

Night Hawk

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-an exclusive short story-

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"Night Hawk"

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He wasn't exactly what she had expected. A killer shouldn't be so handsome that he made a woman's mouth water at the thought of tasting him. He shouldn't be so rugged that her heart pounded at the thought of riding him hard throughout the night. A killer shouldn't haunt her dreams, her fantasies, or her desires.

Yet this one did.

Black Jack. That was his Elite Ops code name. What his true name was, she wasn't certain. She wasn't given that information, and she knew she would likely never know who he was, or who he had once been. She was certain, though, that like her, he had once been someone far different from who or what he was today.

She watched as he entered the dark little bar she had arranged to meet him in. Mostly because it would afford her the chance to watch him walk in, to see that loose-limbed, confident stroll that drew her gaze to his thighs despite her best efforts.

He had fine, muscular thighs. They were encased in faded, soft denim, the material stretching around them, moving with each flex of hard flesh beneath. Between those thighs. She blew out a silent breath of appreciation at the way the pale

denim lovingly cupped an impressive bulge. No doubt, the man had no reason to be ashamed when it came to physical endowment.

It made a woman wonder, though - as with most handsome men, was it all packaging?

She almost laughed at herself. Of course it was. It didn't even matter if the man was handsome. In most cases, ego was his best friend, and of course, he was always the best, no matter what endeavor he set out to accomplish.

Lillian Belle gave a regretful little sigh as her target moved through the shadowed room, his blue-gray eyes sweeping the darkened corners as his well-toned body moved with careful precision.

He was a man on guard, a killer who well understood the rules. But should she judge him for the fact that he did, and would kill again? After all, was she any better?

They had both signed twelve years of their lives away to the Elite Ops in exchange for another chance to live. Elite Operations agents often joked that they signed their lives away, because their missions were often nothing less than suicidal.

She had survived three years of those missions. Three years in which she had sold her soul more times than she had during the five years she had spent as an agent in Europe. She was a ghost. Not really living. She hadn't really lived in so many years. Until she met Black Jack.

Blue-gray eyes pinpointed her. Like shards of ice but also burning with an inner flame. Hot and cold, flickering over her with just enough male interest to send her hormones crashing through her system. Just enough interest to remind her that, despite the circumstances of her life at present, she was still a woman. Woman enough to want all the things that she had once promised herself she would never want again.

She didn't even know him, she told herself as he drew nearer. She knew nothing about him. Jordan Malone, head of the Elite Operations, refused to give her any information. Her own commanding officer acted as though she were committing a sin by even asking.

She shouldn't concern herself with agents outside her own unit, she was told. Yet, she couldn't help but concern herself with this particular agent. With this particular man.

She couldn't stop her heart from beating faster. She couldn't keep her fingers from trembling in his presence, and when she slept, she couldn't help but dream.

"You're early." His voice was like aged whisky, dark and smooth, caressing the senses even as it heated them.

"I'm always early." Lillian uncrossed her legs and straightened from where she had leaned against the wall, watching him approach through the dimly lit bar. "You should be used to it by now."

His lips quirked. Lips that had to have been created with kissing a woman in mind. Finely molded, not too thin, not too full. A three-day growth of beard covered his lower face, tempted her to touch. Shades of light brown and blond blended together, giving him a rakish, wicked appearance.

"So I should be," he agreed. His voice, like all Elite Ops agents', was well-modulated. There was no hint of an accent of any sort. No hint of where he had come from or what nationality he was. There was nothing for her to hold on to, no way to identify the man she was desperate to learn more about.

Pushing her hair back from her shoulder Lillian glanced around the bar. It was one location that she could be fairly certain was safe, but lately, even here, she couldn't shake the feeling of being watched. As though the sights of a gun were constantly on her, a finger caressing the trigger lovingly.

Paranoia? She wished she could shake off the feeling with such a simple explanation.

"Shall we go for a drive?" she asked, looking up at him as he towered over her, his six-plus feet giving him quite an advantage over her five feet and five inches.

His brow lifted curiously, though there wasn't so much as a hint of the surprise that he must surely be experiencing. After all, she had never been reluctant to hand over the information she had uncovered to him here. She had personally vetted this bar herself, become a regular, made certain that each inch of the property was familiar and safe.

She didn't feel safe any longer.

"A drive sounds nice," he agreed as his eyes narrowed the slightest bit on her.

Then, he lifted his hand and extended it to her. As though he truly knew her, as though he wanted to touch her.

Lillian stared down at the calloused palm for no more than a second before she laid her hand in his and felt his fingers curl around hers.

Just as she had known. His hand was warm and strong. His fingers encased hers as he drew her from the shadowed corner and led her through the large room.

Few of the patrons paid any attention. After all, she was well-known to them, and she had been known to meet this man here for drinks before. She wasn't an oddity, and she had stopped being a curiosity long ago.

Still, she couldn't help but search the room from beneath lowered lashes. She could feel that itch at the back of her neck, that feeling, that certainty, that to someone, she was indeed worthy of interest.

"The night's cool," Black Jack commented as they neared the door. "Did you bring a jacket?"

He glanced at her, his gaze raking over her bare shoulders as he took in the diminutive black dress she wore and flat strappy sandals.

"I'm fine."

The night was indeed cool, just as it had been earlier. Her jacket was still in her car, in the parking lot behind the bar. She hadn't wanted to cover the dress. It was one of the most flattering articles of clothing she owned. Stopping just below her thighs, the short hem showed off her tanned legs while the snug material cupped her breasts.

She'd wanted him to look at her. She'd wanted him to see her as more than a courier, a source of information. She'd wanted him to see that she was a woman.

How vain, she told herself, as he opened the door and stepped out, drawing her behind him. Instantly, her heart nearly stopped in her chest as his strong arm circled her shoulders and drew her to him.

"The car's parked in the side lot." His voice was low as he bent to her. "Were you followed?"

Always on guard. Always aware that your life could end quickly if the slightest mistake were made. She had learned that lesson already, she didn't need a reminder.

She shook her head. "Not as far as I could tell."

She wasn't an amateur, but that didn't mean she couldn't make a mistake. She was as certain as she could be, though, that she hadn't brought danger with her.

She could feel the steady watchfulness that he carried like an invisible shield. It made her want to lean into him. She wanted to soften against him, feel both arms surrounding her, holding her to his warmth.

She was losing her edge perhaps. She couldn't explain the hunger that assailed her, because it was so much more than simply a hunger for touch. Or perhaps it

wasn't. Perhaps it was just the touch she needed, human warmth to combat that chill that seemed to have taken hold inside her.

"The car should still be warm," he stated as he pulled his keys from his jeans pocket and flicked the remote sensor.

Lillian remained silent as he drew her to the car, opened the passenger-side door, and helped her in. She watched as he closed the door, then loped around the front of the car to the driver's side.

She should have insisted on using her own vehicle. If she were driving, she would have felt in control, or at least, a bit more in control than she was as his passenger.

"Any particular destination?" he asked as he closed his door and pushed the key into the ignition.

Lillian shook her head. "Just wherever."

"You didn't feel safe in the bar," he commented as he put the vehicle in reverse and pulled out of the parking slot. "Do we have a situation?"

Yes, they had a situation. At least she did. Her panties were getting wet. Dear Lord, she hadn't had this problem in a long time.

"We're clear." She lifted her shoulders in a shrug as she looked at his image in the window rather than turning to him. "Perhaps I'm just restless tonight."

"Perhaps, hmm?" There was a thread of amusement in his voice. "I don't think I've ever seen you restless, Night Hawk."

How she was beginning to hate that code name. She wanted to demand that he use the name she had been given after her "death." A new name for a new life that wasn't really a life after all.

She turned to him then, watching him carefully. "Do you ever get restless, Jack?"

She didn't call him Black Jack. Using the name Jack made it seem more personal to her somehow. It made him seem closer.

His lips quirked at the name. "I rarely have time to be restless." There was a hint of the same darkness in his tone that all Elite Ops Agents held. A deep-seated regret, a sense of loss. They had all lost everything dear to them because of something they had been unable to control. A stark reminder that they were human, despite the arrogance that had come to them in their former lives.

For Lillian, she had been so certain that her life was charmed at one time. That she was smart enough, fast enough, lucky enough to survive the life she had led without it ever catching up with her.

How very wrong she had been.

"I get restless." She let a mocking smile tilt her lips as he glanced at her. "And the night is beautiful, you must admit."

"I admit this." He handled the car smoothly as he took a turn through the heavy St. Louis traffic and headed for the river, before he surprised her by saying, "The night isn't nearly as beautiful as you are tonight, though."

A surge of sensation shot through her stomach, tightening her womb, then traveling quickly to strike at her too-sensitive clit.

He thought she was beautiful? She stared back at him silently, her mouth dry, wishing she could come up with something flippant and teasing to return with.

"Thank you," she finally whispered.

She felt like a fish out of water with this man. On unfamiliar ground. Almost innocent. He made her feel like a teenager experiencing her first crush.

His smile, though careful, was slightly warmer now.

"You've been stationed in St. Louis for a while, haven't you?" he finally asked as he turned beneath the old bridge and followed the road that curved down to the scenic waterway.

"Occasionally." She reminded herself bitterly of the rules. She wasn't to give him personal information. She wasn't to get personal. This was part of her assignment, to relay the information she had found to her contact.

The unit Lillian worked within specialized in gathering information for the other units. In gathering certain intel she had come upon a plot that she knew was directly related to another operation Black Jack's unit was involved in.

That information was sensitive enough, imperative enough that she hadn't been required to go through regular channels to call this meeting. For that, she was extremely happy. It meant she wouldn't be debriefed nearly as intently over this meeting. It would be a part of her report, nothing more.

They were silent then as he slowed the car and pulled into the paved parking area overlooking the edge of the water. A casino riverboat was passing by, drifting slowly as its paddle churned the water and the patrons laughed gaily from the decks.

How innocent they all looked, she thought. She hadn't realized how jaded she had become over the years.

Putting the car in park, Jack cut the motor before turning to her. She could feel his stare, the way his gaze raked over her, causing a wave of heat to flash through her body.

"You called the meet," he finally stated. "What's the problem?"

All business.

Lillian lifted her lashes and let his gaze catch hers. She felt suspended then, held between duty and desire, between the rules and a hunger she couldn't explain even to herself.

"Risa Clay." She finally cleared her throat. "Daughter of Jansen Clay."

"The traitor who conspired with Sorrell." He nodded. "I know of her."

Lillian guessed there wasn't an Elite Ops member who hadn't heard of her. Jansen and his ilk were the very reasons why the Elite Ops had been created.

"There's a contract on her head," she stated. "Two million, and word is that Orion has taken the contract."

She watched his eyes then. They narrowed as his jaw tightened. It was a small reaction, but one that assured her that the search for the deadly assassin known only as Orion was still a priority with his unit.

"Why the contract?" he asked her.

"Rumor is, she's beginning to remember things that someone doesn't want her to remember. Things such as the man who conspired with her father."

"The man who raped her." His voice darkened in fury.

Risa Clay had been brutalized by her rapist, then again by her father when he'd had her drugged and institutionalized for nineteen long, horrendous months. The young woman had been freed upon her father's death, when the truth had been revealed. But nothing, Lillian thought, would ever ease the nightmares that girl must surely have.

She nodded at the statement. "The man who raped her. Evidently, he's more influential than first believed. Orion will be arriving in the states within an estimated one to two weeks. He has four weeks to complete the contract by knife."

That was Orion's preferred method of death. He'd been known to use a bullet, many times, but he normally liked to play with his victims, especially the women.

"Any hint to arrival point or his identity?" Jack asked.

Lillian shook her head. "Nothing. We're still working on it, but we've been working on it for years with nothing new. I wouldn't expect that to change in time to save her life. You know how it works, Jack. At least we have a warning this time. It's

more than we usually have when men such as he accept a job. We should count ourselves lucky."

And she should know. A man such as Orion had destroyed her life, had for all intents and purposes, taken her life. And now, she was wondering if the price she had paid for life might have been too high. It was a price that held her back, held her silent, and forced her to deny her need for a man who was just as dead as she.

#

Travis watched the woman he had long ago nicknamed "Lady Hawk." Night Hawk was her codename, and he hadn't realized how much he hated code names until he'd found a curiosity for this one woman.

Curiosity was quickly turning to desire, though. When had it started? Hell, maybe it had always been there. Staring into her emerald eyes, seeing the feminine softness, a feminine hunger, he realized it must have always been there after all.

He stored away the information she had given him. He'd arrive back at unit command tonight and relay the message to Jordan. He wouldn't mention a midnight car ride, or the fact that his cock was throbbing and his need to touch his contact was driving him crazy.

Damn. She looked like a dark angel as she sat next to him in the car, staring back at him with aching loneliness. That loneliness was easy to identify, it lived and breathed inside him as well.

"Any further information?" He forced the question past his lips. He didn't want to talk to her about death or assassins. He didn't want to talk at all, but what he did want was so forbidden that it could make him a dead man in truth. Maybe.

She shook her head, her long, dark brown hair brushing around her shoulders and upper arms, drawing his gaze, his hunger. He wanted to feel that hair on his flesh,

watch it fall around his face as she lowered herself to him, kissed him, breathed her warmth into him.

"The information was sent to me directly by a contact I've been fostering for quite a while," she told him. "Orion is one of our priority missions."

Travis nodded when he wanted nothing more than to kiss the lips that were parted, glistening as her tongue swiped over them.

She wanted him, just as damned much as he wanted her.

"We'll take care of it," he told her. "Inform your unit commander that EO-1 has accepted the information as well as the assignment that will go with it."

There wasn't a chance in hell that it would be rejected by Jordan, and Travis knew it.

She nodded slowly, still watching him. Travis warned himself that he was getting into some deep shit here. He knew he was and couldn't seem to pull back.

He'd played by the rules in his former life. He'd done everything by the book, and still, he'd lost all he'd worked for. He'd fallen back into that habit with the Elite Ops. Playing by the rules. Hell, if there was a hunger worth breaking the rules for, then it was the hunger rising inside him now.

His jaw clenched as he lifted his hand and reached out to her. His fingers brushed over her jaw as she stared back at him, surprise flickering in her gaze.

"How long have we been meeting?" he asked her then.

Night Hawk shook her head. "A couple of years."

Three years. She had been assigned to his unit as courier and information-gatherer three years ago, and Travis had tried to make certain that he was always the one who met with her.

"Three years is a long time," he said softly.

Her lips parted as the tops of her breasts began to rise and fall, her breathing becoming more uneven. In the pale light that bled into the car, he could see her nipples pressing against the snug material of her dress and saw the faint hint of a flush as it washed over the upper curves of those perfect breasts.

"Too long?" It was a question, but not about the amount of time that they had been meeting. She was questioning the amount of time they had both wondered and had never made a move to assuage the curiosity.

He'd always wondered if her lips were as soft as they looked, if her kiss would be as heated as he imagined.

His hand cupped her cheek. "We'll pay for this," he warned her.

"I've already paid," she whispered a second before his lips covered hers.

As his tongue licked over her lips, felt them part, felt the little hitch of her breath, and felt the hunger in her response, he knew this punishment was much worse.

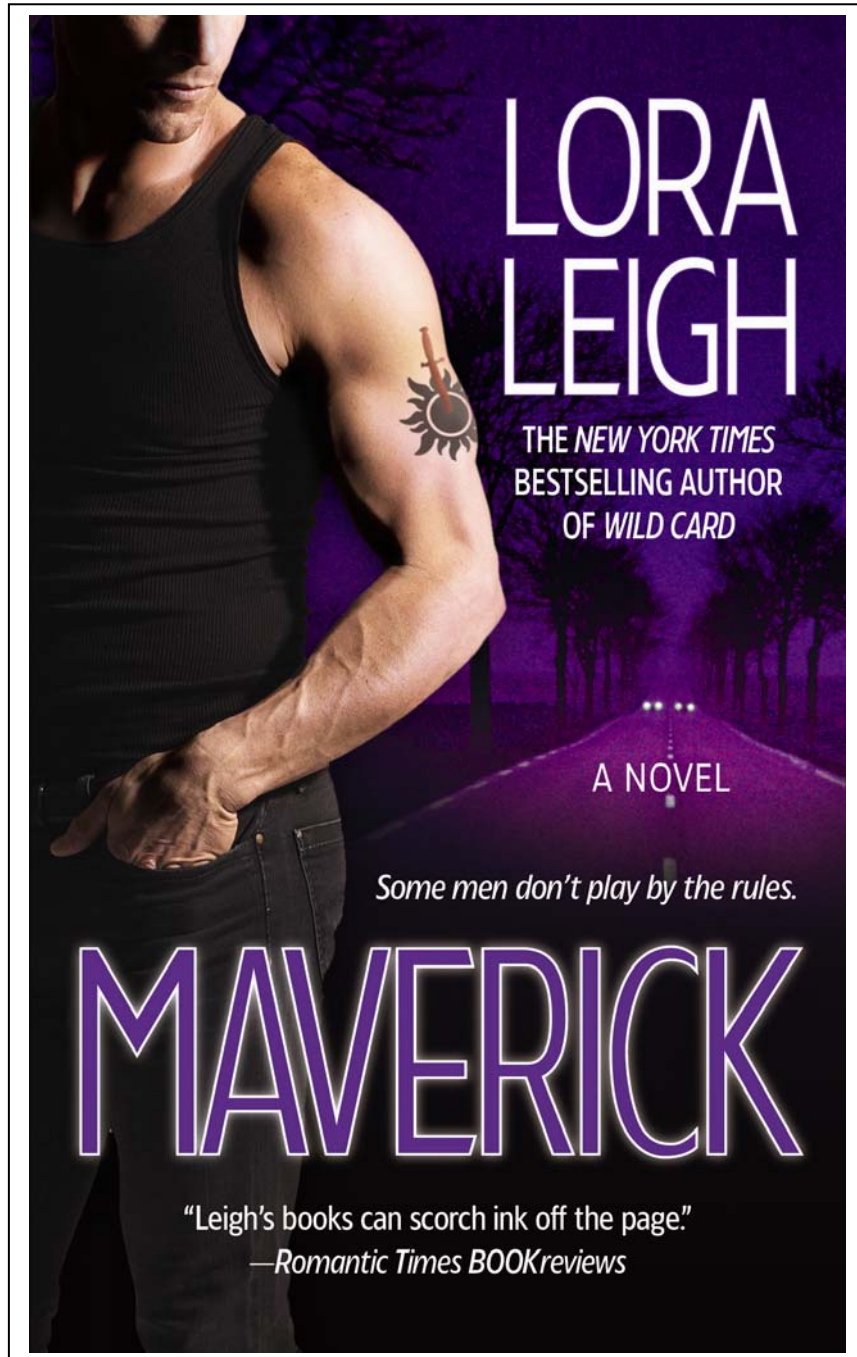
It was a fact that he would have to leave her tonight. That he'd have to walk away. That this single moment in time was the most he could allow himself.

Then her arms twined around his neck. Her lips parted further and a small moan sizzled in the air around him. Her moan. Her need. And he wasn't about to deny it.

He was a dead man. He was a hungry man. He was a man about to take the greatest gamble of his life.

-The End-

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