



Rogue Doll (Dirty Doll Ops #2)

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Category: Dark Erotica

Description: The rules were simple: seduce, infiltrate, obey.

But I've never been good at simple. Or obedient.

Things are getting messy and I like it that way.

I didn't volunteer.

They took me — dragged me out of my life and dropped me into The Dollhouse, a covert black-ops unit wrapped in silk and secrets.

Now I'm Landry James: spy, seductress, disposable asset. They trained me to be a weapon — all curves, claws, and kill shots — but they never expected me to think for myself.

Because beneath the lingerie and lipstick, something darker is unraveling. Secrets that don't add up. Allegiances that don't hold. And a mission that smells more like a setup.

I was supposed to follow orders.

Instead, I'm about to blow the whole damn thing open.

High-octane thrills. Dark twists. Zero apologies.

Welcome back to Dirty Doll Ops.

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The blade doesn't waver—cool metal against my silk-covered hip, a ticking bomb waiting to explode. My pulse hammers, blood rushing in my ears like a freight train, but outwardly, I don't flinch. Don't panic. Just let my smile widen, slow and dangerous as sunrise.

"My, my," I breathe, letting a thrill edge my voice, "aren't you full of surprises?"

Victor's eyes narrow, pupils dilated in the low light.

The pressure of the blade increases—not enough to cut, just enough to promise it could.

His cologne suddenly seems stronger, sharper, cloying against my skin like expensive poison.

Sandalwood and something chemical underneath—the scent of wealth and corruption, of power gone rancid.

The jazz has faded to white noise, the bar's ambient chatter dissolving into a dull roar. All I can hear is my heartbeat and Victor's breathing—slightly elevated, slightly ragged. Not from fear, but from excitement. The sick fuck is getting off on this.

"Who sent you?" he asks, voice dropping to a whisper that feels like sandpaper against my neck. "FBI? Corporate espionage? One of my competitors?"

I laugh—a sound like breaking glass, bright and dangerous.

My fingers trace the rim of my abandoned martini glass, nails clicking against crystal like a countdown.

"Is this how you flirt with all the girls?

Because I've gotta say, the knife is a bit much for a first date.

" I lean in closer, letting my breath ghost across his lips, close enough to taste the top-shelf whiskey lingering there. "Some women prefer dinner first."

His jaw tightens, tendons standing out like steel cables beneath designer-stubbed skin. One of his cufflinks catches the light—platinum and diamond, worth more than Isaac's car—as his grip on the knife flexes. "Cut the bullshit. I know a honey trap when I see one."

Fucking terrific. My first real op, and the target's already made me.

Killion would be so proud. Or he'd snap my neck himself to save Victor the trouble.

The air between us thickens, every atom charged with the promise of violence.

The leather booth creaks as I shift, my thigh brushing his, the contact electric through silk and wool.

But here's the thing about guys like Victor.

They don't get to where they are without being paranoid as fuck.

Doesn't mean he knows exactly what I am—just that he suspects everyone.

Probably sleeps with one eye open and a gun under his pillow.

Changes his passwords hourly and has a bug sweep done on his office while he gets his weekly happy-ending massage.

Time to pivot.

"Put the knife away, Victor," I say, letting my voice drop an octave, all smoke and gravel and promise. The sensation of danger spreads through me like warm brandy, loosening my limbs, sharpening my focus. "You're ruining a perfectly good dress. Valentino doesn't come cheap."

I slide my hand up his thigh, slow and deliberate, feeling the muscle jump beneath my touch.

My fingertips brush the outline of his rapidly hardening cock, and I can't help but smirk.

Men—suspicious enough to pull a blade, stupid enough to still want to fuck the person they don't trust. The ultimate evolutionary defect: a brain hardwired to think with the wrong head when it matters most.

His breath hitches, the knife wavering slightly. In the dim light, a thin sheen of sweat glistens on his upper lip. I can almost hear Killion's voice in my head: "Exploit the weakness. Find the crack. Slip in and break it wide open."

"If I were here to hurt you," I continue, fingers tracing his length through expensive wool, fabric so fine I can feel the heat of him through it, "you'd never see me coming. And I guarantee I wouldn't be this obvious."

I maintain eye contact, unblinking, letting him search for lies he won't find. I've already perfected the art of lying with my eyes wide open—a skill perfected on Isaac years before Killion ever got his hands on me.

Victor's eyes flicker—doubt warring with arousal, caution tangled with need. I can almost see the gears turning in that paranoid millionaire brain of his, weighing risk against reward. The knife presses harder for a fraction of a second, then eases, metal cooling through silk.

"Then what do you want?" he asks, voice rough, like gravel under tires.

"Same thing you do." I press my palm against him, feeling him throb beneath my touch. His pulse beats against my hand, rabbit-quick. "A night you won't forget. No strings, no complications. Just two consenting adults doing very, very unconsensual things to each other."

He doesn't ask my "price" because men with money don't fuck around with something as plebian as what something costs. The old adage, "if you have to ask the price, you can't afford it" is very real in this scenario.

The taste of power floods my mouth, metallic and sweet, better than any cocktail. This is the high I chase—the moment when control does an about-face, when the prey becomes the predator. When I go from target to trigger.

The knife presses harder for a split second, then retreats.

Not gone, but no longer threatening to aerate my internal organs.

Progress. I can feel my heartbeat in my fingertips, in my throat, in the hollow space between my legs.

This is what living feels like—not Isaac's suburban purgatory with its beige walls and scheduled sex, but this: the precipice between victory and disaster, the razor's edge of adrenaline slicing through my veins.

A waiter passes, the scent of overpriced appetizers wafting past—truffle oil and seared meat and something herbal. Victor doesn't even glance up. His world has narrowed to just the two of us, to the electric circuit we've created in this dim corner.

"You're not on someone's payroll?" he asks, skepticism dripping from every syllable. His thumb traces idle circles on my wrist, like he's testing my pulse for lies.

"The only person paying me is me," I lie, smooth as silk.

The lie tastes good—rich and dark, like the finest chocolate.

"I'm highly selective about who I spend my time with.

" I lean in, my lips brushing the shell of his ear.

The stubble on his jaw scratches my cheek, a delicious friction.

My teeth graze his lobe, and I feel him shudder—a micro expression of weakness. "Consider yourself chosen."

His free hand closes around my wrist, tight enough to leave bruises.

His thumb digs into the soft underside, right over my pulse point.

Another test. Another line to cross. His fingers are dry, calloused in unexpected places—a man who still works with his hands sometimes, despite the empire and the minions. "Prove it," he growls.

The scent of him intensifies—whiskey and cologne and beneath it all, the unmistakable musk of arousal. Male pheromones, primal and raw. My body responds before my brain can intervene, a Pavlovian reaction to power and danger.

"Right here in the bar? Kinky." I smirk, holding his gaze.

In the depths of his green eyes, I see the battle—desire fighting suspicion, hunger warring with survival instincts.

"But I think what you need is confirmation that I'm exactly who I say I am.

" I take his knife hand in mine, guide it slowly to my inner thigh, where the silk parts in a high slit.

The metal of the blade is a cold counterpoint to his hot fingers. "Feel free to search me. Thoroughly."

His fingers slide against my bare skin, callused and hot, trailing upward with brutal precision.

The knife is pressed flat now, handle in his palm, blade against my flesh—a threat and a promise intertwined.

The metal warms against my skin, a strange intimacy.

His touch is clinical at first, searching for wires, for weapons, for proof of deception.

But as his fingers reach the lace edge of my thong, something changes.

The search becomes something else—something hungrier, darker.

Around us, the bar continues its sophisticated hum—crystal clinking, muted laughter, the distant moan of a saxophone. A world away from this moment of primal assessment.

"Nothing to find but me," I breathe, letting my legs part slightly, an invitation wrapped in a dare. The leather of the booth creaks beneath us, a whispered promise of friction.

His fingers slip beneath the lace, finding me already wet—a physical reaction I can't control, my body's fucked-up response to danger and power plays.

He makes a sound deep in his throat, primitive and raw.

The scent of my arousal mingles with his cologne, creating something new—a chemical reaction, the perfume of predators circling.

"Jesus," he mutters, fingers exploring, testing. His pupils dilate further, black eclipsing green. "You're soaked."

"Told you I like dangerous men," I say, grinding against his hand, letting him feel the heat of me. The motion sends a jolt through my core, pleasure mixing with calculation in a cocktail that's becoming dangerously addictive. "The kind who pull knives in public places. Really gets a girl going."

He laughs—a short, harsh sound that holds no actual humor—and withdraws his hand, bringing his fingers to his nose, inhaling deeply.

It's crude, animalistic, and exactly the kind of power move a man like Victor Reese finds irresistible.

In his world, this is dominance. In mine, it's just another step closer to getting what I came for.

The taste of victory floods my mouth, sweet and sharp. I'm rewiring his brain in real-time, redirecting blood flow from rational thought to baser instincts. Killion's training

merging with my natural talents to create something lethal.

"No wires," he concedes, slipping the knife back into some hidden pocket in his suit, the motion practiced, smooth. "But that doesn't mean I trust you."

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"Good," I reply, reaching for his drink and taking a sip, leaving a crimson kiss mark on the crystal. The whiskey burns, smoky and expensive, coating my tongue. "Trust is boring. Isn't it more fun when you ride the edge of possible devastation?"

The tension between us has shifted—still dangerous, but no longer lethal.

Now it's charged with something else, something primal and hungry.

He watches me through narrowed eyes, weighing options, calculating risks.

His chest rises and falls faster now, the fine cotton of his shirt stretching across pecs too defined for a man who should spend all day in board meetings.

Works out with a trainer, I remember from the file.

Probably has an entire home gym in his penthouse.

I stand, smoothing down my dress with practiced grace.

The silk whispers against my skin, cool and sensuous.

"Now that we've established I'm not here to kill you or steal corporate secrets, I have a proposition.

" I lean down, giving him a perfect view of my cleavage, my voice a husky whisper.

The pendant dangles between us, emerald catching the light—a precise mirror of the

one in his mother's portrait.

"Your room. One hour. No names, no past, no future.

Just now. Just a momentary detour before your scheduled plans, but I promise you, worth every second. "

His hand snakes out, gripping my wrist hard enough to hurt. The silver cufflink bites into my skin, a tiny blade of its own. "Why wait?"

Gotcha.

"Why indeed?" I purr, letting him pull me back down, close enough to smell the whiskey on his breath, to count the flecks of gold in his cold green eyes.

A curl of his designer-coiffed hair falls across his forehead, humanizing him for just a moment.

I resist the urge to brush it back—to touch him first, to take control. Let him think he's leading this dance.

"I have a suite upstairs," he says, thumb tracing circles on my pulse point. His skin is hot against mine, his touch electric. "Penthouse level. Private elevator. No cameras."

Of course he does. Men like Victor are always prepared to fuck someone who isn't their wife.

It's practically a line item on their corporate expense accounts—right between "business lunches" and "offshore tax havens.

" I wonder if his ex-wife found the receipts.

I wonder if that's why she left, or if it was the violence I sense simmering beneath his polished surface.

"Lead the way," I say, letting him think this is his idea, his conquest. The submission tastes strange on my tongue—bitter and unfamiliar. But it's calculated, a sacrifice to win the game.

He throws cash on the table—enough to buy the whole damn bottle—and stands, adjusting his suit jacket to hide the obvious bulge in his pants.

The bills fan out across the dark wood, green and discreet, presidents' eyes staring up accusingly.

His hand finds the small of my back, possessive and controlling, five points of heat through thin silk, guiding me through the crowded bar toward the private elevator bank.

The bar patrons' eyes slide over us—another rich man, another beautiful woman, another transaction in a world built on them. A woman in red silk glares as we pass, jealousy flaring behind Botox-frozen features.

A group of Wall Street types nudge each other, one of them muttering something that makes the others laugh—crude, entitled, toxic. The bartender nods at Victor, a silent acknowledgment passing between them. He's done this before. Many times. But tonight is different, though he doesn't know it yet.

Tonight, Victor Reese isn't just getting laid. He's getting played.

The elevator doors slide open with a soft pneumatic hiss, revealing a capsule of brushed steel and recessed lighting.

He gestures me inside, ever the gentleman, even as his eyes strip me bare.

I step in, spine straight, shoulders back, hips swaying just enough to keep his attention, every movement calculated to draw his gaze, to keep him hooked.

The air feels cooler here, climate-controlled and sterile, a sharp contrast to the warm, whiskey-soaked atmosphere of the bar.

As he follows me in, punching a code into the keypad that will take us to his suite, I catch my reflection in the mirrored walls—emerald silk clinging to curves I'd long ago learned to use as a weapon, crimson lips full and slightly parted, eyes sharp as broken glass.

For a split second, I thrill at the change in myself. This isn't Landry James, bored housewife with a taste for club hookups. This isn't the woman who faked headaches to avoid Isaac's fumbling, predictable touch. This is someone else—someone deadlier, more focused, a weapon honed to a perfect edge.

I see Sienna's handiwork in the curve of my lips, Killion's training in the predatory glint of my eyes. They've remade me, molecule by molecule, into this sleek, dangerous creature.

A shiver runs through me, half dread, half exhilaration. In my ear, I can almost hear Killion's voice: " Control the situation. Control yourself. Get what you came for and get out. " His voice is clearer than Isaac's now, more present, more real. What does that say about me?

The elevator purrs as it climbs, the floor numbers glowing gold as we pass them.

Victor's hand slides to my ass as we begin our ascent, squeezing hard enough to make me gasp.

I let him hear it—let him think it's desire, not calculation.

The scent of his cologne intensifies in the enclosed space, mixing with the leather of his wallet, the starch of his shirt, the unmistakable musk of male arousal.

His mouth finds my neck, teeth grazing my pulse point, marking territory.

"I'm going to ruin you," he murmurs against my skin, breath hot and whiskey-sweet, and I bite back a laugh.

Oh honey, if only you knew. I'm already ruined. Shattered and rebuilt into something that can ruin you right back.

But I say none of this. Just arch into his touch, letting my head fall back, offering my throat like a sacrifice.

The mirror multiplies us—a kaleidoscope of sin, green silk and dark suits, grasping hands and hungry mouths.

"Promise?" I whisper, letting vulnerability bleed into my voice—another mask, another hook.

The elevator climbs higher, each floor taking us further from the world below, closer to the moment of truth.

The lights of the city spread out beyond the glass walls of the elevator's outer side, a tapestry of gold and silver against the night sky.

His hands are everywhere now, greedy and demanding, mapping my body like territory he already owns.

The knife is forgotten, replaced by a different kind of weapon—one attached to his ego, to his need to conquer, to possess.

Men like Victor are so predictable. Wave sex in front of them, and they forget to be suspicious.

They forget to be careful. They forget everything except their own hunger, their own entitlement.

I can almost feel the moment his brain switches tracks, abandoning caution for the more primal directive throbbing between his legs.

I press against him, letting him feel every curve, every promise my body holds.

The fine wool of his suit rasps against my skin, a delicious friction.

His breathing roughens, control fraying at the edges.

Good. I need him off-balance, need his brain offline, need his guard down when we reach that room.

Did I mention I'm competitive? Yeah, I have to win every game I play. My ego requires complete domination of every situation.

Victor Reese is just another player on the new game I'm destined to master.

The elevator slows, a soft chime announcing our arrival.

The doors slide open with a whisper, revealing a private foyer.

Italian marble gleams underfoot—creamy white veined with gold, polished to a

mirror finish that reflects the subdued lighting from crystal sconces.

The air smells different here—rarefied, filtered, with subtle notes of fresh flowers and old money.

A single door awaits at the end of a short hallway, paneled in dark wood and brass—his suite, his lair.

The space feels removed from the real world, suspended in mid-air, a fantasy realm for those with enough money to escape gravity. Thirty floors below, people live and struggle and sweat. Up here, the air itself seems purified of desperation.

Victor pulls back, adjusting his tie with practiced precision, smoothing non-existent wrinkles from his jacket.

His eyes are dark with lust, pupils blown wide, a predator's smile curving his lips.

A vein pulses in his neck, blue beneath expensive skin.

"Last chance to walk away," he says, voice rough, like he's offering a courtesy he doesn't expect me to take.

I smile, slow and wicked, a weapon disguised as surrender.

My lips feel swollen, sensitive, painted in a crimson that matches the bloodlust humming in my veins.

"Oh honey," I breathe, trailing one matching crimson nail down his chest, feeling the solid wall of muscle beneath designer fabric, "I'm just getting started. "

His laugh is low and dangerous, a sound that raises goosebumps along my spine—not

from fear, but from recognition.

The sound of a predator who thinks he's found easy prey, unaware he's walking into an ambush.

The lock beeps as he waves a keycard, the sound echoing in the hushed foyer.

The door swings open, revealing luxury draped in shadow—his temporary kingdom, his hunting ground.

Floor-to-ceiling windows frame a panoramic view of the city—a carpet of lights stretching to the horizon, a kingdom of glass and steel laid out for his viewing pleasure.

Modern furniture, all clean lines and masculine angles, occupies the space with quiet authority.

A bar gleams in one corner, crystal decanters catching the low light.

The bedroom door stands partially open, revealing glimpses of an enormous bed dressed in charcoal silk sheets.

As I step across the threshold, I feel it—that sick, twisted thrill humming in my veins, that knife-edge between terror and triumph.

My body vibrates with it, a tuning fork struck against danger.

The wig's pins dig into my scalp, a constant reminder of the mask I wear, the role I play.

The scent of his cologne mingles with mine—hunter and prey, predator and predator,

two apex creatures circling.

I picture Killion watching me, grading my performance, waiting to catch the slightest fuck-up.

Which he won't.

This is what I signed up for, when I wrote my name on that contract in blood-red ink. This is what Killion trained me for, his voice a constant companion in my head, his hands reshaping me into something deadly.

This is what I was made for—not white picket fences and Sunday brunches, but this: the hunt, the game, the razor's edge between victory and annihilation.

Victor Reese thinks he's getting lucky tonight. He thinks he's found a beautiful distraction, a night of consequence-free pleasure. He has no idea what's really coming for him—that beneath the emerald silk and practiced smiles lurks something more dangerous than anything he's ever faced.

I feel the weight of the mission settle over me, heavier than the pendant, more binding than any wedding ring. I am not just Landry anymore. I'm something far more dangerous, more cunning, and more lethal than anyone could've ever imagined.

And I'm going to change the way the game is played.

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Victor's suite is a monument to compensatory masculinity—all sharp angles and cold surfaces, black leather and chrome, a space designed to intimidate rather than welcome. The kind of place that screams "I have money" but whispers "I'm empty inside."

The door clicks shut behind us with the finality of a jail cell. Victor's hand remains at the small of my back, five points of heat through thin silk, proprietary and controlling. His thumb traces small circles against my spine—a gesture meant to soothe, but layered with ownership.

Of course he does. Men like Victor think expensive whiskey is a personality trait.

"Sounds perfect," I purr, slipping out of my heels.

The marble floor is cool against my bare feet, anchoring me to the moment.

I move toward the windows, letting him watch me walk away—the sway of my hips, the flash of thigh through emerald silk—a performance calculated to keep his blood flowing south, away from his brain.

The city sprawls beneath us, a tapestry of light and darkness. From up here, everyone looks small. Insignificant. That's the high Victor chases—not just wealth, but the power to make others feel small.

I hear the clink of crystal, the splash of amber liquid. His footsteps approach, deliberate and measured. The scent of him reaches me first—cologne and arousal and underlying it all, that chemical sharpness of a predator's sweat.

"Quite a view," I murmur, accepting the tumbler he presses into my hand. Our fingers brush, another point of contact, another electric spark. "You must feel like a god up here."

His laugh is smug, satisfied. "It has its advantages."

I sip the whiskey—it is exceptional, smoky and complex, warming me from the inside out. The good things in life, all at his fingertips. All taken for granted.

Victor moves closer, trapping me between his body and the glass. His reflection stares back at me, superimposed over the cityscape—his kingdom, his hunting ground. One hand comes to rest on my hip, the other on the window beside my head. Caging me. Testing me.

"You're not what I expected," he says, voice low, lips brushing the shell of my ear. "Most women who approach me want something. Money. Connections. A stepping stone."

"And what do you think I want?" I ask, meeting his eyes in the reflection. The contact lens makes my gaze sharper, icier. Not Landry's eyes at all.

His smile is slow, predatory. "The same thing I do." His hand slides from my hip to my stomach, pressing me back against him, letting me feel the hard ridge of his erection through expensive trousers. "Satisfaction."

I set my glass on a nearby side table, turning to face him. His pupils are blown wide, black eclipsing green, his breath coming faster. The power balance shifts with every heartbeat—him thinking he's in control, me letting him think it, both of us circling toward the same inevitable collision.

"Then what are you waiting for?" I challenge, one eyebrow raised. "I'm right here."

Something flashes in his eyes—surprise, maybe respect—before he closes the distance between us. His mouth claims mine, hard and demanding, tasting of whiskey and entitlement. His hand fists in my hair, angling my head back, deepening the kiss with bruising intensity.

It's not gentle. Not sweet. It's a conquest, a claiming, his tongue invading my mouth like he's staking territory.

His other hand grips my ass, fingers digging into flesh hard enough to leave marks.

I let him feel my response—the hitch in my breath, the way my body arches into his—a performance that's only half-fake.

This is the fucked-up part of the job Killion never explicitly spelled out: sometimes your body betrays you. Sometimes the danger, the game, the power play—it gets to you. Makes you wet. Makes you want things you shouldn't.

Victor's hands are everywhere now—rough, demanding, rucking up my dress, exposing skin inch by inch.

He breaks the kiss to trail his mouth down my neck, teeth scraping against my pulse point.

"I'm going to tear you apart," he growls, and there's something darker than lust in his voice now—something closer to anger, to punishment.

I reach for his belt, fingers deftly working the Italian leather, but he catches my wrist, grip punishing. "Not yet," he says, spinning me around to face the window again. "First I want to see what I'm working with."

The zipper of my dress slides down with an obscene hiss, cool air kissing my spine.

Victor pushes the fabric off my shoulders, letting it pool at my feet in a whisper of silk.

I stand before the glass in nothing but a black lace thong and the emerald pendant, exposed to the entire city—though no one can see this high up.

It's the illusion of exhibition that matters, the fantasy of being watched.

His breath catches, a gratifying sound of appreciation. His hands smooth over my shoulders, down my back, tracing the curve of my ass with possessive heat. "Perfect," he murmurs, more to himself than to me. "Fucking perfect."

I watch his reflection, cataloging every micro-expression, every tell. Behind the lust, behind the arrogance, I see something else—a flicker of insecurity, quickly masked. It's there in the way he needs to control, needs to dominate, needs to prove himself. A weak man's idea of strength.

His hand comes around to cup my breast, thumb brushing across my nipple, sending a jolt of pleasure through me that's frustratingly real. His other hand slides between my legs from behind, fingers finding the lace already damp.

"So responsive," he says, that smug satisfaction creeping back into his voice. "So fucking wet for me already."

I hate that he's right, that my body's playing along too enthusiastically with the charade. But I can use it—channel it, ride it like a wave toward the goal.

I reach back, fingers threading through his hair, pulling him closer. "Show me what you can do with those hands," I challenge, voice husky with need that's only partially manufactured. "Make me scream."

It's calculated—stroking his ego while pushing him toward what I need. The code. The information. The mission.

His fingers push aside the lace, sliding into me without warning, thick and invasive. The stretch burns, pleasure-pain that draws a genuine gasp from my lips. His thumb finds my clit, circling with surprising skill, and my knees nearly buckle from the sensation.

"That's it," he growls against my neck, fingers working me with ruthless precision. "Let go. Show me how much you want this."

I'm caught—trapped between the cold glass and his hot body, between the mission and my own traitorous responses, between Landry and Nova and whoever the fuck I am now. My breath fogs the window as he adds another finger, stretching me wider, his pace relentless.

The orgasm builds against my will, a tidal wave I can't stop, can't control. This wasn't supposed to happen—not like this, not so fast, not so real. But my body doesn't care about the mission, about Killion's training, about anything except the skilled fingers driving me higher.

"Victor," I gasp, hands braced against the glass as he finger-fucks me with brutal efficiency. "God?—"

"Say my name again," he demands, voice rough with power and arousal. "Let the whole fucking city hear who's making you cum."

The orgasm crashes through me, sharp and unexpected, my inner walls clenching around his fingers as wave after wave of pleasure radiates outward.

I cry out his name, just like he wants, the sound raw and unfiltered.

For one terrifying moment, I lose control—of the situation, of myself, of everything—free-falling into sensation.

As I come down, trembling and disoriented, Victor withdraws his fingers, spinning me to face him. His expression is triumphant, smug, as he brings his fingers to his mouth and sucks them clean. "Sweet," he says, eyes never leaving mine. "Now I want to taste the source."

He drops to his knees—Victor Reese, multimillionaire, on his knees before me—and wedges himself between my legs. He buries his face between my thighs, tongue seeking, finding, devouring.

It's too much—too soon after the first orgasm, too intense, too real. I grab his hair, intending to push him away, but somehow end up pulling him closer instead. His tongue works magic, circling and flicking, drawing patterns that send aftershocks rippling through me.

This isn't how it's supposed to go. I'm supposed to be in control. I'm supposed to be using him, not the other way around.

Time for a counter-move.

"Stop," I gasp, tugging his hair sharply. "I need you. Now. Inside me."

His eyes flick up, his face a mess of my wetness.

Dripping from his chin, smeared across his nose.

Animal. His tongue swipes across puffy lips like he's starving for more.

For a second, the mask slips—millionaire, businessman, sophisticate—and I see the

truth.

He's nothing but a beast in an overpriced suit and his desperate to prove himself worthy of the beautiful woman in front of him.

For a heartbeat, I think he'll just keep going, face-fucking me against the glass until I'm a quivering wreck, unable to complete my mission because I can't even stand up straight. My fingers tighten in his hair, ready to force him off.

"Please," I gasp, playing the part of the desperately needy lover. "I'll die if I don't feel you inside me."

The magic words. The formula that works on every man who thinks with his dick. His ego inflates like someone jammed an air pump into it. He rises from his knees, all smug superiority again, my juices still marking his face like war paint.

"Bed," he commands, voice like gravel. "Now."

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I comply, stepping over the puddle of green silk, making my way toward the bedroom on unsteady legs.

The sheets are black, of course—silk or high-thread-count Egyptian cotton, the kind that whispers against bare skin.

I turn to face him, standing at the foot of the king-sized bed, naked except for the pendant and the wig.

Victor pounces on me, all composure gone.

His fingers fumble with buttons, ripping two off his shirt as he yanks it open.

His jacket hits the floor in a crumpled heap—three grand of tailoring tossed aside like garbage.

The expensive silk tie catches on his collar; he tears it loose with a strangled curse.

Sweat beads on his forehead as he struggles with his belt, hands actually shaking.

I've struck a nerve. The mighty Victor Reese, coming undone like a teenager about to get laid for the first time.

His chest heaves with each breath, the carefully maintained muscles flexing beneath tanned skin. A few scars interrupt the perfect canvas—reminders that even apex predators bleed. But right now, he doesn't look like a predator. He looks desperate. Unhinged. Human.

For a man who spends his days in boardrooms, he's impressively built—not gym-rat bulky, but lean and hard, the body of someone who uses expensive trainers to maintain the illusion of natural fitness.

When he drops his pants, I'm not surprised to find he goes commando—another affectation of the powerful man, the rejection of restriction. His cock springs free, thick and flushed, curving slightly upward. Impressive, but not intimidating. I've seen better in the back rooms at Malvagio.

Victor lunges for the nightstand, yanking the drawer so hard it nearly comes off its track.

Condom packets scatter, half of them falling to the floor.

He grabs one, tears it open with his teeth, spitting the foil somewhere across the room.

His hands are actually trembling as he tries to roll it on, cursing under his breath when he fumbles it the first time.

"Fuck," he mutters, face flushed red with a mix of frustration and desire.

His cock jumps in his hand as he finally manages to sheath himself properly. No smooth operator now—just raw, animal need making him clumsy. The careful facade of control has cracked wide open, revealing the desperate man beneath.

"On the bed," he says, voice rough with need. "Hands and knees."

Ah. Of course. The position of maximum control, minimum connection. I crawl onto the bed, arranging myself as instructed, back arched, ass presented like an offering. It's degrading, objectifying—and exactly what I expected from a man who needs to

dominate to feel powerful.

The mattress dips as he kneels behind me. His hands grip my hips, positioning me to his liking. The head of his cock presses against my entrance, testing, teasing, but not yet breaching.

"Beg for it," he commands, one hand sliding up my spine to fist in my hair, pulling my head back. "Tell me how much you want me to fuck you."

This is the moment—my opening. I can feel him trembling with the effort of restraint, can practically taste his need to bury himself inside me. But he needs this first—needs to hear me plead, needs to know he's won.

So I give him what he wants.

"Please," I gasp, voice pitched to sound desperate, broken. "Please, Victor. I need you inside me. Need you to fill me. Need you to fuck me until I can't remember my own name."

"Call me daddy!"

I fight the eyeroll, but I play the part. "Daddy! God yes, fuck me, Daddy!"

A groan tears from his throat, primal and raw. His hips surge forward, filling me in one brutal thrust that knocks the breath from my lungs. It hurts—a searing stretch that's too much, too fast—but the pain centers me, clears my head. Reminds me what this is, what I'm here for.

He sets a punishing pace, each thrust driving me forward on the mattress, the wet slap of skin against skin obscenely loud in the quiet room. His fingers dig into my hips hard enough to bruise, his other hand still fisted in my hair, controlling my every

move.

"So. Fucking. Tight," he grunts, punctuating each word with a savage thrust. "Tell me how good it feels."

"So good," I moan, the sound only half-feigned. "So big. So deep. God, Daddy, you're splitting me in two."

More flattery, more stroking of his fragile ego. It works—his pace quickens, his breathing ragged. I can feel him swelling inside me, getting closer to the edge. Time to escalate.

I push back against him, meeting his thrusts with equal force. "Harder," I demand. "Fuck me harder. Make me feel it tomorrow."

He growls, animal-like, hips snapping with renewed vigor. The angle changes, and suddenly he's hitting that spot inside me that makes stars explode behind my eyelids. A real moan escapes me, uncontrolled and raw.

"There it is," he says, voice triumphant. "There's that sweet spot. Cum for me again. Cum on my cock, you little slut."

His thumb digs into my clit hard enough to hurt, grinding against the swollen nub while he pounds into me.

Everything shorts out—my brain, my mission, my fucking identity—as my cunt clamps down on his cock like a vise.

The orgasm rips through me, violent and unwanted.

I'm not even sure what noises I'm making—something between a scream and a sob.

"Fuck, fuck, FUCK," he barks, his rhythm going to shit as he jackhammers into me three more times before freezing. His cock pulses, twitching as he cums with this pathetic animal grunt. His sweaty chest collapses onto my back, nearly crushing me.

Our sweaty bodies are seamed together, both panting like we ran a marathon. His heart hammers against my spine. He stays inside me too long, going soft, until the condom starts to slip. He finally pulls out with a wet, obscene sound.

I face-plant into the mattress, every muscle turned to jelly. My cunt throbs, used and angry. I can still feel the ghost of him inside me, stretching me open. The delicious touch of shame for being such a dirty whore that I loved every second curls through me, tickling dark places.

God, I was fucking made for this job.

I hear him moving around the room—disposing of the condom, retrieving something. When he returns, he has two fresh glasses of whiskey. He nudges me until I roll over, then hands me one, clinking his against it in a twisted parody of celebration.

"To unexpected pleasures," he says, voice rough but satisfied.

I sip the whiskey, letting it burn away the taste of submission. "You weren't what I expected either," I say, adding just enough admiration to feed his ego without sounding fake.

He stretches beside me, all lean muscle and casual arrogance, a man comfortable in his skin, in his power. "Most women can't handle me," he says, tracing idle patterns on my bare thigh. "Too intense. Too demanding."

"Most women are boring," I reply, setting my glass aside and rolling toward him. My fingers trail across his chest, mapping the terrain, feeling his heart still pounding

beneath my palm. "I'm not most women."

His smile is slow, predatory. "No, you're not." His hand captures mine, brings it to his lips. "Which makes me wonder why you're really here."

My pulse skips, but I keep my expression neutral, half-lidded and satiated. "I told you. Pleasure. Pure and simple."

He studies me, those green eyes suddenly sharp again, calculating. "Nothing is pure or simple." His grip on my wrist tightens, just short of painful. "Especially not women who approach men like me in hotel bars."

Fuck. We're back to suspicion. Back to danger. I need to redirect, and fast.

I laugh, the sound deliberately light. "Are you always this paranoid after sex? I'm a whore, Victor.

I thought that much was obvious." I pull my wrist free, stretching languorously, giving him a full view of my body—a distraction tactic that's older than civilization.

"I fuck powerful, rich men for money, and I love my job. "

His eyes track the movement, desire momentarily overshadowing suspicion. But only momentarily.

"You haven't named your price. Usually, that's done first. What if I decide not to pay you?"

I act unbothered, amused even. "I'll get what I want." I cock my head to the side. "Your paranoia is cute. Flattering even. Do I look dangerous?"

I end the question on a sultry purr as his gaze roams the curve of my hips, stopping at the vee between my legs, practically salivating for another round.

But Victor shakes off the sexual haze with a frown. "It's not paranoia when people really are out to get you," he says, sitting up and pulling the used condom from his spent dick and dropping it into the wastebasket. "And in my position, someone's always out to get you."

He extracts his phone, thumbs in a passcode too quickly for me to catch, and checks something. His shoulders relax fractionally. Whatever he saw—or didn't see—has reassured him, at least temporarily.

Time to pivot again. I roll to my side, propping my head on one hand. "Let me guess," I say playfully, "you're checking your stock prices even now? The markets never sleep, and neither does ambition."

He glances at me, surprised, then amused. "Something like that."

"Must be exhausting," I continue, voice soft, almost sympathetic. "Always on guard. Always waiting for the knife in the back." My fingers trace his spine, feeling the tension there. "Is that why you need control so badly? In bed, I mean."

He stiffens under my touch, then deliberately relaxes. "You think you've got me all figured out, don't you?"

I shrug, the movement sinuous, cat-like. "I'm just making conversation. Post-coital bonding and all that." I reach for my whiskey again, take another sip. "Though I'd rather be doing something else with my mouth."

His eyes darken, desire warring with caution. But desire wins—it always does with men. Such simple animals. He sets the phone aside and turns back to me, hand

cupping my face with unexpected gentleness.

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"You're dangerous," he says, and there's something almost like admiration in his voice.

I smile, slow and wicked. "So I've been told."

This time when he kisses me, it's different—less domineering, more exploratory.

His hands roam my body with appreciation rather than ownership.

The shift is subtle but significant—he's stopped seeing me as just a conquest and started seeing me as something more intriguing, more worth his genuine attention.

Perfect.

I straddle him, taking control without seeming to.

He's already hard—impressive recovery time for a man his age. Must be all those vitamins and personal trainers (or maybe the little blue pill, who knows). I lean over and grab a fresh condom, only this time, I do the honors, rolling the thin sheath onto his cock with familiar ease. This is something I didn't need Killion's training for—I could do this in my sleep.

"My turn," I whisper against his lips, "my pace," as I guide his length into my dripping pussy.

He laughs, hands settling on my hips. "By all means."

I rise and fall on his cock like a piston in an oil rig—mechanical, ruthless.

His eyes lock on mine, greedy and needy, drinking in the porn show I'm giving him. I bite my lip, flutter my lashes, gasp at all the right moments. It's all bullshit—a performance calculated to his ego. I'm bouncing on his dick like it's a fleshy pogo stick and he's eating it up.

His rough hands maul my tits, clumsy and grasping. His thumbs drag across my nipples, sending actual sparks of pleasure shooting down to my clit. Fuck me for responding to this asshole.

"So responsive," he grunts, staring at me like I'm some kind of science experiment. "So real."

I almost laugh in his face. Real? Nothing about this is real except the mission. But I swallow the laugh, twist it into a moan that would make a porn star proud, and arch my back to give him a better view of his cock disappearing inside me.

"Touch yourself," he barks, trying to sound commanding but coming off desperate. "Let me watch you cum."

I comply, fingers circling my clit as I continue to ride him, pace quickening. His breathing roughens, hips thrusting upward to meet mine. We're building toward something together now—a shared crescendo, a mutual destruction.

"Tell me your real name," he says suddenly, the words startling me. "Not the one you gave at the bar. Your real name."

My rhythm falters, but I recover quickly. "Why? So you can find me after this?" I lean down, breasts brushing his chest, lips ghosting across his. "Wouldn't you rather keep the mystery?"

His hands grip my hips harder, taking back some control. "I like to know who I'm fucking," he growls. "Who's making me feel this good."

It's a test. A trap. If I give him Landry, he could trace me—back to Isaac, back to my old life, back to complications I can't afford. If I insist on Lydia, I confirm his suspicions that I'm hiding something.

So I take a third option.

"Nova," I breathe against his lips, the name Killion gave me, the identity that's becoming more real with every mission. "My name is Nova."

For a jarring second, recognition arcs through my body like a red-hot flare but it's gone in an instant. It's nearly enough to throw me off my game but I recover before my mark notices.

Hell, I probably could've sprouted horns and a pointed tongue right in front of Victor's lust-glazed eyes and he wouldn't give a shit as long as he's buried hilt-deep inside my body.

Satisfaction flashes in his eyes. He believes me—or at least, believes I've given him something true. His pace quickens, driving deeper, harder.

"Nova," he repeats, testing the name on his tongue. "Beautiful. Dangerous. A star that explodes."

"Ready to explode for you," I gasp, fingers working faster, body genuinely responding to the friction, the fullness, the danger of the game.

His thumb joins mine, adding pressure to my clit, and the dual sensation pushes me over the edge. I come with a cry that might be his name, might be gibberish, might be

nothing at all. He follows seconds later, hips jerking, a groan torn from his throat as he empties himself inside me.

I collapse against his chest, feeling his heartbeat thunder against mine, our sweat mingling, breath synced. For a moment—I forget who I am, why I'm here, what I'm supposed to be doing. I'm just a body floating on endorphins, adrift in the aftermath of pleasure.

But reality floods back too quickly. The mission. The code. The reason for all of this.

I roll off him, stretching like a satisfied cat, giving him a smile that's all smoke and mirrors. "That was worth the knife at the bar," I say, voice honeyed with fake affection.

He laughs, the sound more genuine than before. "You're something else, Nova." He reaches for his phone again—checking the time, I think. "It's late. You should stay."

"What about your engagement?" I ask, feigning concern. "I'd hate to keep you from your plans."

"Fuck my plans. I'd rather be here with you." He reaches for me, pulling me closer, so he can slowly turn me around. His finger drags down the sweaty crack of my twin halves. "What if I want to fuck you in the ass next. You good with that?"

"Sounds like a party," I respond with a wicked grin. Don't get me wrong, I don't mind backdoor action but I know for a fact, that ain't happening tonight.

Perfect. Exactly what I need.

"I should clean up first," I say, pulling away from his grasp with deliberate grace. "Mind if I use your shower?"

"Go ahead," he says, settling back against the pillows, satiated and relaxed. "Take your time."

I swagger to the bathroom, his gaze burning into my ass with each step. That's it, gorge yourself on the view, buddy , 'cuz that's all you're gonna get.

The bathroom's all rich-people excess—marble for days, glass shower big enough for an orgy, golden fixtures probably worth more than Isaac's car. I lock the door, flip on the fan, and get to work.

First things first. I reach up to my hairline, fingers finding the edge of the small flesh-colored patch Sienna had applied during my transformation.

Designed to look like nothing more than a beauty mark near my temple, the synthetic skin conceals Killion's chemical masterpiece—a neuropharmaceutical cocktail developed by ex-Mossad scientists.

I peel it carefully from my skin, revealing a crystalline film no thicker than a contact lens.

"For after he's spent," Sienna had instructed during prep, eyes clinical as she applied it. "Put it in his drink. Bypasses the blood-brain barrier in seconds. He'll be suggestible as a hypnotized teenager, especially with post-orgasm neurochemicals already flooding his system."

I twist on the shower, cranking it hot enough to fog the mirrors. Through the steam, I check my reflection—lips swollen, bite marks on my neck, mascara smudged. I look fucked. I look like someone else.

I carefully place half the film on my own tongue—the antidote component that'll protect me if there's any cross contamination while Victor turns into a confession

booth with a dick.

It dissolves instantly, tasting like metal and burnt oranges.

The rest I fold between my fingers, invisible but potent.

Clean and ready, I saunter back into the bedroom, still dripping. Victor's propped against his headboard like the king of his domain, scrolling through his phone with that rich-asshole intensity. He glances up, cock already twitching back to life.

"Come here," he orders, dropping his phone face-down on the nightstand. "I'm not done with you yet."

I flash a smile designed to make his balls ache. "Good."

His whiskey sits half-empty beside the bed. As I crawl toward him, I let my hand brush the glass, dropping the nearly invisible film into the amber liquid. It disappears on contact—odorless, tasteless, undetectable even to the most paranoid of marks.

"Thirsty work," I purr, nodding at his drink. "Finish that. You'll need the stamina for what I'm about to do to you."

Victor smirks, downs the rest in one swallow.

I slide off the bed and onto my knees between his legs, the perfect picture of submission.

But this is strategy, not servitude. The drug's clock is ticking.

Three minutes until his frontal lobe goes offline.

Five until he'll tell me whatever I want just to feel my mouth on him again.

"Let me thank you properly," I purr, taking his half-hard cock in my hand. His eyes are already starting to glaze as I wrap my lips around him, tongue swirling over the sensitive head. He groans, fingers threading through my hair—not pushing, not yet. The control freak is slipping.

I watch his face as I work him, tracking the drug's progress through his system.

His pupils dilate to black pools. His breathing shallows.

His grip on my hair loosens as his coordination fails.

Halfway through a particularly deep stroke, his eyes suddenly unfocus, staring at something a thousand yards beyond the bedroom walls.

Bingo. I release him with a wet pop, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand.

"Victor," I whisper, rising to straddle his thighs without taking him inside me. "I need something from you."

"Anything," he slurs, hands pawing clumsily at my breasts.

"The access code to your private server," I say, rocking against him, keeping him just stimulated enough to stay hard but not enough to cum. "The one with the Nexus Holdings information."

His brow furrows momentarily—some last remnant of resistance—then smooths as the chemicals overtake his higher functions.

"Eight-four-seven-three-one-nine-zero-six," he recites, voice flat and mechanical.

I commit it to memory, repeating it silently. "And how do I access the server remotely?"

He tells me everything—IP addresses, secondary passwords, encryption keys. Information worth millions on the black market, spilling from his lips as easily as bad pickup lines. I grind against him harder as a reward, watching his eyes roll back.

"Good boy," I purr, increasing my pace. "You're so helpful, Victor. So open with me."

"Only you," he mumbles, hands gripping my hips. "Only Nova."

I should stop now. I have what I came for. Mission accomplished. But there's that twisted part of me—the part Killion recognized, the part that craves chaos—that can't resist one final flourish.

"Victor," I whisper against his ear, "I want to know your deepest desire. The thing you've never told anyone."

He shudders beneath me. "My mother," he confesses, voice cracking. "I always wanted her to see me succeed. To be proud."

I tsked lightly. "Poor little mama's boy always seeking her love."

Oh, this is too perfect. Practically gift-wrapped. The emerald pendant between my breasts—the one chosen to match his mother's—catches the light as I move.

His breath hitches, ending on something that sounds suspiciously like a sob. "M-mama," he groans.

Oh, good grief. I hold back my laughter. "When you wake up tomorrow," I murmur,

voice hypnotic, "you'll realize something about yourself. Something you've been hiding."

"What?" he asks, completely in my power now.

"You're intensely, unavoidably attracted to your mother," I whisper. "You'll think about her when you touch yourself. You'll see her face when you're with other women. You'll dream about her every night. You're a shamefully dirty boy, Victor. You can't get hard without thinking about fucking her."

His face contorts—confusion, horror, arousal all mingling together as the suggestion takes root in his drugged brain.

"But my mother," he mumbles, his brow furrowed with drug-addled confusion, "she died... three years ago."

I trace one finger down his chest, a smile spreading across my face like an oil slick.

"Perfect," I whisper against his throat. "That means she can't contradict your new confession about wanting to fuck her corpse. Imagine explaining that to your board members."

I kiss his slack mouth once, tasting victory and expensive whiskey.

"Sweet dreams, Victor. Hope you've got a good therapist."

His eyes roll up into his skull and within minutes he's out like a light, the drug pulling him under into dreamless sleep where my suggestion will burrow deeper into his psyche.

I roll off him, mission complete. I slide from the bed, gathering my things with silent

efficiency.

The information is secure, the mark compromised in more ways than one.

By the time he wakes, I'll be gone, and he'll be left with nothing but a hangover, a security breach he doesn't know about yet, and a deeply disturbing new sexual fixation that will haunt him for years.

Killion would disapprove of that last part—unnecessary risk, unprofessional behavior.

But as I let myself out of the suite, I can't bring myself to care.

Some small part of Landry James—the chaos-loving, boundary-pushing thrill-seeker—is still alive in there, refusing to be completely subsumed by Nova.

And honestly? That's the only part that still feels real.

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I stride through the steel doors of headquarters like I own the place, mission-high still buzzing through my veins like premium vodka.

My body's a map of victory marks—bite bruises on my neck, fingerprints on my hips, and the sweet, secret ache between my thighs.

The emerald dress is gone, traded for tactical blacks that hug my curves like a second skin.

Let them look. Let them see what success wears home.

The concrete labyrinth echoes with my boots as I make my way to debrief. No more hood, no more handlers steering me like a broken shopping cart. I've earned my place in this fucked-up family of killers and spies. I got the code. I fucked the mark. I mindfucked him for dessert.

Mission accomplished, bitches.

Two hours after Victor Reese's cock was inside me, I'm sitting across from Killion in what passes for a debriefing room. The air smells like industrial cleaner and testosterone. Sienna leans against the wall, arms crossed, face blank as virgin canvas.

"Report," Killion says, voice arctic. No 'hello.' No 'good job.' Just that one word, dropped between us like a block of ice.

Agent Asshole reporting for duty .

"Eight-four-seven-three-one-nine-zero-six," I recite, the numbers falling from my lips like diamonds. "Plus three secondary passwords and the encryption protocol. It's all right here." I tap my temple with a smirk. "Photographic memory. One of my many talents you're only beginning to appreciate."

"Did you follow protocol to the letter?" Killion's expression was cold as stone.

The tiniest smile curving the corner of my mouth is my undoing.

"Landry."

"God, you're the fun police." I grouse, crossing my legs, leaning back in the metal chair like it's a throne before admitting, "Maybe I got a little creative after securing the intel."

Consider it a performance bonus I awarded myself.

"I lick my lips, savoring the memory. "It was really a work of art, actually."

"What the hell did you do?" Killion ground out.

"Oh, calm down. It's not a big deal. You can't hand me super cool spy tools and expect me not to use them."

Killion's low growl tickles me in private places but I figure I better not push too hard.

"All I'm saying is that I may have planted a really awkward psychological time bomb that may have him springing wood every time he thinks of his poorly departed mother."

"I cackled with amusement. "Imagine Victor Reese jerking off to the thought of his

blue-haired conservative mother. Classic.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Killion barked, glaring at me like I’d just pissed in his cornflakes.
“What is wrong with you?”

I arch an eyebrow, sitting up straight, hitting him with a glare of my own.

“What? Mission accomplished, parameters exceeded.

I deserved a little fun. Besides, the more.

.. memorable I made the encounter, the less likely he'd be to question what information he might have shared during our little pillow talk. "

His jaw tightens. "The psychological suggestion wasn't in your brief."

"The mother thing?" I shrug, examining my nails like they're suddenly fascinating.
"Consider it a bonus. Insurance policy. He tries to come after us, we leak his new mommy fetish. His reputation's toast before the stock market opens."

Killion's eyes narrow to slits. In the fluorescent glare, his face looks carved from granite, all hard angles and cold calculation. "You compromised operational parameters for a personal fuck-you?"

"I improvised," I correct him, holding his gaze. "Isn't that what you trained me for? Adapting to the situation?"

"I trained you to follow orders."

"You trained me to succeed."

Behind him, Sienna's mouth twitches—the ghost of a smile, there and gone so fast I might have imagined it. But I didn't. She's amused. Interesting.

Killion slams his palm on the table, the sharp crack echoing through the sterile room. "This isn't a fucking game, Landry."

"Of course it is," I fire back, leaning forward, my voice dropping to a dangerous purr. "It's the highest-stakes game there is. And I just proved I'm very, very good at it."

He's on his feet now, looming over me like a storm cloud, all barely contained violence and cold control. "You think you're special? Irreplaceable? There are a dozen more like you—women with your skills, your profile, your particular... pathologies."

"Bullshit," I laugh, the sound sharp as broken dreams. "If there were a dozen more like me, you wouldn't be so pissed I went off-script. You'd just liquidate me and slot in the next desperate housewife with boundary issues."

Sienna makes a noise—something between a cough and a laugh—and Killion whips his head around to glare at her.

"Something to add, Agent?"

She straightens, face instantly professional, but I catch the glint in her eyes. "Just that perhaps we should focus on the intel. The operation was successful, despite"—she glances at me—"creative flourishes."

Killion's nostrils flare. He's furious, but he's calculating too. Cost-benefit analysis playing behind those cold eyes. I was right, and he knows it. Mission success trumps method.

"Reese accessed the Nexus Holdings server at 12:38 AM," he finally says, turning back to me. "The data you extracted confirmed our suspicions. He's laundering money for high-value targets including?—"

The door bangs open, cutting him off. A suited analyst rushes in, face pale, clutching a tablet. "Sir, there's been a complication."

Killion stiffens. "What kind of complication?"

"Victor Reese is dead."

The words drop like a bomb. My blood turns to slush.

"What the fuck?" I breathe. "That's impossible. The drug doesn't?—"

"Not the drug," the analyst interrupts, swiping through screens. "Gunshot wound to the head. Hotel security found him thirty minutes ago."

Silence crushes the room. Then everyone moves at once.

Killion's on the analyst, grabbing the tablet. Sienna's on her phone, barking orders. And I'm frozen, processing. Victor Reese, the man I fucked into oblivion six hours ago, is a cooling corpse.

"Blackout debrief," Killion barks, his voice cutting through the chaos erupting around us.

Two armed operatives materialize at the door like summoned demons. Sienna's already moving, tapping commands into a wall-mounted panel. The lights shift from sterile white to blood red, casting everyone's faces in crimson shadows. Somewhere, an alarm wails, then dies—strangled mid-scream.

"What's happening?" I ask, but no one answers.

They hustle me down a corridor I've never seen before, deeper into the facility's guts. No windows, no cameras, nothing but bare concrete and steel doors with electronic locks that require Killion's palm, retina, and a six-digit code that changes every hour.

The room they push me into is smaller than a prison cell, with a single metal table bolted to the floor and three chairs. No two-way mirror. No visible surveillance. This isn't for show—this is where real secrets get buried.

"Sit," Killion orders.

I do, because even I know when to pick my battles.

Sienna takes position by the door while Killion towers over me, not bothering with a chair. Power move 101. His face is cast in demonic red from the emergency lighting, turning his eyes into black pits.

"Start from the beginning," he says. "Every detail. Every word. Every person who saw you with Reese."

"I already told you?—"

"Again," he cuts me off. "Someone put a bullet in our mark's head thirty minutes after you left him. Either you were compromised, or you missed something critical."

The implication hangs between us like a grenade with its pin halfway out.

"I wasn't made," I say, fighting to keep my voice level. "Victor suspected a honey trap initially—pulled a knife— but I convinced him otherwise." I smirk, can't help myself. "Thoroughly."

"The bartender," Killion presses. "Who else saw you together? Who noticed you?"

I close my eyes, replaying the evening frame by frame. The mission profile's hardwired into my brain now, every detail accessible like files on a computer.

"The bartender. Carlos, Filipino, early thirties.

He nodded at Victor—they knew each other.

A woman in red Vera Wang at the corner table kept watching us.

Corporate wife type, probably jealous. Three finance bros by the window, Patek Philippe watches and coke-pink gums. One made a comment when we passed. "

My eyes snap open. "Wait. There was someone else."

Killion leans in, all predatory focus.

"A man at the bar. Gray suit, expensive but not flashy. I didn't register him at first because..."

"Because what?" Sienna asks, speaking for the first time.

"Because he was too careful not to look at us." The realization crawls up my spine like ice water. "Most people either stare or deliberately avoid staring. This guy had the perfect amount of disinterest. Trained disinterest."

Killion and Sienna exchange a look loaded with more meaning than a CIA cryptography manual. Silent communication perfected by people who've seen too much together—the kind that makes outsiders feel like they're missing half the conversation.

"What aren't you telling me?" I demand.

"Focus," Killion snaps. "The elevator to Reese's suite. Anyone see you enter? Security cameras?"

"Private elevator, keycard access. Victor said no cameras." I remember his hands on me in that mirrored box, his mouth hot against my neck. "But there was a staff entrance nearby. Maintenance corridor, probably."

"And after? How did you leave?"

"Service elevator. Changed clothes in a supply closet on the third floor. Exited through the loading dock at 1:17 AM exactly. No one saw me."

Killion paces the small room like a caged tiger, all coiled muscle and barely contained violence.

"What's going on?" I press again. "If Victor's dead, that means someone else wanted what we wanted. Or wanted him silenced."

"Or wanted to send a message," Sienna adds quietly.

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Something in her tone makes my blood run cold. For the first time since this whole fucked-up adventure began, a tendril of genuine fear curls through my chest. Not the fun kind that makes your clit throb and your heart race—the kind that tastes like metal and makes your hands shake.

"Am I in danger?" The question slips out before I can stop it, small and pathetically human.

Killion stops pacing. His expression shifts—just a flicker, gone so fast I almost miss it. Not sympathy, exactly. Recognition. He's seen this moment before in other recruits. The instant when the game becomes real.

"Everyone in this building is in danger, every second of every day," he says, voice flat. "That's the job you signed up for."

I swallow hard, the fear twisting, transforming—not gone, but changing into something else. Something electric. The same sick thrill I used to chase in club bathrooms with strangers' hands around my throat.

"Good," I say, straightening my spine. "Boring is worse than dead."

There it is—something like approval in Killion's eyes. Brief as a camera flash, but real.

"The man in the gray suit," Sienna says, pulling a tablet from somewhere in her tactical gear. "Can you describe him? Height, weight, distinguishing features?"

I close my eyes again, reconstructing him from memory. "Six-one, maybe 190. Athletic but not showy. Mid-forties. Eastern European features, possibly Russian or Ukrainian. No visible scars or tattoos. His watch was interesting—vintage Omega, the kind intelligence officers wore in the Cold War."

When I open my eyes, they're both staring at me.

"What?" I ask.

"Your observational detail," Killion says. "It's exceptional."

"I told you," I shrug. "I notice things. Especially about men. It's how I've survived this long."

Sienna slides the tablet across the table. On it is a grainy surveillance photo of a man matching my description, entering what looks like an embassy.

"Is this him?"

I study it, then nod. "That's him. Who is he?"

"Alexei Volkov," Killion says, the name heavy with history I don't understand yet. "Former FSB. Now private sector, which means he's more dangerous, not less."

"He's a cleaner," Sienna adds. "Among other things."

"A cleaner who got there after I left," I point out. "So either he was following Reese, or..."

"Or he was following you," Killion finishes.

The room seems to shrink, the red light pulsing like a wound.

"If he wanted me dead, I'd be dead," I reason, surprising myself with how steady my voice sounds.

"Unless you weren't the target," Sienna says. "Yet."

"Enough," Killion cuts her off. "We're moving to containment protocol. Landry doesn't leave the facility until we know exactly what Volkov was doing there and who he's working for."

"Fuck that," I protest. "I'm not sitting in some underground bunker while?—"

"Yes, you are," Killion slams his palm on the table. "Unless you want to end up like Reese. Or worse."

"There's worse than a bullet to the brain?" I challenge.

His eyes lock with mine, hard as granite. "Much worse. And Volkov specializes in it."

The fear's back, but so is that other feeling—that dark, twisted excitement. The dance with death that's always turned me on more than it should.

"Fine," I concede, but I can't resist adding, "but when you figure out what's going on, I want in. This is my operation now too."

Killion snorts. "This isn't a democracy."

"No," I agree, leaning forward. "It's a mission. And I just proved I can get results no one else could. Volkov saw me with Reese, which means I'm already connected. Use

me."

The double entendre hangs between us, deliberate and loaded.

"Use me," I repeat, voice dropping lower. "Or waste me. Your choice."

Sienna makes that sound again—almost a laugh—and Killion shoots her a look that could strip paint.

"72-hour lockdown," he says finally. "Then we reassess."

It's not a yes, but it's not a no either. I'll take it.

"One more thing," Sienna says, her slate eyes calculating. "The drug you used on Reese. Was there any possibility of adverse effects? Anything unusual in his reaction?"

I think back to Victor's glazed eyes, his slurred confessions, the way he folded into unconsciousness like a puppet with cut strings.

"No," I say confidently. "Textbook response. By morning he would've had nothing but a hangover and some very uncomfortable feelings about his mother."

"And the suggestion," Killion presses. "Was it verbal only, or did you use physical triggers?"

"Verbal primarily," I reply, wondering where this is going.

"Though I was sitting on him when I planted it—my hand on his chest, his cock desperate to be inside me again, whispering directly into his ear while the drug had him completely open.

Maximum physical and psychological penetration. " I tilt my head. "Why?"

Killion ignores my question. "Your pendant. The one that matched his mother's. Did he comment on it?"

"No, barely noticed. He was more transfixed by my tits —as he should be."

Killion and Sienna exchange another one of those loaded looks.

"What?" I demand. "What are you not telling me?"

"Watch yourself. You're an asset," Killion reminds me, voice cold as liquid nitrogen. "A useful one, but still just an asset. Remember your place."

The door hisses open, and he's gone before I can argue further, leaving me alone with Sienna.

She stares at me for a long moment, her expression unreadable. Then, so quietly I almost miss it:

"You knew exactly what you were doing with that suggestion."

I hold her gaze. "I'm a fast learner."

A smile ghosts across her face. "Maybe too fast. Be careful, Landry. Not everyone here appreciates initiative."

She turns to leave, but I catch her arm. "Sienna. What's really going on?"

She glances at my hand until I release her, then meets my eyes.

"Victor Reese wasn't just laundering money," she says finally. "He was moving something much more valuable. Information. The kind people like Volkov kill for."

"And now I'm connected to it," I realize.

She nods once, sharp and precise. "Welcome to the big leagues, Landry. The game just changed."

After she's gone, I stand alone in the red-lit room, adrenaline and something darker pulsing through my veins. My body still carries the marks of Victor Reese's hands, but now they feel different—not like victory trophies, but like breadcrumbs leading somewhere dangerous.

And fuck me if I'm not dying to follow them.

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The morning after is always the worst part. That's what they don't tell you in spy school.

I wake up feeling like I've been fucked by a freight train—muscles screaming, throat raw, brain pulsing against my skull like it's trying to escape. My body's a crime scene of fading bruises and fingerprints, souvenirs from a dead man's touch.

Victor Reese, billionaire asshole, now cooling in some morgue with a bullet where his ego used to be.

And here I am. Alive. Locked down. Quarantined like a virus they're not sure how to contain.

The clock reads 9:17 AM. Day one of my 72-hour timeout, courtesy of Killion and whatever clusterfuck I've stumbled into.

The room—my five-star concrete box—feels smaller today, walls pressing in like they know something I don't. The air tastes recycled, filtered through too many lungs, too many secrets.

I drag myself to the shower, cranking it hot enough to punish.

Steam billows as I catalog the damage: hickeys blooming purple on my neck, crescent-shaped nail marks on my hips, a tender ache between my thighs.

Evidence that I did my job—and did it well.

The water pounds against my skin, but Victor's ghost lingers, a phantom grip I can't wash off.

There's no protocol for this—waking up knowing the man whose cum you scrubbed from your thighs is now a corpse with a bullet hole for a third eye. Should I feel something? Guilt? Fear? Instead, all I feel is hungry. God, I could destroy a heaping mound of pancakes right now.

But the ugly truth? I'm, maybe a little proud, in a fucked-up way. Mission accomplished, target terminated. Just not by me.

The halls are quiet when I venture out, but not empty. This isn't solitary confinement—it's observation. I can feel the eyes tracking me, cameras hidden in plain sight, handlers making notes. Asset displays normal post-mission behavior. No signs of psychological distress.

The cafeteria—or "nutrition center" as some corporate asshole labeled it—hums with low conversation and the mechanical whir of espresso machines.

It's like a high-end prison commissary designed by someone who read about food in a magazine once.

All quinoa bowls and cold-pressed juices that taste like liquidized lawn clippings.

I grab coffee strong enough to strip paint and a protein bar that promises twenty grams of tasteless nutrition. Fuel, not food. The distinction matters here.

A group of Dolls cluster near the window—three women, two men, all attractive in that generic, interchangeable way, like they were assembled from the same kit of perfect parts.

Their laughter sounds rehearsed, their casual poses too studied.

When I approach, the conversation shifts like a school of fish changing direction.

"Hey, it's the rookie," says a blonde with cheekbones that could cut glass and dead eyes that have seen too much. Her smile is perfect and perfectly empty. "First mission jitters?"

There it is—the probing disguised as small talk. The fishing expedition wrapped in false camaraderie.

"Nothing a bullet to the head won't fix," I reply, watching the ripple of reaction.

A redhead with a mouth like a switchblade snickers. "So we heard. Messy. Was he at least a good fuck before someone ventilated him?"

"Mediocre," I shrug, sipping my coffee. "Men with money never try as hard. Why bother when you can just buy another toy?"

They laugh, but it's hollow. Testing me, evaluating the merchandise. I'm the new exhibit at the sociopath zoo, and they're deciding if I'm worth the price of admission.

"So," a guy with a jawline too perfect to be natural leans in, "how'd it really go last night?"

His casual tone doesn't match his eyes—sharp, calculating, hungry for weakness.

"According to the debrief, it was a success," I deflect, matching his stare. "Until someone turned my mark into modern art."

"Occupational hazard," he says with a half-smile that doesn't reach his eyes.

"Welcome to the family."

Family. Right. The kind that drowns the runt of the litter when no one's looking.

These fuckers cannot be trusted, I can feel that right away.

I make mental notes as I scan the room—who's watching me too closely, who's pointedly not watching at all.

The hierarchy isn't obvious, but it's there, hidden in micro-expressions and body language.

The veterans sit straighter. The rookies laugh louder.

Everyone's performing, even when they think they're not.

The bathroom is all marble and stainless steel, cold elegance that screams money but whispers surveillance. I'm washing my hands when she enters—fifty-something with the posture of a ballerina and eyes like a combat veteran. Her makeup is flawless, her suit expensive but conservative. Old school.

"I remember my first mission, seems like a lifetime ago," she said, her voice has the rasp of too many cigarettes, too many screams swallowed down. "It was thrilling."

Friend or foe? I can't get a bead on her just yet. "Definitely had its moments," I return, taking a moment to peer at my reflection in the mirror, subtly conveying a lack of concern whether she stays or goes.

She applies lipstick the color of arterial blood, her hand steady as a surgeon's. "You think you have it all figured out, but you don't. You should watch your back."

“Wow, they really roll out the welcome wagon around here,” I smirk, drying my hands on a towel soft enough for a baby's ass. Luxury amid brutality—the Dollhouse special.

She caps her lipstick, turns to face me directly. “They like you when you're shiny,” she says, her voice dropping lower. “But shine too bright? You make yourself a target.”

The words land like ice down my spine.

“Who's 'they'?” I ask, but she's already moving toward the door, heels clicking against marble like a countdown.

“Figure it out before they figure you out,” she throws over her shoulder, and then she's gone, leaving nothing but expensive perfume and chilled dread in her wake.

By lunchtime, the Dollhouse is buzzing like a hive poked with a stick. News travels fast in a place built on secrets. I'm sitting alone, picking at something pretending to be food—grain bowl with kale and enough microgreens to feed a colony of rabbits—when I hear it.

“—and Cecilia didn't check back in. Third one this quarter.”

The words float from a nearby table where four Dolls huddle, voices low but not low enough. I keep my head down, ears tuned to their frequency.

“Retired?” asks one, the euphemism hanging in the air like cigarette smoke.

“That's the official story,” replies another, voice barely above a whisper. “Sent away for 'reassignment.'”

They laugh, but it's the kind of laugh that covers fear. Like whistling past a graveyard filled with your colleagues.

"Remember Martinez? Top of his class, specialized in corporate extractions. Gone." A third voice, male, bitter as old coffee. "Discipline got him after Belgrade."

"Discipline?" I ask before I can stop myself, turning to face them.

They freeze like deer in headlights, caught sharing the wrong story with the wrong person. The silence stretches, thick and awkward, until a brunette with shrewd eyes shrugs.

"Discipline Team," she explains, glancing over her shoulder like the words themselves might summon them. "Internal affairs with a body count."

"For when you fuck up too big to fix," adds the guy, his perfect tan unable to hide the pallor underneath. "You don't want them knowing your name."

"What, like, they kill you or something?" I scoff, making light of their hushed tone. "They can't fucking do that. We're Americans. There's rules and shit against that kind of stuff."

The brunette mocked my arrogance. "Honey, you're in no place where rules apply or exist. You are property of the Dollhouse now, don't you know that? They can do whatever they want with you and there's fuck-all that's going to stop them."

"Bullshit," I shot back but a drizzle of ice slid down my spine. Before I can ask anything else, the air in the room changes—a subtle pressure drop, like the moment before a storm. Conversations die. Backs straighten. Eyes dart toward the entrance.

He stands in the doorway—six-foot-something of solid muscle wrapped in black, face

blank as fresh concrete. Not security, not a handler. Something else. His eyes scan the room methodically, landing on a girl maybe twenty-two, fresh-faced despite the makeup aging her up.

The girl who, minutes earlier, had been joking about pocketing a diamond bracelet from her latest mark.

The man doesn't speak. Doesn't need to. He just stares, waiting, the silence crushing everyone in the room like a physical weight.

The girl's hand trembles, coffee sloshing over the rim of her mug. "It was a joke," she stammers, voice small and suddenly young. "Just a joke, sir. I would never?—"

He nods once, the movement sharp as a guillotine blade, and turns to leave. The room exhales collectively as the door swings shut behind him.

"Jesus," someone whispers.

"Discipline," the brunette confirms, pushing her plate away, appetite gone. "Like I said. You don't want them knowing your name."

The message is crystal clear: If you fuck up, they don't pull you into an office. They pull you out of existence.

Jesus, this place is all kinds of fucked up.

I spend the afternoon in the gym, working out the knots Victor's eager hands left in my muscles, burning off the jittery energy that comes with captivity.

The facility's training area is state-of-the-art—heavy bags, speed bags, weights, cardio equipment, even a combat ring in the center where Dolls can spar under

supervision.

Everything you need to hone your body into the perfect weapon.

I'm on the treadmill, pushing past the burn in my thighs, when she appears beside me—five-foot-nine of coiled grace in a black sports bra and leggings. Her cropped platinum hair frames a face that belongs on Soviet propaganda posters—strong jaw, high cheekbones, eyes the color of Siberian ice.

"Landry," she says, my name twisting through her Russian accent like barbed wire. "You are new girl. Victor Reese's last fuck, da?"

Subtle.

"And you are?" I ask, not breaking stride.

"Natalia." She matches my pace effortlessly. "You want spar? Is better than running nowhere."

Can't argue with that logic. I shut off my machine and jerk my head in agreement. "Let's go."

Twenty minutes later, I'm flat on my back for the third time, gasping for air while Natalia stands over me, not even breathing hard. She fights like someone who learned on streets, not in dojos—dirty, efficient, brutal.

"Not bad," she says, offering a hand up. "But you telegraph left hook."

I take her hand, muscles screaming as I rise. "Thanks for the pointer and the bruises."

She grins, wolfish. "In Dollhouse, bruises are love letters. Pain is teacher."

I must be insane because there's something about Natalia that I like. She's blunt and brutal —two things I can trust in this two-faced prison yard of pretty people.

We grab water, slumping against the wall as other Dolls circle each other in the ring. The gym smells of sweat and determination and something darker—desperation, maybe. The need to be stronger, faster, better than whatever's hunting you.

"How long have you been here?" I ask, rolling my shoulder where her last takedown nearly dislocated it.

"Three years," she replies, gaze distant. "Killion found me in Moscow brothel. Was...not good place." She taps a scar on her collarbone, silver-white against tanned skin. "He killed man who did this. Brought me here."

The reverence in her voice when she says his name catches me off guard. "Killion," I repeat. "He's...intense."

Natalia laughs, the sound unexpectedly bright. "Is like saying ocean is wet. Killion is best. Saved my life."

"He broke my wrist during training," offers another Doll, a compact man with the graceful movements of a dancer, joining our conversation. "Said it was a lesson about maintaining distance."

"Did you learn?" I ask.

He holds up his hand, flexing fingers that don't quite straighten. "Every day."

"He's a bastard," a third chimes in, a woman built like a gymnast, all lean muscle and controlled anger. "Broke my ribs first week just to teach me a lesson."

"But you survived," Natalia points out. "You are stronger now."

"I'd die for him," the gymnast admits quietly, and the others nod in solemn agreement.

I catalog their responses, filing away the dynamics for later analysis. Some worship Killion like a dark savior. Some fear him like a vengeful god. A few—I can see it in their eyes, the subtle tightening around the mouth—hate him quietly, but they never say it out loud.

Loyalty here is currency. And betrayal? It's a death sentence.

Night comes too quickly and not soon enough. I lie in my regulation bed, staring at the ceiling, sleep a foreign concept. Every creak in the hallway sets my nerves on fire. Every shadow holds Volkov's ghost, gun in hand, bullet with my name on it.

I notice what I didn't see before: there are no locks on Dollhouse room doors. Nothing to keep anyone out.

No, that's not it.

Nothing to keep us in.

It's not about containment. It's about access. Anyone could walk in, anytime. It's about keeping Dolls open, available, vulnerable. Always ready to serve, to perform, to obey.

I understand now what this place really is. Not an agency or a facility or a program.

It's a harem with government clearance. A prison with Michelin-star catering.

Luxury coffin, gilded cage, velvet noose—call it what you want. The Dollhouse only lets you out one of two ways:

Naked, or dead.

And I'm starting to wonder which one would be worse.

Not for the first time, I'm wondering, have I finally gotten myself into a mess that I can't get out of?

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Day three of lockdown crawls to a close like a wounded animal dragging itself to die.

The recycled air tastes stale, metallic with the tang of industrial cleaning products and institutional despair.

The low hum of ventilation has become my white noise machine, interrupted only by the mechanical click of the security cameras as they swivel to track my movements.

I'm sprawled on my bed, staring at nothing, when my door swings open without warning. The hydraulic hiss sounds obscenely loud after days of near-silence.

Killion fills the frame like darkness personified—all hard angles and cold purpose, his solid blacks hugging a body built for efficient violence.

His face betrays nothing, but his eyes flicker over me with that clinical assessment that makes my skin crawl and my pulse quicken. I wish I could explain my physical reaction to the man but it's one of those mysteries that I don't have the time or the patience to unravel.

Maybe that's on purpose.

"R&R is over," he says, voice stripped of emotion. "Get dressed."

I raise an eyebrow, not moving. "Good morning to you too, sunshine. Or is it evening? Hard to tell when you're locked in a concrete box with no windows."

His jaw tightens—that microscopic tell that says I'm pushing too far, too fast. The

fluorescent light catches the small scar bisecting his left eyebrow, highlighting it like a warning sign. "Ten minutes. Briefing room three."

He turns to leave, but hesitates. Something slips in his stance—a barely perceptible softening around the shoulders. "You holding up okay?" The question comes rough, reluctant, like he had to drag it across broken glass to get it out.

The unexpected concern throws me more than any threat could. I sit up, studying him for the angle, the catch, the trap hidden in four simple words.

"Peachy," I reply, voice dripping sarcasm. "Love being quarantined while someone who murdered my last fuck buddy might be gunning for me next. Really brings out my eyes."

He doesn't smile—Killion never smiles—but something almost human flickers across his face. "Volkov's not the type to leave loose ends. If he wanted you dead, you'd be dead already."

"Wow. You're incredible at pep talks. Ever consider a career in grief counseling?"

This time, I swear the corner of his mouth twitches. "Eight minutes," he says, and then he's gone, the door clicking shut behind him with the finality of a judge's gavel.

I drag myself to the shower, letting scalding water pound away the stiffness of captivity. My skin turns angry red under the assault, steam billowing thick enough to obscure the surveillance camera mounted in the corner.

The institutional soap smells like nothing and everything at once—antiseptic and bland, designed to leave no trace scent that could compromise an operative in the field.

My mind races, churning possibilities like a slot machine on speed. Why now? What changed? Is this a new mission, or my execution? The water sluices down my body, carrying away three days of paranoia but none of the underlying dread.

Seven minutes and forty seconds later, I stride into briefing room three like I own the fucking place, hair still damp, dressed in the tactical blacks they provide—pants that hug every curve, a fitted long-sleeve that feels like second skin.

The fabric is some high-tech composite—moisture-wicking, temperature-regulating, subtly armored at vital points. Power move. Never let them see you sweat.

The room's already occupied. Killion stands at the head of the table, arms crossed over his chest, the overhead lighting casting harsh shadows across the planes of his face.

Sienna leans against the wall, sleek as a stiletto, expression unreadable. The scent of her perfume—something expensive with notes of jasmine and gunpowder—cuts through the room's sterile air.

And there's a third—someone I don't recognize. Older guy, silver at his temples, eyes like polished steel behind expensive glasses.

His suit costs more than most people's monthly rent, tailored within an inch of its life to his lean frame. He has the look of someone who orders deaths over breakfast while checking stock portfolios.

"Asset Nova, this is Director Harlow," Killion says, the formal introduction setting my teeth on edge.

Director. Fuck me. Big guns coming out to play.

"S'up?" I nod, keeping my tone neutral while mentally cataloging exits, weapons, variables. Three against one. Bad odds if this goes sideways. "Is this a good meeting or a bad one?"

Killion looked to Harlow as if to say, 'See? I warned you she's a pain in the ass.' To me, he points to a chair. "Sit down."

I decide not to be argumentative and slowly sink into the fine leather chair because frankly, I'm a curious cat. The leather creaks under me, still cool against the backs of my thighs, expensive enough to make me wonder about black budget allocations.

"Impressive first operation," Harlow says, voice smooth as aged whiskey but twice as dangerous. His accent has the faintest trace of old Boston money, vowels stretched just enough to betray an education at schools with Latin mottos and legacy admissions. "Unfortunate complications aside."

Translation: Nice job not dying when your target got his brains painted across a hotel suite.

"Thanks," I reply, deliberately casual. "Always aim to please."

Sienna's eyes flick to mine, a silent warning I can't quite decode. Her fingers tap a subtle rhythm against her thigh—one-two, pause, three—a nervous habit I've never seen from her before.

Something's off. The air in the room feels charged, molecules vibrating with unspoken tension.

Killion taps a tablet, and the wall screen flares to life with a soft electronic hum. Victor Reese's face appears—not the corpse version, but very much alive, smirking from what looks like a charity gala.

The high-definition display shows every pore, every silver hair, every smug line around his mouth. I can almost smell his cologne again, feel his hands on my skin. My body remembers what my brain wants to forget.

Beside Victor, another face materializes: Alexei Volkov, the gray-suit ghost who haunted the bar that night.

The image is grainier, taken from distance with a telephoto lens.

His features are Slavic, hard—cheekbones that could cut diamond, eyes like frozen mud, his hair dark and untamed, the kind of face that's seen too much and caused most of it.

"Victor Reese was moving more than money," Killion states, cutting straight to business. His voice bounces off the room's concrete walls, flat and precise. "He was brokering intelligence—specifically, the identities of deep-cover assets across three continents."

My stomach drops like an elevator with cut cables. The taste of copper floods my mouth as I bite the inside of my cheek. "Assets like... us?"

"Like you," Harlow confirms, studying me like I'm a particularly interesting lab specimen.

His manicured fingernail taps against the polished table surface—once, twice, three times.

"Your extraction was phase one of a larger operation.

We needed confirmation that Reese was the source of the leak.

You provided that. Now we move to phase two. "

I lean forward, adrenaline already humming through my veins like electricity. The chair leather squeaks beneath me, suddenly too hot, too constraining. "Which is?"

"Volkov," Killion says, tapping the screen again. The display splits into multiple windows, each showing a different angle. New images appear—Volkov entering buildings, meeting contacts, always in that same nondescript gray suit.

In one, he checks his watch—the same Omega Seamaster I saw him wearing the night of Reese's murder.

In another, he passes something to a man whose face has been pixelated. "He's the middle-man. Takes the intel, sells it to the highest bidder. Usually hostile state actors with a taste for bloody retribution."

"He saw me with Reese," I point out the obvious. The memory flashes hot and sharp—Volkov's calculated disinterest at the bar, the perfect angle of his body that kept his face partially obscured from security cameras. "He knows my face."

"Precisely," Harlow smiles, the expression never reaching his eyes. They remain flat and calculating behind those designer frames. "That makes you our perfect bait."

The word hangs in the air between us, ugly and exposed. Bait. Not asset. Not operative. Bait. The air conditioning kicks on with a mechanical wheeze, sending a chill across my damp hair.

"You want to dangle me like a worm on a hook," I say flatly, "to catch a shark that specializes in eating people like me."

"To put it crudely, yes," Harlow confirms, unperturbed. He adjusts his French

cuffs—platinum links winking under the fluorescents—with the casual indifference of someone discussing the weather rather than my potential disembowelment.

My eyes find Killion's, searching for... what? Reassurance? Denial? But his face remains impassive, a mask of professional detachment. Only a muscle ticking in his jaw betrays any emotion at all.

"What's the plan?" I ask, because what choice do I have? This isn't a request. It's a briefing. The metallic taste in my mouth intensifies as I swallow my pride along with my fear.

Sienna pushes off the wall, stepping forward.

The soft squeak of her tactical boots against the polished floor punctuates each word.

"We engineer a leak. Word gets out that you have access to the same server information as Reese, but more—the identities of the buyers.

Make Volkov believe you're planning to sell to his competition. "

"We'll plant digital breadcrumbs," Killion adds, calling up another screen that shows lines of code, IP addresses, server locations.

"False communications through channels we know are compromised.

Money transferred to offshore accounts in your new identity's name.

Meeting arrangements at locations we control. "

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"He'll come for you," Killion continues, voice steady. His fingers dance across the tablet, bringing up building schematics—a high-rise apartment in what looks like downtown. "His contact will want confirmation before authorizing a hit."

"So I'm not just bait," I clarify, "I'm a fucking pinata they'll try to crack open before killing." My fingers curl around the armrests, knuckles white with tension I refuse to show on my face.

"That's the general idea," Harlow confirms, untroubled by the concept of my potential dismemberment. "You'll be positioned at this safehouse—nineteenth floor, corner unit. Enough security to look legitimate, but with deliberate vulnerabilities they can exploit."

My laugh comes out harsher than intended, scraping my throat raw. "And how exactly do I avoid the whole torture-and-death finale to this little screenplay?"

"We'll have eyes on you constantly," Killion says. The tablet flickers as he pulls up surveillance specs—thermal imaging, audio monitoring, motion sensors placed at strategic points throughout the building. "Full surveillance, extraction team ready to move the second they make contact."

"Alpha team will be stationed here," he continues, marking a building across the street with a red X. "Bravo team here, in the service corridor. Response time under ninety seconds from breach."

"And if they take me somewhere off-grid? Or if your surveillance fails? Or if the extraction team hits traffic?" The questions fire from my lips like bullets. Outside, a

helicopter passes, its rotors creating a rhythmic thump-thump-thump that matches my accelerating heartbeat. "What then?"

Something shifts in Killion's eyes—a flicker of... what? Concern? Doubt? It's gone before I can name it, buried beneath layers of professional distance.

"You'll have emergency protocols," he says, voice dropping lower. The tablet lights his face from below, casting ghostly shadows across his features. "And you'll have this."

He slides something across the table. A necklace—simple silver chain with a small pendant. Looks like costume jewelry, the kind you'd find in any department store. Up close, I can see the craftsmanship—the clasp reinforced, the links imperceptibly thicker than standard.

"Twist the pendant counterclockwise and pull," Killion instructs.

His fingertips brush mine as he demonstrates, the brief contact sending an electric jolt up my arm.

"It contains a dose of tetrodotoxin derivative.

Not enough to kill, but enough to mimic death for approximately forty minutes.

Slowed heartbeat, minimal respiration. They'll think you've died from their interrogation. "

“Are you kidding me? This is all I get?” I stare at the necklace, mind racing. The pendant feels heavier than it should, warm from Killion's touch. "So instead of being tortured to death, I get to play dead and hope they don't decide to chop me into pieces just to be sure?"

"It buys time," Sienna says quietly. For the first time, I notice the similar pendant around her neck—different design, same purpose. Her fingers touch it unconsciously, a gesture that speaks volumes about past missions, past close calls. "Sometimes that's all we have."

"When?" I ask, fingers closing around the pendant. The metal edges dig into my palm, grounding me in the reality of what's coming.

"Tomorrow night," Harlow answers, already standing, his chair rolling back with a soft hiss against the polished floor.

He checks his watch—Patek Philippe, hand-wound, probably worth more than most people make in a year.

"Sienna will handle your prep. Killion will run point on the operation. Good luck."

He leaves without another word, the door whisking shut behind him. The room feels different with him gone—less sterile, more charged with something I can't quite name. The scent of his cologne lingers—something with notes of cedar and privilege.

Sienna follows, pausing at the door to give me a look I can't fully interpret—warning? Sympathy? Assessment? Her fingertips tap that same rhythm against the doorframe—one-two, pause, three. But then she's gone too, leaving me alone with Killion.

We sit in silence for three heartbeats. I can hear the building's ventilation system cycling, the distant hum of generators, the soft electronic whir of the surveillance cameras adjusting their focus.

"This is fucked," I finally say, turning the necklace over in my hands. The pendant catches the light, throwing tiny reflections against the wall like miniature distress

signals.

"Yes," he agrees, surprising me. No justification. No patriotic speech about necessary sacrifices. Just acknowledgment of the obvious. His chair creaks as he leans back, scrutinizing me with those impossible-to-read eyes. "Wasn't my call."

I study him, trying to peel back the layers, find the man beneath the killer. The fluorescents highlight the tiny scars that map his face—one above his eyebrow, another at the corner of his mouth, testament to a life lived in the shadows. "Are you setting me up to die?"

His eyes snap to mine, something dangerous flashing in their depths.

The tablet between us goes dark, plunging half his face into shadow.

"If I wanted you dead, Landry, I'd kill you myself.

Cleanly. Respectfully." The words come low, intense, vibrating with a truth I can't ignore. "I don't outsource my executions."

"How comforting," I mutter, but oddly enough, it is. In this upside-down moral universe I've landed in, Killion's direct approach to murder feels almost ethical. The pendant grows warmer in my palm, as if absorbing my rising body heat.

He leans forward, close enough that I catch his scent—gun oil and something spicy, expensive, with undertones of strong coffee and sleep deprivation. "Listen carefully. This operation is high-risk. The survival rate for bait missions is?"

"Spare me the odds and just tell me what's really going on," I cut him off. "Why am I being sent in as bait."

For a moment, I think he'll shut me down, pull rank, remind me I'm just an asset.

The air between us thickens with tension, with possibilities.

But instead, his voice drops lower, almost a whisper.

His breath fans warm against my cheek as he leans in closer, eyes darting to the corners of the room where surveillance might be watching.

"There are layers here you're not seeing," he says carefully. "Watch your back. Some traps aren't set by the enemy you can see."

The cryptic warning hangs between us, unexpected and sharp as a blade. My throat constricts, a cold sweat breaking out across my back despite the room's carefully controlled temperature.

"So, why tell me this?" I ask, genuinely confused. "Why warn me at all?"

Killion stands, towering over me, all controlled power and lethal grace.

His shadow stretches across the table, across me, like a physical manifestation of his influence.

But his eyes—for just a second—show something almost human.

The overhead light catches the gold flecks in his irises, turning them from cerulean to something complex and layered.

"Because you remind me of someone," he says, words tight with something that might be regret. His knuckles whiten as he grips the back of his chair. "Someone I couldn't save."

I hold his stare, probably the longest I've allowed myself to do so. There's something there, I can't put my finger on what it is and if Killion knows, he sure as hell won't tell me. The man is a locked box unless he chooses to share intel —and he only shares when he has a reason.

“Why Nova?” I ask.

He straightens. “Field names are safer when you're on mission.”

“Yeah, I get that but why'd you pick the name ‘Nova’?”

His gaze narrows. “You don't like the name?”

“No, actually, I do. Feels...right. I'm just curious...why you picked it.”

“Don't read into something that's not there,” he warns, immediately irritated. “It's just a name, Landry.” He moves toward the door, spine straight, shoulders set. His boots make no sound against the floor—the practiced silence of a predator. At the threshold, he pauses, not looking back.

"Get some rest. Tomorrow we make you into perfect bait." The professional mask slides back into place, cold and efficient. The door panel reads his biometrics with a soft blue glow. "And Landry? Don't trust anyone. Not even me."

The door shuts behind him with a click—quiet, deliberate, and damning. The pneumatic seal hisses like a coffin lid locking into place.

“Don't trust anyone?” Really? That's the pep talk?

I'm about to hand over my life to a team of strangers, and my “boss” thinks cryptic doom-posting is helpful.

Figures. Only the government would build a castle out of quicksand and call it secure.

I sit alone in the suddenly too-large room, turning the poison necklace over in my hands.

The metal warms against my skin, the weight of it both promise and threat.

The surveillance cameras whir softly as they adjust to the change in occupancy, red lights blinking like artificial stars in the ceiling corners.

I'm left wondering which is more dangerous—Volkov, the organization I've sworn loyalty to, or the twisted part of me that's actually looking forward to tomorrow. My reflection in the blank screen shows a woman I barely recognize—harder, sharper, a weapon still being honed.

A strange headache pulses behind my eyes as I stare at the pendant. For a fraction of a second, something feels familiar about it—not just as a tool, but as something I should recognize. The feeling passes as quickly as it came, leaving nothing but confusion and that same dull ache.

My skin prickles along my ribcage, like a hundred ants just marched across my butterfly tattoo. I wince and rub the skin to shock my nerve endings into a different sensation.

A normal person would've said, 'Fuck this shit, I'm out' but I'm not normal and I gave up hoping for normal a long time ago.

They're making me bait for a shark, and all I can think is: I've always wanted to go swimming with predators.

The necklace dangles from my fingers, catching the light, winking like a deadly

promise—a tiny lifeline in what's sure to be a sea of blood.

It's a good thing I'm an excellent swimmer.

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The safehouse is a textbook study in controlled vulnerability—expensive enough for a deep-cover operative, secure enough to seem legitimate, but riddled with deliberate weaknesses that practically beg for infiltration.

Nineteenth floor corner unit, views for days, and enough blind spots to make any self-respecting assassin cream their pants.

I prowl the perimeter for the third time, cataloging exits, choke points, and the best places to stash weapons.

The apartment whispers of government budgets—high-end appliances with the warranty stickers still attached, designer furniture no one's ever sat on, and pristine white carpets that have never felt the desecration of actual human habitation.

"Nova, sound check," Killion's voice crackles through my earpiece, the microsonic transmitter vibrating against my skull.

"Receiving," I mutter, adjusting the necklace that might save my life or get me killed, depending on how the night unfolds. The pendant sits heavy against my collarbones, a constant reminder of the thin line between mission and suicide.

"Alpha team in position," he confirms. "Bravo standing by in the service corridor. Surveillance is live."

I glance at the innocuous painting on the wall, knowing there's a thermal camera hidden behind the canvas, watching my heat signature pulse with a combination of adrenaline and something darker, hungrier.

"Copy that," I respond, moving to the floor-to-ceiling windows. Nineteen stories below, the city sprawls like a circuit board, car headlights tracing electrical currents through the veins of downtown. Somewhere out there, Volkov is getting hard just thinking about peeling my skin off in strips.

"Remember," Killion's voice crackles in my ear, tension tightening his usually controlled tone, "when Volkov shows, we let him get close enough to confirm identity, then Alpha team moves. Your job is to stay alive until extraction."

"Yeah, yeah. I'm just the cheese in the mousetrap."

Look pretty, act vulnerable, don't get dead before you nab him.

"I adjust the designer dress they've poured me into—midnight blue silk that costs more than most people's monthly rent, slit high enough to reach my hip holster.

"Though I gotta say, if this is what bait looks like, I should've been fishing years ago."
"

"Focus, Nova," he growls, but there's something beneath the command—concern, maybe, or just professional irritation at my inability to take imminent death seriously. Hard to tell with Killion. The man emotes with all the enthusiasm of a tax auditor on Xanax.

I check my watch—custom Cartier on loan from whatever black-budget wardrobe department outfitted me for this charade.

The face shows 21:37, but a subtle press of the stem reveals the real data: extraction teams' positions, emergency protocols, the countdown until the fake meeting I'm supposedly arranging to sell Volkov's secrets.

"Think he'll bite?" I ask, moving to the wet bar to pour myself two fingers of bourbon. Liquid courage, or maybe just something to steady my hands. The crystal tumbler feels cold and solid, a touchstone in a situation built on smoke and mirrors.

"He'll bite," Killion confirms. "Digital breadcrumbs are too tempting. Money transfers, communication intercepts, hotel arrangements for buyers. Our mole confirmed he accessed the files three hours ago."

I sip the bourbon, letting it burn a path down my throat. "Your confidence is touching."

"Just don't get cocky. Volkov didn't survive two decades in wetwork by being sloppy."

"Pot, kettle," I mutter, but he doesn't respond. Professional to the bitter end.

The waiting is the worst part. Each minute stretches like taffy, sticky and endless.

I circle the apartment again, restless energy burning through my veins like cheap vodka.

Something doesn't feel right—a whisper of wrongness I can't quite place, like catching movement in your peripheral vision that vanishes when you turn your head.

The bourbon glass is empty again, though I don't remember draining it. I set it down carefully, watching my reflection distort in the crystal—elongated, fragmented, a funhouse mirror version of whoever the fuck I'm becoming.

22:14. Nothing.

22:47. Still nothing.

My nerves are strung tighter than a junkie three days into withdrawal. The silence in the apartment feels loaded, dangerous, like the moment before lightning strikes.

"Status check," I whisper, needing to hear a human voice before I crawl out of my skin.

Nothing.

"Killion? Alpha team? Someone better fucking answer."

Silence.

Ice slithers down my spine. I move to the window, trying to spot the building where Alpha team should be positioned. The scope glint of a sniper rifle should be visible, a reassurance that I'm not alone in this.

Nothing but darkness.

"Comms are down," I say to the empty air, already moving toward the weapons cache concealed in the kitchen island. "Going to backup protocol."

The hidden panel slides open with a soft click, revealing the compact SIG Sauer and extra magazines I'd stashed earlier. I check the chambered round out of habit, though I know it's loaded. The weight feels good in my hand, solid and certain in a situation rapidly deteriorating into chaos.

That's when I hear it—the soft snick of the service door lock disengaging.

Too soon. Too fucking soon.

This isn't a surveillance operation anymore. It's a breach.

I kill the lights with a sweep of my hand across the wall panel, plunging the apartment into darkness broken only by the city glow filtering through the windows. The darkness is a friend, a lover, wrapping around me as I slide behind the kitchen island, gun ready, breath controlled to near silence.

The door opens with a whisper of well-oiled hinges. Someone's disabled the security alert that should have triggered. Someone who knows the system. Someone who had access.

Two figures slip in—shadows within shadows, moving with the predatory grace of professionals.

Their silhouettes are bulkier than standard—body armor under tactical blacks, night vision goggles giving them alien, insectoid profiles.

The first carries a suppressed MP5, the second what looks like a specialized breaching shotgun.

Not a kill team. An extraction team.

They're here to take me, not eliminate me. Volkov wants his answers fresh from the source.

"Clear," the first one whispers, the word barely a breath.

"Motion sensors show target in primary bedroom," the second responds, jerking his chin toward the far hall.

They think I'm asleep. They're in for a rude awakening.

I ease the safety off, calculating angles, timing, risk factors. Two against one, but

they don't know I'm ready. Surprise is my only advantage, and it won't last long.

A third shadow slips in—taller, leaner, moving with an elegant economy that screams higher-level threat. Something about the silhouette tickles my memory, a nagging sense of recognition.

"Check the bedroom," the newcomer orders softly. "I'll secure the main area. Remember, we need her alive and relatively undamaged."

That voice. I know that voice.

The two operatives move toward the bedroom, weapons ready, while the third begins a methodical sweep of the living area. I track their movements, heart hammering against my ribs so hard I'm certain they must hear it.

The third operative passes the kitchen island, close enough I can smell the expensive cologne beneath the tactical gear. Close enough to see his profile in the dim city light filtering through the windows.

I know that profile.

Director Harlow.

The fucking Director is here, with Volkov's extraction team. What the fuck?

The realization hits like a shotgun blast to the chest. The whole operation is compromised. There's no Alpha team watching my back. No Bravo team in the service corridor. The surveillance is probably looping false footage while I'm being served up like a prime cut at a butcher's counter.

Killion's warning echoes in my head: "Don't trust anyone. Not even me."

But he hadn't said a goddamn thing about not trusting the Director of the entire fucking operation.

I have seconds to decide—fight now and die trying, or wait for a better opening. The decision crystallizes as Harlow moves past, his back to me for one precious moment.

I strike.

The bourbon glass makes a satisfying crack as it connects with the base of his skull. Not hard enough to kill—I need answers before I start eliminating problems—but enough to stun. He folds like a busted lawn chair, a grunt slipping out as he hits the hardwood.

Shit, did I just kill the Director?

Harlow groans and I release a sigh of relief even though the fucker looks guilty as hell showing up with Volkov's team to kidnap me.

The noise, subtle as it is, draws the attention of the other two. They pivot, weapons raised, night vision scanning for the threat.

I don't give them time to find their boss.

I launch from behind the island, firing two shots in rapid succession.

The first catches Operative One in the throat, just above his body armor.

He drops, gurgling, the MP5 clattering to the floor.

The second shot goes wide as Operative Two returns fire, forcing me to dive behind the sofa as rounds stitch a pattern in the wall where I'd been standing.

“Stand down you little cunt or I’ll take out your kneecaps,” Operative Two barks, scanning the area, waiting for me to emerge.

Oh yeah? Eat lead, fucker.

I pop up from behind the sofa, squeeze off three rounds. One catches him in the shoulder, spinning him halfway around. He recovers fast, too fast, bringing the shotgun to bear.

The blast catches the sofa, shredding the designer fabric and sending splinters of frame into my leg. Pain explodes like white fire, but I roll with it, using the momentum to slide behind the heavy dining table, flipping it for cover.

Two rounds left in the magazine. Make them count.

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He's moving carefully now, flanking, trying to get a clear shot. I can hear his breathing—controlled but heavier than before. The shoulder wound is slowing him down.

There's a moment of silence, the kind that stretches between heartbeats, between life and death.

Then everything happens at once.

The operative lunges into view, shotgun braced against his good shoulder. I fire my remaining rounds, aiming center mass where the armor is strongest—not to penetrate, but to stagger.

It works. He stumbles back, the impact forcing him to recoil just enough that his shot goes high, decimating the chandelier above. Crystal rains down like deadly confetti.

I'm on him before he can recover, using the empty gun as a bludgeon against his wounded shoulder. He howls, dropping to one knee, and I follow through with a palm strike to his throat that crushes his trachea.

He collapses, hands clutching his neck as he struggles for air that won't come. I retrieve his shotgun, putting a final round into his skull as mercy—or maybe just to make sure. The blast is deafening in the enclosed space, but silencers are a luxury I can't afford right now.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," I pant, adrenaline making my voice shake as I systematically strip ammunition and a backup pistol from the corpse. Pain pulses through my leg where

the wood splinters penetrated, but nothing arterial. I can still move, still fight.

I turn to where Harlow fell, ready to secure him for interrogation.

He's gone.

Fresh blood glistens on the floor—he's wounded, but mobile. Dangerous.

A noise from the bedroom galvanizes me into motion. More operatives? Or Harlow, looking for cover? Either way, I'm out of time and options.

The window. Nineteenth floor is suicide, but there's?—

The thought dies as the apartment door explodes inward, the concussive force of a breaching charge sending me sprawling. My head cracks against the edge of the overturned table, stars bursting across my vision.

Through the ringing in my ears, I hear boots on hardwood. Multiple hostiles. Professional entry pattern.

I raise the shotgun, determined to take as many with me as I can, when a familiar voice cuts through the chaos.

"NOVA, STAND DOWN!"

Killion.

He materializes from the smoke like an avenging demon, gear making his already imposing frame massive in the doorway. Behind him, a full team sweeps in, securing the apartment with ruthless efficiency.

"Director's compromised," I gasp, blood from a scalp wound trickling into my eye.

"He was here with Volkov's team. He?—"

"We know," Killion cuts me off, kneeling beside me, his hands already checking for serious injuries. His touch is clinical but not rough, cataloging damage with practiced precision. "Sienna intercepted communications an hour ago. The entire operation was a setup."

"You knew?" I grab his wrist, fury cutting through the pain. "You fucking knew and you sent me in anyway?"

Something flashes in his eyes—regret? Guilt? It's gone before I can be sure. "We suspected. We needed confirmation."

"So I really was bait," I laugh, the sound edged with hysteria. "Just not for who I thought."

"Harlow's been working with Volkov for months," Killion explains, helping me to my feet. My leg protests, but holds. "Selling our people, our operations. When you exposed Reese, they needed to clean house. You were the perfect scapegoat."

"Where's the real Alpha team? The backup?"

"There wasn't one," he admits, voice tight. "Just me and Sienna. We couldn't risk anyone else. Not until we knew who was compromised."

The betrayal tastes like copper and gunpowder on my tongue. "You risked my life on a fucking hunch?"

"I risked your life on your skills," he corrects, checking the shotgun I'm still clutching like a lifeline. "You held your own. Two trained operatives down, the Director on the run. Not bad for a rookie."

Before I can decide whether to thank him or shoot him, Sienna appears in the doorway, face grim.

"Harlow's gone," she reports. "Took an emergency evac route we didn't know existed. Left a blood trail to the garage level, then nothing."

"Yeah, I cracked the shit out of his head with whiskey snifter," I said. "He's probably bleeding like a stuck hog."

"He'll go to ground," Killion says, already moving toward the exit, pulling me with him. "Contact all handlers, full blackout protocols. Everyone's compromised until proven otherwise."

"What about me?" I ask, limping beside him, acutely aware of the bodies cooling on the apartment floor. "Am I compromised too?"

Killion's eyes meet mine, something almost like respect glimmering in their depths. "No. You're the only one we're sure of."

"How can you be so certain?"

His laugh is sharp, humorless. "Because Harlow tried to have you killed. In our business, there's no better character reference."

As we exit the death scene that was supposed to be a simple observation post, I realize the game has changed entirely. I'm no longer just an asset, a weapon to be aimed and fired. I'm a player now, with skin in the game and blood on my hands.

The poison necklace still hangs around my throat, the pendant warm against my skin. I didn't need it tonight, but the night's not over. Harlow's out there. Volkov's out there. And now there's really no hiding the target on my back. Fan-fucking-tastic.

"What happens now?" I ask as we enter the service elevator, the doors closing on the carnage behind us.

Killion checks his weapon, eyes cold with purpose. "Now we hunt."

And God help me, despite everything—the betrayal, the lies, the blood soaking into my designer dress—I feel that familiar electric thrill racing through my veins. The one that's always gotten me into trouble. The one that might finally get me killed.

Because Killion's right. Now we hunt.

And I've never felt more alive than when I'm dancing with death.

Has Landry survived the trap only to walk into an even deadlier game? As the Dollhouse crumbles and allegiances shift, one thing becomes clear: in this shadow war, the most dangerous weapon isn't the one you face—it's the one you trained yourself.

Outside, the city sleeps, unaware of the war about to erupt in its shadows. Harlow. Volkov. Their entire network of traitors and killers.

They think they've won. They think we're finished.

They have no idea what's coming for them.

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