

THE HITMAN: *BURNING HALOES*

SEAN MCKENZIE

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ISBN: 9798674158899

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Cover design and illustration by Andrei Bat

First edition.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Author's works

The Elf King
Project Human

The Hitman series:

The Hitman: *Dirty Rotters*

For Quentin and Alessandra
You are bright lights in a dark world

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Chapter 1

Crack!

I knew that sound. Bone breaking, snapping in half. The screaming that followed validated my suspicion. I doubt he would walk again normally. Certainly not any time soon. I had planted the heel of my right Nike hard against his shin. He went down in a whirl of flailing arms.

I stood over him and smiled. I was right after all.

Ten minutes ago I had seen him pass me by. I had watched him. His shoulders hunched slightly forward as he swept past me, long legs working hard. He was the type of guy you wouldn't turn your back on. It wasn't just his attire—the baggy jeans, dirty and ripped at the knees, white wife-beater so dingy that it made his scruffy face appear clean—it was also his eyes. They were cold. He was a villain. A scumbag. A waste of life.

I had gathered all of that in just one quick passing. I had felt his energy, too. He was about to do something that wasn't right. So as I opened the door to my triple black 1970 SS El Camino 454 LS6 and slid down inside, I had shut the door and watched him out of curiosity. I turned my attention away from the flyer I had been studying and waited to see what the creep was up to.

Damn was it hot out. I had just sat in the sweltering heat and thought about what I was really doing.

It was the type of day in mid-July that would have sent me to the beach somewhere along Lake Michigan, in some small town packed with privileged tourists who were buying fudge and jaywalking, someplace where relaxation took priority and the locals found solace far off the beaten path. But not today. Not yesterday, last week, or the past few months. Which is about how long I have overstayed my visit to San Antonio.

I had fled Seattle in an attempt to leave behind the memories of my last job and drove until I was tired of driving. The physical distance never matters, though. I knew better. The faces of the job haunt me for weeks afterwards, no matter how far I run. And Seattle had been bad. Probably the worst job I had taken. I was truly lucky to be alive.

I had grown comfortable in my role as a hitman. I had learned how to study people, to read them, to either trust them or to break them. I was good at it. I was a blue-collar worker getting my hands dirty. The money was good too, but it was never about getting paid. I considered it more of a service to humanity. The world was a scary place if you opened your eyes. A guy like me was necessary to even the playing field.

I sat motionless in the heat, in my dark jeans, a black T, and black Nike sneakers. My usual attire these days. Minus the leather jacket for obvious reasons. I had kept watching the creep work his way through the park towards a group of benches where I had been sitting minutes ago trying to forget where I've been and what I've done. Forget about being a hitman. Forget about the people I was forced to deal with, forced to hurt, the scumbags, the unworthy of life, those who were dark and terrible on the inside, like monsters in human form. But I could not forget. It was not distance I needed to put behind me, it was simply time.

I had hoped, anyway.

I had been thinking of taking a leave of absence and taking time to recover. Find a small town and disappear for a while. Be normal again. Just another guy in the crowd.

Get my mind back on track, all of that self-care crap you hear about in therapy. And I would have. But as I left my bench at the park a purple piece of paper blew into my leg and I looked down to see a black and white photo of a young woman's face. It bothered me. I became troubled right away. Not because it was a missing person's flyer, but something else. Something I couldn't put my finger on just yet. I took the paper with me and made my way back to my car.

That's when the creeper had passed by me.

That's when I knew I should stick around for a few more minutes. My hunches had been paying off lately. I was on a roll. I was going to wait this one out.

I had felt a tinge of pain in my right shoulder. The wound I had received in Seattle would take some time to heal. The Phillips screwdriver had been jammed in there pretty deep. *It will take time*, the cute nurse had said. But time doesn't heal everything.

I took another look at the flyer. If I had seen this woman, I surely would have remembered. But I couldn't place it. It drove me nuts. I thought that maybe I had seen her at the park. I had visited it for nearly two straight weeks, same time of day, eating the same fast food from the same burger joint around the corner. I enjoyed the quiet here. More importantly though, there was shade.

It had been about a quarter to four and not a cloud in the sky. No wind, either. I couldn't recall the last time it had rained. The trees looked like they were suffering. The grass was brown in large splotches. Dead, or in the process. It had seemed to be the average look in the area and I was tired of it.

I had set the flyer down and stared out into the park to find the creeper circling the group of benches. Looking for lost change, I figured. By that time my interest had dwindled down to almost nothing. I figured it was time to leave. Not just the park or the city. I meant the damn heat, the dead grass, the lack of blue lakes. All of it. I had planned on staying just through the winter initially and after May had come and gone I found excuses not to travel north again. But this place had little to offer me and the heat of the day had run its welcome. I could be in Montana in a day, maybe Wyoming. Some place with fresh air and blue water. I was mapping out places I'd stop, places to eat, rest, whatever, along the way. I like road trips. I like new places. Figured I wouldn't make it back to the deep south any time soon.

I had looked out into the vast sky and stretched in various positions. I saw a jet at 30,000 feet. Probably going about 600 mph. A costly, but quick trip. I preferred driving. Crank the radio, roll the windows down, no hurry.

I had put the key into the ignition.

Goodbye, Texas. This heat can kiss my ass.

I had looked into the park one last time and that's when I had seen it happen.

Creeper had made his move on an older woman. He came up behind her as she was sitting on a bench looking in the other direction. He had snatched up her bag and began moving back away without her knowing. He had been smooth, like a professional. From the El Camino parked curbside, it had looked to me like he had the woman's purse. He was quickly heading back towards me.

Fight of flight.

I had only thought of leaving for a second.

I sighed. Took my hand off the key.

I stepped out of the car at once and made a line towards him. I had kept my head down, just a guy out walking, uninterested in anything or anyone.

He was about my age, height, and weight. Face sweaty. Stubble on his chin. A devious look in his eyes. I had purposely veered into his path just in time to send my right foot hard against his left shin, sending him face-first down into the dry brown grass.

As I stared down at him now, crying like a child, I actually wished I had just drove away. But I can't help myself. It's just who I am.

"Asshole! You broke my leg!" he screamed. "What the hell are you doing?"

He let go of the bag and gripped both his hands on his left tibia. He was cursing a lot, obviously in pain. His shouting was a bit extreme. I didn't care for it.

I walked closer to the bag, which he suddenly desired, but was just out of his reach.

"You're dead! You hear me!"

I picked up the bag. "Can't you get your own snacks?"

"What? Go to hell, you dumb asshole!"

There was something in that bag and it wasn't snacks. It was firm. Tall. Hefty, a pound, probably. I wasn't sure what it was. But I knew by his reaction that it was important.

"What's in the bag?" I said.

Nothing. He just glared at me. Must've ran out of swear words. I suggested he begin to combine them, but his face suggested that I wasn't funny.

"I'm going to put a tag on your toe, man."

"Maybe I'll return it to the old woman."

His face twisted in anger. "You ain't got no business with her, you moron! You don't even know what's going on!"

I bent down, real close to him. I could smell cigarettes and something worse lurking underneath his shirt. I stared at him hard. "I'm giving this bag back to grandma and if you're still here when I get back, I'm breaking your other leg. Understand?"

He didn't say anything.

But the old lady did.

Standing beside him suddenly, she pulled a small revolver out of her purse. "What's going on here?"

"Easy, lady. I saw him take your bag and decided to take action. Get your bag. Let him go. I'm sure he's learned his lesson." I said.

She took a moment. She stared down the creep for a second before turning to me.

"You saw him steal my bag?" she said. "How glad I am that you were here." She turned to the thief. "I hope you learned your lesson. Now go."

The man got to his feet and hobbled away as best he could.

"Are you all right?" I said to the old woman.

She put her gun in her purse and I noticed she had several of the flyers I had. She pulled one out and handed it to me. It was the same one I had found, same woman's picture, name beneath, along with a phone number and a reward.

"I've seen one," I said sympathetically.

"It's my daughter. Vega. That man called me and said he had information. He said he could tell me where she was. He said to meet him in the park and bring the reward." She wiped her face with a colorful handkerchief. She spoke with confidence, like well-

educated people do. I pegged her for being wealthy. At least better off than most of the people in this area.

“What happened to her?”

“Missing. Police cannot find her. Say they have a thousand missing girls.”

“You think they can’t help you?”

She nodded. “Hang flyers, they say. Pray, they say. But it’s now three months and no news. There’s no help for my Vega. I don’t know what else to do but hire someone to find her.”

She was having a hard time keeping herself together. My heart ached for her.

“I’m very sorry.”

She shook her head and mumbled her response as she retrieved her bag and purse and walked away. I turned and headed back to the El Camino, staring at the flyer.

Once inside the car, still lost in the black and white photo of Vega, I began filling colors in to humanize the picture. I went with tan skin with brown hair and dark eyes. Short, maybe stout. I pictured her to look a bit like her mother.

The statistics had been running through my head since she first gave me the flyer. The old lady was angry with the police, but in all likelihood, Vega was dead. Her body may never be found.

I tossed the flyer out the window. I didn’t need two of them. Maybe the next guy will have better luck than I did. I started the car. I pulled out into the street and drove south along the park. In about twenty-five minutes I’d be at the freeway. It was a long haul up to Montana, but I won’t mind. I like to drive, especially at night, under a full moon, or a blanket of stars.

I made a left at the streetlight, lining the park still, and made eye contact with a young, pretty woman. Blonde with blue eyes. I held her gaze for a moment. Then all the gaps in the flyer came to life.

Dammit!

I had it all wrong.

My left foot slammed the clutch while my right foot stomped the brake, creating a terrible screech as the tires left two lines of rubber shrapnel in the concrete, and I was throwing it down into first gear and busting a U-turn. My eyes scanned the park, coming to rest near the sidewalk up ahead where the old woman was heading. I pushed the gas pedal further, the El Camino SS surging ahead ten over the speed limit with ease.

She was at the edge of crossing the street as I came to a skidding stop beside her. We locked eyes.

“Get in!”

Her head cocked to the side in question.

But there was no question. No doubt about it.

I had seen Vega.

Chapter 2

Vega.

Two days ago, I had stepped away from the ATM and shoved some crisp twenties into the front pocket of my jeans and saw her right away. I think I had stopped walking. Stopped everything, actually. I just stared as she walked past, probably ten feet away. To say she was attractive was an understatement. She had stick-straight blonde hair that fell across the mid of her back, which bore a vibrant green T-shirt. Her skin looked smooth and flawless; I doubt she had any make-up on at all. And those eyes—crystal blue and intelligent.

I stared.

Guess the two guys walking at either side of her noticed me doing so. They were nearly past me before I even noticed them shooting me hard looks. One was tall, the other shorter than Vega, who was closing in on six feet herself. The tall one wore a jean jacket, sunglasses, a long tied-up ponytail with a receding hairline. The shorter guy was bald and sported a goatee and fingerless brown leather gloves. If they had said anything in passing, I didn't remember. After what Vega had done to my mind, I'm surprised I remembered them at all.

I had continued my business to the sidewalk and turned left, opposite the direction that Vega had went. My mind had already moved on to the business at hand. I had to get to the burger joint before shift change brought in the new cook who over-seasons everything.

I told all of this to the old woman as we sat inside the El Camino, parked on a side street. She hadn't said a word since getting in. I guess she was processing. Maybe overwhelmed that she had some news on her daughter. Maybe deep inside she believed, too, that Vega had been murdered and would never be found.

"Either of those men sound familiar? Friends of hers perhaps?"

"No," she answered. "Her friends were nice girls."

"Any chance I could speak to them?"

Her head shook slightly. "They don't come around anymore. No one does. Not since they stole my Vega."

We didn't make eye contact. I was looking out the window, back to when I had seen Vega on the sidewalk. I hadn't noticed her struggle to break away from the men then. But maybe she had done so before and had learned a lesson. A hard one. Maybe one that broke her spirit. Maybe now she merely obeyed to survive.

I turned my attention to the old woman, to keep my mind from wandering down a dark hole of Vega's well-being. I've been in some places before, saw things I'd never be able to forget. I could feel my blood pressure rising.

"Where did they go?" Her hand came down upon my forearm and I instinctively jerked it away.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean..." I didn't finish, I just put my arm back to where it was. She seemed to understand. "No, I don't know where they went."

She was quiet for a moment, staring out to someplace a million miles past the windshield. I knew then why I had overstayed my visit to Texas. Vega.

"I'm going to help you. I'm going to track Vega down."

She turned to me with a curious look. “You are policeman?”

No. Policemen have rules.

“I’m just a man who helps people in need.”

She smiled. “I know what you are.”

Good. I suddenly felt uncomfortable with telling the old woman that I was a gun-for-hire, a hitman, a man who was paid to make people hurt.

“You are an angel. You were sent to save Vega.”

Not the words I would have chosen. I didn’t reply. She looked happy and I didn’t feel the need to ruin it with a minor technicality.

Her lips slowly curled up into a huge smile. There was life in her eyes, a twinkle of emotion she probably hadn’t felt in a while. Relief. She shoved the sack onto my lap.

“For you.”

Maybe I frowned slightly, and it showed. I only imagined a ruined burger sitting in the heat for far too long. She must’ve read my mind, motioning me to accept it.

Reluctantly, I opened the sack. I smiled despite myself. It was a bag of cash. Crisp, new fifties and twenties neatly stacked and held with red rubber bands. Could be close to a five thousand dollars.

“It’s a thousand dollars,” she said.

I was a bit off. I shrugged. I’ve worked for less.

She added firmly, “I can give you more when you bring Vega to me.”

“It’s not about the money. Go home and try to put your life back together. I’ll call with updates. Okay?”

She nodded. She reached for the door, opened it, then turned back to me. “I didn’t give you my number.”

I pointed to the phone number on the flyer. She smiled and nodded. She shut the door and bent down into the window frame. She held out a hand the size of an overweight twelve-year old.

“My name is Bella.”

I took her hand. “I am Michael Lynch. Nice to meet you, Bella.”

“This is a good day, Michael Lynch!” She began singing and clapping. “The Lord has sent me an angel.”

She danced away, still singing and carrying on. I stared down to the flyer of Vega. My only thought was not letting Bella down.

Chapter 3

Morning.

I was sitting in a greasy spoon restaurant eating a pile of scrambled eggs that were wetter than I prefer, a stack of blueberry pancakes that were missing blueberries, and a few orders of bacon, of which I had no complaints. I had ordered a tall glass of orange juice, pulp free, my favorite, but judging the size of my cup, I should have ordered a gallon. I can only imagine someone asking for a 'small' would be served a thimble.

It was early, nearly 7:30, and I hadn't slept all that well. I couldn't get Vega and her mother out of my mind. I had tried to form a strategy but knew that would be short-lived and I began fearing my next conversation with Bella would be very apologetic.

I'd start by hitting up the bank and the local businesses to see if anyone had security footage from two weeks ago. It was doubtful, but I had to start somewhere. The local police department would be next, which seemed as bleak. After that, if things go as poorly as I figure they would, I was going to hit the streets and ask questions. Seems unlikely, but I've turned over a few stones that way before.

I stood, tossed down a twenty to cover the bill and tip, and walked out to the sidewalk, into the new day's air where traffic, both foot and vehicle, were picking up. People were shuffling in and out of coffee houses like addicts. *Can't do anything until I get my coffee.* They're not morning people. They're not like me. Get up, get at it. No need for anything in my system to help me function, to help me do my job.

The day was warm already with the promise of strong heat this afternoon. I wanted to get at it and get the most out of this morning before then. I turned left and walked to the intersection, then made another left. I would keep to the sidewalk for three more blocks before making another left to reach the bank's front door. I didn't waste my time.

Someone else did though.

I was still two blocks away when I heard her voice running up behind me quick, abrupt, and direct. A trace of excitement in her words.

"I said not another step, black T-shirt guy!"

I turned. She spun me back around immediately. Pushed me flat to the store-front wall.

"Keep your hands against the glass!"

"What did I do?"

She pushed me against the giant glass windows of the coffee shop, with small tables and chairs just beyond. People watched. I made eye contact with a woman eating a fudge-coated brownie. She was in mid-bite and held it there. We both were confused.

"Anything in your pockets? Any needles? I'm not going to get stuck with anything?" She said, patting me down.

I was offended. I wasn't some meth-head with scabs and sores on my face, scrawny and malnourished. I'm not thin, I'm slim built. Big difference.

"No. Just some change." I was glad I had left my snub-nosed .38 in the car under my seat.

"Any weapons on you? Bazookas? Grenades? Rocket launchers?"

"Pants are way too tight for all that."

Her voice was raspy, her hands small but quick as they searched me, and kept me pinned to the window-wall. I had only caught a quick glance of her, a youthful tanned face, jet black hair tied back underneath the blue cop hat, matching the blue uniform top. Dark blue pants? Black, maybe? She wore dark sunglasses. Maybe pink lipstick.

“Want to tell me what this is about?”

“Stay quiet. Don’t move.” She kept at it, doing a thorough job searching. I didn’t mind. I just stared into the eyes of the brownie-eater and smiled.

The cop yanked out the folded-up flyer of Vega from my back pocket. I didn’t hear it unfold. Instead, her hands immediately went to the front pockets where they removed a few wadded-up dollar bills. Mostly ones and fives. I felt her back away.

“This all the cash you have? Where’s your wallet? ID?”

First, I don’t carry my ID in my wallet, and I don’t carry my wallet on me. Bad move in my line of work. “In my car.”

“Turn around. State your name. Where’ve you been, where you’re going.”

I obeyed, turning slowly around to stare down at her. The cop stood about two feet away, investigating my money. Which wasn’t much. I never keep a lot on me. Also bad for my line of work.

She was taller than I had figured. Slim. No lipstick. Dark blue uniform pants. Maybe mid-twenties. And not married. At least, not wearing a ring. She was all business. Beautiful and intelligent. A combination that would make some men intimidated, but I was going to—

“That’s an awful lot of thinking about your name.”

“I’m Michael Lynch. What’s this about, officer...?”

“Where are you coming from?”

“Diner around the corner. The one with the sponge pads for eggs. You know of it?”

“I know you were in there this morning. I know what you ate. I know you drank three glasses of pulp free orange juice.”

“Two and a half really.”

“I know because the manager called it in. Can you think of any reason why he would do that, sir?”

“Michael. Not *sir*. I’m not that much older than you, officer...”

“Officer is fine.”

Damn right she’s fine. My God does she smell good.

“Let’s continue on with the diner.” She added.

She was cute. Stone faced, trying hard to be rough. I’m guessing she was new on the force. “Did I over tip? Service wasn’t that great.”

“Comedian, huh?”

“I have my moments.” She said nothing. I said, “I’m assuming you’re going to tell me what the problem is then?”

She paused. I couldn’t see her eyes past the sunglasses, but I could feel them on me. Maybe she wasn’t a newbie. She definitely had an edge to her.

“You paid with a counterfeit twenty, sir. In the past few weeks, those have become quite popular. They’re a thorn in my side right now. Is there anything you’d like to tell me? Anything you would like to confess?”

I could feel my eyebrows rise. “I confess that I don’t even know how to tell the difference. If I had one in my possession, I wouldn’t know. Unless it was an obvious fake, like some board game money. But it wasn’t, was it?”

“Where else have you passed money this past week?”

I gave her my run down of usual places, from the diner to the greasy spoon. My guess is that she’s received no complaints about my money at those establishments. I think she’s run into a dead end, and the look on her face suggests there’s been plenty of them.

“Sorry I can’t be of more help, officer.”

Officer Smellsgood.

She stared at me for a moment. She was trying to find a lie, trying to see if she could trust me or not. When she spoke again, the excitement in her voice was gone, the edge had diminished, and she sounded like a normal person. She sounded genuine, and I could tell the job was getting to her.

“Can you think back real hard and tell me where you received that twenty?”

“Bank, actually. ATM around the corner, about a week ago.”

“Are you sure about that?”

I nodded. No smile. No need for her to think I was lying. “Absolutely. I’ve withdrawn money once a week there for the past month. Always in twenties.”

“What’s your address? Employer?”

I gave her the whereabouts of the place I was renting, and then paused. I had reservations about explaining my job. Cops tend to ask a lot of questions, and I liked to keep a lot of answers to myself.

“And...?” *Smellsgood* said, with a look to encourage me to answer the second half of her question.

“I’m self-employed.”

“In which field?”

“I was actually hired to find a missing person. A young woman named Vega.”

“Vega hired you?”

“No. Vega is missing. Has been for two weeks. Her mother hired me.” I pointed to the flyer in her hands. She opened it. I gave her a brief rundown of my encounter with Vega and how I met Bella.

“Why didn’t she call it in?”

“Said she did.”

“I’ve never heard of her.”

I shrugged. She seemed to be thinking of something. I let her. She was quiet a moment. I just stared at her. No complaints.

“Two weeks?” Her voice was laced in gloom.

“I know the odds.”

We were quiet for just a moment.

Her head turned in the direction of the bank. “Why don’t you have your ID on you?”

“Could get stolen. Then I could have some nutcase at my house waiting for me to come home. Then all kinds of bad things could happen.”

“Are you always this funny?” She looked right at me again. No smile.

“I have my moments.”

“Lucky me.”

The corners of *Smellsgood's* lips curled ever-so slightly. I smiled back. She gave me a good vibe. Past the rigid front she was showing, due to her job, I knew, she was a cool chick.

“It’s against the law to be in town without an I.D. on your persons. If I see you again and you’re without it, I will write you a citation. And I hate writing citations. It’s a lot of paperwork that I don’t have time for. So please don’t put me through that. It really pisses me off.”

I nodded. She handed back my cash.

“Table For One at the other end of town has the best eggs.”

She turned swiftly and walked away, pulling out a small pad of paper and writing as she did so. I watched her until she rounded the corner, out of sight. I was upset with myself for not getting her name. But I had a funny feeling I would be seeing a bit more of her in the days to come.

I hoped so, anyway.

Chapter 4

The bank was empty.

I had walked the two blocks to the bank after the cop turned me loose and proceeded with my plan for tracking down Vega. There would be security cameras facing the sidewalk that I was hoping to see. Maybe in the footage there would be a clue, a vehicle they stepped into, or another store they entered. It was a long shot, I knew, but it's what I was working with.

I stood inside at a counter designed for customers to fill out deposit forms or balance their checkbooks or simply to wait for the next available teller. But there were none. I had been standing for two minutes now and hadn't seen anyone in the bank at all. I turned, roaming around, hoping someone would pop out of an office space and see me, but so far that hasn't worked out. I looked at the doors and windows for a sign saying they were even open.

Then I saw out of the big glass windows to the drive-up teller section, a white van parking at the ATM and two figures working on loading it with cash. Most of what they were doing was blocked by the machine itself, but I got the gist of it. Nothing better to do, I watched them. But it was over in a flash. A blonde woman shut the backdoor to the van while a young guy locked up the machine. The woman walked around to the front of the van, got in, and drove away. The machine guy walked to the bank.

He entered with a smile. A tall, slim kid, maybe late-teens. His hair was cropped short and neat. No evidence of facial hair. Business attire, pressed, no wrinkles.

"Morning," I said.

"Oh, hello. Good morning to you, sir."

His voice broke a few times, like puberty wasn't over yet. I watched him move around to the teller's side of the counters. He had things to prepare and seemed to be rushing through it. After a few moments, he looked back to me and smiled, waving me over to him. It was probably his first job. Very eager to please.

"Good morning sir. Sorry about the wait. Usually James is here and helps the..." He caught himself rambling on. "How can I help you?"

"I need to look at your security footage."

There were a few things that took place on his face then. One of them was worry. Quick and abrupt, then back to casually forcing that smile. I wasn't entirely sure of his reservation with my request, but there was no mistaking that he had one.

"I'm sorry, sir. That's not something I can show you."

"It would only take a minute. Two, tops."

"Are you a policeman?" He was worried.

"I need to see the tape to help locate a missing woman, who I saw pass by the bank the other day. Maybe you can have someone else—"

"I'm sorry, but I can't. I don't even have access to that. That's all Brad's area." He continued with his voice lower, "Above my pay grade, if you know what I mean."

"When's this Brad guy going to be here? I can wait. Or come back later."

"Brad will be in at nine."

We both turned to the giant, circular clock on the wall above the entrance. It was about 8:10.

“I’ll wait.”

“I’m sorry, did you say you were law enforcement?”

“I’m working a missing person’s case.” I broke out the folded-up flyer, unfolded it, and showed it to him. “Her name’s Vega. Ring any bells?”

“Sorry.”

“She passed by the ATM with two men, that could be her abductors. I hate the thought of what they could be doing to her. Do you have a sister, or girlfriend? Could you imagine?” I saw his face shift. He was genuinely concerned, but also couldn’t help.

“I do know that the security tapes roll over after twenty-four hours. So even if she was...”

I got it. Dead end. No surprise.

“Okay. That saves me from waiting for Brad.”

“Sorry. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

I turned for the door. “Thanks anyway...”

“Avery.” He caught on.

“Thank you for your help, Avery.”

I stepped out of the bank and into the sunlight again, the dry air starting to make me uncomfortable already. It was going to be a hot day. Best to get all this walking and talking out of the way soon. There were about five more stores lining the street that I was going to question, with about five more *I’m sorry sir* coming my way.

It was 8:15.

I hit up the shops and stores along both sides of the street and by 8:30 no one could help me. No big surprise. All the stores have surveillance that rolls over after twenty-four hours and records over. Got that out of the way.

So I made copies of Vega’s flyer. Passed them out to every business in town. Took me most of the day. Worked through the heat, my black T was saturated with sweat. My feet were sore and tired of the walking, and by 6:30 I called it quits. I had stopped dozens of people and showed them the flyer, explained to them how Bella is at home heartbroken. But it was all for nothing. Just another dead end.

I had eaten in town and had retreated to my lair to shower and change the bandage on the screwdriver wound, and now to contemplate. I was shackled up in a B&B at the edge of town. It was a decent size one bed, one bath, above a garage, with a small kitchen and a slider exiting out onto a sliver of a patio overlooking a bus station. It was cheap.

I sat outside on the patio in a wicker chair until the sun went down, thinking of ways I could track down Vega. There wasn’t much to go on. I guess my next step would be the local PD, even if Bella had already beat that bush. Besides, it would give me a chance to find out what that cop’s name was.

I stepped inside and turned the oscillating fan on high and lied in bed. Three-inch memory foam mattress top. The best sleep I’ve ever had. I rolled onto my side and felt under the bed. I grabbed the brown paper bag and dumped it out onto the bed beside me. Four piles of neatly stacked cash. Jacksons and Grants. They looked brand new. I rolled back the rubber bands on a stack and stared at a few bills. Crisp money. Cold hard cash.

I thought about *Officer Smellsgood* inspecting my cash, looking for fakes. She had an eye for it. The waitress or the cashier at the diner had noticed the fake I passed off right away. But as I stared at it, it began to bother me that I had no idea how to spot a counterfeit. I know technology these days can make it nearly impossible to tell. The face,

the color, the paper thickness, all the damn numbers that mean something. It all plays a part. My untrained eyes were blind to the craft.

Maybe I'd ask *Smellsgood* to educate me.

I collected the cash and stuffed it back into the bag, lobbed it back under the bed. Out of sight, out of mind.

I stared up at the ceiling and as I dozed off, all my thoughts were of that cop.

Officer Smellsgood. It was a fitting name.

My eyes closed. The last thing I remember was smiling.

Chapter 5

Table For One.

I woke up at 7:00, showered, changed into a lucky red T, dark jeans, and typical black Nikes. I drove to the other side of town in the early morning traffic, well out of my way, hoping my hunch would pay off. I found the place easily enough and parked out front on the street. I walked in, scanned the room, then asked for a booth near the door.

It was a nice clean place with a friendly atmosphere. It was packed, too, which meant good food. The waitresses wore light blue dresses, with white aprons decorated with blue flowers. They reminded me of something from the '50s. I sat in a booth, with a window facing the street. The bench seat had some good spring to it, but it wasn't bad enough to complain about. Wafting from the kitchen were the smells of breakfast foods and the sounds of sizzling grills and busy spatulas.

It was about 7:45, way too early to be up and out of bed, but I figured it was worth a shot. It was warm outside, but Table For One had the a/c on at a comfortable 68 degrees. An old couple behind me were talking about the weather. It was going to rain later, they said. It would be an awful bad storm, they agreed. It's been far too long, they added.

"I was right, wasn't I?"

I turned, recognizing the raspy voice. *Smellsgood* was approaching, aptly named, in her blue work uniform, still in the black shades. Still looking fine.

My hunch had paid off.

"Best eggs on the planet," she finished.

"I wish we would've met sooner, save me from wasting so much time elsewhere." I smiled, motioned for her to take a seat.

She slid into the booth seat opposite me and instantly flagged down the waitress with a hand signal that they both understood to mean: *coffee!* She was comfortable here. A regular, probably.

"Come here often?"

"That a pickup line?"

"No. I don't even know how to pick up a woman anymore." I said it truthfully, but her smirk indicated she wasn't buying it. "I was serious. This place is a good distance from the station, so I'll assume you live nearby, and assume you eat here before your shift."

"Never assume anything." She took her cap off. Her jet-black hair was shimmery, tied back in some contraption-style figuration that I knew nothing about, like a bird's nest held together with chopsticks.

"I come here to get away from it all," she said. "And I don't tell anybody. It's more of a sanctuary for me."

Yet you told me.

"We all need someplace to escape to."

Her left eyebrow raised in agreement. "Have your I.D. on you?"

I didn't answer. No reason to piss her off so soon.

"I'll let it slide. I'm not on the clock yet."

"Thanks for the head start."

“I figure a guy like you could use one. How’s the missing girl situation coming along?”

“Still missing.”

An elderly waitress, hefty with short grey curls, arrived with a pot of coffee, and a cup for *Smellsgood*. Handing the mug to my new friend, the waitress turned in one motion to fill my cup with coffee but stopped short with a quizzical look seeing the orange juice. With a quick smile, she took *Smellsgood*’s order, which she stated as ‘my usual’, then lumbered away.

Smellsgood took a drink of her coffee. Her face shifted slightly, like she was wincing with pain. It was gone almost immediately. She said nothing about it.

“Girls come up missing all the time. It’s not as safe here now as it was growing up. Or maybe we were just oblivious to it. Back then you didn’t have Amber Alerts and social media.” She stared down into her mug, lost in thought. “Where are you looking?”

“Figured I would hit up the shops and see if the surveillance videos-”

“Dead end. They record on 24hr loops. What else do you have?”

I shrugged. “I’m crafty. Maybe I’ll shake down some prostitutes and see if anything comes up.”

“Good luck getting one to talk. They know the consequences. Usually they zip right up when someone starts asking questions. Especially if he looks like you.”

“Like me?”

“Yeah, you know.” She paused as if she didn’t want to say what was on her mind. “You’re not a bad looking guy. You look clean, taking care of yourself, not their usual John. More like a cop. Well, to them, I guess.”

“Not to you?”

“Somewhat. Like your mannerisms. You’re aware, alert, careful, patient. You could be a cop. Why aren’t you?”

“Too many rules, I guess.”

Her hands slowly spun her coffee mug and her thoughts drifted as she looked out the window. I took a long drink. I looked at her. I had no reason not to.

She looked right at me. “What else?”

“What else what?”

“Your next move. What else do you have?”

I shrugged. Something would come up. I wasn’t worried about it. If Vega was alive—which was the biggest question—and in town, then I’d find her.

“Probably shake down some prostitutes.”

One eyebrow raised. “Seriously?”

“Sometimes the best dirt is in the darkest hole.”

“That’s a terrible metaphor.”

Was it a metaphor?

“Kidnapped girls often work the streets.”

“Homemade porn, nowadays. You can try the apartments on Easy Street, far end of town. We get some girls in from there. Not a friendly atmosphere, if you know what I mean.”

I did. But she didn’t need to know about the snub underneath my seat. Serial number was filed off. She’d have all kinds of questions. I changed the subject.

“Hey, are you still working the fake bills?” I asked, she nodded with a groan. “Want to show me the difference between a good and bad sometime? I’ve become curious, thanks to almost going to jail.”

“I could arrange something. Maybe this afternoon if you want to swing by the station.”

“I could fit you in my schedule.”

Her food arrived. Pancakes, biscuits, bacon, eggs, toast, fruits. I was staring at a buffet. I was both impressed and concerned. She dug in, I continued working on my heaping egg pile.

“Stores and shop owners are on alert, they know what to look for, how to spot them. And they do. I’ve confiscated close to a thousand dollars this week alone. So it bothers the hell out of me that you received one from the ATM. Those people should be all over that.”

“Sounds like your hands are full.”

“Tied, is more fitting.”

“How so?”

“Chief has passed it down to me. I don’t do anything else. And I’m not making any progress. I feel like I’m in over my head.”

“Ask for help.”

“There is no help. Budget cuts have us stripped to the bone. We’ve had to lay off close to seventy-five percent of our force in the past two years. We’re like a skeleton crew. We’re working doubles, sometimes triple shifts. House calls can take up to fifteen hours to answer. Meanwhile, I eat, breathe, and sleep fake twenties.”

I had a strong tinge of pain in my right shoulder, down deep in the screwdriver wound. I groaned, took my left hand, and rubbed that area.

“You okay?”

“Old wound.”

It was done and over in a second. I was back to eating, though I was careful of how I was moving my right arm now. *Smellsgood* noticed.

“What type of wound?”

“Phillips.”

“What’s a Phillips?”

“It’s a screwdriver.”

She said nothing, just stared for a second, then went back to 8 course meal displayed before her. “Nasty storm coming in this afternoon. Be careful out there. The rain brings out the lunatics every bit as a full moon.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” I felt my stomach churn slightly.

“What is it?”

“Nothing. I just have this thing against storms.”

“Like a phobia?”

“Like I hate them. When I was a kid, there was a storm one night. Non-stop lightning. All night. When we woke up, we found out there had been a tornado about a mile away. Came through at night, no one saw it. No warnings. People died.” I smiled. “I saw a dead cow in a tree. That was kinda cool.”

“You might want to talk to someone about that. Sounds like your traumatized.”

“You couldn’t imagine.”

She stopped eating. She looked up to me, I felt her gaze upon mine. Perfect posture. Perfect everything, really. She gathered herself and spoke with a serious tone.

“I have something to confess. I know you.”

“I don’t think so. I would have remembered-”

“No, I mean that I know *of* you. Yesterday, after I looked at your flyer and you told me about the girl you’re trying to find, I recognized you. You’re the guy who saved all those women from the Russian traffickers a few years back. I saw your picture on the news.”

“I figured everyone had forgotten.”

“Most probably have. But people in those types of hopeless situations, especially women, trapped, looking for a hero, will never forget. They cling to the belief that there’s a man out there coming to rescue them. What you did was incredible. So on behalf of women everywhere, I want to say thank you.”

I shrugged. I wasn’t going back to old memories, old pain, old faces I have put behind me. Not on purpose, anyway. “I just did what needed to be done.”

Her head turned to the window and I saw the tear slip down below her black frames just before she could wipe it. There was a lot more going on with this woman than I could put a finger on yet. She was holding on to something painful. I let her be. I had a feeling that she’d open up when she was ready to.

A moment later I saw her head nod, ever-so slightly, as if she had reached some sort of agreement with herself. Naturally, I assumed she was ready to spill the beans on whatever was bothering her. I continued to eat, ready for her to share the burden she carried.

She said, “What kind of car do you drive?”

Not what I was expecting. “It’s a 1970 El Camino SS.”

She smiled. “It’s black, isn’t it?”

“Triple black, actually. Inside and out. Just put in a new bench seat. Smooth as a whistle.”

“I don’t think that’s the saying.”

“Why? You want a ride to the station?”

“No thanks. My boyfriend wouldn’t appreciate that.” She turned from the window, back to me with a grin. “I just watched you get a meter ticket.”

Boyfriend?

“What?” I looked out the window in time to see a meter-maid walking away from the El Camino. A bright yellow card on the windshield. “Huh. I didn’t know people still checked meters.”

“It’s a twenty-dollar ticket. Please don’t pay with a fake.” She smiled brightly. Great, clean, white teeth. Dazzling.

“Glad I could entertain you,” I said flatly.

She laughed softly, downed her coffee, then slid out of the booth. All her plates empty. Belly stuffed full, probably aching. Her hand reached around to her back pocket when I stopped her.

“No, no. Breakfast is on me.”

She smiled again. She continued to pull a business card out and handed it to me. “Thanks, but I have a running tab. Here’s my card. Call me and we can work out a time to look at some counterfeits.”

I felt my face get warm. My cheeks were probably red. I took her card and looked it over. Name and number.

“Misha LaRue.”

“Remember what I said about Easy Street,” she said, turning and leaving.

Misha LaRue.

Her name played in my head for the duration of my breakfast, which didn't last long after she had left. I had things to do as well. But now, I couldn't quite remember what they were.

Chapter 6

Supercell storms.

Easy enough to spot. Enormous, almost apocalyptic, anvil-like juggernauts that stretch for miles in every direction, packed with swirling clouds of dark colors etched in ghostly white, with an updraft that sucked the heat from the earth and left you shivering as you ran for shelter.

Nightmares come to life. They are a sight to behold.

The one closing in was scary as hell.

By the time I was where I was going, the temperature had already dropped fifteen degrees. Suddenly ten in the morning looked like ten at night. In the sky above me, towering above the two-story apartment complexes surrounding me, the fringes of the storm swept slowly by. Behind the white front held a wicked green mess of a clouds lit by flickers of lightning.

The rain was on its way. I could smell it. I was hoping this would be over before I was drenched, or worse. Thunder cracked in the distance. A deep rumble of something unpleasant lurking in the dark above.

My pace quickened. I fought to keep my anxiety down. I forced myself to stop staring at the sky, to stop thinking of the damage a storm like this could do. I forced myself to breathe normally, before I ended up pissing myself in a panic attack or something.

Easy Street ended just outside of town where vacant buildings and empty farmlands began to take over. I was walking in the middle of two apartment complexes where lower than average income people dwell; where large windows may or may not have screens or glass, or may just be tattooed in graffitied plywood; where large green dumpsters were overflowing with opened trash, sometimes with a couch sticking out, sometimes with a body digging in. It shouldn't take long to find out if *Smellsgood* was right.

I walked to the nearest building, through a small parking lot which homed older model cars whose parts were all mix-and-match. Buick Regals and Skylarks mostly. I noticed an old, rusted out Cutlass with the hood up and the top torn off, with no wheels and sitting on bricks. The lot reminded me of a junkyard, long since abandoned by any civilized mechanic.

Loose newspapers blew in the breeze. Burnouts huddled together sharing joints and needles. And based on the fish-net stockings worn by the women sporting bras for tank tops and really short denim shorts, who were just lounging in the doorways but now were approaching me with cat-calls, this was exactly the area I was looking for.

"Hey baby," a woman said. "What you doing out here?"

I wasn't sure which one was talking. I kept walking towards them, towards the building behind them that served as headquarters for business and pleasure. I needed to find out if Vega had been forced into working. I needed some untrustworthy people to be honest. But I've learned where and how to apply enough pressure to get what I want.

"Oh, he's fine. Let me get a good look at him." Another said. "He's clean, too."

Their cat calls gelled into a mess of Spanish and English as they each fought to be heard over the others. Or simply to grab my attention, as they could clearly see I wasn't interested.

“You lost, baby?”

Out of the three women approaching, she was the shortest. Which was saying a lot. The tallest was close to five feet. They were of Mexican decent, and not as easy upon the eyes. They each went to the same hair salon, that’s for damn sure. Probably the cheapest box of hair dye created and shelved at the local dollar store. It was probably called Gold Dust. The box probably had an image of a leprechaun with a magic wand promising that gold is better.

“No,” I said, staring at them in pity. “I’m not lost.”

“Let’s go get a room, honey.” The tall one spoke with a smile. She had a pretty recent black eye. “It’s nasty out here.”

“Can’t imagine it’s any better in there.”

They surrounded me, casually touching my arms and chest. All smiles. All eyes sparkling. They spoke in sensual tones. Each vying for my money, knowing their pimp wouldn’t be pleased if I walked away alone.

I said, “I’m looking for a girl.” Maybe wrong choice of words to these three.

“I’m right here, baby.” the tall one replied.

“Not you. But maybe you can help me find her.”

She was offended. She gave me a scowling look.

“I can help you in every way,” the short one whispered.

I kept my eyes on the apartment windows. I saw the curtains move slightly on the second floor, the room next to the stairs. The sky was getting dark and the wind picked up. I was getting anxious. The thunder was drawing close.

“I’m not here for a room. I’m looking for a girl. Blonde hair. Blue eyes. Early twenties.”

“Ain’t nothing she can do for you that I can’t, sugar.” The tall one crept in real close, ran her fingers through my hair. “I’mma forget what you said about me ‘cus you so fine. Now, what you got for me?”

I reached in my pocket and pulled out a bill. I offered it to her. She snatched it away. “A five-dollar bill?”

They each laughed. But I couldn’t imagine they’ve seen bigger. Not these three. Not unless the John wanted change made.

The short one said, “What we gonna do with five bucks?”

“Buy some gold body paint, probably.”

The laughter stopped suddenly. Their draping arms retreated. The tall one brought up her hand and slapped me. I felt her long nails claw across my skin.

“You must be loco,” she said.

“Blonde. Real blonde. And cute.” I pulled out the flyer. They didn’t bother to look, just kept glaring at me. “Have you seen her? Does she work or not? She’d stand out in your crowd. Maybe she’d get all your business.”

“We ain’t gotta tell you shit,” she short one said emphatically. “We don’t talk to police.”

They began to call me names. Not nice ones like earlier. Bad ones. But I didn’t budge. If I stayed here long enough, their pimp would come out and find out what was going on. I needed to speak to him.

“You like your neck broken or sumptin?” she asked.

“If you want out, I can help you. All of you.”

More names. Worse than before. They were angry like the sky above us.

“I’m serious. I’ll put you someplace nice. You’ll never have to *work* again. No one will find you. No one will hurt you. I promise that. You’ll be safe. Just answer my question.”

They calmed down for the most part. Their eyes were filled with uncertainty. *Was it a trap? Is he for real? Would I be killed?* The short one kept quiet and exchanged looks with the middle one. They wanted to respond. So the tall one was in charge, and they were waiting to see what she would do.

The rain came in gusts of sprinkles. The hammer would drop soon, and I didn’t want to be out when it fell.

“You some kinda miracle cop?” The tall one asked with sincerity. I knew the look in her eyes. I’ve seen it plenty of times. Fear mixed with a faint trace of hope.

“I’m making you a promise right now. All of this can end, right here, right now.” I looked each of them in the eye. “Does the blonde girl work? Do you know where she is?”

“We need to go,” the short one whispered. She was scared. “Let’s go inside.”

She turned, and began to usher her co-workers aside, when the middle-sized one stopped them. “She’s not here! We’ve never seen her!” Her eyes were wide, probably shocked at her own admittance. The other two were stunned. “I want out.”

“No!” the tall one growled at her. “You know better!”

She turned and looked back to the apartment, back to the second-story window. Then she turned back to me, still unsure, but now also desperate.

The Golden Girls turned to each other and spoke in hushed tones. We all knew how dangerous getting out was. And this delay wasn’t helping. I realized that I had better get going. The mission now was to get these three away from harm. Vega wasn’t here. It was time to go.

“Okay, follow me.”

The tall one turned to me. She was scared. “You better go. Alone.”

“Come with me.”

“You’ll get us all killed!” She gave hard looks to the girls.

“I made you a promise. You’ll be safe.”

She brought her clawed hand up to her eye and carefully brushed across it. The other two began to panic.

Someone whistled.

“You can’t promise us that. You have no idea. . . He’s coming now. You better run.”

“It’s too late,” the short one said. “He’s gonna be angry.”

“That’s something he better get used to.” I motioned for them to get behind me, but they weren’t going to commit to suicide.

“Too bad you’re notta cop,” the short one softly groaned.

“Just remember what I said.”

I saw the apartment door slam open and crash back into the wall as a guy bolted out. He was hunched over, with his beefy arms dangling straight down at his sides. Right hand gripped a Louisville Slugger. Left hand balled into a fist. He sported a dingy white T with sloppy jeans, no shoes, and no hair. He was probably thirty years old. Probably most of those years were spent behind bars.

“Awful lot of talking going on out here,” he said, stopping within grasp. He wore a thin graze of black stubble on his face, and tattoos from the neck down.

“Just working out the details of our deal.”

“What sorta deal is that, man? I didn’t see any money handed over.” He turned to the tall woman for an answer, who managed a slight shake of her head. He spun back to me. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m negotiating.”

A curious look to his flock, then back to me with a cruel smile. I stood still. No expression to give.

“You a cop?”

“I’m a hitman. Do you know the difference?”

“Ain’t no difference out here. You’re either buying or you’re walking.”

A jagged bolt of a billion watts struck the town a few blocks away, with the rumble of thunder immediately following. We all looked up to the swirling mess above for a brief second. I could feel the anxiety building within me.

“You should clean out your ears sometime. You don’t hear so well. I’m negotiating. And I have a few questions for you, too.”

“Is this guy for real?” His laugh was cold.

I stepped forward. “I’m as real as it gets.”

The laughing stopped. The look in his eyes was dangerous. “Is that so?”

“Where can I find her?” I held out the flyer.

He took interest. “If this were mine, I wouldn’t need these three! Who is she?”

Dead end. He wasn’t worth anymore time.

“Never mind. You can go now.”

“I can go now?”

“Yeah. Why don’t you go take a shower, maybe make a dentist appointment?”

“How about you negotiate your ass outta here?” He whipped the flyer back to me and brought the business end of the bat to my nose. “Empty out those pockets before I knock your smartass out.”

I flicked my five-dollar bill at him and he became enraged. His face twisted in anger; he looked like a wild animal ready to attack.

“That’s all you got?”

“I don’t need much more for your women.”

He turned to the Golden Girls. “You filthy whores, back inside! I’m gonna teach you Chicanos a lesson about who you run your mouths to. Get in there!”

The women turned to obey, scared and whimpering.

I said, “They’re coming with me. That was the deal.” The women stopped and stared at me with wide eyes and open mouths.

“We didn’t make no five-dollar deal for no whores!”

“The women are coming with me. The five was for the bat I’m going to break against your legs.”

“Ain’t nobody threaten me, man.”

He tore at me then, cursing and swinging his bat in every direction. As he charged me, I felt a gust of wind and with it came the rain. Large, heavy drops fell in sheets and didn’t let up.

He swung at me from a yard away, moving at full speed, but I was ready. I ducked and the wooden bat swiped over my head in a *whoosh!* The momentum sent the guy off balance and before he could regain his footing I kicked him hard at the back of his left

ankle, rupturing his Achilles tendon from his heel bone, sending him down into the wet grass shrieking in pain.

With the rain pelting my face and nearly blinding me, I yanked the bat from his hands. As he was screaming about how he was going to kill me, I raised the bat high over my head and like a lumberjack brought it down across his right fibula. The man screamed. The women screamed. The eerie sky overhead screamed with wicked bolts of blinding light.

“Kill him, you whores!” he yelled. “Kill him!”

He could do little else but lay withering in pain, clutching his injuries, yelling at his whores to help him.

The women were hesitant. It was probably the first command that they didn't jump to obey. I could see the anger wash across his face. They were crossing a line and there was going to be no coming back.

I was soaked. My jeans felt like cement, both in weight and material. It was hard to see clearly through the relentless sheets of this downpour. It was even harder to hear over it beating down on car tops and against the buildings' vinyl siding.

“If I ever see you again, I'll do the same to your face. The women are done with you.” I looked to the women. “You're done here! You don't belong to him. It's over.”

I put the bag down against his Adam's apple. “You understand?”

His response was muffled by the rain and his crying, but I got the gist of it. He understood. I tossed the bat aside out of his reach.

“Let's go!”

I motioned for the women to join me as I began a quick pace back to the shelter of the El Camino, but not before picking up my five-dollar bill no one wanted. The short woman was at my side instantly, the medium one a step behind. I didn't look back. I made a mistake.

The bullet ripped through the air as just another spark in the violent sky. If it hadn't whizzed past my left ear, I wouldn't have even turned back. But I did. All three of us did.

To my surprise, the tall one was on her knees beside her master, crying hard, cradling him, her pleas drowned out by the persistent rain. He was pointing a pistol at us. But he was shaking, and the rain beating his face made it nearly impossible for him to take aim. At least good aim. I collected the Golden Twins and continued at a much faster pace.

We piled in the car, absolutely drenched. I started up the 450-horse powered beast and drove with the wipers on high. They couldn't move fast enough. The rain was pounding against the windshield so fast all I could make out was a whitewash interrupted with a strip of black every second. Visibility was cut back to about fifty yards. The Twins were holding onto each other crying over the one that stayed behind. They feared for her life. I tried to calm them, but my words were nothing against what they knew in their heads.

We drove back to my place and I got them settled in. There was plenty to eat and drink, and they could shower and change into the courtesy robes while I shopped for them. I took some money from Bella's bag and left them alone for almost an hour and returned with decent outfits and black hair dye. Once the storm was passed, I'd take them someplace far away. I was a man of my word.

“It's going to be okay now,” I promised.

But I knew we all were thinking about the one that decided to stay.

Chapter 7

I called *Smellsgood*.

The news forecast shown a patch of purple inside a large stretch of red, which was outlined in green. The green I knew was just rain. The red was severe. I figured the purple was run for a basement. The storm would last all day and there were more scattered storms coming. I had spent the last hour talking with the Twins, who now looked nothing alike, or resembled who they were this morning. Their hair was black, and their attire was pretty.

“I love my clothes,” Tina said quietly. She was looking at herself in a mirror. She was happy.

Tina is the short one and the other is Luciana. They gave me the rundown of their lives and how ‘working’ was something they were enslaved into. They told me about the tall one, Camilla, and her love for their pimp. They knew she would never leave him. I said nothing. Camilla made her decision like the rest of us.

“Why are you doing this for us?” asked Luciana.

“Because no one should ever be enslaved.”

They went quiet. Maybe it was the harsh tone in my voice, or the angry look in my eyes. I softened my stance a bit. “The decision to leave was all yours. And I think you made the right one. You should take some time and think about what you want to do with the rest of your lives. You have an open book now.”

I ate some cereal out of the box as the Twins began chatting in Spanish. They seemed edgy. I figured it was because I was there. Maybe they could relax and try to make plans on their lives if I wasn’t. Maybe some time alone is what they needed.

I pulled out Misha’s card and made the call. We spoke very little, and nothing about the Twins. She said I could come by now, and that’s what I was going to do.

“I’ll be a few hours,” I told them. “Remember what I said about leaving it all behind you. You can’t contact anyone. This has to be a clean break if you ever want to be free.”

They both nodded. I had a talk with them earlier about dropping all contact with everyone to make a clean escape. Calling anyone could put their lives in absolute danger. They understood. They were happy to be free. I could see it in their eyes.

I had changed into dry clothes, made sure they understood how to turn the cable TV on, and waved bye. It was a temporary setting for them, they knew. I would get them their own place, someplace nicer than my B&B once the storm let up. I couldn’t imagine what their living conditions have been like. A nightmare of constant fear. Not to mention the physical damage. But things would change now, and little by little what they held onto would slip away and they could have a normal life with normal relationships.

I shut the door to the B&B and stepped back into the cool rain. I was soaked before opening the El Camino’s door.

The ride to the police station was a mess. Streets were choked off by flooding and I was forced to find alternative routes. But doing so didn’t pan out either, due to fallen tree branches and downed power lines, and stupid people abandoning their vehicles in waist-deep water. And the people were everywhere. People were huddled up under the awnings of shops and businesses. Some were just out in the open doing nothing but getting wet. They didn’t look right, either. Like they had mental problems and the only time they

stepped outside was in a storm. The guy pushing an empty shopping cart through knee deep water made me think of a zombie apocalypse.

I made it to the police station much later than I had planned. I walked into a small screening room with a giant mirror on the wall. Then the door beside the mirror buzzed open. An attractive female cop appeared in the doorway, her black hair braided back, her blue uniform looking pressed, and her eyes masked behind the ever-present shades.

Smellsgood.

“You walk here?” Misha asked with a smirk. She held the door open and motioned for me to follow her.

“I could have sailed here,” I shot back.

I followed her through the door and through a few hallways, locked doors, offices, to her desk. No cubicles, just three short Mahogany desks in a row. She pulled out a chair for me and I sat facing her. She had stacks of paperwork and manila folders, but everything was neat and organized.

“How’s your day going?” I asked.

“They just brought in a naked woman for hijacking a bus, driving it into a flooded section on Main Street while pretending to be a pirate.” She looked up at me from her paperwork for the first time. “That’s how this whole day has been.”

I nodded. I said nothing. I looked around as I waited for her to finish writing something then watched her file it in a drawer. She took a deep breath, then gave me her full attention.

“How are you doing with the storm?”

I shrugged.

“We have a siren. You know, for tornadoes.”

I nodded. Didn’t want to think about it. She could tell.

“Okay, you want to see some twenties?”

She reached down into a drawer, hauled up a locked box and opened it. It was full of money. Loose, not stacked neat like her desktop.

“This is just this week,” she said, grabbing a handful of bills and placing them in a line before me. All twenties. All still in near mint condition.

“What’s the first thing you look at?”

She motioned for me to move in closer, and I moved my seat forward until my knees were touching the desk. I leaned in, elbows on the desk, just like hers. I watched her talk. I could do this all day.

“There are several things that should stand out. The fakes circulating now are good, but not great.” She produced a real twenty and placed it beside the fake, face up. “See any difference?”

Nope.

Smellsgood pointed to a real bill. “Look at the right side of the face. Notice anything?”

“Nope.”

“Okay, now look.” She held it up to the light. In that spot was an image of Jackson. “Watermarks can’t be seen unless using a light. Maybe the quickest, easiest way to spot a fake.”

“Neat.”

“Fakes will either have no watermark, or it will be visible all the time.” *Smellsgood* pointed to a fake on the desk, the image of Jackson was there all the time. She held up another fake into the light and no image shown at all.

“Watermark. Okay, that’s easy enough to spot.”

She smiled. She was sorting through the fakes, finding differences to show me. I think she was genuinely happy doing so. It made me forget how uncomfortable I was in my soaked-through jeans.

“There’s also a feel to the ink in authentic bills. Ridges that can’t be duplicated easily with counterfeits. The serial numbers should match the year it was made. There’s color shifting, and new bills have security ribbons. And never trust a bill with blurry words.”

I spent a few minutes looking at fakes and goods. I made small talk about my day, mostly to spend more time close to *Smellsgood*. I told her about my trip to the ghetto apartments and my taking in of the Twins.

“I’ll relocate them across state someplace once the storm passes. I hate driving in the rain.”

“I have to say, I don’t know anybody who would have done that. In my line of work, it’s refreshing to see something good happen.”

I flipped a bill over and saw blurry words, small and bold. “It’s the one that stayed behind that I’ll think about. I’ll always wonder now if she’s okay. If she regrets staying with him. If she’ll ever try to get out on her own. That type of thing will always bother me.”

“You can’t save everyone.”

“Why?”

I tossed a fake back onto the fake pile. Her tone changed unexpectedly. Our casual conversation somehow became personal. She began packing up the goods and fakes.

“Not everyone wants to be saved.”

I said nothing. The mood was different now. I was rubbing the side of a fake, thinking only of her wording and her tone. Thinking only of her. My eyes stared at the bill without seeing it at all. Then something bothered me. I was staring at the backside, top left corner.

“What’s this?”

“That’s our biggest clue. We’re calling it the Maker’s Mark. We have only just begun to see them on this string of fakes.”

It looked like some small Japanese symbol. I noticed it was on the fakes in the fake pile. Green slashes inside a circle. Small. Same spot, each bill.

“What does it mean?”

“It’s the *swoosh* on your shoes.”

I gave her a blank look.

“It means that whoever is printing them wants everyone to know its them. Their mark.”

“Fascinating. I know dope dealers will use pictures on their bags, same principle. So much for anonymity.”

“It’s bold. But criminals never believe that they can be caught.”

She leaned back and sat upright suddenly. I think her chair even rolled back slightly. I looked at her questionably, but her gaze was fixed on a stack of paperwork.

Then he arrived. Strolled in from behind me, pausing for a second, long enough to eye me up, then her, then pat her shoulder and give me a slight wave before walking past, turning left at the hall and out of sight.

Boyfriend.

Though I'm guessing by her rigidness that their relationship was on the rocks. And I'm sure she wasn't going to talk about it. I said nothing, just went back to pretending to stare at the fakes as she tidied up her spotless uniform.

"Are you all set," she said.

I nodded.

"I've got to get back to some paperwork."

"Well thanks for taking some time to educate me. I should head back before Noah's Ark cruises by. Besides, I'm getting hungry. I'll need to hit up my favorite restaurant soon."

I stood. She stood. I reached towards her, hand open. She accepted. I shook her hand carefully, which I don't normally do. Normally I like to give a firm handshake to women, because I hear they like that sort of thing. But with *Smellsgood* I backed off a bit.

I turned to leave with three things bothering me. Two of them I connected instantaneously: her damaged knuckles, and the sunglasses that I figured now must be hiding a damaged eye socket. I had a bad feeling about something. I wished I was wrong. I tried hard to reason it out another way, a different verdict. But the more I thought about it, the more it all fit.

I made my way outside, into the beating rain again, hearing her words anew.

Not everyone wants to be saved.

Chapter 8

Nearing 5:00.

The sky was still black with swirling clouds, heavy rain, and now golf ball size hail that beat against my car in deafening waves. I was now driving directly into the wind. Visibility was cut down to zero. My wipers couldn't move fast enough. I had the heat on blasting warm air up against the fogging windshield. The El Camino bottomed out in a few deep spots, slowing me down even more-so. Fifteen miles per hour was unreachable. With no idea of what was in front of me, I called it quits. I parked against the curb, sulking in defeat.

I was hungry. I was mad. I was wet. I wanted to do anything but sit and wait out the hailstorm. I wanted to go back to the station and get some answers from *Smellsgood*. I wanted to make sure she was safe. I wanted to hurt the person responsible. I wanted to crush him. I wanted her to know that it wasn't okay. I wanted to do anything else but wait, hearing only the hard rain and the whistling wind.

That's when my phone rang.

"Hello?"

"I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!" a woman cried frantically. Her voice was filled with fear. She rambled on for a few seconds before I could understand her again. "It was a mistake! I'm so sorry!"

"Who is this?"

Hysterical crying. If she was talking, I couldn't decipher it.

"Misha?"

Sobbing, just beyond the receiver.

"Misha, is that you? Are you hurt?"

"It was a set up. When he got out of the hospital, he said we could buy her freedom. He promised. But when we got here with the money, he beat Cami so bad. So bad this time. I don't think she's alive. You gotta come get me!"

Tina.

The shortest Golden Girl. One of the Twins I left in my bed and breakfast. I felt hot and anxious. I pictured her crying into the phone, scared out of her mind.

"Calm down and tell me where you are."

"He dragged Luci into another room and I hid. I don't hear her scream'n no mo. I'm scared he's gonna kill me! We never should'a came back here. We should'a listened to you!" She spoke thirty-two words in three seconds. "I'm sorry we took the money. We just wanted to buy Camilla. We just wanted Cami to come with us. We were gonna pay you back, I swear! I swear we was!"

"Tina, where are you?"

"Sh! He's coming." Her voice quieted to a soft mumble. "He's gonna find me. You're too late."

Silence.

"Tina!"

I had passed beneath the swaying streetlights before I realized the car was moving. Tina ended the call. She was hiding. She was terrified. Maybe she was already dead.

I told them not to go back. I warned them.

Dammit.

I lowered the gas pedal further, hydroplaning through another intersection, unfazed by the red light. No telling how long it would take me to get back to Easy in these conditions. I was pissed at the Twins for going back. For putting their lives in danger.

What really was eating away at me, was the feeling that I wasn't there to save them. Lead foot, white knuckles, gears shifting, engine roaring.

I'm coming!

The hail disappeared, along with the pounding rain. The sky was dark. Lightning bolts were sent searing into the earth, and I loved it. I wanted more. I wanted this place to burn.

I turned sharp down Easy Street without remembering any of the drive. I parked in the junkyard parking lot next to a doorless Geo Tracker, when I saw a blast of light coming from the apartments and was peppered with fragments of the Tracker's exploding windshield. The second shotgun blast riddled the Tracker's door with a hundred *tinks*, the third shot would be on target for sure. I slammed the El Camino in reverse, hands and feet working in unison, clutch-shift-gas, tires smoking as I backed away as fast as I could, all the way back to the main street, out of the shotgun's reach.

I parked another block away and snatched my snub .38 from under the bench seat. I got out and marched in the rain, down the street and angling to the back of the buildings, out of sight from the second story window. I approached from the side, stomping through the sodden grass and the stench of worms. At the building, I hugged the siding as I snuck around to the front, careful of anyone watching. I peered around the corner. I could make out a few inches of the shotgun barrel sticking out of the second story window screen. I pressed flat against the wall and moved quickly to the door, the steady rain quieting my every move.

The building door was off its hinges, lying against the wall inside. I stepped in. The smell was musty and funky, a cross between that wet couch in the dumpster and rotting meat. Holes in the drywall. Graffiti everywhere. Litter. The sounds of a busy brothel filled the silence.

I checked the first-floor rooms and kicked out all the girls working, all the guys paying, all the skanks lounging and smoking weed. I sent them all out the back door, directed them towards the nearest chapel. But not before asking them where their boss was. I didn't get a straight answer. I figured if I didn't find him on my own, they'd go rat me out.

The second floor was even more disgusting. It was a dream find for a reality show make-over. The carpet was dark and filled with even darker stains that could have been pet urine or even patches of blood. The apartments were missing doors. At the far end of the hallway I heard something heavy slide across the floor. It was quick, and I'll bet it was accidental.

My problem right now though, was the first door to my right was open, and inside was a shotgun with my name on it. I would have to deal with that first. Work my way down the hall next.

I walked for the door, across the grimy carpet, extremely grateful I was wearing shoes, and paused just before the doorway. I stood motionless for a moment, listening hard, identifying sounds, threatening and non. I pictured him at the window, staring out

into the rain, watching the parking lot for the El Camino to return. He would be preoccupied and wouldn't notice me approaching his backside.

I took a deep breath, exhaling slowly. With *Snub* ready for work, I stepped into the room.

The warm steel of the used barrel stuck to my right temple before my second foot planted on the ruined carpet.

I froze.

"I figured it was you down there," a man said. "Drop it."

I let *Snub* fall.

"Kick it over there," he said.

I did so.

I turned, feeling the barrel slide against my wet skin to my forehead. I was looking at a crackhead, a burnout, a junkie. Probably a meth-head, due to the open sores on his face. He was on something right now; I could see it in his glossy eyes. He was shaky too. Scrawny, tall, wearing a shabby white T and baggy jeans. No shoes. No socks. His hair was dingy like the carpet.

"You're the one," he said again. He looked pleased. Like now he would get a reward. Probably a bag of dope.

"No. He's outside. He sent me in to see if you would step outside and talk to him. He said you shot at his car. He's pissed about that. He likes that car a lot. He said it was a good thing that you're such a lousy shot."

He got mad. He rushed back to the window. It was open. No glass. Just a pointless ripped up screen. He aimed out into the rain, one way then quickly another, spazzing out, worried he would miss his shot. Worried he wouldn't get his reward.

"Where is he?!"

I was tired of his worries. He was pressed against the tall windowsill that bottomed out at his waist. I ran at him. Three feet away I jumped, planted both feet dead center of his back, and sent him out the building in a blur of flailing limbs and unintelligible words. I looked down at him screaming in pain. He landed awkwardly. He looked like a police chalk outline.

I had other concerns.

I picked up the snub and checked out the apartment. The place was a mess. A stronghold for flies and gnats and maggots. The bedroom held a stained mattress on the floor, and the bathroom didn't appear to be in working fashion. I checked the small closets and found no one hiding.

I left, back into the hall. I turned right, the snub ready for work. Another opened door was on the left. I entered slowly. This place had a TV and some old take-out containers. There was a faux leather couch and a table with four chairs. I saw boxes of opened cereal. Dirty bowls in the sink. I crept to the hall closet. One hand opened it, the other held the gun into the dark. There was a ton of garbage bags that all looked full of clothes. No bodies.

I pressed on, further into the hall. Another bedroom door was open, another mattress on the floor. More piles of clothes. More half-eaten plates of food. The bathroom had shampoos, razors, and female personal hygiene products scattered everywhere. The closet was packed with boxes of junk. No bodies.

I made it back to the hall and turned left. Four more rooms waited, two on each wall. One of the rooms on the right is where I heard movement earlier. But there was another door on the left first. I skipped it. I had a hunch and played it, walking instead to the right-side wall, to the open doorway, peeking inside, then carefully entering.

More of the same. The only difference now were the video cameras on tripods. I searched the place and found it empty of people.

I went into the hall, working my way to the last room on the right, opposite the desk and closed door. Dilemma. I wasn't always good with fifty-fifty choices. I crossed the hall figuring that the door was locked to keep someone inside. I moved behind the desk. There were .22 casings on the floor. I put my finger across the peephole while I gently took the door handle and turned it. Locked.

I saw blood on the door frame at the carpet.

I backed away slowly, retracing my steps, avoiding the room across the hall. I went backward to the room I had passed on. I entered behind the .38. I went into the kitchen and snatched a knife from the sink. I went through the hall, into the bedroom and listened to the right-side wall. It would be a shared bedroom wall with the locked door. I heard mumbling, very hushed whimpers, and a soft rustling of metal.

I took the knife and stabbed through the drywall. I made a horizontal cut until I hit the stud, then cut back the other way to the stud. I made long cuts to the floor. I dug the drywall out and had sixteen inches of a doorway. I squeezed through into the room.

Chained half-naked to the bedframe was a woman with a thick strip of duct tape across her mouth. Not a Golden Girl. Not Vega. She was pale white with sandy colored hair. Maybe nineteen, and scared. I urged her to remain quiet. Using my hands, I promised I was not going to hurt her. I moved in close to her and peeled the tape off her mouth. I asked her if she was alone. She shook her head, her eyes rolled to the closed bedroom door.

I unraveled the chains as quietly as I could, which took a few minutes for me, but probably felt like years to her. She scrambled to her feet when I was finished. I was happy to see she could move on her own. I would need her to do exactly that. I told her where my car was parked and that once she was out of this room she needed to get there and wait for me. She nodded. I moved to the bedroom door and motioned for her to wait. I turned the doorknob. It squeaked, but it wasn't locked. I slowly opened the door.

I smelled someone close by. A smoker. I shut the door softly. I motioned for the girl to sit on the bed and to stay calm. I took the chains and rattled them hard. Her eyes grew wide with fear. She knew that would send someone in, probably to punish her.

She was right.

Footsteps came right away, opening the door and entering fast. I kept out of sight, pressed against the wall behind the door. I waited to make sure no one else was following, then I slowly shut the door.

"Where's your tape?" a woman gasped when seeing the girl sitting upright. She was stunned. Then she saw my door in the wall. "What did you do?"

I snuck up behind her. She was about forty, tall and skank, smoking her tenth cigarette of the hour.

"You trying to leave us?" She took the cigarette out of her mouth. "You're gonna be damaged goods now, girl!"

She moved fast to burn the girl with the cigarette, but I was faster. I tackled her to the bed and pinned her with ease, using the chains to hog-tie her, the duct tape to keep her screams from alerting anyone else.

I looked to the girl. "Anyone else?"

"The man comes sometimes."

I motioned for her to follow me. I left the skank tied up on the bed, she wasn't going to escape, and no one was going to hear her. I shut the door.

We entered the hall. I saw traces of blood speckled along the wall at the hall closet. I opened it and a black garbage bag flopped out. It was wet. Red. Fresh. Heavy. I didn't open it. I didn't have to. In the closet on the floor was the shirt I had bought for Tina. Torn and bloodied. Opposite the closet was the bathroom. A slew of filled garbage bags and bloodstained rags. My eyes didn't linger on its gruesomeness. The girl behind me covered her scream.

I had a flashback of the Seattle job. The bloody walls, the fear and helplessness. I saw their faces again. I could feel a change taking place inside me.

I fought to calm down, but I was losing it. I was hot. I was breathing hard and fast. Sounds were blocked out. I was losing control of my sanity. It was happening again. Just like Seattle.

I yelled then, loud and terrible, filled with the promise that something awful was unleashed.

I stormed through the rest of the place, but it was empty. I unlocked the door and threw it open, wanting to rip it clean off the hinges. I saw across the hall into the other apartment. I threw the desk aside and rushed into the room, the snub out and eager for action.

I headed to the bedroom; everything was happening so fast. Everything was a blur. The anger had taken over and I felt like I was outside my body watching it unfold. I kicked through the bedroom door as if it were paper. There was a man rising quickly from a chair, reaching for a handgun on the nightstand. Behind him was a woman tied up with rope. *Snub* went to work. I didn't feel the recoil; I didn't hear the *pop*.

Nothing registered at all until I was back outside in the rain and heard the woman crying for the first time. I looked back and she was right with me, clinging for safety. I looked down to see bloody rope in one hand and *Snub* in the other. I tossed the rope.

"You're safe now," I told her. I wasn't sure if I had said anything to her at all. She kept crying, turning, and running frantically away from me. I let her. I realized the first girl wasn't with me. I had hoped she had found the El Camino.

I was on my way there when he found me.

"Hey, boy! You costing me a lot of money today!" his voice called out from between the buildings. "I knew you'd come back! Too late though, weren't ya?"

It was the guy from earlier, now with a cast over his ankle. Behind him was the scrawny shotgun guy, now with a limp arm, and a few rough looking men and women.

"Look what you did to my leg! I'm gonna cut yours clean off!"

The rain had lessened. I heard a train coming close by. A car alarm somewhere in the distance. But there was something else I couldn't identify so easily.

"Put down the gun," the man said.

"I'm going to put you down instead."

I was staring at a sawed-off shotgun, maybe twenty-five yards away and inching forward. I shot first. *Click. Click.* No shots fired. I had zero shells to use. I had spent them all on the room upstairs.

The shotgun fired, missing poorly, the recoil nearly knocked the meth-head on his lack of an ass. It was my chance to run then.

But I froze.

The train whistle became deafening and the ground was shaking. And all at once it dawned on me. There was no train coming. And the car alarm was the tornado warning siren.

I saw it then, tearing towards us, towering above the apartments in a spinning funnel, separating life and limb miles apart.

“Run!” someone yelled. A group of them took shelter inside the apartment building.

I ran the other way.

The ghostly white tornado’s rumble drowned out every sound now. It was tearing the siding and shingles off the apartments as I reached the parking lot and looked back. I saw a manhole and frantically began to pry it up as the apartments succumbed to destruction and my assailants were swept off the earth.

The manhole lid came up and I dropped down about nine feet, landing in a foul stench of flowing liquids. I saw the hole of light above me turn black as the ground around me shook with a great force. I couldn’t hear my own scream.

I was still trembling when it was over, and I waited a few minutes before climbing the rungs up to the parking lot. But once there, I saw a complete path of devastation in both directions for miles.

I saw bodies, but no survivors.

Back at the El Camino, the car was intact, exactly how I left it. Save for the girl, who was extremely surprised to see me.

Chapter 9

“How are you alive?”

Misha LaRue hovered over me, inspecting me for injuries, showing real concern. I didn't mind it. Not one bit.

I had left Easy Street and drove the shackled woman to her house, to rejoin her with her family. She had been missing for two months. She lived less than a mile away.

I went back to my place and called *Smellsgood*. I reported the tornado. I reported freeing some kidnapped women. I reported the garbage bags. I kept my mouth shut about the work *Snub* did though. She was off work and wanted to see me, to make sure I was okay. And I wasn't. Not even close.

“You're trembling,” she said, her soft hands slid down my temples down into my brown stubble. “Are you sure you don't want to go to the hospital and get checked out?”

“I'm fine,” I lied. “Excuse me.”

I rose from the couch and went to the bathroom where I threw up again. Dry heaves now. I had emptied my stomach out on the first five takes an hour ago. It happens during some jobs. The damn tornado didn't help.

I came back into the room to find *Smellsgood* on the phone ordering food. Her black hair was down now, shoulder length with a glossy shine, and her uniform top was untucked, and the top two buttons undone. Shades still on.

She must have noticed me staring.

She placed a hand over her phone and whispered, “It's an oven in here.”

I was tempted to crank the heat up even more, but I lied back on the couch. I needed to sleep for a day or so. But she convinced me that I needed to eat something first. I wasn't hungry. She was persuasive. I ordered a burger.

“You don't have to stay. It's late. Your boyfriend will be concerned.”

“I ended it.” She stated flatly. “I have something for you.”

Misha LaRue took the sack she brought off the floor and opened it up, pulling out a dark colored V-neck T. She held it out to me, and when I took it from her, I was immediately surprised. It was heavier than I was used to.

“That's some tough polyester.”

“It's a Kevlar prototype. It's lightweight and bulletproof. Or in your case, screwdriver proof.”

I smiled. She had thought of me.

“Very nice, Misha. Thank you.”

“One hand washes the other, right?”

I shot her a questioning look. “What do you want—”

“Nothing. Let's just consider it an exchange for all the people you've helped.”

“Okay. But seriously, if there's anything I can do for you, don't hesitate.”

“Can you make it into the station tomorrow for a formal statement on the women?”

“Sure you need it? The tornado wiped away all the evidence. What was it, an F-5?”

She laughed. “Not quite. Maybe a lower-case F.”

“Glad to see you can laugh about it.”

“I’m sorry. It’s nothing to laugh about.” Her smile retreated. “It was close to a 2. The destruction was limited to just those apartments and a half-mile of fields afterward. It would appear to be an act of God, if you’re a believer in a higher authority.”

“Are you suggesting that someone above is looking out for me?”

“It looks like what it looks like, Michael.”

Her smile retreated. Mine didn’t.

She wandered the room, ending up at the slider to stare outside. “Two more women were freed today because of you. I want to make sure you get the recognition you deserve, Michael. You’re someone’s angel, you know?”

“The devil was an angel once, too. Look how that turned out.”

She spun back to face me. “I don’t have to know everything that happened there. I’ve been out there, I already know, and that’s why I warned you earlier. But it takes a special kind of person—a type of person that doesn’t come along but once every twenty years to disregard their own safety and go into a mess like Easy with every intention of rescuing someone and actually succeeding. You’re not a cop. You’re not FBI. You’re a man with a real heart making a difference in a world where people will shoot you for not using your blinker.”

I sat upright. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you. I know you’re just trying to do something nice for me, but I don’t want to be in the paper or on the news. I don’t want the attention. The less people that know me, the better.”

“You’re worried about your case, or job, I mean? The missing girl.”

I shrugged. “I’ve learned the hard way that it’s best to keep low.”

“I get it. I really do.”

She walked over to me and stood close. She had something to say. Maybe she was rehearsing it, or trying to find the right words. Either way, it never happened.

Her cell phone buzzed.

She took the call, walking back towards the slider, keeping her voice hushed. But it was hard to do because she was angry. I knew it was the ex.

I got comfy on the couch again. It felt good to lay back and not think. Not move. Not talk or listen. I wrestled my shirt off and laid there motionless, fading out the angry words hushed into the phone and the street traffic just outside. I let it all go. I closed my eyes and let my chest rise and fall slowly.

“Michael? Are you sleeping?”

It was a faint whisper breaking through the dreams that were already forming. My eyes slid barely open, just enough to see *Smellsgood* bending over me. I could feel her soft touch against my chest as she gently caressed my skin. Her hands went through my hair and her lips moved towards mine. Then it all went black.

The nightmares came instantly. Faces of those I knew intimately, of those I’ve killed and of those I’ve let down called to me from iron cages, swirling around me in a storm sent to destroy me. I ran. I ran through the wet streets towards the El Camino, but it was on fire, and my legs were turning into cement. I could run no longer. The cages with the screaming faces were barreling down on me. I made eye contact then with Misha, screaming for me to help her, before I was sucked away into a cage and sent spiraling into an abyss.

I came awake yelling. I sprang upright with arms swinging in the dimness and felt the sweat race down my back. My breathing was hard. The images had faded completely, but I could still hear their screaming.

A warm hand touched my shoulder.

I spun quickly to see Misha, wearing only one of my black T's and a concerned look.

"You were having a nightmare," she said softly. Her hand rubbed my shoulder.

I said nothing. I took a moment to gather myself as she walked around the couch to face me. The streetlights cast a faint yellow glow on her legs.

"Misha? What are you doing still here?"

She sat down beside me. "You were out cold and I was worried about you. I hope you don't mind."

I saw her face in the streetlight glow. Dark eyes. Brown skin. Black hair that shimmered even in the failing light. She was marvelous. Her head tilted to bathe in the yellow glow. I saw her black eye. She didn't bother to hide it now, which I was grateful for. "No. I'm glad you stayed. I'm just sorry I passed out. I'm not much of a host, I'm afraid."

"You talk in your sleep," she said.

I shrugged.

"You kept saying 'smells good'. A lot, actually. What was that about?"

I told her about the nightmare. I didn't tell her about *Smellsgood*.

"I think the cages you keep seeing are about the work you do, like maybe you feel trapped and you can't save everyone. But you think you must, like it's your purpose. And it's all too overwhelming."

"Wow. How much do I owe you?"

She smiled. "Your money isn't even real."

Her hand ran across my chest to my right shoulder to the wound. She rubbed gently around it in a caressing fashion with a curious look.

"It must've hurt," she said.

I shrugged. "The emotional wounds are the ones that always hurt the most."

She looked at me and said nothing for a moment. We just stared at each other. I reached over and caressed her face, gentle around her eye. She didn't back away. Instead, she stood off the couch and sat on my lap.

"I feel safe with you."

"You shouldn't. People have a way of dying around me."

"That's a lot of weight to carry. You should talk to someone sometime. But not now."

She kissed me. Slowly at first, then wild and passionate and hungry. I didn't fight it. I wouldn't be the first to tell her no.

The second time I woke, it was morning and Misha was lying next to me in a bed not nearly big enough for the both of us. I didn't mind. I hadn't slept that well in months.

The sunlight slipped through the cheap plastic shades. It was nearly 9:00. I was starving. I propped up onto my left elbow and stared at *Smellsgood*. She was stirring awake. I ran my right hand down from the back of her smooth neck to the back of her left knee.

“God, I haven’t slept in this late in months.”

“Sorry I kept you up all night.”

“No, you’re not. Neither am I.” She smiled, sitting upright. “I like your scent.”

I smirked, thinking of her. Her eyes questioned me.

“*Smells good* is the name I called you before I knew your name.”

“Your nightmare makes more sense now,” she said with grin. “Dipshit.”

“What?”

“It’s what I called you in my head before I knew who you were.” Her smile broke into a soft laugh. “You were passing out fake twenties. Dipshit is pretty appropriate.”

I watched her laugh. She calmed, staring at me for a moment. Her sparkling eyes and smile remained, but her tone changed into something more important. She spoke carefully, taking her time, maintaining eye contact—of which I loved.

“He hit me. It was just once. I should have left him that night, but... I guess I was scared. He is my boss, you know? Anyway, I began to make excuses for him. For his anger, for the verbal abuse, too. I’d tell myself that he is just stressed out, or it’s not the real him. But it wasn’t until after you and I had breakfast did I realize that I didn’t want to be around him, that I was falling into that ‘battered wife’ category and I wasn’t going to allow that to happen.”

“You don’t have to explain yourself to me.”

“I know. But it’s something I didn’t want to keep from you. I admire you. I guess your opinion of me matters, for some silly reason.”

“What matters is that you know what he did was wrong and that you deserve better.” I leaned in close to her, pressing our bodies together and kissed her on the cheek.

“Thank you, Michael.”

We held each other for a long minute before breaking away and finding our clothes. I asked her to breakfast but she was already running late for work.

“How’s the investigation going, anyway?” I asked, watching her tuck in her uniform.

“No breakthroughs yet. Whoever they are though, they’ve spent some real money-making fakes.” She slipped on her shoes and tied them snug. “And your investigation?”

I shrugged. “About the same. I was actually thinking of leaving town, maybe calling it quits.”

Misha stopped tying up her hair and stared at me. Whatever she felt, she seemed to cope quickly, and finished her hair, adding the shades and hat.

“You’ve been through a lot, Michael. If you were on the force, you’d be required to see a shrink. Plus, the whole tornado ordeal—”

“I’m fine, Misha. Really.” I lied.

She stared at me for a moment before speaking. “You have seen a lot of death, Michael. In your line of work... What you do and what you see is having a dramatic impact on you, Michael. Maybe walking away is the right decision for you. You need to heal. Leave the bad guys for the cops.”

“Sometimes the cops are the bad guys.”

“Sometimes.” Misha was genuinely concerned. “You can’t kill everyone.”

“Someone needs to.”

She sighed. She walked over to me, held my face with both hands, and kissed me full on the mouth, deep and hard. “If you decide to leave, say goodbye in person. You know where to find me.”

She broke for the door and left without looking back. I slumped into the couch when the door shut and didn't move for a long while.

Chapter 10

Decisions.

It would be the first time I had walked from a job. There had been a few jobs over the years that I had passed on taking, but none that I had started and didn't finish. And this job was starting to feel like Seattle all over again. I simply wasn't ready for it. Mentally, it was too soon.

The odds that I could find Vega now were slim to none. The best thing for Bella was probably to keep hanging flyers and wait for the police to come through. I had no leads. No sources. And after Easy Street, I was left with very little desire.

I had to call Bella and give her the bad news. I had to give her back the money, too. Or what I had left, rather. I had taken a wad of cash from the bag she gave me and tucked it away inside an empty box of cheap cereal stored on the fridge. One of my favorite hiding spots. Glad I did too, because before the Golden Girls were making their last mistake, they had found the cash bag under the bed and taken it thinking they could buy out their friend's freedom. Noble cause, poor choice.

I dumped the box of cash out onto the small table and began to count it. I was a few twenties in when I realized something.

"Shit."

It was there, at the top corner, just like the others. The symbol. *Smellsgood* had named it The Maker's Mark. I thumbed through the pile quickly, not counting any more, just looking. The Mark was on them all. Every bill. Guess I'd be talking to Misha one more time after all.

First, I was going to spill the news about it all to Bella. She had a right to know about her fake money, and about my decision to walk. I couldn't imagine it was going to be a happy conversation.

I found the flyer with Vega's image and Bella's phone number. I sat down on the couch, took a few deep breaths, then made the call.

It rang twice.

"Hello?"

"Hi Bella, this is Michael Lynch. You hired me to find your daughter."

"Oh, yes! You found her!"

"No, Bella. I didn't. I want to talk to you about this job."

"No Vega?" The excitement in her voice was gone. "I don't understand. Why are you calling?"

"Bella, listen, I have a few things to tell you. First, you need to inspect whatever cash you have because what you gave me are all counterfeits. Fake twenties. Do you understand?"

She was quiet a second, then confused. "My money is no good? You want more money?"

"Yes and no." I should have done this in person. "I don't want any money from you. I found out that the twenty-dollar bills are not real. Someone made them. They are not worth anything."

"This cannot be. That was all my savings." She was worried. Probably thinking of all the things she needed to buy, like meds and food. "What am I going to do?"

“I can give you the name of the policewoman in charge of this. She’s very friendly and understanding. She’s going to want to know where you got your cash. I can give you her number.”

Nothing.

“Bella?”

“I’m okay. You talked to the police already and I will talk to her too?”

“I’m sorry, Bella.”

“I didn’t know. They look so real to me.”

“I know. I got some from the bank.”

“I got mine from the bank, too. It’s their fault!”

“No one is blaming you, Bella. Okay? You’re not in trouble. The policewoman I spoke with will understand. Okay?”

“Of course. I will talk to her immediately.” She sighed.

“Bella, are you alright?”

“I don’t care about the money. You just keep looking for Vega. Find my girl.”

I nodded.

I gave her *Smellsgood’s* name and number then ended the call before telling her I couldn’t continue working for her. I think the money situation was too much for her to bear now. I decided I would meet up with her later and break it to her face to face.

I had to make another call.

Smellsgood.

It rang four times then went to voicemail. I left a message. “Hey, it’s me. I have more fakes. I’m going to swing by and drop them off.”

I ended the call. I sat quietly for a moment and mapped out my day. I decided I would swing by the station and drop off my fakes, then grab a bite to eat, then meet with Bella and say goodbye. The feelings I had about abandoning her were gone. I felt good about my decision. It’s something that I needed to do.

I changed into the V-neck Misha left me, mostly because I wanted her to see me in it, then left the rental place and drove to the police station. Misha wasn’t in. Her ex was though.

“Know where I can find Misha?” I asked him.

He was sitting at his desk typing. When I mentioned her name, his fingers hit the keys a little harder, a little faster. It sounded like steady gunfire.

“Nope.”

His voice wasn’t as gruff as I figured. It didn’t match his neck tattoo, or this gelled hair. He was big, broad, probably had another fifty pounds on me. But he wouldn’t look at me.

“No idea? I’m here to drop her off something.”

“Nope.”

“I’m—”

“I know who you are. I’ve heard all about you.”

His tone gave me the impression that he wanted to inflict great bodily pain on me. Maybe he knew about Misha staying with me. Maybe I should tell him more.

“And I’ve heard all about you.” I stepped closer. He looked up at me. Eyes full of hate. “So how do you want to do this? Because I know everything about you. I mean

everything.” I made a small space between my index finger and my thumb. It was a hunch.

He bolted upright. But he didn’t do anything. I was right. I gave him a look that suggested he get on with it.

“She took a call and then she left. She didn’t say, and I didn’t ask. And if you want to make this official, I’m sure there’s all kinds of questions I can ask about you being out at Easy Street before the tornado.”

I kept my cool.

“You don’t hold any cards here, little man. Why don’t you make this your last visit before it’s your permanent visit.”

Understood.

I took a yellow notepad from Misha’s desktop and left a note for her to call me. I felt uncomfortable leaving my fakes lying on her desk, so I kept them and walked back out to my triple black SS.

It was just after 10:00. I was beyond hungry. I decided to hit up Table For One and chance that *Smellsgood* was there working on her fifth plate. But she wasn’t, and I ate alone wondering what she was up to. For a split second, I considered asking her to leave with me. But I knew she wouldn’t.

I paid my bill with my last real twenty, and turned right to walk a few blocks to a bank’s ATM. As I took my cash out, my phone rang. I shoved the cash in one pocket and yanked my phone out of the other. I was excited.

But it wasn’t Misha LaRue.

It was Bella.

“I want to meet with you.” She said right away. There was urgency in her voice, but she wasn’t excited. I couldn’t put my finger on it.

“I’m at the bank near 5th and Baldwin.”

“Stay there.”

“Bella, I have to tell you something.”

It was on my lips to say I was backing out of the deal. It was a good time for it.

But someone had better timing.

Vega.

I turned to look away from the bank and found myself staring face to face with Vega.

“Can it wait?” Bella asked.

“No, it’s Vega. She’s right here.”

Vega passed right by me. If Bella was still talking, I had not heard a word. My eyes turned with Vega.

“Vega?” I called out.

She spun back to me with a very cautioned look. It was her. I was sure of it.

“Who are you?”

I put the phone back into my pocket. I chose my words and tone carefully. “I’m a friend. I’ve been looking for you.”

Now she was suspicious. “They sent you to find me, didn’t they?”

They?

“I was hired to find you.”

“Hired? By who?”

“By your mother.”

“My mother died when I was sixteen.” Her tone became icy. “You mean Bella? She’s not my mother. She’s not anything but evil. And whatever they made me do is on them. I’m not that person. And I’m not doing their dirty work. I’m not going back.”

“Vega, listen—”

“Stay away from me!” She reached around to her backside. “I’ll shoot you right here, I mean it. I’m never going back. You hear me? I don’t know what they told you or what they promised you, but I’ll kill myself before letting them get me again. I don’t know how you found me, but that was a mistake and if you don’t leave right now, you’ll make the biggest mistake of your life.”

“Easy. I just want to talk. Your mother—”

“Stop calling her that! She’s evil! Their whole cult is evil!”

My hands came up in a submissive stance. I wasn’t going to get into the middle of this. I was going to calm her down and talk to her. She was afraid and I wanted to know more.

But then a white van came to a screeching halt and three men jumped out. Before she could even turn to face them, two of the men were pulling her back into the van. I charged at them, but one of them struck me in the forehead with something hard and I collapsed. Through the blood draining across my eyes and dizziness racking my head, I looked up and saw the van speeding away. The third man was limping towards me with the aid of one crutch and sporting a new cast on his lower left leg, from his toes to his knee.

“Hey asshole. Remember me?”

I did. He was stealing Bella’s cash bag in the park the other morning. I had broken his leg. “How’s the leg?”

“Better than you’re going to be.”

His left leg sped towards my face, the cement-hard cast over his foot struck my head. My sight blurred. Everything was dimming. I was giving in to the dizziness. I felt tired and at ease. But before I passed out, I saw clearly a black BMW roll up beside us and Bella got out.

I fought hard to warn her, to tell her to get back in her car and drive for help. But my motor skills were asleep, and my voice was only a gasp and a cough.

“I didn’t want him to die here on the street, you idiot!” She growled at the limper. “Get him in the car! Hurry up!”

Limper lifted my shoulders up and the last thing I saw was the look in Bella’s unbelievably cruel and cold eyes.

And away we went.

Chapter 11

I woke up.

I was in the backseat of a BMW. All black leather, shiny. Smelled clean. My ankles were duct taped together and my hands were taped as one behind me. My head hurt from being hit and I could feel the dried blood crusted to my face. As my mind adjusted to my surroundings, I realized how screwed up everything was. The pieces fell into place and the puzzle materialized in front of me. I sat motionless, staring at the back of Bella's head, wondering exactly what I had stumbled into.

"Where are you taking me, Bella?"

The driver eyed me through the rearview mirror. Clean cut with a thick dark mustache. I didn't recognize him. Limper sat quietly behind him. Bella's hand came up, dismissing my question without a word.

I don't handle the silent treatment very well. I get angry.

I turned to the Limper. "I'm going to kill you first."

He laughed. They all did. Then he slammed his fist down hard against my left thigh.

"Did you like that, asshole?"

"I've had better." I smiled. "I'm sure you get that a lot."

"Ma! Pull over and let me smoke his ass right now!"

"Settle down, Ruby." Bella said. "We're almost there."

"Ruby? I've been calling you Limper." I smiled. "Can I sign your cast?"

Limper leaned in real close. "I can't wait to break your face."

I just held my breath until he sat back again. They all went silent again. Not me.

"He wasn't stealing your money, was he?" I said to Bella. "When we met in the park the other day. I had it all wrong. You were dropping it off. Paying him. If it was for brushing his teeth, you should get your money back."

Bella said nothing. She wasn't the same woman I had met. She was assertive and cold. I was mad at myself for not seeing through her charade.

"You got played," laughed Limper. "Now you're dead."

Bella said, "It was unfortunate, Michael. Wrong place and wrong time. But it all worked out. I did need to find Vega and you fit the bill—a loner that no one would miss. And mostly important, you succeeded."

"Who is she?" No response. "She told me that you aren't her mother. So who is she?"

Limper punched me in the side. It took my breath away. I sat coughing for a few moments. My eyes watered.

"You don't get to ask questions, dead man."

We were driving through the city, near the outskirts where empty warehouses were abundant. They seemed to know exactly where they were going. I didn't care so much. The longer I stayed in the BMW, the longer I stayed alive.

But they were quiet again. I hate quiet.

I turned to the Limper and softly spoke. "I'll tell you where the money is."

He couldn't hear.

I said it a little louder.

He looked at me with a sly grin and motioned for me to say it. I did. Real quiet. Like I only wanted him to hear it. It was our secret. He seemed to catch on. He leaned in a little.

I said it again, a mumble of nothing.

I motioned for him to get closer. He looked at Bella in question, then the driver. Then he did as I asked.

His face was tilted, close enough. I used my forehead like a sledgehammer and drove it down hard into his nose. It sounded like a head of lettuce smashing against concrete. I felt the blood against my cheek before I heard his terrible scream.

And my God did he scream.

“What’d you do to him?” Bella yelled at me.

I turned sideways and jammed my feet into his stomach and pressed hard. With my back pinned to the door, I had great leverage and Limper wasn’t going anywhere. I figured I would break his ribs into his lungs. Maybe send his spleen through his spine.

But I was too late. The car drove into a parking garage and parked in the shadows. The driver threw my door open and I toppled out onto the cement, leaving Limper still drawing breath.

The driver placed his foot on my neck and pinned me to the ground. I was helpless. I could hear Bella urging Limper to get up. She was telling him that I was all his now. He stopped crying.

They came around to my side of the BMW. A mother and her wounded son. I wondered if they really were related. Maybe just the way her and Vega were.

“I want to say thank you for helping us get Vega back home and I won’t be needing your services any longer.”

Limper stepped closer to me. The driver got back in the car; Bella followed. She stopped near the rear and turned back to me. “And also, thank you for the heads up on the policewoman investigating the counterfeits. An unexpected surprise, Michael.”

She gave a nod to the bleeding-faced Limper, then she got in the car. Limper stood over me holding a handgun. His face was an absolute mess of blood and tears. I don’t know which he shed more of. Tears, probably. I’ve never heard a man cry so much.

He had his blood-covered left hand over his nose and a small handgun in his right. I saw a white flash then felt a speck of concrete rake my face. He missed. The pain in his face was making his eyes watery and he couldn’t focus on my head. I took a deep breath. I let it out slow.

Dammit.

I tried, Vega.

Farewell, Misha.

I saw the white flash again.

The impact on my chest was like a small explosion that left me gasping until my eyes shut.

When I awoke, the day was bright and warm. I wasn’t at peace with angles or burning with demons. I was on my back staring up at the garage’s decrepit infrastructure. I looked down at my chest, to the beautiful, the wonderful V-neck from *Smellsgood*. Two copper bullet tips were crushed against my chest.

I laughed. I don't know why. I just did. I did for a few minutes, staring at the bullets all compacted and mushroom-shaped, and seeing the empty casings scattered beyond my feet.

And to think I had always hated V-necks.

Misha.

My smile faded as I recalled how Bella had mentioned the cop I sent her to. Misha was in trouble.

It hurt like hell, but I sat upright, slid my hands under my legs, used my hands to remove the duct tape from around my ankles, then chewed my way through to free my hands. It didn't take long. I was no stranger to the process.

I stood and the bullets fell off the Kevlar shirt and bounced on the cement. I took one as a souvenir, then walked out of the parking garage to find my way back to the station.

To the bank, I corrected myself.

I had a plan forming.

People were going to die.

Chapter 12

I had no cell phone.

Pockets were empty.

Bella must have given the order to relieve me of my possessions. Glad I left my wallet in the triple black SS. I began walking through the empty streets, looking for any sign of life, for anyone to give me a ride or a phone call. I walked three blocks in this abandoned warehouse area before I saw the first car speed by ahead, rap music blasting at a deafening level as it ran the red light at the intersection.

The next block came and with it were a few teens vandalizing a vacant black Tahoe. They scattered like cockroaches when I called out to them. And although it wasn't a scorcher, all this walking was making me sweat. And I was thirsty. And worried about Misha. And I probably had a broken rib or two.

I rounded a corner and came to a street of dead shops, barred, and boarded up windows and doors. Graffiti everywhere. As far as I could see down the street the scenery was the same. Save for the end of this block were some homeless people huddled together. I could hear their voices, low and mere whispers from here. They didn't flee as I approached.

"Hey man! Over here!" A thick voice shouted at me, turning the other five to my attention.

"I have nothing on me," I said. "I can't help you."

A short one staggered over to me. A half drunk bottle of whisky in one hand, a dingy finger pointed at me with the other.

"I don't talk to your kind." He looked to my right. "But your friend can stay, if he wants."

I stopped walking. I wasn't going to get into a fight with a deranged homeless man. "I can't stay."

"I wasn't talking to you. I was talking to your friend here." He began a conversation to the empty space next to me. I guess he and my friend have a lot in common.

I turned past him to the others sitting against the red brick building. I walked right into their mix. Ragged flannels, filthy jeans, shoes and no shoes, unkempt hair, and unwashed bodies. Not a pageant winner in sight.

"Can you guys direct me to the nearest store?"

A man with an eye patch said. "What's it to ya?"

"I'm broke. I have nothing on me, you guys. I was robbed and shot. And every second I lose, the people who did it get further away. If you help me now, I'll pay you back later. I promise."

Murmurs broke out between them. Disbelief. They gave me all kinds of slur for not helping them out. I emptied my pockets and lifted my V-neck to show the red bullseyes within the giant purple bruises on my chest. I told them my story. I didn't mean to carry on with my own problems to a bunch of people who couldn't remember what a bar of soap felt like, but I didn't know where to start. I began with meeting Bella and ended with meeting them.

Eye patch guy stood and patted my shoulder. The others began digging in their pockets.

“Two blocks, go left. There’s a working payphone.”

“Here,” a voice said. “Go call your cop friend.”

They were giving me a handful of dimes and nickels.

“I can’t take your money.” I tried.

“You better.” Eye patch said in a firm tone. “Make your call and go save that girl.”

Another guy pressed forward. A wild look in his eyes. “We might be homeless, but we’re not heartless. If my daughter, rest her young soul, had been kidnapped, I’d wish someone out there would be going to rescue her. Find that girl! You might be the only chance she has!”

Shouts of agreement belled out. They were angry. They wanted justice.

“Thank you,” I said, then took their money. “I’ll remember this.”

They laughed.

“We’ve been forgotten by everyone including our government. Don’t worry about us. Go out and be someone’s hero! Get out of here!” Eye patch said, patting me on the shoulder.

The others joined in on telling me to scram, to go and do what others can’t. To go and be a hero.

“I’m no hero.”

I walked away from their celebration. Through the heat and the dilapidated buildings, I walked to probably the only payphone left on the planet. I slid in the coins, pressed some buttons, wiped off the handle before listening to it ring. It rang three times. I got nervous.

She answered on the fourth.

“Hello?”

“Misha!”

“Michael?”

“Where are you? Are you okay?”

“I’m at my desk sorting through—What’s going on? I thought you were leaving town.”

“I need a ride.”

I told her everything that happened since finding Vega. I gave her the nearest street names. Ten minutes later her cruiser pulled up and I got inside.

I hugged her tight and felt her thin arms wrap around me. “I thought you were dead.”

“You should be. I’m taking you to the hospital to get your chest X-rayed,” Misha said. “We’ll talk on the way.”

I wasn’t going to be the first person to tell her no.

Chapter 13

Bruised ribs, not broken.

The male nurse, who was probably twenty, wrapped my chest in a beige elastic wrap and told me to rest heavily for a few days. I didn't have a few days. And I didn't have a place to rest.

"I have a bed you can sleep on," Misha said once the nurse left the room to get a wheelchair.

"I'll need your help with something."

"Name it."

I told her my plan and she was in without hesitation.

I was wheeled out of the room, out of the hospital, to the parking lot where the night sky in the area was overrun with HED lights packing 60,000 lumens a punch. Misha had her cruiser waiting. She helped me in, then drove us to her place.

"We will get the tapes first thing in the morning." Misha said, referring to my plan of getting the bank to let me see their surveillance video.

"It's our only chance, Misha."

"Well, maybe yours. On the police force, we have things called tactics and protocol. Gathering evidence. Things you wouldn't know about."

I smiled. She smiled. She checked her phone with a groan. She mumbled something under her breath about it being the tenth call. I assumed it was her ex. I was glad she wasn't answering it.

"Thanks, by the way."

"Don't mention it."

"I mean for everything. Just, thank you."

"No trouble at all, Michael."

It was too dark in the car to see her face clearly, but I know she smiled. It was in her voice.

We were at her apartment ten minutes later. She gave me the nickel tour, but all I focused on was the bed. Just the one. I told her I could sleep on the couch, but she gave me a look that suggested I was being foolish.

"Do you want to eat or shower first?" she asked.

I was too tired for either. "Both."

"Go shower. I'll put your clothes in the wash then make you something to eat."

I did as directed. I had to have Misha remove the wrap from my chest, then wrap me back up once out of the shower. I went to her table to eat. There were three boxes of cereal and an empty bowl.

"Turns out I eat out a lot," she said.

"Turns out I love cereal."

I had three bowls, then *Smellsgood* led me into her bed. It was soft and smelled just like her. I was asleep instantly.

We got up early. Too early for my liking. We hit up Table For One for something that looked like a banquet for ten. Misha paid, then drove me to a dollar store where I picked up a cheap phone, then we went to my El Camino. We drove separately to the bank, as she would be heading to work directly after we had access to the security footage, and I would be sending some people straight to hell. At the bank, *Smellsgood* left her police cruiser for the comforts of my set of wheels. We waited impatiently.

“The sketch artist will be in around eleven. That should give you some time here to wrap this up.”

“I already told you what they look like.”

“I’m afraid this is official police business now, Michael. You were shot, and a girl was kidnapped. And the only reason we’re both here right now is because I pulled in a couple of favors. This will be Kip Derringer’s case. He’s rough around the edges, but a good cop.”

I nodded. We were quiet for a moment. I was worried about her. I always wanted her with me.

“Your life is in danger, Misha. I believe Bella has something planned for you.”

“You told me.”

“You don’t seem worried that she probably has a goon out there waiting to rub you out.”

“You mean *snuff* me out?”

“Sure.”

“I’m not too worried. I’m a cop. There are all sorts of whack-jobs out there that get off by killing cops. Comes with the territory.” She gave me a serious look. “I’ll be cautious. You might want to be even more so.”

She motioned to my chest, then she felt the bulletproof shirt I was wearing. I would wear it every day.

“Fair enough. Let’s get back to Bella. How deep is she?”

“That’s the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question. She definitely has some ties to the fakes. I’m betting that she knows exactly where they’re being made. The cash bag she gave you were fakes, but like you said, it was originally supposed to go to that *goon*. Maybe it was his job to exchange them.”

“There’s more to her than we know. Vega made that painfully clear.” I let things get quiet for a moment, thinking of Vega and what she told me. “Vega is in trouble. I don’t know what they did to her, but I’d bet she’s back at it. I have to get her back, Misha. We have to find that van.”

She sighed heavily. She turned to look at me in the early morning light. I found her uniform irresistible. She gave me a melancholy smile and nodded.

We went back to keeping our thoughts to ourselves. A few minutes passed before she spoke again.

“Showtime.”

She pointed. A newer model Durango pulled into the lot. Misha was already opening her door, grabbing her cap and exiting. I let her get out before me. Official police business and all.

I followed her. She began calling out to the man while he was unlocking the side door. She made him wait for us, using her police voice. She had him open the doors for

us and we all entered in a quick line. Misha made it clear we needed to see the surveillance from the last day.

“Oh, well. I’m not the I.T. guy here. That’s Avery’s department. And I’m sure he’s off today.”

I said, “I’m pretty computer savvy. Why don’t you just point us in the right direction.”

“We don’t have time to spare,” Misha added.

“I’ll show you what I know.” He said. He wasn’t nervous or tired. He was a morning person.

“What is your name?” I asked.

“James Driver. Follow me.”

We followed tall James to a short, narrow hall with three doors. He took the second door on the right and went in. He flipped a light switch on the wall, and we all entered. The surveillance room. Small. One desk. One chair. Three computer screens with split sections all showing different images from cameras in various places inside and outside. One was showing the drive-up section, which also captured the ATM. The other two showed the entrances and the teller’s stations.

James sat behind the desk and began a series of keystrokes on the black keyboard. Login and password, probably. A menu came up on one of the screens. He stood from the chair.

“All I know, you guys. Sorry. I can give you Avery’s number—”

“Avery the kid? Tall, skinny. Skittish?” I said.

“He’s the owner.” James quickly corrected himself. “Avery runs the bank, however, it’s family owned. Hence his title.”

“I met this kid the other day,” I began to Misha. “He was coming in from the ATM and said he couldn’t help me with the video footage. Said it was Brad’s department.”

James laughed out loud like it was absurd. “Brad? You ever see Brad?”

“No. I’ve seen the kid, and now you.”

“Is there something we should know, James?” Misha said with annoyance.

“I’m not saying anything other than when ATM deposits have come in in the last month now, Avery has given all of us the mornings off. That’s all I know. Look, I have to go open, so…”

“We’ll take it from here.” Misha dismissed him.

“Thanks, James.”

He walked out. I shot Misha a look, then got behind the desk and fumbled my way through the video system. Misha stood beside me, living up to the nickname I gave her. The distraction caused me to miss my time frame of around 11:00am and I ended up stopping the video just before the bank opened. I was just about to fast forward the video a few hours and get this ship sailing when we saw a white van approach the ATM.

Then something happened.

Chapter 14

“Go back.”

“I saw it.” I was already rewinding the video. We were watching the view on the ATM about 24 hours ago, just as the bank was opening. An unmarked white van pulled up to the machine, then the video blurred, and the van was gone. Misha pointed it out, standing over my right shoulder with her left arm clutching the back of my chair and her face nearly touching mine. No complaint.

“Play it from there,” Misha said.

I started the video again as the van pulled up. “Let me try to slow it down.” I played it in slow motion. As the van came to the ATM, something happened to the video, then the van was gone.

“There’s a glitch,” I said.

“No.” Misha was curious. “The camera was shut off.”

“Who? And why?”

“Based on James’ statements, there’s only one person here when the ATM gets stocked.”

“The kid. Avery. But that’s not an armored truck. The van could be anything. Could be just a guy wanting a fresh twenty to buy some coffee.”

“Could be.”

“You don’t think so though.”

“I think that if fake twenties are being put into the ATM it’s not being done by an armored truck.”

“Okay. Well, that’s a Chevy Express cargo van. Probably a ‘99 model. We can track it down.”

“Impressive.”

“I’m a car guy.”

“Well, car guy, that’s the most common van around,” she mused. “There must be a hundred around here. And without a plate... I was thinking of something more accessible. Some *one*, rather.”

“Avery.”

Misha shot me a look. “We need to talk to this kid. Keep going with the video. I want to see if it happens again.”

I resumed playing the video, then pointed something out to her. “Look at the time stamp. We lost ten minutes. That’s a long time for a withdrawal. But maybe enough time for a switch.”

Misha said nothing. She merely nodded, lost in her own conclusions as we skipped forward, slowing the video down only when a vehicle drove in to make a withdraw. Before we knew it, I made my way into the scene. We played it out in regular speed through the first pass, then rewound it and played it back slowly in the second pass. Vega, the henchmen, Bella. We watched it all unfold several times.

“That’s the same van from the missing ten minutes.” I said. “See that dent in the front bumper?”

“Makes sense now why she paid you in all fakes. She had access to them.”

“We’ll never see the plates from this footage,” I said.

“We can get footage from the intersections.”

“Let’s go.”

Misha shook her head. “I can’t. “It’ll be Derringer’s call now. This is where we part ways, I’m afraid.”

“Dammit. So, you’re headed back to the office then?”

“Not quite yet. There’s a kid here I have some questions for.”

I smiled. “Avery.”

“Call me later with your progress. Maybe we can discuss things over dinner?”

I stood from the chair, standing tall over Misha. “You’re on, LaRue.”

She smiled. She turned for the door and I followed. We made our way back through to the teller’s counter and saw James. He was busy on the phone and looked up at us for only a second.

Then we heard a slow, lazy voice call out. “Can I help ya’ll?”

We turned. Slowly rising from a chair to slouch against his own booth on the counter was a very large man. Hefty. I imagined him as a kid being picked first for football and dead last for track. The four words he gave us nearly sent him back into his chair.

I walked over to him; Misha followed. His name tag read BRAD. Misha and I shared a look.

“Good morning, Brad. I am looking for Avery.”

Brad groaned and rolled his eyes. He didn’t bother to hide his annoyance. He slouched back down into his chair, the springs groaning themselves. “He’s not in.”

“Where can I reach him?” Misha asked.

Brad took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. His mouth opened and I waited for words to slop out, but he took another breath and exhaled slowly. It was painful to watch. I was tempted to call 911 for him. Every thread in his white polo shirt looked like they were being tested to their limit. Beads of sweat trickled down from his nearly bald head to his sparsely patched black beard.

I turned to Misha. Behind her I saw James smirking at us. I turned back to Brad.

“Is he going to be in today, Brad? We have some very important questions for him?”

“He’ll be in late. As usual.” Brad took a long drink of bottled water. “Are you sure I can’t help ya’ll?”

I said, “Can you show us the last twenty-four hours of the security videos?”

Misha turned sharp to me. I kept my gaze on Brad.

Brad stared dumbfounded. “I know one thang about computers, mister. Don’t spill coffee on them.”

His mouth sagged open. His eyes blankly stared.

“Thanks, Brad. I’ll wait for Avery.” Misha said.

Misha and I turned away from Brad and casually made our way back to the door. We stood close to one another and spoke softly.

“How long are you planning on waiting?”

“All day if I have to.”

“Want me to wait with you?”

“No. You don’t have time to waste. Hang on.”

Misha pulled out her phone and made a call. It was short and direct. She ended the call and said, "Derringer is on his way."

I said, "There's your guy. Avery."

I pointed to the door and she turned back to see Avery entering. He shuffled in quickly and had some brief words with James. I watched his casualness shatter, and he very abruptly looked over at us. Worry was in his eyes. I could almost hear him *gulp*. And I'm damn sure his mind was racing with reasons to suddenly exit. But at that point Misha was already making her move on him. He just stood there like a deer in headlights, awaiting certain doom.

I lingered near the door, giving *Smellsgood* room to operate in official police mode. I turned to stare out the large floor-to-ceiling windows, thinking of my next moves, when I saw a police cruiser pull up. A tall man exited the vehicle and marched for the door. I stared at him. Sunglasses, mustache, bald, long strides. He was all business.

I went to greet him at the door. He came in, made out *Smellsgood*, then turned to me.

"You must be Michael Lynch."

I stuck my hand out. "And you must be Kip."

He shook my hand firm. "Detective Derringer." He removed the sunglasses. His brown eyes were wide and held an intense gaze. "Let's take this outside."

Kip Derringer turned and walked outside, all the way back to his cruiser then entered. I got in, sat shotgun, and watched him break out a small pad of paper and an ink pen.

"Name."

"Excuse me."

"State your name."

"You already know my name."

Kip Derringer released a long sigh. He turned to face me. He wasn't happy.

"I know your name. The Chief filled me in on some details regarding your background. I know you're a bounty hunter. I know that you were hired to find a missing girl. I know that you were abducted and shot. I also know that Officer LaRue granted you some information and time with her checking the bank's security footage with the hopes of seeing your abductees. And although I am sorry to hear about your situation, I am here right now to help you understand that your time on this case is over. I am here to do a job. I am very good at what I do. I take my job very seriously. So whatever fantasy you have about us working this case together, sharing information or anything the like, end it now. I will take a formal statement and not another moment of your time. Did I make myself clear?"

I was quiet for a second. Kip hadn't blinked or looked away. He was as serious as it gets.

"I am not interested in finding them for my own case. These people will lead me right to Vega, the kidnapped girl. She's all I care about."

"I will not let you interfere, Lynch. Don't test me. You will lose."

I held his gaze for a second. I knew I was on my own.

"My name is Michael Lynch."

He stared me down for another minute, then went back to his pad and pen. He had a series of questions about who, what, when, where, and how Bella and her goons jumped me. He took all the information down without looking back at me once.

“Thank you for your statement, Lynch. I have all the information that I need at this time.”

I said nothing. I opened the police cruiser door and moved to step out. As I did, Kip Derringer had one last remark.

“I do not play games, Lynch. I will find the parties responsible.”

I shut the door. I walked around the front of his car and thought about going back into the bank to tell *Smellsgood* that Kip Derringer was a dickhead, but I thought better of it. I realized I didn't have time to waste. Whatever his next move was, I had better make mine first.

I moved around his car and walked to the El Camino. I looked at Misha's cruiser still parked and said goodbye. I started up the triple black SS and gave it some gas, enjoying the deep rumble, before leaving some rubber fragments on the pavement. My destination was the intersection, more direct, it was the shops nearest the intersection. It's where *Smellsgood* and I would have went. If I wanted to see the security videos and find the van and the BMW, I had to beat Kip Derringer.

Chapter 15

“Sir?”

He was in his late fifties or early sixties. Thick black-framed glasses, hair parted neatly on the left. No facial hair. Maybe five and a half feet tall. Cuban, probably. Maybe Puerto Rican. And timid. This wasn't the guy who'd question authority.

“I'm Detective Derringer and I need to see your security footage from the last twenty-four hours.”

I flashed him my fake badge and gave some attitude.

He didn't flinch. Barely hesitated.

“This way.”

He motioned for me to follow him. We made our way past the counter, past the rows of new and used radios, stereos, and all kinds of antennas, columns of batteries of all sizes, and bins of USB cables for every type of electronic device. He moved to an old wooden door and opened it, holding it for me without making eye contact, then stepped into the backroom, which looked like an electronic hoarder's paradise. Off to the left side was a small desk and a flat screen computer monitor. He sat down and I stood beside the desk.

“I reported no problem,” he said.

With a few clicks of his mouse he was showing me the inside of his electronics store. One shot aimed at the register from behind the counter.

“Outside. I need to see the street. Can you show me the intersection? Around 11:00am?”

Confusion washed his face, but only momentarily. He began clicking the mouse again. The screen showed the exterior, above the door, aimed straight down. Nothing of the street.

“This is it?”

He barely nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Dammit.

“Thanks anyway.”

I turned and made my way back out through the labyrinth of cables and clutter. Outside again, into the heat of the day, into the sounds of traffic and slight commotion, I looked left and counted three more shops on each side of the street before the intersection. And four cameras facing into traffic, one per street, mounted high onto the utility poles holding the stop lights.

I would never get access to those on my own.

If Misha was with me...

Kip Derringer would have all the access he needed. I had to work the old-fashioned way. And I had better get to it.

It took me the better part of thirty minutes to hit all the shops. All with the same result.

With nothing coming to mind, I walked the sidewalk back to the SS El Camino parked curbside, now in the sunlight. My mind began wandering. I was stressing out. I was getting hot. I began chewing my fingernails. I couldn't think. Time was slipping away, and the helpless feeling was starting to overwhelm me.

I was just about to give *Smellsgood* a call when I saw a painting in a shop window. A beautiful acrylic of a cab parked beneath the cinema marquee at night. It was amazing. I knew exactly where it was, too. The artist captured the lights reflecting off the cab as if it were an actual photograph. It was real talent. But it was the actual photographs on display that owned my attention.

One in particular.

I entered the art gallery. It was stuffy inside. No air conditioning. Not even a fan humming, blowing warm, stale air around. I didn't care for it. I walked in and banked sharp to the right, walking around a section of small-scaled photos, to the big canvases in the window. I stared at one for a few long minutes. The photo was of a rainbow glowing brightly against the dark sky. It was beautiful. But what I was most fascinated with was the van in the foreground. A late nineties Chevrolet Express 1500 cargo van. White. Dent in the bumper. The same van from the bank.

"I'll never forget that day," a girl said.

I turned to my left. She was standing there like I was, just admiring the photo. She was probably twenty-five, five-eleven, and maybe a hundred pounds. She wore thick-framed black glasses that seemed to swallow her face. Her blonde hair was short and styled. She was hip. An artist. It was her work, I knew. Plus, she held a paint brush.

"Why is that?"

"It was just after the twister. Everything was so chaotic. And in the middle of that you have such a beautiful rainbow. A great symbol of peace and hope."

"Did you get pics of the tornado?"

"Just afterwards. I'm not a storm chaser. Twisters scare me." She was quiet for a moment, then added, "It was a little too close to home for me."

I can still hear its horrifying whistle.

"Do you have any other photos of that day. Particularly from this view? Moments before or after this one?"

"Dozens. Literally. Come on back."

She motioned with her head for me to follow as she went through the gallery and down a few steps into what was her studio. Just more of what was on display upstairs.

She brought forth a large purse, yanked out a long photo album, thumbed through carefully, then pointed to a few photos. She had fifty or more of that rainbow.

"That one right there," I said, pointing to a photo of the white van. Nearly identical to the one upstairs. Beside it was another photo taken a few minutes afterwards, showing Avery walking away holding a backpack.

"Want to take them out?" she asked.

"If you don't mind."

"Is this official police business, officer?"

"Huh?"

She was staring at the badge on my belt. I had forgotten about it.

"Yeah. Undercover stuff, so keep it between us."

"Gotcha."

I removed a handful of pictures and lined them up in a timeline. When I was finished, I stood back in awe.

"Find what you were looking for?"

I nodded.

I was looking at about five minutes' worth of time. Enough time to see the kid Avery enter the white van, make out with a blonde driver, then walk away with a backpack.

"Can I take these?"

She smiled. "I'd be happy to help."

"You have. Believe me. Great work, by the way. I mean, the paintings. You're very talented."

She blushed. "I dabble."

"Don't sell yourself short."

She blushed again. I waved bye and left the stuffiness for the outside heat and a slight breeze. I walked fast to the El Camino and drove away with the engine roaring and the scent of burning rubber invading the air.

I was back at the bank in no time and noticed that Misha's cruiser was still there. Good. Hopefully, she had Avery in some sort of headlock and was giving him the business end of a baton. I also noticed that Kip Derringer's car was missing.

Tick tock.

I made my way back into the bank and saw no sign of Misha LaRue or Avery. I made eye contact with Brad, who stood waiting for me, but I turned instead and walked to James, who was busy with a female customer and didn't care for my intrusion.

"James! Excuse me, James."

James was bothered. "I'm with someone."

"I can tell. Listen, I need to speak with Avery. Does the cop, my partner, have him somewhere?"

He looked baffled. "He's in the back."

James pointed down the hall. I didn't wait. They went back to business and I went to start mine.

The first door in the hall was open. I stuck my head inside, but I already knew it was empty. The second door was closed. I knocked and asked for Misha and heard some sudden movements inside. Nobody answered. I tried the door handle, but it was locked.

I knocked on the door real hard.

"I'm busy! Get back to work!" Avery yelled from within.

I could feel the panic in his voice. And then I knew why. He was in there with the security footage. I took a few steps back then charged the door, sending my right foot flat against the door just above the handle. *Crunch.* It broke open and swung in fast.

There, in a mess of panic and sweat, was Avery, clicking on the computer mouse like a machine gun at work.

"No!" he yelled.

No sign of *Smellsgood.*

I tackled him to the floor. His attempt to break free was laughable at best. "You've done enough in here today."

"You can't come in here! You know who I am?"

"I do, Avery. I know a whole lot about you that you'd wish I didn't. I know what you are doing, too. And I know why. I'll start with a white van full of fakes bills. You help exchange the real money for the fakes and you get a small percentage?"

I yanked him up to his feet, keeping his hands behind his back. He stopped struggling.

“Where’s Misha?”

“Who? I don’t know who that is!”

“The good-looking cop.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

He tried to break free again and I planted my left elbow in between his shoulder blades. He whined.

“She was talking to you when I left an hour ago.”

“I didn’t even talk to her! I swear! She was on her phone, then she left. I don’t know where she went. I swear! Let me go!”

I backed up and then spun him around face-first into the wall. I kept pressure on him. It wasn’t hard. He was all bone and cartilage. He was soft, like a kid who grew up wealthy and never had to earn anything.

“Are you taking me to jail?” he stammered. “I want to make my one phone call now.”

Forgot about the fake badge.

“Who would you call right now? Your mom can’t help you.”

“I know my rights. I don’t have to tell you anything.”

I was losing my temper with this kid. He was smug and privileged and guilty of something other than erasing the security tapes.

“I don’t think so.”

“You have to! I pay taxes! It’s my right!”

“I don’t care about your rights, Avery. I care about my friend, who I believe is in danger, possibly by people you know. So unless you want to live the rest of your pathetic life in a wheelchair, I’d start talking.”

He went still. No fidgeting. He looked away from me. I saw the corner of his lips rise. “Never mind. She’ll come for me.”

“Who?”

His smile rose higher. I don’t think he was even aware. I think he was fantasizing about her.

“Someone who’ll be worried about me going to jail.” He threatened.

“The girl in the van? She your girlfriend? Or your boss?”

He looked quickly at me. Surprise and concern in his eyes. He was about to say something but thought better of it and closed his mouth.

“Tell me her name and I’ll let you go.”

Nothing.

I lost my patience. My right hand balled into a fist and slammed into his gut. He buckled over, gasping. I shoved him into the chair like tossing a handful of leaves.

“I want everything you know about her. Name. Number. Address.”

He sat upright like it was the hardest thing he’s ever done physically. His eyes were watering. Once he caught his breath, he decided he didn’t want to get hit again.

“Raven. She calls herself Raven.”

Good. We have something. I had a feeling that chatterbox here would be able to set up a meeting with her. But I needed to find Misha first. I couldn’t shake the bad feeling I had about her. Something wasn’t right.

“Where’s Misha?”

Chapter 16

Her phone rang.

I hung up when her voicemail picked up then I called her right back. When *Smellsgood* didn't answer for the second time, I left a message. I told her to get back to me asap. It was urgent.

I turned to Avery, who was a nervous wreck sitting next to me in the triple black SS. We were parked beside *Smellsgood's* cruiser. We were worried. For different reasons.

"Tell me again," I said, for probably the tenth time.

Avery wiped his tears with the palms of his sweaty hands. His legs were shaking. He was tired of me asking him the same questions. But I told him repeatedly that he wasn't going anywhere until I got what I wanted. It was almost noon now and Misha wasn't returning my calls. The last person I knew who saw her was Avery. He wasn't getting out of my sight.

"You left with the guy and she took a call and walked out." He summarized this version. He was tired of it. But he kept to his story, and I had believed him the first time he told me.

I had walked out of the bank with Kip Derringer, gave him a statement in his car while Misha took a phone call and walked out of the bank. I never saw her. Which meant she didn't walk for her car. Which meant she wasn't leaving.

I mulled it all over again and again.

If she wasn't leaving, then she walked out to meet someone? Who? The person that called her? Who would that have been?

"Did you hear her answer the phone?"

"I told you a thousand times." He groaned, curling his fingers into fists.

"I don't care what you told me. Think about it this time. Think real hard." I shifted so I was facing him entirely. "She was walking towards you, then she pulled out her phone. What did she say?"

"I don't know!" He threw a tantrum like a child, pounding his fists into his thighs and screaming with his mouth closed. "I didn't hear her say anything but hello."

"What was her tone? Was she annoyed? Did she sound like she was speaking to her boss?"

"It was just a normal 'hello'."

"Then?"

"She turned and walked straight for the damn door. I'm telling you the truth! Maybe she went for a walk. Maybe she wanted coffee. Maybe she's out doing her fucking job and not harassing me!"

I slammed my right hand into his chest and pressed him hard into the seat. "You want out of this alive?"

More crying.

"Answer me!"

"Yes!"

Waterworks.

"Why were you deleting the surveillance videos?"

Nothing.

“That is what you were doing, right? Covering your tracks? Protecting yourself.”
He stopped crying and stiffened his posture. His smile was cold. “I’d do anything for her.”

“You’re protecting this Raven chick? She’s that special? Maybe she’s that dangerous?”

Nothing.

“You don’t even know her real name.”

He looked away from me. “Take me to jail. Go ahead.”

“You’ll go to prison for her. Because that’s what is going to happen.”

“Yes.” He looked to me. There was a seriousness in his eyes that barely masked his anger. “We’re in love.”

“Would she go to prison for you?”

He said nothing. He turned to stare out the window for a few seconds. He was calm when he spoke again. “You never read me my rights. Our whole conversation will be dismissed. But it doesn’t matter any longer. I’m done talking to you. I want a lawyer.”

“Two things, Avery. One: she’s not in love with you. She’s using you. Chances are she’s shackled up with a guy like me. And two: I’m not a cop.”

His head spun towards me and his eyes were wide with bewilderment. He looked down to my badge. I held it in my hand. I tossed it to him and watched his face flush with worry as he inspected it.

“Let’s go for a ride, kid.”

“Where?” his voice cracked. He was barely keeping his worry in check. The fidgeting returned. He began chewing fingernails. “Where are you taking me?”

An abandoned warehouse to beat the truth out of him? The police station to hand him over? The desert to make him dig his own grave?

Didn’t matter. My phone rang.

I looked at it.

Smellsgood!

“Misha!”

Relief washed over me in a tidal wave. It felt as if the weight of the world was taken off my shoulders. My body sagged into the seat. I smiled.

I was so lost in the wave that I barely noticed Avery using his phone.

“*Michael, sorry I’m returning your calls so late. Is everything okay?*” Misha’s voice muffled through my jank phone.

“I was worried about you,” I said. I turned away to face out my window for whatever privacy I could find. “Where are you?”

“I’m sorry. Kyle showed up and wanted to talk. He was all miserable and crying. It was all very unprofessional. But I went with him to the park. He did a lot of apologizing and we talked about us.”

“Us us? Or you and him us?”

“*Both, actually. Then we ended up arguing and I made him let me out.*”

“Okay. Where are you now? I’m at the bank.”

“I know. I’m walking towards your car. Who’s beside you?”

“The kid. Avery. I’ll tell you about it when you get here.”

I turned to see Avery, who was sitting with a smile and staring down the street ahead of us. Then he looked in my eyes. I saw something then. His eyes. The look. That smile.

That smile.

“I’ll see you,” I said and ended the call.

“There’s your friend,” Avery said. His eyes fixed on her. The corners of his lips crept upwards ever-so slightly.

I followed Avery’s stare across the street to where Misha was walking towards us. Avery and I watched her. We locked eyes for a second. She gave me a dazzling smile.

Smellsgood.

I should have named her *Dammfine*.

She came to the street and looked both ways, waiting for traffic to clear up. I had my eyes on hers when she looked down the street then straight back to me. Her smile was gone. Her eyes were wide. Her mouth opened.

Just then, the Chevy Express 1500 cargo van sped into view and braked hard, blocking my view of Misha. The driver was a young blonde. Avery’s girl. Raven, I assume by the squealing sound he made. He was going wild next to me.

Raven brought up a sawed-off shotgun and took aim at us. I dove under the dash as the windshield exploded above me. I heard the van engine roaring away and tires squealing.

Avery was screaming.

I wiped the glass fragments off my head and climbed up onto the seat. Avery took some windshield to the face and left shoulder. He was bleeding, but he wasn’t dying.

“It hurts! It stings so bad!” Avery cried. “I got blood all over me! My shirt’s ruined!”

“Shut up!” I looked out through the giant hole in my windshield to across the road and didn’t see Misha. She was in the van. Just like Vega.

“Take me to the hospital!”

“You’ll live. Stop crying for a second and realize that your true love just tried to kill you.”

He paused. He stared out the hole in the windshield.

“She was aiming at you!”

“Keep telling yourself that. But you’re the one with all her secrets. Now shut up and hang on.”

My right hand cranked the ignition key over while my right foot stomped the gas pedal and 450 horses came screaming awake. I threw it into drive and the triple black SS El Camino slid sideways into traffic and instantly became the meanest predator on the street.

“Drive more careful!” Avery cried as his whip-frame pressed tight to the door.

I zoned out his whining and focused solely on getting through traffic. I was getting hot, but I wasn’t sweating. My internal core was boiling with rage. I was losing control of myself. It was Seattle all over again.

But this time, I welcomed it.

I tore through the street like a maniac on the run. Traffic cops were going to be busy as I was forcing cars off the street onto the sidewalks, nudging blue-haired drivers

through intersections and out of my way. Pedestrians scattered. Everything became lost in the wash of red I was seeing. The anger took hold of me fully now. No one was safe.

About two blocks ahead of me was the white van stuck in traffic, causing its own clusterfuck. There was no way in hell the cargo van was going to outrun me. There would be no escape. No forgiveness.

“This isn’t the way to the hospital!” Avery cried. His arms were flailing in panic. “You’re going the wrong way, you moron!”

My two hands clenched the steering wheel in white knuckles. Then suddenly the right one was flying off the wheel, balling into an iron fist, and slamming into Avery’s forehead. His crying stopped, slumping over against the door.

My eyes never left the white van.

It was now ramming a white four-door sedan out of its way and turning left onto a one-way street. I saw Raven’s face in the giant door window as she turned. Our eyes locked. Our gaze the same.

I braked hard and slid to a screeching stop just inches before sending a confused kid to his grave. We locked eyes, too. Not the same. The kid was scared and crying. I yelled and pointed for him to get off the street, but he looked back behind him and pointed. A truck T-boned a small compact car. In the car was a woman, probably badly hurt. She was crying. Screaming, rather. Any other time I would’ve stopped.

I threw it in neutral and hit the gas. The engine roared and the kid did too. I pressed my left palm flat against the horn. The kid didn’t budge.

“Go!” I yelled to the kid. A bystander passed by and ushered the kid to safety.

Rubber burned then as I shifted into first gear and stomped the gas pedal. Weaving my way through the vehicle mess, I turned onto the one-way street heading north and saw more of the same.

Raven!

For several blocks, the street looked like a kid emptied his bucket of car toys. I chose plan B instead. I turned into the southbound one-way lane and disrupted traffic again. Horns were honking. Brake pads started clamping discs in screeching sounds. Middle fingers shot out of windows. Curse words flooded the airwaves. But they all got out of my way. After a couple of blocks, the mess Raven left in the northbound lane was thinned out and I turned sharply back into it.

The cargo van was nowhere in sight.

It was a race to the next intersection. I looked both ways, saw no one, then tore ahead to the next intersection. To the left, nothing. To the right, the white van was turning left at the end of that block. I followed it, hitting the gas hard, leaving sloppy fishtails across the cement.

It was a two-lane street with cars parked curbside through the upper-end suburban area. Homes were big brick beauties. Yards were lush greens. A quiet, peaceful area where the kids could safely play in the streets.

Not so much now.

Not with me on the hunt.

The white van had slowed ahead of me and parked curbside next to a giant steel-barred fence lining a huge lot. I reached under my seat for my snub-nose .38 and the small box of shells I carried around. I had two bullets. I shoved them into the chamber

then came to a screeching stop close enough to the van so the driver's door wouldn't open. I threw open my door, *Snub* already pointing and ready to scream.

But it wasn't the scream I heard.

The driver was in the window, hands out, yelling. He was terrified. He was tossing me his wallet, begging me not to kill him. Then I noticed the van. White 1500 cargo. But no dent in the bumper. It was a plumber's work van. The sign on the side said it all. My heart sank.

For the first time in a while, I was scared.

I stormed back into the El Camino and sped away.

Chapter 17

“Get up!”

I smacked his face again. Avery came to suddenly. The glass side of his face was a mess of dried blood and specs of my windshield.

“What’s going on?”

He sat upright and looked around in panic. He looked out the window to the giant emergency sign on the west wing of the hospital, calmed down, then turned back to me. His stare was bitter.

“We’re here. Go get your face fixed up.”

He stared at me hard as he reached for the door handle. As he opened the door and prepared to get out, he said to me, “You’re a real asshole.”

“I’m not the one who shot at you, kid.”

We stared at each other for a moment. His anger at me was misplaced, but mine towards him wasn’t. I may have lost Raven, but he would lead me right to her. I was going to make damn sure of it.

“Make sure you go to the cops and report it. Stay away from her, kid.” I added. “Do not call her.”

He snorted in disgust and exited the El Camino, slamming the door. I let him go. I knew he would call Raven as soon as he could. He’d have questions. She would of course lie to him and feed him some bullshit he would eat right up and keep doing her bidding, keep on believing that she cared for him. He was in love. He’d do anything she asked him to.

But I was going to interrupt all her plans.

He walked to the emergency room and I pulled away, driving down the street with an eye on him. He saw me go. That’s all I needed.

I figured he’d be inside for an hour. I grabbed my phone and called the precinct and asked for Kyle. I had to tell him about Misha. I figured he’d get the ball rolling and send out all available units to find her.

I made the call as I circled the block and found a spot to park where I could watch the patient exit doors and not be noticed. Kyle picked up the line.

“Kyle, this is Michael Lynch. I was at the bank at 5th and Baldwin when Misha was kidnapped,” I told him. “I followed the van, but I lost it. Misha is in serious trouble.”

“Lynch, huh? You know what, Lynch? I’m tired of hearing your name.”

“Now’s not the time, chief. Did you hear what I said? Misha LaRue was kidnapped.”

“Yeah, I heard what you said. I heard what she said about you, too. Heard all I care to hear.”

“She’s missing!”

He was jealous. Plain and simple. But his ego was getting in the way of his job.

“Sounds like a lover’s quarrel, Lynch.”

Click.

He hung up.

I threw my phone into the floormat. I beat the steering wheel while cursing him out. He was a lowlife piece of shit and I was going to make him pay for it.

I snatched up my phone and called a guy who wouldn't let me down. After one ring he answered.

"Derringer."

"Kip, this is Michael Lynch. Misha LaRue has been kidnapped. The same people who shot me took her into a late nineties Chevy 1500 white cargo van. There's a big dent in the front bumper. The female driver shot out my windshield."

"Did you call it in?"

"The chief dismissed it. I don't have time to change his mind."

"I know what you're thinking, Lynch. But do yourself a favor, call it in. Let the police handle this. Trust us to—"

I hung up.

My frustrations were an avalanche now. I was filling with anxiety. But Kip Derringer was right about calling it in. I dialed 911 and made the report. Cruisers and beat cops would be alerted and hopefully someone could make out the van.

I began wiping windshield fragments from the dash and the seat. My hands were shaking. My core was cold. My stomach was churning. I was making myself sick. I needed food and rest.

I needed Misha.

Nothing else mattered.

Another ten minutes went by when I saw the kid Avery hustling out of the emergency room doors. His cheek was bandaged. His hands were busy texting on his phone and his head was tilted down. He wouldn't have seen me if I were ten feet away. I watched him walk to the curb and stand there, waiting, texting.

Raven.

A few minutes passed before a small blue Honda Civic pulled up and he got in the back. They drove away. I followed.

The Honda drove carefully through the city for about fifteen minutes. I stayed back a safe distance. They were in no hurry; they weren't trying to outrun me. They were casual enough to pull over while Avery exited the car and went inside a flower shop, coming back with a bouquet of red roses. It looked like a dozen. Maybe a dozen and a half. He got back into the backseat and they drove away again.

Another five minutes and we were pulling over in front of a kid's park with swings, slides, and monkey-bars. Avery exited with his flowers and walked to a bench while the blue Honda drove away. I stayed back out of site and parked around the side so I could see anyone approaching Avery head-on.

It wasn't a long wait.

A new Durango pulled up and parked, drawing Avery's attention. It was a black SRT. Shiny. Tinted windows.

Raven.

Avery stood and waited like his date would be heading towards him. Instead, the Durango flashed its high beams twice and Avery walked towards it.

I kept my eyes on the SRT. The driver's window came down slightly. I could see Raven behind the wheel. Avery gave her the flowers. Words were exchanged. She gave a fake smile and pretended to give a shit about the flowers.

But there was something else. Something wasn't right. Avery took a step back, surprised by something he didn't like. The driver's window went back up and Avery stood still for a second. He slumped. He looked around. Maybe for help.

The passenger door flung open and flowers went flying into the air. Avery flinched as a man exited, rushing towards him, tired of Avery's indecision. He ushered Avery back around to the other side of the SRT and helped him into the backseats.

Avery was in trouble.

The black SRT jerked back out into the street and sped away. This wasn't going to be easy. The triple black El Camino with a shot-out windshield was going to be easy to spot. Especially to people who've seen it up close. But I had no other choice. I rolled into traffic and tried to blend in.

Raven was a tough driver. Very aggressive. I normally like that in a woman. But not at the moment. I was having a hard time keeping an eye on her without drawing attention to myself. Damn near impossible. There wasn't enough traffic to hide in, and twice now I've had to slow down to avoid being behind her at a red light.

I followed the Durango for some time and my thoughts drifted between the moment and the last time I saw Misha. The look in her eyes. The surprise. The concern.

The fingers on my left hand had squeezed down so hard on the steering wheel that my knuckles were white. I was grinding my teeth. My right foot anchored the gas pedal to the mat before I realized what I was doing.

It took everything I had to back away and not slam the El Camino into the Durango in an attempt to drive straight through it.

I calmed, slowed down, and backed off. Killing them now got me no closer to Misha. I needed answers. Then it didn't matter what happened. Then I could let the red overtake me.

We were across town now, far on the north side where trailer parks blossomed. It is where the blacked out SRT Durango turned into a junkyard's driveway and waited for a tall chain-linked gate to roll away, then entered. I rolled up really slow, until the driveway, where I stopped to take a look. Past the chain linked fence surrounding it were rows of old cars. Scrap metal. Huge piles of junk tires. A building was up front. It had four garage doors, a shabby blue paint job, and a very dingy white office attached. The sign above it was vertical with several letters needing paint years ago.

JEAN'S AUTO SCRAP.

The Durango rolled past the piles of decaying vehicles and entered one of the garage doors. The gate began to roll closed, so I drove past and tried to think of a way in. I wasn't a good planner. I was a shoot first kind of guy.

I took *Snub* out.

I had two bullets.

I've worked with less.

I pulled into the nearest trailer park and parked the El Camino. In its current condition, no one would question it here. I ran my hand across the seat and shifter for good luck.

"Hope to see you again, old pal."

I exited and made my way over to the scrap yard about a half mile away.

Chapter 18

It was quiet.

I scaled the fence on the southwest corner, into a stack of old cars that had been compressed by a machine. The stacks were five or six vehicles high, running the length of the row to the shop. I followed an isle towards the office and found more isles running north and south, east, and west. The ground was dirt and rust. The air was washed in scents of oil and chemicals.

I snaked my way through the scrap maze until I found the building. I headed around back. The blue building was big. Tall and long. The backside had small stacks of tires, a grill, and a giant excavator with sheers for cutting through giant I beams and H beams and probably tanks. It was heavy duty. It bothered me.

The quietness was bothering me too.

About twenty yards out sat a hydraulic press car crusher. Place a car inside and the lid comes down, flattening steel down to probably three feet high. Very intimidating now.

The backside of the building had only one garage door, but it was enormous. And it was open. I made my way to it, nice and careful. I made no sound. *Snub* led the way.

I could see there were vehicles inside. It was a mechanic's shop. I would assume that they did a lot of welding and engine repair, alternators, and starters, and zero detailing. The place itself wasn't kept up to par, and I had a feeling cleanliness wasn't their forte.

I reached the entrance without incident. I stopped to listen inside. I heard something. A voice. Soft. Muffled. Gagged, maybe. I took a deep breath, then pressed around the corner and inside. *Snub* was out front, waiting to handle questions.

But there were none. Yet. I saw no one.

I pressed around a gold colored Camry on the hoist and peered left where I saw tires and toolboxes, portable hoists, scrap piping, and a door to the office. To my right I saw the white van, doors open, interior gutted and set aside. Ahead of that was the black SRT.

I froze.

Heartbeat slammed against my chest recklessly.

I calmed my breathing down.

Then I heard it.

Mumbling.

It was coming from the other side of the white van. *Snub* led the way.

I kept my eyes alert as I approached the van, waiting to see a group of men with guns or wrenches. But no one showed. I cleared the van's interior, seats, and dash, and passed around to the other side to stop in my tracks. A man was in a chair. A chunk of cloth was in his mouth. His arms were behind the chair, I assumed they were bound to it.

We locked eyes.

His were cold and bitter. Not what I was expecting.

I moved quietly to him, pressing my index finger against my lips. His expression never changed. I bent down and removed the cloth from his mouth.

"Avery, you okay?"

The look he gave me was incredible. Smug. And something else I didn't like.

"Where's Misha?"

His smile was wolfish. “You’re an idiot. A complete moron. You took the bait, just like Raven said you would.”

I watched the rope fall to the cement floor behind his chair as his arms came around. He stood. His smile grew wider. His eyes darted past me.

Dammit.

I was too slow. Before I could turn, I felt something sting my head, then everything disappeared in a wash of black.

My eyes crept open then slid closed for a few minutes as I drifted in and out of reality. At first, what I saw, I couldn’t connect. I couldn’t place my whereabouts or remember anything as I came to. But slowly I began to think and understand again. I felt the rope snug around my wrists behind me and at my ankles as well. I knew I was slumped back in a chair and that my head hurt like hell. I was thirsty and hungry. And the vibe in the shop had changed. I saw the kid Avery very upset, panicking in front of Raven. The blonde stood before him talking slowly, unaffected by his tantrum.

My eyelids slid closed. It felt good to do so.

When my eyes crept open again a big and muscular man was dragging Avery out of sight, though Avery wasn’t fighting or yelling anymore. He was limp. Raven was walking towards me, her lips moving, her eyes full of mischief. Of anything she was saying, the only thing I caught was her mentioning that Bella was on her way.

I didn’t want to drift out again. I could tell it wasn’t going to be good for me. But as Raven bent down close to my face and ran her hand gently across my cheek down to touch my lips, I blinked.

When I opened my eyes again, I was alone.

But not entirely.

There was a loud engine running just out the door and I saw the backing out with the white van in its claws. It was an excavating rig with a long arm and a claw-like end, big enough to grab the top of that van and lift it. It drove over to the car crusher and set the van inside, then back out of sight. A few minutes later the engine died. The muscled man walked in, tossing a pair of leather gloves onto a cart of tools. He didn’t look at me once. He just walked by, back behind me.

I heard change being deposited into the vending machine. Four quarters and a dime, or a nickel. A plastic button was pushed. A second later the muscled guy mumbled, “Dammit.” I think he hit the side of the machine then and it must’ve worked because he gave a celebratory grunt followed with a degrading name to the machine. I heard him tear open a bag. His hand was in the bag every few seconds.

“Want some?” he asked. His voice was deep and grungy.

“I hate pretzels.” Raven said, fully annoyed.

He laughed.

They were behind me still, probably twenty feet back. Probably standing close to each other. Probably just doing nothing but watching me.

“Did your boyfriend like pretzels?” The man asked with a tone.

“He wasn’t my boyfriend.” Raven shot back. “I’m surprised your jealous.”

Bag crumpled up. “Never said I was jealous.”

She yelped. Then I heard kissing.

“Take me to the Spider Trap tonight.”

“Ma okay with that?”

“This will all be finished by then. Besides, she doesn’t need to know.”

He laughed in a sarcastic tone. They spoke in hushed tones then, probably close to one another. Maybe more kissing.

I sat tied to the chair and hoped Bella would arrive and put me out of my misery.

I wondered about the kid Avery. I wondered where they took him. I wondered if he knew that Raven wasn’t his true love. I wondered if he knew too much. I wondered if he were still alive.

“Hey lovebirds,” I called out. “Where’s the kid?”

Leather work boots and tennis shoes shuffled over to me right away. They stood before me, side by side. The muscled guy was taller than I thought. Maybe six-two. Six-four. Probably two hundred and ten pounds. Raven was slender, but not short. I’m guessing she was near five-eight and one-ten soaking wet.

“Worry about yourself, guy. Ain’t no kids here.” Muscles said.

“Avery. The bank kid. The one doing all your dirty work.” I said right at Raven.

Her smile was frightening. “Last I knew he was getting in a van.”

“Just like Misha. Where is she?”

“Doesn’t ring a bell.”

“You put her in the van.”

“Well, anyone who goes in the van dies. And I’ve put a lot of people in the van. But humor me. What did she look like?”

“Untie me and I’ll draw you a picture.”

“I prefer being the one tied up, but right now it’s your turn. So why the concern? Are you two a thing? Lovers?”

“Tell me where she is, or I’ll crush your boyfriend’s skull flat.”

The muscled guy laughed, then walked back behind me somewhere.

“Not my boyfriend. Try again. This is fun. You have a dark side. We’re the same, I think. Connected. Do you feel it too?”

“Where is she?”

“Hmm. Shall we ponder her whereabouts? Do you have the stomach for it?”

“Whatever happens to her, happens to you.”

“Promise?”

I tore at her with every bit of strength I could muster, but the ropes didn’t budge, and the chair didn’t move.

“Bolted it down myself, guy.” The muscled guy mused.

Raven stepped in close. She ran her hand across my face again, caressing it. She had a wild look in her eyes that made me uncomfortable. She moved in and pressed down against me with her face in my right ear. Her breath was warm.

“Take the deal,” she whispered. I felt her tongue run up the side of my neck then and I flinched away.

She stood and smiled.

I heard more change in the vending machine. Another button pushed. Another bag opened. “Where is she? I’m starving already.”

Raven walked back behind me to join him. They spoke softly, probably close to one another.

“I hope we don’t have to kill him.”

The muscled guy grunted a disagreement.

“Jealous again?” She said.

“Yeah, right.”

“Maybe you should be.”

They were quiet for a second.

I sat wondering what the ‘deal’ would be when the muscled guy walked over to me.

By the time he was standing at my right side, I saw his right fist in a blur.

Then stars.

Then nothing.

Chapter 19

Warm white sand.

We walked the beach hand in hand like fools in love, frequently staring at each other, smiling and giggling, casually dipping our toes into the warm water surrounding the tropical island. The sun was sinking, yet the air was warm and showing no sign of changing.

Misha wore a white two-piece bikini and I went topless with my blue jeans. Her eyes were filled with happiness as she frolicked across the beach, laughing, and singing.

“I love being here with you, Michael.”

“You’re beautiful, Misha.”

I approached her for another kiss. Her slender finger waving me on. Before I could reach her, she teasingly backed away and told me to catch her. She ran and I laughed. I loved the way she was playful. Innocent and beautiful. I took chase. I’d follow her anywhere.

But the air grew cold then, the sun blocked out by a black wall of angry clouds, and the beach opened into an abyss. Misha’s eyes found mine. They were scared and she was calling me to hurry, to save her as she began to sink. But I couldn’t move. I was stuck in place, helplessly watching as Misha slipped down into this black nothingness.

Out of sight, out of reach.

I came screaming awake. I was thrashing against the ropes binding me to the chair. I was hot and sweaty. My hands were fists. My jaw locked tight, my teeth grinding. My heart raced in near explosion.

Then I saw Bella.

“Nightmare?” she asked.

Her short, stout body stood ahead of Raven and Raven’s boyfriend. She was in a purple business outfit. Respectable. A wolf in sheep’s clothing. Fooling most. I know. I was one of them once. I know better now.

“Where’s Misha?” I spit. “What’d you do to her?”

“She asked about you too.” Bella stepped in closer. “But we have some things to iron out first.”

I spit at her. “I’ll cave your head in with an iron.”

Her approach didn’t slow, didn’t waver as my threat had no ground. She came right up to me and lifted my chin up with her hand. I looked right into her soulless eyes.

“I know a lot about you, Michael Lynch. It took some work, but your cop friend did some talking.”

I lunged hard against my restraints. The muscled guy stepped forward in response. Raven at his side, smiling, arms crossed, staying silent.

“I know who you are. I know exactly what you are as well. Michael, we could have been such great partners if I would have known.”

“I’m going to pull your spine out.”

Not a smile. Not a smirk. Nothing. Stone cold eyes stared back at me as if I had said nothing at all.

“Michael, I have a proposition for you. I need a man of your talents. A gun for hire if you will.”

“More fake twenties?”

“Not this time.”

“You don’t have enough real money to—”

“It’s not money that you’re after, Michael. I have a bargaining chip.”

She waved off to the side out of my sight and I watched a blacked-out SUV creep forward. The back window rolled down. And there was Misha. Her face was a mess of tears and makeup, and she had a belt over her mouth.

“Misha!”

Her yelling was muffled, and the window rolled up.

“Misha!”

“Relax Michael.” The devil in purple said. “Like I said, I have need of your skills and I have a proper payment.”

“Let her go.”

“First you need to do a job for me.”

Her eyes didn’t tell me if she was lying or not. But it didn’t matter. This was the deal Raven told me to take. And I didn’t need her direction. There was no other way to save Misha.

Bella must have seen the realization in my eyes. She smiled. “Do we have a deal?”

“Let her go first.”

“I’ll keep her for now, Michael. But she’ll be safe.”

“No. No deal. Misha goes free, right here, right now.”

Bella shook her head and spoke to me like I was a child. “The deal here is you do a job for me and in return you save her life, or she’s going in the car crusher like your friend from the bank.”

I looked past them all, outside to the car crusher, which held the white van, now compacted down to a few feet. *Avery. Anyone who goes in the van dies.*

I didn’t believe for a second that Bella would let Misha live, if I helped her or not. Misha had limited time. And once my job for her was finished, my time would be up as well. People like Bella didn’t negotiate.

Neither did I.

“What’s it going to be, Hitman?”

I stared at her for a second, then looked over to the SUV. Misha was inside. Hopefully still alive. Waiting for my answer. Waiting for me to save her.

“What’s the job?”

“You chose well.” Bella reached in her large purse and slid out a piece of paper. “It seems things are spiraling out of control a bit faster than we’d anticipated. Our people need this man removed from office so we can implant one of our own. I need you to make him go away, Michael.”

She held the paper in front of me.

“Senator Bounty.”

“Don’t worry about his title. He bleeds same as you.”

“This is a high-risk job, Bella. It won’t be easy.”

“If it’s too much for you, let me know now.” She stared at me with a coldness I hadn’t seen in a while. She raised a hand and waited. If I backed out, she would signal Misha to be killed, then myself.

“I’ve had harder jobs,” I said with a smile.

“Good. It’s a win win.” Her hand lowered.

“Not for the Senator it isn’t.”

“He made his choice. Don’t feel sorry for him.”

“How do you know I won’t come kill you as soon as I’m free?”

Bella laughed. She turned around and walked to the SUV. “I have eyes in many places, Michael. If there’s any slightest concern about your whereabouts, your friend will die in a very, very gruesome way. Same as you. You’ll have twenty-four hours. Once his death is on the news, and it will be, then I will let you know where to pick up your friend.”

She opened the passenger door of the SUV and entered. It drove out the back door into the lot leaving a cloud of dust in its wake, leaving me with her goons.

Raven walked over to me. She was happy. She held a small digital clock. It read twenty-four hours. She pressed a button and it began counting down.

“Tick-tock.”

Her boyfriend, or whatever he was, came over and stood before me. “Nothing personal.”

The last thing I remember was watching his fist descend towards my head.

Chapter 20

It was bright.

The sun had lowered down to be shining right in my eyes as I opened them for the first time in an hour. On a tool cart before me sat the digital timer reading less than twenty-three hours. Beside the clock was a phone, a small pile of rope, *Snub*, a bottle of aspirin, and a glass of water. I realized then that my hands were free, and I stood from the chair slowly, feeling the blood rush throughout my lower extremities. My head was pounding. The punches, the lack of food and water, and the stress was taking a toll on me.

I took a few pills and downed the water. I picked up the burner phone. There was a note attached. It was a smiley face. Raven. Her boyfriend wasn't a note guy. He was a fist guy.

I took *Snub* off the table and shoved it in my left pocket and suddenly realized my phone was missing. I took the phone from the cart and shoved it in my front pocket on the right and then turned to my left and saw the El Camino. It caught me by surprise. New windshield. The interior was detailed. Another note stuck to the steering wheel. Another smiley face.

Raven was psychotic.

Bella couldn't be trusted.

The timer was close to 22 hours.

I had work to do.

I drove the triple black El Camino SS out the back door, leaving a dust cloud of my own. At the road I turned right and began processing. I had dismissed the job for Bella altogether. I needed to find another way to save Misha.

The phone beeped.

I pulled it out and looked at it. There was a new message from an unknown caller. I opened it.

He's in Dallas. Make your way there. Only twenty-two hours left.

I put the phone on the seat. Misha didn't have twenty-two hours. I bet my life on it. And I sure as hell wasn't driving across state wasting precious time. There was someone, maybe two someones, who could speed all this up.

And I knew right where they would be.

I drove for a few minutes and then hooked a left and went south. I was heading to the outskirts of the city. Then the phone Bella gave me beeped again. I looked at it.

This is not the way to Dallas.

I checked the rearview mirrors at once and didn't see anyone. I hadn't been followed. I knew it. But I've been wrong before. I began to feel uneasy. I was being watched.

I pulled into a gas station and filled the tank. I texted back. *Who are you?*

Almost immediately there was a response.

Are you breaking the deal?

I casually looked around. I found no one watching me. Which made me think they had implanted a camera in the car. Clever.

I texted back. *No.*

I got back inside and casually scanned the interior. But I didn't see anything. Didn't matter. I needed to ditch the El Camino now anyway. I'd be spotted a mile away, and I had a plan forming.

I drove to the nearest grocery store and parked in the lot. I went inside to where the giant poster board was next to the three rows of empty shopping carts. I scanned the board, looking across the dozen self-companies until I saw an ad for a driver. "Andi's Ride". I called the number and asked to be picked up at the store. The driver would be there in less than a minute.

I went to the nearest cashier lane and picked up a Mt. Dew and a bag of beef jerky. I ate outside. About the time when I was finished, I saw my ride pull in. It was a '08 Dodge Charger. Red. Four door. Big magnetic sign on the hood that screamed "Andi's Ride!"

I got in the back.

"You know where the Spider Trap is?"

"The bar?" The young girl asked.

"Can you take me there?"

"Giddyup."

We were on the road in a moment. She was an overly cautious driver. We met eyes a few times in the mirror. Maybe she was twenty. Couldn't be much older. Short brown hair, thick black glasses.

"Excuse me for asking, sir, but why the Spider Trap? That's like where all the skanks go."

"Because I'm looking for some skanks."

"You just don't look like the sort, is all. I mean, you got like this handsome thing going on so you could probably do better than a gross bar. Guys that go there look like trouble."

Looks. We base most of our judgments on looks. We can categorize someone we've never met in person just by a passing glance. I assure you that you'll screw yourself over by judging a book by its cover.

"Looks can be deceiving, Andi. Thanks for your concern."

"None of my business anyways," she said to herself. "And it's Sharon. There is no Andi. I made it up. I'm in incognito. You know? It's not safe out here and I don't need everyone knowing my name."

"Smart, Sharon."

She was happy with herself.

Then my phone beeped.

I checked.

1 new message.

This isn't the way to Dallas. Should I remind you of what will happen?

I turned around behind me immediately. Light traffic. Nothing suspicious.

"Would you mind sitting still back there?" said Sharon.

"I need you to drive faster. Someone's following us."

If she sped up at all, I couldn't tell. I texted back.

Where are you?

I'm everywhere.

I don't like being watched.

I don't trust you.

I don't trust you either.

Go to Dallas.

I will.

Clock is ticking.

I didn't respond.

"If someone is following us, I'll know in a second."

Sharon took a left on a side street, then the first left again, then parked in a driveway. We sat for a second and watched traffic. Nothing came.

"I took a class on safety," Sharon said. "Not just karate, but how to spot danger. I'm pretty sure no one is following us. Are you okay?"

I was staring at the phone Bella gave me. A smart phone.

"I'm sure I was just being paranoid, Sharon."

She back out into the street and we were at it once again. She mentioned that she'd keep her eye out for anything suspicious. I was staring at the phone realizing my mistake. I had to get rid of the phone. I had to send it to Dallas.

"Do you have a pen and something to write on?" I asked.

She passed back a small note pad and pen from her glove box. I began to write a message. I asked Sharon to take me to a bank so I could use the ATM. I took out two hundred bucks. We were back on the road. Twenty minutes later I saw the bar ahead. A dump. A giant spider in neon colors hung above the entrance.

"Well, here we are."

"Sharon, can you do me a favor? Can you drive to Dallas?"

"That's like two hours away."

More like three.

"I'll make it worth your time, I promise."

I handed her the ATM money. Her reaction made me think her driving business wasn't all that successful.

I texted back now.

I'm heading to Dallas. Don't bother me again.

"Can you mail this phone to this address when you get there?" I handed her the phone and the piece of paper with Kip Derringer's name and the police headquarters address.

"Find a motel and put it in their outgoing mailbox."

She was happy counting the twenties. "No problem."

"One more thing. Don't pull into the parking lot. Let me out in the street."

She slowed the car in front of the Spider Trap, and I wished her luck, then exited the car. It sped away as I skirted the gravel parking lot looking for a place to hide. I wanted to be able to see anyone entering and exiting the bar without being easily noticed. There was a dumpster nearby which offered the best solution. I walked over to it and slumped down against it. The smell wasn't great, but I know anyone who were to look over here would look away right away.

I had a view of the parking lot entrance and spent some time just watching traffic. There were only five cars in the lot now, but it was early. Things would pick up around dark, maybe another three hours from now.

I wasted about an hour plotting and planning, running all kinds of scenarios for getting back Misha, when I noticed a kid on a bicycle circling me. He was about twelve. Dirty and tattered jeans and a red shirt. He had bright red hair and freckles to match.

He stopped about ten feet away and did nothing. He looked at me every now and again but said nothing.

“Hey, want to do me a favor?” I asked.

He looked around, then back to me. He shrugged.

“Can you go inside and order me a burger?”

His head shook.

“I’ll give you twenty bucks for the burger and you can keep the change. What do you say, kid?”

He thought about it. More looking around. More wasting time.

“Why don’t you go get one yourself?”

Fair enough.

“I can’t go in there. I’m waiting on something.”

He spit. “My mom’s working. She’ll be mad at me for talking to a stranger.”

“Your mom is smart. Can I trust you to keep a secret?”

He shrugged. I wasn’t sure if that was a yes or a no. But my experiences with kids was that they like to be involved with secrets. Especially if its helping cops.

“I’m a cop. I’m undercover. I’m waiting for some bad people to show up so I can catch them. But I don’t want to be seen until then. This is very important.”

His eyes grew wide with interest. He rode over to me.

“Jack’s dad is a cop. He works for the Marines.”

“He’s a good man.”

“Jack’s mom says he’s an asshole.”

“She’s probably right then. How about that burger?”

I pulled out a twenty from my pocket. My last one. I held it out to him.

More thinking. More wasting time.

“Are you here to take Roy to jail?”

“Who’s Roy?”

He looked back to the Spider Trap. “My mom’s boyfriend sometimes.”

“You don’t like Roy?”

He kept staring at the shabby bar. “He makes my mom cry. He punches her.”

“I don’t like him, either.”

He was quiet for a moment, then he looked right at me. I saw the anger in his eyes.

“I’m going to punch him one day.”

“Roy’s a bad guy.”

He spit.

“You know what? A lot of times bad things happen to bad guys.”

He looked away, staring off into the sky.

“But you know what?” I waited until he looked at me before finishing. “Sometimes you have to *make* bad things happen to bad guys.”

He nodded. He rolled his handle grips back and forth like he was on a motorcycle. The kid had a lot of anger in him. He was older than his years, that was for sure.

“Who are the bad guys you’re waiting for?” he asked.

“A man and a woman. They did some bad things to my friends and now I’m going to take them in. Lock them up. Make sure they can’t hurt anyone else ever again.”

“Are you going to make something bad happen to them?”

I gave him a stern nod and he liked it right away.

“Your mom is a good woman. She deserves a good guy. Good guys don’t hit women. They care about them. They hold their hand and keep them safe. Remember that. Treat a woman like they’re precious.”

“I will,” he nodded. He was getting teary-eyed thinking about his mother.

“I’ll make you a deal. You get me some food and if Roy shows up, I’ll make sure he never hits your mother again. Deal?”

His smile couldn’t be measured. He reached out and snatched the bill from my hand. “My mom won’t be mad that I’m helping you. She likes cops. So do I.”

The kid rode away to the back of the bar and entered the side door. He came back fifteen minutes later with a to-go carton and a large cup. He gave them to me and smiled.

“My mom told me not to play with you. She said I should leave you alone. But she was happy you were here. She don’t smile much. But she smiled today.”

I opened the carton. Burger and fries. Coke in the cup. I made short work of it all. I hadn’t realized how hungry I was. The kid said nothing, just watched and spit a lot.

“Thanks, kid. Tell your mom she helped me out and good things happen to good people.”

He felt good about that.

“I have to go wash dishes.”

He rode away across the gravel parking lot, back to the side door, and entered. I picked up some scraps of a newspaper to hide my face when it became important to do so. I got comfortable, which wasn’t easy.

About two hours later more cars and bikers began to channel in. I eyed up everyone. But none of them are who I was waiting for.

More sitting.

More shifting around uncomfortably.

More thinking of Misha.

My plan was to break into Raven’s Durango and get comfy. When they left, I’d make short work of her boyfriend and force her to tell me where I could find Misha. Then it was her turn. No regrets. Do it all right in her SRT. No witnesses. No time for her to alert Bella of my whereabouts. Just time for revenge. Just a few shouts from *Snub*.

The side door to the Spider Trap flew open and the kid was there yelling and screaming for help. He was looking right at me. My cover was blown. But when I heard him scream Roy’s name, it didn’t matter. My blood was already boiling. Before I realized it, I was charging towards the Spider Trap.

Chapter 21

“It’s Roy!”

I met the kid at the door. I could tell by the tears in his brown eyes that he was scared. He was in a panic, trembling, unable to remain calm.

“What happened?”

“He did it again.” He fought back his tears. His small hands clenched into tight fists. “Take him out of here!”

“Show me,” I said, entering the bar, not waiting for him, but he joined me a step later and led the way.

We walked into a small, congested storage space, then into a hall that led to either the freezer or the kitchen. The air was stagnant with old beer and grease and grime and sweat. I could hear voices from the bar nearby. But it was the sizzle of food cooking on a hot griddle and the soft whimpering of a woman that we were heading towards.

The kid rushed into a kitchen I wouldn’t let a dog eat from and pressed against the counter with her back towards us was a slender woman in faded blue jeans and a green T-shirt tucked in snug. The kid ran to her.

“He’s here,” he said quietly, but urgently. He knew to keep it a secret. He knew Roy was listening.

She spun around to face me. We locked eyes. I approached carefully. She was about my age and trying hard to look good for this crowd. She probably took make-up tips from an old ‘80s magazine. Her left eye was bruised and yellow and purple. It was fresh, but not today fresh. Then I noticed she was holding her side.

“Are you hurt?” I asked.

“Go finish up them dishes. Use the scrub thing like I showed you.” She spoke softly to the kid, who looked at me before doing what she said. She looked at me. I saw the pain in her eyes.

“Where is he? Roy?”

She shrugged.

“He give you that shiner?”

She looked away. “Are you a cop? Because you don’t look like no cop.”

“Do you need a cop? Or do you just need Roy to leave you alone?”

She looked right at me. She studied me for a moment. Whatever hope she had of me helping her was gone and she was afraid.

“Who are you?”

“I’m here to help you.”

“I don’t need your help.”

She went back to flipping burgers. I approached her and stayed close, keeping my voice low and my anger high.

“Roy hurt you?”

“Just leave.”

“I’ve helped a lot of women in your position. I can help you too.”

“Go. Before you get us all...”

She didn’t finish.

She didn’t have to.

“What’s he look like?”

She turned to me. A look of desperation in her eyes. A look of wonder and worry. She looked to her boy washing pans and then back to me.

“Just go.”

She was scared. She had a reason to be.

But I didn’t.

“I’ll leave. But I’m taking Roy with me. He’ll never touch you again. You or your boy. You’ll be safe. That’s a promise.”

“You can’t promise—”

“It’s a promise.”

Men began yelling from the bar. They wanted their food. They began with the degrading catcalls. She went to work, making their burgers. She was in a hurry. Two plates were being fixed when a man entered demanding his food.

“Where the hell’s our food?”

Then he saw me.

The man was about forty, five-five, and hefty. He wore a neatly trimmed mustache, but otherwise he was clean shaven. He was decorated in cheap leather, and even cheaper than his tats was his wedding ring. His menacing demeanor shrank when we met eyes. He wasn’t a tough guy. Not to me.

I noticed the kid washing dishes had shut the water off. He crept closer. Maybe to protect his mother. Maybe to be protected.

I stepped forward. “You Roy?”

“The hell wants to know?”

I stepped closer. He swallowed hard.

“He’s a cop!” the kid shouted.

Not what I would have done. But he was a kid who wanted to see justice. And he would.

“I said, are you Roy?” I repeated.

He nodded. He was nervous. I was going to break his hands. Maybe deep fry them. But from the bar people began to shout for food and drinks and even Roy. I recognized one of those voices yelling for service.

Raven.

No doubt about it.

Now wasn’t the time for putting Roy’s hands in the deep fryer. He was lucky.

“Roy, why don’t we step outside and discuss you keeping your hands off women.”

He shot a quick look to the woman, then back to me. He was ready to cry. “You taking me to jail?”

“You can’t come here ever again, Roy. I must make sure that this ends right now. Now we can do it the easy way, or we can do it the hard way, but this will be the very last minute you are in this bar. Understand that?”

Roy nodded.

I motioned for him to use the side door. “Outside. Let’s go.”

He walked for the side door and burst into tears. I followed him outside, barely listening to his story about how his wife is going to kill him, about how his dad never loved him, about how his brothers were given everything and he’s had to work for so little. Pathetic.

We stepped out of The Spider Trap at the rear of the parking lot. I looked around and saw no one. He turned to me, still crying, still rambling on about how his life wasn't fair, when I decked him. Square on the chin. I sent him to the ground. I scanned the parking lot and saw the black Durango right away. It stuck out like a diamond in a sea of beat up trucks and Harleys.

I felt my breathing quicken.

I stepped back into the shadows.

Roy rolled over on his hands and knees, spit blood and cried. I grabbed him by the ear and helped him to his feet.

"What kind of cop are you?"

"I'm no cop, you piece of shit. I'm a psycho who loves to beat up bullies. So if you ever come here again, if you ever lay a finger on a woman, I'll come to your house while your sleeping and make you into one fat mess."

He was shaking. He was scared to death.

"We clear?"

He stood in front of me shaking.

"Answer me."

"Yes." He stuttered.

"Now get the hell out of here!"

He stumbled back and scrambled into the parking lot. I was sure he'd never come back. He was nothing but a coward.

I dismissed him right away and began walking towards the Durango. I needed to get close enough to see inside, to see if there was an alarm on. I snaked my way through the parked vehicles and came up to the Durango from behind. I peeked inside quickly while keeping stride and saw a red light slowly blinking on the dash.

The back window exploded then in a shower of glass and gun fire.

I turned back quickly as the Durango's alarm frantically awoke a three-block radius. Roy was straddled on his Harley unsteadily firing his revolver at me. I saw a flash of yellow and heard a bullet zip past me, shattering the Durango's driver side mirror, before I dropped to the ground and rolled under a beat up late 90's Chevy Silverado.

Screams broke out from the bar as people were rushing outside. I could hear another shot from Roy and wasn't sure where the bullet went this time. Then I heard Raven. She was wildly upset about her Durango. She was making it clear that Roy was going to pay for it with his life. I saw a rush of feet towards the Harley and saw the wheels begin to drive but he was tackled to the ground. I saw Raven's boyfriend pick him up and beat the hell out of him. People were screaming to call the cops. Drunks were screaming in protest. Others were calling for Raven's boyfriend to finish him.

Raven came back to her vehicle to access the damage. She was busy yelling to herself about a lot of things as her boyfriend carried Roy in the direction of the garbage bins. Someone yelled that the cops were coming. Raven screamed to her boyfriend to hurry up and then entered her vehicle, still obviously upset. The scene was nothing but commotion and distraction.

I rolled out from under the Chevy unnoticed. I saw Raven's boyfriend stuffing Roy into the dumpster as I walked to the back of the Durango. I reached the passenger side door and I got in.

Raven was wiping glass shards from the dash and her door panel. She was pissed. “I hope you broke his neck!”

I said, “Me too.”

She stopped moving and slowly turned towards me. We locked eyes. The storm inside her dangerous eyes changed into something even more frightening. She looked down to see *Snub* pointing at her. She smiled.

“Drive.”

Chapter 22

Evil.

It was everywhere around her. She was bathed in it. She was consumed by it. Her thoughts. Her actions. Everything that she was and everything that she wanted. It was deep-rooted, like a birth defect, like something in her brain wasn't firing on all cylinders. Her eyes were captivatingly cold, and her ever-present smile was sinister. There would be no sympathy found within her. She wasn't able to empathize. She wasn't able to connect to a person on any type of emotional level. She was a psychopath. No doubt about it.

"Where is she?" I asked.

"You should be on your way to Dallas, lover boy. Ma is going to be mad with you."

"I'll deal with her when it's her time. Right now, it's your time. Where is she?"

Her response was a soft laugh. I found it degrading. She drove with two hands on the wheel and an odd smile. Her head bounced around like she was singing a song in there, like this was a good time for her.

"I am going to put two bullets into your stomach if you don't answer me, Raven."

"Yeah, that's not my name. Try again."

"I don't care what your name is. I'm not here to—"

"It's Rachel. I always hated it. Rachel. Blah! But Raven. Oh my God that's a kickass name. Right? Like, who wants to fuck with that? I got a raven tattoo. If you're lucky, you'll get to see it."

I put *Snub* a little closer to her side. She didn't mind.

"It'll burn at first. Then you'll feel sharp pains as your nerves realize they don't connect anymore because your stomach, intestines, liver, kidneys, will all be scattered across your door. Then it'll hurt so bad that you'll black out. But you won't die right away. It'll be slow. Painfully slow."

"Are you flirting with me? You really want to see my tattoo, don'tcha?"

She turned to me. Her eyes flickered with wild excitement. I didn't want to shoot her yet. I couldn't. She was my only chance at getting to Misha before my time was up. I had my gun pressed into her side, but she had the upper hand.

"Ma is going to go berserk. You had one job, lover boy." She turned to me with great suspicion. "How did you do it?"

"What?"

"This." She made a bunch of quick hand motions. "You're here and Ma doesn't know. And I would know as soon as she would know. Ya know?"

"I ditched her phone the way you ditched your boyfriend at the Spider Trap."

"Yeah, I don't think so. How'd you do it? The suspense is killing me."

"I'll be the one killing you."

"Okay, fine. Keep your secret." She began tapping her thumbs against the wheel and humming to herself.

"How long are you gonna keep this up?"

"What? The drumming? I guess until you splatter my door with your little gun." She kept at it. Head tilting one way, then the other. We could have been on a vacation road trip for all she showed.

"Well, let's get this over with then." I moved *Snub* up under her rib cage.

She giggled. “To be honest, I knew you wouldn’t go to Dallas. But I didn’t expect to see you here. My money was on you going back to the new cop on the case. You two could spitball ideas or something, then comb the area looking for clues. So you surprised me. Well played, lover boy.”

“I work alone, psycho. Now I’m asking you for the last time. Where’s Misha? Where is Bella keeping her?”

She sighed with annoyance. “Just stop already. Put away that little gun. If you really was gonna shoot me you’d done it by now.”

Hard rock music began to play in short bursts. A ringtone. “He’s not going to be happy we left him. God, I wish I could see what face he’s making right now.”

“Don’t answer it.”

She laughed. “Oh-kayee.”

She pulled her phone from her front pocket and tossed it on the dash. It quit ringing a moment later. “He’ll just keep calling. Stalker. I always end up with the weirdos.”

I snatched her phone. She didn’t seem to care. “You’ll text him that your fine and he can find his own ride home.”

“Well, I won’t exactly be fine if my guts are all splattered on the door. Remember?”

“Keep your hands on the wheel. I’ll text him.” I sent the text. I kept her phone. “Let me explain something to—”

“Let me explain something to you, lover boy. I know you’re all love-sick for the cop chick and you’re gonna hurt me and stuff if I don’t spill the beans, but the thing is, if I tell you, worse things will happen. Much worse. Worser than that little gun. So make your threats, pull your trigger, or just shut up and kiss me.”

Bella had her scared. She wasn’t going to talk no matter what I threatened her with. I had to try another approach. I had to outwit her. I had to make her think we were the same to gain her trust, to help her *spill the beans*. I knew how to play her. She wasn’t my first psycho.

“Worse things, huh?”

“Way.”

“Bella’s crazy, isn’t she?”

“Cray-cray. And her hub is too. Straight up psycho.” She laughed again. “They make me look like a friggen saint.”

More laughing.

More head bouncing.

More humming and thumb tapping.

More phone calls from the boyfriend. I ignored the calls and shut the volume off because the ringtone sucked. It wasn’t even in English. It was probably German. It was angry, like all the voices in her head.

I said nothing. I eased back into my seat and put *Snub* in my pocket. I let it all be noticeable. She looked at me a few times. She told me to cheer up.

“Ever back out of any deal she sends you on?”

“Yeah right. I’m not stupid. Plus, I love my job.” She paused, then became serious. “Hey, there’s plenty of work. Ma could use a guy like you around. But you’re going to have to go to Dallas first. Get it over with. Get on her good side. Maybe we can work together.”

“You know, you and I aren’t that different.” I didn’t look at her. I could see her face turned towards me. I’m sure she was smiling. “I mean, we both get paid to do someone’s dirty work. I enjoy it. You’re happy with it.”

“I knew you were dark. It’s in your eyes.”

I said nothing. I wanted her to know more, to be eager to get more. I sat quietly for a moment.

“Who are you?”

“I’m a hitman.”

“Who do you work for?” she asked.

“Men in high power who don’t like to get their hands dirty.”

She laughed. She took her right hand off the wheel and playfully punched my left shoulder. “They’re nothing without us.”

More laughing.

More questions.

More bullshit.

I was careful and filled her curiosity with choice words. She was drawn to me now, in more than a physical attraction. We shared war stories for a few minutes and bonded. But I couldn’t keep the charade going. I was losing time.

And *Snub* was eager to meet her.

“This guy I’m working for now, real asshole, trusts no one. He wants to know something that only Mischa knows. She worked a case where a lot of money and dope disappeared. He hires me here to get close to her and learn where the stash is. Thing is, she doesn’t trust a lot of people either.”

I looked right at Raven. Her eyes were wide, filled with anticipation. This was her kind of story.

“So what if we made a deal? You and me? No one else needs to know.”

She laughed. The kind of laugh that said *I don’t think so*.

“Hear me out. All I’m asking for is a few minutes alone with her. I get what I need to get paid, you can do whatever you want with her afterwards.”

She got quiet. She pulled over onto the side of the road and threw it in park. She was serious now. We were making a connection.

“First off, you have, have, have to go to Dallas. I mean, like right now get in your flipping car and get there tonight. Or none of this can happen. Ma isn’t like me. She won’t give you a second chance.”

“I could go there after. Give me ten minutes with Misha and I can be in Dallas in three hours. No one has to know.”

She studied me for a few moments. She wasn’t sold.

“Too dangerous.”

“Is it really though? A girl like you surely has access to wherever Misha is. You could get it done easily. I mean, who’s going to question you?”

Her wolfish smile said she was tempted. “I forget what it is that I get out of all this? This is a pretty big risk for me.”

“Name it.”

“Well, first off, you screwed up my night pretty good. You owe me.”

“I can pay for your windows.”

“I wasn’t talking about the windows, lover boy. I was on a date.”

She cast me a mischievous smile.

I shrugged.

“Maybe we can work something out.”

Laughter again. But different this time. More psychotic. Less humorous. She was quiet then for a minute. “Give me what I want first. I want to make sure I can trust you.” She smiled. “Besides, you’ll need me to get into Haloes.”

Haloes?

“So, we have a deal?”

“Damn you, lover boy. I’ll take your deal. But we do things my way.”

I nodded. I wasn’t entirely sure what she meant, but it didn’t matter. I’d do anything to keep Misha safe.

“But first, how do I know she’s still alive?”

Raven laughed like my question was absurdly ridiculous.

“Because I do all Ma’s dirty work. And tonight, I’m doing something else.” She winked at me.

I felt better about Misha being alive. I thought about her face the first time I saw her on the street, acting all cop-like frisking me, smelling good, looking good.

I was so swept in that memory that I hadn’t noticed when Raven had placed her hand on my thigh. She began rubbing my leg. I let her.

For now.

She let it slip that Misha was at a place called Haloes. All I had to do now was find out where that was and why I needed Raven to get me in.

With *Snub* screaming for me to let it speak, I shot Raven a smile.

Let her enjoy the last moments of her life.

Chapter 23

Her phone rang.

Different screaming music ringtone. And a quite different reaction.

“I need that,” she urgently barked. “That’s Ma.”

I handed her the phone, still playing the game. My hand slipped *Snub* out, just in case.

“And stay quiet.”

I motioned my lips were zipped shut. I pretended not to care about the call.

She answered it quickly. After a few short answers, mostly *okay* and *yes*, she hung up. Her mood changed.

“Dammit!”

She flung her phone over at my feet and began screaming a variety of profanity, groaning, and growling like a maddened animal. Her slender fingers wrapped tight around the steering wheel as she vented. I said nothing for a few moments, but I had to know what Bella said that got her so worked up. I had to know if it was about me.

I had to know if I should shoot her now.

“Problem?”

“Yes,” she hissed, then threw it in drive, slammed on the gas, and made a sharp U-turn and sped back the way we had come with no regard to the drivers she sent skidding out of harm’s way.

“Anything I can help with?”

She stared at me with an odd look. “Yeah.”

I shrugged, careless. “What is it?”

She was quiet for a few moments, as if she were trying to decide on how much she wanted to tell me. Or how much she trusted me, rather. But I guess her job outweighed her indecision because suddenly it all spilled out at once. Raven was pissed.

“There’s a job. Ma called with a fricken job. This fricken late. Are you serious? I can’t even right now. I can’t even deal! I have to go clear across town before the mark is gone and I don’t have time. And if he leaves there’s going to be hell to pay. And I don’t want to be out doing this shit all night long.”

She drove like a maniac. If we don’t get pulled over or in an accident it’ll be a miracle. The Durango SRT was a smooth ride, fast and quick. It was comfy, too. There were a lot of amenities that the El Camino didn’t have. I considered for a second of an upgrade. But it was almost too nice for me. Too clean. Too prissy.

“There’s always somebody fucking up my night.”

She was looking right at me. Guess I was to blame, sort of. If not now, I would be soon enough.

“Sorry. So, who’s the mark?”

“Some dipshit.”

Dipshit sounded more elegant when Misha said it. Raven makes it sound like it’s a bad thing.

“Doesn’t sound so difficult.”

“He’s not the average dipshit.”

Cop, probably. I wonder what the questions were. Must've been right on Bella's heels for her to send out a death warrant.

I feared for *Smellsgood*.

"I know him," she added angrily. "I wanted to know him more, but he fucked it all up."

"Do you have to kill him, or take him to Haloes?"

Her head slowly turned to me. The look in her eyes made me think that I had said something I shouldn't have.

Haloes.

Raven turned away. "I'm pissed about this. Dip. Shit."

I let it alone for a moment. She was worked up about this and I wanted her to calm down a bit. I needed her to talk to me about Haloes. I had a feeling that once she deals with her lover, she's not going to want to help me.

"Well, there's two of us. It shouldn't take long. Then you can continue with your night. Get back on track. Some jobs take me a week to get over. Sometimes it just takes a bottle of Hennessy." I paused for a moment. "But sometimes it just helps having someone else around. Know what I mean?"

"Are you seriously trying to flirt with me right now, lover boy? Because you suck at it."

"I'm just saying I will do whatever it takes to keep my end of the deal. Partners?"

She hesitated.

I should just end this now and find Haloes on my own.

She looked at me with those piercing eyes and said, "It would be easier if I had your help."

"Deal."

Raven smacked my thigh. Her smile came back. The twinkle in her eye returned. She saw me as a partner. One and the same. But there was a big difference between us that she couldn't see. Raven did her job without regret. She hurt people. My work as a hitman put me in situations where people had to be hurt, sometimes killed. Bad people. People just like her. Our work might be the same, but we were on opposite sides of the spectrum. When this is all said and done, I will put a bullet in her brain.

Thirty-minutes later she killed the headlights and crept down an alley in a run-down business area. Raven was quiet. The only sounds I heard were coming from the SRT's engine. I didn't mind that part. Everything else troubled me.

Behind the businesses, the buildings all ran together as one. There were boarded up windows and plenty of graffiti. I've seen it all before. Too many times. For once I'd like to end up on a white sand beach where the people I came in contact with weren't all trying to kill me.

We ended up in front of a large roll up door between two abandoned businesses. Warehouse storage, I assumed. There were no cars in view. No one standing around waiting for us. No one lurking in the shadows to snipe me.

But I was uneasy. Raven wasn't to be trusted.

"Now what?" I asked. I did my best to sound relaxed and unconcerned. I played the part of a guy who didn't have a care in the world.

Raven sighed.

She lunged over quickly and kissed me hard on the mouth. It was wild, messy, and wet. She backed off just as quick, over before my instincts kicked in and sent her flying off me.

“Let’s get it over with,” she said and got out.

I wiped my mouth on my shirt then stepped out of the Durango SRT. By the time I was shutting the door, Raven was tugging up on the back-hatch door. I stepped around back with her. The interior was a blanket of glass shards. She was lifting the floor compartment for the spare tire. There was a black case inside. She heaved it out of hiding and set it down in the trunk space. She popped it open. There was a stack of cash and two handguns with silencers. She took one out then closed the case, then the hatch door.

She beckoned me to follow her and we went to the building’s rollup door. She produced a key to the lock, popped it off, and heaved up on the door. It went with ease, allowing us access to a black interior.

“After you,” I said.

“And they say chivalry is dead.”

She entered. I stayed behind her.

We were in some sort of warehouse as I had presumed. There were tables with boxes, shelves packed with things, and plenty of emptiness. I saw no one inside. Heard nothing. I had no warning feeling coming from the warehouse that wasn’t caused from Raven.

“Where is he?” I asked.

“Won’t be much longer.”

She turned to face me after scanning the darkness for a few moments. She seemed distant, focused maybe. I understood that. It was the job. It was preparation. It was mental every bit as it was physical. It wasn’t a glam or glitz job. It was dark and evil. It was dirty and soul-crushing. And when you left it, it came with you. It changed you.

I understood what she was feeling all too well.

For a split second I had empathy towards her.

But then we locked eyes and all I could think about was putting a bullet between hers.

“Cha thinking about? That kiss?”

She moved in close to me, pressing her skeletal frame against mine. Her face came up to mine and I sensed her wanting more from me than what she already took.

“No one has to know,” she whispered.

It felt like she was talking to herself, making an agreement that maybe before she had ruled against but now was on the table.

But it wasn’t going to happen.

The roll-up door began to rise and headlights flooded in.

“Jesus H. I gotta pee.”

And just like that she was gone, disappearing into the darkness of the warehouse. I was left alone, standing pressed against a ten-foot-tall shelf full of paint cans and other useless junk as the headlights steadily approached.

The car’s engine died.

The roll-up door was rolled back down tight and loud.

There was a scraping of metal against the cement floor for a few seconds. Then all I heard was the muffled cries of a female.

“Shut up.” A man said to her.

It was a familiar voice.

It brought me out of hiding, pressing closer into the headlights glow. I wanted to see. I wedged myself between two tall racks on wheels with machine parts and peeked out towards the car.

In front of the car, in the brightness of the high beams, sat a young woman. I couldn't make out her features but could tell she was gagged and her hands were tied behind her. A tall man stood next to her, doing nothing but looking into the darkness around him.

I wasn't sure where Raven went to. I assumed she would be out by now, getting this job done so she could move on to bigger and better things. But she was a no-show.

The guy moved back to the car and opened the door for something inside. The dome light came on and I could see things slightly better. Much better, actually. I saw all the pieces of the puzzle fall into place.

I knew what this was all about.

I knew the girl.

I knew the guy.

And I was the dipshit once again.

Chapter 24

Andi's Ride.

I could see her sign on the car clear enough. It was Sharon sitting on the floor crying, having no understanding as to what was going on. She was innocent in this mess. It was my fault. I put her at risk.

The guy stepped back out of the car holding a crutch, slammed the door shut, and yelled out for Raven. His face was bandaged. He gingerly walked around while degrading Sharon. I knew him. I named him Limper.

"Raven! C'mon! I ain't got all night!" He sat on the hood of the car and waited. The crutch leaned against the car beside him.

I stood just out of the high beams. Raven was nowhere in sight. I raised *Snub* out and took aim at Limper. I could knock a round of lead into his chest and out his back then get Sharon out before Raven could say otherwise. Or I could stay in the shadows and wait to get them both. But that could get tricky. Now was probably the best time to drop one of them. One shot. Quick. Painless. Unexpected.

The world wasn't going to miss him.

I calmed my breathing. I steadied my arm and aimed for his chest.

"Set it on the shelf, nice and slow." A voice spoke in my left ear. I felt the silencer press coldly against my neck.

Dammit.

I took *Snub* over to my right and set it down on the shelf as Raven had requested.

"What are you doing?" I said.

"What you should have."

"I didn't have to. Neither do you."

"You sent your phone to Dallas. I almost died laughing when Ma told me that. That was smart. Trying to be my friend was stupid though."

"But I am stupid."

"I'm so flipping mad at you."

"Me? Or your job? Because my offer still stands."

"Oh lover boy, I told you that I wouldn't cross Ma. You should have just sprayed my guts out in the car."

"I don't like messes."

"Well you've made one now."

"Who's there?" Limper called out. "Raven? C'mon already! My leg is killing me! I can't be out all night doing this shit! Raven!"

Raven slid her weapon down my back, leaving it pressed against my spine, mid thoracic. "I want you to know this is going to hurt me."

"I won't take it personal."

"C'mon!" Limper began shouting. He moved off the car and closer to us. "Why you gotta do shit like this? I ain't got all damn night, Raven!"

"Let's not keep him waiting." Raven nudged me forward, out of my hiding place and into the headlights.

The surprise on Limper's face was unmeasurable.

"Are you kidding me?" Limper said. "I shot him!"

“Good to see you again.” I smiled. “How’s the nose?”

“I’m gonna break your neck!”

Limper lunged for me, but Raven swept around and stopped him, aiming her gun at his forehead.

“Boys.”

“He’s the one! He broke my face!” Limper stormed away.

“You shot me.” I said.

He came right back. “I’ll shoot you again! A hundred and fifty times in the face! How would you like that, Mr. Nine Lives?”

“Waste of bullets.”

“Enough!” Raven growled. She pointed at me. “Get down next to her.”

I sat down on the floor beside Sharon.

“Hang on, Sharon. You’re getting out of here soon.”

“The only place you’re going to is hell!” Limper said.

Raven stepped over to him in an attempt to calm him down. “Stick to the plan. If you can’t do that, go.”

He growled something back in return, but I couldn’t understand it. Maybe he didn’t want anyone to hear him. He backed away and sat on the hood of the car, mumbling under his breath.

Raven turned to me.

“You were given a job and you decided to disobey and now you have to be punished. She was found with your phone, and as she says, she was sending it to the police. Her words, not mine.” Raven sighed but kept her strict tone. This was business for her, not personal. “This is your mess Hitman. You must eliminate the problem.”

Raven motioned with her head that Sharon, tied and gagged, was the problem.

I shook my head.

“We’re not here to ask you,” she stated.

“She’s not the one I’m here to kill.” I said.

I turned and winked at Limper, who became enraged and stormed over to me holding a revolver. “You’re gonna bite it! I don’t care what anyone says! You’re mine!”

“Don’t touch him.” Raven gave him a look. She motioned for him to return to the car. But he refused.

“I don’t take orders from you, skank. I told you once before not to get in my way!”

Raven squared up to him. Whip thin and a bit gangly. She didn’t seem a bit concerned. “You really gonna do this now? Very unprofessional. Just get your mind into the job at hand then you and I can settle our differences later.”

“You’re a psycho. I don’t trust you.”

Raven stepped closer to him. “You shouldn’t.”

While they were busy deciding who the head honcho was, I was busy untying Sharon’s hands. I whispered for her to remain calm. I told her she’d be out of here in a moment and not to freak out when she hears gunshots. I told her they wouldn’t be shooting at her, but she did need to be fast. She quit crying, but she was still visually shaking.

“When I say go, get to your car and drive out through that door. Don’t stop. Don’t look back.” I whispered to her. Her head nodded in response.

I turned my attention back to Raven and Limper. I inched my way back out of the headlights. Raven's back was to me, shielding my view of Limper. They were still in a heated conversation with neither paying attention to me. Tempers were escalating. I could feel the energy in the room. Something bad was about to happen.

"You know what your problem is? You're jealous." Raven said to him. "I'm Ma's right-hand man, and you're her major screw up. I'm her trusted one. I get the job done. That's why I do the bank drops while you do...? What do you do again? Besides meth."

I slowly rose to my feet, staying crouched, using Raven as a shield from Limper. I backed away. I tried to remember the shelf where *Snub* sat waiting. It wasn't far. I could reach it within a moment.

Limper snorted in disgust. He was clearly pissed. Maybe the truth hurt. I saw his right footstep backwards and plant firm. He was bracing himself.

I had to make my move. I backed out of the light and became lost in the darkness. I scrambled to the shelf where I knew *Snub* was, but I was wrong. I could see through the items on the shelf to the figures in the light.

Limper aimed his revolver at Raven. "I dust you off and blame it on him, then I put a bullet into his skull. Ma won't know. She won't care. You're not as important as you think!"

"Do it already. Jesus! Talk, talk, talk, talk."

I backpedaled around the tall shelf to the next isle. I found *Snub* right where I had left it. I picked it up as their arguing heightened. I slipped through the dark and stepped out into the open. I aimed quickly and fired two shots. I saw Raven drop and Limper fall backwards. His revolver fired once up into the ceiling.

"Go, Sharon!"

As she bolted up to her car, the room erupted in gunfire. I shoved *Snub* into my pocket and ducked back out of sight. The car started up and tires squealed seconds before I heard what sounded like Andi's Ride backing out through the rollup door.

"Get him!" Limper yelled.

I heard Raven begin shooting then, the gunfire muffled from the silencer. *Tink!* *Tink!* I heard the bullets ricochet into a wall farther way. More gunfire erupted then as the revolver joined the party. Bullets were flying everywhere. I scampered back through the shelves and part carts looking to hide.

Then it went quiet.

I hate quiet.

I picked up a small metal valve with a pipe fitting and lobbed it across the room as far as I could. It hit something and made a loud clamor. They'd go investigate it. I could sneak up behind them.

I made my way towards the clamor, easing out from my concealment. I found myself looking back outside through the torn down rollup door. *Nice job, Sharon. Get home safe, kid.* But then I saw something else. A body.

I moved towards it carefully. The lamp lights from the parking lot outside gave a faint cast over the area, but I knew what I was looking at. It was Raven. She was motionless. I crept in close to make sure. She was bleeding from her chest. She was choking on the blood in her throat. I knelt and held her head up. She was paying the price for all the killings she took part in. I didn't feel sorry for her.

We locked eyes.

“I was supposed to kill you,” she gasped. “I didn’t want to.”

“Help me, Raven. Tell me where she is.”

“Ma will kill her.” It was hard for her to speak. She wasn’t going to make it much longer.

“Where is she?” I whispered. I took her hand into mine.

Gun fire broke out somewhere behind me. He was shooting at nothing but shadows. He was irate, throwing things and shooting randomly. Then he screamed that he was out of bullets. Perfect.

Raven spit blood. She was shivering in a pool of her blood. Her eyes were glossy. It was the end.

“Where?” I asked urgently.

“On the border. North of Laredo. Haloes, but there’s no angels.” She tried laughing but ended up coughing up blood. When she stopped, her eyes were full of fear. “Kill me, lover boy.”

I froze. Her plea caught me off guard. I had planned on doing it for some time now. But this was different. She was asking for it. I figured the how and the when of it didn’t matter. She would die soon regardless of my decision.

My heart gave into pity.

I put my hand over her mouth firm. I pinched her nose, quickening the process. She could go burn in hell now. I had no further use for her. She barely moved as there was no fight left in her. She went limp. I reached for the gun in her hand when I saw a cheap pair of sneakers zip past my face and felt the kick strong into my arm.

I was knocked off balance.

“You sonofabitch!” Limper yelled.

He dove down onto me then and we rolled across the floor punching each other. I took a few shots to the ribs, but he was slow and stupid. I went for his eyes with my thumbs and sent him down off me. I took advantage as he cried and slammed his head onto the floor a few times then began to choke him. I saw his shirt was bloodied at the shoulder where *Snub* had nicked him.

With a kick to my groin, I stopped, and he took over. He landed a punch to my jaw and shoved me backwards. I hit the floor next to Raven’s hand. Limper got up with a long pipe in his hand and came at me swinging down hard. I rolled out of the way and as he raised it and began to strike down at me again, I took the gun from Raven’s hand and shot.

Tink!

I watched Limper’s right side turn red as he fell back to the floor. Everything went quiet. I took a moment to gather myself. I wasn’t hurt. I knew where Misha was. I had time. No one knew I was still alive. Sharon got away. The police would be coming soon. I needed to leave. I put the gun back into her lifeless hand.

I stood, stepped over Limper, and made my way towards the half-torn down rollup door. I would take the SRT Durango into the desert, into Haloes, and end Ma.

I got inside the SRT and pushed in the start button, but the fob key was missing so the engine wouldn’t turn over. I looked everywhere for it. It had to be on Raven. I had to go back inside. More time wasted.

Dammit.

A dark figure stood in the opening of the damaged rollup door. He was slowly staggering like a drunkard towards the Durango. Towards me. He was holding Raven's gun. His shirt was a bloody mess. I wasn't sure how he was even alive.

Dammit.

I remembered the gun box in the back. I dove back into the backseats, then over top of the second row and onto the third row. As I rolled down onto the floor, I heard the driver door open and close.

"Shit!" screamed Limper a moment later.

The door opened again. The dome light lighting up the entire car. I listened to him curse and cry all the way out of earshot. I popped up and peeked around. He went back inside. He needed the fob. I had a small pocket of time.

I looked behind me to the black box Raven left out.

I heard Limper's sobbing again. I looked. He was moving to the car, faster this time. Eager to flee before police arrived. I grabbed the box and dropped back down out of sight. He got in, slammed his door shut and started the SRT up. We were driving away at a frantic pace. Swerving, too. Lots of it.

I went to work opening the box. My fingers were touching the smooth metal as Limper made a ferocious outburst. I flung open the box and removed a 9mm with silencer. I rose and took aim. He made me out through the rearview mirror and swerved hard, sending me down and into the right-side wall. Bullets ripped through the plush seats in front of me then in exploding puffs of expensive leather and padding. I raised the 9mm just above the seat and began blindly firing towards the driver's side.

Tink!

Tink!

Tink!

The return fire stopped. All went quiet. I felt bumps and heard gravel underneath. I felt the SRT gaining speed.

More bumps now, hard and hammering.

The road can't be that bad. This isn't Michigan.

I peeked up over the seat.

Dammit.

I saw Limper slumped onto the passenger seat and I had about three seconds before the speeding SRT slammed into a grove of Texas Ash. All I had time to do was get in the seat and buckle up before everything exploded into a ball of terrible noises and smoke. As the SRT began to tumble end over end, my head slammed hard against the window.

Chapter 25

Dawn.

A reddish-orange glow peaked in through the blinds, warm and inviting. The air smelled of vanilla and I loved it. The bed sheets were silky smooth and clean. The fireplace was lit. And Misha LaRue was in a black nightgown walking into the bedroom towards me.

“I had a great time with you, Michael Lynch.”

I propped up in the bed and rested my head against the wall. I watched Misha climb into bed and presses firm against me.

“I’m glad to see you’re awake,” she said.

“I’m still tired. I could use another hour.”

“You don’t have another hour.”

Misha leaned up and we kissed. Her lips were soft. We were slow and patient. I ran my hand through her hair. We broke after a minute. Misha sat upright and placed a hand on my face, gently caressing it.

“I had a terrible dream.”

“Tell me.”

“You were gone, and I had to find you. But I was lost and out of time.”

She smiled. The look in her eyes softened. I had missed something.

“What?”

“It’s time.”

Misha rose from the bed and walked for the door. She paused in the doorway, facing me. Her smile was gone. Her look was concerning.

“Time for what?” I said.

“Time to go.”

“I don’t want to.”

“You have to get up. You have a lot of work to do.”

“I don’t want to leave you, Misha.”

“You must get up now.”

I stared at her. My heart ached. She seemed to be distancing herself from me. I wasn’t sure why.

“The doors are locked. You need to use the back door.”

It was getting warmer. I stared at the fireplace, which was roaring with spitting flames. Misha didn’t move. She simply stood in the doorway calling my name.

“Michael.”

I sat up further. My neck hurt.

“Michael.”

I tossed the blankets onto the floor, suddenly getting unbearably hot. I wanted to tell Misha to put the fire out. But she walked away, stepping into the light of the other room. I couldn’t see her.

“Michael.”

I wanted to hold her. To smell her. To feel her.

“Michael, you have to get up!”

I was suddenly afraid. There was a growing fear inside me that if I didn't hurry up and get out of bed, I would never see Misha again.

"Misha!"

I crawled out of bed and stood staring at the doorway. It was bright. The fireplace behind me was growing out of control. I hurried to leave the bedroom. I called for Misha frantically, but heard nothing back.

Then when she spoke, her voice was loud and booming. "Michael!"

My eyes snapped open. I could smell something burning. Rubber. But something more. Black smoke was surrounding me. Beyond were flames.

I realized where I was. Trapped in the SRT, upside down in the back, strapped in place with the seatbelt. The fire was stemming from the engine and I didn't have much time before it blew up. I released the seatbelt fastener and dropped to the ceiling. I picked up the spare gun with the silencer and tried to open the back doors, but they wouldn't budge.

You need to use the backdoor.

Misha. Saving me in my dreams.

I scrambled out through the hatch door, where the window should have been, and stood in the field. The highway was about fifty yards away. I could hear sirens in the distance getting closer. Cops. Ambulance. Fire truck, maybe. I had to go. I didn't have time for all their stupid questions.

Who's the dead guy driving?

Why are you all fucked up?

Where are you coming from?

Where are you going?

Whose gun is that?

That loaded?

Cuff him!

I hobbled away from the Durango, but not exactly towards the highway. I stayed in the field and walked parallel for now. I'd cut up and intercept the road once the cops arrive at the wreck. My movements were slow and awkward. My neck, head, and ribs ached. I was weak and dizzy.

Moments later the cops arrived behind me. I heard their shouting and yelling a hundred yards away. I happened to look back in time to see the fiery SRT explode in a burst of red and yellow. More yelling. More shouting. They'd be busy for a few minutes. I had time to escape.

I walked through the tall grass to intercept the highway when I tripped over something and went down hard. I lied in the dirt and grass listening to the cars speed past only a short distance away.

My eyes began to close, and I did nothing to stop them.

Chapter 26

Dawn.

A peach and purple haze covered the sky above. The air had a chill to it. I sat upright in the dirt and grass with a splitting headache. It took me a few moments to gather myself and realize where I was, what had taken place, and my course of action.

Misha.

I rose and faced the highway. I-35. Speeding cars were no less than twenty yards away. I tucked the 9mm into my waistband and started towards them. It wasn't easy. Aside from my soreness, I was filthy. My face and hands were laced with small cuts and dried blood. I looked down at myself with a grim reality.

Who in their right mind would stop and pick me up?

I reached the pavement and began walking with traffic, left thumb extended high and obvious. I was heading south at a turtle's pace. Farms and woods were off to the east, the city far to the north, and almost nothing was to the west. Just sand and dirt, and smooth rocks that jutted hundreds of yards into the sky.

I pressed on for hours before I heard a vehicle slow down behind me. I turned slowly. It was a small car, like a teardrop. Like a fun-size candy bar. Like pointless. It was quiet like it had no engine. Which didn't surprise me at all as there was no room for one.

A frail old woman behind the wheel waved me back to her. I waved and walked back, opened the narrow door and squeezed in. It was tight. Compact. Pointless.

My knees were denting her dash as I shut the door. "Thank you, mam."

"No problem at all. I am on my way to service and figured this would be a good start."

Her voice was as wispy as her frame. Short grey curls, big thick glasses. Nice outfit. She was probably ninety. I looked like Hulk sitting next to her in this car.

"Okay, hold on. We're going to merge." She veered back into the lite traffic. Nearly soundless.

"Electric?"

"Isn't it wonderful?" she said happily.

I sighed.

Pointless.

She was obviously in no hurry. If she were, she wasn't going to get there in this contraption.

"Does it go faster?"

"We're in no hurry."

I was.

"Seriously. What's the top speed for this thing?"

"Oh dear, I'd have to put on my trifocals to see all those little numbers."

I sighed. "Just drive as fast as everyone else."

"You seem stressed out."

"It's because I'm in a hurry."

I sighed again, nice, and loud. I shifted around uncomfortably. My head rubbed against the ceiling and my knees couldn't ride below the dash.

“Are you going to the shelter?” she asked.

Shelter?

Oh. My attire. My appearance. My stench.

“I’m trying to find Haloes. Ever hear of it?”

“Haloes? Like the angels?”

“Sure.”

“Well, scripture mentions haloes in—”

“This is a place. It’s on the border. North of Laredo.”

“Well I know exactly where to take you. You sit tight.”

I was relieved. I reclined as much as I could and tried to relax. For some time, we didn’t speak at all. No radio either. She hummed something an awful lot and I stayed quiet, lost in thought. I needed some time to wind down. This was my moment. I took full advantage. I shut my eyes.

A while later I felt the car slow and turn, then gently speed up again. She said nothing, so I kept calm and relaxed. But after a few minutes something was bothering me. I opened my eyes and saw that we were heading west on highway 255.

“Where are we? How close to Laredo? How close to Haloes?”

I checked her speed as it felt like we were just floating on the wind. Ten under the speed limit. Doubt it was going to go any faster. Doubt she even should.

“Well I don’t know where that is, but I know that Pastor Rick has fresh pastries. Then maybe I can get you to that shelter you need. I hear there’s a nasty storm coming in later. No since in being out in the rain.”

“Wait. You’re not going to Laredo? Then where the hell are we?”

“I told you, we are going to the shelt—”

“I’m not going to any shelter!”

Quiet. Aside from me huffing and puffing. When she spoke again, her tone was stern.

“Well I would have to believe the shelter would have people you can talk to, if you’re able to make friends. I have a great grandson like you, all rough around the collar and won’t take sound advice. That boy has no friends.”

“I don’t need friends and I’m not going to the damn shelter, lady. I’m not homeless. There are some people out there that I need to kill. Now put both feet on the gas pedal and hold it to the floor until we get to Laredo!”

I felt my face getting hot. I was too tired for her notions and her slow driving. I was angry. It occurred to me to drop her off and take the car myself. I’m sure Pastor Rick could pick her up, bring her some pastries and whatever.

Her small head slowly turned towards me. She didn’t look at my face, just my attire. Looking and thinking. Judging. Making decisions. She looked back to the road.

“Oh no. Not now.”

She slowed and pulled off the road. I saw no reason. I just saw more wasting time. Maybe I saw an opportunity to get behind the wheel. Sometimes you must know when your opportunities arrive.

“What?” I groaned. “This thing wound a mosquito?”

“The battery must have come unplugged. Without it plugged in, the car won’t drive.”

“Are you serious? That’s a real thing?” I got pissed. “Why didn’t you just buy a real car, lady? With gas pedals and horsepower. And leg room. Maybe a convertible. You know what they look like? Like they have headroom.”

I heard something click.

“It’s in the trunk.” She said it with defeated look. A helpless old lady. If I wasn’t here, she probably would have called for help. I guess she saw her opportunity and took it.

“I’ll get it.” I would do it faster than her anyhow. I looked back and the truck was popped up. It would take me a few minutes to get out of the damn car first.

I opened the door and began to remove myself. “This is a coffin on wheels, lady. You should sue whoever sold it to you. They saw you coming a mile away.”

I got out. I decided when I got back in it was going to be in the driver’s seat.

“The door, please.” Her frail voice was filled with annoyance. She may have just asked me if I were born in a barn.

I shut the door. I walked behind the car and got back to the slim trunk when the tires squealed, and the tiny electric joke sped into traffic.

“Now you can drive fast?”

I picked up the nearest stone and chucked it at her. But it didn’t matter. She was gone. Off to church.

I started putting one foot after the other. Left, right, left. Thumb extended again. Cars passed by without slowing. It was getting hot out. I was sweating profusely.

After an hour or so the highway curved and ran southwest. It was nice to get the sun off my face, but it was too damn hot to be walking anyhow. I cursed out the heat when a van sped by me. I took notice right away. I stopped in my tracks and just watched it go farther into the distance. Same type of van I had seen for days. I watched it exit the highway and turn south on a dirt road. I saw it drive through nothingness, heading towards nothingness. I would have tossed aside the notion of following it, but everything about me was screaming with alarms. I couldn’t calm my breathing. I couldn’t stop my panic.

And as I couldn’t make out the van any longer, I peered further south and noticed I could make out something on the horizon. A building of some sort. Probably a few buildings, actually. Surrounded by nothingness.

A dessert setting.

Thank you, Raven.

I crossed the northbound traffic and exited the highway into the dirt and shrub terrain. There was no way I was going to risk walking the road to their doorstep. Bella would spot me and bring all this to an end quick. A van of goons with heavy firepower, probably. Maybe some big tough guys, or ninjas. I was too tired for any of that. Solitude and secrecy usually panned out in my line of work.

Left, right, left through the dirt and heat. About an hour later I stopped. My chest was sore, my mouth was dry. I sat on a flat rock the size of a diner table and removed my chest bandage wrap. I took *Snub* out and buried him in the dirt. I was grateful for his service, but the 9mm was going to work for me now. I inspected it. Plenty in the clip. The silencer would definitely come in handy.

I stood and sighed.

With the sun at my left and no wind at my face, I pressed on, a solitary intruder.

After what felt like a million sweat beads and a thousand footsteps, I could see Haloes clearly. I realized that there was a fence. Not a fence, I corrected myself, but a wall. It looked solid steel. Maybe eight or nine feet high. Probably a foot thick. Impenetrable. It ran for a hundred yards either way. I was weary of it. Of what they were trying to keep out. Of what they might be keeping in.

I reached the northeast corner of the wall a while later. I was right about it. It was tall and thick. Probably cost a fortune. I looked to my right, towards the road, and saw where a guard post was stationed at the entry. I could make out some guys with machine guns walking around, watching the road, killing time. I looked left and saw the wall end and the desert ran past it for as far as I could see. I weighed my options and went left.

I searched for a way in, or a way over the wall, but saw neither. It was too high for me to jump up and scale over and I didn't want to take the guarded entry at the road if I didn't have to. The less they knew I was here the better chance I stood.

Maybe this is what Raven meant when she said I needed her to get in. Maybe the only way in was through the front, through the inspection. Probably a metal detector. Probably a lot of questions for a guy like me. I had a few questions of my own. Like why the heavy security? The isolation? The wall? Only one way to get those answers though.

The wall ended and turned west. There was construction taking place ahead. The land was marked with pink ribbons on posts and the land was leveled. Piles of lumber and more of the giant fence slabs were stacked. It would be an addition, though I couldn't tell what.

I proceeded with caution.

Then I heard voices.

Chapter 27

Swearing.

Four-letter words mostly. Not loud. Not shouting in anger. Just a few words peppered in conversations. They were close. Just ahead, somewhere in the new-build site. As I headed closer, I could make out other sounds too. A metal shovel digging, scraping dirt and rocks. Another man's voice was talking. And something else, too. I couldn't picture what it was. It was a steady, rhythmic sound. Grinding, crunching, scraping.

I stuffed the 9mm beneath my waistband in the back. I passed by some tall dirt piles and saw two sweaty, dirty men filling a narrow walkway with cement. It was outside of the build site, probably a path from a doorway out into the vast nothingness. Beyond the men lay about a 50x30 foot section of dried cement going back to the wall, to where it looked like was an outline of a doorway within the wall. A 4x4 Cat utility vehicle with a trailer attached was parked to the side with a small cement mixer steadily churning.

I dismissed it and just stood in the shade watching them smooth over the fresh layer of cement. They were younger than me. Mid 20s. Blue jeans. White Ts. Clean cut.

The men went quiet. They stopped working. I realized then that they were watching me.

"Excuse me," I called out. "I could use a drink."

They spoke to one another quietly. Deciding. I didn't have time. I continued towards them.

"You're trespassing!" a voice shot back.

"Sure, sure."

"Hey! Don't come over here!" he yelled back. "Stop!"

"I know. I know. Trespassing."

"Turn around!" the other voice ordered.

Left, right, left.

The taller one picked up the shovel and they walked for me. They looked a little panicked like they weren't sure what to do.

"Water?" I said. "Yes or no?"

They looked at each other. It made sense now why these two were out in the heat making the building and not in a cool office making decisions.

"Seriously guys. Simple question."

The shorter one pointed to the Cat before they got into an argument about it. But I saw the igloo container and headed for it. I helped myself. Good water. Cold. I drank while they argued about me drinking. I overheard the tall one mention something about not helping outsiders. I finished drinking then used the rest of the water to wash my face and hair.

"You're out of water."

"Sonofabitch," the tall one grunted.

"You have to go," the other said.

I turned. They both were staring at me, both pointing back the way I had come.

"That's a long ways." I pointed to the buildings. "That's much closer. What's behind that wall, anyway?"

"You can't go there." The tall one said with a hard look.

“Why?”

“Don’t ask why.”

“Why not?”

“I said don’t ask why.”

“I didn’t ask why. I asked why not.”

No response. No surprise.

“Is it a house? A business? A cult?” I waited, but they kept hush. “It’s Haloes, right?”

They shared a look then.

The short one said, “We can’t tell you that.”

“I think you just did. What goes on in there? Besides too much inbreeding. No offense.”

“Who are you?” the tall one said.

“I’m the guy that’s going to take your Cat for a ride and see what’s going on in there.”

The short one stepped closer. He didn’t look pissed off. He looked like a nice kid trying to do his job. “It’s private property, sir. If you don’t leave, we’ll have to make a call.”

“You’ll call the cops on me?”

They shared a look again.

“Okay. Call them. I need to report somethings too. I have a friend missing. I believe she’s in danger. And I’m pretty sure she’s in there.”

I pointed to the buildings.

The look that passed between them made me realize it wasn’t the cops they’d be calling. Of course not. The call would be for back up. Maybe a small pick-up truck full of more of them. A call to alert their boss of an intruder. A call to Bella, perhaps. I didn’t want that. I didn’t need her to know I was there. Not yet.

If indeed it was Haloes.

“Is Ma in there today? Can I get in to see her?”

The short guy’s eyes grew in recognition. He suddenly became nervous. “Why?”

It was Haloes all right. No doubt. Now I had a decision to make about these two.

“She hired me to find her daughter, Vega. Ring a bell? Paid me in fake bills.”

They looked at each other again.

“Know anything about it?”

“I suggest you turn around and go back to where it is you came from.” The tall goon stepped closer. He rested the shovel over his shoulder.

“Sir,” the shorter one said, pointing for me to back away. “We don’t want no trouble.”

I stepped closer.

“You boys must struggle with comprehension. I’ll put it in terms you can understand.” I pulled out the 9mm. “I’m here to free my friend and bury anyone who gets in my way.”

The tall one took a swing at me with the shovel. I ducked and felt a rush of wind sweep overhead. From my crouching stance I brought up the 9mm in one quick motion.

Tink!

The tall one took a bullet to his forehead. He fell lifeless into the dirt. The short one backed away, stumbling into the materials. He tossed aside 2x4s as he scrambled to his feet.

“Wait! Wait!” His hands came up. “I can help you.”

“Yeah? How?”

“You need me to get in.”

“How so?”

“It’s password protected. The gate, I mean. You need a password.”

“So, what is it?”

He said nothing. He just stared at me with big wide eyes and a sagging jaw.

“What’s the password?”

“I don’t want to tell you.”

“Why?”

“You’ll kill me if I do.”

“Words or numbers?” I said.

“Huh?”

“The password.”

“Numbers.”

“I’m pretty good with numbers.” I put the 9mm back into hiding. “How many numbers?”

He paused then reluctantly said, “Six.”

“Six? That’s a lot. Who can remember six numbers?”

The kid smiled. “I had to write it on my hand.”

Then he showed me.

Then he realized he showed me.

He put his arms behind his back. I played it out as if I weren’t interested.

“I’m not going to kill you. Let me in and you can run off.”

I began walking to the Cat. I looked back at the kid, who was busy scrubbing his hand on his jeans, and whistled for him. He came running. Like a mut. A dirty, mangy mut.

I got in the passenger seat and let Mut drive.

Ten yards later I read the passcode on the back of his hand. *200220*. He had to write that down.

He saw me staring at his hand.

Then he attacked me.

He jumped over into me with a long flat bar in his left hand, swinging at my face and missing by a hair. And he was quick, ready for another attempt before I was. As I reached back to get the 9mm, the flat bar slammed into my collar bone. Would have buried deep too, but my left arm deflected the blow every-so slightly. He leaned back and went to thrust it into my neck with all his weight, but I was quicker.

Tink!

I used my legs to send him out into the dirt to bleed out in the hot sun. I took the driver seat and continued. My plan was to gain access of the door, walk in and start shooting. As I came to the wall, a section of it began to slide back. It took me by surprise and broke my train of thought. I almost panicked. A guy showed up and stood in the way. He dragged a large black garbage bag over to me and left it a few feet in front of the Cat.

This guy had ten years on me and looked prison hard. Tats and scars. Shiny black ponytail.

“Ya got one more.”

He walked back through the gate. A moment later it slid closed with a heavy thud. I saw the lock pad then.

200220.

But the nature of the black bag owned my attention.

Odd shape. Bulky. Heavy.

I bent and opened it a bit.

I stepped back instinctively, almost falling backwards with surprise. I looked away for a second, but knew I had to see more. I had questions now that needed answers. I pulled the bag open more, just to see enough to be satisfied. And I was. I stood quickly and looked around to see if I was being watched. I saw no one. I wasn't yet discovered.

I saw the lock pad and thought of the code. Then I thought of the kid who gave it to me.

The mut laying cement. Fresh cement.

Then it dawned on me.

I flushed with panic then as loose ends suddenly strung together and I saw the entire picture enfold like an avalanche.

Ya got one more.

One more.

More.

I jumped back into the Cat and turned around, hauling ass back through the build site.

Chapter 28

An eyeball.

Dead. Glazed over in a frozen stare. I've seen my fair share. And I was going to make sure I would see a few more. I couldn't get the image out of my head as I drove the Cat across the Texas desert dirt as fast as it could go.

I reached the shed site and picked up a shovel. I couldn't calm down to save my life. I slammed the business end of the shovel into the fresh cement and tore it up, time and time again, heap after heap, tossing it aside until I was down into the dirt. Then I slowed. I was careful. I kept digging, kept removing the loose earth. When I found nothing, I went back to the cement. It was soft still. The two goons must've started a short time ago. Lucky for me.

I tore through the cement as if it were paper. My mind was lost in thoughts I didn't want to come true. All I could think about was Misha. Finding her here, buried under the cement in the desert would destroy me. It would be the end of me. The new me would be a hellish nightmare.

Nothing.

New hole.

Fresh dirt.

Nothing.

I kept at it like a maniac. I had more than half of the foundation tore up into small heaps scattered behind me. A part of me didn't want to see her. A part of me knew I had to keep digging until I did.

Through the cement and into the dirt I struck something. It wasn't a rock. It wasn't clay or anything earthly. I stopped. My breathing stopped. My heart stopped. I stood looking into the ground where a small patch of white was visible.

I dropped to my hands and knees and began to scoop the dirt out by hand. It wasn't long before I had a clear view of a white shirt. A shoulder. It took several more minutes to clear away the neck and the head. Brown hair. Short.

I grabbed the head and turned it up towards me. It was a man. His face was covered in dirt, but it wasn't Misha. I sat back and took a moment to gather myself. I cried. When I was done, I worked on clearing out the rest of the cement and digging out three more bodies. All men. All shot in the chest. All buried and hidden to be untraceable. Mothers would mourn. Wives and children would never be the same.

I threw up. I heaved out my guts and cried. For several long minutes it went on. I was shaky and nervous and angry. Somewhere in that compound was Misha. Maybe she was alive, maybe she was in the process of being tortured. But I was going to find her.

I got in the Cat and drove back to the wall. I wasn't sure if it was going to open for me again or not. I parked in front of the gate and waited a moment. Nothing. I got off the Cat and walked to the lock pad. I kept the 9mm under my waistband in the front.

200220.

Beep.

The door slid back with the groaning of metal against rusty metal. Before me stretched out a series of buildings in various sizes. There was a basketball court and picnic tables in the center of the area, which looked like it was nearly a hundred square

yards. There was a long building with half a dozen garage doors, all shut. There was lush green grass and a swimming pool.

It was a compound alright. I'm guessing there was a leader here that everyone would die for. Everyone was probably armed to the teeth, too. Probably die-hard religious freaks ready for the end of times.

I stepped in. I didn't see the guy with the tats.

"Where's your partner?" a voice said.

I turned. The tat guy was walking towards me from a small windowless building. It was made of wood with a tin roof. Probably hot as hell in there. He was sweaty and irritable.

"He's napping. We need more water."

He stepped into the doorway, staring out into the nothingness, up to the sky, then pressed a button on the interior lock pad and the gate began to slide shut.

"Get it covered up soon. Storm's coming."

Nothing more. He turned and walked back to his hut. I was standing there like an idiot, so I followed him.

"Any more today?" I pried.

He barely looked back as he kept walking. "What?"

He entered his hut. I went in behind him. The far wall had an air conditioner running. I assume it was for all the computer monitors. This was the place I needed to be. Whatever security system they had, it all fed into this one small building.

"Bodies." I said. "Are there gonna be any more today?"

He just looked at me with annoyance.

"It's just that the cement is going to set. I don't want to dig any more than I have to. Know what I mean?"

He sat down and began to watch monitors. "Not today. Ma just left. Go get your water and finish up before the storm hits."

Not a conversationalist.

I stood over his shoulder watching the monitors, hoping to catch a glimpse of Misha. But all I saw were the front gate, people walking in and out of a larger building, and a large group of people doing something with paper and small machines. Counterfeiting, probably. It could be stacks of money.

"What are you doing?" he groaned.

He was looking up at me.

"Sorry." I turned to leave, then turned back. "Hey, I heard there was a woman cop brought it. Dipshit out there said she's pretty hot."

He went back to watching his monitors. But he smiled now. "She is."

Is not was.

"I don't buy it."

He began clicking his mouse and the image on his main screen changed to the interior of a room with a bed. Misha was lying on it, curled into a ball. The black and white view couldn't hide the abuse she had taken. Her clothes were tattered and her hair disheveled. But she was moving. She was alive.

Misha!

I grew hot. The red was coming. There was no fighting it off. No will to. I welcomed it with no remorse. They deserved whatever they got.

“Where is she?”

He cocked his head. “You need to get back outside.”

He clicked onto the surveillance that showed the new build outside the wall. On the screen, plain as day, was Mut lying face down in the dirt.

Tat guy moved his head closer to the screen. “What the hell?”

Tink.

The 9mm was in my hand, but I don’t remember squeezing the trigger. My thoughts were all on Misha.

I shoved his limp body off the chair and took over at the helm, clicking and searching, but I couldn’t get to the screen with Misha on it. My IT skills were limited. But it didn’t matter. She was there. She was alive.

A click of the mouse and the screen changed. Different view. Different camera. I was looking at a dimly lit tunnel, at least eight feet high and maybe three wide. Wood beams supported the dirt walls and ceiling. Lights were fashioned to the beams every few feet.

I didn’t care for that. It was a concern. It changed things. Tunnels and secrets were never good.

I was wasting time. I had to find her on my own. My way.

I stepped out of the surveillance room and went to the nearest building. Most of them were single level structures, but this one had three levels. Windows. Shingles. Shrubbery. It looked like living quarters.

I was surprised by the silence. It was like a ghost town. It gave me cause for concern. It made me wonder a lot.

I made it to the building and opened the wooden door. I stepped inside, into more silence. I was in a small area, like a mud room, with floor mats and coat hooks. I kept on. The wood floors were shiny. Everything was clean. I entered in the great room with couches and a fireplace and an entrance into a kitchen and a set of stairs going up. I checked out the kitchen. It was packed with food, and it was spotless.

I went upstairs. There were bedrooms packed with bunkbeds, and a smaller main area that had a few more couches. I saw no one. Not a person or picture. The white walls were bare. There was no charm. This might be a place to sleep, but it definitely wasn’t anyone’s home.

I snooped around until I was certain Misha wasn’t there, then stepped outside into the hot air. The next closest building was a smaller, single level structure that very well could be a pole barn. I stepped towards it.

“Hey, you!”

I turned.

Coming at me quickly in long, rushed strides was a man my age with a thick black mustache and a military style haircut. He was all business.

“Where’ve you been?” he said.

“Out laying cement.”

“Later for that. You’re coming with me.”

“Where?”

“One of ‘em tried to make a break for it. He’s contained, but now he’s going to be a problem. Ma wants him out. She’s trading him in with that cop. They’re on their way right now.”

Cop?

I nodded like I understood. Mustache man motioned with his head for me to follow then walked towards one of the single-level buildings. He would be taking me to Misha. I stayed at his heels.

Chapter 29

Desks.

Rows of empty desks were facing a large, green chalkboard. Papers, schoolwork it appeared, were strung up on the wall. Some sort of essay, I figured. Lots of words. They were graded with a red marker that I could see from twenty feet away.

The guy I'm following strolled through the classroom to the back closet and stepped inside. There was a mop bucket and a broom. Pretty basic.

Then he pressed something on the wall and a section of the wall gave way. It was a door. Nothing basic about this. As it swung in, I saw yellow light beyond illuminating from a strand of light bulbs descending around the spiral staircase. Mustache man entered and I followed.

The air cooled right away. We were heading down about ten feet. I heard talking, some arguing, some hushed concerns, as we neared the bottom and a smaller room opened before us. There were four rows of two tables. Each had several young adults at them, working hard at creating counterfeit bills, stacking them, and stamping them with what Misha called the Maker's Mark. Men and women alike. All in their early twenties. They were sweaty and stressed. Attached to their ankles were some sort of device. Maybe a tracking device. Maybe something that would harm them if they tried to escape.

I looked them over good. Looked around the room until I was satisfied that Misha wasn't there, then made a reach for the 9mm.

"Give me a hand!" The guard called out to me.

Off to the side the guard, who was about my age, size, and build, was holding a younger man to the floor, pressing his body weight down on top of him. The younger guy wasn't doing much but mumbling to himself. He didn't look twenty. He was short and thin. Just a damn kid, really.

"C'mon." Mustache man rushed over to the scene, helping the other man lift the kid off the cement floor. I surveyed the room. No one looked up from their work.

"Just let me go, man. Let me get back to work." The kid groaned. "Gimme another chance!"

"You've had enough chances," mustache guy said to him. "You're done here."

"You've been sold, hero." The guard coldly smiled. "You don't work for Ma now. But you're going to wish you did."

They began to walk him to the stairs. The kid fought back. Arms swung and legs kicked.

"Don't touch me!" He yelled and cried and took a beating. "Just leave me here! I'll be better! I promise!"

"Hey!" Mustache man yelled at me. I moved over to help get the kid in line, who now dropped to the ground and began thrashing around like a fish out of water. But after they kicked him a few times, we were able to lift him up like a hundred feet of rolled up carpet and walk him up the stairs and back into the classroom.

"Here's fine." Mustache guy stated, then they dropped him to the floor. "I'll bring the cart around."

He left. The guard looked at me. "Who are you?"

"Lynch. I've been working with Raven."

“She was a real piece of work. Psycho. I’m glad someone put her out of her misery.”

The kid began crying hard. He curled up into a ball and let it all out. He was shaking and sobbing. I couldn’t understand him. He was sorry. He just wanted to go home.

“Watch the kid,” the guard said to me. “I gotta hit the head.”

He left the building. It was just me and the crying kid.

“Kid. Stop crying. Talk to me.”

More crying.

“Hey, listen. I need your help.”

Sobbing.

I knelt next to him. “Hey, I’m going to get you out of here. Just stop crying and talk to me.”

He looked up to me. He was a mess. He blew his nose down on the floor between his legs then used his shirt to wipe his face.

“They’re going to kill me.”

“Nobody is going to kill you. Trust me.”

He snorted. “We all know what’s going to happen.”

“I need to know where the woman cop is. Where are they keeping her? She’s going to be traded to someone today and I need to find her before that happens.”

“Who are you?”

The door opened. Mustache was back. He walked right to us and began barking orders for the kid to get up. He looked at me but found the 9mm staring back at him.

Tink!

As his body fell to the floor, the kid scrambled to his feet. Action, reaction.

“Listen kid, do you know where the cop is or not?”

“No! I swear it, man! Don’t shoot. Don’t shoot me!” He backed away with his hands waving frantically.

“Calm down.” I looked around. I’d have to find someone with authority. “Here’s what I need you to do.”

I gave him direction. He was very unsure at first. I had to reassure him a few times. Then he went to the secret door and I went to the front door. I stood looking out into the courtyard and saw a golf cart parked just outside.

Then I saw the guard walking towards me.

I heard the room fill with hushed worries and turned around to see the kid was leading the counterfeiters into the room. They looked like miners who had been trapped for weeks underground.

“What about our trackers?” The kid pointed down to the device around his ankle.

I said, “Everyone do your best not to scream.”

The door opened and the guard entered. His face flushed with shock. For a second, he just stood there in stunned silence. He made a reach for his pocket, but I stopped him.

“Easy.” I had the 9mm pointed at him. “You have a key to their bracelets?”

He nodded with reluctance, like it was physically painful for him to do it, to betray Ma.

I motioned with the 9mm for him to remove them. He stared at me a moment. Probably realizing that he didn’t recognize me. Probably wondering who I really was and how I got inside. Probably wondering if he could take me.

I slowly shook my head at him.

He reached into his pocket and tossed a key at me. I kept the gun on him and handed the key to the kid, who went to work using it.

“What do you think you’re doing? You can’t get out of here with them?”

I smiled. “I don’t plan to.”

I motioned with the 9mm for him to step away from the door, over to the far wall.

“Put your nose on the wall.”

He obeyed.

I said to the kid, “Take the cart to the wall, just past that small building.” I pointed. “Outside that building, there’s another cart. Take it east to the highway.”

No questions. They all were stunned and hopeful. I told them the code key for the gate, then turned to the guard. I patted him down and removed a small revolver. I took it and gave it to the kid. I opened the door for them and pointed in the direction of the gate. They didn’t hesitate. In a matter of seconds, they were driving and running away.

“You’re a dead man. Ma’s not going to let you just walk out of here.”

“You need to worry about yourself.” I walked over to him and pressed the silencer into the back of his neck. “Where’s the cop?”

“Piss off.”

“I don’t think so. I think you’re going to tell me. Know why? Because Ma put you in charge here and when I’m gone, she’s going to need to blame someone.”

He said nothing.

“Lead me to the cop and I’ll let you run off into the sunset. Keep playing tough, I’ll tie you up and let Ma find you.”

He groaned.

Lesser of two evils. He’ll side with common sense.

“Piss off. I’m dead no matter what.”

I should have expected it. Ma has these people terrified of her.

“You want to live? Want a way out of here? I can do that. I can help you leave.”

Nothing. But he was listening.

“You lead me to the cop, I’ll put Ma underground. This all ends.”

He laughed.

“No?”

“Piss off.”

I slammed his head into the wall. He yelled. His nose bled.

“Now?”

“Piss off!”

Another slam. More yelling. More bleeding. Drywall cracking.

“Now?”

“Pi—”

Tink!

I was done wasting my time.

I walked to the door and stepped outside. I caught a glimpse of the gate closing at the far side of the wall. The kid would be a hero. He’d be in the paper and on the news. His parents would throw him a party. Maybe this mess would stick with him so that he’d want to do something in return, like become a cop or a detective. Maybe a hitman.

I stood looking around. I would ransack the next building. Every room. Every closet. Every wall. Everyone in my path would fall.

I stepped towards the next building.

Then I heard yelling.

I tracked it down, going around the next building to stare at the vast garage. I saw three men escorting a woman, who was bound at the wrists behind her back and wearing a grey cloth sack over her head. They were forcing her to walk, pushing and shoving her into the garage.

Misha!

I made no attempt to hide my coming. I walked fast, feeling a knot form in my throat. I was getting hot. Things were about to get bad.

I entered the garage through the same open doorway the men had. It was a lengthy space with a high ceiling. There were several white vans and other luxurious vehicles. There were outdoor equipment, gardening tools, and landscaping machines. But no people.

I heard a thud. It was heavy, iron on iron, nearby. I walked around the garage and found nothing out of place. Nothing unusual. No sounds. No people. There were no hidden rooms. The vehicles had no one in them. It was a single level structure, and it was empty.

I paced around quickly and desperately. I went from car to car checking to make sure I had not missed something. All were empty. There was no place in sight for anyone to go.

Then I heard something move. Metal on metal scratching for a second, then it disappeared. I heard the faint hum of a machine at work. I turned around and saw a BMW lifting on a platform. Under the platform stood one man rising. It was an elevator. Well disguised.

I hid behind a van and watched carefully as the man exited the garage and the platform began to descend.

I bolted for it then, sprinting the twenty yards in a flash and made it onto the sinking platform seconds before the BMW's tires reached the concrete.

I was underground in dim lighting. The dirt floor was littered in footprints. I brought the 9mm up and let it lead me away into the dark uncertainty.

Chapter 30

The air was cool.

It was moist and refreshing for the moment. The tunnel was narrow and maybe a foot higher than my head. Even with the light strands, I couldn't see beyond ten yards. My footsteps were quiet and quick. My trigger finger would be quicker.

I was heading south, I figured, just east of where I came through the wall. I figured I was now about fifty yards out into the desert. The tunnel thinned considerably. It was single file now. My elbows scraped the dirt walls on both sides. There was more spacing in between the light bulbs now, too. I didn't care for it. I was breathing rapidly. It felt as if I was merely waiting for the ground above me to collapse.

I had to divert my thinking. My senses were scrambled. The tunnel had twists and turns, I knew. But I could no longer keep track in which direction I was heading. I felt panicked. I was going to collapse and die of a heart attack.

I stopped moving to calm myself down. I shut my eyes and forced my breathing to slow. It was just for a moment. Just long enough to gather myself.

Bad idea.

I opened my eyes then in a rush of confusion. *Which way was I going? Had I turned around? How long was I out?*

I was uncertain. The dirt trail offered no relief. I couldn't tell which set of tracks were mine. My heart began to beat against my ribs again. I began gasping for air. It wasn't cool anymore; I was sweating profusely. The panic was overwhelming me.

It felt as if the tunnel was swallowing me alive.

I had to do something. It didn't matter any longer which direction, I had to keep moving. I had to get out, get back onto ground, into fresh air and away from these walls.

I moved quickly, nearly using the walls to brace myself from falling, from toppling over and letting the darkness consume me. I wanted to yell. I wanted to scream for help. I wanted to claw my way up and out.

But I tripped. I hit the dirt floor and lied still for a moment. I was in the darkest section of the tunnel. My chest felt heavy like it wanted to crush me. My breathing was short and rapid. I wasn't going to make it out. I shut my eyes again as I was drifting away.

Metal creaked loudly and I jumped awake. Light flooded down into the tunnel twenty feet away. I saw a ladder. I saw a way out. I saw a pair of legs descending.

I stood quickly. My phobia gone back into the darkness. I moved towards the ladder as a man made his way down. The light began to dim and with the closing of an iron door, the darkness was back.

The man turned from the ladder and faced me. He stood next to a set of lightbulbs, though his features were masked in shadows. He was trying to figure out who I was as I approached.

"What are you doing?"

I said, "Where is she?"

"We made the transfer," he said and pointed up.

Tink! Tink!

I stepped over him and onto the ladder. I went up. There was a door or a lid at the top. I pushed it up and it went with a groan. Light flooded down onto me. I crawled out and stood in the desert. Immediately my hands came up to block out the sun. I was filled with relief.

I turned around and saw five Cuban men staring at me. The woman with the sack over her head was being pushed into the back of a small piece of shit pick-up truck with no mirrors or tailgate. Her screams were muffled. Probably had her mouth taped. Or a gag stuffed in there.

One of the men spoke to me in Spanish. I don't know what he said, but I gathered that he was questioning me.

I brought the 9mm up to answer for me.

Click.

Click.

Click, click, click.

Empty.

Dammit.

I tossed the empty gun aside and charged the nearest guy and punched him in the throat before he could realize what was happening. He went down instantly. The man next to him scrambled to pull out his handgun and was too slow. My right elbow came crashing down into his face right between his eyes. As he dropped like a sock full of rocks, the other two were swinging and kicking at me. They were short and not very strong. I was tall and angry, and vengeance was very powerful ally. I broke an arm and a nose before I was struck in the back of the head and went falling to the dirt. They stomped and kicked me then. These men wore cowboy boots. Their kicks were like steel hammers beating into my flesh.

One man broke for the truck. I figured he was going to flee with the woman. As I fought through the constant barrage of lethal footwear and stood, I noticed him standing in the doorway of the truck aiming a sawed-off shotgun at me.

I grabbed the nearest guy by the neck and pinned him to my chest. I heard the shotgun blast and we both went down. My human shield was dead, bleeding on top of me. The shirt from Misha saved me again.

I heard the truck start up. I heard two doors slam shut. I threw the dead guy off me then dove and grabbed the rusty bumper as the truck began to drive. As my legs were being dragged through the sand, I climbed up into the bed of the truck. Near the cab, the woman lied on her side. Her hands were zip tied together behind her. I crawled to her and told her to be quiet. She kept mumbling, yelling something. She wasn't going to catch on and I didn't have time to explain. I scooped her up in my arms as gently as I could.

"Just hang on."

The truck didn't slow. The two men in the cab didn't suspect a thing. They figured I was dead. I picked the woman up then jumped off the back. I hit the soft dirt and she went rolling out of my hands.

We made it though. Misha was mine again.

I belled out an emotional yell.

The weight on my shoulders lifted. I was excited and happy again. I was filled with relief. It was over.

I won.

I rolled off my back and sat upright. I wiped the dirt from my face as I scrambled over to her and helped her up. I began telling her how I felt about her. I poured my heart out to her. I felt like a kid on Christmas. I untied the cloth sack and pulled it off her head. I stared into her eyes and watched the fear and curiosity turn into relief.

She began crying.

I peeled the tape from her mouth and snapped the ties from her wrists.

“I remember you. What happened? Are you a cop?”

It felt like a punch to the throat.

Dammit!

“I’m not a cop, Vega.”

“You saved my life. Who are you?”

“I have to get back,” I said.

“No!” She was shaking. “Why? Why go back in there?”

“I’m not done.”

I told her how I came to find Haloes and why I was there. When I was done, she came over to me and hugged me tight. It was as if she were afraid to let go.

“Vega,” I began, pulling away from her. “You can help me. You know that place better than I do. Where would they keep her?”

“I don’t know. They have all kinds of secret rooms.” She paused, considering.

“Ma’s place, maybe. It sits closer to the road, away from where the workers stay. Our *pretend* home. It’s well protected. No one’s allowed in there. If she’s not in there, chances are you’ll never find her on your own.”

“Pretend home?”

“It’s all pretend. All of it. It’s all for show, so the state can see that she’s running a real business.” She paused, reflecting on some painful memory. “You know what I did for her? What she made me do? I was a collector. My job was to find new recruits. Homeless, hopeless, runaways, you name it. I found the best. The smartest. I’m responsible for all of them being there. Me.”

It weighed heavy on her. She was ashamed. She looked towards Haloes, far in the distance. “I ran away when my mom died. I met a woman who took me in and introduced me to Ma. She promised to take care of me. At the time, it all sounded so nice. But as soon as I got to Haloes, everything changed. We were prisoners. She gave us jobs that were all illegal. Counterfeiting, mostly. And I saw stuff. Things happened to others who didn’t want to work anymore. I didn’t question her after that, but she went the extra mile to make sure. She would give me pictures of my dad every now and then, doing stuff like yard work, or out to dinner somewhere. If I screwed something up, he’d pay the price.”

“But you escaped.”

“I was out one day at a shelter looking for recruits when I saw in the newspaper that a man was killed in a car crash. It was my dad. Thing is, she kept giving me these pictures for weeks after. She was never going to tell me he was dead. I had nothing to lose then. I waited for my chance and I took it. I ran. I guess I didn’t run far enough.”

“I’m sorry, Vega.”

“I escaped once. I knew I couldn’t do it again. When I wouldn’t work for her, she traded me to the drug guys. They would have done horrible things to me. I can’t go back in there. I won’t.”

“You won’t have to. You’re safe now. And when I’m finished, there will no one left to hurt you, Vega. I promise.”

Another hug.

She cried.

I held her close and told her it was going to be okay. When she pulled away, I couldn’t tell if she believed me or not.

“The highway is that way,” I pointed northeast.

Vega nodded.

“They’ll be back when they don’t find you in the truck.”

She nodded. She knew.

“I’m never going back.”

She gave me a look. I believed her.

She ran then, fast towards the highway. She never looked back.

Godspeed.

I turned back towards the hidden tunnel. Haloes was in the distance, maybe a half-mile away. I was going to burn it down.

Chapter 31

Haloos.

I rose on the platform underneath the BMW, heading back into the garage from the tunnel. I don't remember much of getting back, my thoughts were dark and focused. I was going to find and save Misha. I was going to bring Ma to justice, either the legal way or my way. I was going to free all the slave laborers. Saving Vega only refueled my drive and confidence that nothing would stop me.

"Hey, you!" A man shouted.

I stepped from the elevator and onto the garage floor and watched a man heading towards me. He was tall with a sleek look, and lean like a hanger holding a shirt, and something was bothering him.

I had no weapon.

I stepped towards him. He was all skin and bones.

I was the weapon.

"Anyone else with you?" Bones asked hurriedly. He was nervous, almost frantic. "Kevin? Bryan? Prevost?"

"No."

I could break his neck easily enough. I doubt he could outrun me unless a strong wind arose, and he was swept away.

"Dammit." Bones turned around, peering through the garage. His face kept shifting like he was always smelling something horrid. "We're on lockdown. I can't find those guys."

I could snap his arms off, stuff him in a van.

"Lockdown?" I asked.

"It was just called in. Ma's pissed about something. Fred, or Frank, whatever his name is at the gate said that she wants everything shut down. No one is to leave or enter. I guess it's something bad. Anyway, I need help getting them all back into the house."

Fold him up like a pretzel and drop him down into the secret tunnel.

He stared at me with wide eyes.

I could simply throw him through the wall. Wouldn't take much effort. I was thinking of the ways I could do it now, when I realized he was waiting for a response.

"Yes or no?" he asked.

"I forgot the question."

"I need help! We have to get moving."

"Ok."

"I'll get the paper and you get the printers. We'll have to get to the cop too. They want eyes on her room at all times now."

The cop was Misha.

"I'll get the cop. Where is she?"

"No. She's not going anywhere. Ma has something special planned for her. We just need to be there. We have to get the workers back to their rooms and lock 'em in first. I wanna be done before Ma gets back, so we'll have to hurry. You know how she gets when she's pissed about something."

He turned to leave when I saw he was carrying a Glock pressed against his spine under his belt. I followed him outside. The blacktop driveway snaked from the garage, to my left, skirting around a small building, and into the center of the compound where I presumed it made another left towards the front gates. Ma's house was somewhere in that direction. I was going to follow the driveway.

"Hey!"

Bones was staring at me with great agitation. He was moving, really putting his feet to work.

"Would you hurry up!"

I looked back and the thin guy was glaring back at me, heading towards the school building. It was in the opposite direction I needed to go. Chances were that he'd discover what I'd done and run around screaming. I didn't need all that attention. I needed to shut him down. For good.

I also needed a gun.

I followed him. I moved in like a big cat on the hunt.

Like an eagle stalking a walking stick.

Like a gust of wind approaching smoke.

He entered the school building and froze in the doorway. He turned back to me with a stricken look. He began to speak as I met him, but I yanked his gun free and pushed him inside, hard to the floor. I'm surprised he didn't shatter.

"What are you doing?" he yelled.

He stared at the dead guy more than he did me. I took no offense.

"I'll give you the same choice I gave him. Maybe you're smarter."

He scrambled back to the wall. "What? What is it?"

"The cop. Take me to her."

"Are you crazy?" he said, quickly regretting it. "Wait! Wait! I didn't mean crazy. Hold on a second."

He wasn't worth a bullet, but I kept the Glock on him. "I didn't ask him twice. I won't ask you either."

"Okay! Okay. I got it. I will help you. I know where she is."

I motioned with the Glock for him to get up. I didn't have to twice.

"Just lower the gun. I hate guns pointed at me."

I shoved it into my front pocket. I can't walk around here with a gun on him anyway. "I'm going to follow you. Alert anyone, I'll shoot you in the back of the head. Go."

He moved to the door without hesitation. His movements were flimsy and wild. We stepped outside and headed around the school to the driveway. We followed it around another building, heading out into the center of the compound. It went just as I presumed. Within a few moments, Ma's house came into view.

"In there," he said. "In Ma's house."

"Keep walking."

Bones groaned something he didn't want me to hear. I didn't ask him to repeat it. I didn't care.

Ma's house was nice and expensive. Wood and stone. Grand porch. Lush grass surrounding it. It was two-story, maybe two-thousand square feet. Not counting any hidden rooms.

There were well-dressed men on the porch talking as we approached. Bones didn't hesitate, we simply walked up the steps to join them as if we belonged. I was a step behind him as he reached for the door. Smooth sailing.

"Hey, where's Kevin and Bryan?" a gruff, deep voice rose from the idle chatter.

Bones stopped mid-stride. He turned back. "I think they're still getting the kids."

Bones tried to continue entering, but the other guy wasn't going to let it happen.

"Who the hell are you?" he said to me.

Bones stopped. I stopped. I sighed loudly.

I turned. The guy was big. Over six feet. Probably close to three hundred pounds. The head honcho. The other two men drew in close behind him as he walked to us. His brown eyes were soulless. I can always tell. I can always look a man in the eye and see if he's been working for Lucifer.

"I've been out working with Raven. But she's dead now, so Ma brought me here to make sure you guys don't screw this up."

An eerie silence fell upon us. I had treaded waters that no one dared, I suspect. I glared the big man down hard. He didn't trust me. He didn't like the way I talked to them. But he backed down. He snorted his dislike, then turned and walked back to the post he was standing by. His minions followed without a word.

Bones gave me a look, then entered the house. I followed, shutting the door behind me as conversations on the porch continued once again. The interior of Ma's house looked like something out of a fancy magazine. Clean, of course. But the decor was pristine. She was living well indeed. But it all came with a heavy price tag.

Bones led me through the living room to a small library with floor to ceiling bookshelves on two walls and a wall of windows facing the east. Ma didn't strike me as the reading type, so I assumed it was all for show like everything else.

"Over here," Bones said.

He walked to the bookshelf, selected a large book, and pulled it out. A narrow section of the bookcase swung away into a secret room. Bones didn't enter. He stood off to the side as if unsure of what to do next.

I looked past him into the room beyond. I saw a bed and a small chair. I stepped inside with my heart racing. The bed was empty. I thought the room to be the same. I turned back to Bones and saw in the corner of the room a small body curled up. I knew it was Misha right away. Her frame. Her hands. Her hair. I could smell her.

I abandoned all logic then and rushed to her. Her head was buried in her knees. I don't know if she was sleeping or crying. I knelt in front of her and took her hands into my own.

"Misha."

Her head slowly looked up. She had been hit a few times, but she was strong. Her eyes were full of determination.

"Michael?" Her eyes sparkled. Her dry lips parted and curled upright at the corners. "You look like hell."

"I've been worse." I smiled, then kissed her. "They hurt you?"

"Nothing I couldn't handle."

"Seen enough of this place?"

She cried. "I never gave up on you. I knew you'd find me."

"We have to get going. Can you walk?"

She nodded. I helped her stand.

“Things are going to get dark for a minute, but I’ll get you out. I promise.”

“You look like an angel,” she smiled.

I took out the Glock with my right hand. I motioned for her to follow. I turned to lead her out of the secret room and into the library, to shoot our way past the porch and to steal a car then drive out.

But I stopped in my tracks.

The door was shut. I hadn’t heard it close or lock.

“Plan B?”

“Plan B was to keep with plan A.” I walked to the outline of the door and tried to pry it open with my fingers.

“I spent an hour doing that.” Misha stood next to me now. *Smellsgood* living up to her name once again.

“Looks like it’s plan C.”

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“I don’t know yet.”

She smiled. “Let me know when you get to plan D.”

I punched the door. It was all drywall and cracked from the beating I gave it. I heard Bones from the other side begin yelling. Calling for help. I had plans for him.

I cracked the drywall and peeled off a chunk where the door latch was connected to the wall stud. I removed it and pulled the door back. Bones was standing there with an astonished look on his face. He must have been a short bus rider.

I swept the Glock up and sent a bullet into the small amount of brains he had. Misha came up beside me and gasped at the sight. She kept at my side as we went through the small library and out into the living room.

Already we could hear the rush of boots against wood as the porch men came running. Misha pressed against the wall, pulling me back with her, out of direct sight, out of direct shot. We stood beside the entryway as the calvary came rushing in.

Pop.

Pop.

The Glock was louder than the 9mm. No silencer. I had grown fond of the silencer. It was nice. It was quiet. It made me feel like I was an action figure in a spy movie. The Glock was fine though. It was smooth and accurate. And it was free.

Two men joined Bones on the floor, and I realized the big guy was missing. He was staying back in hiding to see what would happen. I’m sure he had his gun on the entryway.

Misha tugged on my arm. She wanted to know what I was waiting for. I held up a finger then pointed out into the house. I mouthed, *One more.*

She understood. I could tell she was thinking. I wasn’t in thinking mode; I was in shooting mode. I stepped around the wall and into the entryway with the Glock drawn and shooting. But there was no one there. The room was empty.

Chapter 32

Silence.

I hate it. It's creepy. Eerie. Unnatural. Especially when you know it's on purpose. Nothing ever good happens when things are quiet. It's why I sleep with a fan on. Even in the dead of winter.

We pressed through the house slowly, close to one another, watching and waiting. A cop and a hitman. A man and his woman.

"Listen," Misha said, grabbing my arm and holding me still.

But I knew. I heard the yelling outside, coming from the gate. The news had spread and now they were coming for us. "Hurry."

I took her hand we ran for the front door. We'd have to shoot our way to the garage and probably shoot our way out to the road. I wasn't worried. I was a good shot.

I felt Misha yank my arm hard and I looked back to see her go flying towards the wall and the big guy closing in on me. I didn't know where he had come from. I hadn't seen him at all. I'm guessing Misha had been just as surprised.

"End of the road, pal."

I stopped and turned, raising up the Glock to his face. But he was already pulling the trigger on his pistol. I dove, scrambling behind the couch, only to watch bullets rip through the soft cushioning. I kept rolling, kept moving across the floor as chunks of the dark bamboo laminate erupted around me.

I returned fire back in his direction, instantly hearing glass shatter. Then I was out of ammo. I was lying on my back facing the door with the couch between he and I. Misha was out of sight, probably still on the floor near the wall. He came into view, stalking around the couch towards me. He didn't have his gun drawn. As he stepped closer to me, he casually lobbed his gun onto the sofa.

He rolled up his sleeves. Silk shirt, probably. It looked nice, anyway. A deep crimson color. Costly. His pants were a dark blue, a sleek fabric. He could have been a businessman. But he was working for the wrong company.

"Get up," he groaned.

I did.

"You're him, aren't you?"

I shrugged.

"Yeah. You are." He motioned for me to come at him. "Show me what you got."

What I would give to have *Snub*. But I had nothing.

But he didn't know that.

I smirked. I made no indication I was going to fight him. Instead, I took my right hand in a quick motion and reached around to my backside. I watched his soulless brown eyes grow wide before he dove over the couch.

I leapt over the couch and raced him to the pistol. I was closer. I reached for it as he punched me in the head. I went sprawling backwards onto the couch. I scrambled to my feet, but he was there waiting and sent another gargantuan fist at my head. It stung with a depth I hadn't felt in a long while. When I hit the cushion, I didn't want to get up. My head was throbbing. The room was spinning.

“I don’t care how you got here, and all your secrets Ma wants to know. You’re nothing to me.”

I watched him undo his belt, helpless to the dizziness washing over me. I tried to fight through it, to stand up and take care of business, but he thought otherwise. Another fist the size of a softball was sent into my gut. Before I could cry out with the little air I was left with, he was wrapping his leather belt around my neck. He sat down on my lap and began to pull the belt tighter and tighter.

“I’m better than you.”

More pulling.

Less breathing.

I swung and scratched and clawed at him, but it was pointless. He was like a brick wall.

I began to see small light bursts. Then the dark came and began to swallow everything in its wake.

In the distance, far, far away, I heard a sound. A soft *pop*.

Just when I was giving in to the dark, light began to fade in. I clung to it, feeling a rush of air enter my lungs. I gulped it in, starving for it.

Misha’s face came into view right in front of me. Her lips were moving quickly, but I couldn’t decipher anything. All I could focus on was the air. I had to get more of it.

“Can you hear me? Michael?”

I nodded.

Misha helped me stand. She was speaking quickly. “We have to go. Michael, stay with me.”

I was coming around. I knew where I was and who was speaking to me. I understood the danger we were in. I saw past Misha to the dead body on the floor. The big guy. He was a mess now. Misha had found his pistol and went to work saving my ass.

“There’s a garage across the lot,” I said.

“I remember.”

Her eyes were wide and beautiful. If anything were to ever happen to her...

“C’mon!”

Misha ran for the front door of Ma’s house and I followed. Her pistol led the way. It was through the front door and firing before I made it out of the house. I saw men charging us from the front gate, men who bit the bullet and were falling lifeless. Misha didn’t know hesitation. She had no remorse. She understood what needed to be done.

We ran side-by-side across the compound to the garage. Gun shots erupted from everywhere, but nothing hit us. We entered the garage and went for the nearest vehicle, a white van. I heard Raven’s voice in my head saying no one goes into the van and comes out alive. It was all bullshit. I wasn’t going to get worried about superstitions.

The keys were in the ignition. I started it up as Misha rolled down her window and held the pistol outside, waiting to shoot.

“Ready?”

“Don’t stop!”

From P to D, right foot slamming the pedal down into the mat, both hands gripping the wheel, tires spinning and squeaking on the cement, and the white van shot out of the garage like a missile.

Two men came victim to the front bumper immediately. Speed bumps followed and Misha yelled in disgust, but I didn't let up on the gas. I drove us straight to the front gate. Straight into a hail of gunfire.

A line of men with AK-47s stood in our way. Bullets ripped into the van everywhere. It sounded like popcorn in the microwave. The tires were shot out and I lost control. We veered hard to the left and there was nothing I could do to put us back on course. We were speeding towards the massive iron wall and the brakes weren't working.

"Get down!" I said.

Misha hit the deck, and after a second of steering in vain, I followed. Nothing went as planned.

Misha reached for my hand. As I held it firm, her small hand lost in my own, we hit the wall. The windshield shattered down onto us. The air bag exploded from the steering wheel. The impact sent us hard into the seats. My head connected with the framework and I saw small lights flashing.

Everything went quiet.

I looked up and saw flames.

I saw Misha's door open. I saw her face, her smooth skin was shiny with sweat and glass shards, her mouth wide open and moving quickly. The last thing I made out was a man grabbing her and sliding her out of the van.

Chapter 33

Blood.

I could taste it in my mouth. I knew the taste well. I didn't care for it, either. Not just the texture, but the meaning. Blood in my mouth meant something was wrong. It meant that I wasn't in control. It always made me question if this was going to be the end.

"Misha?" I screamed out.

It was bright. And yet it wasn't.

My sight cleared and my awareness came around. I was in a dark room with a single light dangling inches above my head. I wasn't sure if I was alone, but I didn't see anyone. I was sitting in a chair. I tried to rise but found my legs were tied at the ankles and my wrists were bound behind me to the chair. It was wooden. It had nothing comfortable about it.

I needed water. Tylenol. Pizza. A shower.

I needed Misha.

"Misha!"

Nothing.

"I'm going to kill every last one of you!"

There was some quiet laughter from behind me. I knew who it was. "I'll be pissing on your grave soon, Bella."

More laughing.

More blood in my mouth. I noticed a stinging sensation from my right eye and my nose, which I could see was swollen. I was missing a tooth in the back, right side. A molar. Number 3.

There was motion to my left side, and I saw a figure approaching just beyond the light. It came to me and sat in a chair close by. It was Bella. The hard-ass crime boss herself. I remember back when I first saw her, just an old lady looking for her lost kid. A mother with a broken soul.

Looking at her now, I saw she had no soul.

"Where is she?"

Bella's smile was wide and cruel. "She's working for me now, Michael."

"Where is she?"

Nothing.

"You're a psycho. I hadn't pinned you for the counterfeits. And I never would have figured you to be a heartless killer."

"And you're a headache." She moved her chair in closer. "Your friend thinks highly of you. We talked quite a bit."

"Did she tell you I was going to break your neck?"

She smiled. "You should have been honest with me from the beginning. I could have had so much work for you. We could have been partners, Michael. I think you could have relieved me of some of my other headaches."

"Let me go. I'll rip your head off. Problems solved."

"I believe you."

"I wouldn't lie."

She sighed. "A wasted talent."

“Let’s put it to use.”

I motioned my head to the ropes. Bella wasn’t amused.

“I spent a good deal of time thinking about you, Michael. Wondering if I still had a use for you. I think I have made the right decision. My partner and husband, Wu, is less sympathetic, but he does what needs doing.”

“He can burn in hell, too.”

“He, Michael, is hell.”

Her eyes were cold and deceitful. She was frightening. I thought of all those young people she had enslaved out of fear.

“What goes around, comes around. Remember that.”

“You’re too naive, Michael.”

“You don’t scare me. I won’t be working for you or your partner. I won’t be held prisoner making fake money or driving around collecting kids for you.”

“No, you won’t. But there will be others, Michael Lynch. You rescue one and five more are waiting to be taken. They are out there. Scared and alone. Waiting for someone to love them. Waiting for Ma to welcome them home.”

I laughed. “You’re psychotic! This isn’t a home and those kids you take don’t love you. Haloes is a prison! Those kids I released will tell the authorities and they will be swarming all over this place. You’re going to fall, Ma. You’re going to rot in prison, just like what you did to those kids.”

Bella was quiet a moment. When she spoke again, she was upbeat. It made me furious.

“Haloes was created many years ago. We are a business for troubled youths to be healed and sent out into the world. We do the work of angels, Michael. Angels. That is why I named us Haloes.” She smiled broadly and looked up as if she were envisioning an actual halo above her putrid form.

Insane people never really know they are insane. They lack reasoning and common emotions like sympathy and empathy. She wasn’t able to see herself for what she was. She couldn’t decipher between right and wrong. She truly was a dangerous being.

“I’m going to end you.”

Her smile vanished. “The workers will all be found and brought back soon. They will be punished severely because of you. Especially Vega. No one escapes. All the work you did was in vain, Michael. You failed. You’re no angel after all.”

“I wear a halo, too. It’s a ring of burning fire. And it’s coming for you. I don’t fail, Bella. You won’t escape me.”

“You will see soon enough,” she said. “Wu is coming for you. He will be here when your friend comes back. He will have her, too. But for her, things will be very, very different. She will live, but she will pray for death.”

I thrashed against the chair, trying in vain to break the ropes holding me fast. I screamed out my rage until my lungs were empty as she edged closer to me, watching with some twisted delight.

“This is all your making though, Michael. All of this.”

I quit. I sat in defeat, for the moment. I saved my energy for when I would need it. I wanted my hands ready for when they were squeezing her neck flat.

“Think about it, Michael. Think back. It was you who meddled in my business in the park that first day. It was you who came back to me with news on Vega.” Her smile

flattened. Her tone became more sinister. “You chose not to go to Dallas, putting your companion in your place.”

“What?”

“Yes. The senator needs to be replaced with one of our people. It’s a job you failed to do, but your friend won’t.”

“What did you do to her?”

“You had a choice, remember? You chose to save her by not going. She chose to save you *by* going.”

Dammit Misha!

“Call it off, Bella. Call it off and I’ll do it. I’ll work for you. Whatever you want.”

“I’m afraid you are now spoken for.”

“Call it off, Bella, and I’ll let you live.”

She laughed. “Don’t worry so much for your friend. I have faith that she will complete her task. She likes you very much. And once the senator is dead, your friend will be joining you across the border with Wu.”

“I promise you that whatever happens to her will happen to you.”

“Take a good look around. Do you know where you are?”

I didn’t. Underground somewhere, probably. It didn’t matter. It would all be burning soon.

She continued. “No? No one else does either.”

“You think you have me, don’t you? Thing is, you have more to lose than I do.”

“I don’t think so, Michael.”

“You have all of this, this illusion you need to keep in place. I have nothing. Killing Misha doesn’t stop me from bringing you down. And I have a feeling when you fall, it’s going to be loud and heavy. It’s going to trickle across the border. Wu will be wondering what you told the police. Sounds like a lot of loose ends to tie up.” I smiled right back at her. “All I have is me. Me and my burning halo.”

She was quiet for a moment. She knew I was right.

“You’re out of my hair in a few hours, Michael Lynch. What happens to you then will be a nightmare, I assure you.”

She stood. She pushed a button on the light, and it turned off, leaving the room black.

“Call it off, Bella. Bring her back and I’ll do it.”

Silence.

“This is your last chance, Bella!”

I heard a click, then the sound of a door shutting closed.

“Bella!”

Chapter 34

Footsteps.

The wood planks above my head suddenly became full of foot traffic. There was some yelling going on from Ma, and more shuffling of boots across the floor. A door slammed, then everything went quiet.

I sat in the dark. I cared as much about the dark that I did for the quiet. I moved my hands as much as I could, which was very little, and tried to scrape my fingernails across any section of the rope that I could reach. But I couldn't reach enough to matter. I wasn't going to be able to untie myself.

I tried turning my feet, too, in a failing effort to wiggle free. It was pointless, I knew, but I had to try. I thought then if I could stand, I could also throw my body back into the wall until the chair itself broke. It was a tactic I had used several times before. But I stood up too fast and lost my balance. I toppled face first onto the carpet.

More footsteps above. More yelling, though this time it was all men barking directions. Do this, do that. Go there. Come here. They were following some plan Ma put in action, I assumed.

I heard some noise at the door, keys scraping against one another in a soft jingle, then a sharp clicking sound. The door opened and light flooded in. My face was looking away from the doorway, but I gather from the tone in his voice that his face was full of surprise.

"What the hell?" a man said.

The man came over and stood in front of me and helped me back upright. He was older than me, maybe in his forties. Clean cut and well dressed. There was no kindness in his eyes or gentleness in his approach.

"Come to untie me?"

He didn't crack a smile. Instead, he took his right fist and slugged me in the gut. The air fled from my lungs and my eyes watered.

"You an idiot or something?" he asked. "Why would you come here and threaten Ma? Maybe you have a death wish, eh? Or maybe you're just plain stupid?"

He waited until I was breathing okay again, then he punched me. I sat gasping for air while he walked around me. He went to work on my right side. More punches. My eye was swelling, and I could taste more blood.

"What's this?" he said.

He was staring at my Phillips wound. I guess it was bleeding and drew his curiosity. I spit blood and didn't answer him. My face hurt too much to talk.

He yanked my shirt out of the way and put his thumb on my wound. It was hurting, and he wasn't making it any better. Then he pressed down into it. I held back my scream for as long as I could, but he kept at it, pressing harder, trying to get his fat thumb into the small hole the screwdriver made. I think he enjoyed watching me squirm. And my God did I squirm.

"What are you a lackey? The bottom of the totem pole? Think you're a tough guy beating up on a helpless man?"

He smiled and shrugged. He punched my wound.

When I was able to talk again, I said, “Can’t Ma send in someone who is actually strong enough to fight me man to man?”

“You’re no threat to me.”

“Yeah? Untie me.”

“Nice try.”

He sent another punch at my Phillips wound that sent me and the chair tipping over onto the floor. I was in agony. I hurt everywhere.

“*Everyone come to the garage*”, a man’s voice said from his two-way radio.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes. Don’t go anywhere.”

After he walked out and locked the door, I screamed. I struggled to right my position, giving up after only a few pitiful attempts. I hadn’t the strength. I laid on the floor with my face and shoulder throbbing in pain and listened to footsteps above me walk to my right. A door closed.

I knew the house was empty then, or wherever I was. I figured it was Ma’s house, seeing how the basement room was carpeted. I began to wonder if I could catch the carpet on fire by rubbing the rope against it. But I dismissed the idea quickly. Even if I had started a fire and burned the ropes off, I had nowhere to go. That door would surely be locked, and I wasn’t going to voluntarily burn myself to death.

I couldn’t move enough to hope for anything, so I relaxed. I took deep breaths and tried to fall asleep. I needed to save my strength. Within moments I was drifting and no longer tasted the blood bath in my mouth.

“Get up!”

The light came on and I was opening my eyes, unsure how long I had been asleep, momentarily uncertain as to where I was, as I watched the guy come charging back to me. He left the door open and didn’t bother turning the light bulb on. He set the chair upright.

“Just not your day, is it?”

“Come back to hit me some more, tough guy?”

“I would love to. But you’re all out of time.”

He unsheathed a giant knife and stood in front of me. I sighed inwardly. I wasn’t scared. I knew the day for me was coming. My only thoughts fell on Misha, with the hope that somehow she’d make it out of this mess alive.

I shut my eyes.

I felt a tug on the ropes at my feet, then felt less tension. I opened my eyes to see the guy cutting the ropes. I was surprised. He walked behind me and removed the ropes binding my arms to the chair, but left my hands tied together at the wrists.

“Going to even the fight?” I said.

“I won’t be the one who kills you,” he said. He pulled me up from the chair, keeping my arms behind my back. “Walk.”

He pushed me towards the doorway. I went gingerly. “Cut my hands free, and I’ll let you walk away from this.”

His response was to shove me in the back. I laughed. These men weren’t going to cross Ma. Not now. Maybe not ever. It was just fine with me. I cast them all in the same lot anyway. All worthless beings. All worthy of a bullet.

I turned to him for a moment as I entered the doorway and checked for a weapon. He had no gun that I saw. I turned back around and found myself inside a fully finished basement with steps leading up just ahead. I had been in a secret room. My captor took the time to shut the secret door behind him. It looked like it was just part of the wall.

Ma and her secrets.

“Go.”

He pushed me again towards the stairs. As if I didn't know already. The basement was empty. I assumed he was taking me to a holding place before Wu arrived. But maybe Wu had. Maybe Wu wants to see me. Maybe he's come to surrender.

We reached the landing and I fumbled going up the steps. I fell hard and didn't get myself up. I made him do it.

“Get up! Get moving!”

“I can't. I can't lift my leg, you idiot.”

He wasn't happy. He cursed me out, called me all sorts of belittling names. But in the end, he came to my rescue. He had to. He had to get me up the stairs and out to wherever they needed me. It was his job and he wasn't going out to tell Ma he couldn't bring a tied-up guy by himself.

He stood behind me, pressed in close, real close, holding my waist as he brought me to my feet. He allowed me to lean back into him as I tried to raise my leg onto the next step. And I did. I went a few steps. I let him think everything was going to be just fine.

Then as I went to plant my right foot onto the wooden step, I sent it instead onto the face and planted it hard, springing off it with great momentum into him, barreling my wounded shoulder into his chest and sending us both backwards and down the steps. I fell hard, but he fell harder. We hit the bottom and he began crying in pain. Broken arm or foot, probably. Maybe his knee popped out. I wasn't sure. He was in pain though.

I sat upright and swung my hands under my butt, under my feet, and out in front of me where they found his neck and began to squeeze. He tried to fight me off, but I got behind him, then he had no chance. He had a broken ankle, I noticed. He couldn't stand up. I applied pressure until I didn't have to.

I tossed his limp form to the floor. I used his knife to saw my binds then stuffed away under my right sock, into my shoe and out of sight. I searched him for a gun, but he had none. I took the knife and made my way up the steps.

Chapter 35

Food.

I had walked up the steps and into a mud room beside the kitchen. Voices came from outside, and for now I was unnoticed. I entered the kitchen. The smell of tacos filled the house. I could see a spread on the counter beside the oven. Tortillas. Shredded cheeses. Chopped veggies. Ground burger.

I was starving. But the thought of eating, the thought of chewing anything right now made me nauseous. My mouth was in too much pain.

I filled a glass with water and rinsed the blood out of my mouth, then filled up another and downed it. I didn't see any pain pills out and I wasn't going to search for any. I didn't have time. I walked out of the room with hopes that I'd be taken to Bella without too much trouble. I wasn't prepared to fight a bunch of henchmen. I had a feeling that if I took Bella out of the picture, the rest of them would stand down. Run and hide, probably.

Hopefully.

I saw no one else on my way to the door. I stepped outside and things changed.

"What the hell?" a voice yelled ahead of me.

Four men with assault rifles were heading to the house when they saw me on the porch. They drew their weapons up quickly. I raised my hands in defeat, surrendering without confrontation. I didn't need to be hit or shot or patted down.

Just take me to Ma.

I had been so occupied by the four men ahead of me and my right eye was so swollen now that I missed the two men coming at me from the right. I turned to them just as they reached me and was able to make out the stock end of an AK-47 racing towards my head before everything went black.

Dammit.

I woke up in the garage, on a chair, staring out through the open door. The air was cool. The sky was dark with swirling clouds. Thunder rumbled close by. The rain was coming soon. It was going to be a good storm. Maniacs in trucks would be driving around watching the sky hoping to find a twister. Those types of people never made much sense to me. Might as well be skydiving into an active volcano.

I wasn't tied up this time. I was surrounded by a group of men wielding assault weapons pointed right at me. Just as good as rope, I guess. Ma was there, too. Just outside the ring of men, she paced around while talking on her cell phone.

"Anyone have a gun I can use?" I asked.

Nothing.

Ma walked over to us, entering the circle. "Wu is on his way. He wants to be out before the storm hits. He'll come back later for the girl."

Ma came over in front of me and smiled. "I guess this is goodbye, Michael Lynch. The end of the line for you, I'm afraid."

I shrugged.

“They have orders to shoot you if you move. But you look like you’re done anyway.” She motioned to my face. I guess it was looking bad. “Some people learn the hard way.”

“Some don’t learn at all.” I shot back. It hurt to do so. Moving my jaw came with a price. I’m sure tooth number 2 was loose, too.

Thunder boomed out and rattled the garage. A couple of the men looked up. I kept my gaze on Bella.

“You’re going to die today.” I said.

She laughed. “You have a lot of spunk in you. I am going to miss that. But right now, you should really consider saving what strength you have left. Things are going to get dark for you. You’ve killed many of my men. You are going to pay for that.”

“You don’t scare me.”

She paced again. “Let me tell you a story. Once upon a time there was a young man working for me who decided to tell things he shouldn’t have to his girlfriend. She wasn’t anything special. A waitress or cook someplace. A nobody. And we really could have just brought her here to work for me, but we needed to set an example. We brought the young man in, sat him down in a chair about where you are now, and had him watch the sky. He had no idea what to expect, so you can imagine his surprise when the helicopter flew over and his girlfriend was flung out. She landed right out there in the yard, right in front of him.”

Bella paused and stood before me. “Then I had them all line up, everyone, and watch as we put him in the helicopter and took him up, way up into the clouds, where he too was dropped.”

“You’re sick.”

“And all he did was tell his girlfriend that he drives a white van for me. Now think about all you have done. You’re going to wish we would throw you out of the helicopter.”

“All hell is going to be unleashed unto you. I’ll make sure of it, Bella.”

She shook her head. “Not in your lifetime, hitman.”

There was a grinding metal sound followed by a motor running behind me. Everyone turned to look, including myself. The hidden elevator was coming up.

“Get the money ready.” Bella barked and her men went into action. Four of them went behind me and picked up long boxes and carried them out to the elevator. Two men per crate. All her counterfeits, probably. Hell, maybe this was the real deal. The real money that was swapped out of the ATMs in exchange for their fakes.

Bella had a few men stay and keep their guns on me. Which was smart. I stayed put for now. There were too many guns, too many chances.

I saw a man exit the elevator and walk to us. He looked like he could be Cuban. He was short and slim, with a slick appearance. Black hair. Dark mustache. He wore white business attire. His black shoes had a shine to them. He wore gold rings and necklaces. None of Bella’s men would look at him.

I did. I didn’t look away.

He met with Bella. They spoke for a few moments, but I couldn’t make out much. After a moment, they stopped talking and they both turned to stare directly at me.

“This is him, the hitman.” Bella told him.

Wu’s eyes were shit-brown and cold. Evil. Soulless. “I expected a bigger man.”

He came right over to me. He stopped at my feet. He looked me over and wasn't impressed. "You don't look so dangerous, man. Huh? Are you? Think you can fight my tiger? Are you that tough, amigo? I think no."

"A tough man doesn't need a tiger."

I kept my gaze on his as he looked me right in the eye then spit at me. "I have plans for you, man."

Bella yelled at her men to hurry up, then joined Wu. "I will alert you when the other one is back. You will like her. She is very pretty."

Wu smiled like a wolf. "You always make me happy."

"Everything is on schedule. No worries."

Wu began speaking, but his voice was drowned out by a man approaching fast. He was yelling at Bella, while holding a computer tablet. His face was twisted in worry. His eyes were wide.

"Ma! We have a problem!" He ran into their midst and apologized to Wu for the interruption. He held out the tablet for them to see. "I thought it was delayed because of the storm. Sometimes the signal gets cut because... Well, it was delayed. But now as you can see it's back up and running."

"What is your point?" Wu demanded.

"It's the tracer on the cop." The guy said and then looked only to Ma. "She's not going to Dallas. She's on her way back here."

Misha? She's alive and headed back?

"Where's Marco? I sent him with her. Reach him on the phone!"

"I did, Ma. I called him five times and it just rings with no answer."

Wu became highly concerned. "Is this a problem?"

Bella was hesitant to tell him it was. "It doesn't mean anything. If there is a problem, I will have it handled. Go back to Mexico before the storm."

Misha.

I smiled. I couldn't help myself.

"The thing about kidnapping a cop," I began, looking only at Wu, "is that they behave like cops. The first thing a cop does when she's in trouble is to call for back up. Make a report. Give an alert. Let everyone know what you know. I'd say that this is one hell of a problem. Mucho problema."

Wu turned to Bella. He didn't have to say anything. Bella began rambling on, obviously concerned.

"I will handle this. Take the money and go."

"Get up!" Wu yelled at me. "We leave now."

I stood. Wu walked fast to the elevator, not bothering to look back at Bella, who was failing to convince him that all would be fine. Her men finished moving the crates onto the platform as I was pushed into their midst and we descended.

It was a slow ride down into the tunnel. No one said a word. I stood facing Wu, our eyes locked on one another.

We reached the bottom and stopped. Wu whistled and the men began lifting the crates. Wu motioned for me to help, before taking the lead through the tunnel. With guns pointed at me, I picked up the front of a crate as a mean-looking guy picked up the other end, and away we went. Fortunately, my crate was second to last in line. Three more were ahead of me, with Wu leading the way.

The tunnel walls were damp now. The rain and thunder were loud overhead. All I could smell were worms, but that changed when Wu lit a cigar. I liked that smell. It was sweet.

Thunder rumbled loud above again, and the string of lights faded and flickered briefly. Wu yelled back for us to continue. Full steam ahead. Left, right, left.

We were about fifty yards from the garage, when I forced myself to put aside thoughts of Misha and focus on some sort of escape plan. I was easily outnumbered. Outgunned, as I had none. My knife was buried in my shoe, but I'd be Swiss Cheese if I took it out now.

I was hopeless. I couldn't get Misha out of my head.

Thunder cracked sharply overhead somewhere close. Then everything went black.

Chapter 36

Opportunity knocked.

“He’s getting away!” I yelled. “Shoot him!”

I let go of my end of the heavy crate and dropped myself flat to the dirt floor as pandemonium set loose. The darkness was immediately disrupted with short bursts of the white and yellow flashes of gunfire. Bella’s men panicked like I figured they would and began shooting where they thought I was. It all happened faster than they could think. Bodies dropped to the dirt. Voices screaming became silent.

When the shooting gave way to silence, I looked up ahead of me to see the red glow of Wu’s cigar, almost lost in the blackness. Unwavering, it glowed. I crawled around a dead man ahead of me and fumbled across his bleeding chest, to his arms, to the pistol clutched in his right hand. I removed it. I took aim as best I could at the reddish glow and fired. *Pop!* Nothing changed. It didn’t move. Wu didn’t groan or whimper or scream in pain. Nothing happened.

I took aim again. Then the lights came on.

Dammit!

I was staring at Wu’s cigar resting atop of a light bulb. Wu was nowhere to be seen.

Dead men were scattered on both sides of me. I stood and looked past them, both ways, as I reasoned what to do. My strongest instinct was to head back to the compound and be there when Misha arrived. Let Wu go. The police can collect him later. I didn’t care if he lived or died.

But I did.

If Wu escaped, it would eat at me for the rest of my life. I had to finish this.

Dammit!

I ran then, ahead into the dim light, through the narrow tunnel, with the pistol out in front of me, hoping Wu wasn’t lying in wait. It thundered continuously and rain was trickling down in a few spots, but the lights stayed on.

I reached the exit ladder sooner than I had expected. I went up, released the door latch, and opened it out to a flood of heavy rain pellets beating down on me. I climbed out and stood facing a big black Escalade. It wasn’t running. The lights were not on. I kept my aim on it, waiting to see Wu. I forced my breathing to stay calm. I knew he was there waiting. There would be no surprise.

I circled it. Nothing.

I threw open the driver’s door, weapon ready. Empty.

I checked the back seats, then the 3rd row. Negative.

The Escalade was empty. The fob key was in it. I stood in disbelief for a moment, getting soaked in the rain.

Dammit!

I ran back to the tunnel wondering how Wu had got the best of me. Sometime during the bullet exchange game, he must have turned back. He must have raced right past me. I was mad at myself then for not listening to my instincts. Wu would be back at the compound by now, certainly by the time I get there. They’d be waiting for me for sure.

Dammit!

I turned back before entering the tunnel. I had a second thought I didn't want to dismiss. I closed the secret door then jumped inside the plush Escalade. I threw it in drive and parked over top of the door. If Wu came back this way, he wasn't getting out. Ten men couldn't lift that door now.

I ran through the wet desert ground towards Haloes' giant wall. I'd hit up the far side where the construction site was. I still knew the passcode for entrance. They wouldn't be expecting it. It was my best option.

Reaching the wall took a lot longer than I had imagined. The wind was blowing straight at me, pelting my face with the rain, making it hard to see. If Wu was out here hiding, I'd never find him.

I reached the construction site and went to the passcode, punched in the code, and stood aside as the door opened. I saw no one. But I knew how I could. I went into the security room and the monitors were all on, all working. The visual on the exterior shots were wasted with the rain, but the interior shots were clean.

The tunnel was empty of activity. The room beneath the school was empty. Rooms in some of the buildings and the living quarters were empty. I saw no one anywhere. That led me to believe that Ma was at her house.

Clicking the mouse and looking at new images, I found a small group of men carrying assault weapons to the garage. I kept clicking, trying to get a picture of the garage, and stumbled on an exterior shot of Bella's front porch. I saw Wu enter. I checked more screens and found the garage view. The men were heading to the secret elevator. Wu must have sent them to finish me off.

I was satisfied with my choice to cover the tunnel's exit door with the Escalade.

"Ma, we have a problem!" a man's voice sounded in panic. I looked over to see a two-way radio on the desk.

"Ma! There's line of vehicles heading this way." He yelled again. "Squad cars, Ma! Ma? Do we retreat?"

Nothing came back for a moment. I imagine the guy was sweating bullets.

When the radio did respond back with a message, it wasn't Ma. It was Wu. "Stay where you are! Shoot all federales!"

The radio picked up Ma close by screaming and crying. She was in obvious pain, yelling for Wu to let her go, explaining that she was sorry. Before Wu ended the transmit, he struck her. I could hear the smack loud and clear, and her painful reaction could not be mistaken.

Radio silence.

I crept outside into the rain. I moved close to the wall, making my way down to the garage. I was quiet, but with the rain beating down and the thunder swallowing the airwaves, I could have been beating a kick drum and went unnoticed.

I stayed in stealth mode around to the front of the garage, not finding any obstructions. I snuck inside. It was quiet. The gunmen were already in the tunnel below me, I figured. I had some time before they reached the end and were forced to backtrack to Haloes.

I saw a red plastic five-gallon gas jug. I took it. I had a promise to keep. I searched through the vehicles until I found a small pack of matches. I went out into the rain to the nearest building and poured gas while checking for hostages. When I thought it was clear, I lit the gas with a match. I did the same to the buildings around it, even the school. I had

found no one. Bella's men hadn't been able to bring any of the kids back that had escaped.

I tossed the empty jug of gas and went around the school to where I could approach Bella's house from the side. As I walked quickly in my crouched stance, I saw a few men lingering at the main gate. AK-47s in their hands. Just waiting for Misha and the cops to show up. I figured I had a few minutes. Just enough time to make good of a promise.

I reached Bella's house and flattened myself to the wall with her porch to my right. I didn't want to use the front door. It would be too obvious. But when I made it around to the back, all I saw were some big fat windows. One way in, one way out. Terrible choice of construction.

I went back to the porch. I went up the steps quickly and made it to the door unseen by the few guards lingering at the main gate. I turned the door handle and thrust myself inside in one fluent motion, pistol ready for work. I saw no one. I softly shut the door and made my way inside.

I saw a two-way radio on the floor next to blood droplets. I followed the trail to a tipped-over couch. Blood was smeared over the cushions. I eased around the side and found Ma on her back. Wu had beaten the life out of her. Her legs were bent and broken. Her left hand was missing in a pool of blood. I moved in closer because I saw her lips moving. As I stood over her, looking down at her misshapen face, I realized she was somehow still alive.

Her eyes opened and found mine.

I stepped back, then bent over her. She was trying to speak. With her mouth so badly damaged I wasn't sure I would be able to even make out a sound.

"Hitman," she began painfully, "kill him. I pay you..."

Her voice trailed off. She hadn't the strength to continue.

From the back room there was a loud thud and glass breaking. I could hear Wu venting his wrath. He was looking for something.

"Kill me," Bella pleaded.

More things breaking. Maybe the psycho tossed over a dresser. I stared in that direction, away from Ma, towards the only danger left.

My eyes landed on the stove and an idea came instantly.

I went to the oven and turned on all the gas pilots. The hissing sound was drowned out by the violence Wu was inflicting on Ma's things. I doubt he'd notice the smell until it was too late.

I rushed to Ma and put my pistol in her right hand. I said nothing. She said nothing. I backed away quietly. I could already smell the gas. I reached the door and gently opened it. I went through, onto the porch, and left the door slightly ajar.

You can't kill everyone.

But someone needs to.

As I leapt from the porch, eager to put as much distance between it and myself, all hell broke loose at the gate. Rapid gunfire and screaming. I looked in that direction and saw Ma's black BMW coming through the gate like a bullet through a melon. Police cruisers with lights flashing followed it. Heavy gunfire ensued.

I had to believe Misha was in the BMW. The windows were tinted, and I couldn't see anything inside, but I ran for it. I followed my instincts. Bullets ripped through the air all around me then as Bella's goons came rushing from the garage. It was a warzone.

Ma's house exploded.

The eruption shook the air and sent fire and debris flying. I hit the ground and it seemed that everything paused. I looked back to see a cloud sweeping the sky, and nothing else. I like to think that they were both alive when it exploded. Maybe it was Ma pulling the trigger on Wu that sent them all to hell. Maybe it was Wu coming back to finish her, lighting one of his sweet-smelling cigars that did them in. Either way, I was satisfied.

"Michael!"

I looked up and back to the BMW. Misha was rushing towards me. She was concerned. As the cops and the gunfire began again, *Smellsgood* dropped down over me protectively. I grabbed her tight and rolled over onto her. I kissed her. I wasn't sure of anything else happening around me.

"This whole place is on fire," someone said. "Are you hurt, Lynch?"

I looked up from Misha and found a man standing over us. It was Kip Derringer. I climbed up and helped Misha stand. I looked around and saw a couple of Ma's henchmen lying dead, and two being put into police cruisers.

"Yeah, Kip. I'm just dandy."

We each turned around to look at the destruction. Most of Haloes was on fire. The rain was lessening. Good, I thought, let it burn.

"Are there any survivors besides you?" Kip asked.

I turned to Misha. I nodded. I kissed her again. Kip could wait.

Chapter 37

Burning Haloes.

It was a beautiful sight. I enjoyed it thoroughly. I answered all the questions Kip Derringer had for me. I told him about the counterfeits under the school, the hidden rooms, and buried bodies under the cement, but said nothing about the secret elevator. Not right away. I had plans of my own.

First things first. I got Misha out of there. We took a cruiser back to her place. We said nothing all the way back, we simply held hands. It was a great moment. I was at peace. But I knew it had to end. I loved Misha. I loved everything about her. That is why I knew I had to go.

At her place, I cooked her some food while she showered and slipped into her pajamas. She was quiet. She had been through a lot. She didn't touch her food, she just sat staring out into space.

"Misha," I said. "If you want to talk about anything..."

"I'm sorry. I'm just not hungry." She rose from the table and took my hand. "I just want to enjoy what time we have left."

I shot her a curious look, but she looked away. She led me to her bed, and we lied down close to one another. She slid her arm over my body and closed her eyes. I stared at her face for a few moments before I closed mine.

When I opened my eyes, it was morning, and I was staring at Misha. She rubbed her hand across my face gently. She smiled, but I could see she was sad.

"Misha," I began, but she shook her head.

"Don't."

"I need to tell you something."

"I know. Don't."

We laid for a long time, just staring at each other, rubbing, and caressing one another, ignoring phone calls that were undoubtedly important. It must have been close to noon before she rose from the bed.

"I have to be at work for a while. I won't stay there long today. I might not go in tomorrow at all. I saw things that will probably haunt me forever. I know it's changed me. I don't know how you can carry it all with you. And I know you do."

I sat upright. She held a finger up to her lips, telling me not to speak. But I had to. There were things I needed her to understand.

"You have to leave, Michael. I know. I know that you can't stay. And I know why, after being locked away and seeing those kids and the abuse, I know. So don't try to explain it. I just want to say that I am happy to have known you. You're a bright light in a dark world."

I said nothing. She was right. I was leaving. I watched her get dressed. There was an ache inside me. But I couldn't stay. I couldn't endanger her any more than I already had. She'd be safer without me, I kept telling myself.

I rose and got dressed. I stopped her from walking out the door. "Misha."

She paused and sighed, turning to me with a sadness I hadn't seen in a long while. She shook her head and fought back the tears but cried eventually.

“Misha, when they took you, I wasn’t sure if I was ever going to see you again. They were going to kill you.”

“Michael, don’t. Don’t explain it.”

I would have. I would have also told her how much I loved her. I would have gone on to say how I have endangered her life and by leaving she would be safer. But I guess she understood.

“I knew a long time ago that I could never stop doing this. It’s who I am. I know right now as I sit here that out there somewhere is a man, a father, a son, wondering where their mother or wife or daughter was and if they would ever see her again. And I know the odds. And believe me, I know the heartache. I have to go. I have to find them. I can’t live with myself knowing that I gave up.”

“I love you, Michael.”

I swept the tears from her cheeks. I kissed her softly. I would miss her dearly. “I will never stop thinking about you, Misha LaRue.” I turned and walked for the door.

“Stay safe, dipshit.”

I smiled. I opened the door and turned to her. “Stay smelling good.”

I walked out and didn’t look back. Going forward meant putting this behind me and it needed to start right now.

I had hitched a few rides back to the 1970 triple black El Camino. I had a stop I needed to make before heading north. But before leaving, I had to go back to Haloes.

I parked on the highway and walked through the desert in the direction I figured the Escalade was. After a mile, I could make it out in the distance. I came upon it, still parked where I had left it. The door underneath still shut tight.

I got in and backed away from the tunnel’s door. I went down into the secret passage and hauled back the crates of money. I stacked them two-high in the back of the Escalade then drove to the El Camino. I made the switch and drove back into the city. I filled up the tank, bought some snacks and a cheap burner phone.

I called Kip Derringer on the way and explained to him about the hidden elevator in the garage. He was grateful. He said I could call him anytime if I had remembered anything else. I wished him good luck.

I drove back to where Ruby shot me. I found my way over to a block corner where a small group of people were lounging around. They were shabby looking. Hopeless.

I pulled up and parked as they all turned to me. I stepped out as a guy with an eye patch met me. He smiled with recognition and shook my hand.

“Did you find her?” he asked.

I nodded. “I did.”

I motioned to the crates in the back of the El Camino. I asked them to set the crates on the sidewalk. They did so without question.

“They’re yours,” I said. “I didn’t forget about you.”

I got back in the car as they began to pry open the crates. I didn’t stick around. I hammered the gas and ripped through the gears, feeling the 454 LS6 come to life. I was out of the city in minutes, speeding up the highway heading north. I’ll go as far as I can. Montana, maybe. Someplace quiet. Someplace with less people. Less problems.

At least, that was the plan.

About the Author

Sean McKenzie began writing shortly after high school, publishing his first novel, the epic fantasy *The Elf King*, following it with a short novel based on a screenplay he had written called *Project Human*.

The Hitman: Dirty Rotters is the first book of *The Hitman* series. He plans on continuing the series.

Sean currently lives in northern Michigan with his lovely wife and two children.

You can connect with the author on Facebook at:

<https://www.facebook.com/AuthorSeanMcKenzie/>