



RIDE SHARE

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THE COLLECTIVE, BOOK 1

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Ride Share

First edition

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RIDE SHARE

The job is as simple as they ever are for members of the Collective: get in, fool the marks, and commit some devastating corporate espionage. For Miroslav Antanasijević—an expert at faking identities—it’s a high-stress gig, but one he’s used to.

At least that’s how it starts.

When it all goes wrong, Mirko barely escapes with his life... and only because a ride share driver comes to his rescue.

Arlen Tate is just trying to finish his doctorate, help his sister through school, and leave his turbulent family life in the past where it belongs. His schedule is packed tight, and it does not have room for “help an organized crime syndicate rescue one of their own.”

Too bad the minute he hauls that stranger into his car and takes off, he’s on a one-way trip down a rabbit hole of crime, corruption, and a very strange gray area between moral and illegal.

And maybe he doesn’t want to go back. Especially the more time he spends with the enigmatic chameleon he rescued.

But someone is coming for the Collective. Someone ruthless and powerful.

And they will happily murder anyone who gets in their way.

Ride Share is book 1 of *The Collective*.

CW: Graphic violence, kidnapping, descriptions of off-page torture

CHAPTER 1

MIRKO

Something was off.

That was all I could think as I crossed the dimly lit hotel restaurant with Anatolie and the half-dozen people we'd come here to meet. When I caught Anatolie's eye on the way into the private room in the back, there were traces of uneasiness in his expression, but I couldn't get a bead on him. If he was just feeling the pressure of the job, or if he, too, sensed that something was wrong.

I didn't like this. Danger was a constant companion in the circles where we moved, but it had been crowding our space much more than usual recently. Everyone in the Collective was getting paranoid, and rightfully so. The problem arose when that paranoia blurred with the requisite fear that accompanied high-risk jobs. Was I edgy because of all the ways this meeting could go wrong? Or was it because of the looming threat and the lingering images of two recent murders that had been scarily similar to each other and terrifyingly close to home? Probably both, but how did I know which instincts to trust?

Like Anatolie, though, I went through the motions as if nothing were amiss. I smiled and shook hands with the others as I was introduced. When I spoke, I slid into my flawless American accent as easily as I'd slid into the jacket and tie that sold my persona, Eric Nault. Anatolie—Jeremy Carter to

everyone in the room—affected a Boston accent that inevitably encouraged questions about the Red Sox and the Bruins without raising a single suspicion about his true homeland, never mind his real name. Practiced mannerisms subtly defined our assumed identities while distancing us from who we really were. We'd both grown our hair long for this assignment, and I'd endured this annoying, scratchy beard for months as we patiently worked.

No one who saw us, we knew from experience, would recognize us. No one who heard our voices would peg me for Serbian or Anatolie for Moldovan, never mind name us. The people in this room had bought everything we'd sold them, from our phony names and accents to our expertise in their industry.

Our covers were airtight. Our own mothers hadn't been able to see through them.

But as I took my seat at the table, I couldn't shake the itch of a set of phantom crosshairs roaming my spine and the back of my head. Something was wrong.

A server brought in a large decanter of ice water and some glasses. After she'd filled the glasses and distributed them, she left the private room, and everyone settled in to peruse the menu.

Beside me, Anatolie picked up his water. The ice tinkled softly against the glass as he brought it to his lips, giving away the slightest tremor in his hand.

Not good. Not good at all.

I opened the list of specialty cocktails. Keeping my cover persona firmly in place, I casually asked, "What are you drinking tonight?"

He rolled some water around in his mouth as he craned his neck, pretending to take interest in the list I was holding. "White wine tonight, I think."

Ice slithered down my spine, and I called on all my training and practice to keep my reaction out of anyone's sight. "Sauvignon Blanc?"

Anatolie shook his head. “Chenin Blanc.”

That ice grew even colder. “Bottle?” My mouth had gone dry. “Or glass?”

He reached for his water again. “Bottle.”

Shit. Not good. Not good at all.

Anatolie took a deep swallow of water, and as he put the glass back down, he added, “For after dinner, though, I think.”

Okay, that was...slightly better. He sensed the danger, same as me, but he didn't think it was enough to warrant canceling this meeting. That didn't settle my nerves, but it did make me feel slightly less like bolting for the emergency exit that was a meter and a half to my five o'clock. It went into an alley, one that would take us to either the main road in front of the restaurant or the one on the opposite side of the block. There was another restaurant abutted to this one, and its emergency exit was twenty-two meters away from the door behind me. It could usually only be opened from the inside, but one of our colleagues had taken care of that problem in the wee hours of the morning. If this meeting went sideways, that restaurant's undetectably two-way exit was a viable means of escape.

Assuming I made it that far.

I sipped from my water glass. Rolling an ice cube around on my tongue, I looked from face to face, analyzing each of the people we'd come here to meet.

Four of them I knew. Their names weren't important, only their roles. They comprised the C-suite of an explosively successful tech startup that believed it was paying us to consult in expanding and streamlining their business. In reality, they had highly motivated competitors paying the Collective to mine them for valuable secrets. If these four men knew how much information Anatolie and I had already lifted via loose lips and piss-poor cybersecurity, they'd have cut our throats by now. Fortunately, for all their genius in developing software and branding, their hubris and

carelessness were going to be their demise.

As I continued working at the mostly melted ice cube with my tongue, I slid my gaze toward the two newcomers. Forrest Vincent. Melanie Baldwin. Their real names? According to intel, yes, but I was taking nothing for granted. Not right now. Anyone who wasn't a known quantity was an imminent threat, and it didn't matter how much the Collective had dug into their backgrounds and identities—until I'd had a chance to personally feel someone out and search for tells, I believed nothing. Maybe not even then, given my paranoia recently, not to mention my partner signaling his unease.

But we couldn't bail on this meeting or this job. No matter how much I wanted to hunker down in a safehouse until the threat was identified and neutralized, I couldn't even flinch. Couldn't make any changes to anything, not even the way I styled my hair or drove to the startup's offices. The slightest shift could be read as being aware of the threat, and thus give away my involvement with the Collective.

For all I knew, Vincent and Baldwin had guns beneath their suit jackets. But I had to act as if they didn't. Tonight *had* to go down as normal.

I was more than adept at maintaining my cover under even the most dangerous of circumstances. So was Anatolie. It was part of the job. We could do this.

The pins and needles just made it more stressful than I would've liked.

Especially the pins and needles in my mouth.

I stopped turning the ice cube on my tongue.

What the fuck?

Beside me, Anatolie cleared his throat. Again. He grabbed his water glass and brought it up to take a sip, but hesitated.

I brought mine up as well. Instead of drinking, though, I casually let what remained of the ice cube slip back into the water. Tingling warmth remained on my tongue, creeping back and sliding down my throat, the sensation reminding me of when I'd partially swallowed some topical anesthetic at the

dentist.

My heart was going too fast. Panic? Poison? Both?

As subtly as I'd spit out the ice cube, I took some deep breaths to try to calm myself. Or at least to bring my vitals back down to normal.

Anatolie shifted in his chair and his lips twitched into a faint grimace as he rubbed the front of his throat.

"Jeremy." The single word came out as clear as I'd intended, the American accent fully intact, but enunciating took more work than it should have. As if the muscles in my tongue and jaw were betraying me.

He turned, eyebrows up, and something in his expression—something in the way he swallowed hard with a faint wince—sent my pulse soaring with renewed panic.

I cleared my throat. "I think I might join you..." I had to clear it again, the spreading numbness making my breath feel thick. "Join you for that bottle of wine. *Before* dinner."

He swallowed again, then cleared his own throat. "Should we see if anyone else wants in on it?"

"No." I gave my head a shake. "This one goes on our tab."

He nodded slightly. So did I. He folded his forearms on the edge of the table behind his place setting and slipped a finger under his sleeve. My heart sped up, this time less with panic and more with preemptive adrenaline. We were about to move. He was sending a message to my phone, and once it went off, that would give us the out we needed to escape this meeting without setting off any klaxons.

Across the table, the CFO touched the middle of his chest, then coughed. Again. He reached for his water glass and took a drink but nearly choked on it.

Beside him, Baldwin gave him a concerned glance, but the way she was pursing and licking her lips made my blood turn cold. She turned to Vincent and asked him something. He met her with an alarmed look of his own,

dabbing a finger to his lips as if he expected there to be something that didn't belong.

All around the table, the signs were there. Throat clearing. Lip biting. Difficult swallowing.

Oh shit. This was bad. And either someone was an incredibly good actor, or everyone was affected by whatever was in the water. Which meant the threat likely wasn't coming from anyone at this table.

My mind zipped back to moments earlier when we'd arrived. The server. The decanter. There was no telling who'd had contact with that water before it made it to us.

We had to leave. All of us. Right now.

Anatolie's "call" came through, but I ignored it. There wasn't time for that. Instead, I sent a text to another number. Then I slid my phone into my inside pocket, and despite fight-or-flight demanding that I take action at once, I stayed still. Stayed outwardly calm.

Anatolie turned to me, and his voice was strained, his accent slipping ever so slightly. "No one important?" The upward flick of his eyebrow demanded to know what the fuck I was doing.

"It can wait."

His eyebrow climbed even higher, but whatever response he had died away as a harsh, wheezing cough took over. Not a deep, hacking cough like there was something his chest—more like he was struggling to get breath past the back of his throat.

Across the table, the COO did the same.

Fuck. We were out of time. Forget waiting for—

The fire alarms blared to life, startling everyone out of their chairs.

Okay, scratch that—my last-resort bailout had worked after all.

I went straight for the emergency exit and threw my weight against the push bar.

The bar slammed into the door. As did I.

But the door didn't move.

What the hell?

"What's going on?" The CFO was instantly beside me. "Is it locked? Holy shit, the fire door is *locked*?" He sounded on the verge of completely losing his shit...and also out of breath. Just like I was.

In fact, I was suddenly grateful for the door supporting me, because my legs weren't as sturdy as they should've been. My head was light, spinning with more than just adrenaline. Warmth spread through me that would've been pleasant had I been smoking something, but was decidedly not when I needed to think and move quickly.

"Out the front!" I let my accent slip. "Go! Now!"

If anyone noticed me blowing my own cover, they didn't react. Probably because they were drugged and freaked out, too.

Everyone hurried out of the small room, startling a server who'd been on his way in, probably to tell us to evacuate. The dining room was packed with people leaving the restaurant in an orderly fashion. Anatolie and I didn't have time for orderly; someone in this building wanted either us, the C-suite assholes, or the clients dead, and I had to assume we were the targets. And that anyone—literally *anyone*—was the perpetrator.

Anatolie grabbed my arm, and we broke away from the pack to slip out through the kitchen. It was empty, the staff having already evacuated, and we quickly made our way to the opposite side where another fire door was wide open.

We stopped there, pressing our backs to the wall on either side of the door, pistols in hand. I couldn't even remember drawing mine, it had been such an instinctive thing—we exchanged glances across the void between us.

While I covered him, he checked outside, scanning with eyes and barrel for any threats. In the kitchen, there was no one. No movement. No sounds. No—

A flicker of motion blurred across a stainless-steel cabinet front.

“Tolya!” I barked.

Anatolie turned around, back against the wall again, but neither of us was fast enough. The motion resolved itself into a pair of men, and muzzle flashes were all the warning we had before something pinged off the stainless steel beside my head. Anatolie shouted in pain and grabbed at his chest.

I fired at our assailants, but the pistol was heavier than it should’ve been. The recoil stronger. The noise too disorienting.

What the fuck?

Oh God. The drug was kicking in hard now. We had to go. Had to go right now.

Anatolie was doubled over beside me, trying to aim his weapon with one hand, but he couldn’t steady it. I grabbed the outstretched arm and hauled him out into the alley, my own gun outstretched and doing a quick sweeping arc to make sure no one was waiting for us.

The crack of gunfire told me two things: someone *was* waiting for us, and I hadn’t been fast enough. I did manage to take out the shooter, but it was too late. The shot hadn’t missed me this time, and I grunted at the hot pain biting into my side just below my ribs. Anatolie staggered, leaning hard on me. Probably hit again and bleeding out. Shit. Shit, shit, shit.

“Come on.” Why was it so hard to speak? “We have to go.”

He tried, but he stumbled. So did I. I couldn’t hold both of us up—I could barely hold myself up.

Three men burst out of the fire exit. Anatolie managed a couple of clumsy shots in their direction, sending them ducking for cover. Then, “Go!” He shoved me toward the end of the alley. “Let’s go!”

Running was a challenge. It was like trying to walk while blacking out—my vision was darkening, my head was getting lighter, and my balance was precarious as my legs started to liquify beneath me. But I forced myself to take each step. Forced myself to hold on to my gun.

The bullet in my side didn’t hurt much. Not yet. As soon as the adrenaline

and endorphins ebbed, I'd be on the ground. Which meant I had to keep moving for as long as those brain chemicals kept me upright.

I made it to the end of the alley, stumbling around a corner and slumping between a dumpster and a stoop in a low, shaking crouch. Over my pounding heart and through the cotton in my ears, I listened for footsteps and voices. None at the moment, but that wouldn't last long.

Anatolie? Oh fuck. Where was...

I chanced a look around the dumpster. He was gone.

Shit.

I needed to go back for him. But I also...

I took as deep a breath as my tight, tingling throat allowed. Then, with one arm braced against the dumpster, I felt around to my back to see how badly I was wounded.

My shirt was slightly damp, but there was far less blood than I expected. And the expected pain didn't come. A sting and a dull throb. A spreading warmth that tingled, the sensation not unlike what the substance in my water had done to my mouth.

Confusion held fast for a few seconds.

Through the haze, though, horror dawned. This wasn't a bullet. It was worse: a tranquilizer.

That meant the objective wasn't to kill me. It was to subdue me so they could take me someplace else. Probably to torture information out of me.

Fuck that.

And fuck letting them grab Anatolie for the same.

Renewed determination broke through the heavy fog that was trying to hold me down, and I forced myself up on unsteady legs. Maybe not such a good idea after all—the dizziness was getting worse, and fast. Numbness spread through me. Encased my throat. Thickened my breath. Warmed muscles. Loosened joints. My grip on my gun was as tenuous as the one I had on consciousness. I staggered forward, barely staying upright and nearly

dropping the pistol.

Had to get to Anatolie. Had to find him. Had to...

The pavement listed hard.

There were voices all around. Uncertain ones. Annoyed. When I lifted my head enough to look around—when had I lowered it?—I had to blink a few times to bring the world into semi-focus.

A crowd had gathered in front of the restaurant. People were on phones. Chatting among themselves. Looking around. Annoyed. Panicked. Frustrated. Scared.

The C-suite and clients were nowhere in sight. Maybe they were the reason for the ambulance that was moving up the avenue through the light late evening traffic, flashing lights and siren ordering drivers out of its way.

The thought of leaving Anatolie behind cut through the numbness like a shard of hot glass, but a colder and sharper shard dug in deeper: if I went after him, we were both dead. Or tortured. And I was in no condition to run, never mind fight.

Anatolie was gone. I had to accept that. I could grieve or rage later, and hopefully extract him from wherever the hell he was, but right now, I had to survive. I had to get the fuck out of here while I was still conscious...and from the way the world was going gray, I didn't have much time.

I staggered out from my hiding spot, intending to move away from the crowd.

Instantly, gunfire cracked through the night. Screams drowned out sirens, and people were suddenly moving in a million directions.

I fell in with a stampede, but only made it a few steps before I couldn't stay up anymore.

Oh shit. Oh fuck.

My knees buckled. I managed to get out of the flow of traffic so I wouldn't be trampled, and then fell hard over the hood of a parked car. My knees gave. I tried to hold on to the hood, tried to find some kind of purchase,

but my numb, useless fingers wouldn't have been able to hang on even if there'd been something to grab. My kneecap hit the pavement. Then the other. Shouldn't that have hurt? Maybe. Maybe not.

"There!" someone shouted, and somewhere deep in my fading brain, I thought... believed... *knew* they meant me.

Time was up.

Strong hands grabbed me under my armpits. I tried to make a last stand, or at least hold my ground with a solid grip on the wheel well, but my hands wouldn't cooperate. Where was my gun?

In those seconds of confusion, I was hauled off the pavement and shoved roughly into a vehicle. The slamming door echoed inside the cavern where my mind had once been.

Someone banged on the window. The engine whined. The world lurched to one side.

"Jesus fuck!" Male voice. American accent. Something southernish. Somewhere in my head, I could identify it—I knew accents like some people knew cars or wines. But I couldn't put my finger on it now, not even as he added, "What the fuck is wrong with these—oh shit!"

The sheer bone-deep panic on those last two words should've had me upright for a fight or taking cover, but I couldn't move. Not even when a window shattered, raining glass fragments all over me.

The world lurched again, and I distantly heard tires squealing. Another window—the back window, I thought—exploded inward.

The dizzying movement could've been in my mind, or it could've been the car speeding along the avenue. Toward the cops? Toward the freeway? Toward...a hospital would be good. Because I was pretty sure I needed a hospital.

I just couldn't remember why.

CHAPTER 2

ARLEN

Turns out, existentialism wasn't incredibly comforting as a philosophy when you're sitting in your crappy car downtown waiting to jump on the next GrubHub order or Lyft request to come your way. Once you'd been steeped in the view that the only meaning of life was the meaning that you yourself give it, then remembered that you were doing a delicate balancing act between budgeting time, budgeting gas, and budgeting your will to live in the face of grading undergraduate papers on basic logic, well...it wasn't hard to start down that slow slide to nihilism. And nobody wanted me to get nihilistic, least of all myself.

I had three options while I waited for a job to come through. I could suck it up and go over the same logical fallacies again and again—because fuck these “begging the question” little bitches, and I didn't care if it was an ad hominem attack, some of these kids deserved it.

I could dig into the paper I was supposed to be writing an analysis of by next week, but “Synergetics as a Phenomenon of Post-Non-Classical Science” just wasn't keeping my attention right now. Or...

My phone beeped. I opened the message from Roxy and snorted. She'd sent me a picture of a vet with a resigned expression on her face, supporting a dog that had clearly just shit all over the floor. The caption read *My family doesn't ask me for work stories anymore...I have no idea why.*

The battle of the memes was on.

I sent back an easy shot at a guy known by most people for one thing: *Zeno jokes never get old. Just closer and closer and closer to old.*

Yep. I felt better already.

It sucked not being roommates with Roxy anymore. A fellow southerner, she could commiserate with me about the bullshit we experienced on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line. She “accidentally” cooked way too much food on a regular basis too, bless her, which had helped me through some lean times in the course of getting my doctorate in philosophy. Now that she was in a clinical rotation on the other side of the city, though, it just made more sense for her to get an apartment over there for the year. That meant I could stay in student housing, or hunt around for the cheapest studio apartment in the city in an effort to save a few bucks.

Living with roaches for the pleasure of saving a hundred and fifty dollars on rent won out. Maybe it shouldn't have; I was pretty sure the bastards were planning to off me.

You sure about staving off that slide into nihilism, bucko? I thought it at myself in my dad's voice, not that my old man had the faintest fucking clue what nihilism was. *'Cause I'm startin' to think that dog won't hunt.*

Shit. I knew I was having a bad day when my mental Dad began to sound sensible.

Arlen, we ain't meant for wastin' time in school like that. Real men do real work, not sittin' around thinkin' about shit that don't matter. Someday, you're gonna learn better. Someday you're gonna come home with your tail between your legs, and when you do I'm gonna laugh myself sick.

Ha, showed what he knew. I'd starve to death in my dank little room and become nothing but roach shit before I admitted defeat and went home. I'd rather *not* starve, though, hence all the gig work I was doing on top of my studies and part-time TA position.

It's gonna be okay. You can handle it. You've been handlin' it for years,

and a little hiccup here and there ain't enough to knock you down. Stay in the fight, boy. Stay in the fight.

I sighed and leaned back against the headrest, resisting the urge to rub my aching eyes. I hardly knew what the fight was anymore.

I heard sirens in the distance dopplering toward me. They got closer and closer, and I tilted my head away a little to take the sting out as I waited for them to move on by.

They didn't move on by. They stopped right in front of the hotel I was parked next to, two cop cars and an ambulance. Holy shit, what was goin' on here? I put my phone down and craned my neck to look back at the entrance of the place. A bunch of people were streaming out the front door, some of them looking worried but most of them looking more annoyed. Huh. Maybe someone pulled the fire alarm as a prank? Or maybe—

Blam! Blam! Blam!

“Aw, fuck.” Nobody who grows up as country as I did mistakes the sound of gunfire for anything else. Only here, I was pretty sure what I was hearing wasn't my older brothers and their dumbass friends trying to set off a bunch of homemade thermite from a “safe distance” with their .22s. Shots fired in the city could only mean bad business was happening, which meant I needed to take *my* business somewhere else. I started up the engine, went to disengage the parking brake, and—

Thud.

All of a sudden there was a person draped over the hood of my car. I barely got a chance to look at him before he was slumping down, fingers scrabbling as he went. Shit, he was in a bad way. I couldn't just leave him like that. I opened my door and darted around to see what was going on.

“There!”

That sounded...targeted. I turned and looked at the hotel and saw two men in bland suits, laser focused on the guy on the ground by my car. One of them had a gun pulled. They were fighting against the current of people right

now, but they'd have this guy in seconds if I didn't do something.

And something definitely needed to be done, 'cause this poor son of a bitch was bleeding from some kind of wound on his back. And these guys didn't seem like they were associated with the ambulance or the cops, that was for sure.

God forbid I come off as anything other than law-abiding after my sheriff grandfather beat my ass blue the one time I got caught trespassing on my neighbor's land, but this guy needed help. Deontological ethics could get fucked. I grabbed him under the arms, opened the back door of my shitty little Civic, and got him inside as fast as I could. I felt downright twitchy getting into my own seat and locked the doors. How fast could those guys get here? Surely I had time to make a quick—

“Jesus fuck!”

A meaty hand banged on my door again. “Open up!” the guy holding the gun yelled. At this angle he loomed above me like some sort of murderous monolith. He was furious, that much was clear. He had white froth in the corners of his mouth, and his small, pale eyes were narrow with rage. His nostrils puffed in and out like a tiny set of lungs.

I had a tendency to talk to myself when I was under lots of stress. “What the fuck is with these—oh shit!”

The newcomer stepped back far enough to level his gun at the man in the backseat. Oh, hell no. I wasn't about to let this guy shoot the poor sucker I'd just scraped off the sidewalk.

Time to bid this ugly motherfucker farewell.

I put the car into gear and gave up on the idea of backing out of the lot, just gunned it hard enough to go over the median. I glanced back as I bumped onto the sidewalk, then onto the street. The guy's buddy had caught up to him, grabbed his arm and was shouting something at him, but Nostrils wasn't having it. He leveled his gun at the car and shot out one of my back windows. Glass sprayed all over my neck and rained down on the dash.

I slammed my foot down on the gas pedal hard enough to make my tires scream bloody murder. We lurched forward, disappearing into the relative safety of traffic, but not before another shot took out my rear window.

Holy shit, somebody was shooting at me. Or, really, at this guy. Somebody walkin' around in the open with a gun just ran right up to my car and tried to shoot the guy in my backseat.

I glanced over my shoulder at him—he was way out of it but not unconscious, one hand moving like he was trying to find something but didn't know what it is. He didn't look like a bad guy, but then, what did a bad guy even look like? My uncle Geoff was a crapstorm who beat his kids every night until they got old enough to finally hit back, but he was also the town parson and looked like he wouldn't hurt a damn fly.

Not my circus, not my monkeys.

“Hospital,” I muttered. After a few months of working as a delivery man, I had the streets of this city mapped out in my head, no phone required. “I can get to Good Sam in two minutes and—”

“No.”

Oh huh, he was talkin'. I looked back again and was a little startled to find this guy staring straight back at me. He was clearly dazed, but he did his best to hold eye contact as he said, “No cops.”

“I'm not talking about cops, I'm talking about taking you to the hospital,” I said as gently as I could, given the fact that my heart was still racing at a thousand miles a second.

“No cops,” he repeated, and...oh. Yeah. This guy, whoever he was, had been shot. Any hospital worth its salt was gonna report that to the police, and that was apparently something this guy didn't want. Kind of reinforced the whole “bad guy” narrative, but...

That man with the gun. Nostrils. He was batshit fucking crazy, shooting at my car—a random civilian's car—in the middle of a crowd just to try and get his hands on whoever my passenger was. That wasn't the behavior of a

so-called *good guy with a gun*; that was somebody who didn't care about the damage he caused getting to whatever his sick goal was. That wasn't somebody *I* wanted to see again and I'd only been in his presence for half a minute, so I couldn't blame this guy for not wanting to get tangled up in something that could alert Nostrils to his presence.

"You've been shot, right?" I said to the guy in my backseat. "You probably need a hospital. At least a doctor—do you have a doctor I can call?" That would be convenient.

He shook his head. Fuck.

Well...I guess I *did* kind of have a doctor on call. And Roxy, being the lowest vet in the pecking order, would probably be the only person at the clinic on a Friday night.

Why are you going to all this trouble for somebody you've never met before today? Just drop him at the closest ER and get the hell out of here!

That was reasonable. That was what a sane, responsible person would do.

Eh, whatever. I was a graduate student in philosophy; sane was clearly a reach, and responsible? Fuck it.

"All right, fine," I said. "We'll steer clear of the hospital, but you need to get some help, man. I've got a buddy who might be able to look at you. You okay with that?"

"Buh...buddy?"

There was something about the way he spoke that was off, like he was consciously shaping the words before he said them. It shouldn't be that much work just to speak. He was taking a turn for the worse, which meant I had to get him to Roxy *now*.

"Just relax," I told the guy. "Just relax and focus on not bleeding all over my car, 'kay? I'm going to get you some help, man."

"Hmm." His eyes closed, which—that was bad, right?

"Hey, no, wake up. Eyes open, man."

They didn't open, but he hummed again. It was probably the best I was

going to get.

Driving like a maniac was out. I already had two blown windows; if I got pulled over, things were gonna be ugly. I kept to the speed limit, taking every shortcut I knew to get me to the other side of the city and within spitting distance of Roxy's clinic before I finally gave in and called her.

The phone rang through. "Hey, pick up," I said, turning left at the corner of Pine and slowing to twenty-five as I neared the clinic. "Pick up, seriously. I need help here, Rox, you gotta pick up the phone." Nothing. "Fine, then you're gonna be real surprised in a minute." I ended the call, and a few turns later I pulled up in front of Tender Care Exotic Animal Veterinary Practice.

Tender Care was a chain vet specializing in everything *not* cats and dogs, from turtles to birds to fancy pets like sugar gliders that rich kids bought and then knew fuck-all about caring for. Roxy had commented more than once on how she wanted to take half the animals that came into the place away from their clueless owners, but I managed to talk her down from owning her own zoo.

Besides, Winona didn't like competition.

I parked the car and got out in record time, flinging open the backdoor and getting my hands on the guy again. Shit, he was out now, *really* out.

"God damn it." It wasn't like I didn't know *how* to carry him, I just didn't *want* to. Still... I crouched down and got my arms around him, then hauled him toward me until I could hoist his midsection over my shoulders. One hand through the legs to stabilize, and...there. My knees cracked a little on the way up, but it was a solid fireman's carry.

If Roxy didn't open the door, I was gonna throw this guy at it. Not really, but...how had my day gone so freaking wrong so fast?

Your day ain't shit compared to this guy's. Cry me a damn river and get on with it.

I avoided the front door of the clinic, which had a camera attached to it, and swung around to the back. I freed a hand to knock on the door as hard as

I could, then stepped back and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

“Damn it, Rox, come on!” I shouted, reaching awkwardly for my phone again.

The door finally moved, pushing out toward me just a crack. A second later it slammed the rest of the way open, leaving me in a stare down with my best friend. Roxanne Lee was five foot two, with short black hair, glasses a quarter inch thick, and the temper of a honey badger when she got backed into a corner. She had a white coat on and held a scalpel in her free hand. I tried not to take it personally.

“Holy shit.” Her dark eyes widened as she took in the tableau that was... well, me. “What did you *do*?”

“I didn’t do anything!” I exclaimed. “I—look, can we talk about it inside?”

“Are you about to make me party to a felony?” she demanded. “Is this aiding and abetting? Because if it is, you can piss right o—”

“I didn’t do this,” I told her. My tone of voice must have convinced her how desperate I was, because she lowered the hand holding the scalpel. “I’ll tell you all about it, I promise, but please. He needs help and he didn’t want to go to the cops, and after what happened I can’t blame him. Please.”

“Fine,” she muttered, holding the door a little wider. “Get in before someone sees you, weirdo. And watch out for the box with the snake in it.”

Right. Of course. The box with the snake in it. Delightful. “Thanks for the warning.” I followed her through the back of the clinic to an exam room, where she extended the table as far as it would go so I could lie this guy down on it. I let him go with a sigh of relief, then went for the edge of his shirt. “He was shot by something. I don’t know what. Should we—”

“Stop, just *stop!* You’re not even wearing gloves!” She pointed at the box on the counter as she put on a pair. “Safety first.”

“Oh, for fuck’s—” I bit back my impatience. She was doing me a hell of a favor right now, and the fact that this guy was still alive meant he hadn’t been perforated all that badly. Probably. Hopefully. I got my own pair of gloves on, then I helped roll the mystery man onto his side so she could lift his shirt and get a look at where he was bleeding from.

“Huh.” She wiped some of the blood away. “That’s not a bullet wound.”

“Good.” But then...I looked at the spot myself. There was a lot of bruising around a pretty small hole, but no sign of whatever had made it. “What was it, d’ya think?”

“If I had to guess? A tranq dart.”

Holy shit. “Are those legal to use on people?” Could police actually go out there and use fuckin’ *tranquilizers* on the general population now?

“No,” Roxy said, making me feel slightly better about the dystopian state of the world. “They’re really only meant for large animals. Think cattle, or tigers. Things go wrong if the body mass of your target is too small.” She frowned and leaned in, applying pressure to the sluggishly bleeding hole. “I have no idea what the hell was in the dart, though.”

That wasn’t good. Maybe this guy had been poisoned. “Isn’t there some, like, blood stuff you can do to figure it out?”

Roxy turned a glare on me. “No, because this is a *veterinary clinic*, not a hospital! You want analysis, get your ass to an emergency room. All I can say is that given the fact that he’s unconscious right now, he wasn’t just tranquilized. There was a sedative of some kind in there as well.” She put her free hand on his neck. “Count to fifteens seconds,” she said.

I counted it out in my head. “Time.”

“His heart rate is all right. Not dangerously low. And his color seems okay.” She let go of his neck and shrugged. “Probably the only thing to do at this point is let it wear off somewhere safe. Think about it like he’s coming down from a bad trip. He needs hydration, electrolyte replacement, and ice on the impact site because he’s going to have massive bruises and diminished

mobility for quite a while.”

I thought about that for a second. It was all stuff I could help with, which took away the faint hope I'd been harboring that there might be a path out there other than taking personal responsibility for a dude I didn't even know. “Well, shit.”

“Yeah.” Roxy looked at me somberly. “Are you sure you don't want to take this guy to a hospital? How did you even end up with him, anyway?”

“Oh, it was a total shitshow.”

I told her the story of what had gone down at the hotel, up to and including the bastards who shot out my windows. By the time I got to my arrival here, she looked about as overwhelmed as I felt.

“That's fucked up,” she said feelingly.

“*Fucked up!*” someone screamed.

“Jesus!” I spun around as fast as I could toward the corner of the room, where a large black bird was bobbing up and down on a custom perch. “Winona, shit, don't scare me,” I muttered. “I've had enough of that for one day.”

“*Shit!*” Winona, foul-mouthed crow that she was, repeated with glee. Did you know crows can mimic speech like parrots? Because I sure didn't before Winona, and she still caught me by surprise sometimes. “Shit, shit, shit!”

“I mean, she's not wrong,” Roxy said, regaining a little of her equilibrium now that her bird had distracted her. “This is a bad situation, Arlen. What do you want to do?”

What *could* I do? It was a simple if/then. Even without the bullet wound, somebody coming in to a hospital after getting shot with a tranq dart was probably reportable. And even if it *wasn't*, I was still rolling the dice with this guy's safety if I took him to a hospital in the city. That meant the only solution was hanging on to him until he woke up on his own...or...

“Roooox...”

“No,” she said immediately.

“You didn’t even know where I was going with that!”

“Oh, I so did,” she snapped. “Every time you bring me another animal, you use that exact same tone of voice.”

“And you’ve helped every single one of them. Especially Winona.” The crow’s wing had been too badly broken to let her go again, but she and Roxy had become as thick as thieves since I’d brought them together two years ago. “How is this guy any different?”

“Hello? He’s a *guy*. A human. I don’t do people.”

“Not the time to talk about your kinks, girl.”

“Ew, shut up.” She shook her head. “Sorry, but I don’t feel comfortable getting any more involved than I already am. But the good news is, apart from feeling sore as hell for a while, he’ll probably come out of this pretty well. That means he’ll be out of your hair before you know it.”

“Right.” I decided to try to believe that, because otherwise I’d lose more time I didn’t have to freaking out over a decision I’d already made. “Okay. I’ll get him to my place and keep an eye on him until he sleeps it off.” Hopefully the elevator was working, because otherwise I was going to have to carry this guy up five flights of stairs. “Can you give me five more minutes to get the glass out of my car before I put him back in there?”

“I’ll do you one better than that.” Roxy clapped me on the shoulder and gave me an encouraging squeeze. “I’ve got some black trash bags and a roll of duct tape with your name on it.”

“Trash,” Winona chortled, tilting her head almost a hundred and eighty degrees as she looked at me. “Trash!”

If I believed in omens, I might worry she was referencing my suddenly crazy life.

There’s no such thing as omens.

It was all going to be fine. One night, maybe tomorrow morning with this guy, and he’d be out of my hair with no one the wiser.

I could hang in there for one more day.

CHAPTER 3

MIRKO

Keep your mouth shut.

That was the only thought to come into focus through all the pain and confusion. I had no idea where I was. *How* I was. What in the fuck had happened. Why I wasn't dead. If maybe I was dead and this was some weird version of Hell.

I just knew I had to keep my mouth shut, even if I couldn't quite remember why.

Don't say a word. Don't ask any questions.

Keep. Your mouth. Shut.

I wanted to ask questions, but I knew deep in my bones that I shouldn't. As the fog slowly cleared, I wondered if I could've spoken anyhow—my mouth was still vaguely numb, the sensation somewhere between *went to the dentist* and *ate something I'm allergic to*. It went partway down my throat, too.

Like I'd swallowed something.

Like I'd swallowed *poison*.

My eyes flew open in the darkness.

The water. The restaurant. The meeting.

Anatolie.

Panic surged through my aching, burning chest.

He'd gone down. That much I knew.

And I didn't think anyone had been shooting at us with bullets. No, those had been tranqs. More poison like what had been in our water.

Which meant they didn't want us dead. Not yet, anyway. God, I hoped Anatolie had escaped, or else he was probably being tortured into giving up information.

Information about what, though? The company we'd been with last night? Or the Collective? I had no idea. And I couldn't think clearly enough to mentally thumb through all the possibilities, though there was something cold in the back of my mind that said I knew the answer. That this was about the Collective.

Two assassinations recently. Both eerily similar. Cops thought it was a serial killer, since the method and the body presentation were identical. They had no idea both victims were members of the Collective. No one knew that.

No one *should've* known that.

A chill crept up my back. Someone knew. And now someone had tried to grab me, and they'd probably succeeded in grabbing Anatolie. I doubted they'd known or cared about the job we'd been on. The startup, the clients, the intel we'd gathered—any of it. They were after our whole organization, not the individual op.

Because somehow they'd found out about the organization, and they'd found out Anatolie and I were connected to it.

Shit. Shit, this was bad. I needed to get back to—

No. Just like some deep-seated instinct told me not to speak, another told me not to hightail it back to the Collective. Not to reach out. Not to do anything except hold my cover persona.

Taking some deep breaths—why did that hurt?—I closed my eyes and ran through my dossier again.

Eric Nault. Thirty-two. Originally from Salem, Oregon. Went to univers—went to *college* in California. UCLA. MBA. Business consultant. Married

to Olivia. Two sons and a daughter. Henry, Alex, and Nicole. Six, four, and eighteen months. Penchant for sleeping with male clients while working away from home.

The dossier was deeply detailed, down to Eric's preferred drink (Jack Daniels neat) and the occupants of his family's tropical fish tank (including that asshole Oscar who liked to bite), but just running through the basics in my drug-slowed mind was enough to let me slide back into that persona. Until I knew where I was and who I was with, I had to be Eric Nault, because...

Because it was too dangerous for someone to figure out that I was Miroslav Antanasijević.

Because it was too dangerous to flinch and let someone think that anyone in that room last night had been anyone other than who they said they were.

Because that could lead them back to the Collective.

As my head cleared, the *don't speak* drumbeat faded. Awake and coherent now, I put the pieces together—every member of the Collective was trained not to talk if they were compromised. It was drilled into our heads until it was instinctive. Until it was so deep into our subconscious that if we were loopy or drugged or concussed, there'd still be that little voice telling us to shut the fuck up, even if we couldn't remember why. That especially applied to those of us who routinely went undercover using false accents. If I started slurring in my Serbian accent, my cover would be blown. That, or someone would assume I was having a psychotic break, toss me into a psych ward, and *then* my cover would most likely be blown.

That training hadn't been pleasant, but it had served me well in the past. It probably had last night, too, because God only knew where I'd gone and who I'd been around while I'd been out of it. For that matter, there was no telling how conscious I'd been. I couldn't remember anything after the window blowing out, showering me with glass, but that didn't mean I'd been out cold—or that I'd stayed quiet—the entire time.

Glass. The window. The back window of a car.

A blurry memory filtered through of someone hauling me off the pavement and throwing me into the backseat. Then movement. Then glass. Then...

Then I was here.

Alone. With no idea where Anatolie was, who'd been attacking us, or what had been their intent.

And...where the fuck *was* I, anyway?

Shit. That was a good question.

For a moment, I lay still, flicking my gaze around in the darkness and listening. The room was quiet, though there was noise beyond the walls. On upper and lower floors, I thought. Voices. Music. Movement.

That was encouraging. I wasn't in a basement somewhere or locked away in an abandoned building. A lot of people around meant a lot of collateral damage, which was bad, but it also meant I was close to civilization. Close to help if I needed it. Which I probably would.

The room itself was small and dark except for some pale light coming in through thin curtains. An upper floor, if I had to guess, since the light wasn't bright enough to be a streetlamp right outside. A couple of LEDs implied electronics charging or running by one wall. As I gingerly sat up, I noticed a strip of dim light beneath a door.

This wasn't a detention facility, then. Though I could've guessed that by the small but reasonably comfortable bed. As sore and battered as my body was, a hard or lumpy mattress would've been pure misery, but all things considered, this wasn't bad.

Was I...

Was I in someone's *bedroom*?

What the fuck?

Though my head was throbbing and I didn't relish the idea of treating it to any brightness, I needed to see my surroundings better. I felt around for

some kind of light, and found a switch on the bedside table. With a click, the room was bathed in a warm, inoffensive glow.

This...was definitely not a detention facility or anything like that. Not unless whoever had grabbed me was planning to torture me with flashbacks to my university days. Because there was definitely a “student” aesthetic to this place. Sticky notes attached to every imaginable surface. Stacks of binders and spiral notebooks. Thick books that probably cost as much as a kidney and could double as weapons.

Above the desk was what looked like a framed degree, but the light was too dim and my head was too fuzzy to make out the words. At least not from here. I started to get up so I could move closer, thinking I could grab a name or see if it was a phony university or something, but a spasm in my back stilled me.

I rested a hand on the nightstand and squeezed my eyes shut as I breathed through the sudden sharp pain. Other aches and pains glowed to life all over my body—kneecaps, my elbow, one hip. I tried to mentally map them out. Figure out where they’d come from, as if that might let me assess how bad I was fucked up and maybe suss out what actually happened last night.

I made it as far as assigning the pain in one kneecap to when I’d fallen off the car and hit the pavement. Something about that rang a bell and made me think I’d bruised my hipbone around the same time, but a creak outside the door snapped me out of my thoughts. Spasm be damned, I was on high alert, sitting up straight and facing the door even as I did a quick sweep for anything I could use as a weapon. Pen. Scissors. Chair. Power cord. Oversized textbook. Maybe a—

The door opened a little, and a white man I’d never seen before cautiously poked his head in.

“Oh. You’re awake.”

That voice. The southern American accent. I’d never seen his face before, but I’d absolutely heard that voice, and that vague recognition had the hair on

my neck standing on end as I scrambled to place him.

He slipped all the way into the room and closed the door behind him, though he stayed pressed against it, eyeing me warily. We both regarded each other silently for a long moment. I had no idea what he saw when he looked at me, though I had a feeling I was visibly bruised. My jaw and cheekbone throbbed. Had I hit my face on the car on my way down? Probably. In fact, I was pretty sure I remembered my teeth snapping together painfully just before my knee hit the pavement.

Sliding off the car. Being hauled into the car. Glass shattering.

The southern-accented voice.

I looked him up and down. Was this him? The man who'd picked me up off the sidewalk and thrown me into his car? Why? What was his motive?

"I'm not talking about cops." The words had sounded distant and panicked. *"I'm talking about taking you to the hospital."*

I remembered telling him not to. Shit, I'd spoken. Had I let my accent slip? God, I hoped not. But he hadn't taken me to a hospital as far as I knew. He hadn't taken me to the cops. He'd brought me here. So who the fuck was this guy?

Nothing about him told me anything. I mean, it did. He clearly had the bedraggled student thing going, from the dark circles under surprisingly pretty green eyes to the scruff along his sharp jaw. His hair was short and probably black or brown, though it was hard to tell in this light, especially since it looked damp and finger-combed. I thought he was a little taller than me—just under six foot, so he had maybe three inches on me—and though the university hoodie he wore hid a lot, he looked trim and well-built. Not huge, but big enough that he would assume he had a physical advantage over me.

That assumption would be wrong under most circumstances. Today... Well, he might be right. I doubted I could take on someone even half my size until my body healed a bit and some more of these drugs were out of my

system.

The guy shifted his weight, folding his arms in a gesture that looked more nervous and uneasy than defensive. Now that I studied him a bit more, he was definitely nervous. Hell, he was *scared*. Of course, that was exactly the kind of thing an operative could manufacture to put a mark at ease so they'd trust him and let down their defenses.

Not me. I assumed everyone was an operative of something nefarious until they proved otherwise, and even then I stayed on alert. Once bitten, and all that.

Fidgeting against the door, he quietly said, "I was just, uh...just coming to check in on you. The doc said to keep checking until you woke up, so I—"

"The doc?" I kept the Eric Nault voice in place like a ballistics shield. My head was still clearing, but I was coherent enough not to let my cover slip. "What doctor?"

"The, uh..." Was that embarrassment? Oh, shit. Yeah. The way he suddenly avoided my eyes, the way his cheeks colored—yeah, he was embarrassed. Clearing his throat, he tightened his arms over his chest. "You said not to take you to a hospital. But I, uh..." He threw up a hand and sighed as he met my gaze across the small room. "You didn't look so good, so I had to do *something*."

I furrowed my brow despite what that did to my already pounding head. "What did you do?"

"I took you to my friend." He chewed his lip, then almost timidly added: "She's a vet."

I blinked. "A vet? What, like a combat medic?"

"A combat—no, no." He laughed cautiously as he shook his head. "I mean a veterinarian."

I stared stupidly at him. "You took me...to a veterinarian."

Biting his lip again, he nodded. "Like I said, I had to do something."

Well, shit. That was... It was innovative, I had to give him that.

Before I could say anything, he swallowed nervously. “Do you have a name?”

“Do you?”

His eyebrows lifted, confusion written all over his face. “Arlen?” He said it like a question. Like he was unsure of his own answer. Not that he was unsure of his name—I doubted this kid was some kind of undercover operative—but that he didn’t know if he should tell me. “What’s yours?”

“You didn’t check my identification.”

Arlen stared at me like I must’ve stared at him when he’d told me about the vet—so confused, it was a wonder there weren’t question marks floating around his head. “I... No. The vet looked in your wallet just to make sure you didn’t have any medical issues—allergies, that kind of thing—but we didn’t mess with anything else.”

Something a trained operative would say.

Spoken with exactly the amount of innocence and earnestness a trained operative would deploy.

So why did I believe him?

He cleared his throat. “So...your name?”

“Eric.”

“Okay. Eric.” He uncrossed his arms and slid his hands into the front pocket of his hoodie. “I, uh... What happened last night is probably none of my business, so I won’t ask, but... I mean, if you need me to drop you off somewhere, or...” He chewed his lip again, studying me with renewed apprehension.

I swallowed, wincing at the lingering numbness in the back of my throat. “Where are we right now?”

“Close to the university. A few blocks from student housing.”

I nodded. “So...southern part of town.”

“Yeah. Right off Crittenden Avenue.”

I ran through a mental map of the city, trying to figure out the best way to

get from here to someplace reasonably safe where I could keep my head down and maybe reach out to trusted associates. Of course, that was a lot easier in areas where the city wasn't so committed to the veneer of safety and hadn't put up so damn many cameras on every—

My head snapped toward Arlen. “Where did you pick me up?”

He jumped, pressing back harder against the door as if I were a dangerous animal who'd gnashed its teeth at him. “In...in front of the Intercontinental.”

Ice water slithered through my veins. That was one of the “nicer” parts of town, and it was largely kept that way by the city's constant surveillance. There wasn't a crack in the sidewalk or a graffiti dick on a wall that wasn't in view of at least one high-resolution camera.

“Where's your car now?”

He blinked, shifting from appearing threatened back to abject confusion. “In the parking lot?” He gestured over his shoulder with his thumb. “I was going to call the window repair place when they open later this morning, but it's—”

“Shit,” I hissed.

“What?” His eyes went huge. “What's going on?”

I swept my tongue across my dry and vaguely tingling lips. “You're going to have cops at your door soon.”

Those green eyes went wider still. “What? But...I didn't do anything! All I did was—” His already fair skin lost a few shades. “Aw, fuck. You weren't running from the cops, were you?”

I wanted to say no, but now that I thought about it, that was a valid question. Truth was, I had no idea who I'd been running from. Only that, one way or another, the cops were probably going to come sniffing around to figure out what happened, what Arlen had seen, and what had become of the guy he'd hauled into his backseat, most likely with about forty-seven cameras filming him. For better or worse, the cops were coming. And if I left right now, I'd undoubtedly be seen by both electronic and human eyes.

I rubbed the back of my neck and exhaled. “Look, we probably don’t have a lot of time. There’s nothing I can do to convince you I’m not in any trouble, especially when I really don’t want the cops to find me, but if you can help me one more time, I’ll keep the heat off of you.”

Admittedly, I felt guilty for the sheer terror in his eyes. He didn’t have to help me last night. I still wasn’t sure why he had. I just hoped he took me at my word that I was trying to keep this out of his hair as much as possible. Because I was. Arlen was an innocent bystander who’d become a good Samaritan and saved my ass. This was the absolute least I could do.

He was definitely scared now, but he quietly asked, “What do I need to do?”

Part of me wanted to sigh, roll my eyes, and tell him to stop being so damn trusting. For all he knew, I’d robbed a goddamned bank or something.

Where is your survival instinct, Arlen? Where is your natural paranoia?

But this wasn’t a gift horse I had time to look in the mouth. I thought quickly. “Do you have a razor I can borrow?”

“Uh. Yeah?” He motioned in what must have been the direction of the bathroom. “Electric, or...?”

“Both.” I hesitated. “I’ll pay you to replace them. I’m sure you don’t want to share them.”

“I’ve got disposable blades for the regular one. The electric...” He grimaced.

“I’ll buy you another.”

“But are you sure you want to use it? I’ve been—”

“It’s fine.” Not ideal, but beggars, choosers, et cetera.

“Oh. Uh. Okay.” He moved aside, opened the door, and gestured for me to follow him.

I was a little lightheaded on top of being sore, but I managed to get to my feet. Heart racing, I ignored all my various aches and pains, and I crossed the hallway with him. He showed me into a tiny bathroom, and he took a few

things out of the cabinet beneath the sink. As he was doing that, I noticed a couple of lapel pins sitting on the counter, as if he'd been wearing them recently but hadn't put them away yet.

Born this Way. Love is Love. A rainbow flag.

I turned to Arlen and gestured at the pins. "Are you...?"

Instantly, his hackles went up, and he glared at me. "Is that a problem?"

I *almost* laughed, but his sudden anger was hiding some renewed fear, so I kept my response neutral. "No, it isn't. In fact, it's perfect."

"It..." He blinked. "It is?"

"Yes. Let me..." I gestured at my face. "Then I'll explain."

"Uh. Okay. Sure. I'll be..." He motioned down the hall. "I could use some coffee. Do you want any?"

My stomach was still woozy from whatever concoctions I'd ingested or had injected via projectile, so I shook my head. "No. Thank you."

Arlen gave a curt nod and disappeared down the hall.

I got to work. As much as I was loath to drop my cover persona, I couldn't be sure that Eric Nault was safe right now. My best bet was to get as far as possible from the man the cameras might've seen last night.

So... off came the beard. The bulk of it, anyway. I wasn't sad about that. I fucking hated having more than a short, neat beard, and that's what I went with this time. I'd have shaved it all off completely, but there was a bruise on my jaw that could draw suspicion. At least my eyes weren't black and my cheek hadn't bruised. Once I was finished, I wadded up some damp toilet paper and wiped down his sink and counter completely, making absolutely sure there was no evidence, then flushed it all.

I scrutinized myself in the mirror. I looked more like myself than I would've liked—more like Mirko than Eric, that was for sure—but no one who knew Eric would recognize me on the street. I styled my hair so it was somewhere between damp bedhead and lazily finger-combed, which pulled me further from both personas.

There were a couple of small cuts I couldn't hide on my face and neck. Probably from the glass. They weren't bad, though, and there wasn't much I could do about those except come up with a cover story.

I looked down at my hands. They were cut and scraped, too. Not in a way that implied hand-to-hand combat, fortunately; those types of bruises and abrasions were hard to explain away innocently. These were more like road rash on my palms and small cuts from the glass that I'd managed to keep from hitting my face. Good thing I'd had that much survival instinct still operating; it had kept me from losing an eye or something, but it was also a lot easier to come up with alibis for lacerations on my hands and arms than on my face. If anyone asked, Eric had recently encountered a foul-tempered cat.

Now that I was shaved and styled away from Eric or Mirko, I stripped off my battered suit, stuffed everything under his sink, and grabbed a towel off the rack, which I wrapped around my waist. I gave myself another look in the mirror, and... Fuck. That bruise on my back was ugly. Ditto the one on my ribs. And the other on my shoulder. Jesus Christ, had someone tossed me down a flight of stairs, too?

I pressed my hands on the edge of the sink and thought fast. Paintball? Mixed martial arts? Industrial mishap?

A tap on the door startled me, which made that motherfucker of a bruise on my back hurt even more just for spite. Gritting my teeth, I stepped aside and opened the door.

Arlen had his phone in his hand, and he looked frantic. "I just got a text from the front desk. The cops are on their way up right—" He froze suddenly and looked me up and down. "Whoa."

Okay, time for Plan B, which was... Come up with a plan.

As Arlen raked his gaze up and down my torso, something flickered across his expression that was neither fear nor confusion, and Plan B dropped out of the sky.

“Come on.” I herded him out of the bathroom, looked up and down his short hallway, and figured out which way led to the living room.

“Oh my God!” he sputtered behind me. “Dude! Your back is—”

“I know. I know.” I turned to face him. “And we’ve only got as much time as it takes for those cops to get to this floor.” I raised my eyebrows.

“Uh.” He gulped. “Not very long. The elevator...” He gestured at the door.

“Right. So as far as they know, I’m your Tinder date from last night.” I glanced at the door. “Take off your shirt and muss your hair a bit.”

“Take off—”

The elevator dinged outside.

“Oh, Lord,” he murmured, and peeled off his hoodie and T-shirt in one go. Had the situation not been so urgent, I’d have spent a few seconds drinking in everything he revealed, because...goddamn.

No time, though.

I looked him right in the eyes. “Do you trust that what I’m doing is to help us both get out of this?”

“Uh. Yeah?”

“Good.” Then I grabbed his face and kissed him. *Hard*. He whimpered a little, and squirmed, but then he followed along, and...

Shit. He was good at this.

Like...*really* good.

Voices outside prodded at me like a thumb jabbing into that bruise. “His room is right up here on the left.”

Arlen broke away, breathless and wide-eyed, and he stared at me. Then at the door. Then me again. “What the fuck?”

“Tinder date. My name is Enzo. We came back here an hour after... After whatever time you actually found me. And the guy you picked up? He bailed at a stop sign, and that was the last you saw of him. Got it?”

“Enzo. Stop sign. Bailed.” He looked utterly confused, but he nodded.

“Okay. Yeah. Got it.”

“Good.” I kissed him again, making sure we were both good and flustered by the time someone knocked at his door. When I drew back, I slid into my Italian accent. “You should get the door.”

He stared at me in wonder. Then he shook himself, let me go—when had we wrapped our arms around each other?—and stumbled toward the door.

I quickly sat on his couch and grabbed a pillow, which I put over my lap. The cops would be looking for either Miroslav or Eric, so I steered clear of American or Eastern European accents. Fortunately, most Americans wouldn’t know an Italian or a Serbian if he walked up and introduced himself, so I doubted the cops would give a second thought to Enzo the Towel-Clad Tinder Date.

Arlen opened the door and put on his southern charm. “Good morning, officers. Can I help you?”

“Yes, you can, son. Are you...” There was a pause. “Arlen Tate?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Okay, well, we’d like to ask you a few questions about an incident you were involved in last night. Do you mind if we come in?”

I could sense the panic coming off Arlen from here, but he wisely let the cops in. They looked at me and both did double takes.

“Oh. Hello.” I grinned. “When you said order in for breakfast, I didn’t think you meant strippers.”

The horror on his face would’ve been funny under any other circumstances. It was that look someone gave when their date said something vulgar in front of their conservative grandma. The *oh my God, would you shut the fuck up?*

For their part, the cops were bemused, and one of them squirmed uncomfortably. A homophobic cop? One in every pair, in my experience. Exactly what I was banking on.

I winked at Arlen, then said to the cops, “I’d get up and shake hands,

but...” I gestured apologetically at the pillow and offered a sheepish shrug.

The homophobe looked like he was ready to be sick. His partner just seemed to be wondering if this was really happening.

“Uh.” Arlen crept closer to the couch. “Can I...can I get either of you some coffee?”

“No, that’s fine.” The homophobe inched toward one of the mismatched armchairs. “We just need to ask you a few questions about last night.”

I sat up a little, still holding the pillow over my lap. “Last night?” I put on a panicked expression. “Is this about what we did in the elevator?” To Arlen, I said, “You *swore* no one would—”

“Jesus fuck, Enzo.” Arlen rolled his eyes. “Really?”

“What? If they saw, then—”

“Uh.” Officer Homophobe cleared his throat. “This...has nothing to do with an elevator.”

“Oh.” I sat back a little, exhaling with relief even as I pressed against that fucking bruise. “Good.”

Arlen murmured something that might’ve been, “God help me.” Then he sat down beside me on the couch. I shifted, draping my bare legs over his lap, and I completely ignored the way his breath hitched when I did that. He was just startled. Nothing more.

Slouching down a little bit, I rested with my back firmly and not at all comfortably against the armrest. The bruise on my back made it hard to breathe, but much like the bruise itself, I kept that out of anyone’s sight.

To my surprise, Arlen slid a hand over my knee and partway under the towel between my thighs. Just selling the charade. That was all.

But it was a damn good thing I still had the pillow in my lap.

CHAPTER 4

ARLEN

Holy rolling baby Jesus on a motherfucking pogo stick, fuck my life.

My mother would've slapped the shit out of me if she could've heard my thoughts right then. Thank God that wasn't a thing. Also, thank God these cops were all business, because if one of them had followed up on Enzo—Eric's?—whoever the hell he was's chatter about what we allegedly did in the goddamn elevators last night, we'd be up shit creek without a paddle since they'd see me hauling his unconscious ass over my shoulder.

It was a *nice* ass, but still...

"Mr. Tate." One of the officers raised his voice, and I only just realized he was holding out a photo toward me. For all he looked like he was lounging without a care in the world at my side, Eric felt pretty wound up.

"Beg your pardon?" I took the photo. It was Eric, only with the beard and in a suit that made his shoulders look half again as broad. You wouldn't know it was the guy sitting next to me unless, well, you *knew*. And I wasn't about to tell.

"Do you recognize that man?" the cop asked, and—ah, lovely. It was time for them to go fishin'. Good thing I'd been fished before.

"Yeah," I said, handing the picture back. "That's the guy who fell into my car outside the hotel yesterday."

"You admit you recognize him," Cop A—the blatantly homophobic one

—said with the air of a cat pouncing on an unsuspecting mouse.

“Yeah, of course. You folks wouldn’t be here askin’ me about him for no reason.” I smiled beatifically. “I’m always up for helpin’ the police.”

“Mm.” Cop B frowned and tucked the picture away inside his jacket. “Footage from the scene shows you helping him into your car, Mr. Tate. That’s a far cry from some random fall.”

“But it *was* random,” I said. “Look, some banged-up guy appears on your hood all of a sudden, it’s a good idea to see if they need help, right? That’s all I was trying to do.”

“Then why did you flee the scene with him?” Cop A pressed. “Why take off instead of handing him over to the police?”

I made my expression as confused as possible. *Think about arguments for incompatibilism...* “What police?”

“The ones who—”

Cop B held up a hand, shutting his partner down. “You didn’t see any police on the scene?”

Oh, wasn’t he just Mr. Tricky Bitch. The key to handling someone like that was to play as stupid as possible. You couldn’t pin down somebody with a memory as firm as Jell-O. “Look, man—officer—sir, I was so freaked out,” I confessed, sagging a little against the back of the couch. “Enzo” leaned into me, playing with some of my hair as he pouted sympathetically. Damn, he was good at this. Neither of the cops wanted to look me in the eye anymore. “One second I’m waiting for a rideshare, the next some guy is bleeding out all over my car, then there’s screaming and gunshots and I just—I flipped my shit, sir. I drove away as fast as I could.”

“And then what?” Cop A demanded. “Where did you take this man next?”

“*Take* him?” I forced a laugh. “Dude, I didn’t take him anywhere. I got all of, like, six or seven blocks before he came to, opened my door, and ran out of there like his ass was on fire. Didn’t even say thanks or nothing.”

“Really.” Cop A’s voice was flat with disbelief. “You’re trying to tell me

that Miroslav Antanasijević simply shrugged off a high dose of—”

“*Chad.*” Cop B sounded like he’d lost all patience. Cop A stopped talking again, clearly aware he was being chided. It would have been funny if Eric hadn’t suddenly gone stiff as a board. Just for a split second, but that was enough to tip me off to the fact that the police had come with a name that meant something to him.

Shit. Who the hell was this guy? What was I *doing*, trying to help him out instead of ’fessing up to these cops? If they found out I was lying to them...

“Mr. Tate.” Cop B tried to get the conversation back on track. “Had you ever met the man you put in your car before yesterday?”

“You mean Mirror...Mirslav...whatever the hell his name is?” I snorted, and Eric relaxed a tiny bit. “No way. I never saw that guy before he fell on my car. Never saw any of those guys before, to be honest, and I’d rather not again. It was fuckin’ creepy, pardon my French.” I shuddered and leaned a little more into Eric. “I gave up on workin’ for the rest of the day, man. I had to, um...well.” I glanced at Eric and gave a one-sided shrug. “Do something to take my mind off it all.”

“I’m honored,” Eric said in full-on Slutty Enzo mode as he trailed a finger across my bare chest. His nail scratched one of my nipples, and all of a sudden my traitor body decided that now would be a good time to think about getting hard.

“Right, well!” Cop A shot to his feet. “That’s all we need right now from you, Mr. Tate.” He turned toward the door and was out before his partner even finished standing up.

“Miroslav Antanasijević is a known criminal who’s wanted in connection with numerous felonies, including domestic terrorism and murder. And more pertinently, two murders committed at the Intercontinental Hotel last night.” Cop B spoke calmly, like he was used to the other guy acting like a royal douchebag most of the time. It was almost enough to make me feel sorry for him, except I was kind of more stuck on the whole “known criminal” and

“wanted for *domestic terrorism and murder*” thing. “You should plan to stay in town for the next few weeks. We might have more questions for you. It’s possible we’ll need to impound your car for DNA testing, so—”

“Aw, man, c’mon,” I begged, completely honest for the first time since these guys showed up. “I’m a starving grad student and I need that car to help make ends meet. Don’t take it away!”

“We’ll see” was all he said before giving us a nod and heading for the exit.

“Ciao!” Eric called mischievously right before the door finally shut. Once it did, neither of us moved for a long moment, waiting to hear footsteps moving down the hall. As soon as they were gone...

I got up off the couch so fast Eric almost fell into my spot. He winced and pressed a hand to his ribcage. I felt bad, but not so bad I was about to get down there and help him again. Not when he might be a murderer. Or a *terrorist*. I wasn’t the type to hold a person’s past against them, but killing people—plural—was a hell of a lot different than someone going to jail for smoking weed.

“So, Eric-Enzo-Mirra...whatever,” I said, hoping my voice stayed steady. “What is your actual name?” *And did you kill two people? Cause if so, you need to get the fuck up outta here.* What did I have that I could use to defend myself in grabbing range...nothing but *Nicomathean Ethics*, not even two hundred pages long.

“Are you sure you want to know?” Whoever-He-Was asked me. His seductive front was completely gone, replaced by pain and fatigue. I was caught between wanting to go grab the guy my bottle of ibuprofen and needing to keep my distance. My head got too fuzzy too fast when I was close to him.

“I feel like I should know the truth.”

“But what is truth, hmm?”

I relaxed a little as I rolled my eyes. “Who here’s the fuckin’ philosopher,

man—you or me? Don't get all equivocal on me, just tell me your name."

"My name." He was quiet for a moment, then sighed. "Fine. My name is Miroslav Antanasijević, but I go by Mirko with my friends."

Whoa, that was a whole other accent. One that sounded Eastern European, I thought, though I couldn't put my finger on it. It seemed so much more effortless than the others, too. More natural. His real accent, maybe?

"What were you doin' at that hotel, Mirko?"

He shook his head. "I can't tell you that, for your own good. I'm serious," he added, obviously seeing the mulish set to my jaw. "But I assure you, I wasn't killing anyone there. I'm not a murderer. I'm not a terrorist. Last night..." He exhaled, suddenly looking downright exhausted. "A friend and I got into a bad situation, and when we tried to get out of it..." He closed his eyes for a second. "We got separated. I don't know what happened to him. I *do* know that I wouldn't have made it out of there without your help, so... thank you."

Well. That was uncomfortably earnest. Either this guy was a great actor—which I already knew he was, thanks to Enzo—or he was being real with me.

It didn't matter. Shit, none of this mattered anymore. It was time for him to go. Except... "Can I loan you some clothes?"

He frowned. "What's wrong with the ones I was wearing before?"

"They're covered in glass and blood."

"Sounds like a fun night out."

I stared at Mirko for a second just to make sure he was being serious. "You're all kinds of fucked up, aren't you? Listen, just let me give you some better clothes to wear, okay? You can bundle up the ones you came in and use 'em for rags or something."

He sighed. "That was a nice suit."

"Not once you were done with it, it wasn't." I ran a hand through my hair, probably making myself look like the world's softest porcupine given how stiff it was. I needed to shower, to shave, to get some sleep myself instead of

wondering if the guy sleeping off the sedatives in my bed was going to be okay or not. “Look, you can use my phone or computer and call...you’ve got somebody to call, right?”

“I do,” he confirmed. “But I don’t need to use any more of your things. I’ll just go, and—”

“Dude, you’re wearing a towel.”

He glanced down at himself. “Oh, right.” He sounded a little bashful, and the way he ducked his head a bit was... Well. Shit. It was *cute*, and fuck this guy for being cute. Fuck him for being adorable and easy to talk to and genuinely the kind of guy I would have loved to pick up in a club.

Too bad I’d picked him up off the pavement instead.

“Let me get you some clothes.” I retreated to my bedroom to look in my closet while having a quiet freakout.

I was done with this. Completely done with it. Cute or not, honest or not, Mirko needed to leave. I couldn’t afford to get into trouble with the cops on top of every other trouble rolling my way right now. My sister Lacey’s tuition was due soon, and if I didn’t get it to her school on time she was gonna have to ask our father to co-sign for loans, which he would never, ever do. I wasn’t going to be the spike in the wheel of her success, no matter how shitty my own attempt to better myself was at the moment.

This was just a bump in the road. A big, person-shaped bump in the road. Mirko would go, the cops would forget all about me, and I’d get back to hustling and grading papers and living the life that, at the very least, I’d chosen for myself. It might be crap, but it was mine.

I grabbed some boxers, a pair of shorts, and a T-shirt that said *I want to can, but I Kant* because Roxy had a dumb sense of humor. Those plus my least-holey pair of socks and my old running shoes would have to do.

I carried them out and handed them as a bundle to Mirko. He accepted it with a nod, staring up at me with a bland expression but intense eyes. It made me feel like I was being X-rayed.

“I’ll just...make sure my phone is charged,” I said, then booked it back to the bedroom like the coward I absolutely was. Shit, I was afraid of and turned on by the guy in my apartment in equal measure, and I wasn’t comfortable with either scenario.

Five minutes later Mirko was dressed, holding a trash bag full of what he’d been wearing yesterday, and ending a call with someone who spoke...it wasn’t Russian, I didn’t think, but that was as far as I got with it. He handed the phone back to me with a simple, “Thank you,” drank the last of the slightly discolored water I provided, and turned to go.

It was a weird feeling watching him leave after keeping him where I could see him for the past twelve hours. I almost reached out to stop him, to ask him to at least call me and let me know he recovered all right, when he suddenly turned around.

“Arlen?” he said.

“Yeah?”

“It’s best if you forget me and everything that’s happened between us.”

Oh. “Right, yeah,” I said, that weird feeling amping up until it was a genuine pang. “Sure. Don’t worry. I won’t go calling the cops back or anything.”

“I know you won’t.” He smiled a little. “Take care of yourself.” He was gone before I could lie and say, “*That’s what I do best.*”

I listened to him walk to the stairwell, heard the door clang shut, then fell back on my couch with a groan. My couch groaned right along with me, poor old thing.

What a fuckin’ night. This had to have taken top place for the most bizarre experience of my life, and I said that as someone who’d literally learned to noodle catfish with my feet as a kid. I needed three things now: food, a shower, and bed.

I got coffee, instant ramen, and a pack of undergraduate essays instead. My eyes were burning from fatigue, but I wasn’t about to piss off the

professor by missing deadlines for the class I was TAing. I managed to scrape through the last of them after three solid hours of caffeine and determination, sent them all off to Professor Hartford, then set my computer aside and picked up my phone.

No new messages. Fine, then I could go to bed...or...

Almost like they were moving on their own, my fingers scrolled to the last call made. The number was unfamiliar, of course, but the area code was local. This was who Eri—no, Mirko. Shit, my brain was fried—had called. Somebody who knew him, somebody he trusted enough to come and pick him up from my place. Somebody who was probably also up to their neck in trouble with the police. Maybe they were also accused of murder and terrorism, or maybe Mirko was just special that way.

It took a second for me to recognize that I kind of wanted to call them.

And what, ask to speak to Mirko? Like they're gonna give a shit what you want when they don't even know who you are. You need to let this go.

I did, I knew I did, but also...Mirko was the first person outside of my faculty advisor and Roxy whom I'd had a real conversation with lately. Roxy was great but she was busy as hell, and my advisor was less of a friendly face and more of a "show me ten pages of progress by Tuesday" kind of guy.

Mirko had been, well...flirty. In his Enzo persona, at least. Even without acting like he was into me, he'd still been nice to talk to. Serious, but it was a serious situation. I wondered what he was like when he relaxed a little bit. I could call his friend and find out...

And get labeled a stalker. And maybe get myself killed.

No, thank you.

I put my phone face-down on the arm of the couch and went to the bathroom. It still smelled a little damp in here, remnants of Mirko's hasty shower. I turned the water on as hot as it would go and got in, scrubbing myself down quickly without giving a lot of thought to what he'd done in here, what he might have touched, where his hands had lingered.

I got out, dried off, and scraped my scruff down to a “five o’ clock shadow” level, then put on clean underwear, went to my bedroom, and collapsed onto my single bed.

The sheets smelled like sweat and blood.

“Fuuuuuuck,” I groaned, then got up and pulled a fresh set of sheets out of the tiny linen closet. I wasn’t proud, but I also wasn’t going to sleep in filth if I didn’t have to, even when that filth came from a guy I was very awkwardly into. Sheets changed, I turned the lights out and went from awake to unconscious in probably two seconds flat.

Waking up was like clawing myself out of concrete. Everything felt heavy, especially my head. It felt like I had a hangover, even though I hadn’t drunk anything other than water and coffee yesterday.

Yay, post-adrenaline dump crash.

The last time I felt this bad was the day after one of my older brothers flipped a car while I was in the backseat. He’d rolled that sucker three times. I’d been wearing my seat belt—Jack hadn’t. He’d ended up in a neck collar for six months.

I forced myself up and into the semblance of a real, live person. I made some toast, tried to make coffee, then remembered I’d used up all my grounds yesterday.

Fuck it. I’d get some while I was out. It was Saturday, a good day to get some work with my gig jobs. Maaaybe not shuffling people around right now, since my car was missing a few windows, but I could still deliver food.

I headed downstairs with my keys in my hand, feeling pretty good despite the lack of coffee. I’d get something tasty for myself, not too expensive—McDonald’s drive-through, maybe. Then I’d work straight through until evening, give Lacey a call, maybe—

What.

What the *fuck*?

My car was gone.

My fucking car was *gone*. Holy shit, somebody had stolen my piece of shit car. I needed to file a police report. I turned on my phone and almost started to dial 911 before I noticed I had one message waiting for me.

“Mr. Tate, this is Officer McBride—we spoke yesterday.” Oh right, Officer A, the extra-homophobic one. “I wanted to let you know that we do in fact need to process your car. You didn’t respond to our attempts to contact you before removing the vehicle, but if you come down to Precinct Nine at —”

He blathered on, but I wasn’t listening anymore.

They’d taken my car. The bastards had *taken my car*.

I wasn’t going to be making any money today.

Shit, I probably wasn’t going to be making any money for weeks, given the speed of the police when it came to returning people’s property.

Which meant I needed to find something else to do or another car to drive, fast, or I’d never meet Lacey’s tuition due date.

I was going to figure this out. I was. I *had* to. But first...

First I needed a little wallow. I sank down onto the concrete bumper in front of where my car had been parked and let my head sink into my hands.

Fuck. My. Life.

CHAPTER 5

MIRKO

“Fuck, that burns!”

“Don’t be a baby.” Danuta thumped my shoulder, which also hurt. “It isn’t that bad.”

“The hell it isn’t.” I gritted my teeth as she kept working the awful substance into my hair. It fucking *did* burn, and it made my eyes sting too. “Are you bleaching it or burning it off?”

The exasperated sigh suggested she was rolling her eyes. “Stop complaining.” She shifted a little, making the crappy motel bed we were both sitting on wobble. “You didn’t like my suggestion of shaving it, so this is the next best thing.”

I scowled, wondering if she was actually using too much bleach so she’d burn off my hair and win the argument we’d been having an hour ago.

“You are not shaving my head,” I’d declared.

“Do you want to be recognized?” she’d demanded. “This is for your protection, not your fucking Grindr profile.”

“You’re *not* shaving it.”

“Ugh. *Fine.*”

Maybe I should’ve let her. At least that wouldn’t have fucking *burned*.

“How much longer?” I asked. “You’re going to melt my skin!”

“I am not. It needs to stay in for half an hour.”

“Half an hour? For fuck’s sake, it’s—”

“You’ll be fine. Stop being a baby.”

“Jebi se,” I grumbled, which earned me another thump on my shoulder. A much harder one this time, too. Danuta didn’t know much Serbian, but she *did* know *that* phrase.

“No, fuck *you*,” she muttered back. It was an exchange we often had in much friendlier tones, but neither of us was in good humor today, or else I’d have called her a kurva and she’d have responded in Polish with something explicit involving my mother.

Not today, though.

At least she was done kneading the vile crap into my hair. Now I just had to wait what would probably be the longest half hour of my life before she rinsed it out.

I tilted my head from side to side, trying to work out some of the stiffness. Everything was sore after last night’s debacle, and now I had the added ache after she’d cut off most of my hair. It had been long in my Eric Nault persona—long enough to tie back in a ponytail or even pull up into a ridiculous man bun when I wanted him to look exceptionally douchey. As myself, I usually let the ends of my hair just touch my collar.

Now, as I shed that persona and tried to mask my real identity, my hair was shorter than it had been since I was a teenager. I hadn’t even had a chance to look at it—Danuta had gone at me with scissors and clippers, and then started in with the bleach—so God knew what I looked like now.

A knock at the door had me on my feet with a gun in my hand before the new arrival had even finished knocking. Danuta still knelt on the bed, her own pistol in hand and trained on the door. We exchanged wary glances.

Adopting a completely American accent, she called out, “We don’t need any more towels.”

Another female voice responded in a similar accent, “I have a pizza for a Mr. Jones?”

Danuta and I both exhaled and lowered our guns. As she climbed off the bed and went to the door, I sat back down on the mattress's edge, fighting the urge to scratch the irritated skin around my hairline. Didn't need to get that shit on my fingers, too, or I'd probably rub my eye with it or something.

Danuta opened the door and, as expected, in strode Mariana. Her green and white golf shirt and cap would've sold the pizza delivery persona to anyone who looked her way, and she'd completed the charade with a pair of pizza boxes. The smell of garlic and cheese mingled with the acrid scent of bleach, and my mouth watered. I couldn't even remember the last time I'd eaten, and the bullshit poison's effects had finally worn off enough that my mouth and throat weren't uncomfortably numb.

Mariana gave me a wry look as she put the pizzas down on the other bed. To Danuta, with her Colombian accent back in place, she said, "Couldn't make him shave it?"

Danuta rolled her eyes and shook her head. "Stubborn mule."

"Fuck you both," I grumbled as I opened one of the pizza boxes. Supreme with extra green peppers. Hell yes. "I don't suppose you brought plates."

Mariana huffed. "I dressed like this"—she gestured sharply at herself—"and brought you food, and all that after I stuck my neck out for you." She pointed at the pizza. "Hold it in your hands and eat it."

I didn't want to make a mess, but...fine. I wasn't going to argue with her. She had indeed stuck her neck out. As had Danuta. Not that it was just for my benefit—we were all in the middle of this shitshow whether we liked it or not—but they'd both risked being seen with me when I was apparently wanted for murder.

I shuddered as I slid a slice of pizza out of the box. "Have you heard anything?"

Mariana's expression turned grim, and the pizza in my hand suddenly wasn't as appetizing. "It's bad."

Heart in my throat, I sat back down on the bed. Despite the newly

forming ball of lead in my stomach, I took a bite of the pizza. I couldn't afford not to eat. "How bad?"

She sat on the bed beside the boxes, eyed them, but didn't take any pizza. Danuta stayed standing, leaning against the broad dresser with her arms folded loosely. Silence hung between the three of us for a long moment as Mariana seemed to weigh how to answer my question.

Finally, she met my gaze. "Well, the good news is that Anatolie is alive."

I actually swayed a little. "Fuck. That's good. But..." I lowered the pizza, because...fuck. Blood pounded in my ears as I repeated, "How bad?"

"He's in police custody." She wrung her hands in her lap. "Off the books. No records. But he's... We've confirmed he's there. I've reached out to some of our people on the inside to get more information, but everyone's staying tight-lipped." She chewed her own lip and looked at me through her long lashes. "I think the cops know the Collective has people inside."

That blood pounding in my ears was instantly ice cold. "Do they know who?"

She shook her head slowly. "I don't think they'd let them keep working and having access to the information they do. But they smell a rat. If they figure out who it is..."

I exhaled and leaned forward, putting the barely touched pizza back in the box. As I sat back again, I very nearly ran a nervous hand through my hair, but the persistent burn in my scalp reminded me why that was a bad idea. "So the cops know there's someone among them. They've got Anatolie. They know me by name and they know I was there last night—that I was at the meeting—and they're trying to pin what happened on me." I swallowed bile. "Which means they were behind it. All of it. Or...or at least they're working with whoever is behind it."

Mariana and Danuta both nodded slowly. Those pieces weren't hard for any of us to put together. It was the implications that were difficult to swallow.

“How did they find out about the Collective?” Danuta barely whispered. “And how much do they know?”

Mariana blew out a breath. “Don’t know. But I think it’s time for damage control. We need to get Anatolie out of there, and we need to find a way to get all of our operatives out without raising suspicion.”

“How do we do that?” I asked. “The whole reason I had to go to the meeting was if I changed tactic or routine, then whoever was coming after us would know we were spooked. And that I was part of the Collective.”

“Yes,” Mariana agreed, “but that was before we realized the damn *cops* are involved.” She glanced back and forth between Danuta and me. “We don’t have the luxury of keeping our heads down now. Not like we were before. Not with the resources they have, and not with as brazen as they’re getting.”

“And not with them labeling us a terrorist organization,” Danuta said.

“Exactly.” Mariana swallowed hard. “We have to assume they know who and what we are, and we have to act accordingly.” She looked pointedly at me. “Which means the op you and Tolya were in—it’s off. All of it.”

I sighed. As aggravating as it was for all that time and work to be wasted, she was right. From the moment our nebulous enemy had assassinated a sitting politician, shit had been real. The way they were coming at us now, they’d done all the recon they needed to. Had all the intel they needed. They were making moves—big ones—and we were, ironically, in the position of undercover cops whose covers had been blown. Forget trying to pretend we really were our fake identities in hopes they’d think they’d made a mistake. It was time to shoot back and get the fuck out.

But...maybe we weren’t quite there yet. Especially not with a police department that was as powerful as it was corrupt, and which had secured a horrifying amount of military equipment in recent years. Now that we knew who the enemy was, at least in part, we needed to do some more recon of our own. Gather some intel and figure out exactly what we were up against.

I told Mariana and Danuta as much.

Danuta chewed her lip, shifting her weight against the dresser. “Our operatives inside the police department won’t be able to make any moves like that without drawing attention. Not now that someone’s caught the scent.”

“And we can’t risk any of us going in there in case we’ve been made.”

Exhaling, I considered it. They were both right. Whoever was aware of the Collective and its infiltration of the police force would be on high alert for anyone within their ranks to so much as twitch and give themselves away. Any operative we sent in might already be made—if the cops knew who Anatolie and I were, then they could know *any* of us.

An idea slammed into my head, and I sat bolt upright. “What if we send in someone who has nothing to do with the Collective?”

They both stared at me like I’d lost my mind.

“What?” Danuta scoffed. “Just grab someone off the street, train them, and send them in?”

“No. Well...kind of?” I rested my hands on the edge of the mattress. “But what about the guy who scraped me up last night?”

Their incredulous looks intensified, as if they were genuinely concerned the bleach on my scalp had seeped in and melted my brain.

“How much does he know?” Mariana asked.

“Very, very little,” I said. “He knows my name, but—”

“What?” Mariana flew to her feet, throwing up her arms. “You told him your name? Are you insane?”

“Hey.” I stood, showing my palms as I stared her down. “I didn’t tell him—the fucking cops did.”

“But did you confirm it?” she challenged.

I opened my mouth to speak, but hesitated.

She pushed out a breath and pinched the bridge of her nose. A few Spanish curses rolled off her tongue before she dropped her hand and glared up at me again. “What were you thinking?”

“That I needed to earn some trust from him? He was on the cops’ radar, they thought I was a murderer, and he wanted some sort of gesture of goodwill so he—”

“A gesture of goodwill?” Danuta snapped from where she was standing. “So you told him your fucking name?” Out came the comment about doing unsavory things with my mother, delivered with *far* less good humor than usual. “For Christ’s sake, Mirko.”

“Do you trust my instincts?” I demanded of both of them.

“I used to,” Mariana grouched. “But...he’s a liability to us now. You know that, right?”

I did, but I stood by the decision I’d made, even if I couldn’t explain it in a way they understood. Or even a way I understood, because outside of my family and the Collective, I guarded my real name like a state secret. “He can be useful to us.”

They both peered at me, skepticism written across their faces.

I snatched the piece of pizza I’d started eating a moment ago, sat back on the bed, and explained what I had in mind.

Arlen wasn’t happy to hear from me. I didn’t blame him. I wasn’t happy to be bringing him further into this than he already was, even if some part of me got an inexplicable little thrill out of seeing him again.

I tamped that down as I parked in front of the place we’d agreed to meet. It was a coffee shop not far from his university. A popular one, too—students huddled around coffee cups and piles of textbooks while moms chatted with strollers beside their tables. Baristas worked fast to keep up with the demands of the long lines at both the counter and the drive-through.

There were CCTV cameras along the ceiling, and I pointedly didn’t look at any of them. Most people thought it was suspicious to duck your head and

avoid showing your face to a camera, and it absolutely was, but casting wary looks at the lenses screamed *“Hey, I’m up to no good here!”* It was a surprisingly difficult thing to learn, being aware of cameras without giving in to the urge to glance uneasily at them. I’d learned it, though, along with the countless other skills the Collective had instilled in me for existing effortlessly as people other than myself and doing things the law generally frowned upon.

Right now, that meant showing my face in a public place while the police were hunting for me as a murder suspect, keeping my head up and my expression placid. It meant being confident that even if Eric Nault or Miroslav Antanasijević appeared on a giant television screen behind me, no one would connect me to either of those men.

Standing in line for a coffee, I scanned the room. That took more work than usual because part of this persona included a pair of glasses. Not fake ones, either—the whole point was that the lenses made my eyes appear ever so slightly larger. Anyone looking at me wouldn’t think much of it—the distortion was minor—but the difference in size as well as the change in the distance between my eyes was enough to fool facial recognition software. Unfortunately, that also meant some distortion to my field of vision, which meant focusing on things—the menu above the counter, the faces in the crowd—took a little more work than usual. I was going to have the headache to end all headaches once this day was over.

“You brought it on yourself,” Danuta had remarked after I’d mentioned that to her. There’d been a barbed exchange of colorful curses in Polish, Serbian, and English after that, before Mariana had told us both to knock it off. Small wonder my head had already been throbbing before I’d put on these stupid glasses.

Now I was here, and when I reached the counter, I smiled at the barista. “I’ll have a cappuccino, please.” British accent this time. “Dine-in.”

She smiled back, rang up my order, and sent me to the end of the counter

to wait for it. The British accent was a little harder for me to maintain than some of the others, but much like the Italian persona in Arlen's apartment, it would put some distance between me and the man law enforcement was looking for. It was another degree of separation from both Miroslav and Eric; even if someone recognized my voice, the accent would throw them off the scent before they had time to think much of it.

While I waited with a few other customers, I looked around again, and this time I found the man I'd come here to see.

Arlen sat alone at a table for two, a coffee cup in front of him. He stared out the window, his expression a mix of emotions. Worry. Annoyance. Maybe some fear. He shifted in his seat, thumbing the handle on his cup. Every now and then, he'd scan the room, wariness written all over his face. Three times, his gaze swept over me and kept right on going. Not a flicker of recognition. Understandable, I supposed—he was looking for a very different man than the one standing here by the counter. Good.

After a couple of minutes, a barista called out my false name, handed me my drink, and wished me a pleasant day. I thanked her, then crossed the room to where Arlen was sitting.

Apparently sensing someone approaching, he glanced up, his expression blank except for a vague hint of curiosity. Then he seemed to realize I was heading toward him, and he straightened.

British accent still firmly in place, I said, "Arlen Tate, I assume?" And then I took the seat across from him without waiting for an invitation.

He stared at me, an explosion of questions in his eyes, most of them probably boiling down to *What fresh hell is this?*

"Don't say my name," I casually and quietly said as I brought up my cappuccino for a sip.

"I..." He shook himself and gave a tired, humorless laugh. Running a hand through his hair, he looked me up and down. I supposed I didn't blame him. In the space of thirty-six hours, he'd seen more versions of me than

some people within the Collective, and even I'd barely recognized the man gazing back at me from that motel room's mirror. Danuta hadn't left me the platinum blond I'd been after she'd rinsed out that burning bleach. After a few hours, she'd applied a reddish dye, giving me a light auburn color—not quite ginger, but definitely not just brown. She and Mariana agreed it complemented my features better, though she'd lightened up my eyebrows too.

I was cleanshaven now, which went well with the short, neat haircut Danuta had given me. At least she hadn't gone for a military look or anything; it was long enough to require some moderate styling, but drastically shorter than I'd worn as Eric and even Mirko. Mariana had also expertly applied some makeup to both lighten up my complexion slightly and to mask the bruise on my jaw. When they were finished, Danuta and Mariana had both teased me that I cleaned up well, and I actually looked fuckable now. Definitely not something I'd needed to hear prior to this meeting with Arlen, though I did *not* let myself think about why that was a problem.

I sipped my drink again. “Since you're here, am I to assume you're still onboard?”

He laughed, and it was a combination of fatigue, exasperation, and resignation. “Do I have a choice?”

“You do.”

His laughter vanished and his eyebrow flicked upward. “Do I?”

“Yes.” I rested a forearm on the table behind my coffee cup, and with my other hand, took off those damned glasses. None of the cameras were angled in a way that they'd get a good look at my face, and though I generally disliked having my back to a room, it served me well this time—no one but Arlen had a direct line of sight to my face. Which meant it was safe to take off the glasses for now. Thank God. The accent, however, I kept in place—never knew which walls had how many ears. “We'll discuss the details later. But yes, if you want to walk...” I tipped my head toward the door. “Walk.”

My heart pounded. I needed him. The Collective needed him. We needed all the advantages and ins we could get, which meant we couldn't afford to lose this opportunity for reconnaissance within the police department.

Arlen's gaze slid toward the door, his posture tense like that of a prey animal considering its escape. He was poised to run, and I didn't know if I should say any more. If that would spook him right out of here, or if I had a shot at convincing him to stay.

After a moment, he shifted his gaze to the table between us, watching his fingers drum rapidly on either side of his untouched coffee. Then he sighed heavily. "So, what exactly do I need to do?"

I had to fight hard not to release a sigh of my own. One of profound relief. Keeping my cover firmly intact, I casually sipped my drink again. "We'll discuss that in the car. Not..." I gestured around us.

He scanned the room, and I thought he paled. He must've understood the implications. Leaning back, he raked both hands through his hair. "If I didn't need my car back so fucking bad..."

It was a struggle not to grimace apologetically. He'd been reluctant to even meet with me until I'd convinced him this was probably his best chance at getting his car back sooner than later. That kind of manipulation was part of my job, and I usually did it without flinching, but admittedly, I felt guilty about it this time. Arlen was just a kid tangled up in something that was way bigger and more dangerous than he could possibly comprehend, and he was coming along with the belief that talking with the cops could help him reclaim his car.

And it was true. He just wouldn't be getting it back from police impound.

"As long as the crew is cleaning it up," I'd told Mariana earlier, "have them do some mechanical repairs, too. We owe him that much."

She'd eyed me. "What the hell? Are you soft for this guy or something?"

"No," I'd snapped. "But he did save my ass, and now he's helping all of us after I persuaded him under false pretenses. The least we can do is return

his car to him running better than we found it.”

Another incredulous stare, and then she'd rolled her eyes and said she'd see what she could do.

I nudged my cup away on the table and folded my hands. “It may still take some time to get your car back. The processes, they can be...” I waved dismissively. Panic surged into his expression, but I patted the air between us. “In the meantime, I will arrange for you to use another car.”

Panic gave way to renewed suspicion. “For me to use—what? Like a rental?”

I shrugged. “Something like that.”

He peered at me. Then he started to speak, but looked around and seemed to think better of it.

I pulled up the sleeve of my suit jacket and checked my too-flashy watch. “Perhaps we should take this conversation to my office. So we can discuss more confidential details.”

Arlen swallowed, and I thought he blanched. But then he nodded. I put on my glasses again, paused to let my eyes adjust, and we both got up to bus our drinks. As we walked, he shot me a look.

“What?” I asked.

“I...” He shook himself. “Nothing. I just... I thought you were shorter than...”

“I am.” I flashed a quick smile as I set my cup in the designated area on the counter. Nodding downward, I said, “Lifts.”

He glanced at my shoes. “Oh. Huh.”

I didn't elaborate. He didn't need to know that the cops had a dossier of me that included a height of five-seven. Much like the glasses would fool facial recognition software and the haircut altered how people perceived the shape of my face, the extra inch and a half would nudge me above the height people were, consciously or not, expecting.

Neither of us spoke again until we were in the car, which was a sleek

Mercedes from the Collective's fleet of ghost vehicles. The license plate was legitimate, as was the VIN. If we were pulled over, the registration and insurance would match the name on my driver's license, which was also on the business cards tucked into my pocket. The sunglasses blacked out my eyes enough that I could drive without the distortion from my clear lenses and without any traffic cameras recognizing my face.

As I pulled away from the coffee shop, Arlen said, "This is a nice car."

Dropping the British accent, I said, "It is." I chuckled and glanced at him. "You did say to bring a car."

He'd been rather grumpy about that, and I didn't blame him.

"Yeah, I did," he said. "Just didn't realize it would be..." He trailed off, then fixed a pointed look on me. "This isn't stolen, is it?"

"What?" I flicked my gaze toward him again. "What makes you think I'd need to steal a car?"

"Besides the fact that you're wanted for murder, and I've seen you switching personas like a one-man theatre performance?" He shrugged. "I don't know, man. Just kind of feels like it might be your M.O."

I laughed at that. He may have been naïve about this world he'd stumbled into, but he wasn't stupid. "Stealing cars *is* one of my many skills."

"It's... Aw, fuck. Are you serious? This car is hot?"

I shrugged.

"Dude. *Dude.*" He groaned.

"What? You said bring a car." I motioned at our surroundings. "I brought a car!"

"I kind of thought it went without saying that the car wouldn't be *stolen!*"

"Why not?" The aggravated sound he made was funny, but I figured I shouldn't push his goodwill much further. "I'm joking—it's not stolen."

He watched me dubiously.

"I'm serious. It's not stolen." Technically true. Obtained through somewhat shady means and absolutely registered under false everything, but

not actually stolen.

Beside me, Arlen pushed out a breath. “You’re a dick.”

I snorted. I deserved that.

“Okay, so.” He cleared his throat. “Now that it’s just us... What am I actually doing?”

I sobered, gripping the wheel firmly as I navigated at a normal, legal speed through town. “All right. The police are still looking for me. The real me. And you were the last person to see me, so they’re still going to be interested in you. I suspect that when you walk into the police station to ask about your car, they’re going to casually ask if they can have some of your time to ask more questions.”

“Ugh. What the fuck do they want from me?”

“Me,” I said simply.

“Jesus fuck,” he whispered. “So, what? I’m just supposed to go in there and let them grill me?”

“Yes,” I said. “And I—or rather one Daniel Taylor—will be accompanying you as your attorney.”

“My *attorney*?” he squeaked. “Why do I need a lawyer? I’m not a suspect!” He paused. “Am I?”

“No, but you’ve been a university student long enough to have a healthy skepticism of the system. After the way they spoke to you in your apartment yesterday *and* after they impounded your car, you’re not talking to any cops without a lawyer present.”

My answer was dead silence. When I looked over, he was watching me in disbelief.

“What?” I asked.

“You’re... Have you been stalking me or something?”

“Huh? No! But it’s a logical profile for someone studying what you are.”

“How the hell do you know what I’m studying?”

I huffed a laugh. “Well, I assume you don’t read those textbooks for fun.”

More silence, followed by a quiet, “Oh.”

“I’m correct, then?”

He sounded almost sheepish as he admitted, “Yeah.”

“Mmhmm. That’s what I thought. So you tell them you didn’t appreciate how they spoke to you yesterday, and you want a lawyer present for everything going forward.”

Silence hung between us for a moment as he, I assumed, digested that. “What am I supposed to say?”

“Stick to your story.” It was my turn for some nervous shifting. This was where I had to trust him more than perhaps was wise. More than Mariana or Danuta thought I should, though they hadn’t been able to come up with an alternative that would get us the information we needed. I took a deep breath. “They’ve been fed a bullshit tip that Miroslav Antanasijević is still in the city and likely to attack again. So they’re going to press anyone who’s had any contact with him. They’ll probably try to scare you by telling you things he’s done or things he’s involved with.”

Arlen shifted in the seat. “Speaking in the third person isn’t going to fool me into thinking we’re not talking about you.”

“Yeah. I know. But for this, you have to convince them that you don’t believe Miroslav is sitting there in the room with you.”

He exhaled hard and whispered, “Fuck.”

“All I need you to do is keep denying you’ve had any contact beyond that short drive,” I said gently. “Just let them keep talking and showing cards.”

Arlen was quiet for a moment. “So we’re there to get them to tip their hands.”

“Yes. I need to know what they suspect about...” I hesitated. “What they suspect about me.”

“Jesus Christ,” he breathed.

“I know it’s a lot. And thank you. For doing this. You... Didn’t have to.”

“I do if I want my damn car back,” he muttered.

I suppressed a wince. “Well, no. You don’t.” I sensed him watching me, so I elaborated: “The desk sergeant will probably let whatever detectives are assigned to the case know you’re there, and they’ll just *happen* to show up and ask if they can talk to you. It’ll be an interview, not an interrogation. You’re not a suspect. And yes, you can say no.”

“But you don’t want me to.” It wasn’t a question.

My voice came out more ragged than even I expected: “I’m *begging* you not to.”

More silence. For several blocks, there was only the purring of the Mercedes’ engine and the thumping of my heart.

As we cruised down a street lined with shops and restaurants not unlike the one where we’d met, Arlen said, “Pull over for a second.”

I glanced at him. “Why?”

“Just do it,” he said through his teeth.

I had no idea what this was about, but I did as he asked, sliding into the first parking space I found. With the brake on and the engine idling, I turned to him.

Arlen looked right back at me, eyes fixed intently on mine as if he were searching them for something. “I know nothing about you. And I don’t expect you to tell me what’s going on. It’s...” He made a frustrated gesture. “I kind of don’t want to know.”

“You don’t,” I admitted. He didn’t need to get involved in my world. He deserved the plausible deniability so he could walk away if this all went to hell. Especially since I was pretty sure it would.

“Before we go another step,” he said evenly, “I want one thing from you. And it’s non-negotiable.”

I swallowed. “All right.”

“First, take off your sunglasses.”

I did.

Eyes locked on mine, Arlen studied me for a long moment. Then he

pointed at his own face. “Look me in the eye, Mirko, and tell me you’re not a murderer.”

Lying was part of my entire job. I lied about who I was. What I knew. Where I’d been. What I’d done. Everything I did involved lies and manipulation, including—especially—lying to and manipulating people whose trust I’d earned, sometimes over weeks or even months.

But in this moment, I hesitated to lie to this man I’d known for less than two days. Maybe because he’d saved my ass multiple times in that two-day period. Maybe because he was far more innocent than most people whose paths I crossed in this world of mine. Maybe... I didn’t know.

I just knew that while I would easily be able to tell anyone else on the planet that, no, I was not a murderer, the words stuck in my throat this time.

“Okay. Fuck this.” Arlen put up his hands. Then he unbuckled his seat belt and reached for the door. “I’m out.”

I grabbed his arm. “Wait.”

He turned suspicious eyes on me, still gripping the door handle.

“Please.” I loosened my hold. “I... Yes, I have killed people. In the past. It’s...” I shook my head. “There is so much I can’t explain now. And maybe it wouldn’t justify it to you. But what they’re accusing me of now?” I let go of his arm and sat back. “I didn’t kill those people. *I’m* the target.” I paused. “One of them.”

Confusion mingled with suspicion. He relaxed his grasp, but he didn’t let go of it. “What does any of that mean?”

“It means I’m involved in things that I can’t begin to explain,” I said quietly. “But I’m not a murderer. Not...not like that.”

He furrowed his brow. “What are you? A spy or something?”

“I... Kind of? I guess?”

His eyes widened. “I was joking.”

“Yeah, well.” I half-shrugged. “I’m not.”

He lost what little color he had left.

Moving slowly so as not to spook him, I withdrew my hand and looked right in his eyes. “I need your help, Arlen. I know I’m asking a great deal without offering much in return. But I wouldn’t ask if I had other options.”

His jaw worked, and he looked vaguely like he might throw up. After a long, long time, he let his hand slide off the door handle, and then he brought it up to pinch the bridge of his nose. A few more seconds ticked by before he dropped his hand and turned exhausted, resigned eyes on me. “Okay. I’m still in.”

“Thank you,” I whispered. “And I promise—I’ll play the lawyer card and end the interview if they push you too hard or get out of line.”

That got a humorless bark of laughter out of Arlen. “Oh, I can hold my own with cops. Don’t you worry.”

After yesterday, I believed him. I was curious where that experience came from.

Maybe when this was over, he’d stick around long enough to tell me.

CHAPTER 6

ARLEN

I couldn't believe I was about to walk into a police department of my own volition.

I couldn't believe I was doing it not in an effort to get my car back—although there was that—but to try and pump the *cops* for information on a guy they suspected of killing two people at the hotel on Friday.

I *really* couldn't fucking believe that I was going to do all this with that exact guy beside me posing as my lawyer. Whoever Mirko really was, and I wasn't naïve enough to think I knew anything about him that was completely true, he had balls of steel.

Lucky for him, I really did have experience handling the cops. And city cops might come off as tough, but they were nothing compared to a small-town officer who could operate with the next best thing to impunity. The cops in my home town were their own gang, dispensing justice if and when they felt like it and never against people who paid them to look away.

I still had a scar from where my grandfather's belt buckle had caught on the skin of my hip after he'd busted me and some friends sneaking around in the woods behind a friend of his's house. "Private property" my ass, the guy was growing weed and we all knew it, but since the man in question was a big-shot lawyer who donated heavily to police fundraisers, the response was...outsized.

“All right.” I ran my hand over my head one last time. “Let’s get this over with.”

“Remember not to rush,” Mirko said in what seemed to be his regular voice; the accent he slipped into whenever he wasn’t playing Eric or Daniel or Enzo. It sounded really bizarre coming from a guy I hadn’t even recognized until he told me who he was, not gonna lie. “Let them guide you where we want them. Give them just enough to want to hold on to you for a few more questions. I’ll be there to keep things from getting out of hand.”

“Sure. And what happens when they call your bluff and ask for documentation?”

“Daniel Taylor has a driver’s license, a license to practice law, and a website that’s been up for over five years. It has a lot of positive testimonials.” Mirko winked behind his ridiculous glasses. Without them on, he was hot—with them on he looked a little like a myopic owl. “This is a solid cover; don’t worry about them poking holes in it.”

“Why the hell would an Englishman come to practice law in the States anyway?” I pushed. “Why not stay over there and be a…” What was the word? “Barrister.”

“Dual citizenship, luv. Mum was an American,” Mirko replied without missing a beat. “Now, are you done stalling or can we get moving on this?”

Now who was being pushy? He was right, though. “Yeah, fine.” I got out of the car and grabbed the sport coat I’d brought along. I didn’t need it—the day was warm—but it was the only thing in my closet other than the one suit I owned that could even vaguely qualify as fancy, and since I was walking into the lion’s den it made sense to look like I was putting some effort into it.

I pulled the slim-fit navy sport coat on and, after some debate, buttoned the single button in the center of it. It went surprisingly well with my jeans. I patted my pocket to make sure I had my wallet, tamped my hair down once last time, and glanced over the car at Mirko. “How do I look?”

His eyes looked unusually wide behind those glasses. “Good,” he said a

second later, British accent firmly intact. “Quite...right. Shall we?”

“We shall.” I headed for the precinct’s front door, feeling like every eye was burning a hole in me. It was an overreaction, I knew that—nobody gave a shit about me yet, I was just another guy. But I couldn’t help but feel...observed. Intensely observed.

Probably that was just Mirko.

I headed for the front desk and gave the sergeant on duty there a nod. “Howdy, sir. I’m lookin’ to pick up my car from impound.”

“Hmm?” The guy looked disinterested. “Oh, okay. See, that’s not really something we handle here. There’s a number you have to call, and you’ve got to provide proof of payment for whatever parking violation or traffic law you might have—”

“All due respect, sir,” I said, knowing I was treading the line a little fine interrupting him but willing to do it anyway, “those aren’t the instructions I was given. Officer McBride specifically said that I needed to present myself in person, since my vehicle might have been involved in a crime.”

The sergeant, to his credit, didn’t immediately fall for it. “*Might* have been? Your car either is involved in a crime or it isn’t.”

“Not according to Officer McBride. Here.” I handed over the cop’s card.

“Uh-huh.” The sergeant sighed. “Eh, it’s a slow day. Might as well handle things here right now. Let’s see your driver’s license, son.”

“Yessir.” I handed it over and waited while he punched some numbers into the computer.

“Let’s see here...let me see...” He hit a few more keys, then his eyes went wide for a second. “Ah. Hm. Well, um.” He looked up at me again. “Things are, ah, a little bit complicated when it comes to your car.”

I frowned. “Complicated how?”

“Well, they’re...tell you what, let me get Officer McBride on the line and we’ll see if he can tell you more. Hang in there, son.” The sergeant picked up his desk phone and pointedly swiveled his chair so I couldn’t see his face.

I was almost as annoyed as I would have been if this hadn't been the plan all along. "All I want is my damn car back," I muttered.

"And we'll get it for you," Mirko—no, Daniel, Daniel Taylor, my lawyer—said with perfect aplomb. "These things can get a bit convoluted from time to time, but rest assured, you'll be taken care of."

"Let's hope so, given your hourly rate."

Daniel smiled at me. "And worth every penny, Mr. Tate."

It took a surprisingly long time for the cops to get back to me, long enough that Daniel decided to make himself right at home and bring us two cups of coffee. "It's piss compared to a proper cuppa," he said as he handed one to me, "but stiff upper lip and all that."

"That can't be how actual British people speak," I muttered to him as I took the cup. One sip confirmed it—it was only a few steps above piss.

"Don't know that for sure, though, do you?" He smiled faintly as he took his own sip, then grimaced.

"Mr. Tate?"

I turned and saw a man I'd never seen before coming toward me. He had the bearing of a cop but wasn't in the uniform, so probably a detective. He towered over both Mirko and me—this guy had to be six and a half feet tall, and his jaw was square enough a carpenter might find a use for it. "I'm Detective Owen Rayner. I'm the lead on the case that you're involved in."

"Oh. I thought I'd be talking with Officer McBride and...whatever his partner's name is again."

"They're both out on patrol, but I'm happy to take over things from here."

"O...kay. Does that mean you can release my car to me?"

"I'm afraid that's not possible yet."

Of fucking course it wasn't. "Why not?"

"I'm more than happy to explain that in a private room, if you'd care to come with me." He glanced at Mirko. "And...who are you, sir?"

"I'm Daniel Taylor, Mr. Tate's lawyer," Daniel said in his plummy voice,

holding out a hand. “Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Detective.”

Rayner looked nonplussed. “I don’t think this is a conversation that requires a lawyer.”

“Think of me as a concerned friend, then,” Mirko said. “Mr. Tate has been very distressed over the loss of his vehicle, and he wanted to make sure he’d be well taken care of here.” He inclined his head. “Unless of course it’s standard operating procedure in your department to insist upon talking to people *without* an attorney present.”

Had to credit him, Detective Rayner rolled with the punches way better than either of the uniforms had. “Of course, that’s understandable. Please, gentlemen, this way.” We paused to throw away our not-coffee before he led us from the lobby down a hall that was such an aggressive shade of beige I felt personally attacked, then into a room that did it one better and got in your face with “institutional gray, asylum version.” Whoever was in charge of the decorating around here was way behind the times when it came to color and mood manipulation.

There were only two chairs beside the table there. “Let me get another one. Wait just a moment,” Detective Rayner said, then disappeared again.

I turned to Mirko, whose eyes widened. What, was he expecting me to start talking *candidly*? In an interrogation room? Sure, they were supposed to notify me that they were recording, but I never bet against the house when it came to things like that.

“Lotta trouble to go to for a car, huh.”

“I’m afraid it’s all part of the system,” Mirko replied in a faintly apologetic voice, pushing his glasses a bit farther up his nose. “There are lots of little bumps that bureaucracy can throw at you along the way, but never fear. We’ll get it back.”

He sounded very sure. I suppose he needed to, given this persona. “Yeah, sure.” I rubbed the toe of my sneaker against a scuff mark on the floor. What had made that? Someone scraping a chair back, a table getting shifted

around?

A person being thrown against the door?

Get your head under control.

I straightened up and stopped pussyfooting around, and not a second too soon—Rayner walked in a second later, pushing a noisy rolling chair with one hand and holding a folder in another.

“It’s a little wobbly,” he said to Mirko, “but it’s the best I could do on short notice.”

“Completely understandable,” Mirko said, taking a seat. The chair immediately listed to the side, leaving him canted at an uncomfortable angle. “Not a problem.” He forcibly righted it with a push from his foot. “Let’s not wait any longer, shall we?”

“Of course.” Rayner and I both sat, and I watched him work through how to present himself to me. He was probably fifteen years older than me, and I had a bit of a baby face, so it was no surprise when he ended up going with “avuncular good cop.”

“Mr. Tate, as long as I’ve got you face to face, I’d like to talk to you a little more about the events you experienced Friday night.”

I sighed. “You want to talk about the hotel stuff again?”

“I do. You see, Mr. Tate—do you mind if I call you Arlen?”

Yes, I do. “Naw, go ahead.”

“Thank you. Now, Arlen, I understand from the report you gave our officers that your contact with the man who entered your car was very brief.”

I nodded. “It was. Miro...what’s his name again?”

“Miroslav Antanasijević.” He said it quickly, like he’d just been waiting for the chance to whip it out.

“Yeah, him. He really wasn’t in there with me all that long.”

“I understand. It’s just...Arlen, there’s a lot you don’t know about that man. I’m sure when you helped him into your car, you thought he was just another scared person running away from the chaos of the hotel.” The buddy-

buddy compassion in Rayner's voice was as thick as pond scum. "What you couldn't realize at that moment was that Mr. Antanasijević was the *cause* of that chaos."

"I mean...the other cops kinda talked about that a little..."

"They were limited in what they could share with you, Arlen. However, when I tell you that Miroslav Antanasijević is a bad guy, I mean it." I so wanted to glance at Mirko and see if any of that registered, but I didn't take my eyes off Detective Rayner. I didn't want him to start looking too closely at Mirko, given his apparent hard-on for bringing him to justice. "He's a member of a criminal organization called the Collective, a group of international terrorists responsible for everything from cyberattacks that can take entire cities hostage to drug trafficking with the Mexican cartels."

"Dude." I raised an eyebrow. "Seriously? This sounds like something out of a Patterson book."

"I'm afraid it's not fiction, Arlen." Rayner took his tone down a notch, heading into "I'm Mr. Serious" territory. "While the Collective he's a part of is accused of all manner of crimes, Mr. Antanasijević *specifically* has been accused of orchestrating assassinations in three different countries, and we don't want him to make the US the fourth. He's wanted by Interpol and the ICC. The last time he was in the country, the FBI was on the case."

I swallowed hard. It was one thing to let myself be reassured by Mirko when it was just him and me; it was quite another to listen to a laundry list of his crimes and have to wonder what was real and what was fake.

"I want to show you something." Rayner opened up the folder he'd brought in with him, withdrew a photograph, and turned it to face me. I winced—it was a body in a morgue, strangulation marks livid around the guy's neck.

"This is Vilis Bels, a Latvian politician and dissident. He was murdered by Antanasijević on behalf of some powerful enemies."

He pulled out another photograph. This one was a Black woman, older,

with tightly curled gray hair and a severe expression beneath the blood on her face. “Edwige Adamo, the wife of an African warlord that Antanasijević was working with. A deal between them went bad, and instead of taking it out on each other, Antanasijević went straight for the man’s innocent family.”

A third photo joined the others. I couldn’t tell much about the body—it was swollen, like it had been pulled out of a river. “Ronaldo Martinez, an environmental activist working against the Bolsonaro government in Brazil. He was murdered by Antanasijević and his Collective for his work undermining the destruction of the Amazon.”

Rayner sat back but left the photos on the table for me to keep staring at. I didn’t want to, but I also didn’t want to look away. I was afraid of what I might do if I turned toward Mirko right now.

Could he be an assassin? Mirko had already admitted that he’d killed people before, although he claimed it wasn’t murder—did that make it self-defense? How could it really be self-defense if he was part of some criminal underworld, though? Seemed like it had to be more dog-eat-dog down in that case.

Still, I had to be logical about this. I wasn’t about to be guilty of falling for a simple fallacy like “appeal to authority.” It was easy to show me a bunch of pictures and feed me a line, but in reality...

I looked up at the detective. “If Antanasijević is such a bad guy, why isn’t the FBI workin’ on this case now?”

Rayner looked a little taken aback. “Well...what makes you think they aren’t?”

Oh, answering a question with a question again. It had almost worked for his cop buddy, but I wasn’t buying it from this guy. “I mean, I’m no officer of the law, but I’ve watched enough cop shows to know that y’all and the FBI aren’t best friends. Why would a major federal investigative agency let a detective and a pair of beat cops run around after this crazy bad dude when they could be on the verge of collaring a guy who’d make their career?” I

frowned. “That’s what it’s called, right? Collaring? *Brooklyn 99* didn’t lie to me, did it?”

Rayner sighed. “Law enforcement jurisdiction is a complicated issue, and no trite TV show is ever going to be able to accurately reflect the issues that can come up. Regardless, I want to assure you that I’m well-qualified to be going after Mr. Antanasijević.”

“But—”

“I think we’re getting a bit distracted,” Mirko finally spoke up. Yeah, I fuckin’ *bet* he’d like to change the subject now. “Let’s pivot back to the issue of Mr. Tate’s car, shall we?”

“Not until I’m satisfied that Arlen here has told us everything he knows about the known criminal he was harboring in his vehicle.”

“For six blocks!” I almost shouted. “Six fuckin’ blocks! And he hardly said anything at all!”

“A-*ha!*” Rayner pointed a finger at me. “But he did say *something* to you.”

“Look, I don’t know. It was crazy and I could barely hear over the sound of breaking glass, and—”

“Don’t go around in circles with me, Mr. Tate.” The buddy-buddy tone was gone, and what was left behind was a man prepared to shout me into submission. “This man is dangerous in the extreme, and you’re putting yourself *and* others at extreme risk by not telling me everything you know. It’s time for you to talk to me, for your own benefit.”

There was a long moment of silence, then I looked at Mirko. He must have gotten the point, because he said, “Detective, perhaps you’d be kind enough to get a bottle of water for my client. I can discuss some...legalities with him that he might want to take into consideration.”

Rayner smiled. “You do that, Mr. Taylor. I’ll be right back, gentlemen.” He got up and lumbered out of the room, and Mirko immediately scooted his ratchety chair over to me.

He leaned in close enough that his lips touched my ear before whispering, “What the fuck are you doing?”

I lifted my hand so that my mouth was covered in case any cameras were on us. “Tell me what I should say to get his attention.”

“What are you talking about?”

“He’s pushin’ way too hard to let me off easy, so I need to feed him something. Tell me what to give him to keep his interest.”

Mirko paused. “This could make things harder for you.”

“*You’ve* already done that, asshole.” Had he ever. We were gonna be havin’ *words* about the bullshit he’d fed me earlier, because...seriously, assassinations? Drug trafficking? What the fuck was his Collective really about? And I wasn’t going to let him placate me with diversions and promises this time, either—I wanted hard fucking proof that he wasn’t as bad as Rayner was saying, or I’d come running right back to the cops.

If I lived that long.

Should have thought of that sooner, boy. You’re up shit creek now.

I heard heavy footsteps in the hall. “C’mon, talk fast or—”

“Anatolie.” The name emerged with a hint of reverence and a heavy dose of regret. “Tell him you heard the name Anatolie. Tell him you might be able to remember more, tell him—”

“Here you go,” Rayner said jovially as he walked back in, handing me a bottle of water. It was already open. Shit, who *did* that? I took it gingerly and didn’t drink a drop. “You two have a good talk while I was gone?”

“My lawyer says it’ll be easier for me to get my car back if I’m straight with you,” I told Rayner as he sat down.

“Mr. Taylor is a wise man.”

“Just experienced with this sort of thing, I’m afraid,” Mirko said with admirable restraint. “Go on, Arlen. Tell him what you know.”

I sighed. “It’s really not that special or anything. He was mutterin’ in the backseat, thrashing around like he was lookin’ for someone. Sounded really

upset about it. When he finally sat up and decided to play tag with traffic, I finally figured out what he was saying. ‘Anatolie.’” I let that hang in the air for a moment, then shrugged. “Or Anatole, or something. Might even have been ‘asshole’ and he might have been talkin’ about me for all I know.”

“And that’s it?” Rayner asked, eyeing me keenly.

“I think so.”

“You *think* so?”

“Dude, the guy had an accent a mile thick, all right? From one man with an accent to another—” because I knew just how noticeable my Tennessee hill country drawl was up here “—I get the struggle of trying to understand what the hell somebody’s sayin’ at times.”

“Hmm.” Rayner glanced at Mirko, then at me. “Let’s get a signed statement to this effect from you, Arlen. Then I’ll take a closer look at what’s happening to your car, and we’ll see if we can’t pry any more useful information out of that handy memory of yours.”

This was the start of a two-hour “sit and spin” marathon, the kind of shit where I got asked the same thing over and over, occasionally by more than one person, all while my “lawyer” sat on the sidelines and told me to cooperate, because it would all be over soon. By the time we finally got out of there, my stomach was growling so loud I thought I was going to get a noise complaint. That was nothing compared to the pain in my head and the ache in my heart, though.

What the hell was I doing? I knew nothing about Mirko—he’d authentically looked and sounded like four entirely different people since I’d first met him. He used accents the way I might use a napkin. He was perfectly capable of lying with a straight face, and he might be a *paid fucking assassin* for totalitarian governments and gunrunning warlords.

And I *still* didn’t have any answers about my damned car.

We made it to the Mercedes before he started to talk. “Arlen, listen to me —”

“No.” I shook my head and turned to look at him. “You listen to me. Now’s the time to come clean, you hear me? I want the truth from you, and proof to back it up. I need to know that you’re what you say you are, not what *he* says you are.”

“He was lying,” Mirko said earnestly, maybe even a little defiantly. He rubbed his temple, then swore and jerked the glasses off his face. “I already told you, that’s not the sort of thing I—*we*—do.”

I could run back into the station, but what would that get me? What could I say at this point that wouldn’t make me an accessory? *Hey, you know my lawyer? He’s the guy you want!* My hands trembled with the need to do something, to jerk open the door or start hitting, but I restrained myself.

I should have said no from the start. I didn’t, so now I had to hope that Mirko could prove himself to me. “Make me believe you.” I sure as hell hoped he could.

Otherwise I was probably on track to ending up dead.

CHAPTER 7

MIRKO

The last couple of days had consisted of me being between various rocks and hard places. I was trained for that. Dealt with it all the time. Could adapt to the most volatile situations with practiced ease.

Standing beside the car in the crosshairs of Arlen's demanding glare, I froze.

"*Make me believe you.*" His words echoed in my ears and in the silence all around us. For all I was trained to sell every imaginable persona to the most paranoid and dangerous people, I was at a loss for how to persuade this naïve academic that he should trust me over the cops.

It didn't help that I was already off-balance. When the cop had laid out those photos of the three dead bodies, I'd had to call on every millisecond of training I'd ever received to keep any reactions out of sight. I couldn't let anyone—not the cop, not Arlen, not the cameras—notice the way my chest had hurt at the sight of the woman the cop had called Edwige Adamo. I'd had to bite my tongue as subtly as possible, fighting the urge to correct him and insist her name was really Gabriella Davis, and she'd been a fucking genius and a total sweetheart, and like hell had she been the wife of an African warlord.

And my goddamned *life* had depended on not showing the way my heart had dropped and my throat had tightened when he'd put down that photo of

Ronaldo. Even now, I had to fight back the threat of tears.

Ronnie. God, no. Not Ronnie.

But there was nothing I could do to save Ronnie or Gabriella, and if I was going to make it through this alive and untortured, I needed Arlen's trust. At the very least, I needed him to not go sprinting back into the police station and tell them who I was.

I cleared my throat. "All right. There is a lot I can't tell you. It's—" I put up a hand to halt his angry protest. "Please. Listen to me."

He closed his mouth, but his jaw worked as he continued to glare at me.

"I want to show you something," I said as calmly as I could. "It won't explain everything, but...I think it'll help."

His tight lips twitched with annoyance. "Fine. Show me."

I nodded toward the Mercedes. "I have to take you someplace first." I showed my palms. "Give me one hour. If you're not convinced after that, I'll take you back to your apartment and you'll never see me again."

He looked dubious. Which...he had every right to be. "How do I know you won't just leave me dead in a ditch somewhere?"

"Because *you* didn't leave *me* dead in a ditch. Or hand me over to the cops." I shrugged. "But if you'd really rather not get into the car with me, then give me thirty minutes to get there, and I'll FaceTime you to show you what you need to see."

That seemed to catch him off guard. "Really?"

I nodded, mentally scrambling for how I'd explain it to the rest of the Collective. Secure locations were secure locations for a reason, and FaceTiming with someone outside the Collective was not exactly high on the list of ways to keep a location secure. Neither was bringing someone to such a place, but it was easier to fool a person than a device into believing they were somewhere else, but—

"Fine." Arlen exhaled. "Let's... Okay. Fine. Let's go." He gestured at the car, and he sounded downright exhausted as he said, "I assume you're

driving?”

“Yes.” I took out the keys. “Shall we?”

Clearly not happy about it, he went around to the passenger side. I drove us out of the police station parking lot, then turned into a box store lot a few blocks later.

Arlen peered out the window. “You’re showing me something...here?”

“No.” I slid my phone from my inside pocket. “I need to make a call.”

He sighed and shrugged, but said nothing.

As I pulled up a contact, I asked, “What language did you take at your university?”

“Huh?”

I turned to him. “Language? I assume you had to take one for your degrees?”

“I, uh...” He shook himself. “Yeah. Four years each of German and Spanish. Why?”

“Just curious.” Then, in Serbian, I said, “Those pants make your dick look *huge*, by the way. Don’t know if I can take it all in my mouth, but I will certainly try.”

He tilted his head, staring at me like I’d turned into a Martian. Good. If he’d understood what I’d said, he might’ve tried to bluff and pretend he hadn’t, but the blush would’ve given him away.

I chuckled, shook my head as if to say *Never mind*, then sent the call.

On the other end, Ilya Drugov answered. “Da?”

He was Russian, but he was fluent in several Eastern European languages, and his Serbian was *much* better than my Russian. So, I spoke in my native language. “I need to bring someone to the motor pool.”

He was quiet for a second, then responded, “Someone? Someone, who?”

“Someone who’s getting information for me about who’s hunting down the Collective.”

More silence. “Shit. They know something?”

“He knows very little about us, but he’s already saved my ass once. And he had every opportunity to hand me over on a silver platter but didn’t.” I flicked my eyes toward Arlen, who was staring out the passenger-side window. “We can trust him.”

“Says the man whose entire job is to convince people who shouldn’t trust him to—”

“And you wouldn’t buy any bullshit I tried to sell you.” I rolled my eyes. “We both know it.”

He grunted unhappily. “Yes. We do. So how do I know you’re just not getting better at bullshitting and—”

“Ilya. Please,” I pressed. “This man—he’s not part of this. Not the people trying to fuck us over. But he’s helping, and if I want more of his help, then I *need* to give him something to earn his trust.”

“Mmhm.” Ilya didn’t sound convinced in the least. “So you’re bringing him here? To a sensitive location?”

“Only to the motor pool. I’ll make sure he doesn’t know where he actually is.”

Silence again. My heart pounded. Ilya knew that I took secrecy and operational security even more seriously than most, which said a lot, given the Collective’s paranoia. He was also well aware of the shitstorm currently raining down on all of us, and the heightened security at all of our facilities. I just had to hope he was willing to give me the benefit of the doubt, even if it meant possibly compromising one of our locations.

After a long moment, he sighed heavily. “All right. But be careful, Mirko. And if anyone even suspects he’s going to leak information—”

“I know,” I said solemnly as guilt knotted behind my ribs. “He won’t.”

“You’d better hope not.”

The call ended. I lowered the phone and exhaled.

Arlen was watching me now, curiosity in his eyes. No, he hadn’t been lying about being unable to understand Serbian, because much like a blush

would've given him away earlier, he wouldn't be able to hide the fear or wariness now. Or, well, the increased fear or wariness.

I rested my hand on the steering wheel and twisted a little to face him. "I've got clearance to take you. But there is risk. To you."

There was that fear, widening his eyes and creasing his forehead. "What kind of risk?"

I sighed. "The kind that comes with a very paranoid and easily spooked group that's worried about being a target."

Pushing his hand through his hair, he groaned, "Oh my God."

"It's not too late to get out of this car. If you don't want to go, then we won't, but—"

"I don't want to," he snapped. "I don't want to be any part of this. But if I get out of this car, then you're going to assume I'm running right back to the cops. I'm a liability to you if I don't believe you are who you say you are. Or..." He threw up his hand. "That you're *not* who *they* say you are." The sudden anger evaporated, replaced by tired resignation. "I appreciate you saying I have a choice, but we both know I don't. Not if you're going to believe I won't go to the cops."

Guilt prodded at me from the inside. He was right. I'd put him into an impossible situation. I could ask all day long for his consent to come along on this ride, but the truth was, we were past the point of no return. If he got out of the car right now, I couldn't take for granted that he'd walk away and try to forget everything that happened.

We were both in this whether we wanted to be or not, and there was nothing I could do about that now.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

"I'm sure." He gestured toward the road. "Let's just go and get this over with."

I didn't speak—I just put the car in Drive and left the parking lot. We rode in silence for about twenty minutes, following the interstate to a two-

lane highway that led into the more rural areas. About seven miles past the city limits, I pulled over on the side of the road. Before I'd even put the car in Park, Arlen stiffened beside me.

“You're...not really going to leave me in the ditch, are you?”

I almost laughed at the absurdity of the question. But I didn't, because in his mind, it *wasn't* an absurd question. He had no way of knowing how absolutely motivated I was to keep him alive and on my side.

Keeping my voice gentle, I said, “No. I'm not leaving you here. But I'm taking you someplace that's incredibly secure. I, uh... I can't let you see where it is.”

He peered at me. Then he rolled his eyes. “Oh, for fuck's sake. You're not going to blindfold me, are you?”

“Uh...”

He groaned and wiped a hand over his face. “Jesus Christ. Fine. *Fine*. Do what you have to do.”

“Sorry,” I said with complete honesty.

“Sure you are.”

Eh, I couldn't blame him.

As with most cars from the Collective's motor pool, there were hidden compartments containing items an operative might need in an emergency. The kind of well-stocked first aid kit that spec ops teams carried. A variety of weapons. A few items to plant forensic evidence if a situation called for it.

And, because one never knew when they might come in handy, blindfolds and restraints.

Those lived in a compartment beneath the driver seat. As I pulled the blindfold free, Arlen stared incredulously.

“What the... Don't tell me there's condoms and lube in there, too.”

I blinked. “Huh?”

“You've got a fucking drawer full of...*bondage shit*. In your car. Isn't that...I mean...” He flailed a hand as if he were at a complete loss for words.

I chuckled as I nudged the drawer shut with my heel. Offering him the blindfold, I said, “Unfortunately, these aren’t for fun and games.”

His humor faded a little as he took it. “Yeah. Great.” Without any fanfare or further protest, he slid on the blindfold. “All right. Let’s...” He gestured toward the windshield.

“I’m sorry about this part,” I admitted as I pulled back onto the road. He said nothing.

I drove for another mile. Then, through a series of left and right turns—since a U-turn would be too obvious to my passenger—I put us back on the highway going the opposite direction. Instead of using the interstate, I took some long-memorized back roads, and drove us right back into the city.

My neck prickled as we passed the hotel where our paths had crossed. I’d been damn lucky he’d been waiting out there for a passenger. Even luckier that he’d seen me as a wounded man in need of help rather than a potentially dangerous criminal fleeing police.

I doubted he felt quite as lucky about that encounter.

A few blocks later, I pulled into a parking garage beneath a skyscraper. A badge got me into the lower levels that were for employees only. Three floors down, a code got me through the “Maintenance & Deliveries Only” gate, and a further code opened a roll-up door. Once I’d pulled through, the door closed behind us, and I eased the Mercedes into a parking space.

There, I shut off the engine.

“Can I take this thing off?” Arlen croaked. “I think I’m getting carsick.”

“Yes.” I swallowed my nerves. “Take it off.”

He slid off the blindfold and took a moment to swallow a few times and blink his eyes into focus. I didn’t blame him—being blindfolded in a moving vehicle nauseated me too.

Slowly, he seemed to become aware of his surroundings. He looked around, furrowing his brow.

This level of the garage was lit with LEDs where there had once been

fluorescent bulbs, making the whole place stark and bright. About three dozen vehicles were parked around us, most of them spotless and gleaming, while a few were dirty and rusty. One even had a cracked windshield. To our left was a perfectly mundane blue Toyota Corolla that would be instantly lost in a crowd. To our right, a neon green Ferrari that was probably visible from space. All around us, vehicles that fell somewhere between the Corolla and the Ferrari—everything from beaters to high-end sports cars.

Arlen's gaze landed on a white Porsche, then flicked to the Ferrari. "Holy shit. Where..." He looked at the Corolla, then a battered Honda, probably wondering what kind of establishment could attract people who drove such a wide variety of vehicles. Turning to me, he asked, "Where *are* we?"

"I'll explain as we go." I opened my door. "Come on."

He hesitated, but only for a second. I motioned for him to follow me, and he fell into step beside me as I walked past the various cars.

At the end of the row was a steel door with a keypad above the handle. As we approached it, I said, "The detective gave you some information about getting your car back, yes?"

Arlen sighed. "Yeah. He said it was being analyzed, but they'd call me when I could pick it up from impound. Why?"

"Because he was lying." I punched a code into the keypad, turned the handle, and leaned into the heavy door to shove it open. "The cops don't have your car."

Arlen shot me a look, but then he did a double take and stared past me, lips apart. "What the..." He blinked a few times. "Wait, *you* took my car?"

"Not me, personally, no." I herded him into the room, where his beat-up car was currently on a lift with two of the wheels off. "But...yes."

"What the fuck?" he muttered more to himself. He stared at his car, watching one tech messing with something in the undercarriage while another was focused on one of the removed wheels. Then Arlen swept his gaze around the room before it landed on me. "Seriously—what the fuck?"

I shut the door behind us and met his gaze. “Your car is an older model, but new enough to have GPS. Which means there is stored data in your GPS.” I nodded toward the car. “If the police get their hands on it, they’re going to know you were lying about where you took me.”

Arlen *blanched*. “Are you... I thought they only had that shit in the movies?”

I laughed dryly and stepped past him. “You’d be amazed at the toys law enforcement has at their disposal. Including...” I picked up a small black box off a workbench. “Their own trackers.”

He eyed the tracker. Then me.

“When the cops came to interview you the morning after,” I explained, “I suspected they’d put a tracker on your car. They didn’t have a warrant, so they couldn’t impound the vehicle, but they were absolutely going to keep tabs on you.” I put the tracker down. “And once they had a warrant, they were going to sweep the car for any forensic evidence—especially any evidence confirming that I was in the car—and pull all the data off your car’s computer.”

Arlen went even whiter, and he leaned against the door. “Shit. I...I didn’t know they could do that.”

“They can. So...” I waved a hand at his car. “We’re scrubbing the data.”

Panic shifted to confusion. “Okay. So. When was I going to get my car back? And why are the cops telling me they have it when you do?”

“Leverage,” I said softly. “They think if they have something you want, you’re more likely to cooperate with them.”

“So... I’ll turn on you. Because they have my car.”

“Yes.”

“Jesus H.” He raked a hand through his hair and muttered something I didn’t catch.

“I’m sorry,” I told him. “I knew when we went in there that the Collective had your car, not them, but I suspected they’d claim they did so you’d have

incentive to cooperate.”

Arlen looked like he might get sick. I didn't blame him, quite honestly. Even people with a healthy distrust of law enforcement could still feel betrayed when the boys in blue showed their true colors. And no one enjoyed being manipulated.

“I'm sorry,” I told him. “I know this is all—it's a lot. And I'm sorry you're caught up in it.”

He pressed his lips together, a mix of anger and nausea radiating off him. Teeth clenched, he asked again, “When do I get my car back?”

I sighed. “Soon. I asked our techs to give it somewhat of a tune-up, too, and... that may have taken longer than we thought it would.”

“A tune-up?”

Gaze fixed on the car, I nodded. “You rely on your car for your job. Seemed only right to give it back to you in better working order than when we took it.”

He was silent for a long moment, and when I chanced a look at him, I wasn't at all surprised to find his utterly confused eyes fixed on me. “What the fuck is going on?”

I motioned again for him to follow me, and we went back out into the garage, leaving the techs to continue working on his car. Walking back up the row of vehicles, I said, “After the cops came to your apartment, I knew the situation was bad. I needed information. Someone was targeting me and the people I work with, but that was all we knew. We needed... Anyway, we needed information. Badly. So we could strategize somehow. And when you reached out ...” I gave an apologetic half-shrug. “I saw an opportunity to get that information.”

Arlen stopped abruptly, his shoe scuffing on the pavement. “What?”

I halted, too, and turned to him. “Everything the cop told us today—I needed that. It was life or death. Literally.”

His mouth opened and closed a few times as if he didn't know what to

say. Or what to think. I could only imagine how utterly shocked he was by this whole situation, and it wasn't getting any better with each revelation. He scanned the garage like he had the bay where his car was being worked on, as if his surroundings might offer some clue or some explanation about *why*. He was undoubtedly disoriented, too, wondering where in the hell he actually was. If I took him outside now (which I absolutely couldn't because I didn't dare reveal this location) he'd probably lose his damn mind.

"This place is here?" I could imagine him saying. *"In the middle of fucking downtown? Jesus, what else is hidden out here? A damn doomsday bunker? A hangar full of secret planes?"*

When Arlen finally faced me again, the look he turned on me wasn't one I was used to. Most people I crossed were angry, maybe humiliated. Plenty were afraid of me. Arlen was all of those things.

But he was also hurt.

Deeply, genuinely hurt.

Voice deceptively even but still raw, he said, "You're using me."

That much had been obvious from the start, I was sure, but it was probably only now sinking in just how true it was. And the statement wasn't just an accusation—it was a demand for explanation.

Tell me why I shouldn't turn on you for this.

Tell me why I shouldn't hate you.

My stomach wound itself into knots. Lying came easy for me. It was part of the job. If I couldn't look someone in the eye and lie through my teeth about anything and everything, then shit went south. Covers got blown. People got killed. Lying was easily one of my most critical skills.

But lying to Arlen had brought me up short right from the start, and every imaginable falsehood I could've fed him in this moment lodged in my throat. The only thing I could say was the truth:

"Yes. I've been using you. And I..." Swallowing hard, I raked a hand through my hair, startling for a second when my fingers slipped free sooner

than I expected. Right. Because my hair was short now. Incredibly short. Because the situation was dire, and I couldn't risk recognition. I also couldn't risk losing whatever tenuous goodwill Arlen still had for me. Even if I could risk it, I didn't want to, and in that moment, I didn't have the luxury of taking the time to figure out why that was. So I looked in his eyes and continued honestly, "I'm sorry. I didn't have a choice. I *don't* have a choice."

Surprise flickered across his face, and the fear in his eyes intensified. So did the anger and suspicion. "Why the fuck not? All I did was scrape you off the pavement. What the fuck gives you the right to use me for—"

"Because I'm low on options," I said. "And so is the Collective."

As soon as I said, the words, my heart stopped. Arlen's teeth snapped shut and his eyes went wide.

We stared at each other. I had no idea what was running through his head, but I had pure, cold fear running through my veins. Acknowledging the existence of the Collective to anyone outside the organization was dangerous under the best of circumstances, which this was absolutely not.

Arlen moistened his lips. His voice came out somewhat calm, but he couldn't hide the panic or confusion in his eyes. "The Collective is real, then. You really are part of it."

I nodded slowly. "Yes, it's real." Just admitting that out loud went against everything I'd been trained to do, but he already knew it existed. Just not what it was. "It's real, but it's not what the detective painted it to be. Not even close. Yes, we do engage in criminal activity. I can't elaborate right now. It's..." I shook my head. "We'd be here all day. But what I can tell you is that the assassinations? Those are lies. The people in the photos..." I exhaled as a ball of lead grew in my stomach. "They're not who he said they were."

Arlen's eyebrow rose. "That's not exactly a denial that the Collective killed them."

"We didn't. Two of them were members of the Collective."

The other eyebrow came up, and his eyes were wide as dinner plates. “The Collective has...what? Brazilian environmentalists and the wives of African warlords?”

“No. The woman he said was an African warlord’s wife? She was a member. An incredibly gifted hacker.”

Arlen swallowed like it took some effort. “So the Collective employs hackers.”

“Among other things, yes.” I exhaled and sat on the bumper of a gleaming red pickup truck. “We’re... There isn’t much I can tell you about the organization, but do you know the difference between black hat and white hat hackers?”

Folding his arms loosely, he nodded.

“All right, well. We’re more...gray hat. What we do is illegal. Sometimes questionably ethical. But—”

“You do the wrong things for the right reasons,” he said dryly.

“Something like that, yes.” I rested my hands on the either side of me, pressing my palms onto the bumper’s cool metal. “The woman who was murdered—I’m not entirely sure what her role was, except that it involved exposing shell companies that were used to funnel dark money.”

Arlen’s breath hitched. “Like...politicians accepting bribes?”

I half-shrugged. “Like I said, I don’t know exactly what she was doing. But she was no warlord’s wife.”

His lips quirked. “Should I be reading something into the authorities painting a deceased Black woman as the wife of an African warlord?”

“Probably.” I sighed and rubbed the back of my neck. “As for the environmentalist...” I pressed my lips together. It had taken everything I had not to react to that photo. I’d already been hanging by a thread because of this situation, and I was a wreck not knowing if Anatolie was all right, but then seeing that image...hearing the cop say with a straight goddamned face that *I* fucking murdered Ronaldo... Jesus fuck.

“You knew him.” Arlen’s statement was soft. Almost apologetic. And it cut straight to the bone.

Somehow, I managed, “He was a friend.”

“I’m sorry.” Arlen shifted his weight again, studying me uneasily. “I’m assuming he wasn’t actually working against the destruction of the Amazon.”

The laugh that came out was bitter and edged with the threat of tears. “God, what a fucking joke.” I kneaded the stiffening muscles in the back of my neck. “They’re right that he was an environmental activist. A very vocal one. He was a vegan who never missed an opportunity to bitch about people not recycling or the Collective’s motor pool only having two electric cars.” I rolled my eyes and chuckled softly at the memory, if only to keep myself from breaking down. I wasn’t sure I could cope with the realization that I would never again hear his voice echoing off the rafters of the fleet’s garage.

“For fuck’s sake. Why?” he’d rant and rave. *“What is the fucking point of everything we’re doing if we’re driving these gas guzzlers and pumping more carbon into the atmosphere?”*

One of the motor pool handlers had trolled the hell out of him by filling the bed of one pickup with potted plants, announcing that they would offset the truck’s emissions. Ronnie had been grumbled about that for a week. We’d all laughed about it for months.

Those potted plants had all eventually ended up in Ronnie’s condo. I wondered who’d take care of them now.

Fuck. Why did that make my chest hurt? Wondering who would take care of his plants and—

“Mirko?” Arlen’s voice pulled me back into the present. “You all right?”

That almost made me laugh. I hadn’t been anywhere close to all right since the night in the restaurant. But I didn’t let that show. “Yeah. I’m good. The thing is, the Collective wasn’t trying to stop his work in Brazil. We were backing him. And Ronaldo was my *friend*. I would *never* have hurt him. *Never*. Least of all on the say-so of fucking Bolsonaro.” I leaned back against

the tailgate and looked in his eyes. “Look. I’ve already told you more than I should.” I gestured around us. “Shown you *far* more than I should. I’m taking a huge risk, but I think I can trust you.” I exhaled. “I need to trust you.”

“Okay, but...” He rubbed the back of his head, then dropped his hand to his side. “I guess I just don’t get... I mean, they keep mentioning your name. Not just the Collective—you. And they’re trying to pin those murders on you.” He narrowed his eyes a little, as if he were trying to read something in my expression or body language. “Why are they so interested in *you* specifically?”

“I don’t know,” I said with complete honesty. “What I do know is that the Collective isn’t what they’re trying to portray us as. Whatever’s going on—we’re the targets. We’re getting picked off, and we need to know by whom. We need to know *how* they know about us and *what* they know about us.” I rolled my stiffening shoulders. “And I need to find out why my name keeps coming up. Especially why they’re so adamant about finding me.”

He slid his hands into his pockets and chewed his lip. “Do you have any idea why that is?”

I tipped my head back against the tailgate again and stared up at the concrete over our heads. “My best guess is that whoever’s on to us, they knew I was at that meeting and that I got away. If they paint me as a murderer and a terrorist, then no one will hesitate to turn me in, and no one will blink if someone shoots me on sight.” I swallowed. “And there’s a chance they’ll forge a statement from my friend—from Anatolie—to implicate me, then kill him so he can’t contradict it.”

“Jesus,” Arlen breathed.

“Yeah. It’s... I don’t know what the fuck is going on. That isn’t a lie—yes, I have some guesses, but I’m almost completely in the dark. I didn’t want to drag you into this or use you, but I...” I pushed out a breath and let my shoulders fall as I admitted, “You were someone they couldn’t tie to the Collective. You’re an innocent bystander. So I could use you to get some

answers without putting you in danger. At least, not like I would be if you were someone who might already be on their radar as a member of the Collective.”

“I was less likely to get killed.”

I nodded. “Yes. There was danger. There is. And I won’t pretend that isn’t the case. But this was...the path of least bloodshed, I suppose.”

Arlen seemed to chew on that for a while, and I let him. It was a lot for me to process, and I’d been involved with the Collective for years. This was entirely new for him, and he was being thrown right into the fire instead of eased into this world like I’d been.

“I’m sorry,” I said after a while. “I panicked. I didn’t know what else to do.”

He studied me for a long, uncomfortable moment. “You’re scared, aren’t you?”

A million defenses jumped to the tip of my tongue, borne of both pride and survival instinct. You didn’t grow up as the bullied immigrant kid who barely spoke English without learning not to show fear. And in my line of work, well, fear could be weaponized.

But as I replayed his question, I realized he wasn’t mocking or searching for weaknesses. He was looking for honesty.

I took a deep breath and looked in his uneasy, curious eyes. “Yes,” I said, barely whispering. “I’m scared. I’m fucking terrified. Everything I do means walking into dangerous situations and trusting my instincts and training to get me back out. But this?” I shook my head. “I don’t know how to get out of this. Not without getting people killed.”

“Including yourself.”

“Yes. They already have one of my associates. One of my *friends*. They’ve killed at least three more. The ones you saw in the photos in the interview, and also—” I hesitated. “There’s one more who’s higher profile. I can’t divulge that connection to us.”

I must have been getting through to him on some level about my fear and vulnerability in this situation, because my refusal to identify the fourth victim didn't earn me a scowl or an eyeroll. Instead, Arlen pushed out a shuddering breath and whispered, "Holy shit."

"I'm sorry," I told him again. "I know you didn't sign up for this. But I need your help. Even if that help just means I take you home, we part ways, and you never speak of this again. To *anyone*."

Avoiding my gaze, he chewed his lip.

"You'll get your car back," I went on. "I promise you that. It might take some time, but...you'll get it back."

He nodded, still not looking at me. Silence hung for a long, long moment. I didn't know what else to say, or if there was anything else I *could* say. It was up to him now.

Finally, he broke that silence, and his voice was quiet. "After that interview today..." He lifted his gaze to meet mine. "It's the cops, isn't it? Targeting you and..." He gestured around us.

Though every card I showed him put all of us—him, me, the Collective—in greater danger, I admitted, "I believe it is, yes. At least some of them. We just don't know for sure how many cops. Or which cops."

"Oh my God," he whispered, and he started to pace, his shoes clicking almost soundlessly on the concrete. "But you don't know why? What they want?"

"Not yet." I pushed myself up off the bumper, folded my arms loosely to hide my discomfort, and leaned against the tailgate again. "We've exposed a lot of dirty cops. Corrupt politicians. Judges. A lot of people with the power to get us designated as a domestic terrorist group, which is..." I sighed heavily, exhausted just thinking about how much of a disaster this would be if law enforcement had the power to surveil us the way they did terrorist groups. How little backlash there'd be if a sting went awry or another operative wound up dead. We were skilled at staying ten steps ahead of

anyone who posed a threat, but there was only so much we could do going up against a militarized police force who had the backing of the FBI and Homeland Security. If they really wanted to get cute, we could end up facing down the goddamned National Guard.

Arlen suddenly stopped pacing and stood in front of me. “You’re serious. You’ll let me walk away from this as long as I don’t talk to the cops or tell anyone ever.”

“Yes,” I said. “You’re not my hostage. I used you, and I’m sorry, but if you don’t want any further part of this, then you can go.” I moistened my lips. “All I ask is that you say nothing.”

“And I assume you have people who will find out if I do.”

I shrugged, giving him neither an affirmative nor a negative.

That was enough. He shuddered and chafed his arms. “Does this mean I’ll have people spying on me forever?”

“No,” I said quickly. “At most, we’ll keep an eye on you for a while to make sure no one fucks with you. But you’ll never see us, and no one will connect you to us.”

That eyebrow arched again. “No one was supposed to connect you to the group, were they?”

Yeah, he had me there. I gave another shrug. “You haven’t done anything. Not like we have. Even if the cops try to hassle you, they know damn well you’re just a bystander who got caught up in the action.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because you’ve walked out of two police interviews. They’re not looking for you, Arlen. They’re looking for me.”

He didn’t seem convinced in the least.

“They’ll be watching you,” I admitted. “Probably for a while. But as long as they don’t see you with me, as long as you’re just going about your business, they’ll lose interest. They’ll leave you alone.”

“And so will the Collective?”

“Yes. In the meantime, we’ll leave you a car. Keys will be in your mailbox.” I motioned toward the bay where his was being worked on. “When yours is ready, we’ll swap them out, and you won’t hear from us again.”

He scowled. “You’ll probably swap them out in the dead of night, so I just come out and find my car, right?”

I didn’t comment either way, but... yes. That was what would happen. We’d make the swap as stealthily as we’d towed his car in the first place.

Arlen chewed his lip again, looking around the garage. As he (I guessed) weighed his options, I couldn’t decide which way I wanted this to go. The smart thing would be for him to ask me to take him home so he could walk away and, eventually, forget about all of this. That was the sane option. The safe one.

For entirely selfish reasons I didn’t have the brainpower to understand...I hoped he didn’t want to play it safe.

A solid minute passed before he said, “Take me back to my apartment. I’m... I don’t want any part of this.”

I was relieved he was that smart, even if I was disappointed.

“All right.” I started toward the Mercedes. “Let’s go.”

Walking beside me, he asked, “Do I have to wear the blindfold again?”

“Pretty sure you know the answer to that.”

I didn’t have to look to know he was rolling his eyes.

I chuckled to myself, but deep down I was relieved he’d be blindfolded for a while, too.

Then he wouldn’t see me trying to figure out how the fuck I felt about all of this.

CHAPTER 8

ARLEN

I'd never felt so shitty for making the right choice before.

In the end, there really *wasn't* a choice. I could either continue to help Mirko break the law and get deeper and deeper into his shady whatever-the-fuck they were doing, or I could make a clean break of it. What kind of choice was that?

I didn't know Mirko, not really. I wasn't involved in his business beyond saving his life, once, mostly by accident. He'd lied to me, manipulated me—he'd had my car the whole time I was at the police station getting interrogated by Detective Hardass, after all. That wasn't a basis for a continued relationship; that was a reason to get away from him as fast as possible.

He said he'd let me go without any repercussions. I wanted to believe it, I really did. The truth was, though...

The truth was, the number he'd given me was burning a hole in my metaphorical pocket. The truth was, I felt bad for leaving him in the lurch even though I had no good reason to involve myself any further. The truth was, I'd felt more alive in the time I spent with him than I had for the past two stultifying semesters. It didn't speak well of me that getting grilled by the cops apparently got my engine revving, but there it fucking was.

You could call him. Ask about the car, maybe.

He'd already assured me the car would be back in my possession as soon

as possible. And someone had, in fact, delivered a generic Honda to my parking space in the dead of night like Tow Truck Santa Claus. So Mirko had kept his word.

You could ask him how his investigation is going.

That was none of my business now.

You could ask him to let you help with the—

No. No, no, no. I wasn't an idiot, despite feeling like one ninety percent of the time. I was out, I needed to stay out, no matter how I kinda...

Probably...

Definitely wanted to see Mirko again.

By the following Tuesday evening, I'd resigned myself to doing the smart thing and leaving Mirko alone. I had plenty of other things to worry about without him. Like...

"What do you mean, tuition went up?" And why the hell was Lacey only telling me about it *now*, when I had to make her final payment this very weekend? "How much?"

"Two thousand dollars for the semester. I'm sorry!" she added, sounding like she really meant it. "I didn't even think to check online, and the bill went to Mom and Dad's house and I guess they just threw it away without looking at it or letting me know it was there, so I only found out when I visited the bursar's office today."

"Lacey." I laid back on my couch and pressed my thumb into the space right between my eyes. Hard. "I don't have that kind of money on hand." I barely had enough to cover her regular tuition payment. "Do you have anything to put toward it?"

"My loans are already maxed for the semester," she mumbled. "It's enough to cover housing and books, but no more. I tried to get Dad to co-sign with me last fall, remember? And he wouldn't, and he told me to—"

Get your damn head out of the clouds and find a real job. I remembered. He'd called me up to berate me for putting ideas in my sister's mind right

after their argument. We hadn't talked since then.

"Shit." I took a deep breath. Even with a loaner car to run deliveries or take passengers, I wouldn't be able to make that kind of money by next Friday. I *did* have my emergency credit card, which was *only* for—you guessed it—emergencies, in part because of the ridiculously high interest on it, but it had a five-thousand-dollar limit. "I think I can swing it, but you're going to have to find a part-time job from here on out, girl. I just can't keep this up."

There was a long moment of silence, and then— "You said you'd help me."

"I am."

"With *all* my undergrad. You promised."

"And I *am*. I just can't cover surprise increases in tuition without having more warning."

"It's not my fault!"

Then whose fault was it? That was what I wanted to ask—scream, more like—but I recognized that it would only lead to a bitter argument that neither of us wanted. Lacey was smart, but she took a lot for granted, and that was partly my fault. "I'll transfer the money to your account," I said tiredly.

"Thanks." There was a long, uncomfortable moment of silence between us before she said, "Are you okay? You seem tired."

I felt like I'd been treading water for weeks now. "Do I?"

"Kind of...short. Not as level-headed as you usually are."

All of that made sense, yet it was also the last thing I wanted to hear from Lacey right now. "If you're angling for an apology, it's not coming."

"God, fine!" she snapped back. "Forgive me for being concerned for you, asshole!" Then she ended the call.

I dropped my phone to the floor and stared up at the water-marked ceiling. I had a dozen more essays to grade before tomorrow, a paper of my own to finish by the end of the week, and the rent was due. I didn't have time

to lie here and have a crisis.

I'd lie here and drink my last bottle of cheap whiskey dry instead.

Fuck it. I'll wake up early and get it done then.

Morning was a hellscape of monumental proportions made worse by the pall my hangover laid on the world, gray and fuzzy and sick. I battled my way through the last of the essays with the help of my third cup of instant coffee five minutes before class started, then sprinted to the Arts and Philosophy building on campus. I got there ten minutes after class started, and Professor Hartford put the cherry on top by deciding to make an example out of me.

“Mr. Tate!” Professor Hartford—Veronica to her friends, which didn't include me—turned toward me with a smug expression. “How delightful that you managed to join us today.”

“Sorry about being late,” I said quietly, rushing over to her desk and handing off the stack of essays she'd given me three days to grade for her.

“Oh no, no, not at all.” She took the essays with a wrinkled nose. “In fact, I think you might be well served by running right back home and having a shower. Shabby chic only works for interiors.” Someone in the back of the room giggled.

I ground my teeth together. “Sorry, Professor. I'll just head to the office, then.”

“No, no, don't bother. You can stay here, just...” She waved a hand. “Out of smelling distance.”

Professor Hartford was a necessary evil when it came to my education. I had to work for her, since my advisor was emeritus and didn't teach classes in person anymore. The trick to handling her was to let her talk down to you—and there was always something for her to pick on. Today wasn't a rarity. It generally stayed light enough not to warrant a formal complaint, but I

already knew the rest of my day wasn't going to go well.

It didn't. Two students disputed their grades, one with cause (she literally couldn't read the notes I'd written at the end of her paper because I'd been so tired when I wrote them—my bad) and one without cause (he'd gotten Sartre's definition of bad faith completely wrong). Professor Hartford increased both their grades right in front of me without bothering to get more details in either case, then proceeded to scold *me* in front of *them*.

They left smirking and I left feeling about a foot tall. Honestly, given how exhausted I was by the time my last class finished, it was amazing I noticed the guy tailing me at all.

When I was a kid, I used to play a game called Assassin with my friends. We spent a whole summer stalking each other with fake weapons and being on the lookout for our own would-be killer. I was the number one survivor out of eight kids that summer, completely thanks to being paranoid as hell after growing up with too many brothers. Nobody managed to get the drop on me, not even the friend who tried to "poison" my popcorn or the one who got into my room and hid out under my bed waiting for me. I got in trouble for throwing a bucket full of water beneath my bed to flush him out, but it was worth it.

It had been a long time since I'd played Assassin, but I was angry, wired, and full of existential angst—the last thing I wanted to do right now was a deep dive into my mental state. Instead, I turned my attention outward, focusing on everyone and everything around me, and five minutes into my walk home someone pinged my radar.

I didn't recognize the guy. He wasn't a student, although he could have been. He looked young enough, but he wasn't dressed right. No bag, a bland gray T-shirt, moseying along distracted by his phone...no. He should be carrying half a dozen books, wearing a band shirt, and hustling like his life depended on it. I slowed down from my own manic pace out of curiosity, and—lo and behold, he slowed down too. I finally stopped to tie my shoe, and a

second later he stopped, lifting his phone to his ear with a “Hey, Mac.”

Who was this guy? I was tempted to throw caution to the wind and go strike up a conversation, but as I stood he turned his back to me. That’s when I saw the bulge at the top of his jeans, mostly but not quite covered by his leather jacket. He was carrying.

That doesn’t mean anything. Tons of people carry guns. Not so much on campus, but...

No. Something was off with this guy.

Time to test his parameters and make sure I wasn’t crazy.

I’d had next to nothing to eat today, so veering from the road that led back to my apartment and the Cup Noodles I had set aside for dinner and heading for the nearest coffee shop was an easy decision. I went into the store, got in line, and started fiddling with *my* phone. *See how you like being caught in selfie mode, jackass.*

The guy, to his credit, didn’t come into the store. I actually lost sight of him completely, and by the time I had my grilled chicken panini and sweet tea—no more coffee for me this late in the day—I was willing to believe that I’d been mistaken. He’d just walked on by and kept going, which was the first thing to go right for me all day. I actually managed a smile as I headed out the door toward my place, where I had another fun night of staring at my computer screen trying to work out the next chapter of my thesis waiting for me.

I made it five steps before I got that weird prickling feeling on the back of my neck, the same one I felt whenever I played Assassin. I paused and shifted my backpack around to the front, opening it so I could put my sandwich in there. Another shift and I was able to check in the other direction, and—

There he was. Still. Sitting on a bench this time, phone out. If I didn’t know better I’d think he was waiting for the bus, but I *knew* better, I *did*. This guy was bad news for me, I could just feel it.

I walked briskly on, not looking behind me no matter how much I wanted to. Once I was inside my building, I raced up the stairs and into my little two-room apartment and, carefully, checked out the window to see if he was still there.

Yep. And he was looking up at my window too.

I shied back and stared across the room at my front door. Was he going to come upstairs? Knock politely? Bang the door down? Was he with the police, or with Mirko's shady operation?

Was it possible I was just being paranoid?

I peered out the edge of the window again just in time to watch the guy walking away. He didn't go far, though. No, he picked out another bench, and then the fucker sat down and picked his phone up again. Was he checking in with his boss? Playing Solitaire?

"Shit." I dropped my backpack to the floor, then sat down heavily on my couch. This was new territory for me. No one had ever followed me before—why would they? I wasn't important enough to tail or hot enough to stalk, and thank God for that.

"Maybe he'll be gone in the morning." It seemed likely. They weren't going to learn anything from me other than the fact that I was an overworked grad student on a shoestring budget.

I wanted to call someone and talk to them. I needed a friendly voice right now. Lacey probably wouldn't pick up, given how our last conversation had gone. Maybe Roxy...I didn't even text first to see if she was free, just hit Send and hoped for the best.

Nope, straight to voicemail. At least her message was funny. It was her and Winona, with Winona saying "Caw!" and Roxy shouting "Me back later! No, but really, leave a message at the beep."

"I know I've told you this before, but puns are the lowest form of humor," I said into the phone. "Probably why I like 'em so much. Look, call me back whenever you're free, okay? I've had a very...weird day." I ended

the call feeling a little better just for reaching out, then leaned over to grab my backpack. Fuck it. I had a sandwich to eat and a paper to work on.

I glanced outside one last time as I got up to get a plate. My mystery man was gone.

Good. I hoped he stayed that way.

Spoiler alert: he didn't. Or actually, *he* did, but the people following me didn't stop. This wasn't a one-man show, this turned out to be a whole three-ring circus. Wednesday morning it was a heavysset man in jogging gear who wasn't breaking a sweat keeping a bead on me, and in the afternoon it was a woman pushing a stroller with one of those covered baby seats, the kind that protects the kid from too much sun or wind. But she followed me for over half an hour as I walked my ass around campus, and not once did I see her reach into that stroller.

Roxy called me back on Thursday while I was walking home. Thursday was another youngish guy who had a military bearing and a Bluetooth headset. I ignored him as I answered my call. Just two more stoplights and I'd be back to the dubious safety of my apartment. "Hey there," I said.

"Hey, Arlen. You doing okay? You sounded pretty rough with that last message."

"I'm...fine." As fine as I could be under the circumstances. I didn't want to think about all that right now, though. "Actually, got any more good bird puns for me? I could use one right about now."

"That joke was Winona's idea, I'll have you know. But as it happens...I *do* have a ton of bird puns that I've been saving for a truly appreciative audience."

I smiled. "Go for it, I'm all ears."

"How egg-citing!"

“Oh, God. I regret my life choices already.”

“That’s because you’re unpheasant and hawkward.” Roxy paused. “Get it? *Un-pheasant?*”

“Yes, I got it, you maniac.” The light turned green and I began to cross the street. “Give me another, this is just the kind of awful I need in my life right now.”

“Okay, um. Hang on, let me find the book...”

This time I laughed. “You have a book of bird puns? Why?”

“It was a gift from the zookeeper in charge of the cassowary exhibit! Did you know that cassowaries are some of the closest living relatives that dinosaurs have in the modern world? They’re also the most dangerous birds to humans, and highly territorial, and their eggs weigh as much as—”

“Roxy. Get back to the puns.” I walked on, and twenty feet back, so did my follower.

“Why? Are you stork raven mad for them?” I groaned and she burst into laughter. “Isn’t that a good one? Shit, I love this book, hang on...”

I was treated to “poultry in motion,” “im-peck-able taste,” and “sounds like a bit of ostrich” by the time I got to the second stoplight. Five hundred more feet and I’d be back in my place, where none of my watchers had bothered going yet. They had to be cops. Surely Mirko’s people wouldn’t wait around on ceremony—they’d just barge in if they wanted something. Or maybe I was underestimating them and overestimating the police, or maybe I really was going crazy.

“Shoot, I’ve got an appointment in five and I still need to write up case notes.”

“That’s fine. Thanks for sharing your bad puns with me, you’re awesome.”

“Aw, thanks.” I knew if I was in the room she would have given me a nudge with her elbow right then, the Roxy equivalent of a hug. “I have no regrets. Bye!” I chuckled as she ended the call.

And so did the guy a few feet away from me, walking around with his phone at his ear.

Was he...*listening* to my conversation? Did he hear what Roxy and I had been talking about? No, surely not, that was just paranoid, but...but...

But you didn't think you were being followed and you are. You didn't think you knew enough to be interesting and yet the cops won't leave you alone.

Shit, shit, shit. Thank God Roxy hadn't brought up the weird guy I'd brought into her clinic.

The light changed. I moved on autopilot across the street, into my building, and upstairs. As soon as I was in my apartment, I dropped my phone on the counter and backed away from it like it was radioactive.

Who were they expecting me to call? Who the fuck did they think I was going to contact who would make this bullshit worth their while?

You know who.

Mirko, that was who.

And that was exactly who I needed to talk to. Mirko had promised to help me if I needed it, and after the weird shit we'd gotten through together, I was somehow not surprised to find that when I was desperate, he was the person I thought of. But that was problematic, too, because the number he'd given me was on my phone.

Could the person following me see what was on my phone in addition to hearing my conversations? Had it been cloned somehow? I didn't know, but I also didn't want to risk them figuring out I knew I was being followed.

Luckily, I had a really good short-term memory. It had gotten me As on tests I should have failed from grade school on, and all it took was a quick trip to my contacts and some fumble-fingered entering of a new, bogus number that happened to slot in right next to Mirko—aka “Enzo”—and I had his number in my head. Now I just needed a way to call it.

It took less than a minute of Googling to figure out how to make a call

with my computer. I dug out the headset that had come with some transcription software I'd bought with the best of intentions, plugged it in, and dialed his number. I didn't expect Mirko to pick up, but if I could just leave a message...

No message, just a beep. Fine. I could work with that. "Hey, it's me. I, um. I need some help. I think..." I swallowed. "I think I'm being followed. And it's possible someone is listening in on my phone calls. I've got that covered, don't worry, but...just call me back at this number when you can, okay?" I ended the call and stared at the screen blankly for a few more minutes, trying to ignore how badly my hands were shaking, before getting up to go take a shower. I'd worked up a cold sweat somehow.

I had a message waiting for me when I checked the screen fifteen minutes later. *Call me back.*

I called. This time he answered on the first ring.

"Arlen, are you all right?"

Oh, huh. It was actually really nice to be asked that. "I'm fine. Nobody's done anything yet but follow me and *maybe* listen in on my phone calls."

"That's more than enough." Damn straight it was. "Is it the police?"

"I...think so? They're carrying, I've been able to tell that much. It's been three different people so far."

"It's a safe assumption," Mirko said. "I promise you, it's no one on our end."

I relaxed a little at hearing that. "I didn't think so."

Mirko chuckled. "You kind of did, didn't you?"

"Maybe at first. But if I thought you were behind this, I wouldn't be talking to you now." My brief good mood fell away. "What do I do? I haven't talked to the cops since we went to the station together. If they want something else from me, why not just ask for it?"

"They're waiting for you to slip up and reach out to me." He scoffed. "They're clearly desperate to pin what happened at the hotel on me, and right

now you're their only link."

"Yeah, I guess so." I didn't like it, but it made sense. "How long do you think they'll be at it? Because if this keeps up much longer I'mma lose my mind."

"I can't say for sure, but...listen, why don't we meet and talk about it? There has to be something I can do to take the heat off you."

I blinked once. Twice. "I'm being followed by the *cops*," I said slowly. "If you show up at my front door all of a sudden, they're gonna think they hit the jackpot."

"They didn't recognize me the last two times they saw me," Mirko said blithely. "I think we'll be all right, especially if we can get lost in a crowd."

"Uh-huh. And how're we going to do that?"

That was how, Friday night, I ended up at Club Verve downtown. I wasn't much for clubbing—too loud, too many people, and I was way too likely to run into my undergraduates there, which was nobody's idea of a fun time. But Mirko had said he'd meet me here unless I let him know I wasn't being followed anymore, which...nope! It was the first guy again today, Mr. Big and Built who kept his gun in the small of his back.

I wondered if he'd be able to bring his gun into the club. They had metal detectors, but if he was a cop he might be able to flash his badge and get in regardless.

Think about something else now. Like having a drink. I wasn't going to last listening to this much house music without a damn drink. I worked my way through the crowd to the bar, feeling claustrophobic with so many bodies pressed against me, and managed to get a beer after ten minutes of trying.

I leaned one elbow on the bar as I sipped, staring out at the crowd and wondering if I'd even be able to recognize Mirko before he was right in front

of me. The dancefloor was seething with energy, the music loud enough that I couldn't even hear the person next to me speaking. It was actually kind of relaxing, now that I was here. I felt totally anonymous, just one more random face in the crowd. Maybe *Mirko* would be the one to work to recognize *me* for once.

“Hey there, handsome.”

Or maybe not. I turned and looked at the man who'd just sidled up next to me. He was...interesting. Close to Daniel the lawyer in coloring, but with his hair gelled and heavy makeup around his eyes, not to mention the net shirt and skintight black jeans, he looked completely different. “Hey,” I said, looking him up and down the way I'd wanted to ever since becoming aware he was hot.

He leaned against me and pressed his lips to my ear. His breath was hot, and I suppressed the urge to grab him and pull him in closer. “Any sign of your stalker?” he murmured.

“Not yet.”

“Good. I know the code that will let us out the back door of this place.” He made some space and looked up at me, batting his unnaturally long eyelashes. “Wanna get out of here?”

“Fuck yes.” I drained my beer, then took *Mirko's* hand and let him tug me across the floor. We were almost to the far wall when I caught a glimpse of a very unwelcome face about twenty feet away. “Shit.”

Somehow, *Mirko* heard me over the music. “What?” he shouted.

“We've got company,” I yelled back, rolling my eyes in the direction of the guy who'd been following me all day.

Mirko pulled me in close, grinding his hips against mine. I moved with him on instinct, keeping my head next to his while swaying to the beat of the music. “He's too close to outrun,” he said. “We need to get him to back off on his own.”

“How the hell are we going to do that?”

He smirked at me. “I’ll show you.” With that, he grabbed my hand and tugged me in the same direction we’d already been going. We were beneath the mezzanine and the shadows were thicker, but this wasn’t going to stop a guy who’d been doggedly following me all the damn—

Mirko pressed his lips to mine, shattering my train of thought. His arms wound around my shoulders as he backed me up against the wall, and I automatically reached around his hips and drew him in closer. I spread my legs to make space and he went for it, kissing me with the sort of abandon I’d expect from a guy who was planning on getting fucked right here in this club.

Ah. Smart.

I don’t know how long we lasted like that; there was no way I could tell the passage of time when this was the first kiss I’d experienced in waaaay too long. Well, aside from the *last* time Mirko had kissed me.

When he finally drew back, I flat-out whined about it. “No, wait—”

“He’s gone.”

Oh. That...right, that was the whole point. “Okay.” I closed my eyes for a second, then nodded. “Okay.”

Mirko stared at me from beneath his fake lashes, making it hard to read him. “Ready to get out of here?”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “Let’s go.”

CHAPTER 9

MIRKO

I may not have thought this through.

That banged around inside my head as I led Arlen through a dark hallway. It was a struggle, navigating between shadow-eclipsed bodies who were dancing, groping, or trying to make their own way toward the dancefloor, the restrooms, or the alley outside, but that wasn't what had my head spinning and my concentration crumbling. It wasn't even the possibility that any one of these invisible strangers could be another hostile hiding in the arms of a random person until they could corner us somewhere.

No, my mind was scrambled because of the man clutching my hand as we strode through the darkness.

In all the painstaking planning that had gone into this extraction, I hadn't bargained for losing my head over a kiss. A *kiss!* How many times had I done far more than kiss someone for the express purpose of distracting them or obtaining information? I had it down to an art form, keeping my head, my situational awareness, my cover, and even whatever goddamned accent I'd adopted, all while giving someone the ride of their life.

Thirty seconds—maybe a minute—of making out with Arlen to throw off our tail had thrown *me* off instead.

Mirko. Get it together. What the fuck is wrong with you?

I shook myself, grateful we were about to be outside. A door between us

and our tail, but also some cold air that wasn't thick with body heat, sweat, and several colognes that desperately needed to come with recommended serving sizes so people would stop marinating in them. Once I was away from this cloud of pheromones and free from all these squirming bodies, I could think with the head above my shoulders again. The one that had our escape planned out down to the last detail, as opposed to the one below my belt that wondered what other talents Arlen's lips and tongue were—

I swore under my breath and threw my hip into the exit's push bar. The heavy steel door swung open, spilling us out into an alley that was definitely cooler and more sparsely populated. A few people were out here smoking or talking, and from the sound of it, at least two were engaged in...more than smoking or talking.

My head was still swimming, my ears ringing from the music, but the well-trained operative part of me kicked in, thank God.

"This way," I told Arlen, and I tugged him up beside me. Sliding my arm around his waist, I leaned into him like an intoxicated partner in need of support, which...fuck, that didn't help me concentrate at all. I didn't even have to fake weaving a little and stumbling over these shoes. I was used to walking in lifts whenever I wanted to throw off someone who was looking for all five-foot-seven of me. Even drunk.

I wasn't drunk tonight. I couldn't even explain it. And was Arlen wearing cologne? God help me.

Without a word, he indulgently kept me upright as we headed toward the end of the alley. Or maybe he was just too scared to question anything. Hell, maybe he thought this was all part of the act, which it was...mostly.

We were almost to the road, and I forced my thoughts to clear as much as I could. The sight of a burgundy sedan with a mismatched rear driver side door helped snap me back into action.

"There's our ride." I made a show of freeing myself from Arlen's embrace, though I kept a hold of his hand. "Come on." Louder, I slurred,

“There’s our Uber!”

He stumbled after me, and we slid into the backseat of the sedan with me on the passenger side and Arlen behind the driver.

Once the door was closed, Mariana met my eyes in the rearview. I gave her a nod, and she pulled away from the curb.

“Where are we going?” Arlen sounded scared now, and I didn’t blame him.

I met his gaze in the blanched flicker of streetlights and headlamps. “Someplace safe. I’ve got people working out the rest of the logistics, but the safehouse is secure. I promise.”

He glanced at Mariana with wide eyes before meeting mine again, and the unspoken question was loud and clear: *Should we be talking about this in front of an Uber driver?*

I smiled and squeezed the hand I was inexplicably still holding. “She’s with us.”

He shifted his gaze back and forth between us, and he slowly relaxed. Well, his shoulders and his features relaxed—I couldn’t say the same for the fingers that were nearly crushing the bones in my hand. I ran my thumb alongside his, hoping to gently remind him.

It did the trick, because he looked down, exhaled, and loosened his grip. Staring out the window, he worked his jaw and furrowed his brow, and I couldn’t tell if he was trying to keep himself composed, or if he was just trying to process everything. He had to be terrified right now. On the verge of losing his mind, honestly; I’d been in this dangerous underworld for years, and I could still find myself paralyzed with fear if I thought too much about things.

That was what most people didn’t understand about people like me. Undercover operatives, spies, special agents, special ops—people who worked covertly didn’t do it without fear. Every breath we took in a place we didn’t belong or an identity that wasn’t ours, we knew on a visceral level that

we were one blown cover away from things that could be a hell of a lot worse than death. Fear kept us alive. We could compartmentalize it to some extent, pushing it aside enough to push past our own survival instincts, but fear was a constant companion.

Arlen...he wasn't used to this, though maybe he was more than most people. A member of the Collective had dug up quite the interesting record involving police, moonshiners, and God knew what else in the backwoods of Tennessee where he'd grown up. So he wasn't unaccustomed to violence or danger.

But not at this level. Especially not when he'd been unwittingly pulled into something that was, he'd found out too late, much bigger than him. We were both scared right now, but I didn't imagine our fear was on the same level. In essence, we were both at fourteen thousand feet with parachutes strapped to our backs, ready to jump. I was the HALO expert getting ready to make his hundredth jump—aware of every way things could absolutely go sideways, but with enough smooth landings under his belt to tamp down that fear and take the plunge. Arlen was the novice skydiver standing at the open door of an airplane for the first time, wondering if he'd really absorbed everything the instructor had told him on the ground.

And like it or not, he was getting pushed out.

I gave his thumb another stroke with mine. "Breathe. We've got this under control."

He turned a skeptical look on me. The novice skydiver demanding to know how we could control things like wind and gravity. Fair enough.

"Do you want to go back to the club?" I asked dryly.

He narrowed his eyes. "I want to go back to the life I had before I stopped in front of that hotel." As soon as he said it, he winced, and he looked away again. "Fuck. I mean... I don't..." He pressed his elbow under the window and rubbed his eyes. "I don't regret helping you. Don't get me wrong. I just..."

“You just wish your life would go back to normal.”

Without looking at me, he nodded.

“I’m sorry.” I really was. For getting him into this, and also because, as much as I wished otherwise, there was no going back to his normal life. Not anymore.

He opened his mouth to speak, but right then, flashing blue lights poured in through the rear window. Arlen straightened and started to turn, but I caught his cheek with my hand and made him look right at me instead.

“Don’t turn around,” I ordered.

He blinked, blue light dancing all over my hand and his face. “What? But it’s—”

“Follow my lead,” I said. “We can’t risk either of our faces showing up on the dashcam.” Mariana started to slow down and pull over, and I quietly added, “Or the bodycam.”

Panic registered across Arlen’s face. I desperately wanted to tell him everything, but there wasn’t time. And anyway, much like fear was a part of this life I led, so was secrecy. I couldn’t show him every card no matter how much I wanted to.

And since when do I want to tip my hand or the Collective’s about anything? To anyone?

Arlen exhaled. “Okay. So. What do we do?”

“Um. Well.” I cleared my throat. Mariana smothered a laugh, and the only thing that kept me from kicking her seat was the risk of hitting Arlen’s foot by mistake, so instead, I muttered, “Would you shut up?” in Spanish.

Arlen eyed her. Then me. Then he groaned, apparently putting the pieces together. “Jesus Christ. Do you make out with *everyone* you rescue?”

Mariana snorted.

I shrugged and leaned across the backseat. “Show me a better way to get someone to look anywhere but at you than an over-the-top public display of affection.”

Arlen swore, but he didn't argue. Which was good, because I could hear the cop's footsteps approaching the open driver side window.

We'd done this twice before. In his apartment when I'd wanted to sell the idea that we'd just been fooling around, and in the club earlier to convince his tail that Arlen was about to hook up with a random clubgoer. Both times, I'd caught Arlen off guard.

Not this time.

He kissed me hard. He kissed me *angry*. Jesus fuck, if he hadn't scrambled my brain in the club, he was definitely doing it now, gripping the back of my neck and kissing me as if to say we were doing it on *his* terms this time.

Distantly, I was aware of Mariana and the cop going through the motions.

"Ma'am, you didn't come to a complete stop at that Stop sign."

"I'm so sorry, officer. I guess I didn't see it."

"Okay, well, I'm going to need to see your license, registration, and proof of insurance."

All the while, I had Arlen's insistent tongue in my mouth, and I wasn't sure these skintight pants were going to contain this erection. Was the hand on my thigh part of the act? And when had I slid my hand under his shirt?

It didn't help that the cop was taking his sweet fucking time. He was back at his car now, I assumed, probably running the plates and Mariana's fake license. Making sure the dashcam and bodycam bought that this was a routine traffic stop and that he and Mariana had never seen each other before. He'd definitely never seen the two horny guys going at it in the backseat, and I thought she'd apologized a couple of times for "these two drunk idiots I picked up at a club."

Finally, he was back at the door. There was some "sign here" and "print here" and "you'll get a notification with your court date," followed by, "Have a nice night, ma'am."

I let my eyelids flutter open and looked past Arlen, meeting the cop's

gaze for a second. His nod was almost imperceptible.

I closed my eyes again, and a moment later, the car was in motion.

“All right, lovebirds,” Mariana said. “Save the rest for the safehouse.”

Arlen broke away and looked around. “Wait, that worked? He let us go?”

“Maybe he let *you* go.” She held up the ticket. “You’re splitting this with me, Mirko.”

I rolled my eyes as I shakily sat back in my seat. Adjusting myself, I breathlessly muttered, “Put it on my tab.”

She flipped me off and kept driving.

Across the seats, Arlen and I made eye contact again. He’d been annoyed when he’d kissed me, but now he just looked dazed.

Dazed, flushed, and more than a little turned on.

I know the feeling.

Slowly, though, he seemed to remember where he was and why, and the fear closed in again. I tried to soothe my conscience by telling myself I’d given him a few minutes of distraction. Probably enough to let him forget everything except that I wanted to fucking make out with him *again*, and that he was pissed at me for that, and that maybe he kind of enjoyed it, and that damn, kissing like this was pretty hot, and...

But now that was over. We had a good eighteen inches or so between us so we could cool off and catch our breath.

Lips still tingling from his mind-blowing kiss, I prayed to whoever might be listening that no more situations arose where making out was the most ideal cover.

Because I was pretty sure Arlen would kill me.

The safehouse was at the end of a row of townhouses in a well-to-do community about twenty minutes out of the city. We tucked the car into the

garage, and then all three of us went inside.

“Is this really safe?” Arlen gestured at the wall dividing this townhouse from the adjacent one. “We’re right up next to other people.”

“It’s safe,” Mariana said. “The next unit is a buffer between us and the rest—trust me, it’s secure.”

He looked at me for confirmation, and I nodded. Apparently taking me at my word, he relaxed, which made me feel guilty; I was as honest with him as I could be, but I still had to lie about some things in order to protect myself, the Collective, and him.

Raking a hand through his hair, he dropped onto the sofa. “So...what now?”

“Now, you both lay low.” Mariana pulled a spiral notebook and a pen out of a kitchen drawer, came into the living room, and slid the book and pen across the table to Arlen. “I need you to make a list of things you need from your apartment, and specific locations so we can find them.”

Arlen stared up at her. “Things? Like what?”

“Valuables. Clothing. Personal items.” She paused. “List your electronics, too, but we can’t bring them here. We’ll take them to someplace safe, though.”

He looked down at the paper. Then at me. Then at her. Then at the paper again. After a moment, he picked up the pen, holding it for a few seconds as if he weren’t quite sure what to do with it. Finally, he was about to start writing, but his head snapped up. “How long am I going to be here? I mean, I have classes. My dissertation. I—”

“We’ll handle that,” I told him.

He watched me as if expecting me to continue.

“We’ll handle it,” Mariana insisted. She tapped her nail on the notebook. “I need your list so I can get your things quickly.”

“Okay, but answer my question.” He glared at both of us. “How long are we talking about?”

Mariana and I exchanged glances.

“We don’t know,” I said. “This whole situation is...unusual.”

“Unusual.” He huffed a humorless laugh as he looked down at the paper again. “No, ‘unusual’ is when it snows in April. This is... It’s...” He gestured like he might try to draw his thoughts in the air instead of verbalizing them. “I don’t know what the fuck this is.” But he hunched over the notebook and started writing.

Mariana and I left him to it, and we went upstairs to make sure the bedrooms were set up. Someone had come by earlier to leave fresh sheets, towels, and toiletries. There were a few sets of clothes in his size and a few in mine. Thank God—I couldn’t wait to get out of this ridiculous, uncomfortable outfit I’d worn to the club. How did people dance in this shit? Or just sit and have a drink? Ugh.

Tugging irritably at the stupidly itchy net shirt, I turned to Mariana. “What did you get from Dan?”

“Besides a bullshit ticket?”

I rolled my eyes. “A bullshit ticket to your fake persona who isn’t going to pay anyway. Who cares?”

“Still. I’m never going to let him hear the end of it.” She frowned and dug in her pocket, producing a flash drive. “He gave me this. There’s a secure laptop in the living room downstairs.”

“Well, let’s have a look.” I went downstairs. Arlen was still writing, and he didn’t even glance at me. I had no idea if he was pissed, scared, confused, or some combination of all three, but I was probably not high on his list of people who made his life easier. And hell, I still needed a few minutes away from him to get my head straight after everything we’d done in the backseat.

Get it together, I ordered myself as I headed back upstairs with the laptop. *You’ve been fucked down during an op without losing your focus.*

Halfway up the stairs, I realized what separated Arlen from everyone else I’d ever touched while undercover, and it wasn’t just that he was more

attractive than any of them.

Arlen was completely innocent. Everyone else was playing the same game I was at least on some level. There were lies and deception from all directions, with strings attached to everything and ulterior motives behind every flirtatious look or sweaty roll in the hay. I sucked the dicks of powerful men in the name of corporate espionage, and I fucked information out of people who lost all sense of opsec as soon as their clothes were off.

Everything was consensual, of course—that was one line no one in the Collective crossed—but it was always a transaction. Always both parties trying to get something—money, power, information—from the other by way of seduction and sex. It was all part of a dangerous game that every player had joined of their own volition, whether as a ruthlessly exploitive tycoon, an unscrupulous politician, or a gray hat undercover operative on a mission to stop them.

Arlen was none of those.

He was a graduate student trying to live his life, help his sister out, and earn his doctorate, and his only “crime” was helping a drugged, bloody guy who happened to collapse over the hood of his car.

I grimaced as I cleared the top step. I owed him big time, but I had no idea if it was even possible to repay him for everything I’d put him through. I’d disrupted his life. Scared the hell out of him. Put him in danger. Undoubtedly fucked up his head because it was second nature for me to use sex strategically. There wasn’t enough money in the world—never mind in all of my offshore accounts—to compensate for all that, and I didn’t think money would help anyway.

The least I could do right now was try to get this shitshow over with as quickly as I could.

First things first, having a look at that flash drive Mariana had obtained during that “traffic stop.”

A fresh twinge of guilt hit me as that whole encounter ran through my

mind again. I couldn't explain to Arlen that John was a Collective operative. Or that I really had been concerned with the dashcam and bodycam recognizing one of our faces. We couldn't risk anyone connecting John to Arlen or me. Mariana's face was still, to our knowledge, unknown as a member of the Collective, but the cops were explicitly looking for me and had connected Arlen to me. The cops were jumpy about the Collective and about someone being on the inside; just being able to definitively put John at a scene with the two of us *could* put that microscope on him.

I put the laptop on the dresser in one of the two bedrooms, since there was no desk, and we both peered at the screen as the flash drive's contents appeared.

The file name on the video made my blood turn cold: *Doe_John_Interrogation*.

"Oh, fuck," I breathed. "It's Tolya, isn't it?"

"Probably."

I closed my eyes and swallowed.

"He wouldn't have given it to us if we didn't need to see it." Mariana clicked on the file. "Let's see what they said."

I gnawed my thumbnail as the video started. It was, unsurprisingly, Anatolie in a mostly empty room. The detective had taken Arlen and me into one of those dank, gray rooms like in all the police dramas. Probably just to fuck with his head. In fact, I was surprised it hadn't had a two-way mirror to sell the whole thing. If I had to guess, the cops had assumed—rightfully, to some extent—that Arlen was someone who could be intimidated by the police, particularly if they stuck him in a room that added to the menacing ambiance. That was probably where they interrogated kids or petty criminals they were trying to scare straight.

For Anatolie, they went the subtler route—the one that involved less direct mind fuckery. They had him in a mostly bare, bland office in a chair by the wall. One plainclothes cop sat at a small table, pen and paper at the ready,

tie loose and jacket draped over the back of the chair like he planned to be there for a while. The other cop had also taken off his jacket, and he leaned against the door, his posture casual but his position a signal to Anatolie that he wasn't leaving this room until they were good and ready to let him.

They started talking to him in friendly tones, trotting out those tired old lines about how “We want to help you” and “We can't help you unless you talk to us” in an effort to convince him he was on their side. All the while, they had Anatolie cornered and exposed—his back against a wall with no table or desk for a buffer or even something to drum his nails on. Every nervous, incriminating twitch would be completely out in the open for them—and their camera—to see.

Anatolie wore beige prison scrubs now instead of the suit he'd had on when we'd been separated. His beard was thicker, scruffy in ways he hated even when he was undercover. Heavy shadows had settled in under his eyes, and his shoulders were drooped with fatigue. The beard couldn't hide the gauntness in his cheeks; Christ, had they fed him at all?

“Listen, Mr. Nemerenco,” one of the cops said. “We need—”

“Why do you keep calling me that?” Anatolie asked in his Boston accent, his voice pleading. He threw up his hands in a tired, heavy gesture. “How many times do we have to go through this? My name is Jeremy. Carter. Can we—”

“Your fingerprints are a match for—”

“So you've said. Five hundred times.” Anatolie sounded resigned and wrung out, not hostile. As if he were more tired than anything of trying in vain to convince them they had the wrong guy. “Then he stole my identity? I don't know. I...I have no idea what to tell you.”

He was good at this. We were all trained extensively in what body language interrogators looked for, and one of the tipoffs was defensiveness and anger. Someone who was guilty would get progressively louder and more agitated. The innocent person might start out that way but would quickly

taper off into this subdued, drained resignation. Though I doubted Anatolie had to fake the fatigue he was incorporating into his act, given that they'd been holding him for over a week now. Still off the books, no doubt, since they hadn't charged him with anything.

He also hadn't buckled when they'd insisted they had Anatolie Nemerenco's fingerprints. The fuck they did, but if they could convince him they did, then he might crack.

In theory.

Good luck, pigs. He's better at this than you are.

I glanced at the time stamp. The video was almost three hours long. "Are we supposed to watch the entire thing?"

Mariana shook her head. "I have no idea. John didn't say one way or the other." She paused. "Unless he put something on the ticket. Be right back." Without waiting for a response, she left the room, and I stared at the video as I listened to her fading footsteps.

Renewed guilt crowded in with what I was already feeling for dragging Arlen into all of this. It was my fault Anatolie was in there. I could've done... I don't know. Something. Replaying our escape from the restaurant, I couldn't put my finger on exactly what I could've done, particularly once that poison had started kicking in.

I reminded myself that we were trained for this. Get your fellow operative out if you can, but better one prisoner than two.

Better one body than two, I thought with a shiver. Anatolie was alive, or at least he had been when this video was taken, but there was no guarantee that would continue.

Is it my fault if he dies? Or did I do the right thing by getting myself out instead of letting both of us get killed?

Well, that was something to keep me awake at night for a while.

Footsteps came up the stairs again. I paused the video, schooled my expression in case some of my guilt and regret showed, and turned. "Was

there something on the ticket about—oh.”

Arlen. Not Mariana.

He peered timidly in through the doorway, still holding the pen and notebook. “I, uh...” He gestured with the book. “This is all I could think of.” I couldn’t read the words from here, but he’d filled about half a page. “How are they going to get my stuff? I’ve got my keys, but people will notice if someone just shows up and starts—”

“Don’t worry about it.” I shook my head. “They’ll probably just say they found bedbugs in the building, and they’ll go through the whole place. Maybe even fumigate it.”

Arlen’s eyes went huge. “What? Isn’t that a little over the top?”

I half-shrugged, wondering when that had become such a heavy, exhausting gesture. “Sometimes the over-the-top responses are the best approach. Like burning an entire building to the ground to hide the murder in apartment 3C.”

Damn. Shouldn’t have said that. Not because I’d said anything incriminating—I hadn’t—but because Arlen hadn’t been in this particular world long enough to appreciate the dark sense of humor it cultivated.

“You, uh...” He inclined his head. “You haven’t actually done that, have you?”

“No. Of course not. But you get what I’m saying—something big and distracting, and no one notices the smaller details.”

He swallowed. “But sometimes they do find the murder in the burned building. That happened like a year ago in—wait, was the Collective involved in that?”

“No, no. I’m pretty sure that one was Mafia.”

He eyed me as if waiting for the punchline. Then his lips parted. “You’re not joking, are you?”

I shook my head.

Arlen exhaled and raked a hand through his hair. “Jesus fuck.”

Before either of us could say anything else, Mariana came back up the stairs, crumpled ticket in hand. She glanced at Arlen, then at me, and I gave her a nod. She shrugged and handed over the ticket. “I don’t see anything on there. He probably can’t risk anyone noticing something unusual on an actual ticket.”

Arlen’s spine straightened. “Wait, wait, wait. Was—are you telling me that cop was working with... That whole traffic stop—was it staged?”

Mariana gave me an *I’m letting you answer this one* look.

I chewed my lip. “He contacted us on my way to the club to get you. Said he needed to give us some information, and it couldn’t wait. That was... Well, it was the least conspicuous way we could think to exchange it.”

“Uh-huh. So you didn’t have time to think of any other way to keep our faces off the cameras?” There was a hint of aggravation there.

Heat rushed into my face. Mariana at least had the decency to turn her attention to the laptop screen. I gestured for Arlen to come out into the hall with me. He didn’t seem thrilled about it, and I couldn’t blame him, but with some muttered cursing, he followed.

Closing the door behind me, I lowered my voice. “Look, it wasn’t ideal. And I’m sorry. I’m not...” I shook my head, avoiding his eyes. “I know none of this is normal for you, and fooling around as cover is...”

“Fucking weird?” he asked flatly.

I nodded since I couldn’t think of a better description. “I’m sorry,” I said again. “For all of this, including that part. There are a lot of people tangled up in this mess, and I’m trying to get us out alive. All of us. You, me—everyone. Just...don’t think it was because I was messing with your head or something.”

“I know you weren’t.” He sounded...hurt? “You were messing with *their* heads. I was just a convenient prop.”

“You were—”

“Is this where I’m sleeping?” He gestured at the other bedroom. “I think

I'm done for the night."

I stammered for a second, unable to speak. Then I nodded. "Yes. There are clothes in there. They should fit." I hesitated. "Also a phone. Don't use it to log into anything or—"

"No shit." He sounded exhausted, and without looking at me, he headed for the other room. After a few steps, he paused and handed me the notebook. Then he slipped into the bedroom and shut the door behind him.

Alone in the hallway, I closed my eyes and exhaled. There was no way I was ever making this up to him.

Behind me, the other door opened. "Mirko?"

I turned. "Hmm?"

Mariana gestured over her shoulder, indicating the laptop.

Nodding, I put a mental pin in my guilt over Arlen, and I followed her back into the room. On the screen, she'd opened up another file. A PDF by the looks of it. "Find anything useful?"

With a tired sigh, she shook her head. "Nothing yet. I may need to reach out to John when he's off shift."

I chewed the inside of my cheek. Getting in contact with our operatives within hostile agencies was always tricky. When that hostile agency was the goddamned police force, it ratcheted up the risk and made things a hell of a lot more complicated, especially when the cops were starting to get paranoid that they had a mole. But John knew why he'd given us this thumb drive, and neither of us could see it. I suspected we were better off just asking him than spending the whole night scratching our heads and trying to figure out what the fuck we were missing.

Mariana touched my shoulder. "I'll handle it. You stay here with him"—she jerked her chin toward the wall dividing us from Arlen—"and keep your heads down. I'll be in touch as soon as I have something."

I nodded mutely. It was just as well she was handling this part while I was on babysitting detail. As much as Arlen probably wanted to put some

serious distance between us, about the only thing I could be trusted with right now was keeping him safe. Anything more complicated than that, and I was useless. I wasn't even tired, just mentally off-kilter because there wasn't a damn thing I could do to let Arlen walk away from all this like he obviously wanted to.

“Mirko?” Mariana gave me a gentle shake, pulling my focus to her. “You still with me?”

“Yeah.” I exhaled. “I think I just need to sleep.” I pursed my lips. “Except I should stay awake while he’s—”

“We’ve got operatives in three other units,” she told me. “And there’s an office remotely monitoring half a dozen exterior cameras.” She let me go and gestured at the bed. “Get some sleep.”

Well, that was a relief. Not a surprise, either—Collective safehouses were always watched closely by multiple people, 24/7.

But I doubted my conscience would let me do much sleeping tonight.

CHAPTER 10

ARLEN

I don't know why the hell I ever thought Mirko was being honest with me about—well, about anything, I guess. He hadn't been honest with me about more than his pain from the very start of knowing him, but to lie to me about the cop who'd pulled us over... That had freaked me out so much. I'd thought we were going to be pulled out of the backseat and hauled off to jail, and all we really had to do was hunker down in the backseat and not get caught on his dashboard cam.

And the way he'd decided to obscure us, the kisses, the way he'd clung to me and moved in for more...

Son of a *bitch*.

Fuck him for using me, and fuck me for wanting more. And now, well. Now I was probably in the process of losing my identity, maybe having my apartment building burned down so that I'd be off the radar of people who should never have known about me anyway, and having my entire life nuked because of a single random act of kindness.

"We can fix it," Mariana had said. I had no idea how, though. It wasn't like *she* was dealing with school schedules and grading and demanding professors and my goddamn thesis paper. If I didn't finish that, if I didn't finish school and get my PhD and get a job somewhere using it, then what was the whole point of doing it in the first place? How would I ever be able

to hold my head up back home, knowing that I'd failed to do the one thing I'd set out to do?

Then again, I might not even be allowed to return back home after all this was said and done. Maybe my family would think I'd died, or that I'd run off or become homeless or something like that. I lay back against the dark green comforter on the sinfully soft bed in this room and went full-on macabre for a moment.

There'd be a funeral, if for no other reason than my mother appreciated people bringin' her free food. Cold to say, but I knew my mom. Some of them might miss me for a while, but it wasn't like I was ever home, either. That was my own choice and I didn't regret it, but...

Lacey would miss me, so at least there was that. Not that I wanted her to have to. I wondered how she was doing, whether she'd ever gotten the money I'd sent on.

That, at least, I could check. Along with the clothes that someone had laid out for my use—and who the fuck stocked these places? How did they know my size?—there was a generic, cheap smartphone in the pile, as well as some toiletries. The phone was basic, probably monitored too, but it wasn't like I was going to need to break into a bank to check my sister's Instagram feed. She always posted there on the weekends, usually who she was studying with or whether she was at a party or mixer or...there she was, *Laceupboots*. I clicked on her latest post and saw—

WOOHOO! SPRING BREAK IN KEYS! was the caption for the photo. There was Lacey, in a bikini and sipping on a huge drink, smiling, with her arm around her best friend. There were shots of her in bars, at a party on the beach...and one of her holding what was probably a thousand dollars' worth of twenties in her hand, fanning herself like she was running for this year's Miss Capitalist Shithead crown.

Gotta spend to look this good, this caption read.

Yeah. So apparently, she had to lie to me and spend the money I sent her

thinking it was for tuition to look this good.

Well.

That was...

That. Was.

No. I couldn't think of an appropriate philosophical aphorism to make me feel even the slightest bit good about this. Lacey was...she was the only person in my family I still talked to on a regular basis. The only one I thought got it, got *me*. The one I counted on to be on my side, to listen to me and be honest with me and treat me like a goddamn human being.

Apparently, it was easier to treat me like a bank account.

I was angry, which meant I had to move. Big emotions always made me want to run, like I could run my way right out of them if I just went far enough. Years on the track team in high school and undergrad had shown me there was no way to outpace my stupid feelings forever, but running myself to exhaustion sure helped. Only there was no way for me to do that right now, because I was in a safehouse inhabited by a bunch of internationally wanted spies being looked after by the guy who had upended my entire life.

Ha, running might be the smart thing to do, but it was way too late for that now.

That left pacing, but the floor squeaked. Every lap around the room made what I was doing incredibly obvious to whoever was out there, and I was tired of Mirko and his people knowing every goddamn thing about me these days. I needed to sleep, but I was never going to fall asleep at this rate.

Eventually I settled on having a shower, stripping off my comfortable borrowed clothes—seriously, way too comfortable—and heading in to scald the anger out of my system. The water pressure was amazing, beating the tension right out of my shoulders, and when I grabbed for it, the soap... smelled like Mirko. Mmm, citrus and oakmoss and mint...the last time I'd smelled this was in the car when we were locked together, only it had been even better then because of the pressure of his body on mine and the heat of

his mouth and the little noise he made in the back of his throat...

And now I was hard. Fan-fucking-tastic.

That, at least, I could do something about. I washed the soap off my hand, wrapped wet fingers around my cock, and closed my eyes as I began to stroke. A minute or so in, it was obvious that I wasn't going to be able to do this without thinking of Mirko, so I decided to go heavy on indulgence instead. I pictured him in here with me, leaning against me, his quick, long fingers replacing mine as he jacked me off.

Shit, this is what I'd wanted in the club. It was what I'd wanted in the car; it was even what I'd wanted back in my apartment, only for that little show I hadn't let myself think about being with him so explicitly. I was stupidly into the guy who had ruined my life. He was everything I would have looked for in a boyfriend—smart, gorgeous, quick on his feet. He liked touching me, too, I could tell.

What would he have done if we'd really needed to sell our hookup in the club? Would he have gone down onto his knees for me and sucked me off in there in the dark, the most private area in the least private place imaginable? Would he have turned and let me finger him open, then fuck him up against the wall? Or would he have wrapped his hand in my hair, hauled me down onto the floor, and fucked my mouth until he came?

The thought of choking on Mirko's cock was what tipped me over the edge. I spilled out from between my fingers with a long, slow exhale, then tilted my face up into the spray and let the water wash all the evidence away, along with the last remnants of my angry energy. Now I was just tired, and feeling more than a little pathetic about myself and my life.

Nothing new there. God, I was going to need so much therapy after this.

I stayed on my feet just long enough to dry off, brush my teeth, and put back on enough clothes that I wouldn't scandalize anyone if they barged in to my—well, *their* room, technically—then lay down and closed my eyes.

Falling asleep was the first effortless thing to happen to me all day.

Waking up felt like dragging myself up out of Coal Creek on a winter's day. I felt waterlogged, cold and slow for no good reason. The room wasn't chilly, the clothes weren't damp, I shouldn't...I shouldn't be feeling this way, and yet it was like I had a hangover, or—

Oh. Adrenaline dump. I *did* have a hangover. Well, every hangover had its cure, and in this case I was pretty sure that my cure was coffee. I looked through the pile of clothes until I found a hoodie that would fit over my T-shirt—it even read *The Bitter Southerner* in cursive on the front, so either someone here had an on-point sense of humor or they'd gotten real lucky at the thrift store. Bundled and marginally warmer, I headed out into the living room. Or, jeez, headquarters? Did secret spies do the headquarter thing? I would've asked if I wasn't so pissed off.

All my mental prep ended up being for nothing when I realized I was the only one in the room. Huh. Without the frenzy of activity, it looked just like a normal apartment. I walked down the hall to see if I was really the only person in here, and—ah, no. There was a faint but familiar snore coming from what I assumed was another bedroom. I'd gotten to know that sound when Mirko was passed out in my bed, so unless he was bunking with someone else, he and I were alone.

I could open the door with a slam, storm in there, and let him have the sharp side of my tongue...or I could let him sleep and make the coffee that was calling to me like a siren. I chose option B, since I wasn't a complete asshole. I went ahead and pillaged the fridge for supplies to make eggs and bacon, too—delicious and greasy and just what I needed to help me get over the remnants of yesterday's events.

It was still hard to believe everything that had happened so far. Even more, I was so, so sick of being forced into things, either by the cops or by Mirko and his people.

That running feeling started to well up inside of me again. I ruthlessly squashed it. I didn't have time right now, but I needed...I needed to do something. If I didn't do something soon, I was gonna get out of hand.

Start with breakfast, yeah? Plot uncivil disobedience later. I settled in and started to eat. About a minute later I heard a toilet flush. A few minutes after that, Mirko's door opened. He wandered down the hall looking about as *compos mentis* as I'd felt half an hour ago.

"Howdy."

"Um...hi." He came over to the table and looked at the simple spread, then over at the coffeepot, which was still about half full. "Did you...is this..."

"Yes and yes." I nudged the chair across from mine with my foot. "Sit down, eat some food, stay awhile. Unless you need to run off on me again."

I don't know if it was the tone of my voice that warned him against running anywhere or if he really didn't have anything else planned, but after making himself a cup of coffee, he sat. The eggs were cold by now but he didn't seem to care, tucking into them like he was starving.

"When do you people stop to eat?" I asked.

"When we're not trying to break someone out of jail," he replied wryly after swallowing half a piece of bacon in one bite.

Ah, now we were getting somewhere. "Who exactly are you talking about?"

"A friend of mine," he said, then added after a moment's pause, "Anatolie."

I honestly couldn't care what he called the guy, since it probably wasn't his real name anyway. But it was clear that whoever this person was, Mirko was worked up about him. "Why's he in jail?"

"He was taken at the same time I was shot last weekend."

Oh. That news was a cold splash of water down my back. "Dude, are you sure it's a jailbreak you're thinking about, not a trip to the morgue? I'm not

trying to be a downer, but the guy coming after you was trying to kill you.”

“We got evidence from the cop last night that Anatolie is alive.” Mirko’s eyes were unfocused as he stared at the table between us. “He’s in interrogation. He can handle it; he’s one of the best when it comes to keeping a role, but...everybody breaks eventually.”

“What exactly does that mean for you?”

Mirko sighed. “Anatolie knows a lot about the Collective. If they got him to the point where he was willing to talk—and it would take a *lot* to get him to that point—then a lot of our activities could be in jeopardy. Anatolie is one of the people who brought me in. He’s...”

“He’s important to you,” I supplied, and Mirko nodded.

“Yeah. And while I really don’t think he’d give anything up deliberately, if they get just the right combination of drugs into him or find the perfect leverage, there’s no way to know what could happen.”

“That sucks.”

Mirko chuckled and toasted me grimly with his coffee cup. “That it does.”

Gears were turning in my head, new angles presenting themselves to me. I’d only been in this safehouse for twelve hours and I was already chomping at the bit with nothing to do. Maybe...maybe there *was* something I could do. I’d have to ease into it, though, because I had the feeling that Mirko wasn’t going to be inclined to let me help with anything. He’d probably like it best if I could forget my real life existed, sit on the couch, and Netflix and chill for however long it took them to resolve this.

That wasn’t going to happen. One way or another, I needed to be active. “Do you know where he’s being interrogated? Can your cop friend do something to help get him out?”

Mirko shook his head. “We do know where he is, but there’s no way our contact can get him out. We can’t afford to do anything that might reveal our connection to him, and without him we’d know even less than we do now.”

“So he can’t help.” There had to be another way for them to do this, though. “What about pulling a fire alarm?”

“This isn’t exactly the kind of place that would respond to a fire alarm.”

“So what about calling in a bomb threat?” We’d gotten a couple of those at the university in the time that I’d been there. Each time it had only been forgotten backpacks, but the school had shut down all the same. “Or, hey, some kind of biological attack! Officials have to take that shit seriously, don’t they?” It might be one of the *only* threats they had to take seriously, given how many idiots could conceal carry without any training these days.

Mirko looked at me in silence for a second, then took another long drink of coffee. “Are you serious about this?”

I pressed a hand to my chest. “I’m a caring person. If *you* were kidnapped by some assholes with badges and security clearance, I bet you’d appreciate it if I called in a bomb threat for you.”

I think this might be the first time I’d ever made someone smile while chatting about threats, not including all the ribbing my brothers and I use to give each other before getting into knockdown, drag out fights. “I appreciate that, but a random bomb threat isn’t going to be enough to stir these people. Trust me, we’ve thought about that too.” He sounded pained. “And we can’t risk sending in a member of the Collective to plant something that looks dangerous anyway, because the last thing we need right now is for someone else to get picked up by the police. The number of people we’d have to draw out of the building before our police contact could make a move is...a lot.”

I felt like a cartoon character with a lightbulb turning on above my head. “Yeah, that wouldn’t be good, huh.”

Mirko narrowed his eyes at me.

“And you don’t want to actually set the building on fire,” I went on. “That would be overkill, and the last person a bunch of cops are gonna give a shit about under those circumstances are the inmates.”

“What are you—”

“But it’s important that you get this guy outta there before they break him.” *And fill you with guilt.* I saw it as clear as day on his face, which must mean he was *really* scared for this guy. Or...maybe this was just the effect of talking to Mirko, instead of Enzo or Daniel or any of his other personas. Maybe Mirko let himself be honest because otherwise, he might forget how.

It’s not because of you, I reminded myself. *You’re as much a patsy as a victim here.*

But that doesn’t mean I can’t be useful.

“If you really need somebody to plant something and make it look like the threat you call in is a good one.” I gestured down at myself. “Then there’s always me. The cops have been watching me for days now; they’re gonna notice if I suddenly show up on their turf after going missing overnight.”

“Absolutely not.” He didn’t even take the time to consider it, just *BAM*, vetoed it right off the bat.

Well, he wasn’t the only one who could be persistent.

“I don’t even have to leave anything on the grounds! Just walk around lookin’ suspicious, maybe duck into a room for sec, then you call in the threat and all of a sudden people are going to be way more interested in me than your guy.” I was getting a little buzzed just thinking about it. Actions that would have scared the shit out of me a week ago were suddenly attractive.

It was amazing the difference a little time and intimidation could make.

“That puts you in the same danger it would put a Collective member in. No way.” Mirko made a slashing motion with his hand. “Absolutely not.”

“But I’m not a member.”

“You’re as good as right now.”

I laughed. “I’m really not. I don’t know shit about what y’all are doing, and that’s how you like it. Which, fine, I get it. But it gives me nothing to give up if I get grabbed, which I probably won’t.”

Mirko scowled at me. “This isn’t a game. You’re not trained like Anatolie is. You would never last under interrogation.”

That hurt a little, but he was probably right. “The goal isn’t for me to get interrogated,” I said. “It’s to get Anatolie *out* of interrogation. Are you seriously telling me that you won’t take one little risk for the chance to spring your buddy outta wherever he is?”

“This isn’t a little risk! This is your *life* we’re talking about!”

“Then I guess it’s mine to risk, huh?”

“You—”

“I like it.” Mirko and I both turned toward the door, where Mariana was standing with her arms crossed, nodding slightly. I hadn’t even noticed her come in, but I *did* see the taser in her back pocket. She’d probably heard the shouting, or been spying on us, or something that had let her know it might be good to intervene. Ha, like I was gonna jump Mirko and, what, try to fight my way out of here?

“Bullshit,” Mirko said.

“No, there’s potential here. And you know that if we don’t act soon, the chances of us getting Tolya back alive are...” She shook her head. “Low. We can mitigate the risk Arlen is facing and—”

“No.”

“Mirko,” I began.

“No!”

Welp, I was in for a fight. But I knew I could wear him down. If he cared for this guy half as much as he seemed to, in the end he’d see that in the balance of me versus Anatolie being free, Anatolie tipped the scales.

Besides, I had no intention of getting dragged in for questioning by the cops. I might be reckless, but I wasn’t completely foolish. There had to be a way to figure this out.

Mirko could either get on board or he could sit back and watch, but either way, I was doing this.

CHAPTER 11

MIRKO

Being outnumbered came with the territory of the covert ops I engaged in. More often than not, I was going into the fray alone. Less a wolf in sheep's clothing and more a wildcat prowling through a herd of horses—acutely aware that while I was the one with the teeth, the claws, and the scent of vulnerable prey, all it would take was one member of the herd noticing me, and I'd be getting my skull kicked in.

So this—facing off with Arlen and Mariana—should've been easy. I wasn't trying to maintain a cover identity under pressure. No one was brandishing a weapon, though I had to wonder if Arlen had designs on bashing my face with that frying pan. This wasn't the kind of scenario where I had to call on every ounce of training to smooth talk and manipulate my way out alive.

Sure felt like it, though.

Fully aware of how defensive I looked—and not giving a single fuck about it—I crossed my arms and glared at Mariana. “We are *not* involving him.” I tilted my head sharply toward Arlen. “No way in—”

“Uh, I'm sorry?” Arlen narrowed his eyes. “You've already involved ‘him.’” He made viciously sarcastic air quotes as he spat the last word. “I'm here. I'm stuck with you, so you're fucking stuck with me, and I'm not just going to sit around and—”

“You’re not trained for this shit,” I snapped. “We’ll protect you because we’re responsible for you. And that includes not sending you into the line of fire or—”

“How about letting *me* make a decision for fucking once?” He was livid, but there was a shaky edge to his voice. One that spoke of more than just annoyance. “My life has been out of my control since the second you bled on my car. You and your”—he flailed a hand—“*Collective* have fucked up my entire world. My entire career is probably over before it’s even gotten started because there’s no way I’m going to recover academically, and—”

“We’re taking care of your school,” Mariana said evenly. “Leave that to us.”

He turned an angry, plaintive look on her. “How?” He suddenly sounded more wrung out and devastated than pissed. “I can’t just hit the pause button on something like that. It’s not as simple as—”

“Trust us.” Her voice was mellow and calm, especially for her; I suspected she was doing that deliberately to counter his rising agitation. “You’re not the first person we’ve done this for. I doubt you’ll be the last.”

He stared at her, silently begging her to be telling the truth. In that moment, I empathized with his desire to be part of our op to extract Anatolie. His entire world had been wrenched off its axis and out of any semblance of his control. Being forced to sit on the sidelines and just wait must have been a nightmare. I could relate—an op had gone sideways a couple of years ago, and I’d had to sit tight in a safehouse for almost four months until the Collective sorted everything out. The isolation, the stillness, the helplessness—it was a genuine wonder I hadn’t lost my mind.

With everything happening right now, Arlen was probably looking down the barrel of a much more protracted period of laying much lower. He didn’t even know that yet, but what little he’d gleaned already had him climbing the walls and wanting to *fucking do something*. Could I really blame him?

Mariana stepped farther into the room, sliding into the space between

Arlen and me. Glancing at me, then at him, she made a placating gesture. “Listen. Arlen is on to something. Using him to—” She pointed sharply at me. “Let me finish.”

I closed my mouth, swallowing the objection I so desperately wanted to let fly.

She eyed me. Apparently accepting that I was going to shut up, she went on. “You’re both on police radars. We can’t risk Mirko showing himself, because there’s a good chance he’ll be shot on sight.”

At that, Arlen blanched. I wasn’t thrilled about it either, and her blunt delivery didn’t help, but she wasn’t wrong.

“As far as any of our intel indicates,” Mariana continued, “the police don’t think Arlen is a member of the Collective. He’s still an innocent bystander who got caught up in things. The only thing they’ll want out of him is information, not blood.”

Arlen shuddered. So did I. As much as I didn’t relish the idea of them shooting me, I was nauseated by the thought of them getting their hands on him and trying to wring intel out of him. Couldn’t we just ship him off somewhere? Set him up with a new life someplace warm where no one knew or cared who he was?

Mariana took a deep breath. “Arlen can also go in without being searched or even patted down.”

He cocked a brow. “I can?”

She nodded. “You’re not a suspect in anything. Not officially, anyway. They took you into their showy interrogation room to try to rattle you, but as far as they’re concerned, you’re just a very interesting witness who might have valuable intel. You’re there for an interview, not an interrogation, so they’re going to be far more lax with you than they would an actual suspect.”

He looked confused, but I’d caught on to where she was going. “He can bring something into the facility without being searched.”

“Exactly.”

Arlen swallowed. “Bring in—like what?”

“Anything to create a diversion,” I said. “A biohazard, or—”

“Wait, wait, wait.” He put up his hands. “When I suggested something biological, I didn’t mean actually bring in some kind of—it’s like calling in a bomb threat without actually planting a bomb, you know?” He shifted his gaze back and forth between us, eyes widening as more color slipped from his face. “I didn’t mean *actually* release something biological.”

“It wouldn’t be anything dangerous,” Mariana said, calm as ever. “Something with some uncomfortable effects, maybe, but we’re not going to actually hurt anyone.”

Arlen stared at her, then at me, his eyes asking if she was for real. I offered an apologetic shrug. Because, yes, she was for real. And no, I didn’t have any better ideas.

“That...that would make me a domestic terrorist, wouldn’t it?” he squeaked. “I can’t—*no, no.*” He showed his palms again. “I’ll call in some bullshit, but I’m not—”

“No,” Mariana agreed, “but maybe your lawyer will.”

Suddenly they were both staring at me.

I straightened, pressing back against the counter I’d been leaning on.

Aww, fuck. We were really doing this, weren’t we?

By the time Mariana left an hour or so later, I was exhausted, pissed, and felt distinctly like I’d been backed into a corner. More than once, she and Arlen had asked if I had any better ideas, and...no. I didn’t. But that fact that I couldn’t think of something better didn’t mean we should go with this trash fire she called a plan. Especially since it meant walking right back into the police station with Arlen, potentially getting ourselves labeled domestic terrorists, assuming we didn’t get ourselves killed, and *maybe* escaping with

Anatolie.

Maybe.

I couldn't talk either of them out of it. I couldn't even talk myself out of it, because every time I tried to veto anything, we were left in the same situation: with Anatolie in custody and the police wearing down his anti-interrogation training.

Fine. Fucking fine.

I didn't like it, but it was what we had to work with, and now I was both dreading the moment we put it into action and twitchy because, like any tactical assault, this plan was going to take some time to put into motion. It had a lot of moving parts, and Arlen and I wouldn't be the only personnel going in.

And Arlen shouldn't be going in at all.

Christ, I'm going to get him killed.

I paced in the townhouse's small living room, and I swore in several languages as I raked a hand through my too-short hair. There had to be a better way. There had to.

I kept coming up dry, though, so I ran through the plan again and again, searching for every imaginable way I could keep us both alive, and also hunting for fatal flaws so I could confidently veto the entire goddamned thing.

I came up empty on both counts. I mean, it was fatally flawed in the sense that it was a step down from a suicide mission and involved someone who wasn't a trained operative, but...well, I'd had that argument with both of them several times, and I'd been outmaneuvered and outvoted.

But what really bothered me was that I couldn't make this plan as airtight as I usually could. I had no qualms about saying I was exceptionally good at accounting for every seemingly benign detail that had potential for disaster. One of the skills that the Collective valued me for was my ability to make mental flowcharts of every possible outcome, noting every escape route and

contingency between the start and our objective.

Of course, as Helmuth von Moltke famously said many years ago, no plan survived first contact with the enemy. Once the operation commenced, there were always complications that no one could've foreseen, like the time our getaway car collided with a deer and was suddenly rendered undrivable at the worst possible moment. Or when I'd just started getting information out of a mark by way of pillow talk and a door had suddenly opened, revealing that my mark—fearing being outed to his more conservative colleagues—had successfully hidden his husband from everyone, including the Collective.

Or, I realized with a sinking heart, when an extraordinarily potent combination of sedatives had dropped me onto the hood of a car, and an innocent bystander had thrown me into his backseat, simultaneously saving my life and destroying his own.

Sighing heavily, I sank onto one of the armchairs, pressed my elbows into my knees, and rubbed my hands over my face. It was no wonder I couldn't figure out the mental flowchart for this op. Every step, every move we made, every contingency, every emergency escape—it all had to account for an innocent bystander. Not one who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, but one I was actively pulling into the danger.

One whose safety couldn't be guaranteed.

And whose death or even injury would be more than my conscience could handle.

What the fuck was I supposed to do?

A creak of the stairs alerted me that Arlen was on his way down. I closed my eyes and slid my hands to the back of my neck, where I kneaded the stiffening muscles. I didn't want to face him. I wasn't sure I could.

Holding my breath, I listened to his movements, hoping he'd turn left at the bottom of the stairs and go into the kitchen. Anywhere but right into the living room where I was trying not to lose my shit. Well, and not out the front door, either. He seemed to have resigned himself to staying here until the

Collective gave the all-clear, but for all I knew, he'd changed his mind while he'd been upstairs, and was about to run out and—

His footsteps didn't continue out the front door or into the kitchen.

As he left the hardwood and moved onto the living room's thick carpet, his footfalls were barely audible, but I could feel his presence. Then the soft press of weight onto upholstery told me he was taking a seat on the couch across from me.

I released my breath and kept rubbing at my neck.

Arlen's voice was quiet but full of unease. "Any idea when we're going to do this?"

Too soon was what wanted to come tumbling off my lips. Except it wasn't too soon. Every second we sat here, every second that passed while the Collective locked down our plan, was one second closer to too late for Anatolie. We needed to get moving. We had to get him out of there before they made him talk. Before they killed him.

My throat tightened. I'd already lost one dear friend since this whole shitshow began. I couldn't lose Tolya.

But the only way to save him is to risk Arlen.

Fuck, how do I do this?

I exhaled and lowered my hands as I leaned back in the chair. I met Arlen's worried, guarded eyes, and I shook my head. "I don't know. Soon, probably."

He watched me, more questions in his expression, none of which I knew how to answer. The one he finally spoke was the last one I expected to hear: "Are you always this riled up before...uh..."

"Before an op?" I croaked.

Arlen seemed to consider that, then shrugged. "I guess?"

It was so, so tempting to tell him this was normal for me. That it was just the usual jitters before a high-pressure mission. The equivalent of the seasoned Broadway actor throwing up backstage before the curtain went up,

or the athlete pacing and stretching just to expend some nervous energy before the game. I wanted to reassure him that this was part of the process.

But hadn't I told him enough lies?

Dropping my gaze to my wringing hands, I shook my head again. "No. This is... I'm never like this before an op."

Without looking, I sensed him tensing all over. "Oh. Fuck. That's, uh... That's not a good sign, is it?"

I didn't know how to answer that, and I couldn't sit still any longer. Pushing myself to my feet, I said, "It comes with the territory."

"Huh?" He stood, too. "But you just said you're never like this."

"I'm not." I crossed my arms and shifted uncomfortably, still unable to look at him. "But having someone along—someone who's basically an innocent bystander..." I gestured at myself and laughed bitterly. "What do you expect?"

Silence. Long, heavy silence.

When he broke that silence, his tone was low and pointed. "You think I'm going to blow it and get us killed."

My head snapped toward him, and my lips parted as I met his frosty gaze. "What? No! It's not that at all."

His jaw worked. "Then, what?" Mirroring me, he folded his arms and shifted his weight. "Why are you such a wreck over—"

"Because I'm afraid of getting *you* killed." The words came out before I could stop them, and maybe I wouldn't have stopped them anyway. God knew this man deserved some truth from me.

He clearly hadn't expected the response, either, because he blinked and straightened. "But you're a professional. Why would you get me killed?"

"It doesn't matter if I'm a professional." I ran a hand through my hair again and blew out a breath. "A bullet will kill me just as much as it'll kill you. But I'm *responsible* for you in there. It's my job to keep those bullets and every other fucking thing away from you and—" My voice tried to

waver, which caught me off guard, and I had to clear my throat before I continued. “You didn’t ask to be a part of this. You don’t deserve to be in danger because of me or because of— You shouldn’t be putting your neck on the line for me or anyone else, and I don’t know how to get you to the end of this alive.”

Okay. Fuck. That was probably more honesty than either of us needed.

From the wide-eyed stare, it was definitely more than he’d anticipated.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “For all of this.” I couldn’t look at him anymore, so I turned away and started pacing across the plush carpet again, overwhelmed by more guilt and fear and nervous energy than I could handle. Voice ragged, I repeated, “I’m sorry.”

Arlen was dead silent again, and even though I couldn’t look at him, I could feel his gaze on me as I moved back and forth across the small living room. I was probably scaring the hell out of him, buckling under the weight of all this shit right before we went into a dangerous op. One in which I was the only one with any training, and he’d have to depend on me. This couldn’t have been instilling any faith in my ability to play my role.

Maybe that wasn’t a bad thing. No one would force him if he wanted to bail on this lunacy we were calling a plan. In fact, I hoped he would. Mariana and the Collective and I would find a way to save Anatolie, but at least we wouldn’t be putting Arlen at risk again.

I wasn’t at all expecting his cold, quiet words: “I wish I could believe you.”

I halted and spun to face him. His expression didn’t back up his chilly tone at all. There was no anger. No apathy. No dismissiveness. Just fear and

—

Oh, fuck me.

Fear and *hurt*.

As if what I’d said had cut him to the bone.

Heart thumping, I asked, “What do you mean?”

Arlen's shoulders sagged as he shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "I want to believe you give a fuck about me and that you don't want to get me killed. Hell, I want to believe that you're sorry for all of this." He swallowed hard, and the hurt in his eyes intensified. "But I've seen how good you are at playing roles and lying." His jaw worked, and some anger crept in. "I've *felt* how good you are at lying."

My stomach somersaulted. "I'm not lying."

"Of course you're not." He laughed bitterly. "And I'm sure you weren't lying in the club or in the backseat, either. What can I say, Mirko? You put on a good show."

"I..." What could I even say to that? Because he wasn't wrong. My entire existence was that of a chameleon. Sometimes *I* didn't know where a cover ended and I began. Arlen had seen a different persona every time he'd crossed paths with me, and hell, our first visit to the police station together had been after I'd lied to him about who had his car.

The part about him feeling how good I was at lying—that stung. Not because it was untrue, but because it drove home how little hope there was for me to earn his trust.

I cleared my tightening throat. "If you don't trust me, why are you willing to go in there with me?"

He huffed sharply and irritably, shifting from foot to foot again. "Well, I assume you won't let me die while I'm still useful to you. So...I might as well be useful."

My knees tried to buckle. Jesus, I knew I hadn't cultivated much trust in him, but did he think I was *that* mercenary about his safety? His life? "I didn't pull you out of that club because I thought you could be useful. I don't know if you recall, but"—I pointed toward the kitchen where we'd hashed everything out with Mariana—"I didn't *want* to bring you into our plan."

"Because you didn't think I could hack it." He scoffed and rolled his eyes. "And I'm sure if you went in alone and left me here, you'd spend the

entire fucking time worrying about little old me, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," I said through my teeth, "I would."

His glare said he didn't buy that for a second.

I spread my palms. "I don't know what I can do or say. But I wouldn't be here now, and I wouldn't have done everything I did to get you out of there last night if—"

"Seemed like a real hardship for you," he gritted out, though some renewed hurt made it into his tone. "Do you enjoy winding people up like that? I know a lot of spec op guys are adrenaline junkies, but I didn't know you assholes got a thrill out of feeling someone up and—"

"No, I don't," I snarled, trying to mask some hurt of my own, mostly because I couldn't quite explain it. "Truthfully? Yes, I have used sex to manipulate people. I have gotten people into bed so I could get information out of them." I shrugged. "And no, you're not the first person I've gotten out of a place by giving everyone around us the impression we were heading someplace to hook up."

He winced, eyes flicking away from me.

"Yes, it was part of my plan last night," I said as evenly as I could. "It's the most discreet way to get someone out of a place like that, because odds were your tail wasn't someone who was going to want to watch two men fool around, and no one blinks if two people make out and then slip out the back. It's... I wasn't trying to tease you or wind you up. I was trying to keep as many eyes off us as possible."

Arlen's jaw worked again, and he kept his eyes down, arms folded tightly across his chest. "And in the Uber?"

"Same thing. Anyone who watches the dashcam or bodycam will see an Uber driver getting pulled over after picking up a couple of horny guys from a club. No one will suspect we were involved in anything but each other, or that the driver and cop were doing anything other than going through the motions of a routine traffic stop."

He inhaled deeply through his nose and brought one hand up to rub his neck as if it were getting as stiff as mine had been this whole time. “Why didn’t you give me any warning?” He flicked his eyes toward me. “Was this some more plausible deniability crap? Like when you lied about the cops impounding my car?”

“No,” I whispered. “But which would’ve made you more nervous—thinking our driver was just a driver being pulled over for running a stop? Or knowing there was a covert op playing out in front of cameras where everyone’s body language would be up for scrutiny?”

Arlen dropped his gaze again, and he chewed his lip. Shifting his weight again, he murmured, “I don’t know.” Then his expression hardened again. “You don’t have to keep me in the dark about things. I’m not stupid, and I’m not some naïve kid who’s never fucked around with law enforcement before.” Narrowing his eyes, he added, “Is it too much to ask for you to treat me like an ally instead of some brainless damsel-in-distress?”

“That wasn’t...” I hesitated. “Look, that wasn’t my intent. I know you’re not stupid. Quite the opposite. I wasn’t discounting your intelligence or your abilities—I was trying to protect you in the only way *I* know how.”

He stared down at the carpet between us and said nothing.

“I’m sorry,” I said again. “And I don’t know if you’ll believe me, but...” My heart sped up as I debated going forward, wondering if I was about to make this better or worse. He wanted honesty, though. He wanted the right to decide if he could handle the reality of our situation. And maybe, if he was going to depend on me to keep him alive in a few hours, he deserved to know why my head wasn’t where it needed to be. I took a deep breath and pushed my shoulders back. “It wasn’t all fake.”

Arlen arched an eyebrow.

I fought the urge to fidget. “You know more about me than most people outside the Collective. Including the part where the Collective even exists and I’m involved in it. I took you to see where your car really was because I

wanted your trust. As much of it as I had any business asking for.” I swallowed hard. “The reason I’m freaking out over us going into the police station? Because I’m terrified. For you.”

The other eyebrow came up.

My heart pounded even harder as I went on, my voice faltering a bit, “I’ve already put you in far too much danger. I’m scared I won’t be able to concentrate on the op while we’re in there, because I’ll be too focused on keeping you safe.” I rolled my shoulders and tried to work that stiffness out of my neck as I admitted, “I don’t want you to get hurt, Arlen. I don’t want any innocent bystanders getting hurt—ever—but I especially don’t want anything to happen *to you*.”

Confusion steadily took over where the anger had set up shop in his expression. “Why not? You don’t even know me.”

“No,” I admitted. “But I want to. Enough that it scares the hell out of me for reasons that have nothing to do with bullets or bloodshed. Especially innocent bloodshed.”

Arlen tensed all over. “What do you mean?”

“I mean...” I exhaled, then decided to go for broke: “I mean that on top of everything—you being an innocent bystander and you saving my life—there’s also the part where you know who I am. You know my name. And fuck me but I can’t stop thinking about the way you kissed me back last night.”

His lips parted. “But that was fake. It was an act.”

“It was supposed to be.” My heart was going to come through my ribs at any moment. “No offense, but...I don’t think you’re that skilled of an actor.”

The blush that rose in his cheeks, not to mention his flustered fidgeting, only underscored my point. Obviously aggravated, he said, “So the fuck what? So I got turned on because someone was kissing me, and I got a little into it. That doesn’t mean shit. Especially when the other guy was faking it.”

“I’m good at faking it,” I acknowledged, “but I’m not *that* good.”

He stared at me, and I wished I could read his mind right then. Wished I could parse the gears that were obviously turning in his head. Did he believe me? Hell, maybe he did, and he would decide I was unfit to lead this op, and he'd wisely bail out. That was probably the best-case scenario, since he'd be absolutely right about me and he'd also be safely on the sidelines where he belonged.

Voice unsteady, he whispered, "I don't know how to trust you. I want to believe you, but..."

I swept my tongue across my lips, pretending for the sake of my sanity that I didn't notice the way his gaze flicked to my mouth. "Arlen. My name is Miroslav Antanasijević. I'm a member of the Collective, and I'm wanted by multiple law enforcement agencies for murder and acts of terrorism."

He watched me, obviously puzzled.

I straightened a little. "You know all that. You knew it when we went into the police station. You knew it when we were pulled over last night. All you had to do was tell one of the cops who I was, and I'd be in the same situation as Anatolie. Maybe worse."

He chewed the inside of my cheek. "Okay? And?" He gave a taut half-shrug. "How is that supposed to convince me that anything else you've said or done is real?"

"It isn't," I said simply. "But you know more about me than anyone outside the Collective has in a long, long time. You know enough to absolutely destroy me." I took a cautious step closer. "All I can is hope that that's enough to show you that I *want* to be honest with you. And that when I can...I am."

He stiffened, but not enough to draw away, and he did nothing to widen the space between us. He also didn't speak. In that moment, maybe he couldn't.

Somehow, I managed to find my voice. "People are at their most vulnerable when they're intimate with someone," I said softly. "And I won't

lie and tell you I haven't exploited that in order to take down some truly awful people." I came closer still and touched his face, and his eyelids fluttered shut as he pushed out a ragged breath. "But that vulnerability goes both ways."

He opened his eyes.

I moistened my lips again. "Yes, it was strategic, what I did last night. Because it was the best way I could think of to get you out of the club and through that traffic stop safely. Without drawing attention that could hurt you." Pulse absolutely thundering in my ears, I ran the pad of my thumb along his cheekbone. "And yes, I meant for it to be fake. It had to be because I had to maintain my situational awareness and get us both to the other side safely." I exhaled. "But it wasn't. I almost panicked a few times because I didn't maintain my situational awareness. I couldn't."

He searched my eyes. "Really?"

I nodded slowly. "Yes. It scared the fuck out of me because I thought I was going to get us both killed. I didn't even mean for us to stay in the club for as long as we did, but I just got so..." I trailed off, gaze sliding to the mouth that had short-circuited all my brain cells, including the ones that held the training I'd been relying on to get us out of there.

"Mirko," he whispered.

I met his gaze. He licked his lips. Holy fuck, when had we gotten this close?

I caressed his cheek. "I don't know how to convince you to trust me. I won't blame you if you don't. But I—"

Arlen's mouth was suddenly on mine, and the world stopped beneath our feet.

Everything was gone. Training. Situational awareness. Fear. Just... everything that wasn't warmth and softness and the way our lips moved together.

Except...maybe not everything. Because this was hardly the first time

we'd kissed, but it was the first time without pretense. Without trying to hide in plain sight or make ourselves look like we were hooking up so people wouldn't pay any attention to us. It just...was.

And as I dragged my fingers through his hair and pulled him in tighter, I realized I hadn't been touched like this in...

Since...

Christ, I couldn't fucking remember.

Arlen touched his forehead to mine, and hot breath gusted across my lips. "Jesus fuck..."

"Yeah." I cradled the back of his head. "Something like that."

"I need..." He drew back, took a second to—I guessed—compose himself, and then met my gaze. His eyes smoldered with lust, but the conversation we'd been having was still here, and so was his apprehension. "I need you to answer me something. Honestly."

Mute, I nodded. In that moment, there was nothing I wouldn't have told him, opsec be damned, because I wanted—needed—his trust in ways I hadn't with anyone in I didn't know how long. All I could do was pray he believed me.

Warm fingertips trailed along my jaw, and he locked eyes with me as he asked, "The people in those photos—the ones the detectives showed us..."

I grimaced at the memory, the pang of grief slamming into my chest. "Yeah?"

His brow furrowed as his intense gaze bored right into me. "Did you kill them or not?"

I was already shaking my head, my eyes never leaving his. "No. I didn't."

He held my gaze for several long seconds. My heart was going wild again, this time for entirely different reasons. Did he believe me? Did he see something that he read as a tell? A sign of guilt?

All at once, something in his posture relaxed, and he cradled my face in both hands as he kissed me again.

My knees almost dropped out from under me. The relief was profound in ways I couldn't remember ever feeling. As if somehow, by some miracle, Arlen saw right to my core and, despite all the reasons I'd given him to distrust me, he believed me this time.

I wrapped my arms around him and let the rest of the world slip away. I knew it wouldn't last—we had a few hours at best—but I was going to seize this moment for as long as I had it.

And through the overwhelming haze of need and relief came something I hadn't expected at all. A wave of unfamiliar emotions crashed over me, threatening to drive me to tears even while Arlen and I wound each other up. What the hell? What was this?

But then Arlen broke the kiss long enough to whisper, "Jesus, Mirko..." before claiming my mouth again, and suddenly it all made sense.

This was the first time in years—maybe since I was a teenager—that I wasn't holding on to another persona while I was holding on to someone else. I didn't think I could've if I wanted to this time, which scared me, but...I didn't have to this time. No accent to maintain. No name to remember. I wasn't trying to fool anyone. I was safe with Arlen, and he was safe with me, and I didn't have to be someone else this time. I didn't want to be.

For as long as this lasted, I just wanted to be the man who was making Arlen tremble like this.

CHAPTER 12

ARLEN

This was so dumb. *I* was so dumb. Of all the stupid things to do, falling into bed with Mirko felt like it was at the top of the fucking list. He was the snake in the garden, the poisoned apple—perfect from a distance, but the closer I got, the greater my chances of being hurt. And yet...I was already hurt, wasn't I? Hell, I'd volunteered myself for the opportunity to get into serious trouble and *Mirko* had tried to stop me. So who was hurting who here?

Not to mention he was gorgeous, eager, and if there was one way I could rely on him to be honest with me, it was physically. But not if he took the lead. Whenever Mirko took the lead, he ended up putting on an act for someone else. Even if we were the only two people in this apartment, I wasn't going to let him pretend for me right now.

I cupped his face in my hands and kissed him, held him still and steady and drank him in as I pressed his body up against the wall. He squirmed a little, trying to take back some control, but I shook my head as I broke the kiss. "Nuh-uh. I'm in charge."

Mirko smirked at me. "Getting in touch with your inner dom?"

"Tryin' to get in touch with whatever part of you still has it in you to be honest," I said, and this time he looked away first. "You don't want something, tell me. Otherwise, the only thing I want from you is the truth. Don't spit into the wind and tell me it's raining."

He laughed. “That’s not a real saying.”

“It is. It’s the nicer version, actually.” And while it was quaint, I wasn’t here to talk etymology with Mirko. I was here to get us off.

I kissed him again, sliding my tongue along his lips until he opened his mouth. I licked inside, tasting him and a hint of coffee, then pulled away to kiss a trail down his neck until I found a good spot to suck a mark into his skin.

“Ah...you, you shouldn’t, it—”

“You gonna tell me you’ve forgotten how to use makeup?” I challenged, sliding my thigh between his legs to give him something to press against. He immediately forgot what he was going to argue with me about, grinding down on my leg instead. I hiked his hips in close and kissed him again, rutting up in a rhythm, and it was almost like being back in that club for a moment.

That alone was enough to make me switch gears. What had happened in the club...that wasn’t real. I wanted something *real*.

Mirko shivered, digging his fingers into my shoulders. “Fine. You’re... You’re in charge, but...” He gazed up at me, dark eyes burning with need. “If that includes fucking me into the mattress...” He bit his lip and pressed harder against me.

“Maybe it does,” I growled. “Is that a yes?”

“In *several* languages.”

Jesus fuck.

“My room or yours?” I asked.

“Um...” Was he actually speechless for a second? I’d have to savor it while it lasted. “Mine?”

Good enough. I grabbed him by the arm and tugged him down the hall into what seemed to be yet another plain, generic bedroom. Hopefully he’d stocked the drawers in the bedside table here, because I wasn’t about to go hunt down Mariana and ask for condoms and lube.

I pushed at Mirko's shoulders until he fell back onto the comforter and followed him down, sliding my arms beneath his shoulders so I could move him up the bed while keeping him close enough to feel his heartbeats against my chest.

I'd never been this...*possessive* with a lover before. Not that I'd gotten a lot of chance to stretch that part of myself, but it wasn't the way I normally went about things. I was easy, casual, willing to go with the flow.

Not this time. This time I wanted Mirko exactly where I put him, where I could see every expression on his face and hear every sound he made, where I could *make* him make those sounds and give me those moments, those hints of truth.

Shit, if I was less into him this would all be so much easier.

"I'm gonna suck you off," I told him before pressing another kiss to his reddened lips. Fuck, he tasted amazing. I wanted to keep doing that, give him more bruises, watch his body react and respond and know that it couldn't be faked. I wanted him to give me control, and so far...he was.

"I thought you were going to fuck me."

"I will. Eventually."

That frustrated sound he made was music.

I pulled back, far enough that I could get my hands on his pants and help get them down his long, slim legs. Mirko had a beautiful body—strong without delving into gym rat territory. Staying fit was probably part of his training, something he had to do in order to pull off the cons he and the Collective ran.

How many people had he fucked because they told him to? How many people had he charmed and left wondering? How many...

No, nope, don't go there, don't get distracted. The worst thing you can do right now is get caught up in the "ex" questions.

I focused on him instead, running hungry hands over his hips and down the inside of his legs. I lifted one of his knees and bit the inside edge of it,

sucking on the tender skin there.

“You should—Arlen, touch me.”

“I am.”

“Not like *that*.” Mirko sounded exasperated...and horny, so I was taking this as a win. If he didn’t say stop, I wasn’t going to stop. “You said you were going to...”

“Suck you off? Fuck you eventually? Yeah, I know.”

He spread his hands. “Okay, so?”

“So hold your horses and let me have my way, or tell me you can’t fuckin’ stand it and I’ll stop,” I replied.

Mirko’s cheeks went pink—was he trying to keep himself from telling me off, or did he like being reminded that I was running the show? Either way, he wasn’t going to talk me out of touching every inch of him that I could reach. His cock was pretty, for sure, and hard enough to make my mouth water, but I was interested in more than just that. I wanted to make him...

I found the spot I was looking for on the back of his knee—I knew he had to be ticklish, everyone was ticklish, weren’t they? Mirko laughed for a second, his eyes going wide as he jerked his leg out of reach. “This is *not* getting me in the mood.”

“No?” I pulled my shirt off and got low between his legs, running my hand down his flank as I reached for his knee again. I didn’t tickle him this time, just pushed his leg to the side so I could see all of him on display. “It should.”

“Why?” he asked. He was probably going for annoyed but came off as more breathless than anything.

“Because I bet you can’t remember the last time you laughed during sex.”

The catch in his breathing was audible this time.

“Or maybe you can remember it,” I went on, leaning over him and grinding my groin down against his. I had pants on, he didn’t, so I didn’t go too hard. It was enough that he could feel how turned on I was. “Maybe you

laughed because you were playin' a part, huh? But did you mean it?" I kissed the center of his chest, right over his sternum. "Did you look at them and wish you could stay longer?" I trailed my lips over his nipple, biting down briefly, then up to the base of his neck. "Did you think about how to make them happy? What they'd like best?"

"I..."

I moved up until we were face to face. "Did you think about what *you* wanted from them?" I asked. I kissed him again, then whispered, "I want you to tell me what you want. Right now."

"You *asshole*." He grabbed my shoulders and pulled me down roughly, kissing so hard I knew my lip was going to be scratched. "You said you'd—"

"You want it? Right now?"

"Yes. Fuck. You want me to beg?"

I kind of did, but... "Maybe next time." I was more than ready to get my mouth on him. "Condom?" The thought of having him bare appealed, but I hadn't been tested since before my last...well, *couple* of hookups, and I didn't want to risk it.

"A condom to go down on me?" He sounded curious, not argumentative.

Some heat rose in my face, and I shrugged. "I... might be a little over careful with..." Fuck. Now I felt stupid.

Mirko's hand found mine. "I'm already making you play with enough fire. I won't stop you from doing what makes you feel safe." Then he nodded toward the nightstand. "They're in the drawer."

I knew he had some. And I appreciated him not making a big deal out of my hypercautious approach to this.

I pulled one from the drawer and put it on him, knelt between his knees, and slid my mouth slowly down his cock. I didn't mind the taste of latex, and I especially didn't mind it when it meant hearing those sounds coming from his throat. I looked up at him, then pulled off. "Eyes on me."

"What?"

“Eyes. On me. Or I stop.”

“You are a *bitch*.” He said it with enough admiration that I took it as a compliment. At least his eyes were open now.

I held the base of his cock with my hand and took him as far into my mouth as I could before he touched the back of my throat. I knew what I was good at, and deep-throating wasn't it. I pulled back instead, getting into a steady rhythm as my other hand scratched gently up and down the tender skin of his thigh, almost to his ticklish spot but not quite.

Fuck yes, this was what I wanted. I wanted Mirko writhing, unstable, unable to rely on his hard-earned tricks. I wanted him to watch me so I could look up and see the truth in his eyes, even if it was only the truth of the moment. I wanted his honesty, and that was exactly what I got.

Lube and two fingers inside of him was even better. He could bite his lip and gut it out through the blowjob, but as soon as I started rubbing his prostate he made a choked sound in the back of his throat, and his entire body twitched. I sucked up the length of his cock, then sank back down as I thrust my fingers inside again.

“Arlen.”

“Yeah?” I did it again, and again.

“Stop!”

“Why?”

“Because I'm about to come, that's why.”

“And you want me to stop before you do?” I almost laughed.

“I want you to fuck me before I do.” Mirko's voice was thin, reedy; he'd stretched his vocal cords as tight as they could go without breaking.

“Oh yeah? That's what you'd like?”

He made an exasperated sound. “That's why I'm *asking* for it.”

I was tempted to make him come like this anyway. He wanted to—I knew enough about his body now to tell that he wanted to, he was ready for it. But I also really, *really* wanted to fuck him, so... “Gimme a sec.”

Getting a condom on with lube-slick hands wasn't the easiest thing I'd ever done, but I was motivated. Mirko went to roll over onto his hands and knees, but I stopped him. "I want to see your face," I said. "Your pretty face...I want to see what you look like when you come."

He opened his mouth—maybe to agree, maybe to tell me no way in hell—but he didn't end up saying anything as I lined up and slowly pressed inside of him.

Edging was fun, but there was only so far I could go before I just needed to *fuck*. It was even worse because this was Mirko, and I felt like we'd been stuck in some kind of twisted foreplay from the moment the cops barged into my apartment. Every kiss we'd had before, every taut interaction where our safety hinged on how intensely we could be into each other, culminated in a need to go faster, harder.

I pressed his legs back and fucked him hard enough that I'd be apologizing to anyone else. He felt amazing, so warm and tight...but it wasn't just the way he felt, it was how he arched his back, how he panted and let out these little moans that I knew, I *knew* he didn't want me to hear. Mirko was the opposite of open, of willing to be vulnerable...except right now, seemed like. Right now he was wrapping his legs around my back and dragging me in closer. "Harder," he whispered in the voice I thought of as his own. "More."

"I can do that." I could—not by much, not for long, but as I ground against him after slamming in as deep as I could go, Mirko grabbed the pillow with both hands, clenched his jaw, and came—fast and untouched.

I followed him a second later. He watched me the whole time, even when I had to shut my own eyes from feeling so overwhelmed. My orgasm left me wrung out, barely able to hold myself up with my own lead-weight arms, but there were some things you just didn't do when you were having sex, and that included falling down onto the person you were currently *inside* and passing out. I went to pull away, but—

“No. Stay.” Mirko’s arms wrapped around my shoulders as he held me close, and I let him. We didn’t even kiss; he just held on while I rested my head on his shoulder, shuddery and at a loss now that all my pent-up energy was gone. This was...this had been...damn, it was a *lot*.

I liked this. I liked Mirko. I really fucking did. I probably shouldn’t have fucked him, though, because now I knew what actually being with him was like. I knew how he rubbed his fingertips together when he didn’t know what else to do with his hands; I knew how he fluttered his eyelashes like a butterfly in a breeze when he came. I knew how he sounded when I was on the verge of getting him off. I knew the taste of his lips.

I knew where he was ticklish. *He* might not even have known he was ticklish there before today, and now we both did. It was a stupid little detail about him that he couldn’t hide from me, and I loved it.

I needed to not love it. I needed to get out of this mess before I stopped *wanting* to get out of it.

Might be too late for that.

Fuck you, it’s never too late to make bad decisions.

Story of my life.

“C’mon,” I said at last, finally pulling off him. He winced and eased his thighs closed with the help of his hands. “Hey, you’re the one who decided to be my bed, blame yourself,” I joked.

“I should get back to doing yoga,” Mirko said a little blurrily. “I need to work on my hip flexors.”

A very dirty vision floated across my eyes, of Mirko and legs and—what was that pose called, the plow? The fish? Whatever it was, I was picturing it in a very non-Ayurvedic way. “A hot shower will help,” I said instead.

I didn’t mean having one with me, but he pulled me in behind him as easy as breathing and I wasn’t quite strong enough to resist. I even got him to let me wash his hair—with color-stay shampoo, so clearly *some* of the things in this place were tailored better than the clothes I was wearing.

“So,” I drawled. “Miroslav Antanasijević.”

“I knew you could pronounce it if you tried,” he said.

“I did my time studying the Marxists, it just takes me a while to wrap my brain around things sometimes.”

“Who would have thought that your tongue was a faster learner than your brain?”

I smirked. “Not bad as far as sex jokes go, but you didn’t know me when I was young and insecure. I tried all sorts of shit I didn’t end up liking in the name of ‘education.’” Not all of it nice. There was a good reason I didn’t tempt my gag reflex with deepthroating. “Anyway, don’t distract me, I had an actual question.”

“Go ahead.”

I smoothed soap across his shoulders, thankful he was turned away from me for a moment. “Picture the future for a sec. After I get Anatolie out—”

“Arlen—”

“Fine, after we get Anatolie out,” I amended. “What’s next for you? Are you and your Collective going to pick up and move on to another gig since this one’s been blown? Or do you plan to stick around and tempt fate for a while longer?”

Mirko turned around under the warm spray and looked at me. Water clung to his eyelashes and gleamed on his kiss-swollen lips. He looked like something out of a myth, some immortal creature ready to entice me beyond bearing, then drag me down into the depths with him.

Or maybe that’s how I looked to him, because all he said was, “You don’t want to know.”

And that was safe. That was smart.

It wasn’t the truth, but I was going to pretend it was as hard as I could because doing otherwise meant digging myself in deeper, and I just couldn’t. *I shouldn’t.*

The sooner we got this shitshow on the road, the better. I reached around

Mirko and shut off the water. “Let’s get dressed and see if Mariana’s come up with anything, huh?”

CHAPTER 13

MIRKO

I didn't know what I was feeling. Or what to make of...well, anything.

Dressing in the room where Arlen had fucked me, I was jittery and off-balance. Rattled in ways I couldn't parse. From the moment my head had begun to clear after that orgasm, I'd felt this way, and I couldn't shake it off.

Arlen must've been having some thoughts about it all, too. As soon as he'd pulled on a pair of jeans, he'd left the room, T-shirt in hand. There was some movement downstairs, and I caught the faint hint of coffee on the air.

I wondered if he'd sensed I was a wreck, or if he needed to get his thoughts in order as well. Either way, I appreciated the space, because...*fuck*.

I should not have been reeling after a roll in the hay with someone. I'd slept with plenty of people as part of covert ops. They'd all been wildly different, and the sex had been all over the board—boring, hot, pathetic, mind-blowing, rough—but the single common thread had been control. *My* control. I'd always been in control. Even in those encounters where I'd given my mark the illusion that he was calling all the shots, I'd been in control of myself, of the situation, of...of *everything*. Because I'd had to be if I was going to accomplish my objective and get out alive.

But this time, I hadn't been.

Buttoning my shirt with alarmingly unsteady fingers, I shivered. Arlen had wrenched control away from me in the most terrifying and exhilarating

way. I was a scattered wreck now, but in the moment, I'd felt anything but unsafe. I hadn't just let my guard down, I'd *thrown* it down and *welcomed* his control, and all the while, I'd known on some visceral level that if I so much as breathed the word "no," he'd have stopped.

I hadn't wanted him to stop. I wasn't sure I could've handled if it had gone on a moment longer, but I hadn't wanted any of it to stop.

And now...

Govno. What is wrong with me?

In my mind, I heard the words we'd exchanged as we'd driven each other wild.

"*You asshole,*" I'd growled at him. "*You said you'd—*"

"*You want it? Right now?*"

"*Yes. Fuck. You want me to beg?*"

I sat on the edge of the bed and exhaled. The words didn't bother me so much. I had no shame in bed. I'd beg for what I wanted. Demand it. I had very few inhibitions.

No, what had me off-balance was my own voice. My own accent.

It had thrown me for a loop even before we'd made it into the bedroom, but now, hearing myself over and over, naked and wanton and completely *me* in that moment...

When was the last time I'd been myself in bed with someone? The last time I'd been Mirko? The last time I'd been able to lose myself so fully that I didn't have to keep a single brain cell locked on to a cover identity?

Arlen knew my name. My accent. He was far from the first man I'd had sex with in recent months or years, but he was the first in ages to have sex with *me*.

I didn't know why that fucked me up so much. Or how to process it.

And I didn't have time to process it anyway, because some noise and voices downstairs told me that Mariana was back.

I closed my eyes, took a couple of deep breaths, and then pulled myself

together as much as I could—enough to convince everyone around me I was good—and went downstairs.

Mariana was on her way in with Danuta and another operative, Jan, with some brown cardboard boxes while Arlen watched, his face full of surprise. It was probably some of the things they'd rescued from his apartment. I wondered which approach they'd taken. A fake gas leak to evacuate the building so they could raid his place? An alleged bedbug infestation? The Collective scrupulously avoided things like bomb threats and active shooters, and that was doubly true in a university setting. Those threats were too real for a student body comprised of kids who'd already spent their formative years being traumatized by threats of violence. Instead, we stuck with infrastructure issues and unpleasant but harmless chemicals. Effective without hurting anyone, physically or mentally.

Before I could ask anyone which method they'd deployed this time, Mariana saw me and shoved a box into Arlen's arms.

"Mirko." She gestured toward the kitchen. "Just the man I wanted to see."

Arlen shot me an alarmed and puzzled look, but then continued up the stairs after Jan, box in hand. I chewed my lip as I watched him go. Yeah, we were mindful of not hurting or traumatizing innocent people in our ops. But what about him?

Mariana took me by the elbow and led me into the kitchen. "So, there are some complications to—" She halted, gaze fixed on me, and one of her near-black eyebrows climbed her forehead. Then she sighed and rolled her eyes. "So does this mean you've both got it out of your system?"

"Both got it—what?"

Another eyeroll. "I'm not stupid, Mirko."

"And I would never accuse you of being stupid, since I value my unbroken bones." I glared at her. "What are you talking about?"

She inclined her head. "So I'm just imagining it. You and he didn't fuck."

There was really no point in trying to get anything past Mariana, and even

if I'd thought there was, the heat in my face told me I'd already given myself away. So I just sighed and avoided her gaze.

"Annd did you get it out of your system?" She was half-teasing, half... absolutely *not* teasing. The unspoken question came through loud and clear: *now that you've emptied your balls, are you going to be focused on this op or completely useless?*

I didn't even have it in me to get defensive. She was right to question me, especially since she was right on the fucking money, and no, I wasn't focused.

I shoved a hand through my hair. Which was wet. Just like Arlen's.

Ooh, boy, we were really being discreet, weren't we?

"I'll be fine." I crossed my arms. "Now, what's this about complications?"

She pursed her lips, studying me skeptically. Either she'd taken me at my word or decided it wasn't her problem, because she leaned against the counter and rested her hands on the edge. "There's good news and bad news about our window to get Anatolie out."

I watched her. "Yeah?"

She nodded grimly. "The good news is that we have a little more time than we thought to plan our move. The bad news..." She sighed, her shoulders dropping. "The bad news is that our window is going to be much smaller, and Anatolie is going to be a lot more fucked if we miss that window."

Oh, *that* sounded great.

I shifted my weight. "All right, so why the change in schedule?"

Mariana tongued the corner of her mouth as she stared at the floor between us with unfocused eyes. Pulling all the data together in her mind to explain it to me as concisely as possible, if I had to guess. When she'd apparently done that, she said, "They decided to bring in the big guns. An interrogator from Washington."

I swallowed. “CIA?”

Her jaw worked. “On paper, terminated by the CIA after his methods were deemed excessive, cruel, and dangerous.”

My stomach roiled. “And...not on paper?”

Mariana met me with a grimace. “Very much employed by a shell company that has contracts with both the CIA *and* the Department of Defense.”

“Jebiga,” I breathed, wiping a hand over my face. “So, too horrible for them to keep on the payroll, but just bad enough for them to hire off the books.” Dropping my hand to my side, I looked at her. “How did the local P.D. manage to get this guy?”

She pushed out a breath. “We’ve had operatives on everyone’s radar for a while. All the alphabet agencies on down to local law enforcement. With as interested as they all are in Anatolie, with the assassinations—someone is putting together the pieces. They’re figuring out who the Collective is, and they may be figuring out what *we* know about *them*.”

“Which means they’ll do whatever it takes to shut us down.” I sagged back against the other counter and swore. We’d all known—from the people who’d started the Collective to each of us who’d joined along the way—that we were going to make a lot of powerful enemies. Such was the reality of organizing against exploitative corporations and corrupt government agencies, especially when nearly everything we did was, out of sheer necessity, illegal. No one fought dragons without accepting the very real possibility of getting burned. But no matter how long you’d fought, no matter how well you understood the danger, it was still deeply unsettling when one of those dragons swung its head around and looked you in the eye.

Now we’d caught the attention of one of the biggest dragons out there.

Not good.

Not good at all.

And they were coming for Anatolie.

I cleared my suddenly dry throat. “So what does this mean for Tolya? Obviously shit’s about to get bad across the board, but...what about him?”

Mariana rolled her shoulders. “Well, like I said, they’re bringing in this new interrogator. Our operatives inside the police force said the guy is overseas right now. Couldn’t get an exact location, but it’s going to take some time to get here.”

Okay. There was that. “Do we have any idea how much time?”

“Seventy-two hours. He’s due to land three days from now at two in the afternoon.”

I chewed my lip. “And there’s no word about them moving Tolya? Meeting him someplace?”

“Nothing specific yet. We’re working on finding out exactly where they’ll be taking him, but so far...” She shook her head. Exhaling, she unfolded and refolded her arms. “From the sound of it, they’ve caught enough of the Collective’s scent that they’re erring on the side of extreme caution with regard to who has contact with him. The less they move him, the less chance there is of someone intercepting him, or anyone on the *right* side of the law discovering he’s being held unconstitutionally.”

I huffed with annoyance and rolled my eyes. “Sure, *now* the cops get smart. Of all the times their stupidity almost fucked me over or got me killed, and *now* they decide to strategize.” I threw up my hands. “Figures.”

Mariana gave a dry laugh. I could almost hear Anatolie chuckling along and adding an amused, “*So you want them to be stupid when it benefits us and smart when it benefits us. Where’s the challenge in that?*”

Just imagining him here, contributing to the dark humor, almost choked me up. Fuck. We had to get him out of there. No way in hell were we leaving him at the mercy of an interrogator who the goddamned *CIA* had determined was too cruel to be kept on the payroll. Well, officially on the payroll, anyway.

I shuddered. “So when *is* our window?”

“Sometime after the interrogator arrives, I assume.” Mariana pursed her lips. “When they move Tolya. They’re going to have him under extra lock and key until the interrogator gets here. They’re not taking any chances with him.”

I hissed a few curses. “How are they even holding him? I know it’s off the books, but someone has to have noticed by now that they’re holding someone who hasn’t even—”

She barked a laugh. “Mirko. My sweet, summer child. They have so many people moving in and out of holding, no one’s going to notice, especially if the people who *would* notice are either in on it or bribed *not* to notice.”

She had a point. Damn it. “So there’s nothing at all?”

“Nothing. Do you think they’re playing this one by the rules? There’s *nothing*, Mirko. No arrest record. No arraignment. We’ve checked every name that’s been put into every system since he was brought in, and there’s nothing. We wouldn’t even know where he was if we didn’t have people on the inside.” She sighed. “We just don’t have anyone who can get close enough to him to get him out. Not without getting themselves caught or killed.”

Cold water slid through my veins. An off-the-books inmate. An off-the-books interrogator. That was...not good. Because off-the-books meant they didn’t have to *play* by the book either. No rules. No Constitution. Not that some of these assholes thought the Constitution applied to immigrants in the first place, but when there was no official record that said immigrant was even in the building...

Jesus fuck.

I furrowed my brow at Mariana. “What about the interrogation video? It was listed as John Doe, but it has to be in their system somewhere.”

“It’s all closed circuit on a department intranet.” She shook her head. “We’ve been trying to find it, but it must’ve been deleted from everything.”

We're just lucky John was able to copy the file before they wiped the drive."

"Yeah," I muttered. "I just hope that's not our only stroke of luck in all this."

"Let's hope."

Silence hung between us for a moment. Elsewhere in the house, Jan and Danuta were talking quietly. I didn't hear Arlen's voice, but there was some movement over my head. He was probably going through his things. Maybe even unpacking a little. Trying to make this safehouse as close to home as he could.

I wondered what was going through his mind right now. If he was trying to predict how long he might be here and what might happen next. That was probably an uncomfortably alien feeling, having no control of the future and no idea what the next day or hour or even minute might bring. I was as used to it as anyone could be, and even I struggled to relax when a situation warranted a safehouse.

Guilt wound barbed wire around my heart. Why did I have to faceplant on *his* car of all cars? Neither of us had known in that moment what I'd be dragging him into, but at least I'd been aware of some possibilities. Of the dangerous things I was involved in. Arlen... Fuck. And now there was nothing I could do.

And if I was honest, I was terrified in a way I didn't recognize.

It was one thing to be worried a fellow operative or an asset might get killed. I was worried sick over Anatolie and devastated by the recent deaths of my friends. Those were things that happened in this line of work, and as much as anyone could, I'd made peace with it.

But I hadn't gone into that restaurant internally panicking because something might happen to Anatolie. Not like I was losing it over Arlen. Like there was more than a mission and a friend on the line. And I couldn't even completely convince myself it was because Anatolie, unlike Arlen, had been well-armed and well-trained. Or even that it was solely because Arlen was an

innocent bystander hauled along for this nightmare ride.

“Don’t get attached,” they’d hammered into our heads from day one of training. *“Whether the person is an asset, an enemy, or an innocent—don’t get attached.”*

We all broke that rule to some extent—we forged friendships among ourselves, of course—but out in the field, it was sacrosanct.

At least, it was supposed to be.

But I was pretty sure I’d gone and gotten—

“Mirko?” Mariana pulled me out of my thoughts and back into the kitchen. I had to pull my gaze down too, because apparently I’d let it drift up to the ceiling separating me from Arlen. And yeah, she’d noticed. Frowning at me, she said, “It’s not too late to bench you, you know.”

“No.” I shook my head. “I can do this. Tolya is in there because of me, and I’m—”

“It isn’t your fault and you know it,” she snapped. “But if we’re going to get him out, we either need your head in the game or your ass on the bench. Pick one.”

“My head is in the game,” I said through my teeth.

“And the asset?” She gestured upward, as if to indicate Arlen.

I worked my jaw, annoyed by the use of “asset” in regard to him.

She cocked a brow. Fuck. That had been a deliberate choice of words, not to dehumanize him per se, but to see how I reacted.

Tsking, she pushed herself off the counter and stood straighter. “Listen, Mirko. We have some time, and I need you to use that time to figure out where exactly your concentration is. Jan, Danuta, and I are going to leave, because we still need to get more of his things and deal with other logistics. So you have some time alone with him. A couple of days, maybe. Seventy-two hours at most.” She pointed sharply at me. “I suggest you use it. And when I get back, *I’ll* decide if you’re in the right state of mind for an op.” She paused. “Think you’ll be up for it?”

I swallowed, weighing my possible answers. Finally, I went for the honest one: “I don’t know. If I’m not, then I’ll bow out. Tolya is the priority, not my ego.”

That seemed to cool some of her irritation, and she nodded. “All right. I’ll be back in the morning.” Gesturing at the ceiling, she added, “Get it together.”

This time, I didn’t stop her from leaving. After she’d left with Jan and Danuta, I took a moment to steel myself, then went upstairs to the room where Arlen had slept last night.

He was, as I’d suspected, unpacking. The bed was covered in open boxes, and the bland white and beige of the room was steadily being overtaken by more vibrant colors. More signs of life.

Arlen regarded me uncertainly as he arranged some thick books on an empty white shelf. “Everything okay?” Beat. “Err, I mean, as okay as it can be right now?”

Sliding my hands into my pockets, I nodded. “Yeah. Just...logistics.”

“Figuring out how to get your friend out?”

I didn’t look at him as I nodded again, letting my gaze drift to some paperbacks he’d stacked on the dresser. “It’s... Operations like that are complicated.”

“And dangerous.” Soft words. Not a question, either.

“Yes.” I inhaled slowly as I met his eyes again. “We won’t be going in as soon as we’d thought.”

Arlen stiffened. “What? But...your friend?”

I grimaced. “It’s not ideal. But some circumstances have changed, and we need to plan carefully. Unfortunately, that means letting him stay there a little longer.”

He studied me, gnawing his lower lip. His eyes were full of questions about those circumstances, but he didn’t voice them, so I didn’t volunteer the answers. He probably didn’t really want to know. And I wanted to give him

the full picture when I had it so he could decide if he was still going to stubbornly be involved, or if he was going to wisely tag out.

Right now...

Right now, there was nothing to tell. Nothing he needed to hear quite yet, anyway; seemed only right for one of us to sleep soundly tonight without nightmares about rogue CIA interrogators.

My gaze snagged on a framed photo he'd put up next to the books. It was Arlen posing with a girl who must've been a handful of years younger than him. Family, too, if the matching green eyes and dark hair were any indication.

I gestured at it as I turned to Arlen. "Your sister?"

He tensed briefly, as if he thought I were digging for intel. Relaxing a little, he came around the bed and picked up the photo. "Yeah. That's Lacey." He smiled fondly. "She's the baby of the family."

"Your only sibling?"

Arlen coughed a laugh that was somehow a mix of fatigue, amusement, and something else. "No, no. I'm number six." His gaze turned somewhat distant as he put the picture on the dresser again. "She's five years younger than me, but I'm closer to her than the rest."

There was more there. Sadness and hurt. Maybe anger? I didn't know if I had any business poking around in his family life. I was curious, but I didn't want to intrude into—

"This whole shitshow we're in?" he said without preamble, and those green eyes locked on mine. "It ain't my first rodeo with the cops. Just so we're clear."

"It's..." I hesitated. I knew some of it—the Collective had, of course, done some digging—but I didn't tip my hand or his. "It's not?"

With a bitter laugh, he shook his head. "My dad got hurt at work. Fucked up his back real good." The laughter, such as it was, faded, replaced by sadness. "His health insurance and workers' comp didn't do crap to actually

help him. I mean, he got the surgery he needed and all, but he needed rehab. A lot of rehab. And the bean counters all said, no, he'd be fine." Arlen scrubbed a hand over his face and sighed. "Wasn't shit he could do to actually get better, and he needed to go back to work, so he just did what he could to fix the pain."

I winced. "Opiates?"

Arlen nodded.

"I'm sorry."

He shrugged, the gesture heavy. "Was what it was, I guess. And between the pain and the drugs, he couldn't do his job. Ended up getting fired."

"For being hurt?" I scoffed, as if I was even remotely surprised that this shit happened. I was well aware of how painfully common it was, but it was still a gut punch every damn time. "Jesus."

"Yep. Thing is, Tennessee is an at-will state. They can fire you and there ain't shit you can do about it unless you've got proof they fired you for something they shouldn't have."

I inclined my head. "Like, being injured? Because of their neglect and carelessness?"

"Only if you can prove that's why they fired you." He sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. "Daddy tried to sue, but he and Mom didn't have that kind of money. God, I never saw him drink like he did after he came home from seeing the lawyer." Arlen shook his head, and his Adam's apple bobbed with a hard swallow. "After that, he gave up."

"On suing?"

"On everything," Arlen whispered. "Working. Being a husband. Being a dad." He half-shrugged. "Life."

"And that led to the cops getting involved?" I asked quietly. "The drug use?"

"It was the start, yeah. Everyone in the house was drinking. One of my brothers stole some of Dad's pills. There'd be fights and whatnot." He waved

a hand. “We were far enough from the nearest neighbors that it had to get really loud for the cops to get called. But...they’d show up anyway. Because people talked, and the cops knew my dad had a problem. Nobody wanted to do shit to help him, but they’d sure drag him off to jail or bust out bullshit warrants to search the house or the car.” He scowled, shaking his head. “So I grew up with the cops hauling my dad away, or my brothers, or...” He exhaled. “It’s nothing new.”

“I’m sorry,” I said again, sounding just as useless as I had a moment ago.

He lifted his gaze and looked me right in the eye. “I won’t tell you I’m not scared to go in there and help your friend. I am. I think anyone would be.” He pushed his shoulders back and set his jaw. “But I watched the cops throwing their weight around where it didn’t belong. I was a kid, so there wasn’t nothing I could do but stand there and watch it happen.” The fierce determination in those eyes almost made me draw back, as did the growled, “I’m not standing around anymore.”

Fuck. At least one of us had his head in the game.

And it occurred to me that since he’d shown some of his cards, maybe it was time I showed some of mine, too.

I took a breath. “Companies like that—the one that hurt your father—they’re much of what the Collective targets.”

Arlen’s eyebrows rose. “Yeah?” He moved a box aside and sat on the edge of the bed. After a moment, he moved another, leaving room for me.

I took it, easing myself down beside him, but leaving some comfortable distance between us. “On the surface, we just look like a bunch of hackers and corporate spies. But it’s more than that. Our clients don’t hire us out of the blue—we target them. Feed them enough information to whet their appetite. Once we do that, they contract us for things like corporate espionage.”

His brow furrowed. “Why not just go in on your own? Why the middleman?”

I smiled, sliding my hand over the top of his. “The middleman is the patsy. When the theft is discovered—and it always is, to some degree—it will be traced to the client who hired us and is now using the intel we sold them.” I waved a hand. “Then it’s all just dismissed as cutthroat competition.”

He leaned in, face full of interest. “But the reality?”

“The reality is that we do steal whatever intel they’ve paid us to find, but we dig deeper than that. We find the fraud. The wage theft. The insider trading. All the ways they cut corners and fuck over their employees to line their own pockets. Of course, none of that would be admissible in a court of law—fruit of the poisonous tree and all of that—but the court of public opinion has far more...lax rules of evidence.

Arlen laughed. “No shit? So you guys steal a few trade secrets or whatever for a client, and then blow a company’s secrets up online?”

“Sometimes online.” I shrugged. “Sometimes we’ll tip off a journalist.” I grinned. “Do you remember last year when that fast food chain had to testify before Congress? The one with mountains of allegations about labor law violations, food contamination, and wage theft?”

He nodded, eyes absolutely gleaming with fascination. “That was you?”

“Not me personally. But the Collective, yes.”

Arlen sat back a little and laughed, a hint of glee in the sound. “Oh my God. That’s amazing.” He faced me, grinning like a kid. “Tell me more. Please. I am absolutely here for the schadenfreude raining down on our corporate overlords.”

I chuckled. I couldn’t argue—there was something deeply satisfying about watching capitalist monsters fall from grace in the most public and expensive ways possible. “Well, I did a job two years ago to expose a tire manufacturer...”

CHAPTER 14

ARLEN

“Okay, I have a question.” I lounged on the couch, my feet resting on the coffee table beside our empty takeout containers.

Mirko lay back and rested his head on my thigh. “Yeah? What’s on your mind?” He seemed a little guarded, as if he thought I might ask something deeply personal. I probably would eventually, but not this time.

“When we went to the police station the first time,” I said, absently stroking his hair. “You got us coffee. And I saw you drinking it.”

Mirko made a face. “Yeah, and it was disgusting.”

“It was. But isn’t there something about how, like, the cops can take DNA and fingerprints off discarded cups and stuff?”

He grinned. “Someone’s been watching Law & Order.”

I rolled my eyes. “Uh-huh. But I’m right, aren’t I?”

“You are, yes.” He shifted a little. “They can absolutely get that information off a cup in the trash, but only if they’re looking for it.”

“Right.” I inclined my head. “And they’re looking for you.”

“But they don’t know that your lawyer was me.”

“And?”

He smiled. “The trick to selling a persona like that is to appear completely careless about it. If I’d made a point of avoiding coffee, not touching anything, taking any trash or wrappers with me—they’d have gotten

suspicious. They might've sampled the DNA and fingerprints just to see if they got a hit." With an arrogant shrug, he added, "No one in that building would buy Miroslav Antanasijević waltzing in there and being arrogantly blasé about leaving his DNA or prints behind."

"Ooh."

"The more stupid shit I did that a suspect would never do..."

"The less likely they'd think you were a suspect."

He tapped the side of his nose and winked.

I laughed, shaking my head. "Wow. Spy University must be a hell of a curriculum."

"Eh, it's not for the faint of heart." He didn't elaborate.

I carded my fingers through his hair. "So how did you even end up involved in the Collective in the first place, anyway?"

Mirko cocked a brow. "I haven't bored you to death with stories about the Collective?"

"The stories are entertaining as all hell. This"—I circled my hand in the air to encompass our safehouse—"might bore me to death." Resting my hand on his chest, I said, "So, keep distracting me from the walls closing in."

He chuckled. "We've only been here twenty-four hours. You haven't felt walls closing in yet."

I cocked a brow. "How long do you think we'll be here?"

He shrugged. "Hard to say. But the last time I had to hunker down in a safehouse, I think it was the three-month mark that I started losing it."

"Three—" I gaped at him. "Tell me you're joking."

"Hey, at least this one has streaming services, decent WiFi, and a variety of takeout nearby. Four fucking months in the middle of nowhere with dial-up internet and no food delivery at all..." He squirmed on the couch. "That was hell."

I whistled. "Who did you piss off to wind up clear out there?"

"Ugh." He rolled his eyes. "I had a Neo Nazi militia out for my head, but

that was also around the time someone higher than me in the Collective found out I'd been dating her son, so..."

"Oh, wow, that's some great foresight," I drawled sarcastically. "Bang the boss's kid and then need him to bail you out."

"Hey." He elbowed me. "I didn't even know he was her kid when we started dating. And he still to this day doesn't know his mother and I both worked for the Collective."

My humor dropped. "Oh. Shit. So he didn't even know the Collective existed?"

Sighing, Mirko shook his head.

"Man. What are the odds?"

"Eh. I was doing an op in a fairly small city at that time—smaller than this one—that had a *tiny* queer community. So there was only about two or three degrees of separation from anyone who was queer. It was... probably inevitable, winding up in bed with someone who knew someone you did. In my case, it was my boss's kid." He paused. "And by 'kid,' I don't mean literally a kid. He had a good ten years on me."

"But she didn't like that."

Mirko rolled his eyes. "No. She never said anything about it, but I could tell she was *not* happy. So, then when shit went south on an op, and I suddenly needed to go into hiding until the Collective could get that Skinhead militia off my back, I get sent to this rickety safehouse in rural New Hampshire. For four fucking months."

I gaped at him. "I can't decide if that's hilarious, or if she fucked up something good for you."

He sighed, shrugging again, and rested his hand on top of mine on his chest. "It was a little of both. He and I weren't that serious, but I liked him. I would've liked to have ended things with him on my own terms."

Grimacing, I asked, "What does he think happened?"

Mirko scowled. "That I cheated on him, took off to California with a

much younger and hotter guy who's trying his luck in Hollywood, and oh by the way, he should probably get tested for a few things."

"Wow. She made sure that bridge *burned*, didn't she?"

"She did. And there isn't a damn thing I can do without tipping my hand about what she and I really do. So, he hates my guts, and when everything quieted down, I asked to come back here instead of that shithole town."

"I don't blame you." I ran my thumb alongside his. "You didn't answer my question, by the way."

He looked up at me, forehead creasing. "Which question?"

"About how you got involved in the Collective in the first place. I don't imagine your guidance counselor told you to look into becoming a gray hat for a criminal organization."

Mirko laughed, unaware of how gorgeous his smile was or the way those dark eyes sparkled. "No, they thought I should go into international business or whatever." He gestured dismissively with his free hand. "That was their go-to for all the foreign kids. Since we were all bilingual."

"Even if international business wasn't your forte?"

"Pfft. We were bilingual and foreign. We were supposed to be grateful there was a career path for us at all."

"Oh, for fuck's sake."

"I know, right?" He laughed again. Then he sat up on the cushion and turned so his back was against the armrest and his legs were over mine. Not unlike when he played Enzo a lifetime ago, though he was fully-dressed this time with short, reddish hair. Still hard to believe this was the same guy I'd carried home after that crazy day outside the Intercontinental.

"So, the Collective." He shifted a little as if to get comfortable, then leaned back with his hands behind his head. "I was recruited in high school, actually."

I blinked. "You were recruited into an organization like that in high school?"

“Mmhhh. I was...” His eyes lost focus for a second. “Let me back up a little. I came to America when I was twelve. My father was seriously hurt during the Kosovo Conflict in the late 1990s, and he couldn’t work. Couldn’t support us. My mother—she couldn’t support the family either. Not enough to care for my father and four children. Fortunately, my uncle came over here to keep his sons from being conscripted for the Bosnian War, so we had someone to sponsor us. So things were... rough early on.”

“Wow,” I whispered. “That does sound rough.”

Mirko nodded. “The thing is, English isn’t all that uncommon in Serbia, but I was born in a small village. My father spoke passable English, but my mother didn’t, and my siblings and I...” He shook his head. “So when I came here, I was twelve, and I barely spoke English. When you’re a poor immigrant kid who doesn’t speak English, that’s a recipe for some serious bullying.” He huffed a breath and rolled his eyes. “Especially in the Thunderdome of American schools.”

I laughed dryly. “Aw, hell, they were Thunderdomes for me, and I knew the language. I can’t even imagine.”

“Yeah. It fucking sucked.” He wiped a hand over his face, then rested both hands across his stomach. “So, there was a lot of bullying and bullshit like that. And I learned quickly that the more I could blend in, the less the bullies would notice me. I could mimic an American accent before I could even speak more than two or three sentences in English, and I learned the mannerisms, the way people dress—everything that could make me disappear into a crowd.”

I raised my eyebrows. “So you were teaching yourself spycraft in middle school.”

One shoulder rose slightly. “Pretty much. By the time I got to high school, I was... Well, not fluent enough to speak like a native, but I could fake it enough to keep people from noticing. And I met some friends who were also immigrant kids from all over the place. We’d help each other with

English, but also with blending in, and learning how to hide from bullies without making it obvious.” Mirko’s expression turned a little distant. “That’s how I met Anatolie.”

My stomach clenched. “Oh, shit. So you guys are—you’re childhood friends.”

Mirko’s jaw worked as he nodded. “One of the oldest and closest friends I have in this country. He’s Moldovan, and there’s no mutual intelligibility between our languages, so we had to communicate in English. His English was better than mine, and talking to him helped me become fluent.” He chuckled almost soundlessly. “And I learned to mimic his accent, which he hated.”

“What? Why?”

“Because he was really good at doing the same—he can pass for almost anyone, especially on the phone—and he hated that I was almost as good.” Mirko laughed again. “We were idiot teenagers. It made sense at the time.”

“Sounds like me and my brothers at that age,” I said. “I get it.”

Mirko sobered again. “He *is* like a brother to me. Always has been. And when someone from the Collective recruited him, he told them I’d be good too. So we’ve both been in since we were sixteen.”

“That young?” I breathed.

He nodded. “They didn’t have us in the more dangerous ops back then. Mostly they were training us. They had far better language training than our schools did, so we could not only get better at English, we could learn other languages.”

“How many languages do you speak?”

“Fluently? Four. Serbian, English, Italian, and Polish. And I can understand some Spanish, Portuguese, and Russian.”

“Holy shit. Here I thought I was doing good with Spanish and German.”

Mirko’s smile was soft. “You probably didn’t have as much need for them as I do.”

“No. Just needed the credits so I could move the hell on to grad school.”

“Ugh. I’ll take learning how to not get killed in a dangerous op over... that shit.”

As frustrated as I’d been with my own academic program, I could see the appeal. “So that was it, then. You got recruited as a kid, and you’ve been working there ever since.”

“For over half my life. I was a little unsure in the beginning, but the more I learned about the Collective, the more I believed in it. Especially since it was mostly immigrants like me who know what it’s like to struggle, and the focus is on helping the little people at the expense of those on top.”

I cocked my head. “But doesn’t the little guy become collateral damage sometimes? Like if you take down some big corporation?”

“They can,” he admitted. “We do what we can to mitigate it. Whenever our activities have resulted in people losing jobs or otherwise running into hardship, mysterious benefactors will deposit money into their accounts. We have very good and powerful lawyers who will work pro bono for employees, and we also have a number of shell companies and public-facing members—including some politicians—who lobby vocally and financially for things like unions. Yes, there is collateral damage sometimes, but we do what we can to minimize and offset it.”

“Huh. Modern day Robin Hood in the form of organized crime.”

Mirko laughed. “Someone has to do it.”

“Yeah.” I swallowed. “And now someone wants to stop you.” I slid my hand over his knee. “This is bigger than that Neo Nazi militia that came after you, isn’t it?”

He nodded grimly. “Much bigger. We’re not sure if we’re up against law enforcement agencies, or rogue agents within. If they’re part of another organization, or...” Sighing, he shook his head. “We don’t know for sure. And it may take time to figure it out. All we know at this stage is that we’ve been compromised, at least some cops are in on it, and they have Anatolie.”

“So... next step is to get Anatolie out. Then what?”

Avoiding my gaze, Mirko shook his head. “I don’t know yet.”

I wanted to press. He had to have some kind of idea about where he’d end up. Where I’d end up. What would happen with the Collective. Something.

But I let it go.

I wasn’t sure I wanted to know.

CHAPTER 15

MIRKO

I couldn't sleep.

I needed to. Desperately. And much like people who'd been trained by the military, I could usually sleep any time, any place. I couldn't afford to be exhausted in this line of work. That was how people got killed.

But I couldn't sleep.

I hadn't really been able to since this whole debacle had started. Well, aside from when I'd been drugged, anyway. Since then, though, I'd struggled to sleep more than a handful of hours at a time, and it was always restless and full of nightmares.

I saw Anatolie a lot. I relived that night in the hotel restaurant over and over. Sometimes the details changed. We were in different places or with different people. Sometimes there were real bullets instead of tranq darts. I watched him die. I watched him get dragged away while I bled out. Over and over, I lost him.

Arlen was there, too. Sometimes saving me. Sometimes being the one who needed saving, but just like with Anatolie, I could never save him.

Tonight, I couldn't close my eyes without seeing all that and worse, because there were two major factors that had come into play since the last time I'd slept.

One, the interrogator. I was all too aware of the horrors that would be

awaiting Anatolie if the interrogator got his hands on him. I'd never been tortured myself, but everyone involved in covert ops knew it was a possibility, and we'd all heard the stories of how bad it could be. Being at the mercy of an interrogator like this was literally a fate worse than death.

But that wasn't the only thing keeping me up tonight.

Closing my eyes again, I listened to Arlen breathing beside me. He was safe and alive. Sleeping peacefully beside me in a safehouse monitored constantly by the Collective. But I couldn't relax, and our shared body heat beneath the covers wasn't enough to chase away the chill lingering under my skin.

I finally gave up and slipped out of bed, calling on all that training that allowed me to move in silence while an oblivious mark slept. I found the sweats I'd been wearing before we'd gone to bed, pulled them on, and crept out of the room. The stairs had a few spots that creaked, but a single day of moving around this place had let me memorize all those spots and avoid them now.

Safely downstairs, I went into the living room where Arlen and I had spent half the afternoon. We'd lazily watched TV while we'd eaten takeout. We'd talked. I'd told him more about myself than I'd told anyone in more years than I could count. There'd been moments when I'd almost completely forgotten why we were here at all.

Moments when I'd felt...

Safe.

We weren't safe, though. *Arlen* wasn't safe, and it was my fucking fault. This townhouse gave us the illusion of safety, but the Collective was compromised. If someone had figured out we existed and they'd figured out who some of us were, then who was to say they hadn't tracked us to this location? Who was to say they didn't have someone on the way here right now?

I sank onto the couch and rubbed my hands over my face. God, I was

exhausted. And fucking scared. Any number of things could happen to Arlen now, and anything that did happen to him was my fault. Entirely my fault. And the closer I let myself get to him, the more I hated myself for dragging him into this. The best-case scenario would've been for us to never cross paths at all. Sure, I'd have missed out on those fleeting moments of intimacy and those few conversations we'd had, but then Arlen would be safe. Blissfully unaware that the Collective even existed.

But I couldn't turn back the clock. He was in this now, and he was determined to help us get Anatolie out even if it meant putting himself in danger. I had a lot on my conscience from my time in the Collective, but I genuinely had no idea how I'd live with myself if anything happened to Arlen.

So much for not getting personally invested in an asset.

Because that was what he was—an asset.

He was someone who could help us get Anatolie away from the cops and whoever else was gunning for the Collective, and then he could disappear into the woodwork. New identity. New city. New life that didn't involve me or anything else that would put him in so much danger.

That was a good thing. So why the fuck did I hate the idea so much?

Maybe because, just this one goddamned time, I want to do something selfish.

I pushed out a breath and leaned back into the cushions. That was it, wasn't it? I'd spent so fucking much of my life doing things for the Collective. I'd lived for the Collective and the people we'd tried to help. The boyfriend I'd lost when my boss hadn't appreciated me dating her son? That wasn't the first relationship that had been a casualty of my job. Some hadn't been able to deal with me being secretive; it was tough to build trust with someone when you were living as a persona constructed of lies. Some, I'd let go because I'd known they'd get hurt sooner or later.

Arlen wasn't a boyfriend. He wasn't even a lover, no matter how much I

could still feel the sex we'd had. He was an *asset*. The fact that we'd crossed some lines didn't change that.

But no matter how much I needed to stay objective and professional...
No matter how much I needed to prioritize the Collective...

I wanted to be selfish.

There was some kind of spark here. The first inklings of *something*. At this stage, that something could turn out to be nothing but long nights and mind-blowing orgasms, or it could be a hell of a lot more. All I knew was that I wanted to know what it could be.

Even if this is just a fling, I want to ride it to the end.

I want to be selfish, damn it.

I want—

A creak above my head had me sitting bolt upright.

I had a second or two to hope he'd just rolled over in bed or something, but the telltale sounds of footsteps marked a path that was almost visible to the naked eye. Was it too much to hope he was getting up to take a leak or something? Or would this be like earlier where I hoped he'd go one way but he came straight to me?

From the heavy footfalls on the stairs—no luck.

I closed my eyes and took a couple of breaths to pull myself together. Good thing I hadn't fallen apart completely. My mind was a wreck, but I wasn't crying or anything.

Just sitting alone in a pitch-black room at three in the morning like a perfectly well-adjusted person.

At the bottom of the stairs, the steps halted. There was silence for a moment, then a somewhat sleepy, "Mirko?"

I swallowed. "In here." I paused. "And if you flick on a light, we will have some words."

Arlen laughed softly as he padded into the living room. "I'm not turning on a light. Then I'll never get back to sleep." He could apparently see well

enough to find me, navigate around the coffee table, and join me on the couch. “What are you doing up?”

“Couldn’t sleep.”

Silence hung between us long enough that I assumed he was waiting for an explanation. I wasn’t sure I could give him one if I wanted to. I understood why I was awake. I just didn’t think I could explain it in such a way that would let *him* sleep any time soon.

I was putting him through enough. At the very least, I owed it to him to let him get as much sleep as he could.

“Does this always happen before an op?” he asked quietly. “Or, um... When you have a friend who’s...”

I winced, grateful for the darkness to hide my face. “I usually sleep all right. I’m... I can shut everything off, you know?”

I couldn’t see him, but I sensed him turning toward me. “What’s different now?”

Christ. Was he going to make me spell it out?

To my surprise, he didn’t. Maybe he was too tired. Maybe he just didn’t want to know.

Instead, he changed tactics. “You need to sleep, though. Right? In case we have to move tomorrow?”

My shoulders sagged, and I scrubbed a hand over my face again. “I do. We both do.”

More silence.

I pushed out a long breath. “You should sleep.”

“So should you.”

Again, I was grateful for the darkness, this time to hide me rolling my eyes. “I know. But I can’t. So I’m at least not going to keep you awake.”

Silence. Again.

Goddammit, Arlen. Just go to bed so I can freak out in peace.

He didn’t move or speak for a long moment. When he finally did, he

reached across the space between us, felt around, and then laced our fingers together. “Come on. Come back up to bed.”

Just the thought of climbing those stairs exhausted me. And anyway... “Why? It isn’t like I’m going to sleep.”

“No, but I think I can distract you for a little while. And if we’re lucky, maybe that’ll knock you out.”

I froze for a couple of heartbeats. Did he... How the hell did he think I wanted sex?

And how the hell was he right?

It didn’t matter. He was, and he was leading me back up the stairs, and he was ordering me out of my clothes, and he was guiding me down onto the mattress, and he was...

Everywhere.

Over me. All around me. In my arms. Kissing up and down my neck. Rutting his hard dick against mine. Drawling sexy, whispered promises in my ear before he found my mouth and claimed it.

He’d demanded control the first time we did this—he took it gently this time, and I gave it gratefully. We kissed. We held on. My mind kept trying to wander, because God knew there were things that wanted my focus, but Arlen’s kiss and his touch and his warmth kept pulling my attention right back. There was no getting distracted when I was at the mercy of his relentless mouth and talented hands.

So I just... surrendered. To him. To the realization he was no longer an asset. To the fierce determination to see everything through so we could see what this spark could ignite.

To right now.

I raked trembling fingers through his hair. “Fuck me again.”

Arlen touched his feverish forehead to mine, and he struggled to catch his breath. “Can you... That won’t be too much? After—”

I shut him up with a kiss. Yeah, it probably would be too much, but I

wanted it. The sensory overload would probably short circuit my brain, and I wanted that, too.

I broke the kiss, and still gripping the back of his neck, I whispered, “Fuck me till I can’t think anymore.”

The sound that came from him was somewhere between a growl and a groan—completely primal and absolutely onboard with fucking me into oblivion. The aggressive kiss that followed... oh, yeah. He was onboard.

By the time he relented, I was breathless and dizzy, and I just closed my eyes and lay there while he moved away to get a condom. Downstairs, sex hadn’t even crossed my mind. Once he’d brought it up, though... Jesus, I needed it. Needed him. It didn’t make sense and it didn’t have to. My whole fucking world had gone insane, so why not grab an opportunity to be too blissed out to care?

The mattress shifted a little as Arlen came back to me. “Turn over.” His words were a request, but I responded like they were an order, obeying immediately.

I started to get up on my hands and knees, but Arlen’s weight guided me all the way down. Before I could think too hard about that, two slicked up fingers pushed into me, and I couldn’t think anymore at all. I just pressed my forehead into the pillow and moaned. My mind went completely, deliciously *blank*. Nothing mattered or even existed besides us and that perfect sensation of him teasing me with his fingers.

Then he slipped them free, and my head spun as he paused to add more lube. A moment later...

“Fuuuck,” I breathed as he eased inside.

“This good?” he murmured in my ear.

He expected me to talk? Right now? While his dick was moving inside me?

Somehow, I did manage to talk, and the one word that came out was, “More.”

Arlen said something I definitely didn't catch. His words were too slurred, his accent too thick, and my mind was too lost in the ecstasy of being fucked.

And oh, God, he fucked me. He slid his arms under me, grabbed my shoulders, and drove himself into me over and over, while I just... drowned in him. In the sensation and the heat and the...

Safety.

Govno. Yes. I was supposed to be protecting him, but right now...

It wasn't the first time I'd been with someone bigger than me—wasn't that unusual for a guy my size—and Arlen wasn't even the tallest or broadest man I'd been with. But like this, his arms under me and his weight over me... God, it was like being wrapped in Kevlar. Much more comfortable, of course, but... protected. Safe. In ways I'd never known I wanted or needed a man to make me feel. Maybe that was weird. I didn't care. I just...

"God, don't stop," I moaned.

"Huh?" His breath gusted alongside my neck. "What?"

Fuck. English. Gotta speak English.

I licked my lips and tried again. "Don't. Stop."

Oh, he understood me that time. A low groan came from the back of his throat, and he thrust harder, driving a whimper out of me. I tried to roll my hips to reciprocate, but I couldn't move, and from the sounds he made and the way he shuddered as his fingers twitched on my shoulders, he didn't mind.

"Fuck, baby," he breathed. "Oh, fuck. You feel so damn good."

I muttered something in the vicinity of "So do you" and hoped he understood.

This wasn't like me. None of it was. Hell if I cared, though, because apparently this was like *us*, and I loved it.

Arlen slowed down. He shifted a little, resting one arm beside me as the other went to my hip. Without a word—with just a gentle tug of his fingertips

—he told me to come up off the mattress. I did. Not much, but apparently enough to satisfy him.

He sat up all the way and gripped my hips in both hands. When he started moving this time, there was nothing slow or easy about it. He plowed into me, making the bed squeak in protest while curses in multiple languages rolled off my tongue.

Then he spoke, sounding like he was talking through clenched teeth: “Beat yourself off. You come, you’re gonna make me come.”

I didn’t even need to use my hand at that point. His dick, his command, everything—he was going to get me off without either of us touching my cock.

But I did as I was told anyway, and all it took was a couple of pulls to have me shaking so bad my other arm could barely hold me up. “Arlen...”

“Yeah, that’s it...” He thrust impossibly harder—*punishingly* harder—almost knocking me back to the mattress as he sent me higher and higher with every deep, perfect stroke. “Come on, baby. Take me there.”

Whatever he said after that was lost in my strangled cry as I came. I must’ve done exactly like he’d said and taken him there, because the next thing I knew, he was shouting his own release, pulling my hips back against him as he tried to get as deep as he could.

Then we both collapsed, his body a perfect and protective weight over mine as we trembled and panted.

Vaguely, I was aware that the world wasn’t right. Wrongness tingled at the edges of my senses, but my mind was too hazy and unfocused to do more than kind of notice.

At some point, Arlen pulled out. He left for a moment. Getting rid of the condom, I guessed? Whatever. I’d nearly fallen asleep when he came back and nudged me, suggesting we grab a shower.

Probably a good idea. Especially together, since I didn’t quite trust my legs.

I barely stayed on my feet through a shower with him. By some miracle—and probably because I was leaning on him—I made it back into the bedroom and collapsed into the pillows.

And I slept like the fucking dead.

CHAPTER 16

ARLEN

The Collective moved fast when they finally saw a need to. A little while ago, as we'd lounged naked together in bed, I was listening to Mirko tell more stories about some of his funnier exploits—just the funny ones, and I'm pretty sure he did that on purpose. Now I was preparing to be injected with something that was temporarily going to make me wish I'd never been born.

Awesome.

You asked for this.

It was a reminder I needed. I *did* ask for this, to be included in the plots and schemes, to help get Mirko's friend out of jail. I didn't just ask, I basically *demand*ed to be given a role to play. So it wouldn't really be right for me to bitch about the way they wanted me to play that role.

Even though it involved poisoning me.

Okay, actually, maybe that did merit a bit of bitching.

"How long does this take to work again?" I asked as I rolled my sleeves up. I was back in my "nice" clothes, the only ones I had that were suitable for a trip to the police station. Given what might happen while I was wearing them, I kinda wished I was wearing something ratty.

"It'll kick in hard in about ten minutes, maybe fifteen," Mirko said, his face blank as he readied the injection. There was no need to find a vein with this stuff, apparently—it was enough that he pushed it under my skin. My

body would do the rest. “Long enough for us to get beyond the outer layer of their defenses, I think.”

“And you’re sure about John’s directions?” I’d probably asked three times already. Mirko had to be getting sick of me. To his credit, though, he nodded.

“As sure as I can be. He says he’s actually seen Anatolie through the glass, and they won’t have moved him yet. Not before the interrogator gets here.”

The interrogator. The mysterious CIA agent who had everyone in the Collective flipping their shit. If the guy—or gal, who knew—was bad enough that veterans like Mirko and Mariana were freaking out, then this person was a serious threat. That was how it had been explained, at least, and was probably the main reason they’d let me into the fold. They needed to act fast, and I was in the best position to help.

I took a deep breath and tilted my head up so I was looking at the ceiling. We were back in “Daniel’s” car, which genuinely felt like a vehicle that had nothing of Mirko in it. It was crazy the way he was able to compartmentalize. He looked the part of my erstwhile lawyer, prim and proper, vaguely British, and slightly condescending no matter who he was speaking to.

This was probably the last time I’d ever see Daniel Taylor. This persona was about to get burned, and burned *hard*. Mirko had a cloth mask in his pocket, but that wasn’t going to fool anyone watching the security feeds for more than a few seconds. He wasn’t going to have much time to find Anatolie, free him, get back to me, and then get us all out again.

There was a hell of a lot that could go wrong.

“If you’re having second thoughts...”

“Nah.” I mean, yeah, of course I was, but I wasn’t going to let them actually *stop* me. So what if I blew up my life and my future? What kind of future did I even have at this point? I’d been out of class long enough that Professor Hartford had probably filed a complaint, stricken me from the

register, and gotten me kicked out of the program. My advisor wouldn't stick up for me; he was so lost in Ancient Greek angst that he barely even remembered I existed.

No, this was for the best.

"Go ahead," I said, careful not to look. I didn't want to get sick too early. It was wild how I could see an actual nail sticking through somebody's foot—my middle brother's, if you want to get technical, and we all got a lecture on playing with nail guns after that—and be absolutely fine, but one little glimpse of a needle sliding under my skin and I was woozy.

There was a tiny burn, followed by a more substantial one. I gritted my teeth. "What exactly is in this stuff?" But then I rolled my eyes and answered my own question: "Let me guess—I don't want to know."

"Exactly. All you need to know is that it's going to give you shakes, the appearance of a fever, and very likely vomiting."

Oh yeah, the vomiting. Mmm. This was going to be so great.

"Remember to play it up," Mirko went on as he finally removed the needle, capping the syringe before wrapping it in a plastic baggie and stuffing it in the glovebox. "You're going to be rapid-onset sick, bad enough that people need to be both concerned *and* wanting to back away from you. You being by yourself is good—they locking you in somewhere isn't. If I can't get to you..."

Then he wouldn't be able to get me out. I'd either have to get myself, out, or...well. Something else would happen, something I resolutely wasn't going to think about just before we headed in to the station.

The uncertainty of it all was galling, but now it was *really* too late for regrets. The clock was ticking on my ability to, y'know, stand and not slur my words. "Okay," I said, rolling my sleeve back down. "Let's go freak out some cops."

"You sound very gleeful about that," Mirko said as he opened his door and got out. I followed suit, wondering whether the shakiness I felt was my

nerves or whether the drugs were kicking in faster than we'd anticipated.

Face it, Arlen—you're no spy.

Nope, I wasn't, but I wasn't useless either. I was going to help Mirko get his friend out of jail, we were going to hightail it back to the safehouse, and then I was going to ruthlessly abuse his affection for me by making him wait on me hand and foot until I felt like myself enough to fuck him again.

It was a good plan.

"All right." I resisted the urge to crack my knuckles. "Let's go."

It was almost funny, seeing the look on the desk sergeant's face as we approached. He went from vaguely bored to "holy shit, red alert!" in about point-five seconds, and was scrambling for his phone by the time we got up to the desk.

"Howdy," I said pleasantly, folding my arms over each other as I leaned forward. "My name is Arlen Tate, and my lawyer and I would like to talk with Detective Rayner about the holdup on getting my car back."

"Mr. Tate, ah, of course." The desk sergeant nodded so quickly he looked like a bobblehead. "Give me just a moment."

"No problem." I glanced at Mirko, who stood next to me casually, one hand in his pocket while the other held his briefcase. "Sorry for dragging you back down here," I said for the sake of anyone listening in.

He smiled faintly and inclined his head. "It's quite literally my job to assist you with this. The lack of responsiveness on the part of the police is inexcusable."

"You think?"

"Oh, absolutely. We could have a veritable lawsuit on our hands."

The desk sergeant's eyes were getting wider and wider with every word. "Uh..." Something beeped on his phone, and he turned away from us and began speaking, quick but quiet.

Not quiet enough.

"You need to get back here *now*," he hissed. "The kid you were looking

for is here and he brought his lawyer. I'll put him in a room until you get back, but *hurry up*." He ended the call and turned back around to face us, a faux-pleasant smile plastered on his ruddy face.

"I'm afraid Detective Rayner is out on a case right now," the sergeant said apologetically. "However, there are several other officers listed on your case, if you'd prefer to talk to one of them?"

Mmm, no. "Detective Rayner has been my consistent point of contact on the car thing," I said. "It's him or nobody, thanks."

"Perhaps we should leave and come back another time," Mirko offered.

Are you crazy? What if he decides that's the best solution?

I was worried for nothing, though.

"No, no!" The sergeant held up his hands placatingly. "No, please, he's on his way back! He should be here in the next half an hour, fifteen minutes, easy. Let me, ah, let me show you to a room where you can wait for him."

I made a face. "I dunno. Last time somebody here said that, I ended up in an interrogation room. That was shitty, man. I'd rather just go."

"We have a break room! I'll even give you some change for the snack machines."

"With an offer like that, how could we refuse?" Mirko said, pushing his glasses up his nose a little way.

"Great, great. Hang on." The desk sergeant lumbered to his feet and came out from around the desk. "Let me show you there personally."

I straightened up from where I was leaning, then almost fell over again. *Shit*. My balance was starting to go.

Mirko immediately took my elbow in a solid grip. "Goodness, it must be your blood sugar," he said solicitously, then glared in pure condescension at the sergeant. "If you don't mind hurrying up..."

"Sure, sure, let's just...you two come with me." We followed him back the same way we went before, only this time instead of turning into an interrogation room we walked farther down the hall and were let into what

was clearly a well-used break room. It had a long leather couch, a few tables, a fridge, and a whole series of vending machines.

I beelined for the couch and sat down, fumbling in my pocket for my phone. It was another burner, of course, set up to get me on a group call with Mirko and Mariana once shit started going down. And the way I was feeling, shit was going to go down very soon.

“Mini Oreos or Doritos?” Mirko called out to me from over by the pair of vending machines.

“Ugh.”

“Oreos it is.”

I managed to get my headphones in by the time he came back bearing some very unwanted food, but I couldn’t manage to hit the power button and turn the phone on. I felt like I’d just gotten off a roller-coaster, like my brain was still rotating in circles even though my body wasn’t moving. I closed my eyes, pressed a hand to my forehead, and groaned.

“What, ah, what’s wrong with him?” The sergeant was still here, then. Good—he’d spread the word real fast about the sick guy.

“I don’t know.” Mirko sounded really worried. “He seemed perfectly fine earlier. Mr. Tate? Arlen, what’s wrong?”

“I don’t...” The room suddenly felt like it was a hundred degrees. I was burning up, and I wrenched open the top of my button-down in an effort to get cooler. Someone gasped—great. Maybe I had hives. *That* would help sell it. “I don’t know—”

That was as far as I got before I was puking my guts out all over the floor. I kept my eyes closed, but it must have been quite the sight. The bottle of red Gatorade I’d drunk before Mirko injected me with Insta-Flu probably helped sell it.

“Oh shit,” the sergeant muttered. “This is—he’s not well. Let me get some EMTs in here, we can—”

“No.” Mirko let go of me and backed away, but not before turning on my

phone. “No, I don’t think that’s safe. I don’t think anyone else should be near him right now.”

“What, you think it’s Covid or something?”

“Given how quickly this came on, I think it’s possibly *far worse* than that.”

The sergeant said something else, but I was too lost in my personal misery to pay much attention. I knew I was going to feel sick, I just didn’t think I was going to feel *this* sick. My stomach had already all but turned itself inside out, but it kept trying anyway. My head ached like I’d been smacked with a baseball bat, my hands were trembling, and I was still so *hot*. I fell back onto the couch with a groan and focused on the one thing that cut through the misery I was in.

“Well, that was effective,” Mirko said over the Bluetooth a moment later. “Arlen, I’m so sorry, I didn’t expect it to work quite so well.”

“Operation: Sick as Fuck was a success, then?” Mariana asked.

“So far, so good. I’ve managed to raise quite an alarm about it. The sergeant will be issuing a warning for the whole building in—yes, there it is. Perfect.”

The alert being broadcast over the loudspeaker was a repetitive bleat that made me want to suffocate myself with this dank-ass couch cushion, but yay for Mirko liking the results.

“Did you grab the keycard that John said he hid in the break room?” Mariana went on.

“I got it.” How they were sure that the card wasn’t going to implicate their cop friend, I didn’t know, but Mirko had assured me it was going to be fine, so I had to believe him.

Yeah, look where all your believing has gotten you. My stomach cramped again, hard enough that I almost fell off the couch. I had to catch myself with one hand on the ground, which was—gross.

“Fuck,” I muttered.

“Arlen?”

“M’fine.” Or at least I would be as soon as—

The break room door opened again. I looked blearily up and saw the desk sergeant, the lower half of his face covered with what looked like an N95 mask. The wideness of his eyes betrayed his nerves, though. “Mr. Tate? I, uh...I think we should get you out of here, huh?”

No, that was no good. “Can’t move,” I groaned.

“Well, uh, like I mentioned before, I can get EMTs in here and they can put you on a stretcher, make you nice and comfortable.”

Fucking shit, *no*. It was everyone else who needed to leave, not me. I was going to have to help this along with one of the lies Mirko had coached me on. “D’you think it was the white stuff in the newspaper stand in front of the station?” I slurred dramatically—mostly dramatically, anyway. It was actually kind of hard to make my lips move the way I wanted them to.

“White...stuff?”

“Yeah, I...grabbed a paper right before I came in. It was all gritty and kinda—but it didn’t smell like anything, so...”

Mariana hummed. “Got it, we’re prepared for this scenario. I’ve got someone putting the powder in place. Talc, but they won’t know it without a lab test. Nice job, Arlen.”

“I told you he could handle it. Heading up to the second floor...”

Meanwhile, the desk sergeant was staring at me like I’d just grown a third eye. “The...did you say in the newspaper stand?”

“Mmhmm,” I said, then clutched my stomach again as I spasmed in place. Jesus *Christ*, this sucked so much dick, and not in the fun way.

“White...shit, you stay there, stay right where you are and *don’t touch anything!*” He disappeared, already reaching for the radio at his waist. A few seconds later, the alarm stopped and a voice sounded over the intercom.

“All personnel are required to exit the station immediately. This is an emergency. I repeat, all personnel are required to exit the station

immediately. Avoid the front of the building, take the side and rear exits.” They went on that way for a bit, then the alarm was back.

“Perfect.” Mariana sounded even more pleased. “The anthrax threat is always a good one.”

“Maybe too good. This is the third time we’ve used in in the past two years.”

“In three different countries,” she dismissed. “It’s fine; it’s nothing like a pattern. Are you getting close?”

“I’m within a few rooms.” Mirko huffed. “Convenient that they didn’t mention getting any of the inmates out of the station, despite the fact that anthrax would *absolutely* kill them too.”

“You know how these people think.” Mariana sounded tired. “You can’t tell me you’re surprised, and it works in our favor right now.”

“I suppose...it does...hang on, this door isn’t opening for the card.” There’s a grunting, then the sound of the briefcase opening. “One moment...”

“Are you going to—don’t, it’s so obvious, come on!”

“Obvious *works*, and it’s fast.” He pounded on the door in a specific rhythm—a warning of some kind for Anatolie, maybe?—then went quiet again.

A few seconds later there was a *thud* that I could hear through the phone but feel all the way down here.

“Perfect. Door open. Oh, and—shit, Arlen, cover your head, it’s about to —”

All of a sudden the fire extinguisher system came on. Dank, decade-old water began spraying out of every sprinkler head in the ceiling, soaking me in seconds. It had flecks of something in it that I didn’t want to contemplate too closely, and it felt gritty when I flailed my hand at my face in an effort to wipe it off.

“F’kin gross.”

“Sorry, sorry, just—Tolya!” Mirko immediately began speaking in a

language I didn't know.

“Stop explaining and give me an ETA,” Mariana snapped.

“Three minutes and we're out.”

“Good. Arlen, it's time for you to pack it in.”

I was more than ready for that. Especially since it meant I could finally use the needle and syringe Mirko had tucked into my inside pocket. No, I wasn't thrilled about injecting myself with anything. No, I wasn't nearly steady enough. But the word “antidote” banged around inside my throbbing, spinning head, and I somehow found the fine motor skills and the intestinal fortitude to push that needle into my thigh. Fucking hurt, but it meant relief was on the way, so bring it.

I capped the needle, put the used syringe back in my inside pocket—not leaving any more evidence than I already had—and shifted my focus to getting the fuck out of here.

Which I figured ought to be easy. The break room door didn't lock, and the doors on the way in were one-way locks in case of emergencies just like this. All I needed to do was stand up, brush myself off, and walk out of here. I could vanish into the crowd and the operation would be done.

Done, it seemed, was going to be a fuck lot easier to say than do. Especially since the antidote was slow to take effect. Was it even working at all? Because it sure didn't seem like it. Well, whatever. I still have to get out of here. I managed to get to my feet but I could hardly hold myself there. I made it all of two steps before my legs collapsed and I fell back onto the floor, my head screaming and my entire core threatening to mutiny.

“Arlen?”

On the plus side, the filthy sprinkler water had washed away most of my sick. Bonus.

“*Arlen?* Talk to me.”

“Gimme a sec,” I forced myself to say. “Kinda...having trouble getting to my feet.”

“I knew we should have tested this compound on him before sending him in there,” Mariana said immediately.

“We didn’t have time for that. This was what was on hand—Arlen, can you move?”

“Mmhmm.” I could, I just couldn’t *stand*. That was fine. I shuffled across the floor and opened the door, then crawled out into the hallway. It was even louder out here, but not quite as wet. “’m okay, mind yoursel’.” I wasn’t going through this all this bullshit to *not* get Anatolie out of this fucking place.

And was that injection even *working*?

Using the wall, I managed to push myself to my feet again. My head pounded fiercely, but my legs actually felt a little better this time around. I stumbled forward, bracing myself every step of the way, until I reached the exit for this hallway. I paused to lean against the door, breathing heavily as I tried to keep my balance.

“Arlen, you need to be out of there *now*. Mirko, what—”

“We’re out a side exit,” he said tensely. “Anatolie is masked, no one asked us any questions. I’m going back inside for Arlen.”

“You can’t!” Mariana wasn’t the only one who took issue with that plan. Anatolie was saying something in hell-if-I-know again, and he sounded pissed.

“M’fine, just go. I’ll be out in a sec,” I said. I lifted my head, looked through the little glass window in the door as I reached for the handle—

And saw Detective Rayner’s square, stern face staring straight back at me through the glass. It scared me so bad I actually fell back onto the floor.

Shit, ow.

I heard the *clunk* of the door opening. Huge hands grabbed my lapels and hauled me halfway off the ground.

“Well, well. Mr. Tate.” There was something like a smile on his face, only way worse. “No need to run off now, is there? I think we’ve got *lots* of

thing to talk about.” He glanced behind me. “And I don’t see your lawyer anywhere this time.”

Was it fear or the antidote that suddenly made everything sharper? Suddenly made spinning room jerk to a halt?

“Arlen? *Arlen?*” Mirko’s voice in my ear. “What the fuck is going on? *Arlen!*”

He was freaking out. Any louder and he’d give things away. I wiped my mouth with one shaking hand to distract Rayner, and used the other to turn off my Bluetooth.

There.

Problem solved. One of them, anyway.

Fuck me.

CHAPTER 17

MIRKO

“I’m going back in.”

“No!” Anatolie grabbed my elbow, stopping my march back toward the door and hauling me back the way we’d been leaving. “We have to go!”

“Arlen is still in there.” I planted my feet and wrenched my arm free. “We’re not leaving him behind.”

Anatolie stared at me like I’d spoken in one of the languages we didn’t share. His bloodshot eyes, ringed by dark circles over pale, gaunt cheeks, were full of disbelief. “Mirko. We have to go. They’ll—”

“*You* have to go.” I nodded past him. “Mariana and Danuta are waiting.” I took a decisive step back, pulling out my earpiece so I couldn’t hear Mariana cussing me out for going rogue. “I’m not leaving Arlen.”

“He can take care of himself!” Anatolie flailed a hand down the road where our getaway car was waiting. “We have to—”

“He can’t! He’s not one of us!”

“He’s not—” The confusion in Anatolie’s expression intensified. “Mirko, what the fuck?”

I didn’t stick around to argue or even to ask which part he didn’t understand. There wasn’t time. And for all Anatolie was a stubborn son of a bitch, he was also battered and exhausted. He wouldn’t be able to physically stop me, and while I didn’t *enjoy* taking advantage of that, I also didn’t have

a choice.

Gun in hand, I went right back into the fray.

Not that there was much of a fray in here. The cops had caught wind of the anthrax threat, and they'd bolted just like they had during Covid, leaving the inmates to fend for themselves. So predictably negligent.

The sprinklers were still going. Inmates were bellowing and banging on bars and doors. There was a part of me that wanted to release all of them—this police force was far too corrupt to have any authority, and they were demonstrating right this minute how little regard they had for the safety and welfare of people in their charge. But I had no way of knowing who was here for bullshit charges or non-violent infractions, and who'd been brought in for murder. I also had no time to figure out who was safe to release.

The Collective had people on top of that. People whose reach extended into the legal system and could pull strings and make things happen.

In this moment, my only objective had to be getting Arlen out of here. Something told me there wouldn't be anything about him on paper or routed through the courts. No, he was going to end up in front of that CIA interrogator. Out of sight. Off the books. Tortured into giving up what little information he had.

Over my dead body.

The glasses I wore as part of this persona made it difficult to see under the best of circumstances. With water raining down from the ceiling and sliding down the thick lenses, I couldn't see for shit. At this point, I'd take the risk of facial recognition picking me up. I shoved the glasses into an inside pocket, and I paused at the door out of the holding area to blink my eyes into focus.

Once I was sure I could see again, I leaned into the push bar and, leading with my gun, entered the hallway.

It was deserted in here, silent except for the splatter of water on the dingy gray floor. There were at least three cameras, and I had no doubt someone

was watching me on a monitor somewhere right now.

Fine. Let them find me. That would save me the trouble of finding them.

There was always fear in this kind of situation. That was what kept people alive. Fearlessness was recklessness, and reckless people didn't last long in my line of work.

But I'd never known fear like *this*.

Heart slamming into my ribs, nausea roiling as if I'd injected myself with the cocktail I'd given Arlen, I moved through deserted hallways, sure at every turn I was going to encounter Arlen's bullet-riddled body.

Don't hurt him, I silently begged. *He's not part of this. He's not... God, please, let him get out of this alive.*

My conscience wouldn't survive something happening to him. Not after I'd dragged him into this world. Not after—

No. I wasn't going to think about that. There'd be time to sort out my head once this was over.

Once Arlen, like Anatolie, was safe.

Because he was going to be safe. And like hell was he going to be held for days on end and tortured like Anatolie had been.

The building was, unsurprisingly, deserted. They were probably smart enough to know they couldn't catch anthrax from Arlen, but if there was anthrax in the vicinity—at the newsstand, on Arlen's person, possibly on mine—they were going to get as far away from it as they could. All non-essential staff was probably outside awaiting decontamination at this very moment. Most of the essential staff probably was, too.

But I didn't have any illusions that I was in here alone.

Somewhere, around some corner, in some room, there were people waiting for me. Armed. Dangerous. Ready to fight.

SWAT was, fortunately, not a likely threat. Part of today's op had involved staging a standoff on the other side of town, and both SWAT teams had already been scrambled to handle it. At best, they could be back here

within forty-five minutes. The last update I'd had before taking out my earpiece was that the standoff was still in progress, and that it was being duly escalated to keep SWAT occupied. How long that would last, I had no idea. One team could peel away to come back and deal with the threat at home. Or they could figure out that everything they saw and heard inside the building was being remotely controlled, and that the person they were negotiating with was calling in from miles away.

But a single officer with a service weapon could kill me just as surely as a whole team of armored up SWAT guys, so I wasn't taking chances.

I found the room where I'd left Arlen. Empty. Nothing but ruined paper melting into the floor and tabletop.

Not far down the hall, though, my heart sank. The water had washed away most of whatever evidence there might've been, but *something* had happened here, and not just Arlen getting as sick as we'd planned.

I swallowed bile as I stared at the scene in the hall. Over and over, I told myself there wasn't *much* blood. Even with the water pouring down from the ceiling and swirling around on the floor, it would've been obvious if someone had been seriously wounded. There'd probably been a struggle of some sort, but no one had been shot. That had to count for something, right?

Don't need a gun to cave in his skull.

Or make him bleed internally.

Or add another poison to his system.

I shivered, and not just from the cold water soaking me to the skin. If Arlen was killed, it would be my fault. Plain and simple. I had to live with a few deaths on my conscience—came with the territory—but Arlen's would be too much.

I continued down the hall. There was a camera in here that had been mangled. That was...unsettling. If they were destroying their own cameras, then God only knew what was going down.

Jesus fuck.

Hang in there, Arlen.

The hallway went left up ahead. I pressed myself up against the wall on the left to avoid being seen, and crept toward the turn. The sprinklers were still going, making the surface of the ankle-deep water ripple, but I could still make out shadows. At the very least, irregularities in the lighting that implied something other than an empty hallway.

In this case...a large shadow that appeared to be taking up the entire hall.

I took a deep breath. Adjusted my grip on my gun. Stepped closer, moving slowly so I didn't disturb the water more than I had to.

Outside my field of vision, there was a grunt and a splash.

"Fuck!" Arlen's voice sent chills through me.

"Stay quiet," came the growl. Detective Rayner. I knew that voice anywhere.

I mouthed a few Serbian curses.

"He's coming down this hall," the detective said to someone. "Head him off. But I want him alive."

Well, that was encouraging. Or it would've been if not for the contractor they were flying in to pull answers out of Anatolie.

I shuddered. Then, British accent firmly in place, I called out, "Let the kid go. He has nothing to do with anything."

"Is that you, Mr. Taylor?" Rayner sounded perfectly pleasant. Exactly the kind of voice he'd probably use when he was trying to befriend a suspect into letting his guard down and confessing. "Why don't you come on out and we can all talk about this?"

"Let my client go."

"How about we have this conversation face to face, huh?"

I rolled my eyes, then put on a somewhat terrified front. "How do I know you won't shoot me?"

"We're officers of the law, Mr. Taylor. I assure you, we're not going to shoot you."

He had said they wanted me alive, right? And he hadn't known I could hear him.

If this turned into a firefight, Arlen was likely to get killed. My best hope of keeping him alive was to step out into the open and present myself as non-threatening.

I tucked the gun into the small of my back. Then, "I'm coming out." I inched closer to the corner and presented my hands, both of which were empty. When no hail of bullets came, I stepped out completely.

Detective Rayner stood in the middle of the hall, flanked by a pair of uniforms. Both of the officers had their weapons aimed at me. And Rayner's...

His was tucked against Arlen's temple.

Arlen, who was kneeling on the wet floor, soaked to the skin, eyes red and face paler than Anatolie's had been. There was a smear of blood on his shirt. A bruise coming up on his jaw. More blood running from somewhere in his hair, sliding down his neck and fanning out in a rust-colored stain from his collar.

And those eyes...

Fear had had me on edge since the beginning of this op, but it went all the way to my bones now.

Arlen was *terrified*. And there was nothing I could do to change that for him. Not until we were out of this, and I was flying by the seat of my pants. I had no idea how we were going to get out of this.

Only that one look in those eyes had me determined to do whatever it took. We were getting out of here alive. Period.

"Oh, look at that." Detective Rayner smirked an ugly, smug smirk, and he clapped Arlen hard on the shoulder. "Guess we don't have to get you a lawyer after all."

Arlen stared at me with wide, horrified eyes. "What are you doing?"

I kept my gaze fixed on Rayner, and I kept my British persona in place.

“Getting you out of here.”

Rayner laughed. “You think you’re getting anyone out of anywhere? After you came in here waving a gun at the police? Son, I think getting disbarred is the least of your problems right now.”

I didn’t flinch. Didn’t take my eyes off the detective. Voice just as steady as the gun he was still aiming at me, I said, “Did you expect me to stay professional and polite after you started manhandling my client?”

His laughter faded, but something still glinted in his eyes that made me colder than the icy water sliding down the back of my shirt. “I don’t care how professional and polite you are. But you’re going to prison, son.” He tsked and shook his head. “Killing a police officer is a serious crime.”

“I haven’t killed anyone.”

Without missing a beat, without so much as a flinch or a change in his expression, Rayner shot one of the cops through the head.

Arlen gasped and jumped. I almost stumbled backward.

The other cop winced, but he kept his gun on me and just didn’t look as his colleague crumpled to the floor. Blood swam away from his body toward Arlen, and Arlen watched it, swallowing hard as if he were about to get sick again for reasons that had nothing to do with what I’d injected into him.

Rayner jammed the gun up against Arlen’s temple again, driving a yelp of pain out of him.

For long seconds, no one moved. No one made a sound. Arlen might’ve been saying something. His lips were moving, but my ears were ringing so badly from the gunfire and my heart was pounding so hard, I could barely hear the water raining down all around us.

Panic surged through me. With a single bullet, the situation had gone from really bad to seriously fucking out of control and bad beyond bad. If Rayner was willing to murder one of his own like that and pin it on me, he had no intention of letting anyone walk out of this alive. Possibly not even the other cop.

Not unless he was very, very motivated.

I let my eyes flick to Arlen. He was shaking, and I doubted it had anything to do with the cold, bloody water he was kneeling in. If he'd had anything left, he probably would've thrown up again, and with as white as his face had turned, there was a good chance he was going to *find* something to puke up.

He was terrified. He was probably as fucked as I was.

And just like that, an icy sense of calm settled over me. I wasn't getting out of this. But Arlen had a chance. One chance, and one chance only.

"You don't want him or me," I said just loud enough to carry over the ringing that was undoubtedly in everyone's ears. "You want the man you were looking for when we spoke last. Miroslav Antanasijević. Right?"

From the upward flick of his eyebrow, I had the detective's attention.

Every instinct—every nanosecond of training—screamed at me not to go down this road. That if I said another word, there'd be no turning back.

But much like the ringing in my ears drowned out most sound right then, the truth drowned out all the objections in my head.

The truth that there was only one way out of this for Arlen.

I took a deep breath and when I spoke, I'd dropped the British accent and returned to my own voice. "Let him go, and you can have me."

Everyone froze.

Renewed horror piled onto the fear in Arlen's eyes. Confusion filled both cops' faces.

"You don't want him." I swallowed. "You want me."

They glanced at each other.

"What are you doing?" Arlen growled at me. "Get the fuck out of—"

"Shut up." Rayner pistol whipped Arlen hard, sending him down onto his hands in the bloody water.

"You want Miroslav Antanasijević." I spread my hands. "Let him go, and you can have me."

“Miro—” The other cop flicked his eyes back and forth from me to Rayner. “Is this guy for real?”

Rayner stared at me for long seconds, and even through the water falling between us, I could see the recognition and anger simultaneously taking shape in his face. “You’re... Jesus Christ.” He shook his head. “I can’t believe I didn’t...” He growled something I didn’t catch.

Under any other circumstances, I’d have let fly a cocky laugh, having successfully sat right in front of him without him recognizing me as the man he was hunting. There was something deeply satisfying about sliding so firmly into a persona that someone who’d memorized your face and everything about you could look right at you and be fooled.

This wasn’t the time for that. Not while Arlen was still too close to that gun.

“Let him go,” I repeated.

The other cop watched Rayner. Arlen stared at me, eyes brimming with tears that may have been from the situation or from the fresh trickle of blood carving a dark stripe down the side of his face.

And Rayner... He watched me.

My heart slammed into my ribs. My stomach churned with fear, both of how this moment would play out and of what awaited me after.

Moving as slowly as possible, I raised my hands and laced them behind my head.

Then, just as slowly, I knelt in the red water.

“There’s a gun at the small of my back,” I said evenly. “A second in an ankle holster.”

Rayner swallowed. Then he looked at the cop and nodded toward me.

The cop holstered his own weapon, splashed across the narrow distance, and frisked me roughly, relieving me of the weapons.

All the while, I kept my gaze down, watching blood swirl in the water instead of meeting Arlen’s eyes.

“What about him?” the cop asked as he stepped away with my weapons.
“He’s a witness.”

My head snapped up. “You want me, you let him go. That’s the deal.”

I didn’t think it was possible, but Arlen had gone even whiter, and I doubted it had a thing to do with the injection.

Rayner glanced down at him, pursing his lips.

“Anything happens to him,” I said, “you’re not getting a word out of me.”

The detective laughed. “Oh, we have people on our payroll who will absolutely get whatever want out of you.”

If only for Arlen’s benefit, I suppressed the sickening shudder.

“Let him go,” I demanded again. “And I’ll go quietly.” I narrowed my eyes. “If you know who I am, then you know I can hold my own without my guns.”

From the way Rayner chewed his lip... Yeah, he knew. Which unsettled me. No one was supposed to know this much about anyone in the Collective.

He ordered the cop to cuff me. As the cop did so, Rayner leaned down and grabbed Arlen’s soaked hair. He jerked his head back and dug the gun in under his jaw, driving a terrified squeak from Arlen’s lips.

“Listen to me, kid,” Rayner hissed. “We’ve got people watching you. Everywhere. You understand me?”

Arlen’s Adam’s apple bobbed. “Y-yes, sir.”

“You step out of line, he’s a dead man. And not in a quick, easy kind of way. He’ll be screaming for days if you don’t keep your fucking mouth shut. Do you feel me?”

It was hard to tell with the water falling all around us, but I swore some tears slid down Arlen’s face.

“I won’t say a word,” he whimpered. “Please. Don’t hurt him.”

Oh, they were going to hurt me. There was no doubt about that. But if the threat kept him quiet and kept him from getting killed...fine.

“I’m not joking, Arlen,” the detective growled. “I will fuck his world up

personally if you even think about saying a word to anyone.” He jammed the gun in harder. “And I mean *anyone*, including your whore of a little sister.”

That struck a nerve. Arlen probably didn’t give two shits about this man insulting his sister. Threatening her, though? That was jamming a knife right through his Achilles heel.

Good. I hated seeing Arlen this terrified. I hated seeing him breaking down, the tears falling as he softly begged them not to hurt him or me. It was excruciating to watch, but Arlen wasn’t stupid. He knew they meant it.

Which meant he’d walk out of here.

He’d walk away.

And he wouldn’t say a fucking word to anyone.

I was a dead man no matter what. It wasn’t going to be a quick or pleasant end for me, and it wouldn’t be a painless one by any stretch of the imagination.

But Arlen was getting out of this alive.

And he was smart enough to run like hell and never look back.

Wasn’t much more I could ask for.

CHAPTER 18

ARLEN

Terror fucked you up.

I'd only been even close to this terrified a few times before in my life: once when I was five and my daddy was drunk and on a tear, belt in hand, and again when I was in a car crash that ended with my brother rolling his truck into a ditch.

For all that those incidents had frozen me stiff, filling my mouth with cotton and making my heart pound so loud in my chest I couldn't hear anything over it, they were different from what I was experiencing now. There'd been the threat of damage, even of death, but nowhere close to the same level of *malice* that I got at the hands of Rayner—I couldn't call him Detective, it just didn't fit into my brain. He wasn't a detective. He was a murdering son of a bitch, and now he had Mirko.

He had him because I was a fucking idiot. All I could blame my delayed responses on was terror—and that drug, sure, but that felt like a weak excuse—and I should have been better than that. If I'd been just a little better, I would have gotten out in time. Mirko would have met me outside, tucked me into his car, and gotten me out of there safely. We would have done it. We would have *won*. He'd have his friend back, no one would be at the mercy of Rayner and the interrogator on the way, and everything would have been as good as it could be.

But I'd fucked up. I'd let terror get the better of me. I didn't do what I needed to do. I didn't do nearly enough, and now...

Mirko was going to pay the price.

There was nothing else I could do inside the station. Held at gunpoint, I left—I didn't even turn my head around to look at Mirko, because the damn thing hurt so much I was afraid I'd fall down again if I pushed too hard. No, I just...walked out into the lobby, through the front door, and onto the sidewalk. My body and mind were even cooperating, because either the antidote or adrenaline—both?—had kicked most of that awful drug out of my system. I was still ready to puke, but that was pure fear now.

Outside the police station, everything felt so normal that for a second I wondered if I was hallucinating. There were no sirens or alarms going off. There were no people milling around, just cars driving by on the street twenty feet away. It was placid, just another day.

I turned on shaky feet and watched the cop who'd just "escorted" me out of the building walk away, his gun still in his hand, like he wasn't even worried about being seen.

Because of course he wasn't worried about being seen. None of these bastards were worried. Who was going to see them? Surely the cameras had been turned off or destroyed, and everyone had evacuated out the back. The only person left here was...

"Oh my gosh, sir, are you okay?"

Hands and voice and concern descended on me like a radioactive cloud—not something I wanted to be touched by, but not something I could get away from either. The woman was wearing biking gear and reflective sunglasses, and the thick white smudges of sunscreen on her cheeks and nose made her look a little like a cartoon. "Gosh, you don't look so good," she fretted, leaning in close to me and brushing at my wet, bloody clothes. "I'm parked really close to here and I've got a towel in my trunk. Let's see what we can do, huh?"

“I, um.” It took me a little too long to find my voice, but I did it eventually. “I can’t...I need to...”

I needed to stay here. I couldn’t, but I *needed* to. The thought of moving any farther away from this building, even when I knew that staying here was absolutely idiotic, made me feel like my heart was either going to rip itself right out of my chest or stop entirely. If I took one more step, one step that wasn’t forced on me at gunpoint, I would be deserting Mirko.

He’d saved my life, whatever that was fucking worth, and I couldn’t desert him. Impossible. I was gored on the literal horns of a dilemma. *Stay or go? Leave him or get swept up in the chaos? Make his sacrifice worthless or save your sanity for a little longer?*

“Oh, well, you know...” She leaned in closer, pulled down her sunglasses, and hissed in her normal accent, “It’s Danuta. I’m here to pull your ass out of the fire, so screw your head on straight and come with me, all right? Anatolie is close by.”

He was? He hadn’t taken his chance to run? Maybe it was because he had a plan to get Mirko out of there.

A plan. *Someone* had a plan, and even though it wasn’t me, it was enough to get my legs moving again.

“Yes, very good, sir, you just come with me and I’ll get you fixed right up, huh?” Danuta said, shifting back into her all-American accent without a break. “I’ve got my car right over this way.” I let her put her arm around my shoulders and guide me down the sidewalk toward what was not a car, but rather a van. It was parked beneath a tree with spreading branches that no doubt helped disrupt surveillance and, once we got close, the side door cracked just a bit.

“Open it,” Danuta hissed, and the door opened enough to let me stumble into the vehicle. She slammed the door shut behind me, leaving me face to face with—

Anatolie. He looked about as good as I felt, which was to say like total

shit. Both his eyes were surrounded by swollen, purple flesh, his nose had been broken at some point, and at least one of his fingers had been broken or dislocated, because he'd practically stuck his entire left hand together with athletic tape.

"Shit, tell me he didn't," he said, looking at me with an expression of intense disappointment and...something more. Something deeper that told me he was taking the fact that I was here and Mirko wasn't *personally*. "Tell me he didn't trade himself for you."

"Can't tell you that." I didn't even tear up when I said it—now that the terror was wearing off, it was like my emotions had been tamped down with a thick blanket.

"Who the fuck even *are* you?" Anatolie demanded, the last vestiges of his American accent falling away. He sounded...well, he sounded a lot like Mirko, only with a deeper voice that was hoarse from dehydration—or screaming. "Who are you to get Mirko to make such a *stupid* decision, huh? What do you have on him?"

I shook my head. "Have on him?"

"What do you *have* on him, you filthy piece of—"

"Anatolie!" Danuta got into the van through the back door. "Keep your voice down. What's wrong with you?"

"Tell me who this *fecior de curva* is and how he made Mirko lose all of his operational awareness!"

"This is Arlen, and you need to leave him out of it," she said, stiff but firm. I didn't know Danuta, and she definitely had no reason to like me, but she was sticking up for me. I didn't know whether to be grateful or to scream. "He's a civilian."

If anything, Anatolie looked angrier. He thrust his good hand toward me. "What the *fuck* is a civilian doing working with you on a rescue operation?"

"You've missed a lot," Danuta said tiredly. "Let me catch you up. Arlen?" She held a phone out toward me. "Mariana wants to talk to you."

“Oh.” I didn’t know whether I should look forward to hearing what she had to say or not. I took the phone anyway and raised it mechanically to my ear. “lo?”

“Arlen? Are you all right?”

No. “I’m fine, don’t worry about me.” I turned to look toward the police station. Still no sirens, still no mass attention, nobody paying any notice on the street...they were keeping the anthrax threat on the down-low. Probably had let all the people who evacuated out the back go home already. Why keep them around and make things harder for themselves? Or they’d been taken someplace discreet—the parking garage, maybe?—to be decontaminated. That seemed more likely. Maybe? What did I know?

“You say that, but I can see you. I know you’re not okay.”

I frowned. “How can you see me? You’re not here, are you?”

“No, I’m working from a safehouse, but we have cameras in all our cars. Do you have a concussion? Are you—”

“Why are you worrying about me?” I demanded. “You need to be figuring out how to get Mirko out of there.”

“Funny,” she said in a voice that was not at all amused. “That’s exactly what he said about you.”

“Well, he’s an idiot.”

“For you, he is.”

I sighed and shut my eyes. “I knew the risks going in. I’m not—I don’t deserve this. To be rescued in exchange for him. I don’t deserve it.”

“Arlen, how could you know *all* the risks?” she asked, very logically. It made me angry just to listen to her being so logical. “Let’s face it, we allowed you to be part of this because we saw a legitimate use for you. We fucked up when we didn’t foresee all the outcomes of that usage. The drugs...we should have tested them beforehand, or used a lower dose. I’m—”

“Don’t you dare say you’re sorry.” I couldn’t take her apologizing to me, I absolutely couldn’t take it.

“Regretful that things turned out like this,” she adjusted oh-so-smoothly.

“Yeah? Then tell me what happens next.” I turned and stared out the window again. “How are you going to get Mirko out?”

“Arlen.” Mariana sounded exhausted. “Of course we’re working on it, but this isn’t going to be a simple problem for us to solve. Despite what you might think, the Collective isn’t a huge group of people. Most operations are limited to four or five of us in any one area. Danuta and I, Mirko and Anatolie...in most places, we would be enough. Everyone else you’ve noticed, like John, they’re accessories to the central group. It’s important that they all maintain their plausible deniability.”

I could see that, but... “You can’t leave him there. Rayner is a sadist. He’ll kill him!”

“He’ll hurt him, yes. But he won’t kill him.” She sounded very sure. It wasn’t at all reassuring to me.

“How is that better?”

“Because you can’t come back from death. Alive means there’s something to work with, and Mirko is excellent at laying false trails. He’ll be able to string them along for quite some time—hopefully long enough for us to come up with a plan.”

That sounded...better. Proactive. I tightened my grip on the phone. “What do you want me to do?”

“Oh, Arlen.” Her voice was sympathetic but firm. “I think you’ve done enough. And you did a good job, you really did, but now it’s time for us to take charge again. Pass me to Danuta, I have to speak to her.”

Fuck. I knew a brush-off when I heard one. It was the tone Professor Hartford used when she advised me against submitting papers to professional journals. It was kindness wrapped around an anchor that would drag me down and drown me if I let it. Numbly, I extended the phone toward Danuta, who was just finishing rewrapping Anatolie’s hand.

“Thanks.” She took it and turned away, speaking in a low, fast voice.

That left me with Anatolie, who was staring at me like I was a rare and fascinating species of bug that he still couldn't help wanting to squash.

"So. You saved him at the hotel." His voice was flat, utterly unemotional.

"Yeah."

"And you're a...student."

"Yep." God, my mouth was dry all of a sudden. Staring into Anatolie's eyes felt like looking into the eyes of a snake—I didn't like what I saw there, but it seemed like looking away would be even worse.

"And you somehow got involved in all of this despite Mirko pushing you to recuse yourself at every turn."

Anger flared inside of me. "That's not exactly how it happened."

"Oh no? You didn't see the chance to do something 'fun' and take it?" Now there was emotion filling up his voice, and none of it was very nice. "You didn't play on his sense of responsibility for unwittingly involving you in the first place to muscle your way into our operation?"

"I didn't muscle my way into anything, and from where I'm sitting, you didn't do such a good job handling your operation from the fucking get-go," I snapped. "Or is it just totally normal for you to get grabbed by the cops during these things?"

"You know nothing about—"

"Yeah." Did I sound a little hysterical? Hmm, I didn't care. "Yeah, you're right, I know nothing about any of this. All I know is that Mirko was in some shit, I helped him out, things got worse, and in the end I helped get you out of there of my own free will. I didn't force him to do anything for me." Not that I'd played fair in the end there, but none of this had turned out very fair. "And I'm not going to go anywhere without getting Mirko back, so if you're thinking you can just kick me outta here and forget about me, think again."

Anatolie went still for a moment. Then he said, "Do you know how easy it would be to kill you? I can think of seven different ways to do it in under ten seconds, just like we are in this van. You wouldn't even see two of them

coming.”

I shivered. I couldn't help it—he reminded me too much of Rayner in that moment. I opened my mouth to—I wasn't sure. Tell him I knew that already? Tell him to fuck off? Tell him to do it, if he was so worked up about it?

Danuta saved me by punching Anatolie hard on the shoulder. He hissed, the stillness going away, replaced by normal emotions like anger and upset. “What the hell?” he demanded, rubbing the spot on his arm.

“No threatening people in the van!” she announced. “We have bigger things to worry about. Mariana is gathering everyone who can get here within the hour; we're going to have to rush the building to get Mirko out.”

“He wouldn't want us to!” Anatolie said, loudly and passionately and as though his heart was breaking. That was the part that kept me from punching him in the face.

That and the threat of being murdered in under ten seconds.

“He gave himself up—for stupid reasons, yes, but that was his choice! We can't imperil the entire Collective for him!”

Oh, I think he'd find that we fucking could.

Danuta seemed to agree with me. “If we don't get him out in the next hour, then the Collective will be imperiled anyway.” She shook her head. “There's a special interrogator coming. From the CIA—I believe you and Mirko are familiar with him.”

Anatolie went pale. “The...no.”

“Yes.”

“How did they know to get him?”

“We're not sure, but he's well on his way here.” Danuta sighed. “And you know as well as I do that he'll crack Mirko eventually. So the better option is to get him out.”

I still saw that as the only option, but I wasn't a cool and collected member of their little club, either. “So what do we do?” I asked.

“You don't do anything,” she said, echoing Mariana. “Your part is done.”

Once this is all over, we'll make sure you're taken care of, but for now we need to figure out the best way to get Mirko out of there in under thirty minutes."

It was like someone had flipped a switch in Anatolie—he was all business now. "How many specials can we add in?"

"No more than three, and even that's pushing it."

"What about equipment?"

"We've got plenty of guns, but appropriately generic body armor is another story. We don't have eyes in there right now, but there are at least three people in addition to Mirko, so we need to..."

Two, I wanted to say. Rayner had shot one of his own cops, doing some of the work for them. I wanted to say it, but I didn't. Instead I turned and stared back out the window, because it was clear I wasn't coming along for the rescue. I wanted to, but...

We've got people watching you. And they knew who my sister was and probably where to find her. It was cowardly, but I had to be honest—it probably *was* better for me to sit this next part out. At least then I could pretend I had nothing to do with it.

I'd stay right here in the van. As soon as they had Mirko back safe, I'd get out, walk home, and never bother him again. I'd sooner rip my own stupid heart out than cause him any more bother. I'd...

I'd...what.

What the fuck?

"Guys," I said.

They ignored me.

"Guys!"

"Be quiet," Anatolie snapped. "This doesn't concern you."

"No, but *this* concerns *you*," I snapped right back. "Rayner is moving Mirko!"

Danuta froze, then scrambled over and joined me at the window. "What

the...” She watched in horror as a handcuffed Mirko, sandwiched between two familiar cops, was dragged out to a parked car in the front of the building. “It doesn’t make sense! Why not keep him here and let the interrogator come to them?”

Oh, shit. I knew why. “Because of the anthrax threat.”

“Wait, what?” Anatolie asked. I ignored him. It felt good.

“People have to have reported it by now,” I went on. “However they’ve kept emergency services out of here, it can’t last forever. Once this place is swarming with people again, how are they gonna interrogate anyone? They have to move Mirko to another location.” A secondary location, that was what they were called. I read a statistic once about how the odds of recovering a victim alive once they’d been moved to a secondary location dropped precipitously.

We had to get Mirko before they took him away. Or at least...

“We need to follow him.”

“Arlen, we—”

“We need to follow him! Now!” I pushed my way into the front seat and got behind the wheel of the van, ignoring the protests and attempts to haul me back. I was still a little weak, still a little queasy, but fear, adrenaline, and determination got me into the driver seat. The key was right there in the ignition. I turned on the engine and threw us into reverse, keeping my eyes on the plain silver sedan that Rayner was just following Mirko into. License plate number, make, model...and now they were pulling into traffic, and I still had to get the van to the parking lot exit before I could follow them.

Fuck that.

The city didn’t need these lilac bushes lining the sidewalk anyway.

CHAPTER 19

MIRKO

“Where the fuck is SWAT?” Rayner demanded. “I need those assholes to get *that* asshole off our tail!”

Someone was on our tail? I didn’t dare twist around—being pistol-whipped twice on the way to the car was plenty, thank you—but I tried to angle my head so I could see something through the rearview. With the way it was tilted, though, I couldn’t see shit.

But then the driver slammed on the accelerator in the same instant he yanked the wheel to the left. Tires screamed and the whole world shifted. The car lost its ass and fishtailed. The impact with the curb made my teeth snap painfully together. The two of us in the backseat were thrown against each other, me wedged painfully between Rayner and the door.

His elbow drove a groan out of me, especially when he used me to push his enormous carcass back to his seat. Asshole.

As he was getting himself situated again, I chanced a look over my shoulder.

And just as the ass end of the car swung with another erratic turn, I locked eyes with the driver of the van that was tailing us.

A string of curses tumbled off my lips as I faced forward. What the fuck was Arlen doing? Mariana and Danuta *had* to have had eyes on him. How did he give them the slip?

Well, none of that really mattered at this point. What mattered was that Arlen was behind the wheel of the van, and he was going to get his idiot ass killed. There was a reason most police departments called off high speed chases in populated areas—they were dangerous as hell to the people in and around them. Even when one of the drivers *wasn't* on a miserable cocktail of drugs.

The cop driving this car might've known what he was doing. Arlen...did not. I didn't give a damn what he might've gleaned from careening around the backwoods of Tennessee. This was a whole other animal, and antidote or not, Arlen was probably still sick. Still not operating at a hundred percent, physically or mentally.

Like hell was I letting him get himself killed.

I thought fast, shivering from both adrenaline and from my cold, wet clothes. Right then, the officer tore around another corner, nearly taking out some pedestrians in the process.

Behind us, tires squealed and a horn blew. Then an engine roared.

I didn't have to look—Arlen had done his level best to avoid hitting pedestrians, even when it had cost him valuable time. Now he was catching up, but if someone got in his way...

My heart sped up, as if it hadn't already been going too fast. Swallowing hard, I glanced at Rayner, who had his gun out and was clearly looking for an opportunity to shoot at Arlen.

My throat felt raw and my voice didn't sound any better: "Go the wrong way down a one-way street."

Rayner's head snapped toward me. "Shut the fuck up."

"Do you want to lose him?" I demanded, trying to stay balanced with my hands behind my back and Officer Numbnuts driving like a maniac. "I know how he thinks."

The detective laughed. "Yeah. And you're going to help us lose the man who's trying to get your ass out of here. Shut up before I—"

“I don’t want him killed!” I nodded back at the van. “I didn’t put him up to this. He’s a stubborn fucker who doesn’t know how to save his own damn skin.” I glared hard at Detective Rayner. “If you want to lose him, go the wrong way down a one-way.” I swallowed the bile burning its way up my throat. “He won’t follow you. Not where he’ll risk killing innocent people.”

Rayner’s lips thinned. We whipped down another street. From the sound of it, Arlen did, too, but there was again attempts to evade other people.

“Do whatever you want to me,” I growled. “You won’t get any *more* out of me by killing him.”

The detective narrowed his eyes. He glanced out the rear window. I held my breath, silently begging him to take me at my word like he had at the station. Arlen being on our asses probably didn’t do much for my credibility, but this was all I had.

Please, please, lose him on a one-way street.

And Arlen...please. Fall back. Don’t do this. Fall the fuck back.

The driver peeled around another corner. There was a sign up ahead for the freeway. My stomach twisted. If we took this to the interstate, people would definitely get killed.

“What do you want to do, boss?” the cop asked.

Rayner glanced back at Arlen. Then he sighed, faced forward, and pulled on his seat belt. “Do what he says. Wrong way down a one-way.”

I gulped. The driver swore and pulled on his own belt. I’d have done the same, but my hands were bound. Maybe I’d get lucky and the driver would plow into a building or something, and then I wouldn’t have to deal with the interrogator.

I shuddered. As resigned as I was to what awaited me, I wasn’t exactly looking forward to it.

And as the driver accelerated toward the off ramp, quite clearly planning to go up it against traffic, I debated my options. I’d fully intended to just help them lose Arlen. I was dead no matter what. If I could save Arlen—again—

then whatever came next would be a hell of a lot easier to swallow.

But as the engine whined...

As cars honked and swerved to get out of our way...

Maybe I wasn't so short on options after all.

A solid high-speed impact would save me a date with Mr. Too-Fucked-Up-For-The-CIA's-*Official-Payroll*. And Rayner and this other crooked cop wouldn't be anyone's problem anymore.

My mouth went dry. Fight-or-flight was kicking in hard, and flight wasn't happening.

And, I realized, Detective Rayner was struggling just to get comfortable in this backseat. He had to be at least six-foot-five in a vehicle built for much more average people. Which meant that my five-foot-seven frame gave me a hell of a lot more maneuverability than he could hope for.

Okay, then. Fight, it is.

I braced my back and shoulder against the door, ostensibly to stay upright while the driver maneuvered around trucks and commuters. Rayner was doing the same, his jaw working as he stared straight ahead.

I waited until the driver swerved hard to avoid an angrily honking semi. In that second of violent movement, I swung my legs up and shoved my feet into Rayner's chest.

"What the—*augh!*" He flailed, trying to both balance himself and throw me off. His pistol tumbled from his hand onto the floorboards.

I drew my foot back and then slammed it into the side of his head, sending his skull into the window with a satisfying *crack*. The car swerved wildly. The driver shouted something, flailing a hand back at me while the other tried—and failed—to maintain control of the vehicle.

I kicked Rayner in the head again, catching him in the jaw this time. He shouted in fury and pain, spitting out blood and teeth.

Right then, the driver managed to grab a handful of my shirt. That distracted me long enough for Rayner to get a grip on my ankle and twist

hard. I cried out in pain, but lucky for me, I had *two* legs. Another kick to his jaw snapped some bone and slammed his head against the window a third time. Dazed, probably concussed, he let go of my ankle.

I squirmed, trying to free myself from the driver's grip on my shirt. That involved kicking, using my legs for leverage, and otherwise pummeling Rayner with my boots. Fine. Fuck him. It also meant slamming my knees against the driver's seat, knocking more curses out of the driver as he struggled to control both me and the car.

Finally, he let go of my shirt and put both hands on the wheel. "You son of a—boss! Shoot him already!"

Rayner groaned. His head was lolling badly, blood and fragments of teeth slithering down his chin and chest. I shifted, felt around on the floor with my foot for the gun, then used my heel to kick it over to my side. There was fuck all I could do with it, but at least it was out of Rayner's reach if he managed to regain consciousness.

The car swerved again, but not as violently.

Because we were slowing down.

The driver nosed off the road, then slammed on the brakes, the abrupt stop throwing me against the back of the passenger seat hard enough to almost knock the breath out of me. And now I was pinned.

And the driver was getting out of the car, gun in hand.

Govno. Govno!

I squirmed hard, adrenaline searing through my veins. The door was the only thing keeping me upright. If he opened it, I'd tumble back, and he'd shoot me right—

Gunfire.

Not at me.

More shots.

Back and forth.

The back window shattered, raining glass over me and Detective Rayner,

and I had a flash of lying across Arlen's backseat, drugged and incapacitated, covered in glass and clueless and terrified and—

The door opened. I swore as I tumbled back, expecting pavement followed by a bullet. Probably a bullet someplace painful instead of mercifully through my skull but—

Strong arms stopped me from falling.

“Mirko!”

What the fuck?

I opened my eyes, realizing a second too late there might be glass on my face. If there was, none of it went into my eyes. My vision swam a little, but then it cleared.

And the face matched the voice I thought I'd hallucinated.

“Tolya?”

Anatolie swore in Romanian, then helped me upright. “We have to go.”

I didn't have time to process where we were going or whether my legs had any hope of keeping me upright. Just like the night we'd both been poisoned in the restaurant, we bolted, running past the dead cop on the pavement, and my God, I had never been so thrilled to see Danuta's face. She leaned out the back of the van, motioning for us to hurry. We did, and we'd barely jumped into the van before the tires squealed. I stumbled, but Anatolie and Danuta steadied me. He shut the doors behind us, and she started on my cuffs as I tried to make sense of... hell. Anything.

And then another voice that didn't seem real:

“Is he all right? Mirko, are you okay?”

I followed the sound toward the front of the van. “Arlen. God. You idiot.”

“Idiot?” His laugh was high-pitched, and he glanced back at me. “I just saved your ass!”

I turned a questioning look on my friends, and I was met with reluctant nods and eyerolls. I wasn't offended that they'd likely tried to talk him out of following me. I'd tried to stop him from following me, too. And yet...

I just shook my head. The cuffs finally gave, and I leaned against the side of the van as I rubbed my wrists. Danuta squeezed my shoulder before joining Arlen upfront. They were talking, probably figuring out where to go. Fine. Someone else could deal with logistics for a few minutes.

As the adrenaline quieted and all my bumps and bruises glowed to life, I turned to Anatolie and looked him up and down. He was battered and gaunt, but no more worse for the wear than when I'd pulled him from his cell.

“You're all right?” I asked.

“Yeah.” Then he tilted his head toward the front of the van. “Do I even want to know?”

I blinked. “Want to know what?”

Anatolie rolled his eyes. From the passenger seat, Danuta muffled a snicker.

Great. Wasn't going to hear the end of this one.

And neither was Arlen, for that matter. What the fuck was he thinking? And had I actually underestimated his willingness to drive against traffic? To save *my* ass?

Govno, indeed.

“The media's going to blow this whole thing open.” Anatolie's words pulled me back into the present.

“Hmm?”

“Mariana said we were tapped into the police department's CCTV when everything went down with you and Rayner,” Anatolie explained. “There's no spinning it into apprehending a terrorist when we have him on-camera shooting a uniformed officer in what is clearly cold blood.”

I shuddered. That horrible encounter might've felt like a dream if not for my clothes, which were still cold and wet. “Will they actually air it?”

“Not all of the gory parts. But she's confident our people at the network are going to make it happen.”

Closing my eyes, I nodded slowly. It would take a long time—likely

years—to unravel the tangled web of corruption in this city and in others like it. But an exposé like this would pull that first thread, and people would keep pulling. There was only so much the Collective could do, and this was what we did best—shine a light on the ugly truth, and let the people with the know-how and power take it from there while we slipped back into the shadows.

We could rest now. Catch our breath.

And maybe I could figure out what the fuck to do about Arlen.

CHAPTER 20

ARLEN

There was nothing like being stitched up in the back of a van by your best friend while some heinous drugs wore off and the people you'd just committed multiple crimes with talked among themselves a few yards away to put your life into perspective.

And right now, my life was about as comfortable and secure as a hornet's nest.

"Over my damn lunch break, too," Roxy muttered as she disinfected yet another cut on my head, fucking *ouch*. Rayner had been way too fond of using his gun to hit people—both Mirko and Anatolie had also been pistol-whipped. Of course, *they* had been patched up without a word, while *my* treatment included a combination of the third degree over how I got hurt and a guilt trip that would make my mother proud.

I was stunned to find out that the Collective members I was driving around with didn't have access to an actual medical doctor. They seemed to have everything—why not this?

"Too much work for what should have been a small operation," Danuta had explained once it was clear that the others were too busy "talking" to bother. Yeah, Anatolie had corralled Mirko the second he could and taken him to the back of the van, while I got to sit up front with Danuta as we figured out what the hell to do next. Mirko was all for heading straight back

to their home base and figuring out where the interrogator was, while Anatolie wanted to close down the operation and run.

Luckily, Danuta had an actual brain in her head and agreed with me when I pointed out that maybe, *maybe* it would be a good idea to get looked over by a medical professional before moving on to next steps. You couldn't have a good time for long while also suffering from a concussion, after all. Except, they didn't have a doctor on retainer and there was no way any of us could go into an ER or urgent care clinic right now. Which left us with...

"I'm not qualified for this," Roxy went on. "I work with *animals*, not people! You want to know why? Because animals are better than people, that's why! Animals don't bring you to random people to treat after being tranquilized, then not bother answering your messages for days on end *and* not answer the door when you go out of your way to check in at their apartment."

Yet she was here. And she'd brought everything imaginable—sutures, antibiotics, even some strong mouthwash because she knew I'd been sick. She was a godsend. A godsend who was seriously and justifiably upset with me.

"I'm so sorry about all that," I apologized. "I just...it wasn't safe to use my phone, and then I had to leave my place behind."

"That is not normal!" She slapped a butterfly bandage over a cut, then grabbed my chin and forced me to meet her eyes. Underneath the anger, I could see that she was genuinely concerned, maybe even scared. "You get that it's not normal, right? Two weeks ago you were a grad student doing ride shares to make a little money on the side, and now you're a *fugitive!* You're on the *news*, do you get that? I saw your face on the news in the break room! You're a 'person of interest' and 'wanted by the police' for shit that they're not giving details on. That's bad, Arlen. That's very bad!"

"I know it is," I agreed.

"Do you? Do you really?" She moved down to handle a nasty cut slicing

all the way down my forearm, long but shallow. “Because I don’t think you have. I think you’re still hopped up on adrenaline and excitement and whatever kind of torch you’re carrying for the tranquilizer guy to realize that the life you had two weeks ago is over now.” She sniffed, and it took me way too long to realize that she was actually *crying*. Over *me*. That wasn’t right. Roxy only cried over cute kittens and animals who were hit by cars, not me.

“It’s over,” she said again, cleaning off the dried blood with an antiseptic wipe and reaching for some gauze. “You can’t go back to your PhD program—that’s two years of work down the drain. You can’t go back to your apartment and get any of your stuff, not even your stupid Marvel posters that you got *signed*. You probably can’t go back to your family, at least not for a while. Everything you’ve been working for since I’ve *known* you is, it’s, it’s gone, do you get that? It’s gone!”

“Roxy...”

“And you aren’t seeing that!” she persisted, tears dripping off the point of her nose as she finished on my arm and began balling up wrappers and used medical supplies. She didn’t throw any of them away in the bag Danuta had supplied—this van was surprisingly well-equipped—just held onto them, crinkling and crumpling and working them into a solid mass of trash as she had a panic attack on my behalf. “You can’t see it! You can’t, you need to but you can’t, *I* can’t make you see it, I...I...”

That panic attack was something I needed to help with, pronto. “Hey, c’mere. No, let’s put those down first,” I said, then pulled her into my arms once her hands were empty again. “I’m so sorry,” I told her, rubbing one hand along her back. At least the shirt Roxy was currently wiping her eyes—and nose—on was a clean one from a spare set of scrubs in her clinic instead of the decidedly nasty one I’d been wearing when we got here. “I dragged you into this kicking and screaming and I’ve made things a lot tougher on you than they should be.”

“Shut up, this isn’t about me,” Roxy muttered.

“It kind of is, though. You’ve been a huge help to me ever since we met. I owe you so much,” I told her. “Not just for being my friend, but for being someone who’s helped me when I was at my lowest. I’m sorry I’m scaring you.”

“I’m not scared, I’m worried,” she said. “I just don’t understand how you’re not freaking out right now. Why did you keep helping this guy? Why didn’t you tell him to handle his own shit?”

I didn’t really know how to respond to that question. The thing between Mirko and me was...it was complicated, with a side of weird and a chaser of goddamn crazy. But dwelling on what it was and whether or not this was all worth it right now wasn’t going to help. There was still too much to do, so having a breakdown would have to wait until this operation was officially over. Not that I was an operative in it, but I wasn’t a hapless bystander either. That ship had sailed.

“I just hope he’s worth it.” Roxy pulled back with a sigh. “I guess you’re going to do some spy shit and disappear for a while after this, huh?”

“Probably.” That seemed reasonable under the circumstances. “But I’ve got your number memorized, so don’t be surprised by the occasional meme or rant about the human condition.”

“I’ll rant about *your* human condition,” she said, punching me gently on the arm. “Now get out of here before Winona comes to cuss you out too.”

“Winona is a lady, she wouldn’t treat me like that.”

“Ha!” Roxy crossed her arms and stared at me. “Well? What are you waiting for?”

“You’re the one hanging out in the van that doesn’t belong to you, Rox.”

She deflated a little. “Ah, right. Yep. Okay, well, see you someday, don’t die in the meantime.” She climbed past me and out of the van. When Mirko glanced over, Roxy put two fingers up close to her eyes, then pointed them at him with a glare. Then she stalked off to the clinic without a backward glance.

Mirko joined me a second later. “I feel like I just got a shovel talk,” he said.

“Yeah, she’s good at them,” I agreed. “Doesn’t even need to say a word to be scary as hell.”

“That’s true.” He touched one of the bandages on his face with a wince. “You’re lucky to have a friend like her.”

“I know.” I smiled crookedly. “Not sure when I’ll see her again, but Roxy’s one of those friends who doesn’t go away even when you’re quiet for a while.”

“Yes. About that.” Mirko took a deep breath, then looked at me. I looked right back at him, every banged up and beaten inch of him, and prepared for a fight.

He’s gonna tell you it’s time to go your separate ways. He’s gonna say they can set you up somewhere new, that it’s for the best, that you don’t belong in their world. All shit you know, but fuck that.

Fuck it.

“Fuck it,” Mirko muttered, then reached out and took my hand. I was so surprised I didn’t even tighten my grip until he began to let go. Then I held on twice as hard. “You’re not making this easy on me.”

“Making what easy on you?”

“Letting you go.”

“Then don’t,” I said, my heart beating faster. “Don’t do it. Don’t let go.”

“I should, though.” He sounded conflicted. “Anatolie is right. It’s unconscionable to draw you into my world when all it’s ever done is ruined your life.”

“That’s not all it’s ever done.”

“I don’t see it that way.”

I shrugged. “That’s probably because you don’t like yourself all that much. But I like you. No, I fuckin’ do and you know it,” I said when he looked like he was about to argue. “Don’t start with me, you’re gonna lose.

You keep talking like you bum-rushed me into something, when the truth is I had so many chances to back out. So many, Mirko.” I focused on his hand in mine for a second, trying to figure out the best path to the truth.

“You gave me a chance to change my life and I took it, because I wasn’t happy. The way I was living? All the work I was doing toward my degree, all the shit I was ignoring from my family—it all made me miserable. The first time in months I felt more than apathy was when you fell against my car.”

He shook his head. “That’s not a good reason to—”

“No, I know,” I broke in before he could say it. “And I swear, I’m not using you as some kind of high. It ain’t your job to fix my shit, I know that, but *you* need to know that you didn’t break it, either. Okay? You asked me for help, I gave it, and I don’t regret it. In fact, I want to keep doing it.”

There. The offer that had been percolating in the back of my brain for a while was out in the open now, as raw and bloody as my heart. It essentially *was* my heart, handed over to Mirko on a silver platter. He could turn it away and I would get it, absolutely, but I wasn’t going to get shoved into a tidy little corner on the other side of the country without a fight.

“Arlen, you don’t know what you’re offering,” he said.

“So teach me.”

“We’re still in the middle of an operation,” Mirko pointed out. “We can’t let the interrogator vanish again now that we know he’s here. He’s been one of the biggest thorns in the Collective’s side since our inception.”

“So let me help.”

“I can’t take responsibility for—”

“You already did,” I said gently. “Mirko, you gave yourself up to someone who you *knew* was going to torture you, probably to death, so that I could escape. You took the ultimate responsibility for me. I get if that freaks you out, because you hardly know me. But I did the same thing for you, and I would do it again. Let me help you. Let me learn. Let me...” *Eh, screw it.* “Let’s figure out if there’s something here for us, huh? Because I don’t know

about you, but the way I feel about you is...it's not something I've ever felt before. I don't want to lose it."

I don't want to lose you.

I knew I was being so, so selfish. It would be easier on the Collective if I let them vanish Arlen Tate into the ether, make me into a whole new person, and send me off to parts unknown. But I just couldn't do that. The new identity thing, yes—there was no going back to my old life—but not getting sent away. Not if it meant never seeing Mirko again. I didn't know if there was something between us that could eventually turn into love, but I desperately wanted to find out.

What had Nietzsche said? "There is always some madness in love, but there is always some reason in madness." I wanted to see if the love—or whatever it was I felt or might feel down the line—outweighed the madness of our circumstances.

Mirko tugged on my hand, pulling me closer to him. A second later our lips touched, the most delicate kiss we'd ever shared thanks to the fact that we were both bruised to hell and gone. "Mariana warned me this might happen," he said when we finally parted. "I should have listened to her."

"And what, cut me loose sooner?" I asked.

He shook his head. "No, brought you in sooner. Prepared you better. Offered you another option."

"You can do that now," I said hopefully.

"Yes," he agreed. "I can. She's going to laugh at me."

"Could be worse."

"It could. I'm pretty sure Anatolie will likely try to murder me for this, but I don't care."

Anatolie could pound sand. "Nah, he'll try to murder me instead."

"That's not comforting," Mirko replied, but he *sounded* comforted, so I was taking it as a win.

"So, we're trying this?" I asked.

“We are. But *you*”—he pointed a finger at me—“are going to listen to me every step of the way. I’m not going to risk your life and send you into anything unprepared again. We’ll find things for you to do, but no more fieldwork until I say you’re ready.”

“That’s fine with me,” I agreed. It wasn’t like I’d done so well at the fieldwork part this last time. “I’ll listen, I’ll learn. Just give me a chance.”

Finally, the serious expression on Mirko’s face dropped away. He smiled, and just the sight of it made my stomach clench. He pulled me in for another kiss, less gentle this time, but I didn’t care. Being close to him felt amazing, and even though Hell was still hanging over our heads, I had the feeling we’d be all right.

Anatolie must've walked by just then, because he growled, “*Blyat!*”

I threw him the bird with my free hand.

Go fuck yourself, buddy. It’s a whole new world.

EPILOGUE

Mirko

Three months later

“Okay, I’m still confused about something.”

I looked at Arlen as we walked between the rows of cars. “Only one thing?” His mutters of “*I swear to God, the more I learn about the Collective, the less I know*” had been a constant drumbeat for weeks now.

He rolled his eyes.

I chuckled and bumped his shoulder. “All right. What are you confused about?”

“I feel like we have different definitions of what constitutes a ‘small’ organization. Because I keep hearing that term thrown around, but this?” He stopped walking and gestured around the Collective’s expansive motor pool. “Is not the fleet of a small organization.”

Laughing quietly, I put a hand on the small of his back and gently prodded him into motion again. “It’s...relatively small.”

“Relative to what? The U.S. Army?”

“I mean, yes, but...we’re not a small organization. We’re a small *operation*.”

He eyed me impatiently.

“The Collective itself is big. Sometimes bigger than even I can comprehend. But we operate like...well, like how law enforcement has smaller task forces. Some are small, some are huge. Depends on the task.”

Arlen grunted but didn’t seem satisfied by that answer. In fact, from the way his brow stayed furrowed and his jaw worked, he really didn’t like the answer. Same as he hadn’t the last few times I’d tried to explain the ins and outs of the Collective over the last several weeks.

I was the one to stop this time, pausing with him about twenty feet from the door we’d been approaching. “Why do you ask?”

He swept his gaze around the motor pool before letting it land on me again. “Back in the beginning, when Mariana and Danuta said we couldn’t go after you... She said the Collective was small. That there weren’t more than four or five people in a given area.” His features twitched, and he broke eye contact again. “But the more I see of the organization, the less it seems...” He trailed off as if he didn’t know how to articulate what he was trying to say. “I don’t know. The more I learn, the more it bugs me that the Collective doesn’t fit the version she was trying to sell me that day.”

I stepped a little closer. “You think they were lying so they could abandon me.”

Arlen’s lips tightened. “No, not...not really? Just...” He waved a hand and exhaled sharply before finally meeting my gaze again. “It’s just never sat right. That’s all. And the deeper I get into this, the less it makes sense.”

Nodding, I sighed. “I get it. She wasn’t entirely lying. She didn’t have time to explain everything in that moment, so she summed it up as quickly as she could.”

“Okay, so what’s the longer version?”

I took a breath. “Well, our task force, for lack of a better description, is small. Are there more people in this city? Absolutely. There are Collective members everywhere. But...” I chewed my lip as I tried to pull my thoughts together. “Well, it’s like that diversion we created for the police. Where we kept SWAT occupied elsewhere in the city. The Collective members who are nearby—they’re tied up with their own tasks.”

“And they can’t step away long enough to help one of their own?” He sounded affronted and confused. “Sounds less like a collective and more like every man for himself.”

I shook my head. “No. It’s just the reality of working in deep cover. The night Anatolie and I were attacked—we knew we were in danger. That someone was coming for the Collective. But we didn’t know if anyone—in that room or otherwise—knew that we were part of the Collective. If we so much as winced, then we could have given ourselves away.” I half-shrugged. “As it turns out, we were already made. But we couldn’t have known that in the moment, and we couldn’t risk outing ourselves or compromising our own operation. Not even to save one of our own.”

Arlen avoided my gaze, turning vaguely green.

“We’re not as blasé about it as you might think,” I said softly. “None of us like it. But as we’ve been telling you in your training, covert ops are incredibly delicate. If someone breaks character, there’s too much risk of revealing the existence of the Collective.”

He seemed to consider that for a moment. “Like watching a movie and seeing a microphone or something that shouldn’t be there. Ruins the whole illusion.”

“Basically. So when we’re involved in an op, we have to assume we’re on our own. We know there are plenty of others in the area—they might even be in the same facility—but we all have to operate as if there’s no one else.”

Arlen deflated. “Which meant they couldn’t call for backup when Rayner had you.”

“Exactly.”

He winced, and he actually looked like he might be sick.

I touched his arm. “It’s the reality of working in the field. It’s...” I hesitated. Things had been going well enough between us that even I was cautiously optimistic they might continue that way. But it would be selfish not to be honest with him. “There may come a time where one of us is in trouble and the other can’t do anything about it. Even if we know.” I paused, letting that sink in before I quietly added, “No one’s asking you to like it. None of us do. But if that situation arises, you have to be able to let things play out.”

Arlen grimaced. This wasn’t the first time we’d broached this subject since he’d joined the Collective, and it probably wouldn’t be the last. I didn’t blame him—it was a difficult thing to accept, especially the more one realized exactly how much danger they’d often be facing alone, even when other members were physically nearby. It was a cold, harsh reality of this job. One that had taken me a long time to swallow.

And some people just... weren’t wired for it.

“There’s no shame in saying you can’t handle it,” I said softly. “Being involved with the Collective, or...” I swallowed. “Or being involved with me.”

His gaze snapped right to mine. “I’m not saying I can’t handle it. Or that I want to give any of this up. It’s just...a lot.” He blew out a breath. “And no, I don’t like the idea of letting something happen to you. That’s why I came after you. I didn’t... It didn’t make sense to me why they would just let you go.”

“They had to,” I whispered. “And there might come a time where you will too.” I had to force back some unexpected bile as I croaked, “I might have to do the same for you.”

He searched my eyes. “You’re okay with it?”

“I don’t *like* it. I hope like hell it never happens because I don’t want to

know what life would be like after that. But it's the world we live in."

Arlen stared at me. My own words echoed in my head, and I felt weirdly raw after saying it all out loud. As if I'd confessed to something I hadn't meant to. Or hadn't even realized was there despite it burning like a hot coal at the center of my chest.

I cleared my throat. "You have to promise me, Arlen. No matter what happens. If it's a choice between me and the Collective—you have to choose the Collective. And so do I. It's not an easy thing to do, but this isn't a movie where you're a hero for risking other people's lives to save one person you love. There's nothing noble about it. Not in this world." I found his hand and clasped it tightly. "Promise me, Arlen."

Long seconds ticked past as he held my gaze, and I was sure the scales were tipping toward him deciding he couldn't do this. That he'd changed his mind about his involvement with me and this whole shitshow, regardless of what might be involved with extricating himself from the Collective. Part of me wanted him to go. Even if I had to personally secret him away somewhere even beyond the reach of my own organization. I knew the toll this life took on people, and I'd rather let him go than watch it eat him alive like it did the rest of us.

After a while, he took a deep breath. "It's all for the right reasons, isn't it? Making life better for people at the expense of the wealthy and powerful?"

"It is," I said. "We don't always succeed, but that's the goal."

He considered that, then nodded sharply. "I'm in. And yes, I..." He paused for a deep breath before looking me in the eyes. "I promise. And I understand—if it comes down to you or the Collective...then the Collective has to come first."

The mix of guilt and relief was a strange one. I hated that I'd dragged him into this life.

But as I wrapped my arms around his neck and stole one of those long, lazy kisses that had become one of my favorite things lately, I was relieved—

even if it was selfish—to still have him here.

Arlen touched his forehead to mine. “Promise me something too, all right?”

I drew back, arching one eyebrow. “Go on.”

“I promise I’ll let whatever happen to you to protect the Collective, but how about you try to keep your dumb ass out of trouble, too? Like maybe don’t hand yourself over on a silver platter to a lunatic cop to...you know... save *my ass*?”

I laughed. “Touché. And...yes. I promise. As much as I can, I’ll stay out of trouble enough that you won’t be in that position.”

He chuckled, running his fingers through my hair, and as he leaned in for another kiss, he added, “That’s almost as good as a wedding vow coming from you.”

I grinned into his kiss before letting my lips soften against his. I wasn’t sure how romantic it was, but yeah, it was probably the best Arlen or anyone else would ever get out of me.

The sound of someone emphatically clearing their throat echoed in the garage, and we separated. Unsurprisingly, the interloper was Anatolie.

Standing by the door to the garage, he eyed us impatiently and gestured as if to say, *If you two are finished, could we proceed?*

Arlen just snickered. He would usually blush bright red if someone caught us being affectionate—especially Mariana, since she’d tease both of us endlessly about it—but he greatly enjoyed antagonizing Anatolie. Which he accomplished by both being here and being involved with me.

I took Arlen’s hand, and we headed toward Anatolie, who rolled his eyes and continued inside. I smothered a laugh. Arlen didn’t bother.

Inside, the techs were finishing up the detailing on Arlen’s car. No, not that one. Though there’d been some substantial housecleaning in the city’s law enforcement, there could still be dirty cops who’d recognize it. That vehicle had found its way to a chop shop and was likely stripped down to

nothing by now.

Instead, the Collective was providing him with something new.

Well...“new.”

To the untrained eye, it was a generic black Toyota Camry. A few years old. The chips and scuffs of everyday wear and tear. The upholstery was slightly weathered, complete with a nearly faded coffee stain, and the license plate had a thin coat of street grime. It wouldn't be out of place anywhere—the freeway, a shitty backroad, the supermarket parking lot.

Or, I noted as I bit back a smile, the garage beneath our apartment building. We'd rented a three-bedroom so we could have a little space and ostensibly live together as roommates instead of diving into cohabitating as boyfriends. Which *totally* explained why one of our two beds hadn't been slept in since we'd moved in.

Anatolie and I stood off to the sides while the techs showed Arlen all the—as he'd described them—bonus features of the new ride. Multiple places to store weapons and ammunition. Flash bangs and smoke grenades in secret compartments. Sharp debris that could be deployed to blow out the tires of someone in pursuit. Bulletproofing, and not just the windows—layers of Kevlar inside the doors and beneath upholstery.

Arlen looked both gleeful and shell-shocked as he learned about the vehicle. A mix of “kid on Christmas” and “target who's becoming all too aware of how much danger he's in.”

I didn't envy him. Been there.

“So you're still sure about bringing him in.” Arms crossed, Anatolie kept his voice low so only I would hear him.

“He's already been brought in. And anyway, I don't think I could talk him out of it if I tried.”

Anatolie huffed a dry laugh. “He is a stubborn fucker, isn't he?”

“Well, I'm used to that type.” I elbowed him. “I've been working with you since—”

He growled something in Romanian, and I snorted.

We watched Arlen and the techs in silence. Then the door opened behind us, and we both turned as Mariana stepped in with a tablet tucked under her arm.

“Oh, good.” She pulled the door shut. “Just the pair I was looking for.”

Anatolie and I exchanged glances.

Mariana craned her neck toward the car, then faced us and pulled out her tablet. “Listen, we’re still trying to get a bead on the organization or whoever exactly Detective Rayner was involved in. It’s... we don’t know yet.” As she tapped the screen, she added, “But we’ve got a lead on the interrogator.”

My spine straightened. Anatolie’s breath hitched.

She showed us the screen. On it was a grainy image of a tall man walking from what looked like a Mercedes in a parking garage. Beside it was a clearer image of a front view of the man from the shoulders up. He was white with sharply angled features and dark hair that just touched the collar of his dress shirt.

“Facial recognition had a lot of trouble nailing him down,” she explained. “Even when we got a clear look at his face...” She shook her head.

“Figures,” Anatolie muttered. “The CIA doesn’t like their operatives—current or former—being easy to find.”

“It’s not just that.” She swiped the screen, and another image appeared, this time in color. It looked like a passport photo or one that would be used for a badge. At first glance, he looked like a different person entirely. But the angle of his jaw and the shape of his eyes gave him away. The rest...

I leaned in closer. “Did he get...cosmetic surgery?”

“Quite a lot of it,” Mariana confirmed.

That was no exaggeration. There was a deep scar across his cheek and another extending from his lip down over his chin. His nose was thicker and rounder, with that distinctive uneven look of one that had been broken enough times it had given up on healing properly.

He'd also had a much shorter and more severe haircut back then. A high-and-tight that was higher and tighter than even a freshly minted military recruit would sport. The set of his shoulders hinted at time in a uniform as well.

I looked at Mariana. "Ex-special forces?"

She nodded.

Anatolie laughed. "Of *course*, he's ex-special fucking forces. That'll make it easy for whoever gets stuck taking him out."

I chuckled, too. Mariana...did not.

Anatolie and I instantly sobered.

"What?" I asked.

She closed the tablet and tucked it under her arm again. "Um. Well..."

"Mariana." Anatolie inclined his head and gestured at me and himself. "We do white-collar ops. Not..." He flailed his hand at her iPad. "*That.*"

She didn't budge.

Anatolie and I glanced at each other again.

Then I narrowed my eyes at her and repeated, "What?"

She pushed her shoulders back and took a deep breath. "Well, in doing our recon of this particular asshole, it turns out he has a day job."

"A day job?" I laughed. "Black op interrogations don't pay like they used to?"

"Oh, he has plenty of money. But in addition to needing a way to justify his money, he likes having *more* money. And he particularly likes"—she swiped to an image of the asshole himself on a magazine cover, looking polished and rich and so fucking pleased with himself—"the notoriety and admiration that comes with being at the top of every game he plays—including those in the boardroom."

Beside me, Anatolie deflated. "Ce dumnezeu."

Yeah. I agreed. "So he's a C-suite asshole by day and a professional torturer by night." Wiping a hand over my face, I muttered, "Does he have

‘dark triad’ tattooed on his forehead, by any chance? Or would that be too on the obviously reconstructed nose?”

“Well, you’ll have to let me know.” She looked me dead in the eyes. “Because he’s your next assignment.”

“Why us?” Anatolie demanded. “Even if he’s a white-collar fucker, this is the kind of job for one of the urban assault teams. Not”—he gestured at me and himself again—“us.”

“No tactical team is going to get near him,” she said. “He has security up the wazoo, and he’s extremely paranoid.”

“Oh. Great.” Anatolie rolled his eyes. “That sounds even better.”

“Mmhmm. Well. The powers that be have determined that the best approach is the less hostile one. Gain his trust. Get in close. Take the shot.”

I groaned. “And that’s what we’re good at.”

“It’s what you’re the best at,” she said with an apologetic smile. “Unfortunately for you, those at the top have noticed. So...you have your assignment.”

Before I could say anything, a car door shut behind me, and I glanced back to see Arlen and the tech chatting.

And my heart sank.

Ops like this took time. A lot of time.

Arguably more time than a fledgling relationship could weather, especially with the stress that came with such a job, not to mention our entire existence within the Collective.

Mariana quietly cleared her throat. “He could, um... He could go with you.”

My head snapped back toward her, and Anatolie sputtered, “*What?*”

“Hear me out.” She put up a hand to shut him up, since he was undoubtedly ready to lose his shit. “Having him there as Mirko’s live-in boyfriend will just sell your personas. You’ll look far less suspicious with a partner.” She paused and added with a subtle smile, “And it’ll give him a

taste of what a covert op is really like without having to play one of the more active, dangerous roles.”

“And he could get killed,” Anatolie snapped. “Is that what—Jesus, Mirko, tell me you’re not on board with this.”

I didn’t want to be. Arlen needed more time and more training before he went out into the field, especially in deep cover.

But there was no guarantee I’d be with him the first time he was an active agent in a covert op. There was no way to be sure I could be there to keep an eye on him and pull the plug if things went south.

Chewing my lip, I glanced at Arlen, who was now nodding along as the tech explained how to use the various buttons on the key fob.

As much as I didn’t like pulling him into the fray too early, this would give me a chance to help him refine his skills in the field. Under my supervision. Where I could see and protect him.

“Mirko,” Anatolie whispered harshly. “You can’t be seriously considering this.”

I swallowed. Then I faced him. “I think it’s a good idea.”

He swore and rolled his eyes. Then he threw up his hands and stormed out. I watched him go, but made no effort to go after him. Neither did Mariana. For as level-headed as he was in the field and under pressure, he had a hot temper when things weren’t so dangerous. We both knew him—he’d cool off, and we could discuss it.

She faced me. “So, you think he’s ready?” She nodded past me. “Arlen?”

Oh, no, he wasn’t ready. But this would be a relatively easy op for him. He was still training with the Collective, but a role like this—as the actual operative’s spouse, human set dressing more than anything—would help him gain experience. He needed that experience, and my sanity needed him there with me. So I nodded. “He’ll be fine. I assume we’re not going in right away?”

“No. There’s time. We need to do a little more recon on him, and we need

to get personas in place for everyone involved. Including Arlen.” She smiled faintly. “There’s time.”

I nodded again but said nothing.

After Mariana left, I joined Arlen by the car.

His eyes lit up when he saw me. “Hey, want to help me take it for a test drive?”

“Does that mean I get to drive?”

“Pfft.” He spun the keys on his finger. “Not a chance.”

I laughed despite everything I hadn’t yet told him, and even as I got into the passenger side, I said, “I don’t know that I trust your driving.”

“What?” He pulled the door shut as the garage door began to roll upward. “You trusted my driving the night we met.”

“One, I was on drugs.” I pulled on my seat belt. “Two, I hadn’t seen you engaged in a high-speed chase.”

“So do some drugs, then.” He shrugged as he turned the key. “And I’ll try not to get into another high-speed chase today.”

“You’ll *try*?”

Arlen just rolled his eyes and pulled out of the garage.

I chuckled, too, but my stomach was in knots. There was no telling what he’d think of this. And I still wondered if maybe Anatolie was right and I shouldn’t bring Arlen into this.

But on some level, I was sure this was the right thing to do, and that I wasn’t putting Arlen in unnecessary danger for entirely selfish reasons.

He was also tough. He’d proven that multiple times while we’d been trying to get to Anatolie, and while he’d been trying to get to me. He was smart, he was cool under pressure, and he knew when to shut the hell up and play along.

Arlen and I had both come through the most recent shitshow alive and relatively unscathed. We’d both been rattled, and we were both sporting some new scars, but we’d both made it through. There was no reason to think we

couldn't do it again.

And if our *relationship* could survive the minefield we were about to walk into...

We could survive anything.

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