



YEARS AGO,
HE LOST IT ALL.

THIS TIME
HE WON'T LET GO.

CROSSBOW PROTECTION BOOK ONE

BROKEN WARRIOR

K.C. WELLS &
PARKER WILLIAMS

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Broken Warrior

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Warning

This book contains material that is intended for a mature, adult audience. It contains graphic language, explicit sexual content, and adult situations.

To all the readers who have followed K.C. and I, either individually or writing as a duo, we send our heartfelt thanks!

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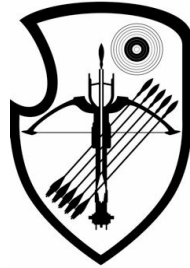
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Prologue



Six years ago

Gary Cross woke up with a strange knot in his gut, a feeling of impending danger that had only grown worse as the day progressed. That sense of doom seemed totally incongruous when faced with a cloudless azure sky.

Fuck, it's hot.

It was *always* fucking hot.

Gary swiped a hand over his drenched brow. The relentless sun beat down, roasting everything in sight, including him. The ocean of sand absorbed its heat, then reflected it back, intensifying the sensation of standing in a pit of fire.

Some things in the Iraqi desert never changed, including the sand that insinuated itself into crevices Gary would never tell his mother about.

“Are you listening to me, Cross?”

He turned to find his lover—his partner, hell, his fucking *life*—glaring at him. God, Eric was so fucking sexy, with his honey-blond hair, eyes that

were a deeper blue than the sky, thick muscles that ran the length of his body...

And let's not forget those hands.

Those fucking *magnificent* hands.

They worked so many different types of magic. They could be rough when he and Eric were sparring, or gentle when they loosened Gary up to take Eric's cock that was every bit as thick as the man himself.

“What?”

Eric's scowl deepened and Gary had a sense of déjà vu. He could almost feel the disapproval pouring out of Eric, heaping onto Gary's shoulders.

So what if he had skinny shoulders? They could take the weight.

“Listen to me, Cross.” The words came out as a growl. “Why the fuck would you think it's okay to pull me from this detail?”

Detail?

Oh yeah. They were there to do a job.

The US had a vested interest in trying to bring the local clans together to fight... something. They were supposed to be guarding a summit between several of the smaller factions that dotted the sparse area. Their commander had insisted it would go a long way toward stabilizing the area, thereby reducing problems they experienced with thefts from their junk heaps. He'd also claimed that getting these people to work together would give them another ally in their fight. Everyone agreed, but no one believed it.

Most people thought it foolish to even try.

“I'm sorry, what?” That arrogant glare, the one Gary always found hella hot, now seemed more sad than anything. Gary couldn't understand why Eric would be angry. It made no sense. “Why are you so upset?”

Eric's blue eyes went wide. “Are you for fucking *real*? You tried to cut me out of this operation. How the hell did you *expect* me to react?”

He had? It was so hard to remember.

It was then he noticed the buzzing. It was what his men referred to as his

Spidey Sense. They had teased him about them, but each time he'd felt that clench in the pit of his stomach, he'd spoken up. Eventually they came to regard his feelings as a barometer of sorts, and it saved them a lot of grief.

That tingling could have been a reaction to the stifling air fraught with tension, but it had been that way ever since the conference began. Hardly a surprise. No trust existed between them, and each had accused the other of harboring operatives of Al-Qaeda. How anyone thought these people could come together and cooperate, Gary had no clue.

Eric had already torn him a new one in their commander's office, but the situation hadn't improved. How the hell could Gary explain the fear in his gut, the terror that became more real every time Eric turned those soft blue eyes in his direction.

Build a fucking bridge between you.

He needed Eric.

Gary reached out to him. "Eric..." His voice was soft.

Eric shoved Gary's hand away, a pained expression on his face. "Fuck you!" He took several steps away, and each one tore Gary's heart out a little more. "I can't believe you'd do that shit to me. What the fuck, man? Bad enough you'd do it to any member of your squad, but to do it to *me*? That shit ain't right."

Eric's anger and hurt lanced into Gary's heart like shards of glass. "I know. I'm sorry. I should have talked to you. Should have explained why. It's just... I've got a bad feeling. Something is going to happen."

That buzzing was getting worse.

Eric's irritated gaze softened slightly. "Which is why you need me. Tell me I'm not the best you've got."

He couldn't argue that fact. Eric consistently scored higher than the rest of them in every aspect. Hand to hand, firearms, and more. Eric Bowman was the man you'd want at your back if everything went to shit. If it hadn't been for the attitude that erupted all the damn time, he probably would have been

in charge instead of Gary.

Gary struggled to find the words to explain why he'd done it. "That's not it at all."

Eric stalked closer and jabbed a finger into Gary's chest. "Bullshit. I'm not some dainty little flower, Cross." He leaned in close, licked Gary's ear, and whispered in a husky voice, "If memory serves, it's *you* on the bottom."

Gary's cheeks burned at the comment. He loved the feeling of Eric taking him, making him know that he held Gary's body, as well as his heart. And now the bastard was using it against him and grinning about it.

Fucker.

"Still want to start a business when we get out?" Gary asked.

Eric blinked. "How fucking random is that?"

Anything to change the goddamn subject. "That's not an answer."

Eric stared out at the shimmering sand. "Of course. It's the one thought that keeps me marking off days on the calendar. Four months and twelve days until we're free men." He cast a glance in Gary's direction, a slight smile playing on his face. "And don't think I don't know you're hoping I'll forget why I'm mad at you, because that's not happening."

"How can I make it up to you?" Gary whispered, pitching his voice low. He always knew how to pluck Eric's strings. The offer of a blow job, or Gary giving up his ass, would always drag his fierce, protective warrior back to the here and now.

He never got an answer.

Eric was the first to spot the vehicle speeding toward them, a cloud of dust trailing behind it. Gary grabbed his radio from the belt clip and barked orders to his men to let them know possible hostiles were on the move. In a blur of activity, they took their positions to defend the men inside the conference. Eric closed the gates on the road, then stood waiting for the vehicle to get close enough for them to get a shot off if necessary. As it slowed, Gary tensed.

This isn't right.

An overwhelming feeling of dread froze him to his very core. *This* was the moment of terror he'd been experiencing, the one that had him doing his best to keep his team safe. He rushed toward Eric as the vehicle stopped at the gate. Gary knew his feeling of fear had a name now, and even though he wanted to believe he'd been wrong, he hadn't.

It all happened so fast. Eric turned, his gaze locked on Gary. He screamed something, then shouted for Gary to get down, before everything shattered into fragments, each one burned into Gary's brain.

The panic in Eric's expression, so overwhelming that Gary's heart missed a beat.

Eric spinning around to fire at the occupant of the rusted-out truck.

An explosion, followed by a wall of heat that knocked Gary back twenty feet and left him sprawled out on the scorching desert sand.

That dark cloud rising skyward, taking with it everything Gary loved.

It was the last thing Gary remembered until he woke up in the hospital.

Chapter One



The Present

July

Gary sat bolt upright in bed, his stomach roiling.
Again?

Eric had died years ago, and yet Gary was still plagued by that same fucking dream. He'd been seeing a therapist since then, trying to find those memories he'd lost.

The dream was as bad as it always was, except for those times when he couldn't recall what Eric looked like. Those were the worst, sitting in a sweat-soaked bed, trying desperately to pull fragments together, to make something cohesive out of them.

He got up, changed the bedding, then started his pot of fucking disgusting decaf. He'd learned that if he doctored it heavily enough, he could almost believe it was real coffee.

Nah, not even a whole cow's worth of cream could convince him of that.

While the pot bubbled away, Gary went to the bathroom. He tried not to

look at his reflection. He was well aware of how he looked: the scars that marred his once kinda sorta decent-looking face, and the crisscross scarring on his head where they'd done surgery to relieve the swelling of his brain. Thankfully, that was covered by the hair, but Gary still saw it whenever he looked in the mirror. He'd never been cover-model material, though Eric hadn't seemed to mind, but now?

Quasimodo had a better chance of getting a date.

He brushed his teeth before going to his closet and pulling out his suit. Today was important. It was the official opening of the new CrossBow offices and he had to try to look decent. But as he turned, a wave of vertigo washed over him.

No, not today. For fuck sake, please let me get through the day without falling flat on my face in front of the reporters.

Once had been enough. It was part of the reason he received them at his desk, where he could be seated in case it happened again.

A searing pain lanced behind his right eye, a pain he was all too familiar with. Fine. It was going to be a shitty day, no matter what. He went to the cabinet and took out his medications. He might only be thirty-five, but he already had a collection of pill bottles to rival any eighty-year-old. Pills for nausea, anticonvulsants, and others that he took but refused to dwell on their functions. The docs had told him he was damn lucky to walk away with scarring and the injury to his brain. He could have died out there, like Eric. Some days he wished he had, but then he pictured Eric scowling at him, heard him say he'd kick Gary's ass if he ever put those dark thoughts into action.

Gary wouldn't. He had a lot to live for. He was the one who had to make their dreams into reality. To give people like him and Eric—military men, cops, firefighters, and the like—a life after their service. Chasing that dream gave them life, because it would allow them to give back to their brothers and sisters who'd given everything in service while risking their own lives to

protect others. It had been Eric who, after a particularly fervent round of sex, had come up with the idea.

“What are you going to do when we get out?”

Gary bit his lip. “Honestly, I’m not sure. I know I won’t make twenty years of this. I respect the people who can, but I need... something else.”

Eric sat up, his skin glistening with sweat, a mirror of Gary’s. “Yeah, I want that too. I... have a proposal.”

“Gee, I don’t know that I’m ready to be married,” Gary teased.

“Fuck you, Cross. When I ask, you’re going to say hell yes.” He leaned in and kissed Gary before sagging into the pillows. “One day, after we get out of here, I’m going to fuck your brains out and then pop the question when you’re too exhausted to turn me down.”

Not that Gary would do that. Not ever.

“What’s your proposal?”

And Eric had laid out his vision, the two of them opening a business and giving back to the community. They could charge exorbitant amounts of money to be bodyguards for high-class individuals, but they could also help those who needed it, but couldn’t afford to pay. His idea was infectious, and Gary found himself caught up in the dream.

But that was then.

Eric was dead and Gary was alone. Still, he was determined to see it through for both of them. And it would start today in their new offices.

Eric’s dream would become reality.

Gary would make sure of it.

He stood outside the newly renovated building that now housed CrossBow Incorporated, the premier protection-for-hire company in the southwestern US. He scrubbed away a bit of wetness on his cheek, refusing to acknowledge it for what it was.

“I wish you could see our dream realized, Eric.” He swallowed past the lump in his throat. “I think you’d be happy with what we’ve been able to accomplish.”

Eight stories of gleaming glass and steel, the sprawling building covered almost two acres of the fifty-six he owned just outside Roswell, New Mexico. The company would have space for work labs, communications gear, permanent and temporary housing for staff, as well as providing businesses workshops on employee safety, security training, and more.

Everything Gary and Eric Bowman had talked about late at night, in the searing desert heat, had finally been fulfilled.

Gary continued his walk through the grounds of CrossBow, noting the cars already in the parking lot. His assistant’s was there, as was Wheels’s. He wondered if Wheels had been there all night—again. There were others Gary recognized as belonging to the service staff, which meant they were more than likely still cleaning up after the workmen had finally gotten their gear out of the way. This building was a far cry from their old place, which had resembled more of a brick box than an office. Still, the team had made it work. Gary scrimped and saved up enough money to buy this tract of land outright, and put a sizable down payment on getting the former factory that had originally stood on the site. Then he’d gotten a huge influx of cash from Wheels, and CrossBow had finally taken off.

Gary looked up at the bright sun overhead. With the warm wind fanning his face and the harsh light from above, he could almost believe he was in the desert again. Not that Roswell, New Mexico was anything like the Iraqi desert. Over there, they had only two seasons—hot and *fucking* hot. Although New Mexico had its share of sizzling temperatures, it also had some

blessedly cool times as well.

Gary loved the chill in winter. Hell, he loved having a winter. He couldn't have taken living full-time in a desert setting anymore.

Now, he only went there in his dreams, where Eric was by his side, reminding him they had a date that night for dinner in the mess. Not romantic by any stretch, but a day hadn't gone by where he wouldn't give up everything to have one more meal with Eric and his team.

Just one chance to utter the words he'd never gotten to say.

And speaking of words, if he strained real hard, he could almost hear Eric's.

"Shouldn't you be working?"

Yeah, he could be a smart ass.

My smart ass.

The headache he'd sensed sneaking up on him had grabbed his brain and given it a good shake. Another remnant of the war. Bad enough he'd lost hearing in one ear, but the constant bouts with vertigo sucked ass. More than once he'd woken in a cold sweat, the bed spinning beneath him. He'd lurched up, needing to spill his guts in the toilet.

Today definitely felt like it would be one of those kinds of days.

"Report," Gary snapped as he entered his office.

"And good morning to you too." His assistant, Michael Kennedy, gave Gary a sweet-as-pie smile that seemed out of place on his six-foot-four-inch frame. "Someone woke up on the wrong side of cranky today, huh?"

Gary's assistants usually lasted about four months, and he knew what sent them on their way was his attitude. Michael's demeanor went a long way to explaining why he was still there after nearly a year. He'd been hired to be the public face of CrossBow, and he was efficient to a fault. Gary liked him, but that didn't mean he was about to let his guard down, not after everything he'd lost. Three weeks in a medically induced coma. Multiple surgeries to remove shrapnel from the bomb the hostile had strapped to his chest, filled

with all manner of shit—nails, glass, needles—and Gary had gotten nearly the full force of it. That had cost him the hearing in his right ear and too many holes in his body. He knew it was a miracle they'd gotten him patched up.

Eric hadn't been quite so lucky. He'd taken the brunt of the blast, killing him outright. Gary never even got the chance to say goodbye. The flag, which should have been Gary's, had gone to Eric's parents. The only thing Gary got was a life insurance policy he didn't even know Eric had taken out. So in exchange for the life of the man he loved, he got money. Big fucking deal.

Someone thinks I'm a prickly asshole, they can go fuck themselves.

He'd fucking *earned* the right.

"Am I getting my report, or do I have to find a new assistant?" Gary rumbled.

Michael put his hands on the desk and leaned forward. "So you've got potential assistants lining up to work for you, have you? Well then, go right ahead. I bet some of them would *kill* me just to get the chance of working for a peach like you, with that *charming* attitude of yours."

The sheer *audacity* of this guy.

"I don't have to take this shit from you." For fuck's sake, he was the boss.

Michael slammed his hand down on the steel desk, the sound echoing through the room. "You do if you want someone to work for you." He arched his eyebrows. "You think I'm kidding about no one wanting to be here? Call the agency if you don't believe me." He straightened, his arms folded. "Your reputation precedes you, Mr. Cross. You are the proud owner of the longest list of people who have already said don't call them about a job here if it means they end up working for you. Congrats, by the way. That's an accomplishment to be oh-so-fucking proud of."

How Gary suppressed a growl, he would never know.

He glared at Michael. "So quit. Go ahead. I don't need you, and I'm sure

as hell not in the mood to take shit from you today.”

Michael threw his hands up in the air dramatically. “Because of course you’re sunshine and roses every other day. Trust me, if it wasn’t for the fact that the agency offered me double pay to work here, I’d tell you where to stick your job. I’ve got three degrees, for God’s sake.” He lifted his hand and ticked off as he spoke. “Business administration and management, commerce, and public administration. You think I *want* to be working for you? The only reason I stay is the forty-eight bucks an hour they offered. That’ll hold me over until a *real* job opens up.”

Gary recoiled and took a step back. Very few people in his life ever spoke to him like that. He actually liked the fact that Michael wasn’t cowed by him, unlike most of his predecessors who’d worked this desk. Some of them had lasted a few days. One hadn’t even made it through a shift before she stormed out, cursing up a blue streak.

Gary bit the inside of his cheek. He’d rather chew glass than spit out the words he knew he had to say. “I’m sorry. Good morning, Michael. How are you today?”

The corners of Michael’s mouth remained pinched, but he brightened visibly.

Why the fuck does that make me feel happy?

“I’m fine, thank you.” Michael picked up his pad and tapped a few keys. “Okay, so here’s how your day is shaping up so far.” Gone was the guy who’d thrown a tantrum, replaced by the efficient man Gary had grown to rely on. “Your appointment at ten had to be changed to tomorrow at three. Sal’s stuck in Milwaukee until tomorrow morning. His assignment went longer than expected. The client already forwarded their payment. Dr. Malone has been asking to speak to you later about a project you have him working on. I scheduled him for the opening at ten. There are four new clients who want a chance to discuss their cases with you. I have their sheets on the computer. Two of them want someone to guard their family. One

wants his basketball player to have a bodyguard after he's received threats. And the other is looking for someone to escort him to a function on June nineteenth."

Gary massaged the bridge of his nose. This wasn't the first time someone had tried to use CrossBow as a dating agency. There were people out there who were willing to pay exorbitant amounts of money to get hooked up with a few of the men on his payroll, especially the ones whose pictures had been all over the news after saving someone's life.

"Dare I ask what kind of function?"

Michael chuckled. "Party at his club."

"Wait. Does he want a bodyguard or a hookup?"

Michael smiled as he placed the pad on the corner of the desk, and Gary's heart beat a little faster. The man was good-looking, with neatly trimmed blond hair, cornflower-blue eyes, and a slim physique that his black suit and white shirt accentuated perfectly.

"He *claims* bodyguard. I looked into his background, and I see nothing there that indicates he's under any kind of duress or threat, so I'm kind of guessing it's more hookup. He asked for someone good-looking, with muscles." Michael's lips twitched. "He was *very* explicit about the muscles."

Gary sighed. "Yeah. I'll call them back. Any clue what Wheels wants?"

"He wouldn't say. He says you know, and he's very excited about it."

That drew out a chuckle. Michael hadn't had many dealings with the man people called Wheels. *Maybe I should see about changing that.* "There is very little that Wheels isn't excited about."

Josh "Wheels" Malone held patents on over two hundred separate devices that operated in people's homes, cars, and toys, plus the ones he'd given to schools and hospitals. Hell, he'd created the pads used by everyone at CrossBow, granting them exclusive rights even when Apple, IBM, and Microsoft were beating a path to his door, each of them clamoring to throw money at him for his invention. He'd laughed and reminded them he made

enough money in residuals that he would never have to work again.

Gary knew the truth, however.

In private, Wheels said if he didn't have something to do, he'd get bored out of his skull. He was grateful for his lab because his landlady refused to let him work from home anymore. When pressed as to why, he'd come out with some tale about a toaster, a wrench, and thick black smoke pouring out of his place that had not only the fire department, but also a helicopter hovering overhead and several men in black suits milling around. He swore he hadn't done anything to warrant it. When Gary asked him for more details, Wheels wouldn't meet his gaze, but spun a yarn that went way over Gary's head. He figured that whatever happened, it had been down to Wheels.

Gary picked up Michael's device and swiped his finger across the pad's bright screen, taking note of where each agent was on assignment. "Anything else?"

"Your coffee is on your desk in your favorite thermal mug. Black, with a texture like tar, just as you prefer it. I've also put the aspirin bottle out with water. I sent Mitchell down to grab a seeded bagel with low-fat cream cheese and an orange juice for you."

Gary's mouth fell open. "How did you...?"

Michael's surly expression softened. "Oh, come *on*. I've been your assistant for nearly eleven months. Would you like to know what makes me so good at my job? I pay attention. I know when you're not feeling well." He gestured to Gary. "I can see it all over your face. Your eyes have dark rings, which tells me you probably didn't sleep much last night—again. You were listing slightly when you came into the building, so I'm guessing your vertigo is an issue today. And usually you're sour, but not mean. If you need me to reschedule something, just let me know and I'll take care of it."

Gary felt *seen*.

He took eight steps across the floor and stopped at the door to his office. He glanced over his shoulder and found Michael back at his computer.

“Michael?”

The man in question turned his head toward Gary, his blue eyes catching the light. “Yes, sir?”

“Thank you.”

Michael smiled, and what came to mind was that it was the first genuine one Gary could recall seeing. “You’re very welcome.”

Gary rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. “I know I might not always show it, but—” Michael raised a perfectly sculpted eyebrow, and Gary had to laugh. “Okay, I’ve *never* shown it. But I appreciate you and everything you do around here. I’ll try to be more mindful of it in the future, I promise. Just so you know, of all the assistants I’ve managed to chase away, you’re the only one I’ll miss when you move on.”

Without waiting for a reply, he went into his office and closed the door behind him.



Michael waited until the office door closed before he slumped back into his seat.

Holy shit. He paid me a compliment.

What was even more miraculous was that Gary hadn’t burst into flames immediately upon paying it. That had been the only time Michael had heard a string of words from Gary that didn’t involve the use of cursing or snarling at someone.

He could almost pass for human.

Almost.

Not that he could blame his boss. Opening the new business, the scrutiny from the media, the hounding of green power groups about the environmental

impact CrossBow's building would have—never mind that Dr. Malone's creative use of solar, wind, and water power went well beyond any governmental regulation and was, in fact, as close to having a negative carbon footprint as humanly possible. Michael knew the strain Mr. Cross was under. This was his baby and it meant the world to him.

Michael knew there was some profound reason why Gary had created it, and one day he hoped to learn what that was.

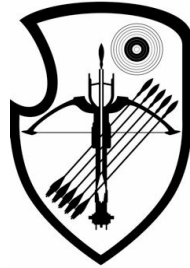
His phone rang, and he saw it was Dr. Malone. "What can I do—"

"About this meeting with Mr. Cross. Cancel it. I can't possibly see him today. Schedule me in for tomorrow, okay? Preferably morning. Thanks." He disconnected.

Michael stared at the phone. "Well, at least he said thanks." He was grateful Mr. Cross was the one who got to deal with him.

Better him than me.

Chapter Two



The next morning, the conversation with Mr. Cross was still on replay in Michael's mind as he headed to his office. In fact, it hadn't been out of his thoughts all night.

He says he'll change.

Words Michael was familiar with, but he weighed them against what he'd heard in passing from the people working at CrossBow.

Maybe I need to give him the benefit of the doubt. He could do that much.

He opened his office door and—

A vase stuffed with yellow roses sat on his desk.

What the fuck?

He walked toward them slowly, placing his backpack on a chair without once taking his eyes off the beautiful flowers that stood out against the blue-and-red striated vase.

“Do you like them?”

Michael spun around. Mr. Cross stood behind him at the door.

He gestured to the roses. “I had to ask the saleslady what flowers were best to signify friendship, and she said these. I hope she was right.”

“She was,” Michael managed to croak. He cleared his throat. “They’re... they’re so pretty.”

No one had *ever* bought him flowers.

Mr. Cross smiled. “I’m glad you like them. I also have a cup of coffee waiting for you. It’s from that shop you go to.”

When have I ever seen him smile?

Then his words hit home.

He knows where I get my coffee?

“How’d—”

“You have a cup in your recycle bin every morning. I went in this morning and asked for a cup of what you usually drink. The woman at the counter brightened and said she’d be happy to do that.” Mr. Cross scuffed the carpet with his shoe. “Look, I know I told you last night how much I really do appreciate you, but... I wanted you to know they weren’t just words, because they can never show you how sorry I am for my behavior. So I promise I will try to have my deeds speak for me instead.” He raised his chin to look Michael in the eye. “If you’re willing to give me another chance, that is.”

The icy annoyance that had gripped Michael’s heart for nearly a year cracked.

“Yes, I think we can do that.”

Mr. Cross expelled a breath. “I promise to treat you as a person. I will do my best to control my anger and annoyance.” Another forthright stare. “I hope you realize none of it was *ever* about you.” He pushed out a sigh. “I guess you could say I’m mostly angry with myself.”

Michael figured he knew the reason for that, but there was no way he was going to ask why. If Mr. Cross was coming to trust him, then he’d let his boss tell him when the time was right.

“Maybe I could have been less prickly.” He shrugged. “Or not. It’s a tough call.”

That earned him a chuckle. “No, you were right, and I appreciate you having the guts to tell me to my face.” Mr. Cross straightened. “Now, if you’re ready to do some work, step in here and drink your coffee.” His eyes glittered. “I’ve got a task for you, if you feel up to it.”

For a moment, Michael was shocked into stillness. Mr. Cross *never* asked him for anything beyond the basics of his job: a cup of coffee waiting when he came in, answering the phones, and doing the filing.

He wasn’t so much an assistant as a glorified secretary.

He said he’ll change, remember?

“Michael?”

He jumped. “Oh, sorry. Yes, absolutely. I’ll be right in. Just let me make sure all calls will be answered first.”

Mr. Cross smirked. “Don’t be too long. Your coffee will go cold.”

Michael wasn’t about to tell him he’d drink coffee any way it came.

When he stepped through the doorway into Mr. Cross’s office, his boss was bent over something, muttering about how unfucking believable it was.

He glanced up. “Sorry. I was checking out the file you’ve got opened for the Mackleson request. This man wants us to pimp out one of our agents, and he’s chosen Dixon Meeks from the website. He sent me a mail and said Dix meets his criteria of good looking with muscles, and wants to know how much it costs to procure his services. It’s like we’re a fucking meat market or something! Tell him....” Mr. Cross’s eyes gleamed. “No, never mind. *I’ll* handle this one.” He shoved the pad he’d been working on aside and gave his full attention to Michael.

For almost a year, Michael had been trying to get his boss to pull his head out of his ass and see him as more than a fixture at the desk. Now he squirmed as Mr. Cross’s gaze pinned him like a butterfly mounted on Styrofoam. “What was it you needed?”

“I’ve got a meeting this morning that—”

Michael did a mental run-through of Mr. Cross’s schedule and frowned.

“Oh, but there isn’t anything in the diary, apart from Dr. Malone. He says he’ll see you—”

“This is a more... personal meeting.”

“Would you like me to reschedule Dr. Malone?” Michael asked. Not that he thought Dr. Malone would even notice such a change.

Mr. Cross picked up a pen from the desk and tapped it on the surface. “No, I want you to go ahead and talk with Wheels.”

Michael had to force himself not to slump against the desk. “Me?” He cleared his throat, hoping to get rid of that damned squeak. “Me?”

Mr. Cross grinned, leaned forward, and speared Michael with a stare. “You.” He stood up and walked to the window. “It occurs to me that while you’ve been my assistant for some time now, you’ve never had the chance to actually *do* the job of one. So I’m going to let you go ahead and talk to Wheels.”

“You’re not serious.”

Mr. Cross turned back around, his eyebrows arched. “Have you ever known me *not* to be?”

Not that Michael could recall. From everything he’d seen, Mr. Cross definitely wasn’t one for joking around. “But what am I supposed to say to him?”

Mr. Cross shrugged. “You’re my assistant, so I trust you to take care of it. You’ve got *carte blanche* to handle whatever he wants however you see fit.”

His mind reeling, Michael stumbled forward and dropped into the seat across from where Mr. Cross sat. He knew it was a breach of protocol, but right then?

Fuck protocol.

“Are you okay?” Mr. Cross’s tone held amusement. He sat back down.

Michael’s palms were suddenly damp. Then he saw the cup of coffee and grabbed it.

Maybe caffeine would help.

He took a long drink, relishing its aroma and flavor. Then he set the cup down. “I... Yes, I’m okay. But why now? Why me? And I don’t have any meeting scheduled for you, so I’m a little flustered over that.”

Mr. Cross picked up the bottle of aspirin Michael had placed on the corner of the desk. He opened it and dropped four tablets into his hand. He popped the pills into his mouth, tilted his head back, and swallowed. His face scrunched up and he shook his head before he met Michael’s gaze again.

“Okay, fine. I don’t have a meeting. It’s just....” Mr. Cross sighed. “I’ve treated you like crap.” Michael raised his hand, but he plowed on. “And don’t say I haven’t, because I know it’s true.”

A little of Michael’s habitual calm returned. He chuckled. “Oh, I wasn’t going to say you haven’t. I was just going to say how surprised I was that you acknowledged it.”

Mr. Cross’s cheeks flushed. “I guess I earned that. And if you don’t want to do this, I’ll understand. But before you answer, you should know I’m going to work you like a dog until you quit. All those things I should have had you doing before? You’ll be handling them now.” His eyes glinted. “Do you think you’re up to the task?”

A band of iron encircled Michael’s chest, threatening to cut off his breathing. He hadn’t been kidding about his educational background, but he hadn’t been completely honest about waiting for another job to open up. He’d had offers, sure, and some of them would have paid him a lot more than he was making in his current position. From the moment he’d walked into CrossBow, however, he’d fallen for the place. He could see himself there, permanently. Maybe not as someone’s assistant, no matter how well he got paid, but as... something.

He looked Mr. Cross in the eye. “Yes, I can do that.”

“Excellent. Okay, the thing you need to remember about Wheels? You have to keep him focused. At any given time, he’s got like a hundred tabs open in his brain. He’s forever bouncing from one thing to another.”

Michael swallowed. *Can I really do this?* He'd never even met Dr. Malone, and had no way of knowing if he'd accept Mr. Cross had given Michael the latitude to handle whatever it was he wanted to talk about.

"Would you be more comfortable if I went with you?"

The fact that Mr. Cross had asked brought a smile. A flush of pride went through him. *He trusts me with this.* "No, I think I can do this."

"I think you can too." Mr. Cross cocked his head to one side. "About yesterday.... Why did you pick that day to go off on me?" He arched his eyebrows. "And what made you think I wouldn't fire you for it?"

His grin told Michael Mr. Cross was amused, not angry. Michael was also well aware of the impossibility of keeping his mouth shut, no matter how hard he tried.

"Since I started working here, I can count the number of times you've spoken with me on one finger. And I don't count being barked at. To be honest, I got sick of being treated like...." Michael fluttered his hand, trying to think of the best word to fit.

Mr. Cross frowned. "Shit?"

Michael gave a sharp nod. "Exactly. I was ready to walk out the door, because I'd gotten so tired of seeing you snap at people every day. I don't understand how you even *have* employees."

Mr. Cross leaned back in his seat, swept a hand over his dark hair, and sighed. "Am I really that bad?" Then he fired Michael a glance. "It's okay, you can answer that truthfully." His lips twitched. "I already got you roses, and they don't give refunds."

Michael had to smile at that. He huffed out a breath. "Look, I know this job is everything to you, and I get that you want things to go perfectly, but... if you had a better disposition, maybe people could stop walking around like they're afraid of stepping on a landmine."

"That seems to be a pretty apt description." Mr. Cross's gaze dropped to his hands resting on the desk. "If it helps, I *am* sorry."

“You’ve already said that—with flowers, I might add.” Michael still hadn’t gotten over the sweet gesture.

“Even so, I shouldn’t be taking my problems out on the people who work for me.”

“No, you shouldn’t.”

When Mr. Cross laughed, that iron band around Michael’s chest finally eased a little.

“You really don’t have a problem taking me to task, do you?”

“None whatsoever.” Michael stood, walked behind his chair, and placed his hands on the back of it. “I’ve learned that there are several types of people who should expect to get walked on in their jobs.” He held up his hand and ticked them off as he spoke. “People of different ethnicities, women, LGBT people. Well, pretty much anyone who isn’t white and straight.”

Mr. Cross’s gaze narrowed until wrinkles showed on his forehead. “I *never*—”

Michael held up his hand. “No, you didn’t. That much I *can* say. You were an *equal opportunity* asshole.” Michael sucked in a breath. He hadn’t intended to say that out loud, but.... *Ah, the hell with it.* “When I was in school, I found out that because I was gay, it seemed to be okay to treat me with less respect than other people. Worse? It felt like it was not only sanctioned, but that the problem lay with me. I’d get bullied in class and the teachers would basically say I needed to *man up*. I got tired of being treated like that, so I started standing up for myself. Admittedly, it garnered me more than a few bruises, but I’d like to think it also earned me some respect. For myself, if nothing else. I won’t be talked down to by anyone.” He tilted his head toward Mr. Cross. “Not even my boss.”

Mr. Cross grumbled something under his breath. “I think you’ve got a meeting to get to.”

“You’re regretting the roses now, aren’t you?”

Mr. Cross blinked, then gave a half smile. “Nope. Not for one damn

second.”

Michael turned and strode toward the door. Just before he opened it, he turned around. “For what it’s worth? You have your good points too.”

Mr. Cross’s eyebrows arched once more and he leaned forward, his gaze locked on Michael. “Oh? Would I be out of line asking what they might be?”

Michael smiled, hoping his boss would understand the truth behind his next words. “You’re fiercely loyal to your employees. Even though you’re a jerk to them most of the time, you’re the only one allowed to act that way. You’re quick to jump to their defense, and that right there is what kept me here all these months.”

Without waiting for a reply, Michael opened the door, stepped out into his office, and breathed a sigh of relief.



Gary stood up and went to the small refrigerator. He opened it, snatched a bottle of water, closed the glass door with a thud, then went back to his desk. His mind raced, turning over all the things Michael had said. Had he *really* been as bad as Michael made him out to be? Yeah, he had, and he knew it. Ever since Eric’s death six years ago, Gary had done his best to keep people at arm’s length.

Being hurt once sucked enough.

He reached into his pocket and extracted the photo Gibbs had snapped of the two of them, arms around each other. He placed it on his desk and gazed lovingly at it. The playful expression on Eric’s face as he mugged for the camera sent Gary’s heart stuttering, as it always did.

“I wish it had been me. Or if you *had* to die, why couldn’t I have gone with you?”

A familiar ache settled in the pit of Gary's stomach as he recalled his repeated nightmares. The black smoke pouring into the sky, the shouts of his men as they rushed toward him, the knowledge that Eric was dead....

In his dreams, though, Eric had lived. *He'd* been the one to survive, and he'd done it intact. In Gary's fantasy, Eric had gone on to find love again, to settle down, open CrossBow, and had learned to laugh at life. He wasn't the one mired in self-pity, weighed down by the realization that if he'd only stuck to his guns, insisted Eric had stayed behind, the idiot would be alive today.

Having Eric angry enough to break it off, to walk away from Gary, was a far better alternative to having him be cremated and his ashes spread over his family's property in Minnesota. Maybe the fact that Gary had never been given the chance to say goodbye was what made the whole situation worse. Or, maybe, it was that he'd never been considered as Eric's life partner. They'd talked about it many times. Eric had told Gary his parents were fine with him being gay, stating that the only thing they wanted was for Eric to be happy. When they'd go on leave, nestled in a hotel room, curled around each other, Eric had said he was happy. To his fucking soul. He couldn't wait to get Gary home so that he could show him off. He'd said that his family would love Gary.

Yeah, not so much.

When Gary had gotten out of the hospital, he'd tried to contact Eric's parents, but they'd refused to speak with him. He reached out to Rich, Eric's brother, and had been subjected to an earful of invectives for his troubles. The final cut came when Rich had sent an injunction preventing Gary from contacting the family or from visiting Eric's grave.

Gary knew he'd been a fool, holding out hope where none existed. More than once he wondered if it would have made a difference to them if they'd reached out earlier in his relationship with Eric. Or if he'd contacted them right after Eric's death. Instead he'd endured months of rigorous physical

therapy that left him exhausted, barely able to open his eyes the next morning. Not to mention the countless surgeries he'd had to go through in a failed attempt to fix his hearing. There had also been too many doctors who said they could cover the mélange of scars that crisscrossed his body, which resulted in deep, dark lines against his roughened skin.

Each time he'd gone in, filled with so much hope that this one would work. *This* would be the surgery that made him look normal. But each time he'd come out disappointed. Finally, he told them no more. His face hadn't been fucked up too bad, despite the scar that bisected his cheek. True, he wouldn't win any beauty contests, but he still managed to draw attention when he went out. He did his best to believe it wasn't pity in their expressions. As for sex? What his body looked like didn't really matter. Darkness was his friend. Exchanging blow jobs in the bathroom at a bar ensured no one would see the multitude of flaws. Not that it mattered.

He had no intention of letting anyone get close again.

A deep shudder coursed through his body. He wondered what Eric would say if he could see him on his knees, hooking up with a stranger. He'd probably kick the shit out of him for being so stupid. Once more, he glanced at the picture on his desk, then picked it up and put it back into his pocket. After a few moments, he took it out and replaced it in the top desk drawer. He'd carried the picture for years, but the irrational thought that he'd lose it, the last connection he had to Eric, rocked him.

A familiar ache settled in his chest.

"Maybe *I* should have gone to see Wheels." He went to the window and gazed at the landscaping, the flowers in every hue of the rainbow, and wished his window had the capacity to open so he could smell their scent. Maybe later he'd go sit outside and have some lunch at the picnic area he'd asked to have so his employees wouldn't be cooped up all day. He'd never used it, so he was overdue to enjoy it too.

He looked down into the courtyard once more, seeing his employees

laughing and enjoying themselves.

Let's be honest here. I'm not likely to be eating out there anytime soon.

Gary returned to his desk and glanced over at the clock. According to its green digital display, Michael would be preparing to get his first taste of Wheels Malone.

What Gary wouldn't give for a video of the meeting.

Chapter Three



Michael's sweat-slicked finger could find no purchase on the pad. It kept skimming over the surface, which meant he couldn't swipe to the next page of the file he was trying to familiarize himself with. He wiped his hand across his pant leg, then rubbed the pad over his shirt. When he was finally able to get it working again, he had to smile.

This tells me almost nothing about Dr. Malone.

In his time with the company, consigned to the office for the entire working day, Michael had never met him. What online information there was about him provided very little insight. There were no pictures of him. Even the company page gave sketchy details at best. What had Michael gleaned from his research, beyond knowing Dr. Malone was twenty-eight and in a race to top Shunpei Yamazki and Kia Silverbrook to have a record for the most patents?

Nada.

The elevator stopped on the third floor—R&D—and the door opened with a soft *whoosh*. Butterflies fluttered in Michael's stomach. Even though his title was Mr. Cross's executive assistant and he was allowed anywhere in

the building, he'd never been on Dr. Malone's floor. He wasn't sure what he expected of CrossBow's resident genius, but the stark white hallway with its white rubberized flooring wasn't it.

He stepped out of the car and peered in both directions. His jacket was the single spot of color on the floor. It was eerie, like a vast nothingness. He made his way toward the labs, at least according to the map on his pad, and his eyes ached at the pure whiteness of it all. Finally, blessedly, he caught a flash of color, a sign that announced *Remove shoes and put on nonstatic slippers before entering*. Below it was a box of said slippers.

Then it made sense. This whole floor was Dr. Malone's sanctum sanctorum. He needed the purity to ensure no experiments were corrupted by stray particles.

Michael removed his shoes, put on the slippers, and marched toward Dr. Malone's office, stopping at the door. Despite his nerves, warmth radiated throughout his body, and there was a drumming in his chest. The fact that Gary was giving him this chance meant everything, and Michael was *not* going to mess it up. He slipped his pad into its soft leather holder, which doubled as a wireless charging unit, then checked himself in the reflection of the frosted glass set into the door. Satisfied with his appearance, he brushed his thumb over his teeth as a last measure, ensuring they were clean. He steeled himself, pushed the door open, and stepped inside the cool office.

There was no one in sight in the cavernous room that was filled with all manner of equipment.

“Dr. Malone?”

“Hm? Oh, put it on the counter, please. Thank you.”

Michael followed the voice around the corner of one of the walls, and found someone in a dark blue lab coat sitting at a desk, bent over it, scribbling into a worn, leather-bound notebook.

“Dr. Malone? Hi, I'm—”

Without looking up, he pointed to the stainless-steel counter across from

him. “There is fine, please.”

Michael couldn’t miss the clipped tone that hinted at consternation. “No, Dr. Malone, I’m—”

He glanced up, and Michael got his first glimpse of the man they called Wheels. His red hair was cut as if he’d done it himself—no symmetry to the style at all, just jagged edges of varying length. He had a generous sprinkle of freckles dotting his slightly pudgy cheeks. A pair of round glasses perched precariously on his button nose, making his eyes appear enormous. The lab coat, emblazoned with the CrossBow logo, had seen better days. Stains littered the arms and chest.

This is a genius?

He looked more like a slob.

Dr. Malone cleared his throat. “I’m very busy here. Please just put it down and—wait, am I supposed to tip you?” He huffed a breath and reached into his back pocket to draw out a wallet. “I’m sorry. I’m never sure about these things.” He pulled out a fifty-dollar bill and held it out to Michael.

Michael arched an eyebrow. “I think you’re mistaking me for someone else.”

His brow wrinkled. “You’re *not* here with my lunch?”

“No, but if you’re hungry, I’ll go grab you something from the cafeteria. You know we serve food there, right?”

Dr. Malone stuffed the money into his coat pocket, then waved a dismissive hand. “No time. I’m trying to unlock the secrets of the universe.” He went back to whatever had occupied him, hunched over again.

The back of Michael’s neck tingled. He *had* to know.

He approached Dr. Malone and peered over his shoulder. On the desk sat a small, white bottle. Michael leaned in closer, narrowing his gaze. Dr. Malone pressed the top, gave it a twist, removed the lid, scowled, then replaced it.

Michael frowned. It looked like an ordinary medication bottle, the kind

that might contain aspirin.

Dr. Malone didn't even acknowledge his scrutiny. "Ever wondered why round pizzas come in square boxes? Why glue doesn't stick to the inside of the bottle? Why we call it a building when it's already built? Or do such trivial matters not enter into your philosophy?" He chuckled to himself. "Today, however, I'm working on the humble but ever so annoying aspirin bottle."

"An aspirin bottle? How is that a mystery of the universe?"

Dr. Malone straightened, his expression one of sheer frustration. He glared at Michael, his eyelids squinting to cover a striking pair of pale green eyes. "Do you know anyone with arthritis?"

"Yes, my mom. She has it in her hands and hips."

He picked up the aspirin bottle and gave it a shake, causing the contents to rattle. "They call these things childproof, yet kids have an easier time opening them than an adult with arthritic hands. Now, why is that?"

"I... um... I don't know."

"Neither do I. Hence the mystery." He returned his attention to the bottle, hunched over his desk, completely ignoring Michael, and the penny dropped.

Mr. Cross set this up, the bastard.

No wonder he hadn't wanted to come down to see Dr. Malone on his own. Well, Michael would show him he wasn't about to be intimidated by the resident genius.

He held his hand out. "We haven't been introduced. I'm Michael Kennedy, Mr. Cross's assistant. He asked me to stop by to see what you needed."

Dr. Malone ignored the proffered hand, dropped the bottle, and straightened once more, his eyes wide. "You're early. You're not supposed to be here until tomorrow."

Michael pulled his pad from the holder and brought up his schedule. "No, today, ten a.m. I've got it in front of me. You asked me to change it,

remember?”

“What do you mean?” Dr. Malone frowned. He grabbed his own device and his fingers danced across the screen. “Aw, damn.” He glanced up at Michael. “I’m sorry. I appear to have lost a day. Again.”

That was a feeling Michael understood. “It happens. More than you probably realize.”

“I had it scheduled, but forgot to set the timer.” His head jerked up and he punched a button on the pad. “Look into automating the timer.”

The man was certainly different.

“Was there something I can do for you, Dr. Malone?”

“Wheels. Everyone calls me that.”

Then he stood up, and Michael blinked. He was ashamed to admit it, but he thought Dr. Malone’s nickname was the result of being in a wheelchair.

That wasn’t the case at all.

“If it’s all the same to you, I’ll stick with Dr. Malone.”

The doctor’s gaze strayed back to the bottle, and he picked it up again, going through the motions of opening it, closing it, repeating the action. “No, it’s *not* all the same to me. I *hate* the title doctor. It sounds pretentious and arrogant. If you don’t want to call me Wheels, then at least call me Josh or even Joshua. Not Joshy, though.” He gave a visible shudder. “An ex used to call me that. Hated it. Made me feel as if I should have been wearing diapers and asking for my binky.”

Michael hesitated. Even though Dr. Malone had said to call him by name, Michael wasn’t sure he should. This man was the single biggest investor in CrossBow, and it seemed wrong to be so familiar with him. Not that he figured Dr. Malone would recall telling Michael that.

From the way his gaze bounced from the bottle to his notebook, Michael could tell he no longer held Dr. Malone’s attention. He cleared his throat, hoping to bring the conversation back to the here and now.

Dr. Malone waved a hand. “You can talk. I’m listening to you.”

“Um... you called me to set an appointment, so I kind of need you to let me know what you wanted.”

He glanced up again, his brows knitted together. Then his green eyes popped wide. “Ugh. Yes, I called you. Sorry.” He reached into his pocket and drew out a pen. He slid it across the desk toward Michael. “This is for Mr. Cross. He told me he needed me to design him a new pen. He wanted something that, in his words, would even write underwater. Which I thought was totally ridiculous, because you can’t really write on wet paper. Then it hit me. He could write on metal underwater, so I redesigned the pen to work in both aquatic and nonaquatic environments.”

Michael picked up the pen. It was lightweight, silver, with intricate scrollwork along the sides. The nib was gold. Michael turned it around in his hand, looking at it from every angle. It didn’t seem different from any other pen, but if Dr. Malone said it was, Michael would have to trust him. “Guess that’s what makes you a genius.”

For the first time, Dr. Malone focused all his attention on Michael. He turned, pushed his glasses farther up on his nose, and smiled. “And what precisely *is* genius?”

“Um....” Michael shifted uncomfortably. “That thing that makes you the smartest man in the room, I guess.”

“Then you’re not describing me.” He stood and walked over to Michael. “So-called geniuses can be some of the dumbest people on the planet. Case in point.” He stabbed a finger into his own chest. “I forgot our meeting.”

“But you were busy. It’s not like you did it intentionally.”

“That’s my point. Yes, I hold patents in a bunch of things. Yes, I got my doctorate from Harvard when I was fourteen. A lousy six months off Karl Witte, the bastard. But the thing is, I was forever forgetting to eat, so I had to make a watch to remind me three times every day, and even *that* didn’t guarantee success.” He picked up his pad. “I have apps on here that tell me what I need to be working on. There’s even an alarm that goes off every hour

to keep me focused on what I'm supposed to be doing. My mind wanders constantly, so it's hard to keep me on task. If that's what you mean by 'genius,' then you can pretty well keep it, because believe me, it sucks."

Michael had never thought there would be a downside to being brilliant.

The ache in Dr. Malone's voice told him otherwise.

"When everyone else goes out after work to get a beer, I'm still here doing my best to understand something. If I forget to set my alarm, which happens more than I'm willing to admit, I'm still here after midnight when the security guy—his name is Frank, by the way. Nice man. His son, Kevin, will be graduating this year, and Frank says he's going to try and get him a summer intern—shit. I'm sorry."

Michael smiled. "It's not a problem. Seriously."

"As I was saying, when everyone else is going out and having a good time, I'm here, working on my next big project."

It sounded like such a sad life. "What do you do for fun?"

"Oh, that's easy." Dr. Malone glanced around furtively, even though he and Michael were alone in the lab. "I give money to animal shelters."

"Oh? Do you have pets?"

Josh gave a quick shake of his head. "Oh, dear me, no. Not a good idea. Knowing me, I'd forget about them, and six months later, I'd find their skeletal remains in the corner somewhere. It wouldn't be fair to them."

"Who do you give money to?"

"Places all over the country. Usually the ones with high kill ratios. Did you know that over one and a half million animals are euthanized each year? If I can help, I will." His lips twitched. "Besides, it's not as if Bill and Melinda are going to miss a few million, right?"

Michael coughed. "Gates? You're *stealing* money?"

Dr. Malone flashed a boyish grin. "I wouldn't use so harsh a term. I prefer to think of it as reallocating funds. Besides, I'm sure if Bill knew about the problem, he'd be on the front lines fighting to save the smaller places and

helping to spay and neuter to keep the population under control.”

“But *stealing*?”

Dr. Malone puffed up his chest. “I donate my money too. Last year I gave almost a million dollars to twenty-five different places. All anonymously, of course.”

“Oh, of course.” No way Dr. Malone could miss his sarcasm.

“Fine.” Dr. Malone sighed. “The truth is, my parents were barely scraping by. It’s not easy having a kid that’s allegedly a genius. When I was younger, I wanted to help the animals, and wished we had the money. Then I figured that if I was supposed to be so smart, why not use my head? For two years I hacked into companies or the bank accounts of the rich and shameless, and shuffled money from them to the shelters.

“Then I learned a very valuable lesson: No matter how smart you are, there’s always someone who’s smarter. One day someone from the government came knocking at my door. And by knocking, I mean they kicked it in. They confiscated all my equipment, tore my room apart, and caused my parents all kinds of angst. In the end, they offered me a choice between a cushy job working for them for five years, or prison for thirty. It was a no-brainer, obviously. I took their offer, and became the model employee.”

Michael lifted his eyes. “Why do I think there’s more to the story than what you’re telling me?”

Dr. Malone chuckled. “That lasted until I got bored—which was about two weeks—and then I went traipsing around in their network. I found things no one was supposed to know about.” He rolled his eyes. “Like it was *my* fault they had such crappy security. Of course, knowing I’d found out didn’t sit well with my employers. They booted me out onto the streets and dogged my every step. We’re talking surveillance people, bugged phones, the works.”

Michael blew out a shaky breath. This went way beyond anything he’d

ever expected when he came to meet with Dr. Malone. “What happened?”

Dr. Malone shrugged. “I sent them pictures showing them doing some shady things on their own, with explicit details of how the information would be disseminated if anything happened to me or if they didn’t back off. After that, they left me alone. Mostly.”

The story was so fantastic, Michael was at a loss for what to say. Instead, he gazed at his surroundings then blurted out something inane. “So I guess everything is white around here because it reduces static or something?”

Dr. Malone blinked again. “What? No, that isn’t the reason. I just happen to like white.” His pad chimed. Dr. Malone picked it up and his gaze darted across the screen. “Okay I have to get back to work. Thank you for stopping by.” Then he turned his attention back to the papers on his desk.

Apparently Michael had been dismissed.

He went back to the door of the lab, his head aching. He barely remembered getting on the elevator that whisked him back to his office.

Mr. Cross stood in the doorway, his arms folded, a smarmy grin on his face. “How did the meeting go?”

Michael thought best about how to break the news gently. “You have a criminal working for you.”

So much for that idea.

Mr. Cross burst out laughing, and Michael was dumbfounded.

How can he be blasé about the whole thing?

“How can you have someone like him working for a security company?”

Mr. Cross smiled. “He’s a brilliant man. A little eccentric—okay, he’s *very* eccentric—but not crazy, if you know what I mean. Yes, he did some legally questionable things, but his heart was in the right place. Besides, he paid his debt to society and turned those powers of his into something decent. He became a model citizen, and working at CrossBow has given him the outlet he so desperately needs.”

Michael drew in a deep breath. “How does working on aspirin bottles

help a company that handles bodyguard assignments from all over the world?”

“Wheels is one of our primary investors. When I went to him with the idea of CrossBow, he made me a deal that I couldn’t turn down. In exchange for completely funding us, he wanted a floor for research and development. In exchange, he’d put the money into the company. It’s because of him we have the cars, the helicopter, the vests, guns—”

“Okay, I get it.” Michael was ready for the conversation to be over. Obviously his opinion carried no weight. “I’ll go back to my desk.”

Mr. Cross blocked his path. “Michael, listen to me for a second. I don’t think you understand. CrossBow believes in second chances. Wheels did some things in his youth that he regrets. Max Doman? He’s on parole for a string of thefts, but we’ve given him a job testing security systems.”

“Yes, but—”

“Jessica Morales? She couldn’t afford medication for her two-year-old and did some very questionable things to get it. The judge wouldn’t accept that as a legitimate reason and sent her to jail for six months. When she got out, she had a hard time finding a job, and she had to fight to get parental rights back for her kid. By the time she was done, she had nothing.” Mr. Cross folded his arms. “Her probation officer contacted me and asked if we had a spot for her. We checked into her background, and what we found told us she’d be a perfect fit here. But instead of finding a position for her, we created one.” He looked Michael in the eye. “Neither of them shies away from the fact that they’ve done something they’re ashamed of. They embrace it, they talk about it, they own it. Why would it be wrong to show them their lives are still worth living?”

Michael wanted to say *something*, to argue the point, but he had to admit Mr. Cross was right. That little niggle still tweaked his brain, though. “How do you know you can trust him? Dr. Malone, I mean. What’s to say he won’t steal from *you*?”

Mr. Cross widened his eyes. “How do I know I can trust *you*? How do *you* know you can trust *me*? If we start looking at everyone who works here with suspicion, then how can any of us work together? Wheels has earned my trust. Okay, I won’t deny he’s scattered, and I can’t say there hasn’t been more than one occasion where something has slipped through the cracks, but he has *never* failed me, not even once. We’re successful enough now that if he pulled his funding, we’d be okay, but I like having him here. He makes great gadgets, and he supports schools by giving them for free. He doesn’t need to do that, right?”

“I guess.” And he did understand. Plus, Dr. Malone hadn’t seemed a bad sort. “You’re right.”

Mr. Cross gave a soft smile, and his eyes flashed under the lights. “Let me ask you one last question. Is there anything you did when you were a kid that you don’t want anyone to know about?”

That hit at the heart of the matter. “Yes.”

“All right. That’s it, right there. You regret something in yours—I have my own burdens. Do you think either of us ought to be let go?”

Wow. Way to make me feel like a hypocrite. “Well, you, maybe.” He grinned.

“So you admit you’re wrong?”

“I wouldn’t say I’m wrong. Let’s just say I’m less right than you.”

They stared at each other for a few moments, then burst out laughing.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“Why not?” Mr. Cross laid his hand on Michael’s arm, and its warmth surprised him. “You’re my executive assistant. You are my eyes and ears around here. If there are things going on, I need to know about them, so you did exactly what you were supposed to.” Another soft smile. “Never stop being you.”

Holy shit. Michael glanced at the calendar, then back to his boss.

“What? Why are you staring at me with that strange expression?”

“Is today opposite day or something? I never expected that from you.”

Mr. Cross chuckled. “Let’s just say my eyes and ears were opened recently, and I’m going to try—not that I’ll necessarily *succeed*, mind you—to be less... me.”

Though the words were sincerely uttered, Michael had heard them too many times in his life to simply accept them.

“Okay, I look forward to the new and improved you.”

Not that he believed it would ever happen.

It never did.

Except there was a vase of yellow roses on his desk that allowed the tiniest smidge of doubt to creep into his mind.

Chapter Four



Gary sat at his desk, reading through the mails that had flooded his box since the presser. The article they'd written had been picked up by a national outlet and CrossBow was now under a microscope. They had more job offers than ever before, a handful of stories designed to get free bodyguard service, and another pile that contained angry letters from environmentalists who accused CrossBow of raping the planet.

“You know, you'd think that for all the purported reading these people do, they'd take the time to find out the truth about us,” he mumbled.

“Yes, but if they did that, they'd have a lot less to complain about, and where's the fun in that?” Michael's fingers danced across his keyboard. “And speaking of which, I'm about to send out a Q&A.”

“What's this one about?”

“CrossBow's commitment to the environment.”

“Don't you have better things to do? Correspondence to answer?”

“I've already done that, and if you check your box, you'll find the ones requiring your attention. Besides, another Q&A can't hurt.”

Gary heaved a sigh. “You know that won't change things, right?”

Michael huffed. “Believe me, I know, but if we ignore it, then we’re the guys in the black hats here.”

That was true, and it showed Michael was good at thinking in more than two dimensions. Gary went back to his mail.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Go ahead.” Gary would rather do that than read his emails.

Actually, the mood he was in? He’d rather stick pins in his eyes than read his mail.

“Why did you create CrossBow?”

“You’ve read the—”

“I want the *real* reason,” Michael interjected. “I know what you told the interviewer, but I want to know the whole story. I could tell you were holding back part of it.” He paused. “If this is bad, we don’t have to talk about it.”

How come I didn’t see how great he is? Only now was Gary learning to appreciate that Michael was something special and he’d risked losing him because he’d been hurting and hadn’t wanted to share that with anyone.

Michael more than anyone else deserved to know the truth.

Gary pushed his chair back, stretched out his legs, and clasped his hands in his lap, his gaze fixed on his desk. “The name CrossBow? Half of it is my name, obviously, but the other half....” His chest tightened, but he’d gotten this far. “Eric Bowman was in my platoon. We started out as friends, but it quickly became something more.” He glanced at Michael, but there was no reaction. He breathed a little easier. “Anyhow, late one night when it was too hot to sleep, we talked about what we were going to do when we got out. Eric’s idea was to open a bodyguard business where the rich would basically pay us to do the job we were *already* doing for the government but getting paid practically nothing for. He spoke in such glowing detail that I got caught up in it. When he asked if I wanted to go in with him, I said yes.”

“Well, if it means anything, you did an amazing job with it. Where’s Bowman now?”

Bile rose, and Gary swallowed it down. “He was killed when the insurgents attacked us.” He squeezed his fingers into his palm, focusing on the sharp pain. “I needed to do this, to create this, for both of us.” Another glance at Michael, only to find his eyes filled with compassion. “Don’t get me wrong, I’ve had a *lot* of therapy, and even though I still miss him, I’ve come to terms with his death. Mostly.” He studied his clasped hands. “Some things trigger memories, like hot nights, or a certain smell.” Memories he needed to shove aside right then. “It’s why so many of our people are ex-military, or worked in some dangerous career. We wanted to give them a chance to do the job and get paid for it.”

The people at CrossBow were strong and good at what they did. They’d returned home broken, and Gary reached out and offered them a job. For the last two years, his people had been model employees, each grateful for what they had. CrossBow offered only the best insurance, including mental health, for those they hired. Gary was grateful for it, because the night terrors still plagued him sometimes, leaving him unable to sleep.

Or function.

There were so many success stories that no one else saw. When he’d hired Nick Owens, he was a shell of the man he’d been. Now? He’d gotten married and had a little boy. Anthony Klein had played the field for a while, but then found a young lady he was nuts for. He talked about settling down and starting a family of his own.

“I think what you’ve achieved is amazing.” Sincerity rang out in Michael’s voice.

Gary waved a hand. “Not yet, it isn’t, but we’re getting there. But I love this job. Even if I can’t be in the thick of things anymore, it still gives me a sense of accomplishment.”

“I can understand why.” Michael sighed. “Everyone I’ve met has been nothing but professional and caring for the job and the people they help. And while there are people out there who want to bitch, moan, and whine about

the company, I've also gotten glowing recommendations and testimonials about how incredible CrossBow is.”

Gary chuckled. “I know. I keep the ones you send me in a folder on the computer. It gives me something to look at when I need a reminder of the good we do.”

When the bitches, moaners, and whiners get too much to bear.

Gary didn't share the fact that a few of the men had been under his command in the Army. They got together each year to toast the memories of fallen friends. They were his one link to the past, and he was clinging to it with all his might.

“Right. Back to work.” Gary glanced at his monitor and winced.

“What's wrong?”

“My inbox. I looked.” There were a ton of mails that still needed addressing. “I think I'm going to be here late tonight.”

Michael pushed his chair back, walked over to Gary's desk, and stood there, his arms folded. Gary recognized the stance instantly.

Michael was on the warpath.

“Yeah, no. Sorry, that's not happening.”

Gary jerked his head up and gave Michael a sharp stare. “Excuse me?”

“You're suffering from a lack of sleep, and it's wreaking havoc on your vertigo.”

“What does that have to do with—”

“Stand up.”

Gary waved a hand at his desk. “I have work to—”

“Stand. Up.” Michael's eyes blazed. “*Now, Cross.*”

He didn't bother to suppress his sneer. *What the fuck?* “Who the hell do you think you are?” And yet his limbs responded automatically. He stood, and as soon as he was vertical, he had to put his hands on the desk to keep from becoming horizontal. Dots of light swam in front of his eyes and his stomach heaved, making it hard to focus. He sat down with a thump.

“Yeah, as I thought.” The hard edge to Michael’s voice melted, and he put his hands on Gary’s desk, leaning forward. “Okay, this is what’s going to happen. First, I’m going to get you some of your prescription pills, and you’ll take them without fuss. Then you’re going to stretch out on the couch for an hour. While you rest, I’ll go down to the cafeteria to get you something to eat, and when I come back, we’re going to sit down together.”

Gary opened his mouth to protest but Michael clearly wasn’t ready to stop.

“I’m going to make sure you take care of yourself. Then, once I’m satisfied you’ve eaten and can make it back to your place without throwing up, I’ll call a cab to come get you and take you home. Or, better still, I’ll drive you myself.”

He did his best to sound indignant. “Where do you get off—”

Michael’s eyes grew flinty. “Let’s get something straight. My day doesn’t end when I walk out that door. I am, first and foremost, your personal assistant. That means it’s *my* job to make sure you’re able to do *yours*. And right now? You can’t. You’re no good to anyone in this shape, so I’m pulling executive assistant rank.” It was back to the folded arms again.

“Executive assistant rank? There’s no such thing,” Gary protested.

That flinty look was still in evidence. “There is now.” His voice rang with confidence. “Go ahead, argue with me. See how far *that’ll* get you.”

Any other day, Gary would have been happy to lay into the smug bastard and bring him to his knees. Right now, though?

A nap sounded *really* good.

“Okay.” His voice sounded weak even to his ears.

“Do you need help getting to the couch?”

He wasn’t *that* weak.

Gary snorted and stood again. “No.” He took a half-step and toppled over, before powerful arms grabbed him and scooped him up. Apparently, Michael was stronger than he appeared—he made the movement seem effortless, and

his face showed no signs of stress.

Michael's breath tickled his ear. "You need to stop lying to yourself and to me, Mr. Cross. You're frayed at the edges and falling apart. I don't know why you feel the need to push yourself, but I can't stand seeing you hurting like this."

The words barely filtered through Gary's brain. It was taking everything in him to not pass out. Ever since the explosion, when something went wrong, his vision became a cascade of colors, one following right after another. Right now, he was up to red, and it wouldn't be long before he'd be curled in a ball on the couch, crying.

No way did he want Michael to see that.

"I should go home," he groaned.

"And you will—*after* I make sure you're ready." Michael led him to the sofa.

"But—"

He gave Gary a warm smile. "Don't worry. The job of a good assistant is to know what they're getting into." He squeezed Gary's hand. "And how to keep things quiet."

He knows.

Had Michael heard Gary sobbing on the couch when things got overwhelming, when the pain in his head made him wish his skull would split and get it over with?

"How?" It was all he could manage to get out.

Michael pushed Gary down on the sofa and pulled one of the pillows close enough to tuck under his head. When he spoke again, his voice was low. "I did a lot of reading. I understand about head injuries and the problems that can accompany them. Plus, I pay attention to your moods, so I know when you're hurting or hungry or tired, and I try to compensate for them. It's what any assistant would do."

Except no assistant before him had *ever* done that.

“Maybe others could have, if you had let them in.”

How does he do that?

“No one ever cared enough to try,” Gary murmured, burying his face in the pillow to blot out the light.

“I guess not.” A moment later the electrochromic glass Wheels had been working on reduced the light in the room to barely above pure darkness. “The man can deny it, but this is genius.”

Gary knew the moment Michael had left the room. His... presence wasn't there, and what surprised him was how keenly he felt the loss. When Michael returned a few moments later, Gary sighed contentedly. All he ever wanted was to be left alone, so why did he want Michael nearby, especially when he was feeling so sick?

“I have your pills.” Michael spoke softly. “Can you sit up a few moments? Do you need help?”

“No, I can do it.”

And he tried. Twice. Fuck, no wonder Michael gave him shit if *this* was how weak he was.

“I—”

“Here, let me help you.”

Those strong hands were back, wrapped around Gary's biceps, tugging him gently until he was upright. Michael didn't say a word but simply held out the two pills and a glass of water. Gary took them, his hand shaking, then popped them in his mouth before chugging the water. He knew it wouldn't be long before they kicked in.

If he thinks he's seen me at my lowest ebb, he's in for a shock.

“The pills—”

“It's okay, I promise. I'm going to take care of you, all right?” Michael drew a thin sheet over Gary.

“What's this?”

“I talked to Dr. Malone and told him I needed a nice blanket. This is what

he gave me.”

Gary snuggled in, wrapping the thin cloth around his arms, then pulling it up to his chin. He opened his eyes enough to find Michael staring at him.

“I’ll be back with food later. I expect you to sleep. And don’t get up and try to work on those mails, because I *will* know.”

Michael turned, and even though Gary could only see a silhouette from the light at the door, he breathed a sigh. Someone was willing to ignore his bullshit posturing and *see* him again. The only other person who’d ever done that was....

Shit.

“I think you’d like the fact that he doesn’t take my crap, Eric,” he whispered to the now-quiet room.



Michael opened his desk drawer and pulled out the binder he’d stored there not long after he got the job. Inside was everything he’d learned about migraines, head injuries, and the like. Gary Cross might have been a shitty boss so far, but Michael still felt for the guy. He’d heard him one night, after Mr. Cross thought Michael had left for the day. He’d lain on the sofa, a pillow pressed to his face, sobbing into it. When the sobs gave way to a scream, Michael had wanted to go to him, but he knew his attentions wouldn’t be welcome. Instead, he went home and started his folder, ready to make himself invaluable should Mr. Cross ever let him in.

And he finally had.

Sure, it had taken a very long time, but at last Mr. Cross had opened his eyes to the fact that he wasn’t alone in the world. Michael was there, and Michael cared what happened to him. Okay, so he’d had to set Mr. Cross

straight about a few things, if only so he could get his head out of his ass, but it had worked.

He flipped through the pages of the binder, bypassing tabs about diet, medications, sensitivity to outside stimuli, and more. He stopped when he got to the part about head injuries and migraines.

These kinds of headaches happen because an area of the brain becomes hypersensitive and can trigger a pain signal that spreads out to other parts of the brain (like the ripples that spread out after you drop a pebble in water). These headaches typically have the following features:

Dull, throbbing sensation, usually on one side of the head.

Nausea or vomiting.

Light and sound sensitivity.

Pain level rated as moderate to severe.

You might get a warning signal that a migraine is coming on, such as seeing spots or bright lights. This is called an aura.

Michael had kept a close eye on Mr. Cross, watching for signs of an incoming migraine. It helped that Mr. Cross telegraphed his problems well, even if he thought he'd kept them hidden. He'd lock himself inside his office, and the light under the door would go out, followed by Mr. Cross's plaintive cries when the pain took hold.

It was all out in the open now, though, and Michael would be there for him.

He picked up the phone and called down to the cafeteria. When someone answered, Michael went into his spiel. "This is Mr. Cross's office. I need to order a dish of brown rice with carrots and spinach, a bottle of nonsparkling water, and some dried cranberries and cherries mixed, please."

"Of course. We'll get started on that right away. Did you need anything else?"

"No, but thank you for checking." He was about to hang up when he had a thought. "Oh! Please make sure there isn't any broth used on the rice. It

should be—”

“As plain as possible. Yes, sir. We have your order on our board, and I’ll take care of it myself.”

Michael smiled. Mr. Cross had put together some amazing people. “When should I pick it up?”

The man on the other end of the phone scoffed. “I’ll have someone bring it to you.” Then his voice softened. “Mr. Cross never asks for anything. We’re happy to help him out.”

Ten minutes later, Kerry Sutter walked into the office, a tray balanced on his right hand.

“Hey, Kerry,” Michael whispered.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Delaney,” he replied softly. “I have your order here.”

“Could you set it down, please? Be as quiet as you can, if you would.”

He did his job with such care, Michael couldn’t help but be impressed. The meeting with Dr. Malone notwithstanding, every person Mr. Cross hired seemed to have only the best interest of the company at heart. Yeah, it could have something to do with the amazing benefits—401k, eight weeks of paid vacation, fully paid insurance that covered dental, vision, health, and mental health as well. Being a military man himself, Mr. Cross obviously wanted to be sure everyone got the help they needed.

As much as he hated to admit it, even if he could be making more money somewhere else, Michael might have kinda sorta fallen in love with CrossBow.



The door to the office opened, and Michael glanced up. Mr. Cross’s normally

razor-neat hair was mussed, his blue eyes were shadowed, and his lips were thinned out into a harsh line.

“Bad?” Michael asked.

Mr. Cross opened his mouth, most likely to protest, but then whispered, “Yeah.”

“I’ve got your food here. I know you probably don’t feel like eating, but your body needs it. Did you want it in your office?”

“I.... Uh.... Would you mind?”

This wasn’t the Gary Cross Michael knew. That man had been all kinds of stubborn and ornery. This one acknowledged he was in pain, reaching out to Michael to make things better. He’d let down his guard and allowed Michael access to the iron wall he normally hid behind.

It felt like a huge step forward.

“Not at all. Go have a seat, and I’ll bring it in to you.”

Mr. Cross trudged back into the darkened room and Michael followed, carrying the tray in both hands. When Mr. Cross sat gingerly on the sofa, Michael placed the food in front of him.

“Were you able to sleep?”

“A little. I think. The pills make me drowsy.”

“Good. Hopefully it’ll help. Want me to keep the room dark?”

“Yes, please” came the pained whisper.

The windows were already set to the darkest possible setting, so Michael pulled the curtains tight, blocking out any and all light.

“Don’t forget to take your pills,” he said softly. He placed them and the bottle of water into Mr. Cross’s hands, then took a seat beside him. He heard the soft *glug* as Mr. Cross swallowed. “How was it? On a scale of one to ten.”

“Probably eleven. Maybe more.” Mr. Cross groaned, an eerie sound that seemed to come from the depths of his own personal hell. “I haven’t had one this bad since....” He sighed. “It’s been a while.”

The soft whimper nearly broke Michael’s heart. He hated seeing anyone

suffer, but for Gary Cross it was different. He'd been out there, trying to make the world a better place, and had himself come home a broken warrior. Things were different now, though. He had Michael.

And I'm going to do everything I can to make it better.

Chapter Five



August

Michael opened the main door to CrossBow and walked toward the elevators, sipping his nectar of the gods. Trent on reception greeted him with a wave.

“Morning, Mr. Kennedy. Where’s *my* coffee?”

Michael chuckled. “I’ll have the cafeteria send you some.”

At fifty-eight, Trent had no right to be able to manage a pout like the one he had on display. “But I don’t want their coffee—I want what *you* drink.”

“Ooh, a connoisseur. In that case....”

“Yeah?” Trent’s eyes held a hopeful gleam.

“Leave earlier tomorrow morning, and you too can pick up a cup of this really good coffee on the way here. Mm-mm.”

Trent rolled his eyes. “Have a good day, sir.”

As Michael stepped into the elevator, he smiled to himself.

I could get to like this.

During the past month, Mr. Cross had been good to his word. He greeted

Michael every morning with a cheery hello. He trusted him with more responsibility. And it wasn't just Michael who'd noticed the change. The mood around the facility was definitely lighter, less anxious.

And once in a while, Mr. Cross smiled.

Michael entered his office, whistling some song he'd heard on the radio on the way there. He stopped short at the sight of a large envelope sitting on his desk.

He grinned. *Well, at least I know it's not roses this time.* A gesture that had proved impossible to forget, especially since it marked the beginning of the thaw. One month later, and things were on the right track. Michael had relaxed a little, and Mr. Cross was....

Improving?

Yeah, that was the word. He still had his moments, but they were less frequent.

Michael put his backpack down on a chair, picked up the envelope, and opened it. Inside was a rainbow-colored piece of paper with a silver border surrounding it. He took the paper out, peered at what was written on it—

And promptly lost his shit.

“Where... what... how...?”

“Those are all good questions,” Mr. Cross said with a chuckle from the doorway.

“This.... This is a gift certificate for Uzon.” Only *the* best sushi restaurant south of the Rockies, not that Michael had ever eaten there. Well, he *could*, provided he wanted to book a table for two years in advance.

Okay, maybe that was an exaggeration. Eighteen months, tops.

“You noticed that, huh?”

Michael was sure he looked idiotic, with his mouth hanging open and eyes probably as wide as saucers. “But why are you giving me this?”

Mr. Cross grinned. “Happy anniversary, Michael.”

It took him a moment before it registered. “Oh. Right.” One year at

CrossBow. “How did you know I like sushi?” Except like was *way* too weak a word.

He fucking *loved* sushi.

Mr. Cross coughed. “You think I don’t see what you eat for your lunch?”

Michael stared at the pretty certificate. “I don’t know what to say... except... *how?* How’d you even get this? These things must be like gold. I tried to get one for a friend once and was told they don’t do gift certificates. Plus, the place has a waiting list like a mile long, so it’s doubtful I could get seating anytime soon.”

“We did a job for the owner not long before you started. His wife needed a bodyguard because of a stalker. We saved her from an attack and caught the guy.”

“Like you do,” Michael added.

“Yeah, like we do. Anyhow, the owner—nice guy, by the way—was so grateful, he offered me a gift certificate. Initially I said no, but he told me if I ever wanted one, all I had to do was call. So I did.” Mr. Cross narrowed his gaze. “And no, it *wasn’t* a freebie. I paid for it.” His eyes twinkled. “Wouldn’t want you to think I’m cheap, you know?”

Michael was still in shock. “Does this have an expiration date?”

Mr. Cross shook his head. “Nope. And it’s good for two people, in case you want to... take a date. Just call them. The owner has a note in the books to accept you on whatever night you want.” He cleared his throat. “And now that we’ve got the celebrations out of the way, do you think we might manage a little work around here?”

Michael smiled. “Certainly, sir.”

Okay, so it wasn’t roses this time—it was even better.

You can’t eat roses.



Gary had known it was going to be a rough week, but he'd never expected anything like this.

Was it Hire-a-Bodyguard Week and no one told me?

There'd been so many calls that they'd had to add someone to field the ones Michael couldn't keep up with. Sure, a lot of them were only asking questions, but enough wanted details about hiring a bodyguard from CrossBow that they'd had to confirm they had the staff to handle that many jobs.

Thank God for Michael.

He'd been on top of his game and had created a spreadsheet showing all available people, plus any assignments they were currently working, and included any specific areas of expertise they might have, not to mention any weaknesses. There was Dobbs's inability to be around kids, for one thing. Could he do the job? Yes, absolutely. Should he be given it? No, unless you wanted the kid to cry every time Dobbs glared at them.

How does Michael do all this?

Gary couldn't have pulled it off in a million years. In fact, he wasn't sure anyone other than Wheels could have gotten it right. True to form, Michael waved off the praise, telling him it was just a few hours' work, but when pressed about when he'd found the time, he admitted he'd done it at home. On his own, off the clock.

Not good.

As Gary's executive assistant, he was salaried, or at least that was what HR had told him. Yet further proof of how much Gary needed him, as if any confirmation was necessary. Michael was a wonder at his job, and Gary was trying his damndest to ensure he didn't fall back into his old habit of pissing

off his assistants, because no way did he want to lose this one.

“Michael?”

He looked up from his computer, his brow creased. “Yes, sir?”

That expression of consternation was enough to stop Gary in his tracks.

“Well, I *was* going to say we needed to talk, but right now you look as though you have something on your mind.”

Michael bit his lip. “I just got off the phone with someone who wanted to schedule a meeting with you. I explained that you didn’t take personal meetings, but he informed me you’d take this one.”

Now Gary was intrigued. “Okay, why?”

“He says you know him.”

“What’s his name?”

“General Dwight Porter.”

Aw fuck.

Michael’s eyes widened. “Mr. Cross?”

It wasn’t possible. He had to have heard it wrong. Sweat trickled down his back as Gary clawed at his shirt and tie, which he was certain were choking him. The room was suddenly too tight, the walls closing in on him with each labored breath.

How long has it been since I heard that name?

Years, and if he were honest, he’d have been fine never hearing it again.

And there it was in his head, the memory of Porter’s matter-of-fact tone, telling Gary the man he’d loved and the men he’d held in highest esteem were dead. He’d sounded as if he was reading it off a fucking cereal box, not giving a good goddamn these were human fucking beings and—

“Mr. Cross!”

Michael’s strident tone shook him, but not enough to pull him out of his claustrophobic nightmare where the bodies of the dead cavorted in some macabre dance, and voices dry as autumn leaves skittered across Gary’s mind, telling him he’d failed them. That he’d allowed them to die.

Strong arms encircled him, and Gary lashed out, struggling to free himself, but his attacks were weak. Ineffective.

“Count with me,” Michael demanded. “Inhale. One. Exhale. Two. Inhale. Three. Exhale. Four.”

Gary couldn't draw in a breath. Hell, he could barely focus. He couldn't see anything but the smoke billowing skyward, taking everything he loved with it. He—

“Cross!” Michael snarled near Gary's ear. “Count with me! Inhale. One. Exhale. Two. Inhale. Three. Exhale. Four.”

The tone began to drum its way into Gary's head and he started counting with Michael. They'd reached eighty-three before Gary felt as though he could breathe again. He turned in Michael's arms, grateful when Michael didn't let go.

I am so fucking pathetic.

“You okay now?” Michael asked, his tone laced with concern.

Gary didn't move. “No, not really.”

“That's fine. We can sit here a while.”

When did we sit down?

It didn't matter. Gary needed to move. Michael probably believed he'd seen Gary at his lowest, but he didn't need to be dragged into this.

“I'm sorry,” he whispered, trying to draw away. “Let me get up.”

Michael held him fast. “No, you're not going anywhere. You're freaked out, and right now I think you need the contact.”

He wasn't wrong. Gary was already stressed to the point of breaking, and Michael's touch grounded him, preventing his nerves from fraying even further at the seams. “You shouldn't—”

“Shut up,” Michael whispered close to Gary's ear. “Executive assistant privilege, remember?”

All the fight seeped out of Gary as he sagged into Michael's arms and whimpered at the memories that assailed his mind. The ones he was sure he'd

put away after years of therapy.

No, you did put them away. Remember what the therapist taught you? The techniques?

He grabbed on to them, letting them flood his consciousness. He whispered his affirmations.

It's okay to be angry or hurt.

It's okay to feel for those who lost their lives while I lived.

The litanies helped clear his mind a little.

“That’s better.” He recognized the approval in Michael’s voice. “Now... tell me what’s going on.”

“Did... did he say what he wanted?”

“He said he couldn’t talk about it with me as it was a military matter and I didn’t have the necessary clearance.” A pause. “If you don’t want to see him, I’ll cancel the meeting. I won’t let him get within two feet of you.”

Fuck, that was tempting, but reason tempered his impulse to flee. “N-No, it’s fine.”

“Don’t lie to me. I’ve never seen you get this worked up over a visitor. Who is he?”

God, where to begin? He wasn’t sure Michael was ready for this. Shit, he wasn’t sure *he* was ready to discuss it.

“He was our commanding officer. He was the one Eric went to when I pulled him off the detail for the day because....”

Does Michael really need to know this? What difference would it make in the grand scheme of things? Maybe it would be better if Gary just kept his mouth shut about those fucking “tingles” of his.

“Because he was acting up, being belligerent, things like that. Porter overrode me, saying that Eric could go.”

Michael was listening intently. Warmth flowed through Gary at having someone’s attention like this. Maybe one day he’d have the nerve to talk to Michael about his tingles. At least he hadn’t had one in years, so that was

progress.

“So what’s with this General?”

“He was a Major back then. He showed up at the hospital when I woke up and dropped the bombshell that Eric and five other men had been killed in the attack. I was the only one nearby who survived it. He started asking questions, which sounded more like accusations.” He shuddered out a breath. “I wasn’t ready for Eric to be dead, and I handled it badly. There was a... a lot of screaming and cussing. I ranted at him until the doctors added a sedative to my IV and I went back to sleep. Haven’t seen or heard from him since.”

Michael squared his shoulders in that familiar battle stance. “Then it’s simple. Say the word and he doesn’t get in.”

The fact that he had options soothed Gary’s nerves. “No, I want to know why he’s coming.” He arched his eyebrows and managed a half-smile. “If things get dicey, though, I might need you to kick him out.”

“I’ll have Security standing by.”

Gary stared at him. “I was kidding.”

“I wasn’t.” Michael’s face was an implacable mask, but Gary could practically feel the anger simmering underneath the words. “*No one* gets to upset you.”

Annoyance flared in him, but Gary quashed it. He had to prove he wasn’t weak. “I’m not an invalid.”

Michael’s eyes widened. “No one said you were. Needing help doesn’t make you weak. Hell, you built CrossBow from sheer determination. You could have retired and lived off your benefits—”

“And sat at home wallowing in self-pity? No thanks.”

Michael chuckled. “No one could ever accuse you of wallowing. You’re too strong for that. But that strength is what drove you to carry out your plans. Even on the worst days, you’re still here, in the trenches, making the world a better place. We appreciate that, you know. Everyone who works

here is a fan of yours.”

“Opinions change quickly,” Gary replied. “I’m sure before I was the devil incarnate.”

Michael’s brow furrowed. “No. People were confused, anxious, and worried for you, but *never* did any of them think the worst of you. Take me as a for instance. I might have been upset, but I never thought poorly of you. You’re a good man. Sometimes, even the best men need help to make it through the rough patches.” He smiled, and Gary’s heart fluttered. “I’d like to be someone you can ask when you need that help.”

Michael didn’t deserve anything less than honesty. “You surprised me with how much you knew about me. I think you’re already that someone.”

Michael met his gaze with a frankness that shook him. “You’ve got my number, Mr. Cross. Never be afraid to use it. Like I said, my day doesn’t end when I leave here.”

What did I do to earn someone so dedicated?

Whatever it was, that didn’t matter now. He would do whatever he could to make Michael’s time with CrossBow—no matter how long that might be—something he could look back on with pride.

“So when is the General getting here?” It was time to shift things back to business.

“I have him down for eleven.” Michael scowled. “He tried to bully his way in earlier, but I assured him that wasn’t happening and that he should be damn glad to get the only opening we had available until next week. He took it awfully fast after that.”

Gary snickered, grateful to feel the last of his tension draining from him. “I don’t have anything pressing on my schedule, do I?”

“No, but he was a total douche on the phone. Didn’t anyone ever tell him you *never* want to get off on the wrong foot with the person at the desk. It tends to make them... cranky.”

Gary had an idea a cranky Michael would be pretty formidable. “Remind

me never to piss you off,” he snarked.

Michael’s eyes glittered. “Oh, if you did it, the punishment would fit the crime, I assure you.” He smirked. “But I wouldn’t be mean to you.”

The teasing, playful banter made Gary’s face heat.

We could have been doing this for the twelve months he’s been working at CrossBow, if only I hadn’t been such a tool.

“Michael, I’m sorry—”

“Stop.” Michael’s gaze grew solemn. “No more recriminations. You’ve already apologized. I accepted, so now it’s over and done with. We move forward now, together. Unless that’ll be a problem for you.”

“No, most certainly not. I think.... No, I *know* I’m eager to work with you.” He glanced at the door separating their workspaces. “Just one thing. Can we leave the door open from now on? I like being able to see what’s going on out there.”

“Oh, you mean you want to spy on me?” Michael winked. “Sure, we can do that.”

His chest tightened. “What? No, I—I wasn’t. I mean—”

“When was the last time someone yanked your chain, Mr. Cross? I’m teasing. Yes, we can keep the door open.” Michael smiled. “Besides, that makes it easier for me to keep an eye on you and judge your moods.”

This whole conversation was surreal. No one Gary had met—Eric aside—had ever been this patient with him. “You really do pay attention, don’t you?”

Michael’s smile was still in evidence. “I told you, I’m damn good at my job. I never want you to doubt my commitment to the place or to you. I will always give as much as you need. Weekends, after hours, before work. If you need me, I’ll be here.”

He frowned. “Surely you must have a life outside the office. I don’t want to pull you away from anything.”

Michael’s chin dropped to his chest as he removed an invisible piece of... whatever from his pants. “Honestly? I don’t have a lot of time for friends.

I've... never been one to make small talk. I try to be laser-focused at all times. No dating, no buddies. Just me, my laptop, and trying to find ways to polish whatever job I'm working on until it glows."

Whatever job he's working on.

There was a lead balloon in Gary's stomach. Michael was the perfect assistant. *I don't want to lose him.* "I'd... I'd really like it if you stayed here," he admitted. "If it's a money situation, I'm happy to—"

Michael waved a hand. "No, it's not a money issue. Even if we're getting along better now, they're still paying me to put up with you." He gave a devilish smirk. "And lately I don't mind it so much."

That was fine with Gary, because he didn't mind it either.



The door to the office opened, and a man stepped in.

Except stepped was the wrong word. He *stormed* in, his chest puffed out, his thick jowls red as though he had windburn. He could only be General Dwight Porter.

Michael hated him immediately. He was spit-polished to perfection, not a single buzzcut silver hair out of place. Everything about him screamed that he was in charge.

What a pity. You're on my battlefield now.

He gave the visitor a sweet smile. "Yes, sir, how can I help you today?"

"I'm here to see Cross. I have an appointment." He spat the words out as if they were acid. This was obviously a man used to getting his way.

How many people—outside of the military—kowitz to you nowadays? Michael would bet there weren't many. He'd also bet that would piss the general right off.

“And your name?”

His cheeks reddened even more, becoming almost scarlet. “General Dwight Porter.” He squeezed the words through gritted teeth.

Michael made a show of examining his monitor. “Porter... Porter.... Oh, yes. Here it is.” He gave his most winning smile. “Mr. Cross apologizes for the delay, but he’s involved in a meeting with Research and Development that seems to have gone longer than expected. Please, have a seat. Would you like some coffee? Tea? Bottled water?”

“I want to see Cross!” The words reverberated around the office.

Michael squared his shoulders. “And you will, sir, but not if you continue to yell at me. If necessary, I *will* ask Security to escort you out.” He leaned forward. “You might have some pretty bars on your uniform, but your rank holds no meaning here. Until Mr. Cross is able to speak with you, it’s in your best interest to have a seat, pick up a magazine, and find out why Justin Bieber isn’t touring right now. You *are* a Bieber fan, right? You look the type.”

“Who the fuck are you?” Porter thundered, his slate-gray eyes bugging.

Michael rose from his seat, towering over Porter by at least three inches. “I’m Michael Kennedy, Mr. Cross’s personal assistant. And if you expect this conversation to go any further, you’d best change your attitude real quick. We’re not in the military, and I don’t have to listen to you bark orders. I am perfectly capable of having you banned from this building under my own authority, which Mr. Cross granted me.” He placed his hands flat to his desk and leaned forward again. “Now, are you going to behave yourself or do I have to call someone to escort you out? Do keep in mind that many of the men who work for us have military training, and they’re more than capable of protecting CrossBow and Mr. Cross.”

“Not before I kick your ass.” A sneer accompanied Porter’s snarl.

“Try it,” Michael challenged. “I don’t need anyone to protect me, and I guarantee if you don’t back the fuck down, I will lay you out on this carpet

and then have your unconscious body tossed out the door to bake in the desert heat.” He smiled. “Wanna try me, sugar lips?”

Porter blinked.

That’s it. Use that pea-sized brain of yours.

Finally, with a huff, Porter turned and went to the chair Michael had indicated.

“A wise choice,” Michael informed him. He breathed a sigh of relief. Yes, he could hold his own in a fight. He’d had to do that many times over the years, except then all he’d faced up to was drunken bullies. He doubted he could best a military vet with decades of hard muscle. Still, he would have been perfectly happy reaching into his pocket and pulling out the stun ring Dr. Malone had given him. In fact, he might even have enjoyed seeing the bastard’s eyes bulge as eighteen million volts of electricity coursed through his body.

Lord, that is so tempting.

Michael waited a few minutes before walking over to Mr. Cross’s office door and knocking. He’d closed it expressly because he didn’t want Porter seeing Mr. Cross until Michael was sure he was feeling well enough to deal with the douche.

“Come in.” Mr. Cross’s voice rang out far stronger than it had a few hours ago.

Michael glanced over his shoulder to ensure Porter was still sitting. He was. A flick of the wrist and Michael opened the door just enough to peer in. Mr. Cross sat at his desk, the very image of a professional in his element.

Michael’s chest swelled with pride. *Good man.*

“Last chance. I can still send him away,” he informed Mr. Cross in a low voice.

He gave Michael a grateful smile. “I appreciate the thought, but it’s fine. Send him in. Don’t bother to offer him anything, because he won’t be staying.”

Michael didn't miss the steel in his voice. "You got it." Then he turned to Porter. "Mr. Cross will see you now."

Porter didn't speak as he stood and worked his way toward the office. As soon as he was in, Michael went to close the door, but Mr. Cross's voice stopped him.

"Michael? Leave the door open, please. We shouldn't be that long."

And just like that, Mr. Cross had shown General Douchebag that he'd stepped into *his* world.

Michael grinned. He'd felt justified in giving Mr. Cross the other stunning Dr. Malone had given him, but it didn't sound as though he'd need it.

Gary Cross was clearly ready for battle on his own terms.

Chapter Six



Gary laced his fingers, his hands on the desk.
Has he changed?

His former CO used to be larger than life, barking orders that had everyone jumping to obey, but now? He seemed almost weak and ineffectual. Gary was sure the General could still pass for a strong soldier, but his time was long gone.

You don't scare me anymore, General.

Except that was a lie. Gary's nerve was considering packing up and leaving, and the only reason he kept his hands clasped was to prevent them from shaking.

Porter was the kind of man who'd sense weakness, then move in with the swiftness of a cheetah to exploit it.

Gary cleared his throat. "What can I do for you, Porter?" His voice came out even, thank God.

Porter's lips twisted, and Gary knew his little dig had gotten under his skin already. "That's *General* Porter."

Gary shook his head. "When I was in the military, you were Major Porter.

Now I'm a private citizen, you're in my building, and guess what? I don't have to be nice about it. So I repeat, what do you want, Porter?"

He squeezed his fingers together.

Porter sat up, his back ramrod straight, and stared right at him. "We have a job for you."

Gary frowned. "What do you mean? We don't work for the government."

Porter gazed around the office. "Can I get a glass of water? It's warm in here."

Gary was wise to his game. He knew Porter was trying to gain the upper hand. Maybe he figured if he could get Gary to serve him, Gary would remember where he was in the pecking order. He'd remember his place.

Pity his place was the office where Porter was now sitting.

Gary folded his arms, his hands tucked out of sight. "I'll ask again. What do you mean, you have a job for us?"

The blood vessel in Porter's temple twitched.

Was it always this easy to aggravate him?

"I'm bringing you something that could make your company the biggest name in protection in the US. The least you can do is—"

"I'm sorry, you're doing what?" Gary interjected. "I don't recall being asked if we wanted to work with you. What did you think? That we'd fall all over ourselves to work for the government? Well, sorry to disappoint you, but you got it wrong. We have more business than we can handle, and working for or partnering with the government isn't in our best interest at this time."

Or ever, if it came to that.

Porter's eyes bulged, and Gary waited for the inevitable explosion.

"I *told* them it was wrong to ask you," he snapped. "Once Bowman died, you lost your fucking nerve."

Yeah, Gary had his number. Porter was trying to bait him, and as much as it pissed him off to admit it, his plan was working. Gary was moments away

from exploding and going off big time.

Get him out of here.

He glanced out the door and found Michael watching them, his eyes narrowed, a sneer on his face, clearly chomping at the bit to dive in feetfirst.

“Michael? Could you ask Security to escort Mr. Porter from the building? And check with Henshaw to make sure he has a picture to circulate to everyone, with a memo stating Mr. Porter is no longer allowed on property, and if they see him, they should contact the police.”

Porter huffed. “Now you wait one goddamn minute, Cross!”

Gary gathered some papers into a pile and stood. “Thank you, but this meeting is over. Have a good day, Mr. Porter.”

He went toward the door. Porter lurched off his chair and dug his fingers into Gary’s arm. Gary was about to grab the stun ring Michael had given him when Porter stiffened.

Michael had Porter’s shoulders in a death grip.

“Porter, I strongly suggest you keep your flabby fucking hands to yourself.” Michael’s voice was as steel. “You were warned. May I remind you we have the right to defend ourselves. Mr. Cross is a good man. He wanted to give you a chance to speak to him. Now, if it had been left up to *me*? I’d be happy booting your ass across the parking lot right about now. I would think *very* carefully on what your next move is going to be, if I were you.”

Holy shit. Michael is a badass.

His bearing was pure papa bear watching over his cub, and while the analogy should have annoyed Gary, it didn’t. In fact, he relished the protection Michael afforded him, because Gary knew he was in no shape to take Porter on, ring or no.

At one time, Gary would have been more than happy to spar with Porter or anyone who threatened him or someone Gary cared for. That was back when he’d had a six-pack, his body thick with muscle from lifting and

carrying fifty-pound containers through the desert, carrying a thirty-pound pack on patrol, and hefting his rifle, not to mention the strenuous workouts he and Eric did to stave off boredom in the downtime. Those days were long gone, however. The attack had taken care of that.

Now he had the body of a man who sat at a desk and didn't do much else beyond that. He hadn't gained a lot of weight, but he wasn't the lithe guy who'd been the envy of his friends. It'd been too long since he'd had a good workout, mostly because of his balance issues. Fighting was out of the question. It would be way too easy for someone to beat the crap out of him. All they had to do was get him to twist wrong or move too quickly, and he'd be fucked.

To his credit, Porter released his grip on Gary's forearm and took a step back. He scraped his fingers over his buzzcut. "Look, I'm sorry, okay? It's of great importance that I speak to Cross—*Mr.* Cross. Abbas Kazem needs help."

And just like that, Porter had Gary's full attention.

I know that name... don't I?

He gave Michael a nod. "You can let him go now." Then he relinquished his own hold and took a step back. Gary folded his arms over his chest once more. "Go ahead. I'm listening."

"Thank you." Porter shrugged the shoulder Michael had gripped, massaging it. "Could we please sit and talk? I promise I'll contain myself. It's only excitement and nerves that have me on edge like this."

Gary didn't believe that for a second, but he could give Porter the benefit of the doubt. He motioned to the chair, then caught Michael's gaze. "Michael, could you stay, please?"

"Yes, sir." He waited until Gary sat, then stood beside him, his arms crossed.

Porter shifted uncomfortably on his seat. "Do you remember when I came to see you in the hospital?"

“Yeah, how could I forget?” If there was sarcasm in Gary’s voice, then it was too damned bad.

Porter paused, his head cocked. “You don’t remember what we talked about, do you?”

There were hazy memories, sure, but Gary had a lot of those. It wasn’t total amnesia, more like nebulous thoughts that fled his mind as quickly as they showed up.

“All I remember is you telling me my men died.”

“Yeah, there’s more to the story.”

“Then why did you wait this long to come see him or contact him?” Michael demanded.

Porter gripped the arms of the chair. “We were at war, kid.” His eyebrows shot up. “You know, that thing you’ve never seen before? A lot of good men died over there in that fucking sandbox, and even more died after it was over. Cross wasn’t a relative, so the government didn’t owe him anything. When I tried to see him, he got... overly excited and I was asked to leave.” Porter’s face flushed. “I didn’t want to rile him up again, so I left him alone.”

“And yet, here you are now.” There was so much sarcasm in Michael’s voice, Gary probably could have sliced it and spread it on toast.

Porter ignored Michael and gave Gary his full attention. “Do you remember Abbas Kazem?”

The name *was* familiar. Then an image flitted through Gary’s mind, a young boy with dark eyes and hair, trailing after Eric, pleading for candy. He remembered Eric laughing before giving the kid a chocolate bar he’d gotten hold of. The kid had scarfed it down, and then had begged Eric to teach him to play American football. *Was that Abbas?*

“I... think so.”

“He was lost on Bowman. Thought of him like a big brother. When Bowman was... Abbas was distraught.”

Gary stilled. “I don’t remember that.” And wasn’t *that* a kick in the teeth?

He'd give anything for a few more memories; not just of Eric, but of all the men who'd been under his command.

"That's okay. He's my reason for visiting today. We have a chance to gain an ally in the Middle East."

Gary resisted the urge to roll his eyes. This song and dance again? The same crap that got Eric killed. "The war is over."

Porter gave a dark chuckle. "War is never over. There are still factions grabbing for power, and Abbas was the son of a tribal lord. His father was assassinated, and now Abbas is expected to take over." He relaxed a little. "Normally we wouldn't bother, but Abbas gives us an in, thanks to Bowman. He remembers the kindness, and when we spoke with him, he indicated he wanted to repay it in Bowman's memory."

"And?" Gary was getting impatient. *Get to the point so I can tell you to get the fuck out of here.*

"Abbas came over here for talks with our people." Porter leaned forward. "With his help, we could solidify a lasting peace. Abbas was so taken with Bowman that he wants to emulate him. He's more than willing to fight with us against what Bowman perceived a common enemy. No one is saying they'd be democratic, but it would be a step in the right direction."

Gary strove to keep his voice free of impatience. "I still fail to understand how this affects us."

A flash of irritation swept over Porter's face. "On one of the last days he was to be in the country, someone tried to assassinate him. It was only through the sacrifice of one soldier that Abbas survived when he stepped into the hail of bullets."

What came to mind was Eric, how he died. Except that didn't help.

Gary did his best to focus. "Why have you come to us?"

"We need protection for Abbas, and I'll be frank... we're not sure who we can trust. *No one* should have known his itinerary, but they still got to him at the exact moment he was weakest. This is making the higher-ups nervous,

and we need to quell that unrest in order to get the mission done properly. If you agree, the federal government will pay CrossBow their fee plus a generous bonus after the mission is complete.”

“And how long will that be?”

Porter seemed to shrink a little in his chair. “We wish we could say. Abbas is still in the US, and he won’t return home until we have this situation sorted. So far we’ve been able to keep a lid on the attempt, because if his people ever find out how close their new chief came to losing his life while under our watch, we’re screwed.”

As much as Gary delighted in that idea, he wouldn’t stand by and let it happen if CrossBow could prevent it. He glanced at Michael, noting the faint creases on his usually smooth forehead, the look of intense concentration.

“Michael? What do you think?”

Michael blinked. “I-I-I... um....” He took a deep breath. “I’m loathe to stick my nose into the business of others, especially when we’re not wanted. If this Abbas has a history with you, maybe at least meet with him and get an impression?”

That seemed like sound advice. “I agree.” Gary met Porter’s gaze. “Bring him here later this afternoon. We’ll see what we can do.”

Porter stood and extended his hand. “Thank you, Cross.”

Gary stared at him, his arms by his sides. “I’m not doing this for you, or for the government. I’m doing it for Eric, who obviously had a soft spot for him.” He took a step back. “I think that’ll be all for now. Call Michael when you’re ready to meet, and we’ll arrange a secure location.”

The tic in Porter’s eye told Gary everything he needed to know. *You didn’t want to come here, did you?* He got the impression Porter would rather chew glass than ask for Gary’s help. And that was fine. Gary would be more than happy to provide him with chewing material.

Porter left in a swirl of badges and annoyance. As soon as the door closed behind him, Gary turned the chair to face Michael. The frown was gone.

He was smirking.

“Aw, did he have to go? Just when it was getting interesting.”

Gary arched his eyebrows. “‘Sugar lips’? Really? Fuck, I almost died laughing when you said it. Where did you come up with *that*?”

Michael shrugged. “You told me you wanted him off-kilter, so I pressed any button I could think of.” His eyes twinkled. “I really pulled off the flighty gay bitch, didn’t I? Guys like Porter don’t take well to weaker men telling them what to do.”

“You are most definitely *not* weaker than—”

Michael held up one hand. “I remember the sneers on the faces of former school classmates who went into the military, then came back thinking they were better than me because they weren’t gay.”

Now Gary chuckled. “I bet you showed them, right?”

That smirk was still in evidence. “More than once.” Then it faded when Michael glanced toward the door where Porter had exited, then back to Gary, his eyes narrowing. “Is it usual for a General to wear all his medals and stuff to a meeting like this? I mean, it seems pretty overkill to me.”

Gary shook his head. “I don’t think most people would, but Porter has issues with the power structure. He wants people to see him as the top dog, so he dresses the part.” He shrugged. “Of course, it could be because he’s here representing the government, but honestly, I’m not sure.”

“And are we really going to do this?”

That was a good question. “Yeah. If Abbas had something with Eric, I want to know about it.” He sighed. “My memories of those times are spotty. I remember Eric and my men. I remember the attack. Beyond that, there are gaps. My doctors told me they might never come back because of the damage, so I try to find out things to plug those holes. I know it doesn’t make much sense, but—”

“Stop.” Michael bit his lip, looking oddly vulnerable for a man who’d just faced down a General. “I’ve read everything I can find on TBI—Traumatic

Brain Injuries—and I think trying to fill in gaps is admirable. Don't get down on yourself if you can't remember things, though. Considering some of the stuff I've seen, you're damned lucky. It could be much, much worse."

Gary rested his head against the back of his chair. "And it would have been, but I was a distance away. Eric was right next to the vehicle, and our other guys were converging. I...." He traced a pattern with his finger on the desk. "I don't remember much beyond the smoke billowing into the sky, and then I passed out. The next time I have any clear memories is when I woke up in the hospital. Still dazed, and I couldn't remember that Eric was dead." He snorted. "The most important person in my life, and I was expecting him to walk through the door at any moment, telling me how lazy I was and to get off my ass."

Michael's expression softened. "I'm so very sorry."

Gary shook his head. "I've been in therapy for a few years. It helped a lot. I had survivor's guilt, but we worked on that. Now it's just sadness for a life that veered off course."

"And that's perfectly valid."

Gary pushed out a soft chuckle. "You sound like my therapist."

"Sorry."

"Hey, that wasn't meant as a criticism. It's good to be reminded, because I do sometimes have problems remembering something. Usually it's not a big deal, but it *is* frustrating." He smiled at Michael. "It's why I needed a kickass personal assistant to keep me moving forward."

If Gary didn't know better, he'd swear Michael was blushing.

Michael cleared his throat. "Okay, what do we need to do for this meeting?"

Another good question. They'd never had to deal with anything like this before, and extraordinary measures would be needed.

"First we find a room. What would you say is the most secure place in the building?"

Michael cocked his head. “Dr. Malone’s lab. With the electronic eyes, the biometric locks, and the like, I can’t think of anywhere it would be more difficult to get into.”

“Excellent. Do me a favor and call Wheels. Have him come to my office for a meeting. Then five minutes after that, call him again so he doesn’t forget.”

“He’s not that bad—is he?”

Gary laughed. “Don’t you believe it. There was one time, when we were still in the old premises. Swear to God, the man walked in, his watch beeped, and he turned and left. I had to have someone chase him down because he thought he was supposed to be somewhere else. He’s the most brilliant man I know, but he needs a minder desperately.”

“A minder?”

“Someone who isn’t a watch or an app. Someone willing to take on the job of keeping a genius focused. And someone who can make him stop on occasion and smell the pretty flowers.”

Hell, who couldn’t use that?

Chapter Seven



The room was set, but Michael was still nervous. There'd already been one assassination attempt against Abbas.

How safe is it bringing him here to CrossBow? And were they inviting trouble?

Still, as Mr. Cross had said, it was the safest place he knew. That didn't mean Michael wouldn't worry about his boss, especially if this Abbas was bringing memories of a former lover. He had to admit, it had sounded like a good relationship, but that didn't mean it wouldn't mess with Mr. Cross's head.

Except that wasn't right. What messed with his boss's head was the loss of his memories, and the fear that there might be stuff he *couldn't* remember.

"How's everything looking, Michael?" Mr. Cross asked as he strode into the room. Michael drank in the sight. His eyes were glassy, he was pale, and his hands shook.

This did *not* look good.

Michael forgot about his preparations and focused on his boss. "Did you take your meds?"

Mr. Cross sighed. “Yes, Mom. And I ate my veggies like a good boy.”
At least he could joke about it.

“Good. I’d hate to send you to bed without supper.”

That made Mr. Cross smile. “Everything okay in here?”

The meeting with Porter and Abbas was scheduled to be held in one of the rooms at the far end of the floor, away from Dr. Malone’s experiments.
That man....

When Michael had approached him on the subject, Dr. Malone had narrowed his gaze. “Do I know you?”

It had taken Michael ten minutes to assure him that they had indeed met. When he’d explained the situation to Dr. Malone, he had been all kinds of excited.

“Of course he can stay on this floor. I’ll turn on the full suite of protections.” His cheeks flushed. “Do you need a laser grid?”

Michael scowled. “Dr. Malone.... Do you *have* a laser grid?”

He’d turned away and muttered something.

“Dr. Malone?”

“Well, um... no, but if you can give me a few hours, I can probably whip something up. I mean, it wouldn’t be perfect. For that I’d need more time.”

Michael had to bite back his smile. “No, I don’t think it’s needed right now.”

Dr. Malone cocked his head. “Really?” He pulled out his pad. “Look into the creation of a laser grid,” he murmured as he wrote. Then he tottered off, apparently dismissing Michael, who couldn’t help but chuckle.

Mr. Cross was right. He needed a minder.

“Michael?”

He gave himself a mental kick. “Yes, sir, everything’s ready.” He pointed to the pitchers of water on the tables, as well as the soft drinks on the display in the corner.

Mr. Cross’s eyebrows shot up. “No snacks?”

“No, but if you want something—”

He waved his hand. “I’m kidding. Maybe we should have something available in case Abbas needs it, though. Who knows if the General is taking care of him properly? Poor guy is probably scared shitless.” He grimaced. “Besides, I don’t have any desire to feed the General.”

“Did he give you any indication who’s coming with him? Apart from Abbas, of course.”

Mr. Cross scowled. “Not even a hint. But I guess we’ll know soon enough.”

Michael had taken the call from Porter shortly after five, and that had really pissed off Mr. Cross. The general had left hours earlier, and there’d been no word since. Mr. Cross had muttered something about Porter expecting them to drop everything and fit into *his* schedule.

He had a point.

“Go on home, Michael. I’ll take—”

“You say one more word, and I will beat you,” Michael snapped. “I am *not* leaving you alone with that man. He’s a little too grabby for my tastes.”

“Grabby?”

Michael blinked. “It’s a common word, isn’t it? And entirely apt. He grabbed you in the office. I had to... *persuade* him to let go of you.”

“Thank you—for manhandling him *and* for staying. I do appreciate it.” He let out a wry chuckle.

“What’s tickled you?”

“It’s nice to have someone worry about me—nice, but unusual as hell too.”

“It’s about time someone did.”

Mr. Cross cleared his throat. “It looks to me as though you’ve thought of everything.”

“About food... I *can* arrange for—”

Mr. Cross snorted. “For Porter? Yeah, no. If we need something, we can

get it from the cafeteria.” There was a very mischievous twinkle in his eyes. “I’m going to guess they have some leftovers from yesterday. If I remember, they had some kind of veggie loaf no one seemed to like. That’ll be good enough.”

Michael chuckled. “You have an evil streak. I like it.”

“Michael? Mr. Cross’s guests are here,” Trent said into Michael’s earpiece.

“Got it. We’ll be right down.” He gave Mr. Cross a smile. “Showtime.”



As soon as Gary walked off the elevator, he knew they had problems.

Porter stood in the middle of the lobby, with Abbas at his side—well, Gary assumed it was Abbas—and six guys in military uniform, all armed. Porter had obviously bought those boys in bulk: they all had square jaws, buzzcuts, broad shoulders....

Michael let out a muted cough. When Gary gave him an inquiring glance, he murmured, “Was there a sale on at Clones-R-Us? Damn, I missed it.”

It was all Gary could do not to laugh. *What do they say? Great minds think alike?*

He strode over to Porter with more confidence than he felt. Gary gave him a nod, then gazed at Abbas. He wore Western dress—jeans, a tee, a hoodie—apart from his black and white hijab. His dark brown eyes, neat mustache, and trimmed beard buried any trace of the boy from Gary’s fragmented memories. Judging by the way he eyed the exit and scanned his surroundings, Abbas was jumpy, which was understandable in the circumstances.

I’d be jumpy if someone had tried to assassinate me.

Gary bowed his head briefly. "Welcome to CrossBow."

Abbas returned his bow, while his armed escort gazed at Gary with neutral expressions.

"Let's go upstairs," Porter barked.

Gary stilled. "Fine, but they're staying here." He gestured to the escorts.

Porter's eyes bulged. "These are my best men."

He folded his arms. "Great. But I don't know them. And since you gave us zero information, none of them have been vetted."

Crimson stained Porter's cheeks. "Are you doubting *my* judgment?"

"We doubt everyone, except for the client."

"Well, *I'm* the client, goddamn it. Or the US government is, at any rate."

"Excuse me." Abbas's voice was low and melodic. "I thought that was me."

"And you'd be right," Gary told him. "Which is the only reason we're allowing General Porter to accompany you. Everyone else stays down here."

"Guys?" Michael gave the escorts a sweet smile. "Take a seat, why don't you? Do some knitting while you're waiting."

"Aw gee, I forgot my needles," one of the men replied in an equally sweet tone.

That earned him a scowl from Porter before he jerked his head in Gary's direction. "Where are you taking him?"

"That's classified."

Porter gaped. "I'm the one who's getting you to protect him."

"Look, *Mr.* Porter, *no one* will know where he is, apart from Michael and myself. It's in his best interest to have this information on a need-to-know basis."

Porter's whole face reddened and he opened his mouth, but Michael stepped into the fray. "General. Your people hired us, which means they know and apparently agree with how we do business. If you'd prefer to meet with your bosses before finalizing the deal, that's great. We'll wait to hear

from you.”

Porter clenched his jaw, and Gary swore that sound he heard was Porter grinding his teeth. At last he managed to speak. “No. It’s fine.” He spat out the words. “I’m taking a huge risk on this, Cross.”

Gary arched his eyebrows. “I think Mr. *Abbas* is the one taking the risk.” He turned to Abbas. “Forget what General Porter here wants—What would *you* like to do?”

Abbas looked Gary in the eye. “Mr. Bowman—Eric—spoke of his dreams. Of how he wanted to open this business with you. His enthusiasm was infectious.” He swallowed. “If Mr. Bowman trusted you, then I will put my life into your hands.”

Gary smiled. “Thank you.” He indicated the elevator. “If you’ll follow me....”

He led Porter and Abbas across the lobby, with Michael bringing up the rear. There was silence in the small enclosed space. When the doors slid open, Gary caught Michael’s gasp.

Gary knew what caused that reaction—Wheels had instituted the full suite of protections, and every single window, whether it was in a door to an office or lab, or an external window, was black, in stark contrast to the blindingly white floor and walls.

“This way, please.” Gary headed for the meeting room.

“Where will you be keeping him?” Porter demanded.

“*He* has a name,” Michael muttered.

Gary stopped at the door to the room. “General, just because you brought Abbas here doesn’t mean we’re going to share that kind of information with you.”

That apoplectic bug-eyed stare was back. “This is bullshit! How do I know you can be trusted with his safety? Or have you forgotten how important this is?”

Gary drew himself up to his full height. “We’ve forgotten nothing, I

assure you. We know our stuff, and the fewer people who are in the loop about what's happening, the more secure this will be.”

“So you're not about to share any details? Even with me?”

Before Gary could respond, Porter removed a phone from his pocket and dialed.

“General, I—”

Porter held up a hand to silence him. “Sir, I need to apprise you of the situation, immediately.” He relayed Gary's words. “So do you agree that we need to know ... But....” He narrowed his gaze. “Yes, sir,” he said through gritted teeth. He disconnected, then glared at Gary. “We'll play this your way,” he said with a snarl. “But if *anything* happens to him, and I do mean anything, the entire weight of the government will come down on you like a ten-ton hammer.” And with that, he squared his shoulders. “So I see little point in my remaining for this meeting.” He turned on his heel and strode toward the elevator.

“Er, General?” Michael followed him.

“I don't need an escort,” Porter barked out.

“No, but you do need my help if you want to get off this floor.”

Gary waited as Michael keyed in the code for the elevator. When the doors slid shut, blocking his view of Porter's red face, he heaved a sigh of relief.

“That was... intense,” Abbas commented.

Michael rejoined them. “Let's go in, shall we?”

Gary opened the door and they went inside. Once they were seated and Michael had handed Abbas a bottle of water, Gary got the ball rolling.

“So, why don't you tell us about the assassination attempt?”

Abbas blinked, his face flushed. “Which one?”

Gary froze. “We were given to understand there'd been only one attempt.”

“There have been three. Two in my own country, and one since my

arrival here.” Abbas yawned, covering his mouth with his hand. “My apologies.”

Gary noted the dark circles under his eyes, the tightened skin. It was a look he recognized—he saw it every morning in the bathroom mirror. “Not sleeping well?”

Abbas shook his head. “Not really.”

“Then let’s not talk now,” Michael suggested. “We’ve set up a room where you can rest until the morning. We weren’t aware of what was going on until about an hour ago, so it’s not going to be a bed at the Ritz or anything. Get some rest and then we can get back to it tomorrow.”

Another shake of his head. “No, but thank you for the thought.” He drank from his bottle before continuing. “The first attempt was outside my home. A man attacked me with a knife as I stepped outside my house. The second? Someone tried to run me down. The most recent one... that was my fault. I was in the car, and we passed a... a chocolatier. I pleaded with the driver to stop. I... might have a problem with chocolate.”

“Impossible,” Michael told him. “Chocolate is never a problem.”

Abbas’s smile was a clear indication that Michael had put him at ease.

“So, we stopped, and although I would normally exit the car first, Corporal Diaz insisted I allow him to lead the way. The moment he stepped out of the vehicle, a hail of bullets...” He swallowed hard and squeezed his eyes shut tight as trembles rippled through him. “I didn’t know anyone could hate me enough to murder an innocent man.”

“You challenge the status quo,” Gary replied. “That’s bound to make a lot of people unhappy.”

Abbas expelled a sigh. “I suppose. I’m not sure I understand how people don’t want the freedom to choose their own path in life.”

“Many do, but there will always be those who want to keep them down. Unfortunately, they’re usually the ones with the power.”

Abbas wiped his eyes. “Diaz gave his life so I might continue my work.

And I know what I want that work to be. Mr. Bowman spoke of a world where people could be happy and choose their own path, as long as no one was hurt. I want to help bring that world about. It always seemed to be a simple desire, but the older I get, the more I understand.” He gave Gary a sympathetic gaze. “I am sorry for your loss, Mr. Cross. Mr. Bowman spoke in glowing terms about you.” He smirked. “Even when he was complaining you were a putz.”

Gary chuckled. “That sounds like something Eric would say.” Abbas’s account puzzled him. There were too many things that didn’t add up.

Then Abbas yawned again, and Gary knew Michael had the right idea.

“We’ll continue this tomorrow. You need to rest.”

Abbas shuddered out a breath. “I hate to admit it, but you’re right.” He smiled. “But for the first time since I arrived in this country, I feel safe.”

“Then let me show you to your quarters. They’re on this floor,” Gary informed him. He returned Abbas’s smile. “This is the safest place we have.”

It would have to be. As Abbas had said, he was placing his life in their hands.

Chapter Eight



Michael stepped out of the elevator, carrying a holder from The Bean Shop with four steaming cups of coffee. He glanced around.

All quiet.

It was nearly nine, and yet there'd been no messages from Mr. Cross, which was weird for him.

He was listing a little last night. If anyone deserves a late start to their day, it's him.

Michael headed for Abbas's room. Klein and Daley were standing guard outside the door. Klein's eyes lit up when he caught sight of the coffee.

"Please say that's for us. I haven't worked an overnight in a while."

Michael handed over the black coffee, then pointed out the containers of creamer and sugar, as well as a few bamboo stir sticks.

"Man, you're a lifesaver."

Daley rolled his eyes. "Ditto. If I had to spend another minute listening to this cranky bastard, I might have done something I'd regret." His grin belied his words, and judging by Klein's playful thump to his arm, such banter was

the norm between them.

Michael handed over the beverages. “How was he? Any problems?”

“Not a thing,” Daley said with a yawn. “And not a peep out of him either. He’s been quiet all night.”

“I’m sorry I had to call you in like that. It was late notice, I know.” Porter’s last-minute call had caught them flat-footed. Michael had a sneaking suspicion that had been his intention. It didn’t make sense, he knew that—CrossBow was providing Porter with a vital service—but he couldn’t shake the feeling.

Michael had learned a long time ago to trust his instincts.

Klein waved him off. “We live here rent-free. The least we can do is pull a few night shifts.” He smiled. “Mr. Cross takes good care of his people. We all owe him a lot.”

It wasn’t the first time Michael had heard that refrain. He couldn’t fault their loyalty, even though Mr. Cross had probably been as big an ass with them as he’d been with Michael at the start.

“Enjoy your coffee. I’ll have a couple guys relieve you in about an hour.”

“Thank you. If you need us tonight, we’re willing,” Daley told him with a smile.

“I’ll keep that in mind. I’ll let you know after I talk to the boss.”

They moved aside, and Michael tapped on Abbas’s door. A moment later it opened to reveal a sleep-rumpled Abbas, wearing nothing but a pair of jeans. Michael held out the cup of coffee.

Now there’s a good-looking man.

Not really Michael’s type, not that he had one. His tastes veered more toward another person entirely, someone he’d had in mind for a while.

Yeah, and that’s not gonna happen, so forget it.

Abbas sniffed. “Oh, just what I needed.” He took the cup of coffee and clung to it like an anemic man in need of a transfusion. Then he blinked. “Good morning, Mr. Kennedy. Please, come in.” He stood to one side.

As soon as Michael entered, Abbas stuck his head out of the door. “Thank you for watching me so I could rest.”

”You’re welcome,” Daley called out a moment before Abbas closed the doors. He took another sip of his coffee, and sighed appreciatively. “Thank you again for this. It’s very good.”

Michael chuckled. “It’s okay. I know how it feels to crave that first hit of caffeine.” He entered the room. “How did you sleep?”

“Surprisingly well.” Abbas sipped his beverage. “Exhaustion was the driving force, I think. I was asleep even before I lay on the sofa.”

“We’ll get you a bed today. I apologize for not having it ready last night.”

Abbas frowned. “What? No. Please. What you and Mr. Cross did was more than I ever expected.” He sighed. “He doesn’t remember me, does he?” He flashed Michael a rueful grin. “When I met him and Mr. Bowman, I experienced my first crush. Here were two men, big and strong, who were trying to protect our village.” Then he crumpled before Michael’s eyes. “When they told me Mr. Bowman had died, and Mr. Cross wasn’t expected to....” His eyes grew misty. “I was grateful when I heard he’d survived and was returning home, but losing them both? I.... It hurt so much, you know?”

Eric Bowman seemed to have had that effect on more than a few people. “I’ve heard.”

Abbas shook his head. “No, you don’t understand. He was different from the rest. They treated us like an assignment. Mr. Bowman and Mr. Cross? They acted as though we were *people*. They kept us informed, engaged. They wanted to show us we could trust them. And I did. Probably more than everyone else.”

“That was because of the chocolate, wasn’t it?” Michael teased.

Abbas shrugged. “Maybe a little?” He chuckled. “Okay, a lot. But neither man minded if I was around. Sure, they’d have to send me home sometimes, but by and large, they were so nice to me, considering I was just a kid.”

“Sounds as if they made quite an impression.”

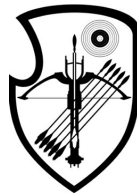
Abbas nodded. “It was their consideration that helped me make the decision to go to university in London. My father and I fought bitterly about it. He said I was becoming too Americanized. In the end, though, I went.” His face tightened. “We rarely spoke after that.”

At least now Michael had an explanation for Abbas’s excellent command of English. “I’m sorry.”

“What? No. Please, don’t be. I loved my father, but he wasn’t willing to grow, to change. He was content with his lot, whereas I wasn’t. I wanted *more* for our people. Despite what you hear, not everyone in the Middle East is rich. Much like it is here in the United States, back home the few control most of the money. If we were going to be poor, we should at least have a fighting chance, right?”

Michael nodded. “Yup.”

Abbas glanced at his bare chest. “My apologies for my attire, but the only clothing I have is what I brought with me. My thobe and hijab are the only things Porter allowed me to keep. The rest he took from me.”



Because of course he did. *Bastard.*

“Don’t worry. I’ll find you something to fit,” Michael assured him. “It won’t be elegant, but it’ll be clean.” Even if he had to go buy a whole new wardrobe himself.

He glanced at his phone, but there was still nothing from Mr. Cross.

This is not good.

“Listen, I need to get to the office, but I’ll stop by in about an hour to take you to get some breakfast if you want. We’ll go to our cafeteria, so we won’t be leaving the building. There’ll be armed guards with us for your protection.

Does that sound okay with you?”

Abbas gave him a grateful smile. “Yes, of course. I’ll be ready.” He gestured to his jeans and the shirt he’d worn the previous day, lying over the arm of the sofa. “If necessary, I can wear these clothes. I don’t want to put anyone out on my account.”

That did it. Finding clothing for Abbas was going to be Michael’s priority for the day.

“It’ll be fine.”

Abbas gave a slight bow. “Then I look forward to seeing you soon.” He nibbled his lip. “Will Mr. Cross be with us?”

That was a good question, one to which Michael hoped to have an answer very soon. “I’ll find out. I cleared some of his schedule, but he’s still got a lot going on.”

“I understand. I’ll see you soon. And thank you again.” He turned and went off toward the bathroom.

Thank God Dr. Malone had all the conveniences. *Probably for when he’s too tired to make the trek back to his place.*

Michael left the room, closed the door, checked in with Klein and Daley once more, and then headed down to the office. *I should have gone there first.* The lack of... anything from Mr. Cross was worrisome.

He entered his office, dropped his backpack, and—

A snore caught his ear. Michael stiffened.

Tell me he didn’t.

He stomped to Mr. Cross’s office door and flung it open. What he found was enough to make Michael grind his teeth. Gary was asleep at his desk, his head on his folded arms.

What the fuck, dude?

Dammit, Cross knew his limitations. Sleeping at his desk wasn’t going to help him one bit. Judging by all the papers scattered beneath him, he’d obviously been there all night.

And he didn't contact me once.

It was official. Michael was pissed.

He went over to Mr. Cross, staring down at him. He wanted to give the man a rough shake, but instead put a hand on his shoulder and gently nudged him. "What the hell is this?" he snapped.

Mr. Cross jerked his head up. "What? What time is it?"

"About twenty after nine. I thought you were going home last night?"

Mr. Cross shook his head. "I tried, but there were too many thoughts running through my head, so I came back to the office."

Michael seriously needed to bite his tongue.

"Why didn't you call me?" he gritted out.

"You needed sleep. And besides, this isn't your life, it's mine."

Gary Cross could be so damned frustrating.

Michael made an effort to breathe evenly. "I'm going to say this once, and you're going to hear me out." Mr. Cross leaned back in his chair, and Michael gripped its arms, their faces mere inches apart. "I am your executive assistant. My place is by your side. If you'd needed me at three in the morning, I would have been here, working shoulder to shoulder with you. I could've gauged your health, since you can't be trusted to look after yourself."

Mr. Cross's cheeks reddened. "I don't recall asking you for help."

"That's because you didn't. And that *right there* is the problem." He locked gazes with Mr. Cross. "If something happens to you, who's going to be in charge? Well? We *need* you, do you understand? And if I have to pull rank to get you to take care of yourself, then that's what I'll do."

Mr. Cross stared back at him, open-mouthed.

Michael grabbed the pill bottles and poured out several tablets. He held them out to Mr. Cross, then gave him the other cup of coffee. "Take these. Better to be proactive."

He wasn't surprised when there was no argument. After how bad he'd

looked the previous night, he would probably be off all day.

It might take Michael that long to calm down.

Mr. Cross popped the pills into his mouth, then swallowed them with a long draw of coffee. “Thanks,” he muttered. “Have you checked in on Abbas yet?”

“First thing I did when I got into the building. He said he slept well.”

“Good.” He appeared to be rallying. “We need to have a conversation today, and I’d rather he wasn’t falling asleep. I don’t want him missing any vital information because he can’t think straight.”

Michael stilled. “What do you mean?”

Mr. Cross took another drink from his cup. “You might have something here. This is good.”

Michael glared. “When you’ve finished complimenting me on my taste in coffee, can you get back to telling me what you’re talking about?” The hairs on Michael’s nape stood on end, and that was never a good thing.

“After we left him last night, I kept playing our discussion over and over in my head, like it was on a goddamn loop. Something he said bugged me. That was why I came back here, to do some checking.”

“And?”

“He said he begged the driver to take him to the chocolate shop, right?” Mr. Cross looked him in the eye. “So how could an assassin squeeze off a shot like that when they would have *no idea* the cars were stopping?”

Oh shit. Michael’s breathing caught.

Mr. Cross nodded slowly. “That line alone had me thinking all night. I wanted to pounce on it when he said it, but was afraid he’d miss crucial details, so I decided to let him get some rest.”

“So what’s your theory?”

Mr. Cross narrowed his gaze. “I think someone was feeding information to parties unknown about where they’d be. My best guess is they had the car bugged so they could track him, but that isn’t something we can check up on

without Porter's help, and after he stormed off.... Well, let's just say I don't think he'll be overly eager." He pursed his lips. "Anyway, it's just a theory."

"But it's a damn good one."

As much as it pissed Michael off to admit it, he would have done the same as Mr. Cross. A thought like that would have dug its way in and held on with a tight grip. Still, he could have called or texted. He could have told Michael not to come in—not that Michael would have listened—but he could have been here to bounce ideas off. Between the two of them, they probably could have worked through any issues.

Michael took one look at the tightened skin around Mr. Cross's eyes and came to a decision.

"Drink your coffee. Crash on the couch for an hour. I'll call to get Abbas some clothes, then let him know breakfast will be delayed by an hour."

Mr. Cross frowned. "What? No, I can—"

"If the next words out of your mouth aren't 'Thank you for looking out for me, Michael. That sounds like a great idea,' I will personally see to your beating." He tilted his head, focusing on Mr. Cross's face. "Your eyes are glassy, and you wouldn't make it through breakfast, even with your pills. You overdid it, and you're going to pay the price. The least we can do is try to mitigate the pain."

Mr. Cross sighed as he scraped a hand over his scalp. "You're right. All night I was out of sorts. Sometime this morning—I think it was about four—I couldn't focus anymore, so figured I'd put my head down for a few minutes."

"Instead of going to the couch." Michael's words were almost a growl. "Of all the stupid—no, I'm sorry. You're an adult, capable of making your own decisions." It actually hurt to say it. "I'll go get started on my list for this morning."

He turned to leave, but Mr. Cross grabbed his wrist. "Michael? I.... Please don't be upset with me. You're right, I overtaxed myself and I know I'm going to have problems later, but I needed to do this. Although if I was

smart, I would have called you to help me.” His gaze softened. “Please don’t stop caring about me.”

That last part was all it took to bleed all the fight out of Michael. “No, never.” He sighed. “You’ve become more than my boss. I’d like to think we could be friends too.”

“I’d like that,” Mr. Cross admitted. “I’d like it a lot.”

When the idea came to him, Michael rolled with it. “Okay then, let me offer you a deal. You promise me you’ll take it as easy as possible today, and I’ll treat you to sushi tonight.”

“Oh, but that’s yours and—”

Michael held up a hand. “You said we were friends. I want to take my friend out for dinner. And before you tell me we couldn’t possibly, let me remind you we have people watching Abbas. He’ll be inside CrossBow, so he’s safe.” He gave Mr. Cross a hard stare. “And you need the break.”

Mr. Cross didn’t cave immediately—Michael imagined the cogs were whirring. A minute later, he nodded. “I’d like that. But let me buy. Keep your gift certificate for a time when you need it.”

Typical. Always doing for others. “We can discuss it.”

“Fair enough.” Mr. Cross squared his shoulders. “Now, I believe my bossy executive assistant told me I need to rest for a bit. Wouldn’t want him mad at me.”

The teasing tone was a welcome relief.

And I really do want him as a friend.

“Get some rest. I’ll see you later.” Michael paused at the door and glanced back at him. “And no reading.”

“Promise, Mom.”

Michael chuckled. He closed the door behind him and went back to his desk, except he wasn’t thinking about work—he was thinking about dinner with a friend.

Just what I need.

Chapter Nine



Gary scanned the menu, stopping every few seconds to look at the pictures next to each item. “Sushi, huh?”

Across the table from him, Michael blinked. “Please, tell me you’ve had sushi before now.”

“I’ve *seen* it at my local gas station. Does that count? Except it looked nothing like this.”

Michael’s wide-eyed gaze was almost comical.

Gary laughed. “Okay, quit staring at me like I’ve grown a second head and talk me through this. What do you think I should try?”

Michael looked Gary in the eye. “Do you trust me, Mr. Cross?”

More than anyone in a long time. “I think you already know the answer to that.”

“Is there anything you don’t like? Something you won’t eat at all?”

“Porridge.” The word came out with more vehemence than Gary had intended. “That’s just... ew.”

Michael laughed, and for some reason, Gary’s stomach squirmed.

“How about if you trust me to order the food? I promise, nothing too

outlandish. Or weird.”

Gary closed his menu and placed it to the side. “I can go with that.”

The server appeared at their table. “Good evening, gentlemen. Can I interest you in a cocktail this evening?”

“No, but we’d both like sparkling water, please.”

Relief flooded him. Gary wasn’t much of a drinker.

“Very good. Have you made your choices from the menu?”

Michael gave the server a winning smile. “Yes, please. We’d like one of everything from the sushi menu.”

The waiter’s eyes bugged slightly. “One of...?”

“Everything,” Michael confirmed. “With extra plates for sampling.”

The server recovered his poise. “Of course, sir. We’ll get that started for you.” He hurried away.

Gary tried to stare a hole through Michael. “Are you nuts? I know the certificate wasn’t for *that* much.”

Michael’s eyebrows shot up. “Mr. Cross, I’m buying, so shut up and enjoy. Besides, whatever we don’t eat, we can put in the cafeteria tomorrow.” His eyes sparkled. “I’m sure Williams will scarf it all down for us.”

Gary snorted. “If he’s around, no one else will get a look in.” He leaned back in his chair. “Everything?”

Michael smiled. “Hey, I might never get to eat here ever again. I intend to make the most of it.”

Gary surveyed the restaurant. Michael had told him it was always packed, and this evening was no exception. Next to them, four tables had been pushed together into one long table, and judging by the balloons, it was someone’s birthday.

Great. They’re probably going to be noisy as hell.

All the better if he and Michael wanted to talk shop.

He had to admit, the dishes carried out by the servers and placed on the nearby table looked intriguing, not to mention colorful. One dish caught his

eye, and he stared.

“What are those?”

Michael followed his gaze. “Mochi. They’re a kind of sticky rice cake, with different fillings.” He gave Gary a mock glare. “And those are dessert. We’ll think about mochi *after* you’ve eaten.”

Gary filled their glasses with water. “If this is my night off, then my executive assistant needs to take a night off too.”

Except when did he ever do that? Even now, his brain was into overdrive.

“He’s safe,” Michael said in a low voice.

“I know. What’s bothering me is how to *keep* him safe.” It didn’t matter that Michael had asked him to take the night off. Abbas’s life was in their hands, and Gary had to say something. “He can’t stay at CrossBow. Too many people outside of us know where he is. We might be secure, but I’m not sure we could hold off a full assault.”

Michael drank from his glass. “Not tonight, okay? Let’s just relax—and yes, I mean you—and enjoy the meal.”

At that moment, the server arrived with a large square plate filled with green bean pods, and two bowls of soup.

Gary peered at them. “What are they?”

“Edamame. Soybeans.” Another smile. “They’re good for you. Just remember the number one rule.”

“And what’s that? Cover ’em with ketchup?”

Michael’s eyes glinted. “Philistine. The rule is... don’t eat the pod.” He picked one up.

“We don’t use chopsticks?” Gary nudged the bamboo sticks next to his glass.

“Nope. This is finger food. You just pinch it a little.” Michael demonstrated. “See how it’s opened? Now pop the beans in your mouth.”

Gary mimicked him and squeezed the green beans out of the pod. “They taste okay.”

Michael rolled his eyes.

Gary stared into the bowl of soup. “What’s that floating in it?”

“Tofu and green onions.” Another mock glare. “Are you going to do this all evening? Give me the third degree about everything before you even try it?”

“Hey, sushi virgin here. Have some respect.”

Michael grinned. “Eat your soup, virgin.”

Okay, it tasted good, not that he was about to let Michael know that.

Gary was starting to have some fun.

The food was delicious. Lobster sushi, seared beef, grilled salmon.... Gary had to admit it was nothing like the rolls he’d seen on sale at the gas station, which wasn’t surprising—the restaurant was definitely more high-end. He liked the relaxed atmosphere while they ate. Michael clearly wasn’t one of those people who felt the need to fill the air with chatter, for which Gary was grateful.

The lull at the end of the meal provided an opportunity to discuss their present guest. Gary opened his mouth to speak just as a whoop went up. It came from the adjacent table. A young man lurched to his feet, obviously the worse for alcohol, and shouted, “It’s my birthday. I’m legal.”

A smattering of applause and cheers came from around the restaurant, and the birthday boy spun on his heel, grinning. His gaze landed on Michael, and his eyes lit up.

“And I know what I want for my present.” He sauntered over to where they sat, stood beside Michael’s chair, and leaned in close. “Well, hello there, stud muffin.”

Michael chuckled. “Happy birthday.”

The drunken man leered at him. “Wanna let me unwrap your present for me?”

Michael gave him an apologetic smile. “If I’d known there was a party, I’d have gone shopping.” He pushed his chair back. “Now, if you’ll—”

“That’s okay,” the young man interjected. “I’m sure you can help me celebrate some... other way.”

Gary watched in disbelief as he straddled Michael’s legs, his arms looped around Michael’s neck as he began grinding against Michael’s crotch. Michael was laughing, his hands roaming over the guy’s chest.

His very broad chest.

Gary clenched his hands until his fingers ached. Michael appeared to be having a good time, and that really pissed Gary off more than it should have done. Then the young man grabbed a handful of Edamame, popped the pods, and fed the beans to Michael, one at a time, Michael taking his fingertips into his mouth, sucking briefly on them.

Gary’s dick was a steel bar in his pants, and he was torn between arousal and anger.

Why am I so upset?

Except that was a stupid question. Michael was being fed Edamame by the sexy birthday boy who was clearly comfortable in his skin, secure in the knowledge he was hot as fuck. Any man in the restaurant—even the straight ones—could have fallen under his spell as quickly as Michael had.

I mean, look at him. The guy was sinfully good-looking with his dark hair, the muscles that stretched his shirt, the pencil-thin mustache, a gold and diamond stud in his right ear, and those black pants molded around that incredible ass.

Fuck.

Gary traced a finger over his face. *There’s a reason why I only have sex in dark rooms or alleyways.* He couldn’t compete with the birthday boy. And he sure as hell didn’t want to continue watching the guy dry hump Michael’s lap.

He stood, reaching into his pocket for his wallet. There was no way he was going to let Michael pay for it all. Gary cleared his throat. “Michael? I’m going to head out.”

Michael peered around the guy who was still grinding on him, his eyes wide. “What?” He nudged the young man off his lap, which resulted in a whine. Michael stood and grabbed Gary’s elbow. “What’s wrong?”

What the hell do I say to him?

How could he explain he was jealous, especially when he had no fucking idea why he should feel that way? Michael could do whatever he wanted, right? He owed nothing to Gary, and any thoughts Gary might have entertained about him were all part of Gary’s fertile imagination.

Because why would someone as sexy as Michael ever be into Gary?

“I’ve got a migraine coming on and—”

Michael scowled, tightening his grip. “Okay, that’s a lie. Try again.”

Shit.

Of course Michael would know. He had a file on Gary and he’d studied it.

He probably knows my tells better than I do.

“I just want to go home.”

Michael removed his wallet. “Fine. Let me pay for this, and then I’ll get us a cab.”

It warmed Gary that Michael was so gallant, but he wasn’t about to stand in the way of him getting lucky. “No, you stay and... and... have fun.”

Michael smirked and leaned in close enough that Gary could practically taste the wasabi on his breath. “Why, Mr. Cross... are you jealous?”

What?

“No, of course not. I’m tired, and I want to sleep.”

Michael’s voice dropped to a whisper. “That’s another lie, Mr. Cross.”

Gary shuddered. Warm breath ghosting over his ear made him want things he could never have. Plus, Michael was his assistant. They couldn’t do anything together.

Could they?

“Wanna know something?” Michael’s whisper was husky. “I’ve got a big

dick. I bet it would stretch you wide and touch those places you've longed to feel again. I promise, you'd beg me to never stop riding you."

Wait. Hold the phone.

This was a fantasy. It had to be. No way was the button-down Michael saying these things. They were all Gary's fevered imagination.

Michael shifted closer. He took Gary's hand in his, guiding it down across the rough denim and onto something long and thick, then flexed his fingers, which had Gary squeezing the length in Michael's jeans.

For the first time in goddamn years, Gary whimpered.

Fuck, he wanted this.

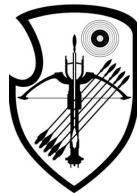
He wanted to be under Michael.

Wanted him to plow Gary's ass.

He swallowed hard, and Michael's breath tickled his ear once more.

"You can have this, Mr. Cross. You just need to say yes."

"I think..." His voice cracked, and he cleared his throat. "I think you said something about calling for a cab?"



The car sped through the streets, but Gary wasn't paying attention to the blurring landscape. His attention was focused on Michael's fingers gripping his.

This isn't a dream.

Because if that was what it turned out to be, if Gary woke to find himself alone in his bed, it could crush him. He couldn't pinpoint the precise moment he'd known he wanted Michael—badly—but he'd never thought for one single minute that it would happen.

Then the cab came to a halt, and he realized they were at his home, the

path winding its way to the front door. Warm light shone through the window from the lamp he had on a timer. Michael paid for the cab, and they got out.

This isn't happening. His dream theory seemed the most likely scenario. All he wanted now was to enjoy it for as long as it lasted.

“Mr. Cross?”

Gary turned to find Michael gazing at him with that focused way he had. Oh, this didn't look good.

He's changed his mind.

“Yes?”

Michael cupped Gary's chin and stared into his eyes. “Before we go any further... I need you to tell me how you feel. Are you sure you want this?”

Are you fucking kidding me?

“What do you mean? We're here, aren't we?”

“Yes, but....” Michael let go and took a step back. “The thing is... I'm rather... enthusiastic in bed, and I don't want to cause you any pain.”

Enthusiastic? What did that even mean?

Gary couldn't resist. “Are you planning on hanging me from the chandelier? Or maybe upside down from the shower rods? I need some details here.” He shivered. Given how long it had been since he'd indulged in a night of passion, both antics sounded like a good time.

Michael chuckled. “No. Nothing like that. At least not *yet.*” He cupped Gary's chin once more, only this time with a tighter grip. “Why? Are you into stuff like that?”

“Maybe? I mean.... Would you think badly of me if I said yes?”

Michael studied him for a moment before moving in to brush his lips against Gary's. It was a fleeting connection, but it pulled a moan from him that he couldn't suppress. Michael's breathing caught, and he did it again, only with more pressure, close enough that Gary was so fucking *aware* of him, his body, his presence.

“I would never think poorly of you.” Michael's voice was low.

Christ, Gary was shaking.

“Okay, confession time. I... I’ve never tried any of those things, but maybe... I mean, with the right person. Someone I trusted.”

Michael grinned. “If I recall, you said you trust me. That *was* what you said, wasn’t it, Mr. Cross?”

“Gary.” The word crept out of him. “Don’t call me Mr. Cross.” That was for work and had no place in his bedroom.

If they ever made it that far.

“All right—Gary. Are you feeling good?”

Standing in the warm night air helped to restore a little of his boldness.

“I *could* be feeling better. For instance, we could be in my bed right now, with me flat on my back and you—”

“I get the idea,” Michael interjected. “It’s just... I care for you, you know.”

And Gary did know. It was part of why he wanted Michael. Trusted him.

“I know. Yes, I feel fine.” Then he realized where Michael was coming from, what lay at the heart of his questions. “I know some people experience a lack of sex drive with a traumatic brain injury, but I’m not one of them, I assure you.” He indicated the front door. “So... are you coming inside?”

God, he hoped so.

Michael smiled. “Lead the way.”

Gary walked toward the house, but when they reached the door, Michael turned him and shoved him against it.

There was no earthly way Gary could hold back the whimper that slipped out.

“Michael....”

He pressed against Gary, his cock as hard as it had been in the restaurant. “Make sure you want this, Mr. Cross—sorry, Gary. I have to warn you, I won’t go easy on you because you’re my boss.”

A late-night fantasy, one Gary would never admit to, battered his mind.

Michael stripped down, the power of his body on full display as he took Gary hard and deep.

No one had fucked him like that since Eric.

“Yes, I want it. Please.”

Michael licked his neck, then sank his teeth into the tender flesh, making Gary cry out. “I want you under me, Gary. I want to hear you cry out like that when I take you. I want to hear my name on your lips.”

Fuck, yeah. Gary wanted that so badly. “I think I can manage that.”

Michael’s grin gave him a devilish appearance, sending heat racing through him. “All right, Gary. Let’s get inside. Unless you want me to take you out here.” He cocked his head to one side. “Do you have an exhibitionist streak, Gary?”

Any one of his neighbors could see them.

“N-no. In the house. My bed.”

Michael bit his lip. “Are you sure? I’m not convinced. *I* think you’d like it if I fucked you right here, out in the warm air, your legs up on my shoulders as I drove into you.”

Holy fuck, was this the same Michael who brought coffee? Who’d given him aspirin? Who’d insisted on taking care of him?

“Maybe?”

Michael’s mouth collided with his a second later, taking his lips in a fierce kiss. He kissed Gary’s neck. “You’d let me do anything I wanted, wouldn’t you?”

Gary was past hiding. “Yes, anything. Please.”

Fingers grazed Gary’s cheek. “You beg so nice. I like it. Open the door.”

Gary reached into his pocket, his fingers latching onto his keys. He fumbled with them, swearing silently. *Why won’t it go in the goddamn lock?* Finally, it turned and he pushed the door open, the light from inside spilling out onto the porch, bathing them both in its warmth. He peered over his shoulder at Michael, noting his flushed cheeks, his narrowed gaze. It was as

if he was assessing Gary, verifying for himself that Gary was worth fucking.

“Don’t go,” Gary blurted.

Michael’s kiss was gentle, robbed of its previous fervor, and it was the best answer he could have given, an I’m-still-here kiss, an I’m-not-going-anywhere kiss.

“The only place I’m going to is your bedroom.” He put his hand on Gary’s hips, pulling him closer. “I hope you have plenty of lube, because it’s going to be a long....” He gave a thrust of his hips, and Gary felt that hardness against his own stiffening shaft. “Hard....” Another thrust. “Night.”

Fuck, it took a supreme effort not to shoot right there. His balls ached from going far too long without release, but he wanted to come while Michael was fucking him.

And there it was, another glorious fantasy, the one where he was pressed up against the wall while Michael drove unrelenting into Gary’s battered ass.

Michael smacked Gary’s butt cheek, sending shivers of desire through him. Then Michael’s breath ghosted over Gary’s ear again. “Are you needy, Cross? Do you need a dick that badly?”

There was only one response. “Yes—yours.”

“What was that? Speak up. I can’t hear you.”

“Yours. I need your dick in me.”

“Say please.”

“Please, Michael. I’ll beg if I have to. Just... please.”

“I wouldn’t mind if you begged. I bet it would sound so pretty from that sexy mouth of yours.” Then Michael struck. He grabbed Gary’s neck and brought their mouths together. This wasn’t a kiss either—it was a claiming, a clash of teeth, tongue, and lips. When Michael demanded entrance, Gary surrendered, opening for him.

God, I’ve missed this so much.

He relished every second, the sweep into his mouth, the glide of Michael’s tongue over Gary’s....

Michael pulled back. “I can’t wait to pound you into the mattress, Cross.”

No more Mr. Cross, no more Gary. Now it was Cross, and what shocked Gary was that he didn’t mind in the least. It was somehow... comforting. In the alleys he frequented, it was “dude” or “man.” At least Michael acknowledged that Gary had a name, and that filled him with warmth,

He wasn’t a nobody.

But what made his heart pound was one simple realization.

Michael wants me.

And fuck, Gary wanted him.

Chapter Ten



Once he'd closed the front door behind them and locked it, Gary's heart thumped.

Fuck, are we really doing this?

"Let me show you around." *Anything* to give his pulse a chance to return to normalcy.

"No need. Just show me the bedroom." Michael's voice was a little raw.

The reality of the situation speared through Gary. *Michael wants to get laid.* This wasn't a relationship—it was an exchange of bodily fluids. After they were done with whatever Michael had in mind, he'd leave and go back to his place.

Tomorrow morning is going to be awkward as hell. That was if Michael even showed up. Because how could things ever revert to their original pattern after he'd been balls-deep in his boss? Was the lure of sex worth risking the best assistant Gary had ever had?

Then he recalled that moment in the restaurant when Michael had guided his hand to what was obviously a long, thick cock. The hardness he'd felt when Michael ground against him.

That was all it took for any remaining rational thoughts to flee. Gary wanted. Badly. And the only one who could give him what he craved was Michael.

It wasn't only about sex. Well, it *was*, but that wasn't it. Gary longed for the touch of a lover, to have their hands on him, to give him that soft smile as they slid into his body, to hear them crying out as they slammed home. To feel them embrace him as they came. To experience that warmth again. To feel, even for a few minutes, like he mattered to someone.

"Having second thoughts?" Michael's quietly spoken question broke through, snapping him back into the moment.

"Yeah," he said with a shiver. Michael's eyes widened, and Gary managed a smile. "I'm gonna have to say no to hanging upside down from the shower rods. I think that's a great way to break my neck."

Michael let out a rough chuckle. "Duly noted. And it's good to get these things straight before we start. Communication is key, right?"

Communication....

Fuck.

Adrenaline shot through his system, and there was a tingling in his chest.

"I... I don't have any protection. There's been... I mean, I haven't...." Christ, he was seconds away from hyperventilating.

Michael gripped his shoulders. "Breathe."

Gary forced himself to do as instructed, taking long, deep breaths, and little by little, his panic receded.

"That's it." Michael's tone held approval. "Now, on to practical matters.... One of the things I like about working for CrossBow is the insurance. You cover everything, including HIV and other disease testing." He fished out his phone, tapped a few buttons, then held it up for Gary to examine. "See? My most recent result. Totally bug-free." He let go of Gary's shoulders and lifted his chin with a couple of fingers. "And just so we're clear? I haven't been with anyone in quite a while." His eyes sparkled. "I

guess I was too busy trying to impress the boss.”

He blinked. “To impress... me?”

Michael’s hand was gentle on Gary’s cheek. “Do you have any idea how insanely sexy you are? I can’t tell you the number of lube bottles I’ve gone through thinking about... well, all the things I’m hoping we’re about to do.”

No. Freaking. Way. “You... you can’t be serious.”

Michael leaned in and kissed Gary’s face, and the feel of those warm, soft lips on his scars made him shudder. “Never more so,” he whispered.

Except none of that would matter, not once the clothes came off and he saw....

“My body is....” Gary sighed, then gestured to his face. “This is bad enough. My body is a lot worse. That’s the reason why no one wanted to be with me. It turned them off.” His stomach clenched.

Michael’s only response was to press his lips to Gary’s in a soft kiss. “Don’t worry. I promise you, *everything* about you turns me the fuck on.” He pulled back, his eyes twinkling. “So... are we good to go?”

“Not yet.” There was something vital they needed to discuss. “Okay, listen. I need to be upfront with you here. I don’t like to top,” he said quickly. “I mean, I *can*, but... I really don’t like it.” He shrugged. “I think I prefer making sure my partner’s needs are met and they’re happy, and that’s all a bit much if I’m topping. Do they like what I’m doing? Should it be harder? Gentler? Do they prefer to be on their hands and knees? On their backs? What about spooning?” He met Michael’s gaze. “But if it’s something you want, I’ll do my best.”

Michael beamed. “I love to top. I hate bottoming with a passion because...well, I like to be in control. I know that scares some people—”

“No,” Gary cut him off. “I... like it when guys take charge.”

“Good to know.” That twinkle was back. “And now we’ve cleared *that* up, I really can’t wait to see me leaking from your ass.”

Holy fuck. Michael came out with stuff like that, and Gary wanted to beg

to be taken, right there, right then. What made it all the more real was the want and need he saw in Michael's eyes. And in that moment, *damn*, it made Gary feel so good.

Except he knew once they got this ball rolling, that might change.

"Okay, so I know I'm bringing up a lot of stuff when we could be in my bed, doing *other* stuff, but—"

Michael stopped him with a finger to his lips. "Let's get one thing straight, all right? If there's something you want to say, then *say* it. I get it. Besides, we'll get there eventually, right?" He removed his finger.

Gary breathed a little easier. "Right."

That earned him another brief kiss. "Okay, then. Talk to me."

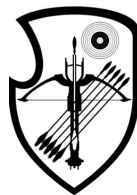
"Still in the spirit of being up front about things... I haven't had actual sex since the attack. I... I don't know what's going to happen. I don't want you to find yourself fucking someone who could freak out on you or pass out in the middle of it."

Please, God, no.

A slight tilt of his head made Michael look even more adorable. Then he closed the gap between them and their bodies connected. "Do you remember when I said I keep an eye on you?" he said quietly. "I swear to you, no matter how hot and sweaty we get, I will be watching you very closely. If things happen, we'll deal with it. There won't be any shame or recriminations." His fingers were still under Gary's chin, forcing him to look Michael in the eye. "Got it?"

Gary shivered at the intensity of Michael's gaze. "Got it."

Michael smiled. "And now that we seem finally to be on the same page... where's this bedroom of yours?"



Gary's bedroom told Michael a lot.

The large room was sparsely furnished. At one end of it was an armchair, a black armoire, and a full-length floor mirror set in a scrollwork frame.

Except a robe hung over it.

A chest of drawers with the same black finish stood against the sage green wall, next to what Michael guessed was the bathroom door. The wooden floor was clear of clutter, adorned with a square beige rug at the foot of the four-poster bed.

That bed...

It drew the eye, plain yet elegant, and the sight of those posts sent Michael's thoughts hurtling down all kinds of pleasant avenues. Not to mention the mirror. Michael had plans for that. *If* Gary was amenable.

I guess we'll find out in good time.

He sat on the end of the bed, noting the mattress's firmness, and patted the white comforter. "Come here."

Gary came to him but didn't sit. He stood in front of him, and Michael pointed to the nightstand. "Lube in there?" When he nodded, Michael smiled. "Then let's put it where we can reach it."

Gary went over to the low cabinet, reached into the drawer, withdrew the bottle, and returned to Michael, holding it out for him. Michael tossed it onto the bed, then gave Gary his full attention. Gary stood before him, his erection barely contained by his jeans, his hands at his sides.

He was apparently waiting for Michael to make the first move.

Michael didn't want to wait a second longer. He'd known there'd be several steps before his cock was where it ached to be, and he wasn't about to hurry Gary, but finally they were there.

He stood, shifted closer, homed in on Gary's lips, and claimed them in a lingering kiss, his hand on Gary's neck, stroking, teasing.... He could almost see the tension seeping from Gary's body, but he knew it would return with a vengeance once it was time to get naked.

Maybe they needed to cross that obstacle sooner rather than later.

Michael freed the first button on Gary's shirt, not missing his shudder. Michael didn't break his kiss, but deepened it, and Gary's low moan went straight to his dick. He explored him while he dealt with the rest of the buttons, and suddenly they'd reached it, the moment Michael knew Gary had built into a mental monster.

"Take it off," he whispered in Gary's ear. "I want to see you." Then he took a step back.

Gary took a deep breath before slipping the shirt from his frame.

Oh my God.

Michael bit back his gasp. He knew Gary had scars, but he'd had no idea there were so many. It didn't diminish how fucking sexy he was, but it did make Michael wonder how he'd survived something so horrific. There were deep pits in his skin, gashes where it looked as though he'd been burned and the skin had healed poorly. Dark, rough patches stood in stark contrast to the pink skin around it. The most prominent scar started at his neck and ran the length of his chest and stomach.

Gary clearly thought his scars made him undesirable, but to Michael it was a roadmap to the creation of the man he held in such high regard. Jagged lines that painted a picture of a man who refused to let limitations define him. Michael could understand why Gary wasn't much for the public eye: People were cruel and only looked at the outside of a person. What made Gary who he was? That was something no bomb could ever take away.

None of that mattered, though, at least not to Michael. What he saw was a brave man. A strong man. He might have come home a broken warrior, but Gary Cross had clawed his way back up and hadn't let his disabilities define him.

That same strong man was watching him intently.

There were so many things Michael wanted to say, but he knew words wouldn't change the way Gary saw himself. What came to mind was

something a writer friend had once told him when he'd asked her the secret to writing a good book.

"Show, don't tell."

Maybe she had the right idea.

Michael unbuttoned his own shirt, then unfastened his belt. He slid it free of the loops, dropped it to the floor, and lowered his hands to his sides. He gazed at Gary, his heartbeat climbing a little.

"Want to take over?"

Gary sank to his knees on the rug. His fingers trembled as he slid the zipper over Michael's bulge. He'd only gotten halfway when he caught his breath. "Do you always go commando?"

"Usually? No. Maybe the hope of getting your mouth on my shaft gave me the idea." When Gary blinked, Michael nodded. "I've wanted that for a while now."

Gary gripped Michael's hips. "Then I'd better not keep you waiting." He pulled the zipper down, leaned in, and buried his nose in Michael's pubes. "Fuck, you smell good."

Michael held him there, Gary's face pressed against his groin, a low moan escaping when Gary kissed the root of his dick. Then Gary sat back on his haunches, grasped the waistband of Michael's jeans, and shoved them to his knees, his cock bobbing up instantly.

Gary coughed. "You weren't lying, were you?" he murmured. He curled both hands around its length.

"Why don't you show me what you can do with that?" Michael's hands were on his shoulders, tremors skittering through him as he waited to slide into Gary's throat. He gently removed Gary's hands before aiming the head of his dick at Gary's lips, precum already beading there.

Gary lapped it up, then took the head into his mouth.

Oh fuck. Michael had to fight the urge to thrust.

He laid his hands on Gary's head, doing his damndest to remain still

while Gary worshipped his cock with lips and tongue. “Yeah, just like that,” he murmured.

Gary moaned around his dick, sliding his lips up and down the shaft. Michael cupped the back of Gary’s head with both hands and held him still while he gave a slow roll of his hips, pushing a little deeper. “How much can you take?”

Gary pulled free. “More than that.” Then his mouth enclosed Michael’s cock, and Michael shivered when half his shaft disappeared from view.

The brakes were off.

Michael pumped his hips, and Gary took everything Michael gave him, his face reddening, tears welling, but he didn’t stop, didn’t back off, and Michael took that as consent.

His dick was hard as steel, and he longed to bury it in Gary’s warm, tight ass.

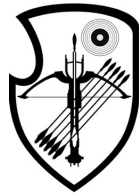
Michael pulled free. “The rest of the clothes need to go.” He kicked off his shoes and got rid of his jeans, gratified at the speed with which Gary removed his remaining clothing, until at last they stood naked, Gary’s cock rising to meet Michael’s, his chest heaving, his breathing shallow.

Michael gave him a push toward the bed, and Gary fell onto it on his back. Michael didn’t hesitate. He grabbed Gary’s legs, hands digging into his thighs as he rolled Gary’s ass up off the comforter. “And there you are,” he said with a smile. That tight pucker twitched, and Michael’s dick responded with an upward jerk of its own. “Hold your legs.”

Gary hooked his arms under his knees and held them against his chest, and Michael dove in. The first taste of him, the smell of bodywash, Gary’s own rich musk, the sound of his labored breaths—all of it conspired to arouse him even more. He worked that hole with his tongue, loving the noises pouring from Gary’s lips. Every gasp, every groan, every sound and smell fed Michael’s hunger.

He got onto the bed beside Gary, grabbed the lube, applied it to his

fingers, then slid one into tight heat.



Shit, it's been a while.

Gary was about to tell him to go slow, when Michael stilled inside him, then bent low to take Gary's cock into his mouth.

Oh, holiest of holy fucks.

Gary thrust up with his hips, wanting more, and Michael took it all, until Gary's dick nudged the back of his throat. Gary reached for a pillow and stuffed it under his head.

He wanted to watch.

Michael worked his shaft with his mouth, and *fuck*, it was exquisite. Gary couldn't tear his eyes off the sight of Michael's head bobbing—

Michael's finger moved slowly in and out, and now it felt so fucking good.

"Yeah, you like that." Michael's tone was warm with approval.

"F-finger fucking was always a favorite," Gary managed to get out.

"Duly noted." Then Gary shivered as Michael added a second. "Just so you know? I'm aiming for three."

Oh God. "You stick three fingers in my ass and that's it, game over." Two felt *amazing*.

Michael leaned over him. "We can't have that, can we? I want to be inside you when you come, so I get to feel you tighten around my dick."

That was a goal Gary could aim for.

Michael kept up his sensual penetration, and it wasn't long before Gary knew he was getting too close.

"Michael... please.... Fuck me."

“With pleasure.” He withdrew his fingers, then lay on the bed beside Gary. “Ride me.” Michael grabbed the lube and slicked up his cock.

His long, thick cock.

Gary’s heart pounded. *Can I take that?*

There was only one way to find out.

He straddled Michael’s hips, reaching back for his rigid dick, then guided the head to rest against his hole. Michael’s gaze was locked on his face as Gary eased it into him, sinking slowly, until at last his body sheathed every inch of Michael’s cock.

Gary took a moment to breathe, because *fuck*, he’d never been so full. Michael lay still, his hands on Gary’s thighs. Gary bit his lip. “I seem to recall you saying something about being rather... enthusiastic.”

Michael grinned. “God’s honest truth. And as soon as you give the word, you’re going to find out just how... enthusiastic I can get.” He stroked Gary’s skin. “Because tonight this hole is mine, Cross, until I shoot my load inside you.”

His words were a stark reminder that this encounter, however hot, had an expiration date.

Don’t think about it. Enjoy it while you can.

He began to move, slowly at first, relishing the burn he hadn’t felt in such a long time. When that morphed into something more pleasurable, he rocked a little faster, chasing the sensation, loving the feel of Michael’s dick stretching him.

And when it wasn’t enough, he leaned back on his arms, raised his hips, and fucked himself on that thick shaft, his own cock slapping against his belly, Michael’s hands curled around his ankles, lifting his head up off the bed to stare at Gary, lips parted, eyes shining, his focus alternating between Gary’s face and his dick spearing into Gary’s hole.

Gary balanced on one hand while he worked his dick, a constant stream of moans tumbling from his lips, conscious of feeling alive for the first time

in years.

“Fuck, the way you look,” Michael ground out. He grabbed Gary’s wrist and tugged him forward until their faces were inches apart and he was crouched over Michael, Michael’s hands on his ass, his hips tilted as he thrust up into Gary.

“Fuck, yeah... oh yeah.” Gary cupped Michael’s nape and they kissed, a collision of lips and tongues, while Michael fucked him with long strokes until Gary was bouncing on his dick, and Michael jackhammered into him. “That’s it, make me your fuck toy,” Gary gasped. He didn’t want this to end, but if this was all he got, then so be it.

Michael picked up speed, and Gary cried out against his lips, carried along on a tide of sensual pleasure. Then everything came to a stop.

“Get on your front, ass high,” Michael demanded.

Gary scrambled to do as he was told, and mere seconds later, Michael straddled him, one foot on the comforter, and mounted him, plunging his cock down into Gary’s loosened hole. Gary turned his head to the side, and their lips met once more, feeding each other groans as Michael fucked him into the mattress.

God, he’d missed this.

“S-so good,” he cried out between kisses, Michael driving in and out of him, pushing him closer to the orgasm he wanted to stave off as long as possible.

“You feel incredible,” Michael told him, pulling virtually all the way out of him, only to thrust back inside, his body smacking against Gary’s. Then he slowed, teasing Gary’s hole with unhurried strokes, before gathering speed again, until Gary was hoarse, begging him not to stop, not to fucking *stop*.

Michael pulled free, flipped Gary over, and was back inside him in a heartbeat, Gary’s knees drawn up to his shoulders, his feet planted on Michael’s chest while Michael anchored himself, his hands cupping Gary’s knees as he rocked in and out of him, hips snapping.

Michael let go and covered Gary's body with his own, kissing him again and again while he fucked him with deeper, harder strokes, his face and chest red, sweat dripping from him. "Gonna come," he said with a groan.

"Come in me," Gary pleaded. He wanted Michael's warmth, the throb of his dick. He reached for his own cock, tugging on it, desperate for release.

Before it came, Michael arched his back, and there it was, that glorious pulsing inside him. He clung to Michael, still working his own shaft, until he shot so hard, his whole body tingled and his head spun.

Michael eased out of him, shifting back a little, and Gary knew exactly what he was doing. He bore down, pushing the cum from his body, and was rewarded with Michael's soft sigh.

"Beautiful," he murmured. Michael lay on top of him, feeding him lazy kisses, Gary's legs wrapped around him, his hands on Michael's shoulders, his back, his heartbeat returning to normal.

Now what do I say? "Thank you, that was wonderful. And by the way, don't leave?"

He went with humor.

"This was so unexpected." Except there was a grain of truth in that statement.

Michael chuckled and kissed his neck.

Gary wasn't prepared to let it go just like that.

"I mean it. I had no idea you even wanted this."

Michael propped himself up on one elbow, dragging a finger through the cum that coated Gary's belly and chest. "Just because I didn't say it, doesn't mean I didn't think it. Not *all* declarations need to be said aloud." He bent down and kissed Gary on the lips. "Sometimes we show how we feel by our actions instead of our words." He smiled. "You know, like worrying if my boss has taken his meds. Or being concerned that he might not have eaten."

Then he shifted position, and Gary caught his breath as Michael slid back inside him, all the way home.

“That’s better.” Michael looked him in the eye. “Don’t you think?”

“Much better,” Gary agreed.

“I could sleep this way, except I really need to take a shower.”

He blinked. “Would... would you stay the night?”

There was that gorgeous smile again. “I’d love to.”

Chapter Eleven



The first thought to cross Gary's mind when he woke was that a baker had mistaken his ass for dough and had spent the night pounding and kneading it. Despite the ache, he smiled.

I could get used to this.

He rolled over to see—

A space where Michael had lain.

He glanced around the bedroom, but Michael's clothes were gone too. There was no sign he'd ever been there. If it hadn't been for the ache in his ass, Gary could almost believe it had been a dream.

Of course he was gone. They'd both gotten their itches scratched, right? He glanced at the clock on the nightstand. Four-thirty.

Wow. He was in a hurry to get out of here, wasn't he?

That didn't bode well. Gary's fears for what the morning would bring appeared to be prophetic.

How could I have been so stupid?

Then the full import of his prediction weighed in on him.

Michael wouldn't want to stay after this. And that meant a new assistant,

someone who probably wouldn't give a shit if Gary needed his meds. Who wouldn't bring him an everything bagel when he was having an off-day.

All that, just because you wanted to get laid. Way to go, Gary. Fuck up the best thing you've had in a long time. Could you be any stupider?

He knew his chances of getting back to sleep were nonexistent—the alarm would go off in an hour or so anyway. And besides, he wanted to get in early to check on Abbas.

He got out of bed, slipped his underwear on, and headed for the kitchen to start the pot of decaf. He needed to be ready to face the consequences when he walked into his office. He pushed the kitchen door open and—

A buck-naked Michael stood at the stove, swinging his hips and humming to himself. His ass wasn't the only thing swaying—Gary got flashes of that monster cock too.

What the—

Gary scanned the kitchen. Michael's clothes were folded neatly, placed on a chair. He peered closer.

Michael was flipping pancakes.

“What are you doing?”

He glanced over his shoulder. “And good morning to you too, Mr. Cross. As for what I'm doing? I should've thought that was obvious.”

Whatever relief he'd experienced at finding Michael still there dissipated at his choice of words. *So it isn't Gary now?* Even Cross would have been better.

“So we're going to pretend last night never happened? Is that what this is about?”

Michael put his spatula on the countertop and turned to face him with a hint of a smile. “No, that's *not* what this is about at all. It's about you and how you feel. I didn't want to make it weird for you.”

Gary blinked. “And standing naked in my kitchen isn't weird?”

Michael shrugged. “Okay, you got me.” He turned back to the stove and

slid the pancake onto a platter piled high with others. “Have a seat and I’ll get your juice and decaf.”

It was then Gary noticed everything Michael had done. The pot was full, the garbage pail had rinds in it.

“You made fresh juice?”

“Well, yeah.” Michael’s tone made him sound as though he thought it was a dumb question. “Who doesn’t prefer fresh over bottled?”

“What time did you get up?” He hadn’t done all this in five minutes.

“About three-thirty or so. You were sleeping so comfortably, I didn’t want to wake you. Plus, I wanted you to get a bit of extra rest. You were... drained last night, after all.” His eyes twinkled.

And then there was the smirk that made Gary’s cock twitch thinking about Michael’s expression before he’d put him on his hands and knees.

Michael set butter and syrup on the table next to two fruit cups, and warmth spread throughout Gary. “Why did you do this?”

“Because I promised you I’d take care of you.”

Gary was fast learning there were two sides to Michael. The caring man, he recognized from work.

The dominant in bed one had been a welcome revelation.

Michael pulled a chair out for him, and Gary stared. “I’m in my underwear.”

He arched his eyebrows. “And I’m naked. What’s your point?” Michael grinned. “Unless you want me to warm the seat first? And I’m willing to make it yours or the chair’s, whichever you prefer.” Then he winked, and Gary wasn’t sure if he was serious.

His ass tingled at the thought that he might be.

Gary sat, thankful the seat pads were fabric and not leather. Michael joined him at his side and poured both coffee and juice.

Gary was still stupefied by the turn his day had taken.

“Do you regret last night?” Michael asked. “If so, we can forget it ever

happened. Like I said, I don't want to make it weird for you."

Gary gaped at him. "Do *I* regret...?" *Are you fucking kidding me?* "Hell no, I don't regret it at all." He swallowed. "Why? Do you?"

Michael laughed. "To quote you, Hell no. You have *no* idea how long I've wanted you under me."

Gary was confused as fuck. "But that guy in the restaurant last night.... He was way hotter than me. And trust me, judging by the performance he gave? He'd have been under you in a heartbeat."

Michael picked up a piece of pineapple from the dish and held it out without a word. Gary dutifully opened his mouth, and Michael fed him the sweet fruit. Michael looked him in the eye. "People are always harder on themselves than they need to be." He leaned in and kissed Gary's neck, sending a shiver through him. "Is this something you want to happen again, Gary?"

Gary didn't even have to think about it. "Yes." Michael had given him everything he could beg for and more.

"Good." Michael smiled. "We have time before we need to go to work. If you finish your breakfast like a good boy, I'll take you upstairs and we can swap blow jobs."

A blow job? As if he was going to settle for that.

"I don't think so."

Michael's grin was back. "Why on earth not?"

"I don't want to feed your ego, but last night? It was amazing. I want a repeat." Gary shifted on his chair, and the movement served as a reminder of the pounding he'd taken.

Michael slid a hand down Gary's side, letting it rest on his ass. "Aren't you sore?"

"Yes, I'm sore. Does that mean I wouldn't deal with it for another round? I repeat... I don't think so."

That earned him a filthy chuckle. "Finish your breakfast, Cross. Let's see

where this morning takes us.” He kissed Gary’s throat. “And don’t blame me if you’ve got problems sitting down this morning.”

Gary would deal with that when the time came. Right then all he wanted was Michael, balls-deep in his ass.

Talk about starting the day with a bang.



Michael stroked languid fingers over Gary’s chest, sending ripples of pleasure through him. How long had it been since he’d known this kind of attention? He snuggled in closer, enjoying the contact more than he would admit.

“We need to get out of this bed,” Michael murmured.

“Mm-hm.”

“You said you wanted to go in early.”

“Mm-hm.”

“How’s your ass?”

Gary chuckled. “Next question.”

“But still no regrets?”

“None whatsoever.” He craned his neck to look at Michael. “Do you ever have those?”

“Doesn’t everyone?” He laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“Actually, I was thinking about something I regret.”

“And you find it amusing?”

“Judge for yourself.” Michael cleared his throat. “When I turned thirteen, my dad bought a combo riding mower and snowblower. Trust me, we needed it. In Minnesota, we have winter eight months out of the year. At least, that

was always how it seemed to me. Anyway, one day it snowed like a foot, and Dad was at work, so Mom asked me to drag the snowblower out and take care of our drive and sidewalk. As much as I didn't want to, I agreed."

Gary frowned. "*That's* your regret? That's like first-grade stuff."

Michael tweaked Gary's nipple, drawing a gasp from him. "Hey, I'm not done telling the story. Gonna let me finish?"

Gary smirked. "By all means, go ahead."

"Thank you. Anyway, I lugged that stupid thing out of the garage, turned it on, and climbed into the seat." He smiled, as though he found the memory pleasurable.

"And?" Gary asked impatiently.

"Think about it. A thirteen-year-old boy with something thrumming between his legs."

"I don't...." Then the light dawned. "Oh, shit."

"Yup. Little Michael stood up and took notice of his surroundings. Then he must have gotten sick, because he threw up inside my pants." Michael grimaced. "It was a sticky, gooey mess."

"You came in your pants?"

"You bet I came in my pants," Michael said with an eye roll. "It was my first orgasm, and I thought I was dying or something. I went into the house and told my mom I thought I'd broken something. After that first time, you couldn't peel me off that machine. I refer to it as 'The Cummer of Sun and Snow.'" He chuckled. "To this day, whenever they have the first snowfall, she calls me, laughing so hard she's crying, and asks if I want to come blow the snow for them. After that first episode, I mowed every Saturday or blew snow whenever it was needed. I also did the neighbor's yards and plowed the entire block." He had a dreamy expression on his face. "I never had so much fun." Then he stroked Gary's cheek. "Your turn."

"For what?"

"Tell me a story. It doesn't have to be as embarrassing as mine."

Gary thought for a moment. “When we finally get out of bed, there’s something I’d like to show you. It’s an article I keep in a frame.” He smiled. “The headline makes me laugh every time I see it.”

“What was it?”

“Local teen’s cock wins first prize.”

Michael guffawed. “Okay, you have to tell me this one.”

“It wasn’t about me—it was about Eric.” Gary took a deep breath. “Eric came from the deep South. Alabama. He was born and raised on a farm. One of the things he was proudest of was a rooster he’d named Dr. Pecker.”

Michael chuckled. “Cute.”

“Anyway, when we were overseas, his mom sent him a box of what she called memories. One of them was that article. The headline earned him a lot of ribbing in high school, he said. Everyone kept asking if they could see his cock. Of course, when we saw the headline, we started on him too. But Eric wasn’t a kid anymore, and there wasn’t much that embarrassed him, so he stood up and whipped it out. Everyone stopped asking, because what he had in his pants could have won an award on its own.”

Michael’s eyes gleamed. “Aha. You’ve got a thing for big dicks. That explains why you were so keen for a repeat performance.”

Gary snuck his hand under the sheet and wrapped his fingers around Michael’s cock. “Oh my God. Does that thing ever sleep?”

That earned him another chuckle.

“Anyway, back to my story. Later, Eric got me alone and remarked on how I couldn’t take my eyes off of it. Then he asked if I’d ever petted a rooster. When I told him no, he said he’d like his to be the first cock I’d stroked.”

Michael laughed softly. “I don’t suppose we have time for—”

Gary snorted. “I’ve only just got my breath back from the last time.” Michael fucked like a god. Passionate, aggressive, but tender when Gary needed him to be.

Michael preened. “I like that I leave you breathless.” He leaned over to kiss Gary’s forehead. “Maybe we’ll test that on our lunch break one afternoon. Your desk seems sturdy enough.”

Getting fucked at work? That wasn’t something Gary had ever considered, but now Michael had said it, he couldn’t get the image out of his head.

“Maybe we should—”

His phone chimed with CrossBow’s ringtone, and Gary reached over to pick it up off the nightstand.

“This is Cross.”

“Jameson, sir. We have a situation here.”

Gary sat upright, and Michael followed suit. “Report.”

“At zero five thirty, two armed assailants attempted to breach the building. The first threw an incendiary device at the doors, which buckled under the blast, but held. The men, neither of whom has been identified yet, rushed toward the building, firing at the men who responded. In the firefight, both assailants were killed.”

Christ.

“Any casualties among our men?”

“Brightmore took a bullet to the chest, sir. Left side. There was heavy bleeding. The paramedics got him loaded into the ambulance and took him quickly to the hospital, but... I was a corpsman in the Army, sir. I’ve seen my share of chest wounds. It doesn’t look good.” There was a pause. “Roberts had just messaged. He’s gone straight to surgery. Status critical. And sir....” Jameson gave an audible gulp. “Dr. Malone was close to where the explosion took place. He’s okay,” he added hastily. “More rattled than anything else. In fact, afterward he wanted to get a look at the bomb. We had to have two men drag him to the ambulance when it arrived.”

That sounded like Wheels. “I’ll be there ASAP.” Gary hung up. He met Michael’s inquiring gaze. “Someone just made a move on Abbas.” That had

to be it. “And we could lose Brightmore.”

Michael was out of the bed in a heartbeat. “Then we’d better move our asses.”

Gary went in search of a clean shirt, his mind already into overdrive.

Looks as if we need another safe house.

And if Brightmore dies... it'll be my fault.

Then Michael was there, his hands cupping Gary’s face. “And before you start hauling yourself over the coals, there was no way you could have prevented this. You hear? And if you stop for a minute and think clearly about it, you’ll know I’m right.”

“If I had been there, I could have—”

Michael’s eyes blazed. “Could have what? Tell me. *What* could you have done?”

When he’d done his therapy after the guys in his unit died, Dr. Reed asked him repeatedly what he could have done to prevent the tragedy. It took two years—and a lot of tears—to realize there wasn’t anything he could have done.

“Cross, what could you have done?” Michael repeated.

“Nothing,” Gary admitted.

Michael kissed him. “Don’t worry. We’re going to find out who is responsible.” He set his jaw, his eyes flinty. “And then we’ll make them pay.”

Chapter Twelve



Gary was grateful that Michael was driving. He clenched his hands tight, driving the nails into the skin of his palms to keep from screaming.

This isn't going to work.

They couldn't have Abbas on property for an extended stay. CrossBow was home to too many employees, including two families with kids. No way could Gary allow their lives to be put at risk because he'd made a bad call.

"It'll be okay," Michael said softly, patting Gary's knee. "We're almost there, and Dr. Malone is fine."

"I'm not thinking about Wheels," Gary murmured. "Well, I *am*, but not just about him. Andrews and Klein have their families living with them. What if it had been one of the kids? Or Andrew's husband or Klein's wife? Me, my men... we know the risks when we take a job. We're all aware that any mission might well be our last. But Jessup, Ariana, and the kids? They didn't sign up for this. They should have a reasonable expectation of safety wherever they live." He stared through the windshield at the road ahead, his stomach churning. "I should never have kept Abbas there."

The car came to a stop, and Gary was about to ask why when he saw the lights had changed.

Then he realized Michael was looking at him.

“Listen to me, okay? Porter sprung this on us, and CrossBow was the safest place we could think of at the time. Was it a permanent solution? No, absolutely not. And after this, we’ll find somewhere better.”

Gary returned his attention to the road, recalling a familiar voice from the not-so-distant past.

You can’t control events, Gary. No one can. The only thing you can control is your reaction to them.

His therapist hadn’t lied. This wasn’t something any of them could have controlled, and Gary needed to calm down. He knew the press would be relentless in their questioning, and the cops would want details too.

Except his mind wasn’t focused on them, but on his people.

I need to call the hospital.

He wasn’t a praying man, but that didn’t stop him from asking the universe a favor. *Keep them all safe.*

The universe owed him.

As soon as they turned into the drive that led to CrossBow, he saw the flashing lights of the vehicles lining both sides of the road, and by the main door, a crowd had already gathered. Gary recognized some of the journalists who’d attended the opening.

Time to feed the vultures.

Not exactly a flattering description of the press, but he’d met plenty of journalists who would have given some scavengers an inferiority complex.

Michael pulled into the lot, and Gary got out.

“Wait.” Michael locked the car, then walked around it and pulled Gary into a hug. “I’m here for you, okay? For whatever you need. Don’t hesitate to use the resources you have available.” He met Gary’s gaze. “This doesn’t need to fall solely on your shoulders, all right?”

Hiring Michael had been one of HR's better decisions. Thank God Gary hadn't succeeded in chasing him away.

"All right," he agreed. He glanced toward the building and took a deep, bracing breath. "Let's do this."

Another plea to the universe. *Keep me poised. Don't let me face-plant in front of this crowd.*

No sooner had he stepped behind the podium someone had set up in front of the assembled press than the cameras clicked and mics were thrust almost in his face.

"Mr. Cross, Taya Ramirez, KOB Eyewitness News. Can you tell us what happened here tonight?"

Gary squared his shoulders. "This morning our facility was attacked by two unknown assailants. They engaged in a firefight with our staff and were killed as they tried to gain access to the building."

"Can you tell us what they were after?"

"At the moment we're uncertain. We have considerable equipment in our facility. Our current theory is they were after something from our weapons storage or items they could pocket and sell for high value on the streets. Fortunately, the staff at CrossBow kept them from entering the building. While we regret the loss of life, we will defend our property at all times."

Another person raised their hand, a man who looked as sleep-deprived as Gary felt. Gary indicated him with a nod.

"Nicholas Hunter, KBIM. Was any of your staff injured?"

"Dr. Joshua Malone was on the scene when the attack occurred. He was sent to be checked out and we're told he's doing fine. Unfortunately, another member of our staff, Richard Brightmore, was shot during the attempted incursion. His current condition is listed as critical."

On and on the questions went, each one blurring into the other, but Gary stood resolute. This was a test and he aimed to ace it. Michael stepped away from him, but returned shortly after. He put a hand on Gary's elbow and

gently pulled him away from the microphones.

One look at Michael's grim expression told him it wasn't going to be good.

"Brightmore died on the operating table thirty minutes ago," he said quietly into Gary's ear. "The damage was too extensive." He squeezed Gary's arm. "I'm so sorry, Gary. I've already spoken with his mother and told her we're doing everything we can to find out why this happened."

The news dropped on him like a ten-ton weight, smashing him into the ground, crushing him into a pulpy mess in front of the reporters and onlookers. Brightmore was the first of his people to be killed in the line of duty. Pain lanced through him, but he managed a sharp nod, then returned to the podium.

"I've just been informed that Richard Brightmore has died. Our hearts go out to his mother, Regina, as well as his brother, Benjamin. My assistant, Michael Kennedy, has been in contact with her. We ask that you respect the family's privacy at this time."

And then the questions started again. Fucking vultures. A man—a *good* man—was dead, and these bastards wanted to dredge up his past, find out if there was anything there they could exploit for an angle.

One bastard in particular.

"Mark Delaney, host of *Hear It from Delaney*. Isn't it true that Richard Brightmore was gay? That maybe he was the cause of the attack? Is this something CrossBow should consider very carefully when taking on staff?" His smug smile was the icing on the cake.

Gary knew the man was baiting him. His right-wing talk show was one of the new popular breed, the kind that always blamed someone's death on something they did instead of those who did the killing. Gary wanted to launch himself at the bastard and pound his face into pudding.

Instead he glared at the guy.

"Richard was a good man. A family man. He has—*had*—his paycheck set

up so that almost every penny went to his mother. He lived in our dorms to save money that would help pay his brother's son's tuition. And you have the audacity to ask a question like that when the man just *died*?" He caught the eye of Donna Tapper, head of Security, who stood at the periphery, her team flanking the press. "Please escort Mr. Delaney from the premises. Inform our staff he's no longer allowed on property."

Delaney scoffed. "I'm a reporter. You can't bar me from—"

"Just did," Gary said. "This is private property. You being here was a courtesy, nothing more. That ends today."

It was satisfying to hear Delaney protesting as Donna and two of her men marched him off property, his invectives echoing until they were out of earshot.

He was about to add a few well-chosen comments when Michael moved forward, blocking their view of Gary.

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your time. This interview is now over. We have a lot of work to do, so please, let us get to it." He gripped Gary's elbow once more and led him into CrossBow by the side entrance.

"What did you do that for?" Gary griped as the door closed behind them. "I wanted to give them a piece of my mind."

"Yeah, I noticed. And how would *that* sound-bite look on the national news?"

He was right, of course. In fact, Gary was starting to believe Michael was always right. "Thank you. I was a rational human being once, believe it or not. The attack screwed up my brain, and I'm a lot less even-tempered now."

Michael's eyes gleamed. "Are you kidding? I would have paid good money for a ringside seat to watch you eviscerate those assholes. Especially that smarmy one, Delaney. Him with his thousand-dollar haircut. Just because he's syndicated in his market, he acts like he's the golden boy."

"And not above pulling a stunt to get what he wants. Do me a favor? Find out who isn't on assignment and send them to watch over Richie's mother for

a while. I don't want anyone getting near her or the family. *Especially* that asshole.”

“No problem, I'll be sure it's taken care of. Now, what do we do next?”

That was a good damn question.

Michael had been impressed by the way Gary held it all together during the press conference. More than once he wanted to call a halt to the proceedings, but Gary needed to do this.

And I have to keep in mind he's a big boy who doesn't need my protection.

Which rankled the hell out of him, because all Michael wanted to do was grab him and hide away from the world. He'd never been with anyone like Gary. Tough on the outside, but as for what lay beneath the surface? He needed to be held together, and something in him called to Michael to protect him.

“Michael? Are you with us?”

He jerked his head up. “I'm sorry. What did you say?”

He looked around the table. The six heads of department he'd contacted were seated, their focus on Gary as he spoke.

And Gary was looking at him.

“We're here to discuss the attack and how to move forward. Chelsey suggests having Abbas on property is putting everyone in the building at risk. Do you agree?”

Why is he asking me? I'm only the assistant. This was something that soared way above his pay grade.

Except Michael had been contemplating the whole fucked-up situation, and he had questions.

He cleared his throat. “Honestly? I'm not sure what to think. None of this makes sense. Who knew Abbas was here? Was this something they did on

their own, or is it someone feeding information to a foreign enemy? And why him? I mean, Abbas is head of a small group, so why would he garner this much attention from anyone?"

"All good questions," Gary replied. "I spoke with Wheels. He said he was doing okay, but the doctors wanted him to go home and rest for a few days."

"Did he see anything that might prove useful?" someone asked.

"He told me he didn't see much, but the bomb they used appeared to be pretty sophisticated. He said he'd need to examine it more closely."

"And, of course, the police confiscated it," Michael surmised.

"I've got a call in to them so we can see if collaboration is possible. I'm not holding out a lot of hope. We're not any branch of law enforcement, nor are we federal or military, so they're probably going to decline our help. That also means they'll keep us in the dark about whatever they find." Gary scanned the faces around the table. "In the meantime, we need to figure out what to do with Abbas. We need him somewhere safe, but if we're being watched, I'm not sure how that would be possible."

Michael wasn't sure either.

The meeting dragged on for another two hours, each person tossing out ideas that were quickly shot down by the others. The main problem, at least as far as Gary saw it, was moving Abbas from CrossBow to wherever they decided on. They were under surveillance, of that much Gary was fairly certain. Any movement on their part would catch someone's attention.

"I have an idea."

Gary jerked his head toward the door. Wheels looked awful. He'd been sprayed with tiny shards of glass, and his face was a series of scratches with dried blood. On his hand there were several stitches that came from shielding his face as best as he could.

"You're supposed to be home resting," Gary snapped, his eyes narrowed.

There were murmurs of agreement from the others.

“You need me,” Wheels assured them.

Gary couldn’t deny that. They needed someone who could think in several dimensions. Everyone in this meeting had the ability to see several moves ahead, but Wheels? He’d probably been there already, and was now on his way back again.

“I want to say go home and get some sleep, but I can’t,” Gary admitted as Wheels crossed the floor and pulled out an empty chair.

Wheels managed a smile. “Try it. See how far it gets you.”

“Why don’t you tell us what you know, then go upstairs and get some rest?” Michael suggested with a warm smile.

Wheels arched his eyebrows. “Do I know you?”

Michael rolled his eyes. He stood. “On that note, I’m going down to the cafeteria to get some sandwiches. Anyone have any special requests?” A few of them fired back their orders, and Michael headed for the door.

“Don’t you want to write down what we want?” Gary asked.

Michael grinned. “I’m not your assistant for nothing.”

As soon as the door closed, Wheels chuckled, then clutched his side with a wince. “He’s fun. I like him.”

Gary aimed a hard stare at him. “What was that about? You *know* who he is.”

“Of course I do. It’s just... well, he gave me the first genuine smile I’ve had in a while, so I’m enjoying playing with him.” Wheels mimicked Michael’s eye roll. “I may be scatterbrained, but I’m not *that* bad. Well okay, I *am*, but I’ve got his picture on my pad so it reminds me occasionally.”

Gary had to admit, Wheels was one of a kind. His laser-focus might be invaluable when it came to realizing his projects, but it kept him from seeing the here and now.

“So what’s your idea?”

Wheels frowned. “What idea?”

Gary bit back a smile. “The one you announced as you arrived.”

Yeah, Wheels really *was* that scatterbrained, despite his denial.

Wheels scooted closer to the table and leaned in. He spoke in hushed tones, as though he was afraid they were being recorded.

Who knows? Maybe we are.

“I don’t want to say much at this point. There *is* a way we can move Mr. Kazem. It’s considerably risky, but I think we can pull it off safely. We’ll still need a place for him to stay once he’s out of CrossBow, though.”

If Wheels said he had a way, Gary was inclined to believe him. “Okay. We need to find someplace where he’ll be safe.” He gazed around the table. “And I know this isn’t going to be easy to hear, but the information from this meeting will be restricted. Anything Wheels says will be between him, my assistant, and me.”

Mere seconds elapsed before the complaints started.

“That’s tantamount to you saying you don’t trust us.”

“We’re a part of this too.”

“Since when do we keep secrets?”

Gary held up his hand. “If you’d all stop and think about this for a moment, you’d see why such precautions are necessary. Someone appears to be monitoring us.”

A hush fell, and they stared at him.

Gary nodded. “You know I’m right, don’t you? The truth of the matter is, I don’t know what can be said aloud. And of course I trust each of you, but we need to restrict this information for the safety of Mr. Kazem.”

“What about the people who are footing the bill?” Marley Daniels asked. “Surely we can trust them.”

Gary had considered that. “I’m not sure we can. If an attack was made on Abbas before he was even in our custody, then the leak is somewhere out there. And I’m not naïve enough to believe someone from CrossBow couldn’t be swayed for the right price. Better not to have information they

could be forced to give up.”

Uncomfortable murmurs rippled through the air.

Michael reentered the room, a tray loaded with sandwiches in his hand. Everyone made a grab for the food—they’d been running on coffee since their arrival.

Gary stood, surprised he didn’t fall over.

This has been one hell of a way to start the day.

“Now that you all have something to eat, I don’t feel bad about finishing up. This meeting is adjourned. Wheels, let’s head to my office where we can discuss your ideas.”

“Of course, Mr. Cross.”

Wheels stood, his gait as unsteady as Gary’s. He really wanted Wheels to go get some rest, but they needed to protect Abbas and turn the focus away from CrossBow. Michael fell into step with them as they headed to Gary’s office.

“Give me a sec to make sure all the calls stay rerouted,” Michael said as they entered. He hurried through the connecting door that led from Gary’s office, and Gary caught his low tone before he rejoined them a few minutes later.

Michael closed the door behind him, and Wheels took a device from his pocket. He held it up, turned 360 degrees, then slipped it back into his jacket.

“Okay, I don’t detect any listening devices,” he announced.

Gary had known the technology existed, but he was certain Wheels had modified it to his own liking. *Thank God he’s on our side.*

“So what’s your idea?”

“Something that’s going to piss off a lot of people, but it’s the only way I can see to find out who’s behind the assassination attempts. Because right now they’re hidden.” Wheels smiled. “But not for long.”

“Will you stop talking in riddles and tell us?” Gary demanded.

“What he said,” Michael added.

Wheels clasped his hands in his lap. What came from his lips had to be the craziest idea in the history of crazy ideas.

What was even crazier?

Gary liked it.

Chapter Thirteen



Michael was impressed—and more than a little annoyed—with Gary’s fortitude. It had been two days since the meeting when Dr. Malone had proposed a plan that trod a fine line between brilliance and insanity. Gary had been right to insist on secrecy: they didn’t want this making its way to the wrong ears. Michael got that the department heads were pissed—*No one likes to be doubted, right?*—but they couldn’t take chances.

What worried him was Gary.

Has he moved from his desk in the last twenty-four hours?

Michael had let him work, knowing full well Gary needed to do this, but at this rate, he’d run himself into the ground. At least he’d ensured Gary kept up with his meds. As focused as he was, Michael knew he’d have skipped them. Eating, on the other hand, was more iffy. Michael had brought him food, but Gary had only nibbled at it, gazing intently at the screen in front of him.

This has to stop.

Michael had promised himself he’d keep an eye on Gary. *So why have I*

allowed him to work himself into a frazzle? At least he'd tried to make sure Gary had gotten some sleep, even if it was on the couch. Not that he was sure Gary had stayed there. In fact, Michael doubted he had. He wouldn't have put it past Gary to get up as soon as the door had closed.

Stubborn bastard.

Michael had provided him with a full breakfast, relieved to see the empty plate an hour later. It was only after that he'd thought to check in the trashcan. After discovering virtually the whole meal, Michael resolved to keep a closer eye on Gary while he ate. And if he didn't like that, then all he had to do was eat the damn food and Michael would leave him alone.

Michael paused at the office door, unsure of what he'd find when he opened it.

If I don't do something, he could pass out—or worse.

He stepped into the office to find Gary at his desk, his eyes closed, his head resting against the back of his chair—in the same clothes he'd worn the previous day.

“When's the last time you showered?”

Okay, so he clearly wasn't asleep. Gary opened his eyes and went right back to the screen in front of him. “No time. I've got to find somewhere safe for Abbas. We need him protected, and the families that live here to be safe until other arrangements can be made.”

He'd had Michael looking into buying a building that could be renovated, but Dr. Malone had insisted nothing needed to change. The present building had survived a bomb blast relatively unscathed, and he could reinforce the structure.

Except Gary wasn't listening to Dr. Malone. He wasn't listening to anyone. He was in fix-it mode. After his call with Richie Brightmore's mother, Gary had become obsessed with the need to take care of his people.

And who takes care of him?

That was down to Michael. The human body could only withstand so

much, and Gary's even less so.

He took a close look at Gary. Dear God, the bags under his eyes had baby bags of their own, and those were fully packed. His lips were flat, nearly white.

That did it. Action time.

Michael walked over to his desk. "C'mon, let's go."

He arched his eyebrows. "Can't. I need to find somewhere for Abbas."

"Your eyes aren't even focusing right now. You need a break. Let's head down to the rec room and shoot some pool." Not that Michael was in the mood for a game, but he'd do *anything* to unchain Gary from his fucking desk.

"You go. I'm sure you'll find someone else who wants to play."

Michael gaped at him. "Sure. I bet they're lining up to have a game—*at two o'clock in the morning*. Which you'd know it was if you weren't fighting sleep."

Gary waved a hand at his desk. "What am I supposed to do?" He locked gazes with Michael. "Someone *died*. One of my people. And I'm the one who'll have to face his mother at the funeral. *I'm* the one who gets to tell her how sorry I am that her son won't be coming for Thanksgiving dinner this year. Or ever again."

"I can handle that."

Gary slapped a hand on his desk. "It's my responsibility! These are my people, and their safety comes down to me."

"You think I don't understand that? But working yourself to exhaustion isn't the way to do it." This was getting him nowhere.

What was required was drastic, swift action.

"Get up," he ordered.

"Michael, I—"

"*Now, Cross.*"

The change in Gary was immediate. He stood, albeit unsteadily. Michael

grabbed him by the arm and propelled him toward his bathroom.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting you out of these clothes, for one thing. You’ve got one hell of a fancy shower in here,” Michael said as he opened the door. “So... you’re going to use it.” He pushed Gary into the room. “Now strip.”

Gary snorted. “And then what? Walk around naked for the rest of the night?”

“One, it isn’t night, it’s early morning. Two, I happen to know you keep a change of clothes in that cabinet out there. Because this is a thing you do, isn’t it? And three....” Michael grinned. “I wouldn’t object to you being naked.” He reached into the walk-in shower and flipped the water on, then stood beside the blue shower enclosure, his arms folded. “You’re still dressed, Cross.”

Gary began undressing, muttering as he dropped his clothing to the tiled floor.

“Got something to say?”

He jerked his head up. “I said, and what are *you* going to do while I shower? Stand there and watch? Sell tickets?”

“I’m going to find you that change of clothing, before I succumb and get in there with you.” And with that, he walked out of the now-steamy room.

By the time he’d found a clean pair of jeans and a shirt, he heard Gary humming to himself.

That’s an improvement.

“For your information, this is *not* a fancy shower,” Gary suddenly called out.

Michael snorted and went over to the door. “Are you kidding me? It has a steam generator, acupuncture water body jets, built-in radio, a folding seat, an ozone sterilization system for God’s sake, digital timer and temperature control—all it needs are sex toy attachments, and it’d be perfect.”

“And how do *you* know so much about it?”

He grinned. "I admit, I was envious as hell when I first saw it, so I went online to find out everything I could. I'd love one in my place, but the bathroom isn't nearly big enough."

"So my stuff is too big for you to handle?" Gary smirked. "Shower envy much? You know, you're welcome to use the shower any time you want."

Michael widened his eyes. "Seriously?"

Gary gave him a sweet smile. "Of course. However, as the owner, I have to be there to ensure your cleanliness. Wouldn't do to have my shower not working at peak efficiency, right? And speaking of sex toy attachments, why do you think I offered to let you use the shower? You could be my walking sex toy. You know, to plug my holes?"

He chuckled. "You're feeling better, aren't you?"

Gary's grin and brighter eyes was all the answer Michael needed.

Gary shut the shower off and opened the door. "Pass me a towel?"

Michael grabbed one from the drawer and stepped closer. "If I'm going to be your sex toy, I should get something out of it too." He ran the towel over Gary's back, smiling to himself when Gary sighed and relaxed into the touch.

"You don't have to do this," Gary whispered. "I can take care of myself."

Michael leaned in and kissed Gary's neck. "What if I want to?"

A shudder rippled through Gary. "O-Okay."

Gary stood still as Michael toweled him off. Goose bumps rose on his arms and his eyes fluttered shut, but despite Michael's hands on his ass or brushing over his cock, he didn't get an erection. That was okay. This was supposed to be sensual, not sexual.

"Let me get your clothes." Michael left him and went in search of the clean clothing he'd located, but Gary followed, strolling naked out of the bathroom, his dick still asleep.

Pity. A good orgasm would help. All those endorphins.... Plus, jacking off before bed always had a soporific effect, didn't it?

Michael smiled. His plan for a game of pool had just morphed into

something vastly more entertaining. Only thing was, they'd both need a shower by the time Michael was done with Gary—or more specifically, Gary's ass.

They wouldn't need cue chalk, but he'd make sure there was plenty of lube.



The rec room was empty, unsurprisingly. That didn't stop Michael from locking the door as quietly as possible. Gary ambled toward the pool table and placed the balls in the rack.

“Still not sure about this,” Gary murmured as he picked up a cue.

Michael walked over to him, took the cue from his hand, and replaced it on the green baize. “Take your clothes off.”

Gary jerked his head in Michael's direction so fast, it must have caused whiplash. “Excuse me? I just put them on.”

Michael removed his jacket, laid it on the adjacent empty table, and unbuttoned his own shirt. “Don't make me ask again, Cross. Strip. Then I want you to lean over the pool table.”

Gary's shocked expression was almost comical. “We're going to—” All words dried up when Michael reached into his pants pocket and removed a couple of foil packs and placed them on the varnished edge of the pool table. “You came prepared, I see.”

“I did tell you we'd do it at work one day.” Michael flashed him a grin. “I was a boy scout in a former life. Okay, that's a lie, but I do like to be prepared. Remember the mower/blower? After that, a tube of lube and box of tissues kept appearing on my nightstand. I learned to keep things... um... at hand.” He aimed a hard stare at Gary. “I thought I said strip.”

Gary's hands trembled as he undid the buttons on his shirt, then let it slide off his shoulders and drop to the floor. He fumbled with the belt, then kicked off his shoes and slipped out of his jeans and underwear.

"Leave the socks on," Michael told him, his voice husky to his own ears. "And I've changed my mind. Climb onto the table and kneel, your knees wide. I want your hole where I can get at it."

"Fine, but someone might come in. We have to make it fast."

Michael chuckled. "I do many things fast. What I'm about to do to your ass won't be one of them." He paused. "And I locked the door, in case that was worrying you."

"*Worrying* me? You're about to fuck my brains out on a pool table by the sound of it. Why on earth should I be worried about people walking in?" Gary clambered onto the table, his dick starting to pay attention.

Michael didn't waste a second. He grabbed Gary's ass cheeks, spread them, and dove in, lapping over his hole with a leisurely tongue. A loud groan fell from Gary's lips.

"Keep that up and this really *will* become a spectator sport." Michael pushed his thumb inside, nice and slow, appreciating the tight channel that sucked him in. He alternated between tongue and fingers until Gary's hole dripped with saliva, and his groans were constant.

He grabbed one of the foil packs, tore it open, and slicked up his cock. A moment later, he'd buried his shaft in Gary's warm body.

"Fuck, that's deep," Gary moaned. His dick was rigid, rubbing on the edge of the table, and Michael couldn't resist. He withdrew, knelt beside the table, pulled Gary's cock toward him, and gave it a good hard suck.

"Aw fuck."

Michael worked the head with his tongue until Gary was writhing. Then he rose to his feet and slid back home, gliding into Gary with languid thrusts at first, but it wasn't long before he was gripping Gary's hips as he drove into him.

He leaned over and kissed Gary's shoulder. "You know what? I think I can get deeper." He pulled free. "Move to the middle of the table, on all fours." Gary complied, and Michael climbed up, kneeling behind him. He filled him to the hilt once again.

Gary grabbed hold of the edge of the table and rocked back and forth, fucking himself on Michael's dick, more noises escaping into the quiet room. Michael reached up to the chains from which the lamps were suspended, and held on to the wide shades, letting Gary do the work.

Still not deep enough.

"Spread your knees wide," he instructed before crouching over him. He aimed his cock at Gary's hole and speared into it, mounting him, his hands resting flat on the baize.

"Oh God," Gary groaned. Michael slammed into him, their flesh slapping with each impact, the sound sharp. "Again."

Slam.

"Again."

Slam.

"Want to see you."

Michael was out of him in a heartbeat. He lay on his back, holding his cock erect. "Climb aboard." Gary sat astride him, reaching back to guide Michael's dick to where it needed to be.

Connection reestablished.

Gary leaned over and their mouths met in a clash of lips, teeth, and tongues, each feeding the other noises that spoke of hunger and need. Michael grabbed Gary around the waist, keeping him still as he tilted his hips and fucked up into him, until Gary's moans filled the air.

"Lean back," Michael told him. When Gary put his arms behind him, his weight on his hands, Michael sat up, still inside him, hunched over, and sucked Gary's cock.

"How the fuck can you do that?" Gary gasped, shuddering.

Michael pulled free and grinned. “Benefits of having a long dick.” Then he pushed Gary onto his back, rolled his ass up off the table, and drove his shaft all the way home.

“You’re so fucking deep,” Gary said with a groan. Michael pulled halfway out, only to slam back in, and Gary’s eyes widened. “Yes.” Michael did it again, and again, hooking his arms under Gary’s legs, bending him in half, one kiss after another.

Michael knelt up, his hands on Gary’s thighs, and rocked into him, short, quick thrusts that had Gary panting, a sheen of sweat coating his chest. Then he gave a long thrust, and Gary’s moan of pleasure went straight to Michael’s dick.

He slid his hand over Gary’s mouth. “No sound, remember? Unless you want people to hear you.”

As if on cue, the doorknob rattled, and they both froze.

“Hey, it’s locked.”

“What? It’s never locked.”

“Well, it is now. Should we get maintenance down here?”

Gary’s eyes were like saucers.

Michael leaned in. “Imagine what they’d say if they found me balls-deep in your ass, Gary. Would they be shocked? Would they want to watch? Do you think they’d be stroking themselves as I slammed into you?”

From the hallway came the shuffling of feet.

“Nah, it’s late anyway. Let’s just get some sleep.” And then they were gone.

Michael leaned in again. “Aw, there goes our audience.”

Gary glared at him. “You arranged that.”

He laughed. “Seriously? You think I said to a couple of the guys, ‘Come on down to the rec room at two thirty a.m. and try to get in. Ignore the moans because it’ll just be me fucking the boss?’” He rotated his hips, stirring his cock inside Gary’s hole.

Gary closed his eyes. “Fuck, that feels amazing.”

Michael bent over him and kissed him on the lips. “Ready for the finale?”

“That depends what you have in mind.”

Michael withdrew. “Stand next to the table, your hands flat on it.”

Gary did as instructed, and Michael followed suit, standing behind him. He reached over for the rack and slipped it over Gary’s head, pulling him back, the plastic resting against Gary’s throat.

“Arch your back for me.”

Gary shivered as Michael nudged his cock between his cheeks and drove it deep. The rack had been a fun thought, but Michael had a better one. He freed Gary’s head, put the plastic triangle back on the table, and curled his hand around Gary’s throat, the other on his chest, holding him as he fucked him, hammering into him, the slap of their bodies connecting adding to the noises that poured from Gary, mingling with Michael’s low groans as he filled Gary over and over. His legs trembled and he knew he was close.

Michael reached low, wrapped his fingers around Gary’s rock-hard dick, and tugged on it. “You’re going to come now, Cross. You hear me? You’re going to shoot your load, and as soon as you do, I’m going to shoot mine. Gonna fill you up.”

If he could stave off his orgasm that long.

Gary gripped the table and rocked, impaling himself on Michael’s shaft, his movements jerky, the fast pace matched by his shallow breaths. Warmth covered Michael’s fingers, and Michael kissed his neck.

“Good.” Gary’s body tightened around his shaft, and Michael was there, pulsing into him, his body shaking as he emptied his balls into Gary. Then Michael wrapped both arms around him and held him close, Gary’s back as slick as his chest, his cock still buried in Gary’s body. He could feel Gary’s heart thumping, the shivers that trickled through him, the musky scent of him infiltrating Michael’s nostrils, the smell of sweat filling the air.

Gary peered at the floor. “Oopsie. I made a mess.”

Michael chuckled. “Let Housekeeping deal with it. Give them something to gossip about, especially since there are no cameras in here.”

When Gary’s shivers died down, Michael let go and turned him in his arms. He kissed him slowly, Gary’s arms looped around his neck.

“Think you can sleep now?”

Gary rested his head on Michael’s shoulder. “Only if you’re there with me.”

Michael would carry Gary to his overstuffed couch if he had to. The idea of crawling in behind him, covering them both with a blanket, and falling asleep with him, his arm around Gary’s waist, seemed like the perfect end to the day.

Except it was morning, and the fast-approaching day would bring yet more challenges.

They could wait, at least for a few hours.

Chapter Fourteen



The only light came from the thin sliver of the moon high overhead and the lampposts that dotted the CrossBow parking lot. There was also an obscuring mist that had been unexpected, but given the circumstances, Gary wasn't about to complain—it made visibility poor at best.

A perfect night to move Abbas to a new location. Except it was three in the morning, and hopefully whoever was targeting him had no clue as to what was about to happen.

Yeah right. Bad guys never slept. It was an immutable law of nature.

It had better be a perfect night.

The area directly in front of the building had about fifty feet of heavy black tarp draped between two poles that further made it difficult to see.

This has to work.

“We ready?” Gary asked in his earpiece. He stood in front of a bank of monitors, relaying images from the parking lot, his gaze locked on the infrared monitor.

“As ready we'll ever be,” Michael replied.

Hearing his voice made Gary's stomach clench.

This was the part of the operation he hated. When Wheels outlined the plan, Gary would have done anything not to have Michael be a part of it. Even now, his mind was racing, trying to find ways to keep this from happening.

To keep Michael with him, and out of danger.

"Michael, you don't need to do this."

"I'm fine, I promise." Gary could hear the smile in his voice. "Let's get this show on the road."

A pain lanced through him. The last time he'd sent his team out on a mission, he'd lost so much. And now Michael, a man Gary was coming to... care for was about to be in the center of a shitstorm that could threaten everything if it didn't go off without a hitch.

He glanced over at Wheels, who gave him a big smile and thumbs-up. Funnily enough, that didn't encourage Gary as much as he'd hoped.

"Is everyone in position?" Gary questioned.

One by one, each person involved in the mission called off with an affirmative answer. Gary sucked in a breath, steeling himself for what was about to happen.

"Go."

As soon as the word left his lips, all the lights in the lot went out. Gary stood in a silent vigil, watching the infrared monitor as the first group hurried out of the building and made their way toward the first vehicle. Once they were safely inside, the next group followed suit. It was then that Michael and the men in his group slipped behind the canvas, casting furtive glances, and moved toward one of eight vehicles. Three of them were dressed in black to further reduce the chances of them being spotted by anyone outside of CrossBow. Abbas was with them, wearing a black jacket over the blue-and-gold thobe he'd brought with him, the lower half of the garment visible.

As he and Wheels watched, Gary resisted the urge to chew his nails. This

could all go horribly wrong in a matter of seconds. Worse, it could cost too many men their lives.

“It’ll be fine, Mr. Cross,” Wheels promised.

Gary wished he could be as certain.

He gave a sharp nod, not daring to speak for fear of screaming into his mic to call the whole thing off, and continued to stare at the bank of monitors. The people had been indistinct blobs of varying colors that flitted about onscreen, which then disappeared as they entered the vehicles. Now, Gary only saw the cars.

“I’m going to work to improve the system,” Wheels ground out. “I never even considered we’d need infrared cameras in our lots. Believe me, I left myself enough notes and voice memos that I’m not likely to forget it.”

The first part of the plan was completed, but Gary knew it wasn’t over. They still had to get Abbas away—and keep Michael safe too.

This is where it gets dicey.

“Alpha team, move out.”

A quick affirmative reply, and the first car rolled out of the lot and onto the street, then took a right turn and drove off. Once they were off-camera, Gary gave the next order.

“Beta team, go.”

He held his breath as the second car drove through the lot and hung a left, then headed toward the open road.

“Gamma team, you’re up.”

The car began rolling toward the edge of the lot, and Gary’s heartbeat quickened.

This might actually—

A brief flash lit up the night sky, followed by a crack that rent the air. A second later, something struck the third car, sending it flying into the air, where it exploded in a shower of sparks and flames, before falling back to earth with a resounding screech as metal hit pavement.

Oh my fucking God.

What had been a car was now a twisted husk of metal that bounced end over end along the parking lot, finally coming to rest about eighty feet from where it had started. In an instant, the doors to CrossBow swung open and a crew rushed toward the car, fire extinguishers at the ready. They flooded the vehicle with a foam fire retardant, but it was useless.

The car was nothing more than a mangled heap.

Wheels stared at the wreckage. “Okay, the car sucked, but they didn’t have to blow it up.”

Gary was hardly listening. His attention was claimed by the flashing lights of the police cars, fire trucks, and ambulances hurtling toward them. He watched them do their jobs, waiting for the radio to burst into life with the words that would tell him everything he needed to know.

“Mr. Cross? I’m sorry, sir. There are no survivors.”

Of course there weren’t. Why would there be? “Thank you.”

He couldn’t stand to watch this anymore. Seeing the events of the night unravel, reliving memories of that day... Gary’s head hurt. He turned on his heel and stormed from the operations room, ignoring Wheels calling after him.

Never mind his head—his heart was hurting too.

He made it to his office and locked himself inside. He flicked on the television and watched as the vultures descended, each reporting what had happened, then clamoring for details about what transpired.

Those wouldn’t be forthcoming. Not yet, at least.

Gary switched the television off and lay down on the couch.

I wish I could turn my mind off as easily.

Miraculously, he slipped into a light doze, startled out of it two hours later by a knock from the outer office. He got up, crossed the room, unlocked the door, and opened it. Ken Dwyer, his assistant chief of security stood there, gazing at him apologetically.

“The natives are getting restless, sir.”

“Thanks, Ken. Have the police said anything?”

Ken snorted. “Oh, plenty. They’re demanding answers to their questions as well.”

That was perfect, at least as far as Gary was concerned. “I’ll be right down. Have to make a stop at Dr. Malone’s office first.”

Once they were in there, Wheels handed him the report in silence. It read exactly as Wheels said it would, which didn’t really surprise Gary in the least. The man knew his stuff. Then he and Ken headed down to the lobby. As he entered, lights went off all around him as cameras flashed, which didn’t help the low-grade migraine he’d been nursing since watching the operation unfold.

“I’ll start the show,” Ken murmured. He stepped up to the podium. The black suit he wore was so much different compared to his normal uniform. He looked good, especially given the blond hair and deep blue, almost black eyes. “Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Cross will take questions. Please be aware that we’re all in a state of shock, so we ask that you be respectful.”

As soon as he stepped back to allow Gary to the podium, the litany of demands for answers started.

“What happened here?”

“Was CrossBow under attack again?”

“Was this linked to the first incident?”

“Were there any casualties?”

Gary drew in a short breath. “This morning at 0300 hours, a client of CrossBow was being escorted off property to a waiting vehicle. A person or persons unknown took advantage of that transfer to attack the car as it was exiting our parking lot.”

“Was anyone hurt?”

Gary’s stomach lurched. “Our client and his entourage, including my assistant, Michael Kennedy, were killed when the car was hit by what my

tech people are saying was a missile fired from a short-range launcher. Reviewing the tapes showed no assailant.” Wheels’s report had said more, but that wasn’t for public consumption.

“Why was Kennedy there? He’s not a bodyguard, is he?”

A burble erupted in Gary’s belly. He swallowed down the bile that threatened to rise. “Mr. Kennedy was the one who’d made all the arrangements. For security purposes, he was one of two people who knew where our client would be kept.”

“Who’s the other?”

Gary arched his eyebrows. “Me, of course.”

“Who was the client?”

“That’s not something we’re at liberty to discuss right now. We need to contact his people and explain to them what happened before we’re able to inform you about the client’s identity.”

On and on the questions went, some insightful, but most were inane. Finally, Gary had had enough. He wanted this farce to be over with and to get back to his office. He cast a glance over at Ken, who got the message. He stepped in front of Gary and resumed his position at the podium.

“Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming. This interview is now over,” he said succinctly.

Gary turned, questions continuing to be screamed at him, but he was past caring. He ignored the whole mess and went back to his office. He sank into his chair, staring at the phone.

Come on, ring.

When its shrill tone pierced the silence, Gary answered immediately.

“Cross.”

“What the fuck!” thundered Porter.

“Good morning, General Porter.” Gary could be civil. He doubted Porter had a civil bone in his body.

“I just saw your shitshow of a press conference. What do you mean,

Abbas was killed? You were supposed to guard him. I thought you were the fucking best?”

“Did you forget my assistant was killed too?” Gary demanded, his hands sweaty.

“I don’t give a fuck about your assistant, Cross.”

It was said with the same vehemence Michael used to utter his name, but lacked the bite of command that compelled Gary to respond.

“Fuck you, Porter!” Gary snarled. “Michael was a goddamn good man, and someone killed him. Why didn’t you tell us people were after Abbas? What other information are you withholding?”

A moment of silence. “That’s on a need-to-know—”

“We fucking needed to know!” Gary roared, which sent the migraine that had been swirling in the back of his head jolting all the way through it. He reached into his drawer and grabbed the bottle of pills, took off the top and tapped a couple into his hand, then swallowed them dry. “You’ve been holding out ever since we met.” He blew out a breath. “Not that it matters anymore now, does it?”

“It should to you,” Porter snipped. “The government is going to want answers, and guess who’s on the hook for this whole debacle? I *told* them not to contract outside help. That our people would be sufficient, but *nooooo*, they wouldn’t listen. And now look what’s happened. Abbas, our best chance for peace in the region, is dead.” Gary caught the long intake of breath. “This is going to cost you every fucking thing, Cross. I hope you’re ready for the fallout.”

“It cost Michael his life. It cost me the best assistant I’ve ever had. Everyone lost something here, Porter, so let them come after me. Right now, I just don’t care.”

He put the phone down and closed his eyes, willing sleep to take him once more.

This time it didn’t.



Two days later Gary feared his head would split as the migraine continued to beat a drum in his skull. There were dozens of messages for Gary to sift through: the police demanding he answer their questions, more calls from reporters wanting clarification on his comments, and the State Department insisting Gary appear before them to tell them how things got so fucked up. There were other calls from CrossBow's lawyers telling Gary about suits that had been filed against them.

It was a clusterfuck of the highest order, and there was no Michael here to field the questions.

Gary stared out the door at the empty desk, his heart heavy.

"We never should have done this," he murmured as he placed the stack of papers on his desk. "I don't know why I listened. I should have put a stop to it right away, said there had to be a better way. This is just going to get worse."

From inside the drawer of his desk, a buzzing sound erupted. Gary took the slender silver key from his pocket, slipped it into the keyhole, and gave it a twist. He reached inside and opened a small wooden box, then drew out the small black phone resting on the velvet lining.

"Cross," he sighed into it.

The words were muffled, almost indistinct. "Miss me yet?"

Gary's heartbeat slowed and a layer of calm settled on him at the sound of that familiar voice. "You have no idea. There's no one to take care of these messages," he quipped.

"Or you, I'm guessing."

"You guess correctly. No one is taking care of me."

"Is Dr. Malone pissed they blew up his self-driving car?"

He chuckled. “Wheels said it was no great loss. He wasn’t a fan of the Tesla anyway. He said he’d rather build his own, so that way he knows it’ll work properly. He hasn’t been seen in a couple of days other than by someone bringing him food.”

“We knew the plan was dicey.”

That was putting it mildly. Josh found the bug on Abbas’s thobe during a sweep and pointed it out to Gary. That was how they’d been keeping track of him, but at least according to Josh, it was how they’d screw with them.

“The plan went without a hitch,” Michael said.

Sure. Without a hitch. Put two teams—one of them with Michael and Abbas—into cars and drive them off the lot. While that was going on, they put Abbas’s thobe in Josh’s car, which he piloted from the sidelines. He was certain it would work, and it had.

Didn’t mean Gary liked it one bit.

Gary paused. “Michael, tell me the truth. Are you safe?”

“We are. I dropped Blenkins and Croft at the other safe house, and then we headed here. Any news?” Gary rehashed the last few days, and when he finished, Michael blew out a sharp breath. “Shit. I’m sorry. I wish I was there.”

Gary couldn’t hold in his harsh anguished laugh. “I fucking miss you.”

“Miss you too, baby.”

He froze. “What?”

A soft chuckle filled his ears. “Yes, you heard me right. I miss you. When I woke up this morning, the first thing on my mind was getting your decaf ready, and how much I was looking forward to seeing you when you came in.” His voice dropped to a whisper. “Or how amazing your ass looks in those black slacks you seem to favor. And what those pants would look like when they’re dripping with my cum. That would be fucking hot.”

Desire slid through Gary, but it wasn’t sexual. It was a need to be held, to have Michael once again standing between Gary and the world. To know,

without a doubt in his head, that he was cared for.

That he was loved.

“Michael, I—”

“You don’t have to say it,” Michael assured him. “But just so you know, I feel the same way. When this is over with, I want to take you to dinner so I can say the words properly. You deserve that.”

And with that, all was right with Gary’s world once more.

Well, almost.

“I swear we’re going to find out who is behind this. We’ll bring you home as soon as we can.”

“Don’t hurry on my account,” Michael told him. “I’ve got lube, a good right hand, and some great memories to keep me warm at night.” He sighed. “But they’re no replacement for you.” He paused. “I should go. Talk to you soon.”

And before Gary could reply, the line went dead.

He stared at the burner phone. “We will bring you home,” he vowed. “We just need to find out who wants Abbas dead and why.”

If only it was that easy.

Chapter Fifteen



“Tell me you’ve got something, Wheels,” Gary pleaded.

T Michael had been gone a week and it was driving Gary nuts. They hadn’t spoken since Michael had confirmed he and Abbas were safe. But it was more than missing his voice.

The house seemed so empty.

Was Michael really there only that one time?

It felt as though he’d spent much longer. The first couple of nights after the op, Gary had lain in his bed, remembering that night. The way Michael had held him so close, his hand moving gently over Gary’s chest, a source of comfort and intimacy.

Then he’d stopped going home. It got so oppressively quiet, Gary decided it was easier and better to not be there at all. The couch in his office would do just fine. It wasn’t nearly as comfortable as his bed, but it wasn’t as lonely either.

“I’ve gone over the wreckage of the car several times,” Wheels said, not looking up from his instruments. “I don’t have all the answers, but there are a few less questions.” He turned toward his desk, tapped a few buttons, and

some forms came up on the screen.

Gary blinked. “Wheels, why do those have a police logo on them?”

Wheels narrowed his gaze. “Don’t ask questions you’d rather not know the answers to.”

He groaned. “Please, *tell* me you didn’t hack into the police department.”

Wheels gave him a sweet smile. “Okay, fine. I didn’t hack into the police department.”

“Fuck.” Gary rubbed the side of his head where the migraine had taken up residence. “Say that again, only this time, make it believable.”

He pushed out a sigh. “I’d prefer not to lie to you.”

“We had a deal,” Gary stressed. “No more hacking.”

Wheels straightened in his chair. “You’re right, we did. So let me delete all these files that I somehow acquired and—”

Gary laid a hand on his arm. “What did you find? And this goes no further than us.”

“No, of course not. The police? They’re not treating this as a priority. A bomb goes off at a major site in the town, but they’re more interested in jaywalking and why Mrs. Haversham’s poodle’s poop isn’t being scooped.” He scowled.

That made no sense. “Do they have anything we can use?”

Wheels shook his head. “They’ve redacted whatever reports were posted and some were moved off the server completely. I can only guess they’re filed somewhere without access, because I—” He lowered his gaze. “I couldn’t find them on the servers.”

An agreement existed between Gary, Wheels, and the court system. In exchange for allowing Wheels to work at CrossBow, Gary had to take responsibility for him. He had to walk a straight-and-narrow path, as dictated by the courts. Any deviation from that path would land Wheels—and by extension, Gary—in hot water. Still, he’d done the only thing he could think of, and Gary was humbled by that fact.

“Thank you. I know what you’re risking by doing this.”

Wheels swung around to stare at him. “They destroyed my car—not that it was any great loss. They took Michael from us. They could have killed more people. What kind of person would I be if I didn’t do whatever I could to help?”

He wasn’t wrong. “You’re a good man, Josh. I appreciate you more than I can ever say.”

His face lit up. “You called me Josh.”

“You don’t want me to?”

“No! I... prefer it.”

Gary frowned. “Then why didn’t you ever say anything?”

Wheels shrugged. “When I was a kid, I was forever taking things apart to understand how they worked. Getting them broken down into parts was easy. Putting them back together? Not so much.”

Gary chuckled. “Just tell me you didn’t take your dad’s car apart.”

He laughed. “Close, but no cigar. It was a friend’s bike. I thought I’d done a good job and asked him if I could try it out. I took it to the top of Maple Hill.” Wheels smiled. “I was so certain of my fixes.”

“Oh God. What happened?”

Another shrug. “I launched myself.” His cheeks reddened. “The handlebars came off first. Then the front tire. I flew off the bike and landed hard, tumbling down the hill. By the time I was done, my parents had to buy a new bike for my friend and were on the hook for my medical bills, which included an arm broken in two places, a busted leg, and a sprained back.”

“Shit. You were lucky.”

Wheels gave a wry smile. “So my father kept telling me constantly. My friend, on the other hand, told *everyone* about the wheel on the bike flying off, and bingo—I had a nickname. Not one I was particularly fond of, but I couldn’t let them see me sweat about it, so I adopted it. It was stupid of me, and I... I wish I could say I learned my lesson, but I didn’t. I always wanted

—needed—to know how things worked. Why they were the way they were. Eventually Dad figured I had to have something that would keep me out of trouble, so he built me my first workshop. I could be out there for hours. It was where I designed the thing that became my first patent: earphones for deaf people.”

Gary cocked his head. “I... don’t understand.”

Wheels—Josh—gave an indulgent smile. “I created headphones that cranked up the bass so that when people who were hard of hearing put them on, they could feel the vibrations.” He gave a half-shrug. “It was a dumb thing, but the government thought it was good enough to become a patent.”

“That’s amazing. How many did you sell?”

Josh bit his lip. “Two. I made fourteen dollars and some change. Still, a few years later, I adapted them into the speaker system our pads use, which is way better than anything Apple or Microsoft put into theirs. True stereo sound without the need for additional plugs or addons.”

It was obvious he was proud of his work, and Gary knew he should be. He’d seen the things Josh had created. The devices he’d given away for free to people who needed them. Gary had also been sent offers by national and international organizations who wanted to “rent” Josh to help with a project they were doing. He’d forwarded them to Josh, because it was his life and his choice. Josh always turned them down, because they weren’t helping people with their stuff—they were only out to make money.

Sometimes Gary forgot what an amazing man Josh Malone was.

“You’re incredible,” he said. “We’re lucky to have you working here, and I’m grateful to have you as a friend.”

A flush crept up Josh’s neck, but he didn’t say anything for several long moments. Then he cleared his throat. “Oh, there was something I forgot to tell you. I get the feeling the reason I can’t access anything on the police computer is because there’s nothing there to find. Either they have the reports printed to paper and they filed them or....”

Or they never did anything beyond cursory reports.

Fuck, Richie Brightmore died and no one is doing a damn thing about it?
Had someone gotten to the cops? This whole thing stunk to high heaven.

“Josh?”

“Yes, sir?”

Gary steeled himself for what he was about to say. “I don’t care what you have to do. Find out anything you can.”

Josh gasped. “But our agreement—”

“As far as I’m concerned, it’s null and void. Someone is fucking us around, and I want to know who and why. We owe it to Richie’s family to find out the truth about his death.”

Josh surprised the hell out of him by resting his hand on Gary’s arm. “Are you sure about this? I don’t mind taking the fall for it.”

Gary turned to gaze at him, and the utter look of concern on Josh’s face nearly made his resolve falter. Then he remembered Richie. Always so eager to please, wanting to prove to Gary that he’d made the right choice in hiring him. That had never even been in question. Richie was the perfect example of what a bodyguard should be: stalwart, kind, willing to do anything to keep his client safe.

CrossBow—the world—had lost out on something special when Richie died.

No, not died. He was murdered, and the cops didn’t seem to give a shit.

“Whatever it takes,” he repeated, injecting as much confidence into his voice as possible.

“Yes, sir,” Josh whispered, then went back to his computer. “I’ll find something, I promise.” He sighed. “If it means anything, I miss him too.”

“Oh? I didn’t know you knew Richie.”

“I mean Michael. I miss him too.”

“Well, hopefully we can get him back soon,” Gary replied.

“For your sake, I hope so.”

Just how much does he see?

Gary suppressed a shiver and focused on Josh. “What do you mean?”

His smile was warm. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone. I had a suspicion the day he came to my lab. He was so proud of the fact that you’d sent him. And you’ve never had anyone else come to see me, so I put two and two together and came up with a hexadecimal integer.”

He could—he *should*—deny it, but right then he was feeling weak and needy.

“Thanks. I appreciate that.”

“Was it him who got you to stop being so snappy?”

“You noticed it too, huh?” Gary expelled a long breath. “Yup, all Michael’s doing.”

A soft chuckle. “We should take up a collection to thank him.”

Gary wouldn’t ask if he’d really been that bad—until Michael had stepped in, he’d been following a very self-destructive path. He had no problem with other people and their fears, but he hated his own weaknesses. The vertigo. The headaches. Yet, Michael saw past those to the Gary he *wanted* to be: strong, upstanding, dependable.

“I’ll chip in for that,” Gary replied.

“You picked a good man, Mr. Cross.”

“Call me Gary. I think if we’re friends, we should be able to do that, don’t you?”

Josh’s eyes widened. “Seriously? You won’t mind?”

“No, I won’t mind.”

“Okay, Gary,” he said, like he was trying it out to see how it felt on his tongue. “Let me get back to work.” He picked up his pad. “Set four one-hour timers.”

“Timers set, Dr. Malone” came the AI voice.

And with that, Josh dove back in, his fingers dancing over the keyboard.

Could this come back to bite us?

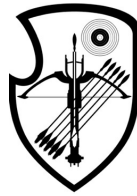
Undoubtedly.

Will I care?

Beyond the fact that the people who worked for him could be out of a job, not really, no.

He returned to his office, took his meds like a good little boy, and then stared at the desk drawer that held his only connection to Michael.

I need this to be over, and soon.



“One more game?” Abbas put the checkers on the board.

“Nah, I think you beating me six times in a row is more than enough humiliation.”

Abbas smirked. “You were getting better,” he taunted.

“Maybe later.” He gave Abbas his full attention. “Can I ask you a question? It might be personal, so you don’t have to answer if you’d rather not.”

“Of course, please, feel free.”

Michael was missing the hell out of Gary. Not just as a bed partner, but as his crotchety boss. Although the bed-partner thing did have plenty of perks too. Maybe he needed to be reminded of how he’d fallen for his man in the first place.

“What was Gary—Mr. Cross—like when you knew him?”

The distant look in Abbas’s eyes caught his attention. “I admit that my... I guess you could say ‘crush’ was Mr. Bowman. I liked Mr. Cross well enough, but Bowman was so big, his voice so deep, his eyes so intense. Most of us were afraid of him. He seemed to be the kind of person who could snap at any moment. He wasn’t, though. Despite his roughness, he cared about

what he was doing. More than once he risked his job by helping us to get food and medicine. There was nothing I wouldn't have done for him if he'd asked."

That sounded like the man Gary told Michael about.

"But I was a child and he was not. Only one person existed for him, and that was Mr. Cross. It made my stomach flutter when I saw them together, because I knew that despite what my father said about gay men, that's what I was." He looked Michael in the eye. "I longed for someone who looked at me the way Bowman sought out Cross."

He got up, went to the refrigerator, and pulled out two cans of Coke. He brought them back to the table and set one down in front of Michael, then popped the top of his can and took a sip.

"No one in my village knows I'm gay. It wouldn't be well received. I told my father one night, and we had harsh, angry words about it. When he died, we hadn't resolved that fight, and now I live each day wondering how much he'd be disappointed in me."

He stared at his soda can for a while. Michael wasn't about to interrupt—sometimes silence was the best course of action.

Eventually Abbas found his voice. "I asked Bowman about it one day, and he said we couldn't talk about it, because he was with the government of the United States and I was a child. I pleaded with him and admitted that I thought I might be gay and wanted to understand. He looked conflicted, but eventually we sat on the end of the truck and spoke." He took another drink before continuing. "He said when he told his parents, they were supportive, at least on the surface. He wasn't sure how much of it was an act. He admitted he wanted to take Cross home with him and introduce him to them. He was certain they'd come to love him. We also talked about me and how I had to tread very carefully. Religion, he said, was malleable. People could twist it for their own reasons and use it against those they disliked. He told me he had no use for people like that."

Another sip of soda, a shuddering sigh, and Abbas leaned forward, his hands wrapped around the can.

“We all heard the explosion. My father insisted I stay inside while he and others went out to see what happened. He came back later that night, his snow-white thobe now blackened with soot. Holes had been burned into the cloth. The worst thing was the pain in his expression when he told me Bowman was dead, and he thought Cross would be soon. When he saw how distraught I was, he encouraged me to pray. I didn’t understand why. It wasn’t as though Allah would bring my friend back to me. Still, I prayed for Cross, that he’d get better. I honestly never expected to see him again until they approached me with an offer to help bring lasting peace to our people.”

It had only been a short retelling of events, but it seemed to weigh heavily on Abbas. His shoulders slumped and he suddenly seemed a decade older.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked anything,” Michael murmured, opening his own soda.

Abbas raised his chin. “Oh, it’s fine. I just... I miss my friend. Even after all these years, I still recall his kindness and the love he had for Cross. Who knows? Maybe one day I’ll find someone *I* can love like that.”

It was a wistful wish, one Michael knew Abbas expected wouldn’t come true.

Abbas cocked his head to one side. “So how did you come to love him?”

What the...?

“I.... What?”

He gave Michael a soft smile. “I saw you two together. You look at him the same way Bowman did. Like he’s the center of your world.”

If Abbas can see that after such a short time, can anyone else?

Michael took a deep breath. “He was always angry and hurting, but I kept an eye on him. One day an employee of CrossBow came in, begging to see Mr. Cross. He walked out of his office, and I was certain he was going to start shouting at her.” He paused. “But he didn’t. He gestured to the seats in

the office, and they sat together. She told him her mother was sick and wasn't expected to make it and she'd hoped to get some time off. Our HR department had told her she hadn't worked with the company long enough to apply for a leave of absence. Gary—Mr. Cross—got on the phone and told HR to do whatever they had to in order to get this woman home to be with her mom.” Michael shook his head. “I couldn't understand how someone as prickly as he was would do something so nice. Then I started to see how he was with others. Yeah, he was still kind of a jerk, but it was obvious he cared for them all.” He took a drink from his can. “I suppose it just kind of... happened after that. I couldn't take my eyes off him, and over the course of a year, I went from hating the man to falling for him.”

“Ah, the enemies-to-lovers trope. Classic.”

“I wouldn't call us enemies,” Michael muttered, remembering the big blowout they'd had that day.

Abbas huffed. “Please, let me have this. While you and Mr. Cross are happy together, my only joy comes from reading romance novels that show me what I most likely will never be allowed to claim.”

Michael could afford to be magnanimous. “Okay, enemies-to-lovers it is. At least now we're not enemies.”

“Then I think you should call him. He doesn't seem to be the sort who can be alone for too long.”

Yeah, Abbas saw a helluva lot. Not all that surprising when Michael remembered this man was now a leader.

Abbas coughed. “And maybe *after* you talk, you'll be able to concentrate more on checkers.” His eyes gleamed. “Because I have to be honest... you kind of suck.”

Michael gave him a hard stare. “Your command of English is way too good, do you know that?”

Abbas had nailed it, however. Michael needed to hear Gary's voice.

I'll call him tonight.

Not for any particular reason.
Just because.

Chapter Sixteen



Gary glanced over at the clock on his desk. It was almost midnight, and sleep showed no sign it was anywhere near to visiting him. Not that he'd slept well since his talk with Josh. There were too many things rattling around in his head. Michael and Abbas. Richie's death. The explosion. Wondering if he'd made a mistake in opening CrossBow. He'd been in charge in the Army, sure, but now....

Maybe I've had enough of that. Maybe this isn't meant for me.

The buzz from his burner phone surprised him, but he recovered fast enough to practically fly across the room, whip out the key, and open the drawer. He'd answered by the time it finished the third ring.

"Michael?" he asked hopefully, even though it couldn't be anyone else.

"Hey, sexy."

Gary shuddered at the huskiness in Michael's voice.

I wish he was here.

"Hey. How are you?" He tried to inject a nonchalance he didn't feel into his tone.

"Never mind me—how are *you*?" Michael paused. "And what are you

wearing right now?”

It was on the tip of Gary’s tongue to ask Michael just to talk, to tell him about what he’d been doing since he’d gotten Abbas away from CrossBow. He wanted to hear Michael’s voice. Listening was safe. Talking ran the risk of Gary coming across as needy, whiny....

He didn’t want to be seen as either of those.

“How are you?” Gary asked again.

The pause that followed told him Michael wasn’t going to allow himself to be diverted. “Don’t hide from me, Cross. Answer the question.”

“What am I wearing? My suit,” he replied quickly.

“Why? You should be in bed and—wait.” The resultant pause had weight. “Tell me you’re at home.”

Gary opted to pull a page from Josh’s book. “Okay, I’m at home.”

Michael let out a derisive snort. “You’re a bad liar, you know that? Where the hell are you?”

He sighed. “In my office. I was on the couch and—”

“You’re not sleeping, are you?”

How does he see me so easily? How can he glimpse the truth behind my words?

Except there was no glimpse about it. It was as if Michael fucking *knew*.

When did he find time to fit cameras in here?

“Not really,” he replied. “I haven’t had more than a nap since you’ve been gone.”

“Aw, baby,” Michael said softly. “I’m sorry.” The warmth in his voice eased the chill of his absence.

“Can I ask you for a favor?”

“Of course. Anything.”

Gary swallowed hard. “Would you.... I mean....”

“You want me to talk to you a while?”

“Yes, please. I know it’s late, and if you’re going to bed—”

“Shut up, Cross,” Michael said in a gentle yet firm voice. “I will *always* have time to talk to you. Tell me something that’s happened lately.”

So Gary did. He told Michael everything that had happened with Wheels, including the story of how he got his nickname. He admitted to not functioning well, especially with the pending threats looming over his head. All the things that had been building up in his mind came spilling out, and when he was finished, he sagged against the back of the couch, feeling a lot lighter for having gotten all of it off his chest.

“Sounds to me as though you’re carrying too much mental baggage.” Michael paused once more. “Can I ask something? It’s very personal, though.”

Gary chuckled. “You’ve had my dick in your mouth and yours in my ass. Doesn’t get much more personal than that.”

Michael laughed. “You have a point. Well, what I wanted to know was... do you still go to therapy?”

Gary hadn’t anticipated *that*. “Yes, once a month. It’s mostly just follow-ups on how things have been going, but sometimes if stuff gets too stressful, Doctor Janes will have me on the couch, so to speak.” He sighed. “Why do you ask? Getting tired of the crazy man?”

This time, the pause had an icy edge to it, one that Gary swore he could feel crawl over his skin.

“‘Crazy man’? I’m going to pretend you didn’t say that,” Michael growled. “Don’t *ever* talk down about yourself to me, you hear? No, wait. On second thought, you know what? Never talk down about yourself, period. You might say it as a joke, but that’s not how *I’m* hearing it.”

“I’m sorry.” He truly was. He *had* meant it as a joke. At least, he’d thought so. Sometimes it was hard to tell, even for him.

“Just don’t do it, okay? I can see I’m going to have to remind you how awesome you are as often as I think you need to hear it.”

The situation still perplexed him. “Why? I mean, why would you even

like me? I was an asshole to you.”

“Yes, you were. But you weren’t to Ella Daniels.”

Talk about going off on a tangent. Still, the name brought back a plethora of memories.

“Ella? What does she have to do with this?”

“Let me tell you the story of how I discovered you have more facets to you than the ones you choose to share with the world. And how some of those facets are pretty damned amazing.”

Michael launched into his tale of Ella, and as he spoke, Gary recalled Ella asking to take leave for her mom who was in the hospital with coronary heart disease. They’d been able to hold it off through treatment, but she’d decided to stop. She was tired and told the family she wanted to be with her husband again. Ella had cried so hard while relating the story, she could scarcely breathe and developed hiccups.

“It was weird,” Gary mused.

“What was weird about it?”

“It took her a long time to get the whole story out, and by the time she’d finished, all I could think about was *my* mom. What I would do if she got sick. Once I’d gone down that road, it had been an easy decision to make about Ella because I love my mom, and I couldn’t bear to see someone suffer the way Ella was.”

They sat in silence for a moment, until Gary cleared his throat.

“Ella was gone a while,” he said finally. “But she called me and kept me informed of what was going on. She offered to send me proof her mom was sick, and then later the obituary to show she’d died. I told her it wasn’t necessary, and that I trusted her.”

“See?” Michael imbued that single word with such warmth. “*That’s* the Gary I discovered lurking beneath the surface. It was seeing the hidden Gary that made me go off that day, because I knew you had a good heart. And then I started watching closely. Could you be a dick? Yes, without a doubt—”

Gary groaned. “Did you *have* to say that? Now all I can think about is your dick.”

Michael gasped. “Why, Mr. Cross, what must you think of me to come out with such words?”

“That you’re a bossy, stubborn mule of a man?” And then some.

He let out a soft snicker. “You’re only saying that because I’m hung like a horse.”

And like rain on hot asphalt, the heavy conversation was over and they were back to the teasing. Not that Gary minded either way. Talking to Michael always made him feel better.

“Your turn. What’s going on with you?”

Michael *humphed*. “Abbas cheats at checkers.”

He chuckled. “Beating you, huh?”

“So badly,” Michael whined.

That made Gary laugh all the harder. “You know, I play checkers. We could always have a game when this is over.”

“Oh really?” Gary could hear the grin in Michael’s voice. “Ever play strip checkers?”

“You just made that up. There’s no such thing.” Gary’s face grew warm at the image in his head of Michael naked, moving pieces around the board.

Who am I kidding? I’d probably be the one who ends up naked.

Hell, he’d throw the game, and he knew it.

“Of course there is.”

“So how does it work?”

“That’s easy. I win, you get to play with my crown. If you win often enough, I *might* even let you play with my scepter.”

That rough chuckle sent the blood heading south, and Gary’s cheeks were no longer warm, they were on fire.

Two can play at that game.

“And what do I have to do if I wanna sit on it?”

That earned him another gasp. “Well, I never! What kind of boy do you take me for?”

Gary smiled to himself. “A sexy-as-fuck one.” There’d been something he’d been dying to ask ever since their first white-hot roll between the sheets. And asking it when Michael couldn’t see him was the perfect setup. “Can I ask *you* a question?”

“Of course.”

Gary wasn’t sure how to phrase it, but he wanted—needed—to know. “Are you a Dominant? I mean, are you into BDSM?”

“No,” Michael admitted before expelling a long breath. “I mean, I’ve never done any kind of training or stuff like that. I just like to be in charge when I’m in bed with someone.” He gave a dark, throaty chuckle. “Especially when that someone is you. Why do you ask? Is it something *you’re* interested in?”

“Well, not BDSM per se,” Gary answered. “But... well....”

“Spit it out, Cross.” Michael snorted. “And make the most of those words, because believe me, you will *never* hear me say them to you again.”

It took a second or two for his words to register, and Gary was glad he wasn’t drinking anything at the time.

He went with honesty. “I thought about, you know, bringing toys into play. Eric wasn’t against the idea, but we never had the chance. I guess it’s something I still think about.” It wasn’t really something you could do on an Army base. Too many prying eyes. And if some of the guys found out? They’d beat that horse to death teasing about it.

“I see. Well, I happen to know this shop online where I can buy some very... interesting things.”

Gary’s heartbeat sped up. “Really? We could do that?”

“Sure. Why not? If you’re willing, I think we could buy a few things and try them out. Some might work for us, others might not, but we can try and learn together.” A soft purr came through the phone. “Take off your clothes.”

“What? Why?”

“Because an orgasm is great stress relief. It floods the body with chemicals that help bring on sleep, and I think we could both use more of that. Plus, I’m worried you’ve already used up your spare clothes, and I don’t want you dropping a load on your clean suit.”

“Shouldn’t you be keeping an eye on Abbas?” Not that he wanted the conversation to end just yet.

“I can concentrate on two things at once. Like sucking your cock while I stroke your balls.”

Gary snorted. “If you can do that over the phone, you really can work miracles.”

“You don’t know *half* of my amazing powers. Besides, *you’d* be the one stroking them, but in your mind, those would be my fingers cupping your sac. Think of me slipping one of your balls into my mouth and massaging it with my tongue. Teasing your taint with it. You’d be aching for me to move my tongue even lower, to lick it across your pucker. Then I’d get you to slide a finger in your ass, imagining it’s me getting you ready.”

Gary whimpered. “Michael....”

“Do that for me, Gary. Finger yourself and think of me.”

His pants were round his ankles in a heartbeat.

“Everything off, I said.”

Gary laughed. “Where did you hide the cameras?” He unbuttoned his shirt and removed it, then tugged on the legs of his pants. “I’m still wearing my socks. Is that okay?”

“Nope. Them too. Because when we’re done, you’re going to lie down on the couch, cover yourself with that snug blanket, and sleep.”

Gary stretched out naked on the sofa, his phone next to his ear. “Okay. Ready.” His heartbeat quickened and his stomach quivered.

“Close your eyes. Imagine the two of us are in your bed. I reach over to the nightstand and pull open the drawer. Your breathing gets heavier when

you hear the metal clink because you know what's coming. I take your wrists in my hand and work quickly to place the cuffs on you. The weight of them. The smell. Everything about it turns you on. You're achingly hard." He paused. "Are you hard, Gary?"

"Fuck, yes," Gary groaned. "So fucking hard." He curled his hand around his shaft, sliding it up and down the warm, stiff flesh.

"And now you're mine."

I already was.

"Spread for me, Cross. Let me see your hole."

His knees fell apart without hesitation. He sucked on a couple of fingers, then reached down to rub them over his pucker.

"You're so hot inside, you know that? I love the way your body clings to my thumb when I press it slowly into you."

Gary inched his middle finger in, unable to suppress his moan of pleasure.

"Does it feel good?"

"So good." He moved his finger a little faster, sliding it in and out.

"Yeah, gonna finger-fuck you until you come, Cross."

Faster.

"That's not going to be long, is it?"

"Fuck no."

Michael's breathing quickened. "I can see you now, wrists encased in cuffs, legs spread wide, two of my fingers all the way inside you, up to the knuckle. Make that three." The slick sound in the background told Gary he wouldn't be the only one about to shoot a load.

Gary gave his balls a squeeze, then concentrated on his cock, working it, tugging on it, feeling the tingle of anticipation as his orgasm approached.

"How does three fingers feel, Cross? Kinda full?"

"God, yes."

"Think you could take four?"

Holy fuck.

Gary groaned as he shot all over his chest, shaking, his breathing erratic, his heart pounding. A moment later, he caught Michael's stifled moan and knew he hadn't been alone.

"I... I've never taken that many." Just imagining the stretch made him shiver.

Michael let out a breathless chuckle. "And now I have a goal. You know I was picturing it, don't you? Four of my fingers wedged in your ass.... Don't think I've ever come so hard."

Gary lay there, enjoying the mini jolts, the flood of well-being that coursed through him. "That was... something else."

"I agree. And now I can't wait till we get to do this for real." His voice was warm and honeyed. "Sleep, baby. Dream of me."

"Will you call again?"

"Only if he's asleep." Another pause. "I hope this will be over soon."

"Me too. I'll have the checkerboard set up and waiting for when you get home."

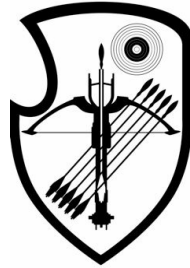
Michael chuckled. "And then you can sit on my scepter all night long."

Then he was gone.

Gary got up from the couch, went into his bathroom, and cleaned away all trace of his climax. He replaced the phone in the drawer and locked it, then grabbed the blanket Michael had gotten from Josh from the back of the couch. He lay down and pulled it over him.

He was asleep in less than five minutes.

Chapter Seventeen



It took Gary a moment or two to realize what had awoken him was the sound of the cleaning crew. For a split second he forgot where he was, until he reached out for a warm body next to him and—

Michael wasn't there.

Of course he isn't here. He's with Abbas.

Relief flooded him. He wasn't as manic as he had been the last several days, and he figured that was due to the amazing orgasm he'd had not long ago.

Or maybe it was simply because he'd been able to talk to Michael.

Gary had once asked Eric if he was too needy. That had earned him a rib-crushing hug and a whisper in his ear that while Gary was busy keeping people safe, he needed someone to hold him. To make sure he kept some of his time and energy for Gary Cross, instead of sharing himself out to everyone else.

"Absolutely nothing needy about that," Eric had said, holding him close. "And no one who truly cares for you would think that."

Like Eric had.

Like Michael seemed to.

Eric would have liked Michael. Thankfully, Gary wasn't overcome by guilt at falling for him. Therapy was a wonderful thing. He'd laid those ghosts to rest years ago. In fact, he was eager to start a new life, assuming he'd find someone who could look past the scars and see the man that still lay beneath them.

That was Michael in a nutshell.

The previous night's conversation had done him a world of good. Gary felt much calmer, and wonder of wonders, he'd had a great night's sleep. He got off the couch, stretched, then peered out the window. The sun was already up, but the windows kept the room fairly dark until he was ready to deal with the light. He dialed back the setting until the office was awash with sunlight, pouring in to help him tackle his day.

Saving Abbas was great, but he wanted Michael home where he belonged.

With Gary.

After a quick shower, he discovered Michael had been wrong—he did have a clean suit after all, although he'd need to send the others out if he didn't want to work naked until they came back.

That had him grinning. *What would Michael say about that?*

It was amazing how much clearer his thoughts were after sleep. His talk with Michael had settled the frantic self-doubt that had plagued him. CrossBow was his baby, and no way could he walk away from it. He'd spent the last six years wallowing in self-pity and doubt—a body full of scars tended to have that effect. Eric had been the one to keep Gary together, but after he died, Gary had only gone through the motions, never really feeling alive.

Until Michael came along.

Thoughts of Michael warmed Gary like nothing else had for the longest time. He looked forward to his mornings, because he knew he'd be seeing

Michael. He wasn't so self-conscious about his scars, and that was because of Michael. He'd rediscovered what it felt like to be fucked into a coma, again, thanks to Michael.

He's been good for—and to—me.

It was as though he'd woken up from a long sleep to realize the world still needed him.

It felt good. Right.

Gary wasn't about to squander this chance. Michael had said he wanted to say the words when they were together, and Gary hoped—deep down—that meant he and Michael had a chance at building a future.

But in order for that future to become a reality, he needed Michael home with him instead of being a hundred miles away playing checkers with Abbas.

Checkers....

God knew he *really* wanted a few games with Michael. He'd cheat if he had to in order to sit on Michael's scepter. His ass clenched at the thought.

And what state are you going to be in when he gets back, if you don't start taking care of yourself?

Eating more than the crackers he'd kept in his desk drawer for a few months would be a step in the right direction. He couldn't even tell if they'd been stale, since he couldn't taste anything when his mind was in such a frazzle.

Gary made his way down to the cafeteria, where he was lucky enough to score a fresh everything bagel, along with two plastic packets of cream cheese and a bottle of ice-cold orange juice. Then it was back to his office to tear into it all, his first real meal in the last week. He relished every bite, going so far as to lick his thumb to get any stray crumbs that remained on the plate.

He left the dishes on the counter where the cleaners would remove them for him, just as there came a frantic knock on the door. He opened it to find

Josh standing there, sweat dotting his face, panting hard....

And grinning like a loon.

Gary's heart leaped. "You have something, don't you?"

Josh gave an airy shrug. "Oh, only a file on someone's computer that said destroy when finished reading."

"Get in here," Gary ordered, then closed the door behind them. He held out the orange juice to Josh, who looked like he needed it more than Gary.

Josh chugged it down, then exhaled. "Okay, so... I finished examining the fragments of the projectile I was able to recover before the police swept in and snatched up what was left from my car. It's amazing how thoroughly they cleaned it. After they were done, I could only find a few micro fragments. I wonder what they were using to get the area scrubbed so well. Maybe—"

He groaned. "Josh, man. You're killing me here." Right now what Gary needed was for him to focus like he'd never done before.

Josh's cheeks pinked. "Oh, sorry. It's just.... Okay, hear me out here. Unless the police department here has access to some really high-end equipment, they'd never be able to get the area scrubbed so well."

"And how does that tie in with the files you found on their network?"

Josh held a finger to his lips, then took out the scanner from his pocket. When he turned toward Gary's desk, it pinged.

Gary jumped at the unexpected noise, until his brain kicked in and he realized what that ping meant.

Dear God, no.

Josh moved around the desk, bent down, and reached a hand under it. When he straightened, he held something between his thumb and forefinger—a tiny device no bigger than a dime. He slipped it into a small box he withdrew from his other pocket, then scanned the area again.

"Okay, we're clear."

Cold spread through Gary as the implications sank in. "Fuck."

“What?”

“I talked with Michael last night. If there was a listening device in the office—”

“It should be okay. I installed an audio jammer in here a couple of days ago so no one could listen in.”

That wasn’t the point. “If they’re as high-tech as you say, wouldn’t there be a way around that?”

Josh frowned. “Well, I suppose they *could* have something. I mean, it’s unlikely, but I wouldn’t discount the possibility.”

Which meant Gary could have put both Michael and Abbas in danger.

He lurched for the drawer and yanked on it, forgetting it was locked. He fumbled for the keys.

“Gary?”

“I can’t. I have to get them out of there. What if—?”

Josh laid a hand on his arm. “Hey, it’s fine. I only said it might be possible, but it’s really not—”

Christ, he was shaking. “I won’t take that chance. Even if it’s only one percent, that’s too high.”

Michael had been the one to call only because he was concerned for Gary’s well-being.

This is all on me.

He flipped open the phone and pressed Michael’s contact. A moment later it rang, then a familiar voice answered.

“Oh, thank God you called. A Nigerian prince has left me ten million dollars. I need to send a bank account number to collect it. If you give me yours, we can split it.”

Gary sucked in a breath, grateful to hear his voice. “Michael, are you okay?”

Gone was the teasing tone in a heartbeat. “What’s going on? Why are you calling?”

He told him the story quickly, adding in the bits Josh had said about the noise blocker.

Michael reacted with more calm than Gary had. “Don’t panic. We’ve got this. It’s all good.” Confidence rang out in his voice. “If Dr. Malone is sure, then he’s probably right. We should stick with the plan and—”

“But you could be in danger!” Gary snapped.

“Which I knew when I agreed to this,” Michael replied with even more calm. “Gary, trust me. We’re fine.”

Josh held up a hand. “Gary?”

“Ooh, so it’s *Gary*, is it? Should I be jealous?” Michael teased.

The humor rolled right over him. “Michael, this is serious.”



Michael knew he shouldn’t tease, but Gary sounded close to a panic attack.

I wish I were there. I could help him.

This whole mess with Porter, Abbas, not to mention memories of Eric... all of it was clearly playing havoc with Gary’s mind, bringing up thoughts Michael knew he’d work through in normal circumstances.

He feels helpless to protect Abbas, someone who’d been important to the man who might have—should have—been his future.

The Gary Michael knew was strong, fierce. Yes, he had bad days, especially when his physical issues overrode his head, but that never stopped him from being there for anyone who needed him. The present situation was a perfect example. Gary was still working to make something decent come out of the nightmare he’d been in all those years ago.

“Breathe for me, Cross,” Michael ordered. “Calm down and look at the big picture again. Abbas and I are safe. There aren’t many ways to get to us.

This is the safest place for us to be.”

Except that was a lie.

An RV in Lincoln National Forest wasn't safe, not really. It was smaller than Michael's dorm room had been in college, and he wasn't there with a roommate. Plus, since it was only an hour from CrossBow, it wasn't remotely close to being hidden, unless being in plain sight counted. It was, however, out of the way, especially at this time of year, and since only Gary, Josh, and Michael knew where they were, it was the best place they could come up with on the fly.

“Michael, I can't... I can't....”

The panic in Gary's voice was all too evident.

“Give the phone to Josh,” Michael demanded. “Now, Cross.”

A moment later, Josh came on. “Michael? What should I do?”

“Put me on speaker, then grab his hands.”

There was a *thunk*, followed by a whimper from Gary.

“Michael, I—I can't. I thought I could, but—”

“Stop. Now. Listen to me. I want you to hear only what I'm saying to you. You're a good man. Strong, dependable, resilient. This? What's going on now? It's a speed bump. Nothing more, nothing less. We *will* protect Abbas, we *will* find out who killed Richie, and we *will* have that conversation between us. Do you hear me? Talk to me, Cross. Tell me what I said.”

“W-We will.... We will....” His repeated whimper broke Michael's heart. He longed to be at Gary's side, where he *ought* to be, helping him through this. Gary was his, and nothing, not even these memories, should come between them.

“Dr. Malone, squeeze his hands as hard as you can.”

There was a sharp intake of breath on the other end of the line, then a slow exhale.

“You with me, Cross?”

“Yes, I'm here.” Gary's voice was strained and weary. “I'm sorry.”

“This isn’t on you,” Michael insisted. “Dredging up memories can be painful, no matter what. Trust me when I say you’re handling this the best way you can.”

“Josh, tell Michael what you found.” A note of calm reassured Michael that Gary was once more in control of himself. Well, a little more than he had been.

“I was telling Gary I’d been able to get some fragments after they blew up the car, and before the cops came in and made it all disappear. This is high-tech stuff, definitely nothing that’s available on any market beyond the black one. In fact, I’d love to have some of this stuff in my lab.”

“No,” Gary croaked. “No explosives.”

Michael silently cursed Dr. Malone’s tangential mind.

“Don’t worry, I was only talking components, not anything that would make holes anywhere.” He cleared his throat. “Anyway, I might have *accidentally* sort of on purpose made my way into the police databases.” He paused, as though he was expecting a rebuke. When none came, he continued. “They haven’t saved any files pertaining to the bomb or the car explosion, although I did find something that had a lot of redaction with their logo on it. Someone went to a lot of trouble to scrub everything.”

“Can’t you pull it back up?”

A rough chuckle filled Michael’s ears. “Hacking isn’t as easy as it appears on television. There are firewalls and passwords and encryption you need to break through. Though it’s not all *that* hard. It just takes time and patience.”

“Aren’t you afraid of getting caught? I know what happens if you do.”

“The fact is, only about five percent of cybercriminals are apprehended for their crimes. There are those of us who learned from our mistakes, and we tread a fine line. What I’m doing, to *my* mind at least, is what’s called gray-hat hacking. I don’t have criminal or malicious intent like a black-hat hacker would, but I also don’t have anyone’s knowledge or consent to be in the

system. If I was hacking a system and found a vulnerability, I'd send an anonymous mail and tell them what to look for. This time I'm not concerned with their vulnerabilities, and you'd better believe I *will* exploit them. A man is dead. CrossBow is being dragged through the mud." Dr. Malone grumbled. "And they made Mr. Cross upset."

It did Michael's heart good to know Gary had people who were invested in his well-being. He'd worked other places where no one cared if you were happy or sad, as long as the job got done. Gary wasn't like that at all. He genuinely cared for his people, and it showed in everything he did.

Initial assholeness notwithstanding.

"Gary, I want you to go take a shower, then lay down for a while."

"But I *slept*," he whined.

Michael bit back a smile at the petulance in Gary's voice. "You were also up most of the week, and if I'm not mistaken, you were in front of the computer a majority of that time, looking to find something that would help us. Or am I wrong?"

"What's your point?"

Yeah, petulant as fuck.

"The point is you're no good to anyone if you don't take care of yourself first. You have a brain, so you need to use it for something more than keeping your ears apart."

"And you said *I* was an asshole," he muttered, but Michael could hear the start of a smile.

"Yeah, but that's my job, not yours. Dr. Malone? You still there?"

"Yes, Michael."

"I need a favor, please. Make sure he gets some rest."

"Of course. I'll do anything to make Gary feel better."

Yup, good people.



He'd deny it to Michael, but the second, much longer shower was definitely what Gary needed. The hot water beating down on him pounded his muscles, drawing out the tension. After he'd finished, he wrapped himself up in a CrossBow robe—he'd given one to everyone when they opened—and stepped out of the room.

Josh stood there, his brow creased as he stared at his pad.

Gary's heartbeat quickened. "Problem?"

He gave a quick jerk of his head, blinking. "No, nothing."

"You're a bad liar, Josh. What's going on?"

"Michael said you were supposed to rest, and—"

"Josh...."

He sighed and his gaze went back to the pad. "I've been going over these reports and there's something weird about them."

"Okay, tell me."

He turned the pad in Gary's direction. "All of this redaction? Why? I mean, really, what's the reason for it? What did they have on it that would have been so damning?"

Gary was about to say something, but then what Michael said about using his brain kicked in. He stood there, hands on his hips, his mind racing. There was something there, just out of reach. Maybe if they had the originals—

Shit.

It might not be the right answer, but it was logical.

"They left that there for you to find. They know we're looking into it."

Then it hit him. He'd been so concerned about Michael and Abbas's safety that he'd ignored the elephant in the room.

Who planted the goddamn bug in the first place?

Chapter Eighteen



Gary watched the video Josh had pulled from the hallway outside his office. He'd already seen it maybe five times, and that was after Josh had painstakingly gone through it frame by frame.

This hurt. Moreover, it made no fucking sense.

“You’re sure this is real? It can’t have been faked?”

Josh shook his head. “I know there’s a lot of deep-fake stuff floating around, but trust me, this is the real thing.”

“How come I can’t see what happened inside the office? Didn’t you put cameras in here too?”

Josh’s cheeks pinked. “I figured with all the time you and Michael spend in here, maybe—”

At first Gary didn’t have a clue what Josh meant, and then it dawned on him. He wasn’t sure how he felt about someone knowing they’d had sex in his office.

For one thing, he found it kind of hot, and that was just so wrong.

“Okay, got it. Good call.” Gary sighed. “Thanks, Josh. I’d better deal with this now.” He waited until Josh had left the room before replaying the

video one final time.

Yeah, that was Jessie Morales going into his office, a place she had no business being when Gary wasn't there.

She'd been with them in HR for years now. She'd always been a dependable employee; punctual, willing to help where needed, always happy to lend a hand helping new hires get oriented.

It just wasn't possible, but there she was. She even *looked* furtive.

He called her and asked to see her in his office. Five minutes later, there was a soft knock at the door.

"Come in."

The door opened, and Gary blinked. Jessie's normally glossy black hair was limp and matted. Her nails, usually immaculate and painted in the color of the trans flag for the person her son had become, were chipped. Her hands shook as she clenched them repeatedly.

What the hell? Jessie always took pride in her appearance, but the woman standing before him had none of that vibe.

Gary gestured to a chair, and she sat. He leaned forward, his hands clasped on the desk. "You know why I sent for you, don't you?"

She swallowed. "No, sir."

"I've been checking the surveillance cameras in the building, and—"

She paled. "Cameras?"

He nodded. "Part of our security measures. So you can imagine my surprise when I saw you letting yourself into this office. I don't know where I was at the time—probably down at the cafeteria—but you must have known I wasn't here."

She stared at him, misery etched into her face.

"That *was* you, right?" Gary's voice cracked. "Getting down on your knees to put something on the bottom of my desk?" That part wasn't true, of course, but he could put two and two together. She'd snuck into his office, there was no one else on camera, so she was his only suspect.

Another hard swallow. “Yes, sir.” The words were barely audible.

Even now Gary wasn’t sure he believed what she was saying. It had to be a mistake.

“Why, Jessie?” She shook her head, and Gary’s initial anger resurfaced. “Dr. Malone got hurt. Richie and Michael are dead. Doesn’t any of that *matter* to you?” His voice rose.

Her bottom lip trembled. “I’m sorry,” she whispered, her voice even quieter. Gary had to strain to hear her.

He didn’t want her apologies. He wanted to know *why*, goddammit.

“You know you’ll go to prison again, right? And this time it won’t be for two years.” He looked her in the eye. “What about your son? Who’s going to take care of him when you’re gone for fifteen years or more? Will he be put into the foster system? Will he even remember you when you get out?”

The dam burst, and her tears flowed in earnest. Gary’s chest tightened. He didn’t want to feel sorry for her. *She’s betrayed me. She’s put Michael and Abbas in danger.* And that betrayal was like a knife in his gut.

“Did you need money? Is that it?”

She shook her head, then lowered it, avoiding his gaze.

“What’s going on, then? This isn’t like you.”

“Just call the police. I did it, and I’ll admit to it.” The flatness in her voice spoke of utter resignation—and despair.

Now Gary *knew* something was wrong. Jessie had never shied away from anything. In meetings she told other people about what happened with her son. She loved that little boy—though not so little now—more than anything in life. No way would she do something like this, knowing she’d lose her kid again.

“You *are* going to talk to me, okay?” Gary insisted. “Because you’re going to tell me why you would do something like this, something that’s so far out of your nature. You *love* Ilia. Everyone here knows that. We stood up to the judge when he didn’t want to give you custody, claiming you were an

unfit parent. We each told him how you'd worked your ass off and proved yourself to be dependable, honest, and hardworking." She raised her chin, her face streaked with the tracks of tears, and Gary softened his voice. "I don't understand what's happened to bring this situation about, but I need to know. Please, Jessie. Tell me what's going on here." He leaned in closer. "We have you on camera coming into this office. How'd you get in here?"

For a moment she said nothing, and his heart sank. Then she drew in a deep breath. "I took the key from one of the cleaning carts," she replied before lowering her head once more.

"But why were you in here?" His heart pounded. "After everything we've been through, why the hell did you betray me like this?"

Jessie snapped her head up, and Gary recoiled at the venom in her expression. "He said he'd hurt Ilia, okay? He told me if I didn't do exactly what he said, he'd take Ilia and... and... he said he'd do awful things to him." Her face contorted. "Ilia's trusting me again, Mr. Cross. He tells me he loves me when I tuck him in. Even though he's thirteen now, he still wants me to tuck him in so he can tell me he loves me. How many kids are like that?"

Her words rattled around in Gary's head. Someone had threatened her, and Gary believed she was telling him the truth.

Jessie gave a hard swallow. "I know you have to fire me, and yes, I know I'll go back to prison, but you have to understand... I can't let them hurt Ilia. I just can't. I'd rather die than let them touch my son."

Gary got up from his chair, walked around the desk, crouched next to her, and took her hands in his. "Jessie, who threatened you?" He was doing his best to rein in the anger, because God knew, it needed an outlet. Except right then? Jessie wasn't it. Hell, she'd never been it. He was angry and hurt, but it wasn't directed at her. Finding out she'd been threatened made it even worse.

She tugged her hands free. "I don't know, I swear. One night after work I went to the gas station, and when I finished filling up, I went to pay. When I

got inside, I realized I needed something for us to have for lunch, so I did some shopping.” She shivered. “I’d noticed him, but I hadn’t really paid him all that much attention.” She barked a laugh. “Go figure. I work for a goddamn bodyguard business, and I wasn’t paying attention to my surroundings.”

“Get back to the guy,” he told her.

She nodded. “Anyway, I gave the clerk my money, then went out to get into my car. Then this guy grabbed my arm, and I dropped my stuff. Suddenly there was something sharp sticking into my ribs. He dragged me around the side of the building, slammed me against a wall, and wrapped a hand around my throat. He told me he’d cut me if I screamed.” Another shiver trickled through her. “Yeah, you can bet I believed him. I stood there, scared shitless, and he started telling me all kinds of things about me and Ilia. Things he shouldn’t be *able* to know. I asked him what he wanted from me, and he said he needed me to put something in your office. I said no, in a heartbeat. Then he pressed harder with the blade and leaned in close, and I could smell the sweat and stench rolling off him. He sliced through my jacket and jabbed my stomach. Then he said if I didn’t do what I was told, he and his friends would take Ilia from school and... and...” She was sobbing now, fat, heavy tears rolling down her cheeks. “They threatened to rape him, then kill him. He made me stand there and listen as he told me all these vile things they were going to do. How they’d take videos and sell them online, then make it seem like I was part of it. He swore they’d kill my son and make me take the blame.”

A cold rage swept through Gary. “Who was this?” he demanded. “Tell me anything you can, Jessie.”

“I’ve never seen him before. He had dark hair and these really mean, dark eyes. He knew what extracurriculars Ilia was in. He told me they could get to him any time they wanted, and his safety hinged on me doing exactly as I was told.”

The anger bled out of Gary. He reached out to put a hand on her shoulder, then pulled back.

“I don’t know what to do now,” he admitted. “If I was in your shoes, I can’t say I would have done anything different.” He paused. “Were you supposed to do anything else?”

She nodded, her face paling. “There are other devices.”

“Where did you put them?”

She told him the locations, and ice crawled over Gary’s skin. Josh had done sweeps of every area in CrossBow and found the ones she’d mentioned, but it made Gary wonder.

How vulnerable are we if someone can access CrossBow and plant listening devices? What if they’d been bombs?

He would need to talk to Josh about this. He’d always believed they were protected, but after this, how could he be sure?

“Were you supposed to let them know when it was done?”

She shook her head. “They told me they’d know.” She grabbed his wrist. “I swear, I haven’t heard from him again.”

This whole episode left Gary with a sour taste in his mouth, and in something of a quandary. If she was telling him the truth—and he had no reason to doubt that—then someone had huge issues with CrossBow or with Gary.

“So... what happens now?” Jessie’s voice quavered.

Gary’s first instinct was to protect her. She’d been invaluable in her tenure at CrossBow.

But what about now? Is she compromised?

He thought fast.

“Okay, here’s what we’re going to do. For the time being, you’re going to bring Ilia here. We’ll protect you both, I promise. Afterward, you’ll do your job as normal. We won’t say anything to anyone. I’ll talk to Dr. Malone and tell him where you said the devices were, and we’ll see if he can do anything

about it.”

“I know I don’t have the right to ask, but could you find someone to look after Ilia when they....” She dropped her gaze again. “When they arrest me.”

In that moment Gary understood what Michael had meant. He needed to see the bigger picture, not just the one where he was hurting. Jessie was in pain too. She’d done something wrong, obviously, but she’d done it to protect someone important to her.

Like Michael was doing. Like Eric had done. Like Josh did.

“We’re going to have to talk to the cops, but I’m not pressing charges,” he told her. “If Ilia were mine, I’d have done the same thing.” He held her hands again, and this time she didn’t pull free of his grasp. “Promise me something, though. If they ever approach you again, you’ll come talk to me right away. We’re stronger together than we are if we let them fracture our trust, okay?”

She frowned. “But... you’re going to have to fire me, right?”

He smiled, wanting to put her at ease. “You made a mistake. No, not even a mistake. You made a choice to protect the person you love over all else. That’s what parents are supposed to do. If I ever have a kid, I hope to hell I can take some lessons from the people around here. They’re good, loyal and —”

She burst into tears. “I wasn’t loyal,” she wailed.

“You were to the person who needed you most,” Gary assured her. “And that speaks volumes about you.”

Jessie swiped her cheeks with the back of her hand. “Why did they make me do this, Mr. Cross? I don’t understand.”

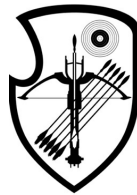
He sighed. Time to spin the tale Michael and Josh had cooked up. “We had a client who we were supposed to protect. Someone attacked us—remember the bomb—and they killed Richie. Then we tried to move him off property, and they blew up the car with Michael and our client inside. They never had a chance.”

Except....

If that's the case, why are they still going to these lengths?

Maybe they didn't believe Abbas was dead, or maybe they were looking for proof since what they'd taken from the accident weren't human bodies at all. Gary was still waiting to see if the cops contacted him about it. He wasn't shocked in the least when they didn't. Whoever was pulling their strings probably knew about the ruse.

So what are they waiting for?



“And that’s game,” Abbas said triumphantly, as he took Michael’s last piece. “That’s thirty-five to two.”

“There’s no way *anyone* can be this good,” Michael complained. He narrowed his eyes. “If I didn’t know better, I’d swear you were cheating.”

Abbas let out a gasp of mock indignation. “As if I would do that.” He put the pieces on the board again. “Would you like to know the secret to my victories?”

Michael rolled his eyes. “I already know. If you’re *not* cheating, then I suck.”

Abbas chuckled. “No, my friend. You’re just distracted. Your thoughts are with Mr. Cross, where they should be.” He smirked, then shrugged. “And okay, yes, you suck.”

A laugh bubbled out of Michael. “Let me ask you something. Can you tell me any more about Gary from back when you knew him? I just... I wanna know who he was.”

Abbas’s eyes grew misty. “He was a good man. Dedicated. Loyal. He went to the wall for his men on several occasions. He wouldn’t allow anyone

to chastise them—unless they outranked him, and in some instances, not even then. But he always deferred to Mr. Bowman when it wasn't something to do with work." He smiled. "Bowman was... I guess he held Mr. Cross's heart, and he kept it safe. I loved watching the two of them together, especially at night when they'd walk around the camp. It didn't happen often, but when they thought they were out of sight of everyone else, they'd stop and kiss. One night, as I hid behind one of the vehicles, I watched them. The moon was huge in the sky. So full and bright across the sand, it was almost like the sun. The two of them stopped, Mr. Bowman cupped Mr. Cross's cheek, and for the longest time, they stared into each other's eyes before they kissed. I gasped, because I'd never seen men kiss." His face tightened. "Mr. Bowman heard me and rushed to where I was and lifted me up by my arm. He was so angry."

That was something Michael could understand. Even if Don't Ask, Don't Tell had been repealed, being gay in the military was still frowned upon.

"What happened?"

"I asked him why they were kissing. I'd heard all the horrible tales of gay men from my father. He'd said they were deviants. But seeing the two of them together, the way they looked at each other? I'd seen that look so many times, whenever my father and mother were together. I'd witnessed them share the same gaze that spoke of love." Abbas paused. "It confused me. I'd been subjected to those hateful words my whole life, but one moment of seeing love like that blew away all the lies I'd been told." He leaned closer, his hand still resting on the checkerboard. "Mr. Bowman saved my life, I think. If not for him, I would have grown up hating myself, thinking *I* was a deviant like the men my father spoke of." Another sigh rolled out of him. "One day I was with my friend, and... I spoke rashly."

"What did you say?"

"I admitted to him I didn't like girls, at least not in the way other young men my age did. I thought he would understand. That there would be one

person I could confide in.”

Michael’s stomach clenched. “What happened?” He knew this wouldn’t have a happy ending.

“He told my father,” Abbas said with far more nonchalance than Michael guessed he’d felt at the time. “And then my father insisted I stop being gay.”

Michael chuckled. “Yeah, Dad, like *that* would work. Your father didn’t know a whole lot, did he?”

Abbas picked up one of the pieces and rolled it in his fingers. “No, but for his sake, I tried. I *really* tried. I went out with girls. Fortunately, they were all against premarital sex and wouldn’t sin.” A hint of a smile played about his lips. “I don’t think I have ever been so grateful my whole life. When I decided to go away to school, I finally encountered other men who were more open with their affections.” His smile widened, reaching his eyes. “It was then that I realized there was nothing wrong with me. And after that, everything changed.”

Michael couldn’t help but return his smile. “You met someone.”

Abbas nodded. “A friend of mine argued with me about it one night. He said if God was all-powerful, then there would be no gay people, because why would he suffer such men to exist if they displeased him? That got me thinking.” He bit his lip. “Then he kissed me, and I stopped thinking completely.”

Michael laughed.

Abbas let out a contented sigh. “He was my first, and I finally understood that being gay wasn’t a sin, but a blessing.”

When Michael had come out to his parents—not long after the incident with the snowblower—they’d hugged him and told him they were glad he trusted them enough to tell them. He couldn’t imagine his father ever being like Abbas’s. No matter what, he’d always been Michael’s most stalwart defender.

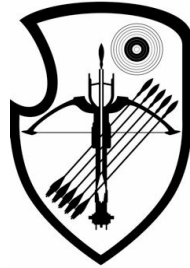
And if he were honest, he couldn’t wait for his parents to meet Gary. He

knew with all his heart his mother would love him and his father would expect Gary to sit and watch sports with him as they drank beer and ate nachos.

Gary would never doubt he was loved.

Not while Michael was around.

Chapter Nineteen



Josh sat across from Gary, who couldn't help but notice Josh's hair was getting long. Gary knew what that meant. Any day now, Josh would be pulling out the clippers, except he never seemed to keep his attention focused long enough to accomplish the task. Gary had known Josh for so many years that he was well acquainted with Josh's penchant for half-done cuts. How many times had Josh come in, his hair somewhat cut, and then panicked when Gary pointed out he'd missed a bit?

Gary didn't expect anything less from him. Josh's mind was constantly on the go, looking for ways to make things better for people. Gary assumed it was guilt resulting from his misspent youth, stealing money from rich people and using it to improve the lives of shelter animals.

Not that Gary would ever say that out loud.

At that moment, however, Josh's hair was the last thing on Gary's mind.

"I'm sending Jaden and Corrella to escort them home from Lincoln Forest," he declared.

Josh stilled, his eyes wide behind the glasses he seldom remembered to wear. He opened his mouth, then snapped it shut.

Gary also knew what *that* meant.

“Whatever’s on your mind, just say it.”

“Our plan is working,” Josh insisted. “I’ve been diving into the web, looking for the manufacturer of one of the chips from the missile and comparing it to what we know of the bomb. I’m looking at both bombs and digging into them from different angles.”

“And that’s awesome, but....” Gary sighed. He needed Josh to see beyond the data. “Look, they threatened Ilia. They said they’d do unspeakable things to him and make it seem like Jessie had a hand in it. They’ve gone so far as to force her to plant bugs in CrossBow that—”

“But we found them all and deactivated them,” Josh protested.

Josh was so locked into his worldview that he couldn’t see what Gary was trying to tell him. “Josh, every indicator is they’re aware—or at least suspect—Abbas is alive. I’d go so far as to guess they know everything has been a ruse.”

“But you can’t be *sure*,” Josh said with a hint of desperation. “And as for bringing Abbas and Michael back, that might put them in even greater danger.”

Did he think Gary didn’t *know* that? Gary had lain awake the previous night, turning all of it over and over in his head. Yes, he wanted Michael home where he’d be safe, but it was more than that.

Gary was tired of being led around on a leash by whomever was behind this.

He got up from his desk and walked over to the window, his stomach churning. Michael was out there, a hundred miles from where Gary wanted him to be.

With unknown bad guys on his tail.

“If they find out where Michael and Abbas are, who will be there to help them?” He glanced over his shoulder at Josh. “They fired a missile that took out your car. The only good thing was that they didn’t do it while everyone

was outside getting ready. And let's not forget how they found Abbas in the first place—by a traceable chip they sewed into his thobe. The same one you found. My best guess is that's why they waited to fire. They knew—or thought they did—where he'd be, so they limited the engagement. They're hell-bent on finding him for whatever reason.”

Josh bit his lip, his expression plaintive. “But the plan was *good*.”

“Yes, it was—on paper. But now we know more about the guys we're up against. We're dealing with people who are willing to threaten a child to get what they want. A *child*, Josh. They seem to have already figured out the plan, and now they're trying to compensate for it.”

“And you still think bringing them back is—”

“Like I told Jessie, we're stronger together. With Michael and Abbas so far away, we're trusting in Michael, an untrained person, to protect a man. If push came to shove, do you think he'd be able to shoot another person?”

Josh snorted. “I'm sorry, have you met Michael? He'd do whatever he had to in order to keep Abbas safe.”

That was a fair assessment. Michael was strong-willed, sure, but he hadn't encountered the horrors of war. Men and women with missing limbs. Bodies so broken that they'd never again function the way they had before they were ripped apart by a roadside bomb or a sniper.

While he had no doubt Michael would shoot someone or take a bullet if he had to, Gary didn't want that stain clinging to him.

The knowledge of ending a life, firing the bullet that rips through another human being, tearing through vital organs and blowing out the other side of their body, all in an effort to kill them... that's a harsh reality to deal with.

Gary stared out the window at the calm, peaceful world that surrounded CrossBow. It was easy for a bunch of old men to sit up on their lofty perches and send other people to fight for the stupidest of reasons. Good young people whose lives should just be starting. Not that fighting was dumb. There were plenty of things Gary would sacrifice for his country—hell, he'd

already given so much—and he'd do it again in a heartbeat.

But that wasn't for Michael. He was good, honorable, and decent. Gary didn't want his pure heart to *ever* know pain like that. Not like the pain that haunted Gary's dreams. He saw the faces of the people he'd killed in his nebulous dreams, beckoning him to join them. He'd heard the accusations of murder because they'd been just like him. They'd wanted to go home too. To their families, the people they loved, their own children.

It was those dreams that made Gary glad he and Eric had decided to open CrossBow. He needed something—*anything*—to help make up for the things he'd done in combat. True, he had done what the government said was necessary, but he couldn't help think that if they'd just stopped being so fucking intransigent, maybe they could have found a more peaceful solution.

Maybe the thousands of graves that now dot the hills of towns throughout the country wouldn't be full of the bodies of those who died defending ideals.

Like Eric's.

Gary turned to face Josh. "They have to come home. We need them safe, and even though we've been compromised, it's still a better solution in my mind." He narrowed his gaze. "I need you to beef up the security in the building. Think Fort Knox, but a bit more family friendly." Then he smiled. "No death lasers or anything else your mind might come up with."

Josh's lower lip slid out. "Not even *one* death laser? I'll make it in your favorite color." He pushed out a sigh. "I understand. Your thinking was good, if not somewhat flawed, but I'll get to work on something. In fact...." He stood. "I'll get to work on it right now."

After Josh exited the office, Gary unlocked and opened his desk drawer. He took out the phone from the box and held it for a moment. He knew Michael would be annoyed, especially after investing so much time, but it couldn't be helped. He pressed the button and waited for an answer.

"Chuck's Disposable Dildos, where you can suck 'em, fuck 'em, and then chuck 'em."

One of the things Gary liked best was Michael's ability to make him smile.

"Hey. Are you decent?"

Michael gave a snort. "Haven't been that for years, and I don't plan on being it anytime soon." He paused a moment. "You okay?" he asked in a softer voice.

There were a dozen ways to answer that question. He could try for funny or sincere or just make a joke.

Unfortunately, this wasn't the time for humor.

"You need to come back," he answered. "They know Abbas is alive."



Michael pulled the phone from his ear and stared at it a moment.

No freaking way.

"How? We had this planned down to the minutest detail. How the hell can they know that?"

Facing him, Abbas froze. *What's wrong?* he mouthed. Michael held one hand up, but Gary started talking again.

"Okay, maybe they're not certain, but they suspect."

Michael listened in horror as Gary filled him in on what happened with Jessie and Ilia. His blood boiled to think someone would threaten a child like that. "Is Ilia okay? What did you do?"

"I brought Jessie in. She and Ilia are at CrossBow, and they'll stay here until we get to the bottom of this. You were right. This building is the safest place. But back to you and Abbas... I need you to come in, because we can't guarantee Abbas's safety the way things are right now. At least here we have enough people available to protect him."

Michael instinctively knew Gary wasn't saying he couldn't handle it, but he couldn't escape the feeling that somehow he'd failed. Right then, Gary was worried about Michael's safety, something Michael didn't want to contemplate. He wanted to be Gary's protector, someone stalwart and strong, always able to keep Gary from being hurt.

Guess I blew that one.

"I'm sorry." The excuse sounded lame.

"What? Why should you be sorry?" He couldn't miss the shock in Gary's voice. "You did the best you could. We all did. And it sure as hell isn't our fault that someone else is doing better than we anticipated. It's almost as if they see what we're going to do before we even do it. Of course, it *may* be they're just pretty good at making assumptions. I honestly don't know, but one thing I *am* sure of? It most definitely is *not* your fault."

The platitude should have eased his mind, but it didn't quell the feeling of failure. Even after spending years in the military, Gary had no expectations of being protected, yet everything in Michael cried out to do just that. CrossBow stood to protect people.

And whatever else he may be, Gary is my people.

"You're right," Michael admitted at last. "Abbas needs to be there. We'll head back now."

"Whoa there. Stay put for a bit. You won't be doing this alone. I've organized an escort for you. They'll be there probably in the next twenty minutes or so. I figured moving at two in the morning was probably the best time, using the cover of darkness. That should help somewhat."

He didn't really sound certain, which worried Michael. "Who have you sent?"

"Benny Corrella and Hank Jaden."

Michael knew them, of course. He wasn't sure there was anyone working at CrossBow he didn't know. They were good, reliable men, and as much as Michael hated to acknowledge it, he felt relieved knowing they were coming.

“Okay. Then I’ll see you soon, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Gary replied softly, then disconnected.

Michael stared at his phone, his heart thumping like it never had before.

We really need to have that conversation soon. Because after this, he would make sure he kept Gary in his life. That was a no-brainer.

Abbas cleared his throat. “So... what was all that about?”

“We’re leaving,” Michael announced. “Within the next half hour.”

He blinked. “Oh? Why?”

“Apparently Gary is worried that someone is on to us.”

Abbas’s face fell.

“I know,” Michael said quietly. “I feel the same way. Gary wants us back at CrossBow, where we’ll make sure you’re secure.”

Abbas sighed as he reached for the box next to the checkerboard and placed the pieces in it. “Which means once again I’ll basically be a prisoner. Not that CrossBow is uncomfortable—you have all done your utmost to accommodate me—but even a mink-lined prison is still a prison.”

“We’ll rectify the situation as soon as we can,” Michael promised. “Just be patient a little longer.”

Abbas gave him an indulgent smile. “You don’t understand. This experience is not new to me. I’ve been in prison most of my life.”

Michael frowned. “What do you mean?”

“My family had expectations, and I failed to meet them. When my father died, I came back from school to find myself the leader of our village. The people expected their ruler to have a family—more expectations, namely that I would take a wife and have her bear my children. All those years while I was studying? I had such dreams for my life, but I should have known better. There was no hope of them ever coming true.”

That thought saddened Michael more than he could admit. He couldn’t imagine someone else planning his whole life for him, allowing him no leeway, no personal freedom.

“Can’t you just... I don’t know—leave?” It sounded like such a simple solution.

Abbas collected the clothes Josh had put together for him and stuffed them into a bag. “I have a duty to my people,” he said in a resigned tone. “My father was their leader, as was my grandfather.” He squared his shoulders. “I may not like it, but I know what must be done.”

Michael opened his mouth to speak, but fell silent when he caught the sound of an approaching car. He froze, his senses alert. He turned to Abbas, signaling for him to keep quiet, then peered out the window at the black SUV that had pulled up next to the RV. The lights he’d placed outside to show the way to the campground bathroom glinted on its bodywork. The doors opened, and Michael exhaled sharply. There was enough light to spot Benny and Hank stepping out of the vehicle, the engine still running. Hank raised his hand in greeting, and Michael opened the door to say hello and get an update.

A crack rent the air, and a second later, Hank Jaden’s head exploded in a shower of blood, bone, and gore.

Holy fuck.

Michael couldn’t move, his feet glued to the spot.

“Get down!” Benny yelled, but no sooner had the words left his lips than a bullet blew a hole in his chest. The force of the blast threw him back and he landed in a tangle of limbs about ten feet away.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Bile rose in Michael’s throat. He wasn’t prepared for this. Not to see two men die.

“We’re gonna make a run for it, okay?” Without giving Abbas time to reply, Michael grabbed his hand and made a dash for the SUV. It would be way faster and more maneuverable than the RV. As they reached it, another shot pierced the side door of the electric RV behind them, and the metal erupted into shards. He shoved a whimpering Abbas into the car, then climbed in and gunned the engine.

Another blast shot out the back window, and the bullet embedded itself in the dashboard. Bits of dirt and gravel flew from beneath the squealing tires as Michael did his best to get away, hoping against hope their attackers weren't mobile.

Oh fuck. The phone.

It was in the RV.

Then he reasoned calling Gary was probably not a good idea, not if they could track it.

I'm on my own.

Driving like a maniac, trying to protect a man who was keeping his head covered, crying out at any noise from outside.

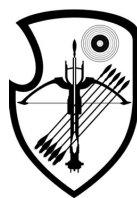
Michael wanted to dissolve into tears now too, but he couldn't afford that luxury. Besides, it wouldn't get them out of their present situation. He kept an eye on the rearview mirror, but couldn't spot anyone following them. Right then he needed to focus on getting Abbas somewhere safe, if indeed such a place even existed anymore.

What if Benny's still alive? Have I just sentenced him to die by leaving him back there?

How the *fuck* did Gary make life-and-death decisions like this on a constant basis? What well of strength did he have that allowed him to send a man to his death if necessary?

Lights crested the road behind him, moving fast. Michael should have known they wouldn't get away that easily. The bad guys were overtaking them, and Michael had no doubt they'd catch them in a few minutes. He needed a plan, and he needed it now.

Use that brain, Kennedy. Quickly.



“He’s not answering the phone.” Gary slammed his onto the desk, unable to suppress a growl born out of anger and stark fear.

“They didn’t have a lot of time to get ready,” Josh said. “Maybe they’re finishing up and—”

“You don’t believe that any more than I do,” Gary barked. Then he forced himself to draw in a sharp breath. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to lose my cool.” His heart was pounding so hard, he feared it would explode.

“Did you try calling Hank or Benny?”

Thank goodness someone was being logical. “No, let me do that now.”

He flipped through his contacts until he found Benny. The phone rang.

And rang.

And rang.

Gary’s stomach clenched, but relief flooded through him when the call was answered. “What took you so long?”

Silence.

Icy fear trickled down his back when a cold voice he’d never heard before came on the line.

“We want Abbas.”

It took him a moment to remember to breathe. “Where are my men?”

A snicker filled his ears, a sharp, hateful sound. “Being tended to by the insects in the area. They seem to have an affinity for blood and, in one case, brain matter.”

“You fucking bastards.” The voice could be lying, but Gary’s senses told him otherwise.

The voice tut-tutted. “Such language, Mr. Cross. Now, on to more important matters. I repeat, we want Abbas. That was very naughty of you, telling us he was dead.”

“You knew he wasn’t.”

A derisive snort exploded into Gary’s ear. “Of course we knew. The car exploded, but it didn’t produce enough heat to incinerate two corpses. You

did do a good job of hiding him, though. We couldn't find him. *And* you discovered the bugs we placed. I won't deny that's impressive."

"Are you saying you killed Hank and Benny?" Across from him, Josh gasped. "Why?"

"Why? Why does anyone do what they do?" A dark chuckle rumbled. "Give us Abbas, and we'll leave your people alone. We'll walk away and you'll never hear from us again."

"So you still can't find him?" Gary welcomed the return of his initial relief. If they didn't know where he was, then Abbas was still alive—and so was Michael.

Maybe.

"I'll be honest," he confessed. "I don't know where he is, any more than you do."

"Then we have nothing more to discuss, Mr. Cross."

The line went dead.

Gary took a deep breath. They would have to mourn their dead later. Someone had declared war on them, and in war, what was paramount was to fight tooth and nail to bring home as many people alive as possible.

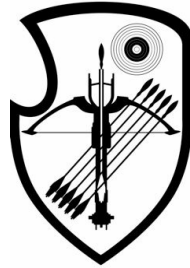
Right now, they needed to focus on the living.

"Josh, do me a favor and have someone grab a car. We have two men to find."

And when we do...

Gary was never letting Michael out of his sights again.

Chapter Twenty



The land sped by so quickly, it was nothing more than a blur. Dr. Malone had chosen the location well. The road was nearly empty, save for a few cars on the other side. Camping in the Lincoln Forest was closed due to the cold weather, so not a lot of people would be coming this way.

Unfortunately, that also meant there wasn't anyone around to help them.

Michael stepped harder on the pedal, even though he knew he had it floored. He winced when the car protested—the SUV wasn't meant for high speed chases, and they'd need something faster if they were to have any hope of escape. He'd been playing chicken with the car, driving down one off-ramp, then speeding to the next area. He did his best to keep CrossBow his destination. It wouldn't pay to get lost on his way back home.

Now if I could only lose this tail....

That damned car seemed to be everywhere, following them like a shark homing in on a blood trail. He tucked a thought into his mind that while CrossBow was doing their level best to be green, these vehicles weren't meant for the punishment they were taking. He gave an internal snort. *Shit, a*

tank probably wouldn't be much safer. Every time the car got near, shots rang out. They hadn't hit the SUV—yet.

Michael's brain was in meltdown mode. He needed to focus, to keep moving forward, but there was every possibility he would die soon, along with Abbas.

And I haven't even told Gary I love him.

Fuck.

He should have said no to this scheme. Gary had wanted more seasoned bodyguards, but Dr. Malone had said having Michael “die” gave them the opportunity to grieve, to make it look like Gary had lost someone important to him, which would embolden them to think Gary would make a mistake once Michael was dead.

He shivered. *I still might be.*

When the flashing red and blue lights came into sight, Michael could have wept with relief. The police would help them. Then he remembered Gary's warning about how the cops in Roswell seemed to be helping the bad guys, and a vise clamped around his heart.

He had *no one* he could trust.

Another shotgun blast rent the air, but this time it connected with the SUV, shattering the taillight. Abbas screamed, which gave Michael enough of a jolt that he swerved, fighting to regain control of the vehicle.

By now the sheriff's Ford sedan had caught up with them. They were driving side by side with the pursuing car, and Michael swallowed hard. If the cops were in league with them, he wouldn't be able to get away. They'd close the roads, blocking Michael from CrossBow.

From safety.

From Gary.

He pressed harder on the accelerator, cursing when the vehicle wouldn't go any faster. He needed something that went at lightning speed, and he needed it now.

The echo of another shotgun blast made him jump. He peered into the rearview mirror in time to see the windshield of the sheriff's car shatter. So they *weren't* with the bad guys? Or maybe they were, and this was a ruse to convince Michael he was safe with them.

Fuck, this was so frustrating, not knowing what to believe.

The cop car dropped back, slowing to a stop. The black car did the same. A moment later, a bright flash erupted, and Michael feared what had just happened. Had the car stopped so its occupants could murder the sheriff? Had he been able to call for backup? Would the black car continue to pursue them, or would they wait for a better chance?

Ahead of them, just off the highway, came the familiar yellow-and-red sign of a Denny's restaurant. The black car stopping had given Michael a few moments for more lucid thought, and he twisted the wheel of the SUV and zipped into the parking lot. If there was any providence, he'd be able to find another car. Surprisingly the lot was fairly full, but sadly, most of them were semis. Then again, the place was a haven for road-weary truckers. It was open all day every day, and a lot of the guys from one of Michael's previous jobs told him they'd stopped in places like this to fill their bellies and get a few hours' rest before continuing on.

Abbas was still curled up in the back when Michael opened the door. He wished he believed they could go inside and be safe, but these guys had killed people, and Michael wouldn't put it past them to open fire in the restaurant if it meant they'd get Abbas. He dragged Abbas behind him, waiting for—

Aha.

A young man and woman came out through the doors, laughing at something as they headed for a nearby vehicle. Michael hated himself for what he was about to do, but he didn't really see any other choice. As soon as the man put the keys into the door, Michael launched himself forward, driving the guy into the door of the car. The man's keys fell from his hand, and Michael snatched them up as the guy tumbled to the pavement. He was

about to stand up when he saw the cellphone holder at the guy's side. He grabbed and yanked it, ripping the Velcro apart.

The woman screamed the man's name, and Michael felt like shit.

"I'm sorry!" he cried out. "He's fine, he's just had the wind knocked out of him, I promise. I've taken his phone, so please, call the sheriff and let him know what happened. Tell him my name—Michael Kennedy—and let him know I'm with CrossBow Protection, and that a person or persons unknown may have killed one of their deputies on the road a few miles back. I need your car to get a very important person to safety. Really, I'm so sorry!"

She gaped at him, as if nothing he'd said had registered.

Michael's nerves had to be shredded, because he rarely babbled. He got the car unlocked and shoved Abbas into the backseat. Then he jumped in the driver's side, threw the car into reverse, and backed out of the stall. The woman ran to the man's side and helped him to his feet.

Michael heaved a relieved sigh. He was afraid he'd hurt the guy.

Then he focused his attention on the new vehicle. If he remembered correctly, this car—a 2022 jet black BMW—was able to hit the same top speed as the SUV had been, but at least he didn't have to think about recharging its battery. He and Abbas sped down the highway, heading for CrossBow.

And then what? Once we get there, what can we do?

His mind went to the building's front doors. With the changes Dr. Malone had made, they were sturdier, but would they hold up to gunfire? Could they withstand a missile? How safe would Abbas—and everyone in CrossBow—be? He fumbled with the cellphone for a moment, then held it up. Thank goodness it didn't seem to be locked. He tossed the phone into the back. No way was he about to try to make a call while they were doing ninety.

"Abbas! You with me?"

"Yes," he croaked.

"I'm going to give you a number for Gary. Call him, then hand me back

the phone.”

Abbas whimpered, and Michael’s heart went out to him. “Look, I know this sucks, but right now I need you to focus, okay? We’re alive.” *For the moment.* Without waiting for a response, he rattled off Gary’s number, then waited while Abbas did what he was told.

He knew Abbas was scared. Shit, so was he.

“C-can’t get my fingers to w-work,” Abbas stammered out.

“I know, I feel the same way, and I’m sorry, but I need you. More than you know. Please, work with me now, and we’ll fall apart together when we’re safe, all right?”

Where the hell are the cops?

An insane thought flashed through Michael’s mind. Would they have killed the deputy if they thought it would get Michael to trust the cops? Shit, probably.

“Here’s the number again.” *Come on, Abbas, focus.* He rattled off Gary’s number once more, then let out a groan of relief a moment later when a shaky hand held the phone out.

“Cross,” Gary barked as the call connected.

“Would now be a good time to wonder what you’re wearing?” Michael asked, trying not to freak the fuck out.

“Michael?” Gary gasped.

Josh chimed in. “Where are you? Whose phone is this? Are you okay?”

Fuck, the worry in their voices came close to unraveling him.

Michael let go and sobbed. “They killed them, Gary. Shot them where they stood.”

“Shh, I know, I know. I called them because you weren’t answering your phone, and someone else answered. He told me what they did. We’ve contacted the police, and they called back a few minutes ago and told us you stole someone’s car. Where are you?”

Michael looked for a mile marker or some indication as to where they’d

ended up. “I... I don’t know. Shit, we just left the Denny’s parking lot, but I don’t know the exact location. We’re trying to get back to CrossBow. I’m pretty sure this is the road I was on when we left, but I’m not certain.”

“No, no, that’s fine. Breathe for me, Michael. We’re not that far from you, okay? We’ll find you, I swear. Have some faith in me, all right?”

“Okay.” Michael clung to his every word.

“You’re doing really well. Just keep driving, and we’ll keep looking. When we spot a bat out of hell, that’ll be you.”

He wanted Gary to stay on the line. The chances that they’d end up dead increased with every second, and as much as he hated to think it, Michael didn’t want to die alone. He now understood Gary’s fears better than he ever had.

Please let me get back to him.



“I’ve got it!” Josh shouted, looking up from his pad, its white screen illuminating his face. “There’s a Denny’s about twenty miles from us. Take a right at the next exit, then it’s a straight shot. Michael must have gotten turned around somewhere, but he’s not too far off.”

Thank you, God. And Josh Malone.

Gary pressed down on the accelerator again, pushing the car to one hundred miles per hour. “Keep an eye on the other side, look for a BMW flying like the Devil’s on its tail.”

Josh reached up to grip the handle, but Gary didn’t kill their speed. He couldn’t do anything about Josh’s nerves, not until they found Abbas and Michael.

A few minutes passed, and then Josh cried out, “There! That has to be

them.”

Gary flicked his gaze to the other side. It was indeed a BMW. He slowed, then spun the wheel and crossed over the divider, the car bottoming out with a loud chunk. It sounded as though the bumper tore off. Not that he gave a shit as long as it kept running. Once on the other side, he sped up, determined to catch Michael who was showing no signs of slowing down.

A blast from behind shocked the fuck out of him. Gary glanced in the rearview mirror at the car gaining on them. These had to be the men who'd killed Gary's people. The ones still trying to get to Michael and Abbas.

Fuck that. Fuck all over that.

He slammed on the brakes, causing the car to fishtail. He compensated, and the car ended up blocking the road, placing them between the BMW and its pursuers.

Michael's car didn't slow down but kept going.

Out of harm's way.

And Gary was done playing nice. He tossed his phone to Josh.

“Gary?” Josh's voice trembled.

“Get out,” he snarled. “Run toward the other side of the road and call the police. Once you've done that, contact Michael and give him directions back to CrossBow. Tell him he and Abbas should sequester themselves on your floor and not leave until they're given the all-clear.”

“But—”

“Now, Josh!”

Josh undid his seatbelt, then scrambled out of the car and across the road.

Gary got out and unholstered his gun, glad he'd had the foresight to grab it. He hadn't needed it since opening CrossBow, but thank fuck he'd kept up with his marksman training.

The car coming his way slowed, then came to a stop when it was about thirty feet away. A man got out, silhouetted by the headlights, his face hidden in shade.

“Mr. Cross. It’s good to finally come face to face.”

That voice....

It was the one who’d answered the phone. The bastard who’d spoken so glibly of killing two CrossBow agents.

“Wish I could say the same,” Gary hollered back.

“Now don’t be like that.” His words dripped with condescension. “All we want is Abbas. This doesn’t have to get ugly.”

Rage bubbled through Gary. He’d seen men die before. He’d ordered them to risk their lives, and then he’d lost them. That was war.

This was murder. Some would argue there was a fine line between the two, but right then it didn’t matter.

“You killed my people,” Gary snarled.

“Only because they were blocking my path to Abbas. It’s business, you see, nothing personal.”

“It’s personal to me.”

The first shot was a surprise. The second, not so much. Gary hid behind the car, trying to take aim. The problem was the headlights that blinded him to the second man’s—the shooter’s—position.

“Mr. Cross, hear me out. I bear *you* no ill will. In fact, I’d like to see your remaining people walk away from this, but that’s not going to happen if you continue to make matters difficult. Please, just give me Abbas and this will all be over.”

Like Gary believed that bullshit. “Thanks, but you know what? I think we’ll be keeping him.”

“Well, no one can accuse me of not trying to be a gentleman.”

Three more shots rang out, dinging off the car’s exterior, but at least now Gary was able to narrow down the vicinity of the shooter. He crawled to the front of the car, then leaned around and fired. The first one ricocheted off the cliff wall to one side of the road. The second hit the guy’s car.

The third was met by a cry of pain, then silence.

Gary held his breath.

“You’re very good, Mr. Cross” came that voice again. “Though it wouldn’t take *me* three shots.” Another retort from a gun, and the bullet slammed into the ground near Gary’s head.

Whoever this man was, he was good.

“That was your final warning,” the guy snapped. “The next one will go through your skull.”

If it had been anyone else, Gary would have said it was bluster, but not this man. This fucker could back up his words with skill.

It was then Gary heard it. An engine revving, the squeal of tires on blacktop, and the flash of lights as they drew closer. And then came the screech of brakes and the satisfying dull *thud* of a vehicle slamming into a body, sending it skittering across the surface of the road, until at last it came to a stop a few feet from Gary.

“You okay?” Michael called out.

Thank you, God.

Gary stood, his heartbeat quickening, crazy happy to see Michael climb out of the BMW unharmed. “What the hell did you think you were doing? Do you know how many things could have gone wrong with a stunt like that? You were supposed to go back to CrossBow!”

“Stunt? I was saving your stupid ass!” Michael shouted. “You’re not invincible, Cross.” His voice dropped to a pained whisper, perfectly audible in the quiet. “And as for me going back to CrossBow and leaving you here? Not happening. You’re not alone. Never again.”

“How’d you even get there?” Gary had been so focused on the fire fight, he’d never heard Michael coming until the revving of the car’s engine.

“Dr. Malone called and told me you two had intercepted the car and that I was supposed to keep driving. That wasn’t going to happen, so I did the same stupid thing he said *you* did—I crossed over. I let Abbas out to be with Dr. Malone, then turned off the lights and drove down the road.” Michael glared

at him. “And never mind me—what the hell did *you* think you were doing? If I wasn’t so afraid you’d get hurt, I’d smack you in the head so hard, they’d hear the gong back at CrossBow.”

Then Michael was rushing toward him, and the next thing Gary knew, Michael scooped him into his arms, kissing his face. “Fuck, I was so scared.”

Gary knew that feeling. It was easy to feel invincible when the adrenaline was flowing, but that never lasted. Once it stopped, the crash was always hard, the crush of exhaustion, rendering all movement to a crawl. He knew Michael’s limbs would feel as if they were made of lead.

None of that mattered, though, not when Gary held him so close.

“Is he dead?” he murmured.

“No idea. Right now he’s not moving.” Michael twisted to peer at the BMW. “You know, I think we might owe these people a new car. I’m almost certain this isn’t going to buff out.”

Before Gary could come up with a reply, Josh came back over, with Abbas following behind him, and threw his arms around them both.

“What the hell was that, Gary?” he snapped. “Don’t you know never to play chicken with another vehicle?”

Gary would do whatever the hell he had to, if it meant saving their client. And, of course, Michael.

“Thanks, Josh,” Michael whispered, his face buried in Gary’s hair. Shit, Gary could feel him still shaking.

“He... called me Josh.” He beamed. “I thought I was Dr. Malone?”

“I never call my friends by title,” Michael murmured, pressing closer. “Is that okay?”

“Yes!” Josh glanced at Abbas. “Are you all right?”

“Now that I’m not in that car? Oh yes.”

“And we should check out our friend,” Michael said into Gary’s ear.

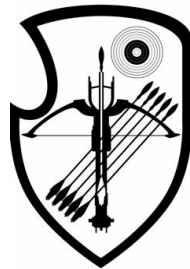
They walked in silence to where the guy lay. Gary was surprised to see he was still breathing, despite his injuries.

Well fuck.

Still, the bastard was alive, and that was what mattered at the moment. Gary called 9-1-1 for an ambulance, then checked in with the sheriff's department for retrieval of the murderous bastards.

And then they'd get their answers.

Chapter Twenty-One



Michael couldn't wait for this day to be over.

First thing they did was go to the hospital, where he sat for over an hour, feeling numb as he listened to the deputies that were watching over them discuss the horrors of the shootings. They said the sheriff's preliminary report, which quoted the medical examiner, confirmed that both CrossBow agents had died instantly from their wounds. That knowledge didn't make Michael feel any better, but at least he knew neither had suffered. The deputy hadn't been so fortunate. He'd been left to bleed out from a gunshot wound to the head. The ME posited that if they had gotten to him in time, he could have been saved—maybe—but reiterated that was only supposition.

Either way, it was something Michael would have to bear the guilt of. If he'd chosen a different path, if he hadn't gotten turned around, if....

If only.

"Mr. Kennedy?"

Michael jerked his head up. "Yes?"

"I'm Doctor Talbert. You and your friend check out. Your blood pressure

was elevated, but that could have been from... you know, all this mess. If you can check it from home, do so. Let your primary care doctor know what the results were. Other than that, we don't really have a reason to keep you here."

Michael stood and shook hands with the doctor. "Thank you."

The doctor didn't release his hand right away. "Listen, I know you saw some terrible things today." His voice was low and earnest. "I would suggest you speak to someone about them. It might seem like it's not all that big of a deal, but I promise you, it can be."

Not that big a deal? It was an experience Michael didn't think he'd ever forget.

"I'll do that." As soon as the numbness wore off.

"Do you have a ride home?"

"Yes, sir. My friend will be driving me."

"Excellent. Again, please follow up with your primary care. He knows you better than we do."

Michael considered the doctor's assessment. *My blood pressure was high? Gee, go figure.*

Dr. Talbert walked away, and Gary approached him.

"I can ask the sheriff if we can hold off on talking to them." He put a hand on Michael's, the warmth seeping into his cold body. "You need to get some rest."

Michael shook his head. "Best to get it over with." He peered up at Gary. "You'll stay with me, right?"

"Just try to keep me away."

The sheriff's office was buzzing with people. There were more cops than you could shake a stick at, all of them on high alert after the attack on one of their own. Then there were flocks of reporters from all the media outlets, including some with national coverage. Abbas had disappeared for a while, herded into meetings with government officials.

Gary and Josh stayed with Michael while he was being questioned by the

sheriff's department, for which he was extremely grateful. Law enforcement personnel scurried around like ants, barking orders, demanding reports, and nearly all of them insisting on talking to Michael.

The interrogation took even longer than the emergency room. Questions—most of which couldn't be answered because of Abbas's security—were fired off at a rapid pace. Gary explained to the sheriff that they couldn't talk about anything at the moment, citing the military's need to keep it confidential. He provided copies of the paperwork they'd received when they signed the agreement to protect Abbas, who was now sitting alone in a room, waiting for this all to be over with.

It was obvious the sheriff didn't like being stonewalled one bit. Still, he couldn't very well go against the US government, and in the end, he grudgingly let them go. Michael was on a bench outside the office when Gary and Josh came out of their meeting.

"You ready to get out of here?"

Michael wasn't ready to lose sight of Gary, that was for damn sure. "You're going home?"

"No. I've called ahead. We've got a room at CrossBow, adjoining Abbas's. My house doesn't have as much protection. We've gotten the all-clear," Gary continued, "and I wanna get out of here. You're going to be staying with me, at least for a while."

Relief crashed over him in a dense wave, almost buckling his knees. "Thanks."

"We'll keep close to Abbas until the State Department is done with all of us."

Michael nodded. Not that he had the strength to argue, and there was no way he wanted to be alone. He trailed behind Gary like a zombie, his mind tumbling over the sights and sounds of the past twenty-four hours as he tried desperately to come up with an answer.

Could I have done something—anything—differently and spared people

from all this pain?

It was a question he knew would haunt him for a long time.



Four days since that fucking awful night, and when Michael closed his eyes, he still saw the face of twenty-five-year old Deputy James Odom. He'd seen him on television too, where he'd learned every bit of James's life story. That face was burned into Michael's memory: the bright smile, the cheerful demeanor, the dark hair shorn to the scalp, and those blue eyes that twinkled with just a hint of mischief. Of course, there had been interviews with James's friends and family, all sharing their reminiscences. His mother told everyone who came to visit her that James had only ever had one goal in mind, even when he was a child: he'd wanted to follow in his father's footsteps and become a cop. His dream had been to help people. To stand for those who couldn't save themselves.

And now, because he'd done his job, he was dead, and everyone who knew him had lost something precious. His fiancé would never become his wife. The unborn baby she carried would never know his father. He would never celebrate another holiday with his family. They were all left to grieve, and James was in the cold, hard ground.

Another wave of crushing guilt slammed into Michael, and he couldn't stifle the sobs, no matter how hard he tried not to be weak. Gary drew him in and wrapped his arms around Michael, and that made it even worse. He was supposed to protect Gary, not the other way around. Lying in Gary's bed each night brought Michael the closeness he craved, but didn't obliterate the reasons for being there.

"It wasn't your fault." Gary rubbed Michael's chest. "There was nothing

you could have done to prevent it. We did the best we could with the information we had.”

“How do you handle it?” Michael managed to blurt out between bouts of tears.

“You go to therapy,” Gary said simply. “You talk it out with someone who can help you. Then you sit down with me and we share stories about our coworkers, to make sure they’re never forgotten.” He paused. “I’ve decided to put up plaques at CrossBow for any agent injured or killed in the line of duty, so people will always know who they were. Maybe we’ll do something so that *everyone* at CrossBow will be remembered.” He squeezed Michael tighter. “And we make sure those that hurt them are punished.”

That was easier said than done. The fingerprints from the guy he’d hit with the car had come back. Marcus Salerno was a high-priced hitman. His partner, the man Gary had killed, had been Ulysses Tryna, a sometimes accomplice. Tryna was dead, thank goodness, but Salerno had survived, albeit with massive injuries, including a fractured spine, both legs broken, ribs that had snapped and pierced his lung, and a dent in his head. That didn’t stop the police from questioning a cop-killer. They shared what they’d discovered out of professional courtesy.

Confined to his hospital bed, Salerno had refused to answer questions about who’d hired him, but after grueling hours—where allegedly he was denied pain-relieving drugs—he’d eventually broke down and told the police it was a splinter group who thought Al-Qaeda wasn’t doing enough to bring down the west. When asked, Abbas confirmed the existence of such a cell.

Abbas seemed to be struggling as much as Michael was with the aftermath. For the time being, he was entrenched in his own room at CrossBow. Gary had made arrangements for him to get an apartment in the dorm instead of the cot he’d slept on during his initial stay. Abbas said the accommodations were better.

He also told them that if the Islamic Liberation Front was after him, he’d

never be safe. Much like Salman Rushdie, Abbas would be hunted until either he died or they killed him.

How can he be so accepting of death? Michael supposed he could understand it in a way, but it still made him wonder.

Life went on, and part of that life was his work. Michael wanted the stability and routine of his job, but then he also wanted everything to *go away*. When they got back to CrossBow, he'd followed Gary to his office and listened in as he made phone calls to everyone he could think of. When they were done giving their accounts of details—vouched for by Abbas—the State Department dropped its investigation, leaving CrossBow free and clear. However, their business had still been affected. Gary said that was fine, because it gave them all time to grieve and heal.

Grieve and heal.

That would take a while.

The nice thing about some of the larger suites in CrossBow was the fact that they had Jacuzzis. As Michael had promised, a few days after the fire fight, he and Abbas were in one where no one else could see them fall apart together.

“How’s the water?” Michael leaned back against one of the jets that pounded his sore back.

“This must be what heaven is like,” Abbas said with a sigh as he wiggled his toes. He peered across the bubbling surface at Michael. “It’s okay to talk about it, you know.” His voice was soft.

“Talk, yes. Except it starts out as talking, and ends with me sobbing my heart out.”

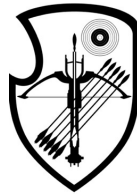
Abbas nodded. “We have both shed tears. And I know you hold yourself to blame, but I too share that burden.”

“You know what Gary says about that, right?”

Abbas forced a smile. “That neither of us is to blame.” He rested his head against the folded towel. “Tell me about Benny and Hank. I want to know more about them.”

Michael shared what little knowledge he possessed, most of which he’d learned from Gary.

I’m never going to forget them.



While Michael’s days struggled to regain their normal pattern, his nights were spent with Gary. There’d been no sex thus far, which was fine by Michael because he really wasn’t up to it. He still woke in cold sweats when he dreamed of all that had transpired in the last week, and though he hated to admit it, he was grateful that Gary tried to act as a buffer against the invasive dreams. Still, he knew the problems he was having were his own to fix.

So it’s about time I fixed them.

One day while Gary was out running errands that had gone undone for too long, Michael got to work. The next morning he told Gary he was returning to his desk. To his relief, there wasn’t any argument, and they decided they’d go in together. Rather than heading to their office, he suggested coffee in the cafeteria.

Michael wasn’t *that* ready to see his desk again.

“I’ve found a doctor,” he told Gary as they sat at a table, the delicious aroma of freshly brewed coffee invading his nostrils. “She comes highly recommended.”

“Oh?”

Michael smiled. “Yeah, by you.”

Gary blinked. “What? Really?”

“You said she helped you a lot, so I’m hoping—with enough work—she can do the same for me.” He sighed. “I can’t get the images out of my head, and my nightmares are getting worse.”

“When is your first appointment?”

“Tomorrow. I’ll need to leave work a little early, if that’s okay with you.”

Gary scowled at him. “Let’s pretend you didn’t ask something so stupid, okay?” He reached for Michael’s hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

It warmed Michael to know Gary wasn’t hiding their relationship from the people they worked with. Most of them seemed to take it in stride. A few asked questions, but no one was outright nasty about it.

“Would you like me to go with you?” Gary said after a minute.

Michael perked up. “Would you?”

“Absolutely. She usually spends the first couple of sessions getting to know you. And it might take a couple of weeks before she delves into the deep stuff. I’ll be there for those, because if you’re anything like me, you’ll feel shredded afterward. You’ll need something to tether you to the here and now.”

Shame flushed through him. Leaning on Gary felt wrong. He’d been through much worse than Michael had, yet he was still strong and resilient.

How different would he have been if it wasn’t for his injuries?



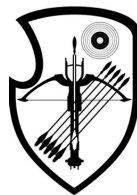
Returning to work was no walk in the park.

Michael did his best, but things kept... gnawing at him. There were too many emotions, too many memories—too much *everything*. He felt overwhelmed all the time. He’d called his parents, and his mom had told him he’d always have a home to come back to. He’d told her about Gary, and she

said he was more than welcome as well. In fact, she said she couldn't wait to meet the man who'd gotten her son out of his shell to finally settle down. Michael forwarded her suggestion to Gary, who'd seemed hesitant at first, but at last they agreed they'd go for Thanksgiving. He assured Gary it would just be the immediate family, so there wouldn't be a crush of people, which seemed to make it easier to say yes.

Overall, things seemed to be looking up.

Until the day Abbas said he was cleared to go home.



“You don't have to go,” Gary reiterated for the umpteenth time as Abbas packed up his gear. He'd fought tooth and nail to get Abbas to stay longer. The State Department informed him their stunt had set back relations with the people of Abbas's village, possibly for years, and Abbas's return was the only way to soothe the tensions.

He has a price on his head and a goddamn target painted on his back, and they still want him to go home?

The State Department didn't merely want it—they were adamant it should take place.

“It's okay, I don't mind,” Abbas told them, straightening from his packing. “It will be nice to see old friends.”

Gary didn't buy that for a second, and one glance at Michael's incredulous expression told him neither did he. Abbas's haggard face, his perpetual frown, the crinkled skin around his eyes—everything pointed to Abbas *not* wanting to go. He was clearly devastated by the prospect, but when they tried to talk to him about it, he shut them down quickly.

“It's not a matter of *my* desires, but what's best for my people,” Abbas

declared. “You hear stories constantly about Muslims wanting war, but do you know what the truth is? We want to be with our families, to live as was intended. Despite our differing religions, isn’t that what *everyone* wants?” His face crumpled. “It’s sad that we can’t focus on our similarities, instead of allowing those differences to divide us.”

“That all sounds very noble, but can I ask a question here?” Michael interjected. “What happens if this group kills you?”

Abbas sighed. “Well, I can’t know for certain, but based on past events, I believe the region will fall into chaos yet again.”

“Then shouldn’t you stay here where you’re safe?” Gary remonstrated.

Abbas shook his head. “They need me. We’ll take up arms against those who would threaten the stability of the region. That will likely be the ILF. When there is a vacuum in the power structure, someone will always step in to fill it.”

“You came here for a reason,” Gary reminded him.

“I cannot work for the benefit of my people when I am thousands of miles from them.” Abbas gave him a gentle, sad smile. “I have to go back, don’t you see?”

Gary certainly did *not* see, and he didn’t like it one little bit.

Chapter Twenty-Two



Why is it that working with the government leaves me with a sour taste in my mouth and feeling as if I need to take a shower?

On the surface, Gary knew his reaction made no sense. The government had been quite generous in their appreciation for keeping Abbas safe: what they paid would make up for a good chunk of the business CrossBow had lost. Although they were still angry over the ruse, they claimed to understand the necessity to keep all parties in the dark.

That didn't mean they liked it, though, but that was fine with Gary. If he had *his* way, he'd prefer never to work with the government again.

Abbas had most of his stuff packed and ready to go, something that apparently irked Michael to such an extent that Gary had taken him aside to get to the root of whatever was bugging him.

"Why should him leaving be such an issue? It's not as if we can stop him."

Michael's brow furrowed. "I guess it's because I think of him more as a friend than a client, especially considering the circumstances under which we sort of bonded."

“Okay, I get that.”

“But it’s not just that,” Michael protested. “I... I hate the idea that no one will be able to protect him once he’s back in his own country. I’m scared that the next time I hear anything about Abbas, it’s going to be a message stating he’s been killed.” He paused. “After losing Benny and Hank—even if I didn’t work closely with them—it left me with a raw nerve, I suppose. A feeling not unlike putting ice on a toothache.”

If he was honest, Gary didn’t like it either. Abbas was one of the few people who were a link to his time in the Middle East. He’d known Eric and what they’d meant to each other. While Gary was happy with the life he was building with Michael, the knowledge that there was someone else out there who remembered Eric fondly meant the world to him.

And Abbas will be gone in a few days’ time.



That had been enough to galvanize Gary into action, because no way was Abbas going to walk out of CrossBow before Gary got the chance to give him a proper send-off.

He asked Abbas to get together with his old squad mates—the ones who’d survived the attack—and have a drink in the common room surrounded by other CrossBow agents. Gary couldn’t help but look for a stain on the pool table. He wasn’t sure if he was disappointed he couldn’t find any reminder of his time with Michael. Still, they’d gotten together to talk about the good old days.

Not that Abbas touched a drop of booze, but he did listen with a smile while they told stories of their time in the desert. He also added his own, talking about the occasion when Eric had paid him to catch a scorpion for

him to put in someone's bunk. They'd all roared with laughter at that.

Gary didn't bother to tell them it had been *his fucking bed* and that he'd freaked the fuck out. He'd felt as if something was crawling on him for weeks afterward.

It was strange to sit there and talk about the old days. There was no melancholy, only a warm fondness and thoughts of friends who were gone, but would never be forgotten. When they'd finished, Michael came and picked them all up, with Gary insisting on going with them, then drove each person to his own home, before he returned to CrossBow with Abbas and Gary. He'd had to pour Gary into bed. Gary wasn't much for drinking—in fact, it was frowned upon with his medications—but this wasn't something that was likely to occur again, so he begged his doctor for permission. He was told as long as it was just this once and he didn't overdo things, it would be fine.

Okay, so Gary might have ignored that last point.

He got into bed, easing into that fuzzy presleep state like snuggling up in a warm blanket. Michael crawled in behind him and wrapped an arm around Gary's waist. He wouldn't say anything to Michael, but this was his favorite part of the night. The feeling of Michael's heartbeat against his back, the possessive way his fingers splayed over Gary's stomach, the warmth of his breath on Gary's neck....

Each little thing added up to Gary falling deeper and deeper for Michael.

Gary lay there in the darkness, listening to Michael's breathing, unable to tell if he was awake or not. In the end, he had to know.

There were things he needed to say, and the dark was the best place for them.

“Michael? You asleep?”

There was no response, and Gary's heart sank.

“If I say yes, will you be quiet?”

Gary smiled to himself. “Probably not.”

Michael pushed out a sigh. “Then no, I’m not asleep. What’s up?”

It was confession time.

“When you came to work here, I didn’t want to like you.”

Michael chuckled. “Thanks. That makes me so glad I didn’t fall asleep. I’d have hated to miss this.”

“Will you let me speak?”

“Zipping up back here.”

Gary took a deep breath. “It wasn’t just you—I didn’t want to like *anyone* who worked for me.”

“Why not?”

“Because if I liked them, the time would inevitably come when they’d leave, and I knew how hard I’d find it to cope with my feelings once they were gone.”

There was a pause. “Let me see if I’ve got this right. You didn’t want to like them because you knew you’d feel bad when they left?”

“Basically.”

“And how did that strategy work out for you?”

“Pretty well, for the most part. Everyone came, I pissed them off, and they left.” Gary took another deep breath. “Except you.”

“The one who stayed.” Michael sounded as if he was smiling.

Yeah, thank God.

“And although I never told you before, I liked having you in the office. You were always on point. You knew what needed to be done, when it had to be completed, and you had it so organized, all I needed to do was pretty much sign where you said to.”

“Well, seeing as it appears to be ‘tell the truth’ time....” Michael let out a heavy sigh. “I wanted to hate you.”

“Wow. And now *I’m* the one regretting opening my mouth. Seriously?”

“Cross my heart. But then I started to pay attention. I noticed that as bad as you were—”

“Oh, so I was bad?”

“Now *you* zip it and listen, okay? As I was saying, as bad as you were, you’d do anything for your people and CrossBow. It’s like... there was so much drive to make this place a success. After I found out it was all for Eric, I—”

“Wait. What?” Gary froze.

“Huh?”

“What do you mean, it was all for Eric?” Gary rolled until they were facing each other. The room was dark, but he could see enough from the light on the Alexa unit to know Michael was frowning.

“You wanted the place to be a success for Eric. To make his dream come true.” Michael’s face scrunched up. “Didn’t you?”

Gary put a hand on Michael’s arm. “No. Well, not exactly. See, I wanted to open CrossBow because it had been a dream, but it was a shared dream. After Eric died, I still wanted to open the place, but it was for me and the people who needed to put down some roots. Those who would have likely been forgotten by the government that they shed blood, sweat, and tears for. Eric and I? We wanted a home for ourselves, but also for the disenfranchised who might otherwise end up on the streets.” He squeezed Michael’s wrist firmly. “I’m sorry, I thought you knew that.”

“So it wasn’t for Eric?”

There was a tinge of hope in Michael’s voice, and suddenly Gary understood.

He thinks I still have feelings for Eric.

“I won’t lie and say no. Partially yes, because originally it *was* his dream. One he shared with me and made it ours. I could have opened it and called it something else, but it seemed disingenuous to me to not have his name on it since the original idea was his.”

“Can I ask you something personal?”

Gary chuckled. “As I’ve said before, you’ve had your dick in my ass. It

doesn't get more personal than that."

"Do I remind you of him?"

Gary's heartbeat quickened. "No. Not in the least. Physically, the two of you are on opposite ends of the spectrum. He was big, you're more lithe. He was... how do I say this? He loved the Army, but he hated the rules. When we went on a mission, he could be laser-focused, but then he made up for that with spontaneity at the weirdest times. It was like he was rebelling. It was a source of friction between us, because while I lived for rules and structure, he wanted me to throw caution to the wind." He met Michael's gaze. "You? You can play, but when it's time to get something done, you're focused, weighing all the options. You know there's a time for fun, but also when work has to get done."

Michael smiled. "My dad drilled that into me. He was forever telling me I needed to buckle down to make it in this world. I couldn't coast by on my looks or personality. Most employers wouldn't care about that, he said. All they'd want were results. My first semester in college, I was the party boy, getting drunk almost every night, doing things I regret to this day. I almost flunked out."

"Oh? That seems so unlike you."

"Yeah, well. Getting caught joyriding in a professor's car changed all that."

Gary smirked. "And you said Josh was a criminal."

"That was... a poor choice of words on my part, I admit. When the police caught us, there were threats of expulsion flying around. I called home, and even though we were a thousand miles apart, I could hear the disappointment in my father's voice. I hated that more than anything."

"So what happened?"

"Brady, he was the guy who told us all it was his car. He said it was fine. The thing was, he was so nervous, I should have *known* it was bullshit, but I was drunk and ready for some fun. That lasted until he crashed into another

vehicle. That was also what set my dad off. How could I have been so irresponsible? What if someone had been in that car when we hit it? What if I'd been part of someone dying?" Michael's face contorted. "That sobered me right up. I stopped drinking, except for an occasional beer if I went out to dinner, and I did what I should have been doing all along—I buckled down and was all about my grades. I had to prove to my parents I wasn't a fuckup."

"You weren't. I told you, we all did stupid things when we were younger."

Michael's sober expression hadn't altered. "Still, I felt like I'd failed everyone, so I vowed to correct that. And I'd like to think I did."

"I can tell you now, you succeeded. Looking at you, I never would have pictured you to be the bad-boy type."

"Because I wasn't, just a stupid one."

"And that's one of the major differences between you and Eric, and it's an important one."

"I'm all ears."

"When one of us got pissed off, Eric.... How can I put this? He was very closed off. He would get angry and shut down, leaving the men who worked with him to figure out what kind of bug crawled up his ass this time." Gary sighed. "And there's that major difference. He thought sex would soothe over everything. Like you can't be mad at him, because if you are, he's going to give you sex and, of course, you'll forgive him.... He thought sex would soothe over most everything."

Michael laughed. "A good fuck cures what ails ya."

"Not gonna argue with that, but *you*... you want to talk, to clear the air, even if that means putting *off* the moment when you get your dick in my ass. And it's a trait I really welcome. But that's not to say I don't appreciate the sex," he added hurriedly. Heaven forbid Michael should think that. Even though he bottomed for Michael, he still felt on a more even keel. They balanced each other. Gary was in charge in the office, and Michael was most

definitely in charge in the bedroom.

Rec room.

On the couch.

Wherever.

I've gotten this far, I might as well bare my soul.

“I know you said you wanted to wait until we could sit down for a nice dinner and talk, but if this week has taught me anything, it’s that you shouldn’t wait to tell someone you care. I did that before, and I paid the price. I won’t do that again.”

“I love you too,” Michael whispered, then leaned in and kissed Gary on the lips.

Gary smacked him lightly on the arm. “Hey, no fair. I was supposed to get to say it first.” Inside, he was so fucking *light*.

He loves me.

“Suffer. You can say it first on our tenth anniversary, I promise.”

Tenth?

Gary’s heart thumped so hard, it hurt. “You mean... you’re in for the long haul? With all my problems, you’ll still stay?”

Michael rolled on top of him. “You’re not the only one with problems. After everything I’ve been through lately, I could just as easily ask you the same thing. Will you be there when the nightmares wake me up screaming? When I shut down because a sight or a smell sends me into a spiral? Will you be able to handle me at my worst?”

Holy *fuck*, that was such a stupid question. “Yes, of course.”

Michael smiled. “Then start planning for our silver anniversary, Cross. I ain’t going nowhere without you.”

And then their lips met, and whereas their previous coupling had been heat and sweat, grunts and moans, Michael rocked against him, a slow, undulating motion, his hard cock rolling over Gary’s again and again, until what poured from Gary’s lips was a constant stream of whimpers.

This was tender.

This was sensual.

This was goddamn freaking *perfect*.

Michael raised Gary's legs to his shoulders, hooked his arms under Gary's knees, and reached for the lube. Then Michael stared into his eyes as he slid slick fingers into Gary's ass, and *holy fuck*, that intense gaze was hotter than hell.

"In case I forget to mention it, Mr. Cross, you are perfect."

Gary managed a huff. "Eric used to complain that I was too anal."

Michael's eyes twinkled as he trailed his finger over Gary's hole, dipping in slightly. "Oh, I don't know. I quite like it when you're anal." Then all talk was forgotten when he shuffled forward to bring the head of his cock into position, and Gary held his breath, waiting to be breached, filled, stretched....

Michael eased into him as if he were made of china, something fragile to be treasured, protected. He bent Gary in half, Gary's knees almost to his ears, and drove all the way home. He paused, and Gary tightened his body around that long, thick shaft.

"Oh fuck." Michael kissed him on the lips. "Again."

Gary did as he was told, loving the look of astonishment and pleasure that lit up Michael's eyes. Gary cupped Michael's nape and locked gazes with him. "Love you," he whispered.

Michael responded with a fervent kiss that stole his breath, and suddenly they were rocking together, their breath mingling as Michael steered them toward the orgasm Gary knew was coming.

"Want me to fuck you against the wall?"

"No," Gary said with a gasp. "Don't stop. This is—"

Heaven.

Michael nodded and anchored himself to Gary's shoulders, their chests pressed together, his hips moving with a fluid motion as he made love to Gary.

Tears pricked the corners of Gary's eyes. "Oh fuck, yeah."

Michael kissed him again, a leisurely, searching kiss that seemed to spin out, until Gary's universe was nothing but them, joined, two bodies moving in sinuous harmony....

He cried out as his climax took him by surprise, and seconds later he felt the slow pulse of Michael's dick. Michael groaned as though he, too, hadn't wanted it to end so abruptly. He stilled, and Gary relished the delicious throb inside him.

Michael kissed his damp forehead. "Just so you know? We're not even close to being done."

"Works for me." Then Gary cradled the back of his head and pulled him into a long, sweet kiss. "We've got all night," he murmured against Michael's lips.

"No," Michael corrected. "We have a lifetime." Then he buried his face in Gary's neck, his breath warm against his skin.

No words needed.

Chapter Twenty-Three



A shrill tone awoke Gary, and it took him a second or two to realize it was his phone. He cracked one eye open and peered at the clock.

Who the fuck is calling at a little after one in the morning?

He was still pinned under Michael's arm, and that was enough to make him give serious thought to blowing off the call—except for the damned need to do his job.

God save me from my overactive duty gland.

Gary forced himself to get up, and Michael let out a sweet whimper as Gary extricated himself from his firm grip. No sooner had he vacated the bed than Michael reached for him. Gary wanted to climb back in where it was warm. Goose bumps rose on his arms at the near Arctic coolness produced by the air conditioner. It made for great sleeping, but sucked when he was naked.

And his goddamn phone was still ringing.

He trudged into the kitchen area. "Cross," he groaned as the call connected. God, his ass ached like a son of a bitch. *What the fuck was I doing*

in my sleep?

Then he remembered. At some point in the night, Michael had woken up, reached around, and gripped Gary's cock, stroking it to full hardness. Once he'd been sure Gary was coherent, Michael had taken him—hard.

Not that Gary had any complaints, however. He knew he'd be feeling that amazing twinge all day long.

He also knew the memory of that sweet, slow fuck would linger even longer in his memory.

At the other end of the call, someone cleared their throat.

“This is Sheriff Trent over in Lincoln County. I'm sorry to wake you so early, but there's been a development, and we wanted you to hear it from us, since you tried to help our guy.”

Gary felt a twinge of guilt. They hadn't, not really. The deputy was more than likely dead before Gary ever showed up. Still, it was nice of Sheriff Trent to think they'd been of assistance. Maybe that would foster a better working relationship than the one CrossBow presently enjoyed with the local police department, who were still stonewalling them and refusing to answer any questions about what they'd discovered regarding the men who'd attacked them initially.

Gary started the pot of decaf. If the sheriff was calling him at *what the fuck* o'clock, he was probably going to need it. “Good to hear from you, sir. What can I do for you this morning?” It was morning, technically.

Sheriff Trent exhaled sharply, and just like that, Gary knew this was *not* going to be good news.

“About two hours ago, Marcus Salerno was found dead in his hospital bed. It's believed he committed suicide by slashing his wrists with something he'd found in the room. The ME is doing the autopsy, but I'm relaying her initial discoveries.”

What the ever-loving fuck?

Gary moved for the living room, where he stared out the window at the

dark yard while trying to process what he'd been told. It made no sense. Salerno was barely capable of moving, let alone scouring the room to find an implement with which to kill himself.

“Sheriff, I—”

“You’re probably thinking the same thing I did when I heard this. There is no way that man could have committed suicide. None.” The sheriff’s tone held steel. “But the ME says that’s how it appears. I’ll admit, she seems as skeptical as we are, so that’s good.” He paused. “You wanna know what I think?”

Why do people ask that? Does anyone ever say no?

“Of course, please tell me.”

“Someone killed him to keep him from talking.”

But that made no sense either. The only ones Salerno had fingered were the ILF, and they—

Wait. Hold the fucking phone.

He’d been mistaken. It all made *perfect* sense. “Sheriff, I think you’re right. Listen, I have to go, but I promise anything we find will be shared with you. We appreciate you keeping us in the loop too.”

He tapped End, then slipped the phone back into his pocket. There was a noise behind him, and he turned around.

Michael was already dressed and holding a cup of decaf.

“So what was that all about?”

Gary repeated the substance of the call, and Michael frowned.

“What do *you* think happened?”

“I *could* be wrong....”

Michael smiled. “But you don’t think you are, do you?”

Gary shook his head. “My guess is someone killed our killer because he knew more than he told us. Or else what he told us was a cover story. I think whoever snuffed him? They’re the people who are *really* after Abbas. And no, I don’t think it’s the ILF.”

Michael handed Gary his pills, then grabbed some aspirin for himself. “Let’s get to work, then.”

“You can stay up here and rest for—”

His eyes glinted dangerously. “I will kick your ass, Cross,” he snapped. “We’re in this together, and you’re going *nowhere* without me.”

The warmth surging through Gary made him feel a complete sap, but he wouldn’t change a thing. “I love you.”

Michael’s grin was equally dopey. “Love you too, idiot.”

Gary smacked him on the arm. “Hey, you don’t call the person you love an idiot.”

Michael slid his fingers across Gary’s head, caressing his scalp. “Okay, how about my *darling* idiot? Would that work better for you?”

Funnily enough, yeah, it probably would.

Michael lowered his gaze, smirking. “I like this look on you, by the way. I think you should wear it more often.”

Gary blinked. “I don’t have a stitch on.”

That lazy grin did all manner of things to Gary’s insides. “That’s my point.”



Michael glanced over at Josh. He seemed more out of it than normal. His head kept tilting forward, his chin dropping to his chest. Michael told Gary it might be too early to call Josh in, but Gary had insisted. No sooner had Josh flopped into the chair than he’d zoned out.

Gary gave Michael an apologetic glance. “You were right,” he said in a whisper. “I apologize.”

Josh snorted, his head tilted at an almost unnatural angle. His eyes were

closed, but Michael could see movement beneath his lids.

Does his brain ever shut down?

He assessed Josh's intricate style of sitting. His legs were drawn up onto the chair, and he was almost curled into a ball, his head resting on one arm. "So what should we do? He doesn't look comfortable at all. I'm not even sure a cat could sleep in that position." How the hell Josh accomplished it was anyone's guess.

Gary reached out and shook Josh, smiling when he murmured something incoherent. "Josh? Hey, can you wake up?"

"I'm awake," Josh insisted, though he didn't move. "If anything I was dozing, but I promise you I haven't missed a word you've said."

Gary chuckled. "I hate to disillusion you, but you were pretty much dead to the world."

Josh sighed and glanced up. He pinned Gary with a stare. "You were right, I apologize." Then his gaze shifted to Michael. "So what should we do? He doesn't look comfortable at all. I'm not even sure a cat could sleep in that position."

Michael tried to pick his jaw up from the floor. "How.... How did you...?"

Josh unfurled and sat up straight, stretching his spine until it popped. He wiggled a bit. "I *told* you I was awake. Sometimes it's hard for me to be comfortable. And you were wrong, Michael. I actually have tried several of the positions cats contort their bodies into. Some of them are surprisingly comfortable and great for working the kinks out of the body. Cats are onto something, man." He gave Gary a hard stare. "Now tell me what was so important that I had to lose out on my beauty sleep."

Gary ran through the phone call with Josh, who frowned as he listened to what the sheriff had said. When Gary finished, Josh put his hands flat on the table and closed his eyes.

"Okay, let me see if I've this straight. A man with a fractured spine

supposedly got out of bed and was *miraculously* able to find something in his room capable of slashing his wrists?” He smirked. “Are we sure he’s dead? Because after performing a trick like that, I wouldn’t be surprised to hear he ran out of his hospital room before he was caught.”

“Trust me, he’s dead. Not only that, he’s with the medical examiner.” Gary folded his arms. “I think someone killed him to shut him up. I also think the entire story about the ILF being after Abbas is bullshit. I don’t know what —”

Then all the color drained from Gary’s face, and Michael’s heart went into overdrive.

He looks as if he just died.



It hit him at full force, so strong that Gary clutched his head. He hadn’t had so much as a tingle since the day Eric and his men died. All that day, there’d been a pressure in his head that wouldn’t quit.

This was like a five-alarm fire bell going off, deafening him with its intensity.

He glanced at Josh to find him staring with wide eyes. When his gaze shifted to Michael, the screaming in his head intensified even more.

Ice flooded his veins as the knowledge sank in.

It was his warning sense telling him something bad was going to happen.

To Michael.

No. Fuck no.



Michael shook Gary gently, trying to get him to come back from whatever nightmarish cocoon he was stuck in. “Cross! Cross! Listen to me!”

But Gary wasn’t even tracking his movement anymore. His eyes had rolled back into his head, leaving only the whites showing. He was shaking like a leaf, his skin sallow.

“Josh, call a doctor!” Michael pleaded as he continued to jostle Gary.

“Lay him on the floor,” Josh ordered. “Don’t try to snap him out of this, because we don’t even know what’s wrong.”

He knew Josh was right, but never in his life had he experienced the level of fear coursing through him right then, sending his heart into a plummet.

I’ve only just found him, for God’s sake.

I told him I loved him yesterday. Yesterday.

I’m not ready to lose him yet.

Fuck it, I’m not ready to let go. Not now, not ever.

He dragged Gary down to the floor and gently laid him on his back. He shoved his jacket under Gary’s head, hoping to make him a little more comfortable.

If anything, his symptoms appeared worse.

It was then Michael went into meltdown. He’d never known Gary to have a seizure. The possibility hadn’t even crossed his mind that such a thing was likely.

He stretched out beside Gary on the floor, wrapping an arm around his waist. He had no idea why, but he needed Gary to be aware of his presence, that Michael had him. Would *always* have him.

Gary Cross was *not* a man he could ever envisage walking away from.

“I’m here, baby,” he whispered in Gary’s ear. “I’m not going anywhere.”

He tucked his face against Gary's arm, not wanting Josh to see his tears.
Come on, Gary. Come back to me.

Long minutes passed by, and the shaking slowed to tremors. By then the paramedics had arrived. They checked him out, put an IV in his arm, then informed Michael they were going to transport Gary to the hospital. Enough lucidity kicked in to allow Michael to call the switchboard to tell them the phones in the office wouldn't be answered, so they should take messages. In such a communal space, they'd already heard what happened and asked Michael to wish Mr. Cross well.

Michael hadn't stopped sending fervent messages to his maker ever since Gary had gone deathly pale. Which in itself was fucking weird because Michael wasn't even sure such a being existed.

If it kept Gary alive, he was going to make sure he covered *all* the bases.



After two hours of sitting around, waiting for news, then sitting around some more while they took Gary to a room, Michael was at the end of his tether. When a nurse appeared to tell him he could go in, he almost kissed her. He stood and walked to the closed door, his heart stuttering.

Let him be okay.

Let him be okay.

He pushed it open, and—

Gary was sitting up in bed, eating spoonfuls of pudding. He gave Michael a chocolatey smile as he entered. “Hey.”

Hey?

Michael's heart lurched into action.

“What the fuck?” He was too choked up to manage more than that.

“So... It seems *someone* might have missed a day or six of his meds.”
Gary’s tone was sheepish.

Michael gaped at him.

“It was just a bad reaction to stopping them cold turkey.”

Finally, he found his voice. “But I *gave* them to you.”

“Yes, yes you did. And then I set them down someplace, fully intending on taking them later. Only... I guess I got a little preoccupied and I forgot.”

Michael’s relief was short-lived. While he was glad Gary was all right, he’d had the shit scared out of him, and after what he’d already gone through, he wasn’t handling it well.

He put his hands on his hips.

“So what you’re telling me is from now on, I need to stand there and watch you take your pills? And what does that make me, Cross? Am I your boyfriend or your mom? Because I need to know which hat to wear.”

Gary blinked. “Boyfriend?”

Michael went over to the chair beside the bed, sat, and took Gary’s hand. It was cool, dry, and Michael never wanted to let it go.

“Is that not what we are? Boyfriends?”

That brilliant, chocolate-stained smile surged back. “Yes.”

Michael leaned in and kissed him, tasting the bitterness of the pudding. He pulled away and swiped an arm over his mouth. “Ew. That’s nasty. How can you eat that?”

Gary chuckled. “I don’t think you can say that, especially after where *your* tongue has been.”

Michael snorted. “Yeah, no. Compared to that... stuff, your dick is like gourmet chocolate, all sweet and creamy and delicious. And your ass? Fuck, that’s like ambrosia.” The scarlet blooming in Gary’s cheeks made him feel a lot better. He knew he was babbling, but he wasn’t sure what else to say that would make sense.

How about the truth?

“I was so scared,” he admitted, retaking Gary’s hand in his and squeezing gently.

Gary’s face fell. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to worry you.”

“You have to take care of yourself.” He stroked Gary’s cheek, hoping the intimate gesture would convey what his words couldn’t. “Our clients might depend on you, but I need you most.” He bent and kissed Gary on the lips, then drew back and gave him a mock glare. “And if you don’t take better care of yourself, no more dick for you.”

Everything had changed.

Gary’s seizure had brought on a wave of utter hopelessness that swamped him, dragging him down into its inky depths. He’d had no idea what to do or how to help. Once he’d found out about Gary’s medical problems, he’d made himself a promise to always be ready to help.

But that was when he was his assistant. Now they were something more, Michael needed to step up his game. He knew Gary was waiting to be pushed aside as soon as Michael got bored or saw him the way Gary saw himself.

Not gonna happen.

There were so many facets to the man, Michael doubted he could ever learn them all. As for his looks, they were fine as far as Michael was concerned. Yes, Gary’s exterior had suffered a lot of damage, but whose hadn’t? Not that it fucking mattered—Michael loved the man, not the body.

Well, not *just* the body.

Maybe he needed to quit his internal monologue and tell Gary what he was feeling. He glanced at him, and—

Gary was asleep.

Michael gazed at him warmly.

He needs his rest.

Then he assessed his own condition.

Maybe I should get some too.

He leaned back in the extremely uncomfortable hospital chair and closed

his eyes. Surprisingly, sleep came.



Michael's light snores let Gary know he could open his eyes. He took in the man's features, memorizing them in case the worst should happen. Because once Michael found out Gary had lied to him, he had no idea what the consequences would be.

His thoughts drifted back to the conversation he'd had with the doctor.

"Extreme stress can bring on a panic attack. That's what we think this was."

He'd never really tried to explain his tingles to anyone but Eric, and even *he'd* scoffed. But after that time Gary had one of his feelings that had subsequently kept them out of an ambush, Eric had become a believer.

Those past experiences were *nothing* like what he'd encountered when he looked at Michael. His brain short-circuited, quite literally. He was so afraid—deathly afraid—he would lose Michael. Afraid he'd be alone—again. The feelings piled on top of each other, heavier and heavier, and the more scared he got, the worse the panic became.

And he couldn't tell Michael *any* of it. That would mean explaining the whole sixth-sense thing, or whatever the hell it was. That only left one option, and it was something he hated the thought of doing, but it was the only way to figure out what the problem was and take steps to ensure it didn't happen.

I can't lose him.

I can't lose someone else.

Chapter Twenty-Four



The bedroom was darker than usual. Michael had turned Alexa off to cut out any ambient light. He lay behind Gary, his arms wrapped around him, maybe clutching him a bit tighter than normal.

It had to be the best Gary had felt in a long time.

Is what I'm about to do going to jeopardize that?

God, he hoped not. Not that he was about to change his mind or alter the plan. He knew Michael would be pissed beyond belief, maybe even pissed enough to break things off with Gary.

That would kill me.

Having lived through loss once, Gary didn't think he had it in him to do it again. He put a hand atop Michael's, allowing its warmth to permeate him.

No, he definitely couldn't lose Michael.

You don't know for certain that something bad is going to happen. You can't be sure.

That was true enough. But after living through each episode that followed the tingles, he'd learned enough to know he needed to pay attention when they happened. And even though he and Michael were alone in the bedroom,

his head was still screaming that *something was going to happen*. Not knowing exactly *what* was going to pass was maddening.

What fucking good is it to have this sensation if there isn't any kind of knowledge that goes with it?

It was about as useful as a fire alarm going full blast, only there was no smoke, no odor, *nothing* to show where the goddamn fire was, and all the while, there was that freaking *wail* that wouldn't quit.

"You're not sleeping," Michael murmured, his voice full of sleep. "You took your pills, right? Do I need to fuck you again?"

Gary wasn't surprised to find him awake. Michael had had a scare, and his own mind was probably racing. *How bad must I have looked?* Seeing Gary's seizure had to have planted doubts in his head. It had to—

"So what do you think we'll serve for our twenty-fifth anniversary?" Michael whispered, his breath tickling Gary's ear. "We gonna go big with Wagyu beef and Dom Pérignon? Or do you see us as more the Big Mac and fries guys?"

His easy words were a facade. Michael was more than likely aware of what Gary was thinking right then.

Gary covered Michael's hand with his own. "Okay, listen. You don't have to stay with me," he said. "I know I'll end up making your life—"

"Amazing, Cross," Michael interjected. "You'll make my life a joy every fucking day." He kissed the back of Gary's neck. "I know you had a scare today, but don't dwell on that, okay? I told you, I won't be walking away. The only one here who can do that is you." He nibbled a hot spot on Gary's shoulder, and Gary's dick made an effort to rise, but his head wasn't up for it. "So is that it? Do you want to call it quits?"

I should say yes.

He should tell Michael to leave both him and CrossBow behind. He didn't need to be an assistant. He had a whole exciting world in front of him that he could grab hold of and mold into his own. That was what he deserved.

It wasn't that being an assistant was beneath Michael, hell no. It was a stressful job, and he could understand why his other people had quit.

Yeah, but that was mostly my fault. I didn't do anything to make it less of a headache for them.

Gary knew what the problem was—he was too weak to tell Michael to go. Even though they'd only been together as a couple for a few weeks, Gary had grown accustomed to the touches. The smile. Those twinkling eyes. Fuck, he was already enamored by every part that made Michael what he was.

And if this goes tits-up, how will I survive without all those things?

Would it be enough to know Michael was safer without him?

“No,” he finally admitted. “I don't want to call it quits. It's weird, but I love you and I don't want you to go anywhere.”

Michael bit a little harder on that same spot, and Gary was sure he was intentionally leaving a mark. Michael seemed to enjoy seeing his hickeys on Gary's body. Gary didn't mind it either. “Did you just call me weird?”

The banter made Gary smile. “You'd have to be. A normal person would have run screaming into the night by now.”

Michael pressed forward, and Gary caught his breath when his warm, thick cock insinuated itself between Gary's cheeks. Instinctively, he drew his upper leg up, providing Michael with greater access. “What normal person would walk away from this ass, or the man attached to it?” He sighed. “Look, I don't want to add any stress to you, especially since you need to sleep, but...well....”

This didn't sound good. “Go on.” Something twisted in his gut.

“When you were in the hospital, I called my mom and we... we talked about you.”

“You've already talked about me. You told me this.”

“True, but... she told me to tell you that you're expected to come with me to their house a week before Thanksgiving dinner so they can get to know

you. She won't take no for an answer."

Wait—What?

"Why? I can't take that long off work."

Michael reached for Gary's chin, tilting his head until they looked each other in the eye. He smiled, and Gary's insides became goo. "I've already scheduled it. We—both of us—will be able to work remotely. As for why? Because you're going to be part of my big, messy family. Thanksgiving will be the first gathering of the troops, but it's only ten to fifteen people under normal circumstances. The biggie is Christmas, so you can treat this as a dry run."

Eric had said his parents would love Gary, but that turned out to be not true. "I don't know."

Michael rolled over for a moment, his dick slipping from the cleft of Gary's ass. Suddenly a flash of light broke the all-encompassing darkness.

"What are you doing?" Gary demanded.

"Hey, Mom. ... Yeah, I told him, and he's hesitating." Michael gave a sinister chuckle. "Sure, that sounds fun. One sec."

Then there was a woman's voice. She sounded utterly exhausted. "Hey, Gary."

He blinked. "You did *not* call your mom at two in the morning."

"Sure. I gotta make her pay for that snowblower thing *somehow*, right? Okay Mom, you're on speaker." Michael placed the phone on the bed in front of Gary.

He has to be fucking kidding.

"I swear, I'll get you back for this, Michael." Then his mom sighed. "Gary? Are you there?"

"Yes, ma'am." Even if he wanted to burrow beneath the blankets and never come out again. "I'm sorry for this."

This time she chuckled, and it was easy to see where Michael got his sense of humor. She even nailed that understated edge of menace, and

hearing it let Gary know Michael was in trouble. “It’s fine. I wish we had gotten to talk under better circumstances. How are you feeling?”

Great. Yet *another* person he was about to lie to.

“I’m better, thank you. Michael has been taking care of me.”

Michael wrapped his arm back around Gary’s waist and pulled him close, his cock coming to nestle once more between Gary’s ass cheeks.

He wouldn’t—would he?

As if in response to his unvoiced question, the head of Michael’s dick nudged his hole, and Gary squeaked as it popped through the ring of muscle briefly before pulling free.

Of course he would. He’d even applied lube for the purpose.

“Can you hang on a second? Michael said something.” He put the phone on mute, then slapped Michael’s leg hooked over his own. “You are *not* fucking me while I’m on the phone with your mother.”

“She’ll never know,” Michael promised in a silky voice, his cock head warm and firm as he pushed again, breaching Gary once more, stretching him, filling him. “God, you’re always so fucking *tight*.”

“Michael,” Gary groaned. “Please.”

Michael slid his hand up to Gary’s chest and tweaked a nipple. “Please what, Cross? Please stop? Please don’t tease and just fuck me? Which one is it? Make a decision.”

It should have been the first, but now Gary yearned for the second. He pressed back until his ass was flush against Michael’s crotch, Michael’s dick fully sheathed in his body.

Oh fuck, that feels amazing.

“Good boy,” Michael whispered. “Now shut up and talk to my mother.” And then Gary was lying facedown, Michael using his own legs to spread Gary’s, so fucking deep inside him.

Gary whimpered, and Michael whispered in his ear. “She won’t hear you if you don’t take it off mute.”

Gary managed to manipulate the phone, trying really hard not to embarrass himself when Michael slowly pulled out of him, every inch of Gary's channel clinging to that long, hard shaft.

"It... It's a...." Oh *fuck*, Michael wasn't messing around. He thrust in hard, skin slapping against skin, and Gary bit back a moan.

Michael's mom nattered on in his ear about... something.

"I'm sorry, I missed that. What did you say? We have a bad connection, I think."

Above him, Michael gave a chuckle that was downright wicked. He knew what he was doing to Gary, and worse, he was enjoying it. He slowed, taking long, deep strokes, bumping Gary's prostate with nearly every thrust.

Not embarrassing them was no longer an option, and the way the tremors were racking his body, he didn't actually care. He twisted to look at Michael over his shoulder, aiming a glare in his direction. Michael gave him the cheekiest grin, followed by another thrust.

Fuck, that felt so much better than amazing.

"Gary?"

Shit.

He was going to kill Michael, assuming he didn't die of shame first.

"Sorry, Mrs. Kennedy, I—*Ohhh.*"

"Are you okay?" she asked, her voice laced with concern and a touch of fear.

"Y-Y-Yes, I'm... oh God... I'm fine." He glared at Michael, hoping to get him to stop, at least for now, but all he got was a wink, a blown kiss, and another thrust.

There was no doubt. Michael was doing this intentionally, the bastard.

Gary wanted to be pissed that Michael was making things so hard—difficult—but he couldn't stay that way for long, not when it felt so fucking good.

"Is there anything you don't eat? Or something you'd prefer?"

Eat? Was your son an acceptable answer?

“No, I eat pretty much anything.”

Michael snickered as he dragged his cock out slowly, then shoved it back in, knocking the air from Gary’s lungs. “Especially my dick, right?”

What the...

“Mrs. Kennedy, can you give me a minute?” Gary put the phone on mute again, then snarled over his shoulder. “What the *fuck*, man? Let me talk to her later.”

Michael put both hands on Gary’s back and pressed him into the mattress. He started doing pushups, driving his cock in deeper.

“Nope, you stay on the line with her until I get off, otherwise I stop. Unless you really *want* a case of blue balls?”

“You wouldn’t... yeah, you totally would. Can’t you at least hurry up?”

Another evil chuckle. “Nah, I quite like being inside you, and I’m not one to rush things. Go on, talk with Mom.”

Gary knew later he’d remember absolutely nothing about that conversation, and managing to form sentences had to be some kind of a miracle, especially when he felt the throb of Michael’s cock inside him. It took every ounce of effort not to moan out loud. But at last the call was over, Michael eased out of him, and he stabbed at the screen.

“Why the hell did you do that?” Gary demanded, reaching back. The evidence of Michael’s enjoyment was leaking from his ass.

Michael kissed his shoulder. “You don’t have enough fun. You’re all about business.”

Gary gasped. “Do you know how many times we’ve had sex?”

“I do. And *most* times you seem like you’re enjoying it.”

“Only most times?”

“I have to be honest, sometimes you’re not fully there.”

What the hell does that mean?

Did he think Gary was distracted? Okay, maybe he had been when Abbas

arrived. And maybe after the explosion. And maybe when....

Oh.

Looking back, he could see times where Michael might have thought that. There had been many occasions when he'd held Gary's attention, but then thoughts invaded his mind like a worm, burrowing in and taking hold.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I do enjoy it. I mean, I really, *really* enjoy it. It's just sometimes—"

"Your head gets in the way. I understand. I do. You've been on your own for six years. You've made CrossBow your life, and now I've come in and disrupted that."

"No," Gary argued. "You haven't disrupted *anything*. In fact, you've made it way better."

Michael rolled him onto his back, then lay beside him, his head propped up in his hand. "Until a few weeks ago, you were Mr. Cross. The boss. He who sat in his office and handed out edicts, but never gave off a *single* warm, fuzzy vibe. Not once."

He winced. "That's how I came across?" He knew he'd kept himself at a distance, but *Jesus*....

Michael gave a nod. "You were closed, not letting anyone in. And if I'm honest, you were wasting away before my eyes. Your whole life was dedicated to work and sleep—and from what I could tell, there wasn't much of the latter." He kissed Gary's throat. "I knew when that icy façade finally cracked, it was going to require a lot of work to keep it open."

Shame coursed through Gary. Not only was he lying to Michael, but now he was being told he hadn't been as attentive as he'd believed.

"I'm—"

Michael laid a finger against Gary's lips. "Don't say you're sorry. That's not why I'm telling you this. You've done all these amazing things since getting out of the military, but you still have that government-sized stick up your ass." His eyes glittered. "As much as I hate to admit it, that stick is

bigger than mine.” He stroked Gary’s chest with a leisurely hand. “But you’re not the same person you were. You’re becoming more comfortable with you and me becoming a we. In the span of a few weeks, you’ve let me into more than your ass. You’ve allowed me into your heart.”

Aw fuck.

And there Gary was, lying to him.

But I’m doing it to keep him safe, because I love him. Not that he could tell Michael that. The words would sound trite and hollow.

How would I feel if Michael was keeping a secret from me?

There was always the possibility that love—especially a new love—left unattended would die easily.

His stomach clenched. “Michael, I—”

“That’s why I wanted you to come to visit my family. They want to be yours too. They know how I feel about you, and they’re eager to meet you. To show you that what we have is big enough and messy enough to include you.”

Oh, Gary wanted that. He still talked with his mom on occasion. She loved him and he knew it, but she wasn’t much of a nurturer. There weren’t many memories of her hugging him or telling him how proud she was of something he’d accomplished. Even after opening CrossBow, her words had seemed shallow.

Gary had understood that. She’d never had passion in her life, not like Gary had in his. In a way, he worried about becoming like her.

Did I close off my heart to the point where I was on that same path?

Yeah, he had.

He’d always worried no one could ever love someone with his scars—both mental and physical. But Michael did, and Gary was beyond certain of that. Everything he did telegraphed that love. Not with words alone, but with action. From making sure Gary had his coffee to handing him his pills, Michael was taking care of Gary out of love.

And now? Gary was certain he would do what he needed to in order to keep Michael out of harm's way, even if it cost him everything he was building.

Michael would survive.

Chapter Twenty-Five



Gary remembered standing by his own front window, staring out at the newly broken morning.

The sky in the near desert-like environment had been cloudless and blue. The birds warbled their morning song while Gary's neighbor backed her car out of the garage, heading to work. He knew that also meant she'd stop and grab a donut from the gas station that she would later tell Gary he had to try.

Now that he was staying at CrossBow, he wondered how she was doing.

The scent of coffee wafted in from the kitchen, mingling with that of bacon and eggs. Gary followed the heavenly aroma, coming to a dead stop when he found Michael at the stove—naked again—his cock swaying to and fro.

He couldn't help smiling.

Once upon a time, Gary had wanted nothing more than a life like this. In fact, he'd yearned for such... domesticity. He'd imagined himself living in a small place with a kid and a husband, the very picture of bliss.

Then he'd done something foolish and gone to war, and in a heartbeat, his

dream changed from one of being in love and happy, to hoping he could survive the night.

Yes, he'd found love, but what he'd shared with Eric had been only a brief snatch of time. Mere seconds compared to the years Gary had spent on this earth. It had been intense, partially because neither of them had known if they'd live to see another day, but also because of Eric's big personality. It was what made Abbas crush on him, what others gravitated toward. He was a hurricane, and without due care and attention, it was easy to be washed away by the deluge.

Gary had gotten caught up in Hurricane Eric, and he'd never regretted it.

Michael, though? He was in a league of his own. Because while Eric was a hurricane, Michael was more like summer rain. Yes, he could be intense at times, but he nourished everything around him, making it grow, more vibrant.

What shocked Gary was that the time they spent time together rekindled his earlier yearnings for domesticity. He wouldn't say it out loud, but he dreamed of Michael living with him. Of waking up to his smile every day. Having someone care if he took his meds, taking care of him when he wasn't feeling well, or when he needed a pick-me-up. All Gary had ever wanted was to have a life with a partner he loved.

And today I'm going to throw all that away.

If he didn't, something terrible would happen to Michael, and Gary couldn't survive that loss. Not again. The prospect was like a rock in his chest.

"Good morning." Gary grabbed two mugs out of the cabinet and poured them coffee. With every movement, his heart cracked a little more. He had to force himself to be cheerful, because Michael couldn't know something was wrong.

What was required was a performance worthy of an Academy Award.

Michael glanced at him over his shoulder. "Hey. Sleep okay?"

Gary put the mugs down on the counter and crossed his arms. "Your

mother is going to kill you. I hope you know that. After she's done, I get what's left."

Michael turned, leaned in, and pecked Gary on the lips. The simple sweet gesture made his heart ache. He wanted to tell Michael the truth, that his life was in danger, and that Gary needed to do... something. No matter how much time had passed since he'd first experienced the ominous tingle, his head was still screaming that something was wrong.

Whatever was coming would be soon. Maybe today.

"Nah, she loves me." Michael wrapped his arms around Gary and pulled him in, staring into his eyes. "She's going to love you too."

As much as Gary longed for that, he knew it wasn't going to happen. What he was about to do would change all that. There'd be no Thanksgiving. No Christmas. No family holidays that Gary yearned to be part of. Today Michael would learn of Gary's lie and then he'd walk away, leaving Gary alone.

The only thought that comforted him was that Michael would be alive. That was all that mattered.

I couldn't save Eric, but I can save him.

"Hey, are you sure you're okay? You look rough." Michael stroked his thumb beneath Gary's eye. "Did you sleep at all?"

The best way—the *only* way—to deal with this was to play it off, make it seem like everything was normal. "Well, if *someone* hadn't made me wake up two more times because he was horny...."

It wasn't true. Gary didn't care if he slept. He loved it when Michael took him. Whether he used Gary's mouth or his ass, even if he crawled between Gary's legs and sucked him like a fucking Hoover, the feeling of Michael burying himself inside Gary's body was transcendental.

God, I'm going to miss that.

"Well, I'm certainly not sorry you've got such a tight, hot, absolutely perfect ass that's impossible to resist." Michael grinned. "I swear, I wake up

in the middle of the night and hear it calling me. *Michael. Michael. I need you. Come to me.* Or maybe it was begging. *Come in me.* Both work.”

Despite his churning stomach, Gary couldn't suppress his smile. “My ass is talking to you, huh?”

Michael reached over and gave it a pat. “What can I say? Your hole loves me.” He gave Gary another light kiss. “Now sit down and I'll get breakfast served.” There wasn't any further discussion while Michael plated up the food, then served it with a flourish and a deep kiss that sent warmth hurtling through him and curled his toes. “Good morning, Mr. Cross.”

Life was so freaking unfair. To have something served to you on a silver platter, then be forced to walk away from it?

Fuck, this hurt.

“Abbas leaves today,” Michael remarked in a low voice.

And that was yet another thing Gary hated. Abbas had a true friend in Michael. He could see it whenever they were together, hear it in his words.

“I'm sorry.”

Michael rolled one shoulder. “Nothing we can do but hope he can stay out of the crosshairs, right?”

His words robbed Gary of what little appetite he possessed.

He took the dishes, scraped them off, then put them in the dishwasher. He got ready for work, neither of them saying a whole lot.

Maybe my mood is rubbing off on him.

The rubbing off part would have raised a smile in the not too distant past, but not then.

They showered and dressed in silence, then headed to Abbas's room. Even before Gary had a chance to knock at the door, it opened, and Abbas stood there, smiling.

“Good morning, Michael. Mr. Cross.”

“Morning,” Michael said.

Abbas widened his eyes. “Hey, don't look so sad. I'm grateful to have

made a friend such as you.” He pulled Michael into a hug. “Both of you.”

The tingle Gary had been combatting ramped up again, but this time the source wasn’t just Michael—it was Abbas as well.

They’re both in some kind of danger.

Gary’s fucking tingles—the gift that kept on giving.

It was time to do *something*.

“Michael? Why don’t you take Abbas and a few bodyguards to go buy some souvenirs? Something to remember his time with us.” Gary kept his tone light. He wasn’t sure where the danger would come from, but having Michael and Abbas out, being lowkey, and with guards made sense.

At least in his head.

Michael brightened a little. “Are you sure?” He turned to Abbas. “They have the most incredible McDonald’s here. The building is shaped like a UFO.”

Abbas’s eyes were huge. “Are you certain, Mr. Cross?”

Fuck yeah, he was. He needed to get them away from CrossBow and somewhere they’d blend in. “Sure. Just do me a favor, would you? Dress down a little. Fit in if you can. Wear jeans and a T-shirt or something.”

He grinned. “I can do that.”

“Be back by four,” Gary told them. “Then we can see what happens after that.”

Michael walked off with Abbas, chatting animatedly about the McDonald’s and other things in the town many considered the UFO capital of the United States. Gary hoped they had a good time. It wasn’t until they were out of sight that it hit him.

I didn’t kiss Michael goodbye.



At noon the phone rang, and just like that, Gary's senses went on alert.

Here we go.

He sucked in a breath and answered. "Cross."

"This is Andrew Sayer from the State Department. We'd like to meet for the transfer of Mr. Abbas into our custody, effectively ending CrossBow's involvement."

It sounded perfectly plausible, exactly what Gary had been expecting.

Then why do I feel like I want to throw up?

"Of course, Mr. Sayer. When and where?" *And if you're from the State Department, I'm Mickey Mouse.*

"There's a small airstrip about twenty miles south of you." He gave directions, and Gary jotted them down on his pad. "We'd like the exchange to happen there, and as soon as that's taken place, we can then get Mr. Abbas on a plane and deliver him back to his own country."

"Sounds like a plan," Gary said, his stomach tight. *Have I gotten it wrong?*

No, he hadn't. He'd tried ignoring his tingles before, and it never ended well.

"We'd like Mr. Kennedy to bring Mr. Abbas," Mr. Whoever he was continued smoothly. "As he was with him during the last attempt on his life, we want to debrief him before we finalize the paperwork. It would be best if only the two of them came, as we don't want to draw undue attention."

There it was. *This* was what Gary had been sensing. *They want Michael and Abbas—alone.* No other bodyguards, no one to watch over his man and their friend.

What the fuck?

"Sure, I get it. I think it's a wise idea," Gary lied in an equally smooth tone. "Abbas finished packing early this morning and is ready. We just need to load the car and then they can head out. Just don't keep Michael too long, okay? He's got a lot of work to do, and since our part of the operation is

mostly done, we'd like to get to it."

And there was Gary's performance for Best Actor. *Thank you to everyone who made this possible.*

Too bad he wasn't going to be around to collect his little gold statue.

The person on the other end of the line chuckled. "I understand. We've been wasting a lot of manpower too, and once Abbas is back home where he belongs, many of us will breathe a whole lot easier."

"Great. I'm glad to know we're both on the same page. They should be on the road in fifteen minutes, so let's say twelve forty-five?"

How Gary managed to sound so fucking *normal*, he would never know.

"That's perfect. Mr. Cross, your government thanks you for your help in this matter. We know things didn't go to plan, and we mourn the sacrifice your people made to keep Abbas safe."

His words were like a knife twisting in Gary's back.

How fucking dare they talk about my men like this? They didn't give a shit about anyone at CrossBow, and he knew it. He'd agreed initially because of Abbas's link to him and Eric. And that had been hubris on Gary's part, thinking they could keep him safe. CrossBow wasn't built for an operation that size.

I should have turned the job down as soon as the words were out of Porter's mouth.

Time to bring the curtain down on his performance.

"Thanks. I have to go if we're going to get everything done before Abbas leaves. Thank you for calling."

He disconnected the call before he lost his nerve. He wanted to buzz Michael, tell him what was going on, but he knew Michael would insist either on going along or Gary taking more men with him.

Which is really what I should be doing. Except....

Michael was his to protect. Gary needed to make sure he was safe, and also that Abbas was kept out of these people's hands. At least until Gary was

convinced everything was kosher.

And right that second, everything felt as far from kosher as it was possible to be.

He fired off a note to Michael and Josh's pads before heading out to the parking lot to grab one of the company vehicles. He paused to take a final longing glance at the legacy he'd helped to build. Not only to honor Eric's wishes, but something Gary was goddamn proud of.

Then he turned the car around and headed off to find out what the hell was going on.



The drive to the airstrip was quiet, not that that was any great surprise. Roswell had 48,000 inhabitants, so it wasn't a small city, but it wasn't as big as Los Angeles or Houston, both places that had been potential sites for CrossBow. When he'd spoke with Josh about it, he'd said that not only did they need room, but that Texas overall was bad for LGBT employees. That had nixed them off the list right away. Gary took great pride in providing for his people, and he wouldn't have anyone disrespected by any government. Plus, Josh told him they didn't need tax breaks to buy the land. Gary didn't want them to be beholden to anyone or to change the way they did business to suit any state statutes.

He spotted the airstrip in the distance. It was tiny. *And this is where they want to meet?*

Yeah, this fucking stank to high heaven. *Now he knew why he'd come.* It was unlikely Michael would have recognized the potential danger. He would have walked right in.

Gary's heart hammered. He was being stupid. He knew it to his very core.

Still, he'd decided on this course of action, and he wouldn't be dissuaded. When he parked the car, he was surprised to see three vehicles with government plates, and the sight caused him to waver a little in his certainty. He still believed the ILF part was a fabrication, but he couldn't be absolutely sure. After all, zealots could come from anywhere.

Gary pulled out his pad and brought up the employee files. He found Michael's quickly enough, then sat there staring at the picture. Those gleaming eyes and that devilish smirk. Why had it taken Gary so long to see past his own problems? He could have been talking with Michael instead of freezing him out. They could have become friends long before now. If only....

No, that wasn't helpful to anyone. *Can't change the past.* He just wished he could be sure they had a future in front of them. He traced his finger over Michael's face, recalling the warmth of his skin, the sound of his voice, the gasp as he orgasmed.

Fuck, he wasn't going to cry now. He couldn't afford the time.

"I'm going to do my best to get back to you," Gary vowed, then steeled himself for whatever was about to happen.

He exited the vehicle and slid his pad under the seat, hiding it from view. He stepped into the hangar, the smell of oil and dust clinging to his nose. It had clearly been quite some time since the place had been used as an airstrip.

"I'm disappointed, Cross" came a very familiar voice from behind him. "You were told to send Abbas and Kennedy, yet I don't see them."

Gary's stomach plummeted and ice crawled over his skin.

He turned and came face to face with Porter, out of uniform. It made him appear less intimidating, but somehow more disgusting.

Gary shoved down hard on his nausea and managed a shrug. "And you know what? You won't. I've told Michael to keep Abbas hidden, because I've gotta be honest, I never trusted you. You're too oily and sleazy."

He was *way* beyond giving a shit about poking the bear.

Porter's nostrils flared. "Where's Abbas?" The words were almost a

growl.

“Somewhere you’ll never get to him,” Gary vowed.

Porter raised a hand and two men stepped out of the shadowed recesses of the hangar, moving quickly toward Gary. Adrenaline flooded through him and he swung at the first man, missing, but the motion threw him off balance. He hadn’t trained to fight in far too many years, and he was out of practice. The second man got behind him and punched Gary in the back of the neck. His head snapped forward with the pain, and then he was thrown down on the grimy floor. Then they were on him, pummeling Gary’s face, stomach, and chest.

Resistance was futile—he was in crap shape, and they were all muscle. He hovered on the brink of passing out, and thankfully they stopped.

Porter came closer and crouched beside him.

“Why, Cross? I didn’t want you involved in this. You’re too much of a fucking Goody Two-shoes. My partners wanted me to try to get you onto our side, but I told them it wouldn’t work. Maybe if you had, Bowman would still be alive.”

Gary stiffened. “What?” he croaked.

Porter’s smile sent a shiver down Gary’s back. “When it became obvious there was no likelihood of you playing ball, we thought maybe Bowman would. The only problem with that idea? He was too much like you.”

Gary’s head spun with a combination of blows and horror.

“Still, they insisted I give it a shot, so I felt him out, wanting to see if he could be swayed. He was stubborn, though. Told me he wasn’t interested in a military career, and that you and he had plans when you got out. I regret his death, but he knew too much so had to be dealt with.”

Gary’s gut clenched painfully. “You murdered him?”

Porter managed to look shocked, the colossal prick. “Not me. The people I work with did the deed. They couldn’t have him talking to anyone.”

Gary had always believed Porter to be an asshole, but a *traitor*?

“How the fuck could you? You let them kill your own men.”

Porter nodded to the two men, and they hauled Gary up from the floor. “The only men I’m concerned with are me and those who are working with me.” He drove a meaty fist into Gary’s stomach, forcing the air from his lungs. “So I’ll ask again. Where. Is. Abbas?”

Gary lifted his chin and stared Porter in the eye. “Fuck you, traitor.”

Porter’s face tightened. “You’re too goddamn stubborn for your own good.”

“If you wanted Abbas, why not come in guns blazing? Why lob bombs at CrossBow?”

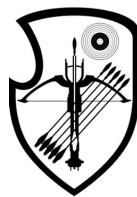
A dark chuckle rumbled out of him. “That wasn’t us,” Porter crowed. “Did we take advantage of it? Hell, yes. But it wasn’t something we started.”

Gary’s head was reeling. They’d all assumed the attack had been launched by whoever was after Abbas, but if it wasn’t....

Porter stared at him once more. “Now, where’s Abbas?”

“You need to take the second star to the right, and straight on till morning,” Gary recited.

This time a left hook to the face snapped Gary’s head back and everything faded to black.



Fuck, that hurts.

He couldn’t be sure how long he’d been out, but he was blindfolded and zip-tied to a chair. That same smell lingered, so it didn’t seem like they’d moved him from the hangar, which was a bonus.

“Oh, you’re awake. Good.”

Porter.

Fucker.

Strong fingers reached out and grabbed Gary's hair. "Where's Abbas?"

"Maybe I didn't say it before, but just in case, fuck you, traitor." Gary grunted as a fist smashed into his face.

"Look, I don't want to hurt you," Porter said in a voice that dripped insincerity. "You were a damn fine soldier. I just need you to tell me where Abbas is."

"And I need *you* to fuck off."

Two more punches followed, and Gary's mouth exploded into pain as a tooth cracked. *Fuck*. He probed the area with his tongue and groaned. He'd paid damn good money to get that capped.

"Where's Abbas?"

This time Gary took measure of where Porter's voice was coming from. He hocked the blood pooling in his mouth toward it. Porter's indignant squawk told him he'd hit his target.

"You motherfucker," Porter bellowed a moment before Gary was pummeled again. Then he stopped, and before Gary had a chance to draw breath, Porter spoke to someone else. "Do it."

Fear spiked through him. A hand gripped his finger and snapped it back, the sound of the bone breaking loud in the room. Gary couldn't help but cry out from the shock and pain.

"I don't want to kill you," Porter said, his tone conciliatory. "This doesn't have to get any worse. Just tell me where Abbas is, and after we have him, we'll let them know where you are."

"I'm not stupid," Gary spat out. "I tell you where he is, and you'll kill me. We both know you can't have any witnesses."

"Fine, you son of a bitch. Then tell us and we'll make it quick. There's no need to suffer. We can be done and you can finally sleep next to Bowman."

Gary shook his head, despite the pain that lanced through it. "Can't."

"Why the fuck not?" Porter demanded, sounding almost whiny.

Gary managed to smirk through the layers of pain. “Mostly because it pisses you off. I kinda like that.”

Someone landed another punch, this time to the gut. It seemed the good general understood torture. Then the beating abated, but Gary knew Porter wasn’t done.

He leaned in close, judging by the cigar breath, Porter’s hateful face was mere inches from Gary’s.

“Now you need to be nicer to me, especially after all I’ve done for you.”

“What the fuck have *you* done? Have your heavies beat the crap out of me?”

Porter chuckled, dark and dangerous enough it sent a chill down Gary’s spine. “I told them to tone it down a little.”

“That was toned *down*? Gee, I’d hate to see what they can accomplish when they *really* let loose.”

“Did you know that if he *hadn’t* been told to pull his punch, he could have paralyzed you from the neck down?”

Okay, so the men with Porter were also good at torturing. Figured.

“So now are you going to tell me where he is?”

“Nice try, but the answer is still no.”

“You have no idea what’s at stake,” Porter wheedled. “With Abbas gone and the US blamed, the fighting will resume. It’ll be like a match to kindling as it all goes up in flames. This will reignite the war, and we’ll have no choice but to wade back into the mess.”

What the ever-loving fuck?

“What kind of idiot would want war?”

“The kind that makes shit tons of cash off it.” Porter grunted. “You gotta love capitalism. We can sell them tanks, bombs, guns. *All* the things they’ll need. Then we sneak through the backdoor and offer the same thing to the enemies of Abbas’s people. In time, the other groups in the area will descend, and everything will escalate. It should keep raging for at least a decade, and

we'll just sit back and reap the profits.”

“You're fucking crazy,” Gary shouted.

He screamed as they cracked another finger. He'd dealt with pain most of his life and he didn't fear death, so this wasn't going to help them in the least.

No fucking *way* would he allow Porter to hurt Michael and Abbas.

No fucking *way* would he allow the US to be dragged into another war.

He'd rather die.

Chapter Twenty-Six



His chest hurt so bad, Gary could scarcely draw breath. He had no idea how long they'd had him in that infernal place, but they'd slashed him with a knife or box cutter, and the warm blood had caked over on his arms and chest. They'd pummeled his face, and he couldn't feel his eye anymore. His lips were chapped and his throat parched and raw from the screams that had barreled out of him when they broke more fingers on his right hand.

They'd long since given up on the blindfold. It no longer mattered if Gary saw their faces, because he'd accepted he wasn't getting out of the hangar alive. Still, Porter continued to make demands of Gary, with the promise of a swift death.

And he *still* hadn't given up any information on Abbas or Michael.

"Cross, why are you being so fucking difficult?" Porter snarled. Either he or one of his men punched Gary in the face again—Gary wasn't lucid enough to differentiate. "This should *never* have gotten to this point."

"You should never have betrayed your oath to this country either," Gary croaked out. "But ya did. You got your own men killed, and for what?"

Money? Power? You were a general in the United States Army, and—”

“I’m still a general.”

Gary gave a harsh laugh. “Fucking traitor.” He squinted at Porter’s contorted face, his blood-covered knuckles, the sputum drying on his cheek. “Gotta say, you’ve looked better.”

Porter snarled. “Where the hell is Abbas?” Another sharp jab found its home in Gary’s stomach to punctuate the point.

Gary’s insides churned. He knew he wouldn’t be able to take much more of this abuse. It wouldn’t be long before he’d be past caring, because he’d be dead.

Then it hit him. If he died, there’d be no one standing between Porter and Michael.

Gain some time. Any fucking way you can.

“Why Michael?”

Porter blinked. “What?”

“You said you wanted Michael to bring Abbas here. Why him?”

“That’s none of your concern. Just tell us where they are.”

Gary was going to make it his concern. He wasn’t going to get loose—they’d already seen to that—but if he had a few moments to catch his breath, maybe he could withstand the pain a little longer. “I’m straining my brain here, and I can’t figure out what my executive assistant could do for you.”

Three more sharp punches landed on Gary’s bruised and abused belly. He wondered if they’d burst something inside him, or if the warmth that filled him was blood pooling at the point of injury.

He’d gotten this far.

“You stole away my men for your greed. I’m going to die, so at least give me this. You owe me this much.”

Porter straightened, then nodded at one of the men who took over from him. The man had fists like meaty ham hocks. And while Porter had obviously gotten tired, this guy was fresh. He took aim at Gary’s chest.

Snap.

The bone cracking sounded so fucking loud, it made Gary wince.

“Where the fuck is Abbas?” Porter shouted.

His body was a mass of pain, but Gary clung on. “Why Michael?” he demanded through gritted teeth.

“Jesus fucking *Christ*,” Porter bellowed into the air. “You know, when you were in my command, I fucking *hated* you. If I needed to discipline one of the men, you were always fucking there, in my face, telling me why I had to stop. I was the *commanding officer*, for fuck’s sake, and you had no goddamn business interfering.”

“They were my men,” Gary snapped. “Michael is mine. Abbas is mine. You? You’re nothing but a traitorous piece of shit.”

And then the assault began anew. Porter launched into a tirade, and Gary struggled to catch his words between blows.

“When someone makes you an offer, especially when it’s something you can get rich from, you fucking *take it*. You don’t turn your back on powerful men. They don’t tolerate failure, and that’s what that whole clusterfuck of an operation was. I warned them your squad wouldn’t fall in line, but oh no, they were so fucking sure money could buy loyalty.”

“Bought yours easily enough, huh?” Gary said, a moment before he was punched in the face once more. He spat out a tooth that had been knocked free.

The cords stood out on Porter’s neck, his face red. “Boo-hoo fucking liberals. They refuse to understand the world runs on money. Billionaires are the ones who control everything. The government? Too polarized to get anything meaningful done. The nation needs a strong hand to guide it out of mediocrity.” He clenched his fists at his sides. “We used to be the dominant powerhouse. People wanted to ally with us because they knew no one would fuck with us. But now? Everyone is so fucking afraid of hurting someone’s feelings or being accused of something. So what if some guys get a little

worked up and play around with a few women? They're *men*, for fuck's sake. Testosterone surges and you need release."

He'd always known he didn't care for Porter, but to listen to the man saying rape wasn't a big deal turned Gary's sore-as-fuck stomach.

"Where is Abbas?" Porter demanded for the umpteenth time, although now Gary swore there was an edge to his voice, almost desperate, like he was....

Gotcha, you son of a bitch.

"They're going to kill you, aren't they?"

Porter stilled, his eyes wide, and Gary knew he'd nailed it.

He managed a single nod, wincing from the effort. "I'm right, aren't I? You fail to do what they want and suddenly you become a liability like that guy in the hospital. Gee, I feel awful for you." Gary narrowed his eyes. "You know what? Even though I hate whoever you're in bed with, I'd put a bullet right smack dab in the middle of your fucking unibrow myself. Hell, I'd do it for free."

"You don't know shit!" Porter thundered. "I've been loyal to them for nearly thirty years. They didn't send me out to pasture like the government did."

"And yet here you are, nearly pissing your pants." Gary smiled, and he was sure it was a disgusting sight because of all the blood. "You're gonna die."

"That would look amazing on you," Michael said as Abbas held up an emerald green shirt with black stitching to his chest. "It highlights your eyes."

Abbas looked at the shirt longingly, then put it back on the rack. "My village is more traditional. Plus, with the rise of groups like ISIS, people are afraid to cross a line by wearing something so flashy."

Michael frowned. “It’s a shirt, not a reflective pink suit.” He moved closer, noting how their detail kept a tight circle around them. “Do you have to go back?”

Abbas gave a nod. “As my father’s eldest, I’m expected to—”

“Fuck what you’re expected to do. What do you *want* to do?”

Abbas said nothing for a moment, then sighed. “I will tell you the truth. I have no desire to go back. My brother, Akeem, is far more suited to leadership. Even his name means wise and intelligent. Our mother saw it in him, but my father insisted tradition must be followed.” He frowned. “Many in the Middle East, especially the young, want progressive reforms. They don’t want to be pigeonholed into roles they have no interest in. It’s why I went to college. Ostensibly it was to help our people, but the truth? I wanted to get away. I was more than willing to let Akeem lead, because as a....” He looked around, then leaned in closer. “As a gay man, I wouldn’t be accepted, even if I followed our traditions.”

Michael was about to say something when his phone chimed. He took it from his pocket and saw a text from Josh.

We have an emergency.

He dialed Josh, who answered immediately, talking a mile a minute, and Michael had problems keeping up. Then his blood froze when he said Gary’s name.

“Slow down, Josh. What was that about Gary?”

“He sent a mail to us, saying we needed to keep Abbas as far from CrossBow as possible until he told us it was safe. Didn’t you see it?”

“No, but—”

“And now he’s gone, and no one can find him.”

“Gone?” *What the fuck are you doing, Cross?* “I’m not even going to ask if you called him.”

“Only about a thousand times. I left messages too.” Josh gave an audible gulp. “I pinged his pad. It’s about twenty point two miles from CrossBow. I

checked and the only thing there is an old airfield. They sometimes use it for working on planes, but it's mostly decommissioned."

"Why the hell would he be there? Did his mail say anything else?"

"Mine didn't. I assumed he'd sent the same one to you."

Michael pulled his phone from his ear and checked his mail. All he saw was the same thing Josh had spoken of—a note telling them to keep safe.

What the fuck have you done, Cross?

Michael's heartbeat raced.

"Get anyone you can out to that airstrip," he demanded. "Tell them to stay at a distance until I get there, though." He disconnected the call, then turned to the guards. "Take him somewhere and keep him safe."

As one they all gave a sharp nod, then moved like a well-oiled machine, trundling Abbas from the building. Michael rushed to his car, sweat dripping down his face. Except he couldn't be certain they weren't tears.

What the fuck does Cross think he's up to?

He thought about calling the police, but nixed that idea. He still didn't know if they could be trusted. He could call Sheriff Trent, but it would take far too long for him to get to them, and Michael wasn't even sure of jurisdiction issues.

They were on their own.

By the time Michael arrived at the perimeter of the old airfield, there was a line of cars waiting. He was surprised by the number of people who'd come, but then he reasoned these men all owed Gary and they would drop anything to help him if needed.

He spied Dixon Meeks standing by the fence, a pair of binoculars in one hand. As the most senior person to work at CrossBow, Meeks was the one deferred to by the men when Gary wasn't around.

He gave Michael a nod. "So far I've spotted three vehicles, close to that old hangar. One of them is a CrossBow car. There's a plane beyond it too. No sign of anyone, so let's assume they're inside the hangar. What do we

know?” His scowl deepened the crow’s feet around his gray eyes. “Wheels was less than communicative. I’ve never seen him so freaked out.”

Michael gave a brief rundown and Meeks growled. “What the fuck is he doing, running off on his own?”

That was a damn good question. One Michael was determined to get answers for, once they made sure he was okay.

Meeks signaled to the men waiting with him. “Okay, move in, but quietly. Be ready. We don’t know what’s waiting for us in there, but we have to assume they’re armed. And we need to reach them before they get onto that plane.”

The sight of their weapons should have reassured Michael, but instead it sent a trickle of cold through him.

This was beyond fucked up.

Cross, if you make it out of here alive, I am never letting you out of my sight again.



Gary couldn’t feel his right arm anymore. He was certain they’d broken it. His mouth was full of blood that trickled constantly from his lips. He barked a thick, wet cough. It was a surefire thing they’d done internal damage.

Then the blows stopped, and Gary found himself praying it was finally over.

“You know you’re going to talk eventually. I’ve yet to meet a man who didn’t. They all crack in the end.”

Which meant Porter had tortured people before. The knowledge came as no surprise. “Does the government know what a psychotic son of a bitch you are?” he croaked. “Or are they the ones paying you to torture people?”

Porter snarled. “I made General in this mess because I was the only one willing to do what needed to be done. If we needed information to save US lives, then I was damn well going to get it one way or another.”

“By breaking international laws?” Gary erupted into another bout of coughing, and pain lanced through him.

“You mean the United Nations? *Please*. They need us far more than we need them. They think everyone will come together and sing ‘Kumbaya’ around the campfire and we’ll all become the best of friends.” A pause. “And I’ve had about all the shit I can take from you.”

Gary heard the click a moment before the bang that tore away his kneecap. He’d never screamed like that in his life. The pain was like nothing he’d ever felt before, and for a moment—just one fucking instant—he thought about telling them everything, just to end the agony. He would never give up Michael, though. That wasn’t going to ever happen.

Thick fingers threaded into Gary’s hair, and Porter jerked his head back. The strain was unbearable. “Final time of asking, Cross, and if you don’t tell me, we’ll kill every fucking person in your building. Every man, woman, and child.”

Gary knew they weren’t empty words. Porter had no morals. Still, the upgrades Josh had made to CrossBow would help hold them off long enough for someone to arrive, right? Assuming they got any help from the cops in the first place.

Gary muttered something unintelligible even to his own ears. Whatever he’d said, it apparently wasn’t what Porter wanted to hear. He slammed Gary’s head into the concrete floor, cracking the back of his skull.

“He’s a good soldier,” Porter muttered as he straightened and walked away. “Too bad he’s a stupid one.” He stood several feet from Gary, regarding him with an expression of loathing.

What is he waiting for? Waves of pain crashed over Gary, and he knew he was about to pass out. Then Porter pulled a gun from the holster at his

side, and Gary's heart went into overdrive.

Oh fuck.

Porter aimed it.

So that was that. He wouldn't get a chance to see what a life with Michael would be like. Tears trickled down Gary's cheeks at the thought of all the things he'd miss about his future. The only source of comfort was that Michael would be safe.

The shot was deafening, and the burn as the bullet slammed into his body was excruciating. The second shot was overkill, and Gary knew it.

He'd probably never have survived the beating.



Shots rang out and Michael's heart seized.

No. No. No. No.

Dixon and the group swooped in like avenging angels, weapons raised, all intent on a single goal. Dixon had told Michael to stay back, and he would have, at least until he heard yet more bangs. Then he was running for the building, his brain screaming that something had happened to Gary. That he was going to lose him.

Michael reached the door, and the first thing that struck him was the momentary silence. Then Dixon's voice rang out.

“We've got a man down! I need an ambulance here right fucking now!”

God no.

Michael stepped into the building, only to be pressed back by Dixon. “You should wait outside,” he said, his tone grave.

“What's going on?” Michael demanded.

Dixon's face fell. “It's Mr. Cross. He—”

Michael didn't wait to hear more. He pushed past Dixon and ran to where several people were kneeling. When he laid eyes on Cross, Michael recoiled. Gary's face was so swollen, it was almost unrecognizable. His right arm was bent at an unnatural angle, and his hand and fingers were thick and misshapen. His leg was a mess. His shirt was soaked in blood that was pooling beneath him.

"Gary," he whispered, falling to his knees beside Cross. He put his hands on Gary's chest, not paying attention to the red stain that now covered them both. The shrill scream was a surprise. It took Michael a minute to realize it was him crying out as he watched Gary dying. He was going to lose everything on a fucking grimy floor.

Strong hands pulled him away, and he struggled against them, but there were too many. The circle of people filled in again, and his view of Gary was obscured. Some were attempting mouth-to-mouth, while others were trying to stop the bleeding. At any other time, Michael would have been glad CrossBow trained their agents in battlefield trauma, but right then he didn't actually give a shit. His brain was screaming, trying to make sense of what he was seeing.

"Michael!"

He jerked his head up. "What?"

"Go outside and direct the paramedics here," Dixon ordered.

"But Gary needs me," he whispered.

"You're fucking useless here. Go do what you're told."

Dixon's words stung. Michael couldn't do anything but be in the way. He didn't have the training any of the agents did. He stumbled to the door and stepped out into the rapidly darkening night. Flashing lights crested the hill, and Michael rushed toward the road, waving his arms, desperate for them to see him.

The ambulance pulled up, and two people—a man and a woman—exited the vehicle. Michael led them to where Gary was dying, bleeding out. He

watched them work, their deft movements probably honed from having done this so many times. They hooked Gary up to an IV. One of them called someone on the radio and was being given directions by a disembodied voice. The words blurred together.

Through it all, Michael could do nothing but watch.

Then Gary seized, except it was nothing like the previous time. His body spasmed, his back arching. His head drooped, and the insistent tone from the machine he was hooked up to gave a flat, steady beep.

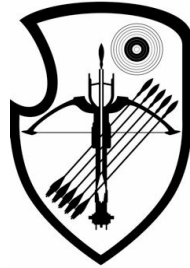
“He’s coding!” one of them called out. “I need—”

Whatever else they were saying was garbled. Michael couldn’t process the words, and the actions were frenetic, jerky. The reality of the situation crushed him.

I’m watching Gary die. And I didn’t even get the chance to say goodbye.

Michael Kennedy’s vision went dark as the world around him tumbled into chaos. He was grateful when the ground gave way beneath him and he fell into darkness.

Chapter Twenty-Seven



During the last three weeks, Michael had barely moved from Gary's bedside. They'd said he'd be on life support for two weeks, but the thoracic surgery and lung damage had necessitated the medical coma and continued dependence on the ventilator. He knew they'd bring him out of it any day now, but there were too many things to stimulate Michael's senses and distract him from Gary's emergence into the world he'd retreated from. Michael had listened to Gary's rhythmic breathing, controlled by the machine. He'd stared at the cervical collar that would stay in place until the physicians were sure his spine was out of danger. And then there were the chest tubes, draining all the blood and keeping his lungs inflated. Just looking at the nearly full torso cast made him want to weep, reminding him of the multiple fractures and breaks Porter and his men had inflicted. The opening that left Gary's chest exposed stood as yet another stark reminder of the fragility of his life, as they needed to be sure they could get to his heart if it stopped again. The wrap over Gary's left eye marked how close he'd come to losing it.

They still don't know the extent of the damage.

Michael was trying to stay positive, but *holy fuck*....

They'd done so much damage to a body that had already undergone incredible trauma, and there was no guarantee Gary wouldn't succumb to his injuries. The doctors informed them his heart had stopped twice on the operating table, and he'd had to be revived.

It didn't matter how many times someone told him Gary was doing better. The knowledge did little to quash the dark thoughts that had plagued Michael since they'd loaded Gary into the ambulance. And the people at CrossBow weren't helping. They kept coming to him with questions that had to be answered, and he wanted to scream at them. He needed to pay attention to *Gary*, not worry about some asshole who, even after being told by Gary he couldn't rent a bodyguard for a date, was still trying. Michael asked Alice Winthrop to refer that to their lawyers, because no way could he deal with it. He could hardly deal with seeing Gary so damaged, let alone day-to-day minutiae.

"Need some coffee?"

His mother stood behind him, steam wafting off the cup she held in her hand. He took it gratefully. He'd gotten so used to drinking decaf with Gary that the fully loaded one gave him quite the buzz. Not that he was complaining—he needed it desperately. He'd been existing on a few snatched hours of sleep here and there, every little noise waking him up for fear that something had happened to Gary.

"Thanks, Mom."

She patted his arm. "He's going to be okay," she said. Her uncertain tone belied her positive affirmation.

"The doctors say he's rebounding."

"They say they're cautiously optimistic," she corrected.

"It's the same thing," he countered. "And this afternoon they're going to take him off the sedative and let him wake up." His voice cracked. "He's coming back to me, Mom. He has to."

Her eyes were kind. “Michael, you know as well as I do, nothing in life is guaranteed. We can only trust in the doctors and hope for the best outcome.”

Why does she have to be such a damned pragmatist?

Michael didn’t need platitudes—he needed someone to tell him that everything would be fine. He needed....

Fuck, he just needed Gary.

It surprised him how hard he’d fallen once the guy had gotten the stick out of his ass. He’d always been attracted to Gary, but when he stopped being such a jerk, he did a one-eighty and became a really decent, sweet, loving....

Michael fought back tears. He’d already cried too much these past two weeks.

“Have I said thank-you for coming?” he asked. Anything to change the subject.

His mom clucked her tongue. “My boy needs me. Where else would I be? Your dad is sorry he couldn’t come, but his stupid work doesn’t consider your partner to be family, so they wouldn’t give him time off. I told him to say fuck it and quit, but he said he couldn’t.”

It was fine. Dad was great, but he was stoic and had always expected the same of Michael. He’d never once said boys don’t cry, but Michael was kinda glad he wasn’t there. It wouldn’t take much to have him breakdown in front of his father. His mom acted as if tears were inevitable, and God knew Michael appreciated that.

They sat together, neither of them talking, until the nurse came in. And just like that, Michael’s heartbeat quickened.

“Would you go sit in the waiting room, please?”

Mom gripped his hand and led him from the room, and Michael took one backward glance.

This is the last time I’m gonna see him all wired up.

He needed the man he’d fallen in love with back in bed with him, cuddling while they watched bad movies. Sleeping with his arm around

Gary's waist, his fingers dipping into those godawful tighty-whities Gary wore, getting Gary hard and needy, then finally taking him until they were too tired to talk anymore.

Not that sex was the only thing they had going for them—far from it. They shared similar tastes in music, although Gary liked Styx and Michael was more a modern rock kind of guy. They also liked the same movies. They could sit and watch anime for hours.

We fit together.

Given Gary's present state, sex would be a long way off, but even if they never made love again, that was still fine. Michael had a good right hand, knew where to get a good deal on lube, and would be happy to make liberal use of it.

Someone was shaking him.

Michael blinked. The nurse stood in front of him.

“Mr. Kennedy?” She smiled. “Mr. Cross is awake, if you'd like to go see him.”

He had no recollection of falling asleep. He gave his mom a hard stare. “Why didn't you wake me?”

She waved a dismissive hand. “You've catnapped since they brought him here. You think I'm going to wake you when you were finally getting some rest? Yeah right. Besides, I would have woken you when the time came.”

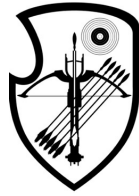
He did feel a little better, but the improvement only lasted until they got into Gary's room.

Oh my fucking God.

His eyes were closed and his breathing was unlabored. Most of the wires were gone, but the stark reality of Gary's injuries could no longer be ignored. His hand was still horribly swollen, his face was a mélange of colors ranging from red to deep purple, and the entry wounds for the bullets were inflamed and angry-looking. Dressings covered the surgical wounds.

But he's alive. That's something.

Michael reclaimed the chair beside the bed and took Gary's hand in his. It wasn't long before he drifted off to sleep.



The insistent beeps and whirs were annoying as hell. Gary cracked his eyes, then squeezed them shut again. Why was it so fucking bright? He was sure he'd closed the curtains. Maybe Michael....

“Oh, you're awake. Good.”

A woman's voice, one that sounded vaguely familiar.

He dared to open his eyes again. Someone was hovering over him.

What the hell is she doing in my house? Then he saw Michael, asleep in a chair, the bags under his eyes darker than dark. He looked as though he hadn't slept for days.

“W-What's going on?” he groaned, then winced, because *fuck*, it hurt to talk.

The woman picked up a cup from the side table and held it out for him. He sipped on the straw, then lay back and paid attention to the room. He'd seen enough in his life to know where he was.

“Hospital?” he asked.

“Hospital,” she confirmed.

What the fuck happened?

“Why'm I here?”

Her face twisted in anger and pain. “Because you're a fucking selfish son of a bitch, that's why.”

“Mom!” Michael sat up and scrubbed a hand over his worn, weathered face. He reached for Gary, then pulled back at the last minute. “How are you feeling?”

“What happened?”

Michael’s face was blank, and Gary’s throat seized. That resigned, almost defeated expression was scarier than when he was angry.

“Porter shot you,” Michael said in a flat tone. “Twice in the chest. Missed your heart, thank God, but even so, we didn’t think you’d make it.”

The memories tumbled back. The beating. The pain. He glanced down at his hand and saw the cast.

Oh fuck.

“Michael, I—”

Michael lurched out of the chair, his face mottled. “You don’t get to talk to me, Cross. You fucking *lied*. To *me*. You cannot tell someone you love them with one breath, then lie in the next. That’s not how a relationship works.”

“But he was going to kill you,” Gary protested.

“And that makes what you did all right? You stupid son of a bitch. If you’d just *talked* to me—to us—we could have come up with something together. But nah, *you* thought, ‘Lemme just lie and then run off like some idiot and nearly get myself killed.’” His eyes blazed. “How the fuck did you get to be so stupid?”

“Michael, honey,” his mom interjected.

He held up a hand. “No, Mom. For the past few weeks, I’ve sat here and stared at him, not knowing if he was going to live or die. How many times did he stop breathing? How many times did I wonder if I’d ever get to talk to him again?”

Gary wanted to protest, but Michael was scary as fuck. Then realization sank in.

It wasn’t anger he was seeing—it was terror.

His mom cleared her throat. “You think maybe it’d be a good idea to let Gary get out of the hospital before you put him back in again?”

Michael shook his head. “I... I can’t do this.” He turned and stormed

from the room.

The silence was broken by the whirring of machines and Gary's tortured breathing.

Fuck no.

He'd known it was going to be over, but he hadn't expected it to hurt worse than anything Porter had done to him.

"M sorry," he whispered.

"You don't get to be sorry." Mrs. Kennedy's voice was soft. "You cut him out of your life. *You* did that. And acting the way you did, you gave him no choice in the matter." Her eyes were so grave. "You treated him as though he wasn't your partner."

Hadn't he *known* that, even as he was doing it?

Of course he had.

"I couldn't let him die." Tears streaked his cheeks. "I couldn't stand the idea... that I'd never be able to see his... smile again. It didn't even matter if... someone else got to see that smile. I'd know he was okay." He swallowed, and pain seared through his throat. "I'd already lost Eric, but... if Michael had died, I... I wouldn't have survived that."

She took a seat beside his bed and put a warm hand on his arm. "Are you in a relationship with Michael? Is he your equal partner?"

Gary thought about shaking his head, but decided against it. "Not really. He's the one in charge."

She chuckled at his admission. "Wow. They must have you on the really good drugs."

It was only then he realized what he'd said. "I'm sorry, I—"

"No, don't apologize. I know what you meant." She shifted her chair a little closer. "You have to understand something. Michael isn't mad. Okay, well, that's not *strictly* true—he's furious—but... he's hurt because you cut him out. And because you did that, he's not sure if you actually wanted a relationship with him in the first place."

“I did! I do.”

“Then remember you’re not alone in this. After what they did to you, he was left feeling so... helpless.” Her eyes glistened. “I’ve never seen him fall apart like this before. And that alone is enough to tell me how deeply he feels for you. That boy has *never* loved anyone the way he loves you.”

Gary sighed. “He doesn’t love me anymore. But you know what? I’m okay with that, because... at least I know he’s alive.” Then he caught his breath when another sigh came from across the room.

“Mom? Will you excuse us?”

She got up without a word and left.

Gary didn’t dare breathe as Michael took the chair she’d vacated. He didn’t trust himself to speak.

It was up to Michael now.

“What the fuck do you mean, I don’t love you anymore?” Michael brushed his fingers through Gary’s hair. “I *told* you I wouldn’t walk away. At least, not permanently.”

“I’m sorry.” They had to be the weakest words Gary had ever uttered.

“I understand that, and just so you know? This conversation isn’t over. Not by a long shot. But yeah, I get it. At least I think I do. When you woke up and found out Eric was dead, it rocked your world to the foundation. Honestly, I want to say that I would have handled it differently, but after these past few weeks, I can’t.”

A desperate need to explain had Gary fighting to overcome his frailty. “He wanted to use you... to start the fighting again. He was going to blame your death... on Abbas’s people or on the ILF.” Fuck, Gary wanted to get back to a physical state where he could manage more than five or six words without running out of breath. But he had to get the words out. “Porter didn’t care about Eric... he didn’t care about you either. Both of you were a means to an end, that was all.”

And then he was done.

Gary broke down, his body racked with painful sobs, as the knowledge of why Eric had died hit him at full strength. Why his entire team was supposed to have died. If it wasn't for the fact that Porter couldn't chance killing them because of the investigation it would lead to, they would all have been sacrificed on the altar of Porter's lust for money and power.

The nurse hurried into the room. "I'm sorry, but you're upsetting my patient. If you insist on continuing, Security will be escorting you from the building and you won't be allowed back in. Mr. Cross needs his rest to heal."

Michael paled. "We'll keep him calm, I promise."

She glanced keenly at him as though assessing the veracity of his words, then nodded. After a final check on Gary's status, she left the room.

Gary forced himself to be calm, but Michael was so goddamn quiet.

"I didn't handle this well, did I?" Michael admitted at last. "I was so fucking angry with you, because you were going to die on me and leave me alone. Then I realized it was probably how you'd felt about Eric, and although I hated it, I started to understand that feeling." He stroked Gary's hand. "I love you, Cross. Today. Tomorrow. In fifty years' time. You're it for me, okay? Am I mad? Hell yes. But I'm going to get over it eventually, because I know we're both going to learn and grow from this experience."

Fifty years with Michael seemed a fair reward for all the shit Gary had just waded through.

Michael's hand was soft on his brow. Gary swallowed. "When you walked out, I thought you'd never come back."

Michael gave him a warm smile. "I called Josh to let him know. He's been on my ass every few hours asking for an update."

Then snippets of conversation flooded Gary's brain. "Porter said something. I don't know if... he was telling the truth or not... but I think he was. He said they didn't have anything to do with... the bombs that killed Richie. He told me they took advantage of it, though."

"What? That doesn't make any sense. Who would come after us?"

Gary wished he knew. He yawned and his eyes started to close. Michael stood up and kissed him gently.

“Get some rest. We’ll talk later.” He turned, but then stopped. “You’re going to be out of work for a while, you know.”

“Figured. Did I lose the eye?”

“They’ll test it in a week or so, after the swelling has gone down. The doctor said he was hopeful, but he couldn’t promise anything.”

If he lost his vision, it would suck, but he’d adapt, just like he did with his hearing. As long as Michael was beside him, Gary knew he could handle anything.

Epilogue



March, 2024

Part of Michael's mind was focused on the inclement weather ahead of them.

The rest was somewhere back in time, in a conversation that had taken place once Gary had gotten out of the hospital the year before.

"I used to have this thing I called tingles. After Eric died, I didn't have another one, and to be honest, I thought they were gone. You remember when I had the seizure? When I forgot to take my pills?" Michael nodded. "Well... that wasn't what happened. I got one of my tingles, and I was so panicked by it, I was thrown into that seizure."

"You felt something was going to happen?"

"Yes—to you initially. Only, I started having them more often, and then they were all about you and Abbas. I was so fucking scared. I was literally freaked out over you dying."

Michael stared at him. "You've been carrying this for years, haven't you?"

"Yeah. Eric and the guys knew. They'd witnessed it firsthand, but they

vowed never to mention it to anyone else.”

“So what did it feel like?”

“I looked at you, and I was swamped by this overwhelming, suffocating dread. I was absolutely certain you were going to be taken from me.” He squeezed Michael a little tighter. “I apologize for what I did, but I’m not sorry I did it.”

Michael sucked in a breath. “I want to be angry or hurt or something, but honestly, knowing this makes me feel so secure. You loved me enough to try to keep me safe.” He kissed Gary with a fervor he hoped conveyed the depth of his love. “But if you ever do something like this again, I’m going to tie your ass to the bed and paddle you until you learn to listen.”

“Don’t threaten me with a good time,” Gary teased. He cocked his head to one side. “So I’m forgiven? I know I lied to you, but I did it with the best of intentions.”

Yeah, Michael had forgiven him. And he hadn’t questioned what Gary told him. Seeing Gary on the floor that day, white as a sheet, had shifted something in him. His anger over Gary’s stupidity—and yeah, it was stupidity, no doubt about that—had simmered for a time, but eventually he did his best to let it go. He’d read about people with such intuition, and he could understand Gary’s panic and need to keep him and Abbas safe. He didn’t *like* it, but he understood.

He glanced over at Gary sleeping beside him in the passenger seat, then brought his attention back to the ever-increasing slippery highway.

He’s not the man I started working for.

So much had changed since they’d finally allowed Gary to come home. He got winded easily and slept a lot. Since they’d disembarked from the plane and piled into the rental, Gary had slept. He looked peaceful, and Michael didn’t want to disturb him, not after the grumbling he’d done about the goddamn car. That had started when they picked it up from the airport.

They couldn’t give us a Chevy Suburban? That was what he’d asked for

so that Gary would have room to stretch his leg, to keep it from cramping, but *nooooo*, they were given a fucking Ford Focus. Okay, it wasn't *that* bad, but still.... He'd started to raise a fuss, but Gary had pulled him away, telling him it would be fine.

The road, Michael. Keep your eyes on the road. Wouldn't do to have us both end up in the hospital.

Staring out at the passing landscape reminded him of the stark contrast between New Mexico and Minnesota. It was nearing the end of the season—if Minnesota *had* a snow season, seeing as how July was the only month in history that hadn't seen snow. Mom had teased him, saying she had the snowblower all set to go. He'd shut her up by telling her Gary was the only blower he'd be riding. Still, getting back on the machine might be good for foreplay....

A familiar ache pierced his chest.

I miss home.

And just like that, a wave of memories washed over him. The sights and smells of autumn, the white snow glistening at Christmas.... His mom making mulled cider, and the family sitting around the fireplace without having to talk, content in each other's presence. Nothing but fond memories. But since Gary had sold his house and he and Michael had moved into CrossBow, they were making new ones every day, and he loved that too.

He reached over and brushed his hand over Gary's arm. "Gary? We're almost there."

Gary opened his eyes slowly, blinking. "Snow?" He groaned. "I don't mind the cold, but I *hate* snow."

"Don't worry. You won't see much of it from inside the house." He squeezed Gary's wrist. "Thank you for coming with me."

Gary's melancholy expression softened. "I'll come anywhere with you."

The attempt at seductive talk made Michael chuckle. "You'll come where and when I tell you to."

Gary laughed so hard, he snorted.

God, Michael fucking loved this man. *His* man. And he couldn't wait to blend him into the family.

The snow fell faster and Michael turned the wipers on high in a vain attempt to remove the flakes building up on the windshield. When he first saw the weather report, he'd thought about calling the trip off, but this would be the first time Gary had left the apartment since....

Michael swallowed hard. *Fucking Porter.*

As tough as Gary was, even he couldn't bounce back as fast as he'd hoped. According to the doctors, he'd never be fully healthy again. Michael hadn't initially realized the extent of the damage. They'd removed Gary's spleen, and then pancreatitis had developed. That had been part of the reason for the slow recovery. When Michael learned about it, the fear that Gary would still be taken from him was so great, his knees buckled with the weight of it. The doctor informed them that when the body loses the spleen, other organs take over the function of protecting the body. That sounded encouraging, but the truth was that for the rest of his life, Gary would be at risk of serious infections developing quickly and he'd need to be aware. It was hard to watch this once-vibrant man looking sickly and pale. All Gary had to do was cough or sneeze, and Michael wanted to rush him to the ER to be checked out.

There were more than just physical injuries, however. Gary had to deal with bouts of guilt and PTSD. He'd gone back to therapy fully because he felt he—and his frequent nightmares—had become a burden to Michael, and no assurances to the contrary changed that.

Not that Gary was the only one seeking therapy.

Michael hadn't realized how talking to a third party could help so much. He poured his heart out to his therapist many times, sharing everything: his nightmares that revolved around the two men who'd been killed, Gary's brush with death, and many other things he'd kept bottled up for years. And

with each session, a bit more weight lifted from his shoulders, allowing him to breathe a little easier, sleep a little better.

We're going to get through this.

Michael was doing his utmost to make sure of that. Not that Gary made his job any easier. Their most recent argument was proof of that. Michael could still hear Gary's hurtful words ringing in his head.

Are you a fucking martyr? Is that it? You want to stay and take care of one sick man instead of living your life the way you should be living it?

Although Michael had done his best to understand that Gary's diatribe had come from a place of fear, pain, and frustration, that didn't make it any easier to deal with. And that night, in the hours following his outburst, Gary had cried and refused to let Michael comfort him. Michael got out of bed and went to sleep on the couch. A few hours later, Gary had snuggled up beside him.

And then they'd talked.

"I'm sorry," Gary whispered. "It's just... I think about everything, and it's so frustrating because you go to work each day and deal with all the stuff that should've been mine to handle. You come home, feed me, and then you clean because I'm too tired. You help me into the bath, then you kneel beside it and wash me." He sobbed into Michael's back. "I'm not the one for you. Not anymore."

Michael rolled over and gently took Gary in his arms. "Listen to me, Cross. We made a promise that we were going to celebrate our twenty-fifth anniversary. We swore we'd be there for each other, no matter what. What you're doing? It's exactly the same as cutting me out when you went after Porter. Don't try to presume how I feel, because you never asked me."

"But I—"

"Ask me, Gary. It's the only way you'll ever know for sure."

He gulped. "Michael? How do you feel about me?"

Michael smiled and twined a strand of Gary's hair between his fingers. It

was growing so long. “I love you, okay? I loved you before all this, I love you now, even while we’re going through it all, and I will love you when it’s all done, when we’re on the other side of it. Sure, we probably won’t be going skydiving or rock climbing, but we’ll grab a blanket, make a huge ass tub of popcorn, and cuddle up on the couch and watch anime until our eyes bleed. Now doesn’t that sound like fun?”

Gary had sobbed into Michael’s shoulder that night, apologizing for what he’d said, promising he would do better, and telling Michael he loved him so very much. The couch wasn’t big, but once they’d slotted their bodies just right, they made it work.

Michael knew there would be other breakdowns. There had to be. He’d already had his own too, because he was frustrated he couldn’t help Gary get better. The doctors said it would take time, and that progress—especially with the extent of Gary’s injuries—would be slow. Physical therapy would continue, mental health checks too. Gary was now well and truly a broken warrior, but with love and patience and good doctors, he would get better.

Until he couldn’t.

But even then, Michael would love him.

It took an hour longer than he’d expected, but finally Michael pulled into his parents’ driveway, grateful to be off the roads. He might like snow, but driving in it sucked. He reached over and laid a gentle hand on Gary’s shoulder.

“Hey, time to go meet the folks.”

Gary let out a cute snuffle and opened his eyes. He yawned. “I’m so sorry. I wanted to keep you company on the drive, but I slept most of the way.”

“It’s fine. You needed the rest.” Michael glanced toward the house, chuckling when a curtain twitched. “And here comes Mom.”

Gary sucked in a breath and sat up straight. “Okay. I’m ready to face the lioness in her den.”

Michael snorted as he opened his door and got out. “Remember you said that. And may the gods have mercy on your soul.”



Gary peered at the house. The front door opened and Michael’s mom ran toward them carrying a jacket far too thin for the weather. She put it on as she approached, then rushed to Michael, who was helping him out of the vehicle.

“How is it?” Michael asked quietly.

“I think I’m okay,” Gary replied as he put a hand on the top of the car to balance. He’d been doing the therapy—because Michael had a fucking timer set and always called to make sure he was working the muscles—but Gary was tired of forever needing to lean on someone to get through the day.

His mom started clucking. “Michael, help Gary inside. I’ll grab your bags.”

“What? No. I’ll come back for them after I get Gary settled.”

Why am I always the weak link? He fucking hated it.

Michael reached over and pinched his lip. “Stop pouting.”

“I’m not,” he grouched.

They followed his mom into the house, where she brushed off the coat and hung it up.

“We weren’t sure you’d make it. The weather report is saying we could get ten inches before it’s over.”

Michael’s dad called out from the other room, snickering. “Didn’t you get that last night?”

Her cheeks went scarlet. “Not in front of Gary!” she yelled.

Michael grinned. “Oh, don’t worry, Mom. He got it too.”

Not that they’d had sex since he’d gotten out of the hospital, but it was

fun to have Michael teasing him about it.

“Let’s get you into the living room so Gary can rest.” Michael’s mom waved a hand toward a door before hanging their coats.

Gary smiled when he gazed at the hallway. He could see Michael living here. It was all warm woods and colors, and he was instantly at ease.

“Gary, welcome to our home,” she said, giving him a brilliant smile.

“Thank you, ma’am. I’m happy to be here.”

What surprised him was that he meant it.

She held out her arms, then dropped them to her side. Gary knew an aborted hug when he saw one. He opened his, and she smiled as she stepped into an embrace. He’d loved her since that day at the hospital. When Michael had told him she’d flown from Minnesota to New Mexico to be with them, he knew right then he wanted to be part of this family.

She stepped back and gave him a soft smile. “Go on in and sit down. The living room is just past the dining room. Michael can introduce you to his father while I get us something to drink. No alcohol for you, right?”

With the addition of yet more medications and on the advice of his doctor, Gary had stopped drinking altogether. He didn’t miss it in the least.

“No, but thank you for checking.”

“Can I get a beer, Mom?” Michael asked.

She scowled at him. “Your boyfriend doesn’t get to drink, so neither do you.” And with that, she strode away.

“Great,” Michael muttered. “You’re already her favorite. Hopefully Dad still loves me.”

They went into the living room, where a big man sat in a recliner, clutching a beer can in one hand and screaming at the television.

“Goddamn, how the hell do you fumble so close to scoring?” He looked up and his cheeks pinked. “Sorry. Packers are playing for shit today.” He stood and extended his hand. “Andrew Kennedy.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Kennedy. I’m Gary—”

Mr. Kennedy's eyes twinkled. "Oh, trust me, Gary. I know *all* about you. Michael and his mother wouldn't shut up about the fact that the two of you are living together now. I've been waiting to ask, though. Why would you sell your house and move into CrossBow?"

Michael had asked the same question when Gary first broached the subject. The truth was, Gary wasn't getting around as well as he'd hoped. Even on the best of days, his vision was blurry, his arm had rods and pins in it to keep the bones together, and his knee was full of enough hardware, he needed a card to show the airlines. His hand was pretty much always stiff, which made writing or typing a pain. He was grateful that Michael was there to help when needed, but he was also tired of needing to depend on him.

They'd moved to CrossBow because Gary felt more empowered there, even if he wasn't.

"More room, sir."

Mr. Kennedy frowned at Michael. "Didn't you tell him to call me by my name?"

"Of course I did," Michael grouched. "He just wants to make a good impression."

His dad nodded sagely. "Understood. That's good character. Please, Gary, call me Andrew."

Gary couldn't help but smile. "Okay, Andrew."

And just like that, they were the best of friends, much to Michael's apparent chagrin.

His mom bustled into the room. "You guys timed that well. Food is ready. Gary, have a seat in the living room and I'll bring you a plate."

"No, please. I'd rather sit with you all. If that's okay?"

She seemed happy with the suggestion. They sat down to a big spread. There was chicken, stuffing, mashed potatoes, gravy, corn on the cob, and iced tea.

I just wish I had the appetite to do it justice. He hadn't had much of one

since getting home.

Gary knew if he could do it all again, he wouldn't change the choices he'd made, but losing nearly seventy percent of the vision in his eye sucked. It also made his vertigo worse. There were days he had to stretch out on the bed until everything stopped spinning. Those were the times Michael would crawl in beside him and act as his anchor until it all settled.

Worse still was the fact that with his lung being damaged by one of the shots, breathing became a chore. He got winded easily, which the doctor told them was normal. Once his body understood the diminished capacity, the other lung would work harder, and things would probably get easier.

It was the *probably* that worried him.

Andrew cleared his throat. "So, Gary... Michael wasn't sure if he was allowed to say anything, so he told us we'd need to check with you first. Would it be okay to ask what happened with that general? Porter, was it?"

Porter....

That name was like fucking nails on a chalkboard.

When they'd told Josh what Porter had said about the bomb, he'd gotten excited because there was a new avenue of research. At least it had kept him out of trouble. For now. He seemed to have been bitten by the hacking bug again. Nothing overt, mostly letting companies know if they had security breaches. He seemed happy, which in turn made Gary happy for him.

"Want me to tell them?" Michael asked.

Gary nodded. He still had nightmares about that day. He'd wake up in the middle of the night, fear clawing at him. Sometimes it was about Eric dying, but sometimes it was Michael. Nearly every occasion included harsh memories of the damage done to his already fucked-up body.

"Things were... dirty," Michael said in a low voice. "I mean from the top-down dirty. The Justice Department got involved and discovered several people in the police department had accepted bribes to quash any information that came in. Basically, anything that happened to us never *officially*

happened, at least according to the police. Porter saw to that.”

“And what about Porter?” Mom asked. “What happened to him?”

“He died in prison,” Michael replied, reaching out to squeeze Gary’s hand. “Or was killed in prison. The jury is still out on that one. The official cause was listed as suicide, but that’s tricky to accomplish when your hands are cuffed behind your back.” He shrugged. “The reach of powerful men is long, and a shit ton of money opens a lot of doors.”

“That’s such bullshit,” she grumbled. “And what happened to Abbas?”

That was another story. “He died,” Gary said quietly. “The plane taking him home was lost over the ocean. They found wreckage, but no bodies.”

He hated lying to Michael’s parents, but they’d agreed it was necessary. The truth was, he and Michael had gone after the State Department who wanted Abbas returned. Both Gary and Michael said no way. After Porter, how the hell could they know who to trust?

The end result was a deal between CrossBow and the government. Gary wouldn’t sue them in court for gross negligence, and Abbas was allowed to stay in the country, once they granted citizenship and provided him with a new identity. At first Abbas had seemed uncertain, but once he had the official documents in his hand, he was over-the-moon happy. His joy increased when he heard his brother was doing a great job soothing the nerves of the people who initially were outraged that Abbas had been killed in America. He’d assured them that wasn’t what happened, and told them the cover story he’d been given, which involved an offshoot of the ILF.

They’d offered Abbas a job at CrossBow, but he decided he’d rather go back and finish his education. He told them that one day he’d like to follow in Michael’s footsteps and become a personal assistant.

There weren’t as many happy endings as there should have been, but there were enough to satisfy Gary.

With one exception.

And I’m going to take care of that one right now.

“Hey, Michael?”

“Yeah?”

“I’ve got to say something to you.”

Michael’s smile lit up his beautiful face, and Gary’s insides went to mush. “Go ahead.”

Gary did his best to keep his expression neutral. “You’re fired.”

His mother and father squawked.

Michael’s jaw dropped and his brow furrowed. “Care to tell me why?”

“You once told me you wouldn’t mind staying at CrossBow, but with your education, you thought there was a better job than being my assistant, right?”

“Well sure, but—”

“So what would you say to being my partner?”

Crickets.

Michael finally found his voice. “What do you mean?”

It was time for the truth.

“I’m functioning at half capacity on the best of days. It could be months or more until I’m back up to full speed. I need someone at the helm with me who knows the job, who’s done it. Someone who isn’t afraid to take people to task when necessary, but also has a kind and giving nature. When you add all those things together, there’s really only one person who fits the bill. The person I trust most—you.”

Michael swallowed. “Are you serious?”

It was Gary’s turn to smile. “Never more sure of anything in my life.”

“Then... I’d be honored.” He leaned over and kissed Gary. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. You’ve more than earned it.”

Gary knew with certainty that Eric would have approved of Michael and also of him being promoted. More than that, he believed with all his heart that Eric would also be thrilled Gary had found love again.

And now we can put all this behind us. Now I have a future to build.

With Michael.
And CrossBow.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Tricia Kristufek for her fabulous editing, and a great deal of appreciation to Meredith Russell for this amazing cover she created for us!

Also a huge thank you to our beta readers for helping us to get the book right.

Special thanks to Miski Harris for her *invaluable* assistance in hurting the boys.

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K.C. Wells

K.C. Wells lives on an island off the south coast of the UK, surrounded by natural beauty. She writes about men who love men, and can't even contemplate a life that doesn't include writing.

The rainbow rose tattoo on her back with the words 'Love is Love' and 'Love Wins' is her way of hoisting a flag. She plans to be writing about men in love - be it sweet or slow, hot or kinky - for a long while to come.

If you want to follow her exploits, you can sign up for her monthly newsletter: <http://eepurl.com/cNKHIT>

Got a favourite trope? Then check out this page: <https://www.kcwellswrites.com/tropes>

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Visit K.C.'s website for her full backlist.

About Parker Williams

Parker Williams

Parker Williams has always loved to write. Ever since he was a teen, one of his favorite things to do was put pen to paper and create worlds where men would find their everlasting love and be happy forever.

Now that he's older, he understands more about what it means to fall in love and the trials and tribulations that come with it, and he does his best to make sure his characters come across as real and alive.

Parker will always love to write, because every story starts when two men..."

Feel free to visit Parker on his website: www.parkerwilliamsauthor.com



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