



HELP ME

*Remember*

ROMEO ALEXANDER

**HELP ME REMEMBER**

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## ABOUT THE BOOK...

**What would you do if you woke up injured and didn't know who you were?**

Well, that's precisely what's happened to me.

A hot stranger with white-blond hair and bright blue eyes says his name is Eric and claims mine is Dylan. Apparently, he was my best friend. Running into Eric felt weird, but so was waking up in an abandoned building, not knowing who I was. *I'd fallen through the ceiling, and I'd been shot!* I don't remember anything else, but at least Eric wants to help me, and the chemistry between us is undeniable...I think.

It doesn't take long to find out I'm not the man Eric remembers. There are things about me, things I can do, that don't fit with the man he knew before. Worse yet, I have an ugly past, and it's coming back bit by bit to bite me. Why are the Russian Mafia and the cops after me? I have no idea what kind of man I used to be, and finding out scares me, but now Eric is caught up in the chaos, and that's unacceptable. Thank God he still believes in me...for now.

I don't know how to fix this, especially when I don't remember enough to know what's going on. I know one thing for sure, Eric is starting to mean a lot to me, and I'm starting to desire things I shouldn't. He's all I have right now, so no matter what happens, I'm getting us out of this mess, one way or another.

That I promise.

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A bisexual, friends-to-lovers suspense romance, *Help Me Remember* will keep you on the edge of your seat. Join Dylan as he searches for answers and uncovers long-buried truths and a passion far hotter than he expected. Will Dylan find a way to escape the Russian mafia's clutches and find his happily ever after, or will he and his lover end up dead?



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# CHAPTER ONE

My first thought upon waking was to wonder what that foul smell was. Whatever my second thought was going to be, it was quickly lost when I opened my eyes, and a lightning storm of pure pain lanced through my head. Groaning, I clenched my eyes shut and slapped my hands over my forehead, holding tight as successive waves of pain crashed over me.

It was several seconds before I became aware of the rest of my body. Besides the agony in my head, my chest was throbbing with a deep ache that demanded attention. Between the two, the rest of the aches and pains in my body were drowned out.

I finally dared to open my eyes slowly. The pain in my head sharpened, and I stared at the ceiling above me. It was dirty and punctured with holes, none of which stood out more than the giant human-sized hole right above my head. Another hole gaped in the floor above it, and I could see another one just above that.

Groaning, I managed to put my hands under myself and sit upright. The room was in no better state than the ceiling. Stains marred the torn and decaying carpet, and holes scarred the walls. There was enough drywall, glass, and wood littered about the floor that I wondered whether someone didn't know how to renovate correctly or had a fit and tore the place apart.

“God,” I moaned, flinching at the sound of my own voice. It was raspy and deep and sounded utterly foreign to me.



Reaching up, I touched the side of my head where it hurt the worst and found it not only sensitive but tacky. Pulling my hand back, I blinked at the crimson smeared on my fingers. At least the pain made sense now I could see I was injured, not that bleeding from my head was a great comfort.

Moving carefully, I pushed myself up from the filthy floor. It was hard to breathe, and I had to lean against the nearest wall to keep myself upright. Touching a hand to my chest, I felt a stiffness that made no sense. That was until I pulled off the ragged shirt I'd been wearing and found a black vest covering my entire chest and stomach.

“The fuck?” I muttered, touching my fingers gently to the dent in the center and jerking when I felt cool metal. My thoughts swam, and all I could think to do was to reach in, curl my fingertips around the metal and give it a sharp jerk. The object was crumpled and mashed, but even in the haze of my pain-filled thoughts, I knew it was a bullet.

The more I discovered, the worse I felt. Well, not physically, since removing the bullet had eased some of the tension in my chest. Nevertheless, it took a couple of minutes of fumbling before I figured out how to remove the vest, letting it tumble to the floor.

“T-take a minute,” I instructed. “Take a breath...or thirty.”

I wasn't sure if talking to myself would help, but at least it made me feel better talking through the steps.

“What...what am I wearing?” I asked myself, choosing to focus on that. “No shirt now, but...jeans, boots...probably socks. Jewelry? No, no jewelry. And the shirt's a bit dirty but useable.”

The idea of raising my arms above my head again was daunting, so I decided to wait until I had a better understanding of my situation. I was in the middle of what looked like an abandoned building, and I'd clearly hurt my head and been...shot? Why had those things happened, and why had I been prepared enough for the possibility to wear a bulletproof vest?

“Shit,” I muttered, running my hand over my face as I searched the fog of my thoughts for answers. I froze when I felt the stubble on my face and realized...I didn’t know what color the stubble was. Hell, I didn’t know what color my hair was, or my eyes, or the shape of my nose or jaw, or...

*What is my name?*

The questions went unanswered, and the cramp in my chest grew tighter. All at once, the confusion in my head was overwhelming, and I could feel my legs threatening to buckle under me. Only the fear of hurting myself further kept me upright and steady against the wall.

“Breathe,” I told myself again, this time through clenched teeth. “Find...get a good look at yourself.”

Right. I needed to make sure I wasn’t going to keel over at any minute and bleed out on the nasty floor. Then I could figure out everything else. The thought was enough to steel me against the rising panic threatening to choke the air from my lungs, and I looked around.

One of the doors leading into the room was wide open, and through it I glimpsed another room where I could see tile. It seemed as good a place as any to start, and I slowly made my way there. My boots crunched on broken tiles as I stumbled into the small space toward a half-broken sink.

Leaning against the wall, I had to fight with the filthy window beside me. The wood squealed as I gave it a shove, forcing it open. There was no screen to block the outside world, but there was light, and it poured in. It didn’t do much to improve the sight of the room, but at least I could see as I rubbed a hand over the grimy mirror.

A beleaguered face peered back at me, paler than the skin I could see on my arms, chest, and hands. An ugly bruise was forming along the left half of my face, spreading down my cheek and toward the jawline. If I ignored that and a few cuts on my brow, it wasn’t an altogether bad face. The jaw was well-defined without being blocky, and my eyebrows were a little bushy, but they worked pretty well with my slightly wide

nose and eyes. The eyes themselves were dark green, which seemed to go hand in hand with my pitch-black hair.

Reaching up, I ran my hands through the close-cropped hair and down over my uninjured side. I didn't feel the faintest flicker of recognition as I stared at myself. There was a scar on my upper lip, and I had no idea where it came from. There were two small crows tattooed on the inner part of my left upper arm, but even that I had no recollection of.

I might as well have been staring at a stranger.

A stranger who was battered, bruised and looking sick enough that anyone seeing me would probably head for the hills or the nearest doctor. Half my face was bruised and coated in blood, I was covered in cuts and scrapes, and given the paleness of my face, I was probably ready to keel over if I wasn't careful.

"Whoever you are," I told my reflection, "you have some of the worst luck...or you pissed off the wrong person."

Suddenly, nausea rolled through me like a gray wave, and I doubled over as the first heave struck me hard. Holding on to the half of the sink that wasn't shattered, I let the contents of my stomach spill onto the floor. There wasn't much to puke up from the looks of it, but all that meant was my stomach heaved and clenched painfully. The ache in my chest and head doubled, and I let out a pained groan as I fought to get my stomach under control.

A soft, whimpering laugh bubbled up from my throat. "Right. Headache...head wound, confusion, nausea...concussion? Yeah, I know what a concussion is, but I don't know who the hell I am."

Unexpectedly, tears sprang to my eyes, stinging as I blindly reached out to flip on the water. It took me a moment to register when nothing happened before I let out a grunt, this time of annoyance. I don't know why I thought water would flow through a building that clearly hadn't seen a living soul in years. It made complete sense not to expect it, but the annoyance took the edge off the panic and fear.

I gazed out the window, where I realized I could hear the sounds of cars and people shouting something I couldn't make out. Looking further, I could see the rise of tall buildings clustered on the horizon. I had to be in a city of some sort, and from the looks of it, I was in an apartment building.

It wasn't much, but at the very least, I had *some* idea where I was. The place was abandoned, and I had no idea why I had been in the building in the first place, let alone the city or what had happened. What I could figure out, however, was that someone had tried to kill me. I didn't know what that said about me, but it was probably best to leave the place where I'd nearly been killed as soon as possible. Figuring out who I was and what to do in the long run were problems that would have to wait until later.

"Right, immediate problem first, existential crisis later," I told myself, spitting into the sink in a futile attempt to get the foul taste of vomit off my tongue.

Which meant getting out of the building without hurting myself further...and without drawing any unnecessary attention. A difficult feat when I looked like I'd been thrown down the stairs and half my face was covered in blood. After a moment, I realized there was nothing I could do about the former, but I could clean up the latter.

I looked down at the shirt in my hand and sighed. It was probably the most reasonably clean thing in this place. Keeping my grip on it, I walked out of the bathroom and made my way around the apartment. There wasn't much to see, but just walking helped me feel stronger, and my gait became steadier as I dug around for anything the former occupants might have left behind.

Despite my best efforts, it took nearly twenty minutes to search the apartment I had found myself in and the other three that shared the same floor. All of them were in the same dilapidated, torn-apart state, and a couple had spray-painted symbols on the walls and floors that I didn't recognize.

My search wasn't in vain, however. I found a crumpled plastic bag with two slightly beaten but unopened bottles of

water. And in another apartment, kicked behind a broken couch, I found a box of clothes. Sadly, none of the clothes were going to fit me, but considering the box hadn't been opened and everything had been thrown into bags, I assumed they weren't filthy.

In front of the least broken mirror on the floor, I paced around, using a clean-enough t-shirt to dab at my face and hair. Unfortunately, it sent new waves of pain radiating down my neck and back. It was a slow process, and I couldn't do much to hide whatever wound lay out of sight at the back of my head. I could only hope I'd cleaned up the mess enough to avoid drawing immediate attention.

Keeping what was left of the water, I pulled on the dirty shirt I'd woken up wearing. It was black, so hopefully, it would conceal any bloodstains it might have picked up while I lay on the floor. With that, I made my way toward the stairway I'd seen earlier and prayed it was still usable.

The little moments of good luck continued as I descended. The stairway was cluttered with the same mess that littered the apartment floors, and I kept away from the railing, but I managed to descend a couple more floors. The front door was blocked by rubble I knew I didn't have the strength to move, so I shambled toward the back.

Thankfully, the back door had been completely ripped off its hinges and tossed into the overgrown grass and weeds in the yard. The steps were cracked concrete but still held as I made my way down. I was thankful I hadn't needed to go up any stairs, or I would have worn out what strength I'd managed to get back.

The back fence was in a similar state, and I was able to carefully climb through a gap into an empty alley between the rows of buildings. From there, I had no idea where I was going, but I knew I needed medical care. The thought brought a bubble of wariness to the edge of my mind but it disappeared before I could figure out why.

Limping to the mouth of the alley, I found myself on a street with only a handful of people. Not one of them paid me

the slightest attention as I looked around, hoping to find something that stood out. It was only when I spotted a store on the nearby corner that I finally started moving again.

The store was cramped and poorly lit, and the clerk at the counter looked as if he'd seen thousands of things in his lifetime and wasn't looking forward to any more. His eyes searched my face as I approached, and while his brow rose, I didn't see any alarm or wariness on his face.

"You look like shit," he proclaimed, setting his phone down to look me over. "Don't smell much better either."

"Kind of, uh, had an accident," I told him, rubbing my jaw and immediately regretting it. "Bumped myself up pretty good."

"Yeah, I see that," he said, clicking his tongue almost annoyed. "We got some bandages, but you probably should get yourself to a hospital."

The vague wariness from before came back even stronger, twisting in my gut. I didn't know what it was or where it came from, but a quiet, unnamed voice in my head told me a hospital was absolutely out of the question. Maybe it was some knowledge I couldn't remember or a lingering instinct, but I knew there would be too many eyes and ears. Maybe it wouldn't be a problem, but that voice offered another far safer solution.

"I was kind of hoping there was a clinic nearby," I said, then wondered how I'd manage to pay for it. "One that could work with me. Not exactly rolling in money."

There was a lump in my pocket that I hadn't paid attention to before, but it was square, and I hoped it was a wallet. I wasn't going to pull it out in front of this stranger, however. The act of going through it, hoping there was some form of identification to give me *something* to work with, felt way too intimate.

He shrugged, clearly hoping I would go away quickly. "There's a place a couple of blocks over. Smells like piss from

all the junkies and hobos wandering in all the time. But it's free for most people, so fuck it."

"Yeah, fuck it," I repeated, rolling the phrase around in my head, not sure whether it was something I was comfortable with or not. "Could you, uh, point me in the right direction?"

His reaction was as disinterested as he'd been for the rest of the conversation, but he told me where to go and what to look for, so I left him alone. As I reached the door, I saw a bin with a handful of discount beanie hats. I hesitated, turning slightly as I patted myself down and saw the clerk hunched over and half turned away as he resumed looking at his phone. I felt the bulge I thought had to be a wallet with a sigh of relief while my other hand snatched up one of the hats as I stepped through the door.

Once I was out of sight of the windows, I yanked the tag off the hat and carefully inched it over my head. It was a little too warm for a hat, but at least it covered the wound on the back of my head for the moment. The instinct to keep a low profile vibrated strongly inside me, and I suspected it was the same one that had led me to steal the hat.

The act had been effortless and without thought, and I felt a tug in my chest as I wondered just what kind of person I must have been. The hat had only been a few dollars, but I'd taken it rather than linger in the store any longer. The thought had come to me, and then I'd simply done it, all within seconds. Either I hadn't been a particularly moral person before, or I wasn't now that I didn't have a lifetime of memories to balance me out.

Neither thought was pleasant, and I pushed them aside once I neared the corner the clerk had described. Stepping out of the way on the sidewalk, I pulled the object from my pocket, heart racing as I did, in fact, find a wallet. It was a bifold, simple, black, and appeared to be made of leather or something like it. I noted it looked brand new as I opened it.

The contents were disappointing...mostly. My heart sank when I found absolutely nothing that identified who I was. There was what might be a pass for a subway, and I wondered

if it was for whatever city I was in. There was also a diner receipt tucked into one of the pockets, but the bill had been paid in cash. The last item was nearly a thousand dollars in cash, and I stared at the amount in wonder.

I may not have known who I was or where I was, but I knew people didn't usually carry that amount of money with them. Combined with the food bill being paid with cash, I frantically began to wonder what the hell I'd been doing before I woke up.

"Steady, steady," I soothed, tucking the wallet away before anyone saw just how much money I had. On top of everything else I was dealing with, I didn't want to risk enticing someone to try to take the money from me. A new surge of guilt over the theft of a cheap hat bubbled up, but I pushed it away. At the very least, I knew I would have money for whatever I needed while I tried to figure things out.

With that done, I made my way to the clinic the clerk had mentioned. The frosted glass door opened with difficulty, and I walked into the lobby. Without thinking, I took a few light sniffs and found only the scent of cleaning supplies, and not piss as had been advertised. Though from the looks of the man hunched in one of the chairs, I suspected one part of the room might.

An older woman sat perched behind a solid, worn desk and looked me over. Her expression held the same disinterest I'd seen on the clerk's face at the store. Still, she seemed to take more interest in my physical appearance than he had and set her pen aside as I approached.

"Yes?" she asked, still looking me over.

"I was, uh, hoping to get looked at," I told her quietly. It probably didn't matter if the other people in the lobby heard what I had to say, but I didn't want to make a show of myself either. "Had a...had a fall."

"You certainly look like it," she said, turning toward a computer that looked like it had probably been brand new over a decade before. "I'm going to need your name and an idea of



what your injuries are. You'll need to fill out some paperwork."

"I don't..." I began, lowering my voice. "I don't know my name."

I didn't know this woman, but I would swear she was fighting the urge to roll her eyes as she grabbed a nearby clipboard with a piece of paper clipped to it. She slapped a pen on top and handed it to me. "We don't need to know who you really are, and we don't care what you were doing to get so beat up. Fill out what you can, bring this back, and wait until someone can see you...unless there's an emergency?"

"Just a head wound," I told her, taking the clipboard automatically.

Her eyes moved to my hat. "Right. If you start feeling like you're going to be sick or keel over, try to give me a shout. Otherwise, fill that out and get comfortable."

I wasn't sure it was possible to get comfortable on the hard plastic chairs, but I did as I was told. It was still better than standing around on my aching legs. My head was still throbbing fiercely, but I wasn't going to bother to ask for anything for the pain. I was quite sure the woman would only send me back to my seat.

The paperwork turned out to be a nightmare as I quickly realized I couldn't fill out half the information properly. The best I could do was make up my name and what I hoped was a good guess about my age and assume my ethnicity. The address I left blank because I couldn't think of one place that wouldn't be obviously fake. But at least I could tell them my injuries and hope whatever doctor or nurse I talked to would be able to help.

I wasn't surprised when the woman at the desk said little when I handed over the paperwork, save to glance at it and send me back to my seat in the corner of the room. There was a certain comfort in finding the one spot in the room that gave me the best view of everything.

To try to ignore the pain and exhaustion filling me, I distracted myself by noting everything happening around me. There were a few people who, if they weren't coming off some drug, were undoubtedly still flying high. Another man nursed a bloodied arm and was the first to be called back by a woman as grim looking as the one working the desk. She strode out from the only other door in the lobby, whisking the bleeding man away and out of sight.

I wasn't sure if it was because I didn't know what was happening or if I had real-life experience that made it easy for me to watch everything with such ease or if it was some remnant of my essential personality. Whatever the reason, I was happy I could entertain myself for long periods of time when it took them nearly two hours to call me.

"Stanley Brown?" the woman called, looking down at a folder in her hand. I stared back blankly as she arched a brow after a few moments of no response. "Stanley Brown? Is he still here?"

I jerked to my feet as I suddenly remembered the name I'd jotted down. My response was stilted as a fresh wave of pain shot through my head at the sudden movement. "Th-that's me."

She looked me over. "Are you able to walk?"

"Yeah," I said, feeling the waves of pain lessen with each passing second. The throb was still agonizing, but at least the edges of my vision were no longer wavy and gray. "Just... stood up too fast, is all."

"Alright, then come with me," she said, watching me warily.

Flashing a smile to show I understood because I didn't dare move my head more than was necessary, I followed her. The waiting room had been dismal and miserable, and the hallway she led me down wasn't much better. The tiles were cracked, and the fluorescent lights in the ceiling flickered against the sterile, somewhat stained walls. The smell of cleaning products was still apparent, so I had to assume the place was simply run-down rather than dirty.

“Here,” she said, motioning to the last door at the end of the hallway. “Take a seat on the exam chair.”

I had to use the small step stool beside the chair to haul myself up, not willing to risk using my arms or relying on my balance. Sitting down gently to the sound of the paper used to cover it, I clasped my hands between my knees.

“So, Stanley, you put down that you suffered a fall?” she asked, rechecking the folder, which I assumed held the paperwork I’d filled out.

“Yes,” I said, wondering if I needed to elaborate and choosing to wait instead.

“Off of?”

“Through a floor...a couple of floors.”

“Through...how many stories in total?”

“I was, uh, a little disoriented, but it was at least two.”

“And how did this happen?”

I grimaced. “I...don’t know.”

“Of course,” she said, closing the folder and setting it aside. “Well, hopefully, you can tell the doctor what really happened, and she might be able to help you. I’ll take your vitals.”

I frowned but didn’t bother to object, figuring I’d be overridden or ignored no matter what I said. Instead, I stayed on the chair and let her poke, prod, and take whatever measurements she wanted. It was a relief that she didn’t feel the need to carry on a conversation with me as she worked, muttering only that the doctor would be in to see me shortly before leaving and closing the door behind her.

Wondering if I was about to be left to entertain myself for an extended period again, I gazed around. The room seemed to be in about the same shape as the rest of the building, but the medical supplies cabinets had clean glass, there was a fresh box of latex gloves on the counter, and the room seemed neat and tidy. While I wasn’t sure if they’d be able to help me, at

least I could probably count on not getting an infection while I waited.

The door flew open, and I jerked in surprise as a tall woman strode into the room. Her white coat was pristine, and her hair was pulled back into a tight, messy bun. It was streaked with white and gray, and I could see the lines on her face deepen as she grabbed the folder and began to read.

“Mr. Brown?”

I blinked at her gray eyes as they peered into mine, waiting for a response. “Oh. Right. Yes, that’s me.”

“Not sure of your name?” she asked wryly, closing the door behind her. “A little confusion from your...fall?”

The hesitation, I noted, didn’t come from doubt but from her glancing at the folder the nurse had left behind.

I nodded. “At least, I think it was a fall.”

“Hit your head?”

“I did.”

“That what the hat is for?”

“I, uh, didn’t get a chance to see how bad it was. I didn’t want to scare people.”

“Of course,” she said, setting the folder aside and going to wash her hands at the sink. “Well, take the hat off so I can take a look.”

Taking it off carefully, I set it aside and bent forward so she could see my head. There was a snap of gloves being put on, and I could see her stepping forward to lean over and peer at the wound.

“Well, that’s a pretty nasty one you have there. You’ll definitely need some stitches,” she said, sounding intrigued. “And you got this from a fall? Through some floors?”

“A couple of floors,” I said. “At least.”

“At least,” she repeated with a snort, gently probing the wound and making me wince. “Falling two floors and landing

on your head is easy. Surviving that is something else entirely, however. Now, just what were you doing falling two stories?"

"Other than getting shot, I don't know," I told her.

Her probing hesitated. "You were shot?"

"I was wearing a vest."

"You were wearing...a vest. So you were shot and fell down inside a building?"

"Seems that way."

She stepped back, and I lifted my head to find her frowning at me. "You can keep your secrets if you must, but jokes and sarcasm aren't going to help me treat you."

"I'm not joking," I said with a shrug. "I don't know what actually happened."

She grunted thoughtfully, stepping back to toss her gloves in the trash. "Having difficulty recalling a traumatic and painful event isn't uncommon after an injury, particularly when a head wound is involved."

"What about not being able to remember anything?" I asked her quietly.

Her motion to reach into the cabinet hesitated. "Anything?"

"What I was doing. What city this is. Where I came from. Where I grew up." I swallowed hard and spoke softer. "What my name is."

The doctor finally turned, her eyes narrowing as she searched my face. "Complete retrograde amnesia?"

"I still remember how to cross the street safely, how to count, and I knew that some of the symptoms I was showing could be a concussion," I told her, feeling absurdly proud of that fact.

"But, you don't know who you are?"

"No," I said, shoulders sagging in what felt like shame.

She bent down, bringing a penlight up and sweeping it over my eyes. “Follow the light. And you don’t have any inclination of anything, not even a speck?”

I thought about the strange impulses I thought of as instincts. Continuing to follow the light until she pulled away, I realized I wasn’t going to tell her that much. The same urges I kept to myself also told me to keep that fact to myself.

“No, nothing but a massive headache, nausea, and my body hurting like I fell a couple of stories,” I told her, surprised at how easily the lie came to my lips.

“Interesting,” she said, returning to the cabinet to dig through it. “I’ve been doing this for almost thirty years, and not once in that entire time have I ever found someone suffering from complete amnesia. Loss of a day or two here and there, but that’s common when dealing with addicts and head traumas as I do here.”

I fidgeted but stilled when she turned around to set a few things on the table beside the chair. “I’m sure it’s hard to believe.”

“Downright impossible for some,” she said wryly. “I’d almost say it’s a delusion, but...”

“But?”

“But the people I typically see here with delusions also show symptoms of abusing drugs, alcohol, or more obvious mental health issues. Not that someone couldn’t suffer from a delusion while completely sober and without other severe, noticeable symptoms.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m sane,” I told her, suddenly wondering if that was just a sign I was losing my mind...or had lost it.

“And there’s still a great deal of debate about whether or not that counts as a mark in your sanity’s favor,” she said with a small, quick smile. It wasn’t much, but just that gesture was enough to make her look younger. She marched over to the door and yanked it open, calling, “Eric! I need a local in here!”

“Local?” I asked in confusion when she turned back to me.

“Anesthetic,” she explained, then arched her brow. “That is unless you want me to sew up that lovely head wound you have without numbing the area first.”

“I’d rather not,” I said sheepishly. I honestly didn’t think it could hurt any worse than I’d already been through, but there wasn’t any point in adding additional pain.

“Before that,” she said, “do me a favor and strip down.”

“Um...why?”

“Well, if you fell like you said, and were shot, then I need to examine the wounds.”

“Oh...right, yeah, sure,” I said, glancing toward the door she’d kept cracked open.

“I can have Eric wait to bring me what I need if you’re shy,” she said with a completely neutral delivery.

“No, it’s—” I shook my head and winced as the motion brought another sharp jab to the inside of my skull.

I did the best I could but slowly, untying my boots and taking off my shirt. All the sitting I had been doing might have been restful, but I’d stiffened up considerably. By the time I managed to pull my jeans off, I was ready to sit down again... and privately glad that whoever I was before my little fall wasn’t the type to go without underwear.

“Here,” she said, handing me a small paper cup and a bottle of water. “That’ll help with the pain. From the looks of it, you should be in a great deal of it at the moment.”

“Don’t really have anything to compare it to,” I admitted sheepishly but took the pills without protest.

“I suppose that’s true, though that’s even more reason for you not to be this calm,” she said, leaning forward and gently laying her fingers on my chest. “Between that and the mysterious circumstances you find yourself in, I’m certainly curious about what you were up to.”

“That makes two of us,” I said, wincing when her finger probed too deeply.

“Hey, I’ve got the—” a new voice added, and I looked over to find a man in colorful scrubs in the doorway.

He had simply stopped and stood in the doorway, staring at us as though we were completely naked and getting ready for an entirely different sort of physical exam. The thought made me cringe, and not because the woman was several years my senior. Almost immediately, I realized I would much rather share a naked moment with the man in the doorway than the doctor...or any of the women I’d seen.

*Huh, I guess I found out something new about myself.*

“Holy shit!” the man proclaimed, and I realized he was gaping at me. “Dylan?”

*Okay, make that two new things.*



## CHAPTER TWO

Eric's face broke into a smile, and he took a step forward. "When did you get into town?"

The doctor glanced between us, curiosity in her eyes. "Do you two know each other?"

I said no at almost the exact same moment he said yes. The effect was immediate, and I watched his smile stutter and fall as he frowned at me in confusion.

"What?" he asked, cocking his head. "Dyl, it's me, Eric. Christ, I know it's been a handful of years, and you're beat to hell...by the way, what the fuck have you been doing? But shit, we know each other, we grew up together. I'd recognize you anywhere."

The fuzziness in my head grew thicker as I stared at him, tracing his features with my eyes. He was about my height but not nearly as bulky, though almost as broad in the shoulders. His face was long with a slim but still noticeable jawline, and his nose might have been long once, but a slight crookedness gave away that it'd been broken. Scruff speckled his jaw, far darker than the so-light-it-was-nearly-white blond hair on his head.

The whole time, his bright blue eyes continued to bore into me, staring with confusion and, much to my growing shame, hurt.

"Dylan?" he questioned.

"Huh," the doctor grunted, looking between us. "You're sure this is him?"

Eric glanced at her, then at me with a deepening frown. “He’s...bigger than the last time I saw him, and that scar is new, but...if it’s him, he’s got a raven tattoo on the inside of his left upper arm.”

“Crow,” I said without thinking.

“Raven,” Eric insisted. “You got them because you were obsessed with Norse mythology when we were teens. You wanted to...look, they’re just ravens. And if that doesn’t satisfy you, there’s a small birthmark on your left hip, just below the waistline of your underwear, in the shape of a star.”

“And you would know this how?” the doctor asked, glancing at Eric in what I thought was amusement.

Eric ducked his head, pale skin coloring. “We went to school together, seen it a couple of times when we changed for gym.”

“Ah,” she said, leaning over to look at my left side. “So?”

I blinked before realizing what she was asking me. Pulling the band of my underwear down, I stared at what, sure enough, was a discoloration on my skin in the shape of a star. It was a lopsided, asymmetrical star, but a star all the same.

“I’m from here?” I asked, looking up to glance between them. This was the first time I’d felt like I had a chance at some answers. “Like, I live here?”

“You moved out of Port Dale eleven years ago, and I haven’t heard from you in over four years,” Eric said slowly before finally glancing at the doctor. “What the hell is going on?”

“Local,” the doctor said, holding out her hand. Eric held a bottle out to her without a word, which she took and immediately got to work, bending over to fiddle with a needle. “Up until you came in here, I was working on the belief that his name was Stanley.”

“Stanley?” Eric scoffed.

“Stanley Brown,” she affirmed, motioning for me to lean forward. “At least, that’s what he put on his entry paperwork.”

What's his actual name?"

"Dylan Levin," Eric said, looking frustrated. "He's thirty-one years old, birthday is August sixteenth, and I don't know what his current address is. We talked less and less after he moved, and then one day, he just disappeared off the face of the planet."

"Family we can contact?"

"No siblings...and no parents."

The last was said with a quick glance in my direction, searching my face nervously. All I could do was stare back blankly, realizing I hadn't even given a thought to any friends or family I might have. My whole existence since waking up had been colored by searching for who I was and trying to find someone who could stitch me up.

"This might sting," I heard the doctor warn, and then I felt the needle slide into my scalp. It wasn't the greatest feeling in the world, and I twitched when I felt the burn of the anesthetic. "Your friend took a fall and claims not to remember anything."

"Not remember...amnesia?" Eric asked in disbelief.

"Completely retrograde from the sounds of it," she continued, giving one last poke before disposing of the needle. "Remembers how to function and basic information, but not a flicker of anything else."

"Seriously?" Eric demanded, staring at me with eyes so wide I wondered if it was possible for them to fall out.

"I was admittedly a little skeptical at first," the doctor said, fiddling with something in the case she'd set on the table beside me. "Though after that little display with you I'm more of a believer now."

"What changed?" I asked with a frown. I could feel the pain in my head beginning to recede, and welcomed it. The problem was, without that, the pain inside my head was growing stronger, and I was more aware of just how much my body ached.

“Well, either you’re the world’s greatest actor, and you missed your calling in life,” she said as she continued to fiddle. “Or you genuinely did not know a thing about a man who was apparently a close childhood friend. A man who knows enough about you to identify you.”

“Or is a stalker,” I muttered.

“Hey,” Eric protested in annoyance. “If I’m supposed to believe you literally do not have any memories, you’re not allowed to be a dick.”

“I’m not being a dick. I’m just stating a possibility,” I huffed.

“Funny how you’re managing both.”

“Or you’re just the sensitive sort.”

“Or you’re a dick.”

“Maybe I am, but that doesn’t mean you aren’t being sensitive...or guilty.”

“You know what,” Eric began and then stopped with a snort. “Okay, actually, now I definitely know it’s you.”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?” I asked, trying to turn to look at him.

“Hold still,” the doctor told me, and I blinked when I realized she’d been working on the wound on my head the whole time I’d been talking to Eric. I hadn’t even paid attention which was surprising. Until then, I had been acutely aware of what everyone around me was doing, almost to the point of paranoia.

“Sorry,” I muttered and then let out a sigh. “And I’m sorry I said you were a stalker.”

“Nah, you said I could be, not that I was one,” Eric said, and I could hear the grin in his voice.

I scowled. “You’re kind of a pain in the ass, aren’t you?”

“Oh yes,” the doctor agreed before Eric could interrupt. Yet even I could hear the affection in her voice. “But he’s

probably one of the best damn people who still works here, so I'm not going to complain."

"You were complaining this morning," Eric pointed out.

"You were being noisy."

"I was singing."

"Again, noisy."

"Is my name really Dylan?" I asked in a moment of silence after they were done.

After several heartbeats, Eric spoke, his words soft and a little strained. "Yeah. You were...well. Yeah, your name is Dylan, and I'm Eric."

"I was what?" I asked, hearing the unfinished thought.

Eric sighed heavily, and I wondered if he was blushing again. "You were my best friend, at least before you moved across the country. I honestly thought I'd never see you again after you disappeared off the face of the planet."

I felt a flush of shame even as I told myself that, for all I knew, there was a good reason I hadn't spoken to him in over four years. Maybe it was simply because of whatever I'd been up to since clearly I wasn't a desk clerk or a nurse, given the way I'd woken up. Still, it could have been something else, a fight or betrayal on one of our parts that I couldn't remember.

"Christ," I muttered. "Was I, uh, a pessimistic person?"

"You could be," Eric said quietly.

"Right," the doctor said, stepping back. "That's your head stitched up. Now, considering the severity of the wound and how you described getting it, I would advise that you go to a hospital."

"I don't think that's going to help," I muttered, looking down and remembering I was sitting in only my underwear.

"Really?" she asked sarcastically. "You think someone who's taken a hard enough hit to the head to quite literally forget who they are doesn't need to go to the hospital?"

“Do they know how to treat amnesia?” I asked, returning her tone. “Do they have pills and injections for that?”

She frowned. “No, but they can see how bad the swelling in your brain is, which you most assuredly have. You’re not threatening to pass out and not severely confused or throwing your guts up constantly, so I suspect your concussion isn’t bad. Still, they have far better equipment and staff to help you.”

Glancing between them, I could see that both she and Eric agreed. I couldn’t very well tell them the idea of going to a hospital filled me with a dread that was impossible to explain. It was no different than all the other times that quiet but firm instinct had struck me. Maybe it was because it was the only part of me that felt like it *could* be a remnant of my former self, or perhaps it was just sheer stubbornness but I had to cling to that little voice desperately.

“Is this your way of telling me you’re going to make me go?” I asked, trying to keep any trace of sullenness out of my voice.

The doctor scoffed, removing her latest pair of gloves and throwing them away. “Technically, I can’t make you do anything you don’t want to do. So long as you aren’t a danger to yourself or others, there isn’t much I can do. You don’t, by chance, suddenly feel motivated to take a swing at one of us, do you?”

“No,” I told her with a frown, “I don’t.”

“Ah well, that’s a shame. It would certainly make things a lot easier.”

“Getting punched would make things easier for you?”

“It’s not the first time someone’s hit me in this clinic, and I’m sure it wouldn’t be the last either. But, if you did do something like that, I would be well within my power to have you sent to the hospital.”

“Well, even if that wasn’t the case, I really don’t feel like punching anyone at the moment,” I said, glancing down at my clothes. “Can I get dressed now?”

I watched as she glanced at Eric, who was watching me intently, his lips a thin line. “Sure. I can get you a couple of things that should be safe for you to take but there’s not a lot I can give you otherwise. Anything too strong might make whatever’s going on in your head worse.”

“Am I allowed to sleep?” I asked as I slid off the chair and bent over to grab my clothes. That alone was enough to show I was in no state to swing at anyone. As skinny and frail as she looked, I was pretty sure the doctor could overpower me if she wanted.

“You’re allowed to sleep, but do you even know where you’re going to do that?” she asked, leaning against the cabinet and watching my slow movements.

Aware of both sets of eyes on me, I made sure to cover up any signs of my frailty as I pulled on my pants. “Why do you care?”

She sighed, glancing toward Eric. “Was he this difficult when he was...himself?”

Eric continued to frown in my direction, and I was half tempted to tell him his face would stick if he kept it up. “A pain in the ass doesn’t even begin to cover it. I always joked that he came into the world that way, but I wasn’t expecting proof it was true.”

“It’s certainly a fascinating insight into the argument of nature versus nurture,” she mused, crossing her arms over her chest. “Is it all there? Who he was?”

Eric shrugged. “It’s hard to tell. Like I said, we drifted apart after he left, and then he pretty much went radio silent and just...disappeared. I didn’t know what he was doing half the time, even before that.”

He drifted off, leaving the doctor and me to stare at him curiously. The more I saw of this man, the more I began to wonder just what was going on in his head. All the energy and vigor he’d shown upon entering the room and trying to talk to me had completely disappeared, at least outwardly. I suspected all that energy had turned inward, and I was struck by the

image of what the inside of a tornado looked like for someone stuck in the middle.

“Good Lord, he’s thinking.” The doctor sighed, shaking her head, then turned her attention back to me. “And for the record, I care in general. It comes with the territory.”

I said nothing as I finished tugging on my shirt and moved to pull on my boots. I supposed that people didn’t work in a run-down free clinic unless they gave a shit about what they did. Then again, the other people here appeared to be so disconnected from their surroundings that it was amazing they even bothered in the first place. Perhaps this was where people worked because they cared, and maybe it was also where they found themselves trapped.

“And I would feel much better if I knew you weren’t just wandering out of here with no clue of who you are, where you’re going, or what you’re going to do,” she told me with a frown. “I understand that for whatever reason, you don’t want to bother anyone else or go to the hospital, but you’re more than aware enough to know you’re not exactly in the best of health.”

I bent over, carefully trying to tie the laces of my boots with great difficulty. I knew better than she did that I wasn’t in any real shape to take care of myself, but I was antsy to get out of the clinic. Despite what she’d said earlier, I didn’t put it past her to try to interfere in some way that could cause me more trouble. Especially if she was the type to worry about others, her good conscience might make her want to take action.

“Even if I don’t remember who I am, I was still capable of getting myself here without incident,” I said, finishing the final knot. “So I guess I’m pretty good at taking care of myself. You should worry about the people out there who might not be so lucky.”

“Is this where you try to appeal to my sense of compassion for others instead of you?”

“This is where I point out there are people out there who deserve attention and care more than I do.”



“You are so fucking *stupid*. Jesus!” Eric barked, causing both the doctor and me to turn toward him. The man glared at me, his arms crossed over his chest as he practically radiated annoyance. “Like, seriously, do you have any idea how badly injured you are? I don’t even know the full story, and I can see you’re beat to shit, and you’re just going to go walking out of here when you were just told your brain is probably swelling?”

“That would explain the headache,” I said dryly, even though said headache felt like Thor himself was pounding around inside my skull with his hammer.

Eric threw up his hands and turned toward the doctor. “Look, my shift ends in an hour. I’ll take him back to my place.”

“What?” I asked, staring at him in shock.

Eric chose to ignore me as the doctor raised a brow in response. “What? I might not be a doctor, but I’ve seen enough head injuries working here that I know what to keep an eye out for. And I also happen to be the only person around here who knows him...or who he was. And I actually care about whether or not he keeps breathing.”

“It certainly would make me feel better,” she said with a shrug.

I straightened. “That’s not—”

“No,” Eric interrupted, jabbing a finger at me. “You’ve said and done enough, thanks. What other option do you have that’s safe, huh? You’re going to wander around until you find somewhere to stay?”

“I have money,” I told him with a scowl.

“But not a card,” he said.

“And how would you know that?”

“Because if you did, you’d have known your name before you came in.”

I opened my mouth and snapped it shut, realizing he’d made a point I couldn’t counter. From the smirk on his face, he realized it as well.

“And unless you’re going to the shadiest, seediest place in Port Dale to stay, you’re going to need a card. Not a prepaid card either, an actual card,” he told me. “So unless you figure out how to open an account and get a card in a few hours without knowing your personal information, you’re shit out of luck for a place to stay.”

I turned my head away to glare at the wall. “I don’t even know who you are. You can say you know me all you want, but I don’t know anything about you.”

“Then maybe you should start using what brain cells you have left in that addled head of yours to figure out if you believe me or not,” Eric shot back. “Take a moment to stop being stubborn and puzzle out if you think I’m at least telling the truth about caring about you.”

“Is this how you’re supposed to treat a mentally-addled patient?” I demanded, still scowling.

“At the moment, yes,” he said, looking completely unbothered.

I noticed the doctor had kept quiet the entire time, her eyes twitching between us but remaining expressionless. Not that I needed her to say anything, she’d already thrown her hat in the ring and agreed to Eric’s plan.

As much as I hated to admit it, there was a certain logic to his counterpoints to my less-than-stellar plan. I might know my name and the name of the city I was in, but that was pretty much all I knew. My resources were limited, and there wasn’t anywhere I could turn, anyone else I could feasibly trust.

Then again, his plan required me to trust a man I knew next to nothing about. My options were limited to either trusting a stranger or taking my chances in a world I wasn’t sure I could navigate in my current state. Perhaps if I weren’t so badly injured, I’d have a better chance, but I retained enough previous knowledge to know the world was not a kind place to people who were on their own, especially the weak and helpless.

“Fine,” I said through gritted teeth. “But I want to know more about who I am or who I was.”

Eric snorted. “I get you to go along with my plan, and all I have to do is rehash old stories? Easiest deal I ever made.”

I could only frown harder, and the doctor laughed. “I think you accepted his condition a little too easily.”

“Not my problem,” Eric said with a shrug.

“Oh, it’s exactly your problem,” she chuckled, patting Eric on the shoulder. “Don’t even bother finishing your shift. Just get this one home.”

It was enough to remind me that I didn’t even know if I had a place of my own to go home to. That thought was enough to take what little stubbornness I had left and dissolve it immediately.

Eric frowned. “Doctor Reagen...”

“Go,” she said with a wave of her hand. “I’m sure we can handle whatever comes through those doors. Just deal with this for me.”

“I’ll get my keys,” Eric said with a sigh, then pointed at me. “And you stay right there, you understand me?”

“I have a brain injury. I’m not a child,” I told him.

“Good. Give me ten minutes, and I’ll get you back to my place. Then you can sleep as long as you want.”



The ride to Eric’s place was quieter and more awkward than I expected. I figured once Eric got what he wanted, he’d be more than happy to talk my ear off like he had when he first saw me. Instead, he lapsed into complete silence while he drove.

I didn’t want to call it unnerving, but it felt strange for him to be so quiet when I would swear he wanted to be anything but. I couldn’t prove it since it was only the impression. At

one point during the trip, I considered whether some latent memory had risen from the depths of my damaged mind. That delusion only lasted a couple of minutes before I remembered I was basing all my understanding of Eric solely on our first meeting.

Well, not our first, just the first to me now...and really, maybe I didn't know this man at all. Despite going along with the idea, I had absolutely no intention of believing we knew each other. Perhaps it had only been in passing, or perhaps Eric was a stalker. The worst theory emerged, however, when I thought that maybe Eric was one of the people or the single person who had tried to kill me.

It was a paranoid thought because even I had to admit the chances were so incredibly small. It should have been easy to dismiss. But, then again, if what Eric had said was true, the chances of me running into a childhood friend at this exact moment were incredibly small as well. Yet I had run into him, and that coincidence was enough to keep the wariness alive and well.

Pulling into a small parking lot beside an old building, Eric turned off the car. "Are you able to walk upstairs?"

I scowled, biting my tongue against my initial retort. "I don't know. Haven't had to do it yet."

"Alright, let's find out then," he said, taking his keys and sliding out of the car.

Sighing, I did the same, albeit at a slower pace. Walking wasn't too much of a problem, so long as I didn't try to rush. Following him to the front of the building, I took the few cracked stone steps up to the entrance, muttering my thanks when he opened the door.

A hallway led straight ahead with a set of stairs to the right. The tiles reminded me of the clinic, though the place didn't smell of cleaning supplies. Someone was cooking something pungent, and it flooded the entire level. The smell made my stomach roll, and I made my way over to the stairs.

It turned out that I could climb stairs, albeit at a speed I was sure a disabled geriatric could have outpaced on a bad day. It wasn't so much the pain or even the tightness in my chest that held me back but an extreme weariness that had set in during the drive. Nothing sounded better than settling down on a reasonably comfortable surface and staying there for as long as possible.

"You good?" Eric asked. The first words he'd spoken since we entered the building.

"Yeah," I said. Because any sarcastic retort I might have had as I tried to catch my breath withered in the face of his genuine concern.

"You can come in and sit down. It's just right here," he said, still watching me closely as we reached the nearest door. He unlocked it quickly and pushed it open, motioning for me to enter ahead of him.

I did so, forgetting my wariness in the face of my weariness, and was met with a long hallway. There was a doorway on my right halfway down, and the hallway continued before opening into what I thought must be a living room. Eric closed the door behind me, flipping a thick deadbolt, the knob, and a bar rather than a chain.

"Eh, screw sitting down, c'mon," he said and led me toward the doorway on the right.

I didn't have the energy to argue and followed him into the room. It turned out to be a bedroom, and one without a lot of space. There was a closet in one corner and a dresser right beside it. The bed dominated most of the room on the opposite wall from the dresser, and it looked like the most comfortable thing I had ever seen in my life, from the sheer thickness of the mattress to the plush duvet that neatly covered it.

Eric moved forward, pulling a part of the duvet back and patting the edge of the bed. "C'mon, you look about ready to fall down."

"I think I've done enough of that for one day," I muttered as I sat down where he indicated.

“Oh, we’re joking about it then, are we?” he asked wryly, crouching down before me.

“What are you doing?” I asked, almost groaning as I felt the bed sink wonderfully beneath my weight.

“You’re exhausted and in pain, and I don’t trust your balance with those two things *and* a head injury,” Eric told me, grabbing my laces and beginning to undo the knots I’d tied earlier. “Don’t worry. I’m not going to strip you down...unless you want me to.”

“I just want to sleep,” I said, briefly wondering if there was some ulterior motive in his words. Could *that* be another piece of the puzzle, adding credence to the possibility that he’d been a stalker?

Yet as he carefully pulled my boots off and set them aside, not flinching as he took my socks with them, I felt the suspicion fizzle out. There was no eagerness or insistence on his part. Instead, he was careful and gentle as he set everything aside and finally stood up, looking down at me.

“Alright, get some rest. And I’m sure you’ll probably end up dead to the world, but I’m going to warn you right now that I’m going to come in occasionally to make sure you’re okay.” He arched his brow as if daring me to argue.

“Gotta make sure my brain didn’t swell too much and shut my heart off,” I muttered, giving in to temptation and rolling onto my back with all the grace of a drunken bear.

“You really need to work on your sense of humor,” he said, leaning over to frown at me.

“Sorry,” I said, meaning it. “It’s just...been a really weird day.”

His expression softened, and he leaned over, gently resting a hand on my brow. “Get some sleep, Dylan. Maybe after you get some rest, everything will be better.”

“Doubt it,” I said, letting my eyes slip closed simply because I didn’t have the strength to fight it any longer. The bed was even more comfortable than I had imagined. “It doesn’t seem like luck has been on my side lately.”

“It’s not all bad,” he said softly, and I could tell he was moving away from the bed by the sound of his voice. “At least for the moment, you’re safe. That has to count for something, right?”

I didn’t have time to come up with a counter-argument before my exhaustion finally won out, and I slipped into peaceful darkness, surrounded by the soft comfort of the bed.

## CHAPTER THREE

*Confusion. Desperation. Yearning.*

*A deep pulse resounded from somewhere, and I twisted and turned to try and find the source. But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't make sense of anything around me. Colors swirled and flashed, taunting me with the possibility of something meaningful, only to disappear before I could sort through the twisting mess. Occasionally a sound would drift from the chaos, or I would feel the briefest caress of some sensation.*

*Bright blue circles, close together as though on someone's face. High, childish laughter and the feeling of my feet thudding hard against a firm floor. Yellow light spilled through a hazy mesh, and the scent of freshly cut grass filled my nostrils. The smell of flowers and fruit drifted by, and I watched as steam wafted before my face, warming it.*

*I flinched when crimson splattered against a flat surface, and I tasted bile in the back of my throat. Silver glinted in the distance, and I shrank away from it, even as I felt my hand close around a hard object and thrust forward. Soft, muted light played over a shattered surface, and I had to fight the wave of nausea that washed through me.*

*Nothing made sense, and I still didn't know what was happening. Each sensation happened without my permission, and I felt a shiver run through me. Each moment was the barest flash of something I couldn't comprehend, couldn't take in my hand or begin to understand.*



*It was sorrow and grief as I felt sharp edges bite into my skin.*

*It was happiness and hope as I felt a warm pressure wrap around my arm.*

*It was nervousness and anxiety as bright blue flashed before my eyes.*

*It was disgust and determination as the acrid smell of sulfur filled my nose.*

It was me.



My eyes snapped open, and I surged upward before I was even aware I was awake. Barely noticing the twinge that shot through my chest, I shoved my hand under my pillow, frantically searching.

After a few seconds, my mind finally caught up with my body, and I stopped my search. Peering down at my hand, I pushed the pillow back and stared at the empty space, wondering what I had been searching for in the first place. My heart was racing, and I'd broken out into a heavy sweat, but there was no reason I could see that would have caused my reaction.

I looked around the room as if it somehow held the answers I sought. Instead, all I found was an empty room, the space under the curtains in the window glowing with orange light from the sun. I couldn't tell if the sun was going down or coming up, so I swung around to get out of bed.

I was even stiffer than I had been earlier, but I counted myself lucky. My body still ached, but I could feel how much the pain had lessened. Even my head was only a dull throb in the center of my skull, which I thought I could live with. Once my feet hit the floor, I arched my back and pushed my arms behind me. My muscles stretched nicely, and I groaned as I felt them protest when I went too far.

“Dylan?” I heard a voice and turned toward it. I was surprised to find another doorway in the bedroom that I hadn’t noticed. It led to a small bathroom, which had another door that was closed. Light poured across the floor, and I saw a shadow moving.

“Yeah,” I called, clearing my throat roughly when my voice came out thick. “Yeah, it’s me.”

“You decent?”

“I didn’t decide to strip since the last time you saw me, if that’s what you’re asking.”

The door opened, letting in the light from the room behind Eric. “I guess getting some rest didn’t improve your sense of humor.”

“It was supposed to improve how I felt,” I reminded him.

“Well, did it?”

“A little. I don’t feel like a giant, walking bruise.”

“Well, that might be true, but you still look like one.”

I smiled at that. “Which I think I can live with for the time being.”

Eric looked me over and snorted. “You’re also going to need a shower, and let me check you over.”

“God,” I groaned at the thought. “A shower would be... wonderful.”

He chuckled. “How does food sound?”

The mention was all it took for me to realize how hollow I felt in the middle. The distraction of waking abruptly and talking to Eric had delayed it, but now that he’d mentioned a meal, I felt my body calling out desperately for food.

“Can we do food and then everything else after?” I asked, not caring if I sounded pathetic.

Eric winked. “It’s a good thing I have some leftovers that’ll only take a few minutes to heat up.”

My stomach grumbled and growled. “I’m pretty sure you could serve me a tire with a bit of ketchup, and I would eat it right now.”

“Considering how long you were asleep, I don’t doubt that,” he said, looking me over one more time before walking out. “Come on out. I’ll get you something to drink while you wait.”

“How long was I asleep?” I asked, following him. I realized the door he’d come from led into the same room I’d spotted from the hallway. It was a mix of a living room and a small dining area, only big enough for two people to sit at the table.

“Hmm, about eighteen hours, I think,” he said as he continued into the narrow kitchen.

“Eighteen?” I asked in disbelief.

“Yes, amazingly, when your body is trying to recover from whatever the hell happened to you, it needs rest.” He opened the fridge. “And fuel.”

“That makes sense,” I said, a little uneasy that I’d slept so long. I couldn’t explain it, but it just felt wrong to have slept so much.

“Here,” he said, holding out a large bottle of water. “Drink this and take a seat. And maybe you could tell me what happened to you.”

“Kinda hard to do that when I don’t know,” I said, opening the water.

“Well, you knew enough to get some help,” Eric said as he pulled things out of the fridge and grabbed a pan from the drawer under the stove.

“I, uh, fell.”

“Yeah, saw that much on the report.”

“And pretty sure someone shot me.”

Eric hesitated, glancing over at me, his unmoving hand resting on the dial for the stove. “Shot you? Where? I didn’t

exactly see you with a hole in anything but your head.”

I reached up and gently placed a finger over the spot that still ached on my chest. “Here, but I...I was wearing a vest.”

“A bulletproof vest?”

“Well, it certainly wasn’t a corset.”

Eric rolled his eyes, flipping the stove on with an irritated flick of his wrist. “How do you lose your memory but not that shitty, sarcastic sense of humor?”

I shrugged, looking down at the small table with a frown. “Maybe it’s just built in. A system feature.”

“Or a bug.”

“Sure.”

I honestly couldn’t say why I was deflecting his questions with sarcasm other than the uncomfortable sensation that I’d told him too much already. It wasn’t like I suspected he was part of the trouble I already had, but the desire to avoid telling him much more sat in my gut and warned me off.

Not knowing who I was grew more and more frustrating. While it had been confusing and upsetting when I’d first woken up, I was no longer stumbling around trying to put pieces together and ensure my survival. For the moment, I was safe, meaning I had time to puzzle over who I was and what I had been doing.

What could have led me to that filthy, broken-down building in the first place? If there were any clues to answer that question, they’d be back in the abandoned apartment building. However, the building wasn’t the safest place, and I didn’t want to risk my fragile health by returning before I was ready. I would need to take a few days to get the worst of the aches and pains out and hope I didn’t run into any trouble.

“Hey,” Eric interrupted with a troubled frown. “Look, I’m sorry. You’ve got enough shit going on in that head of yours right now. You don’t need me giving you shit for just being yourself.”

“Is it me?” I asked grumpily, taking another greedy drink of water.

“Being dry, sarcastic, and a pain in the ass? Oh yeah,” he said with a chuckle, throwing butter into the heating pan. “I always thought it was because of how things were at home, but I guess not.”

For a moment, I was confused, and then I was again reminded that I didn’t have the slightest clue about my past, not even a flicker of what my family had been like. “So, my parents are dead?”

“Yeah, they died a couple of years after you left Port Dale,” Eric said, laying slices of thick-cut bacon into another pan. “A few people were surprised you even showed up for the funerals.”

I frowned. “What, why? How much of an asshole was I?”

Eric looked uncomfortable as he turned to feed bread into the toaster. “I mean, you could be an asshole, but that wasn’t why you might not have shown up. You and your parents... well, you guys didn’t exactly have the best relationship. They weren’t the best parents most of the time.”

“Why? Were they abusive or something?” I asked, wondering if perhaps I had been experiencing buried but not completely gone pangs of mistrust from my childhood.

“No,” Eric said slowly and then sighed. “They were just... mostly absent. They bought you clothes and toys, made sure you were fed and went to the doctors, that you could play hockey for most of high school, and go on field trips and all that. They just...forked over money, pretty much left you to your own devices, and didn’t really parent.”

“I-I don’t know what to say about that,” I said with a frown.

Eric snorted. “If it makes you feel any better, you didn’t like to talk about it much before. I figured things out because you could always do what you wanted when you wanted. Always thought it was pretty cool to have parents like that, but then I started noticing how your parents were barely around

when you got older. And, like, they didn't come to your games. God, they even missed your high school graduation. They kept you alive and healthy, sure, but there's more to being a parent than that."

"I guess I got out of it all alright," I said, still unsure what to say about this 'new' information. It certainly didn't seem like the ideal way to grow up, but for all I knew, it had been golden. It probably hadn't been, but seeing as I didn't feel emotionally connected to it at the moment, I couldn't really say. "Siblings?"

"Uh, you had an older brother. He was four years older than you, died when you were three. You never said, but I'm pretty sure that was when everything with your family fell apart," Eric said, still looking uncomfortable as he flipped the bacon. "Grief does funny things to people's heads. And I guess your parents never really got over the loss."

"From the way you describe it, they lost one son and didn't bother with the other one."

"Y-yeah, I guess that's right."

"Sorry, this has gotta be awkward for you."

Eric looked up, eyes widening. "Oh, no! It's just you didn't like to talk about your parents or your home life very much. Growing up, I was one of the few people who knew as much as I did, and even then, it wasn't something you lingered on. So it's kinda weird to talk about it and try to explain. Not just because I don't know very much, but...hearing you talk about it is strange. Not your fault."

"Oh," I said, figuring that the logic made sense. "What about you?"

"Me?"

"Your family."

"Oh. Nothing like...big. Only child. My mom died in a car crash when I was really little," he said with a shrug, but I wasn't convinced of his nonchalance. There was a gleam of what I thought was fear in his eyes, but it disappeared as he continued. "My dad raised me himself. He didn't know much

about raising kids or handling one on his own, so he didn't always do a great job. But he tried, and he always made sure I was taken care of," Eric said, looking up with a fond smile. "I try to talk to him a few times a week when I can and see him at least once a week in person if I have the opportunity. He always liked you, asked after you a lot when you left."

"Oh, uh, probably not a good idea to tell him I'm back," I said, grimacing. "Because, uh, I'm not really back."

"Don't worry. I'm not going to tell him you're here physically. The last thing you need is even more people asking awkward questions you can't answer properly."

"You haven't been doing that," I told him, a little annoyed on his behalf.

He glanced at me, a small smile pulling at the corner of his mouth. "I was kinda hoping that was the case, but thank you for making a point to say it."

I rolled my eyes. "Well, you haven't, so whatever."

Eric snorted. "Noted."

"Did I date?" I asked suddenly.

"What?"

"Who did I date?" I reprised.

He laughed, shaking his head. "You didn't date. Ever."

"Really?" I asked, unable to believe it. Although I didn't know how he felt about such things, it still felt strange that I wouldn't have tried to at least date someone like him. He was definitely good-looking and obviously caring and direct. While I didn't know who I'd been before, I could at least say that someone with his personality should have at least been attractive to me.

He shrugged. "Just wasn't your thing. You had plenty of girls who were interested, but you always wanted to do your own thing."

My head snapped up. "Girls?"

His eyes shifted to me, brow furrowing. “Yeah, man. I mean, you were and are a pretty good-looking dude, and you’ve always taken care of yourself. They were real interested, especially because you had that whole quiet and mysterious thing about you. And it’s not like you were actively a dick to anyone, so that probably helped.”

“Well, that’s comforting...I guess,” I said, again finding myself unsure what I was supposed to say or how to react. I wondered if that lack of sureness was because I couldn’t remember anything or if it was a part of my personality I had somehow managed to retain.

“Why do you ask?”

“I don’t know. From the sounds of it, I don’t have any parents, no siblings. Doesn’t sound like I made friends much. Maybe I had someone waiting...wherever I was living before. But now it sounds like that’s not the case either.”

*Christ, just how lonely a person was I?*

“Eh, I always thought you were asexual,” Eric said, doling food onto plates. “At least, that’s how it came off to me since you never showed any interest in being with anyone.”

I remembered how struck by his looks I’d been before I learned who he was and shook my head. “Yeah, I...don’t think that’s the case.”

“Oh yeah?” he asked with a chuckle, pulling everything off the stove and turning the burners off. “Already managed to find someone you’re into?”

“I wouldn’t call it...into someone,” I muttered, deciding immediately that there was no way in hell I was going to tell him about my flash of attraction. “Just...I don’t think that’s the case.”

“Right,” he said with a smirk, setting a heaped plate of food in front of me and sitting down. “Well, I won’t interrogate you over what girl you found yourself naked and horizontal with.”

“Horizontal?” I asked dryly, picking up my fork.



“Well, it could be vertical if you wanted. Or any angle.”

“You’re a little disturbed in the head, aren’t you?”

“Probably. But if that’s the case, I’m in good company.”

The joke made me blink in surprise at the sheer bluntness of it, and then I laughed, stabbing a piece of the scrambled egg. Eric stopped to eye me in surprise before smiling back and picking up a piece of bacon. I had seen the look on his face a few times now, and it always seemed to accompany moments when he was piecing together the similarities between the Dylan he had known before and the one he was dealing with now.

“So,” I said, chewing through the egg and swallowing. “What about you?”

“What?”

I was beginning to feel like we were sticking to some absurd script. “Well, I asked about your home life after you told me about mine. Then I asked about my love life, so...”

“Oh!” Eric said, snorting and giving a nod of his head. “Right, right. Yeah, no, I don’t really have a lot of luck in that department. I’m usually pretty busy at the clinic, so I don’t get to go out all that much. And ya know, when I do, I realize dating isn’t something I have time for either. Lord knows my past couple of exes made that more than apparent. You’d think me telling them early on that I’m busy all the damn time with work would get through, but nope.”

“Are you sure they were even listening?” I asked. Most people I’d dealt with in the past couple of days hadn’t been all that interested in listening to me, so I was beginning to suspect that was the nature of the average person.

“Ugh, Tony never listened to anything I ever said. I can promise you that,” Eric told me with a roll of his eyes. “It was, hands down, the biggest complaint I had...well, until he cheated on me, then that took the top spot.”

“Toni?” I asked, thinking it could be a unisex name and absurdly thinking it was a shame I couldn’t find this woman and find a direct way to remind her what decency was.

“Yeah, Tony,” Eric said and then paused. He looked up at me slowly and then let out another soft laugh. “God, that’s going to take some getting used to.”

“What?” I asked in confusion.

“Like, I know I’ve been sitting here telling you about your life because I know you don’t remember anything, but here I am, still forgetting you don’t know anything. I totally forgot.”

“What don’t I know?”

“Well, I guess I get to come out of the closet to you again. I’m gay.”

“You’re…” I paused and then cocked my head. “Oh, Tony, not Toni.”

He squinted at me. “Is it weird that I can hear you using i instead of y? Yeah, that is kinda weird. No, Tony is a guy, Anthony is his name, and being a cheating dick ended up being his game.”

“Oh,” I said, picking up a piece of crispy bacon and taking a bite. “Well, I guess I don’t have to feel bad about wanting to hit Tony now.”

Eric gave me a strange look. “Well, that’s the first time I’ve actually felt like I was stuck between two time periods.”

“What does that mean?”

“History repeats itself.”

“That, uh, doesn’t clear things up for me.”

Eric shrugged. “When we were fifteen, I had some guy string me along for a while before deciding to go out with someone else. I hadn’t told you I was seeing anyone or even that I was into guys in the first place. But you saw how mopey I was and wouldn’t leave me alone until I told you. In an even worse example of names that are androgynous, his name was Ashley.”

I grunted. “So I heard Ashley and thought it was some girl playing with your heart.”

“And you were *really* grumpy about it too,” Eric said with a laugh. “When I finally came clean and told you Ashley was a guy, you were relieved. And almost immediately wanted to go out and find him to beat his ass. So there I was, miserable because of some guy, and then freaking out because I was telling you I was gay...and your reaction upon finding out was to demand to know where the guy lived. The look on your face when I burst out laughing was priceless. You were so confused.”

“Well, yeah,” I said with a frown. “You were my friend, and maybe I don’t remember who I am, but it sounds like that version of me had the right idea.”

“Kinda like how the one in front of me had almost the same reaction,” Eric said with a smirk. “Does that mean you think of me as a friend now too?”

I shifted uneasily in my seat. “I don’t...really know you. I mean, I’m learning more about you and who I was...what our friendship was like, I guess. But it doesn’t...it’s like hearing about someone else, you know?”

Eric did a decent job hiding the hurt look in his eyes, but I still spotted the pained flicker before it was buried. “And I can’t blame you for that. We’d grown apart anyway, and now I’m basically a stranger.”

“Sorry,” I muttered, pushing eggs around my plate.

“Eh, it’s not your fault.”

“We don’t know if it’s my fault or not.”

Eric took a bite of his toast with a low grunt. “That’s true. I’d be curious to know what you were doing to fall a couple of stories after getting shot...and why you were wearing a bulletproof vest.”

I shrugged. “A mystery I’d like solved as well.”

“I mean, you said it was some run-down, abandoned apartment, right?”

“Right.”

“Well, no one goes into a place like that unless they’re trying to find a safe place to sleep, which you clearly weren’t. To do drugs, which I’m guessing you weren’t since I don’t see any signs of long-term drug use on you. Or you were looking for trouble, and considering you were wearing a goddamn bulletproof vest, you were ready for trouble.”

“And I guess I found it,” I grumbled, shoveling more food into my mouth.

Eric’s conclusion was more or less the same one I’d come to when I had a moment to think. I couldn’t think of one good reason why I would have been where I was, dressed as I was, unless I was doing something I wasn’t supposed to be doing.

“And the fact that you didn’t have any ID on you doesn’t look all that good,” Eric said grimly, adding more salt to the wound.

“I did wonder,” I admitted with a shrug. “Kind of hard to put all the pieces together and come out with a picture that makes me look good. But the more I hear from you, the more I wonder if that was the case.”

“Really? Why’s that?”

“Because of how you make me sound. I don’t come off as someone who would...well, be a bad person.”

“Well, you weren’t someone who went looking for trouble. That much is true,” Eric said slowly.

“You don’t sound all that convinced,” I said, raising a brow.

“Because you usually found trouble anyway. It didn’t matter what you did, there was always someone trying to pick a fight with you or start some shit. I always used to joke that no matter what you did, you would always find someone who wanted to fight you.”

“What a wonderfully calm life I led,” I grumbled.

“I don’t know. Maybe you got dragged into something. I wouldn’t be too surprised.”

“Or actively sought it out,” I muttered.

Eric rolled his eyes, reaching out to tap on my plate. “Focus on eating your food. It’s hard to be miserable when you’ve got a full stomach.”

I wasn’t sure that was the case, at least when you were someone without any understanding of who you were while facing the very real possibility that you weren’t a good person. I didn’t want to infringe on Eric’s hospitality by being a miserable dick, so I did as I was told and put another forkful of food in my mouth.

“I think the best thing for you to do right now,” Eric said, gathering up his dishes and taking them to the sink, “is to try to relax. You’re not going to get your memory back by sitting around brooding all day. And it’s better for your body to take it as easy as possible. Right now, it doesn’t matter why you were there or what your intentions were. What matters is that you get better.”

“And if we find out I’m some psychotic killer or gangbanger?” I asked with a frown.

Eric snorted, rinsing off his plate. “Look, whatever you were doing there, I can promise you weren’t either of those things.”

“You don’t know that,” I contested with a huff. “You said yourself we grew apart after I left the city.”

“Right, and people don’t usually go through radical shifts in personality,” Eric said. He paused and then added, “Well, not unless something huge and life-changing happens.”

“Which I can neither confirm nor deny,” I said quietly. “So it’s still possible.”

“Well, like I said, unless something radically changed and you never said anything, then I’m working on the assumption that you wouldn’t be like that,” he told me, dropping his plate and silverware into a countertop dishwasher. “The guy I knew wasn’t that person, so...”

I couldn’t say why, but his assurances only annoyed me more. “And who’s to say you even knew who I was before? You never *really* know someone, no matter how long you’re

around them. Just look at all those people who find out they're married to a serial killer or people who go months or even years never knowing they were best friends with an addict."

Eric rolled his eyes, and for a moment I contemplated throwing the plate of food at him. I held back because I was still starving, and I probably would have felt bad if I'd made a mess of the meal he'd made for me. "By all means, Dylan, feel free to keep trying to change my mind and convince me the world is a dangerous, scary place. Never mind that I'm working out of a clinic in easily the roughest part of Port Dale, and I've seen so much in the years I've worked there. Nope, I'm totally ignorant."

"I never said you were ignorant," I shot back, stabbing a piece of egg a little too aggressively. "But that doesn't mean you don't come off as really trusting."

"And a good thing for you then, isn't it?" he asked, arching a brow. "Otherwise, where would you be right now?"

If there was anything guaranteed to shut me up, Eric had managed to find it. He was right. If it hadn't been for his trusting nature, I would still be wandering around trying to figure out what to do with myself. I would have been hard-pressed to find somewhere safe to sleep, and I probably wouldn't have been half as comfortable or secure as I was while staying with him.

His expression softened, and he flipped the water off. "Look, I get it. You don't know who you are, you don't know what you're like, and that's scary as hell. For every moment I feel awkward or uneasy, you probably have ten of them, and more intensely. But even if the world is scary and dangerous a lot of the time, that doesn't mean you should lose your faith in humanity."

"Kind of sounds like I don't have much."

"Or, like I said, you're just scared. So maybe let me have my faith in humanity. You might even find it useful."

"Or annoying," I grumbled, but my heart wasn't in it. He had probably seen more than I would ever know, working and

living where he did, and I doubted anything I had to say would dissuade him. If the world hadn't managed to rid him of his faith, it probably wouldn't go away anytime soon. "When do you work again?"

Eric grabbed another bottle of water from the fridge and opened it. "In a couple of days. I took a little extra time off to make sure I could be here in case you needed some help."

"What time?" I asked.

He watched me, a mischievous twinkle in his eye. "Two till ten, why?"

"Just because you have faith in the world and people doesn't mean I have to, especially right now," I told him, picking up another thick piece of bacon and biting into it. "So I'm going to come get you from work."

"I drive."

"And I'm capable of walking. I saw the drive. It was only a handful of blocks."

"Seriously? I think I can..."

"It would make me feel better. Plus, I'd be fucked if you got hurt or killed while I'm in the middle of depending on you. So just let me do this so I can at least feel a little better, more in control."

As I predicted, Eric immediately stopped objecting, and the irritation on his face melted away. He sighed heavily, bowing his head and lightly rubbing at his neck as he walked out of the room. "Fine, alright. But you might end up standing around. Sometimes I have to stay over for an extra hour, sometimes two."

"That's fine," I said, glad he couldn't see my smirk as I grabbed another piece of bacon. I had no idea what my appetite was usually like, but now it was voracious. "I don't know if it was true before, but I'm pretty sure I can stand outside for longer than planned."

"You'll wait in the lobby," Eric called as I heard the door to the bathroom close.

“That’s fine too,” I said, pleased I’d managed to get him to calm down and agree with what I wanted. Apparently, I was more manipulative than I thought. Still, if being manipulative meant I could at least pretend to be a deterrent for any trouble that might come his way, then I’d take it.

A few minutes later, as I was finishing the last of the meal off my plate, the bathroom door slammed open. Tensing, I spun around to find Eric standing in the doorway, glaring at me.

“You asshole,” he growled at me.

I spared a moment to realize that, apparently, being insulted and hearing a full-grown man growl at me was a turn-on before I cocked my head in confusion. “What?”

“You played me,” he said, jabbing an accusing finger my way. “You took advantage of the fact that I’d feel bad for you and manipulated me into going along with your demand.”

“Oh,” I said, easing my shoulders out of their tense position. “Well, yeah.”

“You’re a dick.”

“Maybe we can talk about my dick some other time, like when I’m not eating?”

I glanced at Eric and saw him freeze before rolling his eyes and closing the door once more, leaving me to chuckle over my victory.



## CHAPTER FOUR

After a few days, I found myself more or less adjusted to my circumstances. People often say the human mind is adaptable, and I was experiencing it firsthand. I wasn't quite sure who those people were, but the thought bubbled into my head after realizing I'd stopped constantly fretting over who I was before and what my life had been like.

It didn't hurt that I was quickly able to find a routine once a few things were sorted out. Eric had insisted I sleep in his bed while he took the couch, which I personally thought was ridiculous. Despite our sizes, there was still enough room to share the space and be comfortable. He had been adamant that wasn't going to happen, however, and refused to get off the couch.

So I slept in his bed but always managed to wake up when he did in the morning. It turned out I was a light sleeper when I wasn't sleeping eighteen hours trying to recover. The first day we'd gone shopping, I'd point blank refused to let him use his money to buy me clothing. His clothes were a little too snug on me, so buying a few simple outfits made sense.

Though I had insisted on trying to stay active, Eric quickly pointed out that even if I felt stronger, there was no need to push myself. That hadn't stopped me wanting to, and he relented, allowing me some light stretching and a walk through the neighborhood as my cardio. Lifting a few of his unused dumbbells and going for a leisurely stroll didn't exactly feel like real exercise, but it beat sitting around his apartment all day.

We shared meals, and while he wasn't the most skilled chef, it turned out he was better than me. I could cook basic things, so long as they were just hot dogs, came with instructions, or could be cooked in the microwave. It was easier for Eric to cook, and I stuck to making the occasional sandwich.

I'd grown used to having him around, so the first day he had to work and leave me alone, I found myself a little lost. Much to my amusement and annoyance, I stuck to his requests. I wasn't sure if it was some embedded tendency to obey authority, even if that authority came from a man I barely knew, or if I didn't want to worry him.

Whatever the reason, I didn't exert myself too much while unsupervised. I also made sure to drink water and heat the leftovers Eric kept in the fridge, so I had a constant source of fuel for my body. It didn't take long to figure out that my existence of eating, sleeping, barely exercising, and getting plenty of rest was exceptionally boring.

After a while, I started combing through the books he had strewn about the apartment. I was amused to find that, apparently, Eric enjoyed reading romance as much as he liked reading horror and sometimes—if I was reading the synopsis correctly on the backs of a couple of them—books that blended the two genres. I wasn't sure how that would work or how disturbing it would end up being, and I decided to pass on the mixed-genre books. I didn't need to tempt fate and somehow manage to mess with my psyche even further.

Not that my attempts to read the single-genre books were any better. I didn't know if it was because I simply wasn't a reader or if the head injury was still affecting me, but my mind always felt foggy whenever I tried to sit down and read for more than a few minutes. It wasn't long before I found myself having to reread sentences or whole paragraphs and the words quickly lost their meaning.

With that eliminated as a way to fill the time, I decided to start cleaning. That proved far more effective, and because it involved scrubbing and moving things around, I found it more gratifying than leisurely strolls through the neighborhood or

lifting a pitiful set of dumbbells. Though with Eric gone for hours at a time, it only took until the end of the second day before the apartment was practically spotless, much to Eric's confusion and appreciation.

"It looks...and smells great," he said as he dropped his things onto the couch to peer around.

"Idle hands," I said with a shrug, taking a second to remember it was a common phrase rather than the edge of some forgotten memory.

His gaze went from appreciative to suspicious, and he eyed me. "You weren't moving things around unnecessarily, were you?"

"Nope," I said, lying easily. Of course, his couch and bed had weighed far more than expected, but that hadn't stopped me moving both of them to continue cleaning. Admittedly both had winded me more than I would have liked, but I hadn't felt too bad by the time I finished cleaning and moved everything back.

"Uh-huh, and if I were to move the couch and take a look, I wouldn't find it pristine?" he asked, arching a brow.

"Well, I would offer to help you move the heavy-looking thing, but I have orders not to do too much heavy lifting," I told him, shrugging.

He rolled his eyes at that and began walking toward the kitchen. "Just tell me you took breaks while you were doing it."

"Hypothetically, if I *had* performed strenuous physical labor, I would have made sure to take a break whenever necessary," I called out to him, not mentioning the extra load of laundry I'd been forced to do to clean my sweat-soaked clothes.

"Uh-huh. And, hypothetically, of course, would there have been any dizziness, sharp shooting pains, nausea, or confusion?"

"In the hypothetical, I'd like to think I would be adult enough to mention that."

“Somehow I doubt that, but thank you for cleaning.”

I wasn't too proud to admit that the thanks warmed me, but it also didn't change the fact that there wasn't much for me to do otherwise. With all the cleaning done, I was forced to spend the following day watching TV, flipping through the few channels Eric had and wondering if I was the type of person who liked watching TV all day. I'd certainly been the type to enjoy exercise if my constant itch to do it was any indication, but nothing I came across on the TV interested me.

Which was precisely why I decided it was as good a time as any to set out early to meet Eric at the clinic. It usually only took me about an hour to get there, but since I hadn't gone on my afternoon walk, I thought going out an hour earlier wouldn't hurt.

After stepping into the warm air, I glanced up and down the street as I always did when I reached a public area. I could hear a couple arguing in the next building and loud music blasting from somewhere further down. The sounds of cars, some rough and in need of repair, others relatively quiet, flowed by on the street.

As I had started doing a few days prior, I walked down to the store on the corner to buy myself something to nibble on and drink. Eric seemed to survive purely on coffee and bottled water, but I craved something sweeter every now and then. Entering the store, I found a small chocolate bar, a bottle of sweetened tea, and a small bag of sweetener from the coffee station. The young man behind the counter flashed me a smile but continued his phone conversation as he took my money, handing me my change with a half-hearted wave.

The man sitting out front bore a strong resemblance to the cashier, though he looked a little too old to be the man's father. The older man walked with a slight hunch and was never far from his cane. His voice was rough and deep, but when he smiled, showing a few missing teeth, it was warm and deepened the lines on his face.

“Hey, Mr. Reyes,” I said, speaking a little louder than usual to make sure he could hear me. He insisted, quite

adamantly, that he didn't need a hearing aid as his family insisted. I suspected it was less to do with ignoring his evident hearing loss and more with the man not wanting to hear his family all the time.

He looked up, squinting through glasses that probably needed to be replaced and definitely needed to be cleaned. After a second, he smiled. "Well, hey there, Dylan. How you doin' today?"

"I'm up and around, still kicking," I told him, opening the tea and adding the sweetener. "How are you feeling today?"

He sat in a lawn chair just outside the entrance, where I'd seen him a few times before. The large umbrella he sat under was in far better shape than the cheap plastic he sat on, and there was always a cup of coffee on the table. It had stained the hell out of his remaining teeth, but that apparently wasn't going to stop him.

"Doin' just fine," he told me, watching as I closed the tea and began shaking it. "I seen you do that more than once now. You from Georgia or somethin'? They're the only folk I know who can buy sweet tea and think it's not sweet enough."

"No," I said with a chuckle because I knew that much was true. "I'm not from Georgia. I was born and raised here."

He grunted. "One of your folks musta been then."

"Could be," I said because I didn't know enough about the past to comment one way or another. "And don't you get hot sitting out here drinking coffee?"

"Don't bother me a bit," he said, picking up the steaming cup and taking a drink. "Keeps me up and gets me around."

"I guess I caught you early today," I noted. The past few days, I'd only seen the man sitting outside on my morning and afternoon walks. I would see him again in the evening, but only on his walk back to the apartment he shared with the rest of his family.

"Was gonna say you were a bit early today," he said, taking another sip. "Feelin' restless?"

“A little,” I admitted, taking a sip of the tea. It was plenty sweet, but I thought it could do with another half-packet of sweetener to make it even better. “Missed my walks earlier, so figured I should get started early today.”

“That’s a good idea,” he said with a nod, reaching into his shirt pocket and drawing out a wrinkled cigarette. He fumbled with a match before lighting it, drawing the smoke deep. “Gotta keep yourself in good health.”

“This from the man who smokes how much in a day?”

“Now, that’s none of your business. Plus, it’s the duty of the old to warn the young.”

“I’m not that young.”

“Young enough. Hell, for a while there, I didn’t think I would ever start feeling old.”

“Oh yeah? What happened?”

“My sixties,” he said with a chuckle. “Oh, there were things before that, o’course, but that’s life. The knees get a little cranky. You get a little more winded than ya used to goin’ upstairs. I didn’t find it harder to start doin’ things until my sixties, but I knew people who started feelin’ like that long before me.”

“So, the key to making sure I hold off the effects of aging is to smoke cigarettes and drink cup after cup of coffee?” I asked with a faint smile.

He eyed me, wagging a finger my way. “Keep yourself walking, find yourself a reason to live, and people to keep livin’ for. That’s the advice I got for ya.”

My smile flickered, but I nodded, hiding my reaction with another drink. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

I had one of those three things going for me. I didn’t know which bothered me more, the fact that I didn’t have the other two or that I didn’t know if I’d had those things before everything changed. Instead of purpose, there was only confusion and a massive hole inside my head. I thought it would start shrinking, but every time I ran into something that

required me to pull on previous memories, that hole seemed a little bigger.

I had been sorely tempted to start looking into my past. Eric had a laptop he kept beside the couch. Its battery was shot, and the charging port was so touchy it had to be kept in one precise spot, but it worked. The past three days' activity had, in a way, felt like I was leaping from one distraction to the next.

The laptop had sat there, however, taunting me constantly. It would be relatively simple to load it up, type in the name Eric insisted was mine. I already knew I was scared of what I'd learn if I did. Images of warrants for my arrest and a list of various awful crimes came to mind. Or perhaps nothing, leaving an even wider gap as I wondered what kind of things I could have been doing that would leave such a silence.

Worse was the fear that I would look over whatever I saw, malignant or benign, and *feel nothing*. That it would be like looking at the life of a complete stranger who just so happened to have my face and voice. The gap in my head would grow even wider, and I would once more have to face the idea that there was nothing there for me.

I realized Mr. Reyes was peering up at me curiously, and I shook off my thoughts. "Sorry, got a little lost my head there for a second."

"That's alright," he said, making himself comfortable in his chair. "You ask me, far too many people don't do enough thinking when they need to be doing some thinking. Does a man good to ponder...not too much, though. Nothing good comes of overthinking."

Even though I'd only known him for a few days, I was used to his constant life advice. "I'll have to keep that in mind."

"Naw, ya won't. Young people never listen. I know, I was one once," he said with a chuckle. "And then you'll get old and start grumblin' about all the young ones not listening to you."

Without thinking, I reached down and patted him on the shoulder. “That’s the circle of life for you. Thanks for the conversation, but I think I need to get to stretching my legs. I’ll probably spot you later.”

“Gonna be at that clinic again?”

“Yes, sir.”

He nodded slowly. “That Eric boy, he’s a good sort. Not many of those around here. You keepin’ an eye out for him?”

“Trying to, but he’s doing the same for me,” I said with a shrug.

“Good. Decent people need to watch each other’s backs.”

I wasn’t so sure I was one of those decent people, but I nodded. “You take it easy, Mr. Reyes.”

“You too, Dylan.”



As I had done the past few nights, I arrived early at the clinic by only a few minutes. At least this time, the receptionist barely paid me any mind when I walked into the lobby to sit down and wait. It was a change of pace from the first few times when she’d openly watched me with deep suspicion. I honestly thought it was because of my silence as I sat in one of the uncomfortable waiting room chairs, content to let the time tick by as I waited for Eric to get off his shift.

Hearing Eric’s voice approaching after only ten minutes, I glanced out the window. I spotted a familiar hunched figure making his way slowly but steadily down the sidewalk. Waiting to see if Mr. Reyes would look up, I watched him walk his course until he was out of sight.

Eric appeared, phone in hand, his ID badge tucked out of sight. He looked worn down, but he’d looked like that every night. I could understand. His job had to be taxing, even as he swore up and down that he enjoyed it.



“Right on time,” he said with a chuckle, setting a stack of folders on the main desk beside the receptionist. “Here you go. Sorry I’m a little late, Rebecca.”

She scoffed, pulling the stack toward her. “It’s been a bigger madhouse than usual. You’re fine, sweetheart.”

He smiled tiredly at her. “Tell me about it, thanks.”

I stood up as he approached, frowning. “Something happen?”

Eric grimaced, glancing around to see it was just the three of us. “It happens every once in a while. Streets have been pretty quiet around here, so we knew something was bound to happen. I guess some new gang is trying to muscle their way into the area, and the locals are getting caught in the turf war. Had a lot of smacked around, angry people coming in today.”

Just as he said it, I caught sight of the bruise on his shoulder at the base of his neck. “That from one of them?”

Eric’s hand stole up to his neck, and he winced. “It was... it’s fine. It’s part of working here.”

“It’s not fine,” I told him sternly, ignoring the disapproving glare I received from the receptionist. “You’re trying to help these people, and they—”

“He was drunk, stabbed, and freaking out,” Eric told me gently. “People do really weird and sometimes violent things when they’re scared, alright? He didn’t mean it.”

“You don’t know that,” I said, wanting to reach out and run my finger along the mark as if that would somehow make it better.

“I do,” he said, waving to the receptionist and heading toward the door. “And I know he was also very apologetic about the entire thing when he calmed down.”

I sighed, following him outside. “And why wasn’t he in a hospital? You said he was stabbed, right?”

Eric snorted softly as we walked down the sidewalk toward the parking lot where he always parked. It was only half a block from the clinic, but the streetlights weren’t

reliable, and I was glad I'd decided to walk with him. "Because hospitals are expensive, and a lot of people around here don't have the insurance to go to one. We get plenty of donations from the city and private donors. It's not a huge amount, but it's enough that we can deal with people when they're badly hurt...though sometimes we have to send them to the ER."

"Is this job really worth putting yourself in danger?" I asked, glancing toward the parking lot and the small alley nearby. My eyes latched on as I spotted shadowy movement but I couldn't make out what or who it was.

"Of course it is," Eric said, pulling out his keys. "It means I can help people who need it. Maybe people aren't always appreciative, but that's more about them than me. I do this to help, and I *can* help."

"Careful," I said, nodding toward the shapes near the mouth of the alley.

"Who is that?" Eric asked after a minute, squinting in the direction I'd indicated.

"You'd know better than I do," I said, slowing down. "But I don't think it'd be a good idea to get too close."

"Yes, thank you, Dylan," Eric said dryly. "I wanted to go close to the people lurking in the dark alley."

"Is that...?" I muttered, making out four shapes, three of which stood tall while the fourth was hunched over.

"What is it?" Eric asked.

I heard a soft, pleading sound and immediately recognized Mr. Reyes' gruff voice, though I had never heard it sound so wary and worried.

"Hey!" I called, walking faster.

"Dylan," Eric said in a low, warning voice.

I ignored him, walking toward the trio. "I said, hey!"

The one with his back to me finally turned around and eyed me in annoyance. His eyes flickered to Eric behind me,

and he hesitated. “Oh...hey.”

“Ryan?” Eric asked in surprise. “What...oh no, please tell me you didn’t get back with your old crew.”

Ryan, who appeared to be the leader of this shit brigade, hesitated, glancing over his shoulder toward his buddies and the frightened old man they’d been harassing. I wasn’t blind, and I saw the shame that rippled over his face before being quickly replaced by the hardness of sheer determination.

“Mind your own business, E,” Ryan growled roughly, then looked at me sharply. “You too, this ain’t—”

“It is,” I said, jabbing a finger at Mr. Reyes. “That’s a good man who doesn’t need your shit, so it is my business.”

“Ryan,” Eric said in a soft, pleading voice. “You told me time and time again you were done with this. You’re better than this, man. You aren’t anyone’s errand boy.”

“This your old boyfriend, Ry-Ry?” one of the man’s buddies asked, leering at Eric and me. “Didn’t know you swung that way.”

“I don’t,” Ryan snapped with sudden ferocity.

“Shoulda told us,” the second man said, reaching down to grab his junk and squeeze. “I might’ve let you have a taste if I was desperate enough.”

The first man wrinkled his nose. “Christ, are ya both fags?”

“You get horny enough, a mouth is a mouth,” the second one mouthed off with an equal sneer.

“Just go,” Ryan warned with a sharp wave.

“Sure,” I said, stepping closer and reaching out toward Mr. Reyes. “C’mon, let’s get out of here.”

Ryan stepped closer, and I immediately looked him over, ready for him to make a move. “I said—”

“So did I,” I snapped, realizing his friends were already moving away from the older man, quietly circling around to reach my flanks. “He’s coming with me, one way or another.”

“Don’t do this,” Ryan warned me, one hand stealing toward his waist.

“Dylan,” Eric warned, his voice tinged with something that wasn’t quite fear, but I could hear the tension thick in his voice. For all his faith and hope in people, he wasn’t blind to the danger around him.

Me though? I knew what these guys were, or at least I had a pretty good idea. But dangerous or not, they were shaking down an old man who could barely get around on his own without a cane, let alone defend himself. Everything inside me screamed that it was not only wrong but disgusting. I wasn’t in the best shape considering everything that had happened, but it was better for me to deal with them than some old man with a bent back and poor eyesight.

“Back,” I told Eric, glancing over my right shoulder.

“Dylan!” Eric yelled, his head snapping to my left with a sharp gesture.

Which is precisely when everything went to hell.

I snapped my head to the left and saw buddy number one swinging a blunt object my way. Time moved in a stuttering snapshot, and only as my body moved did I realize it was a collapsible baton. Without thought, I twisted to take the blow on the thick part of my upper arm, where fat and muscle absorbed it with only a twinge of pain rather than the crack of bone of my shoulder or elbow. The baton barely caused a twinge, and I shoved forward, driving my elbow against the man’s wrist and chest before he slammed into the wall.

The small alleyway seemed to grow less dim, and every line and color came into sharp focus as I turned toward Ryan’s second friend. I spotted the flash of the metal on the knife as he sped toward me. Using the body of the pinned man, I launched myself toward the second man, my foot driving into his exposed knee. The crack of bone was as sharp as his scream of agony, but I didn’t hesitate as I drove my elbow into his nose.

Movement to my left reminded me of the first buddy, and I turned as he came for me again. This time I was ready, reaching up to catch his swinging arm. With a hard jerk, I twisted his wrist back and brought the flat of my other palm up and into his elbow with a gesture that was too clean, too precise to be anything but practiced and mastered.

It worked, and the baton clattered to the ground. I adjusted my grip on him smoothly, and held him only to throw him away from me, sending him reeling into the dirt and grime of the alley several feet away. I barely noticed, however, as the sound of feet behind me brought my attention around, and I saw limbs moving.

Without thought, I grabbed Ryan's wrist, snapping it so hard I could hear bone and cartilage snap as he tried to stumble away. The knife he'd meant to drive into me slipped from his grasp, and I released him long enough to grab it from the air. The handle was unusual, but I flipped it around with only mild fumbling to bring it down and drive it into his—

A hand slammed into my arm with surprising desperation and strength. "Dylan, stop!"

The same instinct that had gripped me the entire time brought my attention back toward this potential threat. Instead of danger, I found bright blue eyes, wider and more fearful than I'd seen them before. A faint sheen of sweat had broken out on Eric's brow, and I could see the way his lip trembled when he caught the look in my eye. However, his grip on my arm never wavered, and I saw his jaw tighten.

"Stop," he said, more quietly but no less firm. "They're done. You won. There's no need to kill them."

The ironclad grip of instinct that held me melted away like ice, and I released Ryan, allowing the man to stumble away from me with a whimper, his legs tangling under him and sending him sprawling to the ground. Eric glanced at him, giving me a warning look and taking a step toward the injured man. I tensed when Ryan shot him a filthy look and kicked out half-heartedly, warding Eric off.

Eric sighed. “Look, take you and your friends to the clinic. You know they’ll take care of you there.”

With a grunt, I looked around to try to find Mr. Reyes. A cursory glance showed me the older man had already taken off. A delayed memory bubbled up in my head of Eric grabbing Mr. Reyes while I’d been fighting, dragging him out of harm’s way. Amid the confusion of what I’d done and the tenseness of the situation, I felt warmth at Eric’s unflinching instinct to care for someone in the heat of the moment.

“No cops?” I asked Eric as I felt his hand close over my arm again, beginning to pull me away.

“There’s not many cops in this area that I wouldn’t trust to make this worse,” Eric told me grimly as we left the alley.

“Worse, how?” I asked gruffly. “Those guys—”

“I’m forgiving you for your ignorance because you can’t remember shit, but don’t try to lecture me right now,” Eric told me through gritted teeth. “Most of the cops that work this area are part of the reason guys like that exist. The rest are too weak, scared, or outnumbered to do anything about the problem.”

“They were going to hurt him,” I spat back, yanking my hand from Eric’s grip.

Eric let out a frustrated noise and turned on me. The worry and fear on his face were gone as he jabbed his fingers into my chest. “And what are the cops going to do? Huh?”

“Arrest them?” I shot back.

“Or beat the shit out of them despite the fact that you already did. Or let them off because they’re a dirty cop and easily bought. Or stuff them into an already overcrowded jail, where they’ll be let out quickly to clear some space,” Eric told me without flinching.

“Eric—” I began, already feeling my outrage wilting rapidly.

“Around here? The law is just another word for the pricks in badges who use their power to abuse other people, no

different than the assholes you just beat up,” Eric told me, his eyes narrowing. “We aren’t the rich people uptown who get all the best and brightest, who will show up and treat everyone with respect so the place stays nice. Welcome back to this part of Port Dale, Dylan, where people have to deal with most of their problems on their own.”

That was twice he’d mentioned what I’d done. Several questions arose in my mind and threatened the tip of my tongue, but I held them back. It wasn’t a subject I was ready to address just yet.

“Good,” Eric said, his shoulders relaxing as he turned back toward his car. “Now get in. I want to go home.”

My jaw was tight as I did as he said, slamming the door a little harder than was necessary. It wasn’t until we pulled away from the curb that I finally spoke up. “That Ryan guy...”

“Ryan Vasquez,” Eric said quietly, tone thick with emotion. “Born and raised here. Off and on user, and constantly pulled into gang activity. His parents were useless addicts who took turns beating the shit out of him and his siblings. He always danced between being and not being part of a gang. I guess Los Muertos got their claws in him again.”

“Sounds like you’re familiar with him,” I said, feeling the first prickles of unhappiness at the thought.

“We have a sort of rehab program I help with at the clinic. He was trying to kick the habit hard last year, wanted to do some actual, real work to help his family instead of gangbang. I thought I’d gotten through to him and got him back on the right path. Maybe I did, but he’s clearly back off it.”

I didn’t miss the bitterness in his voice and cleared my throat. “Were you and him...”

“Together?”

“Yeah.”

“Does it matter?”

*Yes, yes, it does.* “No, it doesn’t matter. Not really.”

Eric sighed, shaking his head. “Saying not really means it does matter.”

“I’m uncomfortable with you getting involved with a drug addict and gangbanger,” I told him. It wasn’t a lie, but it wasn’t the whole truth either, though the complete picture still eluded me.

Eric stopped at the next light a little sharply. “That’s none of your business.”

“I’m allowed to give a shit,” I told him, crossing my arms over my chest. “But I guess that answers my question.”

“The fuck it does,” Eric said, taking off with another jolt of the car. “Nothing happened between us if you must know.”

“You don’t sound happy about that,” I observed.

“God, we’re just full of invasive questions today,” he snapped, flicking on his blinker at the intersection with enough force I was amazed the stick didn’t snap right off. “Nothing happened. We got close. I got the feeling he wanted something from me. But the kind of life he had growing up didn’t let him admit that sort of thing, so nothing happened. And before you try to give me shit because of what you just saw, I don’t think I need to remind you how you found yourself the other day.”

“That’s not—”

“What, fair? No, you’re right, none of this is fair. People’s lives aren’t fair. But I’m still going to give people the benefit of the doubt and try to believe in them when they need it most, even if they disappoint me. And as someone who looks *really* guilty despite neither of us knowing what happened, I’d think you’d be damn grateful for that.”

“I am grateful,” I snapped at him, taking offense.

“Good, then start showing it and stop lecturing me like an idiot child,” he shot back.

“You’re ridiculous,” I said, turning my head away. Sure, it was a little impressive that he could be as passionate as he was compassionate, but it didn’t make me feel any better. He was willingly endangering himself for people I firmly believed



wouldn't show him a sliver of the same courtesy. Ryan might have regretted the idea of doing something to injure Eric for our interference, but regret wouldn't have stopped him from going along with his friends in the end.

Regret and guilt didn't bring a victim back from the dead.

“And I would *love* to know where the hell you learned to fight like that,” Eric added as he waited for traffic to clear enough for him to make the next turn.

“You and me both,” I grumbled, lapsing into silence as I watched the congestion thicken around us.

## CHAPTER FIVE

The silence that accompanied our return to Eric's apartment was as uncomfortable as it was deafening. The exhaustion I'd seen around Eric when he left his shift only seemed to increase as he walked into the apartment without a word. Just as silently, he slunk into the bathroom, closing the door and turning on the shower.

Not wanting to make the situation worse, I used the kitchen sink to clean my hands. The fight in the alley had marked them, and I hadn't realized I was bleeding from a few of my knuckles until I washed away the grime and dirt. I was otherwise untouched, however, and I stood there, slowly drying my hands with a small towel, staring at them in wonder and curiosity.

*Just who the hell am I?*

I had no idea how long I would have stood there absently pondering that question as it haunted me if a thump from the bathroom hadn't pulled me out of my reverie. I placed the towel back where I found it and waited for Eric. He emerged a few minutes later in a pair of loose pants and a shirt that hung off him. The shower had taken some of the exhaustion from his features, but his brow was furrowed as he walked past me to grab something to eat.

Sensing he wanted to be left alone, I drifted into the bedroom, the only space I could consider a sanctuary. It was still a little early for me to think about sleeping, but I lay down on the bed in the dark, staring up at the ceiling. Occasionally I heard Eric moving around the apartment, and I wondered what

he was doing when I heard a faint scrape and then, a few minutes later, the soft thump of something being set down carelessly.

When I didn't hear much else from him, I turned my attention to the sounds coming from the open window. The neighbors were still blasting the same music I'd heard earlier, and I wondered if someone was having a party or if they just really liked listening to loud music. There was a squeal of tires and then the sound of two men arguing ferociously down the street. I listened carefully to see if it would escalate, but eventually, they grew quiet, and I listened to the distant sound of honks and the occasional shout of someone on the street.

I had nearly tricked myself into dozing off when I heard the soft scuff of bare feet on tile. Opening my eyes, I saw Eric standing in the doorway, frowning at the floor. His arms were crossed over his chest as he leaned against the frame, and I wondered how long he'd been sitting out there in almost that exact pose.

"I forgot to thank you," he said softly, still looking at the floor.

"For what?" I asked, pushing myself upright.

"For helping him, that old guy from the store."

"Oh, Mr. Reyes."

Eric looked up. "You know him?"

I shrugged. "Not really. But I've seen him a few times and talked to him. He's kinda weird, but he's a good guy. Pretty sure he's the grandfather of the kid who always works behind the register."

"Even I didn't know who he was," Eric said strangely. "I stop by that store almost every day, and I never really bothered to talk to him."

"Eh, he...uh, talked to me, to be fair. Asked if I was your new roommate."

"He knows where I live?"

“Not sure, but he knows enough to know I’m staying with you.”

“Huh. Isn’t that interesting?”

“Is it?”

Eric smiled, unwinding his arms. “It is because I never really paid him much attention, but there he is, knowing more about me than I do him. It’s just...interesting how people can be a part of your life in ways you never realize. How often do we get to learn about our lives from other people’s perspectives?”

“He didn’t really give any perspective,” I said.

“And I bet you didn’t ask either.”

“No, why would I?”

“Why wouldn’t you? Wouldn’t you wanna know?”

“Not really. Just because he might have an idea about our lives doesn’t mean he knows us. I would kinda like to know how he knew I was staying with you, though. That’s handy information.”

Eric laughed softly, shaking his head as he stepped forward to sit on the bed. “Yeah, that sounds about right.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, curling my legs up under me.

“It’s just...another piece of you that I used to see all the time. There are a lot of things you are that I recognize, and then there are things that I don’t. It makes me wonder what things are hardwired into us individually and what we pick up along the way.”

“What’s...what’s different?” I asked, suddenly unsure if I wanted to know the answer.

“Well, you didn’t used to argue with me about every little thing I did, even if I knew you didn’t always agree with it,” he said dryly, arching a brow. “I’m not sure why because you used to dislike it when I did certain things.”

“Things like what?”

“Things like I do now. I’ve been like this for as long as I can remember. Sometimes I’d swear I could hear you grinding your teeth or chewing on your tongue just so you wouldn’t say anything to me.”

I rolled my eyes. “Maybe I learned there wasn’t any point in arguing with you. It clearly isn’t going to do me any good.”

“Probably not,” he said with a chuckle. “Or maybe it was some other reason. One you never shared with me, and now you can’t remember. But you also used to be a lot more cautious.”

“Haven’t I been cautious?” I asked.

“Well, paranoid would be a better way of putting it, but I don’t hold that against you. With everything you’ve been through, I’d be more surprised if you weren’t feeling a little paranoid right now,” he said softly. “But I can’t remember ever seeing you willingly throw yourself into danger. You barely hesitated.”

“Mr. Reyes isn’t exactly a young man. Even then, it’s not fair for three people to go after one,” I said with a scowl.

He tilted his head slowly. “Yeah?”

“Yes.”

“And then there was you, one man against three, and you did it without breaking a sweat...and while you’re still recovering from dropping a few stories and getting shot.”

I looked down at my hands, flexing them carefully. “I didn’t—”

“Want to hurt anyone?” Eric asked.

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “I mean, I wasn’t worried about that. I wasn’t really worried about anything. I just saw what was happening and...did.”

“Did?”

“Acted, reacted, whatever. It was like my body did it on its own, but that doesn’t make sense because everything in your body comes from your brain.”

“You know, you don’t have to be literal,” Eric said, and I didn’t have to look up to know he was probably rolling his eyes. “Your body clearly remembered what it was doing even if your conscious mind had no idea...and you had no idea, right?”

I shook my head. “No idea. I mean, I obviously knew enough to have a bulletproof vest on, but I didn’t have any weapons on me. I didn’t know I could...do that.”

“Which, for the record, makes it all the more impressive and a little dumb that you just wandered into the middle of it,” Eric said dryly. “For all the shit you gave me about making stupid choices, you made a pretty dumb one.”

“It wasn’t fair,” I repeated, flexing my fingers again.

“And you’re not going to hear me argue with you on that,” he said softly.

I looked up. “You tried to stop me from interfering. Would you...have let it happen?”

Eric’s mouth twisted, and he sighed. “I don’t know, Dylan. If I’d seen it was Ryan before interfering, probably, because I would’ve tried to talk him out of it. If it was just three random guys with weapons, maybe not. I haven’t been in a fight with someone in years, and I was never really one for fights anyway.”

“I apparently am,” I said, thinking of how easily the whole thing had come to me. There was no way I could have pulled off what I did with such ease unless I’d put myself through training so thoroughly that the knowledge lingered even after I could remember nothing else about myself. “What kind of person needs to have that kind of knowledge? I don’t even know what kind of fighting style that was.”

“The kind that seriously kicks a lot of ass,” Eric said with a chuckle.

I looked up, unable to help my smile. “Kicks ass, huh?”

“Well, I don’t know what you’d call what you did, but I would definitely call that kicking a lot of ass,” Eric said with a snort. “I’m not exactly what you’d call a fan of violence, but

that doesn't mean I don't know an ass-kicking when I see one."

"I'm getting mixed signals on whether or not that's approval from you."

"Look, I don't like violence, and I don't want to do violence. That doesn't mean I don't recognize that it's going to happen and that sometimes you gotta do the violence yourself. Maybe it wouldn't have happened if you'd approached things differently—"

"Eric," I sighed in exasperation. "What was I supposed to do? Politely ask them to stop harassing an old man?"

"But," he said, narrowing his eyes, "I'm also not going to stand here and tell you you were wrong for jumping to his defense. And I'm not going to say you were wrong for fighting back. They had weapons, and they were going to use them."

"And you stopped me," I said, careful to keep any judgment from my voice.

"Yeah, well, I didn't want you to have blood on your hands," he said with a shake of his head. "They weren't worth that. And you don't...it didn't need to happen."

A shadow crossed his handsome features, and I wondered if he was thinking the same thing I was. Despite all the ass-kicking I had done in the alley, there was no denying the fact that I had instinctively gone for the kill on Ryan. The other two might have simply been incapacitated, but I had been willing to use the knife on Ryan without a second thought.

Perhaps Ryan was redeemable like Eric thought and wouldn't have used the knife for anything more than to hurt me, or maybe he was more than willing to use it to lethal effect. The fact of the matter was I'd been willing not to give him the chance to prove either of us right. If Eric hadn't interfered, Ryan would be lying on the ground of that dirty alley, a blade stuck in his neck, sightless eyes staring up at the dark, cloudy sky.

So maybe I didn't have blood on my hands tonight, but I suspected there was a good chance that there was already

plenty there.

“Do you...regret not killing him?” Eric asked softly.

I ran a finger over one of my injured knuckles and shrugged. “It...it’s not like I wanted to kill him or was out for his blood. You were right. It was over, and I didn’t need to keep it going. I still think leaving him alone was a bad idea, but that doesn’t mean I was desperate to kill them either.”

Eric sighed. “Maybe I should have let you call the cops. But...you don’t remember what it was like to live here. And honestly, you didn’t see much of it back then. I preferred going to your house rather than letting you come to my side of town.”

I looked up. “I didn’t...live around here?”

He shook his head, smiling gently. “I went to Rutherford High with you. It’s a private school in Port Dale. I got in with a scholarship, had the whole thing paid for me. Your parents could afford it, though.”

“I-I was a rich kid?” I asked in bewilderment, looking down at my body in further confusion. “I really don’t feel like one.”

Eric laughed. “Thinking about those scars you have? Yeah, a lot of those are new, but you weren’t exactly a rich kid. Just a step under one. Didn’t hurt that you were an only child, so your parents had a lot of disposable income.”

“Oh,” I said, then looked up. “The scars I have, they’re new to you?”

“Hmm,” Eric grunted thoughtfully, standing up and flipping on the light. “Take ’em off.”

I blinked at him. “Excuse me?”

He rolled his eyes. “Just your shirt. I don’t need to inspect your junk...wait, is your junk scarred?”

It was my turn to roll my eyes. “No, you just...that was so sudden.”



His smile was soft and tinged with something I couldn't quite understand. "I'm not here to ogle the straight man staying in my bedroom. Especially one who can't figure out who the hell he is, that seems...unfair."

If it hadn't been for the second reason, I might have pointed out that I didn't think I was all that straight. "I notice that you not being attracted to me wasn't on that list of reasons."

Eric shot me an unimpressed look, but I could see a flush of color blossom on his cheeks as he motioned in annoyance. "Up and off. Plus, I haven't been able to check any of your wounds since I got you here. This is a perfect opportunity."

"Yeah, sure," I said, finally standing up and pulling my shirt off. I was momentarily surprised when I had to fight to work one of my arms through the sleeves, finding the muscles stiff and painful. "Ugh..."

Eric sighed. "Here, let me help. I guess you overdid it in the alley and needed the adrenaline not to notice."

"Thanks," I said softly as I felt him gently grab my arm and pull the fabric away.

"There we are," he said, hesitating a moment before stepping back to look me over.

There was nothing heated or salacious in his gaze, and in fact, he had the same expression on his face that the doctor at the clinic had worn when she'd looked me over while I'd sat there in my underwear. Yet this moment was several times more awkward and intimate as he looked, making a motion with his fingers for me to turn my back to him.

"Your chest is looking better," he said, and I tensed when I felt his fingers on my shoulder. "Careful, I'm just checking for any swelling."

"You just surprised me," I told him, realizing I had been so caught up in my own thoughts I hadn't felt him move closer. "I'm not worried you're...up to something."

"More and more pieces," he said softly, then tapped my back in a few places. "These are new, and I bet I recognize

them too.”

“How do you recognize them if they’re new?”

“Because I know what a bullet hole looks like, and this long one looks like a burn...and another looks like you took a knife at some point.”

“Really?”

“There are other little things I don’t remember ever seeing.”

“Did you see me shirtless often enough to remember something like that?”

“No, but I’d remember.”

There was something strange in his voice, and I looked over my shoulder. His eyes were still locked on my back until he realized I was looking at him. The analytical expression on his face stuttered and shifted until I saw something fearful flash in his blue eyes.

“Eric?” I asked softly.

“Y-yeah?”

“Did you...did you have a crush on me when we were younger?”

I actually heard his breath catch, as though his throat muscles had seized up so hard they’d cramped his lungs. His eyes went wide, and he instantly stepped back, drawing his hand away as though he’d been burned. “Dylan, that’s not what—”

“I know you aren’t trying to do anything,” I told him gently, turning slowly so I didn’t startle him. “I just wanted to know.”

His fingers curled and uncurled in rapid succession. “How the hell did you figure it out now when you were blind to it for so long before?”

“Who says I was?” I asked, finally turning around enough to face him. “Maybe I was the type not to say anything.”

Eric's hand had drawn up close to his chest, and he let out a faint snort. "Since when? You were always the one to speak."

"Maybe," I said gently, hating the way he was pulling away as though he expected trouble or harm from me. I reached out slowly, taking hold of his hand and pulling it from his chest. "Or maybe I knew, kinda like I do now, that it wasn't easy for you to talk about or even hear."

Eric's shoulders sagged at my words. "That...yes. I tried to keep it from you. I didn't want it to...affect things, you know? After you found out I was gay, you never treated me any differently, and I didn't want to give you a reason to."

I was tempted to tell him I wouldn't have treated someone differently just because they developed feelings for me, but I couldn't make that promise. For all I knew, the man I was before would have been more than willing to turn his back or put distance between him and a friend out of awkwardness and worry. Hell, for all I knew, I could have been the sort who was willing to tolerate a gay friend so long as they "didn't hit on me."

But I found myself staring at our joined hands and suspected the only reason I would have acted awkward about Eric being gay was if I was too scared or in denial about my own feelings about other men. Of course, I couldn't say whether or not I had felt that way about Eric in the past, but I was certainly feeling *something* in the present.

That same thing must have shown in my eyes because I saw Eric's widen as he looked me over in wonder. "Uh... Dylan?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you...have you...are...are you...?"

He was stumbling and repeating himself, but I thought I knew what he was asking me. I hadn't brought it up before because...well, I didn't know why. He had been trying to help me piece together who I was ever since the first conversation we'd shared in the clinic, and even though it might have come

as a surprise to him then, maybe knowing I was gay would have helped one or both of us put more of the puzzle together.

Yet I had held back, just one more thing I kept on the back burner among all the other stuff. Every time I tried to make sense of what I was and wasn't feeling, my head filled with constant static, jolting me no matter what direction I turned or how safe I tried to be.

"Pretty sure," I said helplessly.

"You were...you were gay the whole time?" he demanded in shock.

I thought back to the day before when my eyes had followed a pair of joggers I'd stumbled across in a park a few blocks from his apartment. Just as it had been with Eric, my eyes had swept over the couple, instantly logging what I appreciated seeing. Neither the man nor the woman was aware of my analysis, and I hadn't given it much thought save that it had been a nice sight before continuing with my day.

"Not...not gay," I said with a frown, realizing that the moment had possibly been more important than I'd given it credit for at the time.

"Bi?"

"Pretty sure."

"The whole time?"

"The whole time I've known you...well, this version of me anyway. I don't know what me before was like or felt."

Eric sighed. "I know some people like to debate it, but as far as most people are concerned, you either are or aren't something when it comes to sexuality. So you were probably bi back then too."

"Probably," I added helpfully.

"Christ," he groaned, his hand gripping mine tighter. Considering how distracted he was, I wasn't sure he even realized we were still holding hands. "That presents so many questions I know you can't answer."

“Like what?”

“Like when you figured it out. If you knew even when we were close and just didn’t bring it up. Because I adore you and all, Dylan, but you tended to keep things to yourself.”

I thought about the things I hadn’t told him yet, like the little voice that had kept me cautious and paranoid since I’d woken up in the abandoned building. The same voice I was pretty sure my fighting instincts had come from. Or about the dreams filled with confusing, clipped sensations of smoke, blood, and pain.

Maybe I wasn’t all that different from who I was before.

“And it makes me wonder if you were actually dating when I wasn’t paying attention, when the whole time I was beginning to suspect you weren’t into anyone ever,” Eric continued, apparently oblivious to my quiet guilt.

I could see he was starting to spin out of control, and I squeezed his hand. “Hey.”

He stopped, sighing heavily and glancing at me. “Yeah?”

“If I did keep it from you, especially back then, I’m sorry, alright? I don’t know why I would have done something like that, and maybe I had a good reason, maybe not,” I said gently, giving his hand a softer squeeze. “But if it is the case, I’m sorry.”

Eric’s shoulders slumped, and he shook his head. “You really shouldn’t be apologizing.”

“Might be I should apologize.”

“You can’t...you can’t apologize for something you didn’t do.”

“Ugh...”

“You’re not...you still have bits and pieces of the person you were, but you don’t understand who you are. You don’t have the memories and experiences that back up those decisions. You’re you, but not enough to be responsible for what you did back then, not in my book. It’s like apologizing for what an alternate-universe version of yourself did.”

“That feels like several extra steps when you could just say you absolve me of any potential wrongs I did,” I said with a frown.

Eric laughed, reaching out with his free hand and laying it over my chest. “You are honestly the most stubborn and ridiculously practical man I have ever known. You know that? Things are something, or they’re not with you, aren’t they?”

“I mean, there’s probably some wiggle room. Of course, there’s wiggle room. Kind of like you said earlier about violence,” I said with a shrug. “But just because there’s room to wiggle with some things doesn’t mean you get to do it with everything. Like when you might have done something to hurt someone you care about.”

“That you...” Eric began and then trailed off, looking up at me with such softness I felt the prickling annoyance in my head fade away.

Just like that, I was incredibly aware how close we stood, how his hand was still clasped in mine, and how his other was carefully laid against my chest. I could see the moment Eric realized the same thing by the way the light in his eyes shifted. For a moment I thought he would pull away, and I reached up with my other hand, laying it over the top of his. The gesture had come to me as easily and quickly as each motion and counter in the alley.

A dry thought blossomed in my head as I realized I didn’t know who I was and didn’t have even the barest flicker of memory, I knew what was happening. I could see the slight jerk of Eric’s head, not in dismay or repugnance but in surprise. How his fingers tightened around mine and pressed tighter into my chest. I might not know who I was, but I sure as hell knew I wanted to kiss this man, and he wanted to kiss me in return.

“Dylan,” he said softly but added nothing else.

I drew closer and watched him do the same, his eyes sliding closed. Although my mind was distracted by what I wanted from him, I could still feel the way I positioned my body in anticipation. I knew I would feel the brush of his light

scruff against my coarser grain, that I would smell both the cleaning supplies of the clinic and the light cologne he liked to spray on himself in the morning. There would be the bump of our chests as we drew closer, all muscle and solid, and maybe I would feel the press of his erection, or maybe that would come later.

I had the sneaking suspicion this was not my first time with a man.

A sharp rap on his apartment door tore through the moment, and he jerked back in surprise. Our heads swiveled around to look at the hallway, his in surprise and mine in annoyance.

“Who could that be at this hour?” he muttered, drawing away from me even though I was desperate for him to ignore the sound and return to what we were doing.

He didn’t, though, motioning for me to wait and walking out into the hallway. There was an awkwardness to the way he moved, as though he were in a daze, and it almost made me laugh aloud. However, I decided to let him have his dignity and reached down to grab my shirt, pulling it on as I heard him mutter to himself and open the door.

That caught my attention, and I stepped around the bed to try to eavesdrop.

“It’s almost midnight,” I heard Eric mutter in faint annoyance.

“I know, I know,” a familiar voice said. “I just...I needed to talk to you, is all.”

“This...isn’t the best time.”

“I’m sorry, okay, I just—”

“Fine, you owe me, Ryan, but fine.” Eric sighed, and I heard the slide of the chain on the door.

Alarms rang in my head, and I stepped forward. “Eric, wait, don’t—”

My warning went unheeded as the door burst open with a yelp of surprise from Eric. I saw him stumble back, holding

his shoulder before two tall figures stepped inside and bullied him backward.

“Hey!” I barked, trying to get their attention away from Eric.

A third man appeared, and I froze when I saw him pull a gun and point it in my direction. He was just far enough away that any chance of surprise would probably result in me getting shot. That and I had a sneaking suspicion the other two men were armed as well. The only thing keeping me calm was the knowledge that if they wanted either of us dead right away, we would have been in the seconds it took for them to take us by surprise.

Over the third man’s shoulder, I saw a fourth appear, walking past his friend and toward the living room without even glancing at me. He was dressed as casually as the rest, but he moved with purpose and a confidence that told me instantly this was the man in charge.

“Eric, isn’t it?” I heard a voice ask from the living room. There was a rasp to it as if he’d just smoked a pack of cigarettes in two hours, but his cadence was smooth and in control.

“Yeah, wanna tell me why you just broke into my apartment?” Eric asked, and for a moment, I was impressed with how calm and annoyed he sounded. “And why you had to use *Ryan* to get in? Thanks for that, by the way, Ryan! And yes, I can see you trying to hide in the hallway.”

“I said I’m sorry,” I heard Ryan mutter, and I could tell he wasn’t stepping into the apartment. However wrong Eric had been about what Ryan was or wasn’t capable of, I at least had to admit the man sounded ashamed. His shame was useless to Eric and me, but maybe there had been some hope for him before.

“Yeah, that doesn’t help me very much right now,” Eric said, dryly echoing my thoughts.

“Ryan did like he was told, which is what we expected. Just like he was doing before you and your friend interrupted



him,” the leader said. “We’ve got nothing but respect for you and what you do. We’ve got no problems who you help...by stitching them up, not by getting in the way of business. Now, you’ve been living here long enough to know how things work around here, and you should know better than to get in the way of what we do.”

“That wasn’t—” I began with a growl, but the man in front of me waved his gun in an obvious warning.

“Look,” I heard Eric begin, clearing his throat roughly. It was clear to me he was nervous and trying to settle the situation peacefully. “I don’t keep track of who’s doing what around here. We saw someone in trouble and decided to step in. Mr. Reyes is an old man.”

“And behind on payments,” the man said, and I could perfectly picture the sneer on his face. “Doing good things is fine, but there’s a limit.”

“Okay, well, I understand that now,” Eric said slowly, probably choosing his words carefully. “I didn’t realize the three of them were with anyone specifically. It wouldn’t be the first time a few guys decided to rob someone. They didn’t even tell us what they were doing. They just attacked.”

“I never said my boys were smart,” the man said with a snort. “But them getting their asses handed to them, that’s new. What kind of people are you spending your time with?”

“Uh...” Eric began, and I sighed.

“Me!” I barked, ignoring the second warning of the gun waving through the air.

The man snorted. “In your bedroom, Eric? I guess we’re learning new things about you tonight.”

“It’s not like that,” I heard Eric mutter.

“Still, I want to look at the man who managed to beat the shit out of three of my guys without taking a scratch,” the man said, then called louder, “Bring him in.”

The man with the gun gestured toward the doors that led through the bathroom and into the living room. I rolled my

eyes as he gave his gun extra emphasis, as if I hadn't seen the weapon already. I didn't know if all thugs with guns were like this, but this one clearly thought he needed to keep making a point.

With a sigh, I walked through the bathroom and into the living room, careful not to make any sudden movements, so I didn't startle the idiot behind me. I turned to face the man who'd been speaking the whole time, who hadn't moved even when I entered the room, keeping his eyes on Eric. I looked at Eric to make sure he was in one piece, finding him sitting rigidly on the couch, a hand clasped on each knee as he glanced between me and this stranger. There was a bead of sweat on his brow, but his gaze was steady, and I didn't see him trembling.

The man who led the thugs was watching him carefully, his hands shoved into a pair of dirty, scuffed jeans. His shirt and boots were just as dirty and well-used, and there was a smear of something dark that I thought might be grease under his jaw. There were dark circles under his eyes, but those eyes were sharp as he looked over Eric before slowly turning to me. There was a sharpness to him, maybe it was the slightly prominent brow or the hook in his nose, but his dark eyes reminded me of a bird of prey as they swept from my feet up to my face.

Yet when his eyes reached my face, his expression shifted from dispassionate analysis to alarm. His shoulders immediately went rigid, and I would swear he had to fight to resist the urge to step away from me.

“Riley?” he barked, gesturing sharply at the man behind me. “We were told you were dead.”

*Caution.*

It was the first time I could say that the distant but authoritative voice in my head had spoken clearly. Whatever was going on here, I could feel the absolute necessity to play along. This would mark the second time a complete stranger recognized me, but it was a wariness, hinting at fatal missteps that spoke to me this time rather than simple caution.

“Apparently not,” I said dryly, ignoring the way Eric glanced between the two of us like a cat watching a tennis match.

“That was what I was told,” he said, rubbing his jaw. “Gabriel told us all as much.”

I gestured to myself. “Apparently not.”

He grimaced, now tapping his jawline. “What the hell are you doing here? And bothering my boys?”

Danger was practically screaming through my head as I weighed his words. I had no idea who he was or who this Gabriel was, but apparently, everyone involved thought I was dead. It was also apparent that whoever I was to them was someone of importance and quite possibly someone this man deferred to. Yet, unlike him and one of the other grunts I’d heard, I didn’t have the faint accent I assumed ran through the rest of what Eric had previously called Los Muertos.

There was still a good chance I could get us through this in one piece, and I only hoped that both luck and my wits were on my side.

I gestured toward Eric. “Like he told you, we didn’t know they were yours. It was dark, and they didn’t announce themselves.”

The man snorted. “Christ, I’m having one hell of a week. And now I get to go back and tell Gabe you’re still kicking around. At least there’s a good reason they lost to only one guy. Where the hell have you been?”

“Beating your men up in an alley,” I said dryly.

He sighed. “Looks like you’ve gotten a beating of your own since I saw you. But I’m not getting in the way of whatever you and...yours have been up to. I’ve got enough shit on my plate.”

“Probably a good idea,” I said with a shrug, even as I inwardly prayed I was pulling off whatever act I was supposed to be pulling off. I didn’t have the slightest clue what kind of person I was before when this man had known me, and I hoped I didn’t give anything away.

He snorted, waving his men off so they retreated. “Fine, I’ll stay out of your business, and you stay outta mine. I don’t need any more trouble than you and yours have brought already.”

“I’ll do my best,” I said, this time just watching him.

“Hmph, cold bastard,” he muttered, turning away. “Sorry about the door, Eric, but you know how things go. Sometimes a point has to be made.”

“Yeah, sure,” Eric said, his voice faint.

I thought it best to stay where I was, waiting until I heard the door close behind them before I moved into the hallway. It was empty of anyone save for me, and I walked to the door, peering through the peephole to find the hallway outside also empty. I bolted what could be bolted and turned, walking back into the living room.

Eric hadn’t left his spot on the couch, and he was staring intently at the floor, his eyes wide and distant. I hesitated at the sight, suddenly afraid he had been pretending to keep himself in control and was now collapsing under the weight of his own fear.

“Eric?” I asked softly, beginning to crouch to gently reach out and touch his shoulder.

The effect was immediate, and he snapped out of whatever trance he’d been in to jerk away from my touch, his eyes blazing. “Don’t touch me!”

I flinched, taking a step back. “Look, I—”

“No,” he said, standing up and waving a finger in front of him. “I-I don’t want to hear it, okay? The fucking local boss of Los Muertos was just in *my* apartment and treated you like you were—”

“I saw,” I said quietly, unsure what to say about that.

“And you just—”

“I did what I had to in order to make him go away. I wasn’t expecting that either.”

Eric shook his head. “You have no idea what the Los Muertos are like, do you? Well, you probably have an idea if you can remember what gangs get up to when they’re in charge of an area.”

“I know, at least in the general sense,” I said, though I frowned as I said it because that wasn’t true. Or at least, it didn’t feel entirely true. In fact, the more I heard the name Los Muertos, the more it sounded familiar to me.

“Well, I know in the very specific sense,” Eric snapped, his voice rising several octaves. “I’ve seen what they do to people who get on their bad sides. I’ve treated some of them, and some get shipped off in body bags. I’ve seen how they harass, beat, and torture people because they don’t pay their ‘protection’ fees. I’ve watched the addicts and young dealers they create, and I’ve seen the death they’re willing to hand out to anyone who gets in their way!”

“Eric,” I said, sensing for the first time that I was beginning to lose him.

“No,” Eric said again with a shake of his head. “This is... this is too much for me.”

I bowed my head because what could I say?

“Just...take the couch,” he said, waving at it and walking toward his bedroom. “I’m sleeping in my own bed tonight. And in the morning...I don’t know. We can figure out what to do about you.”

I didn’t need him to say it aloud. I knew it meant he wanted me anywhere but in his apartment. It stung more than I thought possible when he closed the door to the bedroom behind him without looking back, then closed the one leading into the hallway.

I dropped onto the couch, resting my arms on my thighs and staring at the exact spot Eric had been staring at earlier. The entire night began to weigh on me, and I heaved a weary sigh.

I had spent so much time desperately hoping I was not the man I feared I was, and now I had prime proof that everything

I'd feared was probably tame compared to reality. In only a few short hours, my good deed had brought reality crashing down around us with the weight of a few dozen semi-truck, and I didn't know what to do with the information.

It seemed like everything new I learned about the man I had been was destined to make who I was now feel even worse. I had left my friend, kept secrets from him, then all but abandoned him over the years. Then I grew into someone capable and willing to commit acts of great violence. And now I had learned I was apparently part of some bloodthirsty crime cartel.

Whoever I was, I was not the man Eric thought, and I had started to like that version of me.

## CHAPTER SIX

My sleep that night was restless, filled with even more flashes of bright colors and disturbing sounds. Everything bled into a swirling mass that was no longer a confusing fog but a relentless kaleidoscope of sensation and memory. There was no sense to be made of it, only a constant feeling of terror as I tried to keep my thoughts straight.

My first act upon waking was to push away the fragments of the chaotic dreams, knowing there was no point in trying to sort through the mess. My first thought was to dully wonder how I'd managed to get any sleep at all. I had finally forced myself to lie down the night before, staring at the bathroom door leading to Eric's bedroom. I didn't know how long I'd lain like that, waiting to see if Eric might reappear, though whether it would be to send me away right then or find it in his heart to forgive what I had really been doing, I didn't know.

Sitting up, I quickly realized I was not alone in the living room. Eric sat at the table against the wall under the windows, gazing at the street below. One hand held a bottle of water that he was sipping slowly while his other hand lay casually on something on the table. Getting myself upright, I slowed when I realized it was a gun.

"Planning on using that?" I asked him softly, staying where I was on the couch.

Eric didn't look over at me, so apparently, he wasn't too concerned. "Been having dreams?"

I flinched, more at the distant, almost cold way he spoke rather than at being caught in a secret. “A few.”

“Anything interesting?”

“Not really. I haven’t been able to make sense of them.”

“How long have they been going on?”

“Since the first time I slept here.”

“Didn’t think you should tell me?”

I sighed, shrugging lightly. “None of it made any sense. I can’t make heads or tails of it. What would be the point of bringing it up?”

Eric’s jaw tightened. “You always liked to keep things close to your chest. And you always liked to explain it away as if there was no point in just...telling me.”

“Because there isn’t a point,” I said.

“There is!” he snapped, finally looking at me, his eyes blazing with the same anger I’d seen last night. “The point is trusting me, not treating me like a child who can’t handle whatever is going on in your head. You’re treating me like I don’t know how the world works. Well, it feels like that when you keep shit from me, like I’m too fragile or dense to understand.”

“I don’t think that,” I insisted.

“Really? Because I’m having a hard time believing that.”

I fidgeted uncomfortably. “It’s not that simple.”

“It seems simple. You could just say you don’t think I’m capable or smart,” Eric snapped.

I let out a growl of frustration. “Fine, because you didn’t exactly make a good case for yourself last night, did you?”

“What are—”

“You let that guy in, or what you thought was just that Ryan guy anyway. Did you even bother to check if he was alone? Did you even consider he might be a threat? He got



humiliated only a few hours before he showed up here. You didn't think he could be pissed about that?"

"He's never—"

"Done something like that before? Has he ever shown up where you live without warning in the middle of the night?"

"Well...no."

I sighed, rubbing my brow. "Look, I get that you want to see the best in people and believe that people like him are just hurting and need help. But hurt people create other hurt people all the time. Being in pain doesn't make you a good person."

Eric's face fell into a heavy scowl, and he slapped his bottle down with a harsh crackle of plastic. "That wouldn't have happened in the first place if you hadn't gone Chuck Norris on him."

"I was just supposed to let him beat the shit out of Mr. Reyes?"

"That's not the point," Eric said, jabbing a finger at me. "And don't try to make this about whether or not that poor man deserved to get beaten up. I hope you know me well enough by now to know I wouldn't want an innocent man hurt."

"Then what is it about?" I asked, torn between exasperation and annoyance at the constant back and forth with no end or real reason in sight.

"If you hadn't gotten in the middle of things, he wouldn't have been here. And if it hadn't been for that, then that guy wouldn't have shown up here...and if you hadn't apparently been a part of whatever the hell they're doing, then this wouldn't have happened at all! Not them, not your interference, and probably not even you getting hurt," Eric said, finally standing up to glare at me.

Not for the first time, and I suspected not the last either, I found myself at a complete loss as to what to say. What exactly could I say to defend myself when he was right? I had brought about every issue he'd listed, and there was no way I

could deny it. What little anger I had died, and I let my taut shoulders sag forward.

“Look,” I said, shaking my head. “You’re right. If it hadn’t been for me, you wouldn’t have been in either of these situations. If you hadn’t tried to help me, none of this would have happened.”

Eric’s mouth opened and, to my surprise, he sat down slowly and heaved a heavy sigh. “I guess that’s one way to teach me the lesson that I shouldn’t be as open-handed as I try to be.”

The thought hadn’t even occurred to me, and a laugh was torn from me at the realization. “I guess that’s true.”

Eric raised a brow. “That’s funny to you, huh?”

“I mean, I hadn’t even thought to use me as a lesson, but if the opportunity presents itself,” I said with a chuckle.

“Which still doesn’t sound all that funny.”

“I dunno. Maybe when your whole world starts falling apart, you’re left with two choices, laugh or cry. Turns out I’m the laughing sort.”

Eric leaned back in his seat, shaking his head. “You never had much of a sense of humor before. So I guess it’s only fitting that I find out now you have a fucked up sense of humor.”

That only made me laugh all over again. My whole life was falling apart, and it felt like we kept finding even more flaws and cracks in the life I’d left behind. For all I knew, the person I had been before my injury would be disgusted with the person I was now, not that I could prove it. I had no real way of knowing how I’d behaved, what I’d believed, or what I would have done in any given situation. The only source of information I had about my life came from other people.

“So, what do we do?” Eric asked me, looking more tired than I’d seen him in the past few days.

“What do you mean?” I asked softly. “It sounded like you were pretty set on getting rid of me today.”

“I didn’t say that,” he said with a frown. “I said we’d figure things out today. After everything, I needed some time alone, in my own bed.”

“After everything, huh?” I asked, thinking of our near kiss.

Eric blinked owlshly at me for a few seconds before I saw a touch of pink flash onto his cheeks, and he scowled. “We found out, apparently, you were a big enough name that a boss of Los Muertos treated you with respect. And not just respect, but the kind no one shows unless the other person is bigger and badder. Is this really the time to talk about...whatever we almost did?”

“Well, it sounded like a happier subject than...this.”

“I think it would be better if we focused on the bigger problem,” Eric said, glancing away.

I couldn’t say I blamed him, but I couldn’t deny it stung a little to hear. I wasn’t going to fault him for wanting to avoid what we’d nearly done when we’d found out there was a very strong possibility I was some sort of gang lord.

The reminder was enough to shake what trace of humor and pleasure I’d found, and I nodded. “So, I guess we should figure out what we’re going to do.”

Eric sighed. “I’ve been trying to figure that out for a few hours now.”

“Hours?” I asked, brow creasing. “You’ve been sitting there for hours while I was asleep?”

The corner of his mouth twitched. “You snore.”

“I-I do not,” I sputtered, not even sure why the thought caused me to feel so awkward.

“You do,” he said softly, turning his head to look out the window. “I’m dying to know what happened to you after all these years. I wanted to know before, but now? Now it’s burning inside me to know what you’ve been doing, what choices you made, and why.”

“I think we’re both wondering that,” I said, rubbing my hands over my knees nervously. “I’m looking at who I am

now, and at all the things I keep hearing and finding out about myself from before...and I can't put a picture together."

"After a little too much coffee...and maybe a couple of shots from the cheap vodka I keep in the fridge," he added with a rueful smile, "I thought I might have figured something out. Like I'd finally solved the puzzle."

"Yeah?"

Eric just shook his head. "I didn't figure out anything. It just felt like I was close to it. Like it was right there at the edge of my thoughts, waiting for me to find it. I never did, though, and it was probably just a feeling I had after sleeping like shit, drinking too much caffeine, and alcohol boosting my confidence."

"So basically, you've been sitting there, fretting over everything and getting nowhere."

"Spinning my wheels, yep."

"Maybe," I started, clearing my throat roughly and telling myself this was probably the best idea I'd had in days, "it would be better if I just left you alone."

"We already did that last night, and it didn't exactly help."

"No, I mean I should go...for good."

"And go where?"

"I have no idea. But it's not exactly a secret that I have money on me, and it's definitely not a secret that I can take care of myself. I'm sure I could figure something out."

Eric rolled his eyes. "And in the meantime, you'll wander around without a clue what you're doing. You don't think that won't make you vulnerable?"

"I think it would be better for you," I said, scowling at him. "In case you've already forgotten, which would be weird because you made the point earlier, I've brought a great deal of trouble and stress into your life recently. You've got a life right now, one that was perfectly safe and secure before I came along and shook it up. I don't want to shake it up even more."

Eric turned to face me, looking unimpressed. “Really? Safe and secure? Weren’t you the one who insisted I make stupid, impulsive choices that’ll get me into trouble?”

“As far as I can tell, that only started happening once you tried helping me.”

“Pfft, trust me, you were saying it years ago too. Like when I’d give some homeless guy my lunch. Or give the last of what little allowance I got to someone in need.”

I wrinkled my nose. “I’m starting to understand how I could have grown into a bit of an asshole.”

Eric laughed. “Not really. Giving my food to homeless people sometimes meant walking down some dirty ass alley by myself when I probably weighed a hundred pounds soaking wet at the time. And waving to people that I had money, even a little bit, practically made me a beacon for anyone willing to demand the money instead of asking for it. You gave me such shit when I told you over the phone that I’d been mugged. Lesson learned on that one.”

I was torn between trying to comfort him because his heart really was in the right place and feeling somewhat vindicated for the caution I’d repeatedly been preaching. All that did was leave me more confused as I was left to wonder if I’d have felt the same way before my memory loss.

I shook my head, trying to dislodge the questions before they settled in too deep. It had only been a few days like this, but I’d learned it was all too easy to get stuck in a constant loop of frustration and confusion if I allowed it.

“And,” Eric began, then looked up at me. “Don’t interrupt what I’m about to say, got it?”

I raised a brow but shrugged. “Sure.”

“The thing is, I’m not totally sold on...all this,” he said, gesturing vaguely around the apartment. “It just...doesn’t feel right.”

“Uh, you’re going to have to be more specific,” I told him, hoping it didn’t count as interrupting.

Eric's brow furrowed in thought. "The man I knew, the man you were. It just...it doesn't feel right that you would go off and start helping a gang in this city, let alone becoming someone important to them."

"I mean, you saw that boss guy."

"He's not the boss. Just the one who runs things in this neck of the woods. And I said, don't interrupt," he said with a wave of his hand. "The point is, it doesn't add up in my head. Or I guess it just doesn't feel right to me. Something is off about this whole thing."

"You mean other than the complete mystery my life over the past handful of years is to both of us?" I asked dryly.

Eric snorted. "Sarcasm is unbecoming."

"Yeah, so is being able to beat the shit out of people without thinking about it and apparently having the respect of a local gang boss," I told him.

Eric grunted. "It just...like I said, something feels off, okay? I don't think we're getting the whole story here."

I couldn't help my heavy sigh. "So after what happened last night, and then just telling me about how you've learned a few lessons, you're choosing not to believe the facts?"

"Making judgments based on limited facts is even more stupid than making them without facts," Eric told me. I was quickly beginning to believe for all his insistence that I was stubborn, he was the one who truly wore that crown. "And I have more facts backing up my willingness to believe in you than facts about whatever happened last night."

"That feels like you're taking the long path to get to the same conclusion I just said."

"Call it what you want. I'm not going to turn you away because...look, I'm not willing to give up on you, alright? So shut the fuck up and thank me."

"Someone's feeling bossy today," I grumbled.

"Dylan."

I rolled my eyes. “Fine, thank you for being stubborn and stupid enough to try your hardest to believe I’m not a terrible person.”

“I guess that’s the best I’m going to get, isn’t it?”

“A good compromise leaves everyone mad.”

“And it’s pointless to ask where you heard that cheery phrase,” Eric said with a roll of his eyes. He pushed himself up. “So that still leaves—”

A sharp knock turned our heads toward the doorway, and Eric frowned. “Who in the...stay here.”

“Eric,” I hissed softly, standing up.

He turned at the entrance to the hallway and gestured for me to back up. “I’m not making the same mistake twice. But unless I’m in danger, I need you to roll with whatever I say, alright?”

“Now you’re suddenly in control and capable?” I asked in disbelief.

“Right, because this is my first time dealing with trouble around here,” he said with a roll of his eyes and another jab of his finger.

I grumbled but backed up, staying out of sight. I didn’t hear the door unlock but still heard him call out, “Can I help you?”

A rough voice on the other side barked out. “Is he here?”

“What did you say?” Eric asked in confusion, which I didn’t think was warranted. The stranger had a thick voice, but I understood him perfectly despite being further away.

“I said,” the man called, his voice growing clearer, “is he here?”

“Who?” Eric asked, and I had to admit his confusion sounded genuine.

“Riley. We know he’s here.”

“Yeah, well, that was true last night. I don’t keep people around who bring trouble into my house, not even old friends.”

I winced at the admission and wished I was closer so I could try to stop Eric talking. He was a believable actor but a little too earnest for his own good.

“Where’d he go?” the man asked after a pause.

“What?” Eric asked again.

“I said, where did he go?”

“I didn’t ask where he was going. I told him to get out, so he got out.”

Quietly, I snuck forward. I could tell the pauses between the man’s statements were because he was talking to someone else. Eric almost jumped out of his skin when he saw me standing behind him, giving me a dirty look even as I shushed him.

“He was your friend, and you didn’t ask where he was going?” the man asked doubtfully.

“Friends don’t bring that kind of trouble to other friends.”

“What kind of trouble?”

“If you’re here looking for him, you know. The thing is, I didn’t want to know what he was doing. That just means more trouble for me. So he’s gone, and I don’t know where.”

The man chuckled. “You are a smart man. Maybe you let Gabe know if you see Riley again?”

“If it means I stop getting visits like this, sure,” Eric said roughly.

“Good, good, you have a good day.”

“You too,” Eric said, still watching the man and whoever was with him through the peephole. After a moment he turned, looking troubled as he whispered, “They’re just standing out there, talking to each other.”



I leaned closer, trusting in how thin the door was to try to catch some snippet of the conversation between the men. I could tell there were three of them, and they were discussing what to do next. They were clearly annoyed that they couldn't find out where I'd gone, and it sounded like they were nervous that I was up and around in the first place.

"Enough," the first man barked. "We'll keep people outside to watch for him, see if this man is a liar. If Riley doesn't show up, we take this one and see if we can't get Riley to come to us. Georgy needs him dead, and I'm not taking the fall if he isn't soon."

"And if Riley doesn't come for this man?" a second, nervous-sounding voice asked.

"Then we get rid of him. I have other ways to get Riley. Now let's go. You two wait outside for..." But the man's voice trailed off as they walked further down the apartment hallway.

"God, they had themselves a little powwow out there," Eric said, sounding relieved. "At least I managed to make them go away before they started any trouble."

I looked at him in complete disbelief. "Are you kidding me? Didn't you hear what they said?"

He let out a laugh. "I heard them, but that doesn't mean I understood them."

I blinked, still unable to get rid of my shock. "They were clear as day?"

"What?" Eric asked, his laughter fading and replaced by confusion. "Dyl, they were speaking Russian or something. I have no idea—"

"They were...what?" I asked, feeling a chill ripple through me.

Eric's face went slack. "They were...Dylan, do you speak Russian?"

Scrunching up my face, I searched my mind for something resembling anything but the English I had been speaking. "Does this sound like Russian?"

“No,” he said with a small smile. “That was definitely English. What did they say out there?”

I thought back and told him, “They said they were going to watch this place and take you in the middle of the night to try to find me.”

Eric’s eyes widened. “That...definitely wasn’t English. Holy shit, you can speak Russian!”

I took a moment to think about what I’d just said and realized it hadn’t, in fact, been in English. With a jolt of surprise, I recognized the words were fluent Russian, and my accent was impeccable. Even a native speaker would be hard-pressed to notice it wasn’t my first language.

“What the hell?” I muttered, bringing my hand to my lips.

“I guess we’re learning interesting things about you too,” Eric said with a smile. “Now, try telling me what they said in English this time, so I’m on the same page.”

My amazement disappeared as I looked at him. “They’re going to watch this building to see if I come back. But they’re still going to take you in the middle of the night to try to lure me out in case I don’t.”

Eric’s smile fell, eyes going wide. “*What?*”

“We have to get you out of here,” I said, turning to the living room. “If they get ahold of you...”

“What, they’re going to kill me?” Eric asked, and before I turned around, I heard him grunt. “Of fucking course they’re going to kill me. Why not? I mean, that makes sense.”

I raised a brow. “It does?”

“Well, sure,” he said in a shriller voice than I’d heard from him before. “The boss of the local gang recognized you immediately. Then some guys who speak Russian show up looking for you like twelve hours later. I mean, that’s connected. I don’t believe in coincidence *that* much. Jesus Fucking H Christ, Dylan, what the *fuck* have you been doing these past few years?”

“I—”

“That was rhetorical. I know you don’t fucking know. But I swear to Christ, I wish your brain would tell you because I’m starting to hate finding out piece by fucked-up piece!”

“Maybe you shouldn’t yell,” I said with a wince, glancing toward the hallway. “They might post someone outside and overhear you.”

Eric scowled and walked into his bedroom, still muttering a surprising amount of expletives under his breath as I heard him rummaging around. While he was doing...whatever he was doing, I busied myself by making sure I had my wallet with the money tucked in my pocket and grabbed a few protein bars from the kitchen. Not that we’d be lacking places to get food in the city, but having an emergency store of fuel wouldn’t hurt either.

As I emerged from the kitchen, Eric reappeared, dressed in jeans and boots, while thrusting a jacket at me. “Here.”

“What am I doing with this?” I asked.

“I want you to wear this to conceal the gun because I’m not carrying that thing. I haven’t fired a gun in years. You sent me the damn thing as a gift, and I never fired it once,” he grumbled, thrusting a holster at me as well. “If you can fight like you do, you probably know how to handle a gun. At least, that’s my hope. My real hope is you don’t need to use it before we get to the station.”

I paused, trying to figure out how the holster fit around me. “Station?”

He arched his brow. “The police station, Dylan. This isn’t a movie. We’re going to the cops.”

“I...why?”

“Because I’m not going on the run or whatever the hell is going on in your head.”

“So why not simply call the cops?” I asked dryly.

Eric adjusted the strap of a bag he’d thrown over his chest. “Probably because I don’t want cops here. It would just stir up trouble. And I’d sooner be there at the station, where they can

protect us easier and quicker rather than waiting for them to show up and make up their minds. At least if we're there, we can hang around until they get their shit together.

"I don't—" I began and then stopped, shaking my head. "Fine. We'll do that."

"Yeah, we will. Now get that frown off your face. I want to get there as fast, as quietly, and as upbeat as possible."

"You find out that a bunch of men are willing to kidnap and murder you, and you're worried about whether or not we're in a good mood about running to the cops?"

"Running to the cops," he repeated mockingly. "If they're not there to help us, what good are they?"

"You tell me," I said, adjusting the holster enough to tuck the gun away. "You were the one with plenty of opinions about the cops just yesterday."

"Don't be a dick," Eric told me with a scowl. "We'll have to take the side exit from the building because I'm sure they're watching the front."

"They're probably watching the side too," I said with a roll of my eyes. "Even if they don't know that we know they're there, they're still going to be keeping an eye out. Well, unless our new 'friend' brought a bunch of brain-dead grunts with him, that is."

"Considering your luck in the past week, I'm really not going to bet on that," Eric said, grabbing his phone off the table. "C'mon. Hopefully, we can get a couple of blocks over to call an Uber."

"To get to the police station?" I asked as I followed him toward the door.

"Well, I'm not going to take us to the closest one. *Everyone* around here knows half of them are in the Los Muertos' pocket, and these guys seem to be on good terms with them," Eric told me, rolling his eyes when I pushed passed him to get through the door first.

I scanned the hall for any signs of danger, finding only closed doors leading toward the elevator and the stairs at the end. “Elevator is probably a bad idea since it opens right into the front lobby.”

“Yeah, well, thanks for pointing that out,” Eric said from behind, forcing me to give him a dirty look at his obvious sarcasm.

“Christ, why do I always get the mouthy ones?” I muttered to myself as I pushed open the door and stared into the stairwell. The problem was the only thing I could see through the gap in the center was more stairs and nothing else. So unless I was going to be scared of railings, we both needed to move forward.

“What?” Eric asked, his voice echoing off the bare walls sharply.

“Shh,” I chided him as we made our way down. Unless we took it slow, our footsteps were bound to announce our presence to anyone lurking around, but that didn’t mean we needed to announce ourselves.

“What did you mean?” he asked as we descended, this time speaking quietly enough it could barely be heard over our footsteps. “About always getting paired with the mouthy ones?”

“You saying you aren’t mouthy?” I asked with a snort.

“No, but how would you know other people have been mouthy with you?”

“I...”

I had no idea. I’d spoken the words without a thought. Thinking it over as we descended, I could swear I imagined the vaguest outline of someone but couldn’t make out their features. There was only a bright flash I recognized as a smile and the sound of soft laughter that irritated me as much as I enjoyed it. Then it was gone before I could tug on the thread of what I knew had to be a memory, disappearing back into the thick fog surrounding it.

“I’m not sure,” I said, feeling my headache threaten to come back with the slightest pulse of pain at the center of my skull.

“Did you remember something?”

“Almost.”

“Almost?”

“Yes, almost,” I snapped out of frustration as we reached the bottom of the stairs. “It was like it was trying to come, and then it just...went away, alright?”

“Oh...like a sneeze.”

“Like a—” I began incredulously and then stopped, my hand resting on the door leading outside. “Actually. I guess it was kind of like that.”

“See? I’m helpful,” Eric said brightly.

I eyed him. “I have serious concerns about not only your definition of helpful but these random mood swings of yours.”

“Sometimes in life you either piss your pants out of fear or you learn to smile,” he said, throwing my words from earlier back at me. “Guess I’m the smiling type.”

“Wonderful,” I said with a sigh. “Now stay behind me, got it?”

“Christ, and to think I found your bossiness kinda sexy when we were younger,” he muttered as I pushed open the door.

I’m not proud to say that my hand stuttered as I pushed the door open, glancing over my shoulder to glare at him before edging out into the alley. A large, overstuffed dumpster sat next to the door, blocking my view of the mouth of the alley, while the opposite end was cut off by a chain-link fence covered with a sheet of tattered plastic.

I nodded for Eric to follow me as I stepped out and peered around the dumpster. Only as the door shut behind him with a bang did I realize we weren’t alone in the alleyway. A man, clad in dirty clothes, was huddled against the wall. He looked

up, but from the distant, faraway stare in his eyes, I'd have bet he barely noticed us.

Then he caught sight of Eric, and his gaze cleared. His eyes widened, and he glanced toward something on the other side of the dumpster. I froze, holding my hand out to stop Eric as I realized the dripping sound I could hear wasn't a leaking pipe. A second man backed out from the spot between two dumpsters, shaking his pants in a way that told me we'd interrupted him.

Without thinking, I reached for the side of the dumpster as the man backed up, wrapping my hand around the unused locking bar. The man's suit stood out as he adjusted his pants and turned to face us. The look of surprise on his face was almost comical, but the "what the fuck" he spat out was less amusing because this time I recognized Russian when I heard it.

He turned, barking out a single syllable over his shoulder before I stepped out and swung the bar. It made a dull, thick noise as it caught the sentry in the side of the head. His cry died instantly, and he crumpled to the ground without another word.

I tossed the bar into the dumpster just in time to see two more people appear at the mouth of the alley. "Shit."

"So much for stealth," Eric said, looking down at the unmoving sentry with a wince. "Trying to spread your amnesia?"

I ignored him, nodding at the homeless man. "Thanks, but you might wanna get out of here in case they decide to ask questions."

"Yeah, go lay low, Dwayne," Eric said because, of course, he knew the guy's name. "You know how to stay outta sight better than anyone."

Dwayne gave Eric a warm smile that was missing more teeth than Mr. Reyes, but there was no mistaking the warmth. I didn't want to linger as the men started jogging toward us,

wearing almost the exact same suits as the man now marinating in the dumpster water of the alley.

“Fence, Go,” I said, turning to give Eric a push.

For once he didn’t have a smart comment, and we both hauled ass toward the chain-link fence with the sounds of the two men’s shouts behind us. With a speed that surprised me, Eric leaped forward and clambered up the fence with a clatter of metal and plastic. He flinched but didn’t hesitate when the first shot rang out.

“Land on your feet!” I barked as I hooked my foot under one of his feet and gave him a shove. I was relieved when I saw him practically flip over the top of the fence, though from the surprised yelp and thud I heard, I was betting he was less happy.

Something told me I was going to hear about that one later.

I didn’t have time to waste on whether or not he’d landed gracefully, as I still had to leap up and clamber over the fence. Sparks flew next to my eyes, stinging my brow as a bullet grazed past me, making a messy hole in the plastic sheet. Grabbing the top where it was safe, I twisted my body and heaved myself over, falling eight feet to the ground and landing on my feet.

“Let’s go,” I barked, grabbing Eric by his upper arm and dragging him to his feet to start running to the opposite end of the alley.

Our feet slammed against the ground as we barreled down the alley to the sound of the fence clattering behind us. I jerked Eric to the side just in time to hear a gunshot ring out.

“Jesus,” he breathed as we reached the mouth of the alley. “Go left, go left!”

I didn’t argue, pushing him ahead and cutting to the left as we reached the pavement. The gunshots had chased off most people, but Eric ran forward, glancing around frantically before darting into the street. I muttered as I hurried after him, checking to make sure we weren’t going to get run over.



He glanced back as he headed toward a large archway where I could see a crowd of people looking toward the alleyway. A quick look told me it was an open-air market, and I wondered what he was doing.

“C’mon,” Eric said, grabbing my wrist and pulling me into the entrance. “Last thing they want to do is start firing into a crowd.”

“That,” I began, following as he pulled me into the thickest part of the crowd, “is actually a good idea.”

“I have them now and then,” he said with a laugh, though it was high-pitched and shaky. “Kind of hoping we can lose them in here and get out as quick as possible.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it,” I muttered as I watched the two men slide into view, looking around quickly. I winced when one of them straightened, barking something and nodding in our direction. “Pretty sure we just got spotted.”

“Keep moving,” Eric said, and I followed him.

There were stalls and small inlets where tiny shops were set up. Some of them were food, but most looked like a standard flea market blend of handmade goods and cheap knickknacks sold at a higher price. Eric and I struggled through the crowd, though I didn’t know where he was taking us.

It didn’t matter, however, as one of the men appeared in front of us at a booth, and another came up and shoved himself beside Eric. Tensing, I stepped forward only for the man next to Eric to allow me to see the gun pressed against Eric’s side, his dark eyes flashing an unmistakable warning in my direction.

“Come with us,” he told me, his accent thick but in English, “and we’ll let this one go.”

“Liar,” I hissed, unsurprised but despairing that no one around us had noticed what was happening.

“Come with us,” he said again, barely glancing at the group of people moving past us, a mix of young men and women who shouted and laughed.

Eric watched them and then looked at the man holding the weapon. “Quick question, have you ever seen *Home Alone 2*?”

The man shoved the gun into his side. “Shut it.”

Eric snorted. “Just checking.”

Both men focused on me, who they thought was the obvious threat. So neither of them noticed when Eric’s hand shot out to a girl beside the man holding him hostage and squeezed her ass hard.

The reaction was as immediate as it was loud. The girl shouted in outrage, whipping around to face them. By the time she looked at Eric, he had already taken a step away and was staring at his confused attacker in feigned shock and outrage.

“Excuse you?” the girl barked at the increasingly confused man, reaching out and smacking him on the chest. Her friends turned, asking her what happened. “This motherfucker thinks he can just grab my ass!”

“Jesus, what is wrong with you, man?” Eric asked, shaking his head. “In broad daylight?”

Understanding filled the goon’s face, and he snarled something at Eric that I couldn’t hear over the sound of outrage from the woman’s friends. The same woman stepped forward into his space. “Oh no, you got a problem with anyone it’s with me because I sure as hell have a problem with *you*.”

The other man, frowning, stepped forward to try to help, but half the group turned on him as soon as they realized he was with the first man. Now, even more people were starting to get involved, and a crowd was forming around the two men. Eric managed to slip back toward me, taking hold of my hand.

“C’mon,” he said, dragging me away and back toward the entrance as the crowd grew louder, feeding on one another’s outrage.

“What the fuck was that?” I asked once we were free of the crowded market and out on the sidewalk.

“That was...me making it up as I went,” Eric said, and I could see a thick layer of sweat on his brow as he yanked his

phone from his pocket and opened an app. “I don’t know, I’ve never been in this sort of situation before. Maybe we should have called the cops instead of this stupid idea of getting away first.”

“If you didn’t trust the cops at your local station, then you shouldn’t trust the ones who would have come to the door,” I told him, having to admit his logic had been sound.

He flashed me a weak but grateful smile. “I guess you’re right. My brain’s going overboard right now.”

“Why?” I asked him.

“I don’t know, maybe because I just had a gun shoved between my ribs?” he asked, voice going shrill again.

“No, I mean,” I said, grabbing his arm and pulling him against a building to stare down at him, “you came up with a damn good idea and pulled it off perfectly. It was clever, quick, and more useful than anything I did. Why are you questioning yourself?”

Eric’s shoulders slumped. “I just...if I screwed it up, everything could have gone wrong in a second. Those guys were willing to shoot us, and no one was even paying attention while they had a gun held to me. I could have been dead before anyone but you knew what happened, and who knows what they would have done to you. And Christ, what if they’d done something to that woman? I shouldn’t have involved her and—”

I kissed him. One minute he was babbling, terrified for himself and everyone else, showing he cared about other people as much, if not more than himself, even while he was in danger, and the next, I had my lips pressed against his.

I wasn’t surprised when it took him a moment to respond with more than just rigid shock at the sudden gesture, but I was relieved when I felt him relax. His hand came up and wrapped around my wrist, giving a squeeze before we slowly separated.

“What was that for?” he asked softly.

“That was me making it up as I went,” I said, smiling when he laughed. It was a shaky laugh, but I could see the tension bleeding out of him.

“Fine,” he said with another chuckle. “But don’t think you’re out of the doghouse just yet.”

I smiled wryly. “Yeah, this is kind of my fault after all. I don’t expect to be out of trouble just yet.”

“Well, that, and,” He slapped my chest, “you threw me, you dick!”

I laughed. “Needed to get you up and over faster.”

He rolled his eyes. “At least give me some warning next time.”

“If I did that every time I was going to do something, I wouldn’t have been able to sneak in that kiss,” I told him with a shrug. Maybe the timing had been a little weird, but I didn’t regret it. There was a warm, liquid feeling in my stomach that wouldn’t be denied after kissing him. And since it clearly wasn’t unwanted on his part, I wasn’t going to regret it.

“Fine, you win this round...for now,” he told me, and I felt my chest tighten at the almost shy glance he gave me. Before he could add anything else, his phone dinged, and he glanced down. “Alright, our ride is just down the street. Let’s go see if the cops are going to be of any use to us.”

“Sure,” I said, not thinking about anything other than that kiss.

It wouldn’t be too long before I regretted not being more wary.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

I leaned back in the hard chair and stared up at the ceiling of the police station lobby. Taking in the almost aggressive smell of coffee that hung around the place, I wondered if it had somehow managed to stain the ceiling.

I closed my eyes and let the sounds of the station wash over me. For the most part, it was quiet in the lobby. I could hear several footsteps and the low murmur of conversation. Occasionally someone let out a bark of laughter, or their voices rose above the low hum, but I didn't mind. I really wouldn't have thought the ambiance of a police station would be soothing, but there I was, almost ready to doze off in the peace and quiet.

"You are *not listening to me*," Eric snarled from the front desk, only a few yards away.

Well, it was almost peaceful anyway.

"Sir," the officer at the front desk said in a voice that spoke of how often he'd probably been chewed out by people and just how exasperated he was with that reality, "you have to understand, the nature of your complaint is...not making a lot of sense."

"I don't know how I can make this any clearer to you," Eric said, leaning forward to glare even harder at the man. Unsurprisingly, the officer did not look intimidated or worried in the slightest.

If Eric had thought getting to the station in one piece would solve our problems, he had learned over the past twenty

minutes that it wasn't happening. Even I had thought we might be in luck when we showed up, and there was no one else in the lobby. Yet all it had taken was Eric to take over talking and seeing the officer's expression as he listened for me to realize we weren't in the clear just yet.

Had it been up to me, I would have left out some details about the past week, including the fact that my memory was shot. Eric, however, decided to include that bit of information early on in our tale, and I noticed the surprise and doubt take root on the officer's face. At that point, I plopped myself down in a chair and let Eric take the fallout. I had only known him a week, but I knew trying to dissuade him from anything, especially when riled up, was asking for him to turn his temper on me.

So I sat there and let the officer deal with the wildcat with a heart of gold.

A female officer appeared, her thin brow arching in what I took to be confusion and amusement. "Jim, what's going on up here?"

Eric turned to her in exasperation. "Please tell me you have more functioning brain cells than this future AA member."

I let out a choking sound and stared at him. "Eric?"

Eric waved at the man behind the desk. "I can smell the whiskey on his breath. All the breath mints in the world can't cover up cheap Wild Turkey."

"That's...specific," I muttered, wondering if there was a story behind it.

The officer behind the desk, Jim, went from irritated to nervous at the specific name of the alcohol. I wasn't sure if Eric could actually smell that particular whiskey, but the guess had either been spot-on or too close.

The female officer looked between us, and her complete lack of reaction to Eric meant she didn't care or already knew about Jim's on-the-clock drinking habits.

"We've got a free moment," she told Jim, cocking her head.

Jim waved dismissively. “Fine, take them. This one just wants to yell anyway.”

Eric huffed. “*Or*, I would prefer to be listened to.”

“Well, I’m Officer Fitz, come on back, and I’ll hear what you have to say,” she told him, adjusting a stray strand of her dark hair out of her face. “Can I get you anything to drink?”

“No,” Eric said just as I said, “Coffee would be great.”

“One no, and one coffee coming right up,” she said as she led us through rows of partitioned desks. Most of the officers paid no attention, while the rest barely gave us curious glances as we passed. She sat us down in front of a desk. “Be right back with that order.”

“Ugh, I hope she’s smarter than the last one,” Eric grumbled as he sank into his seat.

“I don’t think he was dumb. I don’t think he believed a thing you were saying,” I told him as I slid into the seat next to him. “It’s not exactly the easiest story to believe and...”

“And what?”

I hesitated but then decided I was going to live up to his accusation of not treating him like he was capable if I kept my thoughts to myself. “I just don’t think this will work out the way you want it to.”

Eric huffed. “Well, it was the only option I could come up with. I’m kind of hoping the cops prove their bad reputation wrong and do something.”

“I’m pretty sure they won’t, or can’t, whatever way you want to look at it,” I said, watching Officer Fitz as she stopped outside what looked to be a break room. She started chatting with a man about a head taller than her, with black hair practically shorn down to his scalp. “They’re either going to get curious about why we were involved in the shooting earlier, or they’re just going to file a report and tell you to call if we have any more information for them.”

“Christ, I hope it’s not that,” Eric said, looking at his phone. “At least they’re being understanding at the clinic.”

“Tell me what you told them later,” I said, noticing the officer making her way back with the man she’d been speaking to, who I was already guessing was her partner based on how easily they talked to one another. “Just do not tell them I have a gun on me right now.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s not mine, it’ll cause trouble.”

Eric sighed. “Your memory is simultaneously the most frustrating and fascinating thing, I swear to God.”

I would have to discuss that with him later because the two officers were closing in, and I decided to keep my mouth shut. Now someone was paying attention to us, and I wanted to pay just as much attention back. No matter what Eric hoped, I firmly believed this trip would not benefit us. We would have to come up with an alternate plan if this didn’t work out, but it could wait.

“Hey there,” Officer Fitz said, handing me a coffee in a Styrofoam cup. “Here’s your coffee, and this here is my partner, Officer Patterson.”

“Hi,” Eric said, giving a little wave while I reached out and shook the man’s hand briefly.

“Alright, now we’re all taken care of,” she said, sitting down behind the desk in front of us, “why don’t you tell me what’s going on?”

Eric glanced at me, but I gestured to him. “You’re better at explaining it.”

A brief twitch on his face told me he didn’t believe me. Thankfully, he wiped the expression quickly, but I noticed both officers were watching him intently.

“Alright, I’ll start from the top, I guess,” Eric said with a sigh, taking a deep breath.

I took my time sipping the small coffee she’d handed me while Eric went through the story. It seemed to fit the cluttered, noisy environment of the work floor, and I watched the two officers while Eric talked. Fitz took notes on her



computer while Patterson sat at the desk next to hers and watched the two of us.

Fitz was the more expressive and probably empathetic partner of the two. Though she never outright reacted, save to ask the occasional question to clarify something or get more information, there were moments when her brow twitched, or I saw her lips thin. Patterson was the more observant of the two, keeping himself in check. I did notice a couple of times that he stopped paying attention to the story as he tried to hide the fact that he was examining me from the corner of his eyes.

Just as interesting was how Eric handled the story he gave the two cops. I had no idea if he'd been thinking about what he would tell them before we showed up at the station or if he was simply good at improvisation. He mentioned my lost memory, which I didn't blame him for since it would have become evident at some point, but left it open-ended how I ended up that way. He mentioned my name, but not that he knew me from my original life, which I thought was interesting. And while he mentioned the name I had been addressed as, Riley, he hadn't attached it to me.

And he'd taken my advice to leave out any mention of the gun I had hidden on me.

To her credit, Officer Fitz waited until Eric finally wrapped up his story before looking at me. "So, you...don't remember anything of your life before?"

I shook my head. "Nothing."

"So, how do you know your name is Dylan?"

"Sounded right. Not sure if that was some part of my brain remembering or if I just liked the name. I've had it for a week now, and it works, so I figure I should stick with it."

Patterson raised a brow at Eric. "And you didn't think it was a good idea to take him to a hospital to get checked out?"

Eric shrugged. "You and I both know you can't force someone to take medical treatment if they don't want it."

"Sure you can. We've done it."

“You can only force treatment if someone is a clear and present danger to themselves and others. Considering he was lucid, if a bit confused, and not a threat, I didn’t see the point,” Eric said, his tone growing frosty. “Though perhaps you do things differently here, I wouldn’t know.”

The apparent animosity in Eric brought a slight raise of the woman’s brow, but the man’s lips only thinned as he leaned back in his seat. I wouldn’t swear on my life, but I was pretty sure Eric had just put a mark against him in the man’s mental calculations.

“No, he’s well within his rights,” Officer Fitz added slowly. “And you said your boss agreed he was of sound mind, so there’s no point in questioning his fitness. And I think Officer Patterson and I can agree that...Dylan is managing to keep his senses about him.”

“I appreciate that,” I said with a flash of a smile that only she returned.

“So there’s *nothing* in there then?” she asked and looked at my forehead.

“Nothing I can make sense of,” I told her with a shrug. “Just a bunch of confusing pieces.”

“Pieces still work, don’t they?”

For a moment, I heard the ghost of someone’s voice echoing in the back of my head. *Dylan, sometimes you have to work with just bits and pieces. That’s what this shit is all about, getting it all together and making it work. Now fucking work with me.*

I shook my head, pushing against my brow as I felt a dull throb. “If it was a giant puzzle, sure. But this is like someone took a five-thousand-piece puzzle, threw it in a woodchipper, and told me to make sense of it.”

Fitz clicked her tongue. “I’ll be real with you, my friend, I don’t envy that.”

“And I wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy,” I said, suddenly tired.

“Not that you know any enemies you might have,” Patterson said. I imagined it was supposed to come off as wry and sarcastic, but it made me briefly look askance at him all the same.

Fitz cleared her throat. “My partner’s terrible sense of humor aside, we should probably deal with the actual problem you two are having. Namely, the men trying to kill you.”

I could practically see the way Eric lit up at her words, which even to my ears sounded like support for his tale. “All I know is that they speak Russian really well, dress in suits I wish I could insult by calling cheap, and are way too liberal about using guns on people instead of talking.”

Fitz hummed thoughtfully, tapping the edge of her keyboard. “We have had some growing reports in the last few years of Russian Mafia moving into the city...”

“Those were overblown,” Patterson told her with a frown.

“You and I heard two different conclusions then.”

“Or you weren’t paying attention to the follow-up reports. There’s no reason we have to worry about anything other than Los Muertos in this city.”

I had to admit, Officer Patterson sounded sure of his information, almost insistent. Officer Fitz, however, still seemed to have her doubts, but she didn’t strike me as the type to disagree openly with her partner while there were civilians in hearing range.

“Well, we could probably deal with two birds at a time,” she said, pushing her keyboard away. “I’ll submit this, and we’ll send someone back to your apartment to see if anyone is lingering there. In the meantime, we can have you stay here while we sort things out.”

“You said two birds,” Eric said, cocking his head. “That kinda seems like two stones for one bird.”

“Two stones, two birds,” she said, eyeing me. “You let us get a picture of you, and we might be able to feed it into a few databases. There’s no guarantee, of course. Facial recognition software is still trying to catch up, but it’s worth a shot.”

I had suspected trouble could come from going to the cops, and this was the one thing I hadn't anticipated happening. It was only in retrospect I probably should have realized it was a possibility, considering the mystery of who I was would be sure to poke at more than just me. It also left me feeling a little uneasy that they were already starting to pick at the plot holes of Eric's story and were setting themselves up to find out more about me than I was ready for.

"Sure," I said, trying to keep the unease from my voice. I didn't know if Fitz was already suspicious. While I believed her partner was, I didn't want to give them any more reason to be. "I guess we can do that."

"I'm sure it'll be fine," she said brightly, pulling out an object from her pocket and flipping it open to reveal a pocket watch. "I'll just need a few minutes."

"Fine," Eric grumbled but eyed the watch. "That's...pretty. You afford that on a cop's salary?"

She smiled at the insinuation. "It was my grandfather's. He died a few years back. I was his only grandkid. I'm sure he probably thought he would give it to a grandson, but the day I got through basic training, he gifted it to me. It's a little old-fashioned, but it keeps his memory alive. So I carry it with me all the time, right above my heart. Cheesy? Probably."

"No," I said quickly, earning a surprised look from Eric. "Not cheesy."

"From you, that makes sense," she chuckled.

Patterson stood up and motioned to Eric. "You might as well come with me. I'll find an unused conference room you can make yourself comfortable in while you wait."

"Uh," Eric said, glancing toward me as he stood up. "Sure. Lead the way."

Patterson took him without another word, giving me a sharp glance before they disappeared. Although we were reasonably safe in the police station, I still felt a strong sense of unease at being separated from Eric. In only twenty-four hours, I'd realized how capable and vulnerable he was and

until things were settled, I wasn't going to be comfortable being away from him.

As I waited for Officer Fitz to return, I busied my hands shredding the Styrofoam cup. If I *was* the person the Los Muertos member had referred to, there was still a chance my face hadn't ended up in any photographic records. Even if it had, the officer herself had said the software was still coming into its own, so there was a chance it would still miss me. Just in case that happened, I didn't want to leave DNA behind, and shredding the cup was the first step.

It probably would have seemed paranoid to Eric, but I would take paranoia any day so long as it kept me out of trouble or at least staved it off a bit longer.

I had the tiny pieces swept into my hand, which I balled into a fist at my side by the time Officer Fitz returned. "Okay, so the captain is on board. It probably helps that we have a slow week right now. We'll get an official picture and send it off to see what pops up. Are you ready?"

"Lead the way," I said, gesturing with my free hand as I stood up. "Though a bathroom stop would be appreciated."

"Lucky for you, it's on the way," she said, smiling over her shoulder. Despite my misgivings about being there, I had to admit I kind of liked the woman. There was something kind in her that reminded me a lot of Eric, but I suspected she was tougher than she let on.

*A curtain of thick, auburn hair cascaded down around my face, tickling my shoulders as it spilled onto the pillow under my head. The smell of leather and lilacs filled my nostrils, and I saw the wicked grin that made my heart flutter. I reached up to slip my hands into the thick waves of her hair, eager to pull her down, my lips forming the shape of her name as I—*

Officer Fitz's voice cut into the sudden haze. "Dylan?"

I realized I was leaning against the wall of the hallway she had led me down, my headache growing thicker. I shook my head, annoyed that I couldn't remember the name I swore I'd been about to speak. "Yeah, right. Sorry, here."

Her brow furrowed, and she stepped closer. “You’re looking a little pale. Are you alright?”

I cleared my throat as I returned to reality, the smell of perfume replaced by burned coffee and lemon floor cleaner. “Yeah, just...kinda got lost there for a second.”

She cocked her head. “Something come bubbling up?”

“Just a...just a piece. A woman with red hair.”

“Red hair, huh? She a friend, family...or something else?”

I could still feel the slide of her smooth skin against my body and cleared my throat. “Something else...I think.”

“Oh, well, maybe you’ve got someone waiting for you,” she said, sounding hopeful.

Almost immediately I tasted bile in the back of my throat and could smell iron-rich blood and the burn of gunpowder. Wincing, I shook my head. “Maybe. Can I get to that bathroom now?”

The look of concern on her face was only making me feel worse. Along with the torrent of sensations and smells came a strong sense of guilt, shame, and horror. The very same feelings that had plagued so many of my dreams, so it was a relief when she backed up and pointed to a nearby door.

I was careful to make sure I didn’t run and even more careful not to lurch when I entered the bathroom. It was only after I was sure the two stalls were empty that I finally let myself slump against one of the sinks, holding myself up with shaky arms. Looking in the mirror, I saw that she wasn’t kidding, I *was* pale, and it looked like the worst of ghosts had just passed from my wide eyes and trembling lips.

I raised one hand to wipe my mouth and found the Styrofoam shreds still in my hand. That little piece of reality, a reminder of what I had originally intended to do, helped steady me. Ignoring the urinals, I walked into one of the stalls, doing what I had pretended I needed to do and throwing the pieces into the toilet to flush them away.

Washing my face and hands, I looked myself over as I pulled out the paper towel to dry off. I was still looking a little weak and shaky, but at least I no longer looked as haunted.

I stepped out into the hallway to find Fitz waiting, her eyes darting over me. “You okay?”

“Yeah, that just hit me like a ton of bricks,” I said with a shaky laugh.

“That the first time that’s happened?”

“I’ve gotten...a couple of things here and there. But that’s twice in one day I’ve been hit hard, and that was the hardest,” I admitted, unsure why I was telling her. It was probably the easiest topic to talk about at this point, however, and I was still feeling a little off-balance from the sudden memory.

“Hey, maybe that’s a sign your memory is starting to come back,” she said, smiling. “Though I can’t say I’m an expert on the subject.”

“Well, I don’t know what I’m the expert on, so you have one up on me,” I told her lightly.

She clicked her tongue. “I really do not envy you. That’s gotta be hell, not knowing who you are.”

I followed her as she began to walk but kept from telling her the truth. The real hell wasn’t so much the lack of knowledge, it was fearing the truth. From the moment I woke up, I had cause to wonder if I really wanted to know the truth. Everything outside Eric’s stories about me had just gone to prove how right that fear had been.

“Right, here we are. Sorry, it looks like we’re booking you, but it’s the best camera we have for official pictures.” She pointed toward a wall where my height would be marked. Despite her assurance, I felt a slight twinge of wariness, which I quickly smothered as I sidled over to the wall to stand before the computer with the camera aimed in my direction.

“I would joke and tell you to smile, but you’re not a very smiley person from what I can tell,” she informed me.

“Not really,” I said, staring straight ahead.

“Despite how stressed and high-strung he seems, your friend seems the friendlier type.”

The corner of my mouth crooked up. “He’s friendly and kind. He’s just not a big fan of cops.”

“Well, considering what neighborhood he’s from, I don’t blame him. There’s not a whole lot of love for the force down in that neck of Port Dale,” she said sadly, then smirked at me. “Now, how about you get rid of that smile you suddenly found when I brought up Eric?”

If she was trying to kill my smile fast, she had done so in spectacular fashion. Though she also managed to earn herself a glare right before a small light on the camera blinked a couple of times, and she laughed.

“Alright, don’t bring up that you like Eric or you’ll get a look that could kill if given enough power. Got it,” she said, reaching into her pants to pull out her phone.

“I don’t *like* him,” I protested, even as I knew it was a damned lie. But I wasn’t going to have *that* conversation with her, no matter how safe it was relative to everything else. The best I’d managed with Eric so far was almost to kiss him and then actually kiss him. Whatever that meant was still something we would have to figure out, preferably together.

“Right,” she said, looking at her phone and rolling her eyes. “Jesus. I hope you’re not a cop, especially one with a partner.”

“Why’s that?” I asked as I watched her swivel her phone to snap a picture of the screen she was standing in front of.

“Because they’re like nagging grandmothers half the time,” she said, tapping her phone.

“What’s your partner nagging you about?”

“Oh, wondering if I was going to send your picture to him.”

“Why...would he need that? I thought you were sending it to a database.”



“I am, but he’s insistent that people in the city might recognize you, and he wants a copy to spread around.”

The faint tickle I recognized as that quiet voice in the back of my head started. “Wouldn’t you have done that already? Like with the one you just took?”

She shrugged, shoving her phone back into her pocket. “Yeah, but he’s being weird, and when he’s being weird, it’s better to just go with it and give him what he wants. Otherwise, he gets all pouty, and I have to put up with that, and no one likes to deal with a pouty man.”

“That feels like a pointed comment,” I grumbled, shoving my hands in my pockets, trying my best not to look sullen.

“Only a little,” she said with a wink. “Now, c’mon, let’s see if we can find Eric somewhere.”

“Sure,” I said with a shrug.

Without the distraction of conversation, my mind immediately settled on her seemingly innocent comments about her partner. Patterson had seemed intense and interested in the story Eric was telling but more prone to simply watching. I couldn’t fathom why he would need his own picture of me when Officer Fitz was already going to send it everywhere she could.

“Here you are,” she said, opening a door and motioning me in. “This will be your home away from home, at least for a few hours. Not sure what’s going to happen next, to be honest, but we’ll see what they find at Eric’s house.”

I stepped into the room, finding what had probably been a conference room once but now looked more like a break room. A card table stood against one wall, littered with a stack of magazines and books. A small fridge was shoved into the corner, and there were a couple of cots against another wall.

“Nothing fancy,” she said, sounding a little apologetic. “It’s mostly used for people who do double or triple shifts and want to catch a break. The actual room for us to sleep is right next to the road, and despite how it looks, the walls in this building aren’t the thickest.”

“Makes sense,” I said, turning to face her with a frown. “I thought this was where your partner was taking Eric.”

“Oh right, he said something about giving Eric a tour of the place. Try to calm him down a little,” she said. “I guess he’s trying to make friends.”

I arched a brow. “After the way Eric acted toward him, he thought that was a good idea?”

“Imagine how I felt. My partner isn’t exactly the most social of people,” she said, then frowned. “Come to think of it, I should probably go find them and make sure they haven’t killed one another. Your friend doesn’t seem like the most patient of people.”

Unease continued to build in my chest. “He’s pretty patient just—”

“Not with cops, got it,” she said with a wink, the frown immediately disappearing from her brow. “Don’t worry about it. Make yourself comfortable. There’s some snacks in the cupboards and drinks if you want. I’ll go dig up our respective partners and make sure they’re getting along.”

“He’s not my,” I began, but had to stop when she walked away, closing the door behind her, “partner. I don’t...”

Have a partner, I finished in my head, but again there was a dull sense of something distinctly wrong with that statement. In fact, I was beginning to wonder if it was just an extension of that same voice that had been there since the day I woke up in the abandoned building. I couldn’t hear it quite as well as the other one, but this one always made me feel like a liar, even if I didn’t realize it.

I turned to look around the room again, finding nothing out of the ordinary. It practically screamed bachelor pad, and I wondered just what kind of funding the station was getting that they couldn’t afford to have additional places to rest. Either that or their captain didn’t care enough to swap this room and the existing restroom around to make things easier. The thoughtlessness and lack of efficiency irked me even as I told myself I didn’t exactly have a hat in this particular ring.

The same instinct I'd been learning to trust made me sweep the room for anything that could be a recording device. There were no cameras, at least not in the obvious places. There were no mirrors or windows that could have hidden anything. A cursory glance told me the room was perfectly fine for us to be in, but that didn't alter the unease I'd felt from the moment we sat down to talk to the two officers.

That unease continued to grow, even as I walked around the room and looked over the sports and recreational magazines stacked on the table. I knew I couldn't trust either officer, but something told me it was for two different reasons.

As far as I could tell, Officer Fitz had been genuine and open with us, but she was still an officer. If she was one of the good ones, she'd be honor bound to create trouble for us, or me specifically, if she thought I was a danger or found out I was a criminal. If she was simply an enforcer of the law, the results would be the same, but she could end up making Eric's life hell too.

Something about Patterson had me ill at ease, and I found myself running over every little detail as I mindlessly flipped through a hunting magazine. I couldn't necessarily blame him for being so intense and quiet. I was sure someone could have laid the same accusation at my feet. But there had been a sharpness that almost bordered on what seemed like... nervousness.

The thought stuck in my mind, and I returned to the door. Opening it slowly, I peered out into the hallway. I could still hear plenty of chatter from the main work floor, but I didn't see anyone cross the doorway for several seconds. After peeking my head out to confirm, I stepped into the hallway and began to walk slowly away from the work floor.

The building was made up of several smaller hallways crisscrossing one another in what had to be the oddest setup for a police station. If I had to guess, I would have said it was originally an office building taken over by the police. A few officers spotted me, but an old adage popped into my mind when they saw me.

*Act as if you belong, and no one will bother you.*

I wasn't sure if it was a memory or that little voice giving advice, but considering no one gave me more than a brief glance, I wasn't going to argue. It took me several minutes, occasionally glancing through open doors and windows, but my self-given tour led me in an almost complete loop of the building, seeing neither Patterson nor Eric.

Only as I returned to the hallway with the impromptu restroom did I spot a familiar face. Fully aware any suspicious behavior on my part would call attention to me, I quickly stepped toward the coffeemaker near the back of the main work floor as I spotted Patterson. The man was leaving the room, a frown on his face as he tapped away at his phone.

Completely unaware he was being watched, Patterson pulled the phone up to his ear, glancing around briefly before talking. I was too far away to hear the conversation, and his back was to me, but I could see his body language. His shoulders were tense as he briefly gestured sharply with one hand, the picture of annoyance and frustration. After several seconds he tucked his phone away and marched down the hallway, away from where I stood.

As soon as he turned the furthest corner, I returned to the break room, pushing the door open and stepping in. I gritted my teeth when I discovered Eric wasn't there, so I walked back out...and nearly ran into Officer Fitz in the process.

"Woah!" she said with a laugh, taking a step back before I accidentally knocked her over. "Where are you off to in a hurry?"

"Coffee runs through me pretty quick,"

"I'd say that's why I don't drink the stuff, but it's actually shit on my nerves," she said with a snort. "You, uh, seen my partner or yours yet?"

I frowned. "No, I thought you went to go look for them?"

"Yeah, hmm, I thought I saw Patterson earlier, but it wasn't him."

"Where?"

“Whole place is haunted, I swear. Because it looked like he was coming out of the basement, but there’s nothing down there. We don’t even use it for archives or evidence. That’s all by the captain’s office in the back,” she said, rolling her eyes. “He’s probably out back smoking where he shouldn’t be. His girlfriend will have his balls if she knows he’s picked it back up again.”

I forced a smile I didn’t truly feel. “Off to go yell at him then?”

“Probably should,” she said with a sigh. “Or at least grab some Febreze so he doesn’t smell like an ashtray in our squad car.”

“Well, I’m going to go grumble about all the coffee I’ve drunk today,” I said, slipping past her and heading straight for the bathroom. I wasn’t sure what to think when I realized she was still watching me as I disappeared inside.

Stepping around the partition, away from the door, I leaned against it and counted silently. It helped stave off the rising tension as I stood there, burning away time. It also helped me to think about what Fitz had said and what I’d witnessed. Perhaps it was nothing, but I wasn’t going to let go of my suspicion until I found out just what was going on.

Once I’d counted approximately two minutes, I stepped out of the bathroom and looked around. Seeing Fitz wasn’t in sight, I moved to the main work floor, passing through without looking around. Once more, no one bothered me, but I knew if I kept making an appearance, someone would start asking questions.

I was glad that whatever brain damage I had from my accident hadn’t left me unable to remember new things, and I navigated toward the part of the building where I’d seen a sign for stairs leading down. The door was shut, and when I tried the handle, I found it locked. Grunting in frustration, I glanced around, scanning the ceiling and finding only one camera at the far end of the hallway. My heart skipped a beat when I realized it wasn’t facing down the hallway but was sharply turned so the eye in the sky would be blind.

“Fuck this,” I muttered, grabbing a fire extinguisher. I paused, listening to the sounds echoing down the hallway, and then brought the extinguisher down. It took two blows, but the door handle crumpled and popped off with a dull clatter onto the carpet. I snatched it off the floor and returned the extinguisher to where I’d found it.

No one called out, and I heard no footsteps coming my way, so I quickly bent and checked the lock’s interior. A smirk broke over my face when I saw the other handle had fallen as well, and I could grab the circle where the knob had sat. I waited a moment and gave a yank. There was a sharp crack as the door frame gave way, and the door swung open.

“Don’t need a lockpick when you can brute force your way in,” I said, feeling as though I’d done something like it in the past. I left the door open a crack before turning to face the dimly lit stairwell leading down.

Resisting the urge to call out, I descended the stairs, careful not to make too much noise. The room at the bottom would have been wide had it not been for the clutter. Shelves and stacks of boxes were littered all over the place. I had no idea what they were full of, but apparently, the basement was used for something, even if Officer Fitz hadn’t known specifically what.

Still careful not to make too much noise, I maneuvered around the stacks of objects. Everything looked one slight touch away from collapse. It took me longer than I’d have liked to move around as quickly as I dared, but I froze when I spotted several boxes and papers spilled out on the ground at the far end of one of the rows.

Darting down to the end of the stack, I glanced around. If it hadn’t been for the bright green among all the beige and brown in the room, I would never have spotted him.

“Eric?” I asked, moving toward the bright shoe on its side. There was no response, but I saw the shoe twitch and hurried over. I found him sprawled on the floor, his arm stretched out and a pair of handcuffs connecting his wrist to a vertical pole. “Jesus, Eric?”

I crouched, placing my finger against his neck and finding a steady pulse. There was a smear of blood under his head, and I gently pressed my finger into his hair until it came back sticky. That handy bit of knowledge I'd kept reminded me he was probably alright and any wound to the head always looked worse than it was because of all the capillaries. The rest of me, however, had a very good idea who had done this to him and was busy contemplating all the ways I could make Patterson regret his choices.

"Don't," Eric moaned out of nowhere, startling me. "Hurts."

"Shit," I said, breathing out in relief. "You scared the hell out of me."

"Head hurts," Eric groaned, trying to pull himself up and then freezing when his arm didn't move. Finally, he glanced up, eyes widening when he saw the cuff. "What the fuck?"

"I think you're under a very illegal arrest," I said, glancing around once more to find something that could help. My brow rose when I saw another bright red box on the nearby wall.

"This had better not be your way of trying to initiate kinky sex," he said groggily, and I heard him pulling on the handcuffs. "I'm all for a little bondage, but I'd rather have sex with you normally first."

I wasn't proud to say that despite the circumstances, I felt a wave of heat wash through me as I reached the red box to find another extinguisher and an ax. "I wasn't with you, remember?"

"Fucking hell," I heard him mutter as I heard the sharp jangling of the cuffs again. "All I remember is coming down the stairs, irritated with that asshole cop who insisted on keeping an eye on me and then..."

"And then?" I asked, turning to angle my elbow toward the glass.

"That motherfucker," Eric hissed with a vehemence I was surprised he could manage. "He fucking hit me, didn't he? And then chained me to this fucking—"

My elbow hit the glass, forcing it to shatter. “Yeah, pretty sure he’s in league with our suit-wearing buddies. I don’t think Fitz knows what he’s up to either.”

“What the hell are you doing?” Eric asked. Apparently, being ambushed, chained up, and left with an aching head brought out the foul mouth on him.

I shifted the glass aside and yanked the ax out. “Getting us the fuck out of here.”

“And go where?” Eric asked, his eyes widening when he saw the ax.

“Well, I don’t know about you, but I figure most places are better than sticking around here where we clearly aren’t going to be safe from the guys after us,” I said, coming to a stop in front of him.

“What are you doing with that?” he asked, eyes wide.

“Do you trust me?”

“That...is not making me feel much better, and I kinda feel enough like shit right now.”

“Do. You. Trust. Me?”

“Oh, God. I’m gonna say yes, but I swear if you make me regret it—”

I repositioned my hands on the handle, taking a readied stance. “Good, pull your hand away from that pipe. Make the chain nice and taut for me.”

“Oh, already regretting this. That is not a big target to hit,” he groaned but did as I said.

“On the count of three, alright?”

“You’re not going on three, are you?”

“Count of three, hear me?”

He closed his eyes. “Yeah, sure. Count of three.”

“Alright, one!” And I brought the ax down. It sliced clean through the chain and hit the stone floor, causing the blade to spark. Eric let out a yelp of surprise as all the tension he’d



been putting into the pull sent him rolling unexpectedly onto his front with a grunt.

“M’kay, I totally expected you wouldn’t go on three, but I wasn’t expecting you to do it on one,” Eric said in a shaky voice. “I’m not sure whether to hit you or give you credit.”

“Make up your mind about that while we get out of here,” I said, tossing the ax atop the fallen cardboard boxes.

“Where are we going? And how are we getting out of here? I doubt they’ll listen to us when we tell them the truth,” Eric said, trying to push himself up.

I reached down and helped pull him to his feet. I grimaced when I realized I’d done it harder than I meant and quickly steadied him. Being more careful, I turned his head to look at the wound under the overhead light. “It’s...just a little thing. You should be alright. Just, you know, tell me if you feel any dizziness.”

“Or confusion, nausea, or start having a hard time thinking in general,” Eric finished, and I could hear the smile in his voice. “I know.”

“Yeah,” I said softly, letting go of his head and letting him step away. He didn’t move right away, standing so our bodies were still pressed together, his hands on my sides. Once again, I found myself more distracted than I would have preferred considering the circumstances, but I didn’t push him away.

“Eric,” I said softly, feeling his body tensing against mine, coiled and ready to spring. It was supposed to be a warning, but I could feel how warm he was, the soft smell of the soap he’d showered with, and the overwhelming relief that he was alright.

He tilted his head up and, unable to stop myself, I tilted mine down. Our lips met with slow, tentative fumbling, and then Eric reached up to grip the back of my head and pull me closer. That was all it took for the hesitancy and slowness to break down, and I grabbed him by his hip to pull his body flush against mine.

Eric gave a little gasp and then ground himself against my leg. I shivered at the feel of his surprisingly hard dick, a thrill of anticipation rushing through me. As our lips parted, I pushed him until his back hit a solid object. I had him pinned, and Eric groaned against me, reaching down to cup my groin.

I felt his fingers fumble with the button and then the zipper of my jeans. Parting my lips in a last bid to remind him that this wasn't the time or place, I felt his fingers slip into my pants. Sucking in a sharp breath, I felt his explorative, bold fingers slide down the length of my shaft as it strained against my underwear.

Reason and logic took a back seat as I determined that I wasn't to be outdone, and I quickly returned the favor. By the time I managed to undo his pants, he had already fished my cock out and was gripping the base, slowly stroking me. Retrieving him from his own pants, I marveled at how warm his cock was, how smooth it felt to run my fingers across the skin, and at the low whimper Eric gave.

Our hands moved in unison until I pushed my hips forward, shoving my length up against his, and smacked his hand away so I could wrap my fingers around both of us. Never was I more thankful that our height difference wasn't too terrible as I thrust up against him, my cock rubbing against his in the grip of my fingers.

"Fuck," Eric breathed against my lips, nipping at my bottom lip with just enough force to get my attention.

"Another time," I growled and wasn't at all ashamed to admit I relished the plaintive whine he gave.

I could feel him stiffen, the throb of his shaft against mine and my fingers. I couldn't look down to see, but I could feel the way he leaked between us, making our rutting slicker and easier. His breathing became sharp, and I could feel my own excitement rising.

With a hard shudder, he pushed his hips forward and groaned against my lips as he came. Warmth pooled between our cocks as he spilled over, coating both of us with each pulse.

Mindful of how sensitive he was going to be and driven to the edge by the reality that he had just come all over my dick, I released him. With a low growl, I kissed him harder and fisted my cock, using his release as lube as I pumped hard. The sheer reality of what we were doing in the basement of a police station while in danger, meant my cock, covered in his load, didn't take long to erupt.

I came hard, pushing myself against him once more and groaning as I felt another wave of warmth cover us, this time mostly on his stomach and groin. Eric shivered against me as I gave small thrusts with each spurt, holding my breath as pleasure washed over me. When my orgasm finally released its hold on me, I was left heaving for air, staring into Eric's eyes.

"Probably not the smartest thing we could have done," I told him, looking down at the mess we'd made of each other.

"Definitely not," Eric said with a small smile. "Hot as hell, though."

"God, yes"

"And I don't regret it."

"Neither do I."

He smiled, reaching up to pat my chest. "You and I probably need to talk as soon as we're not fleeing from assholes trying to shoot us or club us over the head."

"Now there's a promise I'm willing to make," I said, almost ducking my head as I felt my cheeks warm but remembering I'd probably end up headbutting him in the process.

Instead, I busied myself with finding something we could use to clean ourselves up. There was a box of cloths on the floor, the ones on top were dusty, but the rest looked clean.

"So, uh, do you have a plan for getting us out of here?" he asked, finally stepping away and smirking as I handed him a couple of rags. Watching him clean himself of both our loads was insanely distracting, and I had to fight the urge to reach out and pull him close again. Instead, I took a step away from him, busying myself with my own cleanup.

“I don’t think we’re going to convince anyone to listen to us,” I began, frowning.

“Probably not, especially because we’d have to tell the whole story, and that would make everything even more suspicious.”

“True,” I said, wanting to ask why he’d kept things a secret but knowing we didn’t have time for that conversation. Patterson had tried to keep Eric in one place, an out-of-the-way place, without even his fellow officers knowing. I suspected he had also been looking for a way to lure me away for much the same reason. “So that only leaves escaping without being noticed.”

“Is that even possible?” Eric asked, holding up his wrist where half of the handcuffs still hung. “Because I’m pretty sure they’re gonna notice this. And we can’t use your jacket because they’ll see the gun.”

“I could always stow the gun elsewhere, not safely, but for the time being,” I said, but then immediately dismissed it. “Trying to go out the front would just leave us open.”

“Well,” Eric began, “he was keeping me down here, which means there’s either a way out down here...or somewhere close by where he could get us out without people noticing.”

I cocked my head. “Wasn’t there a fire door near the one leading down here?”

Eric reached up to touch the back of his head and winced before nodding. “I think so. I was so bored and fed up with dealing with that grumpy cop that I kind of zoned out.”

“If we’re both remembering right, then that’s probably the door,” I said, frowning. “And there was an extinguisher near the door down here.”

“Yeah, so?”

“Which means a fire alarm isn’t far off.”

Eric blinked, a hand coming down to rest on the bag at his hip. “So, pull the alarm, get them freaking out, and make a move for the door?”

I cocked my head. “It’s that or try the front door.”

“Uh, well, it’s not a bad idea, but I certainly think it could be improved,” Eric said slowly.

“How?”

Eric reached in and pulled something out of his bag, glancing off to the side. “With something a little more... direct.”

My brow rose, and I smiled a little. “You’re insane...but brilliant.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

The fact that the sharp, acrid smell hadn't managed to drift down the hallway and into the main work floor to draw attention was amazing to me. Even more amazing was that no one noticed as Eric and I quickly used as many boxes of paper, stray fabric, and other assorted things to create a small pile against one of the hallway walls and leading into a room filled with what looked like spare uniforms, shoes, and other assorted equipment.

Glancing around, I finished dumping the hefty can of paint thinner I'd found when we'd been gathering boxes. I'd managed to cover several piles of clothes with it, as well as the papers and boxes we'd stacked in the hall. We probably could have added more, but even the few minutes we'd taken to set this much up was adding to my stress levels. The plan would never be perfect, so we'd have to deal with what we had.

"Gimme it," I said to Eric as we huddled near the basement door. He held out the bottle of rubbing alcohol he kept in his bag. I had also seen a small, sealed package of needles, thread, gauze, tubes of what I assumed were ointments, and bandages.

"I'm suddenly having second thoughts," Eric said as I opened the bottle and stuffed a thick piece of fabric I'd ripped off one of the uniforms inside.

"Lighter," I said because I'd also seen one of those in his bag. I wasn't sure what the point was amidst all the medical supplies he kept on him, but I wasn't going to argue with its fortuitous appearance.

“And third thoughts,” Eric said with a wince as he handed it to me.

“Look, you were the one who wouldn’t let me turn off the sprinkler system,” I told him with a grunt. “Only block the sprinklers over the fire.”

“I don’t wanna burn the place down!”

“So we won’t, but at least they’ll be occupied.”

“Fourth thoughts.”

I lit the fabric, blinking rapidly when it burned faster than I expected. I waited until I saw it spreading down the trail of fabric and closer to the liquid before throwing it into the room of uniforms. Unlike a glass bottle, it didn’t shatter but bounced, which only served to spread the flame into the alcohol faster. Physics took over, and the thin plastic bottle turned into a fireball, sending spinning droplets of flame arcing in every direction.

I jerked in surprise when I saw the flames catch quickly, spreading out. As far as I could remember, I had never known how flammable paint thinner could be, but apparently, it wasn’t a whole lot different from gasoline. The flames quickly spread through the room and down the trail of paper and boxes we had strewn about.

“Oh fuck, alright, we’ll just add arson to our list of things we did today. Is that a felony?” Eric asked faintly as the flames leaped higher. We both watched as the flames finally caught not just on the accelerant but on the paper, boxes, and fabric. The carpet beneath was also beginning to burn, and I watched it curl and blacken before flames spread across it.

“That’s our cue,” I said, grabbing the handle of the alarm and giving it a yank.

Eric jerked as the alarm brayed with a piercing shriek that felt like it was trying to drill into our ears. I didn’t hesitate. I grabbed him and hauled him past the blockade of flames and toward the door we’d seen earlier. It looked like all the other doors, save for the small sign that proclaimed it an emergency exit, warning that an alarm would go off if someone opened it.

“Nice fire safety,” I grumbled, reaching up to the small box above the door and yanking open the plastic. The shouts of shocked and horrified officers could be heard, but I didn’t hear anyone near us. Then again, the flames were getting high and hot enough that the sound was bound to be distorted, especially with the alarm hysterically screaming through the building.

“What the fuck happened?” I heard as I got the cover off.

“Get an extinguisher!” another barked as I pulled the wires out and looked them over.

“Christ, get back, get back!” someone ordered as Eric tugged nervously at my arm.

“It’s on the other side of this shit!” a woman screamed as I gave up trying to make sense of it and yanked all the wires out at once.

“Let’s go,” I told Eric, hitting the bar of the door to pop it open and drag him out. Thankfully, the door’s alarm didn’t go off as we barreled outside, nearly toppling over the railing of the steps that led down.

“Shit,” Eric grunted, pointing up above the door where a camera sat. He frowned when we realized at the same time that it was angled upward, staring at the sky instead of down at us. “Uh...that’s probably not standard protocol.”

“The one in the hallway was like that earlier. That’s one thing that tipped me off,” I said, looking around to realize we were in a narrow alley between the station and the building next door. There was enough room for two cars to sit nearby, and a cruiser near the back, against a wall that went up nearly fifteen feet.

“Shit,” I hissed, immediately realizing there was no way we could go that way without both of us being expert brick wall climbers. The only way out was through the mouth of the alley, right in front of the station. “Why are there so many walls in this city?”

“Aww fuck, remember those repeated second thoughts I had earlier?” Eric asked with a groan.



“Save your fifth thoughts for later,” I said, looking down at the second car in the alley. It was sleek, black, and looked like it probably hadn’t seen much use. The windows were down, and I could see there wasn’t a dashboard computer, which probably meant it wasn’t an undercover vehicle.

I was beginning to wonder how I knew all this but shoved the thought away as I nodded toward the car. “I’ve got another plan.”

Eric’s eyes widened. “Uh, grand theft auto?”

“I mean, what’s one more felony, right?”

“That’s easy for you to say! There’s a good chance you’ve already committed a few. One expunged record is enough for me in a lifetime, thanks.”

I winced at the reminder of what I most certainly, or at least probably was. The pain and shame disappeared as I cocked my head. “Expunged record?”

“Fuck, I forgot that you forgot,” he said, rubbing his face. “Fine! Whatever! This day’s already fucked. Why not?”

It wasn’t exactly the rousing support I was looking for, but it would have to do. We scrambled down the steps, and I rounded the driver’s side door. It was unlocked, and I helped myself inside, sliding behind the wheel as Eric did the same on the passenger side. I pulled back the visor, huffing in unsurprised annoyance when I didn’t find a set of keys waiting for me.

“Of course,” I said, glancing down at the steering column with a frown. I grabbed the plastic covering and yanked it free, looking at the wires and frowning. Nothing there made sense, and I gave a disgusted sigh, leaning back in the seat. “Okay, Dylan, think, think.”

Eric growled, reaching into his bag and leaning over me. “Oh, fucking move!”

I blinked as he practically shoved his head into my lap. “Is this, uh, really the time for that?”

“I’m going to rescind all invitations for you and me to do *anything* if you keep this shit up,” Eric grumbled as I watched him use the object he’d pulled from his bag, a Swiss Army knife, to cut wires. I was distracted enough by what he was doing that I managed to stop paying attention to the fact that his head was in my lap.

“So, about that expunged record,” I said slowly, glancing up to look down the alleyway. Eventually, people would start showing up, and we needed to move.

“Boy, I wonder why I looked so freaked out about committing grand theft auto. But congrats, you just figured out how we first met as teenagers. You happy?”

“I stole cars?”

“No, *I* stole cars. Or helped people do it. Wasn’t good at driving, but I was a quick little bastard when it came to popping locks and starting engines. You caught me trying to steal your parents’ car one time when we were thirteen. I tried to play it off, but you thought the whole thing was hilarious.”

“I can’t picture you stealing cars, but I can imagine finding it funny,” I admitted.

“Sometimes people don’t stay the same people they were when they were thirteen, Dylan.”

I didn’t respond as I saw a few figures edge toward the alleyway, including two dark suits and an officer’s uniform. “Hey, uh, Eric?”

“What?” he snarled, still fidgeting in my lap.

“You might wanna hurry up because I have a pretty good idea whose car we’re currently trying to steal.”

“Great. Is that another felony because it’s some mayor’s son or something?”

I watched as all three men turned and looked down the alley, and I saw the moment they realized what they were seeing. “I’m thinking a bullet to the brain.”

“Fuck!”

The two suited men began advancing, but Patterson growled something at them, putting his hand on his gun and walking toward us. “Sir! You need to get out of the car now, with your hands up!”

“What’d he say?” Eric asked.

“He wants us to come quietly.”

“Tell him to go fuck himself.”

“We’re feeling feisty today, I see.”

Eric growled, so I stuck my hand out the window and raised my middle finger. Miraculously, that made the officer stop where he was and stare at me in disbelief.

“Sir!” he barked, his brow furrowed in annoyance, and he closed his fingers around his gun.

“Eric,” I intoned.

“One second,” Eric mumbled, and then I heard the engine fuss, hiss and sputter. Patterson’s eyes widened as the engine roared to life.

“Seat belt!” I barked as Eric slid off my lap and into his own seat. “And get down!”

Eric fumbled with the belt until he saw Patterson raise his gun. With a yelp, he dove to the side, out of view, and I quickly slipped into drive. Without thinking, I shoved my foot on the pedal, hearing the tires squeal as they burned against the pavement.

I winced at the sound of the gun firing but kept my foot down as the car finally found traction and jettisoned us forward. Patterson managed to fire three rounds before throwing himself out of the way, pressing against the wall to avoid getting run down. The other two men were already gone, and as I hit the brake, twisting the wheel to take a sharp turn, I could see them in the rearview mirror.

“Looks like we’re not the only ones with this idea,” I said, wincing as I watched a woman roughly dragged out of her car and thrown onto the street. “Seat belt?”

“You’re worse than my boss!” Eric snarled, sitting up to fasten the seat belt and lurching as I gunned the engine.

Cars swerved out of my way as I flew down the street, trying to get as much distance between the men and us. I also knew it wouldn’t be long until we had officers on our trail. Patterson could easily spin what happened as him firing on someone trying to run him down in a stolen vehicle. I wouldn’t have shed any tears over him earning a tread mark on his face, but he would have obviously left out the important details.

“Where are we going?” Eric asked, leaning back in his seat and gripping the armrest with a white-knuckled grip.

“Well, at this point, I’m just trying to put distance between us,” I said with a grunt, looking in the rearview mirror before taking the next turn sharply. “And since I don’t know this city, at least right now, you need to direct me.”

“Where?”

“The outskirts. Our best bet right now is to get away from all this bullshit, which means getting out of the city if we can.”

Eric squeezed his eyes shut tightly as I swerved sharply around another vehicle to the sound of a horn blaring. “Yeah, well, pretty sure...pretty sure...you’re going the wrong way. I think this...is toward the sea.”

“I have to turn around?” I asked, then saw him nod ardently, so I took the next turn. I looked over, seeing how white he was. “You okay?”

“Please pay attention to the road and not me,” he groaned, wiping his face.

The time of day meant traffic wasn’t too heavy, so I spared him another glance. “You look terrified.”

“You are driving at highway speed on the main roads, we’ve been in almost five separate horrible wrecks, and there are assholes with guns coming after us, oh, and Russian guys who want us dead!”

I smiled at the cop joke. “All very good points.”

“And I’ve always hated being in cars,” he snapped, looking down at his lap.

“This is something I’ve forgotten, isn’t it?” I asked, finally slowing down after making it a couple of blocks. I had yet to see the sleek, red convertible the two thugs had taken from the woman and knew that erratic driving would only draw more attention to us.

“My mom died in a car accident,” Eric said in a tight voice, though I thought he was starting to relax.

“Oh, right, you mentioned that.”

“What I didn’t mention was that I was in the car. I was pretty young, so I don’t remember it. But I used to have dreams for years, horrible dreams. All this glass and blood everywhere, the smell of smoke and—”

*I couldn’t believe this was happening. My eyes stung, and my arms ached from holding her close to me, but she never moved. She only grew colder. Those bastards had made this happen, had ripped everything away.*

*And I was going to make them pay. I was going to ruin each and every one of them, no matter what I had to do.*

*No matter what, even if it meant—*

I shuddered, hitting the brake too sharply when I nearly ran a red light, almost barreling into the side of a moving truck. Eric yelped in surprise as he was flung forward, stopped only by the seat belt.

“Christ!” he snapped, turning to look at me. “What part of I’m terrified of...being in a...Dylan?”

I stared ahead, heart pounding, sweat breaking out on my face. I could feel my eyes stinging with tears over a memory that had come as only a fractured image. The horror, devastation, and rage still washed through me as I sat at the light. I barely noticed the angry honking of horns behind me until Eric put a hand over my arm.

“Dyl, the light is green, bud,” he said softly.

Nodding stiffly, I found the means to push the peddle and continue forward.

By the time we reached the next light, my heart rate had slowed, and I could breathe easier. Reaching up to brush my forehead, I winced at the amount of sweat. “How long did I lose it?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t even notice you’d lost it until you almost rear-ended that guy,” Eric said, his voice in direct contrast to the high and tight tension it had before. “What happened?”

“I think...my memory is starting to come back,” I said slowly, easing to a complete stop as the next light turned red. “It happened in the station too.”

“*What* happened?”

I shook my head. “It’s like...it’s like I’m in the memory. I’m not just remembering it. It’s like I’m *there*. Like I’m experiencing it all over again. I remembered...”

Glancing at Eric nervously, I licked my lips and pushed the car forward again. Eric leaned over, peering up at my face. “What? Remembered what?”

“A woman.”

“A woman?”

“Red hair, an almost evil smile, but she didn’t mean any harm.”

“Oh. That...sounds like someone you were, uh, into.”

“I think it was more than just kind of into,” I said slowly. I didn’t want to admit it, but I was reluctant to tell Eric about this. I honestly had no idea how long ago I’d known this woman. She had clearly been important to me, but right now, Eric was important to me.

None of this was helping me feel any better, only more confused and frustrated.

“Okay, so you had a woman,” he said, sounding neutral. “Who you were probably in love with.”

“Eric, I—”

“Dylan. Tell me what else.”

I took a deep breath and nodded. “Something...happened to her, uh, she’s...I don’t think she’s alive anymore.”

“Do you...know how?”

“No, but that last thing I just remembered it...I don’t think it was an accident or disease. I think she was killed. I don’t know if I did it or if someone forced me.”

“Why would you think you did it?”

“Because,” I said, feeling the uncomfortably familiar shame and guilt twisting in my gut, “there’s so much guilt and...I hated myself. I hated myself more than I can even understand right now. I held her after she died, and all I knew was rage at someone else and myself. Mostly myself.”

Eric grew quiet as I continued driving, occasionally glancing in the rearview mirror to ensure we were still safe. I had yet to spot anyone or anything coming our way, but despite the blocks we had driven, including the unexpected half-circle we’d been forced to take, I wasn’t going to let my guard down yet. I was amazed at how easy it was to start pushing my emotions away and focus on our current problem. Whoever I was before, I wondered if he was ever as good at compartmentalization as I was now.

“I know I keep saying stuff like this, but that doesn’t sound like you at all,” Eric said softly, breaking me out of my focus.

I sighed. “Eric, I know—”

“No!” he snapped. “Maybe you are the person those thuggish assholes think you are. Maybe you did some fucked-up shit, really terrible and illegal things. But dammit, Dylan, you *never* hurt the people you cared about. You never hurt the ones you loved.”

“People can change.”

“Not that much! Jesus, Dylan, do you have any idea how much it hurt you to have parents who barely paid attention to you? Who were there physically but absent in every way that

counted? You always pretended like it didn't hurt, but then you'd spend time with me, come to my house, and see how my dad and I were, and you'd always act like there wasn't this... this hurt in your eyes!"

My eyes flicked to the rearview mirror, fingers tightening on the wheel. "Eric."

"No, you listen to me! You always did what you could to hold on to what little you had. That's probably why you went so long without dating. You thought you didn't know how to love someone or treat someone right because your parents never taught you or showed you."

"Eric."

"But goddammit, you did, okay? You were fiercely loyal and kind in your own way, even if you were bumbling, awkward, and a little rude about it at times. You let people hurt you before they hurt anyone else. I know because I saw it happen. You did it for *me*. So don't you tell me—"

"Eric!"

"What?" he snapped.

"This is very sweet, and we can talk about it soon," I said, reaching up to adjust the rearview mirror to show the cherry red convertible speeding up behind us. "But we have bigger problems."

"What?" Eric asked sharply, twisting in his seat to look back. "Oh, goddammit. Aren't we allowed to have one fucking moment to ourselves?"

I snorted at the return of his foul mouth, speeding the car up. "Take it up with fate, God, or whoever you want to blame for our circumstances."

"All of the above," he grumbled, leaning back as I took the next corner sharply. "Any chance you'd be willing to get away from the crowds? We'd be less likely to crash, and there's less chance of people getting hurt."

"You tell me where to go, and I'll go," I said, seeing the car still following us.



“Straight through here,” he said, pointing ahead with a shaky finger. “There’s a long bit of road that curves around Port Dale. It’s not used a whole lot.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because there’s a lot of turns, and visibility sucks ass. There’s been a lot of accidents that way. So people call it Suicide Stretch.”

“Comforting,” I grumbled, glancing back only to grimace when I saw they were steadily gaining on us. Clearly, whoever was in the driver’s seat was comfortable driving dangerously, and considering I didn’t know just what my driving skills were like, I wasn’t feeling confident about what would happen next. “Let’s hope it’s their suicide instead of ours.”

“Very,” Eric began, then stopped as I swerved around another vehicle, cutting back around it close enough to make them swerve, “inspiring.”

“I’m an inspiring kind of guy,” I said, eyes flicking between the rearview mirror and the road ahead. The traffic was thinning out quickly, which meant Eric was about to get his wish for less potential collateral damage. “We’ve got left or right coming up. Which one?”

“Left will take us toward the city limits,” Eric said in the same tight voice. I didn’t want to make him more stressed out than he already was, but my choice was being taken away by the car growing closer in the mirror.

“Right, well, here’s where we ignore a few traffic laws,” I told him with a grunt, slowing the car just enough to take the turn without spinning and ending up in the ditch.

“And laws of good sense,” he muttered faintly.

“Looks like I’m not alone in that,” I said as I watched the red car take the corner even harder than I had. I couldn’t help but notice that whoever was driving seemed to have a better handle on their stolen vehicle than I did on mine. Whatever I was before, it clearly wasn’t a stunt driver.

Directing my attention back to the road, I looked ahead for possible complications. The road stretched forward, and I

could see the way it curved and swerved around what I assumed was the edge of Port Dale. For the most part, one side of the road was dominated by the city, while the other was taken up by thick brush and woods. Enough of the road was in sight that I could see the way the forest eventually stopped, becoming a steep drop.

“I see where this place gets its name,” I said as I put my foot down on the gas pedal.

I could hear the creak of the leather as Eric’s grip tightened on his seat. I was impressed he didn’t tear something when a car pulled out at an intersection, forcing me to swerve to avoid ramming into the side. The maneuver only cost us a couple of seconds, but with the fast approach of the red convertible, every second counted.

“Please do not have a heart attack while we’re trying not to get shot,” I said in as even a tone as I could summon, taking the first curve as safely as I dared. There was another car, but thankfully that one was in the oncoming lane, and I only needed to adjust back into my lane to keep us safe.

“Your compassion leaves a lot to be desired,” he growled at me.

I heard two sharp cracks and glanced at the window next to me as we took the next turn, grimacing faintly when I saw the spidering veins of broken glass running through it. “Let’s just say my compassion has to take a back seat at the moment.”

“What the *fuck* was that?” he barked, twisting around in his seat.

“Stay down,” I said calmly, banking into the next turn smoothly. “Those were gunshots.”

“He says as if he forgot to turn on his blinker,” Eric groaned, trying to sink lower into his seat.

“More like, I’m not surprised they finally started shooting at us now they’re closer, and there isn’t anyone around to interfere,” I said, knowing they would inevitably catch up to us. Despite knowing better, I had been holding on to a faint hope that at their speed, they wouldn’t be able to keep control

of their faster car around the curves. “So, going back to how I can’t focus on being compassionate right now.”

“Christ, you are *such* an ass sometimes,” Eric groaned, wincing when another bullet pinged off the car, but at least it wasn’t close to us this time. “And why the fuck are you so calm right now?”

“Because we’re flying down a narrow road with two angry men trying to shoot us.”

“Which is a very good reason not to be calm.”

I knew the next stretch of the road would get even more hazardous, especially with the two men catching up quickly. Even if I didn’t need Eric to do much, I knew it was important he remained as calm as possible in the next few minutes.

“Ever had someone come into the clinic, either freaking out because they’re messed up on something or with their guts leaking out?” I asked calmly, feeling our time running out.

“Yeah, but—”

“Give me the worst time.”

Eric let out a noise of frustration. “Guy came in, and yeah, his guts were practically spilling out. Accident, a home improvement DIY thing that went horribly wrong. Screaming, carrying on, as you do when your internal organs are trying to be external.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“Did you lose it?”

“No! We managed to get him into a room and immediately did what we could to keep him stable and in one piece while we waited for the ambulance to take him to an actual surgeon. Guy was a lot less fussy when we managed to get some drugs inside him.”

“I’ll bet.”

“Was there a point to this conversation?” Eric asked in annoyance, though I could hear a thread of steadiness

returning to his voice.

“Just that, right now, I feel a lot calmer than I would if I had to take care of some guy whose liver was trying to break free like a Xenomorph.”

“I don’t know what’s more annoying, that you’re somehow making sense or that despite being unable to remember hardly anything, you can still make stupid pop culture references.”

“Make up your mind while we get through this. Maybe it’ll help,” I said just as the car caught up to our back bumper.

Gritting my teeth, I took the next turn, hitting the gas pedal just as we began to clear the curve. It wasn’t the smoothest motion, and even I felt my stomach twist in anticipation as we reached the line that ran along the division between the road and thick woods to our right. Messy as the maneuver was, it worked enough to prevent the red car from bashing into the back of us as we took the next turn. I knew it wouldn’t work a second time, and as I watched, they quickly gunned it and swerved around me.

“Ballsy,” I muttered as they gained on us. The road shrank to two lanes, and my view ahead was blocked by the constant curves. Either they were confident no one would come down the oncoming lane, or they simply didn’t care. Neither was of great comfort to me.

“Dylan!” Eric barked from beside me, and my head snapped toward the window. The car had gained quickly, the passenger side window was already down, and I saw the gun poking out from the interior.

“Hang on!” I barked back as I saw the muzzle steady and aim directly for the interior of our car. With a grunt, I switched my foot and immediately slammed on the brake. Eric and I lurched forward, but the red car shot ahead, and the bullet completely missed us. “Christ, someone’s getting impatient.”

“They’re not trying to capture us anymore,” Eric said, the queasiness returning to his voice.

“Yeah,” I drew out, forcing the car to slow again as the red one braked hard. “And apparently, they’re more confident

behind the wheel than I am.”

“That’s...not very comforting.”

“I have the nagging feeling I’m a lot meaner than they are,” I grunted as I whipped around the car to prevent them from running us off the road. “Now get down.”

We were fast approaching the point where the woods stopped, and only the cliffs remained. I needed to keep to the left of them, so if we did go off the road, it would be into someone’s yard or into the thin woods on that side. Getting run off the road on the right would mean death for both of us.

The sharp report of another gun reminded me there was one other factor at play in this little battle.

“Fuck!” Eric barked, squirming as a bullet hit the glass, and I heard the dink of metal striking metal.

“Agreed,” I hissed as I felt a sudden burning line of pain in my side.

“Dylan?”

“Stay down! I’m going to do something stupid.”

“Not comforting!”

“Not trying to be!”

I adjusted the speed and swerved as much as possible to throw off our attacker’s aim while I waited. More bullets rained down on us, and I hoped that for the next few seconds Eric wouldn’t get hit.

“Are you bleeding?” he asked in horror as we came around the next large curve. One that just happened to involve a heavy drop-off on the right side of the road.

“No,” I lied, growling as I pulled as far to the left as I could before rapidly dropping my speed. “Brace yourself. I’m not an expert at this shit.”

Which I proved immediately as I swerved hard to the right. My aim was off, and instead of hitting the back end of the car where it would have spun them, I slammed too close to the

center. Metal crunched, and I heard the squeal of our tires as they tried to get away and I tried to pull loose.

“Dylan!” Eric screamed from the passenger seat as we barreled toward the cliff’s edge.

“Son of a—”

I slammed on the emergency brake and cut the wheel hard to the left, desperately trying to get free. With a grind of thick plastic and metal, our car tore free of the other. I had enough time to register the red convertible sliding in a harsh screech of tires toward the edge, only to tip out of sight.

However, my little maneuver had cost me all control, and the brakes weren’t working. The car swerved and weaved drunkenly as I fought to regain control. Realizing we were going either left or right no matter what, I made the easiest decision between the two.

I opened my mouth to warn Eric, and then a tree trunk was in front of us. I heard rather than saw the horrific crunch and the sound of shattering glass. I flew forward, feeling something firm slam into my face, scratching and burning as I was thrown back against the seat.

The world spun around me, and I wondered what had happened to Eric before my head slammed into the side of the car as we came to an abrupt stop. Stars erupted in front of my eyes, and I struggled to clear my vision.

“Dylan?” Eric muttered from beside me. His voice was strong, though, and I could only hear the tremble of fear and adrenaline.

*Good*, I thought to myself as the darkness around my vision grew thicker, covering everything until all I could hear was the ticking of the engine and Eric calling my name.

*Good, he’s safe.*

And then came the welcome darkness.

## CHAPTER NINE

Consciousness slipped in and out of my grasp. At one point, I woke up and felt a grating burn against my cheek and forehead. At another, I felt myself slump weakly to the side, and something was shoved into my hip. Blue sky met my gaze the next time I opened my eyes, but I could see it was growing dimmer. I thought maybe I was dying and briefly questioned why death had been so scary to me for so much of my life.

Between those moments, I dreamed.



*I stepped through the front door and immediately knew the house was empty. I didn't know when it started, but even as a child, I could always tell when I was alone, probably because having one of my parents home was a strange, foreign feeling to me and always stood out.*

*"Mom? Dad?" I called, knowing it was pointless even before my voice echoed back, proving to be my only companion for the night. Sighing, I slung my backpack over the chair in the nearby living room and flipped on the TV. I rarely watched anything, but it helped to have something playing in the background while I was home.*

*Before my thoughts could grow dreary, I felt a buzz in my pocket and pulled out my phone. I smirked at the familiar number on the screen and flipped it open to answer. "You just saw me, like, thirty minutes ago, dude."*

*“Yeah, well,” Eric said, sounding as bright and cheerful as ever. “I got bored.”*

*“Quelle surprise.”*

*“Ha ha, anyway, I’m bored. Let’s go to the mall and laugh at people while I steal fries off your plate.”*

*“I could always get you food too.”*

*“Where’s the fun in that? Stealing from you is more fun.”*

*“Right. Sure, fuck it. Not like I have anything else going on.”*

*“I knew I could depend on you, Dyl. That’s what I—”*



I fumbled awake, turning my head to find myself staring up at an unfamiliar ceiling only a couple of feet from my face. I could feel the swaying of what I was lying on, and after several seconds I realized I was in the back seat of a car. My body ached, and I could feel a sharp, constant pain in my side as I lay there, my arm dangling uselessly over the seat.

“Eric,” I muttered, feeling darkness take me again, but not before I swore I heard someone respond.



*Walking away from the group, I answered the call. “Hey.”*

*“Hey, yourself,” Eric replied warmly in my ear, but I could hear something heavier in his voice. “This a bad time?”*

*I glanced back toward the men huddled at a table, frowning at the information they were pouring over. The distance between us was enough that I couldn’t hear them muttering to one another in Russian, but they couldn’t hear me talking either.*

*“I can spare a few,” I said.*



*“A few, huh?” he asked, probably meaning to make it sound like a joke, but hiding his emotions had never been one of Eric’s strong suits. I could hear the disappointment in his voice.*

*“Well, I keep myself pretty busy,” I said, glancing over my shoulder once more to make sure no one had inched closer. The last thing I needed was for the people in my new life to start encroaching on my old life. The only way I could keep going some days was to remember when my life wasn’t built on murder, lies, and hiding.*

*“Maybe I’d have more sympathy if I knew what kept you so busy,” Eric said, not even bothering to hide his irritation.*

*“Busy,” I said in a tone I hoped told him he needed to back off the topic.*

*“Christ, it’s been years since you left Port Dale, and it feels like every passing year puts you further and further away,” Eric complained, and I closed my eyes at his evident frustration and pain. “I don’t even know where you are right now, let alone what you’re doing. It scares the hell out of me sometimes, Dyl.”*

*My chest squeezed, and I wanted to reach out and wrap him up in my arms. This man had gotten me through my childhood simply by being there, with his smile and his warm heart, by being himself. Sometimes I wondered how different things might have been for us if I’d figured out I was into guys before I left Port Dale. If I’d realized the closeness I’d felt to Dylan for so many years went beyond just close friends and had always carried the seed for something more.*

*But just as I had to accept that my past and present lives were separate for my own good and the good of people like Eric, I also had to accept that missed opportunities were gone for good. My life and his would never mingle, not without blood, pain, and probably death.*

*Eric deserved better than the life I led.*

*“I really need you to mind your own business once in a while, Eric,” I told him coldly, ignoring the shooting pain in*

*my chest and the ugly knotting of my gut. "If I wanted you to know, I'd let you know, alright? I don't get up in your business."*

*"Fuck you," Eric snapped, and I could hear his hurt feelings feeding his anger. I had started a fight that would bring a rift of silence between us.*

*Afterward, I tried to make it feel like a victory, even with the bitter taste in my mouth.*



"No," I groaned as I felt myself drop before unexpectedly landing on a firm but not hard surface. "Didn't...didn't mean to...sorry."

"Not your fault," a warm but worried voice told me from somewhere out of sight.

"Was..." I said, feeling sluggish and desperate to reach back in time and take back what I'd said and done. Maybe it had been for the best, but handing out that kind of hurt and pain had just been...too much for me.

"Okay, but I need you to lay there. Don't you move, you understand? I can't help you if you start thrashing around."

"Sure, yeah," I said dully, thinking that was a pretty easy promise to keep.

At least until I felt my entire side light up with what felt like an inferno of pain and heat. My back arched, and I fought against the urge, pushing myself back down. It did nothing to help with the agony ripping through me, and I felt myself tip back into darkness.



*I caught sight of him before he saw me. He had grown his hair, making him look younger than when I'd seen him a few years earlier, just before I left Port Dale for good. He had a book*

*bag thrown lazily over one shoulder and was peering down at his phone, giving it a little shake as though in frustration. That little gesture made me smile as I stood beside my car, hands in my pockets, waiting patiently.*

*I had planned to come back for a surprise visit but meant it to happen months ago. Time was a weird thing and had a habit of getting away from me if I didn't pay strict attention to it. As a partner, Life had decided to take a strange turn as well, and now all the original plans I'd had were out the window.*

*Eric brushed away a stray lock of his hair, which was pretty pointless considering how windy it was. I watched him, content to let my heart ache as I took in the sight of him, allowing myself to mourn all the things that could have been and probably should have been in another lifetime. I had intended to come back and show him everything my life had become, how far I had come, to show that I really had gone out to be the person I'd always wanted to be.*

*But plans changed, whether I wanted them to or not, and this might be one of the last times I would be able to see him for quite some time. I wanted to see him before I began what I knew was a slow descent into the dark, so I could have this one bright memory to hold on to.*

*Taking a breath, I pushed all those black thoughts away and sent the text I'd typed but had held on to. I would undoubtedly mourn again when I was gone from Port Dale. When I had spent my few days with the best friend I'd ever had, a man who I'd only recently come to realize I was in love with. My feelings would remain a secret, along with so many other things, and I needed to be living in the moment while I was here.*

*I saw the moment Eric saw the text, his eyes going wide. He turned around rapidly, and when his eyes fell on me, I laughed softly at the comical surprise that made his eyes huge and his mouth fall open. He dropped his phone in his haste to shove it back into his jacket pocket, scrambling to scoop it up as he darted toward me.*

*The look of sheer joy on his face and the way he hugged me without hesitation would stay with me for years, a precious memory among all the others to carry me through the dark days.*



I still ached when I woke up again, but my head felt less foggy despite the throb coming from what felt like the center of my skull. The room around me was dark save for a shaft of moonlight peeking through the curtains. I took stock of the room, realizing I was lying in the middle of a bed. I also saw a dresser, a chair, and little else. The walls were bare, and there was only a lamp on the table beside the bed. Other than that, there was nothing to distinguish the room. No personality or color.

“Fuck,” I muttered, trying to sit up and look around. My head felt stuffed with my ‘dreams’ and the memory of the last few seconds before I’d first lost consciousness.

I winced as I felt burning pain light up my left side and brought my hand down to touch the stiffness of bandages. The sight of them and the pain was enough to bring back the sharpness of what had happened. My eyes widened as I remembered swerving and heading straight for the woods next to the road. “Eric?”

“Whazzat?” I heard from somewhere off to my left before Eric popped up, peering around the room blearily. His attention turned to me, and his eyes widened. “Oh! You’re awake, thank God!”

“What’re you doing on the floor?” I asked in confusion.

“Getting some sleep,” he said, pushing himself upright and leaning on the bed to examine me. “How do you feel?”

“Like shit,” I told him, trying to look him over to see how badly he was hurt.

Eric frowned. “Yes, that makes sense, but I mean specifically. You have to be specific.”

“I feel like I got shot and crashed a car,” I said, reaching up to brush my face, which still felt raw. “Face hurts too, though not as bad as I thought it would.”

Eric sighed, sitting on the edge of the bed. “That’s from the airbag. You didn’t take your own advice to wear a seat belt, so you bounced off the airbag and got smacked all over the place after we crashed. If it weren’t for the fact that those assholes went off the cliff, we would have been in serious trouble...and I’m glad you can admit you were shot instead of insisting it was a graze.”

I vaguely remembered insisting on that while we were in the car. “I wasn’t thinking. I thought it was.”

“It wasn’t deep, thank God, but there was a bullet. I managed to get it out, clean you up and do what I could with the wound. It’s not terrible, but...I wish we could get you to the hospital,” Eric said, biting his lip.

“Probably not a good idea, considering we have two gangs and probably the police force looking for us,” I said with a wry smile.

“I know,” he said, and I could see the wear and tear of the past couple of days. There was a paleness to him I wasn’t used to seeing, and the dark circles under his eyes had grown bigger. “I just wish we could. I’m not a doctor, Dyl.”

I reached out, placing a hand over his and squeezing. “Hey, I trust you more than anyone else in this city. Don’t put yourself down. You’ve been amazing, and I’m sorry I put you through all of this.”

Eric gave me a wobbly smile. “It’s been...pretty crazy.”

“It has,” I said, then looked around the room. “Where the hell are we anyway?”

“Um.” He coughed nervously. “Some house.”

“Some...house. As in, you don’t know?”

“It’s for sale! It was empty, and I didn’t see any scheduled tours when I looked up the listing,” Eric said with an air of

desperation. “It was the only thing I could think of after I got us out of there.”

“How *did* you get us out of there? No offense, but I’m pretty heavy.”

“Stole another car.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Got it back to the wreck, got you in the backseat. Drove around until I saw this place, looked it up, and got you inside. After I got you stitched up, I took the car several blocks away, then grabbed the bus back to near here...and some food for us too. Kinda had to use some of your money to do that, though. Sorry.”

I stared at him with wide eyes. “Are you kidding me? That was fucking brilliant. You pretty much covered everything I might have thought of. Wait, your phone? The cops could—”

“I thought about that once I got here,” he said with a shrug. “Smashed it to pieces. Saved the SD card because fuck you, I have some great pictures and videos on that, but everything else, SIM card included, smashed and thrown in water in the tub.”

I could see the tension on his face and reached out, brushing his cheek. “You can take a breath. You did great.”

“I’m okay,” he said, even as I saw the last remnants of the panic he must have been holding off for hours in his eyes.

“No, you’re not,” I said, brushing my thumb over his chin. “You’ve always been shit at hiding your emotions.”

Eric rolled his eyes. “I swear, no matter how many times you tell me that, I’m never going to not—”

I watched as his face went slack, and he stared at me with wide eyes that looked haunted with his pale face and dark circles. “W-what?”

He grabbed my hand roughly, pulling it close. “You said I’ve never been good at hiding my emotions!”

“Well, I said you were shit at them, not—”

“Dylan!”

“What?”

He leaned in closer. “Are you...remembering more?”

“Oh,” I said in sudden understanding and let out a nervous laugh. “I’m, uh, not sure. I was...dreaming the whole time you were saving our asses.”

“About the girl you were in love with?” he asked. “And me?”

“I didn’t dream about Katya,” I told him with a shake of my head. “I guess this time my brain decided to let me remember more things about you and me.”

“But...you remember her name?”

“Huh. I guess I do. I didn’t dream about her though, or remember, whatever you want to call it.”

He snorted. “Call it either or both if it helps you talk about it.”

“I remembered...being friends with you back in school. What it was like to come home and find my house totally empty. You would always call me and act like you were bored, even though I knew you loved reading all the damn time or watching those crappy soap operas. But I knew you were doing it so I wouldn’t have to be home alone. I never told you I knew,” I told him with a smirk.

Eric’s shoulders eased, and he tilted his head. “I didn’t want you to think I was like...taking pity on you or something. You could be so proud sometimes, so stuck on being Mr. Independent that you wouldn’t have accepted anything else.”

“That...sounds about right,” I said with a shrug. “Not everything has come back. Just enough to know how important you were to me, how much you meant. That’s why...”

Eric’s brow furrowed. “Why, what?”

“That’s why I put distance between us,” I said, trying to recall the dream. More importantly, I was trying to remember

the exact reasons and events that led me to that decision.

“It was intentional?” he asked.

“Yes, but I’m not sure why. I know I did it because I wanted you to be safe and didn’t want you to know what I was doing. And...for selfish reasons.”

“Okay, those first things definitely sound like you, but what would have been the selfish part?”

This was probably a conversation my former self would have balked at having, probably horrified it had even come up in the first place. The thing was, everything the old me hadn’t wanted to happen had happened. It seemed his life, *my* life, had found its way to Eric’s doorstep and dragged him along for the ride. Whatever he’d wanted for Eric didn’t matter anymore, and perhaps his secrets...*my* secrets didn’t matter as much anymore either.

“Because I knew I was going to be doing some rough things,” I said with a frown. “I knew I was headed into a dark place and wanted to have some things that were good, bright and warm. Something I could hold on to when I had to face awful things, just something to keep me balanced or at least sane. I didn’t want the world I had with you to bleed into the new world I was going to. I wanted you safe, but I wanted to keep you firmly in the light, at least in my head, so I could have *something*. That was one reason I came to see you on campus.”

“That was the last time I saw you until I found you in your underwear at the clinic,” he said quietly. “I remember replaying those couple of days over and over in my head. I was never able to shake the feeling you were saying goodbye.”

“Not really goodbye,” I said with a wince. “More like maybe goodbye. I didn’t know what was going to happen to me.”

“And you didn’t think to tell me you were going into something dangerous?” he demanded with sudden heat.

“I was being selfish,” I told him. “I wanted to have...one last time with just you and me, where everything between us



was good, where *I* was good. I didn't want it ruined by telling you what was going to happen."

Eric's lips thinned. "And what was going to happen?"

"I don't know," I said with a shake of my head. "I remember getting into a fight with you on the phone a while after that. I did that with a bunch of Russian guys sitting nearby, and I did it on purpose."

Eric snorted, turning his face away from me. "God, I told myself I was being paranoid, but *goddammit*, I knew you provoked me. I knew you were being a dick."

"Look," I said softly. "I wish I had more answers. I wish I could remember what I was doing. I wish I didn't have to depend on you believing I'm a better person than it looks like I am right now. I really do. And I wish I could give you a proper apology."

Eric sniffled, and I realized why he'd turned his face away. "Apology?"

"Because...I don't know if what I did was the right thing, and I don't want to apologize if I won't end up meaning it," I told him softly, refusing to let go of his hand. "But I can say now what I couldn't say back then. I'm sorry for hurting you. I'm sorry for being such an asshole to you. I thought it was necessary at the time, but the idea of hurting you, then and now, bothered me more than I can explain."

He sniffled again. "That's a pretty shitty apology."

"Yeah, I know," I said with a sigh. "But it's the best I've got right now. It's the best I can offer you."

Eric turned to face me, his eyes swimming with the tears he'd been holding back. "I've also heard worse. At least now I know I wasn't crazy back then. My instincts were right."

"And even though I don't have the full story, I also figured out I didn't actually know I was into guys when I was living in the city," I said sheepishly. "Maybe more will come back to me, but I'm pretty sure I was in the closet even to myself."

"When did you figure it out?"

“I don’t know. But it was after I left and before I came back for that last visit. I don’t know how I figured it out, or if I tested it out, but I knew...and I also knew that...”

My nerves threatened to fray before I finished the rest of my explanation. It was beyond me how I could sit there and admit to the man the shame of lying to him while still having to acknowledge that I couldn’t explain how I’d become a part of a Russian Mafia but couldn’t tell him how I felt. Apparently, while Eric was terrible at hiding his feelings, I wasn’t the greatest at expressing mine.

“Hey,” he said quietly, squeezing my hand. “We’ve already gotten this far, and I haven’t lost faith in you yet. Whatever you’re going to say, I doubt you’re going to make me lose it now.”

“I realized, or I knew, when I showed up that last time, that all the time we’d been friends, I had more than just platonic feelings for you,” I told him, staring down at our hands rather than up at his face. “I’d figured it out by then, not just that I was bi, but that I had probably been crazy about you well before I left Port Dale for parts unknown.”

I could still feel it, the understanding. A lot of the dreams tied to what I remembered were still blurry and out of focus, but I was getting at least the gist of what was there. I had more or less come to the understanding that I’d been in love with Eric for most of our friendship while at school.

“And when I came here for that surprise visit, I watched you for a little while before I let you know I was there. I saw you and realized I was still in love with you, which made it all the more important to keep everything to myself. That you’d never know how I felt or what I was getting into. I could keep all that and hold on to it, but I had to accept that my time and chance had long passed.”

“You really thought,” Eric said in a tight voice, though I didn’t dare look up to see his expression, “that would be enough? That it would be okay?”

“No,” I said simply. “Not okay, but enough? It had to be enough. That’s what I thought at the time. It had to be enough,

or I was going to be lost.”

“I wish you didn’t have a potential head injury right now because I want to slap the shit out of you,” he growled at me.

“I deserve it, even with the injury.”

“Do *not* play the martyr.”

“I’m not,” I snapped, finally looking up to stare him in the face. His bottom lip trembled, but his gaze remained steady as he stared at me stubbornly. “I caused you pain, and even if it turns out that I’ll stand by that decision, it doesn’t mean I’m not sorry I did it. So if you want to take it out on me, you’re well within your rights. That’s how justice works.”

Eric snatched his hand away, and I braced for the blow, only to flinch when he flicked my nose. “You’re a fucking idiot.”

“Ow,” I complained as the sting spread across my face, and I covered my nose protectively. “That actually stung.”

“Good,” Eric said, leaning closer. “Because what you described isn’t justice, it’s vengeance. And I might have had to deal with things these past few days that I would never have wanted to deal with and had to do things I thought I could leave in my past, but that doesn’t mean I’ve changed. I don’t do vengeance, revenge, bloody justice, whatever you want to call it.”

“Not above a little payback, though,” I grumbled, a little offended that he’d flicked my nose like some misbehaving house pet.

“That was to get your attention and make you stop being so goddamn morose,” he huffed at me, reaching out to take my face in his hands. “Look, I’m not happy about how you handled things, and I desperately wish you’d done things differently. I’m not sure what’s waiting for us in the future, but I know you...and I know I’ve loved you since I was like... fifteen, and that hasn’t stopped. I realized that’s still true even after you showed up randomly in my life at the clinic, even with your memory all but gone.”

“You have terrible taste in men,” I told him, my words becoming distorted as he made a point to squish my face.

“I’ve loved you for years, and I don’t think that will stop easily. And I’ve *known* you for years and want to keep knowing you. You’re still the man I knew before, and that’s why I will keep believing in you, even if you won’t believe in yourself, okay?” Eric asked me softly, finally easing up on squeezing my face so I could speak properly.

“Okay,” was all I said. I was glad he hadn’t asked me to start believing in myself because I would have been forced to lie or tell the truth again. Just the echoes of my memories were enough to make me tired at the thought of lying to him anymore. And at least this way, I could hang on to the fact that someone who cared about me still believed in me, even when I couldn’t.

“Good,” he said and kissed me.

I had been half expecting it, but that didn’t stop me from freezing when his lips pressed against mine. Then I felt his fingers slide down my face and across my neck, sending little tingles of pleasure and anticipation through me. I reached over, ignoring the twinge in my side as I pulled him closer, flush against my uninjured side.

Warmth rushed through me as Eric wrapped his arms around my neck, making himself comfortable. I took my time, slowly dragging my hands down his back, feeling every shift of muscle beneath his shirt. I breathed deeply, caught the scent of soap on him, and realized he’d taken a shower at some point while I was unconscious.

“I would love to continue,” I told him softly. “But as clean as you smell, I’m probably covered in dirt, blood, and sweat.”

He smiled, sliding back off the bed. “You’re allowed to shower.”

“I don’t know,” I said, scooting toward the edge of the bed and testing how my body felt as I pushed myself to my feet. I was a little stiff, and my side ached noticeably, but I could get

around on my own. “You look like you could use another one.”

Eric only chuckled as he took me by the arm and led me out of the room into a dark hallway. Before I could see much more than a few other sparsely decorated rooms, he pulled me into a bathroom equipped with everything we’d need, including a large, walk-in shower.

“Not a house for people who like baths,” I noted, reaching out to turn on the light.

Eric stopped me, motioning toward the window next to the shower. It had a plastic sheet for a curtain, pulled down to block out the light. “Don’t. This house is supposed to be empty, remember? I haven’t used the lights because I don’t want to attract attention. I’ve got candles.”

“Okay,” I said, looking around as he busied himself. “But there’s running water and electricity?”

“We’re in a nicer part of Port Dale. Companies will happily foot the bill if it means showing off how the house might look to potential buyers.” He dragged out a bag of tealight candles from under the sink and began lighting them. “These will give us enough light to see but shouldn’t attract attention so long as the curtain’s closed.”

“Sure,” I said because, apparently, one-word answers were all I could manage, especially when I saw him tug off his socks and unbutton his jeans.

He stopped, turning toward me, and in a flash of understanding, I saw he wasn’t wearing any underwear. The barest amount of blond hair poked out from his jeans as he frowned at me. “Right, almost forgot, stay put.”

“Uh, right,” I said, itching to reach out and open the rest of his zipper so the pants would fall.

“Might as well undress while you’re waiting,” he said with a smirk as he stepped away from me. I watched as he tugged at his pants to open them further before walking away. The lighting might not have been great, but it was good enough to see his jeans slip down and reveal the top of his ass.

Mouth dry, I worked at first getting my shirt off, which proved to be a task. I wasn't nearly as stiff and rigid as I had been the first night at his apartment, but my injured side didn't appreciate me stretching to remove the shirt. Most of the work had to be done with one hand, and I tossed the shirt aside. I had just started undoing my jeans when Eric reappeared, having completely shed all his clothing.

"Jesus," I muttered as I looked him over. His shoulders were nearly as broad as mine, but his body tapered far more than mine as it approached his waist. There was the faintest hint of definition on his chest and stomach and only the barest wisps of blond hair in a thin line leading down from his navel. His cock dangled before him as he approached me, and I wondered how to get him to turn around.

"Hold still there, muscle man," he said. It was meant as a joke, but I felt myself begin to harden at the hint of heat in his voice. He stepped forward with a plastic bag and what looked like duct tape and quickly began to cover my bandages. "Sorry, but I don't have a whole lot of bandages left right now, and with the way things have gone lately, I wasn't sure if we'd get a chance to get more. So I'm going to seal this up. Thank God you're not hairy...well, for your sake anyway."

I said nothing as he got to work sealing the bag around the wound, inspecting it carefully before setting the roll of tape aside. The look in his eyes was the same one he'd had whenever he examined my wounds or went into medic mode, as I was coming to think of it. That look quickly changed when I reached to slide a hand over his hip and around to cup his ass.

Eric leaned over, pulling open the shower door and fiddling with the dials, the whole time with my hand on his ass. Once he had water flowing, he settled himself in front of me again, reaching down and unzipping my pants. He had to hook his fingers into them, shoving them down so they dropped to the ground. His eyes never left mine as he traced the outline of my growing cock, letting out a low whistle that I took to be appreciation.

I let him remove my underwear until they were low enough to kick off. Eric's eyes swept over my body with a hunger I shared in my gut, and I gently pulled him into the shower. Warm water spread over me, and I pulled him under the spray, letting it coat us as I kissed him, bringing our bodies closer.

We took our time exploring one another's bodies under the pretext of washing. I found myself eager to run my hands down his back, over the curve of his ass, and back up again. He seemed positively thrilled to squeeze my uninjured side, run his fingers through the dark hair on my chest, and up along my neck to my jaw.

At some point, long after we gave up the pretense of trying to bathe, he reached down and wrapped his fingers around my cock. I bent my head to groan into his neck as I felt his fingers slide against my shaft. He was patient but intent as he wrapped his other arm around my waist to hold me tight as he stroked me, kissing my chest as he worked.

"Eric," I breathed into his neck, nipping at it. Pleasure and anticipation were building inside me, and I thought I might explode unless something happened soon.

"I want you inside me," he said softly.

I blinked. "What? But we don't—"

"Oh, I do," he said with a chuckle. "When I stopped to get what few bandages I could find along with the food, I also grabbed, uh, stuff we'd need. Call it intuition, but I had this feeling that somehow we'd find ourselves here."

"You really did think of everything," I said softly.

"So, is that okay with you?"

"Well, I'm not sure what good I'll be with this hip not liking if I move it too much at the moment."

Eric chuckled, kissing me. "There's more than one way to skin a cat or to have sex with someone. C'mon."

I spared a thought in amusement at how in control he was now, the way he was whenever an emergency happened. True,

I could take the reins when danger threatened, and we needed to get out, but Eric wasn't shy or hesitant when push came to shove. It was a little embarrassing to realize I'd treated him with kid gloves when clearly he was far more capable and tougher than I'd been willing to give him credit for.

Back in the bedroom, with only moonlight to see by, he brought me back to the bed and made me lay down. I snorted at the soft command but did as I was told, suspecting I knew what was coming.

Once I was comfortable on the bed, he appeared with a condom in gold foil and a small bottle of lube. Eric kept eye contact with me as he opened the wrapper and spread a little lube over my thick length. The condom slid on easily, and I realized it fit perfectly, just the right amount of snug without squeezing.

"Someone was paying attention in the police station," I said as he tossed the foil wrapper aside casually.

"Didn't take much attention to know your average condom wasn't going to work," he chuckled, eyeing my dick.

A shiver ran through me when I realized the preparation on my end was all but finished. Eric inched forward, careful to make sure his leg didn't push against my injury as he positioned himself above me. I licked my lips in anticipation, gaze switching between what he was doing and his face.

"Hope you're the patient sort," he said, and I grunted when I felt his hand wrap around the base of my cock, "because it's been a little while since I've done this."

"I'm in no rush," I mumbled.

As he steadied himself, I reached up and took hold of his thighs, both to feel the strength of his legs and to cover the shake of my fingers. When I felt the head of my dick connect with him, I looked up to meet his eyes. I could feel the straining of his legs as he allowed himself to press downward, trying to coax me inside him.

Just when I was prepared to talk him into doing more than just hasty prep work, I felt a sudden tight heat wrap around the



head of my cock. Eric sucked in a sharp breath and let it out slowly. I could tell from his face he'd certainly felt the intrusion, but that didn't stop him from lowering himself a little further before stopping.

"Fuck," I said, feeling the intense heat of his insides despite the insulating layer of latex between our bodies.

"That was kind of my thought too," he said with a shaky laugh and then moaned as he slipped another inch of me inside him. "Glad you're not a monster, but did you have to be big? What's wrong with average?"

"Then stop, and we can do something else," I told him, even as my body practically screamed for him to go further, to go all the way.

"Oh no," he said with a snort. "I meant what I said in that shower. I want you inside me, *all* of you."

"Yes, sir," I said, trying to sound steady and in control and managing only shaky and slightly breathless.

His mouth opened as though to say something and then stiffened as he pushed back, sliding down another inch. To my surprise, he didn't stop there, sliding the next few inches until I felt myself sheathed inside him completely.

"Oh *fuck*," I breathed, tightening my grip and holding him in place desperately.

"All of you," he managed to get out as his back arched, gripping me fiercely.

My breath cut from me in gasps and growls, and it wasn't until I felt his grip around me release that I realized he was allowing me control. I barely noticed the twinge in my hip as I rolled us, pinning him to the bed and burying myself inside him once more. Yes, it hurt like a bitch, but his desperate groans meant so much more to me.

"Dylan," he groaned, fingers crushing my hair as I pushed forward. There was more pain as my injured side protested, but I held myself at just the right angle so I could pull him back into my forward thrusts.

I lost myself in the steady rhythm of pain colored heavily by pleasure. I could hear his gasps, his cries, the low groans he gave when I hit just the right place inside him. Only as I felt the building of pleasure, the anticipation of ecstasy inside my groin, did I finally begrudge the condom.

It didn't matter if I didn't know who I truly was or whether he had made up his mind about who I was. He was *mine*. I was *his*.

"Dylan," he gasped, and I thrust hard, crying out as I felt myself pour into him. I came as deep as my length and the condom would allow, and I didn't shy away from shuddering as pleasure washed through me.

I felt warmth splash my stomach as I held Eric tight and let out a fierce snarl when I realized he was coming. Not just from my fucking him but from the idea that I *could* be coming deep inside him. Condom or no, I had claimed him, and he had claimed me, and the thought was fierce and feral zinging through me as I held him tight.

"Jesus," I breathed as the strength rapidly drained from my limbs. Grunting, I carefully extracted my shrinking cock from inside him, rolling onto my back. It was only then I realized just how much my side was throbbing and pressed a hand gently against it with a wince.

"Just had to overdo it, didn't you?" Eric muttered, scooting to the edge of the bed so he could walk around to crouch at my side. "Hold on, let me see how this looks. Probably time for them to be changed anyway."

"You're going to fuss over me constantly, aren't you?" I asked with a small smile.

"Don't be a dick," he muttered, working quickly but gently as he changed the bandage. "And the damage isn't all that bad. You're lucky. Any more vigorous attempt to prove you can top might have ripped what little I managed to patch."

"Are you complaining?"

"About your wound? Definitely. About the fantastic sex we just had and probably should have again when you're not

going to start bleeding all over the place? Absolutely not.”

I wasn't above a self-satisfied smirk, which only earned a roll of Eric's eyes as he put on the new bandages. I had no idea what kind of lover I'd been before, but it was nice to know I could at least pleasure a partner, especially when that partner was Eric.

“I think we've earned ourselves a bit of a rest,” I told him once he was done, having tossed everything into a nearby wastebasket.

“I can't imagine cuddling can be any more dangerous than what we just did,” he said, using an antiseptic wipe on his hands and a towel over both of our torsos.

“Boy, you're really good at sounding romantic,” I said dryly.

“Shut up,” he muttered, but I could hear the smile in his voice as he carefully crawled over me.

I wasted little time rolling over to wrap myself around him and hold him tight. Eric only gave a tiny grumble before I gave him another squeeze, and almost immediately, I felt him relax against my chest. The gesture was subtle and silent, but it meant the world to me as I listened to the wind blowing softly outside the bedroom.

Eric's whole life had been turned on its head and inadvertently dragged into the chaos that was the disaster of my own life. Yet despite everything we'd learned and seen so far, he refused to give up on me. I wasn't nearly as sold on my own goodness, but here he was, comforted by my presence and considering himself safe.

No matter what happened from this point forward, I hoped I could keep this memory no matter what else came my way.

## CHAPTER TEN

I wasn't surprised when I was the first to wake a few hours later. Despite how restless and dream-filled it had been, I'd slept after the car crash, and Eric had spent more time awake to take care of me. And before everything had gone to shit, I'd quickly adapted to his schedule and usually woke up before he did.

I was surprised when even my slight movement to get off the bed didn't wake him. My feet hit the ground softly, and I turned to hear him grunt, twisting around to face where I'd been lying seconds before. I smiled and watched his face scrunch up as he wiggled into the warm spot I'd left behind before finally clutching the blanket closer and pressing his face into the warm cloth.

Resisting the urge to disturb him further by bending down to kiss his brow, I left him to sleep a little longer. I stopped by the bathroom long enough to take care of business and wash my face. There was no need for candles since the sunlight leaked through the bathroom curtain. Without a phone or clock, I had no idea what time it was and briefly wondered how long I'd slept.

Shrugging, I walked into the hallway and through the open archway that led into what looked like a living room. Like the bedroom, there wasn't much personalization, only a few plain pieces of furniture. There was a vase filled with fake plants and a painting of a house on a prairie over the TV. However, nothing explained why just looking around the room left me with such a powerful sense of unease.

Moving carefully, I checked the room to ensure nothing could threaten me before pulling aside the curtain at the front window. The sense of unease grew as I peered out onto what appeared to be a trimmed lawn, a quiet neighborhood, and a front flower garden in desperate need of flowers.

There wasn't the slightest sign of anything wrong, and I twitched the curtain back into place, frowning as I backed up. It was only as I turned to face the nearby doorway and spotted a set of stairs near the front door that I stopped. Moving slowly, I walked into the entranceway, facing the front door. The half-moon window at the top allowed sunlight to spill in on me, and I turned back to face the house again.

"Mom? Dad?" I called softly, the words leaving my lips before I could think about what I was saying.

Of course, they didn't answer. According to Eric, they'd been dead for years. Yet, for a few pounding heartbeats, I found myself stuck with an old and familiar mixture of anticipation and expected disappointment.

"This is my house," I muttered, turning on the spot to look around.

This was the exact entryway I'd seen in my flashback, calling into a house that was better decorated than it was now but just as sterile. My gaze traveled up the stairs, and I remembered another couple of bedrooms and a bathroom on the second floor. My room had been at the top of the stairs, while my parents' had been at the back of the house. There had once been a giant rug on the entryway floor that Eric had accidentally ruined by spilling a bright red drink, but I had taken the fall for it. My parents had been annoyed but had replaced it after lecturing me to keep anything messy in the kitchen.

"Dyl?" I heard from the other room, and although I could tell it was the Eric I knew now, I half expected the teenage version to come around the corner. Instead of a gangly kid with big eyes and a broad smile, there was only the adult, fully grown, more filled-out Eric, looking concerned and sleepy as he rubbed at his face. "Hey...Jesus, are you okay?"

“This is my house...was my house,” I said, correcting myself quickly. “This was my parents’ house.”

“It went to you after they died, along with pretty much everything they owned. You didn’t use it, though, even the few times you came back. Just rented it out and left it up to a company to play landlord on your behalf,” he said with a shrug. “I didn’t even know you’d put it up for sale, but it’s been that way for a couple of years now.”

“That’s a...weirdly long time to have a house on sale,” I said and then shook my head. “Wait, you knew this was my house.”

“Well, yeah, I came here often enough. By the time I got you into a different car and took off in a random direction, I realized I was mindlessly driving in this direction. Let me tell you how fun it was to try to Google real estate information while you’re bleeding in the backseat, and I’m freaking out that you might have a serious concussion.”

I cocked my head. “Why...didn’t you tell me? You just said it was a house you’d found.”

Eric gently pulled at the loose skin on his elbow, and I vaguely remembered he’d always done that when he was nervous and sometimes a little guilty. “I just...I didn’t want to tell you last night because I didn’t want you to worry about it right away. You want to get your memory back, which I understand! I really do. Of course you do. But last night, I... wanted to make sure you were healthy and not going to hurt yourself trying to dig around for scraps of your lost memory.”

“God,” I said, looking past him and somehow seeing both the plain leather couch that sat in front of the TV and the prissy flower-patterned one my mother had insisted on buying when I was fifteen. “It’s like standing in two different parts of time.”

“Is that...a good thing?” Eric asked me slowly. I wondered if perhaps, on some level, whether conscious or not, he’d been hoping that being back in my old house might shake something loose.

“I don’t know,” I admitted with a shake of my head. “It’s just weird at the moment.”

“Anything coming back to you?”

“Nope, just a surreal sense of being both where I’m supposed to be and a stranger at the same time,” I said, finally having to close my eyes as a wave of dizziness washed through me. “I mean, I remember that ugly rug my mom had that you ruined with a drink.”

Eric let out a laugh. “Oh God, *I* forgot about that. I was so confused when you wouldn’t let me own up to it, even though your parents weren’t all that mad.”

“Because if you took the blame, you would have sworn up and down that you’d find a way to pay them back. That rug was as expensive as it was ugly, and I knew you’d end up finding out how much it cost and get embarrassed because there was no way you or your dad could get that much money together,” I told him, only to open my eyes in surprise. “Okay, maybe I remember more than I thought. What the fuck was *that*?”

“Exactly what you said, you remembering something,” Eric said, peering up at me with a slight smile. “Anything else?”

“I...used this house,” I told him, turning around to look at the mostly bare walls and lackluster furniture. “I remember getting rid of everything my parents left behind and selling it all or donating it. I remember...having all the money thrown into some private account I didn’t tell anyone about and living off...my job’s income.”

“And, uh, what job was that?” Eric asked cautiously.

I knew what he was wondering, but I could only shake my head. “I don’t know. It’s like, some of the stuff I remember is crystal clear, while the rest is still either just an empty space or so murky I can only make sense of a few little things.”

I could remember no longer wanting to rent out the house because I had another use for it...though I couldn’t remember what that use was. I could remember the name of a cat my

parents had taken in once at my insistence, only to give it away a year later because the hair was unmanageable. I had cried over losing Mr. Moo Moo, but I couldn't remember what the cat looked like.

Something had been shaken loose in my head, but I couldn't make heads or tails of what everything was. "I don't know, Eric. I don't know what's going on...but at least there's no pain with these."

Eric arched his brow. "You got headaches?"

"Before. Whenever I remembered something vividly, my head ached like it did when I was in the clinic," I said, rubbing my brow in frustration. "I remember I had a cat, not what it looked like, and that ugly rug, but I can't remember what the fuck I've been doing for the past couple of years."

"Oh right," Eric said, turning to walk into the living room, motioning for me to follow. "Mr. Moo Moo. He was white with big black spots."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously."

"God, that's...a ridiculously stupid name."

"Dylan, you were like five when you had that cat. Of course you named it something stupid. I thought it was the cutest thing ever at the time."

"You would," I muttered as we entered the tiled kitchen, which held only a table and a couple of chairs.

"I remember you telling me about it. You were very...*you* about it, but I could tell even years later, it had always bugged you how your parents handled your cat," he said as he pulled out an electric kettle and a couple of mugs. "Not that you would ever admit they broke your heart."

"I cried for days after they got rid of him," I said.

"Huh," Eric grunted in what I took to be surprise. "Maybe this whole memory thing is kind of good for you. Never in your life would you have admitted something like that before."



“I’m so glad this experience is giving me therapy,” I said with a scowl. “How did you know that was there?”

“Because I went through the house after I made sure you weren’t going to kick it without emergency care,” he said, letting the kettle do its work while he drew a jar of instant coffee out of a cabinet. “There wasn’t a whole lot here, but I didn’t lie to you last night. The place was supposed to be set up so people could come and see the house, so I figured that’s what the kettle was for...though drip coffee would have been more impressive for any potential buyers if you ask me.”

I walked to a nearby door and opened it to find a small closet with mostly empty shelves. There were a few cans that I took out to examine, finding various vegetables and Spam as well.

“There’s nothing interesting in there. I already checked,” Eric told me.

“Was there anything else in the house?” I asked.

“Um, a roll of bandages, topical antibacterial cream, and a bottle of aspirin in the upstairs bathroom. Looked like there was a box of clothes in the closet and linen for the beds,” Eric said, and I didn’t have to turn around to know he was shrugging. “Really basic shit that didn’t help much except for the bandages, and I needed more than what was there. Oh! And a sewing kit in the same closet as the clothes.”

“Did you look in the box of clothes?” I asked, the same uneasy feeling from before settling in my gut.

“Nope, I had other priorities. Just saw there were clothes. Here’s your coffee.”

I turned, closed the closet door, and accepted the cup. Then, dropping down into one of the kitchen chairs, I looked around the room with a frown. The brew was bitter and almost salty, but it tasted enough like coffee that I could pretend it was the real thing.

“So,” Eric began, taking the seat opposite me, “we need to start figuring out what we’re going to do next.”

“Hm?” I grunted faintly, trying to make sense of the unease that wouldn’t leave me. When I’d felt it before Eric woke up, it had been because I remembered the house in some way. Yet this time, the answer wasn’t nearly as forthcoming, and I didn’t like the idea that I could be forgetting something important.

“In case the hole in your side isn’t reminding you, we’re currently hiding out in your childhood home because a bunch of guys are trying to kill us. Very angry guys, with guns and at least one cop on their payroll.”

“I’m betting there’s a lot more than just the one, and not just in that precinct either,” I said quietly, still peering around the room. Perhaps I needed to find the one clue to what was missing, an esoteric key belonging to a lock I couldn’t see deep within the recesses of my memory. “That kind of corruption is bound to spread wide and probably go a lot higher up than just one detective.”

I spared a thought for Officer Fitz and hoped she’d managed to get through the chaos we’d left at the police station relatively unharmed. As for whether she was as dirty as her partner, I didn’t think so. Maybe it was because the woman had been so friendly and earnest, but my instincts told me she was as clean as freshly fallen snow. Whether or not she would get through the rest of her career unscathed when she was partnered with someone as clean as day-old city snow was something else entirely.

“Have I ever mentioned that you’re not very good at inspiring confidence or hope?” Eric asked, and I smirked when he scowled at me.

“You’ve brought it up once or twice,” I said, setting my cup down and frowning.

“Then maybe you could participate in the conversation and be helpful instead of staring around here like...”

He trailed off, and I raised a brow. “Like what? Like I’m trying to find something? Like maybe I’m trying to remember something?”

“Yeah,” he said with a wince.

“Well, maybe you should have thought of that before bringing me back to my childhood home while I’m trying to piece together my life.”

“That’s not fair. It was the only place I thought would be safe while we were still stuck in this city.”

“And maybe you’re trying to jog my memory a little?”

“Oh, and you’re not hoping to get more of your memory back? Don’t make this a just me thing.”

“Right. Because you wouldn’t benefit from me getting my memory back,” I told him with a glare. My temper was getting the better of me, but it wasn’t Eric’s fault. The unease wouldn’t leave me alone, and I was starting to feel like a caged animal, forced to pace back and forth in a cage it could neither understand nor tolerate. “Because you wouldn’t like confirmation of whether or not I’m the giant, evil bastard that mounting evidence keeps proving me to be.”

Eric glared furiously at me. “That is *not* what I’m trying to do! I *want* you to be wrong. I want to be right. I want to make the little voice in my head that keeps questioning that faith shut the fuck up and leave me alone, so I can be happy my best friend is alive and well and getting his mind back together. That the man I’ve been in love with since I was fifteen is still the same man I remember from all those years ago.”

I stiffened, shoulders going back and straight. “L-love?”

Eric’s cheeks colored furiously. “What? Did you think I was just hot for your body the whole time? Don’t get me wrong, lust played a part but c’mon, Dyl. Do you really think someone can be close friends and be attracted to someone at the same time and *not* develop some romantic feelings?”

“I...hadn’t given it any thought?” I said slowly, forgetting what I’d even been frustrated about in the first place.

Eric rolled his eyes. “Christ. You can survive a fight, manage to keep yourself in one piece when you don’t even know who you are, take a bullet, and get us through a high-

speed chase, but understanding basic human emotions is beyond you.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “I understand how irritated I am right now. That’s crystal clear.”

“Look, maybe when things have died down a bit, and we’re not hiding in your childhood home, maybe we can talk...feelings more,” he said, and I wondered just how much he was looking forward to the conversation considering how uncomfortable he seemed with the idea.

Before I could do more than try to think of something to make him feel better, I felt a chill trickle down my back. The hair on the back of my neck stood up as I watched myself reach out, fiddling with something in front of me. For a moment, the kitchen swam out of view, and I saw bare shelves close to me, a space open in the floor. I was tucking away a plastic object, along with a small notebook. At the same time, I pulled a bundle of cash out of the space, not bothering to count it because I knew how much was there since I’d put it there in the first place.

“Let’s hope they don’t fuck this one up,” I heard myself say, and then the kitchen came back into view. Eric sat at the opposite end of the table, staring at me in pure confusion.

“What?” he asked.

“What?” I repeated dumbly, trying to understand what had just happened.

“You hope who doesn’t fuck what up?”

“I said that out loud?”

“Uh...yeah? Wait, did you remember something?”

My fingers twitching, I turned to face the storage space I had rooted through earlier. Standing up, I marched over and crouched down. It was exactly what had just filled my mind’s eye only seconds ago. I reached toward the side and the nearest corner. The kitchen tiles extended into the storage closet, but I hooked my fingers under one of the squares, pulling it away. There was only wood, but without hesitating, I

pressed against a particular spot with enough force until I heard a soft click.

“Dylan?” Eric said softly from behind me. “What are you doing?”

“This...I used this house,” I said, drawing away the square of wood. If I hadn’t somehow remembered how to find and access it, I would have never noticed the seam that gave it away.

“For...for what?” Eric asked, and I felt his hand on my shoulder.

“I-I don’t know exactly,” I said, my hand shaking a little as I drew out the small plastic object and the notebook. “But I hid these things here.”

“A notebook and...flash drive?” Eric said, leaning forward to see into the space. “Do you know what’s on them?”

“No,” I said, flipping the drive around in my hand before letting myself drop back to sit on the floor.

Holding the notebook, I looked it over. It was small, easily able to fit into my pockets, and wrapped in a thick rubber band. I removed the band and set it aside, flipping open the notebook to look at it in the light from the nearby window.

“Of course it’s not in English,” Eric muttered as he peered over my shoulder. “Any chance you can make heads or tails of that?”

I tapped words as I spoke. “Rogue. Scorpion. Watcher. Something here about...moving to a...shadow?”

“That’s cryptic.”

“The whole thing is cryptic. Most of what’s written here is absolute gibberish.”

“I’m a little more impressed that you can read another language...what is that anyway?”

“Portuguese,” I said softly.

“Okay, so add Russian and Portuguese to your list of languages. Christ, what else you got locked away in that head

of yours?”

I shook my head. “You’re not understanding. These aren’t just nonsense phrases, they’re...nonsense. There’s the accent marks and a couple of other tells, but it’s all...wrong.”

“How so?”

“Kind of like a word scramble, but even scrambling some of the smaller words, they don’t make actual words. It’s gibberish.”

“Kind of like a code?”

I peered up at him with a frown. “What?”

“Sounds like you were writing in Portuguese, which even I know isn’t exactly the most widespread language in the world. Also sounds like you were using a code while you were doing that. And using special phrases for other things. Layers upon layers.”

“This is...I don’t know what this is,” I admitted, flipping through the notebook. Half of it was filled, but it was all the same thing, words or phrases with no context I could glean or the scramble of nonsensical gibberish.

“Well, I can definitely tell you the Los Muertos don’t have any Portuguese in their lineup, and I’m guessing your Russian friends don’t have much to do with it either.”

“Who the *fuck* was I?” I asked in a low voice.

Eric reached down to take the drive from me, looking it over. “I also suspect that even if we had a computer, plugging this into it would probably be pointless.”

“It’s probably encrypted,” I agreed, closing the notebook and pushing to my feet. “Someone who writes in weird codes and hides things in secret cubbyholes wouldn’t leave an unprotected drive laying around casually.”

“Yeah,” Eric drew out with a shaky laugh. “Whatever you were doing, you were trying to be careful. I wonder what kind of information you had on this and what you were going to do with it.”

I stared at it, wondering the same thing as Eric rolled it around on his palm thoughtfully. From what we'd learned so far, I wasn't afraid to get my hands dirty and apparently could be quite aggressive when I needed to be. One of the city's biggest gangs knew who I was, and there was already strong evidence I'd worked alongside the Russian mafia. Two crime groups who knew me well, evidence that I was ferreting information away and taking money I knew I had stored in there before.

"Brokering?" I wondered, taking it from him and looking it over. "Fuck knows there's plenty of people who would love to get their hands on detailed information about both groups."

Eric cocked a brow. "Playing mole to make a quick buck?"

"I don't know," I said with a shake of my head. "Nothing we've seen so far has been in my favor. On the other hand, I was willing to do things I shouldn't have been doing, so what's to stop me?"

Eric looked troubled, shifting nervously from one foot to the other. "I don't know. I have a hard time picturing you going freelance spy, selling information to the highest bidder."

"Or I was working for someone else," I said, carefully putting the notebook in my pocket. "There's bound to be other groups that would understand Portuguese and maybe even set up the code with me."

"You're bound and determined to be one of the bad guys, aren't you?" Eric asked bitterly, turning away to pick up his coffee cup.

"It's not 'bound and determined' when I keep having to look the evidence in the face," I told him stubbornly. "Maybe it's time you did the same."

"I'm not having this argument with you again," Eric told me with a weary shake of his head. "Because it doesn't matter which one of us is right. We're both in the same boat."

"At least until we get out of the city," I told him. "There's bound to be safe places where you don't have to—"

"Whatever, sure," Eric muttered, walking out of the room.

I didn't follow him, mostly because I didn't have the strength to continue arguing. The fact of the matter was we didn't know why the Russians were trying to get their hands on me. Then again, I suppose we had found a pretty good motivator for their attack, and I was holding it in my hand.

"Who was I?" I asked the empty kitchen.

A dull thump from the other room drew my head up, and I hastily shoved the drive into my pocket. I had just reached the doorway when Eric appeared, his eyes wide.

"What?" I asked quietly.

"Three men waiting outside in a car."

My jaw tightened, and I moved past him to look out the living room windows. A car was parked on the other side of the road. It was nice enough that it didn't stand out, but I could see the three men Eric had mentioned. One of them was out of the car, a phone to his ear as he looked down the street. Another stepped out, lighting a cigarette as he walked down the sidewalk.

"Those don't look like the Russian guys," Eric said quietly from behind me.

"They're not," I muttered, pointing toward the back room. "Get dressed and get our things together."

"Fuck, what now?" Eric moaned, and I heard his quiet but quick footsteps retreating.

I watched the men carefully, tracking their movements. The one on the phone was calm and sat on the hood of the car, carrying on what looked like a normal conversation, which was completely ruined by his frequent glances toward the house. Even more obvious was the man in the back seat, who I could barely see, scanning the street intently, only partially obscured by the tinted windows.

After a couple of minutes, I heard Eric reappear, just as the third man appeared as well. I hadn't noticed before, but he held a clipboard as he approached the front door. He looked benign, wearing a pair of slacks and a button-up shirt. I looked him over, unease washing through me before I turned to Eric.



“He’s going to knock,” I said, wincing at what I was about to say. “I need you to see what he wants.”

“Ugh,” Eric said, flinching lightly when a knock came. “Seriously?”

“They could be benign.”

“Or could be not!”

“If they’re not, they’re going out of their way to pretend they are, which hasn’t been the case with anyone before.”

“Christ on a cracker,” Eric muttered as he walked toward the entrance.

I followed him, standing where the door would obscure me and allow me to be close enough to hear clearly and intervene in case anything went south. Eric rolled his eyes, shoving the gun and my wallet into my hand before standing by the door. With a sigh, he rubbed at his eyes roughly before running his hands through his hair rapidly.

Disheveled and bleary-eyed, Eric opened the door. “Hello?”

“Good morning, sir,” the man on the other side chirped merrily, though I thought I heard a tone of barely concealed surprise.

“Not yet,” Eric said in what I admitted was a pretty passable sound of annoyance and sleepiness. “Can I help you?”

“Ah, right. Sorry to intrude, sir. We’re going around the neighborhood to see if anyone is willing to sign our petition?”

“Okay, that doesn’t really clear it up. You can’t just say ‘petition’ and expect people to know what you mean. And why are you wearing your necklace inside your shirt? Most people wear it on the outside?”

“Necklace?” I heard the stranger say, sounding bewildered. His tone was immediately hasty and almost embarrassed as he spoke again. “Oh, that’s not a necklace.”

“Looks like the cord to one.”

“No, it’s the cord to my pacemaker. Sorry, I normally have it out of sight better.”

“Right,” Eric said with a grunt that was so uncharacteristically grumpy I found myself smiling. “Well, tell you what, I’ve been awake a whole five minutes. How about you come back in an hour and tell me what you want to save, conserve, whatever.”

“Well, I’m not sure if we’ll be around later,” the man said, and I noted how quickly he was trying to get the words out.

“I guess we’ll find out,” Eric said, pushing the door closed. “Have a good morning.”

“I—” the guy tried to continue but was cut off by the door closing in his face.

“Nice,” I said, walking back into the living room to watch him depart. He stood by the front door with a frown on his face for a couple of seconds before walking back toward the car. “Cord?”

“Looked like a cord.”

“Or something else.”

The man on the phone glanced at him several times, and the chirpy ‘petitioner’ looked agitated as he walked toward the road. When I looked closer, I realized the man from the back seat was no longer in the car.

“Like what?” Eric asked.

“Motherfucker,” I muttered, grabbing Eric and dragging him with me.

“Was more of a father fucker myself,” Eric said wryly as I pushed him toward the kettle. “What?”

“Boil some water,” I hissed at him.

“I feel like I’m going to regret listening to you,” Eric said slowly as he turned to fill the kettle, and I walked toward the back door. “Really, really going to regret this.”

I said nothing, keeping to the wall as I watched the door. I wasn’t surprised when I saw the handle move silently. My

brow did quirk, however, when I heard the soft click of the metal and then watched the lock disengage. The handle turned slowly, and the door pushed inward quietly. The splash of running water blocked out any noise as a strange man entered the kitchen.

“So what,” Eric began and turned, his eyes wide. “What the *fuck*?”

“On the ground,” the man began, reaching for his hip.

I never gave him the chance and launched myself forward. In the periphery of my senses, I saw Eric dart out of the kitchen as I lashed my foot out, hitting the door. The thick wood slammed into the man, sending him crashing into the wall with a grunt. I followed immediately, driving my fist into his side.

With him stunned, I twisted, driving my other fist into his stomach and forcing him to double over. I shoved one leg between his, twisted it and, using my arm, hurled him to the ground, where he landed with a hard crash. Before he could do more than let out a gasp, I straddled him, grabbing both sides of his head.

His dazed gaze rose to my face, and his eyes widened in shock. “Wait!”

Anything he thought he would add was cut off immediately as I drove his head down into the tile with a hard thud. His eyes rolled into the back of his head, and with a brief jerk of his limbs, he went completely still.

“Eric?” I called softly.

“Here,” he said, peering around the corner of the doorway. His eyes landed on the man beneath me. “Is he—”

“Just unconscious,” I told him with a small smile. “Didn’t want to kill someone without knowing if they were trying to kill us first.”

“Dylan.”

“What?”

“Check his pockets, please.”

“Why?”

“Because.”

Grunting, I searched until I found a bifold and pulled it out. My heart skipped a beat as I looked over the ID and read it. “Agent Newscom...FBI.”

“Dylan?”

“Yeah?”

“Did you just assault a federal officer?”

“Pretty sure.”

“Fuck.”

We didn't have time to consider what the FBI was doing in Port Dale or why they were coming into my childhood home and stash house. What mattered most was there were two more of them sitting on the other side of the road, and when they didn't hear back from their friend soon, they were going to act accordingly. For all I knew there were even more waiting, but that was a risk we would have to take.

“We need a new place,” I told him.

“Where?” he asked, and I could hear the first note of panic entering his voice.

“Doesn't matter. It doesn't have to be isolated or even a building you know well. Just somewhere that isn't directly connected to me and would give us a chance to breathe and come up with that plan you wanted so badly.”

“Well, there's a park nearby,” he told me. “We never went there because you hated seeing the people because they always reminded you of being at home. You always said if you were going to be reminded of home, you might as well stay home.”

It wasn't the best, but I wasn't going to argue with the only idea we had, especially when our time before the men outside realized their friend wasn't responding was ticking away. “We're going out the back. You get us there, got it?”

“We're running again, aren't we?”

“We are.”

“I hate this.”

I reached out to him, pulling him close and kissing him. “I know, and I don’t know how yet, but I’m going to try to fix this for you, okay?”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep,” he said, smiling as I drew away.

I gently pulled him with me. “Let’s find out if I can keep them.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

It turned out escaping through the yards of upper-middle-class suburbia was one of the easiest and least exciting things we'd done in the past couple of days. The only person who gave us a curious look was a woman in a wide-brimmed hat, a pair of trimming shears in her hand. She watched us as we hopped over a small fence into the next yard but only shook her head before returning to her work.

Only after we made it a few blocks without an alert or a curious shout did I realize I hadn't seen many vehicles parked in driveways. There hadn't been a clock in the house to tell the time, but I had the feeling we were making our escape during working hours.

"It's just over here," Eric said as we made our way between a gap in the hedges. "It's apparently a lot quicker to get here on foot when you ignore all the niceties like respecting people's private property."

"I'm not going to argue with something working in our favor for once," I muttered as we cleared the thick foliage and stepped out onto a sidewalk.

"With the way our luck has been so far, I'm suspicious of anything going smoothly at this point," Eric said, glancing around before pointing. "There."

I arched a brow at the large, intricately designed metal archway marking the entrance to the park. "Good God. It's just a park. Did they have to go so fancy on the entrance?"

“I can never decide if it’s creepy or comforting when you pretty much repeat the stuff you used to say to me,” Eric muttered. As he grabbed me by the hand and pulled me toward the park, we heard sirens approaching. We glanced over our shoulders to see two police cruisers go barreling through the intersection in the direction we’d just come from. “And I’m going to pretend that has nothing to do with what we just did.”

“What *I* just did,” I muttered as we reached the entrance.

“Like what’s already been said, we’re in this boat together, sink or swim,” Eric said, and then surprised me by lacing his fingers with mine.

“What are you doing?” I asked in surprise.

“We are two men holding hands and enjoying a walk through the park,” he said. The path was smooth, the grass was well maintained, and plenty of large circular planters and trees provided shade and comfortable seating. “In part of the city that likes to brag about how progressive it is.”

“All it takes is one angry person, and all that progressiveness is thrown out the window,” I muttered.

“Good thing I have a big, strong bad boy to keep me safe if anyone gets their underwear in a twist,” he said.

“*Bad boy*,” I repeated with a huff. “That is...you have issues, serious issues.”

“Well, my taste in men was always a little questionable.”

“Gee, thanks. Also, why are we playing at being a couple?”

“Because it helps me stay calm and think about what we’re going to do next,” Eric said in the same cheery voice. “And not think about the fact that I was an accomplice to assaulting a federal officer. Or you know, all the times people have tried to kill us so far. I’m starting to lose track of the number of times that’s happened, which is disturbing.”

“I have the nagging feeling this isn’t all that new to me,” I muttered, looking around. There weren’t many people around, just the occasional reader or jogger. The path we were on led

down the slope of a hill toward a few small buildings around umbrella-covered tables.

“We’re getting food,” Eric told me with a snort. “I’m not going to try to make sense of everything or plan the next move on an empty stomach.”

“Fine,” I said with a shrug. “It can’t make this any stranger.”

At least I was no longer being barraged by the uncomfortable feeling that had filled me while we were still in the house. Maybe it had been the catalyst for me getting more of my memory back, but that didn’t mean I’d enjoyed the experience.

In another world, perhaps we could have visited the house in short bursts to try to shake something loose in my memory, and if it got too uncomfortable, we could just leave. Maybe I could have gone shopping with Eric, eaten out at a restaurant, or just grabbed something and retreated to his apartment, where we could feel safe and comfortable. Not constantly being chased from one place to the next, trying to play catch-up with a past I couldn’t remember.

The thoughts didn’t do anything to improve my mood, and I pushed them away as we approached one of the buildings. Eric walked up and ordered some sort of wrap and a drink before turning to look at me. Only then did I realize the empty feeling in my stomach that no amount of terrible instant coffee could have ever hoped to fill.

“I’ll take the same,” I said with a wave of my hand.

“His is going to be without the mustard but with the onions,” Eric said brightly.

“If that’s all, your total is going to be...\$32.49,” the woman said with a smile.

“Of course you aren’t a cheap date,” I muttered, wondering how two sandwiches and drinks could cost so much as I fished out my wallet to hand over the money.

Eric laughed. “I just like being treated to some nice food and company once in a while. I guess it just worked out that



the company is also helping provide the food.”

“Uh-huh,” I said with a shake of my head. “Or you just enjoy watching me die a little on the inside.”

“You were always offended at the price of things,” he said with a wink, accepting the bag of sandwiches and the two drinks. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” I muttered, allowing a smile when he kissed my jaw before walking toward one of the tables.

“Don’t be so grumpy. Sit down, eat your food, and pretend like we’re not still fighting for our lives for a little while,” he said, dropping everything onto the table. “Give our brains time to unwind and think clearly.”

It was honestly good advice, as I didn’t think anyone could constantly fight for their lives without needing a break. “Fine, for ten minutes.”

“Fifteen,” he countered, unwrapping his sandwich and biting into it. “Mm, this is good.”

“For how much it cost, it’d better be,” I grumbled, taking a bite of my own sandwich.

“Good?”

“I refuse to answer.”

“Because yes, it’s good and worth the money.”

“I didn’t say that,” I said with a frown.

He laughed, and I realized it had been too long since I’d last heard that sound. It reminded me just how much my presence in Eric’s life had cost him, and I wanted to soak up the sound for a bit longer. It reminded me of his soft look when he’d pressed his face into the blanket where I’d been sleeping, relaxing as he breathed in the scent of me.

“It always cracked me up how cheap you could be when we were younger,” he said as he took another bite. “Your family was half a step away from being rich, but you hated spending money.”

“I didn’t hate spending money on this. We needed food. It was the closest place, and fuck it if it makes you happy, then so be it. I just don’t think thirty bucks for two people at a sandwich place is justified,” I said with a shrug. “I can afford it, but that doesn’t make it any less ridiculous.”

“Well, I’m glad I count as a reason to make it worth it,” he said, eyes twinkling.

I shrugged, taking a drink. “Honestly, if thirty bucks on food and ignoring everything else that’s going on for a little while is enough to make you laugh again, I’ll do it again.” Eric stared at me long enough that I finally stopped chewing and stared back at him in confusion. “What?”

“I just...” he began, shaking his head slowly. “It’s funny. There were so many times I pictured what it would be like to go on a date with you, to sit down and just...share a meal and a conversation, you know?”

“We didn’t eat and talk before?”

“Dammit, Dylan, don’t be difficult.”

“What?”

He sighed heavily, reaching across the table and taking hold of my hand to squeeze it. “I mean, as a date.”

“I don’t think this counts as a very good date,” I told him with a frown. “Not that I can speak with any knowledge on the subject, but I’m pretty sure I could come up with a better date than this if I had the chance.”

“Look, sometimes a date is getting dressed up, going to a nice place, maybe going to a nice show or the ice rink,” Eric said with a smile. “And sometimes it can be two people, worn out and trying to stay alive with every step they take. All that matters is that it’s two people, together, enjoying each other’s company...who have feelings for each other.”

Despite his insistence to the contrary, I thought I understood where he was going. “Is this your way of asking whether or not we’ve got shared feelings?”

“Absolutely not,” Eric said, surprising me with a laugh. “Because despite how much you think you’ve changed or are different, I know exactly what you’d say if I asked that.”

“Oh? And what would I say?”

“You’d tell me that yes, you are attracted to me, and you do care about me. But with everything going on right now, you don’t have a good way to figure out just how far everything goes. Plus, you don’t have your memories back, so you don’t know what you’d be like if you did get them back, so it’d be a bad idea to let things go further than they already have before you figure more out.”

“That’s not...exactly what I would have said,” I muttered.

“Not in those exact words?” Eric guessed, raising a brow.

“I probably wouldn’t have made it sound as nice as you did,” I admitted, staring down at my half-eaten sandwich.

“Well, saying things in a pretty way was never something you were good at,” Eric said, and I smiled at the fondness in his voice. “The thing is, I know you wouldn’t have done what you did last night unless you were sure you had enough feelings to count. Maybe you might have gone that far without thinking too hard about it before we started figuring things out but after that? No, not your style to risk someone else like that.”

I sighed, squeezing his fingers. “I wish I had the same faith in myself that you have. I just can’t...”

“I know,” Eric said softly. “And I can’t tell you how much it bothers me to hear you talk like that. But then again, how can I expect anything different? All your information on yourself comes from other people or scattered memories that aren’t piecing much together.”

“You could always tell me I’m an ass for not taking your word for it,” I pointed out.

“Well, I thought about it, and it stung a little, but I realized I was thinking like...well, like me. Someone who has their memory, knows who they are and what they’ve done. You barely know me.”

“Eric, that doesn’t mean I can’t trust you.”

He smiled again. “I know, and I know you trust me enough to keep relying on me throughout this insanity. But no amount of trust can make you believe what I’m saying. You have to know who you are. You have to have...your whole life, all those experiences, back in your head. Otherwise, you’ve just got one person telling you what they believe, and that’s not the same thing as believing something yourself.”

“Well, he’s a pretty good guy to listen to,” I said, smiling.

“I have my moments,” he said with a small laugh, leaning closer.

A new, familiar voice interrupted before I could close the distance, freezing me in place. “Cute. I guess it’s nice to know I was right about something.”

Slowly, I turned to face the voice, jaw going stiff when I saw Officer Fitz. She was still in uniform, her hair tied into a tight bun. Her hand was also resting on her unlatched holster at her hip, fingers ready to curl around the weapon and draw. She was just the right distance away that she could use it before I could get close, and I wondered if she knew that.

“Of fucking course,” Eric muttered, easing away from me with slow, careful movements.

“Officer Fitz, when I say it’s a surprise to see you, I’m not lying,” I told her, looking her over.

Her eyes darted over our shoulders, and I knew she was taking in any potential threats and lines of sight around us. “Just so happened to be in the area.”

Eric snorted. “With the way my life has been going lately, I almost believe that...*almost*.”

“Eric,” I said in a low warning.

“You know she’s lying,” he muttered, glancing up at her with a scowl.

“Yes,” I said, keeping my hands in sight to help keep the woman calm. “But somehow, I think we’re going to get more of the story.”

“Oh really? Why’s that?” she asked with a snort.

“Because you showed up alone, you don’t have your weapon drawn, and you haven’t called for backup,” I said, eyes shifting to the radio on her shoulder. “Though I’m suddenly curious about Port Dale’s policy on making their officers wear body cams.”

“The police have argued their arrogant heads off against it,” Eric said with a snort. “So everyone just keeps talking in circles.”

“Not all of them,” Fitz fired back, looking troubled. “Some of us have offered to wear them, with or without the policy in place.”

“And what did your bosses have to say to that?” Eric asked.

“That until something was or wasn’t policy, we were all to act in accordance with what was already in place.”

“So, fall in line and be a big girl while Mommy and Daddy argue in the kitchen?”

The corner of the woman’s mouth twitched. “More or less.”

“You take over talking to her, Dylan,” Eric said, picking up his sandwich. “I might end up liking her, and then my reputation would be shot.”

“I see his attitude toward cops hasn’t changed,” Officer Fitz said, watching Eric eat, but I noticed she barely tensed at his gesture.

“He wasn’t lying to you,” I said as I wrapped my hand around my drink. Unlike with Eric, however, her entire body seemed to hone in on what I was doing, refusing to relent until I set the cup down.

Okay, she had clearly decided which of us was the one to keep her eye on.

“Not about that,” she said, glancing between us. “But don’t think I believe you were truthful either.”

“I guess that depends on what part you’re talking about,” I told her.

“Which parts were true?”

I cocked my head, noticing the way Eric chewed slower and glanced between us. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think he was starting to treat this conversation like a sports match where he could bounce his attention back and forth. Either he believed me when I said she wasn’t here to start trouble right away, or all the stress from the past couple of days had finally tipped him a little closer to being nuts.

“I don’t remember who I am, though I’ve remembered little things here and there. I know my name is Dylan, or at least it was.”

“Was? Who else were you?”

I could feel Eric’s eyes burrowing into the side of my head, and I wondered what he’d been thinking. We had left my other name, Riley, out of all discussions with the officers. Of course, her partner had either known that name or at least had a way to recognize my face before he called in his leash holders.

“Riley,” I finally said, taking a gamble to see how she would react.

I wasn’t sure if I should be surprised when I saw her shoulders lose a measure of their tension. “You know the name, don’t you?”

She eyed me warily. “I do *now*. I got a call after you tried to burn down half the station. Thanks for that, by the way. I’m pretty sure we’ve all lost our holiday bonuses from that little stunt so they can fix the damage.”

“I can explain that, and if you tell me your story, I will,” I said, ignoring the look of surprise on Eric’s face.

“Right, and I’m supposed to believe that?” she asked with a suspicious gaze.

I shrugged. “I’m not exactly in a trusting mood at the moment either. I’ve spent longer than I’d like trying not to be killed by people who, quite frankly, I’m not even sure why

they're trying to kill me. The only person in the whole world I trust right now is sitting beside me."

"I want to understand," she said in a tight voice, harsh in its demand. Yet I could see the truth in her eyes. Whatever had been happening on her end, it had left her desperate to understand.

"You're breaking a lot of rules to try to understand," Eric said with a frown.

"Maybe we both try to trust each other," I said with a shrug. "Not completely. Neither of us is that stupid. But enough to explain how we both got to this park at this exact moment."

Officer Fitz's eyes darted between Eric and me, her mouth thinning. I could only imagine the internal war in her thoughts as her desire to understand battled with the duty I suspected she believed in quite strongly.

"After we got the fire put out, the whole place was chaos," she finally said, her hand never moving from her gun. "I knew you'd stolen a car, and there was an attempt to find you...and another car had been seen going after you."

"That didn't strike you as weird?" Eric asked sarcastically.

"Of course it did, but I didn't know what was going on. That's all I knew and what you'd told me. And sorry, you set fire to the station and stole a car. I wasn't going to take you at your word," she said, and I could appreciate how unabashed she was about that fact. "Matt was being really quiet and—"

"Sorry," I interrupted. "Matt?"

"Oh, Officer Patterson."

"Fucker," Eric muttered with uncharacteristic fury.

"I'll explain more on that in a minute," I told her at her curious expression.

"Matt was being quiet and wouldn't talk to me. The captain was losing his mind and locked himself in his office. And then, just as I'm ready to go home, I get a call and guess what, it's the goddamn FBI," she said, looking at me.

“Looking for you. Or the man they referred to as Riley Rynfield. Seems like that picture I took went to a database alright, but not the one I was expecting.”

“No, I imagine you weren’t,” I said quietly, trying not to look at Eric.

“You were, though, weren’t you?” she asked.

“Let’s just say it doesn’t come as much of a surprise to me.”

“You’ll explain after I’m done?”

“Yeah.”

She took a deep breath. “I was a little surprised to see how buried the information on you was. But I managed to scrounge up some nuggets after I told the FBI what I knew. Before they showed up, I knew you were Russian Mafia and not just some low-level thug. There’s been a lot of shake-ups, but you were one of the names in line to take one of the upper spots, their version of captains, I guess. Right up there with the big man himself’s kid, Gabriel.”

The name zinged through me, and I remembered the Los Muertos honcho who’d mentioned the name in connection to me. Frowning, I felt my nose itch as the smell of some expensive cologne filled my nose, and I swore I felt a hand on my thigh. Stiffening, the itch turned into a burn and an ache as the sulfuric smell of gunpowder took over the cologne, and I had to close my eyes.

“What’s wrong with you?” Fitz asked sharply.

I shook my head gently, resisting the urge to wave at her. “Just...that’s a name that means something...I guess.”

“Another thing you’ll explain later?”

“Can’t. Unless you think me remembering cologne, gunpowder, and a weird feeling of fear and anger in my gut is worth explaining.”

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” she said slowly.



“You’re pale,” Eric added, and for a moment I was glad I could hear worry in his voice. It wouldn’t last much longer, though, because I knew reality would reassert itself. He’d remember what she told us about Riley, about what sort of person I was before I woke up in that dirty, abandoned building.

“Just a little dizzy,” I said, motioning to her. “Go on.”

“Well, you can imagine my surprise when I realized I pretty much had one of the biggest names of one of the nastiest international crime groups at my desk,” she said, her nostrils flaring.

“Try in your bed,” Eric muttered, too quiet for her to hear.

I kept my expression neutral even as the pain that shot through my chest left me wondering if it might be kinder to get stabbed.

“I guess I was pretty ambitious,” I said quietly.

“I thought I was going to help, but the FBI showed up and...they asked me questions and then left me out of the loop.”

“It’s the FBI,” Eric said with a scathing tone I knew had nothing to do with her now. He also refused to look at me as he leaned forward, which I instinctively knew he would have done before. “They can do that.”

“But they don’t, not normally,” she shot back. “I don’t care what you’ve seen in movies, the FBI doesn’t just show up and bully local cops, not even for something like this. They demanded what files we had, asked a couple of questions of everyone, and took up residence in one of our conference rooms.”

“You were stonewalled?” I said, straightening in curiosity. “It was still in your jurisdiction, especially with the grand theft auto and arson, and I’m sure your partner could have thrown in attempted assault with a deadly weapon.”

“Yeah,” she said, eyeing me with curiosity.

“They ignored all protocol.”

“They...did.”

“For me?”

“They did,” she said, looking me over. “You know more than you let on.”

“I know things, but that doesn’t mean I remember why I know those things,” I said with a wince. “Trust me, it’s more irritating and confusing to live through than to deal with from the outside.”

“He’s not lying,” Eric said in a tight voice as he stared at the table. “Whatever...whatever he was before all this, he still doesn’t have his memory.”

“I...stepped in something here, didn’t I?” she asked, glancing between Eric and me.

I was sure the smile I gave her was not even remotely believable or comforting. “I think you figured that out when you realized you’d accidentally questioned a high-ranking member of an international criminal organization, Officer Fitz.”

“Call me Ana,” she said, finally taking a seat at a table a sizable distance from us. “And you know that’s not what I meant.”

“I know, but that’s not what you’re here to talk about,” I said, aware Eric had barely moved.

“There’s not much to tell. I was on patrol around here because my captain forced me on literal nothing duty after the FBI took over.”

“Stonewalled and put in time-out?”

“Yes. But imagine my surprise when I’m out seething over watching the yuppies, and I hear something over the radio. It wasn’t supposed to be on our band and was quickly covered up, but lo and behold, I heard the address they said.”

“They? Oh, the FBI.”

“They screwed up when they called in the attack.”

I snorted. “Attack. He’s got a bump on his head and a headache for his troubles.”

“Considering you hit your head, I think you’d be a little more empathetic,” she said with an arch of her brow.

I flinched. “Point taken.”

“Before I continue, you really don’t remember who you are, but you had no problem attacking a federal agent?” she asked in disbelief.

“To be fair, I didn’t know he was a federal agent. I suspected a cop, but—”

“How is that better?”

“When I get to my half of the story, you’ll see.”

Something I wanted to call fear flickered behind her eyes and then died. “Right, well. There’s not much more to tell after that. There was no call over the radio that you’d been caught, and even *that* they would have announced, or at least that they were calling off the investigation. And with how you got out of our precinct, I had this nagging feeling you weren’t getting caught too easily.”

“A hunch?”

“Instinct.”

I gave her a humorless smile. “I know something about that.”

She stared at me for several seconds before clicking her tongue. “Luck.”

“Luck?”

“That’s what got me here. There I was, daydreaming of potentially finding you as I drove over here to grab myself a late breakfast from one of the better sandwich places in the city. The next thing I know, there you are, completely oblivious and staring goo-goo-eyed at Eric.”

I blinked, uncomfortable with the reminder of the storm building in Eric beside me and a little self-conscious. “Goo-goo-eyed?”

She snorted. "I knew you two were a thing."

"Were," Eric said, and I pretended I didn't feel the ache in my chest twist into something nastier.

"Pure luck," I said with a mirthless laugh. "Of course, Eric was right, with the way things have been for us lately, it makes sense."

"Now I find out if it was bad luck or good luck," she said, leaning forward. "Talk."

"There's not much more to tell. Eric told you most of the story. We just left out the details. Like the Los Muertos thugs that came to his house knew who I was and mentioned Gabriel. He skated over the fact that I knew we were in danger because I speak Russian, and as we found out, apparently Portuguese as well."

"Oh, a polyglot and a crime lord, classy."

I ignored the jab. "And we *didn't* know why they wanted us so bad or, at least, wanted me. They wanted Eric because... well, probably because he was a witness, and they thought they could get to me through him. Both things are true."

"And now?"

"And now I still don't fully get why I've got a target on my back. I can only come up with so many possibilities, but I don't have the truth."

"I noticed you haven't asked about the car that chased you," she said, cocking her head.

"I assume the two men are either dead or hospitalized. Eric got me out of trouble after we crashed, and we took up residence in my old house. Since it was supposed to be up for sale, he thought it was safe," I said with a shrug.

"He thought a house that was still technically under your name...would be safe?"

"I was doing my fucking best to keep us alive," Eric snapped with a vehemence that made me flinch.

"I am not the bad guy here," she told him in a hard voice.

“Fine, then stop being a bitch when I was just trying to keep us—”

“Eric,” I interrupted softly.

As much as it hurt, I preferred his furious gaze to turn on me. “*What?*”

“I’m the bad guy here, don’t punish her for what I did wrong. And when this is over, don’t punish yourself either,” I said, dropping my eyes.

“What does that mean?” he asked in a strangled voice.

I turned and looked at Ana. “Your partner is dirty. Filthy even.”

There was the slightest flinch on her face, and I knew she’d either suspected it for a while or had come to suspect it. “Is he?”

“He’s the reason the Russian thugs knew where to find us at the precinct,” I told her evenly. “He brought Eric into the basement, knocked him out, and tied him up. I’m not sure what the plan was, but either it was to get us out of there through the side door we used or to lure me away eventually to get to Eric. Hell, I wonder if maybe I even knew about him before I lost my memory. Wouldn’t that be fun?”

Her jaw tightened. “I wouldn’t call that fun.”

“I wouldn’t either,” I said dryly, pointing toward my lap. “I also happen to have in my possession a notebook and a flash drive that probably contain important information, probably about the Russian Mafia.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Probably?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know what’s on it. I remembered I’d hidden something in my old house and found it there. Haven’t had a chance to figure out what’s on it, and the notebook is written in a code I don’t remember.”

Ana looked me over, her eyes going wide in amazement. “What the hell were you? Who were you?”

“I don’t know,” I said softly, spreading my hands helplessly. “Maybe it was insurance in case someone tried to screw me over. Maybe I was selling the information to someone or...any number of things. But I can tell you your partner is dirty, I have important information on me, and I’m probably everything everyone thinks I am.”

Everyone except Eric, who I was quite sure was going through his own internal anguish at the moment. Everything that had happened in the past few days had been completely and utterly my fault. His whole life had been turned upside down and repeatedly threatened because he believed in me. Now he was discovering his belief in me had been for nothing, and I really was the monster he had denied I could be.

I couldn’t help but spare a thought, posing a question to my previous self in sheer wonder. How had I had something so wonderful and good in my life, only to turn my back on it and walk a far darker path? How had I known that someone like Eric would have happily stayed in my life only to spit on the very memory of someone so good and pure?

I might never have the answer to that question, but I knew I owed Eric better than he was getting.

“Is there a point to you telling me this?” she asked warily.

“Because you’re not dirty. Because you genuinely want to get to the bottom of this, and I think you want to do what’s right when you can,” I told her, settling my hands on the table and inching my seat back.

“Okay,” she said slowly, watching me as warily as a mouse watches an approaching cat. “That doesn’t answer my question.”

“I’m going to offer you a deal,” I told her, and I felt Eric tense next to me. I spared a moment to wonder if he was prepared to interfere or getting ready to get out of the danger zone in case I tried anything.

Her brow rose, and I saw her hand twitch against her gun. “Deal? What deal could you possibly—”

“Listen,” I said sharply, unwilling to hear whatever threat or point she had to make. “This can go easily, or it can go messily. Don’t mistake me. I *want* this to go easily. I want you to choose the easy route, not the messy one.”

“You don’t sound very convincing,” she said, her hand moving to her gun ever so slowly.

“No, I mean it. I don’t want a messy result. But no matter how much regret I might feel, it won’t be enough to stop me. And I’m only offering this because there’s something more important at stake.”

“I’m going to guess you aren’t talking about the truth being at stake or rightness,” she said with a snort.

“No. Here’s the offer. I give you everything. You personally take us into custody and hand us over to the feds right away.”

“That’s...not an offer. That’s what I was going to do anyway.”

“The offer is that I *allow* you to do that without any fuss. I’m not sure if you’ve been paying attention, but even in my dazed state, I’m quite good at surviving things I probably shouldn’t. I’ll try not to hurt you too badly, but in the heat of the moment, even the most skilled fighter can make a mistake. Even if you manage to get the better of me, I’ll destroy the evidence I have on me quickly, shouldn’t be hard. It’s flimsy plastic, and the ink in the notebook is strange. I suspect it washes away quickly in water. Even if I get arrested, I’ll do my best to implicate you as much as your partner and I suspect he’d probably sell you up the river too.”

Her eyes widened, and beside me Eric let out a low noise like a partially muted whistling kettle. “Is that so?”

“Yes,” I said simply.

“Jesus *fucking Christ, Dylan*,” Eric hissed, shoving me. “What the fuck are you doing? Just trying to rub salt in the wound that I was wrong? Are you trying to prove you’re a giant prick?”

I ignored him, keeping my eyes on her. “You understand then?”

“I get your threat, and I respect it,” she said slowly, looking me over. “I think I’m starting to see how you could strike enough fear into people to make them listen to you.”

“I don’t need your fear. I need you to listen to me,” I said, finally softening my voice. “Because in exchange for none of that happening, I need you personally to put Eric under protective custody. And when you report everything you learned from me today, you change it so Eric was lied to and unknowingly helped me because he thought he was helping a friend in danger from the Mafia and corrupt cops.”

“You...want me to lie on my reports?” she asked, shocked.

“To the FBI’s face, before a judge, in front of a jury, before God himself, if that’s what it takes,” I told her. “Otherwise, he’ll undoubtedly be punished for helping me.”

“He was helping you, despite knowing there was a chance you were something...unpleasant,” Ana said, though I didn’t know why she was being polite.

“I don’t care,” I told her simply. “Either you agree to help me lie to keep Eric safe and ensure he’s under protection, or I show you how dangerous I can really be.”

“Dylan, what the fuck are you doing?” Eric asked, now tugging at my shirt to get my attention.

I snapped my head to face him, knowing it was a bad idea to take my eyes off Ana before the deal was made or shattered, but he needed to understand. “I deserve whatever happens to me. I get that. But you don’t deserve to have your life ruined when your only crime was believing in someone you care about.”

“Dylan,” Eric whispered, pulling back slowly.

“Well?” I asked, snapping my head back toward Ana.

“Do you know what you’re asking me?” she asked, her hand still on her weapon but with a loosening grip.



I couldn't help but think of the woman I must have loved in the past. I couldn't remember much about our relationship or to what extent our lives were shared. What I did know was I had loved her, and she had died because of me. I had held her body, feeling the last of her life bleeding out.

I wasn't going to make the same mistake twice, not with Eric.

"Deal or no deal?" I asked firmly.

Ana scoffed, shaking her head. "You really know how to drive a hard bargain."

"Ana, wait," Eric protested, probably sensing as I did that she'd already made up her mind.

"This is between her and me," I told him.

"The fuck it is. This is me you're talking about, what you're going to do to me."

"This is about my decisions not affecting you. So my life doesn't ruin yours."

"I made my own decisions. You don't—"

"What, have to 'ruin' my life for you? I'm not because I ruined it long ago, and now I finally have to pay for it."

"And hers?"

"That's her choice."

Eric drew himself up, and I could see the stubborn set of his jaw. "Or I could deny the version you two tell. I could tell the truth. What then?"

To my surprise, it was Ana who spoke up. "And what, get yourself locked up, cast suspicion on me when I'm going to be the one who could help look into Patterson? Possibly go to prison along with Dylan...Riley, whatever, here? You can barely look at him right now, and you're still willing to go to prison for him?"

"You're really going to say yes to this blackmail?" Eric demanded.

“Call it blackmail if you want, but if all I get blackmailed into is helping someone who’s not very good at making decisions, but for the right reasons, and bringing a freaking *crime lord* in, then I can accept it,” she said, though I could still hear that it pained her to admit it. Whether it was because I was using force or because she agreed despite whatever principles she held, I didn’t know.

“That’s...” Eric began but faltered, and I watched the fire in his eyes fade.

“The truth,” she told him with a shrug. Ana then looked at me, grimacing. “You sure?”

“Did anything I said make you think I wasn’t? Do we have a deal?”

“Fine, then I guess we have—”

Ana stopped, her body language and face positively screaming alarm and surprise as she looked past me. Turning around in my seat, I saw the group of men filing up behind us. They were all dressed reasonably nicely, save for one who stepped forward, wearing only a shirt and jeans.

“This is all very sweet,” Patterson began, looking over the three of us. “But I’m going to have to stop you there.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Eric was the first to react, pushing himself up. “Motherfucker.”

The four men with Patterson all reacted, their hands shifting toward their waists. I reached out, grabbing hold of Eric and pulling him down into his seat before he set them off further. We had both seen enough of these men to know they were more than happy to pull the trigger on either of us if it came down to it. Yet we were still alive because they wanted something from us, even if they were still willing to kill us.

“Matt?” Ana asked, standing up slowly, her eyes sweeping around the group, which began to spread out.

I recognized immediately they were trying to cut us off, making it harder for me to reposition myself if I tried anything. Between two of them, I could see the woman who worked at the sandwich place making herself scarce. I had no idea what this situation looked like to her, but she clearly sensed danger and was getting away. I sincerely hoped she had enough sense to get far away rather than just hide.

Patterson looked at Ana and winced. “Ana, I was hoping you wouldn’t be stupid enough to go looking for trouble. I believed you were smarter than that or at least too noble to go vigilante.”

“That’s not...not what I was trying to do,” Ana said, looking at the suited men around Patterson.

“I know,” he said, reaching into his pocket, drawing out a cell phone, and wiggling it at her. “I could hear everything.”

Startled, Ana drew out her own phone and looked it over in confusion. “What, but...you bugged my phone?”

Patterson shrugged. “I didn’t exactly have a lot of options. These two managed to get away when I was supposed to be the one handing them over, so I had to find them. They seemed taken with you, and given how personally you took their escape, I thought it might be worth keeping an eye on you. But well, like I said, I wasn’t expecting you to go out of your way to hunt them down.”

“If you were listening, you know damn well that’s not what I did,” she growled, pointing at him with her phone. “I know what he said, but damn it, Matt, I didn’t want to believe it.”

I didn’t know if I wanted to give the man any credit, but he at least had the decency to look uncomfortable. “You weren’t supposed to get in the middle of all this, you know.”

She snorted. “You mean I wasn’t supposed to find out you were on the take.”

I saw the annoyed twitch and resisted the urge to applaud her for getting right to the soft spot. “That too. Then again, none of this was supposed to go like it has, so I guess I shouldn’t be too surprised.”

“Oh no! The corrupt cop has had a hard time because his Mafia handlers are grumpy with him,” Eric sneered from beside me.

“You need to think very carefully about what comes out of your mouth, considering it’s only him we need,” Patterson told Eric while gesturing toward me. “You’re currently only alive because they think you might be useful.”

“Joy for me,” Eric muttered but lapsed back into silence.

“Jesus. Why, Matt? Just tell me that much. Why?” Ana asked, putting her hands on her hips.

“Is anything I say going to make you feel better?”

“Not really, but I at least deserve to know what kind of person I’ve allowed in my life for the past few years. I let you

meet my kids, Matt.”

“You know I was never good with money,” Patterson told her, rubbing his thigh anxiously. “Found myself in debt a little while back. Couldn’t get out. So it was either they take it out on me and probably my family, or I help them.”

“Define ‘a little while back’ for me,” she growled.

“Before we were partners.”

“Fucking hell. How much debt did you rack up that you needed to sell yourself to the *Russian Mafia* for years?”

Patterson gave her an empty smile. “We both know that once you’re in, no matter how you get in, you’re in for life. That’s how it works.”

“Pimped yourself out to save your own skin,” Ana retorted through clenched teeth. “You know, I always thought you were a little weird at times and distant, but I just thought you were moody. So were you a prick the whole time, or was that your conscience getting the better of you every time I treated you like a friend?”

“That is—” Patterson began and then stopped when one of the men behind him cleared his throat, muttering something I couldn’t make out. “Look, that’s not important. These two will be coming with us. That’s all there is to it.”

Eric snorted beside me. “Wow, he’s so low on the totem pole even the thugs are giving him orders.”

I watched the way Patterson flushed and snorted. “Actually, I’m pretty sure Thug One there just passed on a message from whoever’s in control right now.”

“You should know,” Patterson shot back. “Though I gotta be honest, I wasn’t expecting to find out the whole amnesia thing was real. Though if I were you, I’d be more nervous about the fact that Gabriel heard everything too.”

“Ah, right, the name I’ve heard a few times but always said by people scared shitless of him,” I said, looking over the group. “It should be interesting to put a face to the name finally.”

Patterson raised a brow. “You really don’t remember him? Or...anything?”

I shrugged. “Some things, but honestly? I’m not interested in talking to you.”

“Excuse me?” Patterson asked, his cheeks turning red again.

“You’re just the errand boy, sent to fetch someone else, and you’ll be sent away once the real business starts,” I told him with a one-shoulder shrug. “So let’s skip the part where you do a lot of talking or threat-making to make yourself feel a little more important than you actually are.”

Beside me, I heard Eric whistle, low and slow. “Wow, Ana wasn’t kidding. I’m starting to understand how you could be a little scary for some people...and mean.”

“What?” I asked him with a snort. “That’s all he is, and that’s all he’s going to be. At least the four meatheads with him are actually committed to what they’re doing, which is more than you can say about him. He’s here because he was too stupid not to get in debt to a crime family and then too cowardly to accept the consequences of his actions. Now he’s a kicked dog trying to snarl at someone he thinks he’s better than simply because he’s got his back up.”

“Wow,” Eric said again, nodding his head slowly and looking at Ana. “I swear to God, this is a whole new side of him I didn’t know existed.”

I didn’t blame Eric. It felt a little bizarre even to me to hear the entire speech come out of my mouth. On the one hand, it felt like a stranger speaking through me, and on the other, it felt familiar, like a mask I’d worn so often that I knew just how to wear it. Only now did I realize it was, at least in part, the little instinctual voice that had been guiding me from the moment I’d woken up with no memory.

Patterson’s face twisted into an ugly sneer. “Fine, have it your way, *Riley*. Since you’re so interested in meeting Gabriel again, let’s go.”

“Dylan,” Eric hissed, reaching out to grab my arm.

I gently pried his grip from my arm and pushed him back toward the table. “This was always going to end badly for me one way or another, Eric. Just...be good, okay? Be yourself.”

“Dylan, please,” Eric begged, eyes watering.

“Sorry I couldn’t be the person you thought I was,” I told him and began walking toward the group.

“Uh, no, he’s coming with us too,” Patterson said, pointing toward Eric.

“He’s no longer a part of this,” I said as I reached him. “Just leave them, and let’s get this over with.”

“I’m not going against orders just because you’re suddenly rediscovering your conscience,” Patterson said, nodding toward one of the men who stepped around me.

Before I could do more than turn to protest, another one stepped forward to speak. “No loose ends.”

He pulled out a gun and aimed, squeezing the trigger, and the bullet caught Ana directly in the chest. Wide-eyed, she fell backward, her head thumping hard against the table behind her and hitting the ground. Eric shouted in horror as the woman stirred briefly before going still. I didn’t need the goon nearest Eric to grab him and hold him back, however, I’d seen where the bullet hit. There was no coming back from a wound like that, not without an act of God anyway.

The horror and shock of seeing her gunned down was drowned out by a shout of pain from Eric. He was still fighting like a wildcat to escape the goon’s arms and try to get to where Ana lay unmoving. Another henchman was already moving forward to help his companion, and I knew my moment had come.

Lashing out, I caught the distracted Patterson in the nose with my elbow. The crack of bone was loud as he stumbled back, blood trickling from between his fingers as he fought to catch his balance.

The goon nearest him was quickest to recover and reached into his coat. I didn’t hesitate, diving forward to take advantage of his fumbling and grab his elbow. Shoving my

head forward, I slammed my forehead into the bridge of his nose. Still holding tight to his arm, I brought my knee up into his gut to double him over.

A third moved toward me, and I twisted away, reaching behind to grab the gun shoved into the holster against my back. My finger found the safety with ease, and I brought it up, squeezing twice and catching the third man in the chest to send him to the ground. As he dropped without more than a groan, the man I'd initially beaten was already picking himself up, and I spun to turn the gun on him.

"Riley!" Patterson's shrill voice shrieked through the air, and I heard Eric's pained shout.

Glancing over my shoulder, I found Patterson standing behind Eric, an arm around his neck and a gun held to his temple. Eric was bleeding from a cut above his brow, and it looked like he was already forming a black eye. My heart hammered and went out to him when I saw that instead of being terrified, he was *livid*.

"Sorry," Eric called between clenched teeth as he struggled against Patterson's hold. "Fucker sucker punched me after his friends were done holding me."

"Shut up," Patterson said before turning his attention back to me. "Now, you're going to behave yourself. Do anything I don't like, and he gets a bullet in his skull, got it?"

"Anything is pretty vague," I told him, giving a warning grunt to the goon I'd been prepared to shoot only seconds before when the man looked like he might move. "And if you're as touchy as you're coming off, you might shoot him for a stupid reason."

"And you wouldn't want that to happen, would you?"

"You don't want that either."

"I don't give a shit about him."

"Just like you didn't care about your partner," I said, glancing briefly at the unmoving figure of Officer Fitz. For a moment, I spotted the grimace on Patterson's face.



“Sh-she shouldn’t have gotten involved in the first place,” Patterson said, but I didn’t miss the quiver in his voice.

“Let me put it to you this way, Patterson,” I told him, still holding my gun on the original man. “You make the mistake of killing Eric, and it’ll be the last one you ever make.”

“You don’t get to—”

“I have a lot to lose here, but you take him out of the equation, and I have nothing left. Now, look how well I handled you morons with something to lose, imagine what I can do when I’ve got nothing.”

Did I think I could take on a focused attack from all of them? No, I did not, but that didn’t mean I wouldn’t make sure Patterson was one of the fallen. I didn’t like the sniveling little shit thinking he could threaten me or Eric, not after what we knew about him.

“Even now, you’re still going to take the arrogant route with me,” Patterson spat.

“Just like before, I’m stating pure and simple facts. It’s not my fault your fragile ego can’t handle it,” I told him icily.

Patterson’s mouth twisted and then froze when I heard soft clapping coming from the direction of the small stand. Not wanting to take my eyes off Patterson, I begrudgingly turned to find another two well-dressed grunts flanking a third man. This one stood about my height, nearly as broad in the shoulders, dressed in only a light pink dress shirt that was barely darker than his pale skin and was exceeded in brightness by the flash of red hair atop his head.

“It was always *fascinating* to watch you terrify the ever-living shit out of people,” he said with a crooked grin. “Even if it was little worms like Officer Patterson here.”

The spell I had worked on the group fell away immediately in the presence of this new man who was continuing to watch only me. In the back of my head, I felt a memory bubble up and burst. I remembered the sight of that redhead between my legs, the feel of that hair as I ran my fingers through it. I had

watched him in the early morning hours while he slept, feeling a mixture of regret and self-hatred.

“Gabriel,” I said softly, feeling my stomach turn.

“Oh? Do you remember me? Or are you just making an educated guess?” he asked.

“I remember enough to know who you are, don’t get too excited,” I told him with a scowl.

Gabriel snorted. “Ah well, the same old grumpy Riley...or is it Dylan?”

“From what little I remember, you were pretty fond of screaming out Riley, so let’s stick with that,” I told him.

The good humor on Gabriel’s face flickered. “Watch yourself.”

“What’s the matter? Don’t want people to know? Yeah, I’m sure you don’t.”

“Dylan?” Eric called in confusion. “You know him?”

“I remember a little. Like he’s the head honcho’s son, and it’s a little hazy, but he was also in line to hit the whole ‘captain’ rank,” I said, looking at Gabriel in his expensive shirt and slacks. “Just like I was, apparently. Oh, and we were sleeping together, but we don’t talk about that. We might be in the twenty-first century, but a lot of these crime families aren’t so progressive when it comes to fucking around with other men.”

“Watch your mouth, Riley, or death will be the nicest thing I give to your little boy toy,” Gabriel warned in a voice brittle as ice.

“Fine,” I grunted. “Then tell me what you want. Maybe we can get this over with before it gets too dramatic.”

“You never did like to let me have fun,” Gabriel said with a shake of his head.

If the memories that had just come back to me were any indication, I’d let him have plenty of fun. I couldn’t precisely remember why I slept with him in the first place, let alone

multiple times, but I remembered I hated it. I had gained something from the relationship, though I couldn't quite figure out what it was.

“Gabriel, not to cut your little reunion short, but we'll need to get moving. That's three different gunshots,” Patterson warned, still holding Eric tightly.

Gabriel waved him off. “Tragically, all the scared people will have to wait. Crime is so high today they aren't going to be able to send anyone out for a while. More than enough time to take care of things.”

“Jesus *Christ*, how many high-ranking cops are bought in this city?” Eric grunted.

“Now is not the time,” I told him, trying to decide if the delayed cops would work in our favor or spell greater trouble. If I could just remember what sort of person Gabriel was, I could probably figure out if I wanted him relaxed and cocky or irritated and stressed.

“Plus, I want to have a good long look at the dead man who came back, raised from the dead and reborn as...someone else,” Gabriel said, stepping closer. He stopped to look at the dead goon at his feet and then at the bleeding one and Patterson. “Well, maybe not a completely different person. You were always nasty in a fight.”

I narrowed my eyes as something fell into place. Not a memory, but just the simple act of putting together logical pieces. “You're the one who tried to kill me...in that building.”

Gabriel rolled his eyes. “It was supposed to look like a deal that went wrong. You get offed, my men and I survive, you're out of the picture, and I don't have to deal with you constantly being a pain in my ass.”

“How does that work?” I asked, racing to put all this new information into slots where it belonged. “We were both nearly the same rank.”

“And anyone with a brain knows that every leader needs captains but also a trusty right hand. Everyone thought it was

going to be you...including me,” Gabriel said, and beneath the veneer of lighthearted playfulness, I saw a spark of something ugly. “Which...is annoying. My father is a hard man to impress, I would know after all, and here you come, managing in a few short years to impress him more than I did in my entire life.”

“Right, so you tried to kill me because you have daddy issues,” I summarized, almost smiling when I heard Eric snort. It was such an absurd reaction on his part, I was beginning to wonder if he hadn’t started to lose his mind.

“You might not remember, but this is a cutthroat kind of life we lead,” Gabriel said with a shrug. “If you were stupid enough to trust me and get killed over it, then that’s just how life goes sometimes.”

“Except for the part where that didn’t happen,” I said slowly, making sense of things.

Everything that had happened, from waking up without a memory of who I was to the constant attempts on my life, had all been because of this man’s ambition. He had tried to kill me when my guard was down and only learned a few days later that he’d failed. The only reason that had happened was because I had put myself on Los Muertos’ radar without knowing what I was doing.

“And when you found out I was alive, you went into panicked cleanup duty,” I said with a chuckle. “You didn’t know that I didn’t know anything, so you were trying to put me down before...before I could get my revenge or, worse, tell your father what you tried to do behind his back.”

“He wouldn’t have been pleased if he’d heard,” Gabriel said in a tone I would have expected from someone who’d broken their mother’s vase.

“Only because you would have failed,” I said, the thought appearing in my head as I spoke it.

“Well, if you’re going to do something, even something you shouldn’t do, do it right first time,” Gabriel said, standing about ten feet from me, clasping his hands before him. “And if

you don't get it right the first time, don't fuck it up a second time."

"Considering how things have been going for you, I guess the jury's still out on whether or not you've fucked things up a second time," I said, realizing that other than Gabriel, no one else had moved.

It almost made me miss the memories I lacked. There was something charged in the air as the two of us faced each other down. The problem was he had full use of his faculties, and I was at a complete disadvantage.

"It's a shame," Gabriel said with a sigh. "When I heard you were still alive, part of me hoped to have a chance to meet you face-to-face. There was always a little twinge of regret that I never got the chance to really face you. How did you survive, by the way?"

I tightened my jaw, looking around once more, this time to see if there was something I might use to my advantage. I'd never been more glad I was so good at keeping my emotions in check than the moment my eyes fell on the spot where Ana's body lay. Except there was no body, not even a bloodstain, only what looked like small pieces of something that glittered in the sunlight.

No one else had noticed, their backs had been turned due to my scuffle with two of the goons, and I was the only one paying attention. "It turns out I wasn't as trusting as you thought. When I woke up, I was wearing a vest."

Gabriel snapped his fingers, pointing at me. "*God*, I wondered about that after I heard you were alive. It's so nice to know that even then, you weren't ready to turn your back on me. I was so sure you were dead, if not from the bullet to the heart, then the three-story fall."

"You should learn to confirm your kills," I said, wondering where Ana had gone when no one, even me, had been paying attention. "I woke up with no memory, an aching chest, and feeling like I got beat to hell, but I woke up."

“Well, it’s hard to argue with that logic,” Gabriel said with a chuckle, finally looking over at Eric. “And I’ll be very interested to hear what part this one played in everything.”

“Leave him be,” I told him, tensing when I spotted the faintest movement behind Patterson and Eric. The longer attention was turned in their direction, the more likely Ana would be spotted. I wasn’t entirely sure what the woman was doing, but I suspected. “You’re not his type.”

The comment worked, and Gabriel’s head snapped back toward me, his eyes flashing dangerously. “For all the fun you enjoyed spoiling, you were always a little too happy to try to play dangerous games when it might be better to be smarter about things.”

“C’mon, Gabriel,” I said with a snort, able to see Ana getting closer to Patterson and Eric. I needed to decide what I would do when she finally made her move. And I hoped Eric was smart enough to get away from the danger as soon as something happened. “We both know there’s not a whole lot left for me to lose at this point. I’m outnumbered, outgunned, and without many options.”

“That’s very true,” Gabriel said, unsurprisingly sounding pleased. “And I’m going to enjoy finding out what you have on that flash drive of yours too. Kind of a shame I can’t figure out who you were trying to help, but...”

“You and me both,” I said, having forgotten all about the drive in the midst of everything else. “Because I’m pretty sure you can’t torture information out of an amnesiac.”

“Shame because that would make killing you openly so much more acceptable for everyone else.” Gabriel shrugged. “Now, do me a favor, pull that drive and notebook out of your pocket, and toss them to me. And while you’re at it, why don’t you toss that gun to the ground and stop holding it to poor Gregor.”

I felt the sharp spike of adrenaline when I saw Ana rise from behind Patterson and Eric, a pipe in her hand. “Yeah, I don’t think so, Gabriel. I have other plans in mind.”

Gabriel scowled. “You have no—”

The crack of the pipe against Patterson’s skull stopped what Gabriel had to say and broke the fragile peace between everyone. Patterson cried out, stumbling to the side as blood poured down the side of his head. Eric didn’t waste time trying to figure out what happened, taking advantage of Patterson’s loosened grip and pushing the man as he tried to dash away.

The man, Gregor apparently, that I’d been holding at gunpoint, lunged forward. I stepped to the side, bashing him in the head with the gun and sending him sprawling. Before the man did much more than hit the ground and groggily try to pick himself up, I brought the gun up and squeezed once, needing only one bullet in the back of his head to end whatever ideas he might have.

It came with the same cold precision and razor-sharp intent as the fight in the alley. I didn’t have time to wonder what kind of monster I really was, however, as the rest of the group was already moving. I could see Gabriel still out in the open, rapidly backpedaling as he tried to grab the gun he kept under his loose shirt. He was completely vulnerable as he attempted to reach the two men running for cover toward him.

To my frustration, however, Patterson recovered quicker than anyone with a pipe-bashed head had any right to and was spinning on Ana. The woman had busied herself, pulling Eric with her as she shot at the men, nailing one in the chest and driving the fourth of the original group back for cover.

“Ana!” I bellowed as I saw Patterson’s gun come up and swivel onto her, fury and murder in his eyes. He might have originally hated the idea that she had been gunned down so coldly, but apparently, that didn’t count after she’d bashed him with a pipe. I could already see her reaction was too slow. She was too distracted to realize the danger before it was too late.

Eric wasn’t quite as slow.

Even as I was forced to duck a volley of bullets, I screamed in horror as Eric reared up from where he’d been crouching to grab Ana. He managed to successfully pull her away from the shot before it took her forehead off, but he

moved the wrong way and into the path of the bullet. I watched the spray of blood as the bullet caught him in the neck and the way he slumped against Ana as they slammed into the ground.

The roar of guns sounded like I was six feet underwater in a thunderstorm. The roar of the storm was the thundering of blood in my ears as my gaze honed in on the corrupt officer who stared down at Eric with shock. Even as the edges of my vision blurred, becoming vague shapes and movement, my sight of Patterson grew sharper. I could see the drops of sweat on his brow, the ugly wound from the pipe that had struck him, and the whiteness of his knuckles as he held the gun tightly.

And I saw...

*Eric's wide eyes as he stared down at the red stain on my mother's ugly rug, the flush of his cheeks as I laughed at his horror.*

*The way Eric beamed the first time I hooked an arm around his neck because, of course, we're friends, and he should stop being an idiot.*

*How warm I felt but couldn't give voice to when he showed up on my birthday when my parents hadn't even thought to leave me a card before they went out of town.*

*The sight of his passion and fire as he yelled at me because I was a stubborn idiot and I didn't know how to ask for help, and couldn't I just let him help for once?*

*The peaceful expression on his face as he nuzzled into the faint scent of me in the blankets, and I wondered how something could be so beautiful.*

My first shot caught Patterson in the gut as he turned. His mouth fell open into a perfect circle of shock and horror as he stumbled back. His gun clattered to the ground as he pressed his hand to the bleeding wound turning his shirt crimson. The corrupt officer turned to face me, confusion and fear on his face as he met my gaze. As I adjusted my aim, I saw the realization light up his eyes and the pure horror that came with it.



My second shot took him between the eyes, and he dropped, falling backward with a clatter as he took one of the chairs with him. I had no idea if I had ever taken pleasure in killing someone before, but I certainly had now.

Then there was only Eric, sprawled out on the hard concrete patio. I could hear shouts all around us and the sound of more gunshots than there should have been, but I ignored them as I ran forward. I slid to my knees beside him, tearing up my jeans and a few layers of skin in the process.

“S’okay,” Eric tried to tell me, his voice absurdly loud to my ears. “I don’t...doesn’t feel like he hit something vital.”

Blood leaked from his throat, soaking his shirt and staining the patio beneath him. Ana held on to him, tears running down her face as she stared at Eric and then glanced at Patterson’s unmoving body nearby. I had no idea what could possibly be going through her head as she stared at the man who had been a partner to her and who she’d once considered a friend.

“Eric, don’t do this to me right now,” I told him, realizing only then that the shouts were coming from men in black armor with rifles rushing down on us. “Not now, please.”

“S’okay,” he repeated, and I could see how pale he was becoming.

“I’m so sorry, Eric. I didn’t realize...you shouldn’t have,” Ana began, shaking her head as her voice became strangled.

“I’d do it again,” Eric said with a smile, limply trying to find her arm to pat her. She had her uniform top off and pressed to his neck, desperately trying to stem the flow of blood.

“You’re so fucking stupid,” I told him in a choked voice, reaching down to cup his face as gently as I could without moving his neck. “Why are you so fucking stupid?”

“Yeah, I love you too,” Eric said with a chuckle, only to wince again.

“How can you say that?” I moaned, desperate to ensure he hung on for as long as possible. Help had already arrived in

the form of guns. There had to be help in the form of medics and doctors too. “After everything.”

“Because...because you’re you,” he told me with a deep, ragged breath. “I’m still mad at you.”

“And I’m mad at you. Can we just be even and okay now?” I asked him, not caring that I sounded like a little boy as I whispered it desperately to him.

“Don’t think it works like that,” Eric said with a smile that had no strength. “I’m starting to get cold, and that’s—”

“No, no, no, *no*, Eric!” I demanded, trying to get him to keep his eyes open.

I felt hands clamp down on my shoulders and drag me back. I bellowed, lashing out at the nearest person who tried to lay their hands on me. More hands touched me, and I could hear Ana screaming, but I couldn’t make out the words. All I knew was whoever this was, they were trying to take me away from Eric, who was lying there dying because of *me*.

“Fuck, he’s strong!”

“Get his legs, get his legs!”

“Shit, my nose!”

“Where are those cuffs?”

“Motherfu—”

“Screw this. Just hit him good.”

The voices came in rapid succession, and I ignored them, lashing out at anything and everything I could see. I sensed a break in their formation and surged forward, knowing I finally had my chance. I knocked the officers away from me and took to my feet.

I saw Ana. I saw men approaching hurriedly from behind, and I saw Eric, pale and unmoving. I took a step forward and felt the sharp prick of something driving into my skin. The next thing I knew was pain ripping through me as my muscles spasmed. The agony was nothing compared to the sudden loss of control as I seized up, my body going taut.

Then I dropped, unable to stop myself as I fell bonelessly to the ground. I barely noticed the pain as my head cracked against the concrete, making it spin. Everything was growing fuzzy and dark, but I could still see Eric, now surrounded by strangers as they knelt beside him.

“No,” I moaned as I felt my arms locked behind me and cold steel pressed around them. My legs were numb, and I groaned pitifully as I was dragged roughly to my feet. “Eric, no.”

Everything was spinning around me as I was dragged away, my vision growing cloudier. I barely noticed the hissed curse of frustration from one of the men trying to lug me as I went boneless. Despair filled me as I slumped, and I wished I had done more, wished I had said more. Darkness began to overtake me, and the internal scream of horror in my head became a wail of heartbreak.

*I'm sorry, Eric. I love you.*

*I should have said it.*

*I should have said it.*

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The room they were holding me in was brightly lit to the point of making me feel half-blind while I sat in the metal chair. The air conditioning had been set to maximum, leaving my skin chilled and the metal table I sat at too uncomfortable to touch. The walls were bare of anything save for a few marks, and I knew full well the mirror set into one of the walls was one-way glass.

After dragging me here, they'd made a couple of medics look me over once they were sure I was calm enough not to lash out even when cuffed. Not that it was necessary. Once I'd woken up in the cruiser's backseat, it had been with the immediate memory of what had transpired before I lost consciousness.

*Eric.*

So, I didn't care when they practically dragged me into a police station and into this room where I was poked and prodded. I had been shot twice at some point but hadn't noticed. The bullet in my arm had been dug out, the wound cleaned and sewn shut, and the other was just a deep graze on my other side. It turned out I had also aggravated my original injury, but I couldn't recall ever noticing.

*Eric.*

I honestly had no idea how they convinced everyone I didn't need to go to the hospital first. I spared a thought for the mystery long enough to realize the FBI had to be involved for that kind of weight to be swung around so easily. Apparently,

they thought so long as I wasn't in immediate danger of dying, then I was fit to sit in a freezing interrogation room and wait for them to grill me.

*Eric.*

The clock above the one-way glass was how I knew I'd been in the room for nearly three hours. Half that time I was being fussed over by the medics, and the rest I spent sitting in the chair, hands in my lap, staring at the table. Twice someone had come in to ask if I wanted some water, but I had said nothing, keeping my vigil with the small dent in the center of the table.

*Eric.*

I heard the door open again, and I wondered if they would offer me another glass of water or maybe coffee this time. Instead, a man dressed in a trim suit marched in, closing the door behind him. He walked up to the table and dropped a thick folder between us. It covered up the dent I'd been focused on, and I frowned in annoyance.

“Agent Harkins,” he said by way of introduction.

*Eric.*

“Now,” he continued, taking the seat opposite me, “I'm going to attempt to be patient, but you have a lot of explaining to do.”

I said nothing.

After a few seconds, the agent opened the folder. “I'm trying to understand how this entire...debacle came about. You were supposed to come here for a few deals and then return to Chicago. Instead, you have managed, in no short amount of time, to set fire to a police station, steal at least two cars, assault a federal agent, start a gunfight in a crowded park, kill a police officer, and get yourself and others hurt.”

*Eric. Eric. Eric.*

I didn't know what he wanted from me, but his last words caught my attention. I looked up from my lap to look at him.

He was thin, with a pointed face and thick brows, reminding me of a scrawny owl.

“Eric,” I said slowly, feeling the pull in my chest that came every time I thought of him.

“Mr. Davis,” Agent Harkins said, glancing down at a page in front of him.

“Eric,” I repeated, summoning my brain to try to work for just this one moment. “You said...you said myself and others...got hurt.”

“I did...yes.”

“Hurt. Not killed.”

Agent Harkins blinked, folding his hands in front of him. “Both Officer Fitz and Mr. Davis, yes.”

“He’s...alive?” I asked, hearing the croak of my voice and the desperate plea stitched into every syllable.

Harkins’ brow furrowed. “Mr. Davis sustained serious injuries in the course of the...gunfight. I received an update moments before coming in here. He was hit in the neck, and the bullet nicked rather than directly striking his carotid artery. The damage was considerable, and I’m told it was touch and go during the ride to the hospital. They managed to keep him alive, though, and while he’s still under supervision, they are confident he’ll live.”

“Alive,” I said softly, feeling my heart race. “He’s...alive.”

He was badly injured and would probably be furious when he woke up, but he was alive. Relief, so enormous and pure that it stole my breath away, washed through me as I realized Eric would continue to live his life. He had been pulled in by my life, but he hadn’t been pulled under and drowned. Eric was alive, and he was going to be okay.

“Yes, Agent Levin, he’s alive,” Harkins said, arching a brow.

I went still, the ice-cold smack of shock hitting me. “Excuse me?”

Agent Harkins leaned in, peering at me. “So. What Officer Fitz reported was true?”

I slowly looked up at him, trying to understand and finding nothing. “What?”

“The amnesia. You remember nothing.”

“I remember more than before, but not much.”

“Such as?”

“That I was working for the Russian Mafia, that I was high-ranking, and that I was involved in a lot of their deals. I was apparently here to do more of that work and was betrayed by another member, Gabriel.”

And Eric. I remembered Eric. I remembered more and more, and now the memories weren't a source of pain and guilt for the death and suffering I had brought him, but joy at his existence and relief in his survival.

Oh god, he was *alive*.

“Let me get this straight,” Agent Harkins began, steepling his fingers. “It's your understanding that you are a high-ranking member of an international crime family. Guilty of an untold number of crimes...and the first thing you do upon directly interacting with a federal officer is confess that?”

“Losing your memory and going back to square one gives you a new perspective on what's important,” I told him, narrowing my eyes.

“Like the truth, apparently?”

“Not really.”

“Doing what's right?”

“Part of it.”

“Mr. Davis then?”

My lips twitched, and I leaned back. “Yes.”

A knock on the one-way glass brought Harkins' head up, and he got up from his chair, opening the interview room door.

I couldn't see who he was talking to, but their conversation was hushed and rapid.

"*That* was a genuine surprise," I managed to hear the second person insist, sounding annoyed.

"Then *you* deal with this," Harkins muttered, opening the door.

"Fine," the voice said, and despite the huskiness of it I recognized it as female.

She marched into the room, and I found myself sitting up straighter as I saw her. This agent wore a suit much like Harkins', but the uniformity didn't do much to conceal her good looks. She was tall enough that I was pretty sure she could have reached my nose, which was impressive even for other men. She filled the suit well, and her features were smooth and rounded, giving her a gentle heart-shaped face. Her bright blue eyes stood out against skin that reminded me of freshly brewed coffee and were almost as bright as the white of her smile as she sat down.

"Good to see you again, Dylan," she said in her husky voice, which exuded warmth. "Somehow, I have a feeling you don't remember who I am."

"No," I said without a trace of regret. "I've been running into that a lot lately. I'm guessing you're another agent?"

"Agent Chalon," she said, gesturing to herself. "But you can call me what you always did, Ivy."

I glanced toward the door, trying to process what Harkins had already told me and still unable to make sense of it. "I'm guessing I wasn't very good friends with him."

"You didn't have a lot of interaction with Dave, but he was never a big fan of yours, no," she said with a throaty laugh. "Then again, you were always very good at getting under his skin, so that shouldn't be a surprise."

"I guess me not remembering him hasn't made him feel any better about me," I said, wondering if they were partners or if one of them was the other's superior. However, my



previous suspicion about the FBI's interference had been spot on. I just didn't know where any of this was headed.

"I think it's irritated him more."

"Not a fan of people with brain damage?"

"More that it's difficult for him to be angry with a man who has no way of knowing what he's done wrong. Especially when..."

She trailed off, and I raised a brow. "When what?"

"When it's still very clearly you in there, and I don't mean your looks. Now you're not in shock, I can see you analyzing everything, trying to piece together the puzzle with every new crumb of information you get. Meanwhile, that dry sense of humor and sharp tongue of yours is making a reappearance. It's not totally you, but...I can see it, the Dylan I knew."

"I don't know you," I told her stubbornly. I didn't like the feeling of being known by someone who was a stranger to me. I'd been the same way with Eric too, but with him I'd had the time to trust him again, and in better circumstances.

"Well, I know you, or at least who you were before," she said, folding her hands in front of her. "So let me tell you some of the things I know. You joined the Bureau eleven years ago, at the age of twenty. You started at the bottom and were moved around to find the right fit. It took a few years, but eventually, you landed in our department, mainly dealing with crime families and...undercover work."

"I...joined at twenty?" I asked with a frown, shaking my head. "There's no way."

"See, that's where you're wrong," she said, pulling a small stack of papers from the bottom of the pile and sliding them over to me. "It sounded wild to everyone when we heard you supposedly had memory issues, but my hunch told me to grab what parts of your file I was allowed. It's not much, but in our line of work, it's very good that your information isn't easy to get ahold of."

Eyeing her warily, I pulled the pages toward me, blinking at the photo, staring into my own face. There was my name,

Dylan Levin, born to Deborah and Noah Levin, and I had, in fact, joined when I was twenty, with only an associate's degree in psychology under my belt. What little was left on the page showed some of the departments I had worked for and the various training I'd gone through.

I looked over the list of specialized training and snorted. "I liked to fight...I guess that explains some things over the past few days."

"You told me you thought you would end up in the FBI version of SWAT, so I figured you might as well be ready. That is until I spotted you and took an interest. That's when I realized I wasn't seeing a warrior. I was seeing something else entirely, something...more."

I grimaced as a fragment bubbled up in my mind. "You called me a predator."

She cocked her head. "You remember?"

"I remember you saying I was a predator and then you laughed when I stopped talking...you're senior in rank," I added in sudden realization. "So I couldn't tell you to go fuck yourself."

Ivy chuckled, nodding. "Not with your words, but your eyes told me enough. And maybe predator isn't the right word, but it felt right at the time, and it's what we needed. From the start, you had good instincts, even untrained. You had a good idea what was and wasn't a good decision. You were the only new team member that made it through the self-extraction test on the first try."

"Self-extraction?" I asked in confusion.

"We drop you into a random city somewhere in North America with limited supplies and a time limit. The whole time trained agents are hunting you down, trying to bring you in."

"Wow, way to make me sound like a badass," I said dryly. "Anything else to pad my ego?"

She shook her head. "You misunderstand. Some people were better at being quiet than you, at blending in, and even a

couple who made some inspired choices with phones and computers. You were the only one who not only consistently made smart choices, but you did it fast, and...you never hesitated. Or held back.”

“Held back? In a training exercise?”

“You were told not to treat it as one. Everyone else did. You were the only one, which led to some interesting results.”

I thought back to the past few days and sighed. “Oh boy.”

“The agent you left drugged and knocked out cold in some backroom supply closet where no one thought to look. He was quite pissed until a passing homeless person heard his pounding and helped him...twelve hours after he’d woken up. Then there were the two you led into an ambush because you had the first one’s radio. Only a mild concussion for one of them and a sprained wrist for the other. That was perhaps the only time I think you held back.”

“Well, it’s nice to know my enthusiasm wasn’t dimmed before I lost my memory,” I grumbled.

“Point is, you did exactly what you were ordered. You got your shit together, you got out of that city, and you didn’t treat it like an exercise. You were exactly what I was looking for. All I needed to know was how you handled learning how to act and new languages,” she said, tapping the table thoughtfully.

“Which is where the Russian Mafia comes in,” I said slowly. “And why I know Russian so fluently...but Portuguese?”

“You infiltrated as a sort of merc for the family,” Ivy explained. “We had enough influence to get you noticed and in a good way. After that, you started getting things done for them that put you in higher regard. They figured out pretty quickly you had a good head on your shoulders, that you knew how to take care of yourself, but you knew how to deal with a situation without always needing to kill someone or maim them.”

“I did, though, didn’t I?” I asked, feeling a cold trickle of dread and self-hatred running down my spine. “I did hurt people...and killed them.”

“I’ll assume you aren’t referring to people like Officer Patterson,” she said with an arch of her brow.

“Not in the slightest,” I growled.

She smiled at that. “Cute.”

“Right, I’m fucking adorable.”

“You always kept things close to your chest. It was another reason I thought you’d be good for this. But you mentioned Eric a few times before you went in so deep that you were exclusively living a second life. I always wondered about this person you mentioned, but now I think I understand better.”

“We’re not talking about him, not right now,” I said, jabbing my finger at the folder.

“You learned Portuguese in your spare time, and when you started going deeper, you decided to be more cautious. You left notes and information for us to find at designated places,” Ivy explained, shifting the pages around and looking over them. “You devised the code for it and managed to get it to us so we could decode the information. That was before the head of the family, Dmitri, started taking personal notice of you.”

“Dmitri,” I said, rolling the name through my head and finding only the smell of scotch bubbling up in my memories. “Wait, what about Gabriel?”

For the first time I saw annoyance flash over her features. “Dead.”

“And that’s not a good thing?” I asked in disbelief.

“No,” she said stiffly. “Not when the entire point of this operation was for you to feed us as much information as you could get to chip away at their empire steadily. That would be enough to keep you in there while you gathered more and more evidence to go after the various heads of the hydra.”

I arched a brow. “Even without my memories back, I can tell you that’s a nonsense plan. Anything I found while

committing a crime would have been inadmissible in court and had me locked away along with half of your department.”

“What the public doesn’t know won’t hurt them, not when it comes to taking down the monsters who would happily throw them into the local dumpster,” Ivy said in a clipped tone.

“Fine,” I grunted. “I can get on board with the whole ‘greater good’ bullshit, but that doesn’t make what I said any less true.”

“Because you weren’t feeding us evidence, you were feeding us ways to *find* evidence. You were in the heart of things and got deeper than anyone else, and you did it in only a few years. You were able to feed us ways to dig up information on all of them and tie it back to them. In another couple of years, or less, we could have easily gathered enough evidence to bring them crashing down,” Ivy told me, and now I understood the source of her frustration.

“Until...this,” I said.

“You were supposed to be here with Gabriel, helping to formulate a better business arrangement between your people and Los Muertos. You were to drop off all the information you’d gathered in the past few months and signal when it was safe.”

“My old house,” I said thoughtfully. “Since I wasn’t Dylan anymore, that meant the house couldn’t be tied to me. Especially if I hadn’t used it in a while.”

“Exactly. We were nervous about your return to Port Dale, but you were confident you wouldn’t be spotted by anyone you knew,” Ivy said with a snort. “Clearly, you were wrong.”

“I probably wouldn’t have been if it hadn’t been for a little bit of sabotage and betrayal on Gabe’s part,” I said, then winced at the casual nickname. “Gabriel.”

The corner of her mouth twitched. “Don’t worry, we already knew about your relationship with him. You were open about it, and it also gave us an avenue to keep an eye on local

male prostitution and escort services in cities where he used them.”

“Fantastic,” I muttered. Of course, I would have thought my personal life was on the table to be shared. Then again, the more I thought about it, the more it made sense, and I felt my annoyance fade.

Then I remembered *her*.

“Wait, before we go any further, I need to know two things.”

“O...kay.”

“One thing at a time.”

“Alright, first thing.”

“I...there was a woman...she was important to me, and I got her killed, or I killed her,” I said, looking away from Ivy for the first time as the familiar shame welled up.

“Katya,” Ivy said instantly, though her husky voice went soft. “She was the first time we were worried about what was happening with you. A cousin of Gabriel’s and a free spirit, if one can exist in that sort of family.”

“You thought I might have been going native,” I whispered, a dawning suspicion creeping up on me. “Did you —”

“No,” Ivy said instantly with a shake of her head. “They found out she was passing information freely to the CIA, of all things.”

“The CIA was involved too?” I asked in surprise.

“Which we didn’t know,” Ivy said with an iciness that told me she still wasn’t happy about that bureaucratic fuckery. “She was angling to bring down a few family members in exchange for a life far away from her own family.”

“We don’t have to live this life forever, you know?” I whispered, hearing her voice in my ear as I repeated Katya’s words. We had been curled up on an oversized chair outdoors, staring out at Lake Michigan as the sun crept beneath the

horizon. For all the darkness and horror of my life at the time, she was so bright and warm, and I hadn't noticed the ulterior message in her words.

"Dylan?" Ivy asked.

"The family found out," I said dully. "They killed her. That's what happened, isn't it?"

"Yes," Ivy said, lips thinning. "We thought we would have to extract you right then and there. We hadn't realized how deeply you felt for her, but...you refused. Made vows that you would keep to your mission and then went dark."

"Wow, Eric's right. I'm good at inspiring confidence and hope in people," I snorted, leaning back in my seat.

Ivy sighed, shaking her head. "Thankfully, we have a few feelers out in the family, and we heard about this up-and-comer who had made an impression on the people who mattered. That's when we learned that you were hell-bent on doing exactly what you said."

"Or I just wanted to strangle the boss with my bare hands," I muttered, thinking of how easily I had killed Patterson when he'd shot Eric. If my feelings for Katya had been anything like they were for Eric, I could only imagine how much I wanted revenge. "I held her as she died. I found out about the hit on her and was willing to blow my cover to get to her in time."

"I...suspected as much," Ivy said slowly.

"And you didn't force me out?" I wondered with a frown. "If you thought I was a danger to the operation, you should have stepped in."

"I nearly did. But despite being told I needed to, and reason telling me it was the right decision, I held back. My gut told me to keep faith, so I did, and up until recently I thought I had more than enough proof to show my faith wasn't misplaced."

"You mean the part where I, from your eyes, disappeared and then started popping up all over the city to start chaos seemingly everywhere I went."

“Truth be told, my faith wasn’t tested so much as my reason. Your disappearance was troubling, but it wasn’t the first time you’d been delayed in giving a signal you were safe and we could move to a drop point. Mostly, I was baffled as to what you were doing or attempting to do.”

“And then you got the police report from Ana.”

“Which did little to clear the muddied waters.”

“Trust me,” I said with a snort. “The waters have been muddy as hell in my head, so I don’t blame you.”

“Still, we’ll get there,” she said, tapping her jaw. “You had one more thing to ask me?”

“I lied,” I said without a shred of guilt. “Two more things.”

“Fine,” she said with a slow smile. “But you’re not allowed to add any more after this.”

“Deal. What are you going to do with Eric?”

“Do?” she asked, a crease forming in her brow. “We have questions for him, obviously, though those will have to wait until he’s stronger. Other than that, I don’t see what else we can do with him.”

“You’re interrogating me as either a member of the Mafia or a rogue agent,” I pointed out. “And he was aiding and abetting everything I did, at least from your view.”

“And you disagree with that view?”

“He was as ignorant of all this as I was.”

Ivy chuckled, clasping her hands in front of her and resting them on the table. “You’re not being treated as either of those things. Remember, this entire operation was strictly under the table and with a minimal, easily destroyed trail.”

I blinked. “Which meant, if I were caught, there would be no connection between what I was doing and the government.”

“Precisely. Which, I’ll point out, you agreed to from the onset.”



I waved her off. “I figured as much. It just...explains some things, is all.”

“I would not want to live in the scattered jigsaw that is your mind,” she quipped, and I thought the sympathy on her face was genuine.

“So what, you’re going to question him, and that’s it?” I asked, getting back to the topic at hand.

“Precisely. We need the perspective of everyone we can safely and covertly question,” she said with a shrug. “Which makes it simple, as we can treat it as the FBI interfering with catching a high-profile member of the Mafia. And don’t worry, his involvement will be left out of the press, and any documents will be treated as anonymous.”

“Good,” I said, settling back in my seat. “But let’s not pretend that doesn’t leave him vulnerable.”

“True, but I have a few ideas,” she said with a smile.

“Such as?”

“Is that your final question?”

“You know it’s not.”

She smiled. “We’ll talk about that a bit later. I’m still ironing out a few details, and you may not remember this, but I’m not a woman to reveal my plans until I’m sure of them.”

I disliked not knowing what she was up to, but on some level, I could respect her attitude. If she was half as good as she made herself out to be, I could appreciate her not speaking until she was confident.

“Fine, last question...do I get to see him?”

“You’re being treated as a criminal so everyone in this precinct will think we’re treating you as one. Tragically, you’ll manage to break free when we transport you and will be killed during your attempt to escape.”

The corner of my mouth twitched. “You’re killing Riley?”

“There’s too much mess around the name now. Too many questions would be asked. Dmitri’s son is dead, and he’s going

to start digging, and we can't risk him digging in the wrong direction. Even if that wasn't the case, in your current state... you're not fit to continue the operation, so yes, Riley is dead."

"Was there a point to telling me that, other than just information? Because that didn't answer my question."

Ivy leaned forward, ducking her head a little as she smiled. "It means you're not a criminal. So yes, with some provisos, and after you and I have talked about what's happened this past week, I'll arrange for you to be able to see him."

Which marked the second time in our conversation I felt elation. "Alright, then I suppose you should start asking your questions."

"Good," she said, drawing out a notebook and pen. "Then we'll start from the top, the first thing you remember."

"Other than the massive headache and feeling like someone beat me with a bat?" I asked wryly.

"Right, start from there."

"Okay," I said, leaning back in my seat and taking a deep breath. "I can't explain what it's like to slowly realize you have no idea who you are, let alone where you are, but that's where it started."

## THIRTEEN FOURTEEN

To my absolute lack of surprise, it took the rest of the day and well into the next before Ivy was finally satisfied with my version of events. She handed me plenty of questions and liked to come back to details I thought we'd already covered. I suspected she was trying to catch me in inconsistencies, but that was the least of my concerns. I had already decided to turn myself in and speak the truth, save for how much Eric had involved himself. It turned out it was an even easier decision to make now I'd learned I wouldn't be shipped off to prison.

That didn't change the fact that I was intensely suspicious the entire time I was stuck in that room. Even when they provided me with a private room to sleep in overnight, one with a comfortable cot, and fed me decent food. I couldn't tell if it was because I was naturally suspicious or if too much had happened for me to trust easily. I simply couldn't shake the suspicion that I was being tricked into telling the whole truth under the guise of being a federal agent so I would speak openly and honestly without fear of reprisal.

To my surprise, however, Ivy concluded that she was satisfied for the moment, though, of course, there would be more interviews in the future. I took the opportunity to ask her when I'd be able to see Eric. She gave me a small, pleased smile and told me she would arrange for it to happen within the next hour.

It had taken two, and even when they slipped me out of the building in cuffs to keep up appearances for the cops, I still wondered if I was being arrested for real. Yet the moment I

was placed in the back seat, the agent who slid in with me removed the cuffs.

Only when the hospital came into view and we parked near the back did I finally believe it was real. I didn't even care that the two agents who had traveled with me were also escorting me into the hospital and up to the floor where Eric was supposedly recovering.

"Is there a time limit?" I asked when we stepped out of the elevator.

"No," Agent Harkins told me, his mouth a thin line. "At least not a short one. You have the night, but come morning we'll need to leave and get you out of the city."

"Do you mind not following me into his room?" I asked when I realized they'd stayed close on my heels.

Agent Harkins' mouth somehow managed to grow even thinner, practically disappearing. "We'll stay outside the room, but that's the best you're getting."

"How gracious of you, Agent Harkins," I said dryly. "I'm starting to understand why the old me enjoyed pissing you off, you officious prick."

I heard a soft exhale from the other agent, who looked serious and attentive when Harkins snapped his head around to glare. I wasn't sorry in the slightest. Harkins hadn't exactly been an outright bastard to me, but neither had he bothered to hide his dislike. His 'gracious' offer had probably come directly from Ivy, so I wasn't going to pretend to be grateful for a bit of privacy.

"We'll wait here," the other agent intoned a couple of yards from the door at the end of the hall. "Take whatever time you need. There's plenty to keep us occupied."

I nodded, stepping into the dark room lit only by a thin strip of lights lining the bottom of the walls. It was enough that I could make out everything clearly, but wouldn't disturb someone trying to sleep.

Approaching the bed, I felt my chest squeeze as I found Eric lying on his back. His chest rose and fell gently. He

almost looked peaceful, as though nothing was wrong with him, save for the large bandage on his neck. At the side of the bed, I reached out, and rather than touch his wound, I lay my hand over his arm.

“Oh, Eric,” I said, my voice tight. He was alive, but that did nothing to alleviate my guilt. If it hadn’t been for me, he’d still be happily working at his clinic, none the wiser, whole and healthy. “I’m so sorry.”

I froze when I heard a throat clear behind me. Spinning around, I reached for my gun, only to find my wounded side instead. I gritted my teeth before I realized I was staring at Ana Fitz, staring at me from an armchair in the corner.

“I wondered if they might be nice enough to release you long enough to see him,” she said softly, looking me over. I could see dark circles under her eyes and the way the bandage on her arm glowed under the blue light.

“Shit, I forgot all about you,” I admitted before catching myself. “Sorry, I, uh, didn’t mean...”

“You’ve been busy and clearly had someone else you were more worried about than some cop who almost got to haul your ass in,” she said with a small smile. She was being gentle, but I could tell she was watching me carefully. “I’ve been keeping an eye on him.”

“Thank you,” I said, meaning it. I knew Ivy had set people around the building in case anything happened to Eric, but I appreciated her gesture all the same.

She shrugged. “Eric saved my life, and it almost cost him his. Watching him while he slept was the least I could do.”

“Can...can he talk?” I wondered, panic spiking as I realized I hadn’t been told the full effects of his wound.

Her mouth curled at the corner wryly. “Oh, he can talk. His throat is sore, and it’s rough on him, but I don’t think that’s the problem.”

“No,” I said, glancing down at him. “I suppose the problem is me.”

“Surprise, surprise,” she said, her tone losing its gentleness. “So, what are they going to do with you? Make a deal? Throw you in a hole?”

I laughed, partially because I forgot I was the only one in this debacle who knew the truth, but mostly because the truth felt so absurd. “I’m afraid that’s classified.”

She arched a brow. “Classified? You can just tell me you don’t know.”

“No, I do,” I told her, meeting her eyes and hoping she understood what I meant. I would tell the truth to Eric, but I didn’t want Ana fully in the loop. Not because I thought she would run her mouth but because it would probably be safer for her. “But I’m under orders to treat it as highly classified.”

Her brow stitched together even more tightly. “Orders to...”

I watched her carefully and saw the moment realization struck. Once again, I nearly laughed when I watched her face go slack with shock. After all, even if as a prisoner I was given special treatment to make a hospital visit, my entourage would be hot on my heels, and I’d be handcuffed. Not to mention, there would have been no ‘orders’ any prisoner was expected to follow, let alone have any respect for classified information.

“This...this whole time?” she managed, lowering her voice after glancing at the doorway. “You’re a fed? Are you shitting me?”

“Sorry,” I said with a smirk. “Anything about the ongoing investigation and my role in it is—”

“Classified,” she finished with a snort, flopping back in her seat to rub her eyes with her palms. “Shit, that would explain a lot. Undercover work? No, right, classified. Blink twice if I’m right.”

I rolled my eyes. “It is what it is.”

“I just,” She flopped her hands before her in frustration. “I have so many questions, and you probably couldn’t answer half of them. This whole thing has been driving me crazy, and

Eric's absolute conviction that you were a good man has been sticking with me."

I wondered just how true that was, even in the face of this new revelation. I doubted I'd managed to work my way through a crime family without getting my hands dirty. But I might never remember all the things I'd done. Everything I knew about amnesia told me I might steadily have my memory returned to me, it might simply stop where it was, or I might just get parts of it back. There was no telling until I was properly examined by experts.

I couldn't wait until Eric gave me as many "I told you so's" as he could muster.

"I wouldn't be too worried about it," I said with a shrug. "Even someone who seems good can be rotten inside. The world is full of liars, and well, it's not like I could be who I am...or was."

A shadow passed over her face. "Yeah, you're right about that."

"Hey," I said, feeling pity for her passing through me. "I'm sorry about Patterson."

"Surely that's not an apology for killing him," she said neutrally.

"No," I said immediately. "I'm not sorry for that. He tried to kill you and nearly killed Eric. I just meant I'm sorry because...well, you thought he was a friend."

"Yeah," she said bitterly, wiping at her mouth. "Up until he pulled that trigger on me, or Eric, I guess, I thought maybe there was a chance there was something worthwhile in him. But you know, that kind of gets thrown out the window when they try to kill you."

"How long do you think you'll beat yourself up for not spotting what he was before it was too late?" I asked because I could see the guilt taking shape on her face.

"Oh, a while," she said with a snort. "Are you going to tell me it isn't my fault, that anyone could have been fooled, or that I'm only human?"

I shrugged. “Why would I? Nothing I say will make you feel better. You’ve gotta figure out your own answers.”

“Yeah, that sounds about right. You don’t strike me as a platitude or advice kind of guy,” Ana said with a smile. It was small and fragile, but it wasn’t hollow, so I thought maybe she might be okay when she got through to the other side of this.

“So, I kinda have a question for you,” I said slowly. “I know I’m not exactly in a position to demand answers, but it’s been bugging me.”

“If it’s not all that personal or involved, shoot,” she said, then winced. “God, bad phrase. Bad, bad phrase.”

I smiled. “How did you survive? We all saw you take a bullet straight to the chest.”

Her smile was wistful, sad and thoughtful as she dragged a golden chain from her pocket, holding it up to the light. “My grandfather’s pocket watch. Call it luck, call it coincidence, but that old thing took the bullet for me.”

“Really?” I asked and then remembered the glittering bits I’d seen on the ground where she’d lain.

“I like to think it was his way of looking out for me when I needed it the most. He was always the protective sort,” she said with a chuckle, winding the chain through her fingers. “Though, I wish it didn’t mean I lost the watch. But I’m not going to look a gift horse in the mouth.”

“If he was watching out for you, you owe him a big thank you.”

“I owe him a lot more than that, but...that’s my business.”

I nodded in understanding. We all had our secrets.

Her attention flickered to Eric. “He’s still in deep, isn’t he?”

“Yeah,” I admitted, turning to face Eric and gently squeezing his arm. “He and I have a lot to talk about.”

“That I’m sure of...you’re going to tell him?”

“I’m going to try.”



“I meant, like, about the stuff you can’t tell me.”

“He’s a part of it, and I volunteered to deliver the news.”

Ana snorted, pushing herself out of her seat. “You know, here I was thinking Eric was the self-sacrificing dolt, but I’m starting to think you’re the holder of that title.”

“Nah,” I said, gently stroking Eric’s arm. “He’s the one who sacrifices himself for others. It’s in his nature.”

“Really? Because he’s mentioned a few things while he’s been in bed.”

“I thought you said he didn’t talk.”

“He talked, just not much.”

“That’s not like him.”

“No. Despite how much this hurts, he still wants to believe you’re the man he knew before. Even though you’ve kept many more secrets than I’ll ever know about, he still wants to believe. He’s more stubborn than anyone I’ve ever known, and that’s saying something,” Ana said softly. “But you know what he said? It’s stuck with me because it was the first thing he said after waking up after surgery.”

“What?” I asked, turning to face her.

Ana reached up to lightly scratch at her jaw. “He wondered what it was *you* had sacrificed. That was it, pretty much word for word. And now I’m starting to wonder the same thing.”

“Don’t,” I said, turning back to Eric. “Just...keep being the woman you are, okay? It’s good to know that despite having cops like Patterson, there are still cops like you too.”

“Funny, he said almost the same thing when I thanked him for saving my life. Just with more swearing when Matt was brought up,” she said with a chuckle.

“That sounds about right,” I said, smirking down at Eric’s sleeping face.

“I don’t know what waits for you and him,” she said, surprising me with a soft kiss on my cheek. “But you take care

of him as best you can, got it? Because God and his apostles know he will do the same for you.”

“Goodbye, Officer Fitz,” I whispered.

“Goodbye, Agent Levin.”

I barely heard her footsteps despite the hush of the room, but I could tell she was gone. Rounding the hospital bed, I pulled a chair up to sit by Eric’s bedside. I desperately wanted to talk to him, to see his eyes open and to hear his voice, but he needed sleep.

Laying my head on his thigh, I took his hand in mine and waited for him. Just like he’d waited for me so many times in the past.



The room was still as dimly lit as before when I opened my eyes again, only my grogginess giving away the fact that I had fallen asleep. Nothing seemed to have changed much except the pair of eyes staring at me.

“They let you come,” he said softly, his voice hoarse as he tried to smile.

I sat up too fast, smacking my knee on the metal bed frame. Muttering curses under my breath, I inched closer to him. “You’re awake.”

“I’ve...been awake a few times,” he said, clearing his throat and wincing. “Shit, sorry. Feels like the worst strep I’ve ever had.”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t talk too much,” I told him with a frown.

“No,” he said, taking his time as he spoke. “If this is the last time I get to see you, I wanna talk.”

“Well, that’s part of the reason I’m here,” I admitted slowly. “There’s some things I need you to hear...and things you have to decide.”

He frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I got a few of our mysteries answered while they had me in ‘custody’ the past couple of days,” I told him, squeezing his hand. Relief flooded me when I felt him return the gesture.

“You gonna fill me in?”

“Yes, but there’s good news and bad news.”

“St-start with bad.”

“Figures. Turns out I was hiding a lot more from you than either of us knew,” I said. Honestly, the more I thought about myself and who I was, the more confusing it became. Even if I got all my memories back, would I be my old self or something else? If all I ever got was what I had now, could I really refer to myself from the past as being me?

I was starting to understand why I’d chosen this line of work instead of philosophy.

“Figured that much,” he said with a slow, thick swallow. “Might as well...get it out...right?”

“Yeah,” I agreed, even as my stomach flipped and twisted. “Turns out...I joined the FBI at twenty years old.”

After a couple of seconds, Eric replied, “I...didn’t know that.”

“Yeah,” I said with a wince. “Kinda figured that out. I, uh, don’t know why I kept that from you, and it’s been bothering me. I’m sorry. I wish I could remember why I did something like that, but...”

I trailed off when Eric pulled his hand free from mine, and I let it go without a fight. It stung to see him drawing away from me, but I couldn’t blame him either. I’d kept secrets from him, and I couldn’t explain why.

His finger flicked *hard* against my nose.

“Ow!” I yelped, jerking back to cover my nose. “What the hell?”

“Ass,” he breathed, glaring at me.

“Christ, how do you do that so hard?” I groaned, rubbing my nose. I honestly thought it would have been kinder for him to punch me. “Aren’t you supposed to be recovering from surgery?”

“For m-my neck, not my hands,” he told me with a glare. “And I know...why you did it, even if you can’t...can’t remember.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re an ass.”

“You’re as helpful as I am comforting,” I grumbled at him.

“You did it to...to protect me,” he said softly, even as he glared at me. “Didn’t want me to...worry. You were always...doing shit like that. Used to drive me crazy.”

“That was one of my theories,” I admitted, giving up and hanging my head. “You worry and fuss as it is, so I’m sure it was no different back then.”

“It’s called caring about someone...you *ass*,” he hissed.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “And there’s nothing I can say to take it back. I wish I could say it was because I lost my memory, and my stance has changed, but...I think it’s just seeing you deal with all this shit that did it. I underestimated you and worried too much about how you’d handle it. That was a mistake on my part. I’m sorry, and you can bet I won’t make that same mistake again.”

“Keep that promise...and you don’t have to be sorry anymore,” he said, easing his hand into mine once more to squeeze me again. “But...I guess that means I was...was right, doesn’t it?”

“Does it?” I asked in sudden confusion.

He gave a soft exhale that I took to be a gentle snort. “You were working. That’s...what you were doing with the...those people...isn’t it?”

“Here,” I said, getting up and retrieving a glass of water from the ensuite bathroom and handing it to him. “Drink this

for a bit while I explain what was told to me, alright? Might help you talk a bit better when I'm done.”

Eric silently took the offered glass with a nod, and I took the opportunity to launch into the story. There wasn't much I could tell him, only relate what Ivy had told me. Most of my memories of that time were absent, and deep down, part of me wished I would never get those memories back. I had no doubt my time working for the crime family had been deeply unpleasant, and I had probably done things I wouldn't want to relive.

It took me far less time to explain what I had been doing before I returned to Port Dale. Long enough for me to refill Eric's water glass, pausing only when he requested some hot tea which I asked the agent that wasn't Harkins to get for him. By the time I finished, Eric was starting to sip the tea tentatively.

“And then it all went tits up from the moment I decided to go with Gabriel to that meetup, and then I woke up sometime later,” I finished, glancing at the TV. I hadn't realized Ana had been watching the news and frowned as I realized they were talking about the shooting and Gabriel's death alongside Patterson's.

“It's all they keep talking about,” Eric said in a voice much stronger than before, though still a little scratchy. “I kept waiting to see when your name would pop up, but it never did. Now I know why.”

Falling into silence, I sat beside him, staring at my hands. I hadn't even considered the news coverage that would follow, but it made sense. A massive shootout in an upper-class part of the city? At least one officer of the law dead, along with the son of a major crime figure? They would probably talk about it for days, and the FBI was probably playing constant damage control.

No wonder Ivy had seemed irritated.

“You seem...more yourself than you did before,” Eric noted, looking me over.

“I don’t feel any different,” I admitted, though I wasn’t sure that was the best measure. It wasn’t like I would notice too many changes in myself, especially if they happened without fanfare.

“I don’t know how to put my finger on it. Something about you seems more...stable and solid. Maybe just because you know more about yourself, found out the truth, it was enough to make it happen,” Eric said, still watching me.

I could see the twinkle in his eyes and couldn’t help my heavy sigh. “Look, just get it out of your system so we can get to the other potentially bad news.”

“I *told you so*,” he said with a delight that seemed completely out of place given the circumstances. “The whole damn time, you were being this angsty shit about how evil and awful you probably were.”

“I’ll point out that you were starting to believe it yourself,” I interrupted.

He waved me off. “I just spent days fighting for my life, terrified, confused, and constantly worrying about you. Then I have all this information that just doesn’t fit, and that’s pretty much the only information I’m getting. But you know what? Even when I doubted it the most, I didn’t actually believe it.”

“Yeah, Ana said something about that. She also called you a self-sacrificing idiot,” I told him, enjoying his scowl.

“I told her to go home hours ago,” Eric huffed. “The bullet only nicked me. I was—”

“Don’t you dare say you were fine,” I told him, glaring at him with sudden heat. “I heard how bad it got. Don’t lie.”

“Like you did to me for years?” he shot back.

“I’m not lying now,” I told him stubbornly. “I can’t take back what I did before, and you were the one who said if I made changes, I didn’t have to be sorry. I’m *still* sorry, but it’s not fair to throw that back in my face.”

Eric blinked, let out a low breath, and nodded. “Alright, that’s fair.”

“I was terrified out of my mind when I saw you bleeding out on the pavement,” I told him, not surprised to feel my eyes sting at the memory. With anyone else, I would have fought the reaction, but this was Eric. “All I wanted was to keep you safe, and then you...Christ, Eric, you’re such an idiot. Why did you do that?”

“Why did you stand up for Mr. Reyes? Why did you keep your career in the FBI a secret? Why didn’t you tell me that you would disappear and become a fucking mole in the Russian Mafia?”

“I—”

“Because that’s who you are. You protect people, even when it’s too much fucking protection, and you’re an idiot for going that far. It’s what you’ve always done. I’m not surprised by what I’ve found out. Pissed and irritated? Yes. But I knew what kind of person you were long before you started keeping more and more from me. I knew it when I saw you in the clinic.”

I couldn’t help my smile. “I remember seeing you in the clinic the first time. I had no idea who you were, but I remember that seeing you was when I realized that whoever I was, I was *definitely* into guys.”

“Well, I am pretty adorable,” he said, then wrinkled his nose. “And while we’re on the subject, Gabriel? Really? I mean, he was pretty good-looking, but—”

“Oh God,” I groaned, pressing my warm face into the bed. “I don’t remember why. I was disgusted by him, but I slept with him. I think I was using him.”

“And...the woman?”

“Katya. She’s...complicated. Maybe when we have time, and I can remember more, I’ll tell you about her.”

“You loved her?”

“I think so. At the very least, I cared a great deal about her.”

“And she died in your arms.”

“She did.”

Eric’s face fell, and he reached up to stroke my cheek gently. “I’m sorry.”

I reached up to lay my hand over his, returning his sympathy with a smile. “What memory I have of her is enough to tell me that things can be fleeting, and it’s better to take what you have while you still have it. Especially after...after seeing you practically bleed out in that park.”

“I’d say I’m sorry for that, but...” Eric trailed off, shrugging the shoulder that wasn’t on the same side as his wound.

“You are who you are,” I finished, and it was my turn to reach up and stroke his face. “My point is, my greatest regret at that moment, other than thinking I’d lost you, was that I hadn’t told you the truth, and you deserved to hear it.”

“What’s that?” he asked, leaning into my touch.

“That you were right. I do love you. And I suspect I probably loved you long before I ever lost my memory. Even if I didn’t, I do now, and I’m sorry I didn’t have the sense to say it before,” I said, chest tightening.

His eyes fluttered open, burning with an emotion I couldn’t quite put words to, but I knew how much they warmed me. “And I love you. Have for ages. Even in the moment of my greatest doubt, I still loved you.”

Maybe Eric saw me as a protector, but it was all too easy to see him as a protector in his own right. He had literally protected me when he needed to, and Ana as well. And he had also helped protect me from myself, drawing me back from the edge when I threatened to tip over into my own inner darkness and doubt.

Eric yawned heavily. “So I guess we have to talk about what comes next, don’t we?”

“It does have to happen soon,” I said, giving in and laying my head on his thigh again.

“How bad is it?”



“Well...”

“I’m not going to be allowed to stay in Port Dale, am I?”

I winced. “They, uh, don’t think that’s a good idea. All of them went down in the gunfight with the FBI, but they’ve got reason to believe Gabriel’s father will start digging...and that enough was relayed back to them that they’ll know to look for you. Especially with Los Muertos on good terms with them, I’m sure they’d be happy to tell them about you if it meant getting on their good side.”

“So...time for me to get uprooted then?” he asked with an unreadable expression.

Guilt hit me once again. “I’m sorry, Eric. I know how much of your life is rooted here, but...they’re pretty sure your life won’t keep going after information gets out. You’re going to be in danger, and I insisted they take care of you. You won’t count as a witness, but you can still have protection.”

“My dad?”

“He’ll be watched, but he can’t know where you end up.”

“Could I still...talk to him?”

“Probably. And maybe in the future you could even see him, I don’t know. So much of it is unknown for everyone involved right now.”

Eric’s mouth worked nervously. “And...you?”

“I’m pretty much out of commission for good. Even if I hadn’t lost my whole memory, I was too compromised to continue what I was doing. And anywhere they put me in the US, I would risk being recognized. They’re going to send me somewhere overseas, on indefinite leave until they can determine that I’m fit to do something again,” I said, still not sure how I felt about that. If my short time at Eric’s had taught me anything, I wasn’t very good at being left on my own with little to do.

“Could...if I take the protection, could I come with you wherever you go?” Eric asked quietly.

I had presented the same question to Ivy, and all she had said was that she would look into it. A gleam in her eye told me I would probably have my way, but she didn't want to promise anything. That at least fit with the rest of her personality, and I had let the matter drop.

"We're going to have to see, but even if it's yes, and I'm kinda thinking it will be," I added quickly. Ivy might not want to make promises, but I didn't want to leave Eric without even a crumb of hope. "it wouldn't be for a little while. There's a lot they still have to figure out."

Eric nodded, running his hand through my hair. "Do we have tonight at least?"

"We do," I told him. I'd rather get myself arrested than let them take this away from us.

"Then we'll tell them what we want and see what happens," he said softly. "But just in case, let's...enjoy this while we have it, okay? It's probably the only time we've had when we can just be, at least without worrying about the next threat coming our way."

"Deal," I said, threading our fingers together and closing my eyes to bask in just being around him.

There was still so much in our future that was uncertain and unknown. I'd grown almost accustomed to not knowing much about my past, so long as I had Eric there to help guide me, and perhaps as someone, something I could focus on. Now I was facing a potential future where he wouldn't be there, and the thought turned my stomach in knots every time I thought about it.

But Eric was right. The best we could do was not to obsess over the past or worry about the future but to take the present while we had it. I focused my attention on the soft sound of his breathing and the warmth of his fingers wrapped around mine. At least for now, I had him here, and we were safe.

Despite everything, we had passed the finish line, and we could have this.

Even if it wasn't forever, we had this.

# EPILOGUE

## *Eighteen Months Later*

Squinting, I stepped onto the balcony and peered out at the city. It seemed to stretch on forever, much farther than Port Dale ever had while I'd lived there, but it did remind me a little of Chicago. It was far warmer than Chicago had ever dreamed of being in the middle of December, and I could only imagine how desperately hot it would become in another six months or so.

Still, São Paulo had a charm I couldn't deny. The city practically seethed with life and energy. I could hear my neighbors' conversations a couple of floors below, voices carrying up from their balconies or drifting out from their open windows. The language was familiar, and I listened to the rolling cadence of their conversations, enjoying the sound rather than eavesdropping.

I had only been living in the city for a month, but I had to admit, it was growing on me fast. There was something about the people that I found incredibly charming, even if their warm and friendly natures had thrown me off at first. Maybe it was just because their friendliness and openness reminded me of Eric, but it hadn't taken me long to grow incredibly fond of them.

The thought tugged a cord in my chest, and I turned to check the clock on the wall in the small living room behind me. The apartment wasn't huge, but the whole point was to

blend in among the millions of people in the city. It was just enough space for one person or a couple of moderate means to live comfortably without drawing attention to themselves.

It was, in short, the perfect size.

My anxiety cranked up when I saw it was already ten past five, but I turned my head away, forcing myself to look at the city. I focused on the sights, the glittering of the sunlight on the waterways that ran through it, and the music of my neighbors' conversations. After about a minute, I felt the tension in my body finally give out and dwindle away.

"Remind me never to tell Ivy that therapy was a good idea," I muttered, leaning on the railing to peer down at the street.

Therapy had been one of several requirements from my boss. They had run every scan, done every test, and poked enough holes in me for blood and other fluids to leave me feeling like an overused pin cushion. In the end, they decided that if my memory was going to come back, it would come back on its own when it damn well pleased, if it did at all.

Thankfully, therapy proved much more effective than every other medical specialist. Despite my insistence that I could handle things, I finally gave in and talked to the therapist they assigned me. She wasn't much good at digging up memories, but at the very least, she'd shown me I was not as good at handling things as I thought.

For the long stretches when I was left to my own devices, save for those assigned to watch me, my mind would race. Even minor stresses, like being unable to open a drawer, could send me into a meltdown that forced me to breathe or rip something off its hinges in frustration. So, I was taught to exist in the present, ground myself, and try to let things happen. As stupid as it sounded, I was pleased and annoyed that it worked.

I heard the rattle of the doorknob and turned, heart rate picking up. Despite the safety and the expected arrival, I was never quite sure if I would ever be completely safe. There were things left for me in the house, emergency funds, a gun,

as well as an emergency passport I could use if things went south, but I hoped never to have to use them.

A thump, far heavier than I should hear, shot my attempts to calm myself in the foot, and I straightened. That was until I heard a familiar and extremely irritated voice. “Who the fuck leaves a potted plant in the middle of a hallway? Jesus Christ.”

The speed at which I moved away from the railing would have probably been impressive to anyone who witnessed it. I hopped over the bag of clothes and the box of things I still hadn’t been convinced I should unpack and headed straight for the hallway. There I found the most wonderful sight I’d seen in weeks, eclipsing even the beautiful views of São Paulo.

Dressed in a loose shirt that hung low to show his collarbone and top of his chest and a pair of jeans that were so tight I wondered how he managed to squeeze his ass into them, was a grumpy, sweaty, and disheveled Eric. He had a bag under his arm and a small box, and he was still grumbling at the pot someone hadn’t bothered to move.

His head jerked up when he spotted movement, and his bitching ceased immediately. I hadn’t seen him since they’d allowed us to have a weekend together for my birthday, and he had cut the shaggy mop he’d been growing. Taking in the curve of his jaw and the bent angle of his nose, I felt my heart begin thundering in my chest.

“Hey,” he said, his shoulders dropping at seeing me.

There were no words to cover what I felt, and I stepped forward. It took only three long strides for me to have his face in my hands and his lips against mine. There was a clatter as he dropped the box to wrap his hand around the back of my neck and pull me closer.

I pushed him back against the wall, pinning him with my greater bulk, and smiled softly when he moaned. Something feral inside me clawed to get out at the noise he made when I nipped at his bottom lip. This was supposed to be passionate and welcoming, but I wondered if I’d have time to get him to the bedroom in the back. The pants would be hell to take off quickly, but maybe that would take enough time.

Someone cleared their throat. Loudly.

“Uh,” Eric began as I eased away from him. “Right, I have an escort.”

I glanced and smiled when I saw who it was. “Well, hello there, Agent Twee. I hope you’re not a religious man.”

The agent, whose last name was actually Clee, shook his head, looking unamused. Despite how much of a stick in the mud and a stickler for rules he was, Clee was far more pleasant than Harkins had ever been. He was tolerant of both mine and Eric’s respective...quirks. That included Eric’s nickname for him after mishearing the man’s last name and refusing to call him anything else.

“Good evening, Agent Levin,” he said politely, holding a box out. “I’m also playing the role of bag boy today.”

“Of course you are,” I chuckled, not in the least bit embarrassed by what he’d witnessed. He had been the agent personally assigned to keep an eye on Eric for the past year and a half. Agent Clee had seen more than his fair share of things in that time, especially when he was there on the odd occasion when Eric and I had been given time with one another. “Do you want something to drink? I’ve got water and beer.”

“Water’s fine,” he said.

I carried the box I’d been handed into the dining room and dropped it onto the small table before heading into the kitchen, Eric following me. I turned after grabbing a bottle of water, my smile faltering when I saw him glaring at me.

“What’d I do?” I asked, immediately feeling guilty and not knowing why.

“Beer?” he asked, raising a brow. “And what’s that doing to your meds?”

“Oh, I’m off them,” I said, averting my eyes as I realized I’d given myself away before I’d had a chance to talk to Eric about the change. “So, I can drink. Not much, but a couple of beers here and there.”

Eric cocked his head. “And when were you going to tell me?”

“Preferably after we’d got you settled in and had a chance to unwind,” I admitted, trying not to take offense at his suspicion. I had, after all, been the one who’d kept things from him. Not that Eric held that over my head, but I couldn’t blame him for the occasional unconscious wariness. And if I needed to give him assurances now and again? Well, that was just fine by me. “Look, I talked it over with the shrink.”

“Lisa.”

“I talked it over with Lisa. The side effects were awful, making it hard for me to do anything.”

“They helped you.”

“They muddled my brain.”

“And kept you calm.”

“Yes, and made it impossible for me to think clearly. How the fuck am I supposed to be able to deal with my thoughts when I can’t even think right?” I demanded, losing my patience. “Maybe this therapy shit is taking longer, but I’d rather deal with this shit with a clear head than under whatever fog that crap brought me.”

Eric looked me over, chewing his bottom lip. “Has it been better?”

I knew what he meant and realized he’d probably been obsessing about it for weeks. We couldn’t talk on the phone nearly as much as either of us would have preferred, and we tried to keep the serious conversations for in person. Not just because it meant seeing the other person’s face but because it meant we probably weren’t being recorded or listened to.

“Not...always,” I admitted, though it pained me to do so. Total honesty wasn’t something I came by easily, especially when I knew it would hurt or upset Eric.

Eric’s face pinched. “Dylan—”

“I’m serious about what I said before,” I told him firmly. “I can’t get through anything when my brain is filled with mud

and muck. Even if it's hard sometimes, it's better when I can think clearly. At least then I don't feel like I'm forgetting who I am again."

Memories were tricky things, and terrifying as well. For all the medical and psychological babble I'd gone through, no one had prepared me for the roller coaster that was the return of my memory. Sometimes it was as simple and benign as a phrase that slipped from my mouth as though I'd always remembered it. Other times it came in a rush, slamming into me so hard I was practically living in the memory, unable to perceive the real world around me.

The triggers were just as varied. Sometimes they came about because of something someone said or because of the *way* they said it. Other times it was a song or the sight of something my mind could relate to. I noticed that smells were usually the biggest trigger and the things I remembered more potently than anything else. I had been assured that was normal, as smell was the sense most closely tied to a person's memory.

Those assurances meant nothing when I found myself locked into a memory that would haunt me for the rest of my days. Whether it was the people I'd personally hurt during my rise through the ranks of the family or the people I'd witnessed getting hurt. That all of the former and most of the latter had been other criminals of a particularly heartless variety didn't matter. Or the memories of Katya, whose last words had been to me, drowned in blood and pain while I held her close.

Eric saw me shiver, and his anger disappeared as he stepped forward to take hold of my hand. "Hey."

I squeezed it, bringing a smile to my face. "I'm alright."

Eric raised a brow. "Yeah?"

"I mean it," I said, and I did. "Just a nibble this time."

Eric nodded. "Alright, well, if you feel like it's more than a nibble, you'll tell me?"

"I will," I promised because despite how hard this complete honesty thing was, it was worth it if it meant having



Eric with me. “Haven’t had something come up and take a good bite of me in a little while.”

It was the code between the two of us ever since I’d called him after waking up with the smell of lilac perfume and blood still in my nose. In the midst of trying to calm down to the sound of his voice, he’d asked me what was wrong. I tried to play it off, but he insisted, asking if something had risen from the depths and bitten me. The absurdity and absolute accuracy of the statement had broken the spell, and I’d laughed, saying it was big, with even bigger teeth. From that point forward, that had been our code to explain those moments when something bubbled up in my head.

“I did remember something interesting, though,” I told him as he leaned in for a kiss.

He looked disappointed at the interruption but raised his brow, curious. “What’s that?”

I grinned. “The first time I realized I was into you but didn’t want to admit it.”

“Oh yeah?” Now he was intrigued. If there was something he loved to hear, it was memories about the two of us. And if it just so happened to reinforce the fact that I’d had feelings for him as long as he’d had his for me, all the better.

“One of your swim meets,” I said with a chuckle. “Senior year. You in that skimpy little bikini.”

“They’re not—”

“And you got out of the pool, dropped your goggles, and bent over to grab them. I wouldn’t admit it to myself at the time, but the sight about gave me a heart attack.”

Eric cocked his head, smirking. “Is that your way of telling me I need to get a pair of Speedos for the beach?”

“Only if you wear them in the house first, so I’m not tempted to drag you somewhere private on the beach,” I told him bluntly because honesty wasn’t always difficult with him.

Eric laughed, standing on his tiptoes to grab the water bottle from me and kiss me. “Be right back.”

He left, and I could hear him talking with Agent Clee in the hallway. I'm sure the agent had heard our brief argument, but he was too polite to acknowledge it. I would bet Eric had found him standing as far away from us in the hallway as possible to ensure he didn't overhear us. He was a good man, and I was glad he would be assigned to keep an eye on us while we were here.

How long it would last, I didn't know. The last time I'd spoken to Ivy, she'd mentioned the possibility that they might find work for both of us in the city. With how much my memory was returning, they were growing confident they could use me. Nothing undercover again, even I had agreed with that, but the FBI worked with multiple nations for different reasons. It would work quite well if I pulled a liaison job, especially considering my fluency in Portuguese.

Eric returned, and I heard the front door close. I raised my brow. "What, no debriefing?"

"We were debriefed separately, and I told him if he repeated himself for a fifth time before leaving, I was going to shove the water bottle somewhere unpleasant," Eric said, almost immediately wrapping his arms around my neck.

"You have such a way with words."

"It's a gift."

"Any word on what they're going to do with you?"

"Well, since my Portuguese no longer sounds like...what was it my teacher said? A strangled porpoise, whatever that means, they think I might be able to use my skills."

I frowned. "Not..."

"Not for the government. There's plenty of doctor's offices and clinics in the city that could use someone like me. I requested something similar to what I did before, and they're stewing it over."

"Probably don't want you getting mugged," I told him, already guessing at where their hesitancy came from.

“You don’t seem quite as concerned,” he noted, cocking his head.

I laughed. “I’m long past worrying about whether or not you can take care of yourself. I’m going to worry no matter what, but that’s not going to stop you, so I’m not going to try.”

I knew it was the right thing to say from the way his eyes softened. Not that it was a lie, we’d gone through too much for me to doubt his capabilities. He would never be a fighter, but he had a good head on his shoulders, an even greater heart, and he could take care of himself if he needed to.

“So, we finally get to live together,” he said with a sigh of contentment. “No more of this ‘a few days here, a few days there’ crap. No longer having to spend weeks, even months apart.”

My fingers wrapped around his waist, drawing him closer. He was being wistful and sweet, but I could feel him growing hard against me. Just like the kiss in the hallway, a moment of sweet intent sparked a hunger in both of us that I hoped never truly died.

“Just you and me,” I said, nuzzling his neck.

“Since you’ve been here, in *our* home,” he said, and I could hear the smile in his voice, “how about you give me the tour?”

“Thinking of anywhere in particular?” I asked, kissing the scar on his neck and closing my eyes as I felt him shiver.

“Bedroom?”

“I can do that.”

“Are you sure because...Hey!”

He yelped as I picked him up easily. All the free time I’d had and the need to burn off excess emotion had left me plenty of time to work out. Despite Eric’s complaints as I carried him through the apartment, I knew it delighted him to be carried around by me.

I collapsed onto the bed, kissing him. “I love you.”

Now with our babysitter gone, those words were all I needed to find the quickest way to strip our clothes off. It turned out my earlier prediction about Eric's pants had been accurate, and I spent several seconds cursing them up and down as I tried to get them off him.

"I'll get rid of them," Eric said with a laugh as I tossed them aside with a huff.

"Don't you fucking dare. Your fantastic ass looks amazing in them," I growled before pinning him to the bed with another kiss.

Perhaps not the most romantic thing in the world after not seeing Eric for months, but I never claimed to be a romantic. And if the way Eric wrapped his legs around my waist to force our bodies closer together was any indication, he wasn't all that bothered by it either.

All the hunger and need that had sparked in the hallway had finally found a place to burn hot as I shoved the rest of our clothing off. I was almost disappointed when I had to move away from him to retrieve the lube from the other side of the room, where, like an idiot, I'd left it. Going through government protection meant a full health check, including various tests. Since Eric and I had long since decided we were it for each other, when the tests came back clean, we'd tossed the condoms.

My almost disappointment faded the moment I returned to the bed and found Eric more than prepared for my return. Hovering at the edge of the bed, he gripped the base of my cock and pulled me closer to wrap his lips around the head. It was something we hadn't found time for in the days we were running for our lives. I had learned that while he was not one for deep-throating, he had an enthusiasm that would drive any man crazy in the best way.

Needless to say, I let him have his way. There was something to be said about standing there as he lay on his stomach, sucking me as though his life depended on it. The whole time, his body was spread out across the bed for me to

admire. It didn't matter if I looked down or forward, the view was spectacular.

Refusing to come yet, I made short work of pulling him off me and manhandling him back onto the bed. This time it was Eric's turn to shudder and moan as I took my time, using first my mouth and then my fingers to prepare him. Just as he loved to tease me with his mouth, I loved to use everything at my disposal, feeling the grip of his ass around my fingers before I finally gave in to what we both wanted.

As wound up as we were, it didn't take long before I was pushing into him. Even with the preparation he was tight around me, but he always wanted me inside him as soon as possible. The sound of skin meeting skin, mixed with the desperate groans as I rode him, incited me to go harder and faster.

It was impossible not to give him what he wanted, to feel the way he writhed and wriggled in pleasure. He reached back, gripping my thighs hard as I thrust into him, both of us desperate to have as much skin touching as possible.

I managed to hold myself off as he gave a yelp and came hard, coating his stomach and chest. With the grip of his ass around my length intensifying, I gave in to the demands of my body and thrust deep, growling as I came. Kissing him as I felt myself pump hard into him was one of the most erotic things I'd ever felt, and I kissed him fiercely.

We lay there together for a few more hours. We managed to behave ourselves for the first hour, but loneliness mingled with a need for more physical contact put us right back where we started. I loved touching him, feeling his head on my stomach, his hand on my chest, or the soft gusts of his breath across the sensitive skin of my neck. Sometimes that was enough to sustain me for hours when we lay or sat together, and at other times it awakened the powerful hunger that made me want to tear his clothes off.

After the second time left us soaked in sweat, I finally showed him the bathroom and the shower stall big enough for two. Cleaning each other had become a personal favorite of

mine, and we took our time washing and rinsing one another off, sharing soft kisses, and just holding each other.

Once clean, we replaced the sheets and crawled back into bed, content to wrap ourselves around one another once more. Moonlight crept in through the window as we lay there, realizing we were finally going to be together. No more being shuttled around to separate locations. No more going without updates about the other for weeks at a time. From here on out, it was going to be the two of us.

“I might never remember everything,” I said softly, staring up at the ceiling.

“I know,” Eric said, kissing my chest where he lay before opening his eyes. He looked so unbelievably comfortable and content, and I had been the one to make that happen. “But you’re you, no matter what. And if you’re ever struggling, I’m going to be right here to help you.”

“I really do love you,” I said softly, running my hand through his hair. My chest positively ached with how much I meant those words, and I always wondered why I’d been too stubborn to say them in the first place.

Never again.

“I’m never going to get tired of hearing that,” he said, staring up at me with more warmth than I thought anyone had ever looked at me with before. This was the same man who had brought light and life into my home when my parents had been too busy with their own lives to remember they had a son. A man who had always waited for me to finally get my head out of my ass and come back to be his friend. Who had stood by me even when all evidence pointed to my guilt and even when I was ready to give up on myself.

“I love you. I love you. I love you,” I repeated, kissing his neck, his jaw, and then his lips with each pronouncement.

“And I love you,” he said in a sappy voice that drove me crazy.

For the first time in my whole life, I finally had everything I could ever hope for, and I hoped it was the same for him.

And if I were ever to lose my memory again, I hoped that at least this moment was one of the ones I remembered. A moment where I was loved, wanted, and taken care of. A moment where we were just two people who loved each other so fiercely we would go through hell and back for one another.

That was something worth remembering forever.

# AUTHOR NOTES

Thank you for reading “Help Me Remember” Dylan and Eric’s story. Let me know what you thought or better still, if you could leave a review, I’d be eternally grateful.

And if you love a bit of banter, then delve into my hot Military series, the ‘Men of Fort Dale.’ All the stories are standalone, and if you haven’t read them yet, you can get a free copy of the first story by signing up for my newsletter. ([www.romeoalexander.com/newsletter](http://www.romeoalexander.com/newsletter)) You’ll receive ‘Just a Little Bi’ it’s the story of John and Lance, who take a chance on love. If you can’t tell by the title, this is a first-time gay short story. It’s a sensual and steamy romance featuring romantic encounters between a hot military man in uniform and his newfound friend.

Alternatively, get your kicks from [The Heroes of Port Dale](#), which follows the city’s firemen, policemen, and doctors.

You can also find a list and reading order for my books on my website. <https://romeoalexander.com/reading-order/>

Lastly, join me on social media if you haven’t already...I can’t wait to see you there.



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