

RENEGADE

**Cascade Mountain Manhunt
Book Two**

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CHAPTER ONE

For the first time in three months, Jace Ivy could take a deep breath. With his gun on his hip, he sank into the bar stool at the Rock Road Diner, sipping his hot coffee with his eye on the prize—Reed Monroe.

The vindicated joy racing through his veins was inexplicable. The same high as when he jumped out of a Cessna in Panama.

When he was given the assignment to bring in a rogue DEA agent suspected of shooting his partner, Jace was infuriated. No federal agent ever wanted to track and investigate one of their own. But after seeing the charges on this guy, he felt energized. Two other divisions had spent over half a year trying to find this guy with no results. Which is when they called him.

He couldn't wait to nail the guy's ass to the wall. He just had no idea it would take this flippin' long. Previous cases like this he'd solved within a few weeks. This one took over three months. If he had a woman at home, she'd have divorced his ass by now.

Him married?

He chuckled out loud.

The waitress, Skye from her name tag, still looked stunned and frowned at his laughing.

"Sorry, sweetheart. Inside joke. How about I get my sandwich, then me and your cook there," he pointed with his fork, "can have a little chat?"

Skye nodded and scampered to the back to Monroe.

He kept his gaze fixed on the chef, making sure he wouldn't run out the back door. The man had clearly been hiding out in this tiny town east of the Cascade Mountains for a while. Long enough to establish a job and some connections, based on the intimate whisperings with this waitress.

A glance to his left and Jace noticed a strawberry blonde, her hair pulled back, glasses teetering on her nose, and lips like Tinkerbell. Her ultra-conservative clothes reminded him of an accountant or some kind of government worker.

"Morning." He felt like he should say something since she just stared at him with her mouth parted in shock. "In some cultures, it's considered rude to openly gawk at someone."

She blinked and straightened her back. "Sorry."

He couldn't be sure, but was she looking down her nose at him?

He chuckled again. Damn this sleepy town could be a lot of fun. Too bad he wouldn't be around for long.

"Skye." The blonde waved to her friend, beckoning her.

The waitress returned and leaned in close to Tinkerbell.

"I should go, but I can stay if you need me."

Skye covered a hand over the blonde's. "No. I'm sure this is a misunderstanding. I'll call you later."

The blonde leaned in closer still. "Be careful."

Jace almost spat out his coffee, and some of it burned up into his nose. Several heads turned. He wiped his mouth to cover his smile.

Oh yeah. This assignment has definitely come to a glorious end.

Monroe came around the counter, pulling off his chef's apron. He let the thing dangle in his hand as he stopped several feet away. The look on his smoothly shaven face proved he knew exactly what Jace was here for.

He didn't look like he'd spent the last year on the run. He looked pretty damned happy where he was.

The whole diner had paused and watched the interaction like a thriller movie on a screen. Big audience. Which meant this guy was going to either make it super hard, or as quiet as possible. There would be no middle ground. Given the amount of time it had taken to catch up to this guy, Jace almost wished Monroe would provide a little more drama at the end. Maybe give the blonde at the end of the counter a real show.

Jace took another sip of his coffee, then stood. The guy was a good four or five inches shorter, so it was easy to make himself look wider and in control. "Turn around. Hands on your head."

"Let me see your badge first." His voice was strangely calm.

With a smirk, he reached into his back pocket and pulled out his shiny DEA emblem in a black wallet. "Jace Ivy, Special Investigation Division. Satisfied?"

Monroe glanced at it. "This place closes in fifteen minutes. We have a lot to talk about. Perhaps you'd like to finish your food, then we can grab a booth."

Skye set the plate before him—club sandwich, chips, and a pickle spear. She nibbled her lower lip like it was coated with chocolate.

Jace nodded slowly. "Alright." He lifted the top slice of bread off his club, investigating. "As long as you didn't put anything in here."

Monroe shook his head and grabbed a tomato slice from the top of the sandwich. Then popped it in his mouth. Proving at least the sandwich wasn't poisoned.

Jace frowned.

"Happy now?" the cook asked. "But I'd watch her apple pie." His head jerked toward the waitress.

She gasped and smacked his upper arm.

"Give him a piece of pie on me, baby." Then he kissed the top of her head as he slipped on his apron to make the last orders for the hungry crowd.

Okay, so Reed found himself a woman to spend his time with. Interesting.

"Nuh-uh, Monroe. Out here with me."

Monroe turned. "I have a job to finish."

"So do I. You're not allowed out of my sight. I said you could have fifteen minutes until the place closes before I arrest you. I didn't say you could return back to the stoves where Lord knows how many knives you've got back there to use against me."

Monroe put his hands on his hips. "Then who will feed these customers?"

"I don't give a rat's ass. But it won't be you." He gestured to an empty booth. "Have a seat."

His suspect glared.

Damn, I love this part. He looked to the waitress. "I'd appreciate that slice of pie now."

The blonde Tinkerbell stood by the door, clutching a book to her chest and openly gawking at him.

He tossed her a wink.

CHAPTER TWO

Lynée Clark couldn't believe her eyes. Jace Ivy, Special Investigations Division. This scruffy, motorcycle-club-esque man was actually a lawman. Which didn't match anything in her mind of what an authority figure was supposed to look and act like.

He was DEA just like Reed. The rest of the town knew Reed Monroe as Guy Hancock, the newest addition to Cascade Creek. Her best friend's boyfriend, and a considerably better cook than Ralph the diner's owner. True, Guy was an alias, which they'd learned just over the last week. Guy was really an undercover agent on the run after being framed for murdering his former partner in El Paso. Or at least that's the story he told Skye. Which of course, she then told her best friend, Lynée.

Lord, this Jace man was tall. When he gave her that wink, a whirlpool spiraled through her body practically leaving her lightheaded. Now, he sat in a booth with his back to the wall opposite Reed and watched everyone in the diner. As he ate a piece of Skye's apple pie.

"Keep your hands on the table, where I can see them," he instructed Reed.

Walk away, Linnie. But her feet just wouldn't move. She was completely mesmerized by this walking paradox. He was like a 12-car pileup—horrifying, disturbing, but she couldn't take her eyes away.

"Is there something I can help you with, honey?" the man asked, an all-too-confident smile on his lips. "You just can't stop staring. At least tell me your name."

Lynée frowned at his continued use of chauvinistic endearments. With a complete stranger. "Why? Am I under investigation, too?"

"Do you want to be?" His smile widened, stretching his lips to cut across his beard. He shoveled a piece of pie into his mouth.

"What's his charge?" she dared to ask. She had no idea where this bravery came from. As a librarian, she knew interfering with a police investigation was a criminal offense. But something compelled her to keep this guy talking.

"Lynée," Reed interrupted, "It's okay."

"Lynée?" Jace's gaze roved up and down her face, his fingers twirling the fork on the plate. "Beautiful name." His smile faded as he glanced back at Reed across from him. "He's charged with murder." The words hung in the air between them, and the whole diner quieted. "Among other charges. Killing your partner, a federal agent, is the most severe."

"I did *not* kill my partner," Reed replied calmly.

"You can tell me all about it back at the sheriff's office. Where we'll have our little fireside chat before I take you back to Seattle, and then have you transferred to El Paso." He pulled out his phone and started searching for a phone number.

"I strongly suggest you don't call them." Reed glanced at Skye standing beside them.

"Why's that?" the man asked, almost bored.

"The cartel has a mole in the DEA."

Lynée held her breath. Expecting Jace to act surprised or at least pissed off. She actually didn't like her best friend standing so close to this bad boy with control issues.

He finished the last piece of pie and wiped his mouth with a napkin. "I know."

Reed blinked. "You do?"

"I'm looking at him."

CHAPTER THREE

“*Put a madre!*” Carlos Cabello gripped the underside of his mahogany desk and flipped it, rage pulsing through every vein. Everything on the top scattered across the study, shattering the Virgin Mary figurine that had sat in the same spot for ten years.

The messenger, Tomas, cringed and moved back several feet. Carlos’ second-in-command, Emilio, grabbed the man by the collar and yanked him back. He didn’t acknowledge the porcelain shards skittering across his boots. The monstrous man knew not to react, and not to allow the messenger to leave without being dismissed.

Carlos rarely became this emotional over anything. Except where that *damn boy* was concerned. His nephew, Diego Huerta, had always taken delight in dancing across his uncle’s buttons. Now, despite all the cartel boss’s efforts to keep that arrogant, impatient bastard safe, Diego was dead.

“I told that *pinche cabron* to go to the lake house, so I could clean up his mess.” With a fiery rage in his eyes, he pulled the pistol from under his jacket, rushed over to Tomas, and jammed the barrel against his temple. The man shut his eyes and whimpered. “Why the hell didn’t you *force* him to go? Throw him in the trunk and not let him out until you made it to Chalapa? How am I supposed to run my business against the DEA without Diego?”

“*No se, señor.*”

Carlos lowered his pistol, but gripped the handle with white knuckles at his side. “Tell me precisely what happened.”

Emilio let the man go and stepped back. Giving his superior the respect he deserved. He was an exceptional servant. Carlos wished he had a dozen more just like him. But now, he needed to interrogate the man who brought the news of the death of his nephew, the technical genius behind the cartel’s digital era.

The messenger stammered his reply. “Huerta went to Seattle on his own, tracked the DEA agent to a motel. There was an altercation between them, and he was shot.”

“The same DEA he’s been on the hunt for all year?”

“*Si, señor.* Reed Monroe. He escaped. Along with a woman.”

“What woman?”

“*No se.* The desk clerk said two people rented the room. A man and a woman. A blonde.” He pulled out his phone and held up a picture. “I took this off the security camera footage. The police now have it.”

Carlos took the phone and stared at the picture of that bastardo DEA agent, Reed Monroe. And some doe-eyed blonde woman, both standing outside the motel entrance. “Where is Diego’s body?”

“In a Seattle morgue.”

The cartel boss handed the phone back to Tomas and took a deep breath. The faint sound of the soccer game on the television in the corner helped calm him. He straightened his jacket, then holstered his pistol. “Get him. Bring his remains back here. I don’t care how.”

The man blinked. “All the way from Washington State? The body will—”

“Use a refrigerated truck! Do I have to think of everything? I will not allow my brother’s son to be cremated and scattered in the United States. That mongrel country! Bring him home. Now!”

He waved his hand, dismissing the messenger. When he and Emilio were alone, Carlos motioned him closer to the windows. Overlooking the hills of northern Mexico, his hacienda was well hidden from any local spying. The balcony beyond the windows provided the perfect spot

for a warm breeze on cool evenings like this one. But he couldn't chance anyone residing in the compound below hearing them. Though they were the family members of his henchmen—required to live within the compound walls—Carlos was still more careful than to allow prying ears.

“I'm sick of this chase,” the cartel boss sighed. “My spy in the DEA hasn't been able to bring this man down either. All this money, for this *cucaracha* to keep slipping through my fingers.” He cast his trusted friend a sideways glance. “Bring me this Monroe's head, with his dick shoved in his mouth. Put out a bounty. I want him dead before the DEA captures him. And if you're the one who finds him, I'll double the bounty.”

His second-in-command nodded and turned to leave.

“Emilio?”

The man stopped.

“Both him and his *puta*. Make it painful.”

CHAPTER FOUR

“Kudos to you for dodging our agents a whole year. Not an easy task.” Jace studied his opponent, now in handcuffs across the table in the sheriff’s interrogation room. It was small and stuffy, and as gray as a Seattle sky.

Monroe scoffed. “Dodging the cartel was harder.”

“I bet. You had some pretty nasty bastards after you.” Jace held up a few black and white photos of dead men’s faces, covered in blood. “These two cartel thugs were found dumped in a river outside Wenatchee. And you just happen to be holed up in a tiny town a short distance away. Coincidence?”

Monroe never lifted his eyes from the table. According to Sheriff Wyatt, the suspect was just as silent the entire ride over to the county office. Didn’t make a single sound, nor seemed the least bit nervous.

Jace leaned forward. “Looks like your murder tally just got upped to three.” He stood and slowly walked around the table. With a single finger, he pulled down the high neck of Reed’s sweater. Revealing nasty bruises all the way around. “Where’d you earn that horse collar?”

“I tripped.” Monroe cast scornful eyes at him.

“Into someone’s vicious grip? Or while you were dumping the bodies? Come on. You’ve been in and out of Seattle a half a dozen times this past month. That’s how those guys tracked you. Hell, that’s how I tracked you. I have your face recorded in a nearby coffee shop. Just sitting there glued to your laptop for hours.”

Monroe chuckled and shook his head. But stayed silent.

“Pathetic disguise you wore, by the way. Fake glasses and a ball cap? Got your truck’s license plates off the bank’s security footage from across the street of the coffee shop. Made it all too easy to follow you here through traffic cameras.”

The man still wouldn’t talk. Normally throwing additional evidence on top of suspects’ heads, they’d cave under the weight. The threat of an even worse sentence. They’d always give something. But not this one. He was either really fucking stupid, or trained very well.

“You were driving hours out of your way to hack into servers, hiding your footprints by piggy-backing off someone else’s Wifi signal. Must’ve been really important. Did you have fun?”

“Do you think I haven’t been through this before? Interrogated with the tough guy routine?”

Jace sighed. “I know you have. Where you somehow escaped your handcuffs and strolled right out of the El Paso division like you owned it.”

“Not bad for a tech geek, huh?”

Smug sonuvabitch.

Jace leaned his hands menacingly on the table. “They underestimated you. A mistake I won’t make. I’ve read your entire file. I know how you earned a living prior to the DEA. By the time we’re through, you’ll never touch another computer or smartphone the rest of your life.”

Monroe shook his head. “Then why tell you anything? No matter what I do, you’ll string me out to dry.”

Jace sat down and leaned his elbows on the table. “I’ll keep the cartel off your ass. We’ll have a nice, cuddly cell waiting for you along with three meals a day and Big Bang Theory reruns on the community TV. It’s the least you deserve for killing your partner. Cabello, on the

other hand, will have a special torture chamber set up for you, and keep you alive God knows how long to inflict as much pain as any human *can't* take.”

For some reason, Monroe didn't seem scared or even anxious at that little detail. In a lazy expression, he finally looked up at Jace. “Cabello knows everything you know. He has access to all of it. I have the evidence to prove it. Someone in the DEA is tipping him off. My partner discovered it and was in the process of finding out who it was. They killed him for it, and came after me.”

Jace leaned back in his chair, the creak echoing off the walls. Finally, he was talking. “Which is when you turned yourself in to the El Paso office. *Two days later*. Enough time to wipe all your evidence off the hard drives you turned in.”

Reed's mouth parted.

That one struck home. Jace tried hard not to smile. “Didn't think I knew that detail, did you?”

“When I turned those in, those backup drives were full. Are you saying they're empty?”

“Don't act surprised, Monroe. You already knew that.”

His jaw tensed. “It's all wrapped up in one, pretty fucking bow for them. Why else would the DEA have to dig any further?” he mumbled to himself. Then buried his forehead in his cuffed hands.

Jace pulled out his phone and started to call for a transfer. After all, he was only brought onto this case to find and capture Monroe. He'd leave the official investigation into this guy's crimes for the El Paso folks. Another case solved. He could finally go back home.

“If I was guilty,” the suspect continued, “why would I have turned myself in? If I had wiped everything, I could've just walked away and disappeared for good. You'd've had nothing to chase.”

He paused before he hit the call button.

Monroe's gaze turned hard. “I thought it was a damn debriefing,” he snapped. “I followed protocol for undercover agents. The first step is to lose any tails, then come in. *With* all evidence. There's a confirmed mole in the DEA. Clearly capable of deleting reports from our own systems. From wiping hard drives *after* they've been turned in. You're not a techie, Ivy, but you're not a dumbass either. They're getting rid of everyone and everything associated with the Cabello investigation. I'm the last one. You yourself said they were after me. Then how could I be the mole?”

Jace stared at the man a long time. For a former identity-thief like Monroe, disappearing would've been easy for him. Hell, he'd accomplished that much for a full year. Why would Monroe continue to research the psycho cartel boss after he'd successfully disappeared?

“Shit,” he whispered. Then put his phone back in his pocket. Dammit, he just wanted a clean-cut, get-in-get-out case. His gut yelled that something wasn't right. As tight-lipped as this suspect was, he had a point. Maybe he didn't kill his partner. Just maybe, this was all a cover up. “You said you had the evidence to prove Cabello is working with a mole?”

Monroe clasped his cuffed hands together on the table. “You believe me?”

“Not yet. But show me that evidence, and I'll do everything I can to help you.”

He shook his head. “How do I know I can trust you? You could be the mole.”

He cast his gaze to the ceiling. “We don't have time for this.”

A chime on his phone made Jace pull it from his pocket. His boss sent him a text.

Cabello issued contract on Reed Monroe for nephew's murder. Cartel hitmen en route. Find him and bring him in ASAP.

“Fuck.”

“What?” Monroe asked.

“Your time is up. Is your alleged evidence close by?”

“Why?”

“Because the Cabello cartel has just issued a contract on your head for killing one of their own. Assassins are coming for you. I have to get you out of here, now.”

His eyes widened. In three seconds, his whole face paled. “I can’t leave without Skye. They’ll find her.”

“Why? Was she there when you killed these guys? Which one’s the nephew?”

He pursed his lips and glanced around the room.

“I’m your only chance right now. You have to turn over what you have.”

“Put Skye in protective custody, and I’ll give you everything.”