

THE FIXER:
THE KILLING KIND

A Katerina Mills Novel

By

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Chapter Sample

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8 WEEKS BEFORE CHRISTMAS

Chapter 1

“Again?” Katerina asked as a whipping wind whistled around the parked car. “This is the fourth time.”

“There’s been a delay,” Jasmine said.

A few weeks earlier, Jasmine, MJM Consulting’s “Iron Maiden” gatekeeper, had called late at night. Thomas Gallagher, one of New York’s billionaire one percent, needed an assistant. Except he probably didn’t. Katerina Mills had already learned the first rule of a fixer. *The job is never the job.*

“Does he want a consultant or not?” Kat asked, her mouth overruling her mind. *Careful Katerina. Don’t antagonize. You have to stay in. It’s too dangerous to be on the outside on your own. Not after the last assignment . . .*

“Yes,” Jasmine said. “Any other questions?”

Katerina answered by clicking off the cell phone. Burrowing deeper into her coat, the heavy bangs of her short blond wig brushed her eyebrows as she focused on the apartment building diagonally across the street.

“Bad news?” came a voice behind her.

Katerina didn’t bother turning around. On the floor of the backseat, her current client, Lester Callahan, rearranged himself, kicking the back of Kat’s seat. She sighed.

“I hear you,” Lester said. “It’s tough. People are no good, you know? They give their word, it don’t mean shit.”

Katerina assumed Lester spoke from experience.

A pretty woman, swathed in a fur coat, exited the building and hustled to the corner, her hand in the air to hail a cab.

“Is that her?” Kat asked.

Rustling from the back seat. “Nope.”

Katerina crushed herself further into her coat. She didn’t want the work but she had to keep her hand in this world, to protect herself. *And I need the money.* But instead of a steady windfall of cash, the jobs had been few and far between. Lester needed an item retrieved; but she

didn't know what the item was. From his babbled tale of rambling half-truths, Kat pieced together a picture: Lester had dangerous connections, something had gone wrong, and he needed to disappear. He was about to board a Greyhound bus when he realized he had forgotten something.

"You know it's not easy to get lost."

"So you said," Kat answered.

"Yeah, people don't understand how big their digital footprint is, you know? Take you for instance. You're a young girl. You on social media?"

"No."

"Dating sites? Not that you need one."

"No."

Lester shifted again; Kat's seat lurched forward. She sighed.

"You're smart, you know. There's a lot involved. I hired a professional to help me. Rebel One."

"Yup," Kat said, glossing over the sound of Lester's voice. Am I smart or did it just work out that way? she thought, reflecting on her training by her first boss, shady lawyer and ex-lover, Philip Castle. *Stay away from the computer unless it can't be helped. Never leave a trail.* Katerina realized Lester was still talking.

"It's a stupid name but I didn't say that. I didn't want to hurt the kid's feelings. Anyway, Rebel One can make you disappear. You don't realize you do a thousand things every day and leave clues how to find you: the phone, the credit card, the bank account, your magazine subscription to *Cosmo*...everything."

"I don't read *Cosmo*." *My college transcript. My library card. Could I get away clean if I needed to?*

They sat in silence.

"You have a family?" Kat asked.

"Yeah."

"Yeah? And you're just taking off?"

"It's okay, I made arrangements, you know? I left some cash, told the wife we'd get a condo when I got settled."

“Is that what you told your girlfriend?” Kat mumbled.

“I’m sensing judgment coming from the front seat. I don’t think you’re supposed to do that.”

“Sorry,” Kat said.

As they fell back into silence, Kat’s thoughts turned to her father, William Mills. She had plenty of judgment for him. After walking out on her mother weeks earlier and breezing through the Big Apple with his new bimbo, where was he now? Had he left a digital footprint? Could he be found?

Her father wasn’t the only one to pull a Houdini. Where was Lisa, who had brought Kat into this life as a “fixer”? Where had she vanished to? And then there was Alexander Winter. *If it hadn’t been for him . . .*

She relived the robbery in her mind; Winter taking her by the hand, leading her through the break-in to retrieve the client’s requested item. He had schooled her, protected her, and brought her home safe. Kat realized that not a day passed without her thinking of him. Except for a post-robbery “all clear” text, he had disappeared. *Where is he now?*

A young woman, rock star groupie attractive, wearing leopard Ugg boots and a winter-white fur coat over black pants exited the apartment building.

“Is that her?” Kat asked.

Rustling from the back seat. “Yeah, yeah, that’s her.”

Katerina shook her head. *This anemic, two-bit hustler is hooked up with the jailbait leaving the building.* “Let me guess. You bonded over shared interests.”

“You know, sarcasm is not attractive in a woman. It shows a lack of self-esteem.”

Said the man hiding on the floor of the back seat. “Uh-huh.”

“You got the code, the key, and the phone, right?”

“Yes,” Kat said, her heart racing like she was on the track waiting for the flag to come down. She slipped on her sunglasses, fussed over the wig hiding her long, chestnut-colored hair, and shrugged a large black bag onto her shoulder.

“Call me as soon as you’re in the apartment,” Lester said.

Katerina cracked the car door, checking for oncoming traffic. Getting out, she slammed the door and crossed the street. Punching the numbers on the keypad, she slipped into the building.

Remember, keep your head down. There are cameras everywhere. She made a mental note to change out her coat afterwards. The elevator chimed, the doors opened, and Kat ducked inside.

Getting out on the fifth floor, Kat stole down the hall. Apartment 512. She slipped the key out of her coat pocket, letting herself in. Taking the phone from the bag, she punched in the number. After two rings, Lester picked up.

"I'm here," Kat said. "What am I getting?"

"Go into the bedroom," he said.

Kat entered a room drowning in feminine pinks. "Okay, what?"

"You don't see it?"

"Obviously not," she said. "Is it a bill, a laptop, a deed to the apartment?"

"Go back into the living room."

Katerina retraced her steps and froze in her tracks. A West Highland white terrier stared at her, its head cocked to one side.

Don't bark. For the love of God and all that's holy, do not bark.

"You didn't tell me there was a dog in the apartment," she whispered. *What I wouldn't give for a Snausage right now.*

"Okay, good. You got it."

"I wouldn't say that—wait ... what? I'm here for the dog? You're leaving—and you want the dog?"

"No, no," Lester said. "The dog has a microchip in it. I need the chip."

"Why?"

"Because if the dog is scanned, the chip has my information. They'll find my wife and then, you know—they find me. Digital footprint."

Katerina blew out a mouthful of air. Still staring, the dog sat down.

"The chip is implanted by the right shoulder blade," he said. "It's the size of a grain of rice. It's nothing to take it out."

“I left my veterinary degree in my other purse.” *Moron*. “And what do you suggest I use for a scalpel, a Ginsu knife?”

“If you think that’s best. I’m not really attached to the animal. I don’t think she is either, truthfully. I mean, look, she doesn’t even take it with her when she goes out. I paid a shitload of money for that thing.”

Katerina clamped her eyes shut.

“I was told you agency girls are up for anything. *Anything*. I need the chip. Get the chip.”

Katerina clicked off the phone. She stared at the dog. It raised a paw as a greeting, then lay down on its back, baring its belly for a scratch.

Unbelievable.

Katerina hustled into the car, depositing the bag on the passenger seat. She revved the engine and took off.

“Did you get it?” Lester asked.

“Yup,” Katerina answered.

Katerina dropped Lester Callahan off at the Greyhound bus terminal. Then, she parked the car and sent a text.

Done. W. 42nd. 8th Ave. Thanks

She got out of the car and walked away. The text had gone to Luther, an entrepreneur with his own limousine service. Luther’s clients paid in cash. Luther saw nothing, heard nothing, and asked no questions. Luther had *a lot* of clients. He had gotten the car through Moose, a man Katerina had yet to meet. The car would disappear and turn up somewhere else: different state, different plates, different color. Five thousand of Kat’s take had already gone for payment for the service. Contacts liked to be paid up front. That was a problem; she didn’t get paid until the job was done.

Kat passed the Plaza and entered an elegant, gleaming office building. A few minutes later, she was standing in the empty, dark paneled anteroom of MJM Consultants.

“Come in, Katerina,” she heard Jasmine’s hard-edged voice call out.

With her bag slung over her shoulder, Kat entered the small, immaculate office. Jasmine, wearing her signature black Chanel and pearl teardrop earrings, glanced up from her laptop; she didn't bat an eye at the wig on Kat's head.

"The job is finished," Kat said.

"The client called."

I know. I was there. Right before he got on a bus.

"And then he called back again."

Shit.

"You never showed him the item he wanted retrieved."

Katerina caught the hint of a smirk on Jasmine's lips. *Is this part of the 'probation' test? You are not cheating me out of my money. Think fast, Katerina.*

"The client never said he wanted to see the item. He just said retrieve it. I retrieved it."

Jasmine was about to speak when Kat's bag moved, a sliver of fur peeking through the top. The smirk vanished. "Is that a dog in that bag?"

"You're not a pet person?" Katerina asked.

"Is that the item?"

"It's the item that contains the item."

Opening a desk drawer, Jasmine removed two rubber banded packets of bills. She held them out to Katerina. "Get it out of here."

Katerina took the money, turned on her heel, and left.

Stepping out of the building into the bright, chilly day, she placed a call.

"Whatever it is, it's gonna cost you a lot of money," the raspy voice said through the line.

"Morning, Doc. I need something removed," Kat said. "But the patient isn't human."

The raspy voice broke out into a low guttural laugh.

Katerina watched over the sleeping Westie. A clean-cut man, wearing surgical gloves and a gown, used a feather touch to perform the procedure. He held up the forceps, showing Kat the

tiny chip. Moving to the microwave on the counter, he placed the chip inside, closed the door, and hit a few buttons. Kat watched the plate rotate. A few sparks later, the chip was cooked.

Kat turned to Doc, perched on a stool, his frame struggling under the weight of his bulging stomach. Between wheezes, he puffed on a cigarette.

“Thanks, Doc,” she said.

“Don’t bother. You still have to pay me.”

Kat nodded. *At least he’s honest. This little act of benevolent kindness is about to take another healthy bite of my take-home pay.*

A woman entered the room without knocking. Dressed to the nines, she looked to be in her late sixties, a cross between a gracefully aging Audrey Hepburn and Jackie O., complete with swing coat and pillbox hat.

“Miss Kitty, this is Gertie. She provides pet relocation.”

“Charmed, I’m sure,” Gertie said with a flourish of her hand. “Now darling, time is money. You want a major city or you prefer something rural?”

Thousands of criminals in the city and I get the Dolly Levi of pet theft.

“What do you have?”

“Oh, honey, it’s carte blanche. I always have a waiting list for Westies; very popular breed. Lucky you came along. People are so careful these days. Owners almost never leave them unattended.”

“You steal to order?”

Gertie’s eyes opened wide. “Steal? I beg your pardon,” she said. “Darling, I connect pets with loving families. I provide a service. You think Social Security pays enough to live on? A girl’s gotta get by. I used to be in the garment business—before they moved everything to China—no disrespect.” She gave Kat the once-over. “I can get you a coat at cost. You’d look to die for in a Saint Laurent Chesterfield. You want a coat?”

Kat shook her head. “No thank you. Any location far away from here will be fine.” She wanted to apologize. It wasn’t judgment. Kat didn’t know why, but she never quite felt prepared for the world she found. Even after what she had seen so far, she could be surprised. *Maybe I’m not up for anything. Maybe I just don’t have what it takes.*

The man finished scrubbing at the sink. Drying his hands, he turned to Kat.

“How long have you been a veterinarian?” Kat asked.

The man smiled.

Oh shit. Kat turned to Gertie.

“Meet my nephew,” she said.

The family that steals together . . . that’s one my father missed.

“Still lots to learn, Miss Kitty,” Doc said. “Lots to learn.”

Katerina glanced over at the sleeping dog. Pulling out the packets of money, she counted out fifteen thousand, half of her cut.

A girl’s gotta get by.

She certainly does, Kat thought, watching Gertie and Doc divvy up the cash. And not for the first time, she wondered how she would get by.