



Hard Risk (Aegis Group Task Force)

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Action

Description: Harper Wright enjoys working off-the-books for the government, and his next assignment is a treat. All he has to do is get close to a socialite so he can get the scoop on her rotten as sin family. But this socialite isn't what he was expecting. Instead of being wrapped up in fashion and trends, she's far more concerned with cancer research and fighting for rights. She's beautiful, funny, kisses like sin, smarter than him, and one last thing? She's using him.

Robin Suleiman knows her uncle killed her mother fifteen years ago, and now Robin is going to prove it. There's just one problem. In her family, being female is practically a crime. So in order to get close to her uncle, she needs a man. When the universe provides, Robin is listening. She might be rusty when it comes to the opposite sex, but Harper is diligent about reminding her of all the reasons why men and women are so good together. So good that she begins to wonder if the mystery is worth uncovering?

The choice isn't up to her when Robin's uncle catches her snooping around. It's the wake-up call Harper needed to remember that falling for Robin wasn't the job. Now he has to keep her and his secret safe or risk losing it all.

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Prologue

Wednesday.OldGrainDepot,Fairfax, VA.

Harper Wright tried his best to never see the world before six in the morning. Dawn wasn't his favorite time of day. Which meant it was the perfect time for a covert meeting. Though given how remote the grain depot was, it was damn creepy, and being a brown man by himself; he was not about to play around.

What the fuck was his boss thinking?

He glanced up and down the road while swiping his forearm over his brow. The last thing he needed right now was for a cop to roll up on him. At least he could truthfully say he didn't live far from here and was simply out for a jog.

A gust of wind sliced through his two layers of clothing.

The whole country seemed to be in the grips of the worst winter in a long time.

Overhead, the rusting structure groaned and a piece of loose metal creaked.

He'd seen enough horror movies to know how this would end if he didn't get a move on.

"Fuck," he muttered and ducked into an entranceway partially obscured by the skeletons of tall weeds.

The forecast had threatened snow for days now. Was it going to actually happen? He hoped not. Harper was ready for warmer weather. That was for damn sure. His ancestors were from Central America. Where it was hot. He didn't like this cold bullshit. Seattle had been bad enough with the rain and clouds all the time. He needed a change of scenery. Hell, maybe he should take a vacation and go visit the condo in Key West he'd bought but never lived in. Sure, he'd moved his stuff in, but he had friends who'd stayed there longer than he had.

The old door behind the weeds was partially rusted and the yellow paint chipped. He hadn't known this entrance existed until Zora's instructions had arrived. He pulled out his keycard and felt along the wall until he found a little plate, just like he'd been told to expect. Pulling it up revealed a keypad. A new keypad. When this place was built, keypads probably weren't a thing yet. He swiped his card, then entered his unique code. Only then did the door disengage.

"I'll be damned," he muttered.

He stomped his feet on the rubber mat and peered down the dim hallway.

What would his old boss say if he knew about this?

It was extra weird that he'd worked for Zain and now Zora. He was fairly sure he'd never met anyone with a Z name before them.

Life was full of odd coincidences.

Harper could still remember the day Zain had called them all in to the tiny secure room at Aegis Group's Seattle office—before that place got blown up, what was it with headquarters?—to tell them about a unique opportunity. Uncle Sam wanted their people to work on a joint task force. For what? No one knew. Some days, he still wasn't sure if they knew the whole story themselves.

Unlike the others, back then, Harper didn't have any reservations about taking the job. He went where the team did. Seattle wasn't home for him and neither was DC. Truth be told, he wasn't sure he'd ever felt at home anywhere. So it hadn't been a big deal to pick up and move across the country for an ambiguous job. Hell, it was a lot better than some ops he'd run in the SEALs.

He unzipped his coat and stepped forward.

The dim lights grew brighter, chasing away the shadows.

"Thank you, Bond Girl," he muttered.

Harper had no way of knowing if their resident tech genius had anything to do with the lights, but he'd thank her, anyway. Undoubtedly, someone under her was responsible for this. A job like this took ingenuity and their Bond Girl was the best. Right up there with Zain.

He followed the hall for a dozen or so yards until it met a larger room. A catwalk led off into the darkness and to his right, a metal staircase. He peered down over the ledge.

This had to be one of the grain silos.

Way back when, farmers from all around would have brought their grain here to be sold across the country. Most of that farmland was residential now, and farming wasn't exactly a hot local job anymore.

He inhaled and closed his eyes.

There was a slight, earthy scent to the air.

He pulled out his phone, flipped on the light and descended the stairs like his instructions said to.

It felt as though the stairs went on for an age before he finally reached the bottom.

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The depot had been out of use for some time. As he understood, the facility had been owned by the government and used for various purposes over the years. He didn't stare into the shadows too hard. His dreams were already dark enough without adding the horrors these walls had seen to his collection.

At long last, he stepped onto a concrete floor. There were still grain husks here and there, inedible things that didn't offer any nutrition to even the rats. He shone his light around the deep, dark hole in the ground.

What if Zora got pissed at him and left him down here?

Yeah, he'd mind what he said a little better from here on out.

He turned toward an open door. A light shone beyond it, beckoning him down yet more twisted halls until he came to a locked door. He wished he didn't understand the need for all these misleading turns, but after the last few months, he did.

Harper lifted his hand and knocked against the secured door.

He'd followed the directions exactly, so where was he?

Somewhere, the wind whistled through the silo. The sound took on a life of its own, howling through all the halls and dark corners to stir things better left alone.

Creepy as fuck.

He shivered and almost jumped as the door's lock creaked.

“About damn time,” he muttered to himself. Not too loud. He didn’t want to get his ass left out here.

The door slid to the left, revealing an almost white room beyond.

Zora Clark, head of the Task Force, stepped into view. She was a tall, elegant Black woman with wispy, short hair and a pale blue suit that offset her dark gaze.

“You’re here. Good,” she said by way of a greeting.

“What the fuck?” he muttered and stepped through the opening. He studied the wall and the bookcase that appeared to have moved. “You have a secret entrance in here?”

Zora gestured to the chairs in front of her desk. “Sit.”

Harper knew better than to expect an answer out of her. Zora was as tight-lipped as they came. He didn’t think a word left her lips that hadn’t been over-analyzed and weighted. That kind of calculated behavior exhausted Harper, but it wasn’t his life.

“We have a lot to discuss,” Zora said pointedly.

Harper offered her a winning smile. The type that usually got him numbers at the club. “Then start talking.”

Zora regarded him coolly for a moment. He didn’t actually expect her to warm up to him and his buddy, Tucker, had clearly already staked a claim to Zora. There was history between those two and Harper was dying to know more. But neither were sharing details, damn them.

He shrugged out of his coat and draped it over one of the two guest chairs before lowering into the other. Zora leaned against the front of her desk, probably going for

a casual, confiding air.

“Tucker explained this to you?” she asked.

Harper studied her in return. “Harper didn’t tell me shit. He only asked if I was open to doing some under-the-table work not everyone else will know about.”

She nodded. “Then he has explained it to you.”

“If Tucker and I know, why not the others?” Harper asked.

It was a fair question. The Aegis Group team working with the Task Force was only five men, and they were tight. They’d been together long before this job. Harper was taking a risk in breaking the team’s trust by going behind his Team Leader’s back like this.

“Because Nadine had us,” Zora said simply.

Harper grimaced and shifted in his seat.

She had a point there he couldn’t deny.

Nadine Baker had been like a grandmother to all of them. The senior CIA operative had a good relationship with the entire core team, which was why they’d never realized she was the mole. She was the one blackmailed into killing people in federal custody. She was leaking their secrets. And she was why they’d all nearly been killed. If it weren’t for the complete incompetence of the men sent after them, Harper, Tucker, Logan, Evan, Kelsey and Felecia would be dead right now. They’d gotten lucky. Harper didn’t intend to rely on luck again.

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“But, in the end, Nadine came through for us.” Zora crossed her arms over her chest. “Nadine’s last act was to hand over everything she had on our targets. Everything she suspected.”

Harper still didn’t know if he believed the sob story Nadine had fed her former partner. Supposedly, Nadine had been blackmailed into it all. It was like a movie playing out in real life.

This might be Harper’s only opportunity to ask questions and get answers from Zora. He didn’t know if he wanted to do the job, but he wanted the details. “Okay, so what’s the job? What new insight did Nadine give us? Has Skilton said anything?”

Zora picked up a tablet from her desk and held it out to him. “There’s a young woman named Robin Suleiman. I want you to get close to her and find out everything you can about her family. Primarily, her father and uncle.”

Harper took the device. “That’s it? Seriously?”

“Yes,” Zora said simply.

Harper glanced down at the high-resolution image of the young woman—Robin—caught in a candid moment. Her hair was so dark it might be brown or black. It was hard to tell with the poor lighting. It was curled and hung down her back in a glossy wave. The photographer had caught her turning to look at something. With the light on her face, she seemed radiant. Beautiful. She had that tanned quality that made it hard to determine her heritage, but with a last name of Suleiman that narrowed it down a lot. He knew Suleiman was a Turkish translation of the name

Solomon, and that there were several prominent figures in Islam that bore the name Suleiman, which made it a popular surname.

This was why Zora wanted him.

Out of everyone on their team, it was Harper who spoke Arabic. It could not be a coincidence she wanted him for this.

“No.” Harper handed the tablet back.

Zora’s long fingers gripped the tablet. “You already agreed.”

“And now I’m saying no.” He stood and zipped his coat. “I get what you do. Compartmentalizing information, controlling who knows what, preventing more leaks from happening. But here’s the rub. My team dropped everything to work with you. At every turn, we’ve been loyal. We’ve proven ourselves. When you couldn’t trust anyone, you turned to us. I get not telling me some things for my safety, but this isn’t enough. I’m not sticking my neck out there for you to decide to leave me hanging. And telling me to get close to a woman to talk about her family, who I’m guessing have ties to Middle Eastern powers? Yeah, that sounds like you’re painting a target on my back so you can keep your hands clean.”

Zora didn’t deny she might do just that.

She’d come close to it. On their very first job, their team had been faced with a decision, follow Zora’s orders and ignore a volatile situation, or do something. They’d chosen to act and, as a result, saved dozens of abducted children, not to mention two women who were now married to people on Harper’s team.

He smiled at her. “Let me know if you change your mind and want to be more honest with me.”

Zora's expression never slipped. He had to hand it to her. She was a remarkably strong woman. He actually respected her. It couldn't be easy to get thrown onto this team as the assistant director, only to have the actual director completely ignore everything they did. She'd made magic happen out of nothing but her will and determination. But he didn't always agree with how she ran things. There was doing what you needed to keep everyone safe, and then there was whatever the hell this was.

Harper knew the gig was more complicated than Zora was letting on. It had to be if she was keeping this from Logan, his Team Leader, who had become Zora's right-hand man.

He turned toward the secret door. Part of him couldn't believe that was real. A secret fucking door. Who would have guessed? Did Tucker know?

If it came out that Tucker and Zora were getting it on in secret, it wouldn't surprise Harper one bit.

"It's too dangerous for you to know the specifics," Zora said.

That made him pause. He turned, cocked his head to the side, and regarded her for a moment. "Oh?"

She blew out a breath, planted a hand on her hip, and pivoted. Her gaze remained on the floor. No doubt she was sifting through a million bits of intel right now. How she did it was beyond amazing.

"We now know Skilton was just a middle-man. He wasn't really in charge. I think Robin's uncle puts us one step closer to who is in power. Nadine had a list of names she believed were part of some governing council handing orders down to Skilton to manage."

“So he was just an operations manager guy?”

She nodded. “Yes. Unfortunately, most of the names on Nadine’s list are out of our grasp.”

“How do you mean?”

Zora just stared at him.

Okay, that was a brick wall. She wasn’t even willing to tell him. That meant the names were big. And very scary.

“But not Robin’s uncle? Who is he?” Harper unzipped his coat.

“Daar Suleiman. He and his brother, Cassim, fled Syria thirty years ago. They had a little money. Cassim made waves by marrying an American woman who owned a chain of motels and other businesses. They were together for about ten years, grew the business, then she ends up dead.”

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“Shit. Who did it?”

She shrugged. “It’s never been solved.”

That didn’t sound good. They couldn’t possibly be interested in a ten-year cold case. So that was a red herring, but clearly a detail Zora had thought important enough to mention. He filed it away for later.

“But it’s Daar you’re interested in, not Cassim, right?” he asked.

Zora’s steely gaze gave nothing away. “Correct. We have next to no idea what Daar did in those first few years. He’s gone to great lengths to give himself a good public image. He runs a charity that offers assistance to other Syrian refugees, helps relocate people to find work...”

“I get the feeling it’s all a front?”

Zora nodded. “We know he uses the charity as a front to move weapons, drugs, and other valuables around. The Turkish government was going after him for stolen artifacts, but their key witness wound up dead. Any refugee using Daar’s services is being extorted or worse. We know Daar is instrumental when it comes to moving people and goods around the Middle East. If we found out how that would be a boon, but not the focus. We want to know about who he works with. Who he answers to.”

“Okay, if it’s Daar we’re interested in, why Robin? Why not send me to him as a client?”

“Because Daar doesn’t like Americans, and she’s the easiest mark out of the four.”

“Four?”

“Cassim remarried. It was arranged by—do you want to guess?”

“Daar.” Harper would never claim to be anything other than a grunt, but even that connection sounded fishy to him.

Zora nodded. “Can you work with that?”

“Depends. Do you have a cover story for me? Logan isn’t going to like me vanishing.”

“Leave Logan to me.” She picked up the tablet and handed it to him. “You need to focus on her.”

Harper looked down at his mark.

Robin Suleiman.

Who was she? How was she connected to all of this? And just how was he going to get on her good side?

Chapter One

Twoweekslater.Tuesday.NOLA City Bark, New Orleans, LA.

How was it New Orleans and Washington could share a weather forecast?

Harper was tired of chilly and dreary, which was about all he’d gotten the last two

weeks. To make matters worse, he'd been forced to actually get out in the weather. When this was done, he was going to his condo in the Keys, drink beer, and nothing else.

Two weeks and he only knew one thing about his target.

Robin Suleiman was a busy woman.

She was always on the move at all times of the day. It made surveilling her difficult. What was worse, he still hadn't figured out how to get close to her since he'd arrived and begun watching her.

The initial report Zora had given him made Robin out to be some sort of partying socialite sorority girl. She was certainly on the go in style, which seemed like a socialite sorority thing to do. But that was where the assessment stopped being helpful. She hadn't gone out once that he'd seen beyond grabbing a bottle of wine in a shop that she then took home.

That was a real missed opportunity, but he'd been busy trying to switch out batteries in his camera. A chance brush in a store would have been a nice enough meeting. But she'd been in and out so fast he hadn't gotten the chance.

Damn it.

Zora was breathing down his neck already, wanting to know why he hadn't made any moves on the woman.

Robin didn't go to clubs or bars. The latest he'd seen her out was a dinner at a café, and that had looked to be a business meeting.

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He wasn't Jamie. Harper wouldn't admit it to the guys, but he actually did get nervous around beautiful women. Jamie, on the other hand, could strike up a conversation and have a ladies' panties in his pocket in half an hour. Harper had seen it happen and damn it, he wished he had that skill. Unfortunately, he often put his foot in his mouth.

Harper peered through the lens of his camera. Occasionally he'd snap a shot of a bird or something interesting looking just to give credit to his cover story.

Could he just walk up to her and say hi? Then what? How did he ensure she took one look at him and was interested instead of running away?

Damn it. Why was Jamie in a relationship? This was the perfect job for him, but no. It had to fall to Harper this time around.

Where the heck was Robin going?

She'd taken a bit of a detour today. He'd been surprised when she emerged from her family's Garden District home with what looked like two cotton balls with legs.

Her stepmother's dogs.

The file even had that sort of information for him. For all he knew, she routinely walked the dogs in the historic park, but it was the first time he'd seen her with them.

It was odd to him that a family with Muslim roots had dogs. Generally speaking, dogs were seen as an unclean animal to be avoided. Some of the worst insults in Arabic

likened people to dogs. It was curious to Harper that the Suleiman's had two.

Harper eyed Robin through some trees. The little floofs were bouncing in opposite directions, yapping their adorable heads off, all while she wrestled with their leashes to pull them back to her or away from other pedestrians.

Yeah, he doubted this was normal.

The dog park was up ahead.

What were the chances he could orchestrate bumping into her?

Harper cut across the grass to close the gap between them and get a better vantage point. It meant losing sight of Robin for a few moments, but he didn't think anything too interesting would happen.

"No!" a woman wailed.

Wait.

He jerked his head around to peer through the trees just as the same two fluffy mutts bolted away from Robin.

A tingling sensation shot down his spine.

This was it.

His feet were already moving before he realized this was his lightning strike moment.

The dog duo kept pace with each other, making a straight line across the park back the way they'd come, more or less. He seriously doubted they intended to stop at the

car, though. These pooches were on a mission.

Shit.

They were really fast.

He ran, arms pumping and lungs burning with the cool air. He gripped the camera tightly and wound the strap around his wrist for good measure.

They were halfway across the park now, and Harper wasn't any closer.

If he didn't get his hands on them soon, they'd be out in the road. His stomach knotted up. Nothing good ever came from dogs in the road.

The two canines suddenly split, heading in two different directions around a decorative wrought-iron fence protecting some sort of flower bed.

Two almost identical yelps made him cringe as the dogs snapped the leash tight between them in their excitement to get away.

Harper could have whooped in joy.

The leashes were attached. The dogs had no choice but to go together or get caught up. And they weren't smart enough to know that. They struggled against each other, buying him the time to catch up he so desperately needed.

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He sprinted straight into the fence, wildly grabbing at the leash. His fingers wrapped around the nylon. Hands full, there was nothing to use to cushion the impact with the fence. The pointy ends of the iron jabbed into his chest and arms. He dropped his weight, so he didn't flip over the fence, but that only made the iron point into his stomach harder. Fuck, that was going to bruise. He grimaced and bent his knees some more, doing his best to not pitch over the fence. But damn it, he had the dogs. He had his in with Robin.

He'd take the bruises and scratches if it meant he could stop following her around at all hours of the day.

It was time to move on to the next part of the mission.

Too bad this was the part he dreaded.

A not so delicate snarl ripped through his moment of elation right before teeth sank into his sneaker.

"Ow, hey!"

Okay, it didn't actually hurt. More like it surprised him.

He peered through the bars at the two dogs.

The second dog bounced around his heels, snarling, watching its friend try to violently shake Harper's foot.

“A for effort, little guy,” he muttered.

Harper grabbed the fence with the hand still wrapped up in the leash. He pushed up and back, careful to not unintentionally squash any little paws.

The biter of the two clamped down harder.

“Hey, now. That’s not very nice.”

Harper slid his hand down the leash, taking in the slack until he could hold the little savages as far from his feet as he could. He twisted his foot, extracting his sneaker from the jaws of the more aggressive one. Thankfully, the little thing didn’t have an impressive bite force, otherwise, this would be a much different story. Instead, he was fairly certain the shoe was just about ruined.

“You aren’t cute at all. You’re hell hounds, aren’t you?” he asked the two dogs.

Harper rubbed his stomach. He could still feel the press of all the metal spikes, and it wasn’t pleasant.

One dog bounced into the other and they spun to face-off, tails wagging as if they were having a grand old time. He was clearly forgotten for the moment.

Movement out of the corner of his eye caught his attention.

Harper glanced up as Robin closed the distance. Her light brown eyes were wide and her face creased with worry. Breathless, she stopped and bent forward, hands on her knees. Her ponytail cascaded over one shoulder, almost to the ground.

“Oh my God. Thank you!” she said between breaths.

The little savages howled and lunged at her. Clearly, he wasn't the only one on their shit list.

“Wow, there.” Harper quickly pulled the snapping pups back and chuckled. Crap. And these were pets? “Friendly little guys you’ve got.”

Robin straightened. Her long ponytail flipped over her shoulder and he caught the end of a dramatic eye roll. “I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry. They’re brats, I know. They only behave for my step-mom.”

Harper grinned at her. “They must keep you on your toes.”

“Yes.” She held her hand out. “Thank you again, so very much. They tripped me up, and I lost the leash.”

Harper couldn't think of a good reason to keep the leash. The moment he passed the dogs to her, he needed to find a new way to stay in her orbit.

He held out the leash. “Added a little excitement to my day.”

Robin's eyes went wide. “Oh no...”

“What’s wrong?” Harper glanced about, searching for some new threat, his instincts kicking in.

“Your shirt...”

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He glanced down at the nearly fist-sized hole in his Henley with relief. He'd take a hole in his shirt over someone trying to kill him any day.

"Oh, that's nothing," he said.

Harper tucked the camera under his arm—it was a minor miracle he hadn't dropped it—and zipped up his coat.

That done, he held out his hands. "There. All better."

She pressed her hand to her face. Was that a little groan? "Your shoe! He did that, didn't he? Oh my God."

"They're just shoes. It's okay. I'd rather him chew my shoe up than end up in the road."

"I feel so bad. You were fast. I'm so grateful." She bent and eyed the dogs. "That is not an acceptable way to say thank you."

The dogs flopped down as if in answer.

They clearly didn't care.

Robin straightened and looked at him. "You have to let me make this up to you."

It was an opportunity leaping onto his lap.

Harper opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

What would Jamie say right now? His best friend had all the lines. He knew just what to say to a woman. Harper had listened to him a million times over. He could do this.

“You could let me take you to dinner?” he said. It even sounded smooth.

Robin’s eyes popped open, and she stared at him in surprise. Was it really that astonishing? She was a beautiful woman. Men had to hit on her often enough. Then again, with the rate at which she moved through life, she might very well not give many people the chance to ask her out.

“I should be asking you that,” she countered.

Harper held up his hands. “Hey, you don’t have to ask me twice. I don’t have any allergies or food aversions either.”

Robin opened and closed her mouth. Was it his imagination or were her cheeks pinker?

He held out his hand. “I’m Harper.”

Her lips curved into a girlish smile. Flustered looked good on her. “Robin.”

Harper squeezed her hand, holding on to it a moment longer than politely necessary. “Nice to meet you, Robin.”

She didn’t try to tug away from him, but she did take a flustered step away when he released her. The dogs at least seemed to have calmed down.

“Is your camera okay?” she asked.

He glanced down at the device, then turned it over. “Seems okay. It’s pretty sturdy.”

Surveillance cameras needed to be in his line of work.

“Taking pictures of the city?” she asked.

“Birds, mostly.” He winked. “I haven’t gotten a good shot of a robin yet.”

Now her eyes really did flutter open wide. That was a blush. He’d gotten to her.

Tuesday. NOLA City Park, New Orleans, LA.

Robin’s thoughts were utterly jumbled. She was both frustrated with herself for feeling giddy about a man’s attention while greedy for more. It seemed like these days no one noticed her at all. Not that she’d ever been the most desirable girl. She liked tacos and curry way too much. No man was worth giving up happiness. The guys she’d been attracted to usually went for the petite white girls. Not to mention she’d always been too busy studying to spend time at a salon or shopping, which was probably why she’d graduated with no long-term boyfriend, much to her father’s chagrin.

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Her mind was skittering in all directions.

What was wrong with her? Who was she? She didn't do anxiety over a man. Hadn't she decided that men were a bad idea right now, anyway? Why was she smiling at this one?

Okay, if the guys in her circles looked like him, she might not have been able to convince herself to swear off men.

Whoever Harper was, he looked and acted like he'd stepped out of a Hallmark Christmas movie. The neatly trimmed hair, the rugged yet casual look, the sturdy build, coming to her rescue, and finally bird watching? Was he real? Or was this a joke?

"Want to smile for the camera?" he asked, grin widening.

She glanced at the lens then him, her eyes widening. Here? Now? When she looked like this?

"You've got to be joking." She reached up and smoothed a hand over her hair. There were bits of things from when she'd had to drag one of the fluff-butts out from under the hedges.

She was a mess.

These were yesterday's workout clothes.

She hadn't showered.

Not to mention she'd only slathered a little sunscreen on her face before leaving the house.

"I'll never joke about documenting beautiful things," Harper said.

Her jaw dropped.

This was completely unreal.

And yet a little part of her swooned inside. It felt like ages since anyone had noticed her, much less called her beautiful. In her parent's world, she was merely a daughter. Second best. Nothing worth noticing.

She needed to get out more.

"Who are you and what cheesy movie set did you walk off?" she asked.

Harper tossed his head back and laughed. It was the kind of laugh that invited you to join in on it. She couldn't help it. And damn it felt good to laugh. She'd been a bundle of stress and anxiety for days now. This moment did more for her soul than anything else she'd tried.

The man deserved more than just dinner.

"Do lines like that normally work?" she worked.

He shrugged. "I guess not."

She wasn't convinced. His warm brown eyes glittered with good humor. He probably

had a lot of one-liners. Still, she was enjoying the attention. Most days it seemed like hardly anyone spoke to her. It was frustrating given that she'd stepped back from working on her own career to help out the family. Of course, she had her own motives for that move.

Robin's phone chimed, cutting her thoughts short.

She dug in her pocket and pulled out her phone, only to groan.

"Everything okay?" Harper asked.

"Yes." She sighed and unlocked the phone. "Just my step-mom wanting an update about her precious babies. I swear these dogs are more important than I am."

Crap.

Was she letting her frustration show?

Robin and Saaina didn't have the best relationship. They'd never really been given the chance to get off on the right foot, not with everything that happened after Mom died. Back then Robin had been too young, too hurt. Now, it was history wedging them apart. Which was a shame. They shouldn't be picking at each other like they did.

Saaina did love the dogs more than Robin.

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The dogs got birthday presents. Robin did not.

Still, she couldn't complain. Dad might not be the most present person, but he'd never forgotten a birthday or special occasion.

"I know a few parents like that," Harper said with a conspiratorial nod of his head.

She blinked at him.

Could he get any more unreal? Was she dreaming?

She had the sudden urge to take his hand and never let go.

A man didn't fit into her plans right now, but what was wrong with a little flirting?

It didn't have to go anywhere.

"One moment?" She snapped a quick picture of the little trouble makers and sent it off. That should keep Saaina happy for an hour or until she realized the house was quiet for a change.

Robin really didn't have time to fit Harper into her schedule right now, but maybe that was the problem. She'd been so focused that all the happiness in her life had been sucked out. Perhaps she needed a little distraction?

Hadn't Dad mentioned taking Saaina out to dinner tomorrow? And Uncle Daar was coming to town. It stood to reason that all three were going out together without her.

Under normal circumstances she couldn't do anything about that besides ignore her hurt feelings about being excluded. However, Harper presented her with a new opportunity to advance her plans.

Robin tilted her head and regarded Harper with new interest.

Dad and Uncle always had been more interested in who she dated than her. But that was to be expected. To them, women were second best, who they were attached to truly mattered. That was why Dad had never really mourned Mom. She'd been an accessory and a bank to him, not a partner. And Uncle Daar?

Robin never could make herself give up on the idea that Mom's death was Uncle Daar's doing.

Was it possible Harper could help her out? Could she use him and not let her conscience get in the way?

It wasn't like there was a handbook about investigating your own family's role in a murder. She was figuring it out as she went, without a lot of hope. Mom had been dead for over fifteen years. Robin knew better than to hope she found the murder weapon. All she wanted was confirmation. Something to tell her she was right and then she could cut ties and move on with her life.

Harper clasped his hands behind him then leaned toward her. "How do you feel about coffee?"

"It's necessary."

"Mind if I get us some?"

She gestured down at the hellions. "Do you mind the dog park?"

“You’re going to let these two little hooligans run around a dog park with other, respectable dogs?”

She chuckled. “This time of day there’s usually only a few others around, and those are bigger dogs that can get away from them easier. If they get to be too much of a pain, I’ll just take them home and make them Saaina’s problem.”

Harper wagged a finger at her. “Beautiful and intelligent.”

Robin smiled despite inwardly cringing at the compliment. She knew she didn’t look her best, and yet it was still nice to hear. But what did she say to that?

In lieu of a good reply, she decided to ignore the compliment. “I’m a lots of cream and sugar girl.”

“Got it.” He merely nodded instead of telling her to lay off the stuff like Dad or Saaina.

Harper turned and headed toward a little café cart.

Oh, my. Look at that ass.

Tall, dark, handsome. She felt like she was hitting the jackpot here. He had to have some secret, some less than desirable quirks, otherwise why wasn’t he attached to someone already?

Shit. Was he married? She hadn’t seen a ring or a tan line. He was probably old enough to have lived a little, unlike her. She’d gone from boarding school to college to here. Every step of the path had been managed.

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Robin tugged on the leashes and headed toward the park with the two pups.

She only did this once a week for Saaina, though she would clearly like for Robin to do it more often. Between trying to get all their business accounts in order, she couldn't. Why her father thought it was a good idea to handle the finances himself was beyond her. He had no head for numbers and never kept his wallet organized. He was as likely to charge something personal to a business account as one of the family ones. It was a minor miracle they hadn't gotten in trouble over such a purchase.

Robin let herself and the pups into the dog park. She recognized a Great Dane as another local and two that looked like boxers. With any luck, the two she didn't immediately know would be able to hold their own against her brats.

"You two, behave, okay? You get into it once and we are going home," she said.

Neither dog were paying her any mind.

They never did.

She managed to hold on to both collars at once, get the leash unclipped, then released the hellions into the enclosure.

They bolted forward, going straight for the Great Dane.

The large dog's ears twitched and his head snapped up. For one moment he posed, front paw up, staring down the annoyances, then he was off, leading them on a merry chase.

Robin blew out a breath and ambled over to a circular bench built around a large tree.

The other owners were spread out, most looking at books or their phones, so she didn't feel the need to be social. Besides, she had company heading her way right now.

Robin watched Harper stroll toward her, coffees in hand.

He wasn't part of her plan.

She bit her lip and watched him navigate the entrance and close the distance between her.

"One sweet drink for a sweet lady," he said, handing her a cup.

She chuckled. "Where do you get these one-liners from?"

"My best friend." He sat down next to her and flashed her a grin. "I guess my delivery sucks."

"No." She shook her head. "No, your delivery is just fine."

He turned to study her. "Should I grow a beard? Would that help?"

"I don't think so." Though she was the wrong person to ask. She'd never been fond of facial hair. She quite liked the strong line of his jaw and how chiseled his face appeared. Like a statue come to life.

He frowned. "Damn. I've always been curious what a beard might look like on me."

Robin bit her lip in an effort to keep her comment inside.

Wait.

Why?

He was shamelessly flirting with her. Where was the harm in her returning the favor?

“I think it would be a crime to cover up that face,” she said. Her throat burned, and she stomach clenched. Everything inside of her wanted to grab the words and stuff them back in her mouth, but they were out there.

A slow smile spread across Harper’s face. He lifted a hand and scratched his jaw. “You think?”

“Now you’re just fishing for a compliment.”

He leaned toward her and whispered, “You see right through me.”

“Seriously, are you an actor? Are you in a Hallmark movie?”

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“No.” He shook his head and held up his hands. “No way.”

“So what do you do besides take pictures of birds?” She didn’t quite believe he was birdwatching, but she’d let that slide.

He shrugged. “I’m a security consultant.”

“Security consultant? What does that mean?”

“It depends on the clients’ needs, really.”

“And if I were your client?”

She knew she’d said the wrong thing the moment he froze.

Harper turned his face toward her, one side of his mouth hitched up a tiny bit. There was no physical change, except in the way he looked at her. It was heated, wanton. “I’d say you need round the clock, personal security. I could even cut you a deal, give you a good rate and handle you myself.”

“Oh my God.” She laughed. It was that or shrivel up and die of embarrassment. It was too much. “Stop that. Be serious.”

“Alright.” He sighed and shuttered the heat. Could he turn it on and off like that? Probably. She shouldn’t let herself get that worked up about it. “It’s different depending on the client, if it’s a company or an individual. Also, is the threat physical or digital? It’s not just adding a new security system, changing the locks and telling

you to make sure your windows are secure at night. It's tailored to the client specifically. I'll recommend different things based on the threat. And sometimes, when it's a person, that can extend to things like self-defense training and whatnot."

"Wow. How'd you get into that?"

"Left the military, started working in the private sector with a security company. It's pretty typical these days."

He was older than she'd first thought if he'd accomplished all of that.

"What about you?" he asked.

"Me? Oh, I don't do anything."

"Nothing? I find that hard to believe."

She shrugged. "I'm taking a year off. I finished my Master's and decided to focus on the family businesses for a bit."

"Yeah? What's your specialty?"

"Actuary," she said, and braced for a blank look.

Instead, Harper nodded. "Risk assessment type stuff, right? Lots of projections, statistics and whatnot?"

"Yeah," she said slowly.

"You must be really smart."

Robin opened and closed her mouth. Her instinct was to play it down, after all that's what Dad did. Only, this time she didn't want to.

"Yeah. Actually, I am pretty smart," she admitted.

It felt as though she'd popped the cork on a bottle. Bubbles of pride welled up inside of her and she grinned back at Harper.

He propped his elbow on the back of the bench. "You were totally the top of your class, weren't you?"

Her cheeks warmed, and she licked her lips. "Which time?"

"Oh." Harper's brows lifted. "Listen to you, Miss Which Time? I'm going to guess all three. High school, under grad and master's."

"You'd be right on two accounts. I was more than a little done by the time I got through my master's degree and I wasn't as diligent as I should have been. I got frustrated with how people who could be the absolute worst scored the better job sometimes." It galled her, but she'd still been at the top of her class, just not the top.

"Pretty and smart." He lifted the cup to his lips and drank without breaking eye contact.

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Maybe it was time for Robin to do something selfish. She wasn't going to kid herself, a man like Harper wouldn't be interested in her for long. She knew she was pretty enough, but when it came down to it, she wasn't a party girl. She didn't do wild, unplanned things. And besides, her priority was hunting down the man who'd orchestrated her mother's murder. Anything else was a distraction.

But maybe what she needed right now was something just for her?

It wouldn't hurt if he aided in her plans a little either.

"Are you free for dinner tomorrow?" she asked.

"Why wait?" he countered. "What are you doing today?"

Her heart fluttered and once more her cheeks were warm enough her eyes were about to start watering.

"I just know this really great place, but you have to make reservations. There's never anything the day of, so tomorrow?" That was a lie. She could get in whenever she wanted, but Uncle Daar wouldn't be here until tomorrow.

"What if we made that a second date?" Harper asked.

The nerve of this man. It was almost too much. He was starting to get to her. All these little butterflies were hard to ignore. "Are you always this forward?"

He regarded her for a moment. "I don't see the need to play games. If I'm interested

in you, why not let you know?”

Oh, boy. Hello butterfly swarm!

She swallowed. There was no arguing that point.

He was the kind of guy who probably had ten little black books. With a face and body like his, women had to be throwing themselves into his bed. But for this moment, he wanted her.

It felt good, and it had been a very long time since Robin felt anything of the kind.

“You barely know me,” she countered.

He lifted a shoulder. “Isn’t that the point though? We go out and I get to know more about you?”

“Are you married? Dating anyone?”

He held out his left hand. His very tanned hand.

No ring and no hint that there had ever been one.

“I’m not into games, Robin. I’m just a simple man who knows what he likes when he sees it.” He set the coffee cup down. “I know I can come on a little strong. I guess...”

She watched his face transform. The light in his eyes dimmed, and she knew he wasn’t here. He was reflecting on a different time and place. A darker period of his life.

“I don’t see the point in waiting for what you want. There’s no guarantee I won’t get

hit by a car today, or have a heart attack, or something else. So, why play games with people?”

Robin swallowed, and she felt herself caving.

She closed her eyes and drew in a breath.

Harper was right. His logic made sense. And yet, she had a plan. She couldn't deviate from that.

“How about a compromise?” she suggested. “Lunch today then dinner tomorrow.”

“Oh, look at you.” He grinned. “Locking in two dates? Now who is being forward?”

Robin chuckled and fanned herself. What was the point in denying that he got to her? Besides, she thought she'd rather enjoy his company.

Chapter Two

Tuesday.Undisclosed.

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“I hear you’re taking a trip to the States?” Chancellor Hugo Bernat swirled the amber liquid in his glass.

Daar Suleiman paused. It was only a slight one, but it spoke volumes. “Yes. That is correct, Chancellor.”

“How is that brother of yours?”

“Still an idiot.”

No pause.

Daar never had hidden his resentment for his younger brother. Hugo found their relationship interesting. In Daar’s shoes, Hugo would have quietly taken care of his brother ages ago. Instead, Daar allowed Cassim to continue being a nuisance and a liability.

“We need to discuss expanding in that direction. Your brother could be useful,” Hugo suggested.

Daar snorted. “Not likely. Tell Cassim a secret and within a week everyone will know it.”

“Is that so? I find that surprising given your... History?”

“Yes, well, even an idiot like Cassim knows there are some things you don’t talk about. He knows to keep his mouth shut if he wants to remain comfortable in this

lifetime.”

“If only your brother had your discretion.” Among other things.

Hugo had made it a point to meet Cassim and asses the man himself once. Daar didn’t know. There were a great many things Daar didn’t know, but this one mattered very little. In the span of half an hour, Cassim had divulged no less than three critical points of information to Hugo.

What a waste.

Skilton had always avoided needing to do business in America. He’d been so crafty about it, blackmailing a number of federal agents, but never committing their efforts there. But with Skilton gone it was time to consider doing things differently.

“Do you have any other plans while you’re away?” Hugo asked.

“Is there something you’d like me to do?” That was Daar. Getting to the point.

“Look for Skilton. See what you can find.”

“Do we really believe they captured him?”

Hugo said nothing.

Skilton’s absence was problematic in so many ways.

This union of power worked because of Skilton.

With him possibly in custody, the whole organization was threatened. Hugo had calmed nerves thus far, but for how long? How long until Daar and others like him

withdrew their support and struck out on their own once more? If Hugo couldn't promise them their identities were protected, it would all fall apart.

He needed to handle Skilton. Make sure he could never talk.

And then Hugo could fill the vacancy with someone a little more obedient.

Skilton always had thought too much of himself.

"Chancellor?"

"Hm?" He lifted his gaze to the screen and Daar's blurry form.

"I am loyal to you." He stared back at Hugo. "I know what the others are saying, and I'm here to tell you that I am still loyal. Tell me how I can help?"

Such a statement of faith took Hugo by surprise. Did he trust Daar's words? What were the chances Daar was tricking him?

That wasn't his way though.

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Hugo remained quiet for several moments, weighing the situation. “Find Skilton. Kill him if you can. The sooner we do that, the better.”

Daar inclined his head.

If he could do it, he would.

“Good night, Chancellor.”

Wednesday. Harper’s Safe House, New Orleans, LA.

Harper held the shirt up and stared at it with a critical eye. Normally he’d call it done, but he had a feeling Robin was a woman who expected perfection. He couldn’t have wrinkly shoulders with her around.

“You’re never going to get it smooth that way,” Samuel Jenkins said.

Harper narrowed his eyes at the other man. “You think you can do better, pops?”

Samuel returned the critical look. They were about the same age if Harper had to guess, but he liked messing with the straight-laced guy. Samuel could be so uptight.

“I know so. Give it,” Samuel said.

Harper stopped himself from turning away from the FBI agent and let him pull the shirt from his grasp.

To be fair, out of everyone on the Task Force, none of them had Samuel's flair for style. He showed up to the office every day looking like he'd just stepped out of Sunday church in a trendy orange or blue or red suit with all the accessories. He took dressing in style to another level. Harper was lucky if he wasn't forced to wear the same suit two days in a row.

Samuel arranged the shirt then carefully began swiping the iron over it in short strokes.

"Who taught you to iron like that?" Harper asked.

Samuel paused, iron in hand, and leveled a steady stare at Harper. "My daddy. He said that for a Black man to be taken half as seriously, we have to look twice as good."

Harper nodded and another piece of the puzzle that was Samuel Jenkins fell into place.

"Expecting me to say, my mama?" He arranged the shirt on the ironing board, pinching and pulling the fabric just so.

"Grandma. You seem like the type to have a big, tight-knit family."

"Nope. Just me and my daddy growing up."

Harper took that in. He'd realized about a day into this job that he didn't know Samuel or his partner half as well as he thought he had. Hell, Harper had been just as surprised as everyone else to find out back in December that Samuel's partner, Baruti, was not only gay but married with kids. And none of them had been the wiser.

Harper didn't like that. He didn't like not knowing the people he worked with. Which

was why he was actually glad Samuel was in charge of this op. Supposedly Baruti would be joining them after some much-needed time off to be with his family. Harper hoped they were done with the job by then. He didn't want to have to fool Robin for longer than necessary.

"You ready to talk about tonight?" Samuel asked.

Harper sighed. "Haven't we been over it enough?"

"Just because it went well yesterday doesn't mean it will go well tonight."

He watched Samuel work his magic with the shirt, erasing any trace of a wrinkle.

"You are a magician," Harper said. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet. Let's see how you look first. She still might not let you in the door. You look a mess."

Harper snorted and slid the shirt on. He seriously doubted Robin would turn him away. He'd been nervous in the beginning and yeah, he'd used a few too many lines, but he'd got her laughing. And from there it had been natural.

"Your dad still around?" he asked as he buttoned up the shirt.

"Yes. He just remarried and moved to Chicago."

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“Chicago? No shit? I lived there for a while.”

Samuel regarded Harper a moment longer. “One of my step-sisters has a heart defect, and she qualified for a program there that might help.”

“That’s great that she’s getting help. Think she’ll be okay?” Harper got the feeling this wasn’t something Samuel shared with just anyone. Not that Harper could blame him. They’d worked together almost a year and knew squat about each other.

Samuel lifted a shoulder and cast a critical gaze Harper’s way. “Gives her hope. I can’t say how it’ll turn out, but at least she’s living her life. You really should have those pants taken in a little.”

“Seriously?” Harper looked down at himself. He’d gone out with Jamie to buy the damn clothes. Harper hadn’t expected his best friend to lead him wrong. “I just get what I’m told.”

Samuel held up a tie. “You’ll pass for tonight. We’ll want to get you some better-fitting clothes if you’re going to be around the rest of the family. You need to look like you belong in their circle. You do know how to tie this, right?”

“I think I can manage.”

He tossed the subtly patterned material at Harper.

“Samuel, relax.” He slid the tie around his neck and let his hands work the magic.

“Tonight is just about her. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“What sorority was she part of?”

“She’s a Tri Delt. She did a lot of fundraising for cancer research. Her social circle is still mostly her sorority sisters. Despite how her father likes to play it, their family fortune came from her mother’s chain of motels and hotels. Her mother—now there’s an interesting lady—was an advocate for illegal immigrants and refugees. She went out of her way to employ displaced people. Her business has thrived after her death in large part to the man currently running things, who happens to be an immigrant from... Shit. Africa. Civil war?”

Samuel’s brows rose as if he were surprised. “Burundi. He’s originally from Burundi.”

“Damn it,” Harper muttered.

“Cool it.” Samuel passed Harper a lapel pin that would double as a listening device. “No showboating.”

He sighed and fixed the pin on his jacket. “I’ve got this.”

Samuel passed a critical eye over Harper’s clothing. “Make sure to keep the jacket on.”

He frowned at the other man. “What? After all that work, I have to keep it on?”

“If you take your jacket off, how am I supposed to hear you, dumb ass?”

Then what was the point of all that ironing?

“Fine.” Harper groaned then checked the time. “Got to go. Hope we put on a good enough show for you.”

“No showing off,” he called after Harper.

Seriously, Samuel needed to relax. Harper was taking a beautiful woman on a date. That was it. There would be no milking for information tonight. Just more establishing trust. Besides, he doubted they would talk about employees at all. It was random information crammed in Harper’s head.

More than anything, he needed to remember that this was a job. Not a real date. Robin was a mark, someone he needed to use to get to the big fish. He’d feel guilty about it later, not now.

There had been times yesterday afternoon when it was difficult to recall that he wasn’t talking to Robin for his own benefit. This was work. And yet, another time and place he would have liked to have spent time with Robin just for himself.

He did feel a little guilt at deceiving her. Only a little. If he’d learned anything this last year working with the Task Force, it was that sometimes they had to do unsavory things. If Robin’s uncle really was who Zora said he was Harper couldn’t make room for guilt.

Fifteen minutes later he pulled the car along the street in the heart of the Garden District with its stately old homes.

“You’ve got to be shitting me,” he muttered eyeing the homes.

It was one thing to understand that the Garden District homes were where the wealthy lived. It was another thing to see it. The old, stately homes were from another era. He found it hard to believe he’d have anything in common with people who lived in homes like this.

He almost missed Robin’s house number because he was so engrossed in admiring

the buildings themselves.

Robin's family home was one of many antebellum-styled buildings. It was two or three stories with lots of columns and balconies. More wrought iron framed the place along with trees that had to be close to a hundred years old at this point.

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He eased to the curb.

There wasn't really anywhere to park.

Harper muttered a curse and slid in front of a fire hydrant. It wasn't legal, but with any luck, Robin was ready to go. Just to be safe, he texted her to gauge how safe it was to leave the car for a few moments.

Her reply was immediate:omw out!

Not quite perfect. She could very well take issue that he hadn't come to the door. He should have planned better.

He unlocked the car and got out. At the very least he'd open her door for her.

Heels clicked on concrete. He glanced up and his body forgot what he was doing.

"Hey," Robin called out.

"Look at you."

Seriously.

He couldn't take his eyes off her.

She looked as though she'd been poured into the gray dress. It was conservative in a way, with long sleeves and a high neck that had some sort of slit going on, but he was

willing to bet every eye tonight would be on her. Yes, the skirt was maybe a little on the short side, showing off her long, shapely legs, but it was the fit that was sinful. How it molded to her body, turning shimmery then matte with how she moved, was captivating.

“Wow,” he said as she stepped onto the sidewalk. “Did it hurt when you fell from heaven?”

She lifted a hand, covering her mouth, but he heard her chuckle. Her mirth was short-lived.

“I’m so sorry.” Her voice was tight with emotion. “I should have told you to come around back. There’s never anywhere to park out here. Really sorry about that.”

“Hey.” He reached out and took her hand and the rest of the world faded away. “You look stunning. They might arrest you for taking my breath away like that.”

She chuckled and pushed at his shoulder. “Stop.”

Her smile and the bashful way she couldn’t quite look at him said to keep going.

Harper lifted her hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. “Are you ready to steal the show?”

She lifted her gaze to his. “Ready and starving.”

Damn this job. Why did he have to take her out for work? It was a crying shame, really.

He helped Robin into the car, shut the door then returned to the driver’s seat. That done, Robin plugged in the address for the restaurant, and away they were. The street

was busy enough to make conversation difficult as they wound their way toward their destination. Which was fine because he needed to have a little mental talk with himself.

Robin was not matching up to the socialite profile he'd been given. She didn't party or go out like Zora had led him to believe. Maybe that was the case during her undergrad, but not now. She was responsible, intelligent, and utterly gorgeous. Unfortunately, he didn't see a way to get close to her and not cross any boundaries. She wasn't juggling men. She was focused on family. If he wanted to get close to Daar, Harper would have to get very close to Robin.

He was going to hurt her. For this to work, there was no way around that. He wasn't sure how far it would have to go, but he knew he'd hate himself when this was all over with. But that was the price to pay to stop Daar's people. Given the body count thus far of just their own people, Harper couldn't back down.

Which made this all the more difficult.

"This should be us," Robin said pointing to his next turn.

The restaurant wasn't that far away from her house. Hell, if they'd both been wearing sensible shoes he might have suggested walking.

There was nothing sensible about the way Robin had dressed. Or maybe there was?

It was difficult to look at her and his brain not short-circuit.

Everything from just above her knees to her collarbone was covered, save for a narrow, plunging slit cut down the front of the dress. It showed off nothing but the rarest glimpse of skin underneath. Truly maddening. He didn't want to look, and yet his gaze was drawn back to her at every light.

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If he was going to break her heart, he could make her feel like a queen for now.

“Here we are,” Robin said.

Harper pulled up to the valet. He was quick enough on his feet he even made it around the car to help Robin out himself and was treated to the sight of her long legs.

She was nothing like what he’d expected her to be. Nothing at all. And that was more than a little dangerous.

“Thank you,” Robin muttered as he assisted her up the few stairs to the restaurant.

Whatever this place was, it was so upscale there wasn’t even a sign out front.

They stepped through the doors and into a gleaming waiting area. Men in suits manned a leather-covered booth. He was acutely aware of the slick marble floor in his new shoes. Red velvet benches sat by the wayside, but no one made use of them.

This did not appear to be the type of place that catered to people who did things like wait.

Robin led Harper forward, all the way to the leather booth.

“Suleiman for two,” she said with a sweet smile.

The two men attending the books glanced down with similarly wide-eyed stares.

Did Robin have a reputation?

Please say it wasn't so.

"Is there a problem?" she asked sweetly.

"Oh, no. One moment, please?" the older of the two men asked.

Harper glanced from the men to Robin. What was it about her that had the two sweating bullets?

"What seems to be the issue?" she asked again. Her tone was still light and pleasant, but there was an underlying edge there.

The two men looked at each other.

Harper could practically see them drawing lots to figure out who got to fall on the sword this time.

The younger one drew in a breath.

It was his time.

"I'm very sorry, ma'am. It appears there was some confusion. You see, there were two Suleiman parties booked tonight and—"

"Robin? Is that little Robin?" a man called out.

Robin turned from the attendant lightning-quick, while Harper was still processing it all. She gasped in delight. "Uncle Daar?"

Harper turned, not quite believing his ears. Had he just heard her right?

He turned, mindful that his lapel pin microphone was pointed straight at Robin and the man greeting her with a familiar hug.

There weren't many pictures of Daar Suleiman. Harper really had thought the man would be taller. Daar was probably five-eight or nine without the shoes giving him some added height. He had a wiry build like a man still used to exercise. His hair was mostly silver with shots of black running through it and the patch of hair on his chin. The man's complexion was weathered and lined, as if from the elements. There were no smile or laugh lines. He did not seem like a man given over to laughter or humor very often.

Harper's brain zipped through the details.

Two Suleiman bookings.

The arrival of Daar Suleiman.

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This was awfully coincidental.

It worked in Harper's favor, but it also made the skin between his shoulder blades itch uncomfortably. Was Robin up to something? Had he just been used here?

"They're telling me there was some confusion and my reservation got canceled," Robin said with a dramatic sigh. She turned and caught sight of Harper. "Uncle, this is my date, Harper Gonzalez. Harper? This is my uncle. He's in from out of town."

Daar Suleiman's dark gaze slid up and down Harper's body before he extended his hand. Daar didn't radiate warmth like Robin did. He was cool, assessing, everything Harper would expect from someone who more than likely had a finger in Skilton's pie.

He took Daar's outstretched hand. "Nice to meet you, sir."

Robin leaned in close and said softly, "Harper helped me yesterday with Saaina's dogs."

Harper barely heard her, but that didn't matter.

Daar's eyes widened and his grip on Harper's hand tightened. "And they didn't tear you limb from limb? Good man."

"It was a close call," Harper said gravely.

Daar clasped Harper's hand between both of his now. Whatever it was about the

dogs, it had just changed Harper's standing in Daar's eyes.

Interesting.

"Sounds like the only thing to be done is for you two to join us," Daar said.

Was he fucking serious?

Harper could feel sweat breaking out under his arms. Was Samuel listening now? Was he ready to shit himself the way Harper was?

Tonight had been about building a relationship with Robin to learn more about her family. The last thing Harper expected when he'd set out was to actually dine with the family in question.

"I don't know," Robin said slowly. "I didn't even know you were getting here today. Dad only said you were getting here this week."

Daar finally released Harper's hand and patted Robin on the shoulder. "Come. Save me from boring conversation."

Daar moved past Harper.

Robin glanced at him and shrugged. "This wasn't how I pictured tonight going."

Was it though? Was this really all coincidence? Or was Harper being paranoid?

He wished he could talk to Samuel right fucking now.

"It's fine." Harper grinned at her. "It'll be interesting to meet the little hell hound's master."

Her face creased with concern. “Are you sure? My family...”

“Hey?” He took her hands in his. “It’s fine. I come from a big, in-your-business Mexican family. How bad can it be?”

Of course, his family wasn’t into illegal activities on the global stage.

“It’s just...” She tugged on his hand and edged closer. “Look, Dad and Uncle Daar... They come from a different culture.”

“Yeah, where?”

“Syria.”

“Well, maybe we’ll have something to talk about?” He lifted a shoulder. Time to tout his own accomplishments. “I spent a little time in Syria. I think I get what you’re saying. Look, your family doesn’t represent all of who you are. Only where you came from.”

Her shoulders relaxed. “Okay. Just, don’t take anything they say too personally, please?”

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He took her hand in his then gave it a squeeze. “You got it.”

Harper was in no way prepared for this. Of course, he’d read everything they had on both Daar and Cassim Suleiman, but he hadn’t studied it like he had Robin. He’d thought he had time. At this point, it felt as though he hadn’t done a single bit of prep work.

Together Harper and Robin stepped past the leather booth and into the restaurant proper.

Daar stood in an alcove big enough to fit a circular table. White, gauzy curtains were pulled back but could be released to create a truly private dining experience.

The man turned and waved to Harper and Robin.

And here their biggest worry was that they’d get all their information through Robin. Harper was about to sit down with their target for a meal.

How did this happen?

It still seemed too coincidental to be real, but maybe it was past time for them to get a break. He also wouldn’t put it past Zora to have some inside information she hadn’t shared with him. In fact, that was classic Zora.

Damn this job.

“Mr. Gonzalez and your daughter are joining us,” Daar said as Harper reached the

table.

“Mr. Gonzalez?” Cassim Suleiman looked much like his older brother, only with some added weight and less hair.

Harper was quick to offer his hand to Robin’s father. “Mr. Suleiman, a pleasure.”

Cassim blinked several times at Harper.

Daar elbowed his brother.

“Yes! Yes, a pleasure.” Cassim quickly shook Harper’s hand before his gaze slid to Robin. “Excuse me. I’m not accustomed to my daughter introducing men.”

“We only met yesterday,” Harper said.

Daar lowered into the seat next to his brother. “Not to split hairs, but I introduced him.”

“I see,” Cassim said with a slow nod. That distinction seemed to appease Cassim. He glanced over his shoulder at his wife, Robin’s stepmother, then back at Harper. “You helped with the dogs. That’s you? Thank you.”

“It was my pleasure.”

Cassim waved at the table. “Sit. Sit!”

There was more than enough room for both Harper and Robin to slid into vacant seats across from the other three.

Shit.

Would the mic be able to pick up the conversation? They'd planned for an intimate dinner, not a family affair.

Harper's hands grew sweaty, and he prayed Robin didn't notice.

Cassim glanced at his wife while turning his body toward Daar. Cassim spouted off in Arabic, "Please don't tell me she's pregnant."

Harper swallowed slowly.

Cassim had no idea that Harper could understand him.

Daar ignored his brother's words and instead focused on Harper. "Mr. Gonzalez—"

"Harper, please, sir?"

Daar inclined his head. "What is it you do?"