

“Still clear,” I whisper, looking around the corner, while Tristan picks the locks to the building’s roll door. “How did you find the one building with antiquated locks in this part of the city?”

“This isn’t antiquated.”

“It’s got pins and thingies in it that you need a physical key to make work. Antique.”

“Or it’s possible the owner has realized how prevalent the use of electronics has become to bypass those types of locks and gambled that none of the younger generations would be able to pick a purely physical lock.”

There’s click, then the door rolls up.

“Keep watch.”

Oh, the ways I can reply to that. The things it would lead to, if only the sounds of sirens weren’t getting closer.

“We don’t have long,” I say.

“It won’t take long,” he replies.

Getting away from the police station proved easier than I’d thought possible. The cops’ ID unlocked the back door, then Tristan found the oldest car in the lot, picked door and hot-wired it. How is it any cop can have a car that doesn’t have the latest security on it? You know, one I’d have to unlock and start?

We were three blocks away when the sirens started, and it took three car changes to make it here, and by the sound of it, if we aren’t gone soon, things are going to get hectic—

The roars of the engine makes me smile. It’s amazing that to me, it sounds exactly like him. How that power, under a slick body, matches him.

The Chevelle pulls out of the garage and I get in. Instead of slamming the accelerator down, he gently eases onto the street and then we are among the traffic on Dunlap, heading west.

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Emil, Grams and Gramp are on the porch by the time Tristan stops the car. Unsurprisingly, the three of them are on alert. It’s not Thursday, and we didn’t call ahead.

“What is going on?” Gramp asks as we get out of the car.

“We just thought we’d drop by,” I reply jovially.

“Why is the Chevelle out of storage?” Emil asks, since of the three, he’s the one who knows it stayed stored so it wouldn’t be a casualty of this war we were engaged in.

“The situation changed,” Tristan says, heading for our son.

“I take it the house isn’t on schedule?” Grams replies in a tone that had Gramp looking at her and me cursing. She can’t know everything, but she knows something.

“Why don’t we go inside and talk about it over coffee?” I offer and ignore the look Tristan gives me. It’s the last time I get to talk with them for a while; I get to enjoy it with coffee.

“I suppose that’s an idea,” Grams says, heading insider. I follow her, Tristan and Emil behind me, and Gramp brings the rear. Either to make sure no one surprises us, or that we can’t make a run for it. At least not until he has answers that he’ll be happy with.

By the time we reach the dining room, Grams already has coffee on the table, along with water and tea. Tristan indicates one end of the table, so I sit there, Grams and Gramp joining me, while he takes Emil to the other end of the room.

I'm not sure which one of us had the toughest conversation ahead of him.

I slowly sip my cup. So very slowly, so I won't have to start—

“Alex?” Grams says.

“Do you remember that side project of mine?” I ask. “Back before I met Tristan.”

“That import export thing?” Gramp asks, while Grams simply nods.

“That wasn't what I was doing, Gramp. That was...” I sigh. So much for protecting him from that part of my life. “I'd exposed a senator for having sex with underage boys, and —”

“What?”

I look at him. “Gramp, I've been using my hacking skills to expose men who think they're above the law ever since... well, basically, from the moment I got my own place.”

“Why?”

“Because someone had to do it,” I snap, taking him aback. “Do you have any idea how many powerful men out there use their position to do whatever the fuck they want? I hate Dear Old Dad with a passion, but he's actually not that bad, compared to the men I've exposed.”

“Why didn't you tell us?” he asks, most of the hurt hidden.

“Because I didn't want you involved. I didn't want you to worry needlessly. I was always careful.”

“So careful you had to sleep in different places every night for the last few months?” he asks. I will never accuse him of not being able to put two and two together if given enough pieces.

“This last one ended up being more...complex. I uncovered a trafficking ring; well, we did, me and Tristan, it's sort of how we met.” The smile I give them is no match for the scowl he gives me.

“And you decided to take them down,” he states. “Because someone had to do it.”

“We thought about walking away, but that's when they blew up our home.”

In any other situation, the way Gramp's jaw dropped would be laughing-out-loud funny. The utter disbelief on his face. Then he's angry.

“If my job wasn't to keep him safe, I'd go in there right now and kill him.”

Wait, what?

“It wouldn't change anything, Franklin,” Grams says. “Alex took after him well before that incident.”

“Excuse me?” I demand, having a decent idea who they are referring to now, and not liking it one bit.

“Who do you think you get that stubborn streak from, Alex?” she asks.

“I am not stubborn.”

Her smile is gentle. Gramp is looking at me in disbelief again. I have no trouble imagining what he's about to tell me, but my imagination is what it remains because—

“Oh, fuck off!” Emil yells, and I turn in time to watch him try to shove Tristan away, pushing himself back instead. “You don't get to abandon me!”

“I am not abandoning you, Emil. This is only until—”

“And how the fuck does ‘until I've dealt with the whole fucking government being after us’ come with some time limit?”

Oh, that was not how I wanted them to hear about that part.

“Things might have gotten a little out of hand,” I tell them. And this time, even Grams looks at me in disbelief.

“I will—”

“Bullshit! I spent years looking for you! You said you’d wouldn’t leave me again!”

“This is for—”

“No! It’s because I’m not good enough! If I was, you’d take me with you!” He turns to leave, but Tristan grabs his arm.

I’m up as Emil freezes, but Tristan has already let go and I see fear on his face. After the abuse Emil has suffered, grabbing him like that isn’t good.

“I’m sorry,” Tristan says and sounds small. “I want you to have something better than what I can give you, Emil. You deserve to have a normal life. They can—”

Emil’s bark of laughter silences him.

“Normal? Whose normal, Dad? His?” he points to Gramp. “Who spends his days protecting a man he hates? Hers?” he shifts to Grams. “Who holds so many secrets about so many things I don’t even get how she’s still sane?”

I don’t think I’ve ever seen her this shocked. I know she keeps secrets, because duh, she kept mine, but I’m pretty sure that isn’t something she’d have discussed with him. I’m kind of curious how he worked it out.

“So, whose normal am I supposed to be happy with, dad? Do you have any idea what the kids at that school I go do put up with? Parents who are never there, a father who’s drunk most of the time. A mother who forces them to stay in their room so the boyfriend of the night won’t find out she has a kid. Whose normal are you fucking talking about, Dad?”

“I just want—” Tristan swallows, and it takes everything not to go to him. I don’t think I’ve ever seen actual pain on his face before. “You deserve to be happy, Emil.”

“I am happy, Dad,” Emil replies, his body language softening. “When I’m with Dad and my Pop.” Tears fall. “Please, don’t leave me behind.”

Tristan pulls Emil to him and holds him tightly. For a second, I think I’m about to see tears from my monsters, but his expression returns to neutral as he makes his decision regarding Emil, and he settles his boxes about it.

“Get a go bag ready,” he tells our son, and once he’s out of the room, he faces us.

“What did you do?” Gramp asks, and the anger is naked.

“What needed to be done,” Tristan replies. “To stop people propagating abuse throughout the US, Mexico and almost certainly the rest of the world. We tried doing it cleanly, but our hand was forced.”

“And now the government is after Alex? I thought you were going to—”

“Stop,” I order him. “Gramp, I was already doing this. Trust me, even without him, I’d have gotten to this point. The guy we stopped was evil. Worse than I am, than he is, than anyone I’ve ever taken down. He was someone who enabled all those powerful men, supplied them with kids. Tristan saved me, Franklin, more than once. Don’t put this on his shoulders. We decided on this together.” He’s about to protest.

I hate doing this. I hate shattering the image I allowed him to maintain of me all these years. The strong fighter who managed to survive what his father did to him and live a normal-ish life.

Let's be honest here. Even he isn't so blind as to think I was ever going to have an entirely normal life.

"I'm the one who pulled the trigger, Gramp. I'm the one who murdered that man."

I can't read the emotions that flood his face, but I can tell none of them are good. When Grams puts an arm around his shoulders, he melts against her. The look she gives me isn't a happy one.

It's not that I killed a man she's pissed about. It's that I just broke her man's heart.

But she's still Grams, so while she holds him against her, she focuses on the important things. "How likely is it the police will come to question us?"

"Very. They have mine and Alex's description. It's only a question of time before they match it to one of his pictures from the papers. Then they will question his family and anyone linked to them. You need to erase any evidence he has been here. In the last three months, if you can't remove him completely."

She nods, then we are silent until Emil runs in. Before he's done taking in the scene, Tristan is heading to the exit, and I follow.

"Alex," Grams calls, her tone hard.

I swallow, then turn.

"Be safe." Her expression is hard. "And come back to us once this is cleared up."

"I will." I give her my best smile. "Shouldn't take more than what, a few weeks, right?"

She doesn't smile, and my heart is heavier than I've ever felt it as I leave my family home for what feels like the last time.

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