

~PROLOGUE~

Wilmington, Vermont~ The Present

“I hear they’ve got good schools here, Patch. That what drew you to it?” The amusement in Harris Van Deer’s chuckle, didn’t reach the rather blank look in his unremarkable brown eyes.

“Hell man,” Van Deer continued to probe, “what’s it like to live in a place with less than two-thousand people?”

By then, Patroclus Kostas had answered enough of Van Deer’s seemingly innocuous queries to know that to answer this one would result in the same brutalities his earlier responses had brought on. Renewed dread, along with inward relief flooded Patroclus’ wiry build when he heard Harris Van Deer’s voice again.

“You will die, Patch,” Van Deer’s tone then was an unassuming one, “Now I can give you the option of dying quick and painless,” he gestured to his colleague Brody Alberts, who wagged a syringe filled with an ominous looking pale green substance.

“Or slow and violently,” Van Deer raised his wide hands, curving his fingers in just slightly as though he were gripping a football.

Patroclus heard the firm, distinctive pop of cracking knuckles.

“We know you and your crew were responsible for the jobs on the old men,” Van Deer continued. “It’s too bad the old guys changed their plans at the last minute. *Still*, you and your men should’ve waited to make sure everyone who *was* there was dead. That fuck-up made it easy to find and pin down everyone responsible for this little coup. You guys did a good job of layin’ low, though. Guess you figured after six years it was safe to come out of your holes. You figured wrong. Now, we know you didn’t have the smarts to think this up, Patch,” Van Deer’s voice adopted a quiet, compassionate tone that would’ve been believable were it not for the malice lurking in his lifeless eyes.

“We’re hoping you’ll be smarter than the rest of your guys and give up whoever you’ve been stupid enough to protect all these years,” Van Deer chuckled again. “If your guys had lived to tell you about it, they’d advise you not to play us for fools any longer.”

At Patch’s surprised look,” Van Deer grinned wildly. “Oh yes, whatever you’re imagining we’ve done to them was a hundred times worse. I gotta tell you though, ‘ol Corky was especially remorseful when we paid a visit to him and his wife.”

Patroclus tried to swallow and failed. With great effort, he fought to get words around the lump in his throat. "They had kids." From across the room, he heard Grant Zubin's chilly rumble of a laugh.

"Yeah, they did." Zubin brushed a thumb over the gleaming, beaked blade of a bowing knife.

"Cork was mighty helpful," Van Deer went on even as his wild grin defined. "He's how we found you. And his wife," Van Deer released a low whistle, "boy could she beg. We had a good time together. After a while, I wasn't sure if she was pleading for us to go easy on her brats or for me to give her more of what she was getting from my dick."

Patroclus heard the room explode with laughter. The loudest came from Van Deer and Zubin. He swallowed then and relieved himself of the need to vomit by leaning on his anger. "Sons of cunts!" He snarled. "Do whatever the fuck you came to do. I'm the last, so you better make it goddamn good."

"Oh you aren't the last, Patch," Van Deer wasn't grinning then. "You aren't the last by a longshot. Your part- buttfucked as it was- was not the endgame. Which; judging from the fact that our organization has spent the last six years trying to recover from it, tells us that the main objective was royally accomplished."

"Was it Mercuri?" Van Deer's smile returned and was softer. He'd caught the barest flicker in Patroclus' dark eyes. "It was, wasn't it? Damn that son of a bitch- too smart for his own good." Van Deer spoke as if to himself, but soon brought his attention back to his quarry.

"You'll admit it to me, Patch. Before it's all over, you'll admit it to me that it was him." Van Deer leaned in closer. "I've got unfinished business with those cocksuckers, Patch. So does everybody in this room. Did you think we'd just let that go? That we'd have *ever* let it go?"

Patroclus had no interest in the conversation. He was, however, intrigued by Harris Van Deer's momentary lapse in judgement. He took advantage of the proximity of the man's face to his and executed a punishing head-butt. Given the level of abuse he'd already suffered at the hands of the men in the room, he expected the move to have him blacking out at any moment. It was worth it, he thought, worth it to see Harris Van Deer stagger back and bring both hands to his nose gushing blood.

The other four men had surged to their feet. Beefy hands all curled in unison and sent a chorus of crunching knuckles flooding through the soft lit cherrywood paneled study.

Patroclus readied himself for final brutalities. Van Deer's blood red fingers shook and the ferocity of his roar was as savage as the look in the eyes that bulged manically from his bald head.

The imminence of his life ending, did not fill Patroclus with dread or even panic for that matter. Instead, he took solace in the beauty of his surroundings, knowing that he would never give up the four men who had made that possible.

Patroclus knew someone would talk. In a group the size of the one their famed mission had required, there was bound to be someone who would break. Oh yes, he thought, someone would inevitably let some piece of damning info slip and lead this savage crew to the four who had orchestrated their freedom. It wouldn't be him, goddammit! It wouldn't be him.

Cleaving desperately to flailing courage, Patroclus' face contorted into a mask of deep-seated hate. "Come on you motherfuckers. Come on!" Closing his eyes, Patroclus offered a final prayer that he not be the one to break.

PART I

Never make a major decision based solely on money
-Chuck Noll

~CHAPTER 1~

Las Vegas, Nevada~ 6 years ago

“Those bangin’ heels are gonna wear a groove in this expensive carpet, Tee and I’d say we’ve got enough expenses we can’t cover without you adding more to the list.”

Her friend’s valid warning, didn’t encourage Etienne Shaw to cease her pacing across the large penthouse living room. “We should’ve never taken that money,” she said.

“Well Tee,” LuCarolyn Young pushed out of a deep purple velvet sofa. She stalked across the overdone room in silver ice pick heels that added six inches to her own 5’10. “Maybe if it wasn’t for the string of hard luck situations we’ve found ourselves in over the years, without any rich relatives or hell... caring parents to give us a hand, we may’ve done the right thing and turned it down.”

“Shit Lu, Tee’s right,” Berrill Clayton resisted pacing, but chewed her thumbnail something fierce. “We should’ve run the other way when Dorinda came to us with this.”

“What do you think it means that these guys only wanted black girls?” Etienne asked, distinct dread wedged in alongside her nerves.

“Maybe we should just leave,” Prin Holland hadn’t set down her purse or wrap since she and her friends had arrived in the high roller’s suite. “Those guys who brought us here said to just call them-”

“When we’d done what we came here to do,” LuCarolyn finished and then rolled her eyes and whispered an obscenity, “They’re not our personal drivers, *Princess*.”

“Don’t call me that,” Prin bristled.

“Yes Lu, don’t.” Berrill cautioned with a firm wave. “We don’t need these clowns knowing our real names. Look guys, just do the job and get it over with. No one here is a virgin. Just moan and bear it- maybe they’ll be halfway decent fucks.”

“Jesus, Bear,” Prin groaned.

“What’s wrong with you?” Etienne snapped.

Berrill put her wave in motion again. “It’s called psyching myself up. Best I can do since I didn’t think to get pissy drunk before we came here.”

A panel opened in the rear of the room. A tall, uniformed man emerged pushing a serving cart filled with an array of pitchers, decanters and glasses.

Berrill sent a skeptical look around the room. “God please don’t let them be bugging us,” she whispered.

“Refreshments, ladies?” The server lifted one of the decanters.

Berrill stalked over to the well-stocked tray. “Hell yes,” she took a champagne flute when the waiter offered. “We’ll help ourselves if that’s okay?”

The waiter bowed formally. “As you wish,” he left the room as discretely as he’d arrived.

Berrill sniffed at one of the pitchers. “We’ve got martinis here, ladies. Drink up.”

LuCarolyn went to indulge. Etienne and Prin hesitated.

“You two can’t psyche yourselves up for shit,” Berrill chided, “Do you really want to go into this thing totally sober?”

The taunt did the trick. Soon, all four women were gathered around the cart where they eagerly and heavily imbibed.

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It wasn’t enough, Tee thought as she lay there so much later. She would’ve needed every ounce of alcohol on that cart to deaden her to the events of such a depraved evening.

Sex for money. It was a line she never thought she’d cross. She’d not only crossed it, she’d kicked, stomped on and all but broke it in half that night. They’d have surely left, money be damned if they’d known what was in store. The ten men who had joined them 20 minutes after their visit from the server, had definitely learned how to share. They’d passed her and her friends around like they were mints, keeping them in separate rooms across the penthouse.

Tee could’ve sworn she’d heard screams- and not of the pleased variety. Of course, her... partners didn’t offer a break time for an investigation into the source of the cries. They had more in store for her, Tee discovered.

Now, as laborious snores assaulted her ears, she seized her opportunity and went to check on her friends- check on them and get them all the hell out of there. She didn’t stop to grab clothes. She didn’t know where they were anyway. Besides, she never wanted to see those clothes again.

Tee left her snoring suitors behind. Her dark eyes settled on something gleaming from beneath a pair of trousers discarded near the back corner of an armchair. She veered off from her trek to the door and discovered that the gleam was from a curved knife blade with a grizzly looking wooden handle.

She cast a sideways glance toward the bed and then took the weapon in a surprisingly sure grip. Hefting it slightly, she smiled in grim approval of the weight. She half turned toward the snoring pigs behind her wondering if the weapon might play a part in the next round of sex once the men woke from their slumbers.

Flexing her fingers around the knife handle, she let the blade capture light from a candle burning low on a black lacquer shelf and considered... Later, she promised. She had to find the others. Stealthily, she crept toward the hall. There, her steps took her back to the living room where the night had started.

Tee stood in the middle of the over-furnished room for half a minute, when movement caught her eye on a wide futon laid flat. She swallowed down the need to vomit, hoping she’d not walked in on more sex. Relief seized her when she saw LuCarolyn’s silhouette in the gleam of moonlight and Las Vegas beyond the room’s immense window wall.

LuCarolyn shrieked when Tee touched her arm.

“Shh! Shh! It’s okay, it’s me- it’s Tee.”

“Mmm,” LuCarolyn pressed her lips together and appeared faint. “I have to throw up.”

“Me too, honey, but I’m gonna need you to swallow it.” She applied brisk rubs to LuCarolyn’s arms and squeezed. “We have to find Bear and Prin first, okay?”

LuCarolyn was nodding. “Right, right. Bear and Prin,” she started to stand. “My clothes.”

“Come on, honey,” Tee urged her friend to stand. “There were robes in a closet in the room where they kept me. Let’s go.”

“What’d they do to you, Tee?”

Tee winced as her nausea returned. “Things I’ll spend the rest of my life trying to forget.”

LuCarolyn frowned curiously and glanced back across her shoulder toward the living room. Then, she caught up to Tee who was already retracing her steps through the penthouse.

Together, the women made their way through the dimly lit dwelling. They found Berrill in a second bedroom. She was in the adjoining bathroom heaving into a toilet.

LuCarolyn took in the sight with a look that hinted of longing. "That looks good."

"Later Lu," Tee murmured on her way past to kneel next to Berrill. "Bear? Honey? Let's go. Sweetie, we need to find Prin."

Berrill appeared in no state to leave her perch near the commode. Her blood-shot eyes glistened with fresh tears the moment she looked up at Tee.

"Shh honey, shh..." Tee urged the soother into Berrill's hair. "Later, sweetie. We don't have time for this now." Hastily, Tee finger combed strands of her friend's long hair. She put a hard kiss to Berrill's forehead, consistently squeezing her arm to encourage her to stand.

LuCarolyn came over to help, urging Berrill along with soft words to motivate.

"My clothes..." Berrill murmured as the three of them left the room in the buff.

"We'll take care of it, Bear." Tee soothed, "first we need to get Prin."

Berrill blinked as though the news had suddenly put her on alert. Nodding once, she quickened her pace along the hallway.

The heavy carpeting that spanned the penthouse, muffled any sound of shuffling bare feet. The women broke into a sprint toward a set of closed double doors at the end of the hall.

Tee brought a finger to her mouth to order silence. There wasn't much noise from her friends, only the occasional snuffle or shudder of breath. Still, the minor sounds were too much as Tee wanted to listen through the door. She didn't need long to decipher the sounds. She would've preferred the occasional snuffle or shudder of breath over the tell-tale curses and grunts she picked up on instead.

"One of them's up," she said.

"Filth," Berrill muttered, needing no further detail to understand what Tee was hearing through the door.

Tee raised her hand once more for quiet and then began to twist the door's gleaming chrome handle. A lurid curse snaked its way silently inside her head when she stepped inside the room.

One of the ten Tee and her friends had gotten so intimately acquainted with that night, was still vigorously enjoying the evening's activities. The man appeared happily imprisoned in ecstasy's clutches as he claimed Prin from behind.

Tee saw her friend...appropriately positioned. Her cheek lay flat against the pillows, her light honey-toned skin appeared ashen. Her eyes were lifeless orbs of cornflower blue.

LuCarolyn reached out when she saw Tee stalking boldly forward. Her hand only grasped air.

Tee's steps quickly brought her alongside the bed. Coolly, and without a shred of hesitation, she brought the serrated blade to the man's jugular. "I'd ease all the way up if I were you."

"The fuck-?" The foul query rushed out on a choked grunt.

"I think you got your money's worth," Tee breathed, "get off her."

Across the room; illuminated by rose blush lighting from mini chandeliers, LuCarolyn and Berrill traded troubled looks.

Berrill took a scan of the room and noticed the butt of a handgun protruding from a holster slung across the top corner of an embroidered red velvet arm chair. Closing the distance to the chair, she worked awkwardly for a moment to free the weapon. Soon enough, she was gripping it securely.

Tee's order to her stunned quarry, carried on a distorted chord, LuCarolyn thought. She watched her tiny friend standing there nude, her breasts crushed against the back of a man whose throat she held a knife to. She had the look of an enraged, dark hellion eager to lay waste to her prey, LuCarolyn decided.

The comparison of such a destructive force to one as diminutive as Etienne Shaw, should have roused amusement. LuCarolyn didn't as much as smirk. She had never set eyes on a killer, but she knew in that moment, the woman in her sights was poised to becoming precisely that.

Careful then, the man handled Prin as he withdrew. Prin slid down into the tangle of sheets and remained unresponsive.

"Get her," Tee ordered.

LuCarolyn and Berrill knew the words were meant for them. Immediately, they scrambled across the room to gently help their friend up from the bed.

“Check the cabinets in that bathroom. There should be robes in there. Go.” She tacked on gruffly when Berrill and LuCarolyn only stared.

“Come on, Hon,” LuCarolyn took Prin with her into the bath.

Berrill remained. “Do it,” she encouraged.

The man, too petrified to even attempt escape, managed to sob out a word. “Wait-”

“I intend to,” Tee’s response was meant for Berrill. She moved the jagged blade with one deft shift to the left. Crimson saturated the sheets in a soft, steady downpour.

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“Did you hear somethin’?”

“Damn man, would you stop? For the fifth time, no. The place is soundproofed, remember?”

“They don’t belong in there.”

“That’s the goddamn truth, but it’s probably a point we should’ve acted on several hours ago.”

“We should’ve done somethin’, said somethin’,” the hard square set to Luke Robb’s jaw seemed to define into a more rigid set in response to his partner’s words.

“What exactly?” Caleb Stein’s voice was a snarl. “Tell our bosses those aren’t the girls for them? That they made a mistake and the girls didn’t realize what they were getting into? Is that what you’re sayin’, Luke? Do we tell the folks who pay us that, if they don’t mind, we’ll just drive the girls back home and no hard feelings?” Caleb tacked on a barely audible curse while tugging a hand through a touse of dark blonde strands and then setting his head back hard against the wall.

Luke worked the bridge of his nose between thumb and middle finger. “Why the hell did they take that money?”

“Shit Luke, why do most girls take it?” Caleb sighed, “Down on their luck, figure owing the debt is better than being late with their student loan payment or rent. Then they find out that paying the debt involves a lot more than cash with interest. Then they’re stuck and what’s a little sex if it means you get to keep the cash.”

“Cash don’t mean squat if you ain’t alive to spend it,” Luke muttered and set his head against the wall opposite the one his partner had claimed.

The men had lost interest in languishing in the deeply cushioned wing chairs that were vibrantly upholstered in some rich, glossy fabric. Their post, in the private lobby outside the penthouse, had quickly lost its allure. If it had held any to begin with. Both Luke and Caleb had had their fill of such spaces long ago.

Luke’s words had held a gruesome truth. He and Caleb had been privy to scenes of a similar nature often enough over the long history of their involvement with The Grodins Alberts Network- The Network or The GAN as it was also known. Luke and Caleb had been among several charged with the responsibility of driving hundreds of girls to their- *deaths*?- nights out with The Ten.

Luke and Caleb had seen the unease filling the eyes of those young women earlier when they’d settled into the back of the car for the ride to the overpriced, overdone hotel. Luke and Caleb had witnessed that unease transition to resolve and could almost sense it when the girls had accepted their fates.

The young women were about to step over a line many women didn’t cross without a great deal of soul searching. Sex for money. If only that was all that was in store.

The Ten; as they were known throughout The Network were among the elite in their respective fields. Led by Robert Fritz and Sumter Hamisch, The Ten served as a board of sorts. They determined what jobs required their unique involvement to reach a successful end. Additionally, they advised on how the exorbitant sums earned by those jobs were to be allocated among network personnel and The Network’s outside interests.

In their... normal lives, the men held posts that claimed position among the highest levels of government and industry. They were, without question, above the law. Given that fact, they believed they

were free to explore any and all personal interests no matter how perverse. As long as no one of consequence knew of their indulgences.

“You gotta admit how quiet it is in there, Cale.”

Caleb rolled his eyes. “First you’re hearing things and now it’s *too* quiet. Everyone’s not as loud about sex as you are.”

“Go fuck yourself, Cale,” Luke urged with a slight grin that didn’t quite hold as his concern stuck.

“We should check.”

“Luke-”

“It’s our responsibility to make sure everyone’s safe,” Luke pushed off the wall.

Caleb took a few seconds to ponder his partner’s words before he was nodding his agreement. He fished the room key from the inside pocket of his suit coat and followed Luke toward a short stairway leading up to the penthouse.

The heavy maple door opened soundlessly. There was a brief green flash of the admittance light once the card had been swiped through the reader. The light from the hallway had a garish effect on the room’s shallow illumination. The door shut soundlessly behind them as the men assessed their surroundings.

“Christ, this place is tacky,” Luke muttered eyeing the display of tapestries, drapes, lighting and furniture that strived for opulence but only achieved mediocrity.

“Different strokes...” Caleb noted. He was unable to dismiss the sensation of hair rising along the back of his neck. He resisted the urge to reach for his gun.

The men worked their way into the room. Nothing overt roused their concern.

Except the quiet, Luke thought. Though it stood to reason that everyone was sleeping, the quiet held an eeriness that didn’t solidify the assumption. “Let’s get the hell out of here,” he breathed, dismissing whatever his sixth sense was trying to tell him.

Caleb grinned. “Are we done being responsible now?” He shook his head. “Come on, the least we can do is give the place the once over since we’re already here,” he turned to take the corridor to the bedrooms.

“Caleb.”

“Damn man, this was your idea, remember?”

“Caleb?” Luke persisted.

Losing patience with his partner, Caleb turned to the man with a clenched fist. He found Luke staring fixedly across the room and followed the line of his stare.

“What the hell?” Slowly, Caleb moved past Luke to take in the living room. With the door closed and blocking the light from the outer corridor, his eyes had adjusted to the dim interior.

Lying spread eagled on the floor and looking like a blood soaked snow angel, was Sumter Hamisch.

“Cale.”

Inwardly, Caleb grimaced, reluctant to see what Luke’s keen eyes witnessed then. Turning, he found that it wasn’t at all what he’d expected. The four beauties he and his partner had left to their fates that night were making their way toward the living room.

“Take us back.”

Caleb heard the smallest of the four issue the order when she and her friends were within a few feet of him and Luke.

The four women moved past the two men without stopping or even pausing to offer the slightest acknowledgement of the torn body in the middle of the living room floor.

Luke and Caleb traded bewildered looks and then fixed on the women once more. Their feet were bare and they all wore identical white robes. The scent of fresh blood followed in their wake.

Caracas, Venezuela~ 10 months later

“I get that pimp, son of a bitch Roya,” a gruff voice crackled through the headset, “a man who can’t control his sluts is no man.”

“Copy.” Mercuri Nikolaides returned confirmation of the transmission from his superior while scanning the outlay of the mountainside villa. Mercuri disengaged his set from the ops commander just as an even gruffer voice filled his ear.

At his side, Mercuri heard a groan that held a lethal cord. Nevertheless, the sound beckoned the sly grin that was Mercuri’s trademark.

“A pimp, Christ...” Pope Apostolou’s voice carried on such a low octave that every word he uttered seemed wrapped in a soft roar. The effect often had others looking to the man’s closest friends in hopes of a translation which was usually unnecessary. Pope added the effect when he wanted to unsettle someone or when he was seriously, murderously pissed.

Mercuri knew it was the latter fueling his friend’s tone. Being seriously, murderously pissed was an emotion he shared then as well.

“All this ‘cause those old bastards fucked with the wrong women?” Pope’s growling tone was then akin to a snarl.

“It happens,” Mercuri chuckled.

Pope slanted his friend a wink. “Hell yeah, it does, but most men just suck it up and accept it as a fact of life. Few of us orchestrate a military op on a pimp’s vacation home.”

Mercuri was on the cusp of flat out laughter by then. “Would you shut the fuck up before you give away our position?” He reached into a flap on his black fatigues and withdrew a two-way radio. “Farm Boy, this is Teacher’s Pet, over.”

At his side, Mercuri heard another groan though that one wasn’t quite as gruff as the one prior to it.

“Do these fuckin’ handles have to change over every op or can you guys just choose some you like and stick to ‘em?” Pope ridiculed his friends in a tone that was gruff yet tinged with amusement.

“Stowe it,” Mercuri ordered just as another voice erupted over the channel.

“Teacher’s Pet this is Farm Boy. We ready to do this? Over?”

“Affirmative Farm Boy- order confirmed with Ops Commander. No one takes down the mark, but him. Over.”

Rutger Eliades’ quiet laughter surged over the frequency. “Someone’s gonna be in for a surprise.”

“That’s a big fuckin’ A,” Mercuri’s response was like stone.

Ops Commander Leonard Fowler had seemed to take the news of his murdered employers harder than their widows.

“Advise your men, Rut. Over.”

“Copy. Over and out.”

The channel silenced and Mercuri pocketed the two-way.

“Anybody missing Patch yet?” Pope asked, referring to their partner and friend Patroclus Kostas.

“Nah,” Mercuri’s sly grin emerged once more, causing his extraordinary golden stare to narrow in the process. “But right about now a lot of folks are envying he and his crew for getting the nod to stay behind.”

Pope gave a quiet chuckle. “Lemme guess- Brody’s at the top of that list?”

“You know him well,” Mercuri confirmed. “He pouted for a minute because he and his crew weren’t tapped for the security detail on the old men.”

That time, Pope snorted a laugh. “Christ, did the idiot really think the commanders would allow that considering how royally they fucked up at the hotel?”

“Well one of those old men is his father, remember?”

“Who gives a fuck?” The growling intensity latched onto Pope’s soft voice again. “Not that I could care less, but Fritz and Hamisch might still be with us if that bozo and his crew hadn’t been too busy getting their dicks waxed down in the strip club to help Caleb and Luke keep an eye out.”

The deaths of Robert Fritz and Sumter Hamisch and the other revered board members of the Grodins Alberts Network, had made world news. Of course, those news broadcasts didn't report how the men had really met their ends. They couldn't. They wouldn't- not when the vast majority of the world's news and law enforcement agencies were either owned or controlled by various members of the board.

The savage multiple murders 10 months earlier in the Vegas hotel had caused more than a stir throughout The Network's fabric. Many, though they dared not admit it, found it poetically justified that the sick indulgences of The Ten had finally bitten them in their high powered asses.

Caleb Stein and Luke Robb had discovered the carnage, but had reported that the women sent to join The Ten that evening were nowhere to be found. But for their clothes and purses carrying only lipsticks and condoms, there were no other clues to their identities.

All anyone had to go on was the name of the man who arranged such evenings of debauchery for The Network and its associates. Enrique Roya however, had managed to keep himself hidden. For a while.

"If it weren't for Brody's screw up, this mission wouldn't have been necessary." Mercuri offered the reminder.

"You think this'll go over like we planned, Merc?" Pope asked.

"It better. I don't think another job like this will fall into our laps again any time soon." Mercuri reached inside the collar of his jacket to massage tightness from his nape. "The guys won't be so easy to convince next time around, either."

"Hmph, easy," Pope's smirk caused his striking aquamarine gaze to sparkle slyly. "Only you would think setting this thing up had been easy."

"Persuasion was never my strong suit," Mercuri gave a self indulgent shrug. All jokes aside, orchestrating the strategy for the mission- the underlying one- had been one of the toughest, if not ballsiest, things he'd ever attempted.

Unbeknownst- he *hoped* it was still unbeknownst- to their superiors, Mercuri had managed to convince the bulk of the Grodins Alberts organization to rebel. Those who joined the rebellion, believed that their well-earned retirement was at hand and long overdue.

The radio in Mercuri's pocket began to crackle with static. "Teacher's Pet, this is Runway Model. Over."

Mercuri shook his head and slid a knowing look to a smiling Pope. "Copy Runway Model. What's your position? Over."

"We're hot and ready. Over." Slayte Miltiades' silky Southern drawl eased through the line.

Mercuri nodded. "Copy that. Standby. Over and out."

"I'll never doubt you, Merc," Pope was saying then, "but if these soap heads suddenly get cold feet and betray us, I say we forget about trying to free them from a life of murder and tyranny, take our payoff and run."

"Copy that," Mercuri had already reached the same decision long before they'd boarded The Network's planes in route to another bloodbath. Their intended target had been very grateful for the advanced warning regarding their upcoming visit. The target had been grateful to the tune of several million dollars- enough for five men, tired of the grind, to not only retire but to retire very well.

Mercuri heard Ops Commander Leonard Fowler's voice in his ear again telling them it was time to do this. He nudged Pope, giving the man a silent nod in indication.

"See you on the other side," Pope clapped a hand to Mercuri's shoulder and then went to team up with his crew.

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"Alright men, let's move. Radio silence from here. Out." Ops Commander Fowler's voice was a violent whisper through various headsets and to the men nearest him.

"Boss."

Fowler was forging on ahead with his guys.

"Boss!"

“Goddammit!” Fowler snatched away his headset with a hiss. “Does radio silence mean anything to you, Rollins?”

Les Rollins already had his hands raised in a defensive stance. “You need to stay behind, Sir.” Those words stopped the commander. “Explain yourself, Captain,” Fowler ordered.

“You can’t go in there, Sir.”

Fowler’s full attention was on his subordinate then despite the wave of bodies swarming past them toward the mountainside villa. “And why not?” he demanded.

“Long story, Sir.”

Cursing viciously, Fowler looked back toward the swarm already descending on the house. “Well son, it looks like I’ve just come into some free time.”

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Enrique Royá’s Caracas villa was a work of art nestled in the Venezuelan mountainside with a view of tropical brilliance from every window. The multi-leveled dwelling with its teakwood decks, glossy hardwoods and Spanish tiles, loomed like an oasis against the late evening skies.

Chief Captain Basil Yost felt the sandy red hairs on the back of his neck stand on end within seconds of clearing the estate’s front lawn. “This is wrong,” he growled, pressing a hand to his ear to engage his headset.

“What’s up, Chief?” Jose Arroyo held back to query his superior.

“Too quiet,” Yost said.

Arroyo tugged the visor of his cap and scratched at his brow. “Guess it’s past most people’s bedtimes even in Venezuela.”

“Yeah...” Yost scanned the vast landscape with fresh intensity. “That doesn’t play for security, though. We were told it was considerable. Fuck.” Yost pressed a hand to his earpiece again. “Chief, Captains, Commanders. Report. Fowler? Dennison?”

The response Yost received wasn’t what he expected. A choked gurgle flooded the radio channel.

“Report!” Yost whispered violently.

Two words made their way through the line.

“Set up...”

“Son of a bitch!” Yost was turning for the villa to issue orders to abort when he felt the stinging slice across his jugular. The last thing he saw, before blackness completely descended, was his own blood pooling like the color of crude oil against the palms of his black leather gloves.

Arroyo retrieved a two-way radio from an inside pocket of his jacket. “Big dogs are sleepin’,” he transmitted the message and then used Yost’s jacket sleeve to clean his knife blade.

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The mission- the true mission- commenced. Once the Commander, Chiefs, Captains, and Ops Specialists had been taken out of play, it was time for the next targets on the rung. Taking heed of Mercuri’s tip, the villa’s owner fled with his family hours before the assault team’s arrival. Now, the immaculate home was primed for battle between those loyal to the Grodins Alberts Network and its philosophies and those who had been turned, persuaded-*woed*-by the promise of normal lives.

Such were lives many had been promised long ago- promises that had been unfulfilled. The soldiers in the Grodins Alberts organization had finally learned that they would have to fulfill those promises by their own hands.

The dark night was lit by intermittent dispersals of gunfire and shouting. The men Pope Apostolou predicted would be stricken by a case of cold feet, proved him wrong.

The op wasn’t an easy one. Not every soldier had been on board with taking down the hand feeding him. Those men fought with a mix of ferocity and confusion. They were either unsure how the tables had turned or unsure how they had so seamlessly turned in favor of the comrades they now fought against instead of alongside.

The mutineers claimed victory after a forty-five minute skirmish. The victorious wasted no time with celebration. Instead, they made quick exits- parting ways for futures that were virtually unknown. They'd all had enough of shedding blood for the advancement of others.

Now, those days were over and they made a point of giving their thanks to those who had made it possible. Mercuri received the king's portion of the handshakes and that was no surprise. While Rutger, Pope and Slayte had played valuable roles, everyone knew it was Mercuri who'd had the vision.

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"How long do you think we'll live the quiet life?" Slayte observed the mountainside villa growing smaller in the side mirror of the Jeep he and his friends took to their next destination.

"I'll take forever," Pope called, eyes closed as he relaxed back on the rear seat.

"I mean, how long do you think *they'll* let us live the quiet life?" Slayte rephrased once a chorus of laughter had softened on the wind. "If it's one thing you can count when it comes to guys like Grodins and Alberts, there's always a group of loyal idiots who'll be set on revenge."

"Everybody out there tonight, knew what they were takin' on," Mercuri said from his place behind the wheel. "They knew what the consequences could be later down the road." He slanted a smirk to Slayte across the gear shift. "You're forgetting what else you can always count on."

"What's that?" Slayte slid down in the passenger seat and prepared to nap.

Mercuri set his head back against the driver's side rest. "Anything worth having is worth walking through hell for and walking back in to defend."

~CHAPTER 2~

Las Vegas, Nevada~ The Present

Dorinda Patterson had finally made it. Entrepreneur, investor, she was even an honorary board member at her 5000 member church. Life was good. She had yet to secure the roles of wife and mother, but life was good.

Besides, Dorinda knew, those particular aspirations had never been ones she'd obsessed over. It would have been unrealistic to do so anyway. While becoming a mother wasn't such a far stretch, men rarely married women in her line of work. Such truths had stopped bothering her long ago. The income her line of work provided allowed any upset she may've experienced because of certain truths, to be quickly eased.

That didn't mean the job wasn't without its share of stressful moments. In the field of prostitution, stress was not only a given, it was quite often highly profitable. Men wanted their... sexual recreation to be trouble-free, *stress-free*. After all, trouble and stress were what work and marriage were for. When it came to sexual recreation, men were willing to pay very well to make stress disappear.

Dorinda had considered herself very blessed not to have had stress be a consistent part of her work life. There had been the occasional uprisings of course, but nothing that hovered at the fringes of life and death.

Until, The Ten.

She slid back the lavender suede chair from an immaculate white lacquer desk and surveyed the surroundings she had, on many occasions, demeaned herself to earn. It had all been worth it to pull a nod from Enrique Royá. The stories of how the man had staked his lucrative lifestyle were vast, varied and made her demeaning exploits seem G-rated.

Still, she'd gotten his nod- a nod that had allowed her to put her brothel under Royá's protective umbrella. Protection didn't come without a price, but Dorinda at first believed the price would be worth it. At first. Being one of Royá's associates got she and her girls more than protection.

The Royá name had transferred her brothel from being little more than a penny ante motel, to one of the premiere destinations on the Vegas underground. The transformation had come in the literal and figurative sense.

Gone, was the tacky shag carpeting over which even tackier throw rugs had been placed to hide careless spills of beverages and...other substances. Her floors now shone with gleaming hardwoods. The

entire place had been newly painted, treated to resist stains. The walls boasted vibrant colors that she'd allowed her girls to select. Cheap looking curtains had been replaced by privacy blinds in rich, earth toned shades. It was like an entirely new dwelling.

The 'newness' brought on new tricks as well. Gone, were the cheapskates looking for a quick thrill on a budget. Diversion, Dorinda's brothel, then appealed to a better funded set.

As Dorinda wanted to ensure their loyalty, she made certain that her client's needs were consistently met without question. When certain customers complained about the lack of...variety, Dorinda didn't panic. She went out and added new girls to her roster.

When certain customers requested fresh girls regularly, she didn't panic. She supplied. When Royla drew her into the inner circle of his sex trade conglomerate, she thought she'd died and gone to heaven. It wasn't heaven.

She'd heard about The Ten, heard about Royla's involvement with the Grodins Alberts Network,. No one who earned a living on the relaxed side of the law, went long without hearing of the organization. The Ten however... The Ten were a group few in her business knew of unless their services were specifically requested.

As Dorinda's reputation for pampering her clients grew, so did her place along the Royla food chain. Not long after that, Grodins Alberts wanted Dorinda's special brand of customer service for its most revered members. Though she was eager to meet the demand, finding new girls wasn't an easy thing to do. High class women for high class clientele, didn't just show up wanting to be paid for sex.

Dorinda had no interest in the women who *wanted* to be paid. She wanted the ones who would've believed they had too much self respect, self worth and good sense to even consider the life.

Those women weren't hard to find at all, actually. Dorinda had ample amounts of the bait required to entice such women, but luring them to that bait... another matter entirely. Dorinda needed only to know what lure to use. And there was always an appropriate lure. Nevermind what a woman thought she'd convinced herself she'd never do. Dorinda could be patient though and let others do the luring for her.

The cafes in and around the university area, were perfect hunting grounds for such researchers- those discreet observers who'd keep an eye out for what she wanted. A gorgeous, good girl with money problems. It had been a good scheme, until The Ten. Until, that night.

Sighing out a breath that ruffled the bangs of her curly bob, Dorinda strode over to a bar fashioned of the same lacquer as her desk. The construction jugged out in a sultry curve along the rear wall of her office. She should've started drinking hours ago, she thought blackly and grabbed a whiskey bottle by the neck with plans to upturn it as opposed to looking for a glass.

Decorum, Dorinda... she reminded herself and reached for a blocky glass on the small chrome drying rack beneath the bar top. Quickly, she sloshed a healthy serving of the drink into the glass and down it in one fiery gulp.

Grimacing fiercely, Dorinda still relished the burn, Silently, she repeated that she should have started drinking hours ago- right after that call. It was no use running, chances were strong that he'd had her place under surveillance weeks before he'd even contacted her. She kicked at a stool skirting the bar. *Decorum be damned.*

It had been over six years. Six goddamn years. Harris Van Deer was still on his mad quest for... she had no idea what exactly. She knew it had to do with what happened inside the penthouse where she'd sent those girls.

Harris Van Deer never asked about those girls, though. He had only been interested in what she knew of Enrique Royla's whereabouts. Like she'd be privy to information like that. She may've charted a stunning climb up the Royla food chain, but she wasn't a member of the inner circle where such knowledge would be shared.

Dorinda hadn't heard from Harris Van Deer in years, not since shortly after that night. What the hell could he want with her now? Had something changed? She slid a quick look to the bottle of whiskey and debated again on chugging down the mind-numbing liquid. Had he come into new information about that long ago night? She wondered. Had all the man's investigating about the events leading up to those

brutal deaths finally circled back around to the girls? The girls whose identities Roya said must be protected at all costs?

Dorinda snorted, sloshed another serving of drink into the glass and tossed it back. Protected at all costs? What the hell for? She had never understood why Roya had cared so much about the welfare of four whores who'd yet to earn him a dime?

Perhaps that was why. Dorinda regarded the glass with a furtive look. Those girls hadn't earned Roya a dime before that night, be they *owed* him plenty. They owed him plenty because of her-because of the temptation she'd thrown their way. Now, even years later, Dorinda continued to tell herself that she hadn't forced those girls to do anything to put themselves in Roya's debt. The more she told herself that, the less she believed it. Of course, full disclosure was never the best idea especially in this particular business.

Had she told those four girls what they'd be in for with The Ten that night...she would've lost a very profitable client. Ironically, she lost them anyway and those girls...Dorinda shuddered as she often did when thoughts plagued her of what drove them to the madness they unleashed that night. Perhaps that was why she had and would keep what she knew. She hadn't forced those girls, but she hadn't warned them either. She knew guilt over that would haunt her the rest of her life.

Her hand spasmed around the glass when she heard the knock. She decided against a third hit of the whiskey. It wouldn't do to be too mellowed out around this crowd. With a casual grace, she made her way through the mirrored halls of her establishment.

She had given her staff the night off. This, she wanted to do alone. She'd been instructed to be alone, but would have been regardless. Her girls had no business there tonight.

The liquor worked its magic, already massaging her limbs like a balm. Her stride was a saunter yet; despite all her cool, her heart pounded like a vicious call of thunder. The man she opened her door to, smiled warmly. That warmth belied the distinct chill in his almost opaque stare.

Her ease jostled against sudden disquiet and her large baby blues took a brief scan beyond the man's broad shoulder.

"I thought--"

"He's on his way," Grant Zubin spoke even as he smiled. "He thought we could chat for a little while."

Dorinda stepped back from the door- a soundless invitation for her visitor to enter.

"You don't mind if my guys come in, do you love? It's cold as a bitch out there tonight."

Dorinda only shook her head. It was a totally unnecessary gesture, she knew. Her guests were about to make themselves quite comfortable. She would've rathered not see any of this particular bunch, though. She'd have preferred the one she knew as Harris. There was something dead in his eyes that was more preoccupied than malicious.

The dead element she saw in Grant Zubin's cold metallic blue stare was ominous and alert with dark intent. The unsettling effect of his gaze was only rivaled by the platinum blonde hair he wore in a buzz cut.

Dorinda was moving to close the door once the men were all inside.

"Don't worry about the door, love. I'll handle it," Grant Zubin's voice was as cordial as his warm smile. "You go on and get acquainted with my guys. I'll be right there."

Zubin leaned against the door and watched the madam, flanked by his men, proceed down the hall. His warm smile chilled as he cracked his knuckles.

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Harris Van Deer kept his dark Mercedes SUV parked down the quiet street some distance from the other flashier sports cars and bikes that were littering the curving brick drive of Diversion. Smirking, he considered his partner Grant Zubin's flare for the debased and dramatic.

Harris wondered how the fates had seen fit to bring Zubin such a team of like-minded individuals as the men whose loyalty he commanded. Harris tucked his mobile into a jacket pocket after reading

Zubin's text that they were starting the meeting. He could wait, preferring to brave the night's chilly temps instead of witnessing Dorinda Patterson's 'meeting' with his associates.

Harris had never developed Zubin's equal opportunity outlook when it came to interrogation or dispersing pain as punishment. Though he didn't always approve of the methods, he'd do nothing to curb his partner's techniques. This was too important.

Harris pressed a hand over the bridge of his nose. It still bore bruising from the abuse it had suffered.

Patroclus Kostas, the skinny Greek bastard, hadn't betrayed his friends even after the serious working over he'd suffered. That had been disappointing, but a silver lining had presented itself. Harris had taken great and personal pleasure in pummeling the man's face. No one would doubt that he had died very badly.

How he wished he could be there when Mercuri got the news. How he wished he could see the man's face when he saw what they'd done to his friend's. Taking Patroclus Kostas' life had indeed been satisfying, but it had also been rash.

Kostas may not have been willing to give up his friends, but it would've been useful to have him confirm what Corky Lapis had shuddered out during the waning moments of his honorable life. Corky's heroic efforts as a volunteer fireman had earned him a brief spot on his local news station. That spot had been picked up by a regional affiliate that caught the eye of the network's morning news show.

That broadcast had been the catalyst which had added fuel to an old fire. It had given Harris and his associates all the info they'd needed to track him down.

Why would Corky have given them Enrique Royas' name if it wasn't just as Harris had suspected all along? The Royas job had all been a set up, organized by Mercuri Nikolaidis. It had all been a carefully orchestrated plan to take out the commanding officers of the Grodins Alberts Network as well as The Network's creators Lorne Grodins and Nathan Alberts.

The incident at the Vegas penthouse had all been part of the plan. Merc, that son of a bitch, had left no stone unturned. While that weasel Kostas and his team were well on task to take out Grodins and Alberts, Mercuri had arranged for Royas' sluts to take out The Network's board.

Yes, the plan had been carefully orchestrated. It had been masterfully implemented, Harris admitted. That type of unwavering focus, attention to detail and frigid ruthlessness had made Mercuri the darling of the GAN. A fucking darling! The snarl of words resounded in Harris' head.

How much had *he* done? What lengths had *he* gone to get those cocksuckers to give him half a shot as something more than a leg breaker? Harris balled a fist, an attempt to douse the memories trying to claw their way to the front of his brain.

He couldn't let them in, he thought, slapping his palms to his shaved head. Harris squeezed his eyes shut and gave his thoughts time to settle. Not too much, though. He needed those thoughts to keep some prevalence in his mind. When he finally got his hands on Mercuri, he wanted to do more than kill him. He wanted to take his time hurting him and not to avenge the deaths of the ten bastards who died at the hands of their bimbos. Mercuri had to pay for what he'd done to the organization Harris would've been on track to take charge of as the head of its soldiers. Now, there was practically nothing to take charge of. If the asshole had just waited, Harris raged. He could've given Mercuri what he'd wanted: freedom. The idiot, Harris thought. All this just to resign.

Harris would have laughed had Mercuri's antics not been so costly. At the helm of the GAN, he could've given Mercuri and all the rest their freedom and more. He *may have*. The GAN had secrets that it wouldn't do well to have former employees blabbing about on the outside.

The only way one became a *former* employee of the GAN was by becoming dead. Harris felt the phone vibrate under his suit coat again. Too soon to be Zubin, he thought. The man had patience for little else aside from his work. He checked the phone anyway, grimacing over the notification that his phone would begin updating in an hour.

He reached for fur-lined leather gloves lying on the SUV's passenger seat. Bringing Zubin in at the onset of an interrogation wasn't his usual method. Zubin's style was usually most advantageous towards the end of things.

Sadly, there wasn't time to play the Q and A dance. Harris needed Dorinda Patterson to talk now. The only way she'd do that was if she was too scared to endure more agony than she'd already been subjected to. With any luck, Zubin would call in to tell him Patterson had already given up Roya and he could avoid a trip inside the brothel to get an actual image of the handiwork.

Perhaps the madam would lead them right to what they wanted and there would be no need to hunt Roya. Oh yes, he thought, tugging on one of his gloves. If only they could bypass the pimp and go right to his working girls.

*What would Mercuri do if he knew I had them?* Excitement began to churn in Harris' belly until it overcame the dread of witnessing what was happening to the woman inside the large townhome behind the unassuming brick drive.

What were they to him? Knowing Mercuri and his inner circle, they'd most likely sampled the goods and knew they were up for the task. They wouldn't have charged just any four women with the job. Not only would they have to be adept at killing, they'd have to be the kind of lure that would have a man eager to take off his trousers and his weapons without hesitation.

When found, The Ten had been naked as the day they'd been born. The men may've been board member types, but they were too sadistic to be taken out by four hookers. Unless there'd been more to it than that. He'd spent six years looking for a lead to explain that night. It had been six years of his colleagues looking at him like he was even more insane than they'd already suspected he was.

Six years. Aside from Mercuri, Pope, Slayte and Rutger, there hadn't been a peep from anyone else involved with all that madness. Then, just like that Charles 'Corky' Lapis shows up on a morning show as a hero firefighter. Now the players were being recalled to the stage.

Perhaps they'd find Mercuri's four hookers about to kill off another group of unsuspecting saps. There was however an even more interesting theory, Harris mused. How satisfying would it be to find that his old friend had settled down into normalcy. Perhaps Mercuri had finally found what he'd been looking for. Something he'd be willing to give up any part of himself to claim or to keep.

From his coat pocket, Harris retrieved an old magazine article featuring Mercuri at the onset of his new career. The bastard, Harris sneered silently, while scanning the picture of a ship adorned with the Mercuri Fleets logo.

The vessel, already dated when Mercuri had acquired it, was being dry docked at a local shipyard. It had served as Mercuri's first and only ship to launch his business. The first year had been a banner one. The success had allowed Mercuri to dock his dated ship for newer, top of the line models.

Harris wadded the old article he obsessively kept in his possession and hurled it across the dash. How would the darling of the GAN handle losing his revered and powerful lifestyle? How would he handle seeing his dreams reduced to nothing? Harris knew what that felt like. Thanks to Mercuri Nikolaides he knew what it was like not only to lose it, but to see it savaged, ravaged, destroyed...

How delicious would it be if Mercuri finally got to experience the same?

## ~CHAPTER 3~

*Aspen, Colorado~ 3 weeks later*

Mercuri Nikolaides could've easily envisioned himself taking part in dozens of scenarios other than the one he currently stood in the midst of. Also worthy of note, was who he stood in the midst of it with. Mercuri's business partner and long time friend Pope Apostolou hadn't found it at all funny when he'd extended a party invite only to have Mercuri laugh in his face or... over the phone as it were.

Nevertheless, there he stood as Pope's 'plus one' at his neighbor's house-warming party. Mercuri didn't know what was more surprising, that the man actually had neighbors or that they liked him well enough to invite him into their home.

Mercuri cut his friend some slack, knowing all too well how easily Pope could turn on the charm when he chose. This, despite the intimidating persona the man could tug on like clothes.

Mercuri returned his focus to the conversation he stood closest to. The hosts were explaining that their gathering was in fact a *re*-housewarming party.

"The place isn't new, just newly remodeled," Steve Brassels explained.

Steve's wife began to laugh while shaking her head. "It's not even that," Denise Brassels put a hand to her husband's arm. "We simply had it modified."

"I don't get it," Pope said flatly. "Is that like something with your mortgage?" He asked.

Steve Brassels chuckled. "Good to know I'm not the only one who was confused."

"Oh..." Denise poked her husband's ribs with a soft elbow and then turned to her guests. "We got into it during a visit to one of our friends in California. We were just as clueless as you are now, Pope. Then we sat down with the modifier who explained the concept." The woman positioned her hands as though she were envisioning a scene.

"Basically, all you see here has been here all along," Denise's shrug sent the sequins sparkling across her black blouse. "With the addition of a few minor details, new life has been breathed into our home." Denise laughed when her guests regarded her with curious and skeptical looks. Next, she was pointing to a suede sectional sofa across the large crowded den. The room, glassed in on three sides, overlooked the Brassels' rear lawn. The acreage was an expanse of winter white lit by shimmers of gold from the yard lamps placed throughout.

"I already had four people ask what we did with our old couch," Denise was saying. "Lots of them remembered it because each section boasted a caddy that could hold everything from drinks and

chips, to socks and blankets- very popular on our game days during football season.” She slapped her hands to her sides and looked wholly content. “None of them believed me when I told them it was the same sofa we’ve had since we moved here eleven years ago.”

“So why do they think it’s new?” Mercuri was somewhat stunned by his interest in the answer.

Denise shrugged as though the concept were elementary. “Our modifier does much of what an interior designer would, but on a smaller scale that’s nicer for the wallet.”

Looking confused, Pope dragged a hand through a wealth of blue black waves that just brushed his shoulders. “Couldn’t you just go out and find your own new pillows for the couch?”

Mercuri bowed his head when his mouth quirked on a smile. He was sure the tidy 60something couple would be unnerved by Pope’s harmless, but gruff manner as he towered over them.

The Brassels merrily traded amused looks and then laughed.

Steve Brassels knocked a fist to Pope’s bicep. “That’s where the science comes in.”

“See, it all goes far beyond new pillows and drapes,” Denise continued the explanation. “They’re little additions the average person might never think of in terms of redecorating. Folks tend to look at the flash and dazzle instead of the tiny elements that bring out the more vibrant subtleties.”

Steve chuckled then, his green eyes heavily crinkled at the corners. “If you met our modifier, you’d understand why she’s such a big fan of tiny elements.”

“Darn it, that’s what we’re supposed to be doing now,” Denise slapped her husband’s arm, “the introduction,” she whispered.

Steve smacked his forehead with the heel of his hand. “Guys we’re sorry, but you’re gonna have to excuse us,” he told Mercuri and Pope.

“I’ll go find her,” Denise nudged Steve’s arm again, “Honey be sure to give them a card,” she said before disappearing into the dense crowd.

“Right,” Steve moved to a glass topped end table with granite edging. There, he retrieved a business card from a small silver tin case in the center.

“Most of her clients are corporations, but she’ll do the occasional residence when she finds a place that appeals to her.” Steve explained, handing the card to Pope. Then, he was slapping his guest’s arms and taking the path his wife had charted through the sea of guests.

Mercuri cleared his throat following the Brassels whirlwind departures. “Well man, thanks for a very educational evening. I’m sure that’s more than I ever needed to know about interior decorating, but I guess you’re never too old to learn.”

“It’s called modifying, not interior decorating,” Pope corrected with mock disdain coloring his voice. “And you shouldn’t knock it ‘til you try it.”

“Are *you* going to try it?” Mercuri asked.

Pope shrugged, “A trip to Big Lots is all the modifying I need.” He shook his head then. “Rich people...”

Mercuri’s eyes were a distinctive golden tint that emphasized the feline intensity of his gaze when he was highly intrigued... or highly pissed. Pope’s words had instilled the former emotion- somewhat.

“Seriously?” Mercuri sent his friend an incredulous look that belied his intrigue. “And exactly how many figures comprised your bank balance when you last checked?”

“I’m speaking in terms of old money,” the disdain still colored Pope’s voice.

Mercuri grunted a laugh. “Last I heard, it all spent exactly the same.”

“Aw, can it, man. You know what I mean,” the trademark pissed off growl started to underlie Pope’s voice. “Maybe our grandkids’ll be part of that club, but never us.”

Mercuri refused to bite on his friend’s favorite argument. They had been ‘rich people’ for over six years and still the men closest to him refused to accept it. Mercuri couldn’t say he was confused by that. The way they’d become ‘rich people’ wasn’t a story they’d ever share over brandy and cigars with the boys at the club. Unlike Pope, Mercuri refused to accept that they hadn’t earned their place at the table.

The money earned by way of their ill-gotten lifestyle had been well used or rather, well-invested. Mercuri’s decision to stake his claim in the realm of import, export shipping had allowed him to quintuple his friends’ net worths as those investments continued to diversify.

Though Mercuri's shipping magnate dream had served them all well, Pope had other interests he'd wanted to let his money play around in. As a result, the man had put funds into an array of commercial and residential properties worldwide.

Slayte Miltiades and Rutger Eliades were sadly not the sort for playing the market or anything that even hinted of work. The two were happy letting their friends put their money to work for them.

In whatever way the four had seen fit to tend their money, it was money well-earned, earned legitimately and tended diligently. Mercuri refused to have any of them ever feeling the need to sink back into what they'd once done to survive.

"Hey, hey everybody let's move it on to the living room!"

Steve Brassels' friendly voice resonated through the house as though amplified. From the den, the living room was a healthy trek along a glass corridor that unveiled more of the staggering snow white property. Steps that were muffled by the corridor's short, dark carpeting, sprung to life with sound when shoe soles began to hit the eye catching hardwoods of the living room entryway. The lofty space also drew the eye to an astonishing skylight made more astonishing by the wrought iron chandelier that washed the room in soft illumination.

Steve Brassels applauded as his guests congregated a few feet below where he stood on the stairway landing. The construction branched off and vanished behind the room's white walls.

"Again Denise and I want to thank you all for coming," Steve had set aside the microphone he'd used to herd in his guests from various parts of the house. His strong tone carried easily over the large living room.

"We also want to thank you for all the compliments we've received on this place," the man continued, "Now, while we appreciate the flattery, we can't take it. Luckily, the young woman who deserves all the praise is here to accept it."

Steve Brassels allowed applause to fill the room for a few seconds before he was raising his hands for silence. "Now many of you have had the chance to speak with her tonight, so you know this already. For the rest, I'll have to warn you that the lady's dance card is filling quickly. If you want her to consider working this same magic for you, then you better grab her while the gettin's good. Ladies and gentlemen, Etienne Shaw!"

Mercuri joined in applauding the designer- er- modifier. When she joined Steve and Denise Brassels on the landing, his applause faltered as he was quite simply intrigued.

Brassels hadn't quite finished his introduction, yet Mercuri moved on closer to the front of the room. He brushed past Pope, who caught the dazed set to his friend's expression.

Smiling, Pope closed the distance to Mercuri who'd stopped several feet away from the landing to watch the dark, waif-like beauty as though he were helpless to do much else. Taking the business card Brassels had passed along, Pope slipped it into Mercuri's coat pocket.

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Tee was certain that she'd already shaken hands with everyone at the party. She promised herself that if no one approached her in the next five minutes, she was going to make a run for it. She adored Steve and Denise for throwing the party in her honor. There was nothing like working for clients who didn't micromanage and left you alone to do what they'd paid you to do for them.

It was even more wonderful when those clients referred you to friends who were hopefully the same non-micromanaging, leave you alone to do your work type. Still, she was beat. The flight from her previous job in New York had given her little time to unwind, but not nearly as much as she'd needed. That last job had been especially demanding, but worth it once the final results were tallied.

Now, all she wanted was to head up to the guest suite her clients had prepared for her visit. She'd only had a few moments to admire her bed before the party began. She was so looking forward to doing more than admiring it.

Four and a half minutes, Tee regarded the second hand on her watch. With a resolved shrug, she decided that was good enough.

"Leaving your party so soon?"

The clear baritone touched her ears just as she took the second step up. When she turned, Tee sensed her need for sleep only lingering then as though it were an afterthought.

“I...” her voice, naturally cool, usually carried on a steady chord. *Usually*. Just then, her tone was almost whisper soft and fascinated.

Mercuri’s voice had been gripped by a fair amount of fascination as well. God, how tall was she? He wondered. Her build, though a beckoning one, was slight. Combined with the boyish cut taming her wavy dark hair, she appeared almost elfin.

Tee was thinking almost the same about the man who had spoken to her. God, how tall was he? Granted, most people seemed excessively tall to her- an easy thing to conceive given that her own height topped out at just under 5’3.

But this guy...he would seem excessively tall to anyone. Well over 6’6 easy. Then there was his build. How many reps, for how many hours over how many weeks and years did it take to carve out a physique such as the one he claimed?

The height and build, though supremely distracting had nothing on the face. Brutally handsome, with enviable bone structure beneath smooth copper-toned skin, the face was a potent attention-getter. His hair, thick and black as obsidian, waved back off a wide forehead to emphasize the harsh beauty of his looks.

Tee knew she was staring, but she just couldn’t seem to stop herself. Why couldn’t she stop herself? Losing her composure over gorgeous men was something she hadn’t done in years. Something she hadn’t done since she was a completely different Etienne Shaw.

It had to be his eyes, she thought. Who could resist staring into eyes like that? They were deeply set and intense, but it was the color that gave her pause.

Brilliantly gold; with rich brown flecks that were bolder given the vibrancy of the gold, the combination was a striking one. If she didn’t know better, Tee would have sworn she was staring into the eyes of a feline- a colossal, predatory feline.

“They’re mine,” a quiet sigh colored Mercuri’s words as though he’d guessed and wasn’t at all surprised by her preoccupation with his eyes.

She smiled. “I didn’t doubt it,” Tee was pleased to hear that her voice had regained its cool, steady flow.

“They make some people nervous,” he said.

Tee was sure the eyes were only partly to blame when pitted against the total package. He was speaking again before she could come up with a response.

“Mercuri Nikolaides.”

Again, Tee smiled. “I’m going to have to get you to write that one down.”

“Yeah, it’s a mouthful.”

“I bet,” she winced the second the words tripped off her tongue. *Losing your composure over a gorgeous man is something you haven’t done in years*, she reminded herself.

Mercuri’s mouth, a wide undeniably sensual curve, twitched on the cusp of a smile. He resisted grinning outright over the words he was sure she hadn’t intended to utter- not out loud anyway.

“This is uh- some place,” he half gestured to the Brassels’ living room instead. “Impressive,” he added with a curious smile. “So how’d you get into... Jeez, what’s it called?” He only pretended to hunt for the name. “Oh yeah- modifying?”

Tee laughed, enjoying the feel of the gesture she rarely indulged in away from her girlfriends. “I’m not really sure where that term came from,” she said.

Mercuri sighed again. “Rich people,” he grinned when she laughed again.

“What I really do is interior design for corporations.”

Mercuri nodded, slipped a hand into a deep side pocket along his dark trousers. “I think our hosts mentioned that,” he said.

“Well the thing about design is in the way each designer envisions the space and how well that vision compliments the clients.” Absently, she smoothed a hand over the snug sleeves of the creamy powder blue frock that adored her curves.

“Basically, I reimagine spaces,” she explained, as her brow quirked. “People like how my mind works. Sadly, most people spend so much time regarding the overall picture, they miss the little things—small touches that make a place sing.”

“Like what?” Mercuri stepped in a fraction. Casually, he propped an elbow to the oak railing that sectioned off the staircase landing from the living room. While part of him wanted her answer, a larger part just wanted to listen to her speak— to observe her petite frame and exquisite face as she did so.

“Well there’re all sorts of *little* things one can do to add warmth to a space,” Tee went on. She was in her element as she spoke of her craft and therefore unaware of how intently she was being studied. “It matters very little what the space is used for.”

“A boxing gym?” Mercuri smiled when he saw hers engage.

“Okay...” Tee’s luminous ebony gaze twinkled with amusement as she scanned the milling crowd before looking back to Mercuri.

“If it’s important for someone to make their gym warm and inviting, they could easily add touches such as comfy lounging chairs and plants... but in a place like that you’d prefer subtly. Leave the chairs and plants to the lobby— if it’s a professional gym. For the actual space, minute additions can make bold impressions on the overall appeal. Something as small as having an outlet concealer for a light fixture decorated with the image of a small pair of boxing gloves or having the weight racks painted to match the gym’s overall color scheme.”

“And you could paint the little gloves on the sides of the racks,” Mercuri supplied, grinning anew when Tee laughed.

“Now you’re getting it!” She cheered. “I’ve never done an actual gym, but if the chance comes my way, I’ll be sure to get your permission before I use your idea.”

“It’s all yours,” Mercuri waved a hand. “So how’d you go from conference rooms for corporations to interior design for homeowners?”

“Well, I only got into that part by accident. A friend of mine bought this big, over-the-top place out in Malibu. Just to say she had it, you know?”

“I know the type,” Mercuri thought of Pope.

“It was a gorgeous place, but it wasn’t a home. I griped so much, she finally told me to do something about it. I did and had a great time in the process.”

“So you spend a lot of time in Malibu?”

“Well I live in San Francisco, so...”

“No kidding?” Surprise pooled his vivid eyes. “I’m in Sonoma County— near Kenwood.”

Laughter reflected her surprise as well. “Small world,” she said.

“Yeah,” Mercuri took another patient appraisal of her small, curvy body and then straightened. “I should let you go. It was nice meeting you and I’ll call if I’m ever in the market for a modification.”

“Sounds good.” She gave him a winning smile as she turned to head back up the staircase.

“Goodnight Mr. Nikolaides,” she called.

“Ms. Shaw,” Mercuri watched until she was gone from his sight.