

1 - Nadia

Running a wilderness lodge meant that, occasionally, there were guests I'd like to kill. The fact that I subsidized my income as a hitman made that option so much more viable. Yet in the decade since I opened the Red Oak Lodge, I had never been as tempted as I was today.

I was out at the back of my property, a gorgeous chunk of wilderness northwest of Toronto. A perfect June evening, with a fully booked lodge, and a quartet of eager New Yorkers joining me for a lesson in distance shooting on my range. Four eager New Yorkers . . . and Tyrone Cypress.

"What exactly is the point of this?" Cypress said as I instructed guests at the shooting range.

He didn't mutter the words under his breath or murmur them to himself. Cypress had only arrived this morning, but I'd already concluded that his vocal cords were permanently cranked to ten. He wasn't just loud—he boomed every word as if making a vital pronouncement. When he boomed this, my students all jumped . . . four guests who'd never handled a gun in their lives, jumping while holding loaded ones.

I quickly told them to practice unloading. As I walked to Cypress, the other guests sidled away from him. The man stood almost a foot above my five-six, with a thick, sturdy build. Grizzled brown hair hung to his shoulders, and a thick beard hid half his face.

"If you aren't interested in shooting—" I began.

"I'm just asking why you're doing this."

"I'm teaching my guests the proper use—"

"Not you," he said with a dismissive wave. "I know why *you're* here. Making a few bucks off folks who want to experience the great outdoors but don't actually know the first fucking thing about it."

"Mr—"

“It’s Ty. For you, anyway. These yahoos can call me Mr. Cypress. My question was why *they’re* doing this? Do any of them actually plan to hunt? If they do, are they going to eat what they kill, or just take pictures to hang in their high-rise condos?”

“We don’t offer hunting at the Red Oak,” I said. “But for those guests who wish to do so, we subcontract with an outfit that donates the meat to charity. What I teach *here* is marksmanship.”

He snorted. “And what’s the point of *that*?”

I kept my voice calm. “Sport. We also offer white-water rafting and rock climbing. I do both of those in my free time, too, with absolutely no plans to ever be lost in the Alaskan wilderness and need to raft or climb my way to safety.”

He peered at me. “You ever been to Alaska?”

“Once.”

“You like it?”

I waved at the surrounding forest. “Oddly, yes, I seem to be a fan of nature.”

“You’re Canadian, though, right?”

“We are in Canada, and yes, I am Canadian.”

“Then you should be going to the Yukon, not Alaska. Fewer people. Fewer”—he peered at the quartet—“Americans.”

“I’m quite fond of people,” I said. “Including Americans. But I appreciate the travel advice. Now, either you’re here to shoot—”

“I don’t use guns.”

“All right, so you’re not a hunter, either. Perhaps you’d rather—”

“I *am* a hunter. I just don’t use guns. It’s unsporting.”

“If you like bows, we have a few of those.”

“Don’t mind bows. Prefer the hands-on approach, though.”

“Uh-huh.”

I really had to start screening guests. We’d picked up business enough in the last few years that I could afford to do that.

I continued, “Well, should you happen to encounter our local black bears, I’d strongly suggest you not try the ‘hands-on’ approach. Just run.”

He chuckled. “If you think I can outrun any bear, you have a generous opinion of a big man’s agility level. Nah, black bears aren’t a problem. I’ve fought them off before. It’s the browns that are trouble.”

“We don’t have any grizzlies here, so you’re safe.” I turned to the others. “Let’s reload—”

“One more question,” Cypress said.

I tensed. “Uh-huh.”

“You’ve got a guy, right? Boyfriend?”

“Yeah,” one of the Americans said. “She’s definitely got a boyfriend. Sorry.”

The others tittered, but Cypress wasn’t hitting on me. Whatever vibes he gave off, that wasn’t one of them.

Either Cypress didn’t realize that the Americans were mocking him, or he just didn’t care. He continued with, “You’ve got a boyfriend who runs this place with you, right?”

“I have a boyfriend who *works for me*, yes.”

“But he’s not around. That’s what I heard. One of the other guests asked your housekeeper about fishing, and evidently, that’s more his thing.”

Well, no, Jack’s “thing” was staying as far from the guests as possible. And for once, I really didn’t blame him. However, he did handle the group excursions that bored me to tears, like fishing.

“Yes,” I said. “John’s in charge of the fishing trips, but he’s not here. If you’d like, Owen can—”

“John, huh? When are you expecting ‘John’ back?”

“Probably not this weekend,” I said. “So if you want to try fishing—”

“Oh, I know how to fish,” he said as he walked off in the direction of the lodge. “I’ll go when he’s back. I’m booked here for the whole week.”

#

Jack was away on a job. The same “job” that I did part-time. For him, though, it was a career, one he was easing out of. Not retiring. That implied reaching a point where he would never take another hit, and I couldn’t see that happening. No more than I was ready to give up the occasional one now that I could make ends meet without the extra income.

“Making ends meet” was what got me into the business of part-time assassination. Well, no, it really started when I screwed up my career as a cop by shooting a serial killer . . . after he’d been arrested. After a very public shaming, I’d bought the lodge with my severance money and my mother’s “please go away” early inheritance cash. One day, a regular discovered I was in danger of bankruptcy and offered me some side work. The regular happened to be part of a New York crime family, and his “side work” involved taking out a traitor. That became my part-time job, and I’d gained a reputation for two kinds of hits: criminal-on-criminal and what I must call vigilantism, as uncomfortable as the word made me.

I met Jack a few years later, when his mentor, Evelyn, heard of a new woman in our male-dominated field and sent Jack to investigate. He returned and suggested I wouldn’t be a good student for her . . . and then proceeded to mentor me himself.

In the last few years, Jack had begun whittling down his clientele to those he couldn’t afford to cut loose. Not “couldn’t afford” financially—he was set for life there. But in a

career like ours, there are clients you don't refuse, for the sake of your continued health. With the current job, a desperate former client had called him in after two hitmen failed to kill their target. Jack had done the job and was just tidying up loose ends, expected home soon . . . I hoped.

2 - Jack

When Jack told Nadia that he'd be late tidying up, she'd hesitated, and he knew she was thinking that his work—like hers—didn't need tidying.

“Something with the client?” she'd asked.

“Yeah,” he'd said, which was true, but he wasn't going into detail until he got home. She'd be furious, and he wanted to be there for that, to watch her curse out the Sabatos in a way he could not.

The Sabatos had fucked him over. It happened. Except it never used to happen with a family like this. Which made him feel like an old man, whining about the good old days, and what was the world coming to. Nadia would roll her eyes and say that fifty-three was hardly old. Sometimes he felt like it, though, when he was out here in the world with Nadia back home at the lodge. An old man too far from the fire, chilled to the bone and world-weary.

Truth was that this job had always been full of clients like the Sabatos. Sometimes betrayal was situational; other times it was generational—the new family members disrespecting the customs of the old. And sometimes, well, fuck, sometimes you had to face the fact that being a hitman meant you worked for people who solved their problems with bullet holes and shallow graves.

If Jack was cranky about the whole thing, it wasn't even that he was genuinely upset by the betrayal so much as that he'd find it inconvenient to resolve. He should be home with Nadia by now. Instead, he had to deal with this shit.

Jack sat in Ross Sabato's night-dark living room and waited. He didn't smoke a cigarette. Didn't go into the kitchen and grab a beer. Didn't put his feet up on the furniture. Because *some* people understood the concept of respect.

At 12:30 a.m., keys sounded in the lock, and Ross Sabato walked in, talking to his nephew. A series of fast beeps as one disarmed the security system. The two men headed to

the kitchen. Opened the fridge. Popped a couple of beers. And then stepped into the living room.

“Holy—” Ross began. Then he went for his gun.

“Don’t,” Jack said.

Ross hesitated, but his nephew continued fumbling to pull his weapon.

“Don’t,” Jack repeated.

Ross motioned for his nephew to stop.

“Jack. How the hell did you get past . . . ?” Ross trailed off with a strained laugh. “Stupid question, huh?”

Jack said nothing.

“The guy who sold me that security system guaranteed it,” Ross said. “Guess I’ll be asking for a refund.”

Jack remained silent. Ross shifted from one foot to the other. Then he straightened, and the fake hearty note returned to his voice.

“David? You guys haven’t met. This is Jack.”

The young man started forward with his hand extended, but a headshake from Ross stopped him.

David motioned to the light switch. “Mind if I . . . ?”

Another headshake from his uncle. Then Ross cleared his throat.

“I heard you solved our problem. Not that I ever doubted it.” Ross chuckled. “So I guess you’re here to collect.”

“No.”

Three seconds of silence. Jack swore he heard Ross swallow.

“Well, uh,” Ross began, “as long as you are here . . . David? Go grab two-fifty from the safe. No, make it three. A bonus for efficiency.”

When David left, Jack said, “You’ve got a problem.”

“Hmm?”

“Staffing issue. Three guys for one job?”

Ross gave a forced chuckle. “Right. Well, that’s what I told the family—you get what you pay for. But with you not taking on more work, they didn’t want to pay top dollar for an unknown. So they went cheap and hired internally.”

“Internal’s fine. Boys just need training. Let me talk to them.”

Another chuckle. “I doubt we can afford your rates for that, Jack. They’ll be fine.”

“It’s a freebie. Me and you? Worked together a long time. Built up a trust. Now I won’t take your jobs? Leave you in the lurch? Bad form. Give me two days with your guys. No charge.”

Sweat trickled down Sabato’s cheek. Jack waited. As he did, his phone nudged his hip with the soft vibrate of an incoming call. His first instinct was to look at the clock. It’d be nearly three a.m. back home, and Nadia would only ever call at that hour for an emergency.

Time to get this over with. Fast.

Jack rose.

Ross started to back up and then stopped himself. “What’s this about, Jack? I consider myself a man of some sensitivity, and I can tell something’s wrong.”

“Call your two guys. Now.”

Ross swallowed. “All right. Let me go in the other room and—”

“Here. Now.” Jack stepped forward. “Don’t text. Call. Where I can hear.”

“David will go get them. They’ll be here in twenty minutes.”

“Ghosts move fast,” Jack said.

“Wh-what?”

“They’re dead. The mark killed them. You told me they couldn’t get a shot. Never even got past the setup. I asked if the mark saw either. You said, no. Never got that close. Just, apparently, close enough to get shot by him. You set me up.”

Ross’s eyes rounded. “I’d never—”

“You weren’t trying to kill me. You aren’t that stupid. But if you’d told me two men died pulling this job? I’d have said no. Wouldn’t do it.”

“Sure, it was a bit more dangerous than usual, but you’re careful. You weren’t in any—”

“Danger? No. Because I did my homework. I always do my homework. Knew your men were dead. Still did the job ’cause I gave my word. The problem? The mark expected a hit. If I didn’t do my homework? Took you at your word? Could have ended up like your boys.”

David appeared in the doorway. He looked from Jack to his uncle.

“How much will it take to fix this, Jack?” Ross said. You’re right. I withheld vital information, and that was unfair. So, name your price. David can bring more.”

Jack took the bag from the younger man, set it on the coffee table and counted bundles. “Two hundred grand for the job. That’s what we agreed.” He took that and added another two bundles. “One extra day to sort this shit. Twenty grand.” He put the money into his satchel and left the rest in David’s bag.

“Take that, Jack,” Sabato said, waving at the extra. “Please.”

“Twenty a day overtime. That’s my rate. The price for your fuck-up?” He turned to Sabato. “Don’t ever contact me again.”

“I—”

“Not for a job. Not for anything. Don’t even mention my name. I hear you did . . . ?”

Jack shrugged. That was all he did. Given his occupation, spelling it out was a waste of breath.

He hefted his satchel, walked past the two men and continued out the rear door.

#

Jack checked his phone as soon as he was outside. It hadn't been Nadia who called. Hadn't been an emergency of any kind, but simply a returned call from Felix, another hitman and one of the very few who had Jack's direct number. Also one of the few who Jack would consider a friend.

He waited until he was at his motel and then called back.

"It's me," he said.

"You rang?" Felix said.

"Yeah. Ross Sabato. Blacklist him."

"Dare I ask for details?"

Jack said nothing.

Felix sighed. "Blacklisting works so much better when pros know what a client has done to deserve it."

"Just say it's from me. That's enough."

"True, but still . . . Sharing a few details helps."

"Doesn't help me. I don't give details. That's why I'm still alive."

"So am I."

"Yeah. Proof of miracles." He ignored Felix's protest and said, "Sabato misrepresented a job. The kind of misrepresentation that puts us in a grave. Or behind bars."

"Ah, got it. See? That wasn't so difficult. So, how's Dee?"

"Home."

"I asked *how* she was, not *where*." A deep sigh. "Clearly, we haven't spoken in quite some time if I actually expect you to carry on a conversation. But I must still make a token effort. Do you remember Cypher?"

Jack tensed but only gave a laconic, "Yeah."

“He was one of Evelyn’s, wasn’t he? Which hardly narrows it down, so I suppose you might have forgotten.”

“Not him.”

Felix chuckled. “Yes, it would be difficult to forget our Mr. Cypher, once met. It’s been what, ten years? Fifteen? Perhaps even twenty? Last I heard, he got into some trouble on a job, pulled a kiss-and-tell.”

In other words, Cypher had warned the mark . . . probably after sleeping with her. Felix was being careful with his wording. It didn’t matter how secure their phones might be or that Felix himself was the tech expert who secured them. You never said more than you needed, though sometimes, Felix struggled with that concept.

“Heard that,” Jack said.

“Then you also heard the rumor that he didn’t survive the encounter. Our Mr. Cypher was never heard from again. Until now. He’s been in contact.”

Jack grunted a non-response.

“He called me asking after you.”

Jack tensed again but still kept his “Yeah?” casual.

“I never got the impression you two were close,” Felix said.

That was one way of putting it. Another was that Cypher had screwed Jack over on a job, and Jack had gotten him back, which should have been the end of the matter. Only Cypher seemed to think Jack’s response had been disproportionate to his crime, and he’d told everyone who’d listen that he was going to kick Jack’s ass “for good.” There were exactly three pros in the world who could say that and make Jack start looking over his shoulder. Cypher was one of them.

“What’d he want?” Jack asked.

“Nothing. Just asked about you, how you were doing, what you’d been up to.”

“And you said . . . ?”

“Nothing incriminating. You know that.”

But he’d said *something*. Felix always did.

“What exactly did you tell him?” Jack said.

“Just that you were semi-retired, had left the country, that sort of thing. Do you actually remember Cypher? If you did, then you’d know I could practically hand him your address, and he still wouldn’t find you. Mr. Cypher is not exactly a mental giant.”

That was Felix’s mistake. Cypher might not be a certifiable genius—most pros weren’t. Sure, there were indeed guys who could barely write their names . . . but then there were the ones who acted that way because it was a convenient fiction. That was Cypher. And if he’d been asking after Jack, then it didn’t matter how little Felix gave him—it would be enough.

Jack needed to get home. Now.