

Storyboard-3

The man leaves me a photograph of his daughter before I send him home. I understand he thinks that having it will cause attachment, but it is only a way for me to know what she looks like without having to access her school's database for a picture. I put my glasses on and study it. Daneta is Caucasian, like her father, with only the hint of slants to her eyes indicating an Asian ancestry on her mother's side. She had short black hair, her eyes are brown. She smiles with open happiness. It is an expression a child should have; one this man will never see again, no matter what state I bring her back to him.

Getting into the Phoenix police database is beyond the scope of my skills with computers. I take a phone from a drawer and place a call.

"Yes," the digitized voice answers. I only know this hacker as Asir. I do not know if they are male or female, their nationality or political leanings. If I wanted to, I could find out. But they haven't given me a reason to look into who they are yet.

"I need information on a kidnapping in Pheonix. Take the money from the same account you did last time. It hadn't been touched." I give her Daneta's name and the information her father provided me with.

"A kidnapping means the FBI. If you need me to get into their files, it will cost extra."

"There's enough to cover it." The account in question belongs to a businessman who is officially traveling the world. In reality, he is dead. I killed him. A woman sent me after him after her son took a position at the man's company, quickly climbed the ranks until he was this man's personal assistant.

Assisting in very personal matters, and not willingly.

I returned her son to her, and in her rage at what was left, she demanded I do what the man had done to her son. I did. Unlike her son, the man did not survive it. With Asir's help, I took control of the man's identity. For half of the man's assets, they agreed to keep him moving around the world. I use the rest to pay them.

Once the account runs dry, there are others I can use. Rich men make themselves about the law. Unfortunately, by the time someone seeks me out, they have lost faith in the law. I never had it to begin with.

"I'll need an hour," Asir replies. "I will email you the address where the information will be, along with where to pick up the new phone to contact me." The call ends.

I finish cleaning the Desert Eagle, then it returns to the holster. I pull a case from under one of the work tables and take three pemmican bars from it. The boxes, like the wrappers, have no inscriptions on them. They aren't made by any of the known manufacturers. The company that makes them only supplies radical survivalists, one of whom they believe me to be. The pemmican is one of the least dangerous items they provide.

As I eat and drink water from a bottle I took from another case, I go over the Chevelle in the garage. I will have to travel, so it needs to be in good condition. I give it a tune-up, change the oil, inspect the undercarriage for rust and the hidden weapons I have hidden there. Finally, I line the trunk with a tarp.

I do not want evidence I have transported her body linking me to her death.

A box in my head rattles halfway through that work. Will I? Hope asks. What if I get to her fast enough? Didn't I say that the amount of work put in her capture precludes a quick death? What if she is resilient? What if the plans of the men who took her need her to stay alive?

I slam a mental hand on it, but the questions have been raised.

I finished lining the trunk. If she is still alive, I will not need it, but unlike hopeful people, I do not let a good possibility keep me from preparing for the more likely bad one.

I return to my workshop intent on looking through what Asir has sent me, but the safe next to it makes a new box rattle. If there's a chance she is still alive, it whispers, can you afford delays? Can you afford to sleep while they might be killing her? That box doesn't contain something people would consider good, like hope. It cages addiction.

I ignore the computer and go to the safe. The lock is of my design and it is nearly larger than the safe. It is there to keep me out of it, to keep me from listening to the rattle of that specific box too easily.

The lock's casing is titanium. The only way to open it is to enter the combination while both approved fingerprints are used.

I do not know the combination.

The fingerprints are not mine; the fingers used have been destroyed.

Without either, the only way to unlock it is to take it apart.

It is held together by six specially made three-millimeter screws. The body is titanium while the head is tin. Any jerking while trying to unscrew it will break the head off the rest of the screw. It takes patience and a steady hand to prevent it from happening.

Should that happen, then the next possibility is to use a blowtorch to remove the lock.

There is a thermostat, attached to the inside of the safe's door acting as a trigger, connected to termite. If the temperature on that thermostat rises above five hundred degrees Celsius, it will ignite the termite and incinerate the content.

I stop the screwdriver before I touch it to the screw as the idea the contents could be destroyed raises my heart rate, causes my hand to shake minutely. The box rattles angrily.

I take a minute to settle and center myself.

Once the front of the lock is removed, I need to manually set the combination and reset the fingerprint reader so it will accept any prints. From that moment, I have three minutes to reassemble the lock before the combination is randomized and the prints are set to one of three thousand in its database.

Not one of those fingers still exists.

When I am calm, centered, reassembling the locks takes two minutes forty-three seconds. I place one hand's index and ring finger on the readers and enter the combination.

The lock beeps. The box's rattling intensifies.

I open the door and stop as I reach in.

My hand is shaking.

I take control of the box. I force it to quiet. I am its master, not its slave. I do this

because while I do not believe Daneta is alive, her father deserves I act as if she was.

I am not doing this because I am addicted to what is in the safe.

In the safe are twenty pill bottles, each containing a hundred pills. Each is the same formulation of an amphetamine illegal for civilian use. The general population doesn't even know of its existence. The three times an attempt to make it public was made, they were terminated with extreme prejudice.

The military is the only one using it and only with their special forces. One pill will let a soldier function for between sixty and seventy-two hours without suffering from the side effect of lack of sleep.

As soon as the drug's effect end, they will crave more.

I take one pill out of the bottle on the far left, the only one with a broken seal. I hesitate as I put it back. The box rattles again, reminding me of how good being under its effect it. What harm is there in taking two? I mass more than the average soldier they were designed for, so two will be safe. In fact, wouldn't three be better? Ensure I get the full effect?

I throw the bottle in and slam the door of the safe shut. If the box in my head was real, the strength I put behind slamming it silent would have left it into kindling. My hand is shaking again. Just the memory of my last time on it is enough to get the withdrawal started again.

Is it any wonder that the survival rate of the soldiers who take this drug is zero?

That statistic doesn't stop the military from using it.

I wash the pill down with a bottle of water.

I can control just about everything about myself with my will. The things I can't, I have systems in place to enforce control on me. I finish the bottle with another bar of pemmican and prepare myself for the coming hours.

* * * * *

I feel good.

Not the good of being high; a high soldier is six dead ones. This I the good of being alert; of being focused. Of knowing, without a doubt, that I can accomplish the task I have set myself. That certainly isn't new to me, and it is warranted. I do not know if it is for the soldier who takes this pill. I have never bothered looking into the reports on their performance. I don't care how they performed. I perform as I always do. The only difference is that I do not have to concern myself with sleep for the next sixty-eight hours.

I read through the information Asir sent to the email address we use. They have provided me with more than asked for, and correspondingly, the account is that much lower. Every piece of information is vital to what I am doing. This is why I continue to work with Asir. They never waste my time.

There have been twenty-three kidnappings of boys and girls in Daneta's age group and matching the method used to take her. Nothing in what Asir provided me indicates someone other than them has made the connection between these cases. Is this incompetence or has someone paid to ensure they remained unconnected?

Asir will not act on the information. I do not know if it is because they don't care

that children are being hurt or they trust that now that I am involved, those responsible will pay. They have had multiple chances to inform the media based on research I had them do. They never did.

Asir found three legal firms used in the filing of the power of attorney papers. The addresses of each firm are the same, except for the office number. The company owning the building only rents to numbered companies, maximizing their revenue as they can fill the building with an unending number of companies that only exist on paper.

This is not negligence. Someone is being paid to keep the law from connecting the cases.

The firm specializes in different cases, so it is not surprising they have nothing in common. Only each calls the same phone number every day. Each has their own time assigned to him. Asir traced the number through multiply relays and back to a physical location. A club in Phoenix's theater district.

Liaison.

I have the blueprints, courtesy of Asir, as well as information on their security system. They use electronic locks from Ensuralock. I can bypass one on my own, given enough time. That is a risk I can't take, so I send an order to the LockSmith and pay for my key to be ready by the time I get to the city.

It's eight hours to Phoenix, driving the speed limit. If I leave now, I will be there at six tonight. It gives me the night to get everything in order and ensure that what is offered there can't trigger any of my boxes.

Jeans and a t-shirt are what I put on. I have nothing more elaborate here since I never play a role until I am well out of the reservation, and I only have to dress accordingly once I will interact with people expecting me to be that role. My gun harness is over the shirt and a black leather jacket serves to keep anyone from noticing it easily.

The military boots are the last on. I don't like having my feet encased. I don't like losing contact with the ground. Losing the feel of the dirt under my toes as I move. When I have to cover them, I ensure it is with something that I can use if I get into a fight.

I take the printouts of the information Asir gave me along.

Once the Chevelle is out of the garage, I close it and the house down and lock it.

The house sits on top of twenty-five kilos of Semtex, placed so that if they go off, all that will be left of the property will be a crater. The lock is set so that once the combination is entered and the door unlocked, there are only fifteen seconds to enter the second combination, a twelve-digit one. The lock does not indicate that is required.

I drive down the only road through the reservation. Slow enough, the potholes will not destroy the undercarriage of the Chevelle. Jack insists they are only the result of time and the others driving along it occasionally, but they are located in such a way that it is impossible for anyone to hurry and have a working vehicle left. One hole is wide and deep enough it can leave a hummer stuck.

As I pass one of the twelve other houses, some of the occupants look at me. They are Caucasian. I'm the only none Caucasian on the reservation. There are no natives left here. As far as the government is concerned, this land has been unoccupied since the Navajo Nation

who lived here was wiped out in eighty-eight by a smallpox epidemic.

No one questions the epidemic, almost a decade after smallpox was eradicated.

The lies people will believe.

We, who now live here, are happy to let the government think it is still unoccupied.

The looks I get are guarded, but not fearful. We all understand each other here.

‘Do not bother me unless it’s important’ is our motto.

There was one altercation, twenty years ago, when I settled here. And it was with the man currently standing in the middle of the road in front of the last house of the reservation, or the first if you are coming in. There is only one way in and out, and he will stand in the way each time.

As with previous times, I contemplate running him down. It isn’t anger that he bested me that first time—I was young. Murder and robbery were what I excelled at, not hand to hand combat. It’s reflex. Anything in my way gets removed. The fact I haven’t been able to figure out what contingencies he had in place should I do that, and that the other occupants of the reservation would demand retribution, makes me stop two feet before him.

He doesn’t flinch.

Jacoby, or Jack, as I call him, is pushing seventy, thin, but with a hard gaze. Career military. Navy seal. He could have gone far, but at his core, he is a moral man, the only one in the reservation. Military special force is deadly for men with morals. Rather than being ground down to dust, he left. Unfortunately, he made powerful enemies by then.

“Tristan,” he greets me as he steps to the driver’s side.

“Jack.”

“You coming back?”

I shrug. “It’s the plan, but life might have other ideas.”

“How long until I clear out your place?”

“Two weeks.” Clearing out my place is code for forming the crater. Jack has a remote detonator to the explosives under my house. When I leave, I need to give him a time frame. If I’m not back or haven’t contacted him with the proper code and a new time frame, I’m not returning here, that I be dead or alive.

Jack has few rules. His first; mind your own business. I have broken that one with each of the other occupants, but he doesn’t know that. The second is that I am not to ever bring trouble back with me.

Jack is the first person I have met to see through my facade, to see the monster I hide behind it. He was also the first one to not be afraid of it. I wasn’t the first monster he met. The reservation is comprised of them; I discovered later.

We are each a different flavor of monster. I learned that when Cornelius introduced herself to me. She tried to poison me the day I refused her advances and explain that I am gay. I broke her leg in three places in retaliation. She has to use a cane because of it.

She might be the only friend I have in this world. We compare kills over drinks every week or so. She brings alcohol for her to drink; I drink my water.

Jack runs a hand on top of the Chevelle. “Where are you leaving this beauty? I’ll come to get it if you don’t come back.”

I smile at him. “The address to the storage locker where it’ll be parked is on the coffee table in the living room.”

He sighs. “Of course you’d put that in your house.”

“If you can get to it, the car’s yours.” Jack knows my security system will blow the house up, but he doesn’t know how to disarm it. Jack loves classic cars. He had done more stupid things for one of them than he has for a woman. When I acquired the Chevelle SS 454, fifteen years ago, he demanded I hand it over to him. Payment for the training he gave me. He didn’t ask. Jack doesn’t ask. If he thinks he’s entitled to something, he tells you and it’s your job to keep it.

Combat, to first yield.

Neither he nor I are the kind of men who yield. The fight was my hardest. Jack was a great teacher, and he kept things back, but I didn’t learn only from him. Cornelius nursed him back to life. After that, I made it a point to restore the Chevelle to its original condition and drive it in and out of the reservation so he can see how well I care for it.

I can see how badly he craves it.

I’m not angry at him for the beating he gave me when I first came here. He taught me some of the limitations I then set to overcome.

That doesn’t mean I won’t make him pay for it for as long as I can.

I smile at him, then gently drive away

Storyboard-4

The property is over a hundred acres. The walls around it are high, with barbed wires at the top, and there’s a camera every twenty feet. There are only three gates to enter the property and they are guarded by sensors, guards, and dogs.

That isn’t where I’m going. You couldn’t get me to go in there if I were bagged, gagged, and tagged. I’m going to a small house outside of that wall, but close enough that if anything happens, the two people who live there can be inside that wall before it has time to escalate. The two people I’m going to see are the ones responsible for all that security surrounding that place I will never set foot in, again.

So, who lives inside that wall that I never want to see? My mom and dad, and, at anyone one time, two of my siblings. It would seem strange that I have that extreme of a reaction to my dad kicking me out, wouldn’t it? You’d think I’d at least like someone else in my family.

Well, I don’t.

See, no one in my family came to my rescue when dear old dad kicked me out. No, those who came to my rescue are who I’m driving to see. The two living just outside this no-man’s-land.

My parents’ very own personal bodyguards. They aren’t related to me by blood, thank God, but they are the only family I have left. Gabrielle and Franklin Smith. Of as I call them. Grams and Gramp.

Dear old dad doesn’t know about how Gramp rescued me, how he and Grams raised

me as if I was their own after being abandoned. I was the son they were always too busy to have. First keeping their countries safe, then my parents.

They smothered me with their personal brand of love.

The house appears to be a simple place for simple folks, and that's how the two of them like things. I have the passcode for the gate, an unassuming wrought iron affair that would look out of place next to the ones attached to that wall. Fortunately, it's far enough in the trees it isn't visible from the road. I also have the code for the house's security.

I'm the only person outside of them who those. That's how much they love me.

"Grams!" I call once I've used the code to enter the house.

"In the kitchen, Bart." Comes her reply with the English accent she never fully lost. I never got her to tell me if she ever tried to lose it.

The inside matches the outside. Modest. My parents would never allow such a place inside the wall, where it could mar the grandeur of their mansion. Oh, pretentious is the nicest word I can use when describing my parents' taste in anything.

This house is more home than that mansion ever was, or my current house. There is love in these walls. For me, and each other, and for the house itself and its content.

I lean in the kitchen doorway and watch her in her pink summer dress. The short curly silver hair is new. Last week it was straight. She dances in front of the stove and sink. What could I say about her? Well, what could I say that isn't classified?

Gabrielle Smith won gold at the Olympic biathlon three times in a row in her youth before she was recruited for the British army. Perfect score on the shooting portion of the event. What she did during her service is a very well-guarded secret. I suspect she knows I found out some of it, but I'm not going to ask. I found enough to know that there is a lot more I didn't. That's how well those secrets are guarded.

"Excuse me," a man says behind me, and I step out of the doorway. "How are you doing?" Gramp asks.

"I'm good," I answer without pretension. "Dinner smells amazing, as usual."

Franklin Smith is a decorated soldier too; navy seal and special forces. I could talk about his exploits for hours. They made a TV show about him and his team. The one with that actor who played Angel on the Buffy show, the hot guy. He half denies it, but anytime we watch it, he spends half the time complaining about the stuff they got wrong.

So yeah, these are the two people I owe my life to. They didn't just keep my time on the street short, Gramp taught me how to handle a gun, Grams showed me how to take him down in hand to hand. She also taught me how to handle a knife, but after the race track incident, she agreed with me it was best if I stayed away from them.

"Franklin," she giggles as he wraps his arm around her and kisses her neck. "Go sit."

Instead, he waltzes with her, well follows her movement as she continues to putter around the counter.

The lump forms in my chest. A mix of admiration for two people who've been through so much and are still in love with one another. There's some envy too. This wonder at if I'll ever have that. I'd settle for a fraction of it at this point.

She elbows him and he lets her go, rubbing his side. That was not a play hit.

“Sit,” she says, smiling. “You too Bart. Everything’s about ready.”

“Can I help with anything?” Franklin asks, far too innocently.

I’m already in the dining room.

“Sit your ass down, Franklin. The day I need help in the kitchen, I’ll ask you.”

He should know better. I smile at him as he joins me. The kitchen is Grams’ domain. Anytime he steps in and gets in her way, he is putting his life in her hands. I guess that he’s learned that after forty years of marriage, and that after each other’s lives have been in the other’s hands throughout their careers, continuing once they’re home just feels natural.

I don’t know much about how they met. It’s mostly redacted. Deep enough, even the electronic files have large holes in them. I’ve pieced enough to be confident it was in Ireland, but I still haven’t gotten them to confirm it.

Dinner is amazing. If there is one thing Grams does better than take down a target a kilometer’s distance, it’s cook. Eating is mainly accompanied by the sound of us enjoying it. It’s difficult to have a conversation when you’re in a state of ecstasy.

Dessert is her award-winning apple pie, which isn’t actually won any awards because I can’t get her to enter any competition with it. She would win all of them. Hot out of the oven with a scoop of specialty vanilla ice cream, and I’m in heaven.

“So, Bart,” Gramp asks as he enjoys is after dinner tea, “how’s work?”

“It’s good.” I’m on my sixth coffee of the meal. Come on, a meal this good needs coffee to be really appreciated. “I just started a new project.”

“Challenging?”

I nod. “Import-export. Sort of offshoot from a previous project.”

Grams eyes me as Gramp nods.

“You don’t get a lot of those,” he says and as he closes his eyes to enjoy his tea, I give her a slight nod. Import-export is my code for when I’m going after something bigger than the lone abuser. As Gramp points out, it’s not common.

“Import-export tends to be linked to other businesses, so it’s only when their security situation spills over that I’ll get one of them.” He doesn’t know what I do in my spare time. Even at his age, Gramp can take down a squad of enemy soldiers on his own, with nothing more than one Beretta, half a clip, and the bowie knife in the sheath at his calf. But I, the son he never had, well, he is a little overprotective of me. So I don’t give him reasons to worry.

“How come you haven’t brought by that nice guy?” he asks and the quick change of subject confuses me almost as much as the question. Who is he talking about? “The police officer who couldn’t stop smiling when he looked at you,” he elaborates.

“Oh, Garry?” He was what, two or three weeks ago? “It didn’t work out.”

He raises an eyebrow. “He seemed perfect. Tall and strong, just like you like them. And he seemed so gentle.”

I shrug. “It just didn’t click. We agreed to end it.” Well, I told him it wouldn’t go anywhere, and he blocked me on just about every social site in existence. Overall, I think he took it well.

“You have to find someone, Bart.” He looks at Grams. He doesn’t need to smile; I

can see the love in his eyes, see it in how she blushes lightly. The envy shows up again. To have someone look at me like that, and for me to react to it.

“It’s got to be the right someone,” I say, and mean it. It’s not a dodge. I am okay with being alone until then. Sure, I like the fun night with a guy, testing them to see if they are the right one, but I’m not going to keep one around just because he’s there. I want... I want...

“I want what you told me of how your two met,” I say. “How that first time you saw Grams across the battlefield you couldn’t breathe. All you could do was look into her eyes and you knew that if you didn’t at least talk to her, you’d never breathe again.” Now he smiles and blushes. “That’s what I want. I want a guy who’s going to take my breath away.”

His breathing is ragged, his eyes glisten. “You’ll find him, son.” He wipes at his eyes and when he looks at Grams, I’m sure he’s looking in the past.

She pats his hand and kisses his cheeks. “Bart, honey. How about we take the dishes away while Franklin puts himself back together?”

“I’m good,” Gramp replies.

“I know.” She smiles at him.

I gather plates and cups, then follow her. Once she confirms I closed the door, she looks at me. “I thought the senator was a solo thing.” She doesn’t bother lowering her voice. Every wall and door is soundproof. I’ve blown up firecrackers in one room and couldn’t hear it through the door. If I’d thought about it, I’d never have done it. *I* was the one who had to clean up that mess.

“I thought it was.” I place the plates in the sink and lean against the counter. “But I didn’t find one boy linked to his abuse. I found four. None of which has resurfaced. If not for the pictures the idiot took, I would never have found evidence of what he did. You’re the one who told me the secret service would never enable that kind of behavior, so there’s someone both providing them for him and cleaning the mess afterward. If they’d know about the pictures, Mister senator would just have vanished too, I’m sure of that.”

“Do you know who they are?”

I shake my head. “But I have found a common point to investigate. The pictures were geo stamped and dated. And I traced his movements through the GPS on his vehicles. The night before he was with each of the boys, he stopped at a close called Liaison.”

She frowns, then shakes her head.

“It’s a hookup club. Basically a whore house with really nice paint and expensive drinks. The members get to grab any of the employees, take them to a room, and have their fun with him. Not legal, but what do the rich care about legality, right?”

“You know they don’t,” she replies darkly. She’s a professional. She’s going to keep my mom safe no matter what, but that doesn’t mean she likes her any more than I do.

“I’ve already gone over their systems from my home, and that’s all clean. So, with tomorrow being Friday, they’re going to be busy and it’ll be easy for me to move about unnoticed. There’s no way they run that kind of operation with just paper and ink. They’ll have an office with a computer that’s offline. I find that and I’ll have what I need to continue.”

She nods. “Do be careful. If they are taking those kinds of steps, they will have other

safety measures in place.”

I smile. “I will be. If it gets too hot, I’ll just extract myself and do it another time.”
Maybe I’ll have a conversation with the club’s owner. And I’ll bring a knife to that meeting.