

# THE DEVILS ABOVE

You'll stain your hands.  
But you can't go back,  
you can't opt out.

VIDYA CHAN



# Chapter 1

**A**nother night, another job. Another victim. They were leaning against a filthy brick wall, staring expectantly at the narrow, claustrophobic alley before them. Everywhere was dim, with only a couple of faint street lights flickering in the distance.

“She’s late,” Tripp said, his voice thick with impatience.

“Aren’t they always?” Adelaide replied, tucking a strand of wavy, brown hair behind her ears to reveal her beloved silver butterfly earrings, crafted to fit seamlessly with her double piercings. Their informant, Natalia Burns, had estimated that their target would walk past Crescent Street at half

past eleven, yet they still found themselves bracing against another gush of merciless wind as the clock struck midnight in the distance.

“She’s different,” Tripp told Adelaide.

“I know,” Adelaide said sympathetically. Whenever they drove to remote parts of town with pistols buried securely in their pockets, it was always professional. Shoot their target, rescue them, do whatever they were told to do, whatever needed to be done, all so that they could fulfil their duties as Oleander’s assassins. But tonight was different. Tonight, it was personal, for they were after none other than Madison Harper, the woman responsible for the arrest of Tripp’s father.

Personal to Tripp, at least. To their mentor, Grum, everything was business.

“Madison Harper is a highly skilled and dangerous Government agent,” Natalia had told them back in her office in Oleander. “Or shall I say, was. She was disavowed five months ago for being too pushy and overbearing. Always liked to take matters into her own hands, not a big fan of orders. Paired with her skill set and network of allies within the government, she has become too much of a threat.”

“So the government ordered her assassination?”

Adelaide had asked.

“Harper also stole classified documents before leaving the Government,” Natalia added. “There may have been some exaggeration here and there, but considering Harper’s knowledge and cunning, the intelligence she had claimed to herself as a little farewell gift isn’t something the Government could afford to lose.”

“Why not capture her instead?” Tripp pointed out. “Force her to give up the documents. If she’s as clever as you say she is, they may never find the documents without her confession.”

“Don’t you think they’ve tried?”

“Is this why you’re handing us this job?” Adelaide had asked as she reached over the table for Harper’s case file.

Natalia swallowed uneasily. “There’s actually another reason,” she said, as she leaned forward, snatching the case file from Adelaide’s hands before handing it to Tripp. “Tripp might want to make the kill. Madison Harper was the Government agent who tipped the local police off about Damian’s whereabouts. If it weren’t for Harper and her alleged sense of righteousness, your father might still be here with us, Tripp. She turned against our deal. She sold

us out.”

“Pistol ready?” Adelaide asked Tripp now.

“Been ready for the past hour and a half. Do you think Natalia got it wrong?”

“Natalia’s seldom wrong.”

“But what if Harper tricked Natalia into thinking that she would show up on Crescent Street? For all we know, Harper could be on the other side of the world right now. Quite literally, with her assets and everything.”

“Now you’re just paranoid,” Adelaide smirked. “Do you know you speak in a higher pitch when you’re nervous? Like a mouse.”

“You know I can shoot you here and now, right?” Tripp snapped as his lips twisted into a grin. “And blame it on Harper. No one would suspect a thing.”

“But if you were right and Natalia finds out that Harper’s indeed on the other side of the world, you’re pretty much done for.”

“You speak as if you’ll be missed.”

Adelaide laughed, but her smile soon fell as she slid her hand into the pocket of her coat.

“What?” Tripp whispered.

“Across the road. A man’s looking right at us.”

“Five foot nine, I’d say,” he observed. “Forties? Fifties? No visible weapon.”

“Doesn’t appear drunk either,” Adelaide murmured, as she struggled to make out more than just the man’s silhouette under the dim lights. “Black shirt and trousers. A tie. Businessman? Bodyguard?”

“Harper?” Tripp frowned. “Someone she sent?”

“Hard to tell.”

“I say we abort. Walk towards the car now. I’ll cover you —”

“What? No! You need to kill Harper.” Adelaide hissed, shooting him a brief glance. They would be facing more than Grum’s criticism if they left now. The man could be no one. This was important to Tripp.

“Something feels off, Adelaide,” Tripp muttered, his gaze fixed on the man in the distance.

Adelaide pressed her lips together, clenching her pistol until her hand ached. What didn’t Tripp understand? This job was important. She was no stranger to Tripp’s paranoia — every job had to go perfectly in his eyes, or they might as well just declare themselves doomed. Was it unusual for a man to stand in the unforgiving cold at this hour of the day? Without a doubt. But until they could see a weapon,

the man wasn't a cause for concern. Sometimes she wondered how Tripp and she had survived as partners in crime for so long. She just couldn't understand what went on in the stubborn mind of his. They were abandoning their job for absolutely nothing at all, nothing but Tripp's apparent instincts.

But then, it was also Tripp's instincts that kept them alive for so long. If they were having this conversation out loud, Adelaide would argue that she had saved him way more times than he could ever repay her. Yet there is no denying that Tripp's slender tolerance when it came to perfection meant that he could pick up anything amiss before it was too late. There was always another chance.

Frustrated by her defeat, Adelaide turned to leave, only to see —

"Get down!" she shouted, pushing Tripp out of the way as she quickly rolled aside on the ground.

A bullet hit the wall right behind where Adelaide had been standing.

"What was that?" Tripp gasped, stumbling, when he saw a second man of a similar build and same attire standing at the other end of the alley, smoke trailing off the pistol in his hand.

The man's finger closed around the trigger again.

Tripp drew in a sharp breath. Shoot back? There wasn't enough time. Jump out of the way? Still couldn't eliminate the danger thanks to the narrow alley. But what if he —

The deafening sound of a gunshot permeated the air.

The man crumpled to the ground.

"You're welcome," Adelaide said, reloading her pistol.

"I could've done that," Tripp grumbled as he turned around and aimed at the first man, who was now sprinting away.

"Not yet," Adelaide said, seizing Tripp's shoulder. "Go for his legs instead."

Tripp shifted his aim, and the man fell, groaning in pain.

They made their way along the alley, their hurried footsteps heavy against the cobblestones. Adelaide was suddenly confronted by a wave of unease as the man's cold, composed stare, despite his wound, became increasingly glaring given the narrowing distance between them. Could Harper have sent him? It was now plain that they belonged to the underworld, just like them. If Harper sent the men, then she would be more powerful and unpredictable

than Tripp and Adelaide had imagined. But something just didn't sit right.

"Who do you work for?" Adelaide demanded, lifting her pistol.

The man grinned, yet it was not a smile of defeat. "If you think —" he managed through the pain.

Adelaide pulled the trigger, burying another bullet into the man's lower abdomen. "Why were you targeting us?" she asked again, her voice cold and her face expressionless. She couldn't let the man sense her confusion, her fear, or her worry. She needed answers.

"You'll ..." He gasped, "you'll never guess."

Adelaide lifted her pistol again, but it was no use. The man's head hit the floor, his white shirt slowly soaking up crimson as he lay still in his own pool of blood.

"Damn," Adelaide murmured, returning her pistol to her pocket. "Thought he'd be able to take a bullet to the stomach."

"He was never going to spill anything anyway," Tripp said as he glanced around, almost certain that the flickering streetlights were jeering at the ghastly turn of events. "Still want to wait for Harper?"

**W**ith pistols pointed toward Oleander's top assassins, Tripp and Adelaide, at every turn, they must figure out their pursuer's identity. Yet, when you spend your whole life in the underworld, anyone can be your enemy.

Staying alive isn't their sole mission. They are tasked to kill Madison Harper, a highly skilled government agent, and Oleander's fate depends on their success.

Some things should be left unsaid; the past left untouched. But as Harper skilfully dodges their attacks on one end while mysterious people in black close in on the other, can Tripp and Adelaide uncover the truth before it is too late?

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