

Free Fall-8

The firewall shatters under the assault. There. Now they can't deny their security sucks and they need to employ Silt Security. The notification window pops up in the bottom right corner.

In my office.

I look over the divider. Kat's looking—no, glaring—in my direction. Did she and her husband have a fight? I lock my computer, down the half of the travel mug left and head to her office, placing that by the coffee machine to refill on my way back.

I enter without knocking and drop into the seat. If she needs love-life advice, this isn't going to be quick.

"What's up, Kat?" Can't let on what's going on, can I?

"Do you need a vacation?" she asked, severely. "Another vacation, I mean?"

"No, I'm all good." Is that all she wanted to check on? Okay then. I stand.

"Sit down."

Okay, so there is more to this. I put my ass back in the seat. Is she hoping I'll—

"I just had a third company call me to take over their online security after theirs was decimated within minutes of their IT coordinator being on a page that happened to have some of our advertising."

"Lucky for them," I reply. And lucky for you, since it means more business. Doesn't explain the glare, though.

"I don't use online advertising of any kind."

"Ah." You don't? In what world do you live in that you don't flood the internet with your—

"It's not worth the cost," she deadpans.

Okay, so it's in a world where she actually bothers researching where to put her money.

Well, fuck.

She cracks a smile. "I'm going to guess you weren't aware of that little detail."

I shrug. No point in denying anything anymore. "Cyber-security and internet kind of go hand in hand. Figured you'd be wasting your money on that like everyone else."

"Not that I like how I found this out," she said, "but it's good to know you can be wrong about computer related things."

"Advertising's more psychology than—" I close my mouth as she glares at me again. Let's see if I can salvage it. "Would you believe me if I said I was trying targeting advertising?"

"I didn't know I'd hired you for that. Not that I'd allow my advertising manager to break half a dozen federal laws in the process of pulling this little stunt. Do you have any idea the damage this will cause my company of the FBI ever finds—"

I snort. I don't even try to stop it. "Come on. There's no way those idiots will ever track that back to me. The NSA I give fifty-fifty odds, but they aren't allowed to look at what the people inside the country are doing. And those companies aren't doing government work, so the FBI isn't even going to look in their direction. Or if they see it, they aren't going to bother with something that small. There's too many hackers out there doing this kind of shit. That what a company like yours is for."

Kat leans back in her chair and sighs in annoyance. "Trouble in paradise, I take it?"

"What makes you say that?" No, that is not defensiveness in my tone. It's lightness. I don't want her to know how close she's to the fucking mark.

"You aren't any good at keeping your personal life out of your work."

I scoff.

“Everyone in the office knows you’ve been getting laid because of how you saunter around.”

“I don’t saunter,” I state. Come on, me? Sauntering?

“You did, then just before you ‘fell sick’ you were edgy and aggressive. You came back from that vacation and you saunter—were full of pep. This week you’ve been moody, cranky, and you’ve been pulling stunts like these.” She pulls a bunch of files from what has to be an open drawer and drops them on her desk. “You are becoming a danger to my company, Bart.”

Shit, there’s one for each of the company who visited the sites. “I’m getting you more client.”

“You’re coercing them.”

“No, I’m not. At no point did I tell them that if they didn’t contact you, they’d suffer unfortunate internet related accidents. All I did was show them, in a way they couldn’t ignore, that the company that was supposed to do their security isn’t worth shit.”

“I have someone doing sales,” she tells me, “and Tom does a great job of it. He doesn’t need help in getting us more clients.”

“Are you telling me you’d rather have fewer clients, rather than more?”

“When it comes with the possibility that an astute IT expert can link the code used on those sites to one of my employee, or that employee to other uses of that code that’s going to be even harder to justify, yes. Or did you think that I’d forget our conversation about the after hours work you’ve conducted?”

“Fine,” I admit, nearly throwing up my arms in defeat. “Yes, there’s trouble. My boyfriend has—”

“I don’t care.”

I stare at her. I think I just got whiplash. “You asked if—”

“Because I know your love life’s why you’re doing this, not because I give a fuck about it. Here’s what you’re going to do. You are going to take a few days off and go fix—”

“I don’t need time off.”

She shrugs. “I can always fire you. That’s going to give you all the time possible to work on your personal life.”

“You’re not going to do that,” I reply, rolling my eyes. “I’m the best you have.”

“That’s not going to do me any good when your recklessness brings the authority down on me. I don’t need that risk. Go get drunk. Go talk to a shrink. Go sleep it off. I don’t care what you do, so long as you don’t come back until you’re able to keep your head clear and do your job correctly.”

More replies run through my head than I can keep track. They amount to ‘you have no business butting into my life.’ ‘I don’t have to fucking do what you tell me to.’ ‘I quit!’ ‘you’re not the boss of me!’

Which, yeah, she is, so...

And I don’t need this job. I really don’t. Fuck, I don’t need any job, the way Dear old Dad’s supplying with money without knowing it.

The problem is that I like coming here Monday to Friday, pretending to be this ordinary code jockey. Sure, I can get that elsewhere, maybe, but Kat’s doing good work and I want to help that.

I slam the door angrily as I leave her office and head bobbed up over partitions, only to go back down. Fine, so she’s right. I don’t have to be happy about it. I refill my travel mug and the act calms me enough I don’t just dump the six empty one on my desk into the crate under it and take what matters with me. Leaving five of them here will tell her I will be back.

Well, four will give that message too, right?

I refill the two and put them in my satchel, then take the elevator down.

The doors open onto the lobby, and the security desk on the left, as well as the man seated

behind it, looking up from his novel and in my direction. I smile at him.

Why not? If Tristan can have his fun on the side, it means I can too, right?

“Hey Karl, how has it been doing?” I ask as I approach the desk.

The muscular man looks around, frowning. “You’re taking to me?”

“You are still named Karl, right?”

“Yeah,” he’s still frowning. “I didn’t realize you knew I existed.”

“Come on.” I chuckle. “We went out before. I thought you’d want to go out and grab a drink this Friday after work.”

“Ah, I get it now.” He fixes his gaze on me. “You got dumped.”

“What? Why’d you think that?”

“Because when I invited you for a drink, you stood me up. Then you didn’t even acknowledge I existed. I get I’m not the greatest catch around, but I’m definitely better than the second choice guy. So I’m going to pass on that drink and whatever else you might think it would have led to.”

“Come on, we can—”

“I said no.”

“Fine,” I snap. “No need to fucking get angry about it.”

The drive home nets me one speeding ticket and a pissed off officer. Like I care he wants to be treated with respect. He shouldn’t have become a cop if respect was what he was after.

I can smell the barbecue as I drive up to my house and see the crowd in the third neighbor’s yard. I’m not invited. They gave up trying to get me to join. They are not my kind of crowd.

In the shower, I jerk off, purposely not thinking about Tristan and completely ignoring the guilt I feel at disobeying him.

I go over the results from my scrapping programs, but there’s nothing of use on the Juan Manuel Fernan I’m after. The guy works hard at staying off the internet.

If I’d had any doubt as to his guilt, that would have taken care of it.

I get dressed and head to Grams and Gramp for our Thursday dinner.

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“Is everything alright?” Grams asks.

It’s the gentle tone, more than the question, that makes me look up from the steak I’ve been working through. “What do you mean?” unlike her, I keep my tone politely neutral.

“You’ve barely said three words since arriving. Any questions about Tristan or Emil gets us grunts. And you’ve been moving your food around the place for the last ten minutes.”

I look at my plate, at the pieces of meat spread on it.

“Bart,” Grams says, his tone one of understanding, “you know you can talk to us.”

I sigh. “I—” fuck, do I want to actually say it? “I think it’s over.” It has the ring of the end of the world to it.

They exchange a look.

“You and Tristan?” Grams asks, some confusion in her voice.

I nod, then say. “He prefers spending time with Emil.”

“Emil is his son,” Grams says. “Right?”

“Might as well be,” I grumble.

He opens his mouth, but Gram puts a hand on his and he closes it.

“Did you talk with him about how you feel?”

“What’s the point?” Fuck, that’s a whine. “You have no idea how dense the guy is. If it isn’t about what he wants, he doesn’t get any of it.”

“That can’t be true,” Grams replies. “The guy seemed pretty sharp.”

“Of course he did. You were a test for him. Could he fool you into thinking he was a normal guy?”

Gramps snorts and Gram glared at him.

“Come on,” he replies, “he failed completely. Bart wouldn’t go for a normal guy.” He looked at me. “But it sounded like he cared about you.”

“Now you know how badly he fooled you.”

“Bart, hun. Talk to him.” She reaches across the table to put a hand on mine and I almost pull away. “Bring him here if you want the support, but Franklin’s right. Tristan cares about you. Don’t let your hurt feelings be a wedge that drives you apart.” She squeezes my hand. “I think he’s worth the work.”

Work? Why the fuck do I have to be the one doing all the work? He never visits, he doesn’t talk to me unless I call. I’m fucking tired of being the one working at the relationship. “Why the fuck can I have it easy like you do?” I grumble.

Gramps burst out laughing.

“Oh honey,” Gram says, trying not to laugh. “If only you knew some of the things we had to work through to get where we are.”

I look at them in disbelief. They’re the perfect couple. Yes, I know their courtship wasn’t smooth sailing, being on opposing sides of a battle at the time will do that, but afterward?

“We could tell him about Marseille,” Gramps offers, and Gram blushes the deepest red I’ve ever seen her go.

“What happened in Marseille?” I demand.

“See,” Gramp starts with a chuckle. “There was this guy from the French Legion.”

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I glance at my phone.

Four in the fucking morning, it screams at me, on a Saturday.

If I’d gone to visit Tristan, I’d have been there for five of six hours already. Without Emil there, there would have already been a fight, and if I’d done well enough, I’d have been fucked to orgasm.

The asshole hasn’t called to find out why I’m not there. Doesn’t he even care that maybe it’s because I’ve been in an accident?

I glare at the monitor. I’ve gone through every law enforcement computer in Mexico. The most recent entry’s ten years old. If I believe the Mexican police, that means Juan’s kept his nose clean for all that time.

I don’t.

The police are interested in too many of the people he employs. They haven’t been able to link any crimes to Juan, but that doesn’t mean he isn’t committing them. In the US, I’d say he’s great at hiding the evidence. Since it’s Mexico, I figure he’s great at paying off the right people.

It takes me twelve hours on the ‘dark web’ to unearth what could be a spider silk thin thread linking Fernan to the drug trade, as well as the mention of what I think is his handle connected to human trafficking.

It’s good enough I consider calling Tristan to tell him. Then I see the time on my phone as I pick it up. I look at my phone app, just in case I was so focused I missed his call.

I didn’t.

“Why Aren’t you calling?” I yell after the phone and it shatters on the wall.

Fuck him. I don’t need him.

I go back to turning that strand into a thread the will lead me to Juan Manuel Fernan and all the bad things he’s done.