

## 1 - Nadia

“So we’re watching this show, about a woman hiring a hitman for her husband, and I tell Hank that’s what I’ll do the next time he leaves his dirty socks on the floor.”

Stella’s pickup rolled alongside me as I jogged down the empty dirt road, her window down so she could talk.

“And he says, go ahead, just make sure you ask Nadia Stafford to do it.”

A moment of silence, filled only by the rumble of the old engine and the pant of the two German shepherds at my side.

“Why?” I asked finally, trying for a laugh.

“Because Hank says that’s what damned fools like me always do. Go looking for a hitman. Hire a cop by mistake.”

I did laugh at that. It was true. Finding an actual hitman is nearly impossible for the average citizen, and people almost always end up talking to an undercover cop instead. It’s not as if you’re going to find a hired killer living down your street. Or jogging alongside your truck.

“Well, I’m not a cop anymore,” I said. “Just keep letting Hank eat at the diner. It’ll kill him soon enough.”

That got a guffaw loud enough to startle Rex. Scout looked at me, rolling her eyes at his puppy nerves.

“How about that new man of yours?” Stella said. “Is he good with a gun?”

“Um, yes . . . but . . .”

She grinned. “Don’t worry. I won’t try to hire him either. Hank was just wondering if he wants to go hunting sometime. He do that sort of thing?”

“He . . . has.”

“Well, ask if he wants to go hunt wild turkeys with the boys next month. Hank said since it seems you’re keeping him around, he ought to be more neighborly. Invite him to turkey shoots and poker games.”

I made a noncommittal sound and said, “How about we have you and Hank to dinner? John’s in the States right now, but he’ll be back by next weekend.”

“I won’t turn down Emma’s cooking.”

“Good. I’ll call you later this week.”

Back at the lodge, I could hear guests slowly waking, roused by the smell of coffee and Emma’s cinnamon rolls. I popped in to grab a roll and dog treats. This never impresses Scout and Rex, who seem to think if dog treats are so great, I should eat them, too. The handbook says not to give dogs human food, though, and I’m very good at following the rules. Well, in some things.

A quick word to Emma—my lodge housekeeper—and then I zoomed off before any guests could wander down and declare they’d like an early morning canoeing lesson. They’ll have my guide services for the rest of the day. This is my time, with Jack’s daily check-in call.

Granted, that conversation wasn’t exactly deep. Any phone call with Jack is almost entirely one-sided—that side being mine. I got used to that in the years we’d worked together. Did I expect it to change when we moved beyond friendship? Yep. Which proves that I’d misunderstood the purpose of the conversations altogether. Jack wasn’t calling to talk. He was calling to listen. Calling to hear me chatter about the lodge, about my day . . . The very average life of Nadia Stafford, ad nauseam. Can’t say I see the appeal, but compared to dating a guy who doesn’t give a shit, I’m happy to oblige.

I headed to the site where we're building our private chalet. It's right on the edge of our cell service periphery, intentionally so, because as nice as it'd be to live out of contact sometimes, we really can't.

I retrieved the cell phone from its hiding spot. Rex nosed around, as if hoping for more interesting buried treasure. Scout sighed. Scout is my white German shepherd, a year old now. Jack bought her for me. I retaliated—I mean, reciprocated—by getting him Rex, a black-and-tan shepherd, for Christmas. Yes, he named his dog Rex. Not surprising for a guy who, when given the full array of cool hitman noms de guerre, went with Jack. He didn't even need to think it up—it's what his family used to call him as a diminutive for John.

Phone in hand, I climbed to the half-finished balcony and took a seat on the edge, my legs dangling. The view was perfect. It should be, given how damned long Jack spent picking our building site. He'd actually hauled out a ladder to find the best balcony viewpoint. Hitman perfectionism for you. And it was absolutely right—the morning sun over the lake, leaves whispering in the breeze, not a single structure to mar the illusion that you were in the middle of endless forest. I uncapped my thermos, poured my coffee and took a bite of my cinnamon bun while the dogs snuffled through the forest under my dangling feet. A minute later, Scout let out her “someone's coming” growl and Rex echoed it. I followed their gazes to see a figure coming through the trees. I checked my watch. Three minutes until Jack's call at nine.

Shit.

I rose in a crouch, ready to scuttle back inside the chalet. Not very dignified. Or very polite. But I only got these few minutes each day to touch base with Jack and remind myself that no matter how messy my life might be, it was, at this moment, everything I wanted it to be.

I was halfway through the doorway when a man's voice called, “Nadia?”

I left the doorway. “Hey, didn’t see you. Let me come—”

I stopped. Even in the forest shadows, I could tell the guy wasn’t a guest. Not when he was dressed in a three-piece suit.

“Let me come down,” I said.

As I did, I took my time and turned up the volume on my phone. It was nine o’clock on the dot. If I stalled for a few moments, my visitor would hear the ring and I could excuse myself to answer.

I picked my way through the piles of wood and supplies inside the building.

9:01.

I frowned. Yes, that’s not exactly late, but Jack is precise. Like let’s-sync-our-watches precise.

“Big dogs,” the man called up.

“Don’t mind them. They’re fine.”

To have Scout and Rex on the property with guests, they need to be perfectly behaved. They’re trained to warn of intruders with growls only, and then keep their distance. They’re friendly enough, but they’ll only approach strangers when I give the signal.

I checked the time again—9:02—cursed under my breath and stepped out. I still couldn’t see the man’s face, but despite the suit, I could tell he wasn’t some salesman who’d wandered over from the lodge. He was fit and trim and his right hand rested awkwardly—a man accustomed to having a sidearm within reach.

Law enforcement.

I took a deep breath, plastered on a cheerful lodge-hostess smile and ducked under a tree branch. Then I saw his face.

Diaz.

I don't know his given name. He very likely *was* law enforcement, but he moonlighted for the Contrapasso Fellowship, a secret organization of law enforcement officers, lawyers and judges who looked at failures of justice and said, "I could fix that." So they did. Vigilantes of the highest order. They'd been trying to recruit me for a while and had successfully recruited my ex, Quinn, a US Marshal.

"Nadia," Diaz said. "I'm sorry to approach you here. I know—"

"You sure as hell know," I said, bearing down on him. "This is my *home*. Contrapasso may know more about me than I like, but you are supposed to at least pretend otherwise. You do not show up—"

"It's Quinn."

I stopped. "What?"

"It's Quinn. He's disappeared."

## 2- Jack

It'd been thirty years since Jack had left Ireland and now, crouched on a rooftop overlooking Dublin, he was counting the hours until he could get the fuck out again. Which wasn't what he'd expected. Yeah, thirty years ago he couldn't wait to wash the dust of the city from his boots. But he'd been a kid then. Twenty years old, hating everything about his country, hating what it'd done to his family.

No, hating what *he'd* done to his family. He could blame the politics, and what it'd done to four young men who'd wanted better than the dirt-poor lives of their parents. Boys who'd wanted what they thought the world owed them. But the world didn't owe them fuck all. You make your choices. You make your mistakes. And sometimes, those mistakes lead to a boat bound for America with no plans to ever return because the sight of those green hills reminds you of what you did. Of the fact that your family lies cold in their graves and it's no one's fault but your own.

Yet the boy at twenty isn't the same as the man at fifty, and Jack had started looking back on Ireland with something he wouldn't quite call nostalgia, but definitely a yearning for lush emerald hills and sooty old cities. Back when he and Nadia had become friends and she'd talked of travel dreams, he'd often thought of saying, "How about Ireland?" But he hadn't, of course. Fuck no. Even when he'd invited her to Egypt, he'd cancelled, buying a hot tub for her lodge instead. Because that's what people did, didn't they? Bail on a trip and replace it with a hot tub? Yeah, it'd been a fucking long time since he'd done the friendship thing.

He still couldn't believe she'd let him move *past* friendship. Kept waiting to return from a job and find his bag at the door, some higher power correcting a miscalculation that had awarded him a prize meant for a guy who hadn't spent his life as a hired killer. Instead, the only thing

waiting for him was Nadia herself, jogging out to meet him, grinning like he'd returned from a three-year tour of duty.

His phone buzzed, a reminder that in minutes, he could make his daily check in. He smiled, something he did much more readily these days, but still really only for one person.

He paced along the roof, as close to the edge as he could get without casting a shadow below. Tomorrow, he had to meet an old friend at the cafe across the street, to discuss a hit while sipping cappuccinos or some shit.

Fuck, he was getting old. Starting to sound like a crotchety old man, muttering about the good old days, when if you wanted someone killed, you met in a seedy pub and talked business in a dark back room.

The truth was he didn't mind cappuccinos. Better than some of the swill they passed off as beer. He was just cranky today. He'd been supposed to meet Cillian this afternoon, only to have him call and reschedule for tomorrow, which put the entire fucking job a day behind and left him with busywork like this.

He checked his phone. Three more minutes. He surveyed the street, squinting against the early afternoon June sun as he searched for something interesting to tell Nadia. Know what I saw today? What I heard today? Learned today?

His gaze traveled along the narrow road. *Nope. I got nothing.*

He exhaled and resisted the urge to pull out a cigarette. He'd been cutting back for years, with no real intention of quitting. It was his outlet for stress and his one vice. Well, his second vice if you counted murder as his first, and he was well aware most people did, but that was work. He was down to a couple of cigarettes a week and at the lodge, he didn't even need those, though he still smoked them because they were shared with Nadia, and that meant something to

him. Those shared cigarettes had been their first step from colleagues to friends, when he offered her his cigarette, seeing that ex-smoker hunger in her eyes. A simple, small act of intimacy that had felt as huge as inviting her into his bed.

Maybe he'd mention that when he called. Something about grabbing a couple of cartons. His brand was still Irish, and it was a bugger to get in Canada. Yeah, he'd tell her that. Not exactly scintillating conversation, but she liked it when he added something, even if he'd be happy spending an hour listening to her talk.

His phone blipped the second alert, but he was already dialing. It was an untraceable number, one that'd reroute a few times before ending up at an equally untraceable phone. Jack didn't understand the technology, but he trusted Felix, the guy who set it up for them.

The line connected. One ring. Then a soft click, and he closed his eyes and waited for her voice, for the reminder of what he had waiting for him. Nadia. The lodge. The chalet. That chalet was important. So fucking important. It meant he wasn't just shacking up in Nadia's bedroom at the lodge. They were building a home together, literally, and he still wasn't sure it meant the same to her—was as permanent for her—but it was a start in that direction.

Nadia. A home. A life.

The phone rang again.

What the fuck? He'd heard the line connect, hadn't he?

No, he'd heard a click and jumped on it, like a fifteen-year-old calling his crush, praying she'd answer.

A third ring.

He frowned. Nadia never let it ring more than twice.



Yeah, actually, she did . . . if she wasn't there to answer. It had only happened a couple of times before, but it *had* happened. Once, she'd been putting out a fire—an actual fire. Some moronic guest decided it was a little chilly by the lake and started a blaze he couldn't control. The other time, it'd been a failure of technology.

A fourth ring.

Fuck.

Five.

Jack hung up. Then he paused, his finger over the redial. That was against the rules. His rules, for Nadia's safety. One call per day at the arranged time. If he couldn't place that call or she couldn't answer, then they waited until the next morning.

Still, his finger hovered over the button. The click suggested it just might not have gone through. Another tech-fail. And if he didn't call, she'd worry.

All valid excuses. Which were exactly that: excuses. He put these rules in place to protect her, and the moment he started making exceptions, he'd never stop. Setting limits and sticking to them was the price he paid for his past, and it was a small price, all things considered.

He pocketed the phone, made one last loop around the roof, checking out the scene for tomorrow's meeting. Then he headed down to find something he could tell Nadia tomorrow. Something interesting.