



# Fugitive Flirtation

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**Category:** Romance, Adult, Crime And Mafia, Action

**Description:** A million-dollar game of cat and mouse, with a side of love-at-first-sight.

Ace is an elite bounty hunter with a knack for finding trouble

His latest assignment: bring in Alicia Floyd, a woman who claims she's innocent.

Don't they all?

The twist? A small fortune is bouncing between accounts in Alicia's name.

She insists she's been framed, but Ace has heard that story before.

And yet, while he should be laser-focused on the job, he finds himself distracted by this forbidden attraction.

He should know better since in the world of bounty hunting, the only thing more complicated than the cases are the feelings that come with them.

**Total Pages (Source):** 20

# Page 1

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1

“Okay, guys, let’s get this show on the road.”

Ice drops a bunch of folders on the conference table. Some of us frown at the sight. He’s old school, resisting going all digital.

As if reading our minds, he frowns and grumbles, “Y’all can store your info in your cloud if you want. I’ll stick with the reliable stuff: a notebook and my memory.”

Cobra looks at me and winks. Ice’s memory ain’t what it used to be anymore but that’s fine; when he hits the streets, he still rocks. And most importantly, he’s still the unchallenged president of the Iron Tornadoes. He’s turned the MC into a very profitable enterprise. Mostly legit businesses too.

Ice will deny it, but many say that’s because of the influence of his wife, Lisa. Before I joined, she was our local DA for a bit. I guess it would have made for interesting dinner conversation if she’d had to prosecute him or one of his guys. But it’s no longer an issue. Years ago, she opened her own shop. Her firm has a big criminal law practice and yet, our orders are to do our best not to give her any extra work.

“Soooo...” He scratches his head and laughs. “Looks like it’s ladies’ week. Actually...”

“Yep, you’re right. Most of those gals are no ladies,” Sally confirms.

She runs the PI agency with Ice and Whizz. Those three have been business partners

forever. I don't know which one of them came up with the idea of adding bounty hunting to our activities, but it doesn't matter since they're all on board now.

"You're sending us out to hunt fucking broads?" Falcon protests.

"Yep!" Ice seems so happy with himself, it's annoying.

Why? Because I'm worried. I have a thousand questions about the new bond place we're working with. They sure have a fancy name: "Hunter's Guild: Elite Bounty Services," and it seems they've been around for a while. I'm sure the bosses checked them out, so it should all be above board. But still, I don't like change.

"Yours is a doozie, Falcon. A high roller, a con artist. Look at that angel face. Any Hollywood producer wouldn't think twice about casting her as a choir girl." Ice tosses the file across the conference table. "But guess what—she ran away with the collection basket."

Falcon opens the folder. On one side, there's the summary sheet with all deets the bond place has about the case; on the other, a stapled picture of the woman he needs to find.

Hell, it's true, she does look angelic!

"Ace," Ice calls out. "Don't be jealous. Your gal's cute too, and she does look like a sexy lady."

I catch the thin folder he sends flying to my end of the table.

John Hunter's team obviously wasn't able to get much on her: a one-page summary about the case and the mug shots. A quick check confirms I have all the intel I need to start digging.

While Ice continues his distribution, I tune him out and study my prey. Alicia Floyd, thirty years old, chestnut hair pulled back in a ponytail, big brown eyes, pouty lips. In the pictures, she's got no makeup. She's cute in a girl-next-door way. The type that doesn't stop traffic but grows on you. Though, I could be getting ahead of myself, maybe—all made up and with her hair flowing around her face, she could be spectacular.

But I know better than to get distracted by a pretty face. I'm a pro.

The summary of the case is succinct: she was a high-ranking executive in a big family-owned real estate business in Miami. She took advantage of her position to skim money from her employer. And we're talking real money here, more than a million dollars over a six-month period. Good job, girl! And if not for a tax audit, looks like she would have gotten away with it too. This may be the first time in history a taxpayer will be able to thank the good old IRS for checking their books!

“Okay, don't screw this up,” Ice growls, getting up from his chair. “The guys behind the Hunter's Guild are now the most active bondsmen in Florida. They're sitting on a fucking gold mine, and to get access, we need to show them we're the best around.”

“We're on it, boss,” Cobra calls after him as Ice and Sally leave the room.

My buddy comes to sit next to me with his folder and his laptop. I pull my machine out from my backpack, and while it boots, I ask, “What did you get?”

“A twofer.” He opens his thick folder and slides it over.

It takes me a few seconds to process what I see, but I finally get it. “Twins!”

“They look so much alike the cops took a picture of the two of them together so people wouldn't think he had processed the same woman twice.”

“What’s the crime?”

“I haven’t looked yet. What’s yours?.”

“Embezzlement or whatever it’s called when you confuse your boss’s money with yours. It shouldn’t be hard. I’m willing to bet dollars to pennies, I’ll get her in two days max.”

## Page 2

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Cobra raises an eyebrow.

“Yeah, I mean, her Ivy League education made her fucking good at cooking the books, but I doubt it gave her the basic skills for a life on the run.”

“The white collars always get caught,” Dagger agrees from the other side of the table.

For a few minutes, we remain silent. The only sound in the room is the painful squeak of Edge’s chair as he balances himself precariously.

Ghost growls and the noise stops until Blaze announces that he’s gonna need help for his.

“What’s the matter,” Ghost teases. “Can’t take down a girl?”

Dagger leans over Blaze’s shoulder to look inside his folder and whistles.

“Wow, she can’t weigh more than 110 pounds, but let me tell you, that’s not just a girl, that’s a ....” Blaze can’t seem to find the right words.

“That’s a what?” Dagger barks. Patience has never been his strong suit.

“A stick of dynamite?” Blaze suggests. “She’s last year’s featherweight MMA champion!”

That’s the thing about bounty hunting—there’s never a dull day, that’s for sure.

The rumble of the train has rocked my neighbor to sleep. She's wearing a hospital uniform. I'm guessing she's on her way back home after a night shift. At this time of day, the north trains aren't crowded. Most people go south to Miami. Me? I'm not commuting. I'm running away from the city and have no idea where I'm going to end up.

Thanks to all those spy movies I watched with my dad, the beginning of my plan was easy enough to come up with. I know cash is king, so I've emptied my bank account. I got a bunch of prepaid credit cards and a dozen cheap burner phones. I moved all the data from my regular phone to a very old tablet with no Wi-Fi connection. I parked my car by the Greyhound station, and in the ladies' room, I managed to ditch my phone. It's fully charged, hidden in the huge backpack of a Canadian girl on her way back to Montréal. That's a 60-hour ride with four stops... She's braver than I've ever been!

If anyone is trying to find me through my phone, they'll waste a day or two. Unless it's someone who knows me. Yeah, the idea of me moving to Quebec is absurd. I'm a Florida girl. I hate the cold. There's no way I would ever consider moving that far north. Not in a million years, and let's face it—if I'm going to do time, I wanna do it in a Florida jail.

But I'm not going to do time. I'm going to figure out a way to prove that I was framed. I don't want to think about myself this way, but the truth is, I'm a victim. Well, I initially was one. And yes, now that I have indeed stolen the money, explaining I didn't start this whole process is going to be a hard sale. Still, there's got to be a way to do it. And, if worse comes to worst, I'll move the money to a Caribbean island bank and find my way there. Starting over can't be so hard when you have over a million dollars to burn.

“Tickets, please.”

I almost jump out of my skin. Next to me, the woman pulls her ticket out from her bra without opening her eyes. The controller leans over to take a look at it while I try to catch my breath. I need to chill. I smile at the controller and hand her my ticket. She nods and gives it back to me before moving to the next row. From where I sit, I can see that she’s serious about protection. Next to the train company-issued gun, she’s got pepper spray. It’s nice to know she’d rather temporarily blind an aggressive passenger than shoot holes into him. I’m not sure I would take that chance. I’m not a violent person per se, but I do have a good sense of preservation.

The armed woman walks away, and I look out the window. Point Lookout is two stops away. From there, I’ll take a bus to the seasonal rental I booked for a month. I force myself to breathe. I can stay locked up in an apartment for one month if it means I can be free for the rest of my life. A month should be enough for me to clear my name... or not.

On paper, I look really bad. It looks like I moved the money from the corporation’s account to a bank I had never heard about.

Lucky for me, I saw the name in the file of the DA who was interrogating me. Yeah, reading upside down is one of my many talents.

Anyway, the second I got released on bail, I ran to the bank, showed some ID, and lo and behold, they humored me when I asked if I could open five new accounts, into which I moved most of the money.

That move is like a double-edged sword. On one hand, it’s damning since it demonstrates I had knowledge of the first account, the one I swore I had never heard about. But on the other hand, it’s sweet revenge. I just screwed the person who tried to frame me. He or she no longer has access to the money.



That asshole isn't very bright anyway. Or too self-confident. Had I taken the money to begin with, I would never have left it in the account where I first moved it. That was too easily traceable. Nope, I would have moved it around so much it would have been impossible to track. That's actually what I'm going to do as soon as I'm settled.

When the train stops in West Palm Beach—there's no station in Point Lookout—I hoist my huge backpack on my shoulders and follow the crowd out of the station. The taxi looks real tempting, but I know better. On the bus, no one will notice me; I'll just be one of those seasonal tourists traipsing around South Florida with way too much luggage. Seriously, if you're here for the season, what you really need is a pair of flip-flops, a handful of tee-shirts and shorts, a couple of bathing suits, and a sweater for the cooler evenings.

Why do I have more? Because I'm not sure I'm ever going back home, and there's stuff I didn't want to leave behind. It took me a while to figure out what I absolutely needed to take with me. Some of the stuff was obvious, mementos like my mother's engagement ring and my father's watch. I doubt they have any actual value, but they're precious for me. Same with my childhood photo albums. Those are heavy. I've always wanted to get everything digitized but never got around to it. I didn't bother with diplomas or W2s and stuff like that since there are only two options. Option1, I clear my name and I go home where everything is. Option2, I can't clear my name and I need to start fresh: I'll get a new name and no one will know about my past.

The bus ride is short enough: twenty minutes to a stop across the street from my rental. As promised, there's a keypad. I press the combination and the door opens. I inspect my new home and am happy to see that it actually looks better than in the pictures.

The furniture has seen better days but is still serviceable and enough for my needs: an open kitchen with two stools next to the island, a two-seater sofa that doesn't face the

balcony with its side ocean view, a huge television mounted on the wall, and a mini coffee machine. In the adjacent room, two twin beds pushed together create a king-size bed, and there's an en suite shower room and separate toilet.

I drop my backpack on the bed, and before unpacking, I check that I do have the promised connection to the rest of the world. Yep, the Wi-Fi works...

I'm giving myself the evening off and tomorrow I'll keep on digging.

## Page 3

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I'm not going down without a fight.

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I stare at the computer screen as Ghost digs deeper into Alicia's online trail. I watch over his shoulder. I could probably get to the same place on my own, but he does it so fast it takes a weight off all our shoulders.

"There." He points to a line of code. "Hey, you're not the only one after her. See, someone else has been poking around in her account and... if I'm to believe the IP, they're in Louisiana."

"Right, but that doesn't mean anything. I'm sure that if anyone found a trace of our visit, they'd probably think we're in Alaska or something."

"The Philippines, actually," Ghost says.

I lean toward the screen. I'm not sure what I'm looking for in this pixel jungle. I just know that if they got here too, they're not amateurs. They know their stuff. They've covered their tracks—just not well enough to fool Ghost.

"Chances are it's another bounty hunter," Ghost observes, voicing my own suspicions.

"Probably." I lean back in my chair, considering our next move. "They could be good, but we're better."

Ghost grins, the challenge sparkling in his eyes. “Damn right we are.”

I turn my attention back to the screen. Alicia’s not bad either, I’ll give her that. She’s covered her tracks well for a civilian. But everyone makes mistakes, and I’m going to find hers.

As Ghost continues his online investigation, my mind drifts to the woman in the mugshot. There’s something about her that intrigues me. It’s more than the usual thrill of the hunt. She’s smart, resourceful. An interesting client.

But I’m not in this game to lose.

“Got it,” Ghost announces. “She’s holed up in a rental property in Point Lookout.”

I read the address he highlights on his screen. “Not a bad choice. Quiet, out of the way. Easy to blend in with the tourists.”

Ghost nods and wheels his chair away from his desk while I stand and stretch.

“I’ll head there first thing in the morning.”

“Yeah, get to her before our mystery competitor does,” he calls out as I leave the data room.

I know Point Lookout like the back of my hand. I grew up here and watched the small town turn into... something else. I’m not sure what we are. Way back when I was a kid, we were a middle-class community with a few mansions. At the time, we only had one high-rise, which was the hotel. Now we have an entire row of ten-story buildings right on the beach. It’s not Fort Lauderdale’s Galt Mile, but we’re getting there. Anyway, we’re a tourist town in high season and just a regular medium-size town the rest of the year.

I pull up to the rental complex and park my SUV in a shaded spot. Having to move around in a box is the only part about this job I don't like but I've made my peace with it. No buts about it; to catch runaways, we need four wheels.

It's almost 8. The sun's peeking over the horizon, casting a golden glow over the sleepy buildings. I spot an older guy sweeping the walkway to the building and recognize the uniform of the maintenance company that handles our office cleaning. As I get closer, I have the gut feeling this is going to be a good day. I know the guy.

"Frank!" I call out, waving him over.

He squints at me for a moment before recognition dawns on his face. "Well, if it isn't the big bad wolf in person. What brings you to this neck of the woods, Ace?"

I flash him my most charming smile. "Just here to surprise my girlfriend. She's staying in one of your rentals."

Frank raises an eyebrow. "Is that so? You got a girlfriend now?"

The man is a true romance addict. He's been married for decades and raves about marital bliss. So, just in case I need him later, I lay it on thick.

"Yep, I got bitten by the fucking bug too, just like you said I would."

The man flashes a victorious smile. Of course, he knew all along that I was gonna fall hard one day.

"I even have a picture of her on my phone. Wanna see?" I ask, popping a picture of Alicia I stole from her Instagram feed.

He studies the picture for a moment, then nods. "Unit203. I've seen her. She goes

running on the beach at the crack of dawn and then stays put for the rest of the day. Is she a health nut? She hasn't been here long but she gets everything delivered fresh every single day."

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I clap him on the shoulder and shrug. “Yep, she’s serious about nutrition and shit like that.”

We say goodbye, and as I head toward the building, I spot a grocery delivery truck pulling up. On a hunch, I intercept the driver as he’s unloading a bag.

“Hey there,” I call out, pulling out a crisp twenty from my pocket. “Those for unit203?”

The driver frowns like he’s going to send me packing and then notices the cash. Twenty is all it takes for his scruples to fly away. He nods, eyeing the money. I press the bill into his hand and offer an explanation:

“I’m her boyfriend. Wanted to surprise her with breakfast in bed. Mind if I take those off your hands?”

“Sure, man. Knock yourself out.”

I grab the bags and head into the building. Adrenaline starts to kick in. I’m so close. Just a few more steps and I’ll have her. On the second floor, I find her door and pause a minute, listening for any signs of movement inside. Nothing. Okay, so Frank said she runs early every morning. She could still be out, or she could be in the shower, or she could be back in bed...

Since I’ve decided this is my lucky day, I decide to take a chance. I set the bag down and pull out my lock-picking kit. It takes me less than thirty seconds to get the door open. I learned to do that way before I joined the police academy, but when anyone

asks, I lie and say it's one of the perks of being an ex-cop.

I slip inside, leaving the door ajar and the bag behind me. The one-bedroom is small but tidy. Right away, I spot a backpack on the table and, next to it, a laptop charging. I'm about to take a look at the screen when I hear a shout in the adjacent room.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Stupid, stupid bed!"

Oops. I smile and sympathize. Yep, I'm really good at kicking innocent furniture, especially in the morning before I have my coffee... and every single time the furniture wins.

But right now is not the time to suggest she ice whatever part of her body she's hit. That's not what I came here for.

I just have time to run out and close the front door behind me before she enters the living room.

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Hobbling into the living room and cursing under my breath, I make my way to the fridge. I grab a plastic bag, empty an ice tray into it, and collapse onto the sofa to press the cold pack against my throbbing toe.

I force myself to take deep breaths, but just as I'm starting to relax, a loud knock on the door almost gives me a heart attack.

"Grocery delivery!" a deep, masculine voice calls out.

I frown, thinking it's not the same guy that came yesterday or the day before. I drag myself to the door, pull it open, and take a painful step back. I'm about to ask him to



drop the bags on the kitchen counter when I forget how to speak.

Wow, this is the most striking man I've ever seen. Tall, piercing blue eyes and rugged, handsome face... built like a god. Hermes maybe? If I remember well, he was in charge of deliveries. I want to climb him like a tree. What's the matter with me?

Still holding my grocery bag, he flashes a charming smile. "Where do you want these?" His voice matches his appearance, smooth and confident. That man's way too... handsome, charming, confident... to be just a delivery guy.

A small alarm rings in the back of my mind, but my tingling lady bits silence it immediately.

"Uh, on the counter, please," I manage to say, painfully stepping aside to let him in.

As he makes his way to the kitchen, I admire his athletic build and wonder what it is about him that makes my heart race and my palms sweat. Pheromones? It's a thing with animals, and no matter how much we try to deny it, we're just mammals. Possibly evolved mammals, but when it comes to reproduction, our evolution is not all that it's cracked up to be.

My delivery god sets the bags down on the counter and turns to face me, his eyes locking with mine. "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

I swallow hard, my mind suddenly filled with all sorts of inappropriate thoughts. Crazy, stupid thoughts like what would our babies look like? Okay, something's really wrong with me. I'm usually very picky about men. I'm also a snob. I only date sophisticated men. I'm not the type to swoon over a random delivery guy, no matter how devastatingly handsome he might be.

“No, that’s all. Thank you,” I say, trying to keep my voice steady.

He nods, his gaze lingering on me for a moment longer before he heads back toward the door. As he passes by, I catch a whiff of his scent—a mix of leather, sandalwood, and something uniquely him. It’s intoxicating, and I find myself fighting the urge to lean closer.

I can’t believe how strongly I react to his presence. And now is not the time to get distracted by a pair of stunning blue eyes and a chiseled jawline. I need to focus on clearing my name.

But maybe a little distraction is good... for a minute I forgot all about my toe. But now the pain is back with a vengeance and I need to ice my foot again.

I settle back on the couch without looking at him and start cursing again as soon as the door slams shut. I close my eyes and wait for the cold to work its magic when I get startled again.

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“Let me help you with that?”

“What the hell?” I bark. “What are you still doing here?”

“Well, delivery boy is a side gig really. My main job is bounty hunter.” His tone is calm but firm. “My name is Ace and I’m here to take you back to Miami for your next court hearing.”

I stare at the man, my heart racing as his words sink in. A bounty hunter? Fuck, fuck, fuck, I must not panic.

Despite my best efforts to keep it steady, my voice trembles when I try to plead my case. “No, no. Listen, I don’t know what you think you know, but I’m innocent.”

A shadow of a smile appears on his gorgeous lips. Of course, that’s what everyone must say when he comes for them.

He confirms I’m right on the money. “Save it, sweetheart. I’ve heard it all before. The jails are full of innocent people, or so they say.”

I open my mouth to protest, to explain, but he cuts me off with a wave of his hand. “You’ve got five minutes to pack your stuff. And no, I don’t want to hear your explanations or excuses. I’m just here to do my job.”

My mind races as I try to think of a way out of this situation. At this point, I’m only certain of one thing: I can’t let him take me in. If he does, now that I’ve moved the money, I’ll never be able to prove my innocence.

“Please, just give me a chance to explain.” I hate how much desperation has crept into my voice.

He sighs, looking at me with a mix of pity and annoyance. “Four minutes and thirty seconds.”

Okay, he’s made up his mind. Nothing I say is going to change that. I need to act as if I’m surrendering... for now.

I grab my backpack and start shoving my things inside while going over my options in my head. Those are limited. Go with him or run. The thing is, if I run, chances are he will get me again, and if he doesn’t, I’ll be a fugitive. I’ll have to spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder, always wondering when my past will catch up to me.

“Time’s up!” His voice derails my train of thought as I’m tying my sneakers. Thankfully, my toe’s decided to stop throbbing.

Diving into his piercing blue gaze, I snap back. “You’ve gotta let me go.”

He raises an eyebrow, his hand moving to rest on the gun at his hip. “That’s not really an option, my dear.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, swallowing hard. “But I don’t have a choice.”

For a second, he looks surprised.

That’s when I make a break for the door.

I lunge for Alicia as she dashes toward the door. She reaches the handle before I can grab her, and now we're really in the shit house. The door bursts open, and two men storm into the condo. Instinctively, I draw my gun, but they're armed too.

"Move back, both of you," one of the men growls, motioning with his weapon.

Alicia stumbles back. I grab her arm and pull her behind me, shielding her with my body. Something in the back of my brain is ringing an alarm. If they want her, I should be using her as a shield, not protecting her with my own body.

"She's mine," I say the words sounding oddly appropriate as they get out of my mouth. "Got to her first."

They both frown as if they don't understand English.

Nah, they just don't get what I'm saying.

Okay, so they're not competition. Not another bounty hunter I could negotiate with. Fuck!

"What do you want?"

The same guy talks again, waving his gun as he speaks. "We're here for the girl. We've got no beef with you. Hand her over and we'll just go."

I glance at Alicia. Even when she's terrified, she's hot. Also, she doesn't cave under pressure. Looks like having a meltdown didn't even cross her mind.

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“You’re not taking her anywhere,” I say, my grip tightening on my gun.

The first man takes a step forward, his weapon aimed at me. “Don’t be a hero; she’s not worth it. Hand her over...”

Nope, that won’t happen. No serious bounty hunter gives up that easily. But that’s not it. There’s this protective urge washing over me. Now is not the time to think about it. I’ll do that later, or not. Introspection’s not really my thing. I just know that I can’t let them take her, no matter what.

“Not happening,” I growl, my finger tightening on the trigger as I aim for the first man’s leg. He goes down with a cry of pain. Instead of shooting back, his partner watches him fall to the floor.

Perfect, it’s amateur hour.

I use the moment of confusion to shove Alicia toward the balcony.

“Go!” I yell, firing again at the other man’s right arm to keep him at bay.

Following Alicia outside, I scan the area, looking for an escape route. We’re two stories up, but there’s a small ledge running along the building.

“We have to jump,” I say, holstering my gun and reaching for Alicia. “But not here, over there.”

She stares at me and then looks down again toward a dumpster I’m pointing at. She

shakes her head and whispers, “I don’t know if I can.”

“You can,” I insist, pulling her close. “I’ve got you.”

We climb over the railing, and I hold her tight as we inch along the ledge. I hear shouts from inside the condo, and there’s a new voice in the mix. Fuck, they have reinforcement. Unless it’s some neighbor complaining about the noise...

Hopefully, we’ll never know. We need to jump. It’s a risky jump—the dumpster is filled with construction debris—but it’s our only chance.

“Do you trust me?” I ask, looking into Alicia’s eyes.

She hesitates for a moment, then nods and whispers, “Yes.”

I pull her into my arms, and together, we leap off the ledge, aiming for the dumpster. We land with a crash. My breath’s knocked out of me, but as far as I can tell, it was a good fall. Nothing’s broken. And we’re alive, and for now, that’s all that matters.

“You’re okay?” I ask, reaching for the side of the dumpster.

She tentatively moves her arms and legs, stretches, and nods.

“Good, then let’s get out of here.”

As we scramble out of the broken pieces of sheetrock, I’m reconsidering my first assessment of Alicia.

Not the part about her being crazy hot and sexy—that remains the case even when she’s covered with white plaster dust. I have this flash of me pulling her under a hot shower and... I push those thoughts aside.

Right now, I have more pressing concerns, and what I'm questioning is her guilt. Because someone else is chasing her, I'm ready to consider the possibility that Alicia could be innocent. But there's another option. Those men could be her partners or someone working for partners she tried to screw over. That's something I have to figure out. I just need to keep her safe while I do it.

"Come on," I say, taking her hand. "We need to get out of here."

We run for the car and as soon as our belts are on, I gun the engine and peel out of the alley, putting as much distance as possible between us and the condo. My mind races as I try to make sense of what just happened. Those men were definitely not there to bring her to justice. No, they had something else in mind.

I glance over at Alicia, who's slumped in the passenger seat, her face pale. "You okay?"

She shakes her head. I can tell she's shaken. I get it. This case just got a whole lot more complicated.

I pull out my phone and dial Ice's number. He picks up on the first ring. "Ace, what's up?"

"I need a safe house, boss. Things went sideways at the girl's place. Some goons showed up. I shot one in the leg, one in the arm, and we made it out."

Ice is silent for a second while I hear the clicks of his mechanical keyboard. "Okay, I got you. Head to the shack behind the old clubhouse. I'll have someone meet you there with supplies."

"Will do."



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“Call me when you get there. In the meantime, I’m going to do a little snooping. If those guys were not the competition, then something doesn’t smell right.”

I hang up and try to focus on the road. Ice is right. Something’s off about this whole situation. I glance at Alicia again. She doesn’t look like a criminal mastermind to me, but then the successful ones never do. All good con men or women have one thing in common: they appear trustworthy.

“Who were those men?” I ask, breaking the silence.

Alicia shakes her head. “I don’t know. They didn’t really want me. They couldn’t care less about me; they only want the money, that’s for sure.”

“What do you mean?”

She hesitates, as if debating how much to tell me. “Look, I’m guessing what you’ve heard about me. But whatever you heard is not the whole story. I didn’t steal that money for myself.”

Fuck. My house of cards crumbles. So much for her being innocent. “Oh really? Then who did you steal it for?”

“It’s not like that.” She shrugs and folds her arms. “If I told you what happened, you would never believe me.”

“Try me anyway.”

“Well, it’s... it’s complicated.”

The truth is never complicated. It’s the lies that are.

My brains want to dismiss her claims as a desperate attempt to save her own skin. My gut, which has saved my life countless times when I was a cop, senses there might be some truth to what she’s saying. And then there’s another part of me, one that shouldn’t be used for thinking, which argues that there’s a better way to make her talk... and the image of me dragging her under the shower to help her clean up crosses my mind again.

Thankfully rush hour traffic takes care of my raging hard-on. I hate tourist season. It takes us twenty minutes to get to our destination. One prospect is already there, his ride parked next to the gate. He opens the garage door for me so I can hide the car and closes it behind us.

I guide Alicia outside the building, through the overgrown backyard and into the shack. As we pass the door, I put my hand on the small of her back and she shudders... Yeah, it’s freezing in here. Why do they keep it so cold?

We refer to this place as the shack, but it’s really a large studio complete with a shower room and a small kitchen. From the street it does a great job of masquerading as a garden tool shed. It’s a little too small for two strangers, but it will have to do.

Inside the studio, another prospect closes the fridge door as we step in.

“You have enough food for a few days,” he says rushing out the door.

“We won’t be here that long,” I answer, pressing the electronic lock behind him.

That could just be wishful thinking.

The two young men who got us settled in leave and Ace takes over on the couch. He plays with a remote control. There's a small screen on the wall. A view of the shack from different angles flashes at regular intervals. Eyes on the monitor, he yawns and stretches his legs while I pace.

"You're going to wear a hole in the floor," he says, a hint of amusement in his voice.

I stop and turn to face him. "I can't just sit here and do nothing."

He leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "Then talk to me, Alicia. Help me understand what's really going on."

I hesitate. Can I trust him? Should I? What if, for once, I didn't over-analyze everything and just jumped in? I will most likely curse myself later, but right now, something in his gaze compels me to open up. Okay, here I go.

"I didn't steal the money. I was set up."

Ace nods, encouraging me to continue.

I take a deep breath and sit down next to him.

"As far as I know, only three persons had access to the accounts from which the money was taken. Me, my boss, and his son. That's it." I sigh and shake my head. "I don't think it's Mr.Blackwell. The man's a rule follower... And he doesn't need the money."

Ace laughs. "Don't be too sure about that. For some people, enough is not a thing."

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“You’re right, but if he wanted to cheat Uncle Sam, he would have done it in a more clever way.”

“So the son?”

His question gives me hope. He’s actually the first one who seems ready to consider the possibility that I could be innocent. Even my attorney didn’t.

“Yeah, but I can’t wrap my head around him doing something like that,” I say.

Ace raises a questioning eyebrow.

“It’s not that David doesn’t want more money. He does. If you listen to him, Mr.Blackwell is not as generous as he should be considering how invested David is in the business.” I make air quote around the word invested. “What David’s invested in is his poker games with his buddies. He plays every single night. No one’s ever seen him at the office before noon. The truth is Blackwell Junior is a lazy ass. He’s also not the sharpest knife in the drawer. When he was in high school, he believed that some Nigerian prince on his death bed had picked him to be his heir...”

Ace rolls his eyes.

“Yeah, that’s how his college fund vanished.” I shake my head. “I don’t think he’s smart enough to...”

I stop mid sentence because now that I think about it, I’m wondering how hard it would be to open an account online in someone else’s name. Not that complicated if

you have their personal data... to which he would have had access through my file at HR.

Ace brings me back to the present by asking, "What about you giving me facts instead of a hypothesis?"

"Facts..." I growl. "That's easy: money was siphoned out of the corporation into an account that had been opened in my name, in a bank I had never heard about."

"Okay."

"I'm innocent..." I pause and rephrase. "I was innocent."

Now Ace frowns.

"Well, since the account had been opened in my name, I did something to make sure it wouldn't move again while I worked on clearing my name."

"So you now have the money?" he asks.

"Let's say that I know where it is."

"Okay, now it makes more sense..."

Now I'm lost. "What makes more sense?"

"The guys chasing you."

"Oh, right." I sink next to him on the sofa and mull this over. "How did they find me?"

“The same way that I did.” Ace laughs. “Following the breadcrumbs you left on the net...”

“But... but...” My protest dies on my lips and now it’s my turn to laugh. “So much for me thinking I had covered my tracks.”

He reaches out and pats my hand. “Don’t feel bad; vanishing’s almost impossible these days.”

His touch sends a jolt of electricity through me.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure, ask away,” he says.

“To be a bounty hunter, you need investigative skills, right?”

“Yep.” He nods and stretches his arm on the back of the couch.

“Can people hire you to find out stuff?”

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He nods again and smiles. Gosh, that smile...

“Yeah, I’m real good at finding the shit people hide,” he observes, looking at the screen again.

“So could I hire you to help me...”

“To help you escape, nope.”

“I wasn’t gonna say that. I was going to ask if you could help me find out who framed me.”

“No need to hire me to do that,” he says, looking right into my eyes. “Figuring out this fucking mess is already part of my mission.”

I look into his eyes, and for the first time since this nightmare began, I feel a glimmer of hope. But there’s something else too, an incredible attraction that I can’t ignore.

“One way or another, we’re gonna get to the bottom of this,” he says, his voice filled with conviction. Ace leans closer, his breath warm on my skin. “You’re not alone in this, Alicia.”

My heart races. We’re so close. I know I should pull away, but I can’t seem to move. His hand comes up to cup my cheek, his thumb brushing over my lips.

“Ace,” I whisper, my voice barely audible.

He closes the distance between us, his lips brushing against mine in a soft, tentative kiss. I melt into him, my fingers tangling in his hair as the kiss deepens.

For an instant, everything else fades away. The fear, the uncertainty, the weight of the secrets I'm keeping. All that matters is the feel of his body against mine, the taste of his lips, the way he makes me feel alive.

But reality comes crashing back all too soon. I pull away, my breath coming in short gasps.

"Now that we've got this out of our system, let's focus on clearing your name," Ace says.

If he thinks one kiss got him out of my system, he couldn't be more wrong!

That kiss made it worse.

I stand up, needing to put some distance between us.

"So what's our next move?" I ask, trying to keep my voice steady.

Ace's brow furrows. "We need to find evidence that someone set you up. And we need to do it fast, before their goons find us again."

Before I get a chance to ask him how we're going to do that, a metallic voice blasts through the room. "Alert, perimeter breach. Alert, perimeter breach..."

7

The alarm blares through the room, its piercing tone cutting through the tension between Alicia and me. I jump to my feet, instinctively reaching for my weapon



while checking the cameras.

“False alarm,” I tell Alicia while pressing the button that shuts the alarm off.

A few seconds later, the door bursts open and Ice strides in. “We’ve got a situation.”

“What’s going on?”

“Ghost has been digging into Alicia’s case.” He nods toward her. “And he’s uncovered something interesting.”

“What did he find?” Alicia asks, hope lighting up her beautiful features.

“Look on your phone,” Brian says. “Ghost’s sent you some interesting footage.”

I do as he asks and soon enough, I’m watching security camera footage of a young man entering what seems to be the branch of a fancy bank. “Is this David Blackwell?” I ask Alicia, showing her the screen. “That’s her boss’ son,” I explain to Ice.

“Yeah, it’s him, but wait...” Her voice changes. She fights tears when she adds, “It’s not the right bank.”

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“That’s just a detail,” Ice answers. “It’s enough for a reasonable doubt since in that bank he’s wired money in the name of the receptionist.”

“He did the same thing to Hilda? Can we prove it?” Alicia asks anxiously.

“Yep, we can because this time, the idiot felt so confident he could pull this off that he opened those accounts and transferred the money with a computer connected to his home modem. A few days later he went to this branch to move some money to another account.”

My jaw tightens as the pieces fall into place.

“Son of a bitch,” I mutter, anger rising. “He did set you up.”

Alicia slumps onto the couch, her hands trembling as she takes in the evidence.

“I can never thank you enough,” she whispers, her voice thick with emotion. “I would never have found that on my own.”

I sink down beside her, placing a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “We’ve got proof now. You’re in the clear.”

Relief washes over her face, and she leans into my touch, seeking comfort.

It feels like the most natural thing in the world. All my blood flies south, but I can’t think about my jeans being too tight—Ice clears his throat, reminding us of his presence.

“So, our next moves,” he says, his tone all business. “Ghost is working on tracing the money that just left the new account, but we need to move fast before Blackwell Junior catches wind of what we know.”

“I don’t think it’s David we need to worry about,” I say. “According to Alicia, he’s not the sharpest knife in the drawer.”

“You’re saying he’s working with someone else?”

I turn to Alicia and ask, “You said he played poker every single night, right?”

Alicia nods.

“Are you sure he only plays with his friends?”

“I see where you’re going with that,” Ice says. “You’re thinking he got invited to more serious tables and got scammed.”

“Yeah, and the scammers would be the ones who had helped him set up this mess and hired some goons?”

“That would make sense,” Alicia chimes in.

“Okay then, I’ll ask Ghost to look into that too,” Ice says. “We’ll tie up all the loose ends while you baby-sit the lady.”

“You mean you’re going to keep me here?” Alicia asks.

“Yeah, and then when the coast is clear, we’ll bring you back to justice.”

“But, but...”

Ignoring Alicia, my boss presses on the alarm button that gives him 30 seconds to leave the place and slips out. She shivers beside me, and I pull her closer, offering reassurance I can.

“You’re safe now,” I murmur, my lips brushing against her forehead. “I’ve got your back.”

A few hours ago, I didn’t even know this woman and right this second, I can’t think of anything more important than ensuring her safety and clearing her name.

The tension between us is incredible but we manage to spend the day not acting on it. We talk a lot, laugh a little, cook lunch, binge-watch a series, prepare dinner.

But as the day ends, as we pull out the sofa bed we need to share for the night, I find it impossible not to deny the magnetic pull drawing me closer to Alicia. Her eyes are wide, filled with a mix of fear and desire. I lean in, my heart pounding as our lips meet in a light kiss.

Alicia’s body melts into mine, her fingers tangling in my hair as our kiss becomes more passionate. The world around us fades away, and all that matters is the connection between us. I trace my hands down her back, pulling her even closer.

Suddenly, Alicia breaks away, her breath coming in short gasps. “We can’t do this.”

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“Why not?” I ask, but I don’t care about what she says. She can’t deny how much she wants me. Her voice is filled with longing.

“Because... because... it’s complicated,” she stammers, taking a step back.

I take a deep breath and try to regain my composure. “You’re right.”

Alicia nods, her eyes filled with relief. “Thank you,” she says softly.

We stand there for a moment, the tension between us still thick in the air. Then, without warning, Alicia grabs my hand and pulls me toward the sofa.

“Why do you have to be such a gentleman?” she asks with a mischievous grin.

That’s when I decide to let my desire for her overwhelm any rational thoughts.

Alicia pushes me onto the bed, her lips finding mine once again. I wrap my arms around her, pulling her on top of me.

Our clothes come off in a frenzy, and soon we’re tangled on top of the sheets, our bodies pressed together. Alicia’s skin is soft and warm, and I can’t get enough of her. I explore every inch of her body, my hands tracing the curves of her hips and the softness of her breasts. My fingers dance across her skin, leaving a trail of goosebumps in their wake.

Alicia moans softly as I kiss her neck, my lips trailing down to her collarbone. She arches her back, pressing herself closer to me as I continue my exploration. I can feel

her desire building, and I know I won't be able to hold back much longer. Her eyes lock onto mine, and for a moment, we just stare at each other, the only sound our heavy breathing.

With a growl, I roll us over, pinning Alicia beneath me. She looks up at me with hooded eyes, her lips parted in anticipation. I enter her slowly, savoring the feeling of our bodies connected. The warmth of her skin envelops me, and I feel like I'm home.

Alicia gasps as I move, her hips rising to meet mine. We find a rhythm, our bodies moving in perfect harmony. I can feel the tension building inside me, and I know I'm close to the edge. Alicia's hands grasp my shoulders, her nails digging into my skin as she urges me on.

With one final thrust, I release my pent-up desire, my body shuddering with pleasure. Alicia follows suit, her own orgasm washing over her as she cries out my name. The sound sends shivers down my spine, and I feel my heart racing in my chest.

We lie there for a moment, our bodies entwined as we catch our breath. Then, with a sigh, Alicia rolls over, her back pressed against my chest. I wrap my arms around her, holding her close as we drift off to sleep. The world outside fades away, and all that's left is the two of us, lost in our own little bubble of bliss.

When I wake up, Alicia is gone. I sit up, my heart racing as I scan the room. Then, I hear the sound of water running in the bathroom. I let out a sigh of relief and lie back down, my mind racing with thoughts of what just happened.

As I lie there, lost in thought, the bathroom door opens. Alicia emerges, a towel wrapped around her body. She smiles at me shyly before climbing back into bed.

I pull her to me, my arms wrapped tightly around her. Right now, all that matters is the feeling of her body pressed against mine.

We both drift off to sleep once again.

8

Itoss and turn, unable to find peace. The gentle rise and fall of Ace's chest next to me is soothing, but my mind races with a thousand worries.

Ice's words echo in my head: "We'll bring you back to justice." I desperately want to believe they'll clear my name, but doubt gnaws at me like a relentless parasite. The Blackwells have money, influence, and a vast web of connections. What if they find a way to twist any information Ice's boss uncovers, turning it against me in their favor?

A heavy weight settles in my chest. I can't truly trust anyone, not even the charming bounty hunter whose arms make me feel safer than I have in... forever.

I am incredibly drawn to Ace, his disarming smile and unwavering determination to help me. This is the very reason why I have to stay guarded. Feelings can blind you, make you vulnerable to manipulation and betrayal. I've seen too much evidence of that. I have now learned that harsh lesson well. Allowing myself to let my guard down, even for a moment, could prove catastrophic. So I lie awake, my thoughts spinning, forcing myself to remain vigilant despite the solace Ace's presence provides.

Making sure I don't wake Ace, I slip out of bed and pace around the small room considering my options. I could try to make a break for it, disappear before they have a chance to act. But where would I go? Back to my rental? No one would think of looking for me there.

Or I could stay, play along for now. Let them think they've won my trust. No, that won't work. While under Ace's watch, I have no way to keep gathering information, to clear my name once and for all.

I don't want to end up behind bars, my life ruined.

For a second, I stare at the inky darkness shown by the screen and wonder if there's a way out of this, some angle I'm missing. My eyes drift back to Ace, his features softened in sleep. He seems so calm, so sure everything will turn out all right. He has that sort of trust with his team. I long to have that kind of faith, that certainty. But I've watched people get burned. I've seen how fickle fate is, how quickly the world can turn against you.

No, I can't afford to let my guard down, no matter how tempting it might be. I have to stay focused, keep my eyes on the prize: freedom, vindication.

With a sigh, I sink into the chair, almost resigned to another sleepless night when I remember the switch, the one Ice clicked on to kill the alarm.

I can run!



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Now that my decision is made, I move silently through the room, gathering my few belongings and stuffing them into my backpack. I glance at Ace's sleeping form. Why am I feeling guilty? Am I making a mistake? I push that thought aside. I have to do what's best for me, even if it means leaving him behind.

I slip on my shoes and tiptoe to the door, my heart pounding in my chest. I press on the button I saw Ice push just before he left. I hold my breath, praying it doesn't make a sound. The red light above the handle turns to green, and I exhale slowly, relief flooding through me. I turn the handle, but before I can take a step, a strong hand grips my arm, spinning me around. I find myself face to face with Ace, his eyes blazing with a rage I've never seen before.

"Where do you think you're going?" he demands, his voice low and dangerous.

I swallow hard, trying to find the right words to explain myself. "Ace, I... I have to go. I can't stay here any longer." I hate how my voice trembles.

His grip tightens on my arm, and I wince in pain. "Why not? Because you've got the money and you're running off to meet with your partner?"

My mouth falls open in shock at his accusation. "What? No! That's not true at all!" I protest, shaking my head vehemently.

Ace scoffs, shaking his head in disbelief. "Don't lie to me, Alicia. I was slow to catch on, but now I get it. You and Blackwell Jr. started this whole scheme together. And now... now... you used me, made me think you were innocent. Why? Were you hoping we would help you pin it all on him while you made a clean getaway?"

Tears sting my eyes as I realize the depth of his suspicion and mistrust. How could he think I would betray him like that? “No, Ace, please. You have to believe me. I didn’t lie to you. I’m not working with anyone, least of all David Blackwell,” I plead, my voice cracking with emotion.

He releases my arm, closes the door again, and takes a step back, putting some distance between us. The hurt in his eyes is like a knife twisting in my gut.

“Then why are you running?” he asks, his voice laced with a mixture of anger and sadness.

I can see the pain I’ve caused him, and it breaks my heart. “No, of course not. What happened between us... it was real. But I’m scared, Ace. I don’t want to go to jail for something I didn’t do. I can’t bear the thought of being locked up, branded as a criminal when I’m innocent,” I explain, my voice breaking as I fight back tears.

Ace runs a hand through his hair and lets out a growl of frustration, pacing back and forth like a caged animal.

“So you thought running was the answer? That you could just disappear without a word?”

I think what he’s really asking is how I could think about leaving him behind without a word.

I look away, shame washing over me as I realize how selfish and cowardly my actions must have seemed. I can’t meet his gaze. “I’m sorry. I thought it was the only way to avoid being wrongfully imprisoned. I should have trusted you, Ace. I never meant to hurt you or betray your trust.”

He takes a deep breath, his voice harsh. “I’ve got to hand it to you, Alicia, you’re

good. You had all of us fooled. Fuck, my entire team was working on clearing your name.” He shakes his head. “Let me guess, you ran ’cause you knew this was going to backfire, we would figure out how guilty you are...”

I bite my lip, my heart pounding in my chest. How can I make him see the truth?

“Yes, I did take the money, but only after I was framed by someone at the company. And yes, as incredible as it may seem, I do have faith in you, Ace. I wanted so desperately to believe that you were going to be my knight in shining armor, the one to prove my innocence.” I swallow hard, feeling tears prick my eyes. “But what if your team can’t gather enough evidence? What if the Caldwells twist what you find to further implicate me? I can’t risk being imprisoned for a crime I didn’t commit. Please, you have to understand, I never meant to betray your trust. I’m just trying to survive.”

Ace reaches out, cupping my face in his hands. “If you had faith in me, you would have stayed. I wouldn’t have let anything bad happen to you. But now, I know better than to trust this pair of pleading eyes and those lying lips.”

Oh no, what have I done? I have sabotaged my entire case. I lost the trust of the only person who was willing to help me.

I’m positively screwed: Ace won’t let me run to investigate on my own, and now that he thinks I did, he’ll probably tell his team to stop searching for evidence of my innocence.

9

Since she’s ready to go, we may as well get on the road. I’ll call Ice on the way to let him know I’m delivering our package earlier than we planned. I jump into my jeans and make myself a large mug of coffee, savoring the rich aroma as I take the first sip.

The bitter liquid burns my tongue, but I welcome the jolt of caffeine it provides.

Alicia stands at the opposite side of the room, her arms wrapped around herself as if trying to hold herself together. Yesterday night I would have felt sorry for her. Now I know better than to let her manipulate me with those wide, innocent eyes.

“Let’s go,” I tell her, my voice gruff as I open the door of the shack and stride toward the garage where my trusty SUV is parked.

She follows me, carrying her backpack and looking miserable, reminding me that I’ve learned not to fall for that act anymore.

“Get in the car,” I growl, not bothering to mask the bitterness in my voice. She’s brought this on herself.

Alicia climbs into the passenger seat without a word. I slam the car door shut behind her, the early morning sunlight glinting off the sleek black paint of my ride. As I slide in behind the wheel, she looks up at me, her eyes wide and pleading. I steel myself against the urge to comfort her. I can’t afford to let my guard down again, not after the stunt she pulled. In a twisted way, I’m grateful she tried to run—if she hadn’t, I would still be wrapped around her finger, blind to her true nature.

The engine roars to life, and I peel out of the garage. The drive to Miami stretches out before us, and I’m not looking forward to this couple of hours of tense silence. I grip the steering wheel tightly, my knuckles turning white as I try to keep my emotions in check. Anger, disappointment, and a lingering sense of betrayal swirl inside me, threatening to spill over.

Beside me, Alicia fidgets nervously, her fingers twisting the hem of her shirt. I can feel her eyes on me, but I refuse to meet her gaze. I’m afraid of what I might see there—fear, remorse, or worse, that calculating look that once fooled me so

completely. For now, I need to focus on the road ahead and push all thoughts of her from my mind. The sooner I can hand her over to justice, the better.

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The minutes tick by, each one feeling like an eternity. The distance between us is more than just physical—it's a chasm of broken trust and shattered illusions. I grip the steering wheel tightly, fighting to maintain control over the roiling emotions within me.

Finally, Alicia speaks up, her voice barely audible over the hum of the engine. "Ace, I'm sorry."

I let out a harsh laugh, the sound sharp and bitter. "Sorry doesn't cut it, Alicia." The words taste like acid on my tongue, a bitter reminder of the betrayal I feel.

"No, that's not true," she protests, her voice gaining strength. "I never lied to you. I was scared, yes, but everything I told you was the truth."

I shake my head, my jaw clenched so tightly I can feel the muscles straining. "How can I believe that now? After you tried to run?" The pain is still fresh and raw in my mind.

Alicia falls silent, and for a moment, the only sound is the rush of the road beneath the tires and the pounding of my heart in my ears. Then, she takes a deep breath and speaks again, her words measured and careful.

"You're right, I shouldn't have tried to run. But you have to understand, I panicked, and made a mistake."

I risk a glance at her, and what I see in her eyes is not deceit, but raw vulnerability. She's laying herself bare, offering me a chance to trust her again. Against my better

judgment, I feel a flicker of hope ignite within me. Maybe, just maybe, she's telling the truth. But the wound of her betrayals is fresh. I'm not sure I can let myself believe her so easily.

"My team and I will finish what got started, but first, I've got a mission: I'm taking you to the authorities in Miami," I say, keeping my voice gruff. My harsh edge is gone. "They'll sort this out, and if you're innocent, you'll be cleared." I'm not real good at this emotional stuff, but I know I have to see this through, even if it means putting my own feelings aside for now.

Alicia nods, her shoulders sagging.

"Thank you, Ace. Thank you for giving me a chance."

I don't respond, focusing my attention on the road ahead. The traffic is hell. Fuck morning rush hour.

I'm glad Ice's the sort of man who won't drop the ball. Especially since, right now, I need to know the truth—not only for Alicia's sake but also for my own peace of mind. A nagging voice in the back of my head wonders if I'll lose part of my self-respect over this whole ordeal. I've always prided myself on being a good judge of character, able to separate fact from fiction. But now I'm forced to confront the possibility that I may have been blinded, easily fooled by a pretty face and a convincing story of innocence.

The damning evidence that Ghost uncovered plays on a torturous loop in my mind. The money transfers, the accounts... It all points to one inescapable conclusion: Alicia Floyd could very well be guilty as sin of the crimes she's accused of. And I, the seasoned bounty hunter who prides himself on never being duped, may have fallen for her act hook, line, and sinker like a naive rookie. The thought leaves a bitter taste in my mouth and chips away at my confidence. How could I have been so blind?

I jolt awake as a phone rings.

Ice's voice booms on the speaker of the car, "What the fuck are you doing?"

"On my way to Miami to deliver the goods," Ace answers.

"Aren't you a bit early on schedule?" his boss asks.

"Yeah but I figured..."

"Don't care," the man cuts in. "It was a bad idea. So get off at the next exit and come up on a side road back to the office. You'll probably have company but nothing you can't handle. Just bring them to us, we'll be waiting for you."

Ice hangs up and looks in my direction.

"What?"

"Just making sure you had your seat belt tight."

A minute later, Ace goes down the ramp and bypasses Alternate A1A to take a smaller road.

"How can we have company?" I ask. "Your decision to take me back to Miami now was sort of spur of the moment thing, no?"

Ace frowns as if debating what he can share with me and then says, "I'm guessing they just leaked intel to check a theory."



We drive up a couple of blocks. It's quiet until it's not... An SUV passes us and swerves to block our way. Tires screech and Ace curses under his breath, his knuckles white on the steering wheel. In the rearview mirror, I see a sedan gaining on us. Is that our back-up?

"Hold on," Ace warns, his voice tight with concentration.

I grip the door handle, bracing myself for impact but we don't hit anything. Ace jerks the wheel, sending us careening onto a side street. The sedan follows, its engine roaring. We pass a school bus and enter a busy street. Ace weaves through traffic, his jaw clenched. "These guys don't give up easy."

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As the sedan gains on us, I turn around and catch a glimpse of the driver. It's David Blackwell.

"It's my boss's son," I gasp.

Ace gets out of traffic into a cul-de-sac. Before he reaches the end of it, he slams on the brakes, sending his SUV into a spin. The sedan shoots past us, its tires smoking. Ace throws the vehicle into reverse and blocks the exit.

"We need answers," he growls.

Ace rushes out of his seat and stands in front of David's car, pointing a gun at him. Standing like a cowboy in an old western, Ace's the sexiest man alive. If I wasn't so scared I'd... well I don't know what I would do.

David kills his engine and raises his hands. As soon as he does, Ace yanks open the driver's side door, dragging a dazed David out. He slams him against the car, his forearm pressed against David's throat.

"Talk," Ace demands. "Now."

David's eyes widen, his face pale. "I... I didn't have a choice," he stammers. "They said they'd kill me if I didn't do what they wanted."

"Who's they?" he asks.

"The guys I owe money to. From the poker games." David swallows hard. "They said

if I didn't help them frame you, they'd..." He trails off, his eyes filling with tears.

Ace's grip tightens. "But you're such a dumb fuck, you didn't set all this up on your own. You got Alicia to help you? She's the one who organized everything?"

David's eyes widen, and he shakes his head vigorously. "No, no. She was one of our two marks. None of the girls had anything to do with it."

Ace releases him, and David slumps against the car, rubbing his throat. Ace looks in the car and pulls out a phone. He places it in front of David's face to unlock it and looks at the screen for a bit.

He throws the phone to the ground and steps on it. I'm not sure what he's trying to do. Annoy David or make sure no one will be following us? As far as I know, crushing this state-of-the-art equipment isn't enough to make it impossible to track.

And now Ace pulls out his phone and dials. "Where the fuck are you?" he asks. He listens to someone answer. "Well, tell them to hurry up a bit or they're going to be late to the party." Another pause. "Yeah, in Flamingo Pass, and I've got the son of the boss. He just peed himself." Ace hangs up.

He kneels to get to David's level. He pulls out a pair of handcuffs from his back pocket, snaps them onto David's wrists, and says, "If you're waiting for the cavalry to come rescue you, don't get your hopes up, asshole. My guys just took care of them so no one's coming to your rescue."

I want to tell Ace that I'm not so sure about that. I'm ready to bet my condo that Blackwell Sr. will do everything in his power to make the entire case go away. But I keep my comments to myself.

Why? Because Ace needs to apologize for thinking the worst of me. And I'm not sure

apologizing is going to be enough.

Ace drags David up to his feet by pulling on his cuffs and shakes his head. “You’re coming with us.”

“Where to?” he whines.

“Not sure yet,” Ace answers. “It’s up to my boss. If it was up to me I would...”

We don’t get a chance to know what he would do if he was in charge as we’re interrupted by the arrival of the large SUV that had blocked us earlier, escorted by a dozen bikers sporting the colors of the Iron Tornadoes MC.

The one whose jacket identifies him as the VP of the MC approaches Ace.

“We got the goons,” he says, jerking his thumb toward the SUV. “Tied up in the back.”

Ace nods, a grim satisfaction on his face. “Good.”

Another man steps forward. “Ice called. Everyone’s meeting at the office in Point Lookout.”

“Everyone?” I ask, curious.

“You must be Alicia,” the man says, offering his hand. “I’m Whizz, one of those lazy-ass bosses. It’s a pleasure to meet you. It’s not every day we get someone’s who actually not guilty.”

“Nice to meet you too,” I say. “But you still haven’t answered my question.”

“Right, everyone would be a representative of the bondsman, the sheriff, and even Blackwell Sr.”

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At the mention of his father, David turns white as a sheet. I almost feel a twinge of sympathy for him but then think better of it. He climbs in the back without complaining. He's lucky, he could have been thrown in with his buddies, tied up and packed like sardines in the back of the other car.

We make our way to Ace's office in silence. As soon as we arrive, David gets dragged out of the back seat. He shuffles pitifully inside between two of Ace's men.

The office is bustling with activity, people milling about and talking in low voices. I spot Ice in the corner, deep in conversation with a man I assume is the sheriff.

Ace guides me to a chair and tells me to wait. I sit down, my nerves on edge. I'm not sure what's going to happen next, but I know that whatever it is, it's going to change everything.

Minutes later, the door opens again, and Blackwell Senior walks in. He's an imposing figure, tall and broad-shouldered, with a neatly trimmed beard and piercing eyes. He surveys the room, his gaze landing on his son.

"David," he growls. "What have you done?"

David seems to shrink under his father's gaze, his shoulders hunching. "I... I'm sorry, Dad. I didn't... I didn't mean for it to go this far."

Blackwell Sr. shakes his head, disappointment etched on his face. He turns to Ace. "I assume you have evidence of my son's involvement in this?"

Ace nods. "It's all there. Bank records, security footage, everything."

As Blackwell Senior sighs and shakes his head, I feel a sense of dread wash over me. What if he finds a way to turn this around on me? What if he uses his influence to make all the evidence in my favor go away?

But then I catch Ace's eye, and he gives me a reassuring nod. I take a deep breath, trying to calm my racing heart. I have to trust that the truth will come out, that justice will be served.

The room falls silent as Blackwell Senior sits across from Ice, who hands him a thick file. He turns the pages, his expression unreadable. A few minutes later, he closes the file and looks to the sheriff standing next to the desk.

"I want to press charges," he says, his voice firm. "Against my son and anyone else involved in this scheme."

Relief floods through me, so intense it's almost dizzying. I feel like I can breathe again for the first time in weeks.

As the sheriff starts to read David his rights, I catch Ace's eye once more. He gives me a small smile, and I feel a rush of gratitude toward his team.

He may still have to turn me in, but I know, at the end of the day, I'll be a free woman.

11

We're halfway to Miami when I finally break the tense silence.

"Alicia, I owe you an apology." My voice is gruff, the words feeling almost foreign

as they leave my lips. Admitting fault has never come easy for me.

She turns to me, her eyes guarded and skeptical.

“For what, exactly?” Her tone is clipped, laced with lingering hurt and distrust.

I grip the steering wheel tighter, choosing my words carefully. Vulnerability doesn’t sit well with me, but I know I need to open up if I want to make things right. “For doubting you. For thinking you were guilty.” The admission leaves a bitter taste in my mouth, but it’s the truth.

Alicia remains silent, her gaze fixed resolutely out the passenger window. The distance between us feels like a vast chasm, one I’m not sure I can bridge.

“You can’t blame me for thinking the worst when you tried to run,” I offer, attempting to justify my actions. Old habits die hard.

Her head whips around, eyes flashing with defiance. “As if you could blame me for trying to run! I was scared, Ace. Scared of going to jail for something I didn’t do.” Her voice trembles with emotion, and I can see the fear she’s been carrying etched into the lines of her face.

“I know, but...” I trail off, trying to find the right way to explain the tangled mess of thoughts and emotions swirling within me. How do I make her understand the instincts that have kept me alive all these years? “You have to see it from my perspective. You moved the money, Alicia. That didn’t exactly scream innocence.” The words sound hollow, even to my own ears.

She’s quiet for a moment, staring out the window at the passing scenery. The weight of our words hangs heavy in the air. “I panicked,” she says softly, her voice tinged with regret. “I thought that I needed to freeze the money. I didn’t want them to move



it again. I believed that once I got my hands on the money, I could prove my innocence somehow.”

I nod, understanding the desperation that must have driven her actions. In my line of work, I’ve seen enough to recognize the signs. She was grasping at straws. “I get it. You were backed into a corner, trying to find a way out.”

“Exactly.” She turns back to me, her expression softening as our eyes meet. There’s a vulnerability there that catches me off guard. “I never meant to mislead you, Ace. I was just... I was desperate. I would have tried just about anything to clear my name.”

“I know that now.” The realization settles in my gut like a lead weight. I reach over, taking her hand in mine, offering what little comfort I can. “And I’m sorry for not trusting you. I should have had more faith.”

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Alicia squeezes my hand, a small smile playing on her lips. A glimmer of hope amidst the chaos. "Apology accepted."

We fall into a more comfortable silence, the weight of misunderstandings slowly lifting. But even as the tension dissipates, I can't shake the nagging feeling that we're a long way from the trust needed to build something real with someone. That thought surprises me, but as the Miami skyline comes into view, I feel a new sense of purpose stirring. As strange as it may seem, I think Alicia's the one who might just help me break through the walls I've built around my heart.

A few minutes later, we pull up to the police station. I have no problem finding a spot. There's a special parking space for bounty hunters delivery. Despite the sheriff's reassurances, Alicia seems anxious, her eyes darting around like a caged animal. I reach over and give her hand a reassuring squeeze, the warmth of her skin sending a jolt through me.

"It's going to be okay," I say. "Trust me."

She musters a weak smile, but as we head inside, her eyes betray her fear. At the front desk, the officer looks up, her gaze lingering on Alicia before turning to me. I can sense her boredom. I'm just another bounty hunter.

"We're here about the Alicia Floyd case," I say, keeping my voice level and meeting her stare. "I'm representing Hunter's Guild."

"I see," she nods and taps a few keys on her computer, her long crimson nails clicking against the keys. "Ah yes, MissFloyd. One moment please."

We wait in silence, the only sound the rhythmic tapping as she keeps on typing. After what feels like an eternity, the woman looks up again, her expression unreadable.

“It appears there’s been an error,” she says matter-of-factly, as if commenting on the weather. “The case’s been closed.”

“The case has been what?” Alicia asks, probably a little louder than she meant to, her voice tinged with disbelief.

“Dismissed.” The officer looks up at us, then back to her computer again. “Yeah, it seems it all started because of a clerical error.”

I frown. Something doesn’t feel right. “You’re sure?”

“Well, I don’t have access to the entire file, but from what I see, the money wasn’t lost but misplaced. Some glitch happened during a routine transfer.” She dives further into her cyber file and nods, as if confirming her own words. “Looks like the bank has already contacted the IRS to clear up the misunderstanding. So, yes, MissFloyd is free to go.”

I turn to Alicia, searching her face for a reaction. “Did you hear that? You’re free.”

She nods slowly, her eyes wide, as if she can’t quite believe what she’s hearing.

The officer winks and whispers to Alicia, “You know, no one would blame you if you sued the bank for what they put you through.”

Alicia smiles, a genuine one this time, relief washing over her features. “I’ll consider it, but I think I’d rather turn the page and be done with this nightmare.”

We walk out to the street, and she turns to me, her brow furrowed in confusion. “You

were there with me, you did hear Blackwell Senior say he was pressing charges, and that was, what... less than two hours ago. So how... how is that possible?"

I shake my head, unable to hide my grin. Something isn't adding up, but for once, I don't care. "Who cares? The important thing is you're in the clear."

Alicia lets out a shaky laugh, her shoulders sagging as the tension leaves her body. "Can you lend me your phone, please? I need to check something..."

Leaning against my SUV, I hand her my phone, already guessing what she's getting ready to check online. As I watch the smile grow on her lips, I know. Blackwell's money is still in her accounts, and my guess is he won't be asking for it back. It's hush money, a very nice amount of it too—enough to start over, if she wants to. For now, though, all that matters is that she's free, and the weight that's been pressing down on her has finally lifted.

12

I turn to Ace, my heart racing as the realization sinks in. I'm free. The nightmare is finally over. The running, the hiding, the fighting to prove my innocence—it's all behind me now. He looks at me, a smile playing on his lips, and asks, "Where to, Alicia? You're a free woman now. I can drop you anywhere you want."

I hesitate for a moment, a million possibilities swirling through my mind. Downtown, where my office is? I could waltz right back in and reclaim my position, rubbing it in the faces of those who turned their backs on me and never gave me the benefit of the doubt. On the beach to watch the ocean? The salty air and crashing waves would be a soothing balm after all the stress. But no, there's only one place I want to be right now. A place I've longed for during this entire ordeal.

"Take me home," I say softly, my voice thick with emotion. Home, where I can

finally let my guard down and feel safe again. But as I look into Ace's eyes, I realize I don't want to be alone, not anymore.

The question is, do I really forgive him for doubting me?

"And maybe... maybe you could come up for a bit? We could celebrate my newfound freedom." The words tumble out before I can stop them, but I don't regret them. I'm done running, done hiding. I want to see what life would look like with him by my side.

Ace raises an eyebrow, his smile widening. "Celebrate, huh? What did you have in mind?"

I feel a blush creeping up my cheeks, but I forge ahead. "I might just have a good bottle of wine tucked away in the fridge. We could share a glass or two, if you're interested."

He chuckles, shaking his head. "I'm more of a bourbon guy, to be honest."

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My heart skips a beat, but I play it cool. “Well, as it happens, I have a bottle of Macallan stashed away for special occasions. I know it’s not Bourbon, but you think you could make an exception?” I bite my lip, waiting for his response.

Ace’s eyes light up, and he leans in closer. “For you, Alicia, I’d drink just about anything if it means spending more time together.”

My breath catches in my throat, and I nod, unable to hide my smile. “Then it’s settled. Take me home, Ace.”

Ace drives us home, navigating the noon traffic until we reach my condo. He parks his car in the adjacent parking lot and we walk to my building hand in hand.

The doorman nods as we walk to the elevator bank and we ride to my floor with a bunch of college students who must have found a seasonal rental for spring break. Thankfully, they’re not on my floor.

I lead Ace down the hallway and open the door. We step inside and I wave toward the sofa. “Make yourself at home,” I say. “I will get our drinks.”

While I take out glasses and the bottle from the open kitchen, he first walks to the window to check out the view and the mementos of my life on my shelves. His eyes soften as he takes in the family pictures. He pauses, a hint of curiosity in his expression as he nods to the wall of framed photographs of my adult life. Finally, he reaches the couch and trails his fingers across the wooden coffee table.

“I see. You’ve got a lot of smiling faces here. Lots of memories.” He glances at me, a

gentle smile on his face.

I nod, a lump forming in my throat. “Yeah, my childhood was bliss until cancer struck. First my mom and then my dad.” I take a deep breath, pushing the pain away, focused on the present. “But that’s the way life goes.”

Ace takes the glasses from my hands, sets them on the coffee table, and steps closer to me.

“It’s time for you to finish healing, and get to pick a new family,” he says.

“Is that what you did?” I ask.

He nods and brushes my forehead with his lips.

“Tell me,” I whisper. “Tell me more. We barely know each other.”

“I know enough,” he says, looking into my eyes. “I knew the second I saw you. That’s why I went fucking crazy when you tried to run.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I was being an ass.” He sits on the couch and lifts me so I straddle him. “You see, when the family you’re born into turns out to be a shitty family, you bide your time and, as soon as you can, you move on. It’s not your fault; it’s just the luck of the draw. But it’s different when it’s the family you picked.”

Lightly, he kisses me again, a simple brush of his lips that moves me more than I can tell.

“And I have picked you,” he says. “Just like I picked the Iron Tornadoes when I left

the police. They are my brothers, and because they are my family, if you come with me, they'll be your family too."

"If I come with you?" I ask unsure about what he's asking.

"Is there anything holding you back in Miami?" he asks. "Do you want to go back to work for Blackwell?"

I shake my head. I hadn't thought about it yet, but he's right, there's no way I'm going back to my old job.

"You could start over in Point Lookout," he says. "You could do anything you damned please. I mean, you've got a fucking million dollars as seed money."

I close my eyes and think about it: start my own construction company? Flip houses? Go back to school to learn something new?

Mistaking my silence for a refusal, Ace sighs and adds, "But if you want to stay here, I know we can find a way to make it work. After all, Point Lookout is not so far from Miami. I could..."

I cut in. "Yes."

"What do you mean yes?"

"I mean yes, I'll go with you. Yes, I'll move to Point Lookout. Yes, I'll figure out what I want to do... with you."

"I swear you'll never regret it," he says pulling me tight against him.

Ace's lips meet mine, and the intensity of our connection ignites a spark deep within



me, sending a jolt of electricity coursing through my veins. His hands roam my body, exploring every curve with a hunger that leaves a trail of fire in their wake. I'm lost in the moment, consumed by the passion that has been building between us like a wildfire since I first set eyes on him.

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I know it was only yesterday but time is irrelevant. I don't need weeks, months, or years to know that he's the one.

Our bodies entwined, we move together in a dance as old as time. He picks me up as if I weigh nothing and we stumble from the couch to my bedroom. Our kisses grow more urgent with each step, as if we're trying to devour each other whole. As we reach the edge of the bed, Ace gently lowers me onto my soft mattress, his eyes never leaving mine. The way he looks at me, with a mixture of desire and tenderness, makes my heart race and my breath hitch in my throat. He takes a moment to drink in the sight of me, his gaze filled with a hunger that makes me feel desired and cherished all at once.

With a gentle touch, Ace begins to undress me, his fingers tracing the lines of my body as if committing them to memory. I feel cherished, adored, and for the first time in a long time, truly seen. I close my eyes, savoring the warmth of his touch, the way his fingers linger a moment longer on my hip, the way his hands mold every curve and line of my body. As we lay skin to skin, the connection between us deepens, transcending the physical and becoming something far more profound. It's like a tidal wave of emotion crashing over me, washing away all the fears and uncertainties from my life.

Ace's touch becomes more tender, and I respond in kind, my hands roaming over his muscular frame, reveling in the feel of his warm skin against mine. I'm drawn to the strength in his shoulders, the way his muscles ripple beneath my touch, the way his heart beats against my chest, a steady rhythm that grounds me in the moment. Our breaths mingle, our hearts beat in sync. He is the one. The man I've been searching for my entire life. Someone who sees me, truly sees me, someone who loves me for

who I am even though he barely knows me. It makes no sense and yet it's perfect.

In the height of our passion, Ace's voice, rough and laden with emotion, whispers sweet nothings into my ear, promising love and devotion. I find myself clinging to him, my body shaking uncontrollably as the intense wave of release washes over me. In this moment, I surrender myself completely to the exquisite sensation and the man who holds me close.

Later, we lay tangled in the sheets, our limbs entwined as we bask in the afterglow of our lovemaking. Ace's fingers trace lazy patterns on my skin and I feel truly at peace. I'm filled with a sense of hope and dream about possibilities I never considered before.

As I gaze into Ace's eyes, I know that I've found my safe haven.

"I love you, Alicia," Ace murmurs, his voice filled with a sincerity that brings tears to my eyes.

"I love you too, Ace."

Ace smiles. "You deserve to be seen, Alicia. You deserve to be loved and cherished, and I'm going to spend the rest of my life making sure you know just how much you mean to me."

As we drift off to sleep, wrapped in each other's arms, I know that I'm exactly where I'm meant to be, with the man who holds the key to my heart.

13

I watch Alicia as she unpacks a large box in our bedroom, her curvy form moving with an effortless grace that never fails to captivate me. Her chestnut hair is pulled

back in a messy ponytail, a few strands escaping to frame her face in an enticing way. She looks up at me and smiles, her warm brown eyes sparkling with a hint of mischief that sends a familiar thrill through my body. Once more, I'm reminded of just how lucky I am to have this remarkable woman in my life, and I return her smile with one of my own, undoubtedly looking like a lovestruck fool. But I don't care—she's worth every ounce of vulnerability I've allowed myself to feel.

I grin as Alicia gestures to the empty box, the last remnant of her old life packed away. "Welcome home, baby."

She walks over, wrapping her arms around my waist and leaning into my chest. I hold her close, breathing in the familiar scent of her shampoo that I've come to crave. It's still hard to believe that just a few weeks ago, I was chasing her down as a bounty. Now, she's here, in my house, in my arms, right where she should be.

"Ever since my father died, I never thought I'd find a place where I truly belonged," Alicia murmurs, her voice muffled against my chest. "But here, with you and the Iron Tornadoes, I feel like I'm finally home."

I tilt her chin up, gazing into those warm brown eyes that first captured my attention. "You are home, Alicia. This is where you were meant to be, with me, with us." A sense of contentment washes over me, a feeling I haven't experienced in far too long.

She smiles that radiant smile that never fails to make my heart skip a beat, and I can't resist leaning down to capture her lips in a soft, lingering kiss. The taste of her lips, sweet like honey, sends a jolt of electricity through my body. As we reluctantly pull apart, her eyes sparkle with a mixture of affection and mischief that always manages to disarm me.

The rumble of motorcycles outside signals the arrival of my crew, a reminder that our moment of intimacy must come to an end, at least for now. With a roguish wink, I

tuck a stray strand of hair behind her ear, silently promising that we'll pick up where we left off later tonight.

"Sounds like the boys are here," I chuckle. "Ready to face the welcoming committee?"

Alicia laughs, that beautiful sound filling the room and warming me from the inside out. "As ready as I'll ever be."

Hand in hand, we head outside to greet the members of my crew we invited for a housewarming party. They've all taken to Alicia like a sister, welcoming her into the fold with open arms. Ice, the club president and my longtime friend, engulfs her in a bear hug, lifting her off the ground.

"Good to see you, darlin'," he says, setting her back down. "You keeping our boy Ace in line?"

Lisa, Ice's wife and the closest thing I've had to a mother figure since mine passed, winks at me. She's taken Alicia under her wing since she arrived earlier this week, and I think she's grateful for her guidance.

She's destroying our image. Lisa told Alicia that the wilder we looked on the outside, the softer we were on the inside. Like huge marshmallow bears.

Alicia grins, nudging me playfully with her elbow. "I'm doing my best, but you know how he can be."

The guys laugh, and I join in, reveling in the sense of camaraderie and acceptance. It feels right to have Alicia here, to see her fitting in with the people who mean the most to me.

As the afternoon wears on, we sit in the backyard, sharing stories and cold beers. Alicia leans against me, her head on my shoulder, and I wrap my arm around her waist, pulling her closer. This is what I had been missing. With the Tornados, I had found this sense of belonging, of brotherhood, a family I could trust. But there was still something missing—until Alicia came into my life.

Now, with her by my side, I feel a sense of wholeness and contentment that I haven't experienced before. Her presence brings a warmth and comfort that soothes the jagged edges of my past. With her, I can find some sort of peace and happiness, a haven where we can escape the chaos of the outside world, if only for a little while.

When we're alone, I savor the quiet moments, cherishing the way her body fits against mine, the soft scent of her hair, the gentle rise and fall of her breathing. It's in these tranquil times that I can let my guard down, allow myself to be vulnerable. With Alicia, I've found someone I can trust—a rarity in my line of work.

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As we sit here, surrounded by the familiar faces of my Tornadoes brothers, I feel a sense of belonging that I had searched for in vain when I was police.

Later that night, as we lie in bed, Alicia curled up against my side, I marvel at how far we've come. From that first tense encounter in her rental, to the wild chase through the streets that had my heart racing, to the moment I realized I was falling for this strong, resilient woman—it's been quite a journey. But looking at her now, her face peaceful in sleep, I know I wouldn't change a single moment of it. This is where we're meant to be, together, building a life and a future with the Iron Tornadoes—my brothers—standing by our side.

I marvel at how quickly she's wormed her way into my heart. Alicia found a way of surprising me, of challenging my preconceptions and pushing me to see the world in a different light. Not rose-tinted glasses, but thanks to her, I'm starting to see colors instead of black and white.

14

I stride into Alicia's new office, feeling the familiar weight of my sidearm resting against my hip. Old habits die hard, even after leaving the force. Bounty hunting may not come with a badge, but it sure as hell requires the same level of vigilance.

The scent of fresh paint and new furniture fills my nostrils. The space is bright and airy, sunlight streaming through the large windows. My gaze sweeps over the modern decor, a far cry from the offices we're used to at the Iron Tornadoes' offices. Ice and Whizz went for the série noire decoration handbook. A wry smile tugs at the corner of my mouth as I take in the modern minimalist furnishings Alicia picked. Not

exactly the kind of place you'd expect to find a wanted fugitive hiding out. But then again, Alicia's always been one to keep us on our toes.

After we selected this place together, she refused to let me come and help her set it up. She wanted to surprise me.

Alicia stands in the center of the room, radiant in a crisp white blouse and tailored slacks. Her hair is pulled back in a ponytail, and her eyes sparkle with excitement. She catches my eye and grins, her smile lighting up her face.

"Well, look at you," I tease, crossing the room to pull her into a tight embrace. "All fancy and official."

She laughs, the sound warm and familiar, as she returns my hug. "Like it? I wanted something fresh and modern."

"It's perfect," I assure her, planting a quick kiss on her forehead. "Just like you."

The door swings open, and the rest of the crew piles in, carrying boxes and bags filled with celebratory treats and decorations. Blaze and Glory whistles appreciatively as they survey the space.

"Damn, darlin', you did good," Blaze says, setting down a case of beer on the large glass conference table. "This place is nicer than our house."

Glory mock growls in Blaze's direction. I hear the woman has many qualities but keeping a clean house is not one of them. That's not really a problem since they live in the clubhouse, where mess is an art form.

Alicia beams with pride as Falcon pulls in with Angel to offer their congratulations and compliments.



As the crew settles in for the small celebration, I hang back, basking in the energy that fills the room. A year ago, I never could have imagined a scene like this—Alicia standing tall as a respected businesswoman, embraced by the Iron Tornadoes as one of our own. One who is almost as well educated as Lisa now. She just finished all the classes she needed and became a CPA. I'm so proud of her.

Today, we're here to celebrate her success and the start of a new chapter. I catch her eye from across the room, and she flashes me a brilliant smile that warms me from the inside out.

The door opens once again, and a few more members of the bounty-hunting team start filing in. Their boisterous laughter and backslapping fill the space. They come bearing gifts: a rare orchid, which Alicia will promptly kill by watering it too much, and a few bottles of fine Bourbon, which I will confiscate, as well as the box of Cuban cigars.

As the party kicks into full swing, I make my way over to Alicia, pulling her close. "Congratulations, baby," I murmur, my lips brushing against her ear. "You've come so far, and I'm so proud of you."

Her eyes shine with emotion as she gazes up at me. "I couldn't have done it without you," she whispers, her voice thick with gratitude. "Without all of you."

She comes closer to me and whispers in my ear, "I think I haven't thanked you properly."

That gets a large smile out of me. "What did you have in mind?"

"Well, I was thinking we could let them party in the conference room and go hide in my office for a bit."

Why not indeed? The party is in full swing, every soul in the room is letting loose with laughter and rowdy cheers. They won't even notice our absence. Alicia, she's a sight to behold tonight, stunning in a way that makes my heart race. Nothing would make me happier than messing up her perfectly coifed hair while peeling off her business attire, layer by layer.

The playful smirk that curves her lips, it's a telltale sign. She's not bluffing. She really wants to do this. I nod subtly, a silent agreement passing between us. I take her hand, feeling the warmth of her skin against mine, and lead her through the room. We weave between our friends, their laughter and cheers fading as we slip into her private office.

The moment the door clicks shut, sealing us in her private office, the air around us crackles with an undeniable charge. Alicia's eyes, those sharp, intelligent orbs that usually hold a world of caution, darken with hunger. She catches her lower lip between her teeth, a subtle tell that I've come to recognize as a precursor to her more daring thoughts.

I can't resist the pull any longer. I close the distance between us, my hands instinctively seeking the curve of her hips. I draw her toward me, our bodies fitting together as if they were designed for this very moment. It's a perfect puzzle, and she's the piece I never knew I was missing.

My lips meet hers in a fervent kiss, and passion sizzles between us. Our tongues dance in a rhythm that's as natural as breathing, a passionate tango that speaks volumes about our shared desires.

Alicia's hands explore my chest, her fingers tracing the contours of my muscles through the fabric of my shirt. A soft moan escapes her lips, the vibrations reverberating through our kiss, sending a jolt of desire straight to my core. I reach behind her, deftly pulling the shirt over her head and letting it fall to the floor. I

unfasten her belt, the sound of the leather sliding through the loops echoing in the room, and she steps out of her pants. She stands before me now, clad in nothing but a lacy black bra and matching string.

I take a moment to drink in the sight of her, my eyes devouring every inch of her perfect form. She's a vision, a marvel, and I can't believe she's here with me. I trace my fingers along the edge of her bra, teasing her, making her wait before I finally unclasp it. The garment falls, landing softly on her desk, leaving her exposed and vulnerable.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 1:43 am*

Alicia's fingers deftly work at my belt, undoing the buckle with a practiced ease. In her sound-proofed office, there is no other sound than our breathing. Gone are the laughter and conversations of our friends in the other rooms. I marvel at the way her eyes seem to devour me, just as mine devoured her body moments before. I pull my shirt up, revealing scars that do not frighten her anymore. I push my jeans down, my boxers following suit. We stand before each other now, completely bare, completely vulnerable.

Alicia advances, her palms pressing firmly against my chest, propelling me backward. I falter slightly, taken aback by the unexpected show of force, smile, and steady myself on the edge of her desk. The cool surface offers contrasts to the heat radiating from our bodies. I chuckle as she flashes a wicked grin. With a swift movement, she pushes me onto the desk, her hands exploring my body with a fervor that mirrors my own. I grasp her hips, pulling her closer, the desire so strong it's nearly unbearable. My heart races. I can sense the anticipation surging within me as I await her next move. Today, I'm letting her take the lead.

Our lips lock once more, the intensity of our kisses escalating as we surrender ourselves to the moment. Alicia's fingers twist into my hair, tugging gently as she presses herself against me. The sensation sends a jolt of desire through me, making my heart race faster.

I slide my hand between us, my fingers brushing against the damp fabric of her panties. I trace the outline of her through the material, her breath catching as I caress her most sensitive spot. She gasps, her nails digging into my shoulders as I continue to explore every inch of her body, my touch igniting a fire within us both.

I let out a low growl, my fingers hooking into the waistband of her panties. With a swift tug, I pull them down her legs. I can smell her desire. I cast the small piece of material aside, my eyes never leaving hers as I position myself at her entrance. My hands grip her hips, guiding her onto me with gentle pressure. She sinks down slowly, her gaze locked onto mine as I fill her completely, our connection deepening with every inch.

We move in perfect harmony, our bodies synchronized in a dance older than time itself. The rhythm of our lovemaking fills the room. The desk beneath us creaks in protest. We don't care; we're lost in our own world of pleasure and passion, where nothing else matters but the two of us and this moment of pure, unadulterated bliss.

As we reach the peak of our desire, our movements become frantic, our breaths ragged. Alicia's nails dig into my skin, leaving marks that I'll wear proudly as evidence of our love.

With one final, powerful thrust, we both reach our climax, our bodies shuddering with the force of our release. We collapse against each other, our hearts in unison as we struggle to catch our breath.

After a few moments, Alicia lifts her head, her eyes meeting mine with a soft, loving gaze. "I love you, Ace," she whispers, her voice filled with emotion.

I smile, brushing a stray hair from her face. "I love you too, Alicia. More than you will ever know."

We share one more lingering kiss before reluctantly pulling apart and getting dressed. We slip back into the party, hand in hand. I think no one has noticed our absence. Oh no, I'm wrong.

Ice and Lisa, holding court next to the conference table, did notice. They both wink. Their smiles are such that I'm thinking maybe the good and proper Lisa is just a

facade hiding a wild cat Ice knows how to let out.

They've had their time. Now it's ours.

I am the luckiest man alive.

So happy this was not just a fugitive flirtation!