

And I swear to whatever gods are still listening—I'll keep that promise.

22

LOGAN

Monte Carlo is a liar.

All glitter, no gold. Every inch of this place sells the fantasy: high stakes, high society, high heels that click like gunfire on marble. But beneath the tuxedos and silk gowns, behind the champagne flutes and poker chips, this city hums with something darker. Secrets. Leverage. Blood money dressed in a tux. I've walked these halls too long to be fooled by the surface anymore.

Cerberus has eyes everywhere. Even here, in the gilded rot of the casino, Crown & Scepter, where the chandelier sparkles like a crown and every man thinks he's king. And me? I'm the blade waiting just out of sight.

"Logan, the target's moving," comes the voice in my ear.

I shake my head. I'm the second-in-command of Cerberus here in Monaco. Nick is off grid, sailing with Cherise in the Mediterranean, finally breathing clean air. But here in Monte Carlo, the ghosts never sleep. And tonight, I'm not just chasing betrayal—I'm following whispers that feel more like warnings. There's a signature in the static, a pulse in the shadows. A name I haven't heard in years, embedded in a dead drop meant for no one, but me. Someone long thought buried. Someone with unfinished business. A ghost... with teeth. And this time, it's biting back.

Someone inside Cerberus intercepted a ripple across three black channels. A coded transmission, a signature embedded so deep in the data stream it took two hours and a sophisticated AI program to decrypt it. The signature matches someone who was supposed to be dead. Vivian.

At least that's what all reports—official and not-so-official—say. Could it be someone else? Someone worse? And if that file is right, then what we're dealing with isn't just betrayal. It's resurrection.

Not just of the woman long thought dead in Prague, but everything we buried with her. The truth. The lies. The blood on our hands. Whatever this is, whatever game someone is playing now, it started the night she vanished—and tonight, it begins again.

I adjust the cuff of my black suit jacket and pivot toward the baccarat table where a man in a thousand-dollar waistcoat is losing ten grand like it's pocket change. He's not my concern. But the brunette who just slipped into the booth behind him?

She is. For a moment my breath catches and I swear my heart stops. Vivian.

The name tastes like smoke and ash in my mouth. Vivian Black—former MI-6 asset,

ghost operative, and the only woman who ever got under my skin without shedding a drop of blood. She was an expert in infiltration, seduction, and disinformation—deadly with a whisper and lethal with a lie. Officially, she's dead. Unofficially? She's sitting fifteen feet from me in a backless black dress, legs crossed like a queen and sipping scotch like it's the only thing keeping her anchored to this reality.

Her presence doesn't just stir memory—it ignites something deeper. My pulse hitches. My spine locks. That old injury she left behind—Prague, a bridge, a betrayal stitched with a kiss—starts aching like it never healed. She's a phantom I thought we'd buried alongside Adam. But now she's back, not just alive, but charged with intent. And the dossier in her purse? It doesn't just have the power to burn those high up in the government and intelligence fields. It could fracture alliances across borders, pit agencies against their own, ignite the kind of war that doesn't make headlines—just casualties.

Somehow, she's at the center of it all again. Just like last time. Only this time, I'm not unarmed.

She shouldn't be here, but she is. Alive. Dangerous. And looking straight at me with a smile that doesn't reach her eyes—a smile that feels like a cipher, hiding something jagged beneath the surface. Her eyes scan the room behind me, as if tracking more than threats. A message, maybe. A warning. Or bait for a trap I haven't seen yet.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:41 am

I move toward her without thinking, my shoes silent against the velvet carpet. Each step calculated. Controlled. I've interrogated warlords with less adrenaline in my veins. She doesn't flinch as I slide into the seat beside her. Doesn't speak.

I let the silence stretch.

"You're supposed to be dead," I say finally.

"I get that a lot," she responds, raising her glass.

I lean in close, my voice a low warning. "What do you want?"

She turns her head, lips inches from mine. "A deal."

* * *