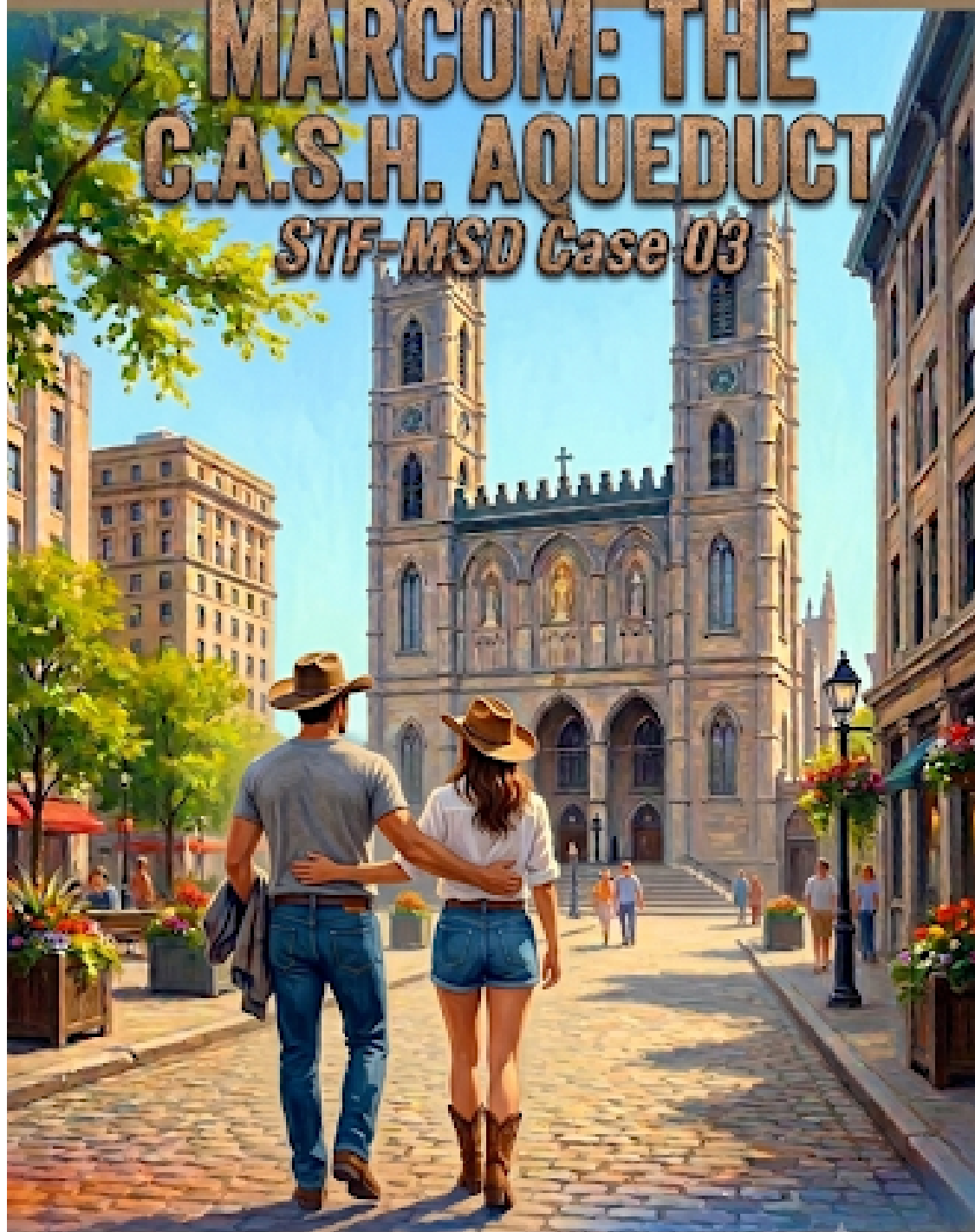


ZION RYDER & AUSTIN RANGE

MARCOM: THE C.A.S.H. AQUEDUCT

STF-MSD Case 03



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MARCOM Case 03: The C.A.S.H. Aqueduct

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CHAPTER 1: THE SHARK ON DRY LAND

Processing a man like Bruno DiTerra turned out to be almost entirely unremarkable, which was, in its own way, the strangest part of the whole night.

Fingerprints rolled one at a time, the same flat black ink used on every intake since the process was invented. A federal jumpsuit exchanged for the ruined charcoal suit he'd been wearing when they'd taken him off the Rotterdam dock — folded, bagged, tagged, and shelved with the same bureaucratic indifference given to a parking violation. A photograph taken against a height chart that had processed men considerably less dangerous than the one standing in front of it now, and men considerably more so. Nobody in the room seemed to know, or particularly care, which category tonight's subject belonged to. That was rather the point of the process. It didn't care who you were. It only cared that the paperwork came out correct.

DiTerra sat where he was told to sit, in a windowless federal interview room three time zones and one ocean away from any water he actually controlled, and said nothing at all for the better part of two hours.

It wasn't defiance, exactly — Austin had seen defiance across this kind of table before, and defiance had a heat to it that DiTerra's silence didn't carry. This was closer to a man doing arithmetic. Adding up, one column at a time, exactly how much of his life had just become someone else's property, and finding, somewhere in the third hour, that the number came out worse than he'd let himself calculate on the plane over.

He started talking a little after four in the morning, local time, in the flat, unhurried cadence of a man who had decided the only thing left he could control was the order in which he gave things away.

"You want the corridor," he said. "Not me. I'm just the man who kept the water quiet."

"We'll take both," Austin said. "But start with the water."

What DiTerra gave them that night wasn't a confession. It was closer to a map — incomplete, self-serving in places, but real, and real was worth considerably more to this unit than a man's remorse ever would be. Somewhere in that map, threaded through shipping manifests and coded port designations, was the first real shape of something MARCOM had only glimpsed in fragments up to now: a corridor DiTerra himself, in a rare moment of something almost like pride, referred to only by its working name.

The C.A.S.H. Aqueduct.

Three weeks earlier, and four hundred miles from the interview room DiTerra would eventually sit in, a container ship rode low and dark through the Gulf of St. Lawrence, running lights dimmed to the legal minimum and not a degree further, exactly the kind of unremarkable that got a vessel waved through inspection without a second glance.

Her manifest listed industrial machine parts, and to the naked eye of any customs officer who ever laid hands on the paperwork, that was precisely what she carried. Buried three containers deep, behind a legitimate shipment of Belgian-milled steel components, sat crates that had left a very different kind of factory — rifles, ammunition, optics, the raw material of somebody else's war, moving up the same commercial waterway that had carried grain and lumber and machinery since long before anyone had thought to hide contraband inside the honest cargo around it.

She passed Quebec City without incident. She would pass Trois-Rivières the same way, and Montréal after that, and from there the water would carry her — or more precisely, would carry whatever she handed off before she ever reached it — deeper into a continent that had built, over three centuries, one of the most heavily regulated, jointly governed, exhaustively documented commercial waterways on Earth, and had somehow, in all that regulation, left exactly enough seams for a man like Bruno DiTerra to make an entire career out of finding them.

Montréal was where the seams ran deepest, and Montréal, more than any other single place on the continent, was also where Yves Montblanc had learned to become someone else without ever entirely stopping being himself.

He had grown up in Laval, close enough to the island to feel its pull every day of his childhood without ever quite belonging to it, and something about that particular distance — near enough to watch, too far to claim — had shaped him more than he generally let on, even to Marie. Montréal was not a city with one identity layered politely over another. It was a city built, quite literally, out of the wreckage and reinvention of every identity that had ever claimed it — Tiohtià:ke before it was anything else, then Ville-Marie, then British Montréal, then an industrial engine that had, for the better part of a century, run more freight and forged more capital than almost any other port on the continent, before finally settling into the singular, unresolved, endlessly interesting thing it was today: the cultural and economic heart of a francophone nation that still wasn't entirely sure, some decades, whether it wanted to be a nation at all.

Yves had grown up inside that unresolved question the way other children grow up inside a language or a faith. He'd absorbed, without ever needing to be taught directly, that a person could hold two entirely true identities at once and let neither one cancel the other out — Québécois and Canadian, French and English, old and impossibly modern, the wooden facades of the old port sitting two blocks from glass towers built on financial capital that had once flowed, unbothered, along the very canal he used to walk past on his way to school. It was not, he had come to understand much later, so very different from what his own life eventually asked of him. A man who could be entirely genuine in two lives at once wasn't a contradiction, in Montréal. He was simply a local.

There was, he sometimes thought, a particular irony in how little political friction it actually took to run a joint continental defense operation between two allied services, compared to how much noise the same two countries' politics could generate over almost anything else. At Alton and Marie's level, at the level where operations actually got authorized and intelligence actually got

shared, the partnership had never once snagged on the kind of thing that dominated the evening broadcasts back home — not tax policy, not the old separatist current that still ran quiet and real beneath Québécois politics whether or not it ever surfaced again as a referendum, not a single one of the arguments that made continental unity look, from the outside, like a fragile and constantly negotiated thing. Sovereignty and security, it turned out, were not the same argument at all. The politicians fought loudly over one. The two directors had never once needed to raise their voices over the other.

Back in the interview room, DiTerra finally looked up from his own hands, and for the first time all night, something in his face resembled a man deciding to actually be useful rather than merely present.

"You keep calling it a corridor," he said. "It isn't. A corridor is one road. This is every road at once — rail, water, truck, whatever's fastest that week. You want to shut it down, you're not looking for a checkpoint." He shook his head slowly, the closest thing to respect he'd shown his own former employer all night. "You're looking for a navy that never once sailed as one. Every piece of it moves alone, looks legitimate alone, gets stopped by nobody, alone. It only becomes an army once it's already where it's going."

Austin looked at him for a long moment, and then at the map spread across the table between them — a hundred separate, innocuous-looking shipping lanes threading up through the Great Lakes, none of them, on their own, worth a second glance from anyone.

Somewhere in that tangle was the answer to a question this unit hadn't finished asking yet: how to find an army that never sailed as one, moving under a flag that officially didn't exist, through water that belonged, on paper, to absolutely no one at all.

DiTerra watched her study the map a moment longer, and something in his voice shifted — not fear exactly, closer to the flat, practical warning of a man who'd spent his whole career reading a room before anyone else in it understood what was happening.

"You should move fast on whatever you're going to do with this," he said. "They're already out there. Every day I sit in this room instead of answering my phone, somebody on the other end starts asking why, and men like the ones I used to run for don't wait around for good answers." He leaned back, the closest thing to a warning he'd offered all night. "The longer you keep me, the more they adjust. Routes change. Names change. By the time you're ready to move, you won't be hunting the network I just handed you. You'll be hunting whatever it turns into once it knows I'm gone."

CHAPTER 2: SEVERAL LOOSE THREADS

Sinclair called the briefing before the sun was fully up, which told the team most of what they needed to know before he said a single word.

"DiTerra gave us a clock along with the map," he said, once the whole table had assembled — Zion and Austin still road-worn from the flight home, Onyx already pulling up the corridor overlay on the main display without being asked, Tanner and Sting flanking the far end, Padre near the window, watching the room the way he always did before he watched any one person in it. On the secondary monitor, Yves's face resolved into frame, and beside his feed, a second window opened a moment later: Director Rugger Wolfen, dressed and alert despite an hour that clearly hadn't been kind to his side of the Atlantic either.

"The network adjusts the longer we hold him," Sinclair went on. "Routes change, names change, and every day we spend admiring the map is a day closer to it being wrong. So we're not spending many more of them."

He brought the corridor up full-screen — the long chain of water and rail threading from the Gulf of St. Lawrence through Montréal, down through the Great Lakes, out toward a dozen inland cities that had no obvious reason to share a criminal supply line except that, somehow, they all did.

"This isn't one operation," Sinclair said. "It's several, running at once, and I want to be honest with all of you about that going in. We don't get to solve this thread by thread, one after another, and hope the rest waits politely. We pull all of them at the same time, or we lose the ones we're not currently holding."

"Director Wolfen has spent the last several days doing something considerably harder than anything my own service could manage alone," Sinclair said, nodding to the second monitor. "Go ahead."

"Political groundwork," Wolfen said, without preamble, the last trace of his earlier hesitation entirely gone now — replaced by the brisk, capable authority of a man who had, in the weeks since Rotterdam, clearly decided exactly how much weight he did carry in a room like this. "DiTerra's corridor doesn't stay conveniently inside friendly jurisdiction. Parts of this network touch Luxembourg, Monaco, and increasingly Brussels — places with real financial sophistication and, in each case, considerably less appetite for a joint task force showing up uninvited than either Director Sinclair or I would prefer." He allowed himself something close to a dry smile. "I have the standing to open those doors. I do not have the operational reach to walk through them myself. That's the piece I'm bringing to this table, and I intend to spend the next several weeks doing nothing else."

"And once he opens them," Sinclair said, "somebody has to be standing on the other side, already known, already trusted, before any of us shows up with a badge."

On the first monitor, Yves inclined his head slightly. "That would be me."

"The Riviera circuit," Sinclair confirmed. "You're deploying alone on this one, Yves — no cover team, no extraction net beyond what you can arrange yourself. Wolfen's introductions get you into rooms; your own legend keeps you in them. I don't love sending you in without backup. I love the alternative less."

"I've done more with less," Yves said, easy as ever, though something in his eyes, just for a moment, flicked toward the empty space on the monitor where Sophia would ordinarily have been sitting, watching him work a room from three seats down. He didn't say anything about it. Neither did anyone else.

"Zion, Austin — you're moving north," Sinclair said. "Quebec, not the Ice Cube this time. Spring, not ice. Marie's already coordinating ground support on her end, and given everything sitting under Marseille and Rotterdam both, I want your eyes on Montréal specifically. If this corridor really does run as deep as DiTerra says, the seams are going to be old ones — the kind of infrastructure nobody builds overnight."

Austin glanced at Zion, something unspoken passing between them — the ranch, the retainer, the trust that had followed them from a French port city to a Dutch one and now, apparently, to a Canadian river as well. Neither of them said it out loud. They'd both learned, by now, that the thread found its own way to the surface without needing to be chased.

"Sting," Sinclair continued, "you're on the hardware. DiTerra's manifest data goes to you first, before anyone else touches it — I want a full weapons-forensics workup, point of manufacture through every hand it's passed since. If there's a pattern in what's moving and where it's headed next, you're the one who's going to see it before the rest of us do."

Sting didn't answer with more than a single, sharp nod, but something in his jaw had already tightened with the particular, focused hunger Padre had seen in him weeks earlier, alone in the ops room with a manifest that had made him angrier than anyone had heard him in years.

"Onyx, Tanner — you're supporting both fronts," Sinclair said. "Signals and logistics don't get to specialize this time. Everybody's stretched. That's the job."

Sinclair looked around the table once more before he closed the folder in front of him.

"Several loose threads," he said again, quieter this time, less a briefing line than something closer to an acknowledgment. "Political, financial, tactical, personal — all of it running at once, none of it waiting for the others to finish first. That's not a flaw in this operation. That's just what it actually looks like to fight something this size." His eyes moved, briefly, to Zion and Austin, to the empty chair Sophia's absence had left at the table, to Yves's face on the monitor, carrying a country's worth of introductions he was about to make entirely alone.

"Wheels up within the week," Sinclair said. "Let's go pull on all of them at once."

THE OLD-FASHIONED

Fog sat thick over the water that night, thick enough that the private office's floor-to-ceiling windows showed nothing beyond their own reflection — no coastline, no lights, no flag flying anywhere close enough to matter. It could have been the Mediterranean. It could have been somewhere considerably less charming. Sterling had built his life, deliberately and at great expense, around rooms that never quite told a visitor which country they were standing in.

He was on his third old-fashioned, which was one more than he generally allowed himself, and it showed in the loose, expansive way he'd taken to pacing behind his own desk instead of sitting at it.

"You know how old this fight actually is?" Sterling said, to the room in general, swirling the glass so the ice caught what little light the office offered. "Not Sedona. Not Rotterdam. Older than any of that." He gestured vaguely, as if the history itself were something he could physically wave into the fog outside. "Generations of it. Land, water, pride — men killing each other over county lines before either one of those two was even born. And somehow, somehow, it all comes down to a cowboy and a corporate heiress who think they invented righteousness."

The two men across the room didn't interrupt. That was, by now, an understood condition of being in this office after Sterling's second drink — you listened, you nodded at the right intervals, and you did not, under any circumstances, suggest he'd had enough.

"Vasquez." Sterling pointed the glass at the larger of the two, a broad-shouldered man who'd been with the organization since the Verde Valley days and had the particular loyalty of someone who'd been personally paid out of a very deep hole once. "You were there at the retreat. Tell me — was Ryder as good as the file says, or did I overpay for the legend?"

"He's good," Vasquez said, careful, honest in the specific way that kept a man employed in this business. "Good enough I still think about that hallway sometimes."

"See, that's what I like about you." Sterling pointed the glass at him again, warmer this time, the particular generosity of a man handing out approval like currency. "Honest. Most men in this business lie to my face about how tough the last fight was. You just tell me the truth and let me decide what to do with it." He turned to the second man, younger, quieter, still new enough to the room that he hadn't yet learned when silence was the correct answer. "And you — Cole. You've got the stomach for what's coming next?"

"Whatever you need, sir," Cole said, which was, Sterling reflected, exactly what a man said when he hadn't actually thought about the question yet. He let it go. There'd be time to find out for real.

"When I get my hands on him," Sterling said, setting the glass down hard enough that ice cracked audibly against crystal, "it isn't going to be quick. I want that understood by everyone in this building, all the way down to whoever's mopping the deck tonight. A man doesn't get to humiliate me in a Verde Valley server room, doesn't get to strip my company naked in front of the SEC, doesn't get to throw me off a cliff ledge in front of half the Arizona State Police, and then get to just — disappear into some ranch with a wedding ring and a horse and call it a

happy ending." His voice had gone low, almost conversational, which was, Vasquez had learned over the years, considerably more dangerous than when it rose. "I am going to take everything from that man the exact same way he thinks he took everything from me. And I am going to make his almost wife my little doll, dress her up real nice, only to tear it off of her and make her scream in every way she never wanted. Our boy Zion our hero on nag gets to watch every single minute of it, right up until it's turn to shoot him and her and the horses and every member of that task force. Leaving nothing and no one to stop us..Do you know what that's called?"

Neither man in the room said anything to that. There wasn't a correct response to it, and both of them knew it.

" that's what we call a conglomerate Monopoly and unstoppable force so powerful anything in its way turns to ashes melting into the waterways. I love my empire, I really do. Surprise! I love you and you. Come on now cheer up. and I love the money oh I love the money and I love the drugs and the guns and best... the power, I love my empire."

Sterling poured a fourth, which nobody in the room was foolish enough to comment on either.

"You know what's actually eating at me tonight," he said, quieter now, some of the theater draining out of his voice and leaving something closer to genuine irritation underneath. "Not Ryder. Not the girl. DiTerra."

"Sir?"

"Bruno hasn't called in four days." Sterling said it the way a man complains about a business partner who's late on a golf tee time, not the way a man discusses the disappearance of one of his three most trusted lieutenants. "Four days, and my guess — my educated guess, gentlemen, built on knowing this man for the better part of a decade — is that he's sitting at a card table, in a private room somewhere in Reno, or Vegas, or Atlantic City, running up a marker he thinks I'm not going to notice, because he thinks winning big enough at the table makes up for going dark on his own network for a week."

"You think he's just—"

"I know he's just," Sterling snapped, though there was less heat in it than the word suggested, more the flat certainty of a man who genuinely believed his own theory. "This isn't my first rodeo with him. Bruno gets it in his head every couple of years that he's going to walk into a casino and walk out having doubled the corridor's operating capital in a single weekend, and every single time, I end up covering the marker myself when it doesn't work out the way he pictured it in his head." He shook his head slowly, disgusted, entirely unaware of how close his own theory had drifted to something considerably worse than a bad night at a blackjack table. "Next thing you know, this is going to cost me another twenty-five million just to keep some pit boss in Nevada from talking to the wrong people about where the money actually came from."

He drained the fourth glass in one long pull, set it down with exaggerated care, and looked out at the fog swallowing whatever coastline was supposed to be out there.

"Find him," Sterling said, without turning around. "Not because I'm worried. Because I'm going to enjoy taking the cost of this out of his next three payouts instead of his ass and you can tell him that, so I want him standing in front of me when I explain the math and we can finally stop pretending you don't have to be in front of your people in this kind of work."

Vasquez glanced once at Cole, said nothing, and reached for his phone — already dialing a number that, four days from now and several thousand miles away, was never going to ring where Sterling expected it to.

He was the kind of man an organization like Sterling's kept exactly one of at any given time — not a lieutenant, not hired muscle, but the one person in the building trusted to handle a problem personally rather than assign it downward. Where Cole still took Sterling's moods as instruction, Vasquez had long since stopped needing instruction at all; he simply understood, the way a foreman understands a job site, what needed doing and in what order, and did it without waiting to be told twice. That was the whole of what made him valuable, and Sterling knew it well enough to never once double-check his work.

He let himself out into the fog without another word, already three steps ahead of the room he'd just left — leaving Sterling alone with his fifth drink, his theory about Reno, and twenty-five million dollars he didn't yet know he'd already lost for an entirely different

CHAPTER 3: THE SPY IN THE PHOTOGRAPH

The air in First Class smelled of warm nuts, expensive leather, and the faint, citrusy tang of aggressive champagne. Yves leaned back into the plush leather of Seat 2A, his noise-canceling headphones resting over his ears without playing a single note. Beside him, a tech venture capitalist explained the intricacies of his secondary yacht to a captive, heavily botoxed boutique owner from Toronto. Both spoke with the practiced, elevated cadence of people who believed their mere presence on an aircraft was a gift to aviation.

Yves didn't join the chatter. He never did. To the flight crew and his fellow high-rollers, he was just another face in the elite stratosphere—an impossibly sharp-jawed ghost traveling under an alias provided by the Secret Intelligence Section in Quebec.

He opened his laptop, deliberately hunting and pecking at the keys with two awkward index fingers while forcing an expression of mild frustration. It was a careful, calculated piece of theater. In a hotel room or behind the secure doors of a bureau in Montreal, Yves could hit 125 words a minute without breaking stride. Here, under the casual scrutiny of the hyper-wealthy, he made himself look harmless, slightly inept, and thoroughly unthreatening—just another piece of designer-name beefcake.

On the screen, high-resolution runway modeling shots flickered: Paris, London, Madrid, Monaco, Tokyo, Miami, Los Angeles, New York, Sydney, Honolulu—the most beautiful cities in the world. He had spent weeks, if not months, in each paradise, but a working model rarely gets more than four to eight hours to experience a city for themselves. Unless he was actively on a mission, Yves was always just passing through. Right now, as on most flights, that was where his mind lingered. Laptop open, headphones on, sunglasses down, face turned toward the oval window—and the rest of the cabin disappeared.

To the casual observer, he was checking the latest trends. To Yves, he was reviewing the terrain of a deeply decadent warzone.

The high-end supermodel fashion world was a gilded machine operating just a hair's breadth from high-class prostitution. It was a universe fueled by lavish gifts offered with sinister intentions, where billionaires, predatory photographers, and paparazzi-orchestrated setups formed a relentless meat grinder. Yves had watched that world swallow the young and naive whole. Promising stars were routinely ruined by illicit, incriminatory footage recorded without their knowledge—and there was always a buyer for the film. Eager starlets and boy wonders chasing the illusion peddled by the media were sucked into voluntary and involuntary drug use, rampant orgies, or outright trafficking among friends and casual acquaintances. The worst were the violent BDSM extremists lurking in the dark circles of the untouchable elite, staging horror shows designed less for pleasure than for pain and the cruel satisfaction of destroying something beautiful.

Where Montreal represented love, quiet strength, and home, Yves viewed the international fashion industry as an addictive landscape divided straight down the middle.

Half of it was cheap magic: mirror lighting tricks, fake breasts, fake lashes, fake hair, fake interest, and hollow people. The rare exceptions were the true elite designers—the icons known by single names like Calvin, Karl, Tom, Ralph, Donna, and Gianni. They were rooted, solid craftspeople doing revolutionary work with fabric, light, film, and spatial concept. They knew how to match a human form to a specific piece of art, elevating the wearer into something greater than their natural beauty.

But the rest? They were the ones who strayed from the cloth and the thread. In their miraculous, trending rises to fame—whether as traditional tailors, seamstresses, or the new-school vanguard of modestly attractive bloggers, savvy influencers, and viral video bombshells "caught in the moment"—they lost their way. They began believing their own press, swallowing the lies they were told until they started telling those same lies themselves.

The other half of the industry was far simpler to define once the money, sex, drugs, power, and exploitation crept in: pure Sodom and Gomorrah.

That was where Yves' real, self-assigned work began. He possessed a fierce, quiet passion for protecting the defenseless—the groomed, lied-to, and exploited teenage boys and girls pulled into the industry before they even understood their own developing bodies. Too often, they were served up like chattel by ruthless handlers or their own greedy parents. Yves stood up for them the only way he knew how: watching silently from a distance.

He had built a quiet reputation as a phantom guardian, cultivating a knack for arranging interventions from the shadows. A timely anonymous call would bring a protective parent, a gang of hired strongmen, or an uncorrupt law enforcement unit bursting through a hotel door at the exact moment a wealthy predator thought they were entirely alone. He lived to yank those kids out of harm's way before they were forced to carry an indelible emotional stain for the rest of their lives.

Every week brought a new headline parading powerful figures in supercars, yachts, and private jets dragging the unprotected offshore for horrific pursuits, returning them forever changed—if they returned at all.

Listening to the low hum of the jet engines, Yves wondered how anyone could look at the industry and want their children near it. No one in that world acted in anyone's interest but their own. It raised a quiet, heavy question: *Is this what we are as a species—pursuers of fame and the hollow adoration of strangers for a price, rather than explorers of a world built on love, spirit, interconnectedness, and self-awareness?*

Yves always tried to position himself as a wallflower by choice—a bystander observing the chaos while keeping his own ledger clean. In a world obsessed with public romance, he had never been officially linked to a partner. No public dates, no cohabitation, no scandal. He moved through life solo or surrounded by groups: either a table for one without a co-pilot, or amidst a flock of fellow models in town for a shoot.

To the paparazzi and rival agencies trying to knock him off his pedestal, his squeaky-clean image was an anomaly. Investigative minds smelled a rat simply because he left no debris behind. He was the unicorn of the industry—an ageless Adonis in high-fashion campaigns, paid to look immaculate while internally waging a silent war.

Yet, as the plane cruised through the dark at 35,000 feet, something new stirred inside him—an emptiness he hadn't planned for.

It had started weeks ago in a small church, watching ordinary people practice a quiet, sacred faith. It hadn't been a mystical intervention or a sudden thunderclap of enlightenment, but rather a slow, rising awareness of what those people possessed. They loved, and they were loved in return.

For Yves, allowing that kind of vulnerability meant dismantling the armor he, Marie, and the Canadian apparatus had spent years constructing. His career showed no signs of fading; he remained the gold standard on billboards from Paris to Tokyo. But the thought of growing old in the trade terrified him—the prospect of standing on set years from now in microbriefs a size smaller than his waist, sporting silver hair and a silver beard, entirely hollowed out inside and ready to put a gun in his mouth because he had let real love pass him by.

That afternoon in the chapel hadn't converted him into a traditional parishioner. Instead, it had lit a fuse. It made him long for a team—or even just one person—who believed in the same quiet, righteous preservation of good that he did.

Yves closed his laptop screen with a soft click, the reflective display going dark. He didn't have a file or a confirmed intelligence report to prove things were about to change. But like every piece of tradecraft he had ever relied on, his intuition was screaming. He felt the shift coming deep in his chest. And for a man like Yves, that feeling was all he needed.

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The tires hit the tarmac at Nice Côte d'Azur with a muted thud, and within twenty minutes, Yves was in the back of a blacked-out Mercedes sedan winding up the Basse Corniche toward Monte Carlo. The Mediterranean stretched out to his right like a sheet of dark indigo velvet, reflecting the glitter of cliffside villas that looked more like gilded fortresses than homes.

Crossing the border into the Principality felt less like entering a sovereign nation and more like stepping onto a soundstage where everyone knew their mark. Monaco didn't hide its vices; it polished them, insured them, and served them on crystal stemware. The air here was different from the cabin's recycled dry heat—thick with salt, sea mist, high-octane fuel, and the heavy, lingering trail of expensive amber perfume.

Stepping out onto the marble driveway of the Hôtel de Paris, Yves smoothed the front of his tailored linen jacket and handed his overnight leather duffel to the white-gloved valet. Paparazzi

lenses instantly whirled to life from behind the velvet ropes near the casino garden, light flashing off his sharp jawline like clockwork. He offered them the usual—a cool, distant nod that yielded just enough to satisfy the cameras without giving away a single inch of the man underneath.

To the concierge, he was just Yves, the international face arriving for the Grand Prix gala shoots. But as he took his suite keycard and felt the cool weight of his encrypted burner phone resting against his ribs, his senses calibrated to the city's silent frequencies. The flight was over. The theater had begun.

CHAPTER 4: OLD STONE, NEW WEATHER

Quebec in spring bore almost no resemblance to the Quebec the team remembered.

There was no ice this time, no squat armored outpost five hundred meters from a defense station, no Marie Tremblay running a command floor lit by tactical displays instead of daylight. There was green — an explosion of it, the particular short, defiant burst of color a northern country produces after months of white, as if the whole province had decided to spend its entire year's warmth in a single generous season. Marie's ground liaison met them at the airfield with actual warmth in her handshake rather than operational courtesy, and the drive into the city passed through light that had nothing cold in it at all.

"Different world," Tanner said, low, taking in the river as they crossed toward the old part of the city.

"Same country," Austin said. "Different season. Funny how much that changes a place."

Zion had insisted, quietly and without much explanation, on taking the first afternoon for himself and Austin, before the briefings started, before the maps came out. Sinclair hadn't argued. Some requests, by now, everyone on the team had learned not to question too closely.

"I've never actually done this," Zion admitted, as they stepped out into Place d'Armes, the old square opening up around them, sun catching the spires of Notre-Dame across the way.

"Walked it. All of it, together, like a — " he searched for the word, faintly embarrassed to be searching at all " — like a person on vacation, instead of a man passing through on somebody else's business."

"You're telling me the great Commander Ryder has never played tourist," Austin said, delighted, slipping her hand into his.

"I'm telling you I've never had a reason to want to," he said, and the honesty in it landed somewhere warm in her chest, the same place his voice had landed on the porch back home when he'd fumbled his way through the word husband.

They stepped inside the basilica together, and Austin went quiet the way she rarely did — the ceiling arching blue and gold above them, the whole space holding a kind of hush that had nothing to do with rules and everything to do with the building simply asking for it. Zion didn't narrate. He just stood beside her, letting the space do what it did, his hand warm around hers.

It was outside, minutes later, that Austin got her first real surprise of the day. A docent by the basilica's side door asked Zion something quick in French — a question about closing hours, nothing more — and Zion answered without a flicker of hesitation, easy and unhurried, the same low, warm cadence he'd once used on a boat deck in the Caribbean that had made her knees go soft the first time she heard it.

"You're doing that on purpose," Austin accused, once they were walking again.

"Doing what."

"Being fluent at me in public. It's not fair."

Zion laughed, low and real. "I've been fluent this whole relationship, Range. You've just never had a reason to watch me use it on strangers before."

By the time they reached Place Royale, he'd done it four more times — a ticket vendor, a woman selling flowers near the old foundations, a concierge outside a boutique hotel who'd wanted directions of her own. Each time, something in Austin's chest did a small, helpless flip she hadn't fully expected. It wasn't the language itself. It was watching an entire unfamiliar version of him move easily through a world she'd never once seen him occupy — cultured, unhurried, at home in old stone the same way he was at home in a saddle or a breach corridor, just a different register of the same steady competence.

"You're very distracting when you do this," she told him, as they stood over the excavated foundations at Pointe-à-Callière, three and a half centuries of the city's own beginning laid bare beneath their feet.

"Good," Zion said. "I like being the thing you're distracted by, for once, instead of a threat feed."

Rue Saint-Paul's cobblestones ran warm and uneven under their boots, old trade warehouses turned into boutiques and cafés on either side, gas-style lamps still standing sentry over doorways centuries newer than the walls around them. The crowd here skewed younger, looser, university students and weekend wanderers drifting between shopfronts — and drifting with them, unmistakable and everywhere, the sweet, unhurried smell of cannabis smoke.

Austin wrinkled her nose slightly, more curious than offended. "That's — everywhere."

"Legal here," Zion said. "Whole country, actually, not just this province — though Quebec runs its own retail through a provincial authority, sells it like a government does anything it's decided to stop pretending it can control." He shrugged, easy. "No patchwork like back home. No state-by-state argument about it. Just settled, mostly, and moved on."

"It smells like the wood," Austin said slowly, breathing it in again despite herself — old stone, old timber, and that sweet, green undertone threading through all of it. "I don't think I'll ever smell this again without thinking of exactly this street."

"Good or bad?"

She considered it, genuinely, watching the afternoon light slide gold across three-hundred-year-old stone. "Good," she decided. "Strange, but good. Some smells just belong to a place once you've had them together."

Place Jacques-Cartier climbed away from the river in a long, sloping run of pale stone, restaurant patios spilling out onto the cobbles, City Hall's Second Empire facade catching the last good light of the afternoon at the top of the rise. Zion pointed it out without turning it into a lecture — just a name, a nod, the kind of fact a person mentions once and lets go of rather than holds onto for effect.

They finished, as the sun began sinking properly toward the river, at the silver dome of Bonsecours Market, and beyond it, the small stone chapel the sailors had built their gratitude into centuries before either of them had been born. Inside, hanging from the vaulted ceiling on old cords, dozens of miniature wooden ships turned slow in whatever draft found its way through the old walls — offerings, Zion explained quietly, from men who'd survived the crossing and wanted something of their thanks to stay behind, permanently, in wood and rigging, long after they themselves had gone back out to sea.

Austin looked up at them for a long time, saying nothing.

"There's something in that," she said finally, quiet, her hand tightening slightly in his. "All these people, centuries of them, standing right here needing the water to bring them home safe. And here we are." She looked at him, something soft and a little wondering in her face. "Still needing the same thing, in our own way. Just with better engines."

Zion looked up at the small fleet turning slowly above them, and for a moment said nothing at all — just held her hand a little tighter, the old wood and older prayers settling over both of them like something neither of them had realized, until just now, they'd been carrying the whole trip.

"Same reason men have always loved the sea," he said finally. "It takes everything from you eventually. And somehow, most of us keep going back anyway."

CHAPTER 5: THE OLD WOUND

The briefing room Marie's service had arranged sat two floors below a perfectly ordinary Montreal office building, and by the time the team filed in the next morning, the softness of the day before had already given way to something harder in everyone's posture — the particular, practiced shift MARCOM had all learned to make between one register and the other.

Onyx had Yves's Luxembourg lead open on the main display before anyone had finished sitting down.

"The holding company Marchetti pointed Yves toward," Onyx said, pulling the registration data up beside a second document — older, formatted differently, stamped with a CSIS seal none of them had looked at closely in a long time. "It's not new. It's the same structure that owned the regional relay tower up near the Ice Cube facility. The one Sterling's people hijacked to frame us for an international incident, back before any of us had ever heard the words STF-MSD."

The room went quiet in the particular way it did when a piece of old, half-healed history got touched without warning.

Marie, seated at the head of the table, didn't move for a long moment. It was her service, after all, that had cleared them of that incident in the first place — her own field agent, at the time still new to this family, who'd traced the spoofed signature back to its true source and personally exonerated a task force that hadn't yet earned the trust it would go on to build.

"I always assumed that was a single, isolated act of sabotage," Marie said slowly. "A tool Sterling used once, to buy himself distance while he restructured after San Sebastián."

"It wasn't isolated," Austin said, pulling the two documents into direct comparison on the screen. "It was protecting exactly this corridor. The tower wasn't a weapon aimed at us specifically. We just happened to be standing close enough to the real target that framing us was the cheapest way to keep anyone from looking north."

Zion stood very still, staring at the old CSIS report — the same clean, careful language that had once cleared his name, now revealing itself to have been standing, the entire time, on the edge of something considerably larger than any of them had understood.

"So the first time Sterling's network ever touched our lives," he said quietly, "wasn't Dallas. Wasn't the ranch. It was here. Protecting this." He looked up at the corridor map still glowing behind the newer data, the long chain of water and rail running from the Gulf of St. Lawrence down through the Great Lakes. "We've been standing inside his war for years without knowing which war it actually was."

Yves's voice came through the secure line a moment later, patched in from wherever the Riviera circuit had carried him that morning — his tone, for once, entirely without its usual easy polish.

"I want to say something plainly, and I want it on the record," he said. "That incident was the first real test of my career under this partnership. Marie sent me to clear MARCOM's name on a signal I traced myself, from raw data, with my own hands. I have believed, every day since, that I understood exactly what I'd found that week." A pause, weighted. "I didn't. Not fully. I cleared an innocent team of a crime they didn't commit, and I never once asked myself why an operation this large would spend real resources framing anyone at all, rather than simply staying quiet and letting the moment pass."

"You weren't wrong," Marie said, gently but firmly, cutting across the beginning of whatever apology he seemed to be building toward. "You were early. There's a difference, Yves, and I won't let you carry the weight of the second one as if it were the first."

"She's right," Sinclair added, arms crossed at the far end of the table, his voice carrying the particular calm authority he brought to moments exactly like this one. "None of us had the pieces yet. Marseille hadn't surfaced. Rotterdam hadn't happened. DiTerra was still a name none of us knew to look for. You did the job you had in front of you, and you did it well enough that a team of good people got to keep serving instead of sitting in a cell over a lie." He let that settle a moment. "Finding the rest of it now doesn't undo the work you did then. It just means the work isn't finished. It never really was."

Zion crossed to the window, looking out over a city he'd spent one golden, unhurried afternoon falling a little bit in love with, now revealed to be sitting directly atop the roots of a war he'd apparently been fighting, unknowingly, for years longer than he'd ever understood.

"The tower's still standing," he said, half to himself. "Isn't it. Whoever runs it now."

"Under new operators, officially," Onyx confirmed. "Same physical infrastructure. Same location. We never had a reason to look at it twice after Marie's office cleared it — it did its job as a decoy perfectly, and decoys don't usually get revisited once the smoke clears."

"Then that's where we start," Zion said, turning back to the room, something settled and entirely certain in his face. "Not the corridor's middle. Not its end. We go back to the exact place this whole thing first reached out and touched us, and we finish what should have been finished years ago."

Austin crossed to stand beside him, her hand finding his without either of them needing to look for it.

"Old wound," she said quietly. "New weather. Let's see if it finally closes."

CHAPTER 6: EVERY ROUND HAS A NAME

The armory bay had gone quiet hours ago, everyone else on the team either asleep or out running the Montreal end of the operation, but Sting hadn't moved from the long steel workbench since before dinner. Spread across it in neat, deliberate rows were the photographs Onyx had pulled from DiTerra's manifest data — crates, stamps, serial sequences, the whole cold anatomy of a weapons pipeline laid out under a single hanging work light like evidence at an autopsy.

He worked the way he always worked, which was to say entirely alone in his own head even in a room full of other people, methodical past the point most operators would have called it obsessive. Every rifle had a birth certificate, if you knew how to read one — a factory, a batch number, a government contract or the absence of one, a paper trail that either ended cleanly at a legitimate buyer or didn't end at all, just dissolved into exactly the kind of deliberate fog Sterling's whole operation seemed built out of.

Sting had been reading those birth certificates, in one capacity or another, for over twenty years. He'd simply never had to read quite so many of them belonging to the wrong side of a war before.

He'd grown up around guns the way some boys grow up around water or horses — not as danger, not at first, but as inheritance. His father had run a small, honest range outside a town too small to have much else going for it, and Sting had learned to shoot the same summer he learned to ride a bike, under a man who treated every firearm in the building like it deserved the same respect you'd give a scalpel. Not a toy. Not a symbol. A precise, unforgiving tool that did exactly what it was built to do, and nothing else, provided the hands holding it understood the weight of that.

He was fourteen the first time he understood what happened when that respect broke down somewhere else.

A boy two towns over, someone Sting had competed against twice at regional matches, had been killed by a weapon that had no business being anywhere near the hands that eventually held it — stolen from an unsecured truck three states away, sold twice more before it ever reached the kid who pulled the trigger, a straight, unbroken chain of small, ordinary carelessness that had ended, eventually, in a closed casket and a competition Sting never got to finish that year.

Nobody in that chain had meant for it to happen. That was, he'd decided somewhere in the years since, the actual horror of it. Nobody had to mean anything at all. The system just had to fail one link at a time, quietly, until a fourteen-year-old boy with a promising shot and a whole life ahead of him wasn't standing on the firing line anymore.

He had never told anyone on this team the full version of that story. Padre knew there was something — Padre always knew there was something — but even Padre had never pushed past the edges Sting kept carefully drawn around it. It wasn't a wound he nursed. It was closer

to a foundation, something load-bearing that the rest of his entire career had simply been built on top of without ever needing to be excavated again.

Every weapon under his maintenance, every round he'd ever personally inspected, existed because of that boy. He had never once let himself forget it, and he had no intention of starting now, sitting alone in a Montreal armory bay at two in the morning with a hundred serial numbers spread out in front of him like a hundred small, unclosed cases.

The door opened just after two-thirty, and Onyx came in without ceremony, two cups of coffee in hand, setting one down at Sting's elbow without being asked.

"You've been at this six hours," Onyx said, pulling up a stool. "Tell me you've found something, because otherwise I'm going to start worrying about you instead of the corridor."

"I've found several somethings," Sting said, not looking up from the photograph in front of him. "None of them add up to one big something yet. That's the part that's taking so long." He tapped a fingernail against a stamped batch code, faint but legible under magnification. "This lot here — bolt-actions, older stock, the kind DiTerra's people were moving by the pallet — traces back to a legitimate manufacturer's overrun batch. Should've been destroyed as excess inventory eight years ago. Paperwork says it was."

"But."

"But eight years is a long time for paperwork to be lying," Sting said. "I cross-referenced the destruction certificate against the actual facility's insurance claims from that period. No claim was ever filed for a destruction event that size. Which means either somebody forged the paperwork after the fact, or somebody inside that plant quietly diverted an entire overrun batch and let the certificate cover for it."

Onyx let out a low whistle. "That's not smuggling. That's a plant employee getting paid to look the other way on an industrial scale."

"That's exactly what it is," Sting said, and something hard settled into his voice. "And it's not the only lot doing it. I've got three more batches with the same shape of problem — legitimate manufacturers, legitimate paperwork, one quiet employee or one bribed inspector standing at the exact seam where the official count and the real count stopped matching." He sat back finally, rubbing at his eyes, the fatigue showing now that he'd let himself acknowledge it at all. "DiTerra wasn't running black-market guns built in some jungle workshop, Onyx. He was running real inventory, off realfactory floors, through real paperwork that just happened to be wrong in exactly the right places. That's not a smuggling operation. That's a parasite living inside the legitimate industry, and it's been feeding for years."

Zion found them there an hour later, drawn by the light still burning under the armory door at an hour the rest of the ranch — the rest of the team, he corrected himself; old habits from Sedona didn't entirely let go, even four thousand miles from home — had long since gone dark.

"You're supposed to be resting," Zion said, though there was no real reprimand in it.

"So are you," Sting said, not looking up.

Zion pulled up the third stool without being invited and looked over the spread of photographs, the neat, obsessive rows of evidence Sting had built out of nothing but patience and a refusal to let a single loose thread lie.

"Talk me through it," Zion said. "All of it. Not the summary. I want to understand exactly what you're seeing."

So Sting did — walking him through batch codes and destruction certificates and insurance claims that didn't exist, through three separate manufacturers who had, each in their own quiet way, become unwitting hosts to the same parasite, through a pattern that, once you'd seen it laid out plainly enough, looked less like a smuggling ring and more like an entire shadow economy running in perfect, silent parallel to a legitimate industry that had no idea how deeply it had been compromised.

"There's a name that keeps almost surfacing," Sting said finally, tapping a cluster of shipping references that all converged, eventually, on a single regional distribution point neither of them had seen in any prior briefing. "Saint Ignace. Every lot I've traced, no matter which manufacturer it started at, no matter which corrupted link let it slip through — it all funnels through the same facility before it ever gets distributed downstream. Whatever that place actually is, it isn't a warehouse. Warehouses don't need this many separate criminal families feeding into the same single point."

Zion went very still, the name landing somewhere he recognized without yet being able to place why.

"That's not a warehouse," he said slowly. "That's a hub. The kind of place you build once you've already won the war you're fighting, not while you're still fighting it."

"That's what worries me," Sting said. "Because everything I'm looking at says Sterling's people built Saint Ignace a long time ago. Years, maybe. Which means we're not looking at the beginning of this operation at all." He looked up at Zion, something cold and entirely certain in his eyes. "We're looking at its capital city. And nobody on this team has set foot anywhere near it yet."

Padre arrived sometime after four, not summoned, simply present the way he always eventually was whenever a room held something heavy enough to need a witness. He didn't ask what they'd found. He set down a plate of food neither of them had thought to eat and settled into the corner without a word, letting the two of them keep working while his presence alone did whatever quiet thing it always did to the weight in a room.

It was nearly dawn before Sting finally set the last photograph down, the full shape of the batch-diversion network laid out clean enough, finally, to brief the rest of the team without a single gap left unaccounted for.

"Twenty years I've been doing this," Sting said quietly, to no one in particular, staring at the neat rows of evidence he'd built out of a single sleepless night. "Making sure the iron never fails the people carrying it. I never once stopped to think about what it costs when the iron gets stolen by people counting on it to fail somebody else instead." He looked up, first at Zion, then at Padre, something rawer in his face than either of them had seen from him in a long time. "Saint Ignace. That's where this ends. I don't care how long it takes us to get there. I want to be standing in that building when it finally closes for good."

Padre didn't say anything grand. He rarely did, when a thing had already said everything it needed to say on its own.

He just reached out and rested a hand briefly on Sting's shoulder, the same gesture he'd offered weeks earlier over a different manifest, in a different room, on a different continent — a witness, once again, to a man carrying something old and heavy finally setting a little of it down where someone else could help him hold it.

"Then we'll get you there," Zion said simply, standing, already reaching for the phone that would wake Sinclair four hours before he'd planned to be woken. "Every corridor ends somewhere, Sting. Looks like you just found where this one

CHAPTER 7: THE LEASH

The safehouse holding Bruno DiTerra didn't look like custody, which was, Austin had learned over three weeks of managing him, precisely the point. A comfortable room, real meals, a window that looked out onto an ordinary Montreal street instead of a cell block — every detail engineered to remind him, quietly and constantly, that cooperation had a ceiling considerably higher than the one he'd have found in federal lockup.

It hadn't made him easy to handle. It had made him harder, in a different way. A frightened man behind bars had nothing left to negotiate with. A frightened man in a comfortable room with a window still believed, some mornings, that there was a version of this where he walked away with something.

"You held something back," Austin said, setting a folder down on the table between them, unhurried. "Yesterday. The Saint Ignace facility. You called it a distribution hub. Our own forensics say it's considerably more than that."

DiTerra didn't look at the folder. "I told you what I know."

"You told us what you thought was safe to know," Austin said. "There's a difference, Mr. DiTerra, and I think you're smart enough to understand exactly how much that difference is going to cost you if I catch you at it twice."

Sinclair watched the exchange from behind the one-way glass, arms crossed, Zion beside him equally still.

"He's not lying outright," Sinclair said quietly. "Which is almost worse. A man who lies clean, you can catch. A man who tells you ninety percent of the truth and holds the last ten percent like a bargaining chip — that's a man who still thinks he's got leverage left to spend."

"Does he," Zion asked.

"Depends entirely on whether he still believes Sterling doesn't know he's gone," Sinclair said. "The moment he stops believing that, the leverage disappears, and so does the reason to hold anything back." He glanced at Zion. "Which is why I want Onyx watching every channel that touches this building. If Sterling's people get even a whisper of where DiTerra actually is, our whole strategy for managing him changes overnight."

They didn't have to wait long to find out how close that whisper already was.

Two kilometers away, in a rented office above a currency exchange that did considerably more laundering than exchanging, Vasquez sat across from a man named Reyes — not Sterling's, not exactly, but close enough to the organization's outer edges that a favor owed in one direction usually meant a favor owed back in the other.

"Four days, no contact, and now this," Vasquez said, sliding a printed flight manifest across the desk — a private charter, filed under a name DiTerra had used exactly once, years ago, for something considerably less serious than this. "Rotterdam to a private strip outside Montreal. Filed the same week he went dark."

Reyes studied it, unimpressed at first, then less so. "You think somebody grabbed him."

"I think somebody grabbed him clean enough that he hasn't been able to send word since," Vasquez said. "Which means either he's dead somewhere nobody's found him yet, or he's sitting in a room right now deciding exactly how much of what he knows he's willing to trade to stay comfortable." He tapped the manifest once, hard. "I need eyes on every federal safehouse pattern this city runs. Every one. If he's alive, he's somewhere quiet, somewhere ordinary. That's how they always hide the ones who matter."

Reyes didn't answer right away. But he didn't say no either, and in this business, Vasquez had learned a long time ago, silence that wasn't a no was already most of the way to a yes.

Back in the interview room, Austin let the silence stretch a full minute before she spoke again.

"Here's what I think is actually happening," she said. "I think you believe, somewhere underneath all of this, that Sterling still assumes you're off running up a marker in Reno. I think that belief is the only thing letting you sleep at night, because as long as it's true, your family's still safe, your assets are still untouched, and there's still a version of this where you walk away from us with your old life mostly intact." She leaned forward slightly. "I need you to understand something plainly, Mr. DiTerra. That belief has an expiration date. We don't control it. Neither do you. And every day you spend protecting ten percent of the truth instead of giving us all of it is a day closer to that expiration arriving before we've finished using what you gave us to actually protect you."

DiTerra's jaw tightened. For the first time in three weeks, something in his composure genuinely cracked — not the calculated cracks he'd offered before, designed to look like progress without costing him anything real, but something closer to the actual fear underneath all of it.

"Saint Ignace isn't a hub," he said finally, low. "It's the center. Everything runs through it eventually — money, product, hardware, all of it. Sterling calls it The Register, because that's what it does. Keeps score. Keeps everybody's debts and everybody's leverage in one place, so nobody in the whole network can ever quite afford to walk away clean." He looked up, something genuinely haunted in his face now. "I held it back because the man who runs security there personally knows my face. If Sterling ever finds out I gave you The Register, that man won't wait for orders. He'll come for my sister in Naples before anyone even finishes explaining to him why."

Austin didn't soften her voice, but something in it shifted anyway — the particular, deliberate steadiness she reserved for moments that actually mattered instead of moments that merely looked like they did.

"Then let us protect her," she said. "That's not a favor, Mr. DiTerra. That's the actual trade you've been trying to negotiate for three weeks without ever saying it out loud. You give us everything, all of it, nothing held back — and we make sure there's nobody left with a reason to hurt anyone you love by the time this is finished."

DiTerra looked at her for a long moment, the calculation behind his eyes finally, visibly, running out of road.

"Get her out of Naples," he said. "Tonight. Not tomorrow. And I'll give you every name, every route, every door into that building that I know."

Sinclair was already moving before Austin finished relaying the request through the glass, phone in hand, dialing a number that would have a protective detail wheels-up toward Naples within the hour.

"He's committing," Zion said, watching DiTerra's posture through the glass — smaller now, somehow, than he'd looked in three weeks of careful, guarded composure. "Whole way, this time."

"He's terrified," Sinclair corrected, not unkindly. "Which, in this line of work, is usually the same thing." He lowered the phone from his ear just long enough to look at Zion directly. "Get Sting and Onyx up. If DiTerra's about to hand us The Register, I want a plan on this table by morning, because somewhere out there, Sterling's people are getting closer to finding him whether we're ready or not."

CHAPTER 8: SAINTS, SINNERS, AND EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN

DiTerra's doors turned out to be real doors, which was, Zion reflected as the team moved into position along the tree line outside Saint Ignace, considerably more than any of them had let themselves fully expect.

The facility sat low and unremarkable against the Michigan shoreline, disguised behind the corporate signage of a regional logistics contractor — the kind of building a person drove past a hundred times without ever once wondering what actually moved through its loading bays after dark. DiTerra's intelligence had given them the guard rotation, the blind corridor behind the main server room, and the exact door that would open, at exactly this hour, to a maintenance code nobody inside had thought to change in over a year.

"Two minutes to rotation gap," Onyx murmured over comms, hunched behind a dark relay van a quarter mile out. "After that, you've got four minutes of blind coverage before the next sweep."

"Four minutes is generous," Zion said. "We'll need less than that."

Beside him, Sting checked his rifle one final time with the same unhurried, exacting care he brought to every piece of equipment that had ever passed through his hands — except tonight, Zion noticed, that care carried something sharper underneath it. Twenty years of carrying other men's failures on a workbench had led, finally, to a door he intended to walk through himself.

The breach was clean, fast, and almost anticlimactic compared to the chaos of Rotterdam months earlier — a testament, Austin thought, to exactly how much better prepared they were this time, and exactly how much a single cooperating source could change the shape of an entire operation.

Inside, Saint Ignace revealed itself to be precisely what Sting's forensic work had predicted: not a warehouse, not merely a distribution hub, but a genuine nerve center — rows of server racks alongside physical ledger vaults, a facility built to keep score on money, product, hardware, and leverage all at once, exactly the way DiTerra had described it. The Register. The name fit with an accuracy that made the hair stand up on the back of Austin's neck the moment she saw the physical ledgers themselves, bound and stacked with the obsessive, old-world thoroughness of a man who trusted paper considerably more than he trusted a server that could be hacked or subpoenaed.

Sting found the security chief in the armory wing — a broad, unhurried man whose face matched, precisely, the warning DiTerra had given them days earlier. He didn't get the chance to reach for a weapon. Sting closed the distance before the man's hand had finished moving, and the confrontation that followed lasted considerably less time than either of them had likely imagined it would, weeks or months earlier, in whatever private calculation each had made about how this moment might eventually go.

"You're the one who threatens sisters in Naples," Sting said, low, once the man was zip-tied and face-down against the cold concrete. It wasn't a question.

The man didn't answer. He didn't need to. Something in Sting's face told him, quite clearly, that the answer no longer mattered nearly as much as the fact that he was the one currently on the floor.

It was Austin, working through the physical ledgers under a portable light two hours into the operation, who found the reference that would end up reshaping the rest of the night.

"There's a secondary property listed here," she said, calling Zion and Onyx over, her finger tracing a line of careful, old-fashioned handwriting. "Not a distribution asset. An investment and I'm not sure it's the only location. Sterling's own capital, personally, not the corridor's operating funds." She looked up. "Mackinac Island. A place called Rosie's Hideaway."

"A bar," Onyx said, pulling up a satellite image on his tablet — a modest, historic-looking building tucked among the island's tourist strip, indistinguishable from a dozen others.

"Not just a bar," Austin said, reading further, her voice going flatter as the entries kept unfolding. "There's a second ledger column here — 'talent acquisition,' tracked the same way they track weapons inventory. Dates. Counts. A tunnel referenced under the strip connecting the club to a converted hotel two doors down." She looked up, something cold settling into her expression. "Zion, this isn't a nightclub investment. This isn't just a holding operation. This is a brothel"

Zion didn't hesitate. "How current."

"Last entry's eleven days old," Austin said. "But there's a pattern going back roughly two months. New arrivals, consistent count, consistent origin notation." She turned the ledger so he could see it himself. "Costa Rica. Every single time."

The team crossed the water before dawn, Tanner arranging a fast, unremarkable charter that drew no more attention than any other early boat making the short run between the mainland and the island's quiet, car-free streets.

Diana and Esmeralda went in first, dressed for the tourist crowd that would eventually fill these same streets by midmorning, moving unhurried past gift shops and fudge counters toward the unassuming storefront that gave no outward sign of anything beneath it. The tunnel entrance sat exactly where the ledger had promised — behind a false wall in a storage room, running the short distance beneath the street to the converted hotel's basement level, low-ceilinged and airless in a way that told its own story before either woman said a word.

What they found on the other side was not the hardened resistance of a criminal operation defending itself. It was seven frightened women, none of them older than twenty-five, huddled in a windowless room that had clearly been designed to keep them exactly there.

Esmeralda spoke first, low and careful, in the Spanish she'd carried her entire life and used, in this line of work, only rarely — no vengan a hacerles daño, están a salvo ahora — and watched something in the room shift, cautious relief breaking slowly across faces that had clearly not expected kindness to arrive speaking their own language.

"Costa Rica," one of the women finally managed, when Esmeralda asked, her voice thin but steadying with every word Esmeralda answered back in kind. "Todas nosotras. Desde hace dos meses."

All of them. For two months.

Padre arrived within the hour, along with a quiet federal medical team Sinclair had authorized the moment Austin's transmission reached him — and it was Padre, more than anyone, who understood immediately that what these seven women needed first was not an interview. It was simply the steady, unhurried presence of someone treating them like people rather than evidence.

It was over the following hours, gently, in fragments, that the fuller shape of it emerged — not through forensic reconstruction this time, but through the far harder, far more human work of testimony freely given once fear finally loosened its grip enough to let the words out. Rosie's Hideaway wasn't unique. It was one node in a wider pattern the women themselves had pieced together during their own captivity, comparing notes in whispers when their captors weren't listening — a network the traffickers themselves referred to, with the particular casual cruelty of men who'd stopped seeing the horror in their own language a long time ago, as the Funhouses. Strip clubs and private clubs strung along the length of the C.A.S.H. corridor itself, each one running the exact same quiet operation Rosie's Hideaway had, each one restocked, per the women's own accounts, from the same point of origin.

Costa Rica. Not once. Not incidentally. A source, recurring and deliberate, feeding into a network built with the same patient, industrial logic Sterling had applied to weapons, to money, to every other commodity his corridor had ever moved.

They flew back to the ranch two days later, the operation formally closed on paper — Saint Ignace seized, its records catalogued, seven women safe and beginning, with Padre's quiet coordination, the long process of actually going home — but nobody on the team mistook this for an ending.

Sinclair called the debrief the same evening, and for once, nobody in the room reached for the easy relief of a job finished.

"Saint Ignace was the center of the corridor," Sinclair said, standing at the head of the table, the physical ledgers stacked in evidence bags beside him. "But it was never the whole operation. Sterling didn't just move drugs and guns through this network. He built a supply chain for people too, and every thread we've pulled tonight points in exactly the same direction." He looked around the table — Zion and Austin, Sting quieter than usual, Diana and Esmeralda still carrying, visibly, the weight of the last two days, Onyx and Tanner, Padre standing near the window the way he always did.

"Costa Rica," Sinclair said. "That's where this goes next. Not because we've decided it should. Because seven women just told us, with more courage than anyone in this room had any right to ask of them, that it's where their part of this nightmare actually began."

Nobody said anything for a long moment. Outside, the Arizona evening was settling gold and quiet over the ridgeline, the same peace the ranch always offered after a hard-won fight — except this time, everyone at the table understood, with a clarity that made the peace feel more like a held breath than a rest, that the next fight had already found its address, and it was simply waiting for them to arrive

CHAPTER 9: THE GRIND AND THE GRACE

The oak table in the Sedona ops room had disappeared entirely beneath paper again — Saint Ignace's physical ledgers stacked beside translated testimony transcripts, financial trails from Rotterdam and Marseille pinned alongside a growing wall of photographs and shipping references that all, in one quiet way or another, kept pointing south.

Nobody called it a breakthrough anymore. By now, three cases deep, the team had learned the actual shape of this work — not a single door kicking open, but a hundred small, unglamorous hours of reading, cross-referencing, and waiting for a pattern to finish saying what it had been trying to say all along.

"Costa Rica isn't a guess," Austin said, late into the third evening of it, rubbing at eyes that had stopped focusing properly an hour earlier. "It's confirmed in six separate places now — the ledger notation, three of the women's independent accounts, a shipping reference Sting pulled off a Register manifest that never should have crossed with a human-trafficking route at all, and now this." She tapped a financial trace on the screen. "A shell entity registered out of San José, feeding capital upstream into the same corridor structure we've been tracing since Marseille."

"So we know where," Zion said, standing at the window the way he always did when the weight of a thing needed somewhere physical to rest. "We don't know where inside it yet."

"No," Austin admitted. "That's next case. Tonight, we just keep reading."

It was, everyone privately agreed without saying so out loud, exactly the kind of grind that made the quiet hours after it feel like something closer to grace.

Onyx found Chantelle on the porch two nights running, the drive down from the ranch to Flagstaff becoming, without either of them planning it, a fixed point in a week otherwise made of ledgers and translated testimony. She never asked him what he'd spent the day doing. He never offered more than the shape of it — hard week, good work, glad to be sitting here instead — and somewhere in the space that restraint left between them, something had started growing that neither of them had rushed to name.

"You look tired in a different way than usual," Chantelle said, the second night, her hand finding his on the porch rail without either of them making a show of it.

"Good tired," Onyx said. "The kind that means something actually got fixed instead of just survived." He turned his head to look at her, something unguarded crossing his face the way it only ever seemed to now, in this specific light, with this specific woman. "I don't get to say that very often. Feels strange to say it out loud to somebody who isn't already inside the work with me."

"Then say it to me anyway," Chantelle said simply. "I'd rather be the place you get to say it, than another room where you have to keep it to yourself."

Onyx didn't answer with words. He just reached over, slow and certain, and laced his fingers properly through hers for the first time — not a hand held briefly, not a kiss to the knuckles, but the plain, unhurried commitment of two hands meaning to stay that way a while.

Tanner found Esmeralda in the stable two evenings after they'd returned, well past the hour anyone else was still awake, sitting on an overturned feed bucket beside Sonora's stall with her knees pulled up and her arms wrapped around them, saying nothing at all.

He didn't ask what was wrong. He'd learned, over months of easy mornings and quiet chores, that Esmeralda's silences carried their own information if a person was patient enough to simply sit inside them instead of trying to fill them.

He sat down on the straw beside her instead, close enough to matter, not so close as to crowd her, and waited.

"Seven women," Esmeralda said finally, quiet, staring at nothing in particular. "I've done hard things, Tanner. I don't usually carry them home with me." She shook her head slowly. "But I keep hearing her voice. The one who finally told me where she was from. Two months, Tanner. Two months in that basement before we got there."

"You got there," Tanner said, low and steady. "That's the part that matters. Not how long it took. That you were the one who finally walked through that wall and told her, in a language she trusted, that it was over."

Esmeralda turned her head to look at him properly for the first time, something in her face softening in a way he'd never quite seen from her before — not the easy, guarded composure she carried into every room, but something rawer, closer to the surface.

"Thank you for not asking me to be fine yet," she said quietly.

"Wasn't planning to," Tanner said, and reached out, slow and careful, to rest his hand over both of hers where they sat wrapped around her knees. Sonora shifted in her stall, blowing out a long, quiet breath, and for a long while neither of them said anything else at all — just sat together in the warm dark, two people who had spent months circling something neither had said out loud yet, a little closer tonight than they'd been the night before.

Alton and Marie kept their session with Padre that week, remote as usual, though the conversation drifted, more than once, toward Yves.

"He carried that Quebec revelation harder than he let any of us see," Marie said, quiet, her face lit by the same secure monitor glow that had carried her and Alton through months of these calls now. "I've known that man for years, Alton. I've never once heard his voice do what it did on that call."

"He'll carry it a while longer," Alton said. "That's just who he is. But he's not carrying it alone anymore, and I think that's the part that actually changes something. A few years ago, he'd have

processed that entirely by himself, on the other side of an ocean, and none of us would ever have known it happened at all." He was quiet a moment. "This family's better at catching each other than it used to be. Small thing. Feels like a large one, some nights."

Marie smiled, soft, and reached toward the screen the way she sometimes did, an old habit neither of them had ever bothered to break. "Small things, Alton. That's rather become our whole specialty, hasn't it."

Zion found Austin on the porch long after midnight, the ledgers finally set aside for the night, the manuscript from Padre's desk drawer open between them to a page neither of them had gotten to yet.

"We're going to Costa Rica," Austin said quietly, not really a question.

"We are," Zion said. "Not tonight. Not this week. But we are." He looked out at the dark ridgeline, the same one he'd been staring at since the very first night this whole family had been built around this table. "Every case teaches us the same thing, Range. The war doesn't end. It just keeps finding a new coastline to hide behind." He turned to look at her, something steady and entirely unshaken in his eyes despite the weight of everything the last two weeks had uncovered. "But we keep finding it anyway. Every single time."

Austin leaned into him, resting her head against his shoulder, the manuscript's open page catching the last of the porch light between them.

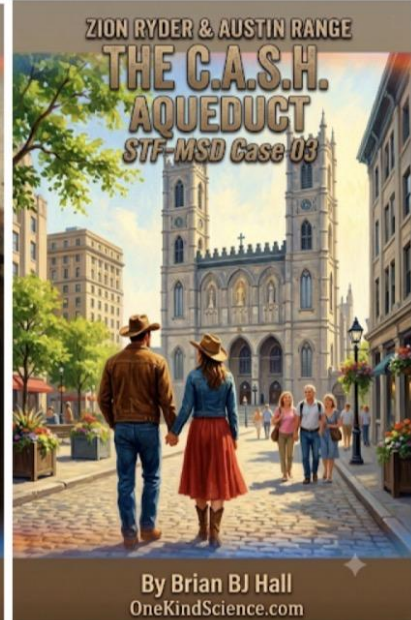
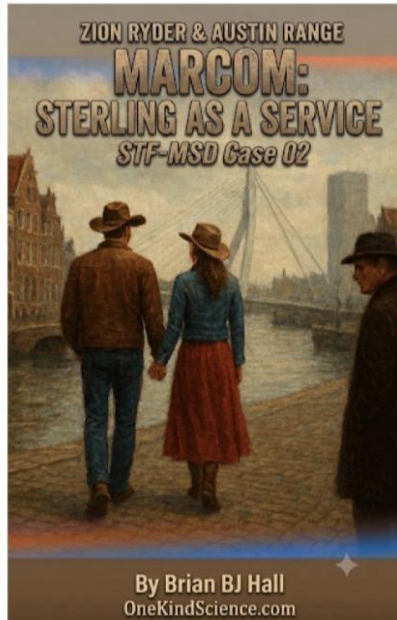
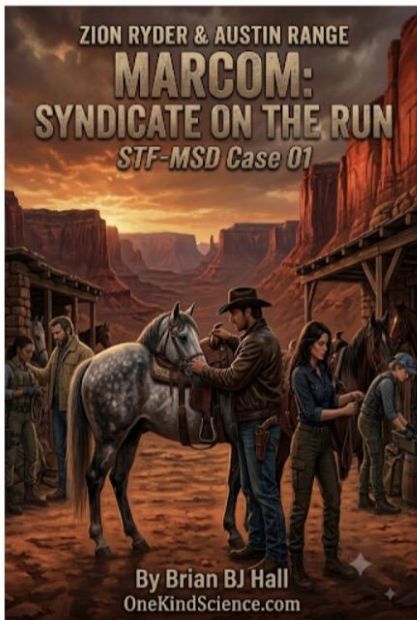
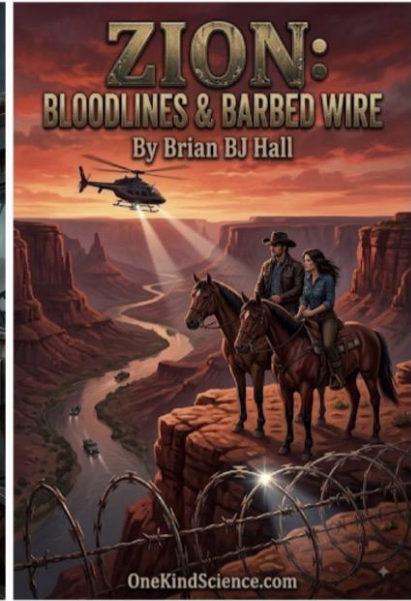
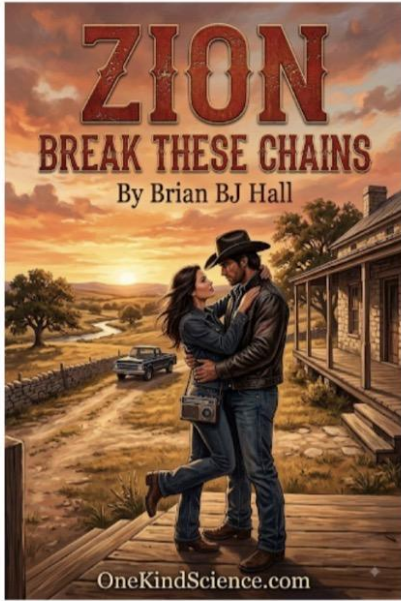
"Then let's read one more page before we sleep," she said softly. "Same page. Together. Like always."

Zion pressed a slow kiss into her hair, and for a long while, the only sound on the porch was the quiet turning of paper, and the mountain wind moving soft through the pines — the war still waiting, patient and certain, somewhere south of here, but not tonight. Tonight belonged to the two of them, exactly the way it always eventually did, no matter how far the next fight was already calling from.

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FIN

Zion Ryder & Austin Rsnge return in MARCOM CASE 04: THE SWITCHBOARD STRATEGY



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Zion Ryder & Austin Range MARCOM: The C.A.S.H. Aqueduct STF-MSD Case 03 By Brian BJ Hall

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