

Chapter 01

Time's a bitch.

That's the only answer.

It's got to be. Why else am I still stuck at work?

It's Friday, and it's been five minutes to five for the last hour!

Yeah, I know. Me leaving at five doesn't sound right. When's the last time I've left work before midnight? Even on a Friday? Nope, can't think of one either. But that was before I had someone waiting for me.

Come on, time. Move forward.

Okay, maybe waiting is too strong of a word. I mean, he sounded pretty adamant when he told me, again, that he didn't want to have anything to do with me. That was after the pounding, his cock, not fists, he gave me that broke a metal table in his workshop, which came after the pounding, his fists not his cock, that he gave me when he found me next to him on waking up, which came after the best night of sleep I have ever had. And that came after he begged me not to leave him.

You'd think getting beaten, then fucked so hard I have bruises in the shape of his fingers on my hip and the edge of the table on my thighs I'd never want to have anything to do with him again. That man is a monster.

Isn't that a dreamy thought? I have a monster, one who will treat me without care for how fragile I might look, and trust me, next to him I look to be made of crystal ready to break in the softest breeze. But he doesn't care about that and love that about him.

Still not five? Come on, you're killing me here.

He isn't worried about breaking me. No, he doesn't care if he breaks me. I think that even if he won't say it; he likes that I want to be treated like that.

How about I leave early? I mean, with all the overtime I've clocked in, I could get away with it, right? Sure, most of that's been for my own projects, but not all of it. It's not like I could work on my stuff while there were other overachievers in the room with me.

You know, I'm doing it. That way she—

“Mister Crimson.”

—get to call on me. Aw fuck.

I plaster a smile and look at my approaching boss. “Katherine, had a good day? A good week?”

She looks at me suspiciously. Right, I usually call her Kat because it annoys her.

“I was going to ask you the same thing. It seems you've been distracted these last few days.”

“Have I?” Oh man, have I. “I'm pretty sure I did all the work I was supposed to.” I don't let my monster distract me that badly. I mean, I had to jerk off three times today, but—

“You did,” she said in a tone that make that suspicious. “But there are some oddities in your methods.” She hands me a file; paper in this digital age. The Wellington security check I ran on Wednesday.

“I know I did the check of their firewall.” I flip through it without looking. I just want this to be over so I can get on the road.

“I wasn't aware that confirming their firewalls were in good order meant getting through it and into their servers to shuffle files around?” she takes a page I flipped past and puts it on top so I have to pay attention to it.

It's a list of files, all JPEGs and MP4s, in a family folder.

Right. Now I remember. When I got into their servers, I peeked through the security feeds inside the house. Low and behold, what do I see? Mister Wellington smacking around his eldest

daughter. I couldn't hear anything, but one thing I could see was his daughter's laptop screen, and the pictures of scantily clad girls on it. She's sixteen, so I can imagine what her old man was screaming about.

My Dear Old Dad would be so proud of him.

"I'm not sure what I'm looking at," I tell her, scanning the page. It isn't the first time I've been accused of a crime I've committed. The trick isn't to deny, it's to not understand.

"Are you telling me you didn't move those files so anyone in the house could access them?"

What was I expected to do with pictures of her old man having sex with other men? Movies he'd made? I was already in the house's servers. Did anyone think I wouldn't peek? I was going to leave them be. I mean, what a married guy gets up with when his wife isn't looking isn't my problem.

But I really can't stand hypocrisy.

So yeah, Dear Old Dad might not have been all that proud of him.

"Why would I? I mean, yes, I went through their firewalls. I documented that in my report. They weren't keeping it up to the standard the firm demands of our clients. So I went in and looked for any indication someone else had taken advantage of it. I found nothing, which I also documented. Maybe someone left something beforehand?"

Her raised eyebrow tells me I just made a mistake. Only I can't figure out what it is. I stay silent.

"You, Mister Crimson, expect me to believe you missed finding a hidden foreign program in one of our client's servers? you've worked for me for five years now. You don't miss something like that. Unless you want to miss it."

Great, I'm going to be done-in by my work ethic. How's that for irony? I don't miss that last part was a statement, not a question. "They don't have a platinum contract with us, Kat, so I only gave their servers the perusing they are paying for. I went above and beyond even checking that when all I was required to do was report the condition of their firewall." Oh fucking great, it's ten past five. She's making me late. "Now, if you'll excuse me, my shift is over." I grab the closest travel mug and drain it, then head away.

"If I find out you had anything to do with this," she calls after me, "I'm going to make sure you get blacklisted in this industry, Wellington is suing us over this because his wife was the files and took the kids when she left him."

Wow, that was quick. Good for her. She had to have suspected something was going on already. I fill the mug from the coffee machine.

Kat's not serious, she's just making sure the others know we can't get away with doing just whatever we want with information we find as part of our work. Come on, did you think I was the only one with extra-curricular activities here? Please. I might have the most extensive of them, but this is Kat's cyber-security part of her security firm. We're all hackers and we just can't help ourselves.

It's not like she can prove anything, even if she was serious. I am thorough in my work. There are no traces left in the Wellington's servers I didn't want there. Even the spy programs she has in my system will confirm that. It's been mine more than the firm's since day two of me working here.

Mug filled, I head for the stairs.

"Hey, Bart," Karl calls from the security desk as I exit them.

"Hey, Karl," I respond without slowing.

"We still on for later?"

I stop. "Later?" what is he talking about?

"Yeah, I get off in fifteen. Just finishing the reports for my shift. We can get that drink right after."

"Sorry, I can't." That was tonight? "I need to drive to my boyfriend's place and it's a long

drive.” I’m out of the building and on my way to the Malibu.

Yeah, I replaced it. This one’s midnight blue. The other was caught in the destruction of Tristan’s storage locker. I should have parked further away, but he was under attack, so I wasn’t thinking of what might happen to my car.

Maybe I shouldn’t have called Tristan my boyfriend in front of Karl. That’s kind of pretentious on my part, but calling him my monster might have caused a different reaction. All I want is to make sure Karl knows I have someone I’m serious about, so I can’t go have drinks with just anyone.

It isn’t like me and Karl were ever serious. Well, I wasn’t. A year and a half since the one time we had sex should have been enough for him to move on. If he hasn’t, that isn’t my problem.

Thinks change, he’ll understand. I didn’t have someone in my life when I agreed to that drink. Now I do. It was just a drink with a coworker, so it isn’t like it meant anything.

* * * * *

Home sweet home, and then gone. Only there long enough to change, fill enough travel mug to last me to the first city on the way with a good selection of coffee bars, then go.

Naked in the bathroom, I admire the fading bruises among the scars. I wish there was something I could do so they’d remain. Five days is a long time with only the memory of what he did to me. I wish I could build a collection of them.

I’m hard again just at the idea more is to come.

I put a hand against the fading bruise left by his grip on my hips. His hands are so big, just like his cock. Then there’s the one around my left wrist, when he held me against the wall and fucked me hard.

Fuck, I need to stop or I’m going to have to jerk off before I get there, and I want him to make me cum.

I wash quickly and almost lose the battle against my cock, but it’s got to wait. I’ll cum eventually this weekend, that’s for sure, and it will be glorious.

Dried, dressed in comfortable jeans, with a shirt and walking shoes, because I am not walking around his property barefoot if I can help it. Even without all the casing lying around, stones there are sharp enough there’s a real chance of dying of blood loss walking on them. The APX holstered at the small of my back completes my ensemble.

The crate holds a dozen travel mugs, each filled with the nectar of the gods. It fits nicely on the passenger seat of the Mercedes-Benz GLC. It’s new too. After driving along that driveway, I knew I needed something sturdier to make it to his house.

I bought it using the Crimson’s fleet account. They go through so many cars the accountant isn’t going to notice an extra one. My family had to have the most recent of everything. I swear, if one of them was forced to drive a car for more than one year, they could pay off the state’s deficit with the money they’d save. Raffle alone has to change his every month. Can’t be caught with any of the girls he’s seeing on the side in the same car as the others.

At least they donate the cars once they are done with them. Oh, not out of the goodness of their heart—I’m not sure Dear Old Dad has one—but for the tax discount. If not for me, my family wouldn’t do anything for the sake of charity.

I divert money every month from their accounts to LGBT rescue organizations, at-risk youth helplines, and the like.

Since it has to fix the expectations of the Crimsons not to be noticed by the accountant, it’s the full package, with a cooler in the back, and the gas guzzler model. I haven’t gotten the house’s garage set up with electrical. I want to do that just to see what I’ll have to do for it to go unnoticed by the accountants.

It starts without the fanfare I expect from a gas guzzler. I guess the sports utility models don’t feel the need to scream their capabilities the way the pure sports models do. Time to go, the other cars better get out of my way.

Chapter 02

I tighten my hand on the handle and pull. Pectoral muscles protest. A box lights up and I pay attention to it. There is a time to ignore pain, now is not it. This is about healing my injuries, not aggravating them. When my arm shakes, I slowly lower it, and the weights rests with barely any sound on top of the others. I give my arm a few seconds to rest, then pull up again.

Healing never proceeds as fast as I prefer. That is when this box is the most active, demanding that I rush through the exercises in the delusion that it will lead to quicker healing. Because I am already weak and distracted, I must be more careful.

I end the last set with the same slow movement. My shoulder and chest hurt, but it is the pain of pushing their limits, not breaking them. The strain has left me sweating, so I shower.

Under the cool water jet, a box brings memories up, tries to get others to break my control. Bart pressed against me as I wake. His back arched in ecstasy as he bounces on my cock. My hand around his throat and his legs around my waist, fear and pleasure in his eyes as he can't tell if I will stop before he suffocates. He can't tell, because I don't know. I need him and I hate him for it. I want to remove him from my life and I want to protect him from myself.

Only he would hate me for that.

Three days working with him and two days sharing a bed and I have no idea what I want regarding him.

I have never allowed myself to push the young men I've used to sate my needs so far, so close to death. Possibly, if I wasn't compromised by withdrawal, I wouldn't have with Bart either, but I did. And Bart... loved it. He doesn't simply want to be hurt; he craves it. Even as he is about to pass out, believing I hate him enough for not having fled when I screamed at him, his cock is hard, throbbing in time with his pounding heart.

I consider letting him die, as his trashing slows, as his eyes flutter shut. The moment triggers a box that sets off another and the conjunction is dangerous. The power I feel, the fear that triggers.

He is barely conscious as I let go of his throat, flipped him, and shove him against the wall to fuck him. As he becomes more conscious, it is to my whispers of all the ways I will hurt him. All the horrible things he will suffer if he dares come back to my home. That if I see him again, I simply might not have the self-control needed to keep from ending his life.

He cries out, his ass tightening around my cock, and I keep thrusting. The trail of dried cum is still on the wall by the door. When I came, it was hard and long. The things he does to me, that he makes me want to do to him. It is a new box, linked to his and others. It demands to be let loose, and I am tempted to let it.

I should be concerned.

The first prison I was in had many books on psychology in its library. I read all of them once I understood how lacking in personal interaction my upbringing was. There are many sections in many of those books on craving violent sex, the causes, the danger. That Bart wants it speaks to something broken deep within him.

It should concern me.

All I want is to make use of it.

I end the shower to the impotent rattle of the box, trying to elicit a reaction in my body. It may make me crave things, but I remain in control. My body will only react when it serves my purpose. Release isn't something I need when I am home.

The boxes quiet as I dry myself, then walk to my workshop.

On the wall next to the computer are pencil drawings of Bart, his face, his eye, a profile. His hand holding a Tanto, dripping with blood. They are an attempt at purging him from my mind. A failure as I keep gazing at them, remembering the man, the way he killed, the way he moaned.

He will be how I die.

I pull my gaze away and onto a box containing folders. Looked through them for the appropriate one, take it out. The name on it is Frederick Cole. He is a reporter in Las Vegas known for covering anything taking place in the Southwest. I have never met him, but Asyr found me everything I needed to impersonate him, and it is all in this manila envelope.

I insert the USB drive and play the audio file as I read his history, both professional and personal. It is unlikely questions about either will come up, but I will be ready if they do. I speak as I read, matching Frederick's timber and accent. Once I am ready, I run the Voice Over IP program and set it to spoof Frederick's number. Then I call the Phoenix police headquarter.

I navigate the automated system to the media representative. Something is off with the sound. I take out the auditory tester from the drawer, for once I am done with my calls.

"Phoenix Police Media relation," a woman answers. "My name is Victoria. How can I help you?"

"Hey Victoria, this is Fred Cole, from the Vegas Sun. I'm wondering what you can tell me that's new about the explosion at the storage company located at. Give me a min. Where did I put that?"

"Washington and thirty-second?" she provides.

"That's the one, thanks."

"That was last week. There's a press release on our website."

"Read it, but it's been a week. You must have something new. Who did it and why?"

"The investigation is ongoing," she says in a professional tone. "You know I can't say anything else. Once we have something, we'll put out a release and the site will be updated."

"Come on, at least tell me if you have leads? My viewers want to know that things are happening. I don't need details, just generalities. I'll settle for a confirmation that there are new leads."

Her sigh is tired. "We do have leads. There are questions as to what the storage contained."

"And suspects? You have to have someone in mind."

"I can't comment on that and you know it."

Code for 'we have nothing'. Even the hint of a suspect, and it would have been 'we have persons of interest'.

"I hear rumors it wasn't the only storage to be destroyed. Can I get a comment on that? Are they related?"

"No comment."

They have no link. I expected as much. My security measures are designed to remove any trace of my existence. Even the explosive will trace to a known, but currently inactive, criminal. He is inactive because I killed him.

"You're a doll."

I disconnect and set the VoIP to spoof a new number, out of Seattle. There is no envelope for this number. The information on the man I will impersonate I acquired myself, as I used him to help me hunt down a rapist. Those two weeks were fun. Not Bart fun, but fun nonetheless.

The mother found me. She didn't want justice. She tried to get that for her little boy, but they failed him. I was her instrument of vengeance. What she paid me was nowhere near enough for what she wanted, but it was everything she had. A better man would have let her keep it and avenged her little boy, anyway. He was eight when he was raped. The age I was when I was stolen from my mother.

Her instructions were simple. She wanted the man who had done this to suffer as her boy

had. She wanted it to be so that he'd never get his cock up once I was done with him.

It took two days to track him to Seattle and seven to have everything in place for once I captured him. The man I will impersonate was instrumental in my success, not that he knew it. His access is why I caught him so quickly once I was ready.

Kidnappers are not the only ones to find storage lockers practical.

I tied the rapist to a sawhorse and fucked him for five days. He trashed, he cried, he screamed into the ball gag. I didn't care. This wasn't about pleasure, asserting power, or even release. Only the contract. I only stopped once he no longer reacted to what I did.

I moved him to the old tubs I brought in, cut off his cock and balls, which went in a jar of Formaldehyde, then opened his throat. Once he was dead, it was the usual lye treatment for him.

The mother threw up when I handed her the jar. We were in her house, so I didn't care. She didn't ask for detail. She told me to leave.

I call the police department again, then the code for central dispatch.

His voice is clear in my head, his smile, his laughter. His screams of pleasure.

"Dispatch," a tired-sounding man answers.

"Hi, this is Detective Victor Barstone, from the Seattle department. Badge number eight, twenty-two, six, fifty-eight, nine."

"That's an interesting way to give me your number," the man sounds more awake.

"Is it? No one said anything about it before."

Victor loves playing that angle. It puts the other person off balance. Makes them think they're the odd man out for calling him out on it.

"What can I do for you, Detective?"

"Is Detective Moya in? Dylan Moya? I need to talk with him about someone he's dealt with."

"Give me a minute."

The omnipresent muzak of the waiting line, then—

"Moya," a man says, his Hispanic accent audible in the one word.

"Detective Moya, this is Detective Victor Barstone, Seattle PD. I'm hoping you can help me with something.

"Sure thing, Vic. What's up?"

Interesting, there is something in the way Moya enunciates that sounds more educated than he aims to portray. Caltech is my guess.

"I've got this guy in holding, Varban Smagula. Reading his sheet, I came across your name about an assault three years ago. You remember processing him? If not you, anyone can give me details about this guy that didn't make it to the report?"

"Oh, I remember him alright. Wish I could forget him, but.... Well, can't talk about stuff I can't prove, right? Where did you say you were?"

"Seattle."

Moya whistles. "So that's where he's and his buddies are hiding."

"What do you mean?"

"We had a scuffle here last week, only days later, we get wind of him, his boss, and a bunch of thugs drove out of town. They haven't been back. Last report we have of their convoy was in the mountains. They must be really scared if they're all the way to your city." Moya hmms as he types. "Any chance you've come across his boss, Keith Riddle?"

I pause long enough to give the impression I have thought it over. I add typing on the keyboard. "No, the name hasn't crossed our system, why?"

"He's wanted here in relation to that scuffle."

"So he had a record?"

"Nothing recent. It's just questions at this point, although I know he was involved. The fact we never caught him doesn't mean he's clean."

"Okay, you think dropping his name will be enough to get Smagula to open up, or is there

anything more pertinent I can use to get under his skin? I need him to answer my questions.”

Moya hesitates. “What is this about?” there is curiosity in his voice, but also caution.

The conversation to this point supports what Asyr has gathered on the man, but I add caution on my side too, both because Victor would and because I can’t afford to have this officer ask after Victor once we are done.

I lower my voice. “I have two missing girls as of three days ago. No one’s looking at Smagula, yet, but I don’t want to wait until there’s a third one. I need something to rattle him, get him to crack and slip up so I can get to them now when there’s a chance they’re still alive.”

Moya lets out a string of curses in Spanish. The sounds change as he walks, the bullpen receding, then the echo of a hall. A door opens and closes. The only sound is his breathing.

“Okay, here is something you need to know about Smagula. He used to work for an import-export company out of Mexico years ago. His papers claim he’s American, but they don’t stand up to scrutiny. I looked into the guy after I processed him. Talk with colleagues in Mexico and the company he worked for was is owned by Juan Manuel Fernan. Mention that name and see what drops.”

“I’ve never heard of him. What’s the relationship?”

“Fernan’s company is a cover for drug smuggling, at the very least. Smagula used to be tight with him, if what I was told was right. Word is Fernan put him in Riddle’s organization. He used to be important enough to be handed over like that, I think, to ensure Riddle did what he was told.”

“Used to be?”

The silence stretches. “That dust-up I mentioned, the one that sent Riddle and company running. The story down here is that it might have been a reprisal for something. That Riddle bucked his orders and Smagula didn’t do his job. Maybe switched loyalty. The story’s confusing, but whoever was there was clearly sending a message.”

“So this Fernan might still be after Riddle, and Smagula would be scared of him?”

“Maybe.” Moya sighs. “Scare of him, yes, that’s certain. After them? I don’t know. Everyone’s pushing that this was reprisal, and yeah, someone sent a message, but I spoke with the girls that were set free, and what they said about what happened doesn’t line up with Fernan bringing his people back under control. Why would he let them go? Most of them were already broken. Even if Fernan wasn’t into selling sex, they’d be easy money and guys like him don’t turn down easy money.”

“If it isn’t Fernan, then who do you think it is?”

“Heroes?” the sound of his teeth slamming together tells me he tried to bite the word back. “You probably think I’m sick.”

“I’m a cop, Dylan. I can’t say I’m okay with vigilante justice.”

“Yeah, I guess you can’t.” He sounds defeated.

“Doesn’t mean I have to think the same way.” It is something Victor would say. He is a just man. He wouldn’t accept a false story just because it’s convenient. If he was on this case and caught me and Bart, he would arrest us, but he would treat us with respect for Bart freeing those people, not as the mass murderers that we are.

“Look, Vic. Be careful. Riddle’s going to want his people back and he’s dangerous. The storage where the girls were held was Riddle’s. He’s that kind of person. He’s probably the one behind those missing girls, not Smagula.”

“Trust me, Dylan. When I come across this man, he will not go free.”

“Good. I don’t want your city to experience what they created here.”

“We won’t. You have my word that Riddle will never make a home out of Seattle.”

I disconnect and leave a message online for Asyr to go into Moya’s account and alter the number I called from to the one for the phone server they established for me to use. The number of one digit off from Victor’s number, and the answering message is identical.

I set about doing a search on Juan Manuel Fernan, but I’m interrupted but a file from Asyr. I

asked them to look into Bart. This is what they found.

The read is quick, with mentions that they suspect a skilled hacker has sanitized Bart's real history. What stops me first is Bart's name. Alexander Bartholomew Crimson. Why does he hide who he is?

Then I read about who the Crimsons are.

Chapter 03

Great. Maybe I should run him over this time?

The old man stands there, in the middle of the road highlighted by the SUV's powerful headlights in the darkness. Maybe that's his thing, trying to get run over? The SUV's wheel bounces in and out of a hole in the gravel road and I have to slow. It's getting bad enough I don't think even this suspension could take this at normal speeds.

Since I'm already slowing, I come to a stop a few feet from him. It's bad form to run over an old man without knowing if he deserves it first, I mean, other than being an asshole.

His name's Jacoby, he's got to be at least eighty, and I can tell he has military training in how he moves as he walks around to the driver's side. There his this aura of 'I'm going to kick your ass if you cause me trouble' about him. Tristan said Jacoby's nominally in charge of the reservation.

The AC/DC shirt he had on looks brand new and I would love to know he manages it, because something that hold can't be available anymore. Maybe he bought a case at their last concert and he is pulling a new one out when the previous one falls to pieces. He's got to be too old to know what the internet is.

I lower the window. "Nice antique." I nod to the revolver he had a hand on.

"It can still put holes into you, kid." He has a strong voice, for an old guy.

"I wouldn't recommend trying."

He raises a bushy gray eyebrow. "You think I'm afraid of that peashooter?"

"Ouch. That's mean." I grin. "A nine-mil can also put plenty of holes in you, and mine had more bullets than yours. But that's not why it's a bad idea to hurt me."

"You daddy's going to come punish me?"

I roll my eyes. "Dear Old Dad couldn't care more if you hurt me. But Tristan might have something to say about it."

"You think I'm scared of him?"

I bite by my first thought. "I don't think you're afraid of anything," I say instead. "Doesn't mean he won't break you in half for hurting me." I'm stretching. He was drugged and half conscious when he said what he did. And his actions the rest of the weekend didn't exactly make him seem like he's grown attached.

"Tristan said you drive a Camaro," he answers instead of whatever put down he had to be thinking of.

"I've seen what this road does to low riding transmissions. So I traded sideways."

He peers in the darkness that's the road I arrived by. "You bring trouble with you?"

"Only good times, but not for you."

His cold and pale blue eyes fix on me. "You cause us problems, and I don't care how Tristan feels about you. I will end you, kid. Am I making myself clear?"

"Yes, Sir!" I even throw in the salute.

He narrows his eyes at me. "I don't like the way you say that."

I shrug. "Tough to be you then, cause that the most respect someone like you's going to get out of me. I really don't care what you run things here. I'm here to be with Tristan and every minutes you delay me isn't raising the respect I already don't feel. I don't care how much military you've gotten in your in your long life. You don't let me go and I am going to remove you myself. Am I making myself clear?"

"You think you can take me in fight?"

I snort. "I'm not an idiot. I'm going to shoot you from a quarter mile away."

The old man cracks a smile. "I think I see what Tristan likes about you."

"You have no idea what he likes about me." That, I do know he likes. "Look, are you going to shoot me, or can I got on with my weekend? I drove too many hours to waste a minute more with you." I point to the dot of light, higher in the distance. "Any longer and he might come ask what's keeping me." Another stretch. He told me to never come back, but I who am I to listen to that stupid order?"

"Go." He walks back and vanishes in the darkness.

I ease forward and look in the rearview in time to see him give me the finger in the rear lights. It's my turn to crack a smile. No idea why, but I like the old man.

Even at this slow speed, one of the potholes bounces the SUV hard enough my travel mugs fly off the passenger seat. I'm lucky one of them lands in my lap, because this isn't a safe place to go diving after them while in motion. None of the houses close to the trail that tries to pass for a road are visible and I'm shaken left and right.

This thing's is so getting a one star review when I get home. Where's this great suspension that makes it none of the holes in a road can be felt?

The houses are too far for my headlights to show them, and only Tristan has his lights on. Maybe he too knows how much weight his last order had.

None of the cars that got destroyed by this calamity of a road are here. They were already behind Zephyr's house by the time I left on Sunday, hidden under sand colored tarps. Tristan gave me the name, and along with what I saw of the man I found out the CIA wants him dead. I won't tell them where he is. I'm actually okay with what he did to end up on their 'shoot to kill' list. Even in war time, there are some people who don't deserve to be protected.

I also found his website, not under his name, of course. Turns out he turns metal scraps into are that goes for a few thousand a piece. Now I know what's going to happen to those cars.

The garage with Tristan's Chevelle is on this side of the property, with the floodlights next to it, illuminating the road and little of the house. I wonder if he repaired the damage I did to its transmission. I handles stick shift pretty well by the time I got here, but I did a number on it leaving Phoenix.

He probably has. He likes for his things to be in proper working order.

I search the yard. It's all dirt, this is Arizona after all. You only get grass if you spend a lot of money on it. Tristan isn't someone to waste money on anything. In my memory, I see where the dead were, where I put most of them. Before me, there is no evidence of the symphony I created. No blood in the sand, no body parts left lying around.

We spent most of Sunday burying them in the forest. One mass grave, seven feet deep. Sex in a freshly dug grave is surprisingly comfortable. With all that cool dirt, getting pointed raw isn't the same.

I finish the coffee in my lap and ease out of the SUV, clipping the Beretta at my pack before putting on my new jacket. Stylish gray with red highlights. Fully reinforced with Kevlar. Gramps recommended it when I ask for something that could stop high caliber gun fire. He didn't voice his concern, and I love him for that.

I don't think Tristan will shoot me on sight, he only promised to kill me, not shoot me, but I figure a man like him will appreciate the precaution.

I'm on my guard the whole way to the door, waiting for him to explode out of it. Come on, he had to have heard me arrive. The GLC isn't exactly quiet. I don't care how busy with his locks or guns he is. He doesn't miss something like that.

The door is still closed, so I raise my hand to knock, and feel the barrel at the back of my head. The ratcheting of the hammer bring two thoughts colliding together. How the fuck did he sneak up on me? And I should have adjusted my cock when I got out of the car. That hard-on it getting uncomfortable.

He leans in. I feel his breath on my ear. I swallow. "Hey," he whispers, then licks it.

"Hi." My voice shakes with excitement. Will he pull the trigger? Will he pull me to the ground and fuck me? With he demand that I leave? Not that one. I'm here, so he's going to deal with me one way or another.

His hand presses at my back. He isn't pushing, just letting me know it is there. "How was the drive?"

The question is so unexpected I almost miss the hand sliding down. "G—good. Too long."

He nibbles my neck and a moan escapes me. Fuck, I need to adjust myself.

"How long was the drive?" his hand touches my ass and I know what he's doing now with the questions and the nibbling. This is all a distraction for when he'll take me"

"Six—" it slides up slightly. "—hours and twenty minutes." The jacket moves up as his hands goes under it, and I feel the tension on my belt, but instead it being forced down, or ripped off me, the pull us up. "Don't!" I exclaim as I realize what he's doing, but I hear the Beretta land in the sand somewhere as my voice stops echoing.

"I told you never to come back," he whispered sweetly. "That I would hurt you in ways you couldn't imagine if you did. Do you remember?"

I nod. I think I can hear the jeans strain under my cock.

"You still came back." He kissed the side of my neck, then I feel his teeth against my carotid artery.

"I couldn't stay away," I reply, already panting.

"I know. And I will hurt you for it."

Oh, dear God. I think I'm about to cum.

"But if you dare make it easy on me, I will not touch you ever again."

What?

"Is that clear?"

What? It only now registers the gun is no longer at my head. He can't threaten me like that.

His lips are against my ear. "I asked you a question, A—"

My elbow in his stomach cuts him off. I duck and feel the air where my head had been as his gun clutching hand slams through the space. I spin, sweep his legs out from under him. I jump on him as he falls down. I am going to make him pay for teasing me like this, then just saying that if I'm not good enough he's going to drop me like last week's laundry.

His foot is on my stomach as his back hits the ground, then I'm flying over him.

I land, roll, get to my feet as I reach for the Beretta that I know isn't there, but it's an ingrained reflex. He's up and puts the Desert Eagle back in his harness. That's all he's wearing, and fuck does he wear it well. He isn't hard yet, but there's definitely blood flowing down there already.

I run at him, feint, punch his side. I block his reposted, and there's three more where those came from, forcing me back until I sacrifice my side to one of them so I can get in close enough to use my knee, but he moves and I graze his thigh instead of slamming it in his balls.

He said to make him work for it.

He grabs my belt buckle and the song of metal pulled out of a sheath sends shivers down my back. Light dancing on metal in time to the whispered song as I try to back away, then the slash and I stumble. I regain my footing looking down, there is no blood, no sting of air on cut flesh.

Did I not fight him hard enough?

He throws my belt over his shoulder. The only reason my pants don't fall off is that they are well tailored.

I snarl as I ran at him. I get in a kick at his side, go for another one, but he catches it and sends me flying. He trows the shoe aside as I get to my feet. I kick off the other one and go at him again.

I feint, duck under the swing. Slam a fist in his side as hard as I can. I slip out of the jacket as I feel him grab the collar, kicked him in the stomach to help him pull it off my arms.

He drops it to the ground.

“I’m fighting as hard as I can!” I scream at him. Where if the pain he promised me.

“Are you?”

I run at him, kick for his side, miss his head as I elevate it, spin. He reached for me, bat—well, slam an arm against—his had away. I grab his harness and as he growls a threat I use it up launch myself up and around his neck, using my weight to unbalance him. We fall and I land away, delightful pain in my side where his fist connected.

Finally.

I go seek more with more attacks, kicks and punches. Elbows and knees. He nearly wrenches my arm out of its socket when he grabs it and throws me away. Stars explode as my head hit the ground. I shake them away and stand.

I snarl in triumph as he wipes the blood from his nose with one of my sock. Now he has to know I’m fighting as hard as I can. I rush him before he’s ready. This time I see the hand come and duck under it. The sock falls before me, which means his other hand’s free. The song comes but I don’t move in time. Maybe I want it to be how the pain comes.

There’s a tug at my waist, but still no pain as I steady myself and turn to face him. I feel them slide down and reflexively catch my pants. I watch him, stunned, as he casually sheath the K-Bar.

“You aren’t taking me seriously!”

“I am and you know it.” His response is flat, lacking anything to tell me how he feels. Even his cock is still in the partially flaccid state it was when the fight started.,

“Then why aren’t you hurting me?” the idea he still thinks I’m not giving this my all hurts. That he think I’d hold anything back against him. Worse, that he is taking it easy on me because he doesn’t think I can handle it.

“You just don’t know what my end game is, A—”

With a scream I let my pants go and run at him. How dare he. How dare he think I’m soft or weak. That I don’t deserve the pain he can give me. I am here and I will get what I want.

I catch the smile an instant before I’m in his personal space, and the realization I did exactly what he expected comes at the speed of the fist hitting my face, then the kick in my side and the hand that catches me before I can stumble away and pulls me close to him. I feel his erection against mine before the fist is in my stomach and I’m stumbling away again.

I don’t fall, this time. The punch is what send me down, and when I go to get up a foot pushes me down. Then I feel him next to me.

I go to protest that I still have more fight in me, but the finger in my ass takes my voice away. It’s lubed—where the fuck was he keeping lube—but rough, and there’s sand in there.

I bite back the cry as his finger hits my prostate, but pain and pleasure. It’s nearly enough to shut down my mind, but only nearly.

Is the fight over? Can I give myself over to him, or will he think I gave up? Will he go inside and never touch me again? Fuck, I don’t want this to be the last time.

I force myself to think through the sensation of the second finger he pushed in. Fuck how am I supposed to think? My swing isn’t aimed, probably has no strength behind it, definitely no leverage from this angle. It doesn’t matter as the fingers disappear and I know I miscalculated.

The hand is painful around my forearm as he pulls me up, then the hand around my throat squeezed and pain nearly blacks me out as I slam back on the ground. Maybe this is how it ends.

I gasp as the fingers are inside me again, pushing deep. The smile on his face as my vision grays out from lack of air telledd me that no matter what happens next, I did make the right decision.

I take a ragged breath as he shoves his cock in me. I must have blacked out. He’s between my legs and they’re over his shoulders. I cry out and his grin is bestial. He pulls out and slams in again and even with the lube, I cry out still.

He’s bigger than I remembered. His cock stretches me as he moves it in and out. He has to

be shredding my insides apart and I scream in pleasure and pain.

His mouth silences me. There is blood in the kiss. I have my arms around his neck and I mash my lips against his. I force my tongue in his mouth, lick the blood.

He pounds me so hard I forget every other pain inflicted on my body. There is only this one left. I moan and he growls. He breaks the kiss and grabs my sides to keep me from sliding away from him on the sand. Pulls me to him, his cock going deeper and causing me to see stars.

His cock it heat and pleasure as he pounds my ass. I want to cum so badly, but I won't touch myself, can't. He is in charge. He will decide when—

“Ahh!” I almost cum from the slick hand grabbing my cock too tight. My ass goes up as I arch my back and I see whole galaxies as this position makes his cock hit my prostate with each hard thrust.

Is he snarling? He had to be snarling. I so want to be afraid, but —oh fuck—I can't feel anything other than his cock and his hand.

“Oh fuck, oh, fuck!” I tense as the hand tightens.

His cock somehow feels better, bigger, hotter. It hits my prostate harder.

I cum. Oh, Dear God, do I cum.

And he keeps fucking me, keeps stroking me. He keeps me hard with botch and it's a new kind of pain.

“Please—” I have no idea what I'm begging for. More, less, everything? I force my eyes open and the look makes me want to flee. The savagery. I'm not looking at a man, I am looking at a monster.

Oh, fuck. I'm going to cum again.

I don't hear my cry; his is so much louder.

His cock is buried so deep each pulsation is painful, and so delightful. When he quiets, he puts both hands on the ground and looks at me. He is pleased, but that doesn't mean he looks any nicer. He is still a monster, but now he's a sated one.

His nostrils flare as he pants. “You fought well.”

“I can tell,” I say as I hear swells, and he cants his head at me.

In the moment I wonder if there is anything human in him, the action is so... animalistic. As if he is only wearing a human skin.

“You think how hard I fuck you is an indication of how well you performed?”

“I fucking hope so.” I smiled. “I fought hard enough to deserved to be demolished by your cock again and again.

Something passes behind those eyes I can't decipher.

“We'll see.” Slowly he pulls out, and let me tell you something. You will never miss something as much as the cock that sent you showed you the Milky-Way.

He stands and offers me his hand.

“You can't seriously expect me to stand after this.”

“I need to look at your back. I can smell the blood.”

Now that the pain of his fucking is ebbing away, the complaints from the rest of my body are reasserting themselves. I take his hand and he pulls me up. I hold on to him while my legs decide if they are going to support my weight or not. They wobble when he turns me and he keeps a hand on my shoulder to steady me. It will add another bruise to the collection my body accumulated tonight.

Good.

“We need to clean these before they get infected.” His tone is clinical. “Two of the gashes could use stitches so they won't scar too badly.”

“I don't mind scars,” I reassure him, and a finger traces the long scar from my should blade to my tail bone. The only visible reminder of the race track incident.

“I can see that, but it's best not to over do it. You don't want your skin to get too tight; it'll

affect your fighting.”

I smile. “Definitely don’t want that.”

He leans in and whispers. “Not if you want me to do this again.”

I whimper at the implied promise this will happen again. He nuzzles my neck.

He guides me through the workshop, the door to the house and the bathroom immediately on the right. The shower is large enough for the two of us a few times over.

I jump as the cold water hits me, then it warms. The shower is modern with digital temperature control set at sixty-five. It’s still a surprise, but not as cold as it sounds. The house is solar powered, I saw as we moved the bodies. For someone living so far from everything, he is surprisingly well equipped.

The soap stings. It’s artisanal. Another of the reservation’s residents makes it and he too sells that online. His site is popular and the soaps fancy. Seems people crave fancy. But the lack of scent and how it stings, this is a basic soap.

The suture kit is already in the shower and the pain is something I endure. It isn’t the same as what lead to the sex, but he is the one causing it, and there’s a certain delight in that.

He washed my back once he’s done, then the rest of me. He doesn’t miss my erection, washing that carefully, as well as my ass, but he doesn’t finish me off. Then I wash him. He doesn’t get hard as I do.

He has amazing self-control, for a guy who can unleash a monster. I dry him, he dries me using a blood red towel. That wasn’t there last time.

The bedroll is larger, but I expected it, since he set that up last weekend. The concrete isn’t comfortable to have sex on, and we sprawl too much when we do.

When I stretch next to him, he pulls me against his chest and I relax, feeling safe.

The world can throw anything at me right now, and he will stop it. He will not let anyone or anything other than him hurt me.

He kisses the back of my neck. Tightens his hold. “Please stay.”

“Always.”

Chapter 04

Simply looking at him makes his box vibrate, setting off a chain reaction I'm reluctant to stop, but concerned about letting get out of control. Even the box containing lust reacts, and it should be silent after the night of sex we had. Less has sated me for months before. It makes me want to take him again, and this one I silence.

That is a distraction I do not want at the moment.

I run a finger over his chest; smooth, except for the occasional scars. Goosebumps spread around my touch. He lets out a soft moan, that makes his box glow brighter. I bring it back to a reasonable level. No matter how much I enjoy the reaction he engenders in me, I will not let it control me.

"Morning," he whispers, smiling.

Control is difficult to maintain, other boxes join in, and they chisel away at my desire to keep control.

"Afternoon," I reply, feeling my lips curve up in a smile of their own accord.

He raises an eyebrow. "Really?"

I can't answer him, my eyes drawn to the scars on his rising chest. My finger traces another down to his stomach. I don't intend to speak, but like the smile, the words come on their own.

"You're beautiful." It's a statement of a fact, this way his skin is damaged ads to—

He backs away as if I had just pulled my Desert Eagle. That's the wrong analogy with him. I can't think of something that would put the fear I see in his eyes right now. I still all the boxes before I lunge after him to make it go away. I will not be controlled.

His ass slides on the concrete floor and he winces to a stop. "What...what are you going?" his voice trembles in a way that matches his eyes. This isn't the fear for his life that acts as a turn-on for him. Again, I can't work out what it is as he searched my face.

I move to set, crossing my legs. "I'm admiring you." I search for clues of my own on his face and his body to understand why he flees from me.

"Stop it." There is a hint of desperation. "You don't have to do that."

"Do what?"

He motions to me. "That."

I silence the irritation at his vagueness. "You need to explain."

He rubs his face, sighs. I want to reach for him.

I quiet his box.

"Do you have any idea what men like you see when they look at me?" now there is anger.

I don't point out there are no men like me. I see determination, deadliness, strength, and sex. But those are what I see. Not what he has experienced. I shake my head.

"They see a small guy. A weak one that needs to be handled with kid's gloves." He wraps his arms around himself. "They see my skin and they don't want to break me anymore."

I look him over. How can anyone look at him and think that? Have other men been blind? No, they would have to be dumb to miss how his body responds when grabbed. The shiver that runs through him as I tighten my hand around his arm, leg, or neck. The moan as I dig my fingers in his flesh. Only the stupid would misunderstand those.

"And?" I ask.

He glares at me. "Do you see me in any of their bed right now, well on their floor? No. I'm here, with you."

I still the box containing my anger. It reacts to the idea he thinks I'm like anyone else he's been with. "Correct me if I'm wrong. You're saying that so long as I am not under the impression I have to be gentle with you, I can do anything I want to you."

"Yes." The word is soft, filled with relief.

I nod. "I can use your body any which way I desire."

He nods.

His breathing is heavier.

His excitement, and his cock, his rising. I motion him closer with a finger and he obeys. I place a hand on his chest and force him back on his back forcefully. There is little padding on the bedroll and his eyes close in pain as his head hits it.

I lean in and whisper close to his ear. "So there is no confusion. Your body is mine?" I make it a question, allow him to keep some control.

"Yes," he whispers needily.

"I own it?" my whisper is more demanding.

"Yes." His breathing is shallow, his cock trembles, and a bead of precum appears.

"I can do whatever I want to it." This is a statement. His last chance.

He bites his lip as goosebumps form over his body and nods.

"Then understand this." I nibble his earlobe. "I am under no illusion as to how you want to be treated. But that is no longer something you have control over. I *will* treat you any which way I desire, and you are never to move away from me again unless that is part of the rules I set at the time. Do you understand?"

A shiver joins the goosebumps and when it reaches his cock, the precum drips onto his stomach. He nods.

I trace a scar on his side with a finger. "This isn't me being gentle with you." When I reach the end just below his pectoral, I move it to one going down to his stomach. "This is me learning your body, finding out where each of your triggers is. This is me, learning how to bring you to the edge without using your cock, your ass, or pain. You will show me how you react to each of my touches. You will hold nothing back." I lick his neck.

He moans.

I get to my knees and the sudden motion catches him by surprise and he looks at me. Good. I don't want any misunderstanding.

"This isn't only for today. Do you understand that?" this new scar going from his navel up to his ribs is nastier. Not caused by a knife, something jagged. "When you leave tomorrow, your body will still be mine, when you are back in Phoenix, I still own it."

"Yes." No hesitation, no doubt.

I smile at him and as I keep his box under control I notice one glowing.

A box I have never seen before.

I wrap it in chains before I can give into whatever is forming. I will study it later.

I move my fingers over his skin and listen to his reaction as goosebumps spread around them. I note where his breath catches. Where it released in a slow hiss. I am alert for the tightening of muscles, and I test the area with different touches. Which arouses him, which causes pain, which causes him to suppress a need to move away. One makes him squirm and attempt to hold back laughter. Another makes him whine and when I stop I see the need in his eyes, the unvoiced desire for more.

His neck is sensitive, but it is from his need for pain, the need for his life to be in danger. Caressing it doesn't make him move away, but I can already notice his cock softening. That stops with only my fingers wrapped around it. The slight pressure and he pants. More and he would be fully hard again.

This is not something that happens naturally and boxes react demanding I know who hurt him, who hurt Alex in such a way that he became mis-wired. How young did he have to be? I am

glad he does, but whoever did this to him needs to die.

They need to die slowly over weeks of pain.

I add chains to that new box and force it into silence.

I ignore his cock, balls, and ass. I know how to use those to make him cum. I want to know all the other ways I can make it happen.

I lick the palm of his right hand, and his moan is exquisite. I suckle on his fingers, lick them under and over until he is panting. His hands are precious to him. They are how he enacts vengeance.

I fix my eye on his. Don't think I don't know that you've done this before, Alex. The missing girl may have been the first time we met, and I might not have found evidence of your other acts of vengeance, but I suspect there have been many others before.

What you did for those girls, Alex. Detective Moya is wrong about you. You are no hero. You are an avenging angel. You are Alex the Angel, while I am simply a monster.

This is why it can't last.

I move down his legs. The muscles are tight under the skin. I have seen him use them as weapons. An expert trained him, not to defend himself, but to attack. Did they know he would use those skills to kill? Would they appreciate how good he is at it?

His feet are sensitive, but in the way everyone's are. Our ancestors needed to know what they walked over, to feel the terrain, the bones break as they crushed their enemies. But Alex doesn't hold them with the same reverence as he does his hands.

Which doesn't mean he is unresponsive to my touch. He squirms, pants, and lets out a soft moan when I lick the underside. But his cock doesn't jump the way licking his finger caused.

"Turn over."

He takes a second to react—sensory overload, then he rolls onto his stomach.

There are more scars on his back than his front, with the long ones from his tail bone to above his shoulder blade at the forefront. Only his arms are devoid of scars. I wonder at the story behind that scar, but I won't ask. Something like this is something he must tell me when he is ready.

Or my investigation of his past reveals.

He isn't a mark I need to question. All I am required to do is enjoy him.

And I do.

I enjoy the contour of his back, the roughness of the scars under my fingers, the goosebumps. The sound of his moan as I slowly lick the length of his back. He barely had knots in his muscle. He is a man not bothered by what he does or what life attempts to do to him.

When I find one, I work it out of the muscle roughly, and he gasps, then whimpers, but the sound is laced with pleasure.

If you have not already taken your revenge on who did this to you, Alex. One day, you tell me why they are still alive. Then I will make them pay.

I kiss the back of his neck, nip at the flesh, and then bite.

He shudders and moans. I am reminded of when I drew blood, and the temptation to do it again is strong. To hear him gasp, see the pleasure in his eyes afterward. The way he came at that moment.

I silence that box.

"Raise your ass," I whisper in his ear.

Languidly, he pulls his knees under him as I move behind. The ass goes up. The flesh tightens, turning them into near-perfect globes; they are stretched apart enough to show me his ring.

I plunge in, lick it, and am rewarded with a "Oh my God!" as I force the ring apart with my tongue.

Rimming is an act I use to get a man ready, to loosen him up before I use lube. But the way Alex reacts makes me want to continue even once I know he's ready.

I take control of myself back. I straighten, spread his knees apart, and move between them. I rub my cock between his spit-slick cheeks and he moans in anticipation. Boxes respond to the need in that sound, but I control them. I have taken him dry and hard before. This time I will take my time with him.

I push in slowly and he opens for me. His body relaxes as if this is where he belongs, on my cock, and has been waiting his entire life for this to take place.

Once hilted, I bend down over his back and wrap my arms around him. Now I am the one who is comfortable, as if he fits perfectly under me. I straighten and bring him with me. The gasp as the motion pushes my cock deeper makes me smile.

He leans back, resting his head against my shoulder, turning it enough to nuzzle my ear. The sound that escapes his mouth as I rock in and out of him is almost a purr. I take his hard cock in my hand, the precum slicking it enough stroking him is easy and he groans.

I am slow with this too.

I have no intention of letting him cum quickly. This needs to keep us both sated until his next visit, and while quantity will accomplish that, quality is more reliable. It's important he be sated since I have plans for him.

I thrust and stroke gently, sometimes stopping as I hear him getting close, and he catches his breath. When I start up almost immediately he is moaning and groaning. He tightens his ass around my cock in what feels like an attempt at taking control away from me.

He fails.

I stop multiple times, and each one the sounds he emits are needier.

"How are you enjoying me being tender with you?" I whisper as my hand moves up and down his cock. My cock thrusts in his ass.

"It's good," he answers, "really good." The words are slurred. He is getting high on sex, again.

I listen to his body, adjust the rhythm accordingly. "Do you think about me when you jerk off?"

"Fuck yeah. How you fucked me last weekend gets me off each time. I've jerked off every day thinking bout it."

"That stops now," I order.

"Oka—what?" He tenses and his ass tightens on my thrusting cock. "You want me to stop thinking bout you when I jerk off?" the slurring is gone. Burned off by the shock.

"No. You are going to stop masturbating completely."

"Fuck that."

I slam my cock in hard enough there is pain in his gasp. "Your body is mine," I growl. "Say it." I slam my cock in again.

"Yours," he swallows. "It's yours."

I slow down, lick his ear. "I decide when you cum. Not you."

"You—" he pauses to catch his breath. "—you're serious?"

"Yes."

"Do you have any idea what you're asking? You're always in my head. I dream of you, of the thing you do to me."

"I'm not asking anything of you," I whisper. "I am telling you. I'm not going to cage your cock and make it impossible for you to jerk off; I'm not that nice. You're going to obey me because you know if you don't, I will punish you. Remember, I just spent as long as I needed learning your body. That information isn't only so I'll make you cum. I will torture you with it if you disobey me."

"Promise?"

Chains break under the strain of the mysterious box and my chest swells. It takes too many breaths to take control back.

“Don’t that this lightly. If I have to do this. You will not enjoy the result. No matter how much I enjoy you, I can find ways to hurt you in ways you will not want to happen. I can always find a way to make that happen. Don’t make me do it.” I kiss his neck. “I wouldn’t enjoy it.”

His body relaxes against me and he gives himself back to the sensations of my hand stroking his cock, my cock moving inside him.

“I don’t know if I can,” he whispers.

“You can,” I whisper back. I will make you feel each and every orgasm you are giving up this week when you return next weekend.”

“That’s going to be a lot of sex for just two days.” He smiled. “I jerk off a lot at those memories.”

The thought of two days of sex with him without stopping makes too many boxes glow for me to fully control. “I think a lot of sex will be a good thing, don’t you?”

He makes a sound that could be agreement, or just giving into more of the pleasure. “That’s not going to be anywhere near enough time if you’re going to take this long to make me cum each time.”

“That isn’t something you need to worry about. This was an indulgence. Give the boxes some of what they’ve wanted since you arrived.”

“Boxes?” the word stretches. He’s high again.

“Don’t worry about it.” They are influencing me more than I expected. “Just worry about cumming.” I pick up speed, both in my thrusting and stroking.

His breaths come harder, his moans are spliced with curses. My name is mentioned often. Sometimes in unflattering ways, and I respond by fucking him harder.

I don’t inflict pain. I want him to cum purely from the pleasure. I need to know he can; that he isn’t so broken pain is a requirement. His scream starts as my name, then becomes incoherent. His body is a bar I hold in place as I fuck him through his orgasm.

The first jet goes to eye level, the nit pools on my still hand on his cock. I feel it pulse. I spread my fingers to give the cum somewhere to go.

He melts back against me. His head lolling on my shoulder. He pants, eyes half-closed. I take my hand off his cock and raise it to his mouth. I don’t have to prompt him. He licks it clean, then suckles on my fingers with a satisfied sigh.

“You haven’t cum,” he whispers.

“I will.”

I lay us on our side and thrust again, holding him against me. I don’t bite him. I don’t grab him. I do nothing to elicit sounds other than what me fucking him causes.

I don’t even imagine myself hurting him.

I have sex with him slowly and gently, so I can prove to myself that I, too, am not so broken I need to cause pain to reach orgasm.

Chapter 05

“I need you to explain to me why you don’t have a kitchen,” I tell the naked hunk on his back on the bench as he lifts weights over himself.

“There is a kitchen,” he replies without altering his motion, up and down, slow, methodical. The bar never comes to rest on his chest and his arms never extend enough to lock. I don’t know if there is a perfect way to lift weights, but if there is, I’m looking at it.

No, I’m not just looking at the gorgeous cock.

“That’s an empty room. A kitchen will have a fridge, a stove, and an oven. The pantries will serve as more than storage for boxes of whatever this is.”

“Pemmican.”

He doesn’t even look at the wrapped bar I’m holding. That, more than the fact the boxes were identically nondescript, tells me they all contain the same thing.

“Whatever that is,” I reply.

“It’s food.”

Okay, I’ve seen him eat it one last weekend. That doesn’t mean it’s food. A bar nine-inch long, three wide, and one thick of something packed tightly enough it feels like I could hammer a nail in with it, can’t be food.

“Are you actually expecting me to eat that?”

“No.”

“So, you have an alternative?”

“No.” The barbell is deposited on the holders. No clanging, no dropping. I can’t even imagine the weights on it, and his shoulder has to be hurting from last weekend, but he doesn’t look like he felt it.

“What if I wanted to cook you breakfast?”

“There’s no need to cook pemmican.”

“I mean, make you a proper breakfast. I’m not sure how you were raised, but I was taught that if you spend the night at someone’s place, you make them breakfast the next morning.” Well, Grams mentioned it one time, as she was reminiscing about her and Gramp’s courtship. I figure that if Gramps cooking for her had been good, me cooking for Tristan was too.

“I was raised to survive by any means necessary. Social niceties were not included in those lessons.”

I almost ask.

I almost ask why a man would kidnap him and his brother. But it was too hard finding that information for me to believe he wants it known.

“You’re telling me you eat this all the time? Not just when you’re dealing with withdrawals and injuries that make it impossible for you to make food.”

“Yes.”

“How do you live that way?”

“I survive, Alex.—”

His mouth moves, but I don’t hear anything. “What did you call me?”

“Alex.”

“My name is Bart.”

“That’s your middle name. Bartholomew.”

“My name,” I repeat forcefully, “is Bart.”

He looks at me. His face betrays nothing of his thinking. Is he going to ask me to explain why? I never told him my full name, which means he looked it up. He researched me. If he's even slightly aware of the significance of my last name. And the fact there are nearly no mentions left of me in relation to the Crimsons, he has to understand why I—

“Alright.” He stands and picks up hand weights.

I watch his back as he does curls. “That’s it?” does he know? Doesn’t he want to know?

“Yes.”

I have no idea what to do with that, so I switch to another important subject. “Tell me you have a coffee machine somewhere.”

He doesn’t answer.

“Please, tell me you have instant coffee.”

He doesn’t answer and my mouth goes dry. Are any of the mugs in the SUV filled? It’ll be cold, but I can reheat—no microwave. Over a fire? Does he even have a fire pit?

“Oh, dear God, let there be coffee left in one of them.”

“There isn’t.”

My head snaps up. “How do you know that? Did you search my car? When?”

“While you were sleeping.”

“Bullshit, you fell asleep next to me. I would have woken up if you moved.”

“You aren’t that light of a sleeper.”

I want to argue. I am not a heavy sleeper. After what was done to me in my sleep, when Dear Old Dad dropped me off to that pimp, I wake up at the drop of a hat.

Which means he didn’t even make that kind of noise.

Fuck, I’m impressed.

“What the fuck am I supposed to do without coffee?”

“Eat. Drink water.” He puts the weights down and faces me. The only thing he wears is his gun harness, and on it are his desert eagle, holstered, a pouch in which he keeps his phone, another for his glasses—he needs them to read, and one in which he keeps a bottle of lube and condoms. Four extra clips for his gun. I study them so I won’t have to think of what he’s, unreasonably, demanding of me.

He raises an eyebrow and I look at the wrapped bar in my hand. There are no inscriptions on it, no list of ingredients. He expects me to eat this. To eat this while drinking water.

He is certifiably insane.

But if it’s eat that or go hungry... I’m not a fan of hunger. Pimps don’t really see a point in feeding you past the level where you won’t die of it.

I unwrap the bar and the... what the fuck is this? Is dark brown, feels dry, and smells... I have no idea what this smell is, which is something in its favor. I know what shit smells like, so even though it looks like that’s been compressed into the bar, it isn’t.

I take a small bite and gag before it even touches my tongue. I think I’m going to throw up. What is that texture? The taste isn’t as gag-worthy as I expect, but the fruitiness is odd, along with the earthiness and whatever those other tastes are. I take the bottle of water Tristan hands me and drinks half of it before taking another small bite.

I follow him to the empty room, where he takes a bar out of the box I opened and eats it mechanically. Is that his secret; he has no taste buds?

He did say he liked how I tasted, so probably not.

* * * * *

So. If nothing else, Pemmican is filling and makes water bearable by the need to drink it if I want to avoid dehydrating all of a sudden. He ate three.

We are back in his workshop, where he opens a cabinet and takes to M-Tech out of it. He clips one to the side of his harness, then turns and hands me the other.

“Are you fucking insane?” I demand, stepping back. I don’t hear the song, but I can imagine

it, feel its call.

“I want to see how good you are.”

“You know how good I am.” I head for the door leading outside to get away from the temptation.

“Bart.”

I ignore him.

“Bart, stop.” The tone isn’t that of an order, so I continue outside, raising my voice.

“I’m not touching one of those. You’ve already seen the results.”

“Bart, Stop!”

I freeze. I don’t even think, I just obey.

I close my eyes with dread as I hear the melody of the M-Tech sliding against leather as it leaves its sheath. It’s a song of promises, dark and bloody.

“No,” I state. To it or him, I don’t know.

He throws the knife.

Unlike what movies have you believing, a thrown knife doesn’t make a sound before the impact. Except for me. The music intensifies as it approaches.

I don’t move.

I don’t have to.

One of the things the song tells me is that it isn’t aimed at me. It slams into the tree a couple of paces before me. I open my eyes at the way it trembles, embedded two inches into the wood, adds vibrato.

Pick me up, it sings to me, remember the joy, the harmony.

“I am not touching it.” I can’t take my eyes off it.

“What if I order you?” he asks.

“Don’t,” I say and barely hear myself. “Please don’t. You have no idea what it wants me to do to you.”

“It’s a knife, Bart.” The tone is neutral, not the exasperation of the few others who said similar things. “It doesn’t want anything.”

I spin, anger rising, and I know I shouldn’t do this again. “Didn’t you see what I did in that storage place?” At least he isn’t a shrink determining if I need to be fitted for a straight jacket. “Didn’t you wonder how I could move like that? Avoid gunfire?” at least he saw me, so he doesn’t have the luxury of thinking I’m making that part up. “How the fuck do you think that’s possible?”

“Situational awareness,” he answers as if he’s thought about it for years. “You heard their steps, the rustle of their clothing. You noted the way the skin crinkles as they applied pressure on the triggers. The same way I do it.”

I let out a bark of laughter. To my ear, it’s mocking. He doesn’t react. “I wasn’t aware of anything except the symphony! It told me how to move, who to cut, throw a knife at, and where to reach for a replacement. If I listen to it, give completely into it, it will move me like a deadly dancer through all the danger until there is no one left alive.”

“There is no music, Bart. It’s a mental trick that makes it easier for you to process the information around you.”

“You’re wrong.” The song is still there, behind me, pulling at me. And I want to turn, step to it, free it from the tree. That’s what scares me. How badly I want for things to be as simple as when I drown in the music.

“We all have mental tricks that let us deal with situations, stay in control, process a slew of information, speed up your reaction to—”

“Shut up!” the song increases with my shout and I close my eyes. “You think I haven’t heard any of that before? You’re repeating almost word for word what the shrink told me after the racetrack.” What Grams and Gramps also said, until, like the shrink, I gave them the answers they wanted to hear. “I had to agree with her if I didn’t want to end up in a padded room, but I don’t have

to go along with your fantasy!”

I pant as I wait. I’m sweating in the dry heat. I want to run; away or to him, I have no idea.

“Explain it to me.”

I search his eyes for anything pointing to him just humoring me. That shrink was lucky she’d made sure there was nothing sharp in her office, because when she asked me that, the first time I didn’t agree with her reasoning, I saw the mockery in her eyes.

All I see in his is patience. I chose to believe that is how he feels.

“Grams’s an expert with knives. She taught me everything she knew after they took me in. You can’t understand how much I loved it. Not just learning from her, but the feel of the blade in my hand. The knowledge they would now defend me. That I would never be at someone else’s mercy. Gramps helped too. He taught me how to use my body in a fight. But no matter how good I got with that, too, it never matched how special knives felt when they were in my hands. There was no symphony then, but I knew how special knives were. I’d already felt what they could do. In case you’re wondering, since that wasn’t in any file you found on me, most of the scars on my body weren’t gained while fighting. The man Dear Old Dad handed me over to when I disappointed him once too often liked knives. He liked them almost as much as I do. It took three months for Gramp to find me. Also, before you ask, he’s dead. I put a bullet between his eyes two years later. And yes, they are also where I learned to shoot.”

There aren’t any emotions in my voice or even in me, as I tell him the things that led to the music. I cut them out of me when it comes to those events and cauterized the wounds.

“The first time I heard the music, it was while saving a girl from her father who was about to rape her along with some friends of his. She couldn’t be older than fourteen. There were more of them than I’d expected and if it wasn’t for the music, I’d have died there. That’s where I got that scar on my back. Most of them survived because I wouldn’t give myself fully to it. I was scared of the promises it made me, of the price it asked for them. I’m still terrified of them because each time I can’t stop myself and give in, it becomes that little more tempting to just hand myself over completely, to not come back when the song ends. I’m not a good man, but if I hand myself over, I don’t think I’ll even be human anymore.”

Tears streak my cheeks. Of course, he’d get me to cry. Who else by that cold bastard could make me? No, that’s the anger speaking. He runs hot, but he controls that heat perfectly.

“It isn’t the music that wants you to kill, Bart.”

Fuck, he doesn’t believe.

“Yes, it is.”

“You want to kill.”

“No,” I snap.

“You want to kill for what was done to you.”

“I don’t want to kill anyone!” how can he think that of me? “The song makes me do it.”

“You’re using it as a scapegoat, so you don’t have to take responsibility. But you can’t do that if you’re going to take control. You have to accept that you are the killer so that you can control the impulse. To put that on something else means you relinquish control. If you aren’t in control, you can’t decide who needs to die. You just kill.”

“You don’t get it.” I thought if anyone would, it would be him.

“I think that I, better than anyone, do understand. What do you think I am, Bart? Why do you think I live out here where the only people around are no better than I am? I am a killer, just like you. I know what tempts me, and I keep away. I control my emotions because they are bombs waiting to explode and take out everything around me.”

“I’m not like you,” I say weakly. Why can’t he see that? What will it take for him to understand?

“Yes, Bart,” he replies gently. “You are.”

“I’m not!” the song crescendos with an answer and I move before I understand what I’ve

agreed to. The M-Tech pulls out of the tree and I spin, releasing it. The music surges as understanding sinks in.

It happened. I gave in fully. The symphony has me and the triumph is loud as the knife flies true to its target. The one thing I found I wanted will be gone and it will be all I have left.

The music screeches to a stop as Tristan grabs the knife out of the air and brings his arm down next to him.

“How?” How is that possible? The music never failed before. It sang his death.

“It isn’t magic, Bart. It’s training, innate skill, and mental work. The music you hear isn’t something outside of you. It is you. You need to accept that, take it in and start using it, instead of letting it use you.”

That’s twice now that he disrupted the music. No one’s ever done that. “Can you teach me?” Can he really control the music?

“I can’t teach you. All I can do is help you. You have to be the one to work out how you control it.” He offers me the knife. “But that starts with you taking up the knife and fighting me.”

I swallow as the song picks up, promises joy again. “I might kill you.”

“You won’t.”

“You don’t know that,” I snap. “You can’t know it. You have no idea how loud the music gets.”

“I do know it.”

I search his face for...something. “How?”

He smiles, and there is satisfaction there. “You don’t want me dead.”

Chapter 06

Alex—Bart, he wants to be called Bart—opens his mouth, but before his snarky reply comes out, he looks to my right. I drop the knife and draw the desert eagle as I turn. It's aimed at the form stepping around the side of my house as she appears.

"Don't stop on my account," Cornelius says, ignoring the gun, "there's nothing hotter than two naked men trying to kill each other. She licks her lips.

"What are you doing here, Cornelius?"

She wears beige pants and a white shirt. One hand rests on the plain cane she uses because of the limp I gave her, the other raises a six-pack.

"I brought beer."

"What are you doing here?" I ask again, flicking the safety off the eagle. Bart walks into my view, at the edge on the right.

She sighs. "I just want to meet your... friend. Things were too hectic at this end last weekend." She looks Bart up and down. "You've never brought someone home before, let alone have someone come over twice, or stay more than a few minutes."

She never lies.

But she never says the whole truth either. She's much like the Fae of old tales that way. But I've taken her measure before and she knows what I'm capable of. I don't need iron to hurt her.

I holster my weapon and head for the house's door. "Sit," I order, pointing to the couch, then continue to my workshop. I take the phone and place it in the holster on my harness, add my glasses before taking two water bottles and returning.

Cornelius is in the chair perpendicular to the couch. Bart sits closest to her on the couch. She smiles as she sees me and offers a bottle to Bart.

"Homebrewed," she says.

I put a water bottle in his hand as he reaches for it. "Never accept her offerings."

"Why not?" Bart uncaps the bottle as if he never expected a different drink.

I sit on the other end of the couch. Bart slides over before I'm settled in. I have an arm over his shoulder as he leans against me. Boxes vibrate quietly as warmth spread through me.

Cornelius's eyes tighten almost imperceptibly as the unsaid message and warning sinks in.

"I've never put anything in any of the other beers," she pouts, twisting the cap of her bottle.

"What are you talking about?" Bart asks cautiously.

She sighs. "I tried to poison him."

"You *did* poison me," I correct. "You *tried* to kill me."

"You should have died," she replies through clenched teeth. "I had your body mass down to the gram. It's that damned black constitution of yours."

Bart stiffens, but I keep him in place. I raise an eyebrow at her. That's new. She never mentioned why she thought I'd survive. That first meeting ended with me shattering her leg in so many places, and the subject was not brought up during the others.

"It's a scientific fact that black men have better constitutions than white ones," she elaborates. "It's all that crap you had to endure while in slavery. We breed a stronger, tougher human being." She sips her beer. "I should have remembered that."

Genetics isn't something I have researched. It doesn't give me enough of an advantage over others. My resistance might have more to do with all the plants my father forced me to eat. Most of them made me deathly sick.

Bart relaxes fractionally. "You two are strangely comfortable with each other for her having tried to kill me."

She pants her left leg. "He taught me the error of my ways. Four breaks in the femur, five in the tibia, and three in the fibula. I'm lucky he didn't shatter the patella. Getting that replaced would have been a pain."

"It wasn't luck," I state.

"Now, when if the weather's humid, I can't put any weight on that leg."

Bart looks at me. I quiet the boxes' reaction as I look into those sea-blue eyes. "You should know this about me. I am vindictive."

She snorts. "That's nowhere near strong enough to describe what you are, Hun."

I shrug.

"Why did you try to kill him?" his tone is tinged with a protective edge anyone outside this community would misinterpret for curiosity.

"He didn't accept the invitation to sleep with me."

"He's gay," Bart states.

"I didn't know that," she protests. "Have you looked at him? Those arms, that chest, those legs, that cock. What did anyone expect when I saw him naked for the first time?"

"Don't play the victim, Cornelius, it doesn't suit you. I told you I was gay then."

She shrugs.

"You tried to kill him because he turned you down?" Bart's tone carries not only dismay but anger. I rub his chest to calm him. I shut down the boxes edging me to do more. She's already picked up too much about how he fits into my life. I will not hand her ways to control me.

"I've never taken rejection well." She sighs. "I might have anger issues."

"That isn't your problem," I say, before taking a swig from my water bottle.

"Oh? And what is my problem, Mister isn't a psychologist?"

"You are homicidal."

"That's a form of anger issues." She drains her bottle and opens a second one.

"You don't wait to be angry to kill."

"I haven't killed anyone here."

Bart stiffens despite her casual tone.

"Jacobly told you what he'd do if you did, same as with me. He's going to remove us if we cause trouble."

"Try to, anyway." She smiles. "He knows better than to try. After all, he didn't do anything after I poisoned you."

"I didn't tell him what you did. Just like you said, a shelf fell on your legs. We both deal with problems ourselves." I sip my water. "It's more satisfying."

She toasts me. "How about something more pleasant? Or at least something Bart can take part in. We're making him uncomfortable with our talk of hurting each other."

"This isn't me looking uncomfortable."

I will have to find out what that looks like.

She leans forward, and her voice is sultry. "How good is he? When he makes you scream, is it in ecstasy or pain?"

Bart's skin heats up against me, and he slips out of my arm as he stands. "I need to take care of something." He leaves the living room.

I now have an idea of what him being uncomfortable looks like, but I don't study him. I am looking at Cornelius. She looks at him, her gaze predatory until he is out of the room. She licks her lips again.

"He is mine."

Her smile is radiant. "Oh, I can tell. I never thought you could manage that." She studies me. "Or is it just an act? Tell me. Do you love him?"

I control the boxes. I do not react to that word. Loves means pain. My father went to great lengths

to teach me that. His love for me knew no bounds, and as a result, he nearly killed me multiple times.

That box was destroyed.

Alex's box glows, but I have too tight a control over the others to react to it.

"What I feel isn't relevant. Only that he's mine. You touch him, and I will make you feel pain like you've never felt."

"Like you make him feel?" her smile doesn't waver.

"No. You won't enjoy what I do to you."

"Is that what he is? A way for you to release your sadistic tendencies? You found yourself a masochist and don't want to share?"

"This isn't about what he is. It's about who you think you can hurt me through him."

She takes a sip from her bottle. "And I can, can't I?"

She played me.

Boxes jockey for importance, pride at her skill, anger at her besting me. I silence them. I nod. She won. There is no shame in it. "If you plan on touching him, make sure I'm dead first."

"Or you'll kill me?"

"No. You will live for a very long time, in excruciating pain."

There is no shame in losing, but that doesn't mean I will let her enjoy her victory.

She doesn't reply.

It's the first time since the first time she visited my house that our battlefield has changed, but after so long, we prefer this fragile truce to an all-out war.

Bart returns wearing pants, held up with a belt made of rope, and holding two water bottles.

"Pants?" she asks, disappointed. "Is being naked suddenly uncomfortable?"

He leans into me again and relaxes once I have an arm over his shoulder.

"No, but I don't show my excitement to strangers. Or anyone I don't care about. Or plan on having sex with," he adds.

"That is a shame. I'm curious as to how big you get. So, you enjoy pain?"

"No," he answers casually. "I enjoy Tristan causing me pain."

"Because he's so talented." She smiles. "You never know, there might be someone out there who is more talented."

He shrugs. "If they aren't him, they can't be talented enough."

His box's glow brightens and I tighten my hold on him before I can stop myself. He's giving her too much information. I silence it and the others that responded, nearly missing that mysterious new box among the others.

I watch her and consider my plans. If she thinks she had the upper hand, she will do something stupid I have to respond—

My phone rings and she closes her mouth. I'm looking at the display on the second ring. It's too old to show a name, not that I keep any contacts information on it. I don't need a name to know who is calling.

"Emil?" I ask before the third ring sounds. "What's wrong?"

I head outside, ignoring Alex's concerned question. I can't have this conversation where Cornelius can hear. She already learned too much today.

"I'm sorry." He snuffles. "I know I shouldn't have kept your number, but it made me feel—" He cuts off as the phone is taken from him.

"So, you're Tristan." The man is older with a New England accent. It's where I met Emil, so this can be about him, and not someone using him to find me. "I've been looking for you for a very long time."

"What do you want?"

"To kill you. Why do you think I went through all this trouble? Invite you fishing?"

"If you have Emil, you know where to find me."

"That I do. 'I'll give the kid credit. He held out longer than some full-grown ass men I've questioned over the years. He did tell me about that reservation you live on."

“Then why hasn’t a sniper taken me out?”

“Because that isn’t how I work.” The snarl in his voice thickens his accent. I’ve heard it before, but I can’t place it. “I’m going to kill you with my bare hands.”

“Then why aren’t you here?”

The pause is long.

He may be trying to get me to fill it with more questions. This isn’t the first time he has threatened someone. He may be expecting me to follow a script. He may be used to how the others reacted and are unsure how to proceed now.

“I’m not there,” he answers, “because you’re going to come to me. I know little about you. Until the kid gave me a name, I didn’t even have that. All I had was a black asshole built like a brick shit-house. You have no idea how many of your people fit that description.”

“I won’t go to you,” I say before I can silence boxes.

“See, I think you will. It’s been how long since you saw the kid? And your number is still in his phone. I’m thinking it’s because he means something to you. Why else give him your number if not so he can call you when he needs you to protect him again?”

This silence this time is because he wants a reaction from me. He has made a series of wrong assumptions and threatened someone he believes that I care about. Because of this, he believes he knows how I will react, but I have the boxes under control this time. Even that unknown one.

“I guess the kid picked up the steel from you. Okay, here’s what’s going to happen. You’re going to come find me. I don’t care how long you take, and I promise you the kid isn’t going to die until you do. He’s too pretty for me to just kill him, anyway. So I’m going to enjoy his company while I wait for you, if you get what I mean.”

“I do,” I growl as boxes slip my control.

“Finally.” The triumph is loud. “I was starting to think you didn’t give a shit about him. I really didn’t want to be wrong about this.” He chuckles. “I’ll be waiting, so please take your time.” The call terminates.

I shake with the effort to bring the boxes under control. That man doesn’t understand what Emil represents. The balm saving him puts over the hate festering inside me at my inability to keep my brother safe. This is like me failing again. Telling myself Emil brought this on himself doesn’t quiet the boxes. I left him with a family who would care for him. He chose to travel the country, looking for the desperate to send my way. His own penance for what he believes is his fault.

When the boxes are sufficiently quiet, I can think again I place a call. “Asyr. I need the location of the phone that just called me. I need it now. Drain all the accounts you have access to if that’s what it takes.” I nearly disconnect but add. “Please.”

I go inside. Bart is in my place, seeking comfort in the heat of the couch in my absence.

“Cornelius, leave.”

“We were just talking about life,” she says, “nothing—”

“Now!”

Bart is who jumps. He’s never seen my anger. Not the anger that kills. She has. She’s also a psychopath, and she’s learned that her acting doesn’t help against me.

“That must have been quite the phone call.” She stands. “It was a pleasure meeting you, Bart. I hope you drop by on place at some point so we can have dinner, the three of us.”

“I don’t think so,” is Bart’s flat reply, and she smiles.

“I like him,” she whispers as she walks by me. “If you don’t take good care of him, I will.” She is gone while I wrestle the boxes under control again.

“Is everything okay?” Bart stands before me, his expression concerned.

I go through the boxes, allow specific ones to vibrate, and use them for my response. “I’m sorry,” I sound saddened. “I should go home.” The smile I give him breaks. “I have to deal with this, and it’s going to take a while.”

“I don’t mind staying.” There is hope in his comment. “I can help.”

Not the reaction I need. I change which box vibrates. I take him by the shoulder, my expression a

mix of stern and sad. “Bart, I don’t know how long it’s going to take. It’s more than six hours for you to get back to Phoenix and you have work tomorrow.” I kiss him lightly. “I’ll make this up to you next weekend.”

“Are you sure you want me to?” his disappointment is tempered by the knowledge of what I will do.

I nod, my smile sad again.

He kisses me hard and boxes slip my control. I kiss him back, hand on his ass, inside his pants. I grind against his hard cock.

I have trouble getting one specific box under control and as I result I pull on his pants until the seam strain. I want him under me; I want to take him. I have the time to indulge. It isn’t like Emil is in danger of dying.

Another box’s shine buries this one and I get my lust under control before I rip the pants off Alex—
Bart.

I gently push Bart away. Emil will suffer if I don’t reach him quickly. If Emil suffers, then... a box, far at the back of my mind, pulses and I have trouble breathing.

“It’s that important?” Bart asks. This isn’t an attempt to distract me from what I need to do, but he knows how I react to him, how badly he erodes my control.”

My answer is more honest than I intend. “I wish it wasn’t. I want to fuck you so badly it hurts, but —”

“Someone needs help, don’t they?” he interrupts before I can reveal too much. “Are you sure I can’t help? I can call in sick.”

Why are you so helpful, Bart? Can’t you worry about your life more? “You need to keep your routine. If you give them a reason to look into your life, they might find things that would hurt you.”

He knows there is a level of subterfuge in what I am telling him. He can’t work out why, but it hurts him that I am doing it. “I’ll see you next Friday.” His kiss is tender. “Be careful. I don’t want to lose you.”

The only box that slips my controls is that unknown one. “I always him.” I want to say something else. That box wants that before I silence it. But even if I hadn’t. I have no idea what it wanted me to say.

He collects his things. The remnant of his shirt, his jacket, socks, and shoes. I will get him clothing when I am done with this. It’s only fair I replace everything I destroy.

He looks at me before getting into the SUV. Worry, hope, and hurt. As soon as it’s out of sight, I head for the workshop.

Glasses and headset on, I bring up the dialect file I keep on the united states and go through those for New England. As it plays, I read Emil’s file and look for a detail that might tell me who the man is.

Emil’s mother was murdered by his father at the same time he tried to kill Emil. His reaction to an illegitimate son is as aberrant as that of the way my father treated me. I am aware of that, but the box that treatment created simmers and reminds me it is easy for fathers to turn on their children.

Thomas Masters is dead. I kill him. Jasmin Rithal has a father still alive, as well as two aunts, but they have no reason to want Emil hurt. As far as they know, he died in the same staged accident that took his mother. Master’s mother died when he was twenty-eight of natural causes, as far as the medical reports indicate. With Master involved, there is no way to be certain, but it holds no relevance to Emil. Master’s father killed himself when he was fourteen. Alcoholism. Unemployed, he let life break him and a gun barrel in the mouth finished the job.

No other relatives.

Then who is this older man with the Boston accent? Emil lived in Manchester until Masters showed up. He left New Hampshire before that. Master lived in Portland but traveled out of Maine. The only occasions I could confirm he went to Boston was to have sex with prostitutes. He couldn’t tarnish his Conservative Christian image by being caught in a prostitute’s bed in his city. Being single was borderline enough. The extra scandal would have cost him his following.

So who is this man and what is the link between him and Emil? There is one because that is the only time I have been in New England, returning from my exile north.

I receive an email from an anonymous account. Inside is Emil’s location.

This was too quick.

Asyr's information mentions the phone is still on.

A box shiver and I question if they are in on it. I silence it. Asyr doesn't know what is happening.

They do not care. Only that I pay them.

There is only one reason for the phone to be on.

The man wants me to find them.

I gather what I'll need, and put that in the Chevelle.

The boxes quiet as I work. There are no emotions, only expectations. When I find that man. I will make him regret messing with me or what is mine.

Chapter 07

This is the end of the world.

Well, okay, not really. It just feels that way with how I got sent home.

Sure, I haven't spent that much time with him, but it was enough to know how Tristan does things, how he is. He's detached, basically, ice cold. Oh, he gets angry, but that's controlled. What he doesn't do is tenderness.

He doesn't need to. He's too damned good to have to care.

Sure, there was that sex, with him touching me all gentle and things, but that wasn't him caring or being tender, he said it. He was exploring my body, figuring out how to control me, my orgasms.

Fuck, why's my mind have to go there? Now I was him slamming me against the floor and pounding my ass.

And I'm out of coffee.

Maybe one of the other mugs has some left? Enough, I can wait until my boner goes down?

No such luck.

Well, here goes. Hopefully, no one will notice the tent while I'm up.

I make it to the counter with the coffee machine without anyone calling me out.

"Mister Crimson," Kat says behind me, startling me. The bitch made me spill coffee. That's got to be a capital offense, right?

"Fuck," I mutter under my breath, throwing Napkins on the spill.

"Something I should know?" she asks. I swear, if she is smirking when I turn around, I am going to lose it.

I settle for looking over my shoulder. "Yes, surprising me and making me spill coffee is dangerous to the health."

Her expression is quizzical. "I didn't think you could be surprised. Something on your mind?"

Oh no, not at all, it's in my ass I want that something. Maybe I should tell her, as punishment for the spillage. "Just family stiff, I mean stuff." Fuck.

She doesn't comment, so I keep wiping at the spill, feeling like I should keen with each coffee-soaked napkin that ends up in the trash.

"You ever thought about how bad for the environment paper napkins are?" I snap. "Each one of those is one step closer to the last tree on earth being dead." I glare at her, the last napkin flying off course as it's basically dry when I throw it at the trash. "And don't even think of bringing up those recycling adds. They have no interest in saving anything but their bottom line. Fuck, I should leave a stack of cloth towels and burn all this paper stuff."

"And who's going to take care of cleaning them?" She asks as I refill my mug.

Cap secured, I turn. "Why should I care, Kat? You're the one destroying the environment, not me."

She's annoyed at me, but not angry. Is that a victory or defeat on my part? I don't even know what I was trying to make happen with this. "I get that having problems at home, not that I knew you had a family, can be stressful. But I'll remind you this is a workplace, and I'm not your therapist."

I snort, which adds a raised eyebrow to her annoyed expression. "I keep away from those after that last one finally signed the papers stated I was sane." I grin at her.

"I can't tell if you're joking or not," she says, her tone pained. "Because even if a question

about your sanity never showed up in the background check I ran on you, neither did the existence of a family.”

“That’s how I like things. So I’m guessing there’s a reason you stalked me.” I sip the coffee and curse. “Fuck, did we switch to decaf or are you buying the cheap stuff now? This is nothing more than water.”

“Maybe you should cut down.”

I gawk at her.

“Fine, how about focusing more on the assignment, and less on what you drink or what your family is up to? That Korymaro Industry report was supposed to be—”

“Shell corporation; doesn’t own anything actual assets, but moves money around like a multinational corporation should.”

“What are you talking about?” she asks, serious. Everything I did to annoy her is now set aside.

“I take it whoever gave you the contract neglected to mention the part where there is no Korymaro outside of the internet. And even there, like I said, it’s just a shell so they can move money.”

“No company can be registered in the US without having a physical address linked to an office.”

“Sure, they have that. Problem is that they are fitting seven hundred twenty-three employees in a nine by nine room. That’s what the address in Chicago leads to. I mean, sure, I guess if they have the right efficiency expert on staff, you might convince me they can all work in that space.”

She rubs her face. “Mister Crimson, your assignment was to test their internet security.”

“Did that; it failed. I did have to put some work into it, but that only took fifteen minutes. Since I know how you don’t like it when I’m just sitting back and relaxing, I looked around and found out what I told you. Don’t worry,” I add, as she’s about to warn me off. “I’m not going to include any of that in my report. It’s going to stick to just their firewall and how to fix it. It’s not my job to bring to light when your company’s being played.”

Her expression darkens. “I was about to tell you to write a full report on it.” She looked at her watch. The man’s watch that’s always on her wrist. “And I don’t want to see it until the end of the day, so how about you use the time you have to dig a little deeper?”

“That’s five hours away; I can dig all the way to China in that time. Hell, I’ll have the name of the man who set the corporation up and in underwear size.”

“I’d prefer you don’t include that little detail, but I want to see everything else in it.”

“Sure, it’s your reputation.” I turn to head for my desk.”

“Mister Crimson?”

I stop and lower my mug. Fuck, that stuff is vile.

“This isn’t the first time you’ve done amazing work in a surprisingly short period of time.”

“It’s what you pay me for.”

“True, but now I have to wonder how it is you only scored mid-range on all the tests you took when we hired you.”

I grin at her over my shoulder. “Because I’m not an idiot.” I mutter the rest as I continue to my desk. “Unlike everyone else at this company.”

I fight not to spit the coffee as I sit down. The mug’s already half empty.

That’s it. Tomorrow I’m bringing a coffee machine for my desk. The rest can be jealous of the aromas coming from here while I enjoy an actual drink.

I look at my screen and smile. Well, my day just got more interesting than faking being busy. Let’s see who set you up, Korymaro Industry, and exactly how corrupt they are.

* * * * *

I’m three layers down just over an hour later, another shell company, this one in Delaware, when my work address pings. It’s work, so it needs to be answered now rather than later.

Or maybe not.

The address is way wrong for anyone from the office. It's a string of random numbers and letters. A quick search tells me the server it originated from is in Nigeria. Oh, joy, one of those made it through our spam filters. I delete it and go back to work.

I go back to work

I said, I focus on—damn it.

I pull the email out of the trash folder because something's not adding up. There is no way some Nigerian prince scam email should have made it through the filters. Those were custom-designed, not by me, but I went over the work when I was hired, really good, and it's been maintained. I never use spam filters with my personal email. I like having an easy list of targets when I'm bored and don't have some perverts to take down.

Spammers aren't all that much better anyway.

I quick read confirms this is the work of amateurs, bad English and all. Some prince is in trouble, and if I can simply find it in the goodness of my heart to send him a measly thousand dollars, he will thank me with a fraction of his fortune when his troubles are over. A few million. So generous.

And here's another reason it kept nagging at me. Instead of the usual request for a reply, so they can add my email address to the bank of sucker they can go back to over and over when they need more money, there is a link.

I don't click it. Again, I'm not an idiot.

It looks like an amateur's work, the way all those are meant to look like because they seem to think that if someone doesn't type proper English, he must be a rich foreigner and in trouble. But one of those mass-generated email addresses wouldn't have made it through the filters.

I look at the address again. Somehow, someone has worked out a way to string letters and numbers together so they can bypass it. That's really clever, and my first thought is that it's got to be Tristan. The guy is amazing enough to pull this off.

Only, he doesn't do his own hacking. He has some second-rate hack on retainer for that. Okay, maybe not second rate, since I haven't found them, yet. But give me time, I will.

What I do know is that it isn't the one hacker living on the reservation. She's good, really good, in fact. Good enough she had to fake her death after hacking Darpa leaking online some of the things they really shouldn't have been involved in.

But I found her, so she isn't who he's using.

There's something disappointing about knowing Tristan doesn't do everything to perfection. That he needs help with his hacking. That he isn't asking me is downright annoying, but that's going to change once I've exposed who he's using as the fraud they are.

But the thing I remind myself of is that Tristan's smarts are in how physical he is. How he can take me down, hold me there, take me, hard.

Here I go, getting a boner again at the idea of him taking me.

And I can't do anything about it either.

Because I'm not an idiot, I take the link apart and reach its destination sideways. It's a folder in one of those cloud-drives everyone uses these days, but this one is on what the media likes to refer to as the 'dark web'. Add scary music here.

It's not as anonymous as the people behind it would like it to be. I could track back who opened it. Will do so, in fact, since I want to make sure, but I doubt it'll lead me to Tristan's hacker. They might not be as good as me, but they aren't idiots either.

In the folder is a simple text file, as if they want to convince me this is inoffensive.

Ah. Nice try.

I deconstruct the file and discover that it's... a simple text file.

That's... unexpected.

Bart.

First off, next time I see you, we're talking about that name. I don't know why you let them force you into using that name. You are an Alexander.

I got this just after you left, so I asked Asyr to send it to you.

I had them look deeper into Liaison, as well as its supposed owner, Keith Riddle, and the man he had with him when he attacked us. A new name has come up, both in their research and some of my own. Juan Manuel Fernan. The information I have places him in Mexico. I figure you can look into this and we can talk about what you come up with when you next visit.

His name isn't anywhere there, but it doesn't matter. I know it's him. And I can't stop smiling. I'm not even annoyed he asked their hack to look into it instead of me.

It isn't because he wants to talk; I just want him to fight me, then fuck me.

No. It's because he looked into Liaison, even if he had no reason to. His only interest in them was to find the girl, and that's done. He found it and did whatever he set out to do, return it to her dad, I think is what he said.

Even with Riddle coming after us, there's no reason for him to look deeper since he killed him and I took care of anyone else who was there.

No. The only reason he looked into this is that he knows I'm not done with them and the human trafficking ring connected to them.

This is his way of saying he wants us to work on this together.

I sigh, and I don't care about the look I get from the woman one desk over. I can sigh in happiness if I want to. I'm a grown-ass man.

The rest of the file is a lot of information I really want to get into right now, but Kat gave me to go-head to look into Korymaro; wants a full report on it, in fact. And because she's caught on that I'm a lot better at this than I wanted her to believe, I can't say I did all I could anymore.

If you weren't so dirty, Korymaso, and the person behind you, this might be a harder decision, but you don't get a stay of execution because my hunk handed me a gift. I'm taking you down, and then I will enjoy my cake.

Anyway, I'm going to need the work Tristan gave me so I don't end up jerking off before I see him again.

I grin and get to work. Time to crack more shells and see who's hiding behind them.

Chapter 08

The unfinished building is fenced off, with signs indicating access is prohibited. The walls are up, with the windows covered by plywood. Eight stories in height in this commercial neighborhood means that eventually, offices will fill it.

Right now, it's being occupied by someone I need to kill.

The guards patrolling the construction aren't the usual police rejects. These don't wear uniforms other than leather jackets that try too hard to be indigenous. The directional microphone picks up Spanish, English, and French, as well as dialects I can't identify. If the goal is to make their conversation difficult to understand, they have succeeded.

I arrived in Phoenix late morning, leaving only after sleeping for ten hours. Falling asleep was too difficult; I kept wanting Alex there—Bart there to hold. The thought of taking the drug sent boxes rattling out of control and my hands shaking too badly to open the safe, even if I wanted to take it.

It will be months until I can trust myself to only take one. Ideally, it will be years before I have to put this to the test.

I almost didn't tell Asyr to forward what they had found on the trafficking ring to Bart. They know who he is, and questioned why I'm involving an inferior hacker, so I instructed them to send it out of spite before I regained control of the boxes. I don't know which is the best hacker, and that is irrelevant. I will use whoever I see fit.

The drive took me over eight hours. Even driving through the night, I kept to the speed limit. Unlike Bart, I can't afford to be noticed by an over-eager state trouper.

With my Phoenix locker destroyed the last time I was here, I am limited in my resources. Finding an appropriate location for a new one is something I need to make happen soon.

Asyr provided me with what they could find about the location where Emil's phone GPS places him. But other than the construction company, site address, and employee roster, too much is handled under the table within this industry for them to have access to more. Normally, I would acquire the physical ledger, but I don't have the time now.

And tracking down everyone involved can wait until after Emil is safe.

I picked up the master key I ordered from the Locksmith on my way to the site and set about surveying it.

Three hours of it tells me little more than the gang guarding it is composed of a dozen members. No one comes in or out of the building.

Boxes glow and rattle, urging me to go in and put a .50 caliber bullet in each of their heads. I silence them. I have no idea of the time frame I am looking at to accomplish this, but even my most generous estimate does not give me what I need to properly dispose of those bodies.

And something is off about the situation.

Why is there only a local gang for security? Would someone from the east coast have a contact here they trusted to handle it without supervision? Why has no one come out or gone in? They are expecting me, leaving Emil's GPS on makes that clear, but they don't know when I'll make my move. Why did no one go for food? The cars parked in the site's lot are old, worn. The types no one would even bother stealing.

The man I spoke with didn't have an educated lexicon, but it was also not filled with street slang. Blue-collar, at most. He works, after a fashion. He can afford a good car, if not a recent one.

So why do I not see something matching that in the lot?

There is the underground parking lot, but it's boarded up, and the area before it only has trails of people walking, not vehicles.

I will subdue them. If it becomes necessary, I can kill them once Emil is safe.

Without my locker, I am restricted to what I put in the trunk of the Chevelle. I decide against a trip to Jofre. This will not require special ordnance. What it requires is a change of clothing. My attire marks me as a professional. I need to come across to the gang members I will interact with, as nothing more than a thug.

Without my locker, that requires a trip to a series of second-hand clothing stores for ripped jeans, a T-shirt, and a jacket. I avoid color schemes that I know are employed by gangs. I didn't recognize their colors and while a gang war isn't something I mind, there are chances its repercussions could impact my assets in the city.

A hoodie and ski mask complete my ensemble. The first planned, the second a lucky find in a city that has never seen snow. It will be hot under all this, but it ensures I will not be recognized. The mask also means I only need a small amount of Caucasian skin color around my eyes to add an extra layer of confusion to my identity.

I am back at the site with the setting sun. I tape my gloves to the jacket's sleeve, the pant leg over my boots, and zip the jacket up. I confirm there is no possibility of skin showing, then make my way past the fence. The piles of construction equipment and elongating shadows give me ample places to hide as I approach the building.

I am behind my first victim before he knows it. My Arm squeezing around his throat keeps him from calling for help while the flow of blood to his brain is blocked. He trashes, but I have height and strength over him. Then he's still. I drag him behind a stack of cement bags and zip tie his wrists and ankle. I make a ball gag of his shirt to keep him silent.

I pat him down for a gun and don't find one.

Once he wakes, it will only take me minutes to escape, but I only need time to subdue the others.

Boxes who push for their death; leaving anyone alive is too much of a risk. I silence them. Without all the information, it is the lesser risk. Their death may be part of the ploy this site represents. I saw no law enforcement, but I didn't have the time to do a thorough investigation of the area.

I subdue the next two similarly. The only mode of contact on them is their phones, so no quick way to do checks. One I staff under a motorized loader, the other in the back of a pickup that has been left on the site. Neither have guns either.

The fourth member is stronger than expected and breaks out of the hold. Instead of calling for reinforcement, he comes at me. Three strikes later, he is unconscious. His bloody nose leaves a trail to the back of the porta-potty where I leave him.

Also unarmed.

The next one goes down easily, but I don't stash him. He is the last one I can locate. The others have noticed the missing and have taken refuge inside. It takes listening to three doors to find them, arguing.

The lock is electronic. I couldn't know what model they would use, which is why I got the Locksmith's Master lock. It is slower, but there are few locks it can't crack. I slip the card in and lights turn yellow, letting me know it's working.

In the two minutes it takes, the voices raise and drop and raise again. They use enough Spanish I work out they are figuring out who should go out to look for those missing. Something in broken French that might be a veto. It's not what they are being paid for.

The lock clicks and I'm inside quickly and quietly.

The arguing doesn't slow.

The walls are unpainted for ten feet, then it's only metal scaffolding. Their shadows move among bright light. Floodlights, I confirm looking around the end of the wall, creating the well-lit

circle where they stand, leaving the rest of the floor in darkness.

The seven gang members are the only ones there. No Emil, no white man from Boston. They may be on another floor. None of them have guns, which is unusual for gang members.

I use the distraction their arguing cause to dart in and grab the closest one to the edge of the light. He trashes as I pull him and knocked over a stack of planks before growing still.

When the reverberation from that ends, the silence is total.

The zip ties are loud as I secure him, then, as one orders for them to search the darkness and receives protests in response, I move. They are still arguing when I find the breaker and send the entire floor into darkness.

The shrieks are amusing and let me find two of them before the rest regain control of their fears.

Three left.

The lights come back on, and I am on the two in the bright circle before they can blink the spots away. They still try, but they hardly pose a challenge. One doesn't seem to know how to fight, they certainly have never trained together.

A box rattle, one that has been silent for a long time, and I wonder what I could make of them. How effective could they become under my tutelage? If I were in charge of all of them, how long until Phoenix was mine?

The last one screams as he reenters the light, and even distracted by bringing the box under control, I bring him down quickly.

With him down, the only sound is the moaning of pain. I am not gentle as I restrain them. Eleven young men, not even twelve, here to what... not stop me. They could never do that. Slow me? Why. Test my abilities? I look around. No cameras I can see, but I notice the stool in the center of the lights, with the phone resting on it.

It is what the lights were illuminating, and would have been obvious if they hadn't taken refuge inside and distracted me.

The phone is old. A flip phone design, much like mine. It's scratched and scuffed, but it's been treated with care.

It's Emil's phone.

Under it is a folded piece of paper.

Let's see how easily you can find him now.

P.S.

If your phone had been on, I might have told you coming here was a waste of time. Then again, maybe not.

I silence the boxes before I throw the phone in anger.

Finding the phone's location was too easy. I knew that.

I calm. Anger doesn't help.

I pocket Emil's phone and study the note. The handwriting is neater than I expected. His voice made him out to be someone gruff, but this indicates a refined side. Someone who took the time to apply himself to shaping letters properly. A patient man.

Patience indicates a planner, and the gang left here supports this.

Plans can be taken advantage of.

I crouch before the closest of the young men and gently slap his cheek until he wakes. When I speak, I give myself a Boston accent.

"Now, you folks got the misfortune of getting between me and the guy I'm after. Right now, you're nothing more than an annoyance, so I'm not angry yet. Give me a reason, and you'll find out how all I did is me not being angry as I beat all of you up."

He looked at me defiantly; it goes away at my lack of reaction.

“Did you speak to the guy who hired you?”

He shakes his head.

“Who here spoke with him?”

The young man’s eyes shift left before he shakes his head.

I look at the two tied-up men as I stand. “It’s simply. I need to know where he went. You tell me that and I leave, then you can get yourself out of this. The longer I have to stay in this fiery hell, the angrier I’ll get. The angrier I get, the more painful it gets for some of you. If I get angry enough, your pain might end, permanently.”

“Hey, no need for that,” the larger of the two says. The screamer, who through loud meant intimidating. “We got hired to rough you up. Only talk I did with the guy was when he told us no gun and to leave you unconscious.”

I crouch before him, and I grab his leg as he crawls away. “Did he tell you anything else?”

“No...” He trails off.

“But?” I squeeze his ankle to prod him.

“I overheard him with another of his guys about Portland. I guess the heat and dryness made him want the cool and wet of the ocean and the rain.”

The one next to him laughs.

“What did the man look like? Sound like?”

The young man shrugs. “White. Wrinkled face, short white hair. He talked like you, but sounded more like us, if you get what I mean.”

“Less-educated?”

“Yeah.” He frowns. “What a minute. I’m plenty educated.”

They know nothing of importance and they can’t tell the man anything he won’t already have forced Emil to tell him. If time wasn’t an issue, I would remove them, just to be sure. I take the young’s man’s phone. It’s unlocked.

I stand and walk away.

“Hey,” he calls after me. “What about us?”

I dial 911.

“You got yourselves into this mess. I suggest you get yourselves out of it. Quickly.”

* * * * *

I enter the shopping center looking like a thug and leave it looking like myself. I need a shower, but that has to wait. I have plans to make.

Portland.

Not Oregon, as they imagine, but Maine. It’s where I left Thomas Master’s body to be found.

He was too visible a person to simply vanish. I made the trail leading to the evidence of how he abused their trust clear enough that they wouldn’t look beyond the obvious for why he died. He pissed off the wrong person among them.

It’s four days to Portland unless I push myself, but all I gain this way is exhaustion. A box rattles, and I think of the safe in my workshop with the bottles waiting for me. If I don’t have to sleep, I can be there under two days and I will be functional.

I close my hands on the steering wheel to keep them from shaking. I want that clarity, but Emil will need me beyond the rescue, and if I take the drug again now, how long will I be able to resist the temptation after?

I call Jacoby as I drive, extending how long I’ll be away for one month. He doesn’t ask why; he knows I won’t answer. I disconnect and consider my phone. My usual procedure is to leave it turned off unless I’m using it. It doesn’t ensure I can’t be tracked through it, but it raises the odds I won’t.

But the old man tried to call me while I drove here. If I had taken the call I could have saved time, gotten him to reveal something. Something in his note makes me think he might try again; if

only to gloat. I should turn it off, but I need the possible information a conversation with him will give me.

I leave it on and put it back into its pouch on my harness.

Then I leave the city via a route that has no cameras looking at it.

Chapter 09

You ever had a night where you just can't sleep? You know, when your mind won't shut up and there's nothing you can do about it?

Last night wasn't a problem. As soon as I got home from work, I was on the computer looking up the name Tristan gave me—yeah, yeah, someone else got it, but he saw to it I was sent the name. When I passed out, it was out of exhaustion.

Today, I was running on coffee. Work kept me busy, but nothing extraordinary. Testing the security of this or that company. Borderline 'keep busy' work, but it kept Tristan off my mind. Tonight, the plan was to sleep. I mean real proper sleep. I showered, ate; sent a couple of millionaires down the route to bankruptcy as a reward for supporting those China companies still using child labor people love so much because of how cheap they are.

I even stopped drinking coffee an hour before bed.

Well, drinking as much of it, so I could sleep anyway.

It didn't help.

Two hours later and I'm lying there, doing everything I can to not think of this hardon I've had since partway through my shower and that I can't do anything about. I always believed not jerking off was easy. I mean, it's just about not reaching down and jerking it.

Yeah, turns out, that's harder than you think, especially when your cock's already slick from soap. Getting myself to stop while in the shower was a lot harder than it had any right to be. Almost as hard as I was.

Still am.

Ah!

I am so funny.

Humping the mattress isn't jerking off, right?

Argh. Why didn't he just say I wasn't allowed to use my hands? At least then I'd know I could do this. Maybe work toward getting more flexible and sucking myself off. Maybe if I cum hand's free from a dildo up my ass, it won't count?

Ah man, I miss his cock.

I try to think of something else, but when I close my eyes, all I see is his muscular body. Not even sweaty as he grabs me and slams me against a wall, shoves his cock up—

Argh. Stop it.

I need to sleep.

Maybe I just need to work on the Mexico angle some more. Only I already got what I can off the net. For more, I need to break into one of their property.

Damn it, didn't I say I needed sleep?

And that isn't a 'me' thing anymore. It's a 'us' thing. We are going to go after them together. Me and him. We're a team. Bart and Tristan. No. Tristan and Bart; that's better. Where he goes, I go.

We will destroy the Fernan together.

I'm out of bed and in the kitchen. The coffee machine is going and the aroma of darkness is spreading. I catch myself humping the cupboard door and groan. I'm never going to last. Definitely won't survive this until the weekend. I don't even want to think of the friction of wearing pants.

I make my voice rough as Kat's office number rings. Once her voice mail message is over, I cough and start. "Kat? It's Bart. Sorry to do that, but I can't come in." I cough again. "I caught something. Must be all those hours I've been putting in. Overworked myself. I should have listened

to you. Anyway. I'll call when I feel better."

I end the call and drink coffee from the carafe before filling the three travel mugs on the counter. Where are the others?

I gather mugs and fill them, then grab my laptop. As much as the plan is for us to never stop fucking once I'm there, Tristan has this thing he needs to deal with, so I'll have to stay busy and I can do that by handling whatever research he needs.

Then I'm in the SUV, and it's the feel of the leather seat against my skin that indicates I forgot a step.

I should get dressed.

* * * * *

Doesn't that guy ever sleep?

He stands there in the middle of the dirt road, still wearing that AD/DC t-shirt, bathed in the morning light. Okay. Maybe he did sleep, and he's just an early bird. But don't they need like sixteen hours of sleep at that age?

I stop before hitting him, and I even lower the window before he's next to the car, all so we can get this over and I can be on my way to a blissful release. "Look," I tell Jacoby as he opens his mouth. "I know I'm not expected, but it isn't like I need to check in with you when I want to surprise Tristan with a visit."

The old man looks at me, unamused. "It's going to be quite the surprise, considering he isn't here."

"What do you mean, he isn't here? He has to be."

"You think that highly of you, don't you?" He doesn't smirk. I'll give him that.

"That's not what I mean. I need to see him. It's important." I need him to take care of me before my alls explode. Of course, it's my fault for assuming what he needed to deal with would keep him at him. I should have called, but— "what did you say?"

"I know love makes people stupid, but how about you pay attention?"

"Sure. What was that about him being gone a while?"

"Tristan called me yesterday and extended the delay before I destroy his place. If he doesn't call or return in a month, it's gone."

I'm going to ask who he thinks he is, that he has the right to talk about destroying my man's place, another time, because. "One month? I was supposed to visit this weekend."

Jacoby rests his hand on the door and leans forward. "Like I said. You think a lot of yourself. You think a boy like you's going to keep his interest long?"

"You think an old man like you's going to keep his interest at all?" I reply in the same deadpan he used.

Jacoby laughs. It's the kind of laughs that, in a man his age, could kill. I hope it does. I even consider helping it along for implying I'm not important to Tristan.

Then he can breathe again, unfortunately. He grins. "I have no interest in him. Never cared for men. Me stealing him isn't something you need to worry about. Doesn't mean he cares about you, though. Men like him, they use you and move on."

"No." I look ahead, in the distance, fighting the urge to start singing 'I can't hear you' as loud as I can to drown his voice.

"You think he'd have left without telling you; if you mattered to him?"

"You have no idea how he feels about me," I snarl and gun it. I fishtail as soon as I have enough momentum. I hit a pothole and the crate of empty travel mugs tips off the front seat.

I give the man the finger as I drive by, picking up speed.

Tristan cares about me. Maybe he isn't capable of love, and I don't give a fuck about that. But he cares. He wouldn't have asked me to stay with him otherwise. Not in that tone, if there wasn't something special between us.

And if there isn't.

If he's playing me, the way Jacoby's implying, then I am going to make him regret thinking of me as a plaything. No one treats me that way.

I don't care how dear of a monster you are. You do not treat Alexander Bartholomew Crimson like some ambulatory fleshlight and expect to walk away from that.

* * * * *

The closest town to the reservation is twenty buildings along the only road. There's nothing worth noting, other than one of those buildings is a Starbucks. That there's one here is impressive enough, but that it's open at six in the morning, with the sign telling me it's been open for half an hour, is mind-boggling. Those are big city hours. Who gets up this early in a town like this? Other than the barista?"

I drop the crate of mugs for him to refill and take a seat.

Okay. If he isn't here, where is he?

I pull the camera footage of the one place I know he'd got to, and I am reminded why he won't be going there. The cameras around his storage locker show me the rubble it still is.

Okay, if I don't have that as a starting point, let's start with him entering the city. There are only a few reasonable ways to reach Phoenix from the reservation. Highway sixty, the seventeen. If he wants to do the unexpected, he can take the three-oh-three to either Northern Parkway or the ten.

Instead, I catch sight of the Chevelle off a camera for the exit from the three-oh-three exit ramp to Happy Valley parkway, but not as he's exiting. As he's approaching it from the west. The sneaky bastard got off the sixty somewhere before the cameras start and used city roads. That's early afternoon on Monday.

Following him as he drives to North Mountain Village is easy. Once he's on foot, it's impossible. His car is parked for a few hours, then he drives to a Goodwill in the Promenade. He then drives back to the same parking spot in North Mountain Village and exits his car looking like a thug with the hoodie up. I lose him again, and it's nearly an hour later when he comes back, gets in, and drives off. He turns into a street without cameras and... vanishes.

I take one of the mugs and replace it with an empty one as I ponder how that's even possible. I ignore the barista's annoyed look. It's not like he has anything else to do right now.

I go over every camera around that road, looking for even a taillight of the Chevelle. He never exited it.

Or rather, he never exited it on a road that has cameras. Every road has cameras, but that doesn't mean every inch of them is covered. There's a lot of Phoenix that doesn't have a camera looking at it, but to be able to drive through all of it in such a way that you're never picked up on even one.

That takes a lot of work.

That takes planning.

My heart sinks.

That takes not wanting me to be able to know where he is going.

I consider asking for the closest bar so I can drown my sorrow, but by the time I reach the counter, I'm too fucking pissed. I pay for the crate's worth of coffee and head out.

I mean something to him. I have to.

He fucking means everything to me.

I can't tell you how long I've been waiting for a guy like him, because I didn't know he was who I was waiting for until I met him. I am not letting him vanish like this just because he thinks he'd done with me.

Please stay. The need in those two words. The pain. There's no way he fakes that. He can't be that good. No one is that good. He wanted me to stay. Needed me by him.

Okay. So you know to avoid the city cameras, but this is the twenty-first century. There is no way you can avoid big brother knowing where you are. I access the US's defense network and look

for whichever satellite was over Phoenix on Monday.

None of them.

You have got to be kidding me.

How can there not be one American satellite over the city? Okay, so who else might be spying on us?

Russia, really? It couldn't be our neighbors to the north? No, it had to be a country I never hacked into before.

The only time I might have been interested in hacking them was when the clown was elected, but I'd have to care about politics for that.

Fuck, there's no way I can get in there on this laptop. I got into the US system because I gave myself access, the first time I hacked them. It was to test my home system.

Okay, fine. We're doing it this way and fuck him realizing I cloned his phone during my visit so I'd have his number. I take out mine and enter his number from memories.

I know entire programs by heart. Memorizing a ten-digit number is child's play.

I stare at them with my finger over the send button.

His phone is an old flip phone, but just how old is it? It could be decades old. A quick search tells me it could be as old as the late eighties. Yes, I can clone a phone that old. And all I wanted was his number. What did I care if I didn't get anything else off it? GPS was introduced to phones in the late nineties, maybe the early aughts. Could his old phone not be too old?

Only one way to find out.

His number gives me the provider, then, because I already have access there, I use the police's network to convince the provider to give me the coordinates of that phone. I just get numbers, and I plug them into Google. The phone is outside Amarillo, Texas. That's easy then. I get on the forty, and I'll catch up to him.

He needs to sleep, eventually, while I have coffee.

* * * * *

Red and blue lights come on into the darkness behind me and I finish draining the mug before putting it back in the crate. I so don't need the delay. I look ahead as far as the high beams will let me see and imagine Tristan gaining distance on me again. I close the laptop and slip it under the passenger seat. It's better if they don't realize I was driving distracted on top of going way too fast for their liking.

How much will the ticket be? What state am I even in? I take five hundred out of my wallet as someone exits the police car.

Come on already. I have the time to dig through the crate for a filled mug and take a long drink, then wonder if this is the last one. When did I get them refilled? It was light when I did.

I remember to lower the window as they reach the SUV.

"Good evening, sir," the woman in uniform says. "Do you know how fast you were going?"

"Sorry, but I wasn't keeping track." I offer her the bills. "Is that going to cover it?"

"Excuse me?" she looks at what I'm holding in confusion.

Really? It's not that difficult. "Is this enough to cover whatever the ticket will come to? I'm in a hurry and I'd rather give it to you to deal with so I can get going. I don't have the time for you to write it up."

"Sir, are you trying to bribe me?" She shines her flashlight in the car.

"No, that's illegal," I said with a sigh. "What I'm trying to do is play preemptively. I really don't care what you decide to do with the money."

"What's in those?" The light is on the crate.

"Coffee." I put the money between my legs and grab a mug, take a sip, then unscrew the top. She looked in and sniffs it.

"That is a lot of coffee."

"I have a long way to go. Can we move this along?"

“Registration and Driver’s license, please.” She says in a frosty tone.

“Really?” I ask in disbelief.

“Sir, if you’re in a hurry, I suggest you comply. It will go faster.” She looks at my face in the indirect light. “Although I suspect you could do with sleep.”

“I’m good.” I hand over my license and the registration. “I have plenty of coffee.”

She walks back to her car, and I put the laptop on my lap. Her lights should keep her from noticing the glow of the screen.

Tristan is still on the outside of Memphis, as he’s been for the last two hours. At least it’s not compounding this delay. It just means I’m going to have to drive a little faster to make it up, instead of a lot.

I put it away, and look through the crates for a mug that isn’t empty, and it’s hard enough finding one I know I’m going to have to make yet another stop.

Fuck.

She returns and hands me my license and the registration, then her pad. “Please sign here. By signing, you are not admitting to any guilt, simply acknowledging receipt of the ticket.” I return it and she pulls out the sheets. On its back, she circles something. “That’s the number you can call to arrange payment. If you want to fight it, you fill out this section and—”

I snicker. “You really think I can talk my way out of this? How fast was I going, anyway?”

“A hundred and three,” she says flatly.

“That feels right.” I take the ticket. “Do you need anything else from me?”

“No, sir.” I can see that there is so much more she’d like to say. “Please drive carefully.”

“No worries there.”

I accelerate gently to the speed limit, then keep to that for five minutes. Long enough to confirm she isn’t following me with her lights off. It’s probably illegal, but it’s what I’d do. Then I’m off, leveling at one-ten so I can make up the time she cost me.

* * * * *

The pain in my chest forces my eyes open.

Why am I angled? What the fuck happened? I was driving and now I’m... I look around and can make out gravel and grass from the passenger window in the reflected headlights. How did I end up in the ditch, and why am I stopped? Fuck, I don’t have the time for this.

At least it’s still night, so this can’t cost me too much time.

There’s a knock on the window and I reach for the gun between the seats. It isn’t there. Where did it go? The knock comes again, and I lower it.

“Fancy meeting you again, Mister Crimson,” a woman says, and I make out the uniform in the reflected light.

“Aren’t you outside your jurisdiction?” I asked with a sigh.

“No. I caught you speeding as you entered it. If you’d waited a mile before crashing, you’d have been out of it. As it is, you get to see me again.”

“At least I don’t need to hand my stuff over again. How much is this going to be?”

“Why don’t we start by seeing if you can get back on the road?”

I give it gas and I see grass and soil fly behind me, but I don’t move. Once I stop, she walks around, shining her light down. She pauses on the passenger side front and her expression isn’t comforting.

“You’re not going anywhere,” she tells me once she’s at my side. “The passenger side front wheels bent. You might have snapped the axle.”

“Fuck. I so don’t have the time for this.”

“I’m afraid you’re going to have to make the time.”

I stare at her. “Did I say that out loud?”

“You did. Normally I’d write you up for this, but seeing as I already gave you a ticket, I’d be willing to overlook it, *if* you let me drive you to the motel six and sleep. I don’t think you’re in a

position to deny needing it anymore. I'm going to call Ralph and he'll tow this to the garage. They open at nine."

"Tell them to keep it. Is there a dealership around here?"

"There is, Wilbur's. But he opens at nine too."

I eye her suspiciously. "What you're saying is that there's no way I'm getting out of that sleep."

She smiles. "Unless you want to walk where you're going, yes, you're going to have to sleep."

"Fuck."

Can I get a car delivered? I'm out of Arizona, so the Crimsons don't have a depot close by. I sigh in defeat.

"Let me get my stuff." It's a good thing the laptop was still under the seat, since the crate falling would have broken it. I pull it up. Dump as many of the mugs as I can back in, then take the laptop, shutting it down before straightening.

"That much coffee can't be healthy for you," she says, taking the crate from me before I extricate myself.

"Trust me." I take the crate back before she can leave with it. "You don't want to see me off the stuff. I get murderous."

Chapter 10

Portland, Main, in the winter isn't a place I care to be in. It's cold, the sun is a parody of itself, and the roads are horrible. It means the other drivers are impossible to deal with. My last time here, it was the end of summer. The weather was cool, but everything else was tolerable.

The locker is still in the name I registered it under, even if the storage site changed hands three times over the last decade. The lock is mechanical and shows no signs of having been tampered with. My other security measures, while lower-tech than what I use now, are also undisturbed.

The air is musty, dust-covered everything, and the clothing rack will have to be burned, but it's still usable.

I have Asyr working the online angle, but I can do some of my own research that might explain why this has anything to do with Masters.

He lived in Portland and it is where I left his body.

I made calls while I drove trying to answer some of those questions. I called his old workplaces, asking for him. The number for his defunct charity, even the house he used to live in.

No one who I was asking for, and those who bothered looking into their records told me he was dead. His old house now belongs to a family of five. Two women raising three adopted girls.

I pull the old files I compiled on Thomas Masters when I was protecting Emil from him, then destroyed the man. If the old man expects me to find him, he must believe I have a way to do so using Thomas's information. It will be something obscure, that will take time for me to find, so he will have more of it with Emil.

But it will be there.

Thomas Masters was born in 1945. To Barbara and Isaac Masters. He had no siblings. He went to St John's Catholic School. Other than anything relying on public speaking, his grades are average. Masters excelled at using his voice to get what he wanted.

I smile as he reminds me of Justin, who could charm me and our father within a year of learning to speak. Of course, once our father realized what had happened, he beat Justin, and me for protecting him. Justin doesn't use his voice now, if he had, I would have quickly found him, but whatever he does, I am certain of this. He is utterly charming at it.

In his early career, Masters when from job to job until he settled on radio, then specialized in Christian radio, and finally, an extremist station, where he stocked hate to build his audience. By the time I killed him, his success had caused him to begin a shift to television.

Masters only had sex with women; which lead to Emil's mother. Then his birth and Master's desperation to remove him. Of all the women Masters had sex with, Jasmine was the only one he couldn't prevent from giving birth because she was out of state at the time. It might be luck, or she knew what he would force her to do that caused her to spend a year in Pennsylvania, at her parents' farm.

While many of the people connected to Masters could be angry at me for killing him, even with the evidence documenting how he took advantage of their gullibility, none of them knew about Emil, let alone his connection to me.

And this is about Emil, not Master's death. The old man hoped I'd react to the abuse he has committing on him, but this kind of violation is an act of power over the person, not those around them.

But how can it be about Emil?

I missed something, so I start from the beginning again.

Thomas Masters was born in 1965 to Barbara and Isaac Masters, who were married... a quick online search tells me 1968.

I pause.

Would a Catholic couple wait three years after the birth of their son to get married? Today, they might never bother, but in the sixties?

A search on Barbara Masters in public databases tells me she was born Barbolina Bogdana. The name is Russian. I also locate a driver's license in her name with a Boston address. The old man's accent makes that where he's from, and Masters was born there too.

I hadn't looked into the particular of his birth before since both his parents or any close relatives were dead.

Masters' birth record includes a scan of the original paper. It lists Barbolina as the mother, but the father's name is hidden. The father didn't want to be on the form; might have found out after the fact she had named him there. The form is numbered, and a call to the hospital confirms they have an old document archive.

I take a Desert Eagle out of the locker and clean it. That done, I consider my phone.

The old man didn't call in the four days I needed to make it here. There is a chance he will, but now that I have arrived, do I want him to? Is there anything I could get him to tell me that I won't be able to discover by myself? Anything important, at least?

I turn it off, place it in its pouch and leave. I need to make a stop to buy ammunition, then head to Boston.

* * * * *

Gaining access to the physical records is easy. A rumpled suit, the haggard expression of an overworked government employee, and the right identification had an administrator escort me there, then hurry away so I can get on with the work I explained I needed to do in a droning voice.

The records are stored in boxes marked with a year. Within the boxes, there is no order and my mental boxes try to escape their shackle so I will alphabetize them, the way they should have been done from the start. They also are not stored by categories, nor do they respect the numbers printed on the top right of each form.

I let a box rattle unfettered for a few minutes as I consider what I would do to the person responsible for this chaos, then silence it.

Thomas Bogdana's birth certificate is paper nearly as thick as cardboard, and there the father's name should be is a stroke of something blue, mate, and thick, but thinking on the right end with a fingerprint visible.

Back then, nurses were women and would be the easiest to access to hide information. The fingerprint could be his, looking to confirm this, probably nail polish, would stay in place, before paying her. I take a picture for Asyr to check, but I don't expect anything. This man is too careful to have a criminal record.

I use the solvents I brought, and start with the weakest, moving up until one softens the polish enough some can be wiped away. I take my time. Protecting the information is the important part.

When letters in dark ink are visible, I have a name. Gregory Romanovich.

A stop at an internet cafe tells me there is no one by that name listed in the Boston area, but a few Gregory R, and one Gregory Roman. I start with him, and find a name change form in the Boston registry in 1966, one year after Thomas's birth, from Gregory Romanovich to Gregory Roman. Gregory Roman was enlisted until 1971, then was a dock worker for Igor Romanovich, possibly his father, definitely a relative. Igor died as a result of a beating a few years later. Gregory rose among the workers until he was in charge of the docks in 2002.

As far as I can find in the public records, this man has never had any contact with Thomas, or his mother. Gregory does not have any other family, but calls to the Boston police inform me he

had been subject to many investigations, even if they never amounted to anything.

Running the dock, with enough influence to stifle police investigations speaks to organize crime connections, if not direct involvement.

The number I have from the directory is a landline, so I can't use it to track him with it. I find his name linked as a public investor or part owner in construction businesses, import-export, a failing taxi company as well as a handful of small, local, businesses. One of the construction companies catches my attention because it's the only one that does work outside of the immediate Boston area.

It includes an office building they are currently renovating, in Portland. Looking into who owns the building, gives me a holding company out of Springfield, with Gregory Roman on its board of directors. Gregory has connections throughout Massachusetts. It could be what made the police suspicious.

The building itself is on Portland's West End, on the line between that neighborhood and Downtown. It spend two decades with renters moving in and out until it was bought eight years ago by the holding company and has been empty since.

Boxes shake at how weak the link is.

I silence them.

It is a link to Portland.

It is the only lead I have.

* * * * *

The windows are covered with plywood. The brick has been removed in large patches, one side the new brick has been laid.

From the outside, the renovation is legitimate but has not progressed in the last five days. The company's website lists difficulties with the worker's union as the reason, but I find it convenient that five days ago Gregory called me.

During the time I surveyed the building, only one car worth noting passed by; the security firm watching over the site. It slowed, then continued. No one had entered or exited.

With the proper supplies, a building this size can house people for months, or years, depending on how many are there.

Boxes rattle, urging me to rush in. To kill this man who undid my work; who is causing Emil more damage as I stand here and observe. I don't silence them, but I temper their need, control it. They fuel the monster that I can be, the one who landed me in prison multiple times until I gained full control.

I know I should wait and gather more information, but this time I agree with the monster. Gregory should not get any more time with Emil if I can help it.

I smile.

That is something I can help.

* * * * *

Getting into the building is easy.

So easy I don't need to pull the electronic lock breaker from the Locksmith. All I have to do is pick one lock. There are no cameras, no security system, and no on-site guards.

It is almost as if Gregory worries I would not be able to enter otherwise.

Inside the lights are on, as is the heat. I shed the winter jacket and hide it behind a stack of drywall waiting to be put up in the first room.

I find the first guard by listening.

The language is Russian, but with a thick English accent. Does Gregory think not speaking English would hide what they say from me? He should have picked a different language.

The man complains about being away from his family. On one-sided conversation with the other side pushing for the importance of money, based on the replies I hear. Peeking around the corner I see him. A large man in jeans and a shirt. The holster under his arm has a Glock with a

suppressor already screwed in.

He complains to the person on the other side of the earpiece that money will not keep his wife's bed warm or hug his kids. They need him to be there, not here. That is this doesn't end soon, the old man can look for someone else to guard the package downstairs

The package has to be Emil. Now I don't have to search the entire building.

The priority is keeping Emil safe, then, I will use him to control where and when Gregory and I have our confrontation.

The conversation ends with an angry finality that lets me know the other will not reestablish contact unless vital. I reach the man before he's done fuming and strangle the surprised shout with my arm around his neck. His gun clatters to the ground as I tense. The box demands his death for the part he played in Emil's suffering. Then, with the snap of his neck, he is limp in my arms.

The door by where we stand isn't locked. The room smells of blood and sex. The bed doesn't have sheets and blood stains the mattress. A U-Bolt is attached to the wall next to the bed.

I drop the man and retrieve his gun; a Glock-17, nine millimeters. The loss in power is made up for by the stealth capability. No extra magazine and only sixteen bullets.

Only moving down reduces the number of people I will encounter, but each I have to kill on my way to Emil increases the odds I will be discovered.

The stairs have a man guarding them, like the previous one, he is dressed in jeans, work boots, and a shirt, and had the feel of someone more used to working in a factory than standing guard. He holds a Glock-17, so I put a bullet in his heart and head. His drop to the floor makes more noise than the shorts, but no one comes. With the blood and brains on the wall, I don't bother hiding the body. I leave him his gun, taking only the magazine.

The stairs go down only one floor to a cooler and damp hall. I check every door I cross, but once I see it, I know I didn't have to bother. It's still wood, but thicker than the frame. Probably hardwood, and not hollow core. It also has a view-port.

The viewport's glass is dirty, but I make out an occupant in the far right corner. The room is longer than wide. Each wall, except this one, is made of cement blocks. The door had no security I can find, not even a lock. Another indication, along with how few guards I encountered, that this is a trap.

The question is how is it sprung.

The door fights me as I pull. The air in the room is thick with piss and shit. The mechanical spring at the top of the door has enough tension it will close the door through anything I have access to, so I take out a screwdriver and deal with it directly.

The wall is thicker than it needs to be, with groves in the door frame from top to bottom. Above my head is a metal strip. I now know how the trap is to be sprung.

This means that my progress has been tracked. The two men I killed happened either because I acted before he could warn them I had arrived, or, more likely, Gregory doesn't care who I kill.

I crouch in the doorway, keeping control of the boxes demanding I go to him. "Emil?"

He looks up, his green eyes visible through the filthy black hair falling over his face. He looks away and the motion lets me see the choker around his neck, and the chain connecting it to a U-Bolt in the wall. On the floor are two bowls; dog bowls. Only had water, the other a mush that still hold the shape of the can it came from.

Newspapers are piled next to him, and on my left, in the corner furthest from him, are eight balls of them. I don't need to open them to know what they contain. Six have lost their shape because they were wet, and the other two have extra layers to keep the contents from falling out in flight.

This time, the boxes react to my need to kill Gregory in the most painful way I can imagine. No one deserves to be treated like an animal.

"Can you come to me?"

The shake of the head is small.

Of course not. It's why the door doesn't have a lock on it. Why bother when the prisoner can't reach it? Gregory also doesn't know how skilled I am with mechanical locks, or that I have a tool to deal with most electronic ones. He needs me inside the room to spring the trap.

I stand. There's no point in making him wait.

I step in.

I'm halfway to Emil when the metal door drops; I don't react to it. I crouch before Emil and he tries to move away from me, but he's already as far into the corner as he can go.

"Emil, do you know who I am?"

He nods.

"Do you believe that I will not harm you?"

He nods again.

"Then I need you to come closer so I can remove the collar.

"We can't escape." His voice is filled with fear and despair.

"That isn't important. I just want it off you. You aren't an animal. Not even animals deserve this kind of collar."

Hesitatingly, Emil pushes away from the corner, turning to show me his back. The clasp is welded shut, but it isn't a thick weld. If Emil had been willing to endure the pain, he could have broken it.

I use wire cutters to snip it apart and gently take it off his neck. Approaching steps send him back into the corner. When they stop, I stand and turn.

The door that dropped is made of metal bars, six inches apart. The man on the other side is at most five-eight. He's wiry, with a wrinkled face, white hair, and a satisfied smirk. He's a well-preserved seventy, or a badly aged fifty.

"I knew I'd get you," he snarls. "I knew you couldn't resist getting that boy toy back."

The boxes would have me reaching through the door and ripping his throat out for implying I'd treat Emil that way, and silencing them his hard. It would be futile, the guards I can't see would react before I reach the door. They wouldn't shoot to kill and injuries will only complicate the situation.

"Why aren't you shooting me?" Gregory asks.

I take the Glock out of the waistband, remove the magazine, eject the chambered bullet, and lob it at the base of the door.

"What about that monster?"

The smile I give him is nasty. "No one but me touches my Desert Eagle, Gregory. Please send in one of your men to try so I can show you what happens."

His surprise is good. It doesn't explain what his interest in Emil is, but that will come.

"Gregory Romanovich, you Americanized your name before joining the army. Five years of service, then joined your father at the docks. You stayed after he was murdered, and built contacts within organized crime. Used them to remove your opposition as you rose in power. Paid them by providing help for their own endeavor, but only when it suited you."

"Who the fuck are you?" he demands. "And how do you know all that?"

"I am someone who keeps away from people for a reason. No one enjoys it when I'm forced to leave my home. As for how I know? Do you think you are the only one with the right connection to make things happen?"

Worry flits across his face, but vanishes. Whoever he's afraid I know doesn't scare him enough to end this.

"The one thing I don't know is why you did this. Masters never cared about him. He didn't even want him to exist. Why are you angry with Emil now?"

"Now?" Gregory snarls. "You think I just got angry now? I didn't give a fuck about that woman's spawn, but I had plans for him, for the places he was going."

“That doesn’t explain why you are lashing out at him.”

Gregory points and the boxes nearly escape my control, but I don’t lunge for him, grab the arm and smash his head against the bars.

“That slut stole my money. I was supposed to get it, not him.”

“Money.” Of all the reasons for revenge, he picks the one have no respect for. “You aim to destroy a young man because I redirected the money you thought was yours?”

“You did it?”

“Yes.” I had Asyr do it. “Masters created a maze of legal jargon to ensure the money went to people who shouldn’t have it. I didn’t care, so I didn’t look into it, but now I wonder if it was even his work, or yours. Emil was his son. He was the only one entitled to it.”

“He didn’t give a damn about him!”

“A trait he seems to have inherited from you.”

“Once you’re both dead, I’m going to make sure it’s mine again. But first I’m going to make sure you see what that slut’s good for. Then, I’ll kill you right where you killed him.”

Why does where I killed Masters matter?

“Right there, where you’re standing. When I’m done with both of you, I’m going to gun you down right there.”

Only one reason for it to matter comes to me. The distance Gregory kept from Masters wasn’t because he didn’t care. Let’s put it to the test.

“I didn’t kill him here. I dumped his worthless body here.” His nostrils flare, he grinds his teeth. I grin. “I killed him in the woods like he was some animal.” I roll my eyes. “To be fair, I put him down because I’d gotten fed up with his incessant whining. For a man who incited so much vio ___”

“Shut up!”

I step to the bars. He didn’t move, but when I see them, the men on each side, again, more factory workers than anything else, have their Glockes in hand.

“Your son was a piece of shit that didn’t deserve to occupy space in this world. But at least, you weren’t there to make him worse, were you? Is that what you were afraid of? Or did you already have plans that didn’t include a kid in your life?”

The answer is in his eyes. Gregory is a man who makes plans and sticks to them.

“He stole your heart, didn’t he? You looked at that ugly little thing in his mother’s arms and you knew. You knew that it would destroy everything you had planned on doing. You couldn’t have that thing anywhere near you, so you sent it and its mother to Portland. But you couldn’t keep from looking into its life. Finding excuses to keep tabs on it. Of course, you didn’t want to know how well it was doing. No, you were just interested in its influence, the money it had. And now, you have none of that. I killed him before you had the guts to go and be a father.”

His hands are through the bars and around my throat. “I’m going to kill you! He was mine! You’re going to pay!”

I grin. He doesn’t have the strength needed to hurt me.

I enjoy his loss of control. I hurt him more with those words than I could with a knife. He will still suffer when the time comes, but there is something to be said for the damage words can cause.

He lets go with as much anger as he reached for me. “You’re going to pay.” His eyes flick to my left and he grins. “I know exactly how to make you suffer.”

He tries to slam the door shut, but the spring clangs on the bars and it bounces away. With a snarl, he walks away.

I use one of the newspapers to remove the balls from the room, then sit in that corner. This is now a waiting game. I cross my legs and watch Emil.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers.

“This isn’t your fault.”

“I should have lost your number. I shouldn’t have put it in my phone, but I needed it. I had to know you were there. That I could call you if I ever was in trouble.”

I can try to convince him nothing he did brought this about, but it isn’t what he needs. He needs conversation; to know he isn’t alone anymore.

“You never called.”

“I didn’t want you to think I was weak.”

“I never thought that, Emil.”

“You had to save me.”

“You were eight.”

He doesn’t reply immediately. “I’m not eight anymore.” This is still about blame for him.

“Why didn’t you stay with them?” I ask to distract him and because it’s the one thing I never worked out.

“They were nice.”

He says nothing more.

I should have thought about that.

No one breaks in the same way. Some, after a trauma, seek comfort. Others shun it. I did not have the time to—no. I did not take the time to understand in what way Emil broke. I saved him and that appeased that box in my mind. I decided that was enough.

He looks at me, my lap, through his hair. He bites his lower lip. “Can I?”

“Yes.”

He climbs into it; makes himself as small as he can. It was easier when he was eight. Now, like then, I need time to quiet the chaos among the boxes this causes and work out what to do.

I place my arms around him.

“I am the one who owes you an apology, Emil. I’m sorry for not protecting you properly. I shouldn’t have left you with strangers.” They were good people, my research on them was thorough, but they weren’t who Emil needed. I should have seen it, then. Not that I know what I could have done differently.

“No one will hurt you ever again, I give you my word.”

He cries into my shirt until he falls asleep.

I will always keep you safe,” I tell him, wishing it was Justin in my lap.

Chapter 11

I slam on the breaks as the dot on the screen vanishes, then I'm fighting for of the minivan and end by the time I win, I'm on the side of the road, inches from the ditch, and the only damage is the honking cars passing by, so that's definitely a win.

Minivans aren't designed for the kind of speed I've been driving at, or the sudden stop I just demanded of it. On the plus side, there is a lot of space for crates of travel mugs.

The laptop on my lap I'm tapping away to understand why Tristan's GPS has gone offline. I can only think of two reasons, he turned the phone off, or it's destroyed. There's not reason for him to turn it off, and I don't want to think about what it would take to destroy a phone in his possession.

"Fuck!"

* * * * *

"What I need," I growl to myself, "is a real computer."

No, what I need is a state of the art, over-clocked, Octo-core computer array. What I have is my laptop and three of the internet cafe's seven computers networked. I'd have used more of them, but they don't have the table space to bring them close enough to wire them together.

And it isn't even giving me what I want!

It's fucking good thing the coffee here's so good, otherwise I'd been leaving them a one star review. What kind of internet cafe can't let me do proper hacking, and why does Portland, Maine have such good firewalls on their public camera network. It's fucking city infrastructure, it should be under funded and clamoring for every hacker to come in and peep on strangers.

Well, at least this place is good for one thing. Letting me access Google to find a place I can access a hard line to the cameras.

That and their coffee, I mean it, some of the best coffee I haven't made myself.

* * * * *

Why does Portland, Maine have to be so fucking cold? What would take Tristan to this of all places. And why doesn't this truck have working heat?

The truck, tools and jacket I'm wearing, that's not doing anything to keep the cold out, belongs to someone named Albert. I found them by hacking into a private dispatching server. Imagine that, a private company server with weaker security than the city. I swear, this place will bring about the end of the world.

I'm parked next to a junction box in an alley and a wire connecting my laptop to it. The cracked window almost certainly doesn't help the cold situation. At least my travel mugs are insulated and the coffee in them still warm.

Six hundred box for the refill of a crate of them wiped the annoyance off the barista's face.

I can barely feel my fingers as I type.

Okay, I have Tristan's location when the GPS went offline. I bring up those cameras and easily find his Chevelle. A different angle shows me he's the one driving him.

I start start breathing again.

Good, now I get to kill him myself for bailing on me with instruction not to jerk off. Well, kill him after he fucked me good and hard.

Fuck I need to cum.

I jump from camera to camera as he drives around the city—don't leave!

Fuck, he left the city. And through a back road, so there's now way to know where he's

going. Maybe he got wind of a great coffee shop and he—no, he doesn't drink the stuff, the heathen. He's out of Pemmican? There's no way he left without the kind of supplies that would feed anyone crazy enough to eat that stuff for a year.

Okay, Bart, breathe. Before putting a bullet through your head at the idea do celibacy for the rest of your life, check if he came back. I have the information on his car, the visual parameter, so writing a search algorithm for the cameras if easy enough.

An empty crate of great coffee later and two refilled mugs I've left outside the truck, I find him again. He was gone for eight hours.

I'm breathing again.

"Where are you going now?" well, then. He's still hours in my past, but not for long

He parks in the Northwest. He turns into an alley and doesn't come out. Still hasn't come up a speed through to the present confirms.

Okay, so what's there that might interest him.

Insurance company, automotive supply, brewery, buildings under constructions, farming supply store. It's fucking long way to drive to renew his insurance in person, or get parts for his car, although the Chevelle's old, so maybe. And he only drinks water. If I can't convince him to drink coffee there is no way he's getting close to a brewery. Farming, really?

Okay, I am not going to find out anything from here. I unplug, refill a mug that I leave with the other two and drive off.

First thing though, I need a new vehicle, something with working heat.

* * * * *

His car is in the alley.

He isn't in it.

I consider breaking into the car for something of a clue. I'm not seeing any obvious security, so I can break the window, pick the lock, well, maybe not that. This is an old car, no electronic locks I can access.

That's not to say what security he might have added. Tristan is the guy who had his base of operation in Phoenix wired to blow at the press of a button, well phone call. The fact I don't see the security doesn't mean there is none, and with him it's probable highly explosive.

Okay, I need a different way.

I'm back in my car, this is a Lexus. It's gray, but it's warm. The sales woman was amused when I told her the only thing I cared about was that it was hot enough inside to be a sauna.

Okay, there no accessing the city's camera from here, but I already know that's a waste of time. What I do have are a lot of wifi networks, and today, just about every store security uses wifi.

Thank you, reliable wireless.

And thank you even more not security-conscious security device owners.

I have one across the alley and rewind until Tristan drives in and exits. He crosses the street out of this field of view. I find him in another, and it comes with a time stamp of three hours ago. I watch him move from one camera to another until he steps onto a construction site, well, renovation, according to the contractor's website.

I find every camera around the site, cover every exit, and confirm Tristan is still in there.

So I know where he is.

That means I need to get out of my new, warm, car.

I hate Portland, Maine.

Out of the trunk I open the brand new gun cases and take out the APX. I did another stop after buying the car. I did leave home rather under armed. I pocket the extra magazines into my also brand new, not thick enough, jacket.

I enter the building the same way Tristan did. The door is conveniently unlocked and thank God the heat is on.

Gun drawn I move in.

It takes two intersections to get a surprise. Or rather, to surprise someone. He gawks as me long enough for my to put the barrel of my APX in his conveniently open mouth. Thug is the best description for him. Jeans, button up shirt. Factory worker, if he has a job. There a roughness around his edges that is rather appealing. Definitely not a thinker here.

“Hi,” I greet him, “Please don’t do anything stupid, like reach for a weapon, or hit me. The safety’s off on this thing, and the trigger is way too sensitive. If you make my finger jerk, and considering you’re currently sucking the gun off, that one orgasm you don’t want to cause. Nod slowly if you get my meaning.”

He nods slowly.

“Are you alone in the building?”

A slow shake of the head.

A quick look up and down doesn’t show a visible gun. “Are you armed?”

A shake of the head.

“Is anyone armed?”

A Shrug.

“How many people in the building?”

Another shrug.

The guy’s way to calm about this. “your first time with a gun in your mouth?”

He shakes his head.

“Having a gun pointed at your face?”

He shrugs.

That explains the casual way he’s dealing with this. “There’s a door behind you. You’re going to back to it, we’re going in that room.”

I close the door behind me. I don’t remove the APX from where it’s comfortably resting. “A few hours ago a man came in. Black, taller than me by a head and with muscles to die for.”

He raises an eyebrow.

“Yeah, yeah. I have the hots for him. You would to, if you’re into guys. Did you see him?”

He shakes his head.

“But you know he’s in the building?”

A nod.

“Where?”

He points down.

“This thing has a basement?”

He shows me three fingers.

“What does a place like this need three basement for?”

He shrugs.

“What floor is he on?”

Two fingers.

“Why is he here?”

He shrugs.

He has been cooperative, so it’s worth a risk for more information.

“I’m moving the gun away. If you raise your voice above conversation level, you can kiss your brains bye-bye. Since this doesn’t have a silencer, it’s going to attract people and I’d rather not have that happen. We good?”

He nods.

I step back, keeping the APX pointed at his head.

He works his jaw.

“Who set this up?”

“My boss.”

“Do you know why?”

“I know better than to ask questions.” The accent is local.

“Since the building is standing, I’m guessing Tristan is a prisoner. Trust me,” I say as he starts to object. “Three hours is plenty of time for him to erase this building of the map. Is your boss here?”

“He left. He’ll be back in a while. Our job’s to make sure things stay quiet until he gets back.”

“I’m afraid you failed at that.” I nod to the APX. “Things are going to get loud once I break him out. Now, I need to figure out what to do about you. Any suggestions?”

“I’d rather you don’t kill me.”

“You are way to calm with a gun to your head.”

“You don’t know my boss. I’ve seen what happens to those who lose their cool around him.”

“Nasty guy?”

“You can’t even imagine.”

“Okay, then let me ask you this. Does he deserve to die?”

“No one deserves to die,” he answered easily and he believes it.

“Clearly, you aren’t a fan of the news.” I motion for him to get to his knees. “Should he find out before we get to him, will your boss kill you for failing to stop me?”

“Not if he thinks I put up a fight.”

“I’m not taking a chance fighting you, and I’m not kicking you while you’re unconscious.”

He nods. “I’ll take my chance with him killing you and not punishing me.”

“The first one isn’t happening.” I pistol whip him and he goes down. As he said, he isn’t armed. “I should have asked if it’s standard for thugs to be this cooperative. Those I’ve encountered to date tend to be in a hurry to try to kill me.” I pocket his phone.

I listen for voices and steps as I move through the building. I avoid a dozen guards before finding the stairs.

Two floors down and when I crack the door open, voices are moving away. I leave my jacket in the stairwell, it might not be good enough to keep the cold out, but it’s certainly baking me in here, and it’s too bulky. I should have cracked the thug’s phones and seen if he had a map of the floors. This place is a maze.

Fortunately, none of the doors are locked, so I slip into one anytime I head someone approaching.

When I find Tristan’s cell, he’s standing away from the bars, looking at me. It’s a small room with a stack of newspaper and a dirty blanket at his feet. That’s it, even if it smells like it’s been occupied for days.

He still wears his jacket, but it’s open. His brown eyes are cold. “Al—Bart. What are you doing here?”

“Me? What are you doing in there?” I indicate the gun in his holster. “You’re armed, how come there’s anyone left alive in here?”

“They aren’t my mission.”

A head peeks around his arm. Black curly hair around a pale face and terrified blue eyes.

“This is Emil,” Tristan says.

I close my eyes. “If you tell me he’s your son, I’m shooting you right now.” He had no right keeping that from me, if it’s the case.

“He isn’t. He’s who I came here to rescue.”

I look at the bars. There aren’t any hinges or locks. I’ll need my laptop to access the control. Probably a pneumatic system. “You let yourself be captured as part rescuing him?” I refuse to believe he was caught by surprise. “Why?” I test the bars to see if there any play left or right.

“So I could talk to the man who took him.”

“Why would you want to do that? Where are the controls for this thing?”

He steps to the bars. "It's gravity fed. I wanted to confirm what this is about."

I grab the crossbar and pull up. It doesn't move. "And what is it about?"

"Greed, revenge." Tristan grabs the bar with me. "On three."

We pull, strain and the bar raises a few inches.

"Emil," Tristan groans, "the papers, under it."

The boy, no more than sixteen put them there but the weight of the door is such they get compressed until there's only space for our fingers under it.

"We need something else to keep it open." I look around for anything we can use, but the hall's clear, as were the few rooms I hid in.

"It doesn't have to stay open. Only up long enough for Emil and me to get under."

"I can't support this while you move under."

"You won't have to." He grabs the bottom of the door, then nods to the crossbar. Once I have it, he tells Emil to be ready. "One, two, three."

We pull and it goes up a foot and a half.

"Now," Tristan orders.

The boy doesn't move.

"I'm going to lose it," I warned.

"No," Tristan growls.

"I can't hold it this way," I strain.

"Then grab the bottom. Emil, I said now."

"You can't hold it on your own."

"Alex don't fucking argue with me. Grab the bottom and pull."

I obey and the strain on his face is marked for the seconds it takes me to take hold and pull as hard as I can. It raises another half foot.

Without letting go of the weight, Tristan gets down on his back and moves until his arms are the columns supporting it up.

"Are you insane?" I demand.

Tristan looks at the boy. "Emil, you can't stay in this prison. I promised I'd protect you. You need to leave it. It's safe, I'm holding it up."

I look at him in disbelief. My arms are shaking from the strain. What is he doing letting the kid make up his mind?

"Alex is a friend."

"A friend?" I ask angrily. "Is that all I am?"

The bastard doesn't even acknowledge me. "He will keep you safe."

Don't you fucking rope me into whatever this is. "Yeah, I will." Come on, he's a kid. Even as pissed as I am, I am not that heartless.

It's enough. The kid gets to the door, crawls under it and plasters himself against the other wall, as far from me as he can. Tristan pulls his legs to himself and manages to rotate himself so they're on this side, his crossed arms are shaking and I can feel the weight shifting to me.

"Alex, you have to support the door by yourself for a second."

Before I can point out I'm already losing my grip, I'm screaming as it feels like it rips my fingers away. It slams down loudly enough my ears ring and with enough strength the stack of papers is guillotined.

Tristan leans against the bars with a sigh.

I rest my head against them. "You are fucking insane."

The kid, Emil, is in his arms. On his lap, curled up like he's a puppy and that is the one safe place in the world. The concern on Tristan's face is scary. I don't want to be the guy who hurt the kid. How did I miss he was naked? Or so damned bruised. Oh I so want to be there when Tristan catches up to the man who did this.

“What happened?”

Tristan shakes his head.

Fine. Now's not the time to deal with this.

He stands and Emil stays behind him, eyeing me warily.

I open and close my hands until the shaking in my arms subsides. Tristan stretches his.

“Are you okay?” I ask once I feel like I can lift my arms.

He nods.

I punch him in the jaw as hard as I can. It's nowhere near that hard after straining the way I did, but it's satisfying to watch his head snap to the left. “What the fuck is wrong with you, leaving without telling me?”

He rubs his jaw. “What do you mean?” There's no anger on his face.

“What do you think I mean? How about asking for my help with this, if nothing else?”

“This doesn't involve you,” he states.

“How can you—”

“Hey,” a man yells. “What are you doing—”

I have Tristan's giant gun out of its holster, turn, flicking the safety and pull the trigger. The detonation makes my ears ring and the recoil throws me back against Tristan. The man's head explodes.

“Fuck, that thing kicks.” I put it back in the holster. “How could you not think of asking me for help?” I yell, barely hearing myself over the ringing. “You were in Phoenix!”

“This doesn't involve you.” He takes the gun out and replaces the magazine.

“Are we or are we not together?” I yell again, even if the ringing is fading.

He searches my face. “I'm not sure how that is relevant.”

I groan as it registers he's honest. “You don't leave your partner in the dark about something like this. Don't you know what it means to be with someone?”

He thinks as he puts holsters the gun, and when he asks, there's hints of confusion in his voice. “You would have wanted to help me?”

“Fucking yes! I chased you here. Doesn't that tell you anything?”

“It tells me you're pissed.”

“I am, but damn it, do you get why?”

“Because I didn't tell you about Emil.” He tries to cover it up, but I can hear the uncertainty.

He has no idea why I'm angry.

The kid has stepped away and looks ready to bolt. I push my anger down, because as much as I want to be it. I'm not the most important person here right now

“We're scaring him.

Tristan nods. “He's fragile right now. He's been hurt deeply.”

“You're his safe place and I'm threatening that.”

Another nod.

I let out a slow breath. “I'm tabling this for the time being.” I fix my gaze on Tristan's cold brown eyes. “But once he's safe, you and I are getting back to this. You do not get to treat me like a fuck toy you can throw aside once you're done with it.”

There's confusion in his eyes. He really has no idea. “Fuck, how can he be so smart and not know this? I want to slap him, scream at him. Distant running getting louder reminds me there are more important things to deal with.

Tristan hands me earplugs, then a pair to Emil and puts one in each of his ears. Of course, that, he's prepared for.

I glower at him as I put them in, then take out the APX and turn to face the incoming forces.

Chapter 12

Killing's easy. I point the gun, pull the trigger and the other person dies.

Killing while needing to keep someone else alive only complicates the situation a little. I need to make sure I don't expose him to danger as we move, that he isn't who I'm reacting to, when I catch motion at the edge of my vision.

A parter helps. Alex watched out back. Bart, he wants me to call him Bart. The problem is that we haven't worked together often enough for me to predict how he moves. That raises the problem with motion at the edge of my vision again.

Being in a corridor helps. It limits where anyone comes from, limits their actions since they can't surround us. The problem is that it makes it easier for them to herd us.

Which is what they are doing.

At the intersection, men jump out of doorways firing at us. They don't hit me, and it isn't because I react fast enough to move me and Emil in the only safe passage. They aren't trying to hit us. Alone, I'd take advantage of it.

Bart fired and he joins up, pocketing the empty magazine putting a full one in. "What's that way?" He nods in the direction of the hall.

"I don't know." Then I add, because he doesn't know me well enough to work out the rest. "I took the stairwell that's down the other corridor." I fire three times in the men's direction before stepping back around the corner for cover. "How did you come down to this floor?"

He shrugs. "Didn't keep track. The other way I thing." He leans in, fires until his Beretta locks empty and leans back. "Do we force their hand or go where they want us to?" he reloads.

"Can you pull the architectural plans?"

He checks his phone. "No signal. Must be a jammer, because there isn't enough metal in this to Faraday the building."

I lean forward, fire twice take down two more, but neither fatally. That leaves seven men firing only if one of us shows our face.

"Emil, how are you doing?" I ask.

He's on the floor, arms around his knees, rocking. He isn't good.

"Whatever way we go," Bart says, "it's on us to keep him out of harm's way."

His box shivers in response at his concern for Emil, then settles. It's learning that now isn't the time for me to be distracted. "Emil, we need to move." I point to the only unobstructed direction. Bart moves. Emil doesn't.

He startles when I place a hand on his shoulder, but he finally acknowledges me. "We'll need to exploit any miscalculation on their part," I tell Bart as I help Emil up.

"I'm not sure all this warrants that kind of optimism." He stays close to the wall, testing every door. He opens those that aren't locked, scans the other side before closing the door again.

Those aren't how we'll escape. Gregory didn't think we'd escape, but he would still plan for it. He picked this building because he can control how we'll move. I haven't seen the cameras, but they are there. He wouldn't leave any of this to chance.

Once we'll reach the ground floor, our options will increase. It's unfinished, so as much as Gregory will aim to continue controlling us, wall won't stop us the way they do down here. Up there. Me destroying a wall means a way outside.

At the next intersection, we're forced left. "We aren't taking those stairs," I tell Bart once I confirm no one is following. The lit exit sign is too obvious. That is where they are leading of toward.

“So we’re going through them?”

I glance around him. Past the stairwell are three doors on each side of the hall. Each had two men aiming their guns at us.

Alone, or if it was only me and Bart...

“The stairs go up,” Bart said, looking through the window. “Clear as far as I can tell. But it’s a potential kill box.”

“There’s no point in Gregory herding us here, just to kill us in there.”

“So he wants you, well, us, now, dead elsewhere. That’s comforting.” His tone is annoyed instead of defeated. “Any thoughts on where he’ll do it?”

“He wants me to suffer for killing his son. He thinks that hurting Emil will accomplish that.”

Bart looks from Emil to me, the raised eyebrow asking if Gregory might not be right. The new box, Emil’s box, shakes. I don’t react to the tightening in my chest. I won’t acknowledge that even to him.

“Then he’s not planning on letting us leave the building,” Bart says, looking through the window again. “He has something planned between here and the exit.”

“To keep me from leaving. He couldn’t plan for you. I didn’t know you’d come.” His box shivers again, but I don’t smile at the idea Bart came all this way to help. Now isn’t the time.

Bart looks at me. “You do get the not everyone is as blind to this stuff as you are, right?” He’s annoyed again. “Anyone who bothered looking when we’ve been together knows I’d cross a lot more than the country to be with you.”

“He hasn’t seen us together until you were before out cell. He used Emil to draw me out, and I made sure to keep you out of it.” I realize the manipulation I attempt after the words are out, and the sickly glow of his box makes me regret it as much as his glare.

“Kept me out of this? Do you fucking expect me to believe this was to keep me safe?”

“No. I’m sorry. I didn’t think of you at all. I said as much earlier.”

“So you just lied to me, anyway?” His tone’s flat and I need a few seconds to calm the reaction his box causes in too many of the other ones.

“It’s a reflex. People want to think they are considered when others make decisions. I use that to put them at ease.”

“So you—”

“I don’t know what to do with you!” the box I keep my anger in flashes red in unison with his golden light. Trying to make one dark his hard, the other impossible. The glow on his box will not extinguish, only soften. I want to study it, its interaction with the other boxes.

“This isn’t the time for this,” I say, eyes closed and regaining control of myself. “We have to protect Emil and escape.” I look at him and Bart glances at Emil, his expression softening.

“How are you for bullets? I’m down to one spare clip.”

“I have three.”

He eyes me suspiciously.

I shrug. “Unlike you, I don’t waste my shots. You need something more powerful.”

He snorts. “That thing nearly broke my wrist. There can’t be enough exercises in the world for me to build the wrist strength I’d need, and the one I’d consider, you aren’t letting me do.” He makes a jerking off motion.

“You...” this time, his box reacts to another one. Disbelief causing it to pulse.

“You told me I couldn’t. It’s one of the reasons I’m here. You owe me one hell of a fuck at this point and I will get it.”

Boxes light up bright and hot, with his at the center. I want him, now, against the wall screaming my name. I’m pressed against him before I realize I’ve moved. The feel of the Desert Eagle in my hand instead of him when I put it on his side is what pulls me out of the blinding desire.

He’s as surprised as I am. We glance at Emil together.

He has his arms around himself; his eyes are glassy. He’s shutting down. He needs to be

somewhere safe so he can process what has been done to him.

Only, it takes me too long to make that matter over getting my way with Bart. Their boxes compete with each other. I don't understand why or which will win if I let them go.

I don't.

I silence them both hard.

I am in charge, not my emotions.

I step away from Bart. Move Emil between us. "We go up. Once we are safe, we can resolve all of this."

Bart nods to my crotch with a loopsided grin. "Think you can last that long?"

I am already soft. "Yes, and so will you." There is not room in the tone for him to question my order.

He swallowed and grumbles as he opens the door. "I am going to kill each and every one of them for this."

Emil doesn't resist when I push him to follow Bart.

When we reach the ground floor door, the men standing on the one above, aiming guns at us, make it clear this is where we exit. Bart looked through the window and motion me forward.

I look at the building's lobby with... thirty-one men standing two third of the way to the building's exit. All of them have the same thuggish look at the once we've encountered until now, except one. Those are clearly Gregory's men. Gregory is absent. Where I'd expect him to be, front and center, waiting to tell me how he will make me suffer, is a man in a black suit. He looks almost governmental, but the suit is too expensive.

Bart's raised eyebrow asks me if I know him, or what he's about.

I don't, but there is something familiar.

Boots on the metal stairs below us take away the time to reason this out. I holster the Desert Eagle. I won't get answers by starting a firefight.

"Only fire if I tell you to." I push the door open. "I want to see what this is about."

"What this is about," the suited man says, "is an opportunity my employer couldn't pass up. I was only here to deal with you, but seeing how you both cost him a lot of money recently, I think he'll appreciate my efficiency."

There's only one job me and Bart worked together.

"And who is your employer?" I ask, already suspecting the answer.

"The dead don't need to know the name of the person who ordered their new status."

I smile. "I'd still like the opportunity to thank them personally for the attempt, once it's failed." My comment angers the thugs, but the suit simply looks at them.

"You might have a point, so it's a good thing I brought my own."

Men in suit enter. Thirty of them.

I glance over my shoulder and Bart mouths 'how?'

Gregory is involved in crime, Liaison was deep in that. Asyr didn't uncover a link between that and anything on the east coast, but I paid them to look at a Mexico angle.

"Okay," Bart says, "at this point I have to ask. What do you people have against women? There's no way you believe they are too honorable or not strong enough to do this kind of work. If that's the case, once this is over, remind me to introduce any survivor to my boss."

"Why we employ who we employ is none of your concern."

"Why, the dead don't get to have their last wish granted? Wait, never mind, we'd be the ones stuck going over what the lot of you want."

"Bart is right. The only think this will accomplish is getting more men killed." The boxes are quiet. This is a situation they are used to. Survival is never a place for emotions.

The suit raises an eyebrow. "You even reach for that gun, and there's sixty guys gunning you down. My understanding is that the boy if your reason for being here. He is someone my boss has no interest in, so I am willing to offer you an arrangement."

I use the time he gives me to answer him to study the men he brought. Most have darker skin, do from the south. Their leader's accent is definitely not from Mexico, but they could be.

"I'm listening."

"My boss wants you dead. Mister Roman wants you to suffer. I believe his plan was to torture the boy in front of you. Fortunately for all concerned, my boss isn't quite as... well, he would prefer him alive to help him recoup some of what you cost him, so he's making sure Mister Roman is busy. I, on the other hand, am willing to let him walk away. It'll be simple enough to tell my boss one of them didn't know how to aim and the boy was hit by a stray shot."

Emil grabs onto me and I feel him mouth 'don't let them,' against my back.

Let them what? Take him away? Kill him.

The man smiles. "I think your decision will be easy. His live for your suffering and eventual death, th two of you. These men," he motions to those in suits, "demanded to be part of this because you hurt some of their friends." His comment makes them all from Phoenix.

Emil's grip tightens, and I understand that he isn't afraid of what they'll do to him. He's beyond caring about that. He is afraid of what I'll let them do to me, be cause of him.

"I didn't hurt any of their friends," I reply. "I killed them. I dismembered them once at a time, I watched them suffered. I didn't even take pleasure in it. I just did it because that is the only thing anyone who comes after me deserves." My aim is to unnerve them. The thugs are worried, but all I've done is anger those in suits. Some take off their jackets and push through the thugs. I can work with anger. Any emotion can be turned against the person feeling them.

"Since Mister Roman made your suffering integral to the deal, and these men do deserve payback in memory of their friends, they'll get to tenderize you before I hand you over to these fine gentlemen to finish off."

"Deal's is we get to kill him," one of the thug says. "Two of them against all of you, they ain't going to survive."

"We won't kill them, you have my word."

The man spat. "That's what your words worth around these parts." He lobs something at my feet. A pair of switchblades. I look up at him and debate if it's even worth acting offended.

I pull the K-Bar from my back. "I'm going to use a real knife instead of some toothpicks. Did you bring knives, Bart?"

"Yo know how I feel about them," he replied flatly.

I kick the two in his direction. "You'll have to settle for those then."

He looks at them, then at me, then Emil and me again. The worry is forcefully brought under control. "You're going to have to stop me. I can't promise I'll be able to tell him apart from the others."

"Emil, you stay against the wall. No matter what happens, you stay there, understood?"

He shakes his head against me, holding on.

I untangle him and crouch. His eyes aren't glassy anymore. He's fully aware of what his happening. And that isn't good right now. I bring his box under control and speak gently.

"It's going to be okay. These men can't kill me, do you remember why?"

He swallows and nods.

"Tell me why."

"You... you're a monster."

"And who gets to kill monsters, Emil?"

"G... good men."

I smile. "Do you thing there's one good man in this building?"

He glances at Bart who is staring at the switchblades at his feet, looking unsteady, but completely oblivious to our conversation.

"He doesn't want to kill me."

Emil looks at me again, then he steps back until he's against the wall.

Bart picks up the knives and closes his eyes. His unsteadiness feels more intentional now, as if he'd letting a piece of music only he hears push his body about. Survive this, I will to him, because I want to see what you can do once you gain control of that song you hear.

"Not that I expect anyone to stick to the agreement," I say to the crows, "but we all agree this is using our bodies and knives only? No guns?"

The suited leader looks around, then shrugs. "Why not?"

"And to make one thing clear. If anyone lays a hand on Emil during this fight, I will make them suffer beyond anything they can imagine." I fix my gaze on the leader. "You said he gets to be free after this, so if anyone her touches him, I will consider that you broke your word. You will suffer even more."

"Threats from dead men don't frighten me."

I grin. "It's living monsters you should worry about."

I step forward and away from Bart. The first three men to reach me are good, used to working together, moving out of one's way, taking advantage of one of them putting me off-balance. Every cut I inflicts costs me multiple punches, one of them slipped on brass knuckles.

But all they cause me is pain, not damage, and it's been me against multiple opponents my entire life. The first box I build, still in my father's care, was to house my pain. That is one box that never opens without my consent.

When the K-Bar slips through one of their defense, this fight is over, even if they don't understand that. The man drops to the floor and it's two against one. They don't even land another hit. The one with the brass knuckles is the next to fall when I lock his arm between mine and my side and open his stomach.

I turn to face the third. Behind him, Bart dances around men in suits and in jeans. Instead of holding two switchblades, one is now a Nimravus.

Three suited men detach from the crowd to come help the lone survivor. My attempt to dispatch him before they reach us fails and it's four against one.

I don't feel the pain, but by the impacts, I know they are causing damage now. By the time I bring one down, I have to be careful of the weight I place on my left leg. When the next one drops, I know I'll be pissing blood for a while. The third takes my K-Bar with him when he falls, and my right arm feels heavier than my left.

Nothing is broken. But I'm going to need the strongest painkillers in my kit before I open that box so I can properly see to my injuries.

The fourth man stares at me in disbelief.

The crowd is much thinner than it has a right to be, and the bodies lying around Bart are more numerous than they should be. I am angry that they are going after him. That they would dare try to hurt him.

I slam that box shut.

Bart is dealing with them. He is in no more danger than I am, and I am in no danger at all. Two more men fall under the flurry of blades so fast I can't tell what he's holding.

The suited leader stands there stunned, looking at the massacre he set forth. He snaps out of it as he notices me watching him. Then I have to deal with more men coming at me.

I deflect the first swing, moving him to take the hit from the thug. They don't know how to fight together. Don't keep each other in mind as they move. I move out of the way, releasing the man I'm holding, and the 2x4 hits him across the head, taking him down for me. I take it out of that man's hands, slam one end into another one's face before breaking it over this man's head.

I am now armed with two pieces of construction lumber with jagged ends. They cut and stab the men that come at me. I take more hits, but anytime the room threatens to tip, I will it to remain properly oriented. When I lose one of the piece of lumber it's because I can't hold it anymore, my arm going numb. I lose the seconds one because it's embedded so deep in a man's stomach it is wrenched out of my hand as he falls.

But it's okay. There are no men between me and the suited leader anymore.

The look on his face is utter disbelief as I take a step in his direction.

He pulls his gun out and I go for my Eagle in response, but my hand only jerks up before dropping back down. The injuries have taken their toll. The man realizes I am at his mercy, and smiles.

A scream of pure rage cuts through room and stuns the man in me in place. It is a scream I know. The scream of someone discovering there is something he is willing to set everything aside for a single purpose.

The 2x4 Emil holds slams into the man's head and there's a flash from the gun's muzzle. I jerk back from the bullet going through my arm. The man staggers. Emil turns the piece of lumber in his hand like it's a staff and hits the man between the legs, then he hits him in the side, and up the chin. When the man's down, Emil turns the 2x4 into a club and hits him over and over.

I smile.

For Emil to be able to do this, there is something left in him I will be able to build upon. Something deep and hard. I will have to be careful that I don't turn that into me, but I know what went into making me. Once he is done, me, him and Bart can—

Bart heads toward Emil, sways to that rhythm. Emil and me are the only ones still standing. Emil is the only one moving.

I scream, forcing my hand to move. All I can reach is my Eagle, and in my state, I don't know if I can manage a non-fatal shot with it, but I can't let him hurt Emil.

Before I fire, Bart has changed direction, coming at me. That song recognized me at the larger threat. Good. I can deal with Bart.

I consider my state, what Bart has done holding knives.

I hope.

The motions aren't as elegant as I've seen. He's moving through injuries of his own.

I block the swing, but at the blade, not his hand. There is no emotion on his face as he cuts through my flesh other than contentment. He is happy not to be in control.

I step away, swing, but he's already reacting to what I intended to do, so I change. I pivot and slam my elbow where he'll be. He staggers, surprised. I put my foot down to stop my turn and grunt as it gives out, and I fall on my shot arm.

My senses blur for a moment, when they are in focus again, Bart is over me, the blade moving in my direction. Emil's scream is approaching.

Their boxes explode and instead of competing as they trigger other boxes, they compliment each other.

I kick Bart's legs out from under him, and the 2x4 misses his head, pulling Emil off balance. Bart's head hits the floor and he lets out a pained moan.

"Emil, stop, it's okay."

His eyes are wild with rage. He winds up for another swing. One that had no chance of missing Bart.

"I said stop!"

My yell staggers him, and he looks at me, confused.

"He..." his mouth keeps moving, but no sound comes.

"I know, but it's okay. He's done. He won't attack me again."

Bart groans. "Not with the way my head's ringing."

"Emil, drop it."

He clutches it tighter.

"They're all dead, Emil. You aren't in danger." That isn't what he needs to hear. "I'm not in danger anymore."

Emil looks at me and something that might pass for sanity is in his eyes. He lowers the stud, then glances over his shoulder. I look at the mess he made of the suited leader as Emil drops to his

knees, throwing up bile.

“I remember that,” Bart says, groaning.

I look at him.

“My first kill,” he continues. “Once I realize what I’d done, I lost my lunch. You?”

My father had broken my ability to care by the time I killed my first man.”

“Bullshit,” he said with enough vehemence he has to spot due to the pain. “You care plenty. We wouldn’t be in so much pain if you hadn’t cared about him.” Bart has to let pain pass. “On the plus side, I definitely don’t feel like getting laid right now.”

I close my eyes at the ridiculeness of the statement.

Emil starts laughing.

“Bullshit, you care plenty. We wouldn’t be in this amount of pain if you hadn’t cared about him and come to his rescue.” Bart groaned again. “On the plus side, I definitely don’t feel like getting laid right now.”

I close my eyes at the ridiculousness of the statement.

Emil starts laughing.

Chapter 13

I'm pain

It's not the pain of my back being lacerated as I'm pounded to orgasm, but one so pervasive it becomes the entirety of who I am. I don't have breath, I don't have a heartbeat, I don't even have thoughts.

I certainly don't have a cock at the moment.

With the pain taking away the other distraction there is clarity in what's left.

I came here ready for a fight with Tristan because he left me. I told myself I'd kick his ass, but really, I was looking to have mine handed to me, with his cock shoved deep in it.

I was filled with indignant fury.

It's gone.

What I'm left with is knowing that I came all this way to be with him. I didn't care about the consequences. I crossed two thousand miles, crashed a car, had to deal with a cop and a sleazy car salesman, and endured this cold.

All that, do be with Tristan.

And I'd do it again.

So I'm left with one question.

Is this pain what love feels like?

A shadow falls over me. Reminds me I'm not actually pain, I'm Bart. I force an eye open.

The kid. Emil, Tristan called him, Kneels next to me. He had a white shirt on, way too big. Not to say anything of the jeans he's wearing. If gets up too fast, he'll just jump out of them. His green eyes give me pause.

They are hollow. I watched him kill a man. Hit him over the head with a two-by-four over and over until there was nothing left, and now, there's no emotion there other than a hint of fear.

But I'm the cause of that.

The music was steering me to kill him.

"Tristan said to take this." He offers me a gray pill and a water bottle. His voice trembles and he sounds so much younger than the fifteen he has to be.

"What is it?"

"Oxycodone," Tristan answers, out of sight. "Take it." There is no mistaking the order, and I fight through my pain to reach for them.

I laugh, then groan in pain.

Two weeks and I'm already conditioned to obey him.

Emil hands me the pill, then opens the bottle. Before I put it to my lips, and drown myself, he's helping me sit. He's a good kid, so I only moan a little at the pain. He then stands, holding the jeans up, looking pitiful, drowning in Tristan's clothes.

I frown.

Where did they come from? Not to say the pill I just swallowed and this bottle?

I look at Tristan, seated and leaning against a wall. "Did you have those on you?"

"In my car." He sounds fine. He moves his left arm in a circle while his right is in a compression cast. How long does Oxycodone need to take effect? Better yet, how many hours have I been unconscious for him to no longer feel the pain.

"That's a few blocks away." He can't have gone there before taking painkillers.

"Emil just returned from getting them."

“Bare-assed?”

“It’s fine,” Emil whispers.

“I need you to drive my car here, Emil. I need things from it you won’t be able to carry.”

“Tristan, he’s fifteen,” I protest for the kid. “He probably can’t even—”

“I’m nineteen,” Emil snaps at me. The steel in his voice surprises me, but it’s gone when he continues. “I’m just small.”

“Back it to the door. What I need is in the trunk.” He points to the jacket on the floor. “Put that on too.”

Emil does, but as he exits, I notice he’s barefoot.

“He’s going to get sick,” I tell Tristan once the door closes.

“We can buy him clothes on the way back.” He grunts as he pushes himself to his knees. I’m still staring in amazement as he gets to his feet with another grunt. Didn’t he say Emil had just returned with the painkillers?

“How can you stand? I can barely keep myself from falling back.”

“I’ve had ample practice at ignoring pain. I had to start young.”

“This isn’t pain, it’s the mother of all pains.”

“The Oxycodone helps.”

“Bullshit. There’s no way it’s working yet.”

“It will.” He stands there, looking at the bodies. “Until then, I have work to do.”

Fuck it. If he can, then so can I. I push myself to my feet.

He catches me before I fall back on my face.

“What are you doing?” I notice the lack of concern in the tone through my pain. Instead, there is annoyance.

“Helping.”

“By falling and giving yourself a concussion?” he pauses. “By ensuring you have one? That isn’t the kind of help I need.”

I try to push away, but he’s strong. So fucking strong. Or maybe I’m weak because of the pain, and I don’t need his strength.

“I can help.”

“Not right now. You have to give the Oxycodone time to work.”

“Like you are?”

“You aren’t me,” he replies, tone hardening, “so don’t try to be.” It softens. “It’s going to kill you.”

I try to break from his grip and fail again. “I’m not some weakling who—”

“You are hurt,” he cuts me off sternly.

“So are you,” I snap back. “You took a fucking bigger beating than I did. Your arm’s in a cast. All I have are cuts and bruises.” Okay, probably just once bruise that going through my entire body. And— “didn’t one of them break your leg? How did you reach me before I hit the floor?”

He points down, and I start at the two by fours duct-taped on each side of his leg. How did I miss that?”

“It isn’t broken, just fractured.”

“You say that like it’s any better.” And how the fuck can he tell the difference?

“We survived. Everything can be dealt with. Can you stand on your own?”

“Of course, I can.” I wrench my arm out of his grip, realize he let me go, and prepare myself to hit the floor. Only I don’t. I don’t even tip over. The pain’s receding. Does Oxy work this fast? “You got me angry, got my adrenaline up to help the pain killer kick in. You planned it that way, didn’t you?”

“No. You’re just stubborn and didn’t do what I told you to.” He looks at me. Evaluate me. “Since you can move. Help me gather the bodies. I didn’t get enough magnesium to cover the entire building, so we need to bring the bodies together.”

“You have magnesium in your car? What are you doing driving around with that stuff?” I have to be careful as I move. I can feel the pain pushing against the growing numbness.

“I knew rescuing Emil would involve killing people. So I grabbed what I needed from my locker to cover my tracks.”

“Didn’t that get destroyed?”

“The one here. I’m going to have to come back and restock it when this is over. See to the others and make sure everything is still usable. The wardrobe I kept here rotted away over the last decade.”

I stare at him. “You have a locker here? Like the one in Phoenix? You have others?”

“I’ve set one up in every city I had to operate in.”

I open my mouth to ask what the point was, but a car backs to the door, then Emil is inside, shivering.

Tristan studies him like he did me. “Help Bart gather the bodies. I’ll get those in we left behind in the basement.” He leaves before I or Emil can protest. Well, I. Emil is already pulling a body to the pile.

I stare at him, working when he should be making sure he wasn’t going to be sick.

“You should start working too,” he whispers.

We work in silence, which gives this the feel of being in the depth of a mine, chipping away at stone, or adding to stone in this case. Tristan returns with bodies over his shoulders, then goes back for more. He barely limps.

We still have bodies here by the time he’s done, and he helps with those.

The trunk of his car is filled with boxes. Survival equipment, Pemican, C-4, clips, each box marked with the caliber, clothing, as well as two ten-pound containers of magnesium and two of lye. He had all that in his locker? Then I remember the size of the one in Phoenix and it no longer sounds unlikely.

“You blowing up the building?” I ask, indicating the C-4 as he pulls a canister of magnesium out.

“That isn’t enough explosive, and there’s no time to get more.” He looks over his shoulder. Emil is adjusting the bodies to make the pile smaller. He lowers his voice. “Gregory wasn’t here, so we need to be gone before he comes with reinforcement.”

“Aren’t you worried he’ll try again?” I whisper back.

He shakes his head. “Once I’m better, I’ll come back—” he stops at my narrowing of the eyes.

The confusion in his is real, so I give him a hint. “Do I need to punch you again?”

I see him think, then he doesn’t look happy. “Once we are healed. We’ll return and finish Gregory.” There is no hesitation, no questioning in the tone. Just annoyance I’m putting myself in his plans.

“Was that so hard?” my smile falters as his glare is replaced with confusion again and I realize he’s searching for a way to explain himself.

“It’s unnatural.” Before I can press, he motions outside. “Can you tell me where the cameras are? I don’t want anyone tracking us.”

I consider pressing anyway but decide just him admitting that is progress. “I can lead you around them.”

“No. Leave your car. Erase any trace it’s yours. We’re going back in the Chevelle.”

“It’s not in my name, so that’s not a problem.” And any other I can deal with over the net. “The suits. The guy didn’t outright say it, but that’s linked to last week, isn’t it? It confirms there’s someone else involved. The Mexico information you sent me?”

“Had sent to you,” he corrects. He’s thinking again. “It must be.”

“That was a very loud ‘but’ you didn’t say.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t have enough information, and it’s possible what he said was a personal figure of speech. Where are you parked?”

Again I consider pushing, but this time, it's that if he doesn't have enough information, no pushing will help that stops me. "Not far from where you were parked."

"Get your things."

My things consist of my laptop and crate of travel mugs. All of which are empty. Fighting for our lives kept me from missing it, but now, I want a long, hot, drink of black ambrosia.

I mean, how else am I going to fight this fucking cold?

When I put my things in the back of the car, Tristan is waiting by the door, a flare in hand and a line of magnesium powder vanishing inside. He motions for me to get in as he lights the flare. It's falling as I get in the back. He lets go of the door as the burning crosses the threshold and in the car by the time the door is closed. I watch the fire dance inside until we've driven around a corner and I can't anymore.

* * * * *

We leave the city following my directions and heading West; I keep us from crossing any camera fields. We stop at the first Walmart we come across. Tristan takes a fiberglass cast from the trunk and replaces the two by fours with it. Then, with instructions for us to stay in the car, goes in, returning with two cases of water and clothing for Emil. He changes without getting out from behind the wheel. Or seeming to care we're there.

You'd think that after what was done to him, he'd be more body shy.

I grab the crate and start to exit. "I'm going to the Starbuck for coffee, you guys want anything?"

Tristan pulls the crate out of my hand. "You need water, not coffee."

"You have met me, right? I run on the stuff. I can drive us all the way home with enough of it."

"You're hurt and you need to stay hydrated. Once the Oxycodone wears off you are going to be weak and exhausted."

"Then I'll take more."

"No. I'm not risking you getting addicted." He takes a bottle of Tylenol from the glove box and hands it to me. "This is all we're getting. We're driving on shifts of no more than eight hours and we all sleep at least eight hours. We only stop for gas, and only at out-of-the-way places."

"What about food?"

"I have that in the trunk."

"You can't be serious. That's stuff's horrible."

"It keeps you alive."

"Alive should mean that I'll enjoy it."

I see Tristan smile for the first time since finding him again. "I'll have something for you to enjoy when we're better."

And that thought gets my cock twitching and that's enough for me to agree. "Fine, I'll deal with the food." Partially. "But I need coffee."

"No. You—"

"That's not negotiable," I cut him off. I have my limits. "You don't want to see me without coffee. That massacre I committed is nothing compared to what I'm capable of if I get decaffeinated." I glare at him.

"I could use a coffee too," Emil says and I grin in victory.

Tristan takes two from the crate and hands them to me. I reach for the crate instead and he twacks my hand with one.

"One each, no more. You can get a refill when we refuel."

I look at Emil for support, but he shrugs. Oh great, he's just an amateur drinker.

"I won't—"

"Alex, you don't need that much coffee," he cuts me off firmly. "One of those will keep the headache at bay if you pace yourself, and I will do it for you if needed. What you need is hydration."

"I can hydrate with coffee fine," I reply.

“Not as efficiently. This is not a negotiation. If you want coffee, this is what you get. And you are not to buy more travel mugs while you’re in there. You come back with more than these two, and Emil is the only one drinking one.”

“Fine.” I grab them out of his hands. “How do you take yours?” Traitor.

“One sugar, two milk.”

I grumble the entire way there, and it’s not all about how unreasonable Tristan is. It’s fucking cold. I’m inside when what he called me sinks in, but I’m busy planning how to get more than I’m allowed, so I set that aside.

I pay my way to the front, get the mugs filled, and get back in line. They’re empty by the time I’m at the counter again. Those I take with me back to the car.

Emil is in the back when I hand him his. Tristan is behind the wheel.

* * * * *

Four hours later we refuel at a gas station in the middle of nowhere. I go for a refill and drink two cups of the passable stuff they have at the coffee station. Tristan catches me as he exits the restroom. He doesn’t say anything, but the look he gives promises I will pay for disobeying him.

Well, since he’s already caught me, I grab a third as I fill a bag with food for Emil.

I hand it to him, along with his mug, and he looks at Tristan, who nods, before taking the bag. Twenty minutes after we’re on the road again, he’s curled up on the seat, snoring.

“I want you to go to sleep in four hours,” Tristan whispers.

“Why?”

He glances in the rearview mirror. “You and he need to get to know each other. You can do that while I’m sleeping.”

I stare at him, the implication hitting hard. “You’re keeping him?” He glares at me and I look to make sure my raised voice didn’t wake Emil. It’s not hurt that caused it, it’s surprise, nothing more.

“I can’t simply drop him off somewhere.”

His glare stops me from commenting. “Fine.” I am not pouting.

The silence lasts a full minute.

“He couldn’t stay with the family I left him with when there was a chance he’d get over what was done to him then. Now, there isn’t anyone who’d know how to deal with him. Who’d have a chance to help him cope.”

“Except you.” And no, that wasn’t bitterness in my tone.

“And you.”

Oh, nice try buddy. Trying to make me feel better by including me this time. Like I have any idea what it’s like to be raped over and over. Having no control over who’s going to use me. Not being able to scream because all that does is cause me pain.

I am not someone’s fucking support group.

Five minutes of silence later enough of my anger as dissipated my curiosity resurfaces.

“How did it happen?”

The reply isn’t immediate. “His father tried to kill him when he was—”

“Not that,” I hiss, and my anger flares until I realize he didn’t understand my question. “You and him. You drove across the country to save him. Are you saying you’d do that for anyone? I thought I was the only one that special.”

Fuck, I didn’t mean for my voice to catch there.

“I didn’t think you cared about people. You’re certainly cold and calculating at the best of times. You told Jacoby to blow up your hours if you don’t call him by a specific date. How cold-blooded do you have to be to get someone to blow up your home?”

“It’s just a thing. If I don’t contact him by the date I give him, it’s because I’m dead.”

“And that’s what I mean. People usually have some emotion in their voice when they say something like ‘I’m going to be dead.’ You sound like you’re reading it off a card.”

He frowns at me. "I'm going to be dead, why should I care?" Understanding dawns. "I'm not saying I'm going to lay down and let it happen. The day I die, I am going to take a lot of people with me. But I'm still going to be dead."

The pain that statement causes keeps me from saying anything. He doesn't see us growing old together. He just said I and going to lose him. Well, fuck that. He better expect me to die at his side with him, because I am not ending up alone again.

"You are special." The admission seems difficult. He glances at me. Then his eyes are on the road again. "No one's ever gotten stuck in my head like you have. I've always used them and moved on. You are proving to be... persistent." He glances in the rearview mirror.

"He's stuck there too now, isn't he?"

He looks at Emil's reflection again. "Yes, but not the way you are."

I look out at the passing trees and snow. So much snow. And I try not to think about the implication of that statement.

"I couldn't protect my brother," Tristan said. "Our father nearly killed us in his insane attempts at making us in his image."

"How old were you?" I'm careful about sounding too curious. This is the first time he's mentioned his brother.

"I was eighteen when he was taken from me. He was eight." Another glance in the mirror. "The same age Emil was when I first met him. Saving him from the thugs his father sent to kill him felt like an absolution for not being able to protect Justin. I did protect Emil. I killed the men, killed his father. I left him with a family that would love him the way a boy should be loved. Then I forgot about him."

I let him be silent. He barely spoke about himself in the two weeks I've known him. I know more about him from my research in his past than what he told me. I have the sense that if I push now, he'll just shut me down.

"I told myself that Emil was proof that if I'd gotten the chance, I could have protected Justin, made sure he had a good life. I wasn't going to keep him with me. The one thing my father taught me is that a monster is not someone who can have a child around him."

He falls silent again.

"When Gregory called to tell me he had Emil, it was like the world unraveled around me. I hadn't protected Justin after all, I wouldn't have been able to. I wouldn't have understood what he needed to be safe, and that would have put him in danger. Now, Emil's in my head too. He built a box there and its tendrils are slipping everywhere." He hesitates. "Just like yours."

Is he saying he can't get rid of me? I want to ask, to be certain. But what if that isn't what he means? He said Emil is different. What if that difference is that yes, he can drop me off on the side of the road and not look back?

"Do you understand what I want out of this?" I ask instead.

"You want to be involved in situations I caused, even if you had no part in causing them." There is no doubt in his voice.

"I want to be your partner," I say, fighting the exasperation. "I want to help you do this."

He frowns and I indicate Emil, still snoring.

"When I have to rescue Emil?"

"When you rescue other people."

He stares at me for a second before looking at the road again. "I don't rescue people."

I roll my eyes. "What were you doing when we met?"

"Looking for a girl."

"There you go."

"You think I was there to rescue her?"

"Why else go through all that?"

"I was looking for her body. To give her father closure before I went after the people who did

that to her.” He looks at me. “I don’t rescue people, Bart. I make those who hurt them pay.”

“Then I want to do that with you. I already do it on my own, so together will be better. I was looking into who supplied boys to a senator when we met.”

He doesn’t say anything, and I want him to. I want him to tell me that he too wants more than just that. Fuck, I know he does. He told me. Only it was after sex, so maybe it was just the orgasm?

I’ll take that over nothing at all, but do I want to know? No. I’d rather be able to make believe we have more.

I look outside, and there’s still snow. Fuck how can there still be snow? I can’t wait for it to be gone from my life forever.

“Alright,” he finally says. “You don’t know what you’re asking for, but we can work together. We still have the Mexico connection to deal with. Once we’re both healed, and we’re dealt with Gregory, we can work on that and you can decide if this partnership is something you actually want.

I’m about to tell him I already know it’s what I want, but metal hitting metal rings over me, then I’m thrown against the back of the seat, then forward toward the dash.

The sun spins out of control, Emil whimpers, and I try to grab onto something to keep the world from throwing me around again.

Chapter 14

The car spins.

Clutch in.

The SUV that hit me is out of view, also out of control.

Trees.

The road is in view.

Clutch out, one pump of gas, as light as I can without being able to feel the pedal through the cast. The rear of the Chevelle straightens slightly, but there's no traction.

Clutch in, turn into the turn.

Clutch out, back in. Adjust the wheel to compensate.

Again.

The Chevelle is now in something closer to a skid than a spin.

A glance in the rearview mirror, and it's eyes forward again. Two SUVs on the road and behind them, a Lincoln Continental I've seen before.

Adjust, clutch out, feel the lack of traction, and in.

The SUVs are not catching up. The road is dry, not that bad to drive on. So they aren't locals.

Where have I seen the Continental?

"Alex, are you okay?"

Adjust, clutch out, no traction, clutch in.

"Are we done spinning?"

The SUVs are getting larger, but not the Continental. They are getting confident.

Adjust, clutch out, some gas. Still no traction, clutch in. Hardly drifting anymore.

"I need you to shoot out their tires. I can't accelerate."

He takes the APX out, checks the magazine, and slides it back in.

Adjust, clutch out. Where is that traction? Clutch in.

He pulls himself out the window. "Fuck it's cold. Try to keep this straight."

Adjust, clutch out, where? Clutch in.

There shots.

A glance in the rearview shows one SUV heading for the ditch. The Continental is drifting further back.

Adjust, clutch out. Traction.

I keep the acceleration gentle.

Two shots.

A glance up. The SUV is still coming.

Alex is inside. "Out of bullets." He reaches for my holster.

"Don't."

"I need it if I'm going to shoot that thing off our tail." His hand is on the grip.

"I can't have you drop it at the kickback." His box shimmers. "Or having you lose your balance."

"It's just a gun. I'll buy you another one." He isn't pulling it out. "And I won't fall."

"It's a gun that was involved in a firefight. The bullets it fired are in those bodies, the shells litter the floor. I haven't sanitized it yet."

He lets go and closes the window. "Then you have to lose him." He puts his hands on the

vent and I glance at the control to ensure the heat is at the maximum. “Unless you want me to climb over the car to reach the trunk for reloads?”

I glance at him and he rolls his eyes.

I accelerate harder and lose traction. I let go.

“Yes, I saw the magazine boxes in there.”

“Emil?” I didn’t see him in my glances, and he’s being too quiet.

Alex looks over the seat. “Emil? Kid?” he reaches back.

“Don’t,” I order. “Don’t touch him. After what he’s been through, he isn’t ready for a stranger to touch him.”

“He’s curled up on the floor behind you. I can’t tell if he even hears me.”

“Get in the back. There’s a latch behind the headrest. It’ll let you remove that section and give you access to the trunk.”

“Didn’t think this old car had removable back seats.” He’s there. There’s a click.

“It’s the second box on the left, Alex.”

“My man’s Bart,” he replies, annoyed. His voice goes muffled as he slips into the trunk.

“You do know that, right?”

“It’s your middle name.”

“It’s the name I use.” His voice is normal. The sound of a magazine pulled out and inserted. The back window goes down.

“I hate that name.” I realize I spoke out loud when he replies.

“It’s just a name. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“It means you’re hiding!” I raise my voice so he can hear me over the wind of the lowered window. “You have no business hiding from anyone!” He stares at me in surprise. I’m as surprised. His box caused the outburst. “Get rid of our pursuers.” I had. “Please.”

He pulls himself out. He empties the magazine, and the SUV is out of control, the rubber of the front passenger side tire flying. The Continental is a point on the road in the distance.

Al—Bart—is back in. “I never want to come this far north again.” He closes the window.

“How does anyone live here?” He changes magazines. “You want the empties back in the box?”

“Flipped.” Without pursuit, I let the Chevelle slow down to the limit.

He sits back in the front. “The kid’s still on the floor. Shouldn’t he realize it’s safe now?”

“He will. His name is Emil. Please use it.”

“And mine is Bart.” His tone had borderline angry. His box brightens and triggers a reaction in others.

I ignore it, them, and his tone. “There’s a laptop secured under the seat.” There’s too much going on to let myself be distracted by my poor control over them. I want time to figure out what it means. What his and Emil’s boxes mean.

He’s still looking at me.

“I need you to find me a truck stop or a garage. Something out of the way with a lot of people, so we can go unnoticed.”

He reaches back and puts a slim laptop on his lap. “I’d rather use me.”

“Is it hardened to keep others from listening in on it?”

He stares at me. “It’s got half a dozen encryption programs on it, two of which I wrote. No one’s going to intercept my searches.”

“How about passive listening?”

“That’s not a thing,” he says dismissively, “and we’re moving. Who would even do that?”

I can’t see the Continental anymore. He is an expert in cyber security, but everything I’ve read supports that regardless of the programs he had on his laptop, a non-hardened machine is insecure. “Please use the laptop under the seat.” His refusal to obey is exacerbating the chaos among the boxes, and I am uncertain how I’ll react if he continues.

Eventually, he shrugs and puts his laptop on the backseat. He pulls the military laptop from

under his seat and lets out s whistle.

“Where did you get this? They aren’t in the habit of handing does out to anyone.” He studies the latch, then turns it in my direction. “You need to unlock it.”

I put my thumb on the print lock. “Acquiring them isn’t difficult. It was just a military base,” I add to his raised eyebrow.

He’s typing and the question I wait for doesn’t come.

“You need to upgrade your security.” He tells me. “And sixteen character isn’t secured anymore. But I’ll give you props for it being random.” He types some more. “You should upgrade the entire thing. This is an antique.”

“It’s only three years old.”

The roll of the eyes tells me what he thinks of that.

“The 95 is fifteen miles south-east. It had services stations along it and a few truckstops off the exits.”

“It’s a tollway?”

“Feeling cheap?” he asks, sounding amused.

“Not feeling like having my picture be one of those looked at when they’re investigating the massacre we left behind. Did you travel along it to get to Portland?”

“I followed your route.” He types again. But before I can ask, he’s speaking. “If the interstate’s off-limits, the closest truckstop is on the 202, in Farmington. Maybe forty-five minutes from here.”

“Keep me off the 202, but guide me there.” He’s typing. “How did you track me to Portland? I avoided the cameras when I left Phoenix.”

“You’re going to want to stay on this road for fifteen miles, then it’s the 35 south.”

“Bart, how did you find me?” I ask again.

His eyes are locked on the screen.

“Bart.” I put the warning in the tone.

A whimper has me look in the rearview mirror as Bart looks over his shoulder. Our eyes meet when he settled back, and I mouth “talk”.

He deflates. “I hacked your provider to track your phone’s GPS.”

“There were no mentions of it having one.” I would have taken an older model if I’d known. When he glanced at me, I see the fear in his eyes. “You aren’t in trouble. I never told you not to follow me. I’ll disable the GPS once we’re back.

Curly black hairs appear over my seat.

“Are you okay Emil?” I asked, looking at him in the rearview mirror.

He nods and sits, hugging himself.

“Are you cold?” Bart asks. “There are blankets in the trunk. I can get it for you if you don’t want to move.”

Emil shakes his head.

Bart gives me a worried look, but there’s little I can do to comfort Emil while driving.

* * * * *

The passenger side lights are cracked and their bulbs broken, but the bumper only had dents where the SUV made contact.”

“How didn’t the SUV destroy the back of your car?” Bart asked, sounding amazed. “It had to be twice as heavy.”

“It’s made of lighter material than the Chevelle, not as much mass.” I stand. Emil is still in the car.

“I offered to have him come in with me to get something to eat, but he won’t move.”

“Get him something warm. Proteins, carbs, some sugar.”

“Not offering him the pemmican you have in the trunk?”

“Right now, he needs comfort as much as nourishment.”

He stares at me. "You know what comfort is? Or that people need it?"

His box glows softly...comfortable and the ease I felt as I held him comes back to me. "I have read enough psychology to know how people work."

"So a burger, a pop, and a donut?"

"Are those comfort foods?"

He's amused again. "At his age? I'd say a bag of chips and a dozen donuts. Kids, these days, have no idea how to eat. I'll get him something decent from the restaurant."

"Only two coffees for you, Bart."

"Yeah, yeah."

I head for the store.

The truckstop doesn't have the light assembly for the Chevelle, but they have bulbs that will fit and repair tape. The fix takes time since I have to work one-handed, and isn't perfect, but will pass the casual glance from a state trouper.

Bart returns and offers me a hand-size package wrapped in foil. "Bacon cheeseburger with all the trimming for you."

"I have food."

"No. You have nutrition. This is food." He puts it in my hand. "It won't kill you to eat something tasty."

I keep my eyes locked on his as I eat it in half a dozen bites.

"Well?" he asks.

"Well, what?"

"Was it good?"

"I doubt it. Something like that can't have everything that's needed to survive."

He rolls his eyes. "I mean the taste."

I shrug.

"Do you even have taste buds?" he asks suspiciously.

"Yes, but I see no point in paying attention to them. Get in the back. You and Emil need to sleep. You'll be driving in a few hours."

I fuel the car, pay cash, and head out.

* * * * *

I reflexively tighten my hold on Emil as I'm thrown aside in the back seat. Bart curses. It's dark outside. Emil trembles in my arm.

High beams flash behind us. Bart curses again: reaches out the window, and fires blind.

"Bart?" I place Emil on the floor, and he clings to my arm for a second. His eyes are filled with fear.

"Two cars. No idea the models, but not SUVs. They're keeping up with me. They came up with their lights off and I barely noticed one in time to avoid getting hit."

I pull the Desert Eagle and glance ahead, noticing the dash. "Slow down, Bart."

"Unless you want them to slam into us, you don't want me doing that."

"Unless you have training in high-speed driving in winter conditions, you are going to do their jobs for them. Slow down." The look he gives me in the rearview mirror is borderline manic. I will have to address that later. "Do not make me repeat myself."

Sanity returns to them and he slows.

I open the window, lean out and fire twice. The lights go out but the after images still blind me. I fire between where they were, and the screeching tells me I hit something vital.

I can't see the second car even once the spots diminish. The growl of the engine tells me it's a V6, but the flash of gunfire sends me inside before I can work out its position. Those didn't come from the V6's direction.

There are three cars, not two.

“Stay down,” I tell Emil, even if he hasn’t moved. I take out the back of the seat.

“Are the windows bulletproof?” Bart asks.

“No one makes them for this model, and a custom order would have drawn attention to me.”

From the trunk, I take a timer, a brick of C4, duct tape, and the two-gallon gas container. I tape the brick to the container and attach the timer. I hate working one-handed. I set a two-second delay, start it, and throw it back and high. I grab the Desert Eagle and lean out.

It explodes, and in the light of the burning gasoline that rains down, I see the Continental as the driver slams the brakes, letting the mustang pass it. I fire twice at the mustang’s driver and it careens into the ditch. Before I can aim at the Continental’s driver, it’s lost in the dark.

I remember where I saw it now. Parked near the office building. Gregory is who I saw behind the wheel.

I close the window, change the magazine, then pull Emil on my lap. “How are they tracking us?” Quickly, his trembling subsides.

“I don’t know,” Bart answers, eyes constantly going to the rearview mirror.

“How would you do it?”

How would Gregory go about it? He’s older than me and uses dockworkers for muscles. That means old style. The Chevelle was out of sight for hours. Could he have found it? I need to look it over as the first opportunity.

He looks at me in the rearview, his eyes glance to Emil, but he doesn’t voice one of the ways he’d do it. “He has access to a large number of people. With that, I’d leave some outside to watch, and only report, not intervene. That gives me the type of car you’re leaving in. We were focused on the cameras so we could have missed someone following us, or since he’s more familiar with the city than we are, he had the ways out watched. Once we’re on the secondary roads and with enough influence, he can have people ahead keep an eye out and report.”

That could be how Gregory did it if he didn’t have assistance. “Could someone hack the satellites and track us that way?”

“They’d need the kind of skill very few hackers have.” He pauses. “Or contacts. You’re thinking about the Mexico angle. If they know the right people within the military, they could do that, but that would depend on what’s over us right now. The kind of satellites that can be moved can’t do so quickly. It would make more sense if they’re using people, or hacking into the cameras of every town in the state.”

“Then, this will be a question of how many men Gregory has access to, which means how far his mysterious partner is willing to go to eliminate us.”

“That means how much money they’re willing to spend on this. I don’t see the Mexico angle limiting this to just the men they and Gregory employ.”

“How much gas?”

“A bit under half.”

“Once you hit a quarter stop at the next gas station and we’ll switch.”

“That isn’t going to be busy.”

“At night, it’s going to take too much work to find such a place.”

He looks at me, hesitates. “Is Emil going to be in a state to drive?”

I feel him nod.

“He will.” I tighten my arm around him and close my eyes.

Chapter 15

You have any idea just how annoying it is to have someone glance at you and frown... all the time? I'm just sitting here, in the passenger seat, minding my business, which in this case means dealing with the headache to track down and massacre all other headaches.

Tristan would be so proud of its work. Maybe that's why he keeps glancing my way with that frown.

I pull the bottle of Tylenol from the glove compartment again, and there he goes, glancing and frowning.

"Don't you think you've had enough?" he comments as I dump two in my hand.

I snort and swallowed them dry. "No. And we need to get more the next time we stop." There aren't many left. I throw the bottle back in the glove box.

And there is the frown again. "Those aren't meant to be taken every hour."

"Then maybe they should work," I snap, still managing to keep my voice low.

"How painful are your injuries?" The concern is mild.

"I have a headache," I growl. I want to scream since it's his fault, but Emil has finally fallen asleep and Tristan made it clear I'd pay if I woke him up.

"It's just caffeine withdrawal."

I glare at him. "Which I wouldn't have to deal with if you'd stopped at that gas station like I asked."

"I didn't need gas."

"But I need coffee."

"It's just the addiction speaking. Ignore it."

"Oh, like it's that easy. Go away craving for the most wonderful of beverage, never bother me again." I cross my arms over my chest and look out the window so he won't see me pouting.

"Yes."

I ground my teeth, turn to let him have it, then remember what he's going through himself. Based on what he told me of the drug he took only two weeks ago and the little I've been able to unearth about it, his cravings have to approach what I'm feeling, but he doesn't even have the shakes.

"I'm not you." I settle for, then look out the window, then, because I just can't help it look at him again and in the worse Negro accent I can manage, I add. "Please, oh great master, when will pour me can have more?"

"Be careful how you talk to me, Bart." His voice is harder and hotter than I've ever heard from him. "My patience has limits and after everything I've dealt with since Portland, I am not keen on being jeered."

I mumble a sorry and look at the darkness outside the window. We're between towns on some secondary highway, so there's nothing to see outside the beams of the headlights.

"It'll be four hours before I need to gas up again."

I groan and rest my head against the window. There is not enough Tylenol in the world for me to last until then.

Headlights turn behind us, and my hand is on my gun when the reds and blues start flashing. Tristan curses.

“How fast are you going?” I glance at the speedometer, but he’s slowing down.

“Sixty-five.”

“That’s it?” I asked. I thought he said we needed to hurry.

He looks in the rearview mirror as he drifts to the shoulder, then takes his gun out of the holster. When he’s still holding it as the car comes to a stop, I worry.

“Tristan?” I asked, unable to mask my horror at what I can tell he’s planning.

There is conflict on his face, and there, there is nothing at all. “We don’t have the time for this.”

“That’s a cop. There’s going to be a dash cam.”

“Asyr can deal with that.” His tone is flat. “The Eagle isn’t in my name. You can follow me in the car. Having it will help us deal with the pursuit. Zephyr can turn it into a sculpture and I’ll dispose of the body. There won’t be any traces of what happened by the time the sun comes up.”

He’s listing the steps like he’s a machine. That might be the scariest thing I’ve seen him do. Scary enough, I only now realize he plans on getting that hack to cover his tracks instead of me. We’re going to talk about that when this is over, but first I need to keep him from acting.

“How are you going to dispose of a body?”

“Cut it into pieces, spread those in the woods over a few miles. Let the animals pick the bones clean and spread those even further apart. Three days and even if a bone is found and identified as human, no one will be able to link it to any other.”

Fuck, he’s really thought it through. I thought lye was the only way he did that. The officer gets out of the car and I can make out enough to tell it’s a woman.

“You shoot her and there’s going to be blood. The GPS will point to this location as where it happened, and don’t bring up that hacker. She reported the stop. If she doesn’t check in within minutes, someone is going to try to contact her. When she doesn’t answer, they are going to send an army of officers here.”

He looks at me and there is nothing in those eyes. “They still can’t link it to me.”

He won’t listen to reason.

She’s halfway to us.

I only have one card left.

“Please just say you lost track of the speed. I’ll go in and erase any evidence you were here afterward.” Still nothing. “Please. I don’t want you to kill a cop.”

She pauses at the back and shines her light down.

He blinks, and I open my mouth to plead as she moves again, but he puts the gun between the seat and lowers the window as she’s about to knock on it.

She shines the light inside and I’m blinded.

“License and Registration,” she said, and I’m so thrown by the fact the voice is familiar Tristan had handed them to her before I can ask.

“Sheriff?” I can now make out her features in the reflected light as she reads the information.

She looks in and I turn on the dash light. “Mister Crimson? I didn’t expect to see you here again.”

“You know her?” Tristan asks, his tone casual, but there is emotion in his eyes now. Cold anger.

“Mister Crimson fell asleep at the wheel and ended in the ditch,” she answers. “I drove him to the motel.”

“You know I was in a hurry to catch up to you,” I tell Tristan, distracted by lights now visible in the distance ahead of us.

“You changed cars again,” she says, “and you got a driver. I’d say that’s wise, but driving with a cast isn’t exactly safe.”

“Safer than if I’m driving.” Something’s off with those lights. I can’t make out any details,

but I can't hear what the sheriff is saying because I have to figure this out.

It's when Tristan glances in the rearview mirror that it clicks. The horizon is three miles away. At sixty miles an hour, those lights should grow fast as they approach. I look over my shoulder. There's another set of lights approaching.

He's right. We don't have the time for this.

Tristan is already plastered against his seat as I reach across him and grab her by the collar. "Go-go-go," I tell him as I pull her in and onto me.

Gravel flies as Tristan gets us back on the road.

I try to reach for my gun, but her squirming and shoving makes that impossible.

"Let go of me," She demands. "I'm an officer of the law. Stop the car and let me out immediately."

"Not a good idea," I reply.

"Are they back?" a groggy Emil asks as he sits up.

"Can't be the same," I reply with a chuckle. "It's not like we left enough of them. It does raise the question of just how many of them they have after us."

"What?" she demands, then is thrown against the door as Tristan does a last-minute lane change and an SUV drives by us. I try to push her in the back as the SUV fishtails and follows up.

"That confirms it," Tristan says. "Locals," he adds. His expression is the thoughtful one he's had each previous time cars have shown up out of nowhere to chase us. He's gone over this car three times already, looking for the tracker.

"Go in the back," I tell the sheriff in exasperation. "I need the maneuvering room."

"What are you doing?" Tristan asks as I finally get her moving, my hand ending up in places on her body I'd rather not think about. Hopefully, saving her life will mean she won't press harassment charges after this.

"Getting ready." I take my gun out of its holster and check the clip.

"I mean with her." His tone is hard. As much as he let me act, he isn't happy about it.

"I wasn't leaving her there for them to kill."

"He has no reason to bother with her. She's a police officer."

"After he would have seen us high-tail it away from her? Are you willing to bet her life on it?" I rub my temple as the headache tried to hammer its way out. "Fuck, I need a coffee."

"Yes," Tristan replies.

"What is going on?" she demands. She's looking out the back, then at Emil who is squeezed against the door, away from her.

"Don't," Tristan orders.

"Get off it," I snap. I am so going to pay for this later. "Context is going to help with explaining why we're running." I smile. "Might even get you out of that ticket, too. Do the driving and let me deal with this. Partners split the work, Remember that."

"Remember what you just told me," he replies as the car makes a right hard enough we're on two wheels for a few seconds. "When I don't hurt you later." It drops back down. "What are you waiting for?"

I swallow. What I'm waiting for is the courage to tell him he's being unreasonable. We're just arguing. That's not something warranting that level of reprisal. I know the delay is only making my situation worse, but come on, he knows I love how he inflicts pain.

I swallow the hurt. I'll just have to not take it. I let out a breath and look at it. "Quick version," I say as I wrack the slide. "Emil," I nod to him, "was kidnapped. He," I nod to Tristan, "left to rescue him without bothering to tell me with he was doing." Anger slips into my tone. "I chased after him. That's why we met. By the time I found him, he was a prisoner of—"

"I was not."

"You were in a cell with Emil. That's the definition of being a prisoner."

"I was there on purpose. I'd rattled Gregory. I was waiting for him to be back to make some

point or another, and I would have ended him, and them, then.”

“Anyway,” I continue, and she’s looking more confused than informed. “I help them escape. We took down the bad guys there, hit the road and more bad guys have been chasing up since then.”

“I’m calling reinforcement,” she says, reaching for the radio clipped to her shoulder. “Jerry’s up and—”

“No,” Tristan orders as I grab her hand. “Involving more people will just get them killed.”

“When I said they’re bad people,” I tell her. “I mean really bad. The kind that have no problem killing a police officer.” I look at Tristan for confirmation, and I get a shrug.

“That’s more reasons for me to call for help,” she replies. “You can’t just keep driving and hope to outrun them.”

“We usually shoot them up.” Then I mumble. “I can’t believe you didn’t see the bullet holes as you walked by.” I lower the window and lean out. I fire three times and three headlights go out. I’m back in and hurry to close the window. “How the fuck is it still this cold? I swear the next time old man winter shows up, I am killing him.”

I find a clip with bullets in it in the box at my feet and slide it into my gun. When I look behind me to see what is going on with our pursuers, I see her horrified expression.

“That’s why she can’t stay,” Tristan says. “She’s not going to be of any use.”

“It’s not like we can just dump her on the side of the road now, is it?”

He glares at me, and I’m going to pay for that, too. If I don’t start shutting up, he might promise to never touch me again by the time we’re on the reservation.

“Well?” I demand. “I’m open to suggestions.”

Yep. I’m never feeling that sweet pain again.

“Where’s the town?” he demands.

The tone snaps her out and she fumbles as she takes her phone out. “Make the next left. It’s going to take you to Main Street. You can drop me off anywhere there.”

Tristan glances in the rearview mirror, then turns hard enough I’m plastered against him. Against his injured arm. He doesn’t even wince.

“You need to slow them down if you expect me to slow to let her out.”

“You have any claymores?” I ask, watching behind us as lights take the turn.

“They aren’t useful and I can recreate them with the C4 and what I find lying around if I need that effect.”

“We don’t have enough lying around in the car to make one. How about a drone? Maybe something equipped with a sniper rifle, no? Hovering mines?”

He looks at me, confused, then focuses on the road.

“I so need to get you watching TV,” I grumble. “Emil, how are you with guns?”

“No,” Tristan states.

“You can’t think of giving a gun to a minor,” the sheriff says.

“I’m nineteen,” Emil replies, and she looks at him in disbelief. “I can shoot.”

“No, Emil,” Tristan says.

“I’m not lying!” he replies petulantly.

“I know. But after what you went through, I don’t want you committing anymore violence until you’ve had the time to work through what’s been done to you.”

“I could really use a second shooter.” The one light is now five.

“You have her.”

“How are you at shooting at cars?” I ask.

She stares at me long enough the headlight gets closer. With a curse at people’s reluctance to commit violence, I lower the window and lean out. I empty half the clip and only remove three of the lights, but the intact set careens out of control and is then hit by another.

I slip back into the seat. “We should be good.”

“Who are you two?” she demands.

“No one you want to mention to others,” Tristan replies. Hints of threat in his voice. I curse as lights appear over the horizon ahead of us, then relax as they keep going up. Street lights.

“Left or right?” Tristan asks, looking in the rearview mirror.

“The station is on the right.”

“Switch with her. I don’t have the time to deal with that when I get there.”

“You heard the man.” I climb over the seat. Emil shies away from me. She stares at me as I’m hunched between the front and back. “Come on.”

“I can’t believe this is happening,” she whispers as she moves and I get in the clear space, helping her get to the front. Now that she’s not fighting me. My hands stay in respectable places on her body.

“You okay Emil?”

He nods, but doesn’t look at me.

“Hand on the handle,” Tristan instructs, and she stares at him. “I said; on the handle. You have three seconds to get out when I stop. If you’re still in the car by them, I will deal with you later.”

“Tristan—”

“Don’t you fucking say anything. You’re in enough trouble already.”

“Don’t talk to him like that,” she tells him.

“Lady,” he replies, and I can hear the murder in his voice. “You’re in my car. You’re going to be quiet unless you want me to throw you out.”

“Listen here. I don’t know what’s going on between you two, but you don’t threaten someone who—”

The car stops so abruptly that I hit the back of the seat. She lets out a cry of pain as I hear her impacting the dash. She’s holding her forehead when I manage to look around the seat. Tristan reaches past her with his injured arm and opens the door, shoving her out. Then we speed away.

“Don’t you fucking say anything.” He glares at me. “I had a plan to deal with her that didn’t involve all of this.”

“I was trying to—”

“I don’t fucking care! I’m not some bleeding heart out here to help people. I can make the hard decision and carry them through, no matter how much I’d rather not. And last I checked. You claimed to be a bad man.” He lowers the window and takes the gun from between the seats again, with his injured arm. He rests it on the windowsill and fires. I see a flash of pain on his face and that’s it.

I’ve felt the kick the Desert Eagle has. There is no way the pain isn’t ripping him apart right now.

Lights pass over us and then a car crashes.

“How the fuck do you do that?” I ask, getting in the front. Emil is back curled as small as he can make himself on the floor.

I check the clip in my gun, find one with more bullets, and lean out my window. Four shots at the other car following us and it swerves out of control, to slam into, to my horror, the glass front of a coffee shop.

The world is so unfair.

I drop into the seat and close the window.

We speed through the town, make turns with barely slowing, and once we’re in a straight line again, he is speeding up. I glance at the speedometer, and we’re approaching something close to reasonable highway speeds.

Then I catch his reflection on the instrument panel’s protective plastic.

“You said we are partners.” His voice drops the temperature in my blood to the point I can feel the crystal forming.

“Yes.” My answer is almost a question by how unsure I am of myself.

“Do partners put each other in danger?”

My mouth is open, ready to point out that was never my intent, but his glare stops me. I swear to God his eyes flashed red just then. I know it’s just the light from the dash, but there was nothing human about him at that instant.

All I can do is shake my head.

“Then why? Why did you pull her in? Why did you tell her what we did? Do you have any idea of the danger you put us into by doing that?”

“I didn’t see you having any problem when I—” his hand is on my mouth and the back of my head hits the window hard enough that I see stars and wonder how it didn’t shatter. How the fuck does he have that kind of strength in his fucking injured arm?

“Watch your mouth, Bart. I understand you don’t care for authority; I even appreciate it. But don’t forget that I am not any authority. I am your life. You put yourself in my hands to do as I want with. Remember that if you want me to treat you the way you deserve to be treated.”

It’s in his eyes, the promise of pain and pleasure. His finger caresses my cheek.

I close my eyes to keep the tears from forming. Fuck, did I screw this up. He removes his hand when I try to speak.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think. I just didn’t want you to kill her.”

His face softens and there might even be the hint of a smile. “I’ve noticed you act without thinking.” He slows to a speed ‘normal’ people use, and with the next sign, I realize we’re back on the highway. “You need to understand something, Bart. She didn’t matter. No one out there matters. It’s you, me, and Emil. No one else.”

I look away as what he says registers.

“What is it?” the question is soft.

“Grams and Gramp.” I try to imagine a world without them in it. “I can’t forget about them. I owe them too much. I understand what you mean about it just being the three of us against the world, I think. But I can’t simply cut them out of my life. I’m sorry.”

“Your guardians.”

I’m surprised he knows who I mean. As important to me as they are. To anyone else, they are just Smith Security, and it’s the rest of my family they keep safe. “I think of them as more of my grandparents than the piece of craps those Crimsons are.”

“Do they love you, or do they just look after you?”

“They love me.” No hesitation, not even any thoughts. They wouldn’t have endured what I put them through after they took me in if they didn’t love me.

“Then cherish them.”

I do. I consider everything they did for me. The man they tried to make me into. The failure isn’t their fault. My father broke me beyond repair.

I lean back and look behind Tristan’s seat. “It’s safe now, Emil.” The only motion is the wince at my voice. “I don’t think I can make him come out.”

“Emil.” His voice isn’t soft, but it has a quality to it I haven’t heard before, and I realize that all this wasn’t only an obligation. It was more than righting a wrong. He said he cared about Emil, but now I can hear it. “It’s sage to come out. We’re not arguing anymore. We resolved it.”

I stared at Tristan as Emil moves. We sent him into hiding? Not the chase and the gunfire, but us? I try to ask Tristan with my eyes how that can be. How can the two of us shouting at one another be worse than people trying to kill us?

I don’t know if the shrug he gives me is about my unvoiced question, but it conveys one thing clearly. He, too, has no idea why we caused Emil to hide.

Chapter 16

I power up the phone. This is a lull between pursuit. I enter the number. It won't last. They are more frequent at night, but the longest lull has been an hour.

"Jacoby," I say as soon as he picks up.

"What?" the sharpness of his tone tells me he knows this isn't good news.

"I'm coming in hot." We're four hours away, but they need time to prepare.

"No."

"Jacoby," I make his name a growl.

"No, Tristan. We have an understanding. You don't bring your problems here. Deal with it."

"I have been for the last forty hours. They are more persistent than I expected."

"I don't care."

"I'm nearly out of ammo."

"Tristan, I'm going to plan myself on the road." He speaks slowly, clearly. He wants there to be no misunderstanding. "If I see you coming and I see anything resembling trouble on your tail, I'm going to fire in the engine block of your car until it stops, then I'm going to fire at you and your boyfriend is you try to approach, until you've dealt with whatever trouble you have. Am I making myself clear?"

A box shakes violently. How dare he threaten Bart, imply a threat to Emil. Keep us from my home. I settle it.

"What this is over, you and I will have a talk, Jacoby." I close the phone with a snap.

Bart glances at me. "You don't have to listen to him."

I tap a finger on the steering wheel keeping the boxes from lashing around. "Fighting a battle on two fronts is a losing proposition. He won't kill us, but any injury will be a distraction we can't afford." I work out Jacoby's reasoning. "Unless the confrontation becomes a threat to the reservation. Then he will remove us to ensure it is safe. Find me a gun shop. Put a preference over a wide inventory rather than closeness.

I glance in the rearview mirror while Bart works. We're close to the hour mark. We're due for another attempt. I can't see them, but there isn't much of a line of sight with the way the road weaves.

"There's one in Fredonia."

"Too close to the reservation," I reply. "I go there every few weeks for supplies. Ideally I need it to be far enough there is no chance someone will recognize me as someone they've seen before."

He types. "In that case, there's one in Farmington, about forty miles from us. Their website tells me they have large building, lots of stock."

We'll still be in New Mexico. I don't have any identities from that state, but Arizona is close. It should still work." "There's a wallet for Eric Strauss in the glove box." It's the fifth he looks at. I put it on my lap when he hands it to me. I had him my phone, set to speaker. "Call them."

"Farmington Gun Experts. My name is Donna, how can I arm you today?" Bart holds my phone with the laptop screen turned so I can glance at it.

"My name's Eric Strauss, Donna. I'd like to speak to the owner. I have a business proposition for them."

"And that makes you think I'm not the owner, Honey?"

"Because," I say, finding the information just as Bart highlights it, "the owner's name is William."

"I'm sorry, Honey, but the boss doesn't take any calls. All business goes through me."

The clarity of the voice, the firmness of the tone tells me she isn't lying, but that doesn't work for me.

"Donna, tell Will that Eric Strauss, the Arizona Rep for the NRA is on his way to talk to him. I'm calling first, because I want to make sure I'm not about to waste my time. If you aren't going to tell him that—" I look at the screen to confirm they are there. "I'll be happy to go to one of his competitors."

"Hold on." There's a 'thunk' as she puts the receiver down.

“Pull up information on the two closest stores, one needs to be on the other side of town from him. Size doesn’t matter for this.”

“Pawnshops?” he’s typing away.

I shake my head.

“Who’s this and what do you want?” his voice is gruff, with the rawness of a lifelong smoker.”

“My name’s Eric Strauss,” I say in a calm, slow, speech. Bart’s still working. “I’m Arizona’s NRA representative.”

“I’m not in Arizona.”

“Very astute,” I say dryly. “I need to rent your shop for a few hours. I have clients who need to talk with me, and they insist it be in Farmington. They haven’t given me the time needed to a proper meeting place.” I motion for Bart to show me what he has. He shakes his head, still typing.

“I’m not a meeting hall.”

“No. You have a gun shop. The best equipped in the region, according to my research, hence why we are talking.” I motion to Bart again. His shake of the head his vehement. Boxes rattle, but I silence them. It is his area of expertise, and he knows the situation we are in.

“I’m not letting a bunch of stranger in here to do God knows what.”

“I see.” I glance at Bart who is still typing. “Then that is your final word?”

“Damn right—” Bart flips the screen with two pages and the relevant information highlighted. “—it is.”

“Thank you. Hopefully, Steve Courver will be more—”

“Wait a minute!” his objection comes quicker than I expected. “Why’d you want to go and talk with him?”

“My research places him as the next best location for what I need. And he has a history of active support of the NRA.”

“That guy’s got nothing but junk. You aren’t going to impress anyone there.”

Bart grins.

“Do you have anyone better suited to recommend?”

William sighs. “What’s renting you my place going to entail?”

“The location empty of customer and employees. Access to every weapon on the property in case my clients want to take with some practice with something while we talk.”

“When?”

“I will be there under thirty minutes.”

“Today? I can’t close my shop to the public. How am I going to make any money?”

“Factor that in how much you’ll charge me to rent your property.”

“How long?”

It’s a little past nine-thirty. I don’t want to risk one of them showing up before it’s all dealt with. “Until six tonight.”

“I don’t know.” On anyone with skill, the hesitation means they are readying to gouge me. “This is one of my better days normally.”

“How much would it cost me to rent your store?”

“Two-hundred and fifty grand?”

There’s so little confidence he’s basically asking for permission.

“There’s a chance my clients will want to keep some of the guns after shotting them. And I can’t tell them no. After all, I am meeting with them to garner their support.” Short of telling him I’m desperate and anything going wrong will ruin my career, it’s the best I can do.

“Three? Three-fifty?”

How does he make any money with this kind of negotiating skills? “Then we agree for three hundred and fifty thousand?”

“If that sounds okay to you.”

It sounds like an idiot asking to be screwed over. Bart’s eyes are wide. “Yes, it does.” If he’s going to invite me to do it, I’m not going to object. “I’ll be—”

“Wait. What’s to say you aren’t going to hand my guns to a bunch of crooks? If they end up used in crimes, that’s going to come back on me.”

Not a complete idiot, at least. “Write up a rental contract. I’m not picky about the wording. Something that makes me responsible for any guns that aren’t in your inventory by the time you come back. I’ll give you my driver’s license and NRA ID numbers once I’m there.”

“Thirty minutes isn’t that much time to do all that.”

“Unfortunately, half an hour is all I can give you. If it isn’t going to work for you I can—”

“No-no. I’m good. I just don’t know how legal it’s going to be. I should be running this through a lawyer to be sure.”

Okay, he might be smart after all. Maybe they just never negotiate on prices around here. “As I said. I’ll sign it regardless of the clauses you put in. I’m in a bind and I can’t let these clients slip through my fingers.”

“Okay. I’ll have it done by the time you get here.”

“Look for a black Chevrolet Chevelle.”

“I don’t know what that is.”

“Look it up online.” I snap the phone closed.

“A last stand?” Bart asks.

“Jacoby isn’t giving us a choice. So long as they have an inventory to match the size of the show floor, we’ll be fine.”

“Where are you getting that kind of money?”

“I have some hidden in the car.”

Bart looks at his screen. “Aren’t you worried they’ll intercept us before we get there?”

I look in the rearview mirror. Still no visible pursuit. Hopefully, it supports my theory as to why. “The further west we drove, the further away from Gregory’s zone of influence we are. That will restrict who he can easily call on to take part in the chase. His failure at stopping us should also make his new partner reluctant to invest too many of his people in this. The fact they have been able to stay with us this lone does worry me, hopefully the gun show will have a radio signal detector in its store. But until I destroy the tracker. It is also something they will rely on as a way to track us without us knowing it.”

Something else looking back didn’t show me is Emil. I look over my shoulder. He’s curled on the seat, behind Bart.

“You okay?”

He looks at me and shrugs.

“Talk to me, please.” I face forward again.

His reply is soft. “I’m sorry. It’s all my fault. If I he hadn’t caught me you—”

“No, Emil, you are not at fault for it.” I keep my tone gentle. “This is your father’s fault, Gregory. Not you. You’ve been a victim through all of it. You did admirably surviving it.”

“If I’d been better—”

“Emil,” I cut him off and I can’t keep the warning from my voice. It’s wrong, but how he blames himself makes his box tremble, and the one containing my anger responds to it. I shouldn’t direct it at him, but the people who deserve it aren’t here.

“You wouldn’t have been caught,” he finishes, defiantly.

“I’ve been to jail,” I reply. “That means I can be caught.”

“You were a kid,” he says dismissively.

“As are you. And I was twenty-five the last time I went. I wasn’t a kid at that point. It’s how long it took for me to work out how to not be caught anymore. Cut yourself some slack, Emil. Me and Bart will teach you so you’ll be better equipped to deal with the next time someone tries to capture you. He’s never gone to jail, so he’d got to be better at not being caught than even me.”

I smile at Bart while he glares at me.

“What did you do?” Emil asks, awed.

Bart sighs and closes his eyes. “Nothing good, kid. Nothing good at all.”

* * * * *

Farminton Gun Expert is a long cinder block building with twenty feet of bay windows on each side of the door and it's name over that. That's not good. Moving shelves behind them as cover. In my injured condition, will take time. Time we almost certainly don't have. I park on the far end of the sand lot and I see two doors on the side of the building. Those will have to be blocked off.

This is nowhere near ideal, but it's what I have to work with.

I maneuver out of the car and lean against it. "Emil, pop the back of the seat and bring it out."

He has to work at it. I ensured he folded up and down easily when I modified it, but I didn't want it to come off each time I wanted access to the trunk. He comes out with it. I use a knee to hold it against the Chevelle, and pull the back off with my uninjured hand, revealing a large bundle wrapped in cellophane.

"Is that what I think it is?" Bart asks as I force the bundle out of the form fitted foam. He slipped out of my hand and I stop myself from reaching with my injured arm as I feel the muscles pull.

"I don't know, I can't read your mind."

Bart snorts. "How much is in it?"

I reapply the back to the seat, ensuring the velcro holds it in place so no one can tell it can be removed.

"Guy's coming," Emil says.

The man is short and fat. Even from here I can see the yellowing of his fingers. The jeans are clean, but worn. He has a revolver holstered at his hip. Large, made to intimidate, but the grip's leather is worn from multiple use. The shirt has more sweat on it than warranted by the heat, even for a man of his mass. He's nervous.

"He matches the picture of the owner from their site," Bart says.

"Mister Strauss?" the man calls, caution in his tone. His eyes widen as I stand and put the seat back on the back seat. They go from the sling to the cast and then up to settle on the Desert Eagle on my harness. His walk gains confidence. It marks me as a gun lover like him.

"You look in bad shape," he says, as I pick up the bundle. I let a box's flashing affect me and wince at the pain the motion causes to my injured arm. I drop it in the sand before the Chevelle, then sit on the edge of the hood.

"I've had a few bad days."

"You should see the other guys," Bart says almost at the same time. Emil Snickers and I glare at them.

William slows and studies us. "Are you really with the NRA?" He clutches the paper that has to be the agreement.

I reach for my wallet, letting the box make me wince some more, then I fumble one handed with it until I have Eric's NRA card and hand it to him. It looks official enough. Their logo is easy enough to recreate and they've yet to include RFID chips in their cards. There's even a Eric Strauss in their database, although he's white, blond, and with blue eyes and had a predilection for young girls.

The only thing that isn't accurate, not that he has a way to know, is the number on the back of the card. It does lead to a NRA member, and he will confirm I am who I claim I am, since answering that number is the only reason I left him alive.

"Call to confirm who I am," I tell him as he looks the card over. "I'm out of the Phoenix chapter." I want to make it as easy and quick for him to finalize the transaction. I have no idea when Gregory will arrive, and I don't want the added complication of William and whatever customers are still here.

"Are there really any clients coming?"

I tap the bundle at my feet. I turn him so he can see the bills are twenties. "There's half a million dollars. It should answer any question you have."

Emil gasps, and Bart stares at me.

William looks at the paper in his hand. "I wrote the agreement for three hundred and fifty thousands."

"Then don't declare the rest," I reply casually. "It's not Uncle Sam needs to know. But it does mean you don't get to ask questions."

"How do I know they aren't fake?"

This is reaching a level of careful I can't afford to deal with.

"They're real," Bart answers, the dismay in his voice doing more to convince William than anything I could say. "He doesn't bother with fake anything." He looks the car over and when he looks at me again, I see the effort not asking the question requires.

I smile. Yes, there is more hidden in it.

“What do I have to do?” William asks.

“Everyone out of the store and off the property now. Turn the security off. Hand me a key so I can lock up when I leave. No one shows up until after six tonight.”

He hesitates. “Is there going to be anything left of my shop?”

I motion to the paper. “As soon as I sign this, you can claim you know nothing of what took place, which will be an honest answer unless you keep pushing.” He hands it to me and I sign it, adding Eric’s number where it’s required and his driver’s license number. “If they have a problem with any of it, they can sue me.”

I hand it back and he bends down. I put my foot on it. “Once everyone’s gone.” He hurries back inside.

“How much?” Bart asks, the dismay still audible.

“Half a million,” I answer, knowing that isn’t the question.

“How much more?”

“Enough.”

“Aren’t you afraid someone’s going to steel it?”

I shrug. “I’ll detonate it before they get to enjoy it, let alone what’s hidden in it.”

He’s quiet, then. “How do you have so much money? The people who come to you are the desperate who can’t get anyone else to help them. Those aren’t people flush with money.”

People hurry out of the store, glancing our way as they head for their cars. “You do realize most of the people I kill for them are the kind who can’t put their wealth in the bank.”

He glances at Emil, concerned.

Emil answers for himself. “I was eight when I watched him kill a thug my father sent to murder me. I know what he does. I’m okay with it. It safe my life, twice.”

“Okay.” He looks uncertain how to take the information. “Some of them must have had bank accounts, because yours is large enough that—” he raises his hands and steps back as I straighten and level my gaze on him. “Calm down. All I did was look. You do know how I go about taking down my targets. Right? The banks are all connected to the internet, and that is my domain.”

I’m torn.

I’m actually torn.

He snooped into places he had no business and he should die for that. His box protests. But he found those places, went in and out and Asyr never realized. They would have told me if he had triggered any of the security they have on my accounts. They kind of skill required to go around Asyr’s security is...

A box reacts, it’s one that has been silent for so long that it takes me a moment to understand what I feel.

I’m proud of him.

“We are going to discuss boundaries when this is over, Bart.” I settle the box down.

He shrugs. “Sure, but you’re going to need me to cross them so I can add actual security there. I mean, do you really want to trust the hack job that second rate hacker did that let me waltz in? What if someone else gets in too, and they don’t stick to simply looking?”

The bastard thinks this is funny. I reach for him and the box flashes. I don’t let the pain register, but it’s a reminder I’m injured. “You are lucky I’m hurt, Bart.”

His amusement drops. “That’s not how I see it. I expect you to make me pay for my impertinence.”

I can envision the fight. The blood I’ll spill. His moans of pain and pleasure. My body reacts before I can take control of the boxes and I no longer think it’s a good thing I can’t do to him what he deserves.

“You can be certain of that.”

William hurries in our direction. There’s only one car left. He hands me a key chain with seven keys on it. “Those are the keys to the doors. Make sure they’re locked when you leave, along with the range. I don’t need Donna getting in there without supervision and shooting things up. I’ve shut down the security system.”

There is suppressed concern on his face, no subterfuge. I push the bundle to him.

“I’ll leave the keys in the ground by the door.”

“Don’t—” he grunts as he lifts the bundle. “—bother. I have the originals and I’m changing all the locks as soon as I come in tomorrow.” He heads to his car.

“Bart, go check the security, shut it down if he didn’t do it. Destroy the last thirty minutes to be safe. Emil, go in and pull all the magazines you can find. Load any that aren’t.”

Once they’re off, I wait for William to have driven out of sight, then move the Chevelle to the side of the building. I’m putting the seat back in place when Bart returns.

“They have bug detectors.” He hands me a package. “The camera’s were off, like he said. It’s on an old VCR, and it looks like he’s been using the same tape for the last decade. I physically disconnected the video and I’m having it record the static. There’s not going to be anything to pull off it by the time we’re done.”

“Get the place ready.” I take the detector out. “Barricade the doors as best as you can, get Emil to help if your arm—”

“I’m fine.”

I look at him and make a decision. “We’re going to need something beyond the front windows since they’re going to be the first thing to be shot out.”

“I’ll get on it.”

I tests the detector, then crawl under the car. I start at the front. The engine block has the most nooks and crannies. It’s the easiest place to hide a tracker. I ignore the cellphone, tucked in one of them, waiting for the call that trigger the explosives. There is nothing else in the front, so I crawl back, scanning everything.

When it beeps, I stare. How did I never take precautions against this? No wonder I never found the bug. They fucking dropped it in the gas tank.

I rush inside, ignoring the flash from the box each time I set my injured foot down. I also ignore Bart as he tries to get my attention. I rip a speaker off the wall, harvest the magnet, then rummage behind the counted until I find a hot glue gun and a coat hanger. I unwind the hanger, glue the magnet to one end, then head back to the car.

When I’m back inside with the bug on the magnet, the car is finally clean.

“Where was it?” Bart asks.

“In the gas tank. I’ll need to make something to ensure it doesn’t happen again.”

“You can get a cap that locks.”

“Too easy to pick. I’ll have ample time to come up with something at the reservation.”

“The window problem was easy to deal with. He reaches behind shelves on the wall. There’s a clank, and metal shutters roll down. They cover the wall from on end to the other, except for the door. They have slits at various heights so we can look out and fire through them, “I think our shop owner might be a prepper.”

I nod. “When you work around so much hardware, it’s easy to realize that others might turn it against you.”

“You’re been thinking about stuff like this I take it.”

“You know I like to be prepared. Leave it down,” I tell him as he reached behind the shelf again. “The open door will be enough warning of their arrival. Which shouldn’t take long anymore. We’ve been stationary for thirty minutes.”

“Aren’t you destroying the bug?” he asks when I put it on a shelf.

“That’s just going to make them scatter and aim to block any possible exit routes. I want them to come here and box us in. I want there done and over with. How is Emil coming along?”

“He has stacks of them and he’s still going. If we run out of ammo before this is over, it’s not going to be because we weren’t prepared.”

“Line up guns along the window. Go through as many of the caliber as possible, rotating them.”

I join Emil and take a box of 22s. “What’s behind that door?” I ask, putting the weight of my injured arm over a magazine to hold it in place as I put bullets in it.

He glances at the door. “An office with a small storage room.”

“The door?”

“Metal, the wood’s just a veneer.”

It supports Bart’s theory of William being a prepper. “When the shooting starts, I want you to go in and close the door. Don’t open it until the shooting stops.”

He stops moving. His shakes his head.

“Emil, you—”

“No,” he whispers, and I wait him out. “You can’t leave me out of this. This is my fault. I have to be part of

ending it.” Tears fall on the glass. “What if you and Bart die? Who’s going to protect me then?”

I place a hand on his. The contrast in color and size is extreme. He looks up at me.

“No matter what else happens, Emil, Gregory will die here. He’s the only one with an interest in you. Once he’s dead, you won’t matter to who’s left, so if me or Bart die here. You’ll still be free.” He tried to pull his hand away, but I don’t let him. “We won’t die, Emil. None of us well. I promise you that, but even if I do, you will be safe. Gregory will never threaten you again.”

“I can help,” he says, hopeful.

I tighten my hand over his. I try to make it comforting, but this is one aspect of interpersonal relationship I am lacking in.

“I know. I don’t want you to.”

“Why?” there is pain in his voice.

“You already killed a man. That will eat at you.”

“He deserved it, he was going to kill you.”

“It doesn’t matter. Killing leaves a mark, and you need to process that.”

“I won’t let it affect me,” he says with confidence. “I’m not the baby your saved ten years ago, I’m stronger, harder.”

“I know.” I look him in the eyes. “I want it to affect you.”

“Why would you want that?” he demands in disbelief and he’s loud enough Bart looks in out direction before going back to placing rifles.

“Because death doesn’t affect me. I can kill indiscriminately and no think about it afterward. Bart is the same on some level. I don’t want that for you, Emil. You’re broken, but no so much yet that you no longer have a chance at something that passes for a normal life.”

“What if I don’t want a normal life?”

His box does something incomprehensible. My heart tightens. I want to take him in my arms, hold him and never let go, but I don’t understand why.

“That isn’t a decision you should make until after you’ve processed what’s been done to you.” I see the defiance in his eyes and I force myself to tell him the truth. “I couldn’t save my brother, Emil. So I need to protect you. I need you to be safe so I know I’m capable of keeping someone safe. Otherwise, it means that even if I’d had the chance to safe him, I would have failed. It’s not fair, but you’re that person for me.”

“Okay,” he says after a long silence. “I’ll hide. Just don’t die, okay? Maybe I represent your brother, but you’re the only thing like a father I’ve ever had. I can’t lose you.”

I squeeze his hand while his box jumps and flips. It spreads a chaos to the other boxes that should make me slam down on it, but I hesitate before gently quieting them so I can think again.

“I won’t. I promise.”

He smiles. “And keep him alive too, okay? He’s kind of growing on me.”

“Yeah, me too.”

We go back to filling magazines in silence.

It’s ten minutes later when Bart calls. “We have company.”

I grab a handful of magazines and Emil arm fulls. He divides them by the guns, making sure there’s each of the needed calibers and goes back for more.

Outside, Gregory’s Lincoln comes to a stop at the far end of the lot Five SUVs stop on each side of him. Unlike the the Lincoln, they are new, with only the dust from the road to mark the surface.

“I expected them to be black,” Bart comments as Emil returned with more magazines. He puts two in each of my pockets.

“They’re fifty-cal.” Then he’s heading back.

“He doesn’t realize that one-handed you can’t reload, does he?” Bart whispers.

“He need to help.”

Bart looked where Emil is arming himself with more magazine and I see the look in his eyes.

“Don’t,” I warn him, harsher than I intend. “Don’t feel sorry for him. He doesn’t need that. He needs you to be strong. He needs to see there’s a way out. Right now, that’s the only thing keeping him going. If he thinks you don’t

see that for him, he'll start believing it too, and I will not have that. Am I clear, Bart?"

Bart nods, looks outside, then at me. "Is there a way out of this?"

"Yes," I reply through gritted teeth, taking out the orange pills from my pocket. "We're going to make one, understand?" I hand him two. "You aren't allowed to think otherwise. You are too strong to let these thugs stop you."

He takes them. "I thought..."

"Pain's not going to help you right now."

He raises an eyebrow as I dry swallow two of my own. If I am taking them, he has nothing to use as his protest. He swallows them.

"I know you're in there!"

"Very astute of you," I yell back. "I'm sorry to see you survived the chase." I take the rifle next to me and chamber a round.

"How about you come out and we talk this out like adults?"

"And I have your goons shoot me? No thanks. I prefer talking from behind a metal barrier."

"No one will shoot you. I've told them you deserve a chance to end this the right way."

I look through a slot. Gregory stands before his Lincoln, six men on either side, more in the SUVs. Not one of them holds a gun.

"Don't," Bart hisses.

I step into the doorway, plan already set. I hold the rifle in my good hand, finger on the triggers, but the barrel pointing down. With my arm in its sling, I appear like a man trying to look threatening and failing.

"I'm..." Gregory starts "impressed that you're still alive." The admiration is honest.

"Get on to the sales pitch, Gregory." I try for confident, but put enough worry in my tone he can't believe it. "I have better things to do than stand here." Of the twelve standing eight are in suits. What I can make out of those in the SUVs makes me think of men in streets clothing, possibly gangs, only doing this for the pay.

So maybe twelve men from Gregory's Mexican partner. That he didn't replenish the ranks means he's reached the limit of what he's willing to invest in this operation. And they are who will target me and Bart directly. The others will do what Gregory pays them to do, which will include Emil.

With time and the opportunity, those I could convince to leave, or pay them to do so.

"Fine. You can't win. I have the numbers. Surrender and this ends cleanly. These men drag you to their boss and you pay for whatever you did to piss them off."

"I thought you wanted to do that to me. Didn't I steal your son's wealth before you could take it for yourself?"

"I did. But I've grown to respect you. I can count on one hand the number of men who stood up to me without flinching, let alone had the balls to fight back. For that, I'm promising a clean death for your two friends."

I sigh. I don't bother even trying to appear brave. All I have left is exhaustion. "So that it. Torture for me, clean, painless death for them."

"If you hadn't cost me so much, I'd consider offering you a position in my organization, but I need to recoup cost, and that only comes if I hand you over."

I nod. "I'll point out that you started it. If you'd left Emil alone, I wouldn't have had any reason to come after you."

"Would you have left something like what you did to me slide?" his question is honest.

So I don't lie. "No. I'd have come after you if you'd taken from me. The problem is that I swore to Emil I'd keep him safe from you."

"I respect that," Gregory says solemnly. "But there are promises you shouldn't go making."

"Only if I can't keep it." the rifle is at my shoulder before I'm done talking and the gunshot punctuates my statement. The recoil rips the rifle out of my hand, and Gregory falls back from the impact.

I hobble inside before anyone has time to take out their gun, pulling the Desert Eagle out of its holster.

"Center of mass?" Bart asks in disbelief. "Why didn't you take his head off?"

"When this is over, let's compete to see which of us is the best shot with a rifle, one-handed. He isn't getting up from that, even if it didn't kill him."

I put in earplugs in time for the gunfire to erupts and then, on top of the the din of the guns and bullets make speaking impossible.

Or so I thought.

“Don’t you dare die” Bart manages to yell over it. “The kid isn’t the only one who needs you alive!”

I smile and nod. I put the muzzle of the Desert Eagle in a slot and fire until the magazine’s empty

Chapter 17

Gunfire's loud.

I haven't seen a TV show that portrays that correctly. It doesn't matter the kind of earplugs you wear. After a minute of constant firing, your head feels like a hammer's gone at it all day. It's mush. Thinking's barely an option. All you have are reflexes.

Fire, eject the clip, put one in, fire. The first time the Desert Eagle slides at my feet, it takes a full second to register. And by then I've only emptied two clips. I change its clips and slid it back to Tristan. He might not be feeling the pain of his injuries either, but he's better than me at not adding to that damage.

Another thing I don't often see shown properly on TV is how firing at a larger force is a losing proposition. There's no way to cover all approaches, not even those you can see. It's only a question of time until someone finds a blind spot while you're reloading, and your mind's too addled to understand where they went.

Tristan, on the other hand. There's something inhuman about him.

When the body falls at my feet, its neck broken, Tristan is already fighting the next guy to make it into the doorway. It takes my brain three seconds to get into gear. Three long seconds during which another body falls.

At that point, two of them have pushed their way in. Tristan's fighting one, and the other's raising his gun in his direction. I'm faster and the man's head explodes off his shoulders. No thoughts required, which is a good thing, because nothing can get past the mush in my head.

Another one makes it in, coming at me. He doesn't have a gun, but a knife. And something cuts through the fog in my head. A melody. It tells me how he'll move and I back to avoid the slash. It doesn't tell me about the rifle I step on and have to shift my focus to keep my footing, but it still tells me how he's moving, so I catch the wrist as he tries to take advantage, twist and I don't hear his scream as I feel the bone break. But the melody continues, gaining intensity as he drops the knife. It promises me victory, tells me how to catch it, turn it and small it into his chest.

I ignore it. I don't need a knife to win this. I pull him to me, then down. My knee meets his jaw and breaks it. He pushes away, a snarl on his face instead of bawling his eyes out from the pain. He picks up the pain, and the melody calls to me.

I should be holding it, not him.

I push the anger down. The need to take it from him.

I don't need the music. I don't want it; I lie to myself.

He's clumsy, fighting with his off-hand. He doesn't listen to the music, because I use it to know how to counter him. If he could hear it, he would be able to turn it to his advantage. I block with a hard slap and his hand opens. The knife flies out of it, the melody a crescendo of hope that turns into a full orchestra as my hand closes over the pommel. Then the knife slams into his ear.

I let go of it as he falls and the melody dies away plaintively.

I look up and Tristan has only stepped away from his opponent, K-Bar in hand, and another body at his feet. How many were there? My mind's getting faster. A dozen out with the guy in charge. Tristan told me his name, but what do I care for it? No idea how many were in the cars. I know we shot down more than a dozen already.

Did anyone else drive up to join the fight? I can't tell. I couldn't hear a plane take off on the roof, let alone a car arrive.

Three push through the door and come at me. More go for Tristan, but I can't pay attention

to that. I put my faith in him being the worse monster here. That these thugs, in suits or not, are only a pale imitation of him.

If even that.

I block, dodge, punch, kick.

It's pure survival.

TV shows at least get that right, nowadays. Fighting's ugly. It's not a ballet, it's a slaughter. If you aren't getting sick watching them fight, they aren't doing it right. If they make you want to get in a fight. Don't.

If you do, pray that it's over quickly.

As if my shirt's not already damaged enough, they rip it as they try to grab me and cut it as one distracts from the sweet melody of the knife being used so I can't use the information it gives me. By the time one of them finally drops—an open hand strike at his adam's apple—my, used to be white, shirt is mostly red from fresh blood. Too much of it my own.

When the second drops—a well-placed kick in the balls—I have a deep gash on my left side. All muscle, but it's bleeding freely. I don't feel the pain, but if I don't stench the flow, I'm going to be out of the fight before the last guy can finish me.

I step back and reach out to steady myself. My hand rests against a shotgun, from a display of them. It becomes a club, giving me reach, and I don't need the melody of his knife to help me take him down.

A fourth man replaces him.

Where the fuck are they coming from?

I throw myself to the ground as he pulls a gun. Holes appear in the rack of cleaning supplies. Rifles clatter around me as my roll stops at the front of the store. I grab one one-handed and fire. The kick rips it out of my hand and my shoulder nearly follows.

And I didn't even hit the fucker.

Thank God got illegal painkillers.

I grab another and this time, the shotgun makes a hold in his chest.

Pain or no pain, my arm falls to my side. There goes my good arm. Hopefully, it being black and blue is the worse I'll have to deal with once this is over. Another rifle serves to push me to my feet.

The front half of the store is a mess, but at least no one's entering anymore. There's already enough people in here as it is, and they're all focused on Tristan. Three are taking him on directly, while... seven of them move around, looking for shots he isn't giving him.

I pick up my gun—I'm not trying this with a rifle—and aim. I'm not ambidextrous like Tristan, but I'm not horrible with my off-hand. Three shots and two fall down. The rest turn in my direction and I'm running before they unload their guns in my direction.

Debris flies around as all they hit is the content of displays. When they pause, it's all at the same time. I pop up and drop one as the idiots all reload at the same time. I shift my aim and curse as someone impacts me.

Down we go and I throw him off me. I can't think about where my gun's gone to. I stand and immediately drop, gunfire exploding around me. The man tackles me again, but I latch on to him and use my weight to keep us lower than the displays.

I knee his stomach; he punches my side. If not for the painkillers, that would have incapacitated me. I catch motion out the corner of my eye and force us to turn. He's between me that gunman, but if he's alone there, another's going to come from the other side. I unbalance him and shove him in the gunman's direction. I run to the side, picking up a can of campfire lighter that survived the gunfire.

I know I saw lighters in here somewhere. I pour the can out as I head for them. Grab a Zippo and light it. If I wasn't about to die from being littered with holes, this would be the worse idea ever. I flick it into the fuel on the floor as the gunmen step around the display with all the other

cans of campfire fluid.

There's no explosion as the flames reach them and the display, but their screams are surprisingly soothing.

I run by a knife rack, as I go around, and ignore the music coming from the sheathed blades. When I peek over the display, they're no longer screaming, putting themselves out. I can't have that, not when I have this on the shelf next to me.

I uncap the gallon size container of gunpowder as I sneak around. This is going to be interesting. I consider pulling my phone to record it.

A gunman turns the corner ahead of me and we freeze. Where did he come from? I react first, throwing the container at him. Gunpowder flies and when it impacts, the container exploded, sending more into the air.

Fuck-fuck-fuck!

I run.

This time, I get my woof of conflagration, except it's chasing me. I throw myself down and manage both hands over my head. The flash of heat is over before it fully registers. Gunpowder burns real quick.

I pat my hair, and everything feels fine, but that could be the painkillers. I take off my shirt, and somehow two patches were dry enough to catch on fire. I put them out and don't bother putting it back on, it's barely rags at this point.

The fire I started with the campfire fluid is now going full force. I look up at the nozzles in the ceiling, waiting for them to disgorge water. It's quickly clear that someone hasn't been maintaining his fire prevention system. That might work against him when he claims this to his insurance company.

I grab the closest extinguisher, not overly hopeful they'll even work, but I have to attempt to stop the fire from spreading since I'm the one who started it; and I'm still stuck in the building. Can't say that I care to go up in flames with it.

I spray the fire, and the white powder covers the display and everything around, killing most of the fire. Two men on the floor are alive, but close to overcooked. I weigh it and step over them without using any more of the extinguisher on the parts still burning. I could need it for more important fires.

The third is barely singed. He was far enough that he was only flashed cooked by the gunpowder. He grunts and sits, eyes going wide as he sees me. Then he's falling back as the bottom of the extinguisher impacts his face.

I look around.

Tristan is in the center of the store, panting. His arm is out of its sling and he's leaning to the left, so his cast probably didn't survive the fight. There is no one else standing. His gaze rakes over my naked torso and smiles. The bastard doesn't even seem in pain.

Right, the painkillers.

I smile back.

A door opens at the back, behind Tristan and I expect Emil, leaving his safe place now that the store is silent. Instead, it's an older man, raising his gun at Tristan's back.

"Tristan!" I yell as the man fires.

Chapter 18

The fear in Bart's eyes has me turning before his yell vocalizes.

The flash of the gunshot nearly hides Gregory's features, then the impact on my shoulder sends me to my back. I grunt as I hit the floor and the box containing pain cracks and shakes, but I hold it close; the effort leaves me panting.

I open my eyes to Gregory standing over me, but his Chiappa Rhino revolver is aimed at Bart.

"I wouldn't move, if I were you," he warns him.

"Don't hurt—" I run out of breath before I can get my own warning out.

"Don't hurt you?" Gregory sneers. "You should have thought of that before you took what was mine." He slams the heel of his boot on the injured shoulder and the box explodes.

I scream.

He grinds his foot down.

I can't think, I can't plan, I can only scream.

The pain remains past the pressure vanishing, and through it, I fight to regain control of my voice. I finally silence the scream.

"It's about fucking time," he says. "I was starting to think you didn't feel pain or something."

I fix my eyes on him but don't respond. All my energy goes to rebuilding the box and putting the pain back where it belongs.

"Since I've demonstrated I can hurt you," Gregory says in a magnanimous tone, "care to plead again?"

"Don't hurt him," I say through clenched teeth to ensure none of the pain slips through.

He looks in Bart's direction in surprise, as I expect, but I can't get my body to respond and take advantage of his attention not being on me. There's still too much of the pain outside the box.

"Him?" he looks at me again. "I'm about to kill you, and you're worried about me hurting him?" the disbelief is in his voice and his eyes. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"I've been threatened too often to care anymore." The pain is nearly all back in its box. My voice is surer. "I was fourteen when my father promised to kill me. You're making the same mistake he did."

"And what is that?"

"Not actually doing it." I slam my foot on his leg, but he's already out of the way. There's more pain than I thought left. It's preventing my body from acting as I tell it. My leg hits the floor and I'm panting again.

He grins, looking thoughtful. "You know, since you just admitted that hurting him is going to hurt you, I think that's what I'm going to do. He looks like a screamer."

"Not for you," Bart replies with a snort. A glance in his direction tells me he's using Gregory's lack of action to look for something to do, but he needs to account for the revolver aimed at him as part of any plan."

"I know hundreds of ways to hurt someone. I'm sure one of them will make you scream."

"I scream for just one man," Bart tells him. "But if you ask nicely enough, I might grunt for you."

Bart's box shines and I smile. Its light pushing some of the pain into its proper place.

Gregory is not amused.

In my peripheral vision, the top of a door opens silently. It's at the back of the store. The

possibilities as to who it is are limited.

“You’re a thug, Gregory,” I say, to bring his attention back to me. “You have no idea how to inflict pain. You think a foot on an injured shoulder is the pinnacle of it.” I have to catch my breath. “In the right hands, it’s an art form. I’ll show—” I’m out of breath.

He stares at me, glances at Bart, and his eyes are on me again. The disbelief is tainted with worry and fear. I’d smile, but I can hardly breathe.

“We’re done here. The kid’s in here somewhere and with you dead, it doesn’t matter how long it takes me to find him. You can die knowing you didn’t save him.”

He moves the revolver off Bart to point it at my head.

Bart takes a step in our direction, but the scream stops him.

It’s the sound a man makes when he believes he’s about to lose his one chance at life. I have caused many men to make that sound. I made it, once. On that day the police officers forced me into a police car and kept me from going to Justin as strangers took him away.

Emil is the one screaming as he barrels toward Gregory, a shovel held over his head.

Gregory turns, and I kick his legs. There’s no strength to it, but this time I connect and it’s enough to unbalance the old man. The revolver fires and the flash keeps me from seeing the impact, but I hear the shovel connect. When I see again, there’s another impact against Gregory’s shoulder as he staggers back and out of my sight.

Emil continues to scream, staying with him, the sounds of the shovel impacting Gregory come again, and again. Something metal and heavy falls to the floor. Gregory’s revolver.

Bart is next to me, worry on his face. “How are you? Fuck, that looks bad. Is your shoulder broken?” He touches my shoulder gingerly and pushes a hand under it. The box flares, but no pain escapes it.

A body drops to the floor wetly. The shovel impacts don’t stop.

“Bart.”

He bits his lower lips as he studies the injury. “I don’t feel an exit wound. Is that a good thing?”

“Bart.”

“Fuck, the bullet’s still in there. That can’t be good.”

“Alex.” There’s a wetness to the sound of the impacts now.

“My name’s Bart!” he glares at me. “Can’t you fucking remember that?”

“You have to stop Emil.”

He looks toward the sound. “He’s fine. I don’t think that guy’s going to do anything to him ever again.”

I grab his arm with my working hand. I have to reach over my chest to do that and it’s nearly enough to send the pain spilling out. “You must stop him. If he keeps going, he’s going to be beyond saving.”

“I don’t think—”

“I have to save him!” I can barely breathe, but I will not let that stop me. “I have explained what he means. I can’t move, so you have to save him for me. Please.” Maybe it’s that I am pleading, or it’s the word itself that makes Bart look at me in concern, but then he’s gone.

I close my eyes. I reorder the boxes, register the extent of my injuries. I’m in bad shape. Bart is right, the bullet is still in my shoulder.

The sound stops.

Steps approach. I force my eyes open and when Emil comes into view, there is fierceness in his eyes, instead of the vacancy I expect. It is the look of a man who had conquered an enemy or a fear. Emil’s box glows, and among the boxes that respond to it is one that I have used when manipulating others, but I can’t recall it ever triggering outside of my control.

Shame.

Shame at not trusting Emil to be strong enough to overcome what was done to him instead

of breaking under it.

The fierceness vanishes as he looks at me, replaced by fear.

"I'm, okay," I tell him and reach up.

He takes my hand and drops to his knees. "You can't die."

He sounds like a broken man again. He has been counting on me to save him, and I no longer look like the monster who will obliterate all who threaten him.

"I'm not dying. Not today, anyway." I look at Bart, who is looking down at us. "I need you to take the bullet out. Emil, get the first aid kits. There's a display of them at the back."

"A tool bag too," Bart calls after him. "If there isn't one, I need pliers. Needle-nose is the best." He kneels next to me. "And a Zippo from that display over there."

"There's a multi-tool by the cash register," I add as loud as I can, and Bart shakes his head.

"Is there anything you don't know where it is?"

"The coffee machine."

"Back office," he replies, then smiles. "You knew that."

"I don't bother remembering something I'll never have a need for."

His expression grows dark as he studies the injury. "This is going to hurt. I'm going to have to dig in there, and this was not covered in any of the first aid classes I took."

"Didn't your guardians teach you?"

"Nothing like this." He looks at me, stunned. I see the questions he wants to ask.

Like how I'd know they could teach him how to care for gun injuries. The nod is understanding. He knows I have access to a hacker and as much as he doesn't respect them, he also knows I wouldn't employ someone who isn't competent.

"Grandma taught me how to stop most wounds from bleeding. Gramps how to deal with any kind of broken bones. Then never expected I'd get into firefights."

"Don't they know what you do?"

He goes back to studying my injury instead of answering.

"Bart?" I press.

"They think I'm a good man." There is shame in his tone. "She knows I take down abusers and perverts who think they're above the law, but she thinks I do it because it's the right thing to do. She also thinks I do it with my hacking exclusively. Neither of them understands that I'm broken, that there's something wrong inside me. She doesn't know I do it to feed the festering need inside me to see people hurt. To be the one who makes them suffer the way I—"

"Those people deserve to suffer," I tell him.

"It's why I go after them, instead of whoever pisses me off that day. I let her believe I do it out of justice, from the safety of a computer." He looks at me. "I'd like to keep it that way."

I nod. His box glowing in response to having been given information Bart considers important. At being trusted with it.

Emil returns and Bart takes the disinfectant from a first aid kit, then hesitates.

"Just pour it in. Don't worry about my pain. It's back where it belongs."

The look that crosses his eye is one questioning my sanity, but he empties the bottle on my wound. The box flairs, but holds. This is nothing compared to other pains I've endured. The box is now stronger for having shattered.

He has Emil heat the pliers as he wipes the excess. Then he wipes the soot off them and plunges them into the injury. The box cracks, and I question my ability to keep it from shattering. Then Emil's hand is in mine and his box glows and that light seals the cracks, lessens the effort needed to hold the box whole.

Bart curses and something clatters to the floor. "Clotting powder! It's that gray bag. Put it in now. I think I nicked something.

There is a flurry of activity over me. The box flashes bright with pressure and everything goes black.

A slap brings me back.

“Don’t you die on us,” Bart says.

“Not part of the plan,” I reply.

“I thought you had for a moment.”

“Exhaustion,” I tell him. “Blood loss. How are your injuries?”

“Bandaged and clotted.”

“Good. We need to leave.” I offer him my hand. “Emil will have to drive.”

“I’ll do the driving,” Bart counters in a tone that leaves me thinking he noticed something I didn’t. He takes it and helps me to my feet.

“Are you in a condition to drive?”

“Coffee can let me do anything.” He smiles at me. “And I need to replenish my fluids, as do you.”

“There is water in the car.”

“Emil, do me a favor and fill as many of my travel mugs from the coffee machine in the back while I secure Tristan in the car.”

Emil looks to me and Bart sighs.

I nod. Now is not the time to argue over his coffee addiction.

The trek to the Chevelle is slow, and once there he lowers the passenger seat’s back and lies me on it. Then he hands me a bottle of water.

I wake to the clattering of the mugs in the crate as Emil puts that in the backseat. Bart joins us a few minutes later.

“I’ve made sure no one can talk,” he says, motioning for Emil to get in. “There’s nothing I can do about the blood we left behind, other than burning the place down, but after the destruction that’s already happened, that feels like going too far.”

“Asyr can erase any evidence from the police’s system.” Something occurs to me as Bart is about to protest. “Did you lock the front door?”

He stares at me. “The door is about the only thing still standing of the front. I don’t think locking it will make a difference.”

“I told William I’d lock up once we were done.”

That look questioning my sanity flutters back, but he heads for the building. Then he’s back. “It’s done. I even threw the key inside, for all the good that’ll do.” He has us on the road and is drinking from one of his mugs already.

I turn my phone on and enter a number.

“Hello Tristan,” She answers, her voice syrupy. “I heard you got yourself into a spot of trouble.”

“Cornelius. I’m about two hours away. I’d appreciate it if you were at my house when I arrive. I’m going to need you to patch me up.”

“What do you have?” she asks excitedly.

“Broken leg, in multiple places. A broken arm. A gunshot injury at the shoulder. The bullet has been removed. There might be some hairline fracture of the spatula, but it isn’t broken. I have lacerations, but nothing feels like an internal injury. Bart has bruises and lacerations. His right arm is giving him problems, but it’s mobile, so it isn’t broken.” Emil’s injuries are not the kind a doctor like Cornelius can look after.

“I’ll have everything ready,” she says, far too eagerly. “I’ll bring my painkillers, my anesthetics, and—“

“I’ll provide everything you’ll need. You know I have supplies for situations like this.”

“Tristan, the stuff I make is much better than whatever you got from the medical suppliers.”

“And if I trusted you, I’d let you use them on me. But you still want me dead, remember?”

“I don’t actively do, and you know that. You just need to pay for refusing my advances.”

“And you’ll get other chances, just not this one. I’m in no mood for games.”

“Fine,” she replies, the disappointment loud. “Two hours. I’ll be there. Without anything of mine.” She disconnects.

“You’re going to trust her to treat you even though she wants you dead?” Bart asks.

“Who wants you dead?” Emil demands, his voice a mix of fear and anger.

“It’s more of a game than anything else at this point,” I reassure him. “And no, I don’t trust her. It’s why I’m going to be conscious the entire time. She knows I’ll have her writing in pain, no matter the state I’m in, if she tries anything.”

“Wouldn’t it be simpler to go to another doctor?” Bart asks, handing the empty mug to Emil and motioning for another. “You know, one who doesn’t hate you?”

“There are no doctors I trust more than Cornelius.”

Again with the look questioning my sanity.

“I know her,” I explain. “I know how she thinks and what to expect. I can plan accordingly and I have taught her what happens if she crosses me. Anyone else is an unknown I can’t plan against. And I am not in a condition to spend the time learning all I need about some doctor, so I will be able to ensure they don’t get it in their head to try something stupid that will complicate matters.” I close my eyes. “And there are no doctors in the state better than she is.”

“Well,” Emil says as unconsciousness begins claiming me. “If she tries anything, I’m going to kill her.”

There is no hesitation in his voice, no doubt. The glow from his box accompanies me into sleep.