

The Hunter

Perfidious

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DEDICATION

For my son. You are my inspiration.
Always be accountable and humble.

The Hunter - Perfidious

“Perfidious” 7
Chapter One 8
Chapter Two 11
Chapter Three..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter Four **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter Five..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter Six **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter Seven **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter Eight **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter Nine **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter Ten **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter Eleven..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter Twelve **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter Thirteen..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter Fourteen..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter Fifteen..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter Sixteen **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter Seventeen..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter Eighteen..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter Nineteen..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter Twenty..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter Twenty-One **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter Twenty-Two..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter Twenty-Three..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter Twenty-Four..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter Twenty-Five **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter Twenty-Six..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter Twenty-Seven **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter Twenty-Eight **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter Twenty-Nine **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter Thirty..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter Thirty-One **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter Thirty-Two..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter Thirty-Three **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Chapter Thirty-Four..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter Thirty-Five **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter Thirty-Six..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter Thirty-Seven..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter Thirty-Eight..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
“Ranald.” **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

The Hunter - Perfidious

“PERFIDIOUS”

adjective

deliberately faithless; treacherous; deceitful.

CHAPTER ONE

Ding, ding, ding. After Aaron taps the small bell on the counter of the hotel, an elderly woman comes out from the door marked “office.” Looking past her, Aaron sees it’s not just an office but where she lives.

“Good evening,” he says, giving her a smile. The elderly woman presses her lips tight, looking him up and down. His six-foot-four, wide, frame takes up most of her small entryway. He is dressed in a dark jacket over a light-colored thermal shirt tucked into faded denim jeans and wears heavy leather boots that leave marks on the floor. He is chewing on what looks like a root, but is a branch of the *Boswellia sacra* tree.

“You look like trouble,” she says as she walks to the counter. “All right, license and credit card.” Aaron looks down at his attire, trying to see what offended her so. Having not showered in two days, he nods with acceptance.

“Look it, but I am not,” he says, trying to evoke a soft response.

“That’s what they all say,” she says, stroking the keys of her keyboard and looking up at the much larger man. “I only got one room. And check out is at ten, no exceptions.” Her eyes continuously check the man over, watching Aaron’s every move, even though he is standing completely still. She focuses on his healing cuts and bruises.

“That’s fine,” Aaron says and hands her what she requested. “Do you always ask for such things?”

“What?”

“The I.D. and credit card. Do you not accept cash?”

“Well, that all depends, big fella,” she says.

“I respect that.” Her lack of fear and attitude does not go unnoticed. *Being in the middle of nowhere, maybe she is used to ruffians,* he thinks to himself.

“Um.” She continues to put in his info. *Something is off.* Aaron can feel that the woman may be as tough as she gives off, but something about her is not natural. Taking the chew stick out of his mouth, he sniffs the

air. The left side of his lip turns upward to a half-smile.

“I’ve fallen behind my brothers. Did they happen to stay here?” he says, putting the chew stick back in his mouth.

“No idea. Nobody looking like you come through here, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“We don’t look all that related,” he says and chuckles as he speaks from the corner of his mouth, holding the chew stick like a cigar. He reaches into his jacket and pulls out a picture. It’s of Aaron and the other Kosmatka brothers all sitting in a row. Seven in total. “Here. Any of these men?” He uses his long fingers to point out the three he is looking for, Vincent, Greg, and Alex. The ones who survived the battle. Chris of course is alive and well. But he wasn’t at the battle. He had been beaten by the Hunter, poisoned by the venom of the blade in the Hunter’s blood. Jesse and Jim had died at the hands of the Hunter, a thought that Aaron is able to ignore, even with their faces shown.

“I couldn’t tell you,” she smirks, focused on Alex within the small picture. Aaron leans away. Taking the frankincense from his mouth, he sniffs the air. Again, he picks up a faint scent only his kind have. But there is something else, metallic in nature. Aaron looks at her, placing his hands on the counter and leaning in on her.

The elderly woman leans back, but stands her ground. “What’s your problem, bub?”

“Where are they?” he growls, sniffing at her.

“Who?”

“I see.” Aaron leans back. Sniffs the air again and pictures the location of the scent. He walks around the small lobby.

“What’re you looking for?” the old woman calls out, moving out from behind the counter and impeding his movement. Aaron pushes past her, sniffing the area and lowering himself to check all the corners. He stops at the door the elderly woman just came out of.

“What’s behind this door?” He knows it’s not his brothers, but something is drawing his attention. And he fears he knows what it is.

“It’s just the office and a little setup for the night shift.”

“Open it.”

“No.”

“Open it,” Aaron repeats himself with a low growl.

“No,” the old woman says defiantly, moving in front of the door.

“When did they leave?”

“Who?”

“Listen. I don’t want to harm you. But . . .” He stops himself. He sniffs the air again, tasting it, smacking his lips together. “He didn’t?” Aaron asks the woman rhetorically. Letting out a sigh, he slams into the door, breaking the lock. He covers his nose instantly, turning from the sight.

The glow of a TV is all that lights the room. The elderly woman comes charging in after him. “Leave my husband alone!” she cries out.

Aaron lets out a low chuckle. “Your husband is dead, lady,” he says as he leaves the room. He stops just outside, his jaw tight, his mind racing with the many implications of the situation he has found himself in.

The woman turns to the small cloth couch. “Henry?” she says, walking to the lifeless body of an elderly man. His face is pale and clawed, his throat torn out. Blood covers the whole area around him. “But he promised me,” the elderly woman cries out, falling to the ground. Aaron checks the air, detecting the smallest hint of Alex. “He is going to change, he’s going to change,” the woman sobs.

Aaron hated seeing the woman's mind being manipulated. He can see that Alex has really perfected his craft. His ability to make mutts has quickened. And, from the looks of the woman, he is doing it without leaving many visible marks. But still, yet. Aaron cannot see why Alex would kill the man and then leave the old woman. Then it dawns on him; Alex was testing, seeing how much he can do to a mutt without them going mad.

A risky move, for anyone making such creatures. It is a fragile art that Alex is not respecting. Aaron himself has never made a mutt, nor does he care to. He had seen too much in his long, yet short life when considering his kind. Aaron focused on other aspects of his kind. Their history and traditions. There are also laws. If word gets out that his clan is killing and leaving bodies to be found, trouble is going to come looking. And it won't take long, before those looking come to Chris's front door. Raising an eyebrow, Aaron smirks, realizing it is *actually a clever tactic*.

Alex hated that the family had to hide its power, but Chris was always the voice of reason. The irony was not lost on Aaron. But even so, he didn't see any reason to believe Alex was doing it on purpose. It was just Alex being Alex.

He was not excusing his brother's action but trying to understand his motives. He has been tracking them, but one thing a good tracker must do, is find the mindset of his chase. Alex was hard for him. His wild nature was so conflicted. The two could not be more opposite.

Amusingly enough, Aaron felt Alex was more like Chris, than anyone else. Even their father. Maybe that was the issue. Alex wanted to be loved by their father so badly, but knew in his heart he was always going to be second fiddle. And with that thought, something comes to Aaron: Alex doesn't need to be in control of the pack; he needs to be better than Chris.

Taking a deep breath, he weaves mentally through everything he smells. He sees it all. A timetable of events plays out in his senses. He gives a quick glance to the weeping old woman, before he leaves the front desk reception. Following his senses, he heads outside.

The night air is cold and bitter. The early morning sun will soon be coming up. The dew is heavy, holding the stagnant scents and helping him to map out how things transpired. He walks straight to a room. The curtains are drawn, the door locked. Listening at the door, he knows no one is inside. Eyes closed, he once again takes in the atmosphere. He pictures Alex's smug smile, getting a grunt out of Aaron. He continues to focus on what the scents are telling him. Controlled and focused, he finds it. Vincent, then Greg. Greg is still badly hurt. Vincent is carrying him.

"They won't change?" he says under his breath. Nodding his head, a sinister grin on his face, Aaron kicks the door in, splintering it to pieces. Looking around he sees everything he had envisioned. The two beds, one messed with blood stains. He runs his fingers along the fabric, tasting them, making sure the blood belongs to whom he thought: Greg.

A sense of calm comes over him. He had been worrying that he would not catch up to them, after having to go back to Los Angeles to clean up the mess, dealing with the body of Melisa's brother and working out a way to hide the truth from the local police. It was a skill that all of his kind have. At a young age, they are taught to hide who they are and what they do. But here, Alex is ignoring that rule.

Aaron is proud of his tracking abilities but worried he has lost too much time. It has been six days since Las Vegas. But now he is on their tail; Alex allowed them to stay in the hotel too long. "Soon, little brother," he whispers. Aaron gets up and heads back outside. He follows the scents, focusing on that of Vincent carrying the much weaker Greg to a car. He kneels to the ground, running his fingers where a tire had rested.

Bringing his hand to his nose, he closes his eyes, taking in all the information the scent can give. He tastes the scent with his tongue, confirming his trace. "Only a day behind," he murmurs, and smiles widely. *I have you.*

The sound of the weeping old woman gets his attention. Looking around the motel, he notices two cars are parked, while all lights in the rooms are off. Aaron stands, again taking in the environment. He sighs in relief. The wrenching smell of death is only within the office.

Aaron walks back in his slow steady strut, putting his chew branch back into his mouth. Everything he needed to find, he has. He goes behind the counter and looks for anything to give him any extra information about his brothers. The CCTV system is broken, and the computer that the woman was typing into was broken too. Looking back at her, he feels bad. Her back shows signs that she too has been bitten. He shakes his head. Looking around the office, he finds the small fire alarm trigger. But before he can set fire to the place, he must do one last regrettable thing. He walks up behind the broken old woman. "I'm sorry for your loss," he says and closes the door behind him.

CHAPTER TWO

"Wake up," Alex calls out. He stands, looking at himself in the small mirror next to the bathroom. He is showered and dressed, his hair perfectly styled in a faux hawk curl. He uses foundation make-up to cover his bruises. He tries concealing his scabs, but it doesn't work. He looks past himself at his brothers sleeping on a queen-size bed, which is dwarfed by their wide shoulders and long legs, one hanging off the side.

Vincent is the first to open his eyes. Hyphema blooms on his right eye between the cornea and iris, the dark blood covering his eye's naturally blue color, making it look almost brown, giving him a heterochromic look, not uncommon among his kind. He rises and gives a wide stretch. He turns to check on Greg, placing his hand on his shoulder. Greg grunts and growls, not wanting to wake yet. "He needs more time, Alex," Vincent says, his baritone voice heavy and scratchy. His long red hair is tangled and greasy.

"Fuck that. Get up, Greg, we got to hit the road. The sun is almost up," Alex adds.

"You are pushing him too hard. Let him change, then this would be not a concern."

“Yeah, and let the Hunter hear that. You kidding me?” Alex laughs and heads to the door. Passing them, he stops at the door. “Look. We got to keep moving, okay?”

“Why the hurry? We don’t know the Hunter is after us,” Vincent adds, moving and causing the struggling springs to squeak from the weight.

“He probably isn’t.”

“Then why the hurry?”

“Aaron is closing in.”

“How do you know this?”

“Call it a hunch.”

“Hunch?” Vincent looks at Greg, who is starting to get up.

“I need to change,” Greg says with an effort. Sweat beads on his forehead. His eyes are swollen, one completely closed, his face unrecognizable. One arm, which he holds tight to his body, is wrapped in a makeshift sling, while his jaw is held closed with a towel tied at the top of his head.

Vincent gets up and walks into the bathroom, grabs a washcloth and wets it with cold water. He comes back, water dripping to the floor, leaving a trail on the dingy old carpet. As he passes Alex to tend to Greg, he gives his brother a look. Vincent squats to be at eye level with Greg. His broad shoulders are almost as wide as the bed is long. In the window behind him, a glow surrounds the drawn curtains. Placing the cold wet washcloth on Greg’s forehead, he turns to look at Alex, waiting for permission.

Alex flexes his jaw and runs his tongue along his teeth.

“Yes. Of course.” Vincent finally gives permission, not waiting for Alex anymore.

“No,” Alex states.

“But he needs to.” Vincent stands up quickly, his frame blocking the window behind him. Alex flinches, then stands firm.

“I said no,” Alex repeats. Vincent lowers his head; his red beard flares out against his neck and shirt. He walks up to Alex, who turns to square up to him. “He needs to man up. I’m hurt, you’re hurt, we’re all hurt. How many times do I have to remind you? The fucking Hunter is out there. Shit, maybe even Aaron is out there right now, listening for a roar or howl? Come on bro, use your head,” Alex says, poking his own head with his two fingers.

“But . . .” Vincent looks to Greg.

“No buts,” he says, spit flying from his mouth. “You fucks need to do as told. Look.” He opens the curtains, blasting the room with sun. “The sun is already up.” He shakes his head, looking past Vincent at Greg. “You got two hours. I don’t get why he’s taking so long to heal anyways, geez . . .” He waves his hand at Greg.

“What am I supposed to do with that kind of time? He’s hurt.”

“Do what we do. Heal. And if he needs to heal faster, maybe you should call on our ancestors and learn how to help him heal without changing.” He turns around shaking his head and grabs the door knob. “The Hunter is still out there. You think he isn’t waiting to hear one of us change?”

“We don’t know that,” Vincent rumbles.

“Then go outside, find out.” Alex points to the window, tapping his foot on the floor four times. Vincent rolls his eyes and shakes his head. “As I thought.” Alex looks at Greg. “God, you know Aaron would have a way.”

“Pardon?” Vincent snarls and grabs Alex, slamming him into the wall. The small hanging lamp falls to

the ground from the impact. Alex swiftly pulls out the blade he had hidden in a small makeshift holder, placing the blade's edge to Vincent's throat. Greg leans up in bed, wanting to intervene, but he is too weak.

"What?" Alex screams. "What you going to do?" he warns. Vincent's eyes move back and forth from Alex's eyes and his hand holding the blade to his throat. He slowly lowers Alex, releasing him. "Yeah, that's what I thought." Alex straightens his shirt. "You guys need to learn quick who's in charge."

Greg lies back in the bed, his eyes on those of Vincent, who is looking back at him. "What is the plan then?" Vincent asks softly, without looking at Alex.

"Head east."

"Then?" Vincent turns back to Alex.

"Just relax. I got a plan." Alex smiles, puts the blade in a sleeve he'd made, and hides it behind his back while tucking it into his jeans. "Now get some rest. We leave in two hours." He walks to the door. Checking through the window first, he opens the door, allowing the bright sunlight to wash over the room.

Once outside, Alex leans against the wall. He rubs his neck where Vincent grabbed him. He closes his eyes, listening for his brothers, wanting to know what they may be talking about, but it is quiet in the room. Peeking in through the window, he watches Vincent tending to Greg.

Alex smiles and heads down the outside hallway to the stairs. He saw a small dive bar when they arrived. The hours said it opened at seven. Looking at his watch, he only has to wait ten minutes. Since he has the blade that the Hunter fears, he knows they are in no danger of being followed by that enemy, as it's the blade that his father helped use to put the Hunter to sleep. Aaron, on the other hand, was closing in. But Alex isn't worried. Just like with Vincent, he would be able to establish his dominance over him easily.

Walking across the mostly empty parking lot, he looks around marking the cars, seeing if any will suit his purposes. Just a few old trucks sit in front of the bar, none big enough for the brothers. The desert air is brisk but not bothersome. The sun is bright, but he likes it. The feeling of the sun is rejuvenating. The sky above is clear, and the smell is different than his home. Everything about the area is different than home. Los Angeles is a busy city and here he is in a small town, with a name he doesn't even know; things are peaceful.

Finding a car will be tough but not impossible. The manager of the hotel had a minivan. He walks up to the car they arrived in and kicks the door. Victor pops up, having slept in the car's driver's seat, as Alex ordered. Quick to turn the key, he rolls the window down and greets his master. He lowers his head, waiting for Alex's hand. Alex runs his fingers through his hair with a certain tenderness.

"Go check that minivan. It may be a good way to travel. Greg is all fucked up still. It will be nice to let him stretch out, don't you think?"

"Of course. Do I steal it?"

"Not yet. Just see if you notice any oil leaks and such. Need to make sure Aaron can't track it too easily."

"As you wish."

"When you're done, go get them some food. Take out some more money from that account."

"Yes," he says, bowing his head in submission. Alex rewards his mutt with a smile and leaves. Looking out at the minivan, his smile widens. He knows it will be nice for Greg. *Give enough space to stretch out while he heals. He really took a beating from the Hunter*, he thinks to himself. Worse than he or Vin. The fight is still fresh on his mind.

It was one thing to fight the Hunter. But to have to fight him with Aaron on his side . . . Alex felt ill thinking about it. The betrayal of Aaron and Chris was hard to swallow. And for Aaron to stand watch as Chris's mate killed their father. A mortal woman. Chris's mortal mate. Alex's heart starts to race at the

thought. He tries not to think about his father. But he can't help missing him. Clenching his fists tight, he rolls his shoulders. The image of Melisa stabbing the blade in his father's chest keeps playing out.

Holding the blade, he looks at the details. He stops thinking about his father's last moments and starts to think about all the times they spent together. Ironic, since one thing his father always pointed out was, once you die, that's it. You're gone. Alex knew what he meant. He knew that once you left this plane, you would be forgotten. Just like all the others who have died before. He couldn't even remember what his father's dad's name was, nor a time he talked about him.

The bar is open by the time he reaches it. When he walks into the main room, it takes a moment for his eyes to adjust. It is dark, dingy, and smells of mold. Alex looks around. There are three men, two at the bar already and one working it. All elderly. The patrons have the look of many hard days in the sun and drinking when not working, with leathery skin. Hats that have been worn for way too long. Cowboy boots, worn down from real usage.

With a smile, Alex walks up to the bar and takes a seat. The men all look at him, giving him a once over, checking out his reddish-brown leather shoes, dark denim jeans with custom-made rips in them, and a tucked-in tee, but only the front to show off his belt buckle. The men just chuckle at one another and return to their drinks.

The bartender walks up to Alex. "What can I get you?" he asks while wiping the area in front of Alex. The rag smells sour, making the bar top worse than before he tried to clean it.

"What kind of vodka do you have?" Alex asks with an open face. The bartender pulls out a large bottle that reads "VODKA" in bold letters. "Wonderful," Alex states. "Any others?"

"No sir," the old bartender says. He looks Alex's face over, seeing all the contusions and scabbed cuts.

"Great. I'll have that then." Alex winks, then looks to the two patrons and nods. The men have been watching, waiting to see what he orders. The bartender places a shot glass in front of Alex and pours the clear liquid, pushes it toward him and puts the bottle away. Alex grabs the glass and lifts it. "*Na zdrowie!*" he hollers, toasting in Polish, gesturing toward the men with a head tilt and slings the drink down his throat.

The alcohol is sharp and burns. Alex coughs, when the fumes leave his throat. The three men all laugh at him, and Alex responds in kind. "Oh my god. That is horrible." He continues to cough.

"You are brave, kid," one of the patrons calls out.

"Give him something better, Chuck," the other yells, laughing to the bartender.

"Like what? That's the only vodka we got," he hollers back. Having the three old men hollering at each other with disdain, yet friendship, gives Alex a level of comfort. He thinks of his father and the time they spent together. The men debate what to give Alex, making him feel like they are trying to look out for him.

"You like whiskey?" the bartender asks.

"Not really. But I will try it," Alex says, responding to their attention. "What are you guys drinking?"

"Just some piss beer," the first patron calls.

"Hey. You ordered it," the bartender volleys, laughing.

"Let me buy you guys some drinks. Have a shot with me. I've had a hell of a few days."

"Shit, boy. You buy us drinks, we'll listen to all your belly-aching," the first patron calls back. All the men laugh together. Alex, for the first time in almost a week, feels happy.

"Let us have the most expensive thing you got here," Alex asks.

"Oh no, boy, no need to get fancy with us. Just get us some bourbon from Kentucky, and we'll be fine," the second patron calls out.

“You heard him,” Alex laughs. “You sure?”

“My boy. When you’ve been drinking as long as we have, you don’t need anything fancy. It all does the same thing,” he says, his eyes crinkling in pleasure.

“Well, all right then.” Alex looks to the bartender. “And one for you too, sir,” Alex says and points to the bartender.

Alex gets up from his stool and walks over to the men and takes one closer to them.

“Shit boy, what happened to your face?” the first patron asks, shaking his head.

“Was in a fight,” Alex states, his eyes tightened, cheeks sunken in. “With my fucking brother. . .”

“Well, that’ll happen,” the second patron adds, lifting his drink and looking up to the heavens. “Lord knows, me and my brother have been in a few scraps ourselves.”

“Hey, family fights happen. I get that. But that son of a bitch brought back up . . .”

“What ya mean?” the first patron asks, looking to his partner next to him then back to Alex. “That ain’t right. Family business is for family business,” he adds.

“That’s how I feel about it. But they—my two brothers, man. They got no loyalty.”

“Well. My suggestion, let it go. Your family. End of story,” the first patron offers.

“You think?” Alex raises his eyebrow.

“Of course. Blood is thicker than water, my boy. Get over it. Take your licks, and then have a drink.”

“You know what? That is a good idea.” He smiles. The bartender drops off the four shot glasses filled to the brim. “You guys have truly given me some fruit for thought,” he says. The three men all laugh.

“You mean, food for thought,” the bartender corrects.

“What?” Alex turns to him, his brow tight.

“What?” The bartender is rattled by the quick change in his customer’s face.

“Did you just correct me?” Alex asks.

“I meant no offense,” the bartender replies. Alex takes the shot, without cheers’ing the men.

“Yeah, I bet you didn’t.” He gets up and heads for the door.

“Hey, you owe me money, kid.”

“Oh, I know,” Alex replies, closing the door and locking it. “I owe you for sure.”