

Storyboard-6

“And what about insurance?” the woman on the phone asks. Her tone is light, jovial, but in a trained manner. Someone at the permit office concluded that customers were put at ease by thinking the person was happy to speak with them, instead of simply doing their job.

“What about it?”

“I don’t see any indication of who your insurance provider is.”

“I set up my own security.”

“I appreciate that, Mister Crimson—”

Alex’s box glows and the smile that spreads on my face draws attention to itself by the strain it finally causes. It no longer happens as often, but occasionally, the reminder that Alex is mine, that I bear his name, causes me to—

“I’m sorry,” I say, bringing the box under control. “Can you repeat that?”

“I said,” the jovialness is strained now, “That I can’t have you be responsible for the value of the cars you’ll be responsible for. Your permit indicates you will work on vintage cars. This has high value. What will happen if someone breaks in and damages one of them? How will you afford those damages?” There is only so much that training will teach someone to endure.

I go over the security measures I have in place for the entrances. None of them are deadly, on their own, but they will leave and would be thief incapacitated and possibly in need of emergency care.

“I see.”

“I understand that you feel you can take care of your business, and that paying for insurance will eat into your profit margin when you don’t need it to, but it only takes one incident to wipe out all the work you’ve done.”

“I understand.” More than once, I have been that incident that has undone decades of work some abuser has put in at remaining undetected. No one else will ever find them once I am done with them.

“Good, otherwise, your application looks to be in good form, so once you update your form on the city website with the provide, and insurance number, I have no doubt I’ll be able to green light it and you’ll be able to open your doors.”

I let her give me the end of call script, then disconnect.

What will be easier? Have Alex hack the permit office to tell those computers my application is in order, or have some amateur walk around my home telling me how their system is more effective than anything I could ever think of installing?

I look at the lockers lining the back of the garage. For tools and uniforms, based on what I found in them. They were on each side of the stairwell leading to the room under the garage. Access to the used oil receptacles under the repair bay and utility room. They have been redone so Alex’s rig can be housed there, where it is cooler, and so I can store everything I need that can’t be allowed to be accidentally noticed.

That is the only completely secure room in the building.

Part of that security is that the entrance to the stairs is now hidden by three lockers, identical to those around them down to the marks of age. Anyone here to evaluate the security of the building will ask to see the utility room unless I can impress on them the futility of asking about that.

Alex will have to hack City Hall. A mechanic such as the one I play at being doesn’t have the knowledge to do more than bribe someone, and that is only inviting blackmailing.

And I have to find a location to set up a fake utility room good enough to fool experts.

A quick drawing of the garage and the equipment in it and I have a corner where I can free enough space to make a small room. Another page and I have the drawing of the inside. Every piece of the utility room in place. I have a list of the material needed to simulate their real time functions. Alex can build an electronic board to control them and write a program to link that to another one downstairs so they will reproduce the readouts of their real counterparts.

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“I don’t know if I can get you something like that.” The man behind the counter is of Latin descent, with African and Asian mixed in. He’s younger than he looks. Early forties, instead of the mid fifties, the graying hair and wrinkles make him seem to be. The neighborhood is hard on those who can’t escape it.

Adan Montenegro was born here, was dragged into the local gangs, pulled himself out of them, but couldn’t muster the needed strength to keep going and leave. He inherited the hardware store from his cousin when cancer took her. Now, he can see his death approaching with each visit from a Slicerback enforcer demanding their cut of his meager profits.

For one, my unexpected visit is about, hopefully, pushing that death away, instead making them happen much sooner than my victims ever expect.

"I'd appreciate it if you could look into it. I've called regular providers for automotive part for older cars like the ones I'm going to work on, and they'd charge me an arm and a leg."

"I don't know that I'd be able to convince them to give me better prices."

"That's not what I'm hoping for. You've been in the neighborhood for some time, right?"

"My whole life," he replies dejectedly.

"And in that time, I expect you've gotten to know the..." I hesitate. This isn't a subject anyone with empathy brings up easily, and the man I pretend to be has some of that, if not as much as most, as that is too draining to portray. "Look, the truth is that my clients don't care where the parts I use to restore their antiques come from. All they want are results, and that they be authentic. If you don't want to contact the junkyards you know to enquire about parts when I need them, I understand. In that case, I'd appreciate it if you could arrange an introduction. But, I figure that someone who's dealt with them before, for years even will get much better prices for those parts than I'd ever manage, as the new guy on the block. And you'd be able to pass on some of those savings to me, so I can get slightly more money out of what my clients are willing to pay me."

Again, charity is not something accepted here, and it is not what I am offering. This is a business proposition. One where, from all appearances, Adan will have the power. I am the one in need of help, which he can provide, since he has contact with those 'junkyards'. That power means I can't push too hard on the savings he will pass onto me, which means that if he plays his cards right and the Slicerbacks don't hear about this deal, he will have more left over after paying them.

I see the calculations in his eyes, just as he sees the barely masked desperation in mine. A desperation that undercut my physicality.

"I'll... see what I can do."

He will do whatever is needed to remain alive, just like everyone in existence.

Another element of stability reestablished in the neighborhood.

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I have the two by fours on the floor, demarcating where the new utility room will be, when the door slams shut. Emil returning from school; except he doesn't slam door without reason. I look over my shoulder as he noticed I'm there.

"I'm fine," he states, limping to the first aid kit on the wall.

"What happened?" I reach him as he rips the kit off the wall, sending the brackets flying. I take hold of his hands to stop him from slamming it on the desk. His cheek is cut, as his is upper lip. His shirt is ripped and cut. His hands tremble from barely controlled anger under mine.

"They jumped me," he snaps. "Like you said they would. By that construction site on Montebello."

"Sit."

He glares at me. His anger isn't spent. How ever the fight ended, it did not provide him the satisfaction he needs, and the walk did not let him relax, because he needed to remain vigilant for reprisals.

I wait him out. Let him decide if he needs me to tend to his wound, or be a place he can unleash his anger against.

His breathing calms. He mouths numbers; something Franklin suggested he try when Emil's anger came up during the dinner. The trembling ceases and he sits.

"Bodies?" I ask once he released the kit. I take the disinfectant from it.

"No, but you have no idea how tempting it was to cave-in a few heads once I got my hand on that crowbar. But it was too public, it would have caused too much trouble. Pop's made it clear that if I'm going to do that, I have to make sure no one's around to see it."

"and that there aren't cameras."

He nods and barely winces as I disinfect his cuts.

"Are you planning on killing any of them?"

He shakes his head. "They're just kids being goaded into stupid stuff." I look over the cuts on his arms. "But I'm scared that means we're going to have to move."

"We aren't moving."

"But they're going to escalate because of the beating I gave them."

"The escalation will happen regardless of what you do. I've ensured that when I didn't go along with their demands. You didn't start this, Emil. I did. The attack on you is part of that escalation. I'm glad you won."

He rolls his eyes. "You should have seen how bad they were. Now that I'm not pissed, I feel kind of bad for them." He winces when I press his calf. "One of them got in a glancing hit with a two by four."

"Do you feel you need more training for it?"

“Are you saying you’re thinking of stopping my training?” he asks in disbelief.

“No, I’m asking if you want to focus on protecting that side.” I motion to his arms and the shirt. “You have more injuries on it.”

He looks at each side. “Hadn’t noticed. I guess I do need to work on guarding it.”

“Alright. Go wash up and we’ll get in some practice. Then I’ll massage your leg and you can soak.”

“Can I eat first? Did Nyeshia bring another dish?”

“She did.” Emil just about begged me to get her to keep cooking for us. “But do you really want to train with an injured leg and a full stomach?”

I now have an informal contract with her that will ensure the kind of medical emergency she experienced the other week will not impact her family has gravely. Alex acted put off, but he has enjoyed having food he can eat ready to eat as soon as he arrives from work. His reluctance to eat pemmican is as unexplainable as his insistence coffee is one of the food groups dictated by the government.

Like either one of us cares for the what the government dictates.

“You promise we aren’t leaving?” Emil asks, suddenly sounding younger than he looks.

“I can’t promise that, Emil. You know that. But promise that we will not leave with me first razing the neighborhood fighting for us to remain.”

He nods, then quirks a smile. “You’ve rigged all the buildings to blow up, haven’t you?”

I return the smile. “If I tell you I have, will you promise not to tell Alex?”

“Holy shit, you have?”

The chuckle is unexpected and takes us both by surprise. Then he laughs.

“I haven’t,” I say once he quiets. “Yet.”