



The Chase

Crime Scene:Houston

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Zondervan

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Chapter 1

Present day

June

Kariss had fulfilled all her dreams but one by age thirty-five. Most women would bask in such a claim, but not Kariss. The one mountain yet to climb beckoned her to strap on hiking boots and make her approach. The peak held her in fascination, and failing meant losing everything she'd ever gained.

Her heels clicked along the marble flooring of the Marriott hotel's lobby adjoining Houston's Intercontinental Airport. Ten minutes early for her appointment with her literary agent and she could use the time to make sure her responses to Meredith were gracious and resolute. A mouthful for sure.

Sinking into a plush chair, she took a deep breath and waited. With all of her prolific abilities, why couldn't she respond with words that relayed her passion for this story? But now she had the opportunity to convince Meredith of her sincerity. A little encouragement went a long way when calling up the powers of inspiration and creativity.

Right on time, Meredith Rockford slipped into a chair across from Kariss, sipping on a cup of tea, no doubt Earl Gray. Dressed in a black traveler's knit jacket and pants, the only color emitting from Meredith was her crimson lipstick.

"You could have texted me that you were early," Meredith said.

Kariss smiled. "Just got here. Did you have a good night's rest?"

Meredith lifted a brow while taking a sip of her tea. "My head is killing me. I had to fly from New York to Houston. Arrived late and had to cancel our dinner appointment, and you ask me if I slept well?" She set the cup on a table in front of them. "The only thing that will give me a good night's sleep is for you to abandon this ludicrous idea of changing genres."

Kariss valued integrity above all things, and she refused to lose control. "Please understand I have given this writing project considerable thought. I need a break from writing women's fiction. I'm not discounting what you've done for my career, my friends who continue to write women's fiction, or my faithful readers. But I have a deep need to write a suspense novel."

"You rehearsed your spiel very nicely, but let me give you the facts: you, Kariss Walker, are about to commit publishing suicide. Changing genres in the middle of New York Times bestselling status means starting all over."

"I was hoping you'd champion my goals."

"My goal is to make sure my writers and my agency make money while ensuring the publishing community has quality writing projects." She crossed her arms. "After Sunrise has held the number two slot for three months. Always a Lady sold over six hundred thousand copies each along with a sweet spot on the bestseller list. You write women's fiction. Period. Not suspense. Your ratings are going to plummet like an avalanche."

Kariss uncrossed her legs and allowed her arms to lay limp at her side. How much more open could she be? "Ten novels in five years is a bit much, don't you think? Suspense intrigues me. Remember the eight years I spent reporting evening news on Houston's Channel 5? I have more ideas than I will ever have time to write."

"It won't work. Your readers want stories about women. They'll drop you tomorrow if you switch to suspense. Now send me the proposal for the next story. The one we chatted about in New York will do nicely. You're the only writer who can remind the reader that the victim isn't just a case file, but a human life."

Meredith started to stand, but Kariss gestured for her to stay. "Please hear me out. Deep inside me is a well of passion for stories that burst onto the suspense scene. These are real and happening in my city. One in particular touched my heart several years ago and has

never let me go. I cannot not write this. It doesn't matter that I don't have a contract. If one of the big six doesn't want to publish it, I'll self-publish."

"If you do not adhere to the demands of the publishing world, your actions may dissolve our representation of your work."

Kariss moistened her lips. "I am fully aware of the consequences."

"Are you? You may never publish again." Meredith retrieved her cup of Earl Gray and left the lobby.

Kariss gathered her purse and laptop before leaving the hotel. She had two hours until her appointment with Lincoln Abrams, special agent in charge of Houston's FBI, referred to as the SAC. Five years had passed since she'd linked arms with law enforcement agencies and enlisted public support to help find criminals. Excitement with a twinge of apprehension grabbed hold of her senses. If only her agent held the same enthusiasm about her writing a suspense novel. Maybe if she knew the real reason why Kariss wanted to protect children. . .

This story meant more than all the six-figure checks combined. In five years, no one had solved the crime stalking her, and she didn't possess the skills to smoke out a killer. But in her novel version, the perpetrator would be brought to justice.

* * *

Drinking a double espresso, his breakfast of choice, Tigo drove through the seedy neighborhood off South Main in Houston, looking for the dark-green van last seen at the shipyards speeding away with two hundred and fifty grand of stolen AK - 47 rifles.

The area looked deserted except for the battered vehicles matching the twisted and dented people who hid behind their weapons and bravado.

Some residents were simply poor and trying to eke out a living. Why they stayed made no sense. But those weren't the ones Tigo wanted to question. He needed Cheeky and his gang of Arroyos behind bars for gun smuggling. Add to that the identity of the dealers who were selling them weapons, and he was a happy man. Houston ranked as Mexico's largest gun supplier, and Tigo intended to drop that stat like a live grenade.

He drove slowly, studying each peeled-painted house for signs of rodents. He didn't really expect a tattooed ganger this time of the morning, but he also knew they could tear through a door at any moment ready to blow him to pieces. He risked the encounter and hoped they were sleeping off the previous night. His appointment was critical to draw out those who continued to break the law, one important enough for him to break the rules and work alone. He'd long ago given up trying to figure out if he wanted credit for the arrests or if he didn't want to endanger another agent. Probably both.

The gangs living here counted coup on law enforcement types.

Tigo eased to the curb next to a bungalow with boarded-up windows. Turning off the engine of the twenty-year-old Toyota minus the fender and hubcaps, he waited for his guest and drank the espresso.

A toddler pushed open the door of a house across the street. Wearing nothing but a diaper, he carried what looked like a rag — probably a substitution for his mother. The reality of the kid's future yanked at Tigo's thoughts, along with the likelihood of him already being an addict. How long before he was dealing and carrying a piece?

No one else ventured from the neighborhood. But Tigo couldn't wait forever. Linc wanted to see him about something. Glancing at his watch and rolling down the window, he gave himself fifteen minutes.

Candy was ten minutes late. Maybe she'd overslept, since her career kept her occupied at night. But the olive-skinned beauty had always been prompt, especially when the extra money didn't touch her pimp's pockets. She seemed to sense Tigo's drive to nail the gang, but he refused to psychoanalyze that. She claimed to have the information he needed to close down the Houston operation, including names of arms dealers and details about those dealers raising prices on their weapons.

Five more minutes passed, and the espresso cup lay crumpled on the passenger's seat. Candy wouldn't have left him waiting without a call. Lately she'd grown bolder . . . maybe too bold. After all, meeting here at seven-thirty had been her idea. Late nights ate up her earning power. She claimed his presence looked like a john leaving, and the neighborhood slept until noon.

Tigo punched in her number. Four rings. "This is Candy. I'm busy right now." A giggle with a Hispanic accent. "Leave a message, and I'll get back to you."

He wasn't stupid enough to leave a message.

They'd met five times, and he believed each one raised the bar on their trust. She wanted to leave her sordid life, but she needed money until she landed a respectable job. Even asked for the name of a shelter. Said her two kids would have a better future. That suckered him in. Now suspicions about her motives called him a fool.

Tigo fired up the Toyota, muttering the language of the area. At the end of the block, two Hispanics wearing black T-shirts stepped into the street carrying assault rifles, their muscled forearms tattooed with gang symbols, their shaven heads etched deep with crossbones. Tigo spun the car, tires squealing. The smell of burned rubber invaded his nostrils.

At the other end of the street, two more armed men straddled his path, matching the MO behind him. Both had sidearms tucked into the front of their jeans. Great. He headed

straight for them. In his quest to singlehandedly stop this gang, thinking a prostitute would take an exchange of money for info, he'd allowed pride to overrule logic. He deserved to have that engraved on his tombstone.

The man on his left lifted his rifle and fired, shattering Tigo's windshield and narrowly missing his left shoulder. In return, Tigo grabbed his Glock from the passenger seat, tossed it into his left hand, then fired into the man's chest, sending him sprawling backward onto the street.

Another bullet whizzed past the top of Tigo's head. The men behind him raced his way. Tigo stomped the accelerator and headed straight for the remaining man on the right. Tigo might have fallen for a classic fog job with Candy, but he still had a few tricks to save his neck.

With the next outburst of fire, he sliced the morning with a pain-filled cry. The man on the right hesitated, giving Tigo the break to send a bullet flying into his chest.

Candy had either set him up or she was dead.

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