

**Sample Chapters from**

**Dead Men: Season 1**

**By**

**CL Walker**

## Chapter 1

West eyed the dry, cracked dirt outside the car warily. The temperature outside the air-conditioning was nearing forty degrees Celsius and predicted to rise, and she didn't handle heat well.

'We going in or what?' Chris said as he put his hand on the keys to turn off the Jeep. West's hand shot out involuntarily and stopped him. The car was old – a beat-up 2016 model – but the AC still worked perfectly.

'Just a minute,' she said, closing her eyes.

'You and the weather have a messed up relationship.' Chris pulled his hand away from the keys, content to let her relax.

Gregory piped up from the back. 'Maybe you're going through early menopause.' West waited a beat, letting an uncomfortable silence build before responding.

Shelley beat her to the punch, slapping Greg on the back of the head. 'Idiot.' It was the most the big guy had said all day.

'Let's roll.' She opened her door and forced herself out. The air hit her harder than any punch she'd ever taken; her throat dried up in a second and every inch of skin began sweating immediately. 'Fuck me. Who the hell would live here?' She started toward the Church of the Martyrs without waiting for her men, eager to get to the shade of the forest.

'You picked it, Captain,' Chris said, laughing. Greg and Shelley were chuckling too and she knew how ridiculous she looked speed-walking to shade that wasn't going to be much cooler.

'Fuck off,' she said. 'And I'm not your captain.' The shade was a disappointment, as expected, but it got her out of the sun at least. She waited impatiently for the guys to join her. They took their time, enjoying her discomfort a little too much.

They were in Darnleyville, a spec of dirt on the map they wouldn't otherwise have noticed, but there was a job waiting in the church. A small town with three old colonial buildings and a church making up the town centre, with shacks bulking it up otherwise. Impulgani – the country they'd landed in after the shit hit the fan – was big on shacks. Most of Africa these days was big on shacks.

They were drawing attention, making too much noise for a group of people who were mostly white and probably dressed better than the mayor. She took a deep breath, ready to shout at them to hurry up, but thought better of it. It's just the heat, she thought.

'So tell me where I went wrong,' Greg said. He was the only one of them who might have been able to fit in, had he not been so attractive. His parents were from Ghana and he even spoke a little of the local language.

'You insulted the captain,' Chris replied. 'You implied there's something wrong with her.'

'I imply there's something wrong with you all the time.' Greg stopped walking and after a few steps so did Chris. Shelley ignored them as he ignored most things. 'The thing that has your delicate sensibilities in a twist is, she's a woman.'

'No, it's that it was a messed up thing to say.'

'Because she's a woman.'

'Because you don't insult people in that way.'

'You're always talking about treating everyone equal. How everyone is the same, really, deep down inside. If I mentioned your crippling inability to talk to women, and how it's a sign of your mommy issues, you'd let it slide.'

'I'd break your nose, actually.' Chris wiped sweat from his brow. 'That's different though.'

'What's different is that your wannabe hippy creed is bullshit. You expect us to believe everyone is equal, but treat some people special.' He grinned, as though he'd scored a decisive victory. 'But people are different and you're full of shit.' He continued walking.

'You're going to pretend this is a social thing? An equal rights thing? For fuck's sake.' He hurried to catch up, kicking up dust from the dirt road. 'You're meant to treat everyone with respect, you ridiculous tool.'

'That wasn't very respectful. I'm hurt.'

'You're an ass.'

'Touché.'

They finally caught up and West turned toward the church, hoping the old building might be cooler.

'Something you're forgetting,' Greg continued. He shut up when West turned round and stepped between them.

'Enough, both of you. Chris, you don't say shit like that to a woman, especially one with a gun. Greg, stop defending me, or I'll come over all hysterical and hurt you.' She waited for one of them to say something. When they kept their mouths shut she turned back to the church and walked quickly up the steps.

'Sorry captain,' they said in unison. She kept walking but they saw the brief pause and laughed. She'd settle with them later.

The call had come through the usual channels, a local boy knocking on the door of their shitty apartment and letting them know someone wanted to hire some muscle. They were meant to be in hiding, keeping a low profile and staying out of trouble, but they had to eat and they only had one set of skills. They were good at what they did though, and news got around. If you needed violence done to someone, or needed protection from the violence of someone else, and you had some money, they were your best bet.

Impulgani was not a large country. For all the warlords and factions that had sprung up after the last war, the country wasn't much bigger than Wales. Sandwiched between Ghana and Burkina Faso, the landlocked country had a lot of problems only a gun seemed capable of fixing. Luckily, West and the guys had plenty of guns.

While the outside of the church appeared run down and neglected, the inside had been taken care of. The pews were varnished and clean, the stone floor swept and maintained. It couldn't get away with stained glass windows and they'd bricked them up, but used active paint on the inside to give the appearance of having them. Fake sunlight shone from the paint, giving the interior a pleasant glow.

The heat had somehow been defeated by the church, and West briefly considered thanking God.

A busy white woman hurried down the aisle toward them. She wore enough of the local handmade jewellery to jingle as she walked. 'You're Captain West?'

'Just West.'

'I'm so glad you're here,' she said, shaking West's hand for a little too long. 'I'm Reverend Mary. Thank you for coming.'

'You need something?' West said. The abruptness of the question caught the woman off guard and she frowned for a moment. Then the smile returned and she was waving them toward the back of the building.

'I think we should speak in private.'

'Seems pretty private to me,' Chris said.

'People are welcome to enter whenever they want,' she replied. 'I don't think this conversation is for general consumption.'

'Fair enough,' West said and followed her. The guys fell in behind her and they left the delightfully cool interior of the church and entered one of the side buildings and on into an office. Luckily someone had thought to include air-conditioning when they built the place, and while everyone else found their seats for the negotiation, West stood over the AC and let the sweat freeze for a moment.

'Give her a second,' Chris said. 'She's having a disagreement with the sun.'

'It is a little warm.' Mary opened a cupboard and revealed a bar fridge. She grabbed cans of sugary drinks for everyone. 'This should help.'

'You're a saint,' West said, abandoning the AC and grabbing the can. The hiss of escaping carbon lightened her mood immeasurably. 'Now, what can we help you with?'

The chair squeaked as Mary took her place behind the desk. The office was barely big enough for the group; West took the chair opposite their new client while Shelley and Greg tried to sit comfortably on a small leather couch. Chris stood behind West like a bodyguard.

'This church has been here since the country was called the Rothwell Republic. We've been a stable part of the local community for more than a hundred years.'

'And something is threatening that?' Chris said.

'A local gang. Practically a militia.' She was ready to cry, West saw, which would make things take longer than they needed to.

'And?' she said quickly, before Chris could try and comfort her, or get her to open up, or something.

'Their leader is a guy called Abi. He's been threatening us since he arrived, and last week he and his goons started terrorising us. They came in and started drinking and fighting in the church. They were grabbing the staff and threatening to... do things to them. To me.'

She started to cry and West could feel Chris moving into comfort mode. She spoke before he could. 'You said he recently arrived. Where from?'

'Somewhere up north. His father runs guns for the government and I think Abi is here to expand the business.'

'Why pick a fight with you?' West said. There was something here that didn't work. Mary was too perfect as the victim, too practiced. Or West had become too cynical, she conceded. But probably the first thing.

'I don't know. We haven't done anything.' She looked away, studying the wood of her desk.

'Bullshit.' West let the word hang in the air, enjoying the shocked look on the church lady's face. 'You're full of shit and we're leaving if you don't tell us what's really happening here.'

'I am,' Mary said, practically squeaking.

It was a gamble, and she could be wrong, but West didn't think the church had any money to pay them anyway. There wasn't a job here, but there was a lie.

'We're going to leave.' She stood and put the drink on the desk. The condensation seemed to flee the sides of the can to pool on the wood. 'Thanks for the drink, but we have to go.'

'Yeah, thanks,' Greg said, before tipping the last of his can down his throat.

'Wait. Please.' Mary was pleading and it was pretty convincing. West almost lost her resolve, but they weren't in the charity business. They needed money.

'Good luck,' Shelley said. His low, growly voice seemed to surprise Mary and for a moment, barely perceptibly, she dropped the act. West grinned.

'Wait.'

'The Jeep is getting hotter the longer we stay here,' Chris said. He nodded to Mary as he turned to leave. 'The captain will probably melt.'

'I'm not your captain,' West said. She waited for Shelley and Greg to shuffle around as they tried to get the door open. The office wasn't made for meetings of their size, or men of Shelley's size.

Mary spoke, stopping them with the tone change. She was all business, stern, no trace of the scared little woman left. 'We stockpile guns too. They can't prove it yet, but Abi is convinced.'

'For who?' West said, half turning back to face the desk. There were plenty of warlords in the country, and a few from outside who chose not to see national borders their ancestors had no choice in drafting.

'The resistance.' Mary lifted West's can off the table and slid a coaster under it. 'The church is opposed to the current regime and is helping to change it.'

West turned back to the guys, checking with each of them before deciding anything. It was tricky messing with the government; they were supposed to be hiding. Participating in a coup, even tangentially, was probably a bad idea.

Nobody lodged an objection and she returned to her seat. The guys stayed where they were, filling the room in as menacing a way as possible.

'What's the job?'

'Kill Abi, and all his men.' She said it easily, as though asking them to mow her lawn. She was like a different woman.

'That all?' West leant forward, putting her elbows on the desk and smiling when Mary glared at her. 'That'll be pretty expensive.'

'No. You'll do it for free.' She didn't react to West's bark of laughter. 'I had hoped to get your help in sympathy, but no matter.'

'Are you high?' West asked, forcing on her serious face. 'Have you been sampling some of the local delicacies?'

'Are you a nun?' Shelley said. His voice cut through the room; West would give a lot to get people's attention as easily as the big guy. 'I've never killed a nun.'

'I know who you are and I'll tell your former employers.' Mary said it as though bored, as though it was beneath her to trot the threat out. The façade fell away when she saw the large pistol West suddenly had pointed at her.

'I'm sorry, I missed that. I couldn't hear it over the sound of blood rushing to my trigger finger. Want to try it again?' She might not be able to silence a room with only her voice, but

when she slipped into business mode people paid attention. Firepower helped too.

'I'm not the only one here who knows,' Mary said quickly. 'And I've arranged for the message to go out if something should happen to me.'

West's grip on the pistol remained easy, ready. It would be simple to squeeze the trigger and call her bluff. If she'd been alone she might have, but she had to consider the guys as well, as much as it currently pissed her off.

'I've never killed a bunch of nuns.' Shelley's tone carried more threat of violence than any weapon West had ever owned.

'Abi is a bad man, and his men will take the church if he has his way. He will rape us and when he finds the guns he will sell them to the government.' Mary was working hard to regain her composure. She breathed more heavily than was natural in the situation, but otherwise she was doing an admirable job for someone in the same room as the four of them.

'So we kill him and we're done?' West kept the pistol aimed where it was.

'And his men?'

'How many?' Chris said.

'Ten, maybe less. No problem for you.'

'And we're done?' West said. Mary nodded, a smile sliding into place. The look of superiority made West tighten her grip on the gun. 'If you fuck us I'll kill you, and to hell with your arranged message.'

'Understood.' Mary forced herself to relax in the squeaky chair. The smile she plastered on wasn't convincing. 'But we're on the same side. We both want what's right for this country, don't we?'

'We'll need guns and details,' West said.

'I'll have my assistant arrange it for you.'

'When would you like this done?'

'Now, if it's convenient.'

'We'll be in the church.' West put the gun away and they filed out.

'We could run,' Greg said. His hand hadn't left his pocket, where he had ready access to the knife strapped to his thigh.

'And kill her before we go,' Chris agreed.

The church was stifling, the light from the active paint on the walls unreal now that she had more time to examine it. A robot shaped like a praying mantis slipped out of a hole in the wall and began polishing the floor, obeying a schedule that had nothing to do with them.

'We're going to do it,' West said, staring at the robot. 'We'll take out this baby warlord and see what happens.'

'Bullshit, captain.' Greg, head and shoulders taller than her, stepped away from the look in West's eyes when she turned to him.

'We're doing it.'

'Think about it for a bit,' Chris tried, going for a conciliatory approach. 'We have options. Africa is huge.'

'The captain said we're doing it.' Shelley shut down the conversation and sat in one of the

pews.

They waited for a few minutes, each lost in their own thoughts. They'd been in combat with worse than this Abi guy. They'd faced the cyborgs known as tanks while working for the company, and that hadn't stopped them. It put them in hospital, but they came out on top.

Their luck would run out eventually, though, West knew. Every fight they ran toward was a risk, and when it wasn't even their fight, when they weren't going to get paid for it, it changed things. Forced her to think about what they were doing.

The assistant, a pretty local girl in her early twenties, eventually shuffled out from the adjacent building.

'If you'd please come this way.' Her English was perfect, with barely any accent. She wore a white dress that stood out against her dark skin, making it seem to glow.

They followed her out a door at the back of the church and then into a cellar beneath the old building. When she reached the heavy steel door at the bottom of the stairs she placed her hand in a seemingly random spot. Heavy locks disengaged on the far side and she opened it for them, gesturing them in and closing it behind them.

When the lights flickered to life West almost forgot why she was there.

'Mommy,' Greg said as he tapped her on the shoulder. 'Is this heaven?'

The cellar beneath the church had once been used to store wine and it was almost as big as the building was above ground. Where wine had once been left to rest, the good people of the Church of the Martyrs had stacked guns. Lots of guns.

'I'm getting a little hard,' Chris said as he stumbled into the room, his eyes wide and roaming.

The nearer shelves were filled with older weapons, rifles and pistols that probably hadn't seen any action since the drug wars back in the twenties. They were lovingly cleaned and repaired though, barely showing the scars of their battles. West was drawn more to these veterans than the shinier stuff further back, but Chris and Greg kept walking, heading for their own favourites. Shelley, ever practical, moved to inspect the shelves along the wall, where boxes of ammunition waited.

A table nearby contained all the equipment required to maintain the weaponry, including some automated arms for the finer work on more modern rifles.

Chris ran his hand along an entire rack of new assault rifles. His eyes were closed as his fingertips brushed each stock in turn. He made it most of the way down an aisle before removing one of the rifles.

'I found her,' he said, grinning as he tested the feel of it in his hands. 'My bride.'

Greg was in the back, where an overhead light had failed and plunged his favourite part of the candy store into darkness.

'Captain,' he called out, waving something over his head. 'They've got Arjies.'

An ARJ13 was Satan's version of a flashbang. Where the latter temporarily blinded and deafened you, an Arjie caused your eyes to burst in their sockets and eardrums to rupture. Sometimes your brain might begin to bleed, but it was the luck of the draw.

They were outlawed by civilised people, because civilised people – in West's opinion – were bloodthirsty assholes. They'd rather you die or lose a few limbs than do without your eyes.

'You can take whatever you can carry,' the girl said. West had forgotten she was there. 'I have GPS coordinates, when you're ready.'

West finished examining a gleaming hand cannon and turned to the girl. 'What's your name?' 'Marguerite.' She looked back at the door, as though realising for the first time she was trapped in a room with a bunch of psychos.

'Why do you have these guns here, Marguerite?'

'The resistance needs them. We keep them for when the army comes.'

She's so young, West thought, marvelling that her naiveté could survive in a place like Impulgani. The resistance were pointless and the government was never coming; they couldn't make it this far, even with their corporate sponsorship. The warlords were bastards, but they were bastards with better PR and larger armies. No government man was getting within a hundred miles of Darnleyville, so the resistance could posture all they wanted.

'Let's roll,' West called to the room.

'But, but, but,' Greg said in cartoonish shock.

'You heard the lady,' Chris said. He had a rifle and a spare, and he took a bag of ammo from Shelley as he joined West at the exit. 'We're out.'

'You're no fun,' Greg had a large scoped rifle held gingerly in his hands and a case of Arjies over his shoulder.

They left the cool cellar and waited while the girl locked up. The sun was past noon and the heat should have begun to recede, but all it seemed to mean was that the sun now hit West somewhere new. Something screamed in the forest nearby as the girl joined them and she flinched.

'GPS,' West said. She settled the handguns she'd chosen and started patting her pockets for her smokes.

'You're doing a good thing here,' Marguerite said. 'We might be the last thing the resistance needs. We have to survive.'

Chris stepped between West and girl. 'GPS, please.'

The girl reached into her pocket and handed Chris a slip of paper. West realised she'd left the pack in the car, meaning the lighter would be ready to explode when they got back.

'Be safe,' the girl said. 'God be with you.'

'For fuck's sake,' West said. She stomped back to the car before Marguerite brought out the worst in her.



## Chapter 2

‘New checkpoint,’ Chris said as they bounced down the highway. The shocks on the Jeep needed some work and the ride was terrible, but there was air-conditioning. They were practically alone on the old government highway, only sharing space intermittently with goats being driven between fields.

‘Who?’ West kept her eyes closed, luxuriating in the noisy fans blowing cool air over her. Another thing the Jeep needed was new fans; it seemed each of the existing ones had their unique noise ranging from clicking to a low whine.

‘Flag says Old Father.’ Chris took his foot off the accelerator.

‘He’s a bit far south,’ Greg said.

‘Don’t stop.’ West kept her eyes closed but her hand crept toward the new handgun in her shoulder holster.

‘They’ll be pissed.’ Chris floored it and they sprang forward.

‘Old Father would be more pissed if we killed his men. Besides, they know who we are and they know what the bounty is. They can do the math and work out how badly they want a repeat of last time.’

‘Ballsy,’ Greg said. He loaded a round in his new rifle, just in case.

Old Father owned most of the drug farms and kitchens in central Impulvani. His couriers ran them south through warlord territory and over the border into Ghana, to feed the appetites of the new cities springing up in Africa’s favourite country. They’d run into his men more than once, but never so far south.

They passed the checkpoint unmolested and were soon back on good, well maintained gang roads.

‘Where to?’ Chris said. He tapped his fingers on the steering wheel in time to some Ghanaian pop – G-pop to the hordes of Europeans who’d suddenly discovered it and made its artists wealthy. There was too much reggae in it for West, but Chris and Greg were fans.

‘Home. We need to think and I need a decent net connection.’

Home was the Place For You Apartments building in Tubuli, an up-and-coming town once upon a time. During the last civil war it housed government forces and was shelled mercilessly. Prior to that it had been a resort town thanks to its lake, but even then it hadn’t been much. Neon lit bars and anonymity, everything they needed to get by and none of the traffic of the bigger towns and cities.

West left the guys in the bar out front and headed up the alley to their apartments. They’d arranged private street access by helping the owner out with a protection racket when they moved in. He still dropped fruit off every morning as thanks. The inconvenienced guests who

now had to walk around the building to the far side were generally ignored.

Her room was a sty and it took her a few minutes to track down her Realmware glasses in the piles of clothes and old food containers. She swore she'd buy a maid at some point, something like the mantis at the church, but there was always something more important to spend the money on. Like food, or repairs on the Jeep.

When the glasses – an expensive wraparound version she'd brought with her from before their exile – were comfortably on her face she waved her hand and brought up the HUD. Graphics sprang to life across the lenses, time and date information, net access, and apps, the HUD was something everyone in the first world lived with constantly. She'd been hiding so long though, it had become novel again.

Tubuli had net access in theory, but it was patchy at best and slow, tapped, and expensive at worst. Place For You Apartments at least gave her a clean line, even if the owner did charge more than average for it.

A screen leapt to life at her command and she started tapping at icons and trying to get a search working, unsuccessfully. The icon for her PDA bounced in the corner of the HUD to get her attention and she tried to ignore it.

'I'm a smart, modern woman,' she told herself, as she did every time she tried to work out her HUD. 'I can do this, because even three year olds can do this.' Another blank screen sprang to life in the air over her coffee table, where it ignored her attempt to get a search engine to appear. 'I can field strip a tank. I can modify an AK47 so it makes coffee as it fires grenades. I can make this stupid fucking display do something useful.'

Jabbing violently at the virtual icons didn't make them work any better and eventually she admitted defeat. She brushed her fingertips over the bouncing, eager little PDA icon. Voxtar appeared in response, its robes billowing in dark smoke as electricity burst from every plug in the room to herald its arrival.

'Could you try toning it down, just a little?'

Voxtar's rumbly voice gave her an instant headache. 'I am the gatekeeper to the knowledge of an entire race. I am a genie and your thirst for knowledge will be sated only through me.'

'You're a fucking app and as soon as I can find a Realmware service provider in this goddamn country that will let me pick my own PDA, you're gone. Behave yourself.'

'Your wish is my command.'

'And be quiet. Your voice is rattling my brain.'

Voxtar – a cartoon heavily promoted on national television – settled down, its robes falling to its sides and its voice coming out somewhere near normal. 'What can I do for you today, mistress?'

'Find out everything you can about the Church of the Martyrs in Darnleyville, and specifically someone there called Reverend Mary. Also see if you can dig up anything about Abi, the son of a warlord from up north.'

'Are you getting yourself into trouble again?' Voxtar waved its hands, bringing screens to life and leaving glittering trails in the air.

'Let me know when you have something, otherwise shut up. Please.'

The PDA wouldn't find anything on Abi; the warlords owned the news and the last in-country journalist to report on their activity had been hanged in the centre of the capital after weeks of

torture. The message stuck and now only the PR campaigns of the murderers themselves were seen in public.

Voxtar was quick. 'Reverend Mary joined the church a year ago. It was a surprise appointment but nobody raised a fuss.'

'Why a surprise?'

'The locals had never had a female church leader before. There was some worry about her destroying their souls and spoiling their crops.'

'Their crops were pretty spoiled to begin with.'

'Perhaps, but everything went on doing what it was doing before she arrived and the noise died down. She comes from southern Portugal, educated in America, of course, and that's it.'

'Anything else?'

'Nope. All coverage on her pretty much stops a few months after her arrival. This country isn't exactly a headline grabbing kind of place.'

'Thanks,' West said and took the Realmware off. Voxtar and the many floating screens vanished as she dropped the glasses on the table.

Everything was news, even in Impulgani and even during the warlord media blackout. West was surprised at the lack of info on the lady reverend, and it gave her the beginning of a suspicion. She slipped the Realmware back on.

'Find everything you can about a girl called Marguerite, also from the church.'

'You know it's very rude to just take off your glasses like that,' Voxtar began. West ignored it. 'Marguerite came up in my search so I happen to have the info anyway, otherwise I'd seriously consider ignoring you.'

'I don't have time. Conversational interface off.' Voxtar remained stubbornly present. The service provider ensured that anyone using their Realmware used the walking advert as their PDA.

'Where would you like me to begin?' Voxtar said. Its face was lost in the dark robe but its tone said it was hurt. PDAs were just pretty graphics over complicated algorithms, but the conversational interface made them feel alive. And, often, annoying.

'Did you get much info from the last year?'

'Loads, mostly from social sites and some automated government blogs.'

'But there was nothing on Mary?'

'Very little, especially by comparison.'

West took the Realmware off again. The last rays of the setting sun now slanted across the dim room and she could make out the music playing in the strip of bars and restaurants along the main road.

Mary was working with one of the warlords, or a gang, or the government. The resistance didn't have the muscle to keep information about her off the net, and if they had they'd have done the same for Marguerite. The government could – they controlled access in and out of the country completely – and the warlords could just ask for the information to be expunged and it would be done.

The church might be hoarding guns for the resistance, but Reverend Mary was up to something else. Unfortunately they couldn't just beat it out of her, so they'd have to find some other way. West wasn't going to run again, even if there had been anywhere else to run to.

The place was noisy and the local rent boys and girls took up all the spots at the bar. Business wasn't great this early in the evening and they had nothing better to do than play with their PDAs. The overnight trucks would be through soon enough, at which point their evening schedule would be full. The guys had taken a table near the rear exit and West joined them. She laid out what she'd discovered, omitting the actions of the PDA.

'So she's a criminal,' Chris said. 'And a religious leader. But I repeat myself.'

'Here we go again,' Greg said, shaking his head and downing his beer. 'You can't just leave the church alone for one day?'

'Maybe if the church stopped raping kids. Just a thought.'

'Enough,' West said, tired of their arguing before it even started. Besides, she'd heard it before, over and over, on their last trip up-country.

'What's the plan?' Shelley said. He was slumped in the booth, relaxed and actually smiling. He liked the local vibe, with its undercurrent of sleaze and promiscuity. If he had his way, West knew, he'd retire to the town and run his own bar.

'We go to Abi and see what she wants with him.'

'She wants him dead,' Greg said. 'How are we feeling on that?'

'If we have to we have to.' West let her mind wander for a moment, imagining what was about to happen and the potential repercussions. 'If Abi is setting up for his father then there'll be some money on site, so at least we'll make something.'

'But that's not why we're going,' Chris said.

'No, we need information. I don't like that bitch ordering us around.'

'When?' Chris said.

'Now is as good a time as any. We can scout it out at least, then work out an approach once we know what we're up against.' She downed her whiskey, then made faces at the glass while the aftertaste attacked her mouth. 'What the fuck is this?'

'I think they make it in a toilet or something,' Chris said. 'They call it whiskey, but I think it's a mistranslation.'

'Warn me next time.'

'And miss that face?' Greg said, grinning.

'The tequila is worse,' Shelley said. Chris slapped his arm.

'Don't tell her. That's what she was going for next.'

'Fuck this,' West said as she stood. 'Let's go mess with someone bigger than us.'

'Yes sir, captain sir,' Greg said, saluting.

'I'm not your captain,' West said, knowing it was pointless.

## Chapter 3

Abi had taken over the former governor's mansion, a ramshackle faux Victorian place. Pointy bits above the windows and a flagpole on the roof, flying a skull and crossbones.

'Classy,' West said. They were a kilometre away, parked on a hill and magnifying the estate on the windshield of the Jeep. The function was new, something they'd added after an insurance scam earlier in the year. The driver controlled what the image focussed on, but the magnification was impressive and the resolution superb.

'Not many guards,' Chris observed, raising his hand and zooming the scene around the perimeter. Two guards manned the front gate but otherwise the grounds were empty. They'd spotted someone patrolling along a hallway inside.

'Reverend bitch said he might have ten men roaming about.' West lit a cigarette and took a drag.

'In here? Really?' Chris hit a button and her window lowered. A wave of hot air flooded the car, rolling over her and blowing the smoke toward the guys.

'You're making it worse,' she said, ignoring the looks they shot her way.

'It's a shitty habit,' Shelley said.

'Didn't you shoot heroin into your balls once?' West countered.

'Once, on a dare. You do this shit all the time and it's gross.'

'Roll the window up, now.' West eyed Chris, daring him to disobey her.

'With all due respect, sweet captain: Go fuck yourself.'

West took another drag, sneered at the open window, and tossed the cigarette outside. 'Happy?'

'Delighted.' Chris raised the window and turned up the AC. 'As I was going to say before I was nearly poisoned, there might be ten guys in there. This Abi guy might have a hundred guys in there. The place is big enough, and we have no way to know.'

'We could take it,' Greg said. 'Even if they have a hundred guys inside. We keep our distance and pick them off. When they're done trying to escape we set the place on fire and keep shooting anyone who runs.'

'Efficient,' Shelley said.

'Maybe.' Something about the set up made West itch. If Abi meant to expand the family business he'd have brought more men, especially here in the south. News of a house full of guns, even a fraction of the size of the one in the church, would draw every scumbag for miles. Putting two guys on the gate meant either they weren't involved with guns at all, or they'd made nice with the locals and knew they didn't have to worry. Or both, she supposed.

'So, you got a plan?' Chris said. He zoomed the image out so they could take in the whole

place.

'I think we'll run it like the Ambassador Hotel,' West said. She couldn't see another way to know.

'You're going in there?' Chris turned to her and the image lost its focus. A smear of darkness and stars filled the windscreen.

'You guys set up and I'll drive in the front entrance. We'll have a chat and see what the reverend really wants.'

'And if he shoots you on sight?' Chris said.

'Who would shoot someone with this face?' West smiled her sweetest smile and batted her eyelashes at him.

'I would, if you gave me any shit. And I'm not a warlord.'

'He isn't either. He's a kid playing at being his dad. Look at that house; he's posing.'

'You think,' Chris said.

'We'll see soon enough.'

Chris bit his lip and glared at her. The others kept their mouths shut, waiting to see which way the discussion would go. Chris was second in charge, not that they'd ever made it formal, and she'd have to listen to him if he had an objection.

Chris yawned, big mouthed and loud. He grinned at her when he was done. 'Alright ladies, let's move out.'

The guards on the front gate were kids.

West pulled up and waited, watching the old AKs pointed at the car. They'd had some training, perhaps even seen some action, and they held their weapons confidently. She was less confident now that she'd seen them, unsure if she could shoot first. Shoot second, sure, and she'd kill them without a worry. They'd have to make the first move though.

One of the boys walked over to the driver's side window and waited while it rolled down. He babbled something in a local language, forcing an angry confidence into his voice.

'Sorry. Don't speak the language.' West waited while he mentally switched gears. Both French and English were official languages but it didn't mean everyone could speak either.

'Private property,' the boy said. His accent was terrible, but she'd lived in the country long enough to build up her powers of decryption. 'Go away.'

'Tell Abi I want a word.'

'Not interesting. Go away.'

'I think you mean interested.' She waited for a moment, letting the confused look on his face pass. It occurred to her briefly that nobody had ever disobeyed him before. The kids were plucked fresh from school and taught to expect respect and obedience, which they usually got in spades from the locals.

The boy raised his rifle so the barrel peeked over the door. 'Fuck off.'

'No.' It was a tricky thing, disobeying the boy; he could shoot her in the face, move the car off the road, and he'd probably be rewarded. But it took a lot to kill someone who didn't appear to pose a threat.

'I shoot you.'

‘Tell Abi, or one of his cronies, that I’d like a word about the Church of the Martyr’s. Do it now, please.’ She held his gaze, unflinching, and watched as his resolve crumbled. People didn’t behave the way she did around him, especially white women. It threw him off guard.

He stepped away from the car and the barrel of the rifle dipped toward the road. He spoke to his friend, urgent whispers she’d have had no problem making out if she understood the language. The night was still, even the incessant insects keeping quiet for once. The Jeep flooded the gates in sickly yellow light but everywhere else, for as far as she could see in every direction, the bright light of the moon illuminated the world.

The other boy raised an old phone to his face and spoke carefully to someone inside. He was worried – naturally, given his employers – and hesitant as he explained the situation. When he was done he whispered to the first boy a moment before the gates opened and she was revving the car and pulling away. They watched her go, hollow eyes following her. She was glad she hadn’t killed them.

She drove the car around a dry fountain and parked at the foot of the stairs leading to the front doors. An adult in a fine suit was waiting for her. He opened her door and stepped away, smiling and pointing her toward the steps when she got out.

‘The boss is waiting for you.’ He had a French twang to his local accent, marking him as a northerner. She turned her back on him and took the steps two at a time.

From a distance she’d noted the age of the building, the disrepair of the stonework and the weeds sprouting from every crack and hole. Up close she could see the façade for what it was. Someone had spent time cleaning up, patching the breaks in the walls and the paving, before recreating the look when they were done. Why, West couldn’t fathom, but it added to her suspicions.

The doors were open and the bright interior was waiting. Another suited man waited for her, friendly and smiling, a pistol visible in a holster under his jacket.

‘Please, miss, come this way.’ He led her up the stairs, walking slowly and letting her examine the place as they went.

It was decorated in a more Asian style than the exterior led her to believe. But it was a fake Asian, a movie Asian, with unnecessary paper screens and stencils of bonsai for no reason. Buddha statues adorned niches where the original owners had probably put vases or sculptures. An ivory village, apparently carved from a single elephant tusk, took pride of place at the top of the stairs, on a fine wooden table.

She’d seen them sold at the market in Tubuli; the ivory trade collapsed when some European companies worked out how to grow it on the cheap, but people still seemed to get a thrill from buying ivory, as though they were still breaking the law.

The man led her to a study, one of the rooms she’d checked from a distance with the guys before approaching the gate. He stepped out and closed the door behind her.

The room was out of place with the rest of the decor, a traditional study with bookshelves lining the walls and a fireplace, complete with crackling fire despite the summer heat. One end of the room was taken up with an enormous desk, its surface empty and shining, freshly polished and unused.

Abi sat on the edge of the desk, waiting for her. He was barefoot and wore jeans and a short sleeve shirt. He was well built, but not huge. Just enough to prove himself, not enough to need a

lot of upkeep. His hands were in his pockets and he grinned at her when she was done taking the place in.

‘You like?’ His voice rivalled Shelley’s, deep and commanding, with no trace of an accent.

‘Seems a bit redundant.’ She crossed the room and stopped a few metres from him, crossing her arms. It might come off a bit cold, she figured, but it let her put her hand on her gun. ‘When was the last time someone read a physical book?’

‘True, but there is something to be said for ambience.’ He pointed to the leather chairs arranged before the fire. ‘Please, take a seat.’

She didn’t accept his invitation, keeping to her spot. ‘You’re remarkably accepting of my visit. No questions?’

He smiled, a charming, handsome smile. His teeth were almost too white beside his dark skin. ‘No questions. I’m surprised you just walked in though. I wasn’t expecting that.’

‘She told you when we were coming?’ West said, keeping her breathing even.

‘She gave me a range, but I was expecting an attack. I like this better.’ He walked to the fire, coming close enough for her to touch, before taking a seat. She wanted him nearer the window behind his desk, but Greg could make it work regardless.

‘Why?’ She followed him and took the chair opposite. ‘You don’t need the bounty.’

‘No, but you have a reputation, and there are some changes coming I don’t think you’ll appreciate. My father sent me ahead to prepare, and you are part of that preparation.’ He raised his hand and snapped his fingers. The door opened immediately and the second man entered carrying a tray with glasses and an unlabelled bottle of dark liquid.

‘I don’t think I’m in a drinking mood,’ West said. ‘But thanks.’

‘You will drink with me.’ His smile slipped a little. The crony poured her a full tumbler and handed it to her.

‘No.’ West put it back on the tray.

‘The only thing keeping you alive right now is my curiosity.’ He lifted her glass and gave it back to her. ‘Drink. Talk. Or die now.’

She downed the drink and kept her composure, successfully fighting the urge first to cough, then to throw up. She didn’t know what it was but it was disgusting, worse than the shit in the bar. Worse than actual shit. She forced a smile.

He sipped his own and relaxed in his chair. The crony remained where he was. ‘Captain West, in my house. It’s a big day.’

‘If Mary hadn’t told me to come here I wouldn’t know you existed. This was a mistake.’

‘You ran from your employers when they asked you to kill to obey a law you didn’t agree with. You protected the potential victims and hid them away, much to the dismay of everyone involved.’

‘So far so boring.’ West kept her hands on the arms of the chair, playing with the ring on her right index finger. She gauged the distance to the crony and tried to work out how much time she’d have to draw her gun. She was fine, still in charge.

‘The situation in Khartoum was chaotic, and the Kids must have seemed so helpless.’ He waited for a reply that wasn’t coming. He sighed, took a drink, and continued. ‘You weren’t the only ones who dropped the ball, but you managed to get away with more of them than anyone else. I want to know where they are.’



West chuckled, surprised at the banality of his plan. All he wanted was the secret, the same thing as everyone else. Where had they taken the Kids? Who was watching them, even as the world moved to hunt them down? It was pathetic, mundane.

‘You think I can’t get it out of you?’ He grinned at her and she saw the images flashing through his mind, the things he’d do to get her to talk. She’d seen the same thing in far better men, in her captain, back when it all began.

‘If I gave you the chance, sure. Everyone talks.’

‘I have that chance, Captain West.’

‘I’m not a captain.’ Her thumb ran over the green gem in the ring. A moment later, faster than most people could follow, she had her first gun out and settled against the crony’s crotch. Her second gun followed. Smooth, muscle memory letting her keep her eyes on the man threatening her while she took his threat away.

Something cold and hard touched her forehead. The crony had his own gun, drawn as quickly as her own.

‘This doesn’t have to be a fight,’ Abi said, still calm and collected.

‘I’ll shoot his balls and your face off, and to hell with the consequences.’ She slipped into business mode and saw that her words had an effect. His smile slipped a little more. ‘I told you this was a mistake.’

He held his hand out to the crony, who fished a revolver out of his pocket and handed it over. He examined it casually before turning it on her, holding it sideways like a common street moron.

‘About now you’re probably expecting us to die.’ He tilted his head to the side and watched for a reaction. She must have let something slip because his smile returned in force. ‘We were prepared. Your men are being brought in right now.’

They could have taken Greg. He was still back on the hill but they might have seen him. Give him a scope and a vantage point and he was the devil, but up close they could get him.

Shelley was a different story. If they were bringing him in then he was dead. The big guy was a monster in a close fight and she couldn’t see them taking him down with anything less than a bullet to the head.

‘Aim that fucking thing properly,’ she said. ‘If you shoot it like that you’ll miss and just end up pissing me off.’

He turned the gun, bringing the sights into position. ‘Don’t you want to know why I want them? Why I would go to the effort, and the risk, of bringing you here?’

‘Not really.’ She weighed the options; she could kill them both, and maybe even get out of the building. But Abi had been expecting an attack so he’d have an army waiting somewhere nearby. As soon as she killed the boss they’d kill Greg, or use him as leverage.

‘Fine,’ she said, lowering her guns and placing them on the tray. ‘Explain it to me.’

‘That’s more like it.’ He clapped, suddenly animated, the barrel of the revolver carelessly pointing in every direction. ‘I knew you’d see sense. Everyone said you were a stupid bitch, but I knew you had to be better than that.’

‘Explain.’

‘Fine, fine, alright. In a sec.’ He dropped the revolver on the tray and grabbed his drink. He was like a child finishing a level on some crappy game, elated at his skill. He downed the drink

and stopped for a coughing fit, bringing a smile to West's face.

'They're here,' the crony said.

'Fantastic. Bring her downstairs.'

There was a crack that shook the world, a wet, blinding pain, and the world faded away.