

FRIENDS^{AND} FAMILY

A Prelude to Smoke and Shadow



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Chapter One: Watching Summer Rain

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Trent always appreciated Summer Rain's sexual expression, but watching her from the window gave him a perspective he wasn't quite ready to embrace.

This wasn't voyeurism for its own sake. He had to know if she was alone before he tried to meet her. He wanted this to be a surprise visit, but he didn't want to stumble into a compromising situation. Trent wasn't sure about Summer's connection to the Uptown Gods street gang or Los Zetas drug cartel. If he walked into her office while one of them was around, bullets could start flying in his direction pretty damn quick. Trent wanted to avoid violence if he could.

Trent tried to focus on the reason for his visit as he watched Summer down on her knees. He needed to find Franklin Frost. The man sitting on Summer's sofa with his pants around his ankles and his eyes rolled back in his head wasn't Frost and it was too bad for Frost.

Trent remembered the guy's name was Jay. He was the bouncer for Summer's bar. Before that he served in Iraq. Tonight, Jay enjoyed one of the possible perks of working at Sanctuary. Frost would probably

kill to be in this guy's shoes right now. Trent wanted a few minutes on Summer Rain's couch too.

Phenomenal was the best way to describe Summer's sexual skill. The way she moved her mouth over and around Jay's erection was an artistic masterpiece. He tried to control her head by twisting his fingers in her thick braids, but he was a puppet between her lips. Even the way she arched her back as pushed her ass out into the air captured Trent's attention like a cat chasing a laser pointer. If he didn't know better, Trent might have thought the show was for him.

But Summer didn't know Trent hid outside her office window. He needed to keep it that way. Frost wasn't here. The best options for picking up his trail now to go back to his apartment or re-checking his online activity. Baker had access to his credit card purchases too. Nikki picked up his credit card numbers at Sub Rosa. Maybe he could find some clues there.

Summer slipped out of her pants and climbed onto Jay's lap. Trent knew they would be busy for a while. He knew what it felt like to have her body riding on top of him. He knew how long she could make the magic last. Frost knew it too. Trent was sure of that. He saw it in Frost's eyes during their first and only meeting. Frost had just as much hunger for Summer Rain as Jay and Trent did. Was there any man who could

resist her if she wanted him? No. There was no immunity to what she had to offer. Trent knew better than anyone.

He used their first moan to cover his movements. He hopped down from the dumpster and dropped into the shadows behind the bar without a sound. Pressed against the wall, he slipped beneath the security camera until he reached the corner. By the time he stepped into the next shadow, their moans ballooned into guttural screams. Summer would be busy for a while. The best way to find Frost was to head back uptown to his apartment.

Chapter Two: Hard Rain

Trent stood in front of Sanctuary alone. Summer closed the bar at four am. Cleaning the place up and counting the money took about an hour. Her "staff meeting" with Jay could take just as long. There was no one else on First Avenue at five thirty in the morning. The night people faded back into the shadows. The day shift wouldn't start the morning rush for another hour. An occasional cab rushed north towards the FDR drive or Metropolitan Hospital, but they didn't notice Trent and they certainly didn't slow down for him. The scene gave him plenty of time and solitude to question his decision to wait for her.

What the fuck was he thinking? Summer knew he lived across the river in Fort Greene. She had spent more than a few nights in his bed. There weren't any other places in this neighborhood to lure Trent out at this hour. Even if there were, the likelihood of him just be strolling the streets at six am without an ulterior motive was close to zero. He couldn't claim to just be in the neighborhood. Summer would know something was up as soon as she saw him.

And then there was Jay.

Trent could have stuck to the shadows to make sure they didn't see him. He could follow her; see if she did anything to hint she might know

about Frost. So why was he out in the open? Why confront her? It probably wouldn't help find Frost and Trent knew he wasn't possessive of Summer. He hadn't seen her in months and even if he did, there was no relationship between them. They had a history, but that was no reason to be jealous.

But Jay might not see things the same way.

The door to Sanctuary opened with the soft sound of Summer's laughter floating out of the darkness. She stepped out first. The height of her heels and the curve of her hip in her skin tight pants combined to hijack his attention as she took the first step down the stairs. Jay came out close behind her. He was too close for an employee or even a friend. Were they moving their party to another location? Trent tried not to think about Jay fucking Summer when he locked eyes with the man.

Jay and Trent avoided each other when Trent used to frequent Sanctuary. Violent men can often pick out their own kind when they walk into a room. They notice the way a person carries himself, the way she scans her surroundings, and the look in their eyes that reveals a bloody past. The two men never performed any posturing ritual to show what they could do or how bad they were. It was unnecessary. They simply recognized each other as potential threats and kept a respectful distance. Neither of them had a reason to start a dick contest that might end with a corpse.

But tonight was different. Jay carried himself with the bloated pride of recent sexual conquest. Trent knew Jay felt a sense ownership over Summer now. He wouldn't appreciate Trent killing his vibe by showing up during his afterglow. There was a good chance Jay would ride the adrenalin rush from Summer's office and turn this into a territorial confrontation. If Trent wasn't careful, things could go very wrong very fast.

But if Trent wanted to be careful then why was he standing there?

Summer recovered from the shock of his appearance with an edge in her voice. "Trent? Hey. What are you doing here?" Her question echoed the one in his head.

"Hey Summer. You got a minute to talk?"

"The bar is closed." Jay didn't bother to hide his irritation. Trent watched him roll back his shoulders and torque his neck. Was that a habitual movement or was he subconsciously getting ready to attack? Jay's right hand patted his pocket. It wasn't a threatening gesture. Trent decided he just wanted to ensure whatever he held there, probably a weapon, was ready in case he needed it.

Summer's voice projected sudden fatigue and frustration. "We were just heading home. Why don't you call me later?"

Trent focused on Summer's words and Jay's actions. They were going home, as in together? Had things changed so much since he'd been gone? Trent pushed the thought aside and tried to focus on the op. "A mutual friend might be in trouble. I was hoping you could---"

"Yo, fuck this bullshit. Why the fuck are we standing here talking to this--" Jay marched down the steps, putting himself between Summer and Trent. Before he could end the conversation, Summer cut in with authority replacing previous fatigue in her voice.

"What's going on?" Maybe Trent's words got her attention. Maybe she sensed the animosity rising between the two men and tried to diffuse it. Maybe she didn't appreciate Jay trying to throw his weight around. Whatever the reason, Trent sensed a caution and a concern in her that gave him hope.

Jay heard it too and it pissed him off even more. "There ain't nothin goin on. Whatever son needs can wait til tomorrow. I thought we had places to go."

Summer looked away from Trent and regarded Jay with a cold evaluating eye. Whatever desire she had for him, whatever need she

felt to stay with him vanished with his implied command. She definitely didn't appreciate Jay's attempt to dominate her. She turned back towards the door, glancing at Trent as she moved. "Come on. We'll talk inside."

Jay sucked his teeth and stomped back up the stairs. Summer shot him a glare to stop him in his tracks. "I think you can go home now, Jay."

The bouncer stumbled to recover from the callous dismissal. His rapid fall from grace caught him off balance. "You want me to wait out here for you?"

"Maybe I'll see you tomorrow." Summer walked back into Sanctuary without another look at her employee.

Trent followed Summer into the bar. He didn't lock eyes with Jay again, but he could feel the intensity of the man's anger pass over him like a toxic cloud. Jay never had any drama with him before, but they did now.

Chapter Three: Cold Rain

"So what do you want to talk about?"

Summer stood by the bar with her hands in her jacket pockets and her feet pointing towards the door. She had one hip tilted at an angle that reminded Trent of past erotic encounters, but her attitude wasn't inviting now.

"You don't want to talk in the office?"

Summer shook her head and gave him a smile of consolation, as if he wasn't welcomed back there anymore. "I think your secret will be safe in this big empty room. What's on your mind?"

Now Trent knew how Jay felt. The sense of flat dismissal was unnerving, especially when it came from someone he knew could be so passionate. "Sorry for the surprise visit. I didn't mean to interrupt."

"Interrupt what? I was just going home. It's the same thing I do every night."

"Well, Jay seems pretty upset."

"Jay doesn't get to be upset. I don't pay him for that. So what's on your mind?"

Trent already said too much and took the conversation in the wrong direction. This wasn't supposed to be about her and Jay. This was about Frost. If Trent was smart, he wouldn't be talking to her at all. "Like I said, I'm looking for a friend of ours--"

"I don't think we share any mutual friends. Who are you talking about?"

"Franklin Frost isn't your friend?"

"I know Franklin, but he isn't my friend. And from what I know about him, he isn't your friend either."

Summer's defensive tone lit a fire in Trent's gut. Memories of being shot at and falling off Harlem rooftops stoked the fire and ignited his words. "From what I hear, I helped him get a lot of influence uptown a few months back. I met him through you. I think that makes us all friends, don't you?"

Summer sucked her teeth in blatant annoyance "I don't know what you're talking about. Franklin was a blogger when I met him, he was a blogger when you met him and he's a blogger now. He had some

information we needed and he gave it to you. Whoever told you something different needs to get their shit straight."

"When was the last time you heard from him?" Trent wondered again how many times she fucked Frost and if she would lie about it if he asked her.

"I don't know. When was the last time you heard from him?"

"I don't know." Trent did know Summer recruited him to kill the former boss of the Uptown Gods. He got most of his intel for the mission from Frost. After Rafael Ramon was dead, Baker found out Frost had taken over the Gods. Trent didn't know how much Summer knew about the whole set up, but his gut said she knew a lot.

Summer's dismissive tone got stronger. "I didn't hear from him. You didn't hear from him. I didn't hear from you. To me, it doesn't really sound like any of us are friends at all. So what do you really want?"

When Trent found out he'd been set up, he made a point to stay away from Summer Rain. He didn't want to wind up a casualty of a street war if she was behind the whole thing. He couldn't be around another woman like Alicia if she wasn't involved. He couldn't go down that road again. But maybe it was already too late. "Then why did you ask me to handle Ramon?"

Summer rolled her eyes and turned away from him. "Fucking Ramon! You're bringing that shit up again? Is that what this is about?" She turned back to him like a tiger ready to attack. "You already know why. You met Mrs. Banks. You know what they did to her grandson."

"And I'm supposed to believe Frost's role in it was just a coincidence?"

"I don't care what you believe. Unlike you, I don't go running away from people in my life. I don't vanish when someone needs me and I don't just show up when I want something. So why don't you just fucking say what you really want, Trent?"

"I already told you what I want." Trent found it hard to look at the fierceness in her eyes. It reminded him too much of Alicia.

"Bullshit. I don't hear from you for months. Nothing. Then you show up at my bar in the middle of the night, bringing up old shit you think I'm supposed to feel guilty about. You don't give a fuck about Frost. If you did, you'd just call me on the goddamn phone. You decided you want some ass. You thought I'd give it up if you threw some Frost shit in my face. Well, fuck you. You don't get to drop out of my life and then show up when your dick gets hard."

Trent wanted to fuck Summer Rain. He wanted to fuck the truth out of her. He wanted to hear her admit to using him to help her other lovers while he was on top of her. He wanted her to confess and beg for forgiveness when the orgasm rushed through her. He wanted to have the same effect on her she had on him. But he didn't act on his want. He wouldn't force himself on her. His fingers trembled with caged energy. His mouth was wet with hunger for her, but he turned away.

"When you hear from Frost, just tell him I'm looking for him."

"Fuck you. Get the fuck out of my bar and go find him on Facebook. I'm not your secretary and I'm not your fuck buddy." Her voice cracked with a frustrated sadness Trent didn't expect. When he looked up at her, tears flowed down Summer's soft cheeks like a sudden storm. It looked like she'd been crying for a while. Trent wondered why he hadn't noticed it before now. But she barked at him again before he could say a word of apology.

"Get the fuck out of my bar!"

Trent left Sanctuary in silence, only half aware of the growing traffic on First Avenue. Jay was long gone, but Summer's screams kept ringing in his ears.

Chapter Four: Caught in the Rain

Sheets of rain made the elevated subway platform feel as if it was submerged under the ocean. Gusts of wind washed waves across the slimy grey concrete. The hostile weather would have forced sensible people back into the station. Trent was the only one out there and he hadn't felt sensible in days. He stood alone, in the dark with his back to the wall, watching the long line of the tracks disappear into the horizon. He thought he might drown up there when he saw two angelic lights in the distance. No sight was more welcomed at that moment than the image on an oncoming train.

Trent stepped from the dark deluge of the platform into the harsh light of a train car empty except for one passenger. The faint odor of old food and the wet newspaper discarded on the floor felt comforting compared to the chaos outside. The lone occupant in the car added to his sense of security. His suit didn't have a drop of water on it. Even his shoes looked untouched by the elements. He sat in the corner of the car, his legs stretched out in front of him. A cane of dark wood rested across his lap. He sat reading a tablet, but Trent knew the man was fully aware of his surroundings. The open device was a signal. It told Trent he could approach and make contact without worrying about hostile surveillance. Trent waited for the subway doors to close before sloshing over to Warren Baker and sitting down two seats away.

Baker looked up at him after the train left the station. "You don't believe in umbrellas?"

"I didn't think it would rain this hard and I didn't know you'd have me waiting outside so long." Trent peeled the soaked hood off his bald head and let it fall back with a wet smack. "I had other things on my mind."

"Well, when you insisted on an unscheduled meet, I decided not to take any chances." Baker slipped the tablet into the pocket of his leather briefcase. "Moscow rules, y'know?"

Trent nodded in agreement. He knew covert meetings had to avoid fixed patterns to keep the enemy from listening monitoring their conversation. A surveillance detection run could expose unwanted eyes. They'd each gone through individual SDRs before the meeting. It was as natural for them as brushing their teeth. The shadow life demanded it, but it wasn't a guarantee of privacy. An isolated location, preferably one in motion, provided an extra layer of security for sensitive discussions. Trent couldn't think of a more mobile and isolated location than an empty subway train on the outskirts of Rockaway Beach in horrible weather in the middle of the night. He understood Baker's logic in wanting to meet here, even if it did cause some discomfort. He tried to remember that as water dripped down his forehead and onto his nose.

Baker skipped his normal introductory banter. "So what happened? Why was it so important to meet?"

"I'm going to need some tech support to help find Frost."

"What do you need?"

"We need access to Summer Rain's data in real time. We need to see her email, texts, phone calls, social media passwords and maybe even her bank account info. The data has to be collected going forward, but we also need to reach back for a few months---"

"Hold on, Mr. President. What's this based on?"

"She's our best lead to finding Frost. I didn't find him at Sanctuary but she might be contacting him online."

"Did you ask her?"

"Yeah, but she just denied everything. I knew she would. But her cage is rattled now. We might be able to shake something loose if we put the surveillance protocols in place now."

Baker ignored his urgency. "What did she say exactly?"

"She claimed Frost wasn't connected to the Uptown Gods and she wasn't connected to Frost. We know both those things are lies."

Baker held up his hand in an attempt to slow Trent's train of thought. "We know Frost took control of the Gods. We don't know how deeply Summer was involved, or if she was involved at all. What she did--"

"She used a false flag. Mrs. Banks was just a smokescreen, an opportunity to make a move using me as a cat's paw. Frost was her real client. She might still be working for him. If she is, then she probably knows where to find him."

"And if she isn't, then you're asking me to dedicate thousands of dollars and dozens of man hours running down a dead end."

"Since when was money an issue for this op? You said the client had deep pockets."

"That's true Shadow, but the situation has changed. Frost isn't a priority target anymore. At this point, I'm inclined to think he's dead."

"What are you talking about? Frost runs the whole show."

"He did, but Diego might have replaced him. Santiago's been banished on his road show. There hasn't been any sign of Frost at his place or any of the Uptown Gods safe houses. There's been no updates to his blog or social media pages and no traffic on his email or cell phone. Currently, all signs point to the demise of Mr. Frost."

"He's worked from behind the scenes before. He might have gone off the grid because something big is going down."

"Doubtful. Nothing in his file indicates he's got the skill set or the resources to go that deep underground. We've got eyes on him from several different angles. If he was still alive, we would know about it."

"Do we have any bodies in the morgue fitting his description?"

"Nope, and Ria says there haven't been any homicides in the blotter that match either. But that's part of the Zetas MO. They cook their victims in acid so there's nothing left to find."

Trent shook his head. "Frost is, or was, a sneaky son of a bitch. If we ignore him, he's going to come back and fuck things up."

"It's true he fooled us before, but that's not what this is about, is it?"

"What are you talking about? You told me to find Frost. That's what I'm doing."

"It sounds to me like you're less interested in finding Frost and more interested in finding the truth about Summer. I think you're willing to focus on a dead end to satisfy your sense of closure."

"She's not a dead end. She knows where Frost is. She's in contact with him."

"How do you know that?"

"Instinct"

"Are you feeling instinct, betrayal, hope or lust?"

"You think I don't know the difference?"

"Maybe you do. But let's say we dig into Summer's story just for the sake of discussion. What would we gain? If we find out she used you to help Frost, would you want her any less? I doubt it. If we find out she's innocent would you really be able to trust her? That's unlikely too. It seems to me your relationship with her can't be resolved with hacking and data mining. You're gonna have to work that out for yourself."

"This isn't about me and her. This is about finding Frost."

"Ok, but even if I thought Frost is still alive, which I don't, I don't think Summer Rain is the best way to find him. I want you to trust your instincts, but I have to weigh that with the data I'm getting from Nikki and Ria. It just doesn't add up."

Trent shook his head again, but he'd run out of arguments. "We're making a mistake with Frost. We're underestimating him again."

"You can keep an eye out for him. You can even stay on Summer if you really think you're still looking for Frost, but Diego is our top priority now. Just be ready to give overwatch to Nikki when she's ready to go in for the pitch."

"I got it. How's she doing anyway? Do you think she can close the deal?"

"She might be in over her head, but she's a lot like Summer when it comes to men. If she wants them to do something, they usually wind up doing it."

Trent stood up as the train wobbled into the next station. "Thanks for the back handed warning."

"You want a real warning? Stop getting stuck out in the rain."

Trent shook his head a third time as the doors opened and he leapt back into the storm. Only Baker could set up such a smooth innuendo.

Chapter Five: Rain Storm

The vinyl disc spun on the turntable with an easy motion that inspired meditation and release. Trent dropped the needle in the groove and let the strong beat of the drum nod his head and tap his foot. All it took then was a sip of whiskey to warm the back of his throat. Then the world was better.

He forgot about Summer Rain and the man trap of her office. He didn't think about the magnetic pull of her body when they were alone, or the feel of her thick legs wrapped around him. He stopped imagining the taste of her mouth on his. He ignored the feel of her hair coiled in his hands as he thrust into her. He was so oblivious to Summer Rain he missed the drop point for the next song. He scrambled to recover, shaking his head in frustration.

Trent never knew a woman like Summer Rain. No, he did know a woman like that, but he was just a teenager then. So was she. Alicia possessed the same feminine strength and the same sexual hunger as Summer. She couldn't get enough of Trent and for his part; Trent thought he would die before letting her go. Alicia was his first real lover, but what they lacked in experience they made up for with enthusiasm.

Trent spent all his time wanting her. He took her in the park, at the movies and in the stairwell of the high school. He undressed her in his mother's basement, in the back of her sister's car, anywhere they could steal a private moment. It was six months of reckless passion.

Then he got Alicia pregnant.

The silence around him felt startling. Trent looked down to see the song had ended. The vinyl spun without purpose, a black hole waiting to be filled. He took a deep pull of his Jack and dropped a tune at random.

The love affair between Summer and Trent didn't last as long as the time he spent with Alicia. It also didn't produce a child Trent couldn't stop thinking about and couldn't bear to meet. But his sex with Summer did change lives. It ended them. Trent killed at least seven men and was responsible for the death of a woman all because Summer Rain made a simple request. He could pretend the situation was more complicated, but it wasn't. He could focus on the money she paid for the hit, but it wasn't about the money. Trent wanted sex. Summer wanted a man murdered. Trent didn't think twice about the trade.

He didn't think twice about Alicia either. He'd packed his bags, dropped out of school and left when he found out she wanted to keep the baby. He lied at first, claiming he joined the Corps to make the money they needed to raise a child. But Alicia figured it out soon

enough. She didn't cling to illusions. He sent the money. He sent every meager dollar the Marines paid him. But he never wrote to her. He never came home to visit. He didn't see his child born and he never saw her grow. Trent ran. He ran into a fraternity of violence and never looked back. He trained and traveled. He hunted and he killed. He took more and more dangerous assignments until sudden violence became his natural state of affairs. Even when Alicia died, Trent didn't have the courage to face his failure. It was easier to hide in the shadows, fighting wars he couldn't win.

And how could he win with Summer Rain? He couldn't stay away from her, even if she used him for her own gain. He couldn't trust her. Her connections with the underworld and his enemies made that impossible. He couldn't force her to change. She decided who she fucked and under what circumstances. Trent was no more in control of Summer Rain than Jay or Frost. He didn't get to be upset. If Frost was dead, Trent couldn't know if Summer knew nothing about it or if she set it up herself. He was no more in control of Summer than he was with Alicia. The only difference this time was he couldn't run.

The record had gone silent again. Trent didn't even remember hearing the song. He switched off the turntable with a harsh snap of his wrist and snatched up the bottle of Jack on his way to the window.

Chapter Six: The Threat of Rain

Trent sat by his window for an hour watching the drizzle racing down the glass before he saw her first text message.

Summer: Hey

Trent decided the best tactical choice was to either wait a while before responding or not respond at all. He decided to wait until later as he typed.

Me: Hey

Summer: Sorry about the other night. I was crazy tired.

Her response came without hesitation. How long had she been planning this conversation? Was this apology a simple mending of fences or was there more to it? Did she want him again?

Me: No worries. It's my fault for surprising you.

Summer: Can we try again tonight?

Trent read the text as a booty call. What else could it be? His head started to swim with images of Summer bent over her desk, but his professional paranoia stirred. What made her change her mind? Was she just remembering the good times they had? Did she just want him to satisfy her needs? Or was this another false flag? Was this about sex or was it a set up? Trent decided a meeting was too risky as he typed

Me: Sure. Should I meet you at Sanctuary?

Summer: No. I don't want more drama from J.

Summer: I know a spot uptown. After hours bar w/ rooms upstairs

Summer: Meet me at 2:30?

She already had a place picked out, away from her business and away from her apartment. The comment about the room suggested extended privacy, but privacy was preferable for both sex and other less pleasurable activities. Her invitation was pre-planned and aggressive. She left him no space to debate or offer an alternative. The smart, experienced operator in Trent saw an ambush. The desperate lover only thought of the feel of her hair and the taste of her mouth.

Me: Sure

Summer: K. Later. :-*

Trent drained his glass, shut off his phone and got up from his chair. It was already after eleven. If he was walking into an ambush, he might as well run an SDR before Summer arrived.

Chapter Seven: Tasting Summer Rain

The Opera House Hotel reminded Trent of Summer Rain. It was a beautiful rose surrounded by dangerous thorns.

He got off the train at Yankee Stadium and walked to Bergen and East 149th Street in a circular, often erratic pattern. The SDR gave him a chance to get comfortable with the streets of the South Bronx after midnight. He melted into the ambiguous energy that infused everyone he saw. The clusters of fast moving young women walking from the train could have been nurses getting off work, prostitutes going to work, or both. The teenage boys huddled in the shadows of Alfred Smith High School could have been hanging out after a basketball game, selling drugs or both. The men sitting in dark cars near the overhanging trees and high black gates of St. Mary's Park could have been killers, cops or both.

Trent took note of all of them, careful not to disturb or even be noticed as he passed. His dark skin blended with theirs. His soft shoes made little sound as he walked. To them, he was just another black man handling his nocturnal business. His SDR took over an hour. He checked out the possible exits, choke points and tactical features of the area. Fortunately, by the time he reached the hotel Trent was immersed

in the South Bronx vibe. Unfortunately, his connection did nothing to clarify what Summer wanted or what would happen in the hotel.

The Opera House itself felt out of place. It was like one of the chic boutique hotels Baker enjoyed going to in Tribeca, SoHo and Chelsea instead of an uptown venue. The rich furniture in the lobby and the subdued hospitality of the staff gave the place a warmth that was supposed to put him at ease. But the large guard at the door and the black eyes of the numerous security cameras on the ceiling broke the spell. They reminded Trent if he wasn't careful, his night at the Opera House could be nasty, brutish, and short.

Trent forgot about being careful when he saw Summer Rain in the lobby. Her purple skirt had a modest cut reaching past her knees, but it was made from some slick and shiny material fitting her in a way that couldn't simply be taken off. It would have to be peeled away from her skin like latex. It shimmered around her legs as she walked to him, as if the cloth could barely contain the smooth fullness of her hips and thighs. The thought of helping her out of those clothes pushed away every concept of security and awareness. Trent knew she wanted that effect. So did he.

He didn't remember the small talk they traded in the lobby. He saw the envious eyes of the men around them, but they didn't hold his attention. He remembered the smell of her perfume in the elevator and

the way it pulled him close to her. He leaned in for a kiss captured by her scent. His lower brain became stiff when she opened her mouth and her body molded to his in subdued sexual surrender.

As their mouths danced together, Trent wondered if murderous men would meet them in the hallway when they reached the third floor. The enclosed confines of the elevator could become a fatal funnel offering no avenue for escape from a hail of bullets. When they stepped out into the empty silence of plush carpets and dim corridors, Trent pushed away the idea of an ambush to focus on Summer Rain.

Their sex was less about connection and more about control. He pinned her against the wall as soon as she slid the lock into place. She bit into his lip and clawed at his clothes in response.

He forced her down on her knees and filled her mouth so he could listen to her muffled groans and gagging with every thrust. She pushed him down on the bed and mounted his face with gyrations of her hips that threatened to smother him.

Trent rolled her over, spread her open and only paused long enough to put on a condom before nailing her to the bed with furious abandon. She welcomed his brutal affection with her own, scratching his neck and back in a savage attempt to pull him closer.

They went on and on, each position and thrust more violent than the last. They stopped using words altogether. Their communication was reduced to groans, whimpers, curses and sweat.

Trent lost track of time when the final wave washed over him. He collapsed into her kisses, unsure if he had just recaptured his lover or kissed her goodbye.

Chapter Eight: Rain Fall

The beginning of the end started when Summer raised her head from his chest and slipped into the bathroom next to the bed. Trent checked the time on his watch in the moonlight and saw it was four in the morning, an hour and a half since they met. If this was a set-up, she gave herself just enough time to pick Trent up, distract him with an epic fuck and leave him in bed to sleep. Naked and satisfied in the afterglow, he would be an easy target for anyone who happened to be waiting in the hallway with a gun.

He heard the toilet flush and the water in the sink running. He imagined her scrubbing under her nails, eager to scrape away any of his skin that might be on her fingers. She wouldn't want the DNA of a corpse on her body. Did she plan to get rid of the sheets too? Did she have people among the hotel staff who could dispose of them and his clothes once he was dead? Could they dispose of his body? Was that why she wanted to meet far away from her apartment, his place and Sanctuary? Did she need to bring him to a place not linked to either of them? Is this how Frost died? Did it happen in this room? Trent imagined Summer pulling Frost close, squeezing her name out in his orgasm before watching a bullet blow out the back of his head. He imagined his own head replacing Frost's. He didn't like the idea.

But where did these thoughts come from? If Summer wanted Trent dead, she could have sent shooters to his apartment while she could stay far away from the danger. She could have had him ambushed in the elevator. She could have hid a man in the room to leap out when Trent took off his clothes and stood completely enraptured by her mouth. She could have killed him herself after he went to sleep. There were dozens of ways Summer could have killed him before now. What evidence did he have of her betrayal, besides his own paranoid speculation? Maybe he was wrong. Maybe Baker was right. Maybe he needed to set aside his suspicions and have a real conversation with Summer about what happened between them.

The light went out in the bathroom before the door opened. Summer eased the door just wide enough to pull herself through it and just slow enough to keep it from making a sound. Trent lay in the same position he was in when she left. On his back with his arms spread out, he watched her through eyes he kept almost closed. When she turned away from the bed and crept towards the door, he knew who was wrong about Summer Rain.

She wore a pair of black sweatpants and a matching pullover fleece sweater. Her braids were tied up and pulled back, as if she was going for a run, or running away. Trent couldn't see her feet, but he imagined her wearing sneakers. She must have hid the whole outfit in the bathroom before he arrived. She might have set up a lot of things before

he got there. Trent watched the abundance of Summer's hips disappear around the corner towards the front door and realized he would never be inside her again.

And when he heard the door open, Trent used the small sound to muffle the sound of his escape from the kill zone of the bed.

It only took a step to reach the bathroom door. It was three or four steps from the hallway door to a clear view of the bed. Trent used those precious seconds to his advantage. He slammed the bathroom door shut with as much noise as possible, but he didn't hide in that dead end box. He crouched low, hiding in the small shadow between the bed and the bathroom. It was the only place a potential shooter couldn't see without turning the corner and the only place Trent could be after they realized he wasn't in bed. Naked and unarmed, Trent would be helpless against anyone who already had their gun drawn and ready to fire.

{"Shit"} A man's muffled voice hissed around the corner.

The slammed door changed the equation. The sound suggested Trent trying to hide in the bathroom. The idea would draw a less disciplined shooter to move in without checking his blind spots. The killer might be so eager to catch Trent before he climbed out a window or called for help. He would race into the small shadow too fast to react

to the misdirection. The door to the hotel room closed with a slam of its own and the rapid rustle of clothing flowed toward Trent.

The strange sense of frozen time that often seized Trent in combat hit him as the barrel of the gun came into view. He recognized the form factor of the weapon. The profile of the .45 and its connected suppressor was a weapon he sometimes used in his own operations. The two hand grip of the shooter also revealed professional training. So did the surgical gloves covering those hands. Only his over eager speed betrayed him, but a momentary mistake was all Trent needed.

Trent reached out for those hands and pulled back with all his body weight. The shooter lurched forward, off balance. A shot spit out of the gun, past Trent's left arm and into the bed. The mattress absorbed the .45 round with a heavy thud.

The shooter relied on instinct, dropping his foot down hard in front of him to regain his lost balance. Trent used his reaction against him, driving his head up and into the other man's nose with a crack that sounded like thunder.

The shooter was good. His body knew how to respond even if his brain was still frozen from the ambush. He ignored the pain in his face and the stars clouding his vision. He didn't let go of the gun to protect his broken nose. But it didn't matter. Trent leveraged the gun away by

the barrel, leaning on it with his body weight. Pushing it back and down, he broke through the shooter's grip. He bent the shooting finger backwards until the odd angle freed the gun with the muffled pop of strained ligaments. Trent heard other sounds, far away but still audible. There was the sharp gasp of a woman and more movement by the door. How many other shooters were in the doorway?

The pain in the shooter's head and the pain in his hand must have shattered his training. The professional instinct of the operator was replaced by the primal reactions of freeze or flight. He stumbled back, desperate to put space between himself and his lost gun. But it didn't matter. Trent spun the weapon around in his own two handed grip, pulled the weapon close to his sternum and fired three rounds. Two struck the shooter's chest and one popped into his head before he could take a step. The shooter tumbled to the ground in a heap. Trent took a low quick peek around the corner, the pistol held up to deal with threats down range.

He saw both of them, framed by the doorway and lit by the hall light. A second shooter had his back to the door. His blue Yankees jacket and matching jeans made him look like any other Hispanic man roaming through the Bronx at night. The gloves on his hands, the nine millimeter in his grip and the scarf pulled up over his mouth made him look like a gang banger. Summer Rain stood in front of him. Her hands cupped over her mouth to stifle a scream. Her eyes were wide with a

fear Trent never saw from her. He couldn't recognize the woman he just went to bed with. He saw both of them and they saw him. No one said a word. There was no time for words.

The shooter moved with decisive violence. He reached out and grabbed Summer, pulling her close and wrapping his bulky arm around her shoulders. Summer opened her mouth to scream. The 9mm came up to eye level.

Maybe he planned to take shots at Trent and use Summer as a human shield. Maybe he wanted to try and hold her hostage and bargain his way out of the room. Maybe he thought about shielding her with his own body to protect her from Trent's gun. Trent had no way of knowing if this man was another of Summer's lovers. It didn't matter. Trent fired three rounds before the man could do or say anything.

Trent imagined he could see the bullets escape the suppressor and travel down the hallway in slow motion. He watched their path and thought about the moments leading up to their flight. Trent recalled his flirtations with Summer across the bar when they first met. He remembered the sexual tension erupting between them before and after the death of Rafael Ramon. He remembered the sight her going down on Jay and the moments of wondering about her sex with Frost. He thought about his hunger to meet her tonight and the delicious moisture of her body beneath him just a few minutes ago. He saw all those things

when he watched the bullets flying. Summer saw them too. She must have seen something. Her eyes caught his for the smallest instant and in that second, every moment they shared flashed between them.

And then both bodies fell to the floor.

Trent moved with the cold efficiency of an operator. He checked the bodies for signs of life. He listened for any indication those fleeting seconds of slaughter might have been heard by anyone in the hallway or in an adjoining room. He dressed, stripped the sheets of the bed and gathered them up with both the condom and Summer's original outfit. He wiped down the gun he'd used and put it in Summer's hands. He snatched up all the cell phones. He looked through the peephole of the door to make sure there were no other shooters or witnesses who might see him leave. Then, holding the bundle of sheets up on his shoulder to block his face from the security cameras, Trent shut off the light, nudged the bodies out of the way and left the hotel room.

He managed to avoid looking in Summer's dead eyes until the door brushed against her full hips.

He managed to avoid crying over Summer until he slipped out the side of the Opera House, stuffed the dirty sheets in the sewer and started his SDR.

Chapter Nine: After the Rain

"So when did you decide to shoot her?"

Baker's question whipped through the wind racing across the bridge. Trent walked beside him, slowing his natural stride to match his friend's hobbled pace. To anyone driving over the 59th Street bridge into Manhattan, the two men appeared to be nothing more than a couple of guys enjoying the pleasant fall day by taking a stroll into Queens. But the question was part of Trent's debriefing and Baker's damage control in the wake of Summer Rain's death.

"I had to take the shot. There couldn't have been more than eight feet between me and the threat. I didn't have the time or other means to escape."

"That all makes sense, but it might not answer the question of when you decided to kill Summer."

Trent thought about the last look in her eyes. "What do you mean?"

Baker shook his head with a sad smile. "I have a theory, Shadow. It's based on two related pieces of data. Would you like to hear my analysis?"

"No."

"Good. You took a live fire Simunitions evaluation a few months ago when I brought you on board. Do you remember that?"

An angry knot formed in Trent's stomach. "Vaguely, you sent me out to Pennsylvania for benchmarking when I agreed to be a consultant."

"Exactly. Do you know what the results were of your kill house tests?"

The door bumped up against her full hip. "From what I remember I did pretty well."

Baker laughed without much happiness. "You were ninety seven percent accurate on a four inch moving target within five feet. You were ninety two percent accurate within ten feet. That's taking low lighting, cramped quarters and simulated stress into account. Your accuracy at that range is still on par with active GIGN, SAS and Delta. You impressed a lot of people out there."

"Good for me." He watched the bullets escape the suppressor and travel down the hallway.

"That's very good. I actually think that's more than good enough to put a round into Summer's shooter without hitting her."

Trent shook his head, watching her turn the corner towards the door. "You can't know that based on the Simunitions test. I wasn't naked in a post sex situation during the test. I didn't just wrestle an unfamiliar weapon from a threat and put three rounds in him during the test. It's not the same situation."

Baker shrugged. "It never is, but based on your test results, I think you might be able to hit the shooter, without hitting Summer while getting a double blowjob by two porn stars, but of course, my opinion is biased."

Trent gave him a hard look. "Your confidence in me is flattering, but I couldn't take that chance. You don't understand the threat level. You weren't there."

"Nope. I wasn't there. You were. That brings me to the second part of my theory. Can you guess---"

Trent stopped walking and turned on Baker. "Just fucking say what you're going to say."

Baker responded with only the hint of anger in his tone. "I stopped to ask myself, what was Shadow doing there? You didn't trust Summer, so you must have known the meeting was a trap. I told you Frost wasn't a priority anymore, so you couldn't even use that as a justification. I have no doubt fucking her was something special, but I don't think you stepped onto the bull's-eye with your eyes closed."

Trent glared. He gnashed his teeth. But he didn't deny Baker's theory. He couldn't.

Baker walked to the rusty railing on the bridge walkway and looked out onto the East River. "I think, at some point, you decided you had to deal with Summer Rain, one way or another. You hoped for the best and prepared for the worst. You exposed yourself to give her one more chance, but you were ready, willing and able to deal with things if she fucked up." Baker shrugged again. "She fucked up. You dealt with things."

Trent leaned against the railing next to Baker and tried to laugh. "That's your theory? You think I set this whole thing up to kill Summer? You think I wanted to get caught ass out and unarmed in a kill zone? Is that all you got?"

"So far. What I don't know is when you decided she had to die. You say it was when you pulled the trigger. Maybe that's true, but it could have happened when you agreed to meet her. Maybe it was when you first confronted her about Frost. It might have been much earlier when you realized she used you to help Frost in the first place. The real question is how long was Summer in your sights."

Trent leaned in, attempting to intimidate a man that never seemed flustered. "If I wanted to kill her, I could have done it anywhere I wanted: in the bar, in her apartment, even on the street. What sense would it make for me to risk another night with her?"

"It doesn't make any sense, but when it comes to risk, you're good at not making sense." Baker looked at Trent with understanding eyes. "We both know you're an adrenaline junkie. That's how you thrive. It's not just violence that drives you. Sexual excitement works just as well as combat. In her own way, Summer offered both and you jumped in with both feet. Luckily, you didn't get your dick blown off in the process."

Trent stared out at the brownish gray water of the East River and soaked in Baker's words. He wondered if some small part of him acted out of jealousy. He remembered the sight of her head rocking back and forth in Jay's lap. The intense anger of their argument came rushing back to him. So did the hopeless confusion he felt before her invitation.

Was it jealousy that drove him to confront her outside Sanctuary? Was his need for closure and release so strong he risked his life to be the last man inside her? Trent thought about the look in her eyes just before she died. Maybe that look was what he'd wanted for the whole time.

A young woman jogged past them, pushing a rugged little baby stroller out in front of her. Baker waited until she was out of earshot before he started walking again. "Those phones you picked up from the shooters were burners, but Summer's phone had some interesting intel on it." He had moved on from questioning Trent's motives and when back to the tactical reality of Summer's death. Trent was grateful for the change in topic.

"Did she put a call into Frost?"

"Yup, a couple hours after you made contact. But Frost never called back. The only contact number of interest belongs to a phone we think might be Diego's. No one has used Frost's last phone in weeks."

"You think Diego sent those shooters? How do we know Summer didn't recruit them herself?"

Ria says according to police records, both guys were Mexican ex-cons linked with Los Zetas factions in Auburn prison. The equipment and tactics they had suggests a paramilitary background and support.

As far as we know, they were *sicarios* brought in to clean up loose ends created after Frost disappeared. Summer didn't have those kinds of contacts. Diego does."

"Are you sure Summer couldn't hire them on her own?"

"If she could, why would she use you to take out Ramon in the first place? Her whole relationship with you was predicated on the fact she didn't have shooters in her stable. That situation might have changed after Ramon, but I'm more inclined to think those were Diego's men."

"What else did you find on the phones?"

"Ganesh is still looking into it, but it doesn't really make a difference for your purposes. I need you to get off the grid."

"I thought you needed me to back up Nikki? I got rid of the DNA evidence and I rearranged the room to introduce doubt in the investigation. None of the cameras saw me leaving. I should be clean enough to finish the op, right?"

"The op should be over in twenty four to thirty six hours, but you don't have that kind of time. The Post is running with a story saying Summer died in a drugs for sex deal gone bad, but what you did to doctor the room didn't change what the cops know."

"Ria got you the police report?"

"No, she saw it. She said there's no way all three people died from the same gun unless one shooter killed himself, and the ballistic pattern doesn't support that. The missing sheets can't incriminate you, but their absence proves someone else was in the room. You hid your face going out, but the lobby camera still caught you coming in and enough witnesses saw you in the lobby with Summer to cause a problem. Once the cops start interviewing her employees, it will only be a matter of time before they come knocking on your door. We can't have that, now can we?"

The mention of Summer's employees brought Trent's mind back to Jay and his hostile reaction at the door of the club. The bouncer would be more than happy to throw Trent under the bus to get back at him for taking Summer away. Trent never had beef with Jay before, but he did now.

"Summer had a bouncer, an Iraq vet by the name of Jay. He has more bulk than I do, but he could be mistaken for me with the right questioning. Maybe you could leave an anonymous tip to add some more confusion to the investigation, give me a little more time to---"

"It's a good idea, but I still need you to vanish. The last thing I need in this op is a police investigation leading back to Diego. That would make him useless as an asset and waste all our efforts. Besides, I'm not in the mood to visit you in prison."

"Thanks. I can be gone in two hours. I just need to get my go bag and head back to Port Authority." Trent had gone underground before. He knew what to do. A bus ticket paid with cash would take him to a random station in the Northeast corridor. By the time he got off the bus, his phone would be gone and his name would change. From there, he would stick to the transient black enclaves, paying for everything in cash and not staying anywhere more than a night or two. In a few weeks, he could cross over into Canada. Then his forged passport could get him set up somewhere unremarkable. He'd have to start over, but it was better than seven to ten years in a cell.

Baker's voice cut into his planning. "Don't go to Port Authority. Get on the train and take it to Baltimore. I'll have someone from the Documents department in D.C. get you papers that will get you down to St. Croix. You can lay low there until I come down to get you in a few months."

"Why St. Croix?"

"We got a potential client opening up a pair of hotels down there, high end all-inclusive shit. I was planning on sending Kean down to do the advanced recon, but you clearly need a vacation."

The two friends reached the end of the bridge. The noise from the clogged traffic and the oppressive shadows from the web of train tracks and off ramps engulfed them. Trent turned to look at Baker one last time before he left. "You still trust me on an op after all this?"

Baker's stupid smile promised more security than an armored car. "I trust you to be a homicidal sex addict, but I'm surrounded by people like you these days. It must be something in the water."

"What do you mean? Is something going on with Nikki?"

"Yes, but that will work itself out."

"Maybe you just attract freaks. Isn't there a saying about employers getting the employees they deserve?"

Baker laughed. "Don't you have a train to catch?"

The friends exchanged hugs before Trent descended into the train station. He wasn't ready to leave New York, but hopefully the change of scenery would help him forget Summer Rain.

The Crime and Passion Series

Thank you for taking the time to read *Friends and Family*. If you enjoyed this book, please picking up the full novel *Smoke and Shadow* to find out what happens to Trent in St. Croix.

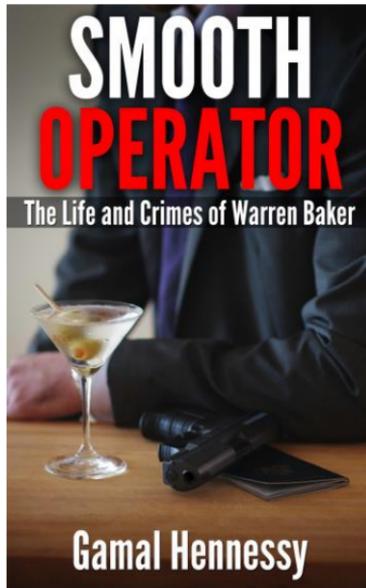
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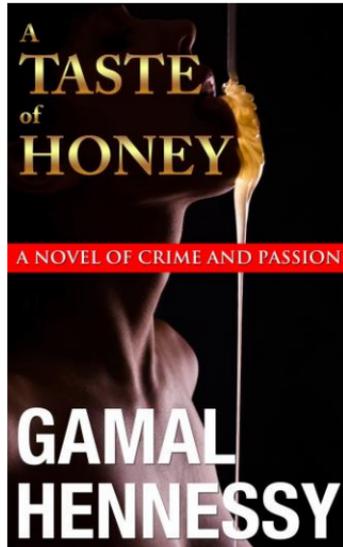
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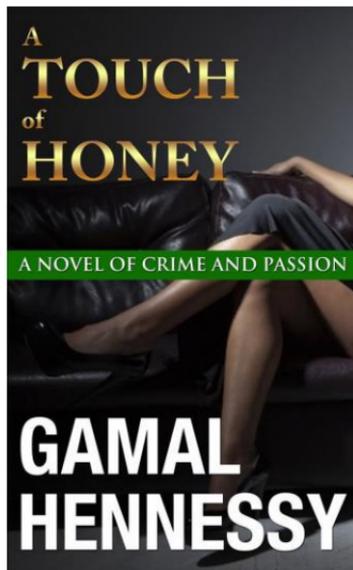
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