

Fatal Moon

By L. E. Perry

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CHAPTER 1 – THE JOB OFFER

"Is that a real fire?" a fleshy lady in hot pink shorts asked the man next to her.

"Of course it's real. All that metal's hiding the gas pipes that feed it," he huffed, sweating in the heat.

Jordan tightened his lips, resisting the urge to correct the tourists with a few choice words, as he hammered the glowing, red steel of the sword blade. A dark-skinned, remarkably muscular young man who, at twenty-four, appeared to be in his thirties, he inherited his Southern Italian grandfather's nose and cheekbones, his Middle Eastern grandmother's skin tone, dark eyes, and eyebrows, but he bore little evidence of his Scottish mother's influence. He wore a sleeveless, homespun cotton shirt to cover his back and chest, over which he had a leather apron to protect his body from the scorching hot metal he maneuvered as he shaped the claymore he was tasked with constructing. Acting as a living museum piece for the tourists who paid for the privilege to see what life was like in medieval times wasn't the ideal position for Jordan. As a "master," he was given the contracts from the weapons guild which sold authentically crafted blades to medieval enthusiasts, which he enjoyed, but it came with the meaningless tedium of answering questions about the blacksmithing process from the daily crowds.

Jordan swung the sword around to thrust it back onto the anvil. The blade flew a little too close to the polycarbonate shield, and the crowd gasped and moved

back. He wasn't allowed to voice his displeasure with the crowd's inane chatter, which came to him through a speaker system so he could respond to their ridiculous inquiries. *At least the tourists aren't accusing me of being an audio-animatronic figure*, he thought. There were those who couldn't believe anyone as big and as steady as he was could be real. Why they believed a European medieval theme village in Los Angeles would order a blacksmith robot with Mediterranean features was beyond him. He resumed striking the blade with the hammer, then turned it over with the tongs and inspected the length, width, thickness, and alignment. One more round of heating and hammering, after this one, should bring it into perfect shape for the forging portion. Then he could quench it, before grinding it down and polishing it. He loved claymores. They were big, solid blades, for fighting men.

The metal was still hot enough that it didn't need more forge time yet. He swung the hammer to shape it, the rhythm mesmerizing... Swing – clang! Swing – clang! Swing – clang! Swing – clang! Gradually, the metal lost the bright red color it needed for alteration. The adult portion of the crowd, having seen enough, moved on to the next exhibit. To his chagrin, several giggling teenage girls remained. They collected around his display like flies. It wasn't so much his looks, as the way his muscles on his five-foot-eleven-inch frame rolled under his shirt, especially in the firelight.

He began weightlifting seriously when he was twelve, in the hopes of being able to defend himself from his father, and athletic authorities had accused him of being on steroids since he was fifteen. He'd been forced to take drug tests on a frequent basis for the wrestling he'd competed in all through high school, hoping to earn a college scholarship. Jordan was a fortress of a man, physically and mentally. Few people understood him when

it came down to it, and he saw no reason to change that since he would have to reveal things about his youth that he felt were better left untold.

Jordan continued muscling the sword into its proper shape as the teens giggled. A deep voice came through the speaker and jarred his rhythm. He lost his grip on the tongs and the steel dropped to the floor. Flames shot up from the ground where it fell and the girls squealed in alarm. It surprised him the first time he learned that steel hot enough to shape was also hot enough to ignite dirt and impurities on concrete, and apparently it surprised them as well. He focused his mind, and swiftly reached for the almost-formed blade with the tongs, fumbling as he tried to grab it. It slipped from the pincer grip, but his next grab succeeded as he dominated the blade and placed it on the anvil with a thunk. The voice that caused the combustion was one he hadn't expected to hear again. The face attached to that voice was pale gold and a touch red from the Southern California sun, burnt with the slightest exposure, unlike Jordan who was a natural copper color over every inch of his body. The visitor's curly, dark-blond hair supported a pair of Tom Ford sunglasses and his pale blue eyes regarded Jordan intently. It was Carl Sanders.

Jordan had been his bodyguard and, as a cover, personal trainer to Carl for a much needed twenty dollars an hour back when they both went to the same magnet high school. Carl was a privileged, British-born addition to Jordan's class, and an odd fit at such a modest educational institution. The school was in Jordan's rough area of town and Carl's family had enough money to make him a target for kidnapping. His Labour party father earned his money fighting for-profit healthcare in the U.S., and his parents had a desire to keep the boy humble and to teach him about the pitfalls of classism, even if it made the daily experience a bit risky for their son.

But that was six years ago. The question was, what was Carl doing here now?

Jordan opened the tongs and grabbed the blade more securely this time, putting it back in the forge, when the door behind him leading into the exhibit opened. His coworker, apprentice, and, lunchtime replacement, had arrived. Jordan pulled the blade out of the forge and set it aside instead. He thought briefly about the competing theme park farther north, where the blacksmith position was entirely blade work. There, he could focus on the craft, which left him alone with his thoughts. The blacksmith demo area at this other place had no polycarbonate shields, but also no speakers, and the distance between blacksmith and crowd made questions difficult to hear. It seemed blissful compared to this human interaction crap.

Jordan stood up and stretched his tired shoulders, to the sound of coos from the gallery. Disdaining to glance their direction, he left through the same back door his replacement had come in. Stopping at the message board down the hall, Jordan tore off the note asking him to meet Carl at the pub across the street. Still no clue as to why he was here. From what Jordan could see, Carl looked quite a bit slimmer than he had been in high school, but some of the weight loss could be attributed to the fact that Carl was a medical student now. He and Carl had discussed their college options back when Jordan had them, but his mother's injury when he was seventeen precluded Jordan from accepting offers, despite all the hours he'd spent studying calculus, chemistry and college-level English. He'd reluctantly turned down athletic scholarships to work full-time instead, sending money home to his mother and younger sister while his mother went through physical rehabilitation, and eventually began to look for ways to retrain herself, since she could no longer work as a maid.

Jordan showered briefly, and changed to loose-cut jeans and a huge short-sleeved shirt, oversized so that it hung loosely over his forty-eight-inch chest. He preferred even looser cut jeans, but few men had his measurements. It was hard enough to find jeans that fit him at all at a price he could afford, especially ones that could be belted in without having to fold the waistband over several times. He left the building and walked toward the pub wishing he could avoid the inevitable, but Carl could be a persistent fool. Jordan wanted to find out what Carl wanted, then nip it in the bud. Carl was part of his past, and Jordan wasn't interested in changing that.

Carl's car, a yellow Jaguar, was parked outside. After six years, Jordan was surprised that Carl had held onto the long-nosed coupe. Entering the pub, Jordan took a swift look around the dimly lit pub to find Carl sitting at a small table in the corner, laughing with the waitress. Still a charismatic son-of-a-bitch.

Carl smiled, rose to his feet and offered his hand when he saw Jordan, who strode over, pulled out a chair and sat down abruptly.

"How did you find me?" Jordan asked, before Carl could say anything. Taken aback, Carl paused for a moment, his hand still in the air. The waitress left swiftly.

"I... need to talk with you," he responded with less of a British accent than Jordan recalled. Carl slowly dropped his hand and sank into his chair.

"That's not an answer, Sanders. I can't even get my magazines delivered when I move. I haven't been in touch with anyone from high school since we graduated. If you can find me, I want to know how," Jordan growled.

Carl paused, almost frowned, then smiled reassuringly. "I had to try pretty hard, actually. I hired a man to find you. He followed your work files. He started with the most recent W-2 we had for you. Fortunately, your last

name is Fontana rather than Smith." Carl grinned as he brought his hands up and clasped them on the table.

There was silence.

"So, I suppose you know my whole friggin' work history, then?"

Carl pursed his lips. "I didn't want to inquire about your work history... Though I must admit that your income was of interest. You're worth a lot more than you bring in, Jordan."

More silence.

"I can make you a rather lucrative offer. I'd appreciate it if you'd listen. You know, of course, that you're under no obligation to accept."

Jordan sat back warily. He wasn't listed in the phone book, and lived in a secure apartment building. Not even all of his "friends" had his number, and he had left strict orders with the people at work not to release any of his contact information to anyone at all. It was no surprise that Carl had been unable to locate him except through his record of employment, but Jordan disapproved of personal business of any sort interfering with his job, even remotely. The thought that Carl had discovered things Jordan considered private, like his income, was infuriating. On the other hand, he was in a position of damage control now.

"I'm listening," Jordan said finally.

Carl relaxed, slightly. "I... would like to take you on again as a... trainer."

Jordan watched Carl's eyes as he spoke. He saw the slightest trace of something: guilt? Fear? "As a personal trainer?" he said slowly, gauging Carl's response carefully.

"At a minimum, actually. I'm ill – not contagious," Carl added quickly as Jordan immediately leaned away from him. "I'm indisposed several times a month. I'm also losing weight. I don't want it publicized. You know how the gossip rags like to follow our family. I just want to

retire to the mountains, to the old cabin, and I need someone to assist me until I've recovered fully."

Jordan shook his head and moved to stand up. "Wasting your time –" he stopped abruptly as Carl put out a hand to grip his wrist. He looked down at Carl's hand balefully, Carl didn't let go, and Jordan finally met his eyes.

"Jordan, I need your help. I've known many people throughout my life, but not many that are absolutely trustworthy. Not many who are as intelligent, as widely skilled, and as health-conscious." He paused in consideration. "I admit, I'm aware of your work history –"

Jordan stood, flexed his muscles and threw off Carl's hand explosively, his lips thinning even past their normal grimness and his eyes narrowing to black slits in his dark face.

Carl stood up and faced him directly. "Just listen for once, damn it," he whispered fiercely. "I came 1500 miles to talk to you. Look, you owe me nothing, but I'd appreciate it if you'd hear me out."

He was serious, then. Jordan realized people were staring at them, and slid back into the chair.

Carl sat down slowly, as the waitress quickly came over to take their order, as if she had been at fault for the tension between the men she was waiting on. Carl kept his eyes on Jordan as he dropped a silver credit card on the table to signal that lunch was on him, to which Jordan nodded briefly. Jordan suggested the pub's specialty, a thick roast beef sandwich with house fries and a soft drink in a pewter mug. For Jordan, they made it cider. He took water on the side as well, and drained it immediately for the waitress to come back and refill at once. Since he started blacksmithing he was going through more than one hundred ounces a day.

"So this is about that training I did for you in high school," Jordan said finally.

"You did well. I gained twenty-five pounds of pure muscle in a single year," Carl reminded him.

"And fell twenty percent short of your potential," Jordan replied, refusing to be flattered.

Carl rolled his eyes expressively. "It's just a game, Jordan. One I never intended to play past high school. I had to concern myself with chemistry and biology."

Jordan took another swallow of water before asking, "So why did you play at all?" His eyes were narrow as always, and calculating.

Carl gave Jordan a self-deprecating smile. "You know my father. He always wanted a strapping boy to play American football, and all he got was me, a tall and relatively slim one. But as long as I was on the team he had something to boast about to the relatives."

"You were pretty damned good for a long-legged blond."

Carl pressed the palms of his hands together and put them against his chin. "I need you to do it again. I've been losing a great deal of weight, and I can't seem to get my diet and workout routine quite right. At best I can maintain, but overall it's still a gradual loss."

Jordan frowned. "Eat more."

Carl shook his head. "It's not at all that simple. I don't need more fat, I need muscle. I can explain more —" Carl looked around the restaurant, "somewhere else."

Jordan paused, then nodded. Carl's face looked too thin. Jordan had learned that face quite well in the three years he'd spent as Carl's trainer and bodyguard. What Carl didn't know was that Jordan did feel indebted to Carl for hiring Jordan in high school. Jordan had been strong even before he started weightlifting when he was a kid, but he had unintentionally run his father out of the house three years later. It had been hard to hide his bulk in huge sweatshirts when his father was still throwing him around periodically, and Jordan's added mass finally became too

obvious when his father ripped Jordan's shirt off his back to whip him one evening. Jordan simply grabbed the man and threw him into a wall, reversing their roles for once. After that, his father left abruptly, but not before he beat Jordan's mother so badly she would never walk again. Out of guilt, and need, Jordan started taking heavy labor jobs to help support his mother and sister while his mother endured years of surgery and physical rehab. If it weren't for Carl, he would have been working ships in Alaska every summer just to survive, leaving his mom and his sister alone and vulnerable.

Carl and Jordan studied each other intently for a while before Carl began to speak again. "I'm willing to work with you on this. I know you have a life here, a steady job and all. I know you aren't the kind of man to throw that away. I'm willing to make it worth your while."

Jordan's ears perked up. "How worth it?"

"Eighty thousand a year."

After a shocked moment, Jordan snorted.

"Plus room and board," Carl added with a hint of desperation.

"Mmm?"

"At the summer house, in The Cascades."

Jordan tilted his head at that. He'd never been to the "cabin" Carl's parents had built up on Stevens Pass, but he had spent as much time as he could afford up in the clean air of The Cascades, hiking narrow forest trails until they broke through the tree lines and exposed sapphire blue mountain lakes. It was country a person could lose themselves in, could forget the grit of the city, become one with the scent of pine, the trail of bird tracks across the snowfields. "And when you're feeling better, I'm jobless, with no unemployment benefits," Jordan answered with contempt.

"I can guarantee you a year of pay."

"A year!" Jordan responded incredulously, then leaned away. "What've you got, anyway?"

A line of tension formed on the bridge of Carl's nose. "Nothing you're going to catch just by being near me. I can guarantee you a year because whatever I have hasn't been documented. I need to research it, and I need you to help me. Even if we get my weight leveled out, I want to have you there for a while, just in case, while I continue my research."

Jordan saw the intensity in Carl's eyes and paused. He needed to know more. "Okay, then; put it all in a PDF. Email it to me by five tonight, I'll write my new email down for you. I'll look at it, and we can talk this weekend. Where are you staying?"

"I'll be at the Beverly Hilton."

Jordan nodded, chewing slowly. He rolled his fries in a napkin to degrease them and looked out the window as he spoke. "Write it all down. Everything you want me to do, and what you're willing to pay me for it. I'll reply with my counter-offer tomorrow, and we can talk Saturday morning. I won't turn you down outright, but I'll tell you what it would take to hire me." He looked back at Carl. "Accept it or reject it, that'll be your choice. But I warn you, if I agree and later on you want me to do anything that you don't write down, you might regret it when I refuse to do it. Get it in now or don't plan on me doing it." Jordan hadn't heard anything about being a bodyguard yet; if he had, he'd have left already. He'd looked out for Carl during school hours, then come home watch over his own mom and sister, and it had made him exhaustingly paranoid, looking over his shoulder and fearing an attack every moment of the day. He never wanted to spend another hour of his life protecting anyone but himself. Never again.

During the rest of the hour, they discussed what they'd done since high school, sticking to safe topics such as

exercise and weather. Aside from Jordan's email address, no personal information was exchanged, particularly on Jordan's part. Jordan had no intention of making his terms acceptable to Carl. Every time he looked at the guy, he remembered his life when he was younger, and with it everything he'd lost in one afternoon. He compared his current meager existence working in an outdated theme park and living in the space under someone's stairs with the college degree and professional career he could have had. Should have had. It wasn't Carl's fault, but still, he didn't want to be reminded of that.

* * *

Jordan finished his morning workout and was just stepping out of the shower Saturday morning when his cell phone rang. The email from Carl had been simple enough: Carl had raised his offer to \$100,000 a year plus benefits, as well as room and board, which was quite substantial. In return, Jordan would be squire/maid/cook/personal trainer and a few other titles to boot, but mostly physical trainer and assistant dietician. To all appearances, Carl wanted a single servant to cater to all his needs, on-call twenty-four hours a day. Jordan was sure there was more to it, but the letter hadn't said anything about bodyguard duties. What was Jordan missing?

He briskly toweled himself dry and threw on a short, thick robe his mother had made for him, then redialed the last number.

"I thought you'd run out on me!" Carl's voice sounded panicky.

"If I hadn't planned to talk to you, I wouldn't have given you the number," Jordan replied, logically. "Did you get my email?"

"Yes, I'm looking at it now," Carl replied.

Jordan paused. He had raised his counteroffer to \$140,000 to force Carl into turning it down. "And you're still willing to talk?"

"I don't think you understand; I haven't got a choice. Have you eaten?"

"Not a full meal. I was working out," Jordan responded.

"Why don't I come by then, and we can talk? If you give me an address, I'll pick you up in, say, half an hour?" Carl's voice sounded strained.

"Right." Puzzled, Jordan reluctantly decided to give him the address and hung up the phone.

Carl's father was a self-made man, and Carl had always been careful with money, after a few indulgences like the car. If Carl accepted the terms Jordan had counter-offered, he would be throwing a lot of that money away, wouldn't he? Jordan began to wonder whether it was still billions or into the trillions that the Sanders were worth by now, and how many more hospitals they'd bought or built to get there. More than that, he wondered what could make Carl so insistent. He didn't want to make this decision between the money he could use to take care of his mom, and the fear that he'd lose what little control he had over his own life. *Shit*, he thought, *now what do I do?*

* * *

Carl's car was waiting in the loading zone when Jordan walked out of the apartment building carrying a notebook with a copy of the terms inside. Jordan checked his watch. He was early. So much for being fashionable. He opened the car door and slid down into the leather bucket seat.

"Which way?" Carl asked, looking at the traffic in the rearview mirror.

"Breakfast or lunch?" Jordan asked.

"Lunch, I suppose," Carl replied slowly.

Jordan thought for a moment. "Take a left at the next light," he said turning to Carl.

Carl looked at him and shook his head, pulling out onto the one-way. "Not likely. Changing four lanes in less than half a block is a bit much. I can go a block past and circle right, can't I?"

Jordan grinned. "So, you do have limits."

"Bloody bastard," Carl said, only half joking, then stopped at the light. Carl put his head down on the steering wheel.

"Tired?" Jordan asked.

Carl nodded, not lifting his head. "I couldn't sleep. You're driving a hard bargain."

"Didn't think 'no' would be such a hard answer," Jordan said.

Carl lifted his head. "'No' would be the easy one. It's 'yes' that I find difficult to swallow."

In a minute, the light turned green, and several people blew their horns at them. Jordan glanced irritably at Carl, who jumped at the cacophony. "Want me to drive?" Jordan asked impatiently.

Carl pulled the car around the corner and nodded, pulling into another loading zone. Jordan walked around to the driver's side and lowered himself into the seat. It was like sinking into a cloud. The stick-shift was right where his hand wanted it to be after he adjusted the seat forward several inches. Carl was one inch taller than Jordan, at six feet, but much of the difference was in Carl's long legs. The clutch was high. Carl's head lolled back against the neck-rest as Jordan pulled out and nearly had to slam on the breaks, not prepared for the surge of power. Carl glanced at him, then closed his eyes. It didn't take Jordan long to get used to how responsive car was. It was like an addiction. He began to think he'd been had, that access to the high-performance car was a ploy to get him

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