

### Bait the Devil (excerpt)

Two hours later, they had managed to corral the quickly sobering Freddy into the back of the Suburban, with no more eventful chases, and turn him over to the county jail. Freddy's bail bondsman paid out their fair share of the bond and a huge tip after some hard pressing on T.J.'s part about the circumstances leading up to Freddy's apprehension. Once the check was cashed, a celebratory late lunch at one of the best Basque eateries Dot had found in Boise was the best way to top off a successful day of bounty hunting.

Parked behind the Bar Gernika, she and T.J. sat in the back end of the Chevy Suburban with the hatch up eating chorizo sandwiches with smoked cod croquetas and a bowl of green olives dripping in garlic olive oil. Dot slurped down half of her Coke, then shook the ice in her cup.

T.J. pointed the remains of his smoked beef chorizo at her. "We should register for the SHOT show in Vegas."

"Why?"

"Because we can." T.J. pulled his *duh* face.

Dot rolled her eyes and bit into her sandwich.

"Have you ever been there?" T.J. asked.

She shook her head, wiping smokey chorizo juice from the corner of her mouth.

"The woman raised to be a hunter and a firearms collector has never been to the great SHOT show?" He lowered his reflective sunglasses and eyed her over the top of the rims.

"Never?"

“You do realize my family wasn’t made of money.” Dot popped one of the croquetas into her mouth. “And that’s in the dead of winter, when we couldn’t just up and run off while we were in the middle of lambing season.”

“All the more reason you should go now.” T.J. grinned. “A lot of the best bounty hunters meet up there.”

Dot scowled at her partner and sometimes bunk buddy. “Lemme guess. You wanna show off your shiny new partner to the boys?”

“Maybe.” His grin turned devilish. “Or maybe I wanna see you kick their asses.”

Dot wadded up the sandwich wrapper and chucked it at T.J.’s head. “I’m not a toy.”

The crumbled ball of waxed paper bounced off his forehead and landed on the Suburban floor between them.

“Really? Then why are you so easy to wind up?”

“You sonofa—” Dot lunged for his throat but was quickly subdued.

Their moment of levity was interrupted by a shrill ring from T.J.’s phone.

“Damn it,” he snapped and patted down his body in search for his cell.

Dot found it lying on the makeshift floor behind his hulking frame. She snatched it up and checked the screen. She batted her eyelashes at T.J.

“Don’t you dare,” he snarled.

She pressed the green icon to answer the call. “Well, hello, cousin dearest.”

Lawyer-extraordinaire and covert purveyor of information, Vivian Montgomery was Dot’s second cousin. And apparently had earned a spot on T.J.’s contact list under the moniker of Hot Ass Lawyer.

“Dot? When did you start taking business calls?” Vivian asked, her brisk tone underscored by the sound of her heavy breathing.

“What are you doing?” Dot asked. “You sound like you’re saving the horse and riding a cowboy.”

“Oh, grow up. I’m on a treadmill. Put T.J. on the phone.”

“You shouldn’t run on those things. They destroy your knees and back,” Dot chided.

“When I want health advice from a cigar smoker who jumps from helicopters for fun, I’ll call.”

“I don’t jump from the helo. Unless it’s crashing. Even then, that’s sketchy shit.”

T.J., giving a rumbling growl, jerked the phone from Dot, and pressed it to his ear.

“Vivian, what do you need?” He waited a moment, then with another low growl, pulled the phone from his ear and put it on speaker. “You’re on speaker.”

“I need a huge favor from the two of you.”

“When you say huge favor, how huge are we talking?” Dot asked.

“You know, I think I liked you better when you were a brooding, isolated eremite whose main goal in life was equal parts trying to piss off her mother and keep her out of trouble,” Vivian shot back.

“Love you too, coz.”

“Now shut up and let me finish.” The whining sound of the treadmill belt slowing echoed over the phone connection. “I just got a call from one of my colleagues. She had a client fail to appear today.”

“Shouldn’t the defendant’s bail bondsman be calling us?” T.J. asked.

“It’s ... complicated.”

Dot smiled as T.J. groaned.

“Vivian, every time you rope us into one of your firm’s problems with their unruly children, we’re out money, time, and patience. We’re called bounty hunters for a reason. Bounty is in the name.”

“Roman, if you keep up the condescending behavior, I’ll expose your dirty little secret.”

“Dirty secret, huh,” Dot piped in. “What’s that?”

He thrust a finger at her nose. “None of your business. Vivian, if you so much as breathe out of line, I’ll make you regret it.”

“Will you do me the favor?”

T.J. stared at Dot, who shrugged as if to say, *Why not?*

“Fine. Mark my words, I’ll be cashing in on this huge favor sooner than you think.”

“I wouldn’t have bothered you with this, expect the guy is a veteran, and you two being veterans yourself, I figured he’d be more likely to work with you than anyone else.”

“What’s on his file?” Dot asked.

“That’s the complicated part. Officially, his file says he was picked up a third time for carrying with the intent to sell. Unofficially, he’s ... classified.”

Dot frowned as she and T.J. locked eyes. As a former army ranger who spent a lot of time flying in and out of forward operating bases in Afghanistan, T.J. knew all about classified situations. Dot, as the main helicopter pilot shuttling him and his team back and forth, though never read in on his actual missions, typically was under strict orders of her own.

“Vivian, I’m not getting fuzzy feelings about this,” T.J. said.

“Neither am I. It’s why I’m calling the two of you in. The judge wants to issue a bench warrant. My colleague was able to ask for a delay before it’s submitted. She was given three

hours to present her client or the warrant is released. If you'd rather, you could consider this job PI work instead of fugitive recovery."

The shingle hanging outside their business office did say private investigators. At this point, that title belonged to T.J. and T.J. alone.

"Still not selling me on this," he said. "If there's no bench warrant, there's no cash for catching him."

"Hang on." Vivian spoke to someone, her voice muffled, then she was back. "The firm will pay you a finder's fee."

T.J. continued to stare at Dot. She could sense what he was thinking. He was torn. Take this off-the-cuff job and cash in on the favor department with Vivian to help a fellow veteran? Or say *fuck it* and play hooky for the rest of the day like he'd planned?

Dot didn't really have much of a say in the business dealings of their partnership since she was eight months into the training phase as a fugitive recovery agent and she wasn't a licensed PI. It didn't stop T.J. from pressing her for her opinion, who argued that, because she was about to start taking bounties on her own, she needed to take the reins more often.

"If it helps you make a decision, I've got his last known address and a phone number along with a photo," Vivian said. "This won't be a hard catch."

"Stop saying that. Every time you tell me it's an easy one, it turns into a disaster," T.J. snarled.

"He's right," Dot added.

"Okay, I retract my statement. But, please say yes. Huge favor to me. I'll do anything."

"Anything?"

Dot glared at him.

“Within reason,” Vivian shot back.

“We’ll do it,” Dot said, tired of T.J.’s runaround. “Send us the four-one-one, and we’ll go check it out.”

T.J. glared at her; his dark eyes flashed a warning. Dot returned his glare with a smug look of her own that dared him to bring it.

“Thank you, coz. Hurry. There’s only two hours left before the bench warrant goes out. Then it’ll be a free-for-all.”

“You couldn’t have called us about this an hour ago?” T.J. grouched.

“Shut your yap, Roman,” Vivian said. “There. Info sent.”

His phone dinged.

“His name is Cade Porter. He was a staff sergeant in the Marine Corps.” Vivian sucked in a breath. “Oooh.”

“Oooh, what?” T.J. insisted.

“If this is right, he was in an artillery unit.”

“Oh my God.” T.J. groaned.

Dot grinned. Not only did acting on a favor for Vivian chafe T.J. in the chaps, but doing it for a Marine with explosives expertise was going to make that chafe burn. Throughout their long, storied history, there had always been a deep-seated friendly animosity between the army and the Marines. Push came to shove, however, they still had each other’s backs.

“If that crayon eater blows us up, I’m going to haunt you,” he said.

“I look forward to the visits. Now get going.” Vivian ended the call.

T.J. shoved his phone in a side pocket of his cargo pants. “Tell me again why we let Vivian help us out?”

“Because,” Dot said as she scooted out of the SUV’s backend, “she’s good for the money. And I trust her intel more than I would some of your bail bondsmen.”

“You say that because you’re biased.”

*“Nire familia da. Garrantzitsua da.”*

T.J. paused before closing the hatch. “I speak Pashto, Arabic, some Spanish, and Oklahoman. I do not speak Basque.”

Dot chuckled. “Time to learn, Danger Ranger.”

“Load up and let’s roll.”