

Chapter 10

Portland, Main, in the winter isn't a place I care to be in. It's cold, the sun is a parody of itself, and the roads are horrible. It means the other drivers are impossible to deal with. My last time here, it was the end of summer. The weather was cool, but everything else was tolerable.

The locker is still in the name I registered it under, even if the storage site changed hands three times over the last decade. The lock is mechanical and shows no signs of having been tampered with. My other security measures, while lower-tech than what I use now, are also undisturbed.

The air is musty, dust-covered everything, and the clothing rack will have to be burned, but it's still usable.

I have Asyr working the online angle, but I can do some of my own research that might explain why this has anything to do with Masters.

He lived in Portland and it is where I left his body.

I made calls while I drove trying to answer some of those questions. I called his old workplaces,

asking for him. The number for his defunct charity, even the house he used to live in.

No one who I was asking for, and those who bothered looking into their records told me he was dead. His old house now belongs to a family of five. Two women raising three adopted girls.

I pull the old files I compiled on Thomas Masters when I was protecting Emil from him, then destroyed the man. If the old man expects me to find him, he must believe I have a way to do so using Thomas's information. It will be something obscure, that will take time for me to find, so he will have more of it with Emil.

But it will be there.

Thomas Masters was born in 1945. To Barbara and Isaac Masters. He had no siblings. He went to St John's Catholic School. Other than anything relying on public speaking, his grades are average. Masters excelled at using his voice to get what he wanted.

I smile as he reminds me of Justin, who could charm me and our father within a year of learning to speak. Of course, once our father realized what had happened, he beat Justin, and me for protecting him. Justin doesn't use his voice now, if he had, I would have quickly found him, but whatever he does, I am certain of this. He is utterly charming at it.

In his early career, Masters when from job to job until he settled on radio, then specialized in Christian radio, and finally, an extremist station, where he stocked hate to build his audience. By the time I killed him, his success had caused him to begin a shift to television.

Masters only had sex with women; which led to Emil's mother. Then his birth and Master's desperation to remove him. Of all the women Masters had sex with, Jasmine was the only one he couldn't prevent from giving birth because she was out of state at the time. It might be luck, or she knew

what he would force her to do that caused her to spend a year in Pennsylvania, at her parents' farm.

While many of the people connected to Masters could be angry at me for killing him, even with the evidence documenting how he took advantage of their gullibility, none of them knew about Emil, let alone his connection to me.

And this is about Emil, not Master's death. The old man hoped I'd react to the abuse he has committing on him, but this kind of violation is an act of power over the person, not those around them.

But how can it be about Emil?

I missed something, so I start from the beginning again.

Thomas Masters was born in 1965 to Barbara and Isaac Masters, who were married... a quick online search tells me 1968.

I pause.

Would a Catholic couple wait three years after the birth of their son to get married? Today, they might never bother, but in the sixties?

A search on Barbara Masters in public databases tells me she was born Barbolina Bogdana. The name is Russian. I also locate a driver's license in her name with a Boston address. The old man's accent makes that where he's from, and Masters was born there too.

I hadn't looked into the particular of his birth before since both his parents or any close relatives were dead.

Masters' birth record includes a scan of the original paper. It lists Barbolina as the mother, but the father's name is hidden. The father didn't want to be on the form; might have found out after the fact she had named him there. The form is numbered, and a call to the hospital confirms they have an old

document archive.

I take a Desert Eagle out of the locker and clean it. That done, I consider my phone.

The old man didn't call in the four days I needed to make it here. There is a chance he will, but now that I have arrived, do I want him to? Is there anything I could get him to tell me that I won't be able to discover by myself? Anything important, at least?

I turn it off, place it in its pouch and leave. I need to make a stop to buy ammunition, then head to Boston.

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Gaining access to the physical records is easy. A rumbled suit, the haggard expression of an overworked government employee, and the right identification had an administrator escort me there, then hurry away so I can get on with the work I explained I needed to do in a droning voice.

The records are stored in boxes marked with a year. Within the boxes, there is no order and my mental boxes try to escape their shackle so I will alphabetize them, the way they should have been done from the start. They also are not stored by categories, nor do they respect the numbers printed on the top right of each form.

I let a box rattle unfettered for a few minutes as I consider what I would do to the person responsible for this chaos, then silence it.

Thomas Bogdana's birth certificate is paper nearly as thick as cardboard, and there the father's name should be is a stroke of something blue, mate, and thick, but thinking on the right end with a fingerprint visible.

Back then, nurses were women and would be the easiest to access to hide information. The

fingerprint could be his, looking to confirm this, probably nail polish, would stay in place, before paying her. I take a picture for Asyr to check, but I don't expect anything. This man is too careful to have a criminal record.

I use the solvents I brought, and start with the weakest, moving up until one softens the polish enough some can be wiped away. I take my time. Protecting the information is the important part.

When letters in dark ink are visible, I have a name. Gregory Romanovich.

A stop at an internet café tells me there is no one by that name listed in the Boston area, but a few Gregory R, and one Gregory Roman. I start with him, and find a name change form in the Boston registry in 1966, one year after Thomas's birth, from Gregory Romanovich to Gregory Roman. Gregory Roman was enlisted until 1971, then was a dock worker for Igor Romanovich, possibly his father, definitely a relative. Igor died as a result of a beating a few years later. Gregory rose among the workers until he was in charge of the docks in 2002.

As far as I can find in the public records, this man has never had any contact with Thomas, or his mother. Gregory does not have any other family, but calls to the Boston police inform me he had been subject to many investigations, even if they never amounted to anything.

Running the dock, with enough influence to stifle police investigations speaks to organize crime connections, if not direct involvement.

The number I have from the directory is a landline, so I can't use it to track him with it. I find his name linked as a public investor or part owner in construction businesses, import-export, a failing taxi company as well as a handful of small, local, businesses. One of the construction companies catches my attention because it's the only one that does work outside of the immediate Boston area.

It includes an office building they are currently renovating, in Portland. Looking into who owns the building, gives me a holding company out of Springfield, with Gregory Roman on its board of directors. Gregory has connections throughout Massachusetts. It could be what made the police suspicious.

The building itself is on Portland's West End, on the line between that neighborhood and Downtown. It spend two decades with renters moving in and out until it was bought eight years ago by the holding company and has been empty since.

Boxes shake at how weak the link is.

I silence them.

It is a link to Portland.

It is the only lead I have.

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The windows are covered with plywood. The brick has been removed in large patches, one side the new brick has been laid.

From the outside, the renovation is legitimate but has not progressed in the last five days. The company's website lists difficulties with the worker's union as the reason, but I find it convenient that five days ago Gregory called me.

During the time I surveyed the building, only one car worth noting passed by; the security firm watching over the site. It slowed, then continued. No one had entered or exited.

With the proper supplies, a building this size can house people for months, or years, depending on how many are there.

Boxes rattle, urging me to rush in. To kill this man who undid my work; who is causing Emil more damage as I stand here and observe. I don't silence them, but I temper their need, control it. They fuel the monster that I can be, the one who landed me in prison multiple times until I gained full control.

I know I should wait and gather more information, but this time I agree with the monster. Gregory should not get any more time with Emil if I can help it.

I smile.

That is something I can help.

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Getting into the building is easy.

So easy I don't need to pull the electronic lock breaker from the Locksmith. All I have to do is pick one lock. There are no cameras, no security system, and no on-site guards.

It is almost as if Gregory worries I would not be able to enter otherwise.

Inside the lights are on, as is the heat. I shed the winter jacket and hide it behind a stack of drywall waiting to be put up in the first room.

I find the first guard by listening.

The language is Russian, but with a thick English accent. Does Gregory think not speaking English would hide what they say from me? He should have picked a different language.

The man complains about being away from his family. On one-sided conversation with the other side pushing for the importance of money, based on the replies I hear. Peeking around the corner I see him. A large man in jeans and a shirt. The holster under his arm has a Glock with a suppressor already screwed in.

He complains to the person on the other side of the earpiece that money will not keep his wife's bed warm or hug his kids. They need him to be there, not here. That is this doesn't end soon, the old man can look for someone else to guard the package downstairs

The package has to be Emil. Now I don't have to search the entire building.

The priority is keeping Emil safe, then, I will use him to control where and when Gregory and I have our confrontation.

The conversation ends with an angry finality that lets me know the other will not reestablish contact unless vital. I reach the man before he's done fuming and strangle the surprised shout with my arm around his neck. His gun clatters to the ground as I tense. The box demands his death for the part he played in Emil's suffering. Then, with the snap of his neck, he is limp in my arms.

The door by where we stand isn't locked. The room smells of blood and sex. The bed doesn't have sheets and blood stains the mattress. A U-Bolt is attached to the wall next to the bed.

I drop the man and retrieve his gun; a Glock-17, nine millimeters. The loss in power is made up for by the stealth capability. No extra magazine and only sixteen bullets.

Only moving down reduces the number of people I will encounter, but each I have to kill on my way to Emil increases the odds I will be discovered.

The stairs have a man guarding them, like the previous one, he is dressed in jeans, work boots, and a shirt, and had the feel of someone more used to working in a factory than standing guard. He holds a Glock-17, so I put a bullet in his heart and head. His drop to the floor makes more noise than the shorts, but no one comes. With the blood and brains on the wall, I don't bother hiding the body. I leave him his gun, taking only the magazine.

The stairs go down only one floor to a cooler and damp hall. I check every door I cross, but once I see it, I know I didn't have to bother. It's still wood, but thicker than the frame. Probably hardwood, and not hollow core. It also has a view-port.

The viewport's glass is dirty, but I make out an occupant in the far right corner. The room is longer than wide. Each wall, except this one, is made of cement blocks. The door had no security I can find, not even a lock. Another indication, along with how few guards I encountered, that this is a trap.

The question is how is it sprung.

The door fights me as I pull. The air in the room is thick with piss and shit. The mechanical spring at the top of the door has enough tension it will close the door through anything I have access to, so I take out a screwdriver and deal with it directly.

The wall is thicker than it needs to be, with grooves in the door frame from top to bottom. Above my head is a metal strip. I now know how the trap is to be sprung.

This means that my progress has been tracked. The two men I killed happened either because I acted before he could warn them I had arrived, or, more likely, Gregory doesn't care who I kill.

I crouch in the doorway, keeping control of the boxes demanding I go to him. "Emil?"

He looks up, his green eyes visible through the filthy black hair falling over his face. He looks away and the motion lets me see the choker around his neck, and the chain connecting it to a U-Bolt in the wall. On the floor are two bowls; dog bowls. Only had water, the other a mush that still hold the shape of the can it came from.

Newspapers are piled next to him, and on my left, in the corner furthest from him, are eight balls of them. I don't need to open them to know what they contain. Six have lost their shape because they

were wet, and the other two have extra layers to keep the contents from falling out in flight.

This time, the boxes react to my need to kill Gregory in the most painful way I can imagine. No one deserves to be treated like an animal.

“Can you come to me?”

The shake of the head is small.

Of course not. It's why the door doesn't have a lock on it. Why bother when the prisoner can't reach it? Gregory also doesn't know how skilled I am with mechanical locks, or that I have a tool to deal with most electronic ones. He needs me inside the room to spring the trap.

I stand. There's no point in making him wait.

I step in.

I'm halfway to Emil when the metal door drops; I don't react to it. I crouch before Emil and he tries to move away from me, but he's already as far into the corner as he can go.

“Emil, do you know who I am?”

He nods.

“Do you believe that I will not harm you?”

He nods again.

“Then I need you to come closer so I can remove the collar.

“We can't escape.” His voice is filled with fear and despair.

“That isn't important. I just want it off you. You aren't an animal. Not even animals deserve this kind of collar.”

Hesitatingly, Emil pushes away from the corner, turning to show me his back. The clasp is

welded shut, but it isn't a thick weld. If Emil had been willing to endure the pain, he could have broken it.

I use wire cutters to snip it apart and gently take it off his neck. Approaching steps send him back into the corner. When they stop, I stand and turn.

The door that dropped is made of metal bars, six inches apart. The man on the other side is at most five-eight. He's wiry, with a wrinkled face, white hair, and a satisfied smirk. He's a well-preserved seventy, or a badly aged fifty.

"I knew I'd get you," he snarls. "I knew you couldn't resist getting that boy toy back."

The boxes would have me reaching through the door and ripping his throat out for implying I'd treat Emil that way, and silencing them his hard. It would be futile, the guards I can't see would react before I reach the door. They wouldn't shoot to kill and injuries will only complicate the situation.

"Why aren't you shooting me?" Gregory asks.

I take the Glock out of the waistband, remove the magazine, eject the chambered bullet, and lob it at the base of the door.

"What about that monster?"

The smile I give him is nasty. "No one but me touches my Desert Eagle, Gregory. Please send in one of your men to try so I can show you what happens."

His surprise is good. It doesn't explain what his interest in Emil is, but that will come.

"Gregory Romanovich, you Americanized your name before joining the army. Five years of service, then joined your father at the docks. You stayed after he was murdered, and built contacts within organized crime. Used them to remove your opposition as you rose in power. Paid them by

providing held for their own endeavor, but only when it suited you.”

“Who the fuck are you?” he demands. “And how do you know all that?”

“I am someone who keeps away from people for a reason. No one enjoys it when I’m forced to leave my home. As for how I know? Do you think you are the only one with the right connection to make things happen?”

Worry flits across his face, but vanishes. Whoever he’s afraid I know doesn’t scare him enough to end this.

“The one thing I don’t know is why you did this. Masters never cared about him. He didn’t even want him to exist. Why are you angry with Emil now?”

“Now?” Gregory snarls. “You think I just got angry now? I didn’t give a fuck about that woman’s spawn, but I had plans for him, for the places he was going.”

“That doesn’t explain why you are lashing out at him.”

Gregory points and the boxes nearly escape my control, but I don’t lunge for him, grab the arm and smash his head against the bars.

“That slut stole my money. I was supposed to get it, not him.”

“Money.” Of all the reasons for revenge, he picks the one have no respect for. “You aim to destroy a young man because I redirected the money you thought was yours?”

“You did it?”

“Yes.” I had Asyr do it. “Masters created a maze of legal jargon to ensure the money went to people who shouldn’t have it. I didn’t care, so I didn’t look into it, but now I wonder if it was even his work, or yours. Emil was his son. He was the only one entitled to it.”

“He didn’t give a damn about him!”

“A trait he seems to have inherited from you.”

“Once you’re both dead, I’m going to make sure it’s mine again. But first I’m going to make sure you see what that slut’s good for. Then, I’ll kill you right where you killed him.”

Why does where I killed Masters matter?

“Right there, where you’re standing. When I’m done with both of you, I’m going to gun you down right there.”

Only one reason for it to matter comes to me. The distance Gregory kept from Masters wasn’t because he didn’t care. Let’s put it to the test.

“I didn’t kill him here. I dumped his worthless body here.” His nostrils flare, he grinds his teeth. I grin. “I killed him in the woods like he was some animal.” I roll my eyes. “To be fair, I put him down because I’d gotten fed up with his incessant whining. For a man who incited so much vio—”

“Shut up!”

I step to the bars. He didn’t move, but when I see them, the men on each side, again, more factory workers than anything else, have their Glocks in hand.

“Your son was a piece of shit that didn’t deserve to occupy space in this world. But at least, you weren’t there to make him worse, were you? Is that what you were afraid of? Or did you already have plans that didn’t include a kid in your life?”

The answer is in his eyes. Gregory is a man who makes plans and sticks to them.

“He stole your heart, didn’t he? You looked at that ugly little thing in his mother’s arms and you knew. You knew that it would destroy everything you had planned on doing. You couldn’t have that

thing anywhere near you, so you sent it and its mother to Portland. But you couldn't keep from looking into its life. Finding excuses to keep tabs on it. Of course, you didn't want to know how well it was doing. No, you were just interested in its influence, the money it had. And now, you have none of that. I killed him before you had the guts to go and be a father."

His hands are through the bars and around my throat. "I'm going to kill you! He was mine! You're going to pay!"

I grin. He doesn't have the strength needed to hurt me.

I enjoy his loss of control. I hurt him more with those words than I could with a knife. He will still suffer when the time comes, but there is something to be said for the damage words can cause.

He lets go with as much anger as he reached for me. "You're going to pay." His eyes flick to my left and he grins. "I know exactly how to make you suffer."

He tries to slam the door shut, but the spring clangs on the bars and it bounces away. With a snarl, he walks away.

I use one of the newspapers to remove the balls from the room, then sit in that corner. This is now a waiting game. I cross my legs and watch Emil.

"I'm sorry," he whispers.

"This isn't your fault."

"I should have lost your number. I shouldn't have put it in my phone, but I needed it. I had to know you were there. That I could call you if I ever was in trouble."

I can try to convince him nothing he did brought this about, but it isn't what he needs. He needs conversation; to know he isn't alone anymore.

“You never called.”

“I didn’t want you to think I was weak.”

“I never thought that, Emil.”

“You had to save me.”

“You were eight.

He doesn’t reply immediately. “I’m not eight anymore.” This is still about blame for him.

“Why didn’t you stay with them?” I ask to distract him and because it’s the one thing I never worked out.

“They were nice.”

He says nothing more.

I should have thought about that.

No one breaks in the same way. Some, after a trauma, seek comfort. Others shun it. I did not have the time to—no. I did not take the time to understand in what way Emil broke. I saved him and that appeased that box in my mind. I decided that was enough.

He looks at me, my lap, through his hair. He bites his lower lip. “Can I?”

“Yes.”

He climbs into it; makes himself as small as he can. It was easier when he was eight. Now, like then, I need time to quiet the chaos among the boxes this causes and work out what to do.

I place my arms around him.

“I am the one who owes you an apology, Emil. I’m sorry for not protecting you properly. I shouldn’t have left you with strangers.” They were good people, my research on them was thorough,

but they weren't who Emil needed. I should have seen it, then. Not that I know what I could have done differently.

"No one will hurt you ever again, I give you my word."

He cries into my shirt until he falls asleep.

I will always keep you safe," I tell him, wishing it was Justin in my lap.

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