

Storyboard-12

“Home sweet home,” I say dejectedly as I lean against the closed door. I should be happy to be home, but what I wanted was for Mister Hunk to ask me to stay, to help; for a repeat of the night, even if it has to include both fights.

I bring up my free hand to my other arm, touch where he grabbed me, press. I wince in pain, but a shudder of pleasure accompanies it. The memory of how he treated me. No one has ever treated me like that; manhandled me like I didn't matter. I thought he'd rip my shoulder open when he bit into it.

Fuck, that was hot.

There's something wrong with me. I know it. The fact he could have killed me in the middle of it, in the middle of the sex, not the fight, turns me on is a clear sign that not everything's well between my ears. He wasn't pretending. I know pretend. I have seen it so often in the eyes of guys who fancy me and think I'm playing when I tell them to hurt me.

Whatever else Ben is, he is deadly.

The temptation to go back, beg, demand, that he treat me like that again is strong. Just showing up after he told me to go will probably ensure a beating. Maybe that would be enough to make him pick me over the mother of his kids.

Yeah, there's definitely something wrong with me.

I force myself away from the door. I have a bag full of travel mugs to put in the dishwasher. I can't keep buying them and leaving the empty ones at the bottom of the passenger well.

I dump the bag's content in the dishwasher, add a capsule of detergent, close it and start it. Stop it, take one out; I'm going to need one while I work. I take two more out, then restart the dishwasher.

I rinse them, fill them, take them to the wine cellar, and wake the computer. I smile as a fully decrypted drive welcomes me. So, it can be good to be home; even without Mister Hunk. Now, I can get to work.

The videos go to one side without looking at them. Right now, I just want them out of the way. I don't care what they have on whom, right now. That's for later; when I need to find out who else I have to punish. I have no doubt that somewhere, there are recordings of someone doing something entirely inappropriate to someone who isn't of drinking age or even voting one.

Once they are all out of the way, I look for the money, and I'm disappointed. No Excel sheet with payment. No payroll program. Not even indications they are handling this through a third party, as stupid as that would have been. Maybe Mister Hunk had the right idea with those ledgers. I should have made a second clone of his phone when he was done.

Next time. If there is one.

Without that, I have to look at JPGs, PNGs, GIF, hard G, anyone who uses a soft J on those deserves to die. It isn't because I want to see a pic of the naughty stuff, but one of the simplest ways to make it more difficult for anyone to find something is to store it as a screen-cap. You can't write a program to search a JPG to tell you if there are billing accounts on it or your list of thugs. I set that one aside. Definitely going to pay them a visit

once this is over. They are going to have a hard time convincing me they don't know what's been going on; if I even let them try.

It'll depend a lot on how I feel at that point. Unless I can find a way to bring Mister Hunk home, I am not going to be in a talkative mood.

Travel mug's empty, so are the other two. I refill them and keep going. I am not going to sleep while kids are being mistreated. Once I have destroyed Liaison and the people behind it, I can sleep.

Another set of refill and I have something interesting among GIFS with strings of numbers for names.

Property holdings.

Now, this I should be able to use. The names are meaningless. The people behind Liaison aren't going to name their property something useful, like 'Breaking of the Will' facility, or 'bedroom training' enterprise. I'm going to have to work out what they do by what I see.

I start by entering the addresses in Google Maps. Thank you, Google. You have no idea how easier you've made my life with your mapping and search engine. Not to say that database of information you don't want anyone to know about. If you're wondering what the Christmas card you've been getting for the last five years is, that is it.

They have a lot of properties. Houses and apartments. I can dismiss most as places they use for illicit meetings. Someone who wants what they offer, but isn't willing to go to a place like Liaison. Those, if they pay enough, get to have the privacy of a house to use. Possibly also assurances they aren't going to be recorded; if they're naïve enough to believe that.

Never underestimate the stupidity of people committing crimes. If they were any smarter, they wouldn't be risking it.

I sip a mug as I watch the last fifteen dots on the map. Those I can't easily dismiss. Not because of what they are, but where they are. Each one of them is within an easy walk of a large concentration of transients.

Two are next to Greyhound transfer points. The six largest rail stations also have them, as do the largest malls. I so can't way for those to die at the hand or E-Retailing. It is way too easy for predators to hunt in those.

Of course, the death of the mall isn't going to kill them too. Like all good predators, they'll adapt, change their behavior, find new hunting grounds. The best predators are experts at adapting.

I should know.

Then there's the airport. This one has two properties close by.

Have someone looking inoffensive at any of those; a grandfatherly old man, or grandmotherly old woman. I don't discriminate in who can be an abuser. Statistics place men at the top, but they do not proclaim women to be innocent. Anyway, whoever they use. They make contact with someone arriving, they'll look for someone young, traveling alone. Strike up a conversation.

Four out of five won't lead to anything. They weren't actually alone, or someone was

expecting them. But it's that fifth one, the person traveling alone. Maybe someone from another country, overwhelmed by all the newness that is the United States. Or a kid on the run, or hoping to greener pastures under the arid Arizona sun.

Whatever their reason for being here. If they are vulnerable, the recruiter will offer shelter at one of those properties, make it seem like everything they could want, and once the door closes behind them, they will cease to exist as a person and become a product. One trained to perform for other people's entertainment and pleasure.

I annotate each address as a place to destroy. I am going to need a lot of C4. Fortunately for me, Dear Old Dad, and his companies, have contact with construction and destructions businesses. So that isn't too hard to get. The volume might be difficult to camouflage.

Once I'm done with those, I realized I missed an address and enter it in Google. It shows up as being away from anything transient-related, Sky Harbor being the closest, but it's too far north of the 202 to be of any use as a place to take someone to. I'm about to delete it as one of the irrelevant houses when I notice it isn't a house.

Why would they own a storage complex? It makes no sense.

No, it does make sense. I just don't know how. If I can figure that out, it might give me the in I need to piece things together.

I hack the city registry, get the name of the company that officially owns the storage complex, hack their computers, and everything looks normal enough. Although I'm not the first person in here. The traces are subtle, but someone got through their firewall. Mister Hunk? He doesn't seem like the kind to be subtle or hack a computer. He was taking pictures of paper ledgers, after all.

I peruse the cameras and that shows me a quiet complex with nothing worth noting.

Still, it bothers me that this is listed as a property among those the people behind Liaison own.

Simple diversification? Maybe it's a thing with the business-minded criminal?

Okay, if it is, do they own businesses? This list only has properties.

Another refill and I'm looking through pictures again until I find a list of businesses they own and see far too many naked pictures of guys who really shouldn't be naked.

So, what do they have here? A few moving companies, professional laundry places—what is it with criminals and laundry places? They know laundering dirty money is a figure of speech, right? It's starting to feel like all I'd need to do is blow up and laundry places in Phoenix and I'd grind all crime to a halt.

Now there's an idea.

I make a note to look into that once this is over.

Catering places. Maybe those customers requesting the houses also request to be fed?

I am done and left with the sense that these are indeed business save criminals with a wide interest. I can find a way to make all of them help with the sex-slavery in some way, but they could just be protecting themselves in case someone like me destroys their criminal empire.

They'd have the legitimate one to fall back on.

Well, if someone other than me was taking them down. I don't plan on leaving them anything they can use to rebuild from. I like to think I'm thorough.

Then I realize that throughout all of them, one's missing. The company that owns the storage complex. Now if that doesn't scream suspicious, I don't know what does.

I go back in and pause. Someone else had been in since I left. No, whoever was in before me came back. He can see the similarity in the way they covered up their trails. I'm cautious as I move through the system this time. There's no telling what they might have left behind. I doubt they know I was in. I am good at covering my tracks, but I also don't know why they came back.

I don't find anything meant to fry my system or that of the company. As far as I can tell, all they did is look. So I do the same, maybe I missed something.

Not that it looks like it. Horrible security, most of the lockers belong to individuals, some to a few companies, none that they already own. There's even one rented by a small airline.

I want to think this is just another way they're diversifying, but if that's the case, why wasn't this company included in the list I found? And why would anyone invest in storage lockers? Those places keep failing and popping back up, right?

Am I driving myself insane over this because whoever is in charge of keeping track of the company forgot to write it down? Is this nothing more than some place they owned before they decided people were more profitable than...

No.

No fucking way.

I cover my tracks out of there. If I'm right, nothing in there will have my answers. I need some place else. One with a view of the complex, but not part of it. Come on, there has to be someone with a camera with a view of outside their business.

Yes, not one, but three.

Oh, security companies, today is a day that I love you.

I write a program to go through the footage and tag every vehicle it saw. That's going to take a while, so I can check something—

Why am I out of coffee? How are my three mugs empty? Better yet, how is my coffee machine out of coffee? I haven't drunk that much of it.

I make some, wait the infinity it takes for it to be done, fill my three mugs, consider it, go upstairs and find a set of matching mugs and screw caps out of the mess in the dishwasher and fill three more. That should be enough.

Okay, so, storage complexes will see a lot of moving vans, and I saw a few of those on the list. I expect the security videos will confirm that. And it makes sense. Who pays attention to those? One parked in front of a house and stuff gets moved in. That's almost considered normal these days. That the stuff happens to be people hidden inside furniture; who'd be able to tell? Better yet, who'd even think to question it?

Now the storage complex makes even more sense, but fuck are the implications scary. I thought I was dealing with a city-wide ring. I'd entertained the thought it might

stretch as far as Tucson, maybe Flagstaff. But there is an airline that owns one locker. That speaks to something a whole lot bigger.

A quick check. Yep, that airline is bonded. So it can cross the border.

Fuck, I might be dealing with something international here.

I amend my program to have to flag only vehicles matching moving trucks owned by the companies listed. And with that, I get some good news. While moving trucks arrive at least once a week, the airline truck only showed up every few months. Two is the minimum from what I get over the last two years of footage. I do love easy, near-infinite, cloud storage. No more having to settle for one week of information to work with. No, I never had to. I'm not that old.

The last pickup was five weeks ago. So I have time.

I breathe easier. Until I remember that there will still be people there, waiting to be picked up. I doubt they are being treated to a five-star vacation while they wait. No, they are being trained. They are being subjected to so much abuse that by the time it's over, they will think that's what a five-star treatment feels like.

Fuck waiting.

I call Mister Hunk as I collect the travel mugs, then give up on juggling them as I get the disconnected message. Smart. He knows his phone is compromised. But fuck, I could use the help. Not to say seeing him again.

Well, it isn't like I've ever had help taking on overwhelming odds before. This will just be business as usual. I'll get coffee on the way, I can't waste the time making it.

Man, I hope I can keep the car on the road. I do not need that as an extra delay.