

## One

Gamer paced the boundary where night's cloaking darkness met a halo of eye watering bright light cast by a trio of high intensity security lamps. He was impatient to cross the courtyard, was eager to reach his target and get the job done.

“Security detail at three o'clock. Two men and a dog. Maintain your position. Repeat, no go.” The male voice whispered in his ear via the com link.

Dressed from head to foot in black, if Gamer took one more step he'd be exposed. Because stealth, not exposure, was the criteria for an assassin, Gamer waited for the detail to pass. Still, the waiting rankled. His objective lay just beyond this courtyard lit up in noon day brilliance and the clock was ticking.

The men moved past Gamer's location. The dog, a Belgian Malinois, had its nose up snuffling the moist, warm air. It paused, curved toward Gamer's hiding place, a low growl thrumming in the night. The men stopped, turning in the direction the dog faced now barking furiously and tugging on the leash.

Tensing, Gamer stepped back, his hands brushing along the rough tree trunk. Suddenly, a *pop* sounded closer to the big

house and the dog twirled to face it, straining against the leash. The radio crackled and the men jogged off.

“Hold your position,” the voice growled in his ear.

Gamer, his face painted in hues of black and gray, shifted right then left like a predator searching for prey.

Satisfied, he moved forward in spite of the protests coming from his com link. “You either get the job done or get done, DM,” he said before switching the link back to team channel. And then he was gone, oozing over the cobblestones like an oil slick over white sand in the noon day sun.

Cursing under his breath, DM watched Gamer and waited for the sound of gun fire, or at least the sound of pursuit. He was forever taking stupid risks, but that was Gamer—always parsing the odds, always pushing his luck. DM’s lips split into a snarl. That would be fine except for the fact the damn fool was pushing *both* their luck tonight, having hijacked DM’s. Now both their necks were at risk.

He had to admit he was impressed by the man’s audacity. He’d even admit to a twinge of envy at Gamer’s carefree attitude. However, luck was the last thing DM would put his faith in. He trusted his training. Trusted having the right equipment for the job. He trusted his uptight, neurotic, mile-long list that he ticked off, point by painstaking point. Gamer called him the Department’s prissy OCD grandmother. What the fuck did he care. He was still vertical, many weren’t.

DM's scowl deepened as a small, gray-garbed figure darted across the space in a smooth, cautious, determined way that signified pursuit. Son of a bitch. Gamer was right. He *was* being followed.

Gamer had come to DM asking a favor, claiming he'd been shadowed on his last two jobs. DM told him he needed to stay off the bath salts. Gamer was not only a risk taker, he was an inventive story teller with a lively imagination. One sure way to know if Gamer was lying was if his lips were moving.

He insisted he wasn't bullshitting, that he'd been tailed. DM told him to tell it to the Chief. After that, Gamer had gone quiet. His face solemn, he said he wasn't going to the Chief until he had concrete proof. Besides, he said, DM owed him and he was calling in the favor. The man had a point.

Certain Gamer was being a neurotic douche, DM agreed to tag along thinking he'd pay off his debt and have enough locker room ammunition to last for months, maybe years. Okay, so, he'd been wrong.

DM set his jaw, his mind spinning through the names of possible enemy agencies and agents. He went down the list, but nothing stuck. He couldn't come up with anyone with big enough balls to tail a Department operator on the hunt, but satisfied himself with knowing that all questions would be answered when he caught up with Gamer's tail.

Cursing softly, DM began his own pursuit. Instead of taking Gamer's insane suicidal route, he followed the tree laden perimeter where there was cover. Reaching an area with a natural blind spot, he sprinted across the manicured lawn, the skirt of his black duster flapping behind him. He ducked round the pool house, avoiding a pair of guards with flashlights, their handhelds crackling and popping, and watched as Gamer slunk up the hill to disappear along the side of the mansion.

DM waited a beat, smiling as Gamer's pursuer took a circuitous route through a miniature shrubbery maze, then skirted a row of rose bushes, stopping shy of the house Gamer had entered.

"Gotcha'," he whispered.

DM burst from cover. His long legs eating the distance in Olympic qualifying time, he looped around to hover, his muscles strung as tight as an E-string, behind the slight figure. The gray bodysuit was tight, obscenely so, showing off curves that were definitely not masculine. The slow smile became a grin.

So, they had themselves a female shadow. Why wasn't he surprised? Gamer got his handle from various traits, one of which was his penchant to game the ladies.

DM studied the round ass, the curve of breast and narrow waist. The stalker wasn't anyone in the Department. He could put a name to every female hunter at a glance. This ass he didn't

recognize, but she was definitely a hunter. No civilian had the chops to tail a Department hitman and go undetected. Wait. His bad, she hadn't had she?

Her shoulders tensed, and DM shifted his attention to watch as Gamer made his move. The light above the French doors suddenly went out. Not ten seconds later, the female glided along the side of the house, one gloved hand trailing the white brick.

DM was fluent in body language so when she tightened, and reached for the handgun at her hip he grabbed her, spun her about, and slammed her against the trunk of an ancient live oak tree.

Other than a slight, "Oof—!" she made no sound. Yeah, she was a pro. She also exhibited some training in hand-to-hand, but not enough. He had her disabled with her hands clasped above her head in one fist and his other wrapped around her throat in three moves. It wasn't his fault she was so much smaller than him. The Assassin's game didn't promise an even playing field. There was no hitman equal rights amendment. Bigger and faster was an advantage that took out smaller and slower every time. Period.

DM kicked her feet apart, shoving his hips between her spread thighs preventing any damage she could cause with her feet. She bucked against him, her hips arcing and raking. DM felt himself go hard.

“Be still,” he growled, his hand tightening on the woman’s tiny wrists. They were as delicate as a humming bird’s wing bones.

She glared up at him, golden eyes sparkling with unshed tears through the eye holes of her gray knit mask. She bit her lips. They were intriguing. A full bottom lip that pouted and begged for kisses.

With his chest pressed tight against hers, her scent wafted around them, a combination of soap and wild cherry. It was a familiar scent. His eyes searched hers, watched her pupils dilate. With fear? He inhaled again and wild cherry exploded inside his head. Suddenly, he released her throat and pulled the mask from her head, hissing as memories of this woman naked in his arms crashed over him.

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DM leaned against the bar, a tumbler of Southern Comfort in his fist and a cigar clenched between his teeth, listening to his friend, Ethan Dusk, growl into the microphone while his band committed assault and battery with guitars and a drum set.

She walked through the door, was carded by Tiny the enormous bouncer slash doorman before stepping in time with the throbbing bass beat through the crowd.

Miles of bare legs disappeared beneath the tiny denim skirt cupping her heart shaped ass. Her narrow waist was exposed thanks to a black tee cut down to the middle of her rib cage. The sugar skull design picked out in tiny rhinestones gave her a Screamo-wannabe look. Her hair, a brown so dark it could pass for black and cut in chopped layers that brushed her smooth shoulders, bounced with every step she took on her black, peep-toe, lace up ankle booties. With her sexy, naughty Madonna attitude, there wasn't a limp dick in the joint. Including his.

DM watched as hard leg number one, a big, blond biker dressed in his club's colors and jeans, his bare chest and arms covered in ink, grabbed her arm. She paused a second, covered the man's hand with her much smaller one, and with a smile pulled free and moved on. He was replaced by hard leg number two. The thin, dark haired goth dressed in black with black painted nails and eyes rimmed in kohl stepped before her and gave her a courtly bow. She returned a mock curtsy and spun past him strutting straight to the bar. Where DM stood.

Her hands grabbed the bar as she called for a Piece of Ass making the rest of the hard legs stand at attention and Speck, the bartender, grin. She turned to DM looking up. And up. "You're a tall one, aren't you?" She said with a smile. The dimple in her right cheek made him want to lick it.

Fast forward through the preliminary bull shit to where DM pulled her to his room above the club and tossed her onto the

bed. She laughed, a throaty chuckle that made him throb with need.

He followed her down, devouring her mouth, nibbling her sexy bottom lip, before tonguing the intriguing dent that appeared with the slightest curve of her lips. She groaned in response, her small tongue stroking, her teeth raking his lips. He thrust his hips against her, wanting to get closer. Wanting to get the goddam clothes out of his way.

He ran his mouth down her neck, inhaling the clean scent of her skin, the wild cherry fragrance that wafted up from her hair. He plowed his hands through the midnight silken tresses then, threading his fingers through hers, he lifted her hands above her head. Her breasts surged forward, pink nipples kernelled in anticipation. Suckling first one then the other, he heard her low moan.

“You like that, baby?”

She whipped her head back and forth when he took turns biting and sucking her taut tips. He moved lower to tongue her navel causing her to shiver when he nipped at her waist.

“Please,” she whispered, her voice husky.

“Patience,” he said. “These things can’t be rushed.”

“Ooo, you’re cruel,” she groaned.

Releasing her wrists, he moved lower still, until he cradled her hips, lifting them, easing his access. He parted her thighs, kissing his way up one satiny leg, bunching the barely-there skirt up to her waist and chuckled.

He'd guessed right. There was no thong to shove aside, no lacy panties to get in his way. Fact of the matter was there was nothing under her skirt. Just the way he liked it. His member throbbed as he ran his tongue over her bare sex, parting the seam with his mouth first then with his fingers, revealing the tiny bud.

“God, yes...please...”

He'd planned on drawing out the torture, making it all the more intense, but at her throaty cry he fell on her, devouring her, loving the salty taste of her flesh, her arousal. He pierced her with one thick finger, and she stiffened.

“Easy, baby,” he said softly, blowing across her slick flesh before continuing the gentle attack.

In seconds, her legs lay open and she sobbed, “Don't stop...God! Don't stop...I'll kill you if you stop.”

He didn't tell her she would have had to kill him to make him stop. He couldn't. Running his teeth lightly over her sensitive bud then flicking it with his tongue, he feasted on her. She was perfection, with a thin line of curls running down her mons and her slender thighs open for him. Her head rocked from side to side as he brought her nearer, ever nearer to the precipice. When

he slid the second finger inside her tight sheath, he felt her stiffen, felt her fingers grip his head, holding it just so. He was happy to oblige. When she cried out her release, he tasted her climax and continued his gentle assault, lapping up her unique, clean taste until her tremors abated.

“What’s your name?” he asked, kissing the inside of one thigh then the other.

She smiled, cocked her head and countered, “Who are *you*?”

Without a second thought DM replied, “Your future.”

Goddam, why had he said that?

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The soft cough of Gamer’s gun as he double-tapped the target finalizing the contract, an octogenarian with a paunch and bald head, brought DM out of his stupor.

“Did you catch my shadow?” Gamer’s voice sounded in his ear.

DM’s gaze tangled with the woman’s. Watching a single dark eyebrow lift in question, he scowled in response. He was torn, and furious that he found himself torn. He shouldn’t feel conflicted. Hell, he should turn her ass over to the Medic, whoever the fuck she was.

“Dark Man—?” Gamer hissed.

“Dark Man?” she gasped.

His scowl deepened. DM’s exploits had become an urban legend in the small world of assassins and hitmen. Hell, they’d been embellished to the point you’d think he could frickin’ sprout wings and fly while shooting laser beams from his eyes.

She attempted to slide from his loosened grip. Automatically, he tightened it, crushing her to him. She exhaled, then went slack as though saying, *Do what you want*.

“Dark Man—?”

DM’s jaw flexed once, twice.

“No,” he answered, eyeing her. “Your shadow got away.” He inexplicably loosed his grip, freeing the woman and stepped back. He was setting her free. Why?

She reached up on her tip toes and pressed her lips to DM’s, running her tongue lightly over his bottom lip. Then she stepped back and disappeared into the night.