

Maifa Graves Sample

Charlotte Brice

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Introduction and TWs

This book is intended for readers over the age of 18. This book may contain scenes that are unsuitable for some readers.

This is a dark paranormal fantasy and a gay romance novel, including some mild scenes of sex and violence.

It is written in British English, by a British author, and the spelling, terminology and grammar is edited accordingly.

This book is a work of fiction and any similarity to any person living or dead is entirely coincidental. Unless you have offended the author in a past life, in which case your effigy may be brutally murdered within these pages.

This book may contain scenes that are unsuitable for some readers. The darkling characters are based on mafia criminals and are morally dark.

There are scenes of a sexual nature between two men, some which are considered dub-con, due to the relationship dynamics.

This book contains BDSM scenes in which Leon isn't always the best Dom.

Aspen deals with mental health around self harm.

Prologue

Dear Mr John Thomas,
Stop fucking up.

You have been a member of Graves clan for quite a while now, long enough to know our hierarchy system by now, but I shall indulge you one last time.

The darkling clan is built on a pyramid system, where each darkling has one number higher, one equal and two under.

For example, you are a level six. You answer to your level seven, Zeke Adams, who is in charge of you and your counterpart, Ryan Osmond.

You and your counterpart are each responsible for two level five darklings. You have a level six darkling energy blast, fatal to those of a lower ranking to yourself, merely cumulative to higher ranking darklings.

I, on the other hand, am a level nine. Myself and my brother Blake, who holds the other level nine post, are accountable to my father, the only level ten in the clan. I oversee my two number eights, Alex Dawson, and Quinn Norton, who each oversee two number sevens.

There is one level ten, two level nines, four level eights, eight level sevens and so on. I'm sure you get my drift.

Everyone knows their place. Everyone except you.

I expect this situation to rectify immediately, or the consequences will be harsh.

Sincerely

Leon Graves.

Dear Mr Leon Graves.

FUCK OFF

Sincerely,

John Thomas

About Charlotte

Charlotte Brice started writing at the age of thirteen, when her handwriting looked like a drunken spider tried to navigate its way across the page. Practicing her handwriting got a lot more interesting when her gran gave her two Rawhide books, and her imagination took over.

Charlotte is left-handed and can lick her own nose. She lives in England with her husband, and many animals, four of them human. Attack chickens, confused dragons, and moving rocks make up the majority of the menagerie. We can't expect much better from someone who studied fruit flies during her animal science degree and then qualified as a vet.

She remembers those days fondly, when putting her arm up a cow's bottom and socks on emus' heads was her kind of normality. Now her head is filled with tentacles and schizophrenic phoenixes.

Keep up with Charlotte's slightly psychotic menagerie of men and magnificent worlds on her website, or sign up for her newsletter.

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Chapter One

Aspen

It's just like the old days; me, Tarren, Kay, Joe, and Wilton together again. The whole team - well almost. It has been almost a year since we last did anything like this. Not since our ringleader died. But we all need to eat, right? And breathe. This job is definitely to help with the latter. Maybe that's how we justify standing outside someone else's property with half of us in ski masks.

"Ready?" Tarren hisses at me. He's our team leader; the man with the plan. For tonight at least.

My heart is like a coiled spring. 3am and we're ready to hit this place. Tarren lets out the sound of an owl, and a bush rustles to our left as the rest of the team moves forward.

"Fuck this up and we're dead." Tarren tells himself.

"We'll be fine," I assure him, but lying isn't my strength.

This isn't an easy mark, it's a top security darkling warehouse with offices and penthouse residence above. Nothing like the deep end after an eleven-month break.

"Ok, pixie dust at the ready." Tarren signals to me, then signs to the others just behind the farthest bush.

“Fuck off.” Why does he always say that? It’s not pixie dust. “I’m not a pixie.”

“Fairy dust ready?” He teases.

I won’t give him the dignity of a reply. I’m not a fairy.

The security light does its sweep, and we move. Three dark bodies jump at the chain link fence and then Tarren joins them. I play lookout while they make entering the property look damn hard. We’re out of practice for this, so why did the damn Deceiver pick us for this shit? Because no one else would do it. Yes, we’re the best, but we quit after we lost our golden girl leader.

The others are over the fence, and I watch their bodies run to the building wall. I duck down and wait for the security light to do its next sweep and then it’s my turn.

Now.

I move forward, floating up into the air and land gracefully on the other side before joining the others.

“Show off,” Kay calls.

I just grin. My eyes flick across to his dark face. It’s unearthly dark. Someone went a little crazy with the camo paint. I give a small chuckle of embarrassment. At least he remembered.

Still, I’ve been invisible my whole life; avoiding a few cameras now will be no problem.

“Wilton.” Tarren has this excellent ability to keep time. He’s got this heist worked out to the second.

Wilton raises his hands and draws in a breath that doesn’t ever seem to stop. I grab his hand and lock thumbs with Tarren. Wilton steps backwards through the wall, pulling the whole team with him. It’s a clever magic trick, and I’m still not sure how he does it, but I don’t know how I fly so it’s best not to question these things.

We’re inside. Now the real adrenaline starts.

There are no words spoken between us, we know the plan inside and out. There are no cameras in this room, these guys don't expect burglars to just slip through their walls. Wilton is one of a kind. It's so easy to see how Tarren and I ended up with this team of misfits. Who knew back then we'd each have skills so perfect for relieving darklings of precious gems? As my team stumbles their way through the dark, I just float over the furniture.

Mustn't get cocky though, ceiling fans and lights are my enemy up here. I reach the internal door before the team and press my ear to the wood.

We have five minutes from the time the guard walks past, I reckon we just missed him because I'm straining against the wood for ages before his footsteps finally pass us.

"Four minutes, thirty," Tarren mutters.

I'm not sure if that's how long we've waited or how long we've got. Wilton grabs my foot, and we slide through the wooden door.

Now we're in a large room, with a black and white checked floor. It represents a big open space we have to cross, and there are cameras in here, so no more flying. If we get caught on camera, I don't want that ability to work against me. I hate walking though, especially the hunched forward hurrying kind I'm now doing.

There is nowhere to hide here as we creep across the polished marble floor. All we can do is hunker down and freeze as the light of a security guard bobs across the room from left to right before leaving through a far door. Tarren drops his raised hand; our cue to walk-run-crouch across the room as fast and quiet as we can. It's a well-polished floor. Kay's shoes make a squeak with each step he takes. I can feel him blushing through the darkness. Mistakes like that could get us killed. He stops and ducks down to pull the offending items from his feet. It costs us precious seconds. Wilton, Tarren and Joe are

already across the room waiting. I stop with Kay, horribly exposed in the empty room. I grab his first shoe as soon as it's off and shove it in my backpack. Soon as the next shoe's off, we're back to running.

Wilton's waiting for us at the end, Tarren and Joe are already inside. I take Wilton's hand, but before Kay does, Wilton gives his face a slap.

Inside the vault, the red bulb gives all the treasures an eerie glow. We aren't interested in anything around us, just the large gem in the centre.

"Looks like glass," Tarren observes tapping on the security box around it. "Just try it first."

The precious gem sits in a glass box, each pane is about two inches thick. We've heard about this stuff. Impervious glass. Wilton touches the glass. From his frown, he's trying to push through the material, but he's not getting anywhere. Joe grins and puts his hands on the glass box.

We all throw our ear defenders on, but even so, I still feel my ears bleeding as his sonic pulse vibrates around the room. It's so bad, I have to abandon my contact with the ground.

"Wilton, get him out," Tarren calls, his concern for me is touching.

Wilton shakes his head and taps his watch. Guards will be coming soon.

"I'll be fine." I just seem to be most sensitive to '*disturbances in the force*' as Tarren calls it.

Joe quits, making no progress on the box.

I've never been so pleased for anyone to give up, dropping to my knees.

"Right Kay, don't fuck this up." Tarren sounds harsh, but he shows his tender side as his arm slips around my shoulder.

I could so easily love this man, but he doesn't share my views on relationships.

To me, men are great, women are great. As long as we both get off, who cares about the tit to dick ratio. Tarren is definitely a two to one ratio kinda guy. I respect his views, but it still has my cock twitching when he touches me like this.

Kay holds two things that look like sink plungers, pressing them against the glass. Kay is a killer at this. Probably the wrong phrase when we liberate expensive items from real killers for a living, but his skill is worthy of forgiveness for his squeaky shoes. Just a shame I hate it so much when he uses it. Tarren hugs me tight, and Kay does his thing. No one else sees or feels what he does. To me, it's like he turns the room on its head, gives it a shake and ends up with the gem in his hand. I hear vague applause, but I feel like my head has just been shaken around like a snow globe. I'm a little unsteady as I stand up.

"Easy, Aspen, let's get you out of here." Tarren supports me against him, my head on his chest gives me the calming beat of his heart in my ear.

Wilton takes Tarren's hand, his contact with me is enough to get us through the wall. I stiffen up, something more than his heartbeat comes to my attention.

"Guards." I hiss a quiet warning.

Shit. Feels like I'm listening through water, but it isn't just my large ears that tell me the guards are outside. I can feel their presence.

"I knew we didn't just bring the elf for his floaty feet," Wilton grins. Arsehole. I'm not an elf. What is wrong with these guys tonight?

"Ok, they're gone," I sigh with relief.

"Back on the clock," Tarren reminds us.

Wilton winks at me and his hand presses on my shoulder.

Just five minutes to cross the hall with our prize...

Chapter Two

Aspen

We leave the safe nicely locked up as if we'd never been in. Then it's a simple case of retracing our steps, and leaving the way we came in. *Simple* is when things go wrong. It's when we relax and drop our guard.

My heart is pounding as we creep across the large warehouse. It's been too long since I felt this buzz. Breaking in had me wound tighter than a spring but retracing our steps to exit lets me relax enough to feel the thrill.

Kay slips on his socked feet, his hands hit the ground and we all freeze.

My telepathic empathy kicks in. There is something wrong; Kay has a secret. This isn't what it's supposed to be. My telepathy is vague at the best of times, just giving me feelings, and those times involve both me and my target being barefoot at the same time. He knows I can read him like this, but he's still got a mental guard up. He's trying to stop me. This would be easier if I wasn't already pushing my abilities to read for the guards.

Kay looks at me, and his face screams betrayal. This isn't about getting a gem to fence for enough money to clear debts and set up a

nice new future. This is something else. This is for someone else. I wish I could read thoughts better, but all I have is suspicions and an urgency to get out of here. Kay drops his head and moves closer. Maybe he just wants his shoe back so he can break my connection. Instead, he gives me a little shove to the right.

All I sense is danger. There's something below me that I'm... oh no, gotta move. Now.

There's a whizz and a whoosh of air, seconds later I move headfirst into a glass wall.

Bugger.

I hit it so hard, my body rocks back into the tubing behind me. Whatever this is, it's around me on all sides. It's a cylindrical tube and I'm in the middle of it. My feet leave the floor as I fly up, but the tube is sealed at the top against the ceiling. It's the same stuff the gem was in. Shit shit shit.

"Fuck, Aspen!" Tarren turns back to me. His hand touches the opaque panel, only two inches of the reinforced glass between us. "Get him out."

"Shit, don't leave me." I can't hear him through the thick tube, it's soundproofed which is eerie by itself. It's only thanks to the small device in my ear that lets me hear and speak to my friends on the other side. I know what this tubing is. I know how hard it was to get the gem out. No, no, no!

"We won't leave you." His words are laced with lies.

They will leave me, eventually. But they try everything they can think of first.

Wilton presses his hands to the glass, but he can't pass through it.

My attention drops as my feet start to feel damp. An orange liquid pools in the bottom of the tube. It's sticky and makes my feet tingle. This can't be good.

I look at Tarren. "Please don't leave me."

"We won't." His words are more lies than truth now.

Joe tries. His hands touch the tube as far apart as he can get them. The pod encased around me shake and groan, but that's all. It doesn't even make my ears hurt. My fists thump back but if Joe's full power doesn't crack the glass, my hands certainly won't. I am starting to see how hopeless this is.

Kay steps up and I watch him closely, trying to gauge through the thick tubing if he is going to help me or abandon me.

"Kay, get me out, please." I'm cut off from him telepathically, all I have is my voice and my fist banging on the tubing.

Kay nods and places his hands on the tube. For a moment I turn upside down and the world turns red and black. As he turns everything back, my body hits the far wall. Nothing. It didn't work, or he didn't try hard enough.

Time is running out, and if they stay much longer, we'll all be caught. I have to swallow my fear and be the bigger person. I have to let them go.

I press my hand to the glass and look down. The orange liquid is up to my knees now, there is no feeling in my feet. Whatever this stuff is, it's already too late for me.

"You need to go." I bang on the glass.

"I won't leave you." That is an outright lie now. Tarren places his hand on the other side against mine. "I don't want to leave you." That is the truth.

"Please..." I haven't got any words for him. He has to save himself, save the others. My lip quivers, but I refuse to let the tears fall. These men are my family; I've grown up with them since I was thirteen. I can't let them get caught because of me. "Be careful, Tar. Be safe."

The others move back, they know the reality better than Tarren, Kay more so. I wish I could warn them, but confusing words from a man abandoned in a tube of orange slime isn't going to help them now.

"Aspen. I'm so sorry." Tarren sounds closer to tears than I am.

"I'll be ok." I'll drown in orange liquid, but at least he will get out. Slowly he tears his hand away and I watch my four friends leave me behind. I can't stop my tears anymore; I don't even try.

We all knew the risks of taking on this job, we all knew the even greater risks of not taking the job. But to stand here and watch them walk away from me breaks me apart. My hand drops, dipping into the thick fluid, now as high as my hips. I quickly lift my hand out of the substance, but my fingers are already tingling from its effects.

What is this stuff?

We researched our mark, and there was nothing in the reports about orange liquid death. Ok, when it comes to darklings, we don't know everything, but this kinda feels like something worth knowing. Maybe no one else knows because any who have ever seen it are now trapped in one of these damn tubes.

The tingling spreading across my chest has me worrying about a different fate now. What I have come to accept as drowning is beginning to feel like something less permanent. Water would be enough if the intention is to drown in this tube. This is making my body go numb. My knees give out and I sink down into the fluid. Thrashing is short lived as the tingling is replaced by numbness. I need to inhale, but there is nothing around me except thick orange fluid. Even if I could lift my body there's nowhere to go now. Desperate for something, my lungs inhale. As soon as the orange liquid coats my lungs, my body tries to expel it and I choke. I think of nothing else, just my need to free my airways but the numbness is winning. I couldn't even say if this orange

substance has a taste or smell, I know it's almost consumed me though.
I spend my last moments convulsing in this dreadful orange liquid.

Chapter Three

Leon

I wake up to my alarm, finally feeling tired now I have to get up. I'm not one to lie in bed after the alarm, so it's straight up to shower, dress and throw open the curtains. Sunshine greets me with the promise of a good day. If only my fate was guided by the weather. Today is going to be a shit day. The joys of being a level 9 darkling means all the shit stops with me. It's my job to keep the petty low lives in check.

"Good morning Mr Graves." A quivering level 3 moron brings my breakfast in on a trolley.

"Piss off." I wave him from the room. See, sunshine, your pissy rays of joy can't touch me. I have to kill John Thomas today. Well, by kill, I mean publicly ruin and humiliate him and then make him disappear. Forever. Death is too good for him though. I will give him eternity.

I finish dressing and walk to where my breakfast waits on the other side of the apartment. Scrambled eggs. Just how I like them.

Benefits of staying in the apartment over my warehouse means I'm always at work on time, even when I'm late. So today I am not late. I'm just still eating when my first problem of the day walks into my apartment. I can tell it's a big problem when it's my number eight

bringing it to my door. Quinn, one of my best friends and trusted co-worker, can't bring a smile to my face today.

"Got a problem, boss." Quinn calls. My number eight doesn't often have problems. He is huge, like solid built and all power. He has a formidable presence in the way he looks down on people, like he can see what they had for dinner. When he puts on his shades and cocks one eyebrow, even I'd confess my last supper. "Need you to see something downstairs."

Like I didn't see that. No one disturbs my breakfast to tell me there's not a problem. Especially not Quinn. Alex and Quinn are here, but the rest of the clan I've called in to help me are the lower level darklings. We're the only three darklings above a level five today. My reason? I don't need to send a message to the guys I trust. This message is for the lower darklings, a reminder to toe the line or lose their lives.

"And... what is it?" I've no time to delay, and Quinn being here means Alex is down there alone.

"John Thomas will be here in half an hour." Quinn is procrastinating.

"Yes." I'll be down by then.

"We got the tube ready for him last night."

"Jesus, spit it out." He's acting nervous, I don't like it.

"Well, something else crawled in it, so we need to rethink what we're going to do."

Never mind him spitting it out, I nearly lose my breakfast. "What?"

I stand, this is something I have to see for myself. Quinn trots along behind me like a faithful level eight pup. "What the fuck crawled in?"

"We don't know what it is," he mutters.

"Like a mouse, a cat? Bigger?" I need to know more. Am I going to walk in and find a sparrow triggered the pod?

"Uh, bigger. Kinda person sized."

“A person?”

“Sort of.”

Useless twat.

I walk into the large hall where I host my events. Meetings, parties, whatever people want, I host it. I do an excellent job; my security is the best. Nothing crawls into my pods without me noticing.

Except, all the pods have been lifted from the floor. I forgot I had so many. Each one is filled with the darklings I stepped on to get where I am today. Except one. One prepared for John Fucking Thomas. That thing inside may be a person, but certainly not a darkling.

“What is it?” I call.

There are enough darklings ogling the fucking thing. My voice pushes them all aside.

Well, it’s a person all right. Arms. Legs. Head. But it isn’t a person. The thickness of the glass makes it hard to tell details beyond basic shape. It is dressed in black, facing away from my vault. It should make my blood boil, but instead, it ignites my curiosity.

“Elf?” I question.

“No idea Sir.” Alex is the only one who dares to speak to me. At level eight, he should know fucking better.

“Flush it out. Get it ready for John Thomas. Come on. Get a fucking move on.”

“If it’s human, it will die.” Alex reminds me.

I know about the preserving fluid. Keeps my victims alive, but removing them, well that’s a far trickier process. It costs a lot of money to buy a loved one back from me.

“Don’t give a shit,” I call turning away. “Get me into the vault.”

“The vault?” Alex trots after me with the key.

“Little fucker is facing away from the vault, as in, *it* was leaving, I want to know what *it* took.”

“We are scouring the surveillance cameras, but so far, nothing.” Alex turns the key in the lock. “For someone to get in, open the vault and be on their way out...”

“And yet there *it* is.” I bend forward, offering my eye up to the retinal scanner.

Alex pulls the door open, and I sigh with relief as I see the contents exactly as I left them. Except...

It’s not exactly as I left it. My ruby red gem is gone from inside its box. “Get me Donte.”

That fucker made me the box swearing on his life that there was no way of getting it out. Ever. And yet, it’s gone.

“Sort it the fuck out.” I walk away from Alex. I didn’t get to level 9 by sorting my own shit out.

I walk back to see the fluid being drained from the tube. Its half drained and the creature inside has slumped against the glass. It’s still no easier to see what it is.

I stand motionless as the final few inches of fluid drain from the tube. Everyone bustles around me; we don’t have long to get this place reset for John Thomas. My mind should be racing with excuses, a backup plan in case we’re not ready, but I’m more interested in who the fuck thinks they can come in here and steal my stuff.

The tube shoots back down into the floor, and the body of my burglar spills out in a puddle of orange.

Fuck.

He’s beautiful.

I’ve never seen a creature shimmer quite like that. He’s male, he looks human, but the preserving jelly is doing strange things to his skin. He has pointed ears like an elf, long gangly limbs, but he isn’t an elf. Something similar.

“Times marching,” Alex calls, spurring the clean-up crew.

Two men grab the unconscious trespasser by his arms and drag him off. The priority now is getting this place ready for my meeting.

“The car’s here,” Quinn’s voice calls out.

I draw in a deep breath, turn from the remnants of the mess behind me and slap on my game face.

“Is the tube good to go?”

“Quick reset and then it will.” Quinn gives a shrug.

I glare at him until he amends his answer.

“Yes, Leon.”

Right, plan A is a go.

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