

Chapter 11

“Rest the stock of the rifle against your chest, then use your shoulder and chin to cradle it,” I instruct Emil as he stretches on the ground.

“I know how to do this,” he replies distractedly. “I looked at tutorial videos last night.” He moves the rifle from his shoulder to his chest before I have to correct him. “They’re pretty clear on how to hold one not to get hurt by it.”

“As with the Beretta,” I tell him, “finger on the trigger and a gentle pull as you exhale. Remember, the T3X has a stronger recoil.” I don’t point out learning from videos doesn’t prepare him for how things are in the real world. The only way to learn properly is for him to get his hands dirty.

“Every video’s made that clear.” The rifle barks as Emil squeezes the trigger. “Holy fuck,” He exclaims through greeted teeth.

Or, in this case, experiencing the pain. “Did the video adequately prepare you for this pain?”

“No.” His voice is pained and his breathing shallow. His hand shakes as he reaches for the bolt, but he pulls it. “Now, when someone talks about being kicked by a mule, I’ll have something to compare it to.” He brings the bolt back into position. “Not going to point out this is nothing like being kicked by a mule?” he asks, lining up for his next shot.

The comment makes his box glow, but the chain reaction among the other box isn’t the one I expect, the one I’m prepared to control. “Being kicked by a mule isn’t something I’ve felt the need to experience.” The words escape while I wrangle the boxes under control.

He glances at me, grinning. “You’re telling me there’s one thing out there you haven’t experienced? I thought you’d done it all.”

“It’s impossible to do it all, Emil.” Bringing them under control isn’t as fast as I’d like. There is something about them, this situation that makes my need for control not as strong. “I pick what will be relevant to our survival.” I point to the forest. “Eyes front. Fire again.”

I contemplate letting my control of the boxes go to see what will happen. I locate the box responsible for that thought and silence it. With that controlled, the others are easier to bring back to a manageable brightness. And to understand what is happening. Endorphins have been released, and that box, which contains my addiction, feeds off that.

The rifle barks. Emil curses. “Can I damage my shoulder doing this?”

“Only if you do it badly.”

“It fucking hurts.”

His box pulses. “Do you want to stop?” I stop the cascade of responses hard. I am in charge, not them. Emil is glancing at me again, his gaze searching. He is trying to determine what I expect of him. I keep my face neutral. He needs to learn to make his own decisions. Not every situation will be one where I will guide him.

He ejects the cartridge. “It’s best I get hurt here, where it’s not going to give my attacker the advantage. Then I’ll be able to properly kick their ass without having to worry about hurting myself.”

His box glows and others emit a soft, comfortable light.

There are no targets for him to hit among the trees. This is about getting Emil used to handling the rifle. For him to learn how it recoils, adjust how it needs to rest against his body. It isn’t something a video, or I, can fully teach him. He needs to feel where the recoil isn’t as painful. What part of his chest is already hardened, or not.

In the silence as he is changing the magazine, I hear it. Sand crunching as someone moves carefully. I turn, Desert Eagle in hand, and Emil pauses, magazine poised to be inserted. I scan the house, the road. He silently places the magazine back in the box and lays the rifle down. When he looks at me, I motion for him to stay down without stopping my search, and he nods. Emil took easily to hand signals.

No enemies can make it this far without triggering at least one of my safeguards, and the ensuing explosion is ample warning others might be coming. I see no one. I see no indication of someone stepping through the sand to reach any of the shadows. It means only one thing.

“Carson, step where I can see you.” No movement. No sound. “If you force me to track you down, you won’t enjoy it.”

A shadow detaches itself from the corner of the house. It resolves into the form of a slender woman. Emil whistles softly when her curves are fully noticeable. The blackness against the gray of the house. Her movements are slow, deliberate as she reaches up, then removes the black mask that compliments her black form-fitting bodysuit.

Blond hair falls out and frames a golden skin face with large green eyes and thick lips. Emil whistles again, and she smiles.

“Jenifer Carson,” I say, as an introduction.

“I hadn’t seen her before,” Emil replies.

“It’s what she does, not be seen. She was Zephyr’s protégé, but where he stuck with government work until he had to retire, she went to work for the private sector. She spied for whatever company could afford her with no loyalties to her previous employers. It was inevitable she’d go up against people she couldn’t stay hidden from in time. When it happened, Zephyr brought her here.”

“So, they’re a couple?” Emil pushes to his feet without asking me. This isn’t a situation where I can afford to show my displeasure.

“Oh, dear God, no,” she replies. Like the rest of her, her voice is beautiful, lyrical, sensual, full of promises she might keep, or might not. With a look, a twist of her body and a few words, she can shut down the reason center of straight men. “Don’t get me wrong, he’s nice enough, but you don’t get attached to your mentor if you want to survive in this business. I go for the occasional rump with him, but that’s it.” She speaks with a light Russian accent, which is an affectation. Asyr’s research has her born in Salt Lake City to a perfectly ordinary American family.

“What are you doing here? We agreed I am not someone you want to spy on.”

“Is everyone here trying to get you?” Emil asks, with mild exasperation in his tone.

Carson laughs, and immediately he looks at her. “Honey, everyone here’s trying to get to the others on one way or another.”

Emil pants, mouth ajar. She shifts her body so her hips hook in his direction. Her breasts become silhouetted. Emil swallows.

Boxes light up, all responding to the wrong signals he is broadcasting. “What are you doing here, Carson?” I repeat, tone harder.

“Jack can’t reach you.” She smiles at Emil. “My house’s the closest one to you, so he called me to come tell you to turn your phone on. I’m paraphrasing. He said it with a lot more cursing.”

I turned it off earlier today, to ensure I wasn’t distracted while working on taking apart an explosive. The message indicating I missed his call appears as soon as the screen lights up and I flip it open.

“What do you want, Jack?” I say as he answers.

“I want you to come the fuck down here and explain to me how it is that, yet again, I have to deal with someone looking for you.”

“I’ll be right there.” Not someone threatening, or looking for my help. The first would have ended in a fight between them, and Jacoby would scream at me to clean up the body. The second he’d let through, Jacoby can always tell when they are honest about the problems they have.

I put the phone away, pondering the situation. I have no allies out there for him to be unsure how to treat them, and Bart he lets through. I can think of a handful of people with a reason to look for me, but they can't know about the reservation.

"Looks like you have to go deal with something," Carson says. "I'll look after Emil while you're gone."

"No." My hand tightens on the Desert Eagle before I can quiet the boxes. "You delivered your message. Now go home."

"It's okay, dad. I don't mind if she stays."

The tent in his pants makes it clear he doesn't. "She is too dangerous for you."

He studies her. "She doesn't seem that dangerous to me."

I stop the boxes from reacting before more than annoyance registers. "You are not having sex with her."

"Dad!" he's offended, and then realizes he'd been broadcasting his intention and readjusts himself. She chuckles at his action.

That is her talent, what makes her deadly. No straight man can look at her and see more than a delectable morsel. The other men only see her as inoffensive. There are few things I can tell Emil that will convince him she is a threat to him.

"Think of her as a female version of your grandfather," I say, "but with enough skill to make you beg her to rape you."

She tisks as Emil tenses. "It isn't rape if they ask for it."

I relax my control over a few boxes and the anger shows on my face, even if I keep it out of my voice. "My son is off-limits, Carson. I'd have expected you to have understood that without needing me to tell you."

"I'm just offer—"

"You do not want to go there, Carson." The danger she represents makes controlling the boxes more difficult. "Emil, go in the house and stay there until I return."

"Dad, it's fine I—"

"Do not question me!" By the time I have them under enough control to regret my outburst, I hear the door slam shut. My actions are enough to erode some of my control, but I have someone to target. I'm in her space before she reacts. She glances at the Desert Eagle in my hand and the only acknowledgment of the danger she is in, as a tightening of the lips. Someone who doesn't know her has no idea she is ready to kill at this moment.

"You know what I will do to you if you step into my house," I snarl. Her being ready to kill doesn't mean she can carry through. "Don't think that because Emil's young and new to the reservation, I'm going to give you any leeway. He's been the victim of enough predators. Hunt elsewhere."

"Tristan, I don't mean him any harm." Even ready to kill, she doesn't drop the mask of innocence. Something I respect about her. As well as her deadline. "You know I wouldn't—"

"You will go after anyone. Anything you think will let you control me. Or did the talk we have about Bart not make it clear I know you? We are all predators here, under an uneasy truce enforced by Jacoby. Test me, Jenifer, and you won't have to worry about how Jacoby will punish you for breaking the truce. The only thing he will have to worry about is if I buried the pieces deep enough to keep the animals from smelling your corpse."

She sighs, the slight trembling the only indication my threat hit its mark. "You're no fun."

The smile I produce makes her take a step back. "The pieces of you I bury will come about because I'm having fun. So be happy that isn't something I'm interested in doing with you."

"Fine." With the word, the mask drops and an emotionless killer looks back at me. "Go see Jack before he has to call you again and think it's my fault you're taking your sweet time." She turns and steps back into the shadows. Her golden hair is the last thing to disappear in the darkness.

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The man standing by Jacoby is Franklin Smith. The first question is how does he know about the reservation. I expected Bart to know better than tell anyone, even those who care for him, where I live. The second is why is Franklin at ease, while Jacoby's body language has him ready to explode.

"How the fuck do you know him?" Jacoby explodes as I step out of the Chevelle. "I told you what's going to happen if I keep having to deal with your problems."

"Sarge," Franklin says. "I told you, I'm not here to cause problems. I just need to have a word with Tristan. You could just have let me go to his house and—"

"How do you know where I live, Franklin?"

The look he gives me is that of a man reevaluating what he thought he knew about an ally. About if that person is indeed an ally. That he knows Jacoby, is at ease around him, does not mean he is not considering me an enemy.

"I put a tracker in Bart's SUV."

I raise an eyebrow. Jacoby looks annoyed, which means he's confused. He doesn't know who Franklin is to Bart.

"Do you know who he is?" Franklin asks.

"I know about his family."

"Then you know there are people out there who would love to get their hands on him if they were to realize whose son he is. I'm not letting that boy's carelessness be the reason he gets hurt."

"I would never—"

"I know."

The certainty in his voice stops me.

"I know you wouldn't intentionally hurt him, but I'm not blind."

"What are you talking about?"

"Where is he?"

I frown. "At work. He'll be driving here once he's done."

"And you know that for a fact?" now the tone is accusatory.

Boxes light up, sound alarms, tremble.

"No. But A—he hasn't called to let me know something is amiss."

"Bart didn't show up for dinner last night. I called his work, and he hasn't been in there week. He took a vacation. He always lets us know if he's going to miss a Thursday diner. The one time he didn't, we found out he was off running after you. So I'm thinking this is about you again."

"I'm here. He isn't." I reply, bringing the boxes under control.

"What happened last weekend? How did that talk go?"

"Bart wasn't here last weekend."

"And you didn't think to call him or let us know? Do you have any idea how much he usually looks forward to visiting you?"

"We had a disagreement when he visited that ended with him storming off. I am giving him the space he needs. When he's ready, he will return." Boxes are slipping out of my control.

"You let him storm off?" Franklin asks in dismay. "Did you even try to stop him?"

"He's a grown man," I growl back. "If he wants to see me again, that is his decision." Other boxes trigger, as Bart's does, as the implication of what I said register. They silence all the others and my stomach knots.

"And I thought you knew him," Franklin says, then sighs. "At least now I have an idea why he was down during the last dinner. If the boy needs to lash out as someone, any idea who he'd pick?"

"No." The boxes require so much attention that it takes too long for me to wonder what Franklin has learned that makes him think I know Bart targets men who deserve it. That Bart has everything Asyr has compiled on the Mexico angle because I had them send it to him. But that was only a few weeks ago. And if Franklin is right, Bart had no reason to make plans to act on his own until two weeks ago. There is no way Bart considers two weeks enough time to take on a cartel

leader by himself.

“How are you so calm when I just told you we don’t know what trouble he’s gotten himself into because of you?”

The boxes go still.

“Because of me?”

“Yes. You. He stormed off after you hurt him, and you never—”

Jacoby interposes himself between us as I take a step toward Franklin. This puts Franklin under Jacoby’s protection. If I act against him, I break the truce’s rules.

I glare at Franklin. “I thought you said you knew I’d never hurt Bart.”

“Intentionally.”

“What are you implying?”

“That you—”

“Smith,” Jacoby says in a tone that causes Franklin to straighten. “Tristan has difficulties when it comes to understanding people, but I’ve seen him with Bart. The last thing he wants is to push him away.”

I study Jacoby. Is he trying to give Franklin some reason to explain why Bart stormed off because of me? I understand people fine. I studied enough psychological texts to get to the point when I could manipulate them the way I do.

“That’s all fine and good, Sarge, but that still doesn’t tell me where Bart is.”

“I’ll look into it,” I say, and the boxes calm down.

“You expect me to trust you after what you did to him?”

“I did nothing,” I snarl, the chains I wrap around the box containing my anger straining. “I don’t know why Bart stormed off, but I will find him. If it is something I did, we will resolve it.” I get back in the Chevelle and take out my phone on the way to the house.

I call Bart and I get his voice mail. “Bart, call me the instant you get this message. My phone will be on.” I almost hang up, but his box gives a soft flash and others respond. “If I hurt you, I’m sorry. Tell me what I did and I promise, I will not do it again.”

I make another call. “Asyr, I don’t care how much it costs me. Find Bart.”

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Inside the house, Emil’s laptop is in the living room, but he isn’t. The door to his bedroom is closed. I knock. The response is muffled by the sound insulation, but positive. The inside is dark. Emil keeps the windows covered. He is in a corner, knees pulled to his chest. I sit next to him.

“Are you angry at me?” he asks.

“No. I’m sorry for raising my voice.”

He leans against me, and I place an arm around his shoulders. “Then why did you order me in the house?”

“For your protection.”

“I can take care of myself.” There is the hint of anger in his voice and boxes respond to it.

“Not against the people here. Don’t let how ordinary the interactions with Cornelius or Zephyr were lull you into thinking they and the others here aren’t as deadly as I am.”

“They aren’t that bad. Zephyr’s a little intense, but what I saw of his paranoia wasn’t that big of a deal.”

“That’s because it didn’t target you. He, like Cornelius, Carson and the others, will kill without a second thought if they feel the need to.”

“Then why are you here if they’re so dangerous and they all seem to be gunning for you?”

“Because I’m like them, Emil.” I silence his protest. “Just because I’m a monster who took you in doesn’t mean I’m no less of a monster. With them, I don’t have to worry that they’ll assume a threat I’m making is a joke just because no one normal would talk like that. They know that if I make a threat, I will carry through if needed. The rest of the world has no idea how to deal with someone like me, like them. My youth is littered with misunderstandings that ended in death. Here,

around other monsters, they know what to expect from me. There are no misunderstandings.”

Emil is silent for three heartbeats. “Then, that woman in black, Carson?”

“Carson uses men until there’s nothing left she can use. She can’t help it, just like I can’t help craving causing pain.”

“What would she want with me?” He asks, puzzled.

“Sex, and to control me, through you.”

“I wouldn’t let her,” he replies confidently.

“I know you’d try. But the only for you to thwart is to avoid her completely.” I rub his arm. “Are you okay?”

He nods. “That was a low blow, using Gregory like that.”

“I needed you to understand, but I’m sorry for bringing up the memories.” I kiss the top of his head. “I need you to prepare your travel pack, but leave your gun here. We’ll have to get some once we’re on the other side of the border.”

“Border?” he asks as I pull him to his feet.

“Bart might be doing something ill-advised, and it might be my fault.” I can’t wait for Asyr to give me his exact location. I have to move now. Fortunately, I’ll have to make a stop in Phoenix for change vehicle, and while I don’t know where in Mexico he is, I know that’s where he is.