

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 thrashes, 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.”

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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.

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