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DIRTY BUSINESS

New Orleans
Club Hell
March 30

“Hey, Pumpkin.”

Just two simple words spoken into air fragrant with the homey scents of toast and cantaloupe, yet they fractured the club’s late-morning peace and iced Heather Wallace’s spine.

Never expected to see him in New Orleans, let alone Club Hell. Did he come on his own or did the Bureau send him?

Heather finished rinsing her plate in the sink behind the bar, turned off the water, then, pulse pounding, swiveled around to face her father. The weight of the Colt snugged into the back of her jeans did little to comfort her.

Special Agent James William Wallace stood in the entrance beneath the neon BURN sign, red light winking from the lenses of his glasses and gliding along the shoulders of his tan trench coat. Shadows cast by the dim overheads hollowed his cheeks, making him look older than his fifty-seven years.

The last time Heather had seen her father had been at the FBI field office in Seattle, where he’d tried to convince her to abandon the truth and sell her soul to the Bureau, and where Heather had also learned that the lying bastard had used Annie to spy on her, promising his long-ignored bipolar daughter that they’d be a family once more.

Of course, Annie hadn't known he'd sell Heather's secrets. Or that he'd lied.

But Alexander Lyons had known, and had shared the information with Heather before he'd held her at gunpoint, before he'd triggered Dante's programming, before Dante had *remade* him into something . . . else.

Your dad contacted a member of the Shadow Branch and told this person that Dante Baptiste saved your life without using his blood. So the SB decided to bring you in for tests to determine what he did to you and how.

"Whose dirty business are you doing today?" Heather asked, wiping her hands dry against her jeans. "The Bureau's or your own?"

"The traditional greeting is still 'Hello, good to see you,' I believe," James Wallace replied. A sardonic smile slanted his lips. His gaze slid past Heather. "I admit, I'm disappointed in you, Annie," he said.

The cold icing Heather's spine deepened. She turned her head to look at her sister. Wearing a fuzzy purple bathrobe, her blue-black-purple-colored tresses bed-mussed and pointing in all directions, Annie sat perched on a stool at the polished counter, her blue eyes wide with shock. She lowered her cream cheese-slathered bagel from her mouth.

"How the *fuck* did you get in?" she asked.

"Well, given that you didn't leave the door unlocked like I asked, I had to find my own solution," James Wallace chided, his tone a wagging *naughty-naughty* finger.

Heather stiffened. "You *called* him?"

Mingled guilt and defiance flashed across Annie's face. "I didn't think it'd be a big deal. Fuck." She looked down at her bagel, then pushed the plate away. She seemed to find the bar's surface suddenly fascinating.

"Jesus Christ! He asked you to *unlock the door* and you didn't tell me?" Heather stared at her sister, her pulse pounding at her temples. "Didn't tell *any* of us? What the *hell* were you thinking?" She slapped both palms down on the counter in front of Annie's shoved-away plate. The abrupt, harsh sound echoed throughout the club. "Look at me, dammit!"

Annie lifted her gaze. Defiance had won the war over guilt in her blue eyes. "But I *didn't* unlock the door," she protested, "so I thought that ended it. I only called him to let him know we were okay. In case he was worried or something."

“*Dammit, Annie. Shit.*” Anger Heather didn’t have time for—*not now, but later, oh, hell yes, we’re going to have it out*—burned a hole in her gut. She blew out a frustrated breath, then looked at their father. “Trust me, he wasn’t worried,” she said, voice grim.

James Wallace shoved his hands into the pockets of his trench. “That’s where you’re wrong,” he replied. “I’ve been worried since the moment I learned you’d disappeared. And before that—from the moment I realized you’ve been protecting a vampire. Lying for him. Covering up for him.”

“That’s pretty damned funny coming from a pathological liar,” Heather said.

“That’s not *you* talking, Pumpkin.”

“I’m pretty damned sure it is.”

“No. It’s not. It’s that bloodsucker, not you. And I plan to free you from Dante Prejean and his influence. Help you redeem yourself.”

“His name isn’t Prejean, it’s Baptiste. And you’re wasting your time,” Heather said, her voice tight, knife-edged. “I don’t *need* or *want* your so-called freedom or your goddamned redemption.”

“You don’t get it—of course you don’t,” her father said, stepping down from the entrance’s mouth and into the club proper. “That bloodsucker has messed with your mind and your loyalties. You no longer know what you want. You’re no longer in control of your own life. You’ve even destroyed your career because of him.”

“You’re so far from the truth, I don’t even know where to begin,” Heather said. “But I’m not going to bother, because you’ll never understand that every action I’ve taken has been *my* choice. So . . .” She reached back for her Colt and locked her fingers around the grip. “You need to leave. I have things to do.”

It was nearly noon, and Heather kept expecting to hear the thump of the streetside doors as Jack or Eli or Emmett Thibodaux arrived to add more warm bodies to their daytime security detail.

C’mon, guys. Now would be good. Before things escalate.

She’d be even happier if Lucien De Noir were present, but he’d gone to the fire-bombed plantation house to meet with the insurance adjuster. But some things could never be compensated for—not even in blood. When Guy Mauvais had orchestrated the

house's destruction, his henchmen burning it to a smoldering pile of rubble and ashes, Dante hadn't just lost the home he'd shared with Von, De Noir, and the others, he'd also lost Simone, his *chère amie*, in the gasoline-fueled blaze.

"You're right," James Wallace said, voice strained, "I *don't* believe any action you've taken since meeting Prejean has been your own. You're lying to yourself, Pumpkin. You've chosen nothing." He walked across the wood floor, headed for the bar. The clean scent of his Brut aftershave preceded him. "That's just what Prejean or Baptiste or whatever name the bloodsucking bastard goes by wants you to think. But I'm going to put an end to that."

"No, you're not." Heather slipped the Colt free and swung it around in a two-handed hold, leveling the muzzle with her father's chest. Her aim was steady despite the hollow feeling in the pit of her stomach. "Hold it right there. Not another step."

"Heather," Annie breathed.

James Wallace halted and lifted his hands into the air, palms out. One eyebrow quirked up. "Is this necessary?" he asked.

"Sadly, yeah," Heather replied. He might be her father, but he was also the man who'd sold her out to the SB.

"We're blood, Heather. Family," her father said, his words calm and matter-of-fact. "*Human*. That should count more than a roll in the sack with an inhuman, bloodsucking scumbag. *He's* not human, and never will be."

"Right now, that's a point in his favor," Heather replied. "And you're wrong about what he is."

Von's words, spoken a lifetime ago, were etched into her mind: *He is the never-ending Road*.

And that never-ending Road Slept upstairs in the bed he and Heather shared, his hair a silky night-black spill across the pillow, with Eerie nestled beside him on the red velvet comforter in a fluffy orange kitty-ball.

Silver and Von Slept as well. All three nightkind lost to the narcotic embrace of Sleep. All vulnerable. And all beyond her ability to awaken.

Heather flicked the Colt's safety off, her heart drumming against her ribs.

"You *can't* shoot Dad," Annie said in an incredulous near-whisper.

“His choice,” Heather said. “If he turns around and leaves, then I won’t have to.”

Resolve tightened her father’s jaw, deepened the lines bracketing his mouth. He touched a finger to the base of his ear. “I can’t leave without what I came for,” he said.

Com set. Lying bastard isn’t alone. The sound of heavy boots against wood echoed from the entrance hall. Tac team.

“Annie, get your ass upstairs,” Heather snapped. She kept her gaze locked on their father. Sweat trickled between her breasts. “You’re not taking Dante,” she told him.

“It’s not Dante I want,” James Wallace replied as four black uniformed and masked figures armed with assault rifles dashed into the club, red neon from the BURN sign flickering over them as they passed beneath it and spread out. “I’ve come for you, Pumpkin.”

Heather stared at her father, her pulse pounding. “Don’t you know what they’ll do to me?”

Genuine pain flickered across James Wallace’s face. “Whatever’s necessary to save you,” he said, his voice husky.

Heather shook her head. Not according to the headline provided to the press by FBI ADIC Monica Rutgers: *Tragic Mental Illness Claims FBI Star Profiler Heather Wallace*. Not unless “whatever’s necessary” meant involuntary commitment to a mental institution, followed by a convenient and tragic suicide.

“Trust me, neither the Bureau nor the Shadow Branch are interested in *saving* me,” Heather said. Adrenaline poured through her veins, made her aware of each breath she drew, aware of the position of each agent in the room. She was surrounded and outnumbered.

What would happen to Dante and the others once she’d been taken down?

She didn’t know if she could awaken Dante from Sleep through their bond, but she had to try. Tightening her grip on the Colt, she closed her eyes and funneled her adrenaline-fueled awareness into her link with Dante.

His scent of burning leaves and November frost permeated her, perfumed her senses, then she felt the razor edge of his nightmares scrape against her mind. Heard the drone of wasps. Her breath caught in her throat.

He’d been Sleeping easy—for a change—his beautiful, pale face relaxed, when

she'd reluctantly slipped free of his heated embrace and risen from their bed. Before leaving the room, she'd placed a lingering *Sleep-well* kiss on his lips.

Dual pangs of apprehension and sorrow pierced Heather as she realized her wish hadn't come true; once again, the past raged through Dante's mind like a monster hurricane, a tidal surge of dark and dangerous debris running ahead of it, scouring away his hard-won quiet, his scraps of peace.

What Von had told her in their motel room in Damascus coiled through her memory.

You're Dante's life-line, doll. I'm sorry you had no say in getting bonded to him, but you quiet the storm inside-a him. And that's a damned good thing.

It looked like her father was intent on severing that life-line.

An echo of pain—Dante's pain—bled in through their bond and whispered against Heather's thoughts as she tried to wriggle her way past his shields and into the wasp-droning darkness he did his best to keep locked away from her.

<*DANGER! WAKE UP!*> she sent, banging mental fists against his shields.
<*BAPTISTE! WAKE—*>

Something stung Heather's left shoulder, hitting with all the force of a knuckled punch, shattering her concentration. Her eyes flew open. A dart protruded from the front of her snug cornflower-blue sweater. Cold oozed down her arm and into her chest. She looked at her father as he lowered the trunk gun. She tasted the drugs, bitter and icy, at the back of her throat.

"Dad! What the fuck?" Annie cried. Leaning across the counter, she plucked the dart from Heather's shoulder.

"Get out of here, Annie," Heather said, her words already slurring. The room took a slow carousel spin around her. Her stomach lurched. "Find Jack . . ."

"You're not going anywhere, Annie," James Wallace said. "Stevenson, hold her, please."

"Fuck you, you lying, motherfucking sonuvabitch!" Annie yelled.

A stool clattered to the floor. A wordless shriek of fury followed as someone—the unlucky Stevenson—grabbed Annie and attempted to hold on to her. Heather didn't look, keeping her attention focused on James William Wallace instead. She blinked as his

trenchcoated figure blurred, then tripled.

“Heather, listen to me,” her father said, his voice low but firm. “Put your gun down before you—”

Heather squeezed the trigger. The Colt’s retort cracked through the air like thick ice breaking apart on a lake, the sound rippling from one end of the club to the other. James Wallace, all three blurred copies of him, dove to the floor.

“Christ!” her father cried.

Heather concentrated on keeping the Colt upright and in both hands, concentrated on steadying her aim. But she found herself going up, then down, as if riding one of the spinning carousel’s horses. A loud *clunk* drew her gaze to the floor. Her Colt rested on the hardwood, its muzzle pointing at a plastic bucket full of bar rags.

The room whirled, a runaway carousel, and Heather stumbled, then fell. Stars super-novaed in blue and green through her vision as her head bounced against the floor. She heard Annie scream her name. She stretched her fingers toward the Colt, darkness nibbling at the edges of her vision.

<Baptiste . . . Dante . . . wake . . . > But Heather’s desperate thought bounced back from a wall of drug-charged static, unreceived.

The carousel spun her into a starless night.

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THE BEAUTY OF BEING NUMB

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Annie watched in horror as Heather swayed in front of the ebony shelves lined with sleek and colorful bottles of liquor. Her head rocked forward, her red hair fanning across her face, then she crumpled, falling behind the counter and out of Annie's view with a soft thud.

"Heather!" Annie screamed.

But Heather was out cold. Tranked by their own father.

And it's all my fucking fault.

And, as shocked as she was by the fact that her sister had just tried to shoot their father, Annie wished—in that moment—that Heather hadn't missed.

Annie struggled against the black-uniformed asshole holding her, kicking ineffectually with her bare feet. She knuckled both fists into his bulletproof vest—protected gut, pounding the mingled odors of sweat and gun oil into the air. He grunted, but more out of irritation than any real discomfort. And his bruising grip on her biceps didn't ease one iota. In fact, it tightened.

"Settle down," he growled, his eyes—the only thing visible beneath the ski mask stretched across his face—gray flint. "We're here to help you, for chrissakes."

"Fucker! Let me go!" Annie tried to ram a knee into the uniformed asshole's crotch, but missed when he arched his torso away from her.

"Annie, enough. We don't have time for your nonsense."

She twisted around to see James Wallace standing behind her, brushing at the knees of his wheat-colored slacks. He nodded at the man holding her. “Go ahead and release her.”

The hands slid away from Annie’s arms and she rubbed her aching biceps. Her fingers tingled as her circulation returned.

“Finished with your tantrum?”

Annie met James Wallace’s stern regard and spat into his face. Spittle flecked the lenses of his glasses, glistened on his cheek. “You used me, you fucker.”

Her father wiped at his glasses and face with the sleeve of his trench coat, his expression one more of weary exasperation than the disgust she’d hoped for. “Of course I did. And without regret. Do you know why?”

“Because you’re a prick?”

James Wallace smiled, but there was nothing warm or paternal in that curving of lips. “Because I will do whatever it takes to save Heather’s life.”

Unspoken: *your life—not so much.*

“I was right,” Annie muttered. “You’re a prick.”

Her father sighed. “Didn’t you tell me that Prejean would hurt Heather someday?”

Guilt strapped around Annie, tight as a straitjacket. “Yeah, but not deliberately. He fucking loves her. Of course.”

Her father tilted his head, a knowing light in his cold, hazel eyes. “I think this is one instance where you *shouldn’t* feel jealous of your sister.”

“Screw yourself—”

“Like I said, sweetie,” James Wallace interrupted, curling his fingers around Annie’s aching arm. “I really don’t have time for your nonsense.”

Movement caught Annie’s attention, and she watched as two members of her father’s black-uniformed posse carried Heather out from behind the bar on a stretcher. Flex cuffs bound her unconscious sister’s wrists, and tendrils of red hair trailed across her face.

“Where are they taking her?” Annie asked.

“Same place you’ll be going, sweet pea. A safe place.”

Annie stiffened. “Me? Oh, hell no. I don’t need to go anywhere. Neither does

Heather! Don't do this. I never would've called you if I'd known—"

"You did the right thing." Her father released her arm and tenderly grasped her chin. Directed her gaze to his face. Warmth, or the illusion of it, anyway, kindled in his eyes. "That's my good girl. I'm proud of you."

A barbed knot of anger, yearning, and guilt prickled against Annie's heart.

I'm proud of you.

For what? Unintentionally helping him kidnap her sister—the only person in her life who'd always stood beside her?

Funny thing—just a couple of months ago, Annie's help might not've been so unintentional if it would've earned her those very same words.

I'm proud of you.

She thought of Heather on the stretcher, drugged and bound, being carted off to shit-knows-where during daylight hours—when nightkind would be unable to rescue her.

But I can. And I've gotta.

"Motherfucking liar," Annie spat, jerking her chin free of his hold.

"Takes one to know one, Annie-bunny," her father replied, all warmth stripped from his eyes.

Annie slipped a hand into the pocket of her bathrobe and palmed the dart she'd yanked from Heather's arm. She doubted drugs still coated the dart, but getting hit with it would still hurt like hell.

"Now it's time to go," her father said.

As James Wallace lifted the trunk gun, Annie stepped forward, jerking her hand from her pocket, and slamming the dart into her father's throat. His eyes widened and a strangled gasp escaped his lips. The trunk gun hit the hardwood floor with a plastic clatter. His hands flew up to the quivering dart protruding from his throat.

Annie bolted for the stairs, a clear visual of the fire escape at the end of the second and third floor landings in her mind. She wished she could pause long enough to attempt to awaken Silver or Von on her way out—or badass and beautiful Dante—but didn't know if it was even possible.

Behind her, several testosterone-laden male voices shouted for her to halt. She lifted a hand, then her middle finger, and kept going.

Annie raced upstairs, her bathrobe flapping behind her. She glanced down. The belt had come unknotted and now trailed her like an off-centered tail. She was grateful she'd pulled on a pair of Silver's boxers and one of his skin-tight Inferno tees before restless sleep and hunger had rolled her out of bed.

Her stomach rumbled and she found herself mourning her cream cheese-slathered bagel. *Seriously? Food? Now?*

When Annie hit the second floor landing, she paused and looked down the hall with its Oriental carpet and gargoyle wall sconces to the French window at its end.

Make a mad dash for the fire escape or try to alert the Snoozing nightkind?

A thump from above Annie launched her heart into her throat and yanked her gaze to the old-fashioned tin ceiling. No one was on the third floor except for the Sleepers, unless—for whatever reason—one of them was no longer Sleeping.

Hope blossomed within her.

The sound of rapidly approaching footsteps from behind propelled Annie around the wrought-iron banister and up the next narrow flight of stairs. When she reached the third-floor landing, a flash of white down the dark hallway captured her gaze.

"Holy shit," she breathed.

Dante was awake. Well, he was on his feet, anyway. And naked except for the bondage collar strapped around his throat.

He leaned drunkenly against the threshold to his and Heather's room, his pale hands clutching either side of the doorjamb for balance. Head bowed, his black hair veiling his face, it seemed as though he was already slipping back into Sleep. But beneath his milky-white skin, his muscles were taut, corded, rippling.

Eerie rubbed against Dante's legs, orange fur practically glowing against that pale skin, kitty-back arched for pats.

Annie stared at Dante, pulse racing, mouth dry, as she drank in the sight of his lean-muscled and very naked body, wishing he'd move just a little so she could see the goodies his current position hid from view.

Ogle later, her mind sing-songed. Danger now. Move!

As Annie pelted down the hall, Dante half slid, half fell to his knees on the Oriental carpet, his black-painted nails scraping furrows along the threshold on his way

down. She knelt in front of him and his intoxicating autumn scent curled around her.

Eerie mewed at Dante, then bunted his head against his hip, before sauntering back into the bedroom's inky darkness, as though saying, *If you can't stand up long enough to feed me, then let's go back to bed.*

Annie couldn't help it, she glanced down at Dante's lap, his hard thighs. She caught her lower lip between her teeth. Warm flutters rippled through her belly. "Goddamn," she breathed.

"J'su ici, catin," Dante whispered, his words Sleep-slurred. *"Je t'entends."*

Catin. Dante's pet name for Heather. Annie forced her gaze back up to his face. "English, dork. I don't understand Cajun," she said, patting his pale, whisker-free cheek. She sucked in a breath at the fevered heat beneath her fingers.

"Quitte moi tranquille," he muttered, sleepily swatting at her hand, his eyes fluttering shut again.

"Dante, hey, c'mon, wake up." Annie pushed his silky hair back from his face and behind his silver hoop-rimmed ear. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw blood trickling from his nose and over his lips.

Migraine. Fuck. At least his hands aren't doing their blue-glowy thing. Wait. Maybe it'd be better if they were glowing.

Footsteps thundered up the stairs.

"C'mon, wake up!" Annie urged. "Heather's in trouble! They're taking her away." Desperate and out of ideas, she slapped Dante, rocking his head to one side. "Wake up!" As she pulled her hand back for another blow, Dante's fingers locked around her wrist in a heated steel grip.

His eyes opened. A rim of dark brown slashed with red circled his dilated pupils. Baring his fangs, he hissed, a chilling and primal sound. Annie froze, the hair lifting on the back of her neck. She saw no hint of recognition in his eyes.

"Hey, dork," she said through a mouth gone dry. She stared at his slender, deadly fangs. "C'mon, it's me. Annie. Heather's in trouble."

Dante's dark brows slashed down and his muscles corded as he visibly struggled to shove away the pain or nightmares or fucking brutal memories that were busy hiding reality from his perception at the moment. "Heather," he whispered.

Annie remembered what Heather had told her just a few nights earlier.

Sometimes he slips between worlds—from now to then. But he’s fighting like hell to stay here and now with us.

“We’re at Club Hell, since your house burned down,” Annie said hurriedly, remembering how Heather would sometimes remind Dante of where and when he was. “But it’s daytime, and Heather’s in deep—”

Dante’s dilated eyes focused. “*P’tite*, what—” His words cut off as his gaze shifted past her, then several things happened with breathtaking speed.

Something hot splashed Annie’s chest and splattered her throat, her lips.

Dante tossed Annie across the hall.

Annie saw blood streaming in dark rivulets from a hole in Dante’s chest. She had time to think *His heart* before her head slammed into the opposite wall.

A gunshot exploded through the air.

Black flecks sprinkled her vision. Pain moshed through her skull. “No,” Annie groaned, struggling to get to her hands and knees. Something stung the side of her neck. Cold swirled into her veins.

“Jesus fucking Christ! That was one helluva lucky shot, Wallace. Good thing your daughter made the bloodsucker pause. Otherwise he woulda been on his feet and *on us*.”

“No shit.” Her father sounded shaken.

Annie plucked the dart from her neck, dropping it onto the carpet with fingers that already felt numb. She crawled over to Dante. He lay crumpled on his side, one pale arm across his waist, the other flung above his head. Like he was Sleeping.

Except for all the blood glistening on his white skin.

“Dante?” Annie choked. She grabbed his shoulder and gently shook it. “Dante?”

Less gentle hands seized her by the shoulders and pulled her back to the wall she’d dented with her head. “Keep away from him,” her father said.

Cold leached the strength from Annie’s muscles, short-circuited her reflexes. Frosted her thoughts. “You fucking bastard,” she slurred. Her lips felt Novocain-numb. “Why the fuck did you shoo’ him?”

“Hush, just go to sleep, sweet pea,” James Wallace murmured. He crossed the hall to stand over Dante’s body, his Glock in hand. Sweat beaded his forehead.

Despite the numbing effects of the drugs spiraling through Annie's system, dread lodged like a pail of pebbles in her belly. She swallowed hard. She tasted blood, coppery and somehow sweet, like grapes, on her lips—Dante's blood.

James Wallace seemed to study Dante, his gaze sweeping his body from head to toe. "His pictures don't prepare you—" He bit off his words, then shook his head, his face disgusted. Dropping to one knee beside Dante, he pressed the muzzle of his gun against Dante's blood-slicked chest, above his heart. He squeezed off two more rounds. Then he placed the gun against Dante's temple.

"No," Annie begged. "Daddy, no, please."

James Wallace ignored her. "For Heather," he said, his voice low and level and Arctic cold. He pulled the trigger. Blood splattered the wall. The stink of cordite and scorched blood curled into the air.

Annie screamed—or tried to, anyway. All that came out of her numbed vocal cords was a muted groan.

"He won't be getting up again, not with *those* bullets inside of him," James Wallace said, rising to his feet. He looked at the pair of black uniforms who'd accompanied him up the stairs. "Shoot the others."

Annie felt her drug-iced body slump over onto the carpet. She lay there, helpless, tears blurring her vision, scalding her face. She heard doors being kicked open. Heard two more shots—one for Silver and one for Von. She sobbed.

James William Wallace stopped beside her, his shoes gleaming with blood. Kneeling, he slung her over his shoulder in a fireman's carry, then straightened with a grunt and headed down the stairs.

Annie's view of the floor dimmed, then melted away into darkness. She wondered if the drugs numbing her body and her grieving heart would hurt the baby. Then she wondered if it would matter. Wondered if she even cared.

As Annie tumbled into unconsciousness, three words followed her into the dark, three words spoken by the man who had once been her father.

"Burn it down."