

DAY ONE

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# The Misfire



# 1

The woman caught Aiden's eye a second time and he realized she was stalking him. Which he found ironic, given he was in the process of hunting another, although he was fairly sure her idea of success was much different than his. Older than the average female at the bar, she projected an air of quiet desperation, with a sultry smile covering her misery like a cheap coat of paint, the pain clearly evident underneath.

Surrounded on all sides by soldiers barely over drinking age, most having recently returned from a combat deployment with the 82nd Airborne, she longed to get away from the smell of stale beer and testosterone. She was searching for someone to take her from the bravado of arms. Someone who didn't have the stench of combat surrounding his every move. A civilized man who didn't believe that training to kill was a decent way to make a living.

She could be forgiven in her assessment, as Aiden Kelleher was much older than most of the men in the bar. His haircut, clothes, and demeanor did not mark him as a soldier. At least not a US one, with Tap-out T-shirts, shaved heads, and skull tattoos. If asked, he certainly considered himself no less a soldier than the rowdy men in the bar. He had taken lives in the name of a cause, and he most certainly knew that killing was a noble way to make a living.

*Maybe I'll come back here later. Taste a little American sweetness.*

He smiled to himself, knowing that wasn't going to happen. He'd already raised his signature simply by opening his mouth, his accent causing the bartender to comment. He might be remembered, which wasn't good, considering what he had planned.

He felt his phone vibrate and checked the number. He held the cell up in the air, letting his partner see it at a table across from the bar, then exited so he could talk in private.

“I have him in the bar, but I’ve raised my signature. The police will retrace his steps, and I might be mentioned.”

“Can you still get him?”

“I think so, if you want to push it. I would prefer to wait.”

“We don’t have time. He’s set to go on a military exercise tomorrow, and we only have three days. You miss him tonight, and we lose him.”

“We still have the others, right?”

“Maybe. All will have the same issues as you, so we might miss more than just this one. Once they connect who we’re after, they will lock them all down tight. All six will be protected. It might even take less than three days for that to happen.”

“Then tonight it is.”

He hung up, texting the numbers 11111 to his partner’s phone, letting him know the mission was being forced, then reentered the bar, looking instinctively at the target’s table. He was gone, and so was Aiden’s partner. He felt his phone vibrate and read the text.

*In the cigar bar. Paying his tab.*

The establishment their target had chosen was called Itz Entertainment City, a large building with a multitude of different venues, including a standard sports bar with the usual chain of flat-screen televisions, a comedy club, a dance club, and a cigar bar. It was a place frequented by soldiers from the sprawling Fort Bragg in Fayetteville, North Carolina. For the most part, their target had spent his time in the sports bar, drinking sparingly and talking with friends. He’d come alone, and, given his field time tomorrow, Aiden was sure he’d leave alone.

Aiden turned to exit, staging for the follow, and bumped into the woman. He saw she was considerably more intoxicated than he’d thought before, swaying slightly and using the bar for support.

“Hey, I’d thought you’d left.” She gave a crooked smile. “Did you come back looking for something?”

“I’m sorry, no. I’m actually leaving now.”

Her eyes clouded in confusion, his accent struggling to find a foot-

hold in her soaked brain. He moved past her, hearing, “Hey, are you British?”

The comment drove a needle of anger deep between his eyes, causing him to squeeze them shut harshly. He whirled around and said, “No, you stupid American cow. Irish. *Irish.*”

She stumbled back at his ferocity, and he knew he’d made a mistake. Knew he’d let his hatred overcome his discipline for the mission. She would remember him for sure now. He smiled and said, “You going to be here when I get back?”

Caught off guard, the liquor clouding her judgment, she said nothing, a confused grin on her face. She hesitantly nodded. He smiled again and brushed her shoulder, saying, “See you soon.”

The touch made her beam, but Aiden didn’t notice. Behind her he saw his target leaving the establishment. She said something he didn’t catch, and he walked to the exit, waiting a beat to let the target get some distance. He dialed his partner.

“Dermot, it’s Aiden. Where are you?”

“Already in the car. I got him in sight. You’re clear to leave.”

Aiden speed-walked to the driver’s side of their rental, sliding behind the wheel. Fiddling with a laptop, Dermot said, “Backup is on station. Waiting on the beacon to lock. What did Seamus say?”

“It’s now or never. We miss him tonight, we pull out.”

Dermot’s computer flashed and he said, “Then let’s get him tonight.”

“Where’s he headed?”

“That road called Skeebo or Skibo or whatever.”

Aiden took a right on Legend Avenue, saying, “We keep following until he gives up for the night. Same plan. We take him at the apartment.”

They traveled through the heart of Fayetteville, passing malls and hotels, until eventually they were on a road called Morganton, the target seven cars up in the right-hand turn lane.

Aiden said, “Is that Reilly Road?”

“Yes.” Dermot’s teeth flashed in the dark. “Good omen.”

“He’s headed home. Get the backup ready.”

Dermot began dialing as the light turned green. Aiden crowded the

car in front of him, pushing to get into the turn lane. Unconcerned before about maintaining a close distance to the target—in fact preferring to let the beacon do the work—he now needed to be in a position to assault. He heard one horn blare, saw the light go yellow, and blasted through the turn, now two cars back.

Aiden saw a sign for Stewarts Creek Condominiums and felt the excitement of the hunt rise. He said, “Get ready. Get backup ready. Remember, no shooting. No harm.”

The target’s turn signal began to blink, and Aiden’s mind flashed to Belfast and the hunting of men. He felt his lip curl involuntarily, his hands crimping the steering wheel in an effort to release the adrenaline. He had to consciously remind himself that there would be no killing here. A death would be *worse* than counterproductive.

The target pulled into the entrance for the complex and Aiden goosed the pedal to catch up. His headlights splashed the back window, and he saw the brake lights too late. He skidded forward, punching the bumper hard enough to slam Dermot against the dash.

The world stopped for a moment, the only sound the ticking of the engine under the crumpled hood. This was not what Aiden had intended at all.

Dermot said, “Abort.”

Aiden saw the door open in front of him and said, “Call the backup. We take him here. Right now, before someone else shows up.”

“He’s completely alert. What if he comes out shooting?”

“God damn it, all he knows is he was hit from behind. Why would he come out shooting?”

“Because this is America. Everyone has a gun.”

Aiden snorted and said, “Bullshit. That’s Hollywood.” He opened the door and swung out, seeing his target in the glare of a streetlight, standing next to the car with his hands on his hips. He said, “Hey, sorry. My fault.”

He took two steps forward, not realizing his mistake. While Aiden was correct in his assessment of the average American civilian, it fell woefully short for his given target. He knew Staff Sergeant Bryan Cransfield had recently returned from Afghanistan but did not realize that the

man's hard-fought sense of survival had not yet returned to civilization. This soldier was still living in a world where green-on-blue attacks dominated his psyche. Where he'd seen a friend killed by the very men he was training. And unlike the majority of America, Sergeant Cransfield now traveled armed.

He'd survived a year in Afghanistan, but the experience had killed him without him even knowing. Had he been less aware, less attuned to potential threats, he would have lived to see the sunrise. He would have only been captured. But he couldn't be faulted for that. He couldn't know that the car behind him wasn't armed. Or about the car in front that was.

Sergeant Cransfield said, "Why are you following me?"

Aiden saw the blunt glare of a semiautomatic pistol. He shot his arms in the air, shouting, "Hey, no, wait!"

The soldier raised the weapon and said again, "Why are you fucking following me? I saw you in the bar. What do you want?"

Aiden saw a flurry of movement behind the soldier and knew it was too late. He shouted, "No! Don't!" but the rounds cracked anyway, the backup team removing the threat. Sergeant Cransfield was struck in the shoulder and collapsed into the car. From the seat he ripped off three rounds. Aiden heard the bullets puncture his windshield and dove to the ground. He crawled backward and heard two more sharp cracks, then his name called.

He stood up and ran, reaching the target car and the backup team. Staff Sergeant Cransfield was lying across the seat, eyes open and skull split from the kill shot. Aiden slammed the backup against the door-frame, shouting, "What the fuck are you doing?"

The man bucked forward, shoving Aiden hard enough to cause him to stumble. "He was going to kill you, you fucking tool!"

Aiden leaned back and rubbed his face, thinking. He said, "Shit. Get your team and leg it out of here. Drive his vehicle deep into the woods. We'll deal with this later."

Without another word, Aiden ran back to his car and slid behind the wheel. He said, "That Muppet Smythe killed the target."

He got no reply. He turned to the right and saw a single hole settled just below Dermot's right eye.

“Jesus Christ.”

He put the car in gear and backed out, assessing the disaster. Not only had they failed to take their target alive, but they’d lost a man in the process. He hoped the other five targets went better than this.

He turned onto Morganton, running through his mind how he was going to deal with Dermot, cataloging his network of American contacts to make the corpse disappear. It wasn’t until he reached Skibo that he realized the target’s body would be found, causing a police investigation.

Which meant the killing wasn’t done. He turned onto Skibo heading back to the sports bar, and the woman who knew his accent.