

Death and the Devil, Book Three

Exclusive Newsletter Excerpt

(not for republishing)

Ping.

Something woke Ethan up, but before he could search out the disturbance, he was caught by the vision of the man lying beside him.

Jack lay on his belly, one leg bent part way, an arm tossed across Ethan's chest. Ethan trailed his fingers up and down his arm, loving the feel of his curled black hairs and the bulge of his biceps. Jack's long fingered hand, too, held his attention for a good while. The gunman callouses, the short nails a little ragged and chipped, the lighter shade of his palm compared to the back of his hand. How it felt to have it glide down Ethan's body. He shivered in recalled pleasure. Lord, those fingers on his skin, barely touching or gripping tight, and *oh*, when they were inside him. He bit his lips to keep from moaning.

Ethan pressed against his lover's side. "Jack," he whispered between kisses on his shoulder, leading up to his neck. "Are you awake?" Ethan had loved topping but now he needed Jack inside him. Needed Jack to drive him crazy and out of control.

Jack mumbled incoherently and rubbed his cheek over his pillow, then settled.

Disappointment mellowed by how gorgeous Jack looked with his face relaxed, lips parted and black curls falling across his forehead, Ethan snuggled closer. Head on Jack's pillow, he contented himself with gazing at this handsome man.

Never before had he believed this would ever be his. A real home, with someone he wanted to spend time with. Someone he could be himself with, who accepted that he wasn't "normal" and still wanted to be near him, be with him . . . love him.

Jack hadn't said it, but he'd told him all the same. Every time Jack came home to him, or let Ethan have space when he needed it and then welcomed him back with warm arms and smiles. Each time Jack pulled him close, just to be touching him without anything more. All the times Jack had laughed at him and with him. Whenever he forgave Ethan for making a mistake.

Every time Jack kissed him.

Which he seemed determined to make up for lost time with. They'd kissed over and over, soft and hard, dirty and chaste, each one as eloquent as the one before, all the way back to the first.

Ethan hadn't said it aloud, either. He wanted to, but it was so daunting. What if Jack couldn't say it back? What if what they had right now was all they needed and Ethan messed it up because he spoke aloud when it wasn't necessary? He loved Jack, had realised it several weeks back. The peace he felt with Jack, the warmth he found in his arms, the lightness in Ethan's mind and heart when Jack was near, could only be love. As was the way he didn't need to constantly analyse and survey his surroundings when Jack touched him, or the crazy swirling mess of emotions he felt when Jack took him apart in bed. He knew Jack loved him, the kisses told him that, so perhaps that was enough. They'd always been better at the physical side than the verbal side.

And perhaps Jack would say it, when he saw the present Ethan had got him in the morning. Maybe afterwards, Jack would take him to bed again and—

Ping.

No. Ethan refused to hear it. That part of his life was over. It had no part in this place or time.

Ping.

He would go to the Office and ask them to program a kill switch into his implant. He would prefer they turn it off permanently, but doubted Director Tan would allow it. After that, he and Jack would celebrate his birthday properly and maybe say *I lo*—

Ping.

Ethan buried his face in Jack's warm body. It was his choice to be here and they wouldn't make him change his mind.

Several minutes of blessed silence and Ethan let himself start to fall asleep.

Beep, beep, beep.

Blast it. A warning tone. Any second now, someone was going to remotely access his implant and sure enough an unknown voice spoke inside his head.

"One-three, confirm."

Ethan rolled away from Jack and stared up at the dark ceiling, counting the exposed beams. It helped focus his mind away from the repeated calls for acknowledgement. Still, his hands twitched for something to occupy them as well. Shoving down the sheet, he found the abandoned tube of lube and without thought, began flipping it.

"One-three, confirm receipt of transmission. If you do not confirm within twenty seconds, base will send an automatic location ping and a team will be dispatched to pick you up."

Twenty. Nineteen. Eighteen. Ethan searched for a way to stop them. Short of an electromagnetic pulse, there was nothing he could do. Fifteen. Fourteen. Thirteen. He and Jack could hold off whatever force the Cabal sent. Ethan had made sure it was possible when he'd bought the penthouse. Eight. Seven. Six. Of course, that meant in five seconds, the penthouse would no longer be their secret. The security Ethan needed would be destroyed. Three. Two .

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"One-three, receiving transmission," he sent silently.

"Hold for command."

Ethan looked at Jack, and the peace he usually found in the thick brows, narrow nose, perfect mouth, and strong jaw wasn't there. All he saw now was everything he had to lose and just how much it would hurt when it was gone.

A new voice entered Ethan's head. *"One-three, the bosses are expecting a full report on the deaths of Two and Nine, in person. You'll have to come back."*

The first voice had been unknown. One of an ever-changing staff of people who had no real idea of who they were talking to, or who they worked for. This voice, though, Ethan knew very well.

"I don't work for you or them anymore, Zero. Remember that conversation we had after Vietnam? You let me go."

Zero sighed. “I remember saying I would pass on your decision to the bosses, nothing more. You, of all of the group, should know that they don’t do anything they don’t agree to. They don’t agree with you about leaving, so you haven’t left the Cabal.”

Which was what Dejana had said when Ethan had told her the same thing, and then she’d promised to help him finish severing the ties that held him against his will.

“And don’t think that accountant is going to do anything for you,” Zero said, a touch of sympathy in his voice as he seemingly read Ethan’s mind. “They had her eliminated before she could, and not just because she said she’d help you.”

Of course they knew about Dejana. They found out everything. All the trouble he’d caused because of Dejana and her demands and promises, made pointless because of the Cabal.

Jack snuffled in his sleep and turned his face away, bent knee straightening, straight leg bending. He didn’t know everything Ethan had done while Jack had been chasing a serial killer, but he would find out eventually, and when he did, would he still be able to forgive Ethan? History said he would, but there was always a breaking point.

“They’re not just going to let you go this time,” Zero said. “They have contingencies.”

An alert told Ethan he’d received an image. Dreading the portent in Zero’s words, he closed his eyes and slipped sideways. The image appeared on his overlay.

A daylight picture of a single storey house with a solitary dark-green bush in an otherwise empty yard. The walls were white stucco and the roof peaked, tiled in red, orange and yellow. An older model mid-sized SUV was in the short driveway and a woman stood beside it, green bags of shopping in both hands. She was perhaps in her late thirties, her long black hair pulled up in a neat ponytail, the skin between her brows wrinkled as she frowned. Even if the brown colour of her skin and the shape of her nose and cheekbones hadn’t been sign enough, the expression told Ethan who she was.

Meera Reardon scowled exactly like her younger brother did. Jack’s niece, a lighter skinned, younger image of her mother, laughed exactly like him. Matilda walked ahead of Meera, phone in one hand, the other swinging a brightly coloured shopping bag.

And the crosshairs of the rifle’s site were centred right on the teenager’s head.