

## Chapter One

“You’re a scary man, Mr. Hawke.”

Killian Hawke lifted his glass of bourbon and drank the last of it. It was one of his favorites. The Pappy Van Winkle’s Family Reserve 23 Year Old. “I’m just sitting here enjoying the last of our excellent meal and even better bourbon, Robert.”

Killian’s potential client, Robert Hawthorne—the wealthy owner of HT Industries smiled—cradling his own glass.

“And yet, my son fidgeted through the entire meal, and has now escaped to the bar. He kept looking at you like he expected you to leap across the table and take him down.”

They were sitting in the Per Se restaurant, one of New York’s best, but a little stuffy for Killian’s taste. He flicked a look at the bar, where Andy Hawthorne sat, waiting for the bartender to pour him another cocktail.

“I’m sorry he felt that way. He seems—”

“Lazy, entitled, and just out to have a good time and spend my money.” Robert sighed.

“He skates along, doing the bare minimum at HT. I worry about when I’m gone.”

Robert’s concerns summed up Killian’s thoughts on Andy, as well. The man didn’t appear interested in work, and every time Killian had looked at him, he’d twitched and had another drink.

Killian didn’t have time for lazy people who didn’t take responsibility. Responsibility was the cornerstone of his life.

For as far back as he could remember, he'd taken care of his mother and sister. Then, he'd joined the CIA. Being a CIA agent meant you had to take extreme responsibility for everything. On a mission, it was vital to ensure success. Vital in order to survive.

Killian now ran his own business, Sentinel Security. His clients depended on him and his team for top-notch security, and his employees depended on him for their livelihoods.

He couldn't ever be as frivolous as Andy Hawthorne. He had too many people depending on him. He'd never had the safety net of a wealthy father.

"I'm sorry, Robert."

The older man waved his hand. "It's not your fault." He shot Killian a small smile. "I wish I had a son like you, then I wouldn't have to worry. Loyalty, hard work ethic, trustworthiness. Your traits are ones that aren't always appreciated by the young."

Killian's grip tightened on his glass. He hadn't been anyone's son in a long time. His father had left when he was young, and his mother hadn't coped well afterward. She'd suffered, grieved, and checked out, which meant Killian had needed to run the house and care for his younger sister. Mentally, he shook off the past. He knew there was no point dwelling.

For a second, he missed Saskia. Not too long ago, his sister had fallen in love and moved across the country to San Francisco. He missed their lunch dates, and the occasional late-evening phone calls.

She was happy, that was the important thing.

And if Camden Morgan ever made her unhappy, Killian would kill him and make sure no one ever found him.

That thought cheered Killian up.

"I can't help you with your son, but I can help your business with cybersecurity," Killian said.

"Good." Robert nodded. "Everything you've outlined is exactly what we need. We can't

afford another attack. Bloody criminal hackers. Let's sign the paperwork." The man glanced at the bar, then sighed. Killian followed his gaze and noted that Andy was chatting up a voluptuous blonde.

"Luckily, I have a young daughter who's demonstrating that she has a sharp brain and likes to work," Robert said. "I think I'd better get her trained up."

"I'll have my assistant send the contract over, and set up a date for our team to start." Killian stood, and slipped into his suit jacket. "Thanks for dinner, Robert."

The man nodded. "I'll be in touch."

Killian strode across the restaurant. It was late, and he just wanted to get home. Maybe he'd have another bourbon and go over a few emails. His inbox was always overflowing with things to deal with.

His mind turned to a certain red-haired CIA agent who was currently missing. Two days, and no one had heard from Devyn "Hellfire" Hayden.

Killian's fingers curled into a fist, his gut tight. Devyn could take care of herself. She'd proven it many times before.

So why the hell hadn't she checked in? Another deep-cover agent, Shade, had given Killian the heads-up. If Shade was worried, something was wrong.

The thought of Devyn being hurt, or worse...

Killian's mouth flattened. *Fuck it.* He'd clear his work schedule for a few days, and go and find her.

As he neared the front door, he felt a brush at his side. He whirled and caught the wrist of a small, curvy brunette in a tight, gray dress. She was slipping something in his pocket.

She smiled. "Hi."

Killian opened the note. It was a phone number.

"I've been watching you all evening," she said. "I'm in town for a few days, if you're

interested in spending some time together.”

He folded the note and handed it back to her. “I’m not, but thanks.”

Her nose wrinkled in disappointment, but she nodded.

As he headed out of the restaurant, his mind wasn’t on a curvy brunette. Instead, he thought of red hair, the color of a violent sunset, and a long, athletic body with just enough curves to tempt a man.

He blew out a breath and walked outside. Spring had hit New York City, fighting back the last dregs of winter.

The valet driver saw him and grinned. “I’ll be right back, sir.”

“Thanks.”

A few moments later, his red Aston Martin DBS Zagato pulled up with a throaty purr. He tipped the man and took his key. The sound of tires screeching caught his ears.

His head whipped up.

A silver Porsche Taycan sped down the street. Behind it, a red Chevy Camaro was giving chase.

Killian moved toward the street, frowning.

The Taycan sped up, then executed a perfect, one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turn, tires squealing. The car rocked, as it stopped in the center of the street.

*What the fuck?*

A woman got out.

Killian stiffened. She wore fitted, black pants, a white tank, and a beige, fitted jacket over it. Her russet-red hair was up in a ponytail.

She stalked down the center of the street toward the oncoming Camaro with a blank, composed face.

Then she lifted her arm, aiming a handgun at the speeding car.

She fired.

*Fuck.* Killian scowled. Screams and shouts broke out behind him.

Bullets hit the windscreen of the Camaro and it swerved, but kept coming.

The redhead didn't move. *The little idiot.*

Killian reached under his jacket and pulled out his SIG Sauer. He braced, aimed, and shot out the front tire of the Camaro.

It swerved wildly, dodging around the woman.

She turned her head and met his gaze.

He had a second to take in the brilliant-green eyes before men got out of the Camaro.

Killian watched as one pulled out an AR-15 rifle.

*Fucking hell.*

"Take cover!" he roared.

The redhead sprinted toward Killian. He leaped into his car and started the engine.

Gunfire ripped through the night. The passenger side door wrenched open.

The woman returned fire, then dived in.

"Go, go!" she cried.

Killian slammed his foot on the accelerator, and peeled away. The twin turbo V12 engine was powerful and fast. He sped down the street, and quickly turned a corner.

"What trouble have you gotten yourself into now?" Killian asked.

Devyn "Hellfire" Hayden twisted around, looking back behind them. "We've lost them." She sank back in her seat.

"Well?" he prompted. He wasn't going to tell her he was fucking relieved to see her. He scanned her body. No obvious blood, that he could see.

She turned her head to glance at him. One of her eyes was swollen and bruised. She also had the shadow of a bruise on the side of her jaw.

Anger punched through him. He reached out and ran his fingers along her jaw line.

“Who did it?” he asked icily.

“I don’t know.”

“You’re on an active mission?”

“No.”

Killian stroked her jaw again. Her skin was so smooth. He shifted his thumb, feathering it over her cheek. Her eyelids flickered.

He pulled his hand back.

If she wasn’t on a CIA mission, then what the hell had just happened? “Shade left me a message and said you didn’t check in yesterday.”

“You two been worrying about me?” she asked.

Whoever had hurt her, Killian would kill them, unless Devyn got to them first.

“Start at the beginning, Devyn.”

“Someone tried to kill me.” She looked at him. “And they’re planning to kill you next.”

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Devyn Hayden had never met a man like Killian “Steel” Hawke.

He’d made a name for himself at the CIA, as a skilled, driven agent who always got the job done. He’d become a legend. Now, he was the wealthy owner of a private security firm, and if anything, his reputation had grown.

She also knew he was deadly, organized, and precise, and did she mention deadly?

He handled the powerful car with ridiculous ease. His long, strong body was clad in a designer suit that made him look hot as hell, but didn’t fool her for one second. The man was a predator. His chiseled, hawkish face made a woman’s eyes want to linger, but the dark gaze made most people flinch.

Devyn shifted in her seat. Not that her eyes lingered. After years of working as a spy, she

was immune to handsome men.

*So why is your skin still tingling from his touch?*

She was *not* listening to her inner bitch today. She was always judgy as hell.

“I had a few days of leave. I came to New York for some shopping.”

“Shopping?” he said, as if she’d said she was coming to go pole dancing.

“I do shop, Hawke.”

“For guns and knives?”

“Ha. No, clothes. Anyway, two assholes jumped me on Fifth Avenue.”

“Jumped you?”

She was not admitting to being distracted by a couple and their small child. The way the man had held the pretty toddler snug in the curve of his arm, and how he had his other arm wrapped securely around his wife. They’d all been smiling and happy.

She’d never had a family life like that. She’d grown up in a dirty trailer, with no father, and a mean, alcoholic mother. And there’d been no kind grandmother, or well-meaning neighbor to look after her, either.

Devyn had fought hard to survive, to scrape by until she could escape. She’d left that trailer, and that skinny, redheaded girl far behind. She’d been determined to make something of herself.

“Devyn?”

Killian’s voice brought her back to the present.

Damn, she knew better than to zone out, or let her guard down. Look what happened while she was staring at some cute family.

“Right, two guys jumped me, dragged me into an alley. Not amateurs either. Based on the accents, I’d say they were Eastern European, and ex-military.”

“Mercenaries.”

She nodded. “Well-trained ones. They got a lucky hit in. Tied me up and tossed me in the trunk of a car. They drove me to a basement apartment not far from Central Park. There was a scuffle, and I got a lovely hit to the head—” she waved a hand at her face “—and lost consciousness. I came to hours later, locked in a closet. I decided not to stay.” It had taken a bit of time to get the ropes loose, escape the closet, then pick the lock on the bedroom she’d been kept in. Then she’d “borrowed” a car from her kidnappers.

Killian made a sound. “Are they still alive?”

“One is,” she replied. “Mostly.”

His long fingers clenched on the wheel of his sexy car. The car suited him, of course. Hmm, she wondered if he’d let her drive it. She’d liked that sweet Porsche.

“So, who were they?” he asked.

“They wouldn’t say. They said they were supposed to incapacitate and keep me contained until whoever was paying them turned up.” She smoothed a hand down her ponytail. “They said I was on this guy’s kill list.”

“Kill list?” Killian’s brows drew together.

“That’s what they said. I don’t actually think they knew the identity of whoever was paying them.” She gently probed the bruise on her cheek. It wasn’t bad. “I feel so special being on an assassin’s hit list. One of the men did say it was helpful that I came to New York, because the next target is here. After some persuasion, they told me Killian Hawke was next.”

He grunted and didn’t look concerned, although the man had a hell of a poker face.

“I came looking for you to warn you. Unfortunately, some of them followed me.”

“We need to get you somewhere safe, and get those bruises checked out.”

Devyn made a sound. “This is nothing.” She’d lost count of all the injuries she’d sustained from missions.

His dark gaze sliced her way like a laser. “You’ll get checked.”



She grinned. “Hawke, you aren’t my boss, or my man, so I don’t take orders from you.”

“I’m guessing you don’t always follow your boss’ orders, either. But too bad, because what I say goes.”

She crossed her arms. “That alpha dog mentality might work with your employees, but not me.”

“We’ll see,” he said darkly.

His tone made her want to shiver, but she fought it back. The CIA had trained her well not to show her emotion.

“After you get checked, we’ll find out who wants us dead,” Killian said.

She laughed. “Steel and Hellfire? The list of people who wants us dead will be a *very* long one.”

But a smidgen of worry crept in. Who else might be on that list?

“For now, we’ll head back to Sentinel Security headquarters,” he said.

She knew about his big, converted warehouse in Chelsea. He’d spent a small fortune renovating an old, brick cargo warehouse to house Sentinel Security. The bottom levels were all large, arched doorways and windows, while Killian’s architects had added a modern glass-and-steel addition to the top, along with several, green-filled terraces. She’d studied pictures of it.

Devyn had just wanted to warn Hawke. Their relationship was competitive and...well, she wasn’t exactly sure what else, but they rubbed sparks off each other. Hot, fiery ones. Still, she didn’t want him hurt, and she knew he could look after himself.

She wasn’t a good team player. She was used to working alone. She preferred it.

She’d been alone all her life, and she had no plans to team up with anyone.

No, she’d track down this assassin on her own and make him regret his life choices.

The car slowed, and Killian frowned.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“The engine is sluggish.”

“Maybe it needs a service.”

He shot her a look. “All my cars are well taken care of.”

“How many cars do you have?”

“A few.”

Devyn didn’t own a car. She wasn’t ever home in Washington D.C. long enough, and when she was there, she just took the Metro. When she had a mission, she just acquired what she needed.

She stroked the leather seat beneath her. “This one is a beauty.”

“It should be. It’s one of only nineteen made.”

*Wow.* “How much did it cost?”

“A lot.”

“Boys and their toys.”

But now she heard a funny clunking noise come from the engine. She guessed even expensive cars had engine problems.

“Something’s wrong,” Killian said.

“I can hear that.”

“No. The car was recently serviced. It drove perfectly to the restaurant.”

Her pulse spiked. “Get out. Now!”

He slammed on the brakes, and they threw the doors open.

Devyn leaped out just as the car exploded.

*Fucking fuck!*

She hit the ground, her arms over her head. She felt heat wash over her and smelled smoke.

*Killian.*

God, had he made it out? Her heart lodged in her throat.

She rolled over and sat up. “Killian!”

She couldn’t see him. She staggered to her feet.

The gorgeous car was a flaming ruin. She took a step, and dizziness washed over her.

Dammit, where was he? He couldn’t be hurt. He was Killian fucking Hawke.

Then, a big shadow rounded the car. His muscular form was illuminated by the flames.

Devyn released a shaky breath.

He was okay.

He stalked toward her like a hunter on the prowl, and she couldn’t look away.