

Gauntlet

by Melenka

A woman seeking revenge finds more than she bargains for. A man seeking redemption finds more than he had expected.

Chapter 1 - Flying Blind

Chapter 1 of 36

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At 11:42, the rain began. It was, Deira thought, just about perfect. For almost two hours she had been on the move, trying to find a good place to hide, rejecting anything that suggested itself too conveniently. She pushed away from the crumbling brick wall and weaved her way through the half-destroyed cars.

If this had been a real junkyard, there would be established paths, but even her clichéd notions of where to hide were less exciting than in the movies. This was just a place where cars went to die, abandoned by people who had used them up, taken anything of value and left them to rust out. They were joined in decay by stoves, old dryers, even an old camper that would make an appealing hiding place and therefore was to be avoided.

There was nothing good about walking crouched down. Especially when she expected to be hit at any moment by some implement of destruction freshly liberated from some heap. The junk field suddenly seemed like a really bad idea. The night had been full of really bad ideas, so at least Deira's decision was consistent.

There was no comfort in that.

She made her way back towards the street, still stooping, occasionally looking over a rusty car to see if she had been followed. Of course she had been followed. She wasn't going to lose them between the subway stop and the junkyard, regardless of how many fences she hopped. She just wasn't good enough, and everyone knew it. She was, however, closer to the end of the junkyard than they were, and they hadn't spotted her yet just her tracks.

If she made a mad dash, she could be back on the street... and then what? Well, it was better than being thrown repeatedly into sharp, rusted metal edges, and if it was the wrong decision, at least the pattern of the day would remain unbroken.

The worst thing about the entire business was that Deira had to admit that Sticks was right. He'd told her that she wasn't ready for this, and she'd argued, knowing the whole time that he was right.

"You aren't bad enough to go after the bad guys, D." There had been no derision in his voice.

"The fuck I'm not!" she had spat back. Angry. So angry that she couldn't hear the truth.

"Nah. You're mad enough, but you still want justice. If you want these guys, it has to be about revenge."

"Which makes me more like them." Deira began.

"And like me," Sticks finished for her, lighting a cigarette and throwing the match at her. It didn't go out until Deira stomped on it fast. Whatever made this floor sticky was likely to be flammable.

"You aren't like them."

"Wrong. I am exactly like them. You just like the side I picked better. The sooner you accept that to fight them you have to be them, the sooner you'll be ready to take 'em on. Until then, you're a fucking snack to them."

That was the point at which Deira had stormed out, so desperate to prove she was ready that she had done everything wrong. If she lived through the night, Sticks was going to laugh himself sick over this. If she didn't, he would sigh and go about his business.

Odds were looking good for the sighing.

Dropping into a full crouch, Deira launched herself towards the street.

The howls of triumph behind her were infuriating. They sounded like they'd already caught her. Something whizzed over her shoulder, too close. She didn't turn, didn't stop. She put what was left of the brick wall between her and her opponents and followed it a few feet, eyes on the truck headed her way. As the driver slowed to check the cross-street, Deira flung herself into the road, veered slightly and came around the other side. They would know she was going to jump a ride on the truck because it was the first thing that occurred to her. Since it would then pass their position, they could pick her off with either their bare hands or a good shot, depending on their specialty.

If she didn't get on the truck, she would be stuck fighting them on the street. They had the advantage in numbers and size, but only an idiot had a full out fight in the middle of a mixed use area. Residents might look away, but barflies came out for a fight without fail, and the authorities were always close behind. Deira might be fighting for justice, but the police wouldn't care. Again, Sticks was right. It still sucked, and she was no closer to having an out.

Deira jumped up, just managing to catch the top of the truck with her fingertips, and made sure that her feet hit loudly on the side. She dropped off, ran beside the truck for a few feet, threw herself into a doorway and realized, just a little too late, that there were unlit steps leading down to the door.

It isn't easy to avoid making a sound as your body rolls over concrete stairs. It's even harder to stay quiet when you hit whatever is at the bottom in this case, a rather solid door. She twisted reflexively, and only the realization that her lower half was soaked from the puddle at the base of the stairs kept her from feeling cocky.

At least two of the thugs following her had taken off after the truck. Deira spared a thought for the driver then shrugged it off. He was probably armed. She focused on staying in the shadows, on deepening her breath. There had been more than two following her, and she could not see the street clearly from the doorway.

She tried anyway.

"Get. Out. Now." The voice from behind made Deira jump.

Her sudden movement caught the eye of one of the thugs, who started across the street. *Shit.*

"Thanks," Deira said to the unseen voice behind the door. The door had made no sound opening and she hadn't even felt the air change. "I have to go die now. You should close the door."

Deira tried to make it up the stairs before Thug One made it to the sidewalk. She glanced behind him and saw Thug Two emerge from the junkyard. She had really, really hoped she would have to face only one. She heard the door close. *Asshole.*

The fight was fairly quick and almost bloodless. Deira managed to cut Thug One's arm as she rolled under his punch. He slashed her shoulder, but not deep enough to get the tendon he was going for. They circled again, and Deira realized that he was turning her back toward Thug Two, who was leaning against a car.

He doesn't think I'm a threat. That was irritating.

She threw herself to the right. It was an amateur move. Thug One followed with a smirk. Deira watched his movements, his breathing, the way he held the knife. *Nice knife.* Deira found the place, tried to stay there, but it slipped away. She wasn't ready for this, and it pissed her off.

As soon as he stepped towards her, she fell backwards and dropped her knife, breathing heavily, counting. One step. Two. He waited for the trick. Three steps. He could hear her crying now and would find it confusing. Four steps, and he was right above her, looking down at her like she was gutter trash that he didn't want to get on his shoes. Her eyes were unfocused and a little glassy. He would figure she was on something. He would be right.

Deira stared up at the man, as if from a very long distance, and smiled, just a little ashamed of having thought she could win. He grinned back. The night had just gotten better than he had hoped. Early nights were good ones.

She waited until he reached down to grab her hair *why is it men always want to grab a woman's hair?* and slammed her arms into his chest. As strong as she was, she barely winded him, and he dragged her up to her feet. She shook her wrist knife into her hand and sliced across his forearm, going deep. He let go of her hair and swore, backing away as the blood ran through his fingers. She hoped she'd hit an artery.

Thug Two pushed himself off the wall and headed for her. She was a little threat, it seemed. She was a lot tired, though, and it showed.

"Damn." It was about all she had to say. "Damn."

"Okay, Fido, back off the lady and head home. This is not the place." The voice came from behind Deira. It seemed that the man behind the door had decided to take an interest after all. She couldn't afford to turn her head to see what the asshole looked like.

"My name is King," thug two spat.

"Yes, well, if you guys would stop naming yourself after childhood pets or maybe the first dog you killed, then I would not get so confused. Go home and tell your owner not to send you to shit in my front yard. It is impolite."

"And who the fuck are you?" The distraction of speaking had allowed Deira to step aside and circle King. He seemed unfazed. Or maybe he was incapable of doing two things at once. That would be nice.

He reached for the gun tucked at his back. *Not so nice after all.*

"Let's just say I am a concerned citizen who does not want to see anyone else get hurt tonight." There was a hint of laughter in the words and a threat underneath.

Deira still couldn't see the guy with the voice because she wouldn't take her eyes off King or his partner, who was absorbed in trying to keep from bleeding out.

"Don't you know concerned citizens get dead?" King asked.

"Yes, I do. But everyone has to go some time."

Deira began to step away from the fight, now that it seemed to have shifted focus. Not too fast, or they would notice and King would shoot her. Her desire to live through the night was stronger than it had been when she was fighting. She'd have to think about that when there was time.

"Now's your time, then." King drew the gun and fired. Deira threw herself sideways and rolled behind a parked car.

Either King was a lousy shot or it had gone wild because the guy was still standing. The only things Deira could see were his bare feet and the hem of his jeans. Then those disappeared, and she heard a body hit the pavement. Now was a good time to disappear. She slipped alongside the cars until she was near an alley that ran behind bars the kind of bars that in a few years might be upscale but right now were just trying too hard. She ran to the intersection of the next street, looked back towards the fight and then turned away, ducking down another alley.

There was a back door to one of the older dives. If she could make it inside, she'd be safe for a moment. Professionals didn't open fire in crowded bars. Well, most didn't. A thin band of light cut across the alley where the door was opened a crack. Deira slowed to a walk, sighing. Wouldn't do to rush in all crazed with at least one body in the road a block away. People tended to remember stuff like that.

She couldn't hear anything over the sound of the bar crowd, so when she was suddenly flat against the wall, she knew that if she yelled, no one would hear her either.

"It is not very nice to start a party and then leave." His breath brushed over her ear and she shuddered. He had her arms pinned to her side and the weight of his body was pressing her into the wall, her legs trapped between his. She tried to move and the pressure increased.

"Be nice, princess. I have not hurt you yet." He had a slight accent. She couldn't place it.

"I'll kill you if you do," she hissed.

"Fine words for the man who just saved you from mad dogs."

"I was doing okay." The lie sounded hollow. She was usually better at lying.

"Not from where I was standing." He was laughing at her.

"What? You didn't like the box seat at the bottom of the stairs? You know, the one you kicked me out of so I could get smeared in the middle of the street?" Anger was replacing her fear, and she wasn't sure that was a good thing. *Oh well.*

"I wanted to see what you could do. You are not bad, but you are raw, too new to this sort of thing to take on pros, even low-level killers like those men in the street."

"The first two didn't think so." *God, I hope the second one is dead.*

"Huh." He sounded slightly skeptical or maybe impressed.

"So, what now?" Deira asked. *He can't hold this position all night. Can he?*

"Shhhhhh. Listen." His body was vibrating with tension, not from the effort to hold her still. In the distance, Deira heard sirens. "Takes them too damned long to get where they're needed, but tonight that is in our favor."

"**Our** favor?" Deira snorted.

"Unless you feel like spending the night answering questions, after which you will likely be locked up, you need to do exactly what I say. If you fuck this up and get me arrested, I will kill you. Is that clear enough to you?" Every inch of him was coiled, making it very plain that he did not like the way the night was shaping up.

Deira just nodded.

"Good girl. Now, I am going to let you up. You are going to turn around and give me your wrists, no questions. Got that?"

She nodded again.

He gave her just enough room to turn around. She didn't see him move, but her wrists were in his hands. With his thumb he popped her other wrist knife, then he raised her arms over her head, held them with one hand and made the knife disappear, whether up his sleeve or elsewhere, she had no idea. The alley wasn't very well lit. *Yeah, that's why it was hard to tell.*

"I like you like this, all stretched out." He was laughing again, a dark sound.

"Not my kind of game, asshole." Deira's voice was too breathy, and it pissed her off. Everything tonight had pissed her off.

"Shhhh. I told you I would not hurt you unless you made me, princess." His smile was almost too bright in the darkness.

"Actually, you didn't."

"Didn't I? How careless." He chuckled quietly.

"So now what?" Deira asked again.

"Listen."

The word was barely a whisper. Deira heard voices, too loud, on the street. She heard the distinct sound of badly-made cop shoes and wanted nothing more than to flee. As the beam from the flashlight hit the far end of the alley, her captor (*Rescuer? Shit, sort it out later*) leaned into her and kissed her.

It lasted for a while. She could taste the blood at the edge of his lips, a hint of cinnamon on his tongue. His mouth felt too warm, the night air suddenly cold. The light swung over them and he pulled away, glanced at the cop, smiled and shrugged. Then he kissed her again. The cop chuckled and moved on. When his footsteps could no longer be heard, the kissing ended. It could have stopped well before that, but Deira wasn't in a good position to argue.

"That was your plan? Kissing me? Jesus! What if they had gotten close enough to see my bruises, your bleeding mouth or even your bare feet?"

"Calculated risk. Men regularly duck out here to make out with women they've picked up in the bar, professional or amateur. The police do not want to get too close because it might impede the bribes they get from the pimps." He was obviously amused. *Why is everything so god damned funny to this guy?*

"So now what?" That question was getting old, but she just didn't have the energy for more words tonight.

"So now I take you back to my place and..."

"Fuck no." Deira spat. She began to struggle. With her hands still held, he wrapped his arm around her hips and picked her up, slamming her back against the wall.

"It is rude to interrupt. I take you back to my place, and we get you dried off and into something a little less obvious than a black catsuit. You tell me who sent you out on this job so fucking unprepared, and I decide if I am bothered enough by having my Saturday night ruined to do anything about it. Then we have too much coffee and wait until morning and I send you home in a taxi. And if any of this does not meet your approval, princess, then I can drop you right now, and there will simply be another dead

body in this neighborhood come morning. How does all that sound to you?" He was growling. He really would kill her for being a pain in the ass.

"Sounds like a better plan than making me play prostitute in an alley so the cops look the other way."

"Good. We are going to hold hands on the way, for show." He smiled again and it wasn't pleasant. They were going to hold hands so she couldn't take off. It wasn't necessary because she was absolutely certain that if she ran, he would take her down, and since she'd survived the night so far, it would be a shame to die because she didn't particularly like coffee. Or him.

"Do you have a name?" Deira asked as they reached the street.

"Gage. And you?"

Her eyes widened. *That can't be true.*

"Bullshit. Gage is dead."

"Not quite, but let people think that. It makes for a much quieter life. A longer one, too."

"How do I know you're not just trading on the name?"

"Because, in the long run, anyone trading on my name is asking for more trouble than any name is worth. There are reasons why I've stayed 'dead' for as long as I have. Next, you are going to ask me to prove it. Don't. I doubt you would like what I show you." His grip on her hand changed and sharp pain shot up her arm. "Better just to tell me your name."

"Deira."

"Is that your real name?" He put his arm around her waist as another cop came into view. She leaned her head on his shoulder, wondering what sort of trauma would come from this new position. Under his relaxed walk, he was all tension.

"Yeah."

"I would not go putting that on your calling card." He muttered, nuzzling her hair. His hand slid up her back and down. It shouldn't have felt good.

"Isn't Gage your real name?"

"Approximately. By the time I was in deep, everyone knew who I was so there was no point in changing it. I thought I would keep you from that particular mistake. No matter, I'm dead, remember?" He stroked her right side from waist to ribs, trailed his hand across her back and repeated the movement on the other side. She trembled slightly. He didn't seem to notice her reaction.

He gave her a little distance as a second cop turned the corner. It really was just about keeping up appearances then. Deira felt a flood of relief and instantly regretted it as everything that had happened to her since sundown came crashing into her head. She wanted nothing more than to crawl into a hole and cry. Some killer she was.

Gage had been watching her face. He felt her movement change and grabbed her hand, pressing hard on her wrist.

It hurt like hell. The pain brought her back with a snap, and she realized that they were heading right towards the cops, the flashing lights, the bodies in the road. She hadn't put it together.

"Don't you dare lose it on me now, Deira. We are half a block from my back door. You can sick up when we get to the alley, but not sooner."

"I'm cool." She said, swallowing hard.

"Like hell. Just hang on, a few more steps. Oh, and if you throw up on my carpet, I will make you clean it up." He wasn't kidding.

It was an unnecessary warning. Five steps into the alley, she turned away from him and proceeded to hurl everything she had ever eaten in her life. Or at least it felt that way. To his credit, he didn't laugh at her. *There's a first.* Sticks would have laughed.

Gage headed further into the alley and came back with a hose. They both knew she was in no shape to take off now. Deira rinsed out her mouth and took a small drink. The taste of water through a hose always made her think of summers when she was a kid. It was disconcerting.

Gage took the hose from her and pointed to an open fence door a few yards down the alley. As she headed for the patio, he washed away the vomit then rinsed his feet. No telling whose blood he'd stepped in tonight.

Deira sat on the stone bench beside the door, shivering. The sound of cops yelling to each other and the EMTs continued, but it wouldn't be long before they began knocking on doors. Gage unlocked the door and ushered her in, then set about making coffee.

"Shower is down the hall on the left," he said, pointing. "There should be towels in the closet. I will bring you a robe. Leave all your clothes and your shoes on the rug outside the door. You will not be getting them back."

"Why?" Deira was finding it hard to focus. She suddenly felt very stupid. The pump she had taken before starting the job was wearing off. It hadn't been very good to begin with, just some street shit she had held in reserve for a night like this.

Sticks would beat the crap out of her if he knew she was using.

"Because I am going to put them in the smokeless incinerator I keep in the basement for just such occasions. He looked at her for a moment, sensing her confusion. "I did say I would send you home in different clothes. I am good for any promises I actually make. Go get cleaned up."

Deira did as he'd instructed, then stepped into the scalding shower. If it was possible to wash away the last year, she would, but there wasn't enough water anywhere for that.

Reaching for shampoo, Deira realized that there were far too many bottles in this shower for your average guy. *Probably best not to ask questions about that.*

If there was a way to get out of the house without talking to Gage at all, she would have jumped at it. Seemed like the end of this evening was full of all sorts of ifs and none of them led to a good place.

Chapter 2 - Holding Steady

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Some people are easier to lie to than others.

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When Deira stepped out of the shower, there were voices in the kitchen. She could hear Gage speaking calmly, but couldn't make out what he said. She cracked the door a bit. Definitely a cop speaking now. She listened while she bandaged her shoulder.

"I'm sorry, what did you say your name is?" The cop wasn't sorry.

"Charles Randall. I think your partner wrote it down. Would you like my card? It might make it easier to reach me. I'm frequently away." Gage sounded like every suit who had ever hit on her. He also had no discernible accent.

"Thanks, that would be a help." Second cop, younger by the sound of it.

"Not a problem. Would you officers like some coffee? It's just finished brewing." The first cop said no as the second said yes. The younger cop changed his mind.

"You say you didn't hear anything tonight? There was some pretty serious fighting going on outside, including gunshots."

She stopped drying her hair to listen. This might go badly, and she had no way out of the bathroom that didn't lead past the cops.

"If you'll follow me, officers, I think you'll understand why I didn't hear anything." Gage must have put them at ease because they moved towards the door on the other side of the kitchen. The door closed and there was silence.

The robe hung on a hook. Stepping out of the bathroom, she noted that the clothes, and the rug on which she had put them, were gone. She was trying to figure out if she should step back in and close the door when the men emerged from the living room.

"That's a nice system." The young cop was obviously impressed. His partner grunted.

"I thought my girlfriend was going to have a fit when I put my bonus towards a home theatre set up. She wanted to go on a cruise. Or maybe she wanted something else. I'm trying not to think about what it might be." He chuckled and both cops joined in this time.

She hated them all at that moment. She loosened the robe slightly and plastered a smile on her face. If he wanted a needy girlfriend, she could play the role. It would serve him right.

"Charlie, honey," she cooed, running her fingers through her curls as she walked into the room, "don't make assumptions about what I want." She kissed him on the cheek, took his coffee cup out of his hands, and took a sip. *Black, of course.* At least there wasn't any sugar in it.

He had changed clothes. She assumed the ones he had been wearing had been burnt along with hers. Testing the air, she smelled nothing but the coffee. His tailored pants and cotton shirt showed obvious quality. The guy had money and didn't hide it. The loose clothes did nothing to mask his muscle definition. She doubted any clothing could. His brown hair was a little longer and wilder than most businessmen wore it, another indication of financial independence. She wondered if the cops noticed such things, then decided they must.

He fixed her with a look, and she realized she had been staring at him. Maybe the cops would see it as devotion. She handed the cup back to him. His smile didn't reach his eyes.

"Were you here earlier this evening?" The young cop asked, trying very hard not to look at the gap in her robe. She looked to Gage to see if he'd answered this question already. He looked mildly annoyed but showed no other concern.

"I got here a little while ago. I was typing deeds until seven o'clock. By the time I got here, I had to walk down that nasty alley because the street was blocked off." She pouted slightly.

"And after seven?" The older cop wasn't distracted by her cleavage.

"Afterward, I met Lydia for drinks at that awful wine bar down the street. Their selection isn't bad, but they let people smoke cigars in there. Ugh. I couldn't wait to get into the shower."

"Your name, miss?"

"Gina Sedoso. I'd offer you my card but, unlike Charlie, I don't keep those in every pocket I have." She smiled at Gage, who gave her a nasty look. *Good, now we seem like a real couple.*

"Honey, why don't you go up and get dressed?" he suggested and then turned to the cops. "Unless you need her?"

"No, go ahead, miss. We can get your information when you're dressed." The older cop looked closely at her, then frowned at Gage, his disapproval of the age difference obvious. Her appearance was deceiving that way. With any luck, the cop would chalk up the attraction to the lure of money.

She had a moment of panic as she realized she didn't know where to go to change, and then she fixed on the word "up." Gage had looked towards the hallway. She found the stairs. The first bedroom was no help. It was a guest room that had been taken over by weight training equipment. The second bedroom obviously belonged to Gage. Aside from having a distinctly Spartan décor, it held the faintest scent of him. She found it almost comforting. *Best not to dwell on that.*

As she opened the third door and found a woman's room, she thought of Goldilocks. *This one is just right.* Now if only the occupant was close enough in size for the next stage of the charade.

Thanking all the goddesses of fashion, she found a loose, long sleeved, silk shirt and a floral skirt that on a shorter woman would have been ankle length but on her fell right below her calves. It was casual, but still classy enough to pull off the ruse. She couldn't find a bra and didn't bother to look for shoes. Turning to the mirror on the overlarge vanity, she tried very hard to comb out her curls with her fingers. It wouldn't cooperate, so she gave up and twisted her hair into a loose bun, securing it with hair sticks she found in the middle drawer. It would have to do.

An animated discussion was taking place in the kitchen when she got downstairs. Gage had obviously been entertaining the cops, who looked a great deal more at ease.

She was grateful she wouldn't have to be the charming one. She was dizzy and sick and some part of her was convinced the cops knew everything she had done that night.

He handed her a cup of coffee. He must have seen her grimace when she'd sipped his, because he had put plenty of cream in hers. Her hands trembled slightly she took it.

She knew cops noticed things like that and forced herself to keep them still. She moved to the table, set down her cup, and sat on the bench.

"Did you need to ask Gina anything else, officers?" Gage asked. He glanced at her hands on the table and gave her a warning look. She folded them on her lap. The younger cop turned to her.

"We'll need contact information for your friend. It's just procedure, but we have to check out everyone's story." He sounded genuinely apologetic.

"No problem. Charlie, would you hand me a piece of paper and pen?" She turned to the cop. "She might not be home. She left with some guy after I told her I didn't need a ride. I know she'll be in the office tomorrow morning. She has a showing at nine." Taking the notepad Gage offered her, Deira wrote down the information, glad she had accepted Lydia's offer to go out after work. At the time, it had seemed an annoyance that might mess up her schedule.

"What did you do after your friend left?" The older cop wasn't letting it go.

"I talked to some people at the bar, ate some really bad food, and pretended to watch a soccer match. I had hoped someone would give me a lead on a property, so maybe one of the agents would sponsor me for classes, but it was a wash. I did manage to get hit on half a dozen times." She didn't have to feign displeasure.

"Okay. We have all we need from you folks tonight. We'll be in touch if necessary." They put away their note pads.

Gage showed the cops to the door, then returned to the kitchen.

She finally took a sip of the coffee. Considering how much she hated the stuff, it wasn't bad. If she wrapped both her hands around the cup, they didn't shake much.

"The name you gave them had better check out." Gage leaned his hip against the counter, but there was nothing casual about his stance.

"I'm not an idiot."

"That remains to be seen. Where did you get the name, and how far back can it be traced?"

"Five years, minimum, current up to today. Gina's a model citizen. She's surprisingly successful at whatever she tries and never even cheats on her tax return." This part she had worked out.

"Great. Where did you get the name?" He was not impressed.

"She was a friend in college."

"So how did you end up using your friend's name?"

"Her dad was from Spain and took her there when she got sick during our junior year. Said the medical care is better. He paid for a bunch of us to visit her over spring break because she was dying and wanted to see us. She gave us all her information, including the information about her private bank accounts, and made us promise to keep her name alive by using her money to do what we really wanted to do."

"And your other friends do not use this name?"

"No. They left the details up to me, since I'm the only one who took Accounting. Gina has investments in a bed and breakfast in Vermont and an art studio in San Francisco. Her portfolio is managed by a close friend. She gives to charity and owns a nice vacation house in Tuscany. Six months ago, she started working at a real estate firm, just for fun. Is that enough information to put me above suspicion?"

"Mine or the cops?" He moved across the room. There was something... liquid... about it. She realized he was pacing, but without agitation.

"Either. Both." She kept her eyes on him. "What do you want?"

"To be out of whatever it is you got yourself into, but that is no longer possible. You are going to have to continue to come by here, at least for a while, because there's a good chance they will be watching the house. I need to know everything about this fucking mess so I can see if it can be cleaned up quietly. Once that is done, I want to forget I ever met you. That is what I want. Think you can manage any of that? Because if you can't, we have a problem." His accent got heavier the more agitated he became.

"We don't have a problem now?" She snorted.

"No. You have a problem now, and you need to fix it. I thought that was clear. Let's start with who sent you to die in my front yard." He was still.

"No one sent me. It was my job." She had liked it better when he was moving.

"That is not enough information to make me happy. Right now, you should be very concerned about making me happy."

"Short version? The guys who were trying to kill me work for the asshole who killed my sister. I took out two of those responsible. The other four came after me. Two took off after a truck they thought I jumped on. The other two, well, I assume you killed them." She took a sip of her coffee and realized her hands were now shaking hard, an after effect of pump. She tried to still them.

"So who killed your sister, one man or six?"

"All of them did. And there were seven. I haven't seen the one ultimately responsible. He got her hooked on pump. The others raped and killed her for sport. He's harder to reach so I started with them."

"How old was she?"

"Twenty. She didn't even get to graduate. Why does her age matter?"

"It doesn't." But it obviously did. "Twenty years old, and a student at university," he whispered.

He closed his eyes and took several deep breaths. When he opened them, she wished he hadn't. They were blank, like staring into the eyes of a dead dog. She looked away. When she turned back, they were almost normal.

"Most people go to the police when they know who killed someone."

"That's rich, you saying I should have called the cops."

"The police have their uses, and investigating murders is one of them. A good hit does not leave bodies. You have taken that option away from me, so now you will tell me why you thought doing the job yourself was better than calling in professionals of any kind."

"I tried to contract it. No one would take the job."

"Excuse me?"

"No one wanted the job. Inquiries were made, and no one was willing to do it. So that left me."

She looked at him. His eyes had turned very, very dark. *At least there's life in them.*

"No one would take the job." He spoke slowly, quietly. "Who are you trying to kill, princess?"

"Jack Cavuto."

"Of course." The pacing resumed. "Jack Cavuto. You thought you could kill the main supplier of pump for the city. Just run through a few goons and pop the big boss. No problem." He laughed, the sound slicing across the kitchen.

"I didn't know who he was when I started " she began. The anger in his eyes silenced her.

"And when you found out, you did not let go of your revenge fantasy. I should kill you right now. Save us both some time, since you seem hell-bent on dying anyway."

"Would you have taken the job?"

"No."

"You didn't even ask what it paid."

"No. It would not matter. How did you manage to come this far and remain so naive? Killing Cavuto simply makes room for the next drug lord. The economics do not change simply because the man in charge drops dead. I prefer the devil I know. And I really prefer it if the devil does not know my name. Pray he does not find out I am involved. Pray hard." He was pacing again.

"So he just gets away with it? He kills my sister and nothing happens to him?"

"Yes. That is exactly how it works. Your sister chose to do pump. Someone may have convinced her to try it the first time, but she came back for more. Repeatedly, if she got hooked. You killing the guy who runs the warehouse is not going to bring her back or change the system. You getting killed while trying to kill him is pointless. And you will die if you keep trying."

"She didn't choose to do it. They spiked her over a couple of weeks. A "friend" in one of her classes put small doses in her coffee, increasing it bit by bit. She didn't really know what was going on until they had her all twisted and something snapped in her head. She wasn't the only one. Several girls went missing over a couple of semesters. Two ended up dead. One got out, which is how I know what happened. The cops had all the information, too, but they didn't do anything. The girl I talked to left town and wouldn't testify. They eventually closed the case because they didn't have anything 'substantial' to go on."

"In my line of work, that indicates the people on the other side have done their jobs well. Something you might want to consider, since you've decided to become a criminal." He let that hang in the air before continuing. "I am assuming someone trained you to be the murderer you claim to be. I need to know who."

"No." She wasn't about to give up Sticks. Her conviction made her feel stronger.

The illusion of strength lasted about half a second. With alarming speed, Gage appeared next to her, one hand covering her throat, the other pressing her back on the seat.

"I'm sorry, princess. Did you think this was a conversation of equals? Were you under the impression that I killed those men out of some notion of chivalry? You left me in a fight and had me finish your job for you, so you are substantially in debt to me right now. We didn't get a chance to bargain on price, so you are going to pay me whatever I ask. So far, all I have asked for is answers to some very basic questions. You can either answer them or I can kill you. It is a simple equation." There was no emotion in his words. "I am going to let go now, and you are going to very politely tell me everything I want to know. I will tell you how you will settle the rest of the debt later."

He moved to the other side of the kitchen, turned his back to her and refilled his coffee cup. They both knew she wouldn't try anything. She took a deep breath, swallowed, and realized there was no bruising on her throat. Her hands were no longer shaking. Real adrenaline was better than pump when it came down to it. She'd had enough of both, and the night wasn't over.

"I am waiting for an answer. Who trained you?" He turned to face her.

"I don't know his real name." She ignored his snort. "But he goes by Sticks."

He lifted an eyebrow. It was the closest she had seen him come to showing surprise.

"Last I heard, Sticks was having trouble walking. I thought he got out of the business," he mused. "It is not like him to send someone out raw, and this is not his sort of job."

"I told you he didn't send me. He just trained me. He was against my going. He said I wasn't ready, and he was right." She wasn't going to put this on Sticks. He might be slow to move, but he made up for it, and if he wanted you hurt, you'd be hurt badly.

"You seem to have trouble listening."

"Always have." She shrugged.

"Did he know you were on pump tonight?" His hard stare belied the casual tone.

"No, and I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell him. It's bad enough I have one professional willing to kill me."

"I hate to point out the obvious, princess, but there's a hell of a lot more than one. You really ought to consider the seriousness of the shit you're in when I am the least of your worries."

"Not at the moment you aren't."

"So the drug hasn't completely robbed you of reason. Good to know. Don't you find it ironic that you chose to take the drug that killed your sister, which most certainly was supplied by the person you are attempting to kill for dealing the drug in the first place?"

"The thought had occurred to me. But much like cops, the drug has its uses." She shrugged. "How did you know what I was on?"

"I know the signs. Go into the living room and make yourself comfortable. I have some calls to make." He pointed down the hall.

"Are you going to call Sticks?"

"He should know you managed to live through the night. Consider it professional courtesy. You will not be going back to his shop. The fewer people involved in this, the better. Go. You already have the shakes, and the chills will be next. There are blankets on the couch."

"Do you need the number?"

He looked at her as if she were a slow child. "Just go." She went.

Chapter 3 - Still of Night

Chapter 3 of 36

Waking up is hard to do, but resurrection is harder.

□

Gage ran his fingers through his hair. He would have to shave his head again, but not until the police had stopped watching the house. **If** they stopped watching the house. He had been as thorough as possible, considering the kills on the street were completely unplanned. There were no shoe prints or weapons not belonging to the killers. Getting a fingerprint off of bare skin was beyond most police labs, and he knew for a fact this department was less competent than most. But if they found his hair on one of the kills, he was screwed. Maybe the rain would wash away anything he had missed. With any luck, it would look like the two goons had killed each other. He had done what he could to make it seem that way. It was the best he could manage. He hated improvising.

His called his remote service. They relayed only one message, the one he got every night. Part of him relaxed. At least something was normal tonight. It was too late to return the call, but it wasn't expected of him anyway.

He had the service transfer him to a free line, then punched in the number he had for Sticks. There would be at least one transfer on the other end before he got through. Keeping a number private in the age of caller i.d. might be a pain in the ass, but worth the hassle. Only a fool gave out his real phone number, and Sticks had never been a fool. The call connected and in one ring was answered.

"Strickland Storage Units, what can I do for you?" Sticks must have known this was not a regular call, but he rarely took risks.

"Well, I would say you could pick up your lost puppy, but I have taken a shine to her so I am calling to see if we can work out transfer of ownership." There was silence on the other end. He could almost see Sticks running through scenarios in his head. He excelled at seeing lots of angles.

"I see. Is she hurt? Because I'd consider it a problem if someone mistreated my pup."

"If she is hurt, she arrived that way. I took her in, cleaned up after her a little and gave her a corner to curl up in. Oh, and sent the dog catcher away. You okay with that?"

"Yeah, but I'm not gonna give her to just anyone. You're gonna have to tell me a little bit about yourself. I mean, if you're a total dick who abuses animals, then I'm gonna insist on getting her back. I've grown fond of her in the past year."

"Understandable. I take care of my responsibilities, and despite your care, she is in serious need of some training. I can provide it. For that, and the fact that I had to deal with the dog catcher tonight, you are not getting her back. I was simply being polite."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. I thought you should know she made it through her little adventure, though some of the dogs she ran into did not do so well. You might want to forget you ever had her in your kennel, or at least make up a good story about how she ran away long before tonight."

"I know you, don't I?"

"You did, once. I left town a long time ago."

"So long it's almost like you rose from the dead just to call me. That might explain why your voice is rougher. I hear resurrection is murder on the pipes." It was probably the most dangerous thing he could have said, but Sticks laughed.

"Considering how peaceful it is to be dead, it might be best if no one figured out I escaped my coffin. I would take it badly if that became public knowledge." He was definitely not laughing.

"You're an asshole, you know that? You don't have to treat me like I'm crippled in the head, too. I'm not gonna say shit to anyone." Sticks continued to be amused but not as much.

"As long as you are okay with my taking your bitch, I do not think we have any other business." The conversation had gone on long enough.

"You're costing me, you know," He hesitated, as if he'd had to consider whether or not to bring it up. "She was a very lucrative investment."

"I will see what I can do in that regard." He saw no reason to make another enemy if he didn't have to. *Especially not one who likes explosives.*

"One more thing," Sticks said. "She's not bred to hunt, you know."

"So I discovered. She will either learn or find a new place to live, possibly both. I will take care of her until she is properly trained or shows she is better off shipped out to some farm. Then I am done."

"I'm good with that." Sticks hung up.

Gage checked the to do list that constantly ran in his head. He never wrote anything down. Unfortunately, the items at the top of the list had changed significantly. He stifled his annoyance. He mixed a powder with a large glass of water and went into the living room to check on his latest complication.

She was shaking hard, but she was still awake. That was a bonus. He really did not want to haul her up the stairs. Unfortunately, if the shakes were bad enough, she would be unable to walk. She had become tangled in the blanket and out of it enough to not have noticed. Awake and aware were not the same thing. He unwound the blanket and she stared at him, her dark eyes glassy and unfocused. He wondered again if it would be a good idea to dispense with her but rejected the notion. The police were bound to notice if she disappeared. Besides, there was no profit in it, while there were definite benefits to her continued existence.

"Get up, Deira." There was nothing kind in his voice.

"What? What? Shit. What?" She whipped her head back and forth, then got dizzy. *Great.* He hauled her to her feet and steadied her.

"We need to get you a drink of water and then up to bed. I am going to help you up the stairs, okay?"

"Are you hitting on me?" She giggled.

"Definitely not. Let's get going." He helped her into the kitchen and held a towel under her chin while she drank the herbal concoction that might make it less painful to get through the rest of the night.

About half way up the stairs, her legs gave out. He carried her the rest of the way. She managed to stay upright by holding onto a post while he turned down the covers. He had to get her undressed. The skirt would be a problem if it tangled, and there would be hell to pay if she ruined the silk shirt. In the morning, he would have to purchase clothes for her. He added it to the list. Clenching his jaw, he turned to the task at hand.

She didn't seem to notice she was being stripped. She fell onto the bed and started shaking harder. He did not want to witness her suffering. He did not want her to be there at all. He pulled the sheets over her and tucked them in tightly. More than one person had strangled themselves with sheets during the shakes. A winter blanket and a comforter were added to the bed. Chills were the worst part of a pump come down. If she was lucky, she would pass out before they got too bad. He sat down and waited for morning.

The lamp on the nightstand gave scant light. He sat in the shadows, thinking. He would need to call in favors to get her trained properly, which meant another person knowing he was still among the living. At some point, the information would get out.

Running through the to do list did not prove helpful, so he switched focus. He watched her thrash on the bed, occasionally muttering as her head whipped from side to side. With any luck, she would say something coherent he could use. She was sweating, blonde curls damp on her face and tangled on the pillow. The familiar, acrid scent of sweat laced with pump filled his nostrils. He really would kill her if she ever touched the stuff again and to hell with any questions the cops might raise. She would be more dangerous alive and strung out than dead.

He should not have opened the door. *I could have left her there.* He knew it for a lie.

The thump on the door had made him check the security display. She had lain in a dark pool, not moving, the streetlight barely illuminating her long, pale hair. The water had been tinged red. Only later did he realize it had been reflecting the retreating tail lights of a passing truck. *Should have settled for black and white cameras.* Opening the door had made sense. He did not need a dead girl on his doorstep. He could almost convince himself there was no other reason.

She thrashed again, drawing his attention. She had managed to free one of her arms. The worst of the shakes had passed, so he let it be. Her hand twitched on the blanket occasionally, long fingers grasping then releasing. As long as she kept moving, kept breathing, everything would be fine.

She had worked on her body long before she had decided to embrace her revenge against Cavuto. Her legs were definitely the most developed. She might have been an athlete at some point. That could be useful during training. Athletes were used to accepting pain to reach a goal. How much pain she would be willing to take remained to be seen. Athletic training paled to what she would have to go through to get what she wanted. If she made it, his decision to help her would pay off. If not, his loss would be far less than hers.

She had few scars, none indicating major surgery or childbirth. He had catalogued everything about her body while he undressed her. Being clinical helped. She'd had enough sense to bandage the cut on her shoulder and to choose a shirt that covered it before talking to the police. *Not a total fool.* The wound didn't seem too bad but would definitely leave a scar.

Scars were excellent reminders of what not to do. He had more than a few of his own. His hand reflexively went to his stomach. That one had been bad. With any luck, she would not need a lesson like that. *No one needs a lesson like that.* With luck, she might give up the whole idea of revenge and go back to what was left of her life. But he doubted it.

By daybreak, she slept quietly. He went downstairs to make calls and more coffee. Staying awake presented no problem for him; coffee simply made it more pleasant. He had his service open a line and looked forward to the vitriolic greeting he would get for the early morning call. He was not disappointed.

"Please tell me what dumb motherfucker decided to call me at dawn, so I can rip your liver out."

"If you had to pick a liver, mine is a good choice. It's practically pristine." He chuckled. "Good morning Nick." There was a long silence on the other end.

"You know, if you're going to call at an ungodly hour, you might want to send coffee over first. You'd get a lot further that way."

"Right, so you could rip out the liver of the poor bastard delivering the coffee. I never took you for being slow, but I might have to reassess."

"I see being dead didn't make you any less of an elitist fuck."

"No. If anything, it made me worse. Down to business, Nicky. I am calling in a favor."

"You think I still owe you."

"I know you still owe me, but nice try."

"I'm listening. I don't want to be, but I am."

"I need you to train someone. Warehouse set up should work."

"You need me to train someone. That's interesting. You too broken to do it yourself?"

"I see you're awake now. For the record, I survived remarkably unscathed. I can't train this one, for a number of reasons. Doing this will go a long way towards making us square."

"If I do this, and I haven't said I will, it needs to go all the way to making us square. I don't like having things hanging over my head."

"You should have thought of that a long time ago. But I am in a giving mood. If you do this quietly - then the debt is settled."

"Fine. Then consider it done. Who am I training, for what and why?"

"You are training a young lady to avoid getting killed or worse. You are doing it because I asked you to. I am not inclined to tell you much more, and you would be wise to not ask her what the story is. I am fairly sure she would tell you and, really, how involved do you want to be in some half-trained girl's business?"

"I don't want to be involved in any of this. I thought I was free of you. How long do you expect this to take?"

"As long as it takes. I think two months should be sufficient. She is not entirely raw."

"Two months. You rotten bastard. That's worth way more than our debt. You're going to end up owing me." There was some glee in the statement.

"No, Nick, I am not, and I am fairly sure you do not want me in debt to you. You agreed to the terms. It is not my fault you failed to ascertain the nature of the assignment first. If I did not know better, I would say you are slipping."

"I never should have fucked you." There was no anger in her voice, just conviction.

"Probably not, but it is a pleasant memory anyway. Fucking me was not what got you in trouble, though. Fucking with me creates a significant source of trouble. Until you need to test her training, forget I am alive."

"Oh, sure, now you give me good advice."

"It is easier to do when you aren't straddling me."

"I'll keep that in mind." She laughed. It was a good sign.

"Call me with details for the set up and I will have everything delivered."

"Mighty white of you, **boss**." The line went dead.

That was one thing off the to do list. He made the call to the personal shopper on a regular line, with promise of a generous tip if the clothes could be there within two hours. They assured him delivery would be swift and confidential. Two things off the list, but it didn't seem to be getting shorter.

Chapter 4 - Give and Take

Chapter 4 of 36

Familial obligation should be taken seriously.

□

The courier arrived on time. Gage tipped him enough to make him forget where he'd been. Setting the package on the table, Gage made his routine business calls. That side of his life was predictable and boring, exactly as it should be. He used the computer to transfer his personal funds to various international banks and made sure all his automatic payments were set up properly. He could barely tolerate the banality of normal life. At least the to do list got shorter.

Karol would have been so proud. Gage clenched his teeth at the unbidden thought. With his brother dead, it had been left to him to take care of everything. He hated it. The phone rang, distracting him from the only pain to which he would admit. The name on the i.d. brought it crashing back. He answered, as he always did.

"Hey, kitten."

"Hey yourself." Katya's phone voice was bubbly, no matter the hour. She kept normal hours, which helped. "I called last night but you weren't around. Your voice sounds rough. Hot date?"

"You know better than to ask me about such things," he growled. There was no menace to it. She snorted.

"I called to find out how things are going. We've been missing each other's calls. What's new?"

A girl, little older than you, drug addled and naked, is upstairs in my bed and I'm trying to decide if I should kill her or not.

He froze, hoping desperately he had only thought that. Katya neither laughed nor screamed, so he must not have spoken aloud. It occurred to him that going without sleep was not as easy as it once had been.

"Not much. I am a boring old man," he said.

"Right. First of all, forty is hardly old. And I hate to break it to you, but you don't seem boring, either. My friends are all dying to meet my uncle, the rich world-traveler. They've seen your picture and deemed you officially hot. Honestly, I think they're cracked, but they don't know you like I do."

"You should tell them I spend my days in warehouses and with accountants. It should shatter their illusions." He could not remember the last time he had been face to face with an accountant.

"I'll give it a try and let you know if it works. If it doesn't, you're going to have to beat them off with a stick when you come up for parent's weekend. The accent alone will make them crazy for you."

"Then they must not know any other Serbian men. We are dogs, all of us." He could have used harsher words, but not to her.

"I doubt they could even find Serbia on a map, or that it would matter. It's the fact that you have an accent at all they find exciting. And all men are dogs."

"Smart girl. If you learned nothing else from me, at least I know you have learned that."

"So I was wondering," she began.

He cut her short. "I put money in your account this morning."

"Oh, that's cold. That was NOT what I was wondering. I had plenty left. But thanks. You never know when I might want to run off to Rio to party," she teased.

His mind instantly went to the many things that could go wrong in Rio, but he kept them to himself.

"Rio is full of drunken tourists," he said instead, "and your course load is too heavy for running off anywhere. Which is why I don't want you working this semester."

"Aww, see you do pay attention! It's sweet." Katya was the only person who had ever called him sweet. Good to know the ruse worked.

"Of course I do." *Not paying attention is deadly.* He brushed the thought away. "What do you need, kitten?"

"I wanted to know if I could come over next weekend. My roommate's boyfriend is coming up, and I'm not so much with the voyeurism thing. They can't seem to keep it to the bedroom or wait until I'm asleep." All of her things were in his house, but she had never called it home.

He went very still for a moment, until a believable story could click into place. Lack of sleep made it harder to think, so he gave up.

"Next weekend is bad. I have some business deals to work through. Things are a little tense right now. I might have to go out of town." So far, truth had proven effective, even if it wasn't the truth she thought she heard.

"I could always go to Rio." She laughed.

"I could always cut you off," he threatened.

"You won't, though. You love me."

"Yes I do. Instead of Rio, you should check yourself into a nice hotel with a spa package. Get some studying done in luxury for a change. It will be my treat since I can't be here for you." He hoped she would take the offer. He didn't spoil her often.

"Wow. The full parental guilt package, huh? You don't have to do that. It's not like I can't study in the library or close my door and put on headphones at night."

"Indulge in my compensation for being a lousy uncle instead. It is not likely you will get such an offer again soon."

"You are not a lousy uncle. But if it makes you feel better, I will happily get a massage and pedicure on your dime. I'll leave it up to you to figure out how to write it off as a business expense. Shall I call you with the number and room when I check in?"

"Always. I always want to know where you are. And if there is any problem at all, call my pager." He knew he sounded paranoid. She had told him so plenty of times.

"Thank you, uncle Charlie. My grades will be better for the break, I'm sure."

"When you figure out how to get better than a 4.0, let me know. I am sure I could market that."

"I don't know if I'll make 4.0 this semester. It's not guaranteed, no matter how much I study."

"You aren't having trouble this semester, are you?" They both knew what he meant, but she brushed it off.

"That's my cue to hang up. I am fine. I am always fine. You should trust that by now." It was an old routine.

"I know." What he didn't know is how she could be fine. Her parents were dead, and the only living family she had was an uncle she barely knew.

"I love you," she said and hung up before he could respond.

"I know," he said anyway, and hung up the phone.

Deira woke up sore. And naked. In a strange room with very little furniture. She shook her head and promptly suppressed the urge to throw up on the carpet. *This is not good.* Looking around slowly, she found clothes laid out neatly on an armchair. Using the bedpost to steady herself, she stood and contemplated her chances of getting dressed without getting sick. Since she refused to leave the room unclothed, she clenched her jaw against the agony of movement. Mornings were never good, but this one had been ordered fresh from hell.

Pieces of the previous night began slotting into place as she dressed. It helped to be distracted. *It's dangerous to be distracted.* Things had not gone at all well, and she had a feeling this was only the beginning of something she would regret for a long time. She laughed, though it came out too low.

It had never occurred to her she might regret killing to avenge her sister. That ought to have seemed more wrong than it did. That ought to have been the worst thing she could think of, but it wasn't. The worst things she could think of were getting down the stairs and having to talk to Gage.

She caught her breath at the bottom of the stairs. *One down.* She wiped away a stray tear and tried desperately to move normally as she entered the kitchen. The smell of slightly burnt coffee almost undid her tenuous control. The kitchen was blindingly bright. What wasn't pure white was polished grey in shades from gunmetal to chrome. It hadn't seemed so bright the night before.

"You made it through the night." He had his back to her. If he had been anyone else, she would have thought him a fool.

"Yes. Thank you. For last night." She made it to the table and lowered herself into a chair.

"It will not happen again."

"Which part?" She shouldn't have spoken. He turned to her with flat eyes.

"Any of it."

"Ah, that part. Good to know. Does that mean I walk out of here and handle this on my own, then? That would suit me."

"Sure. If you can make it to the door. Go ahead. You can have a head start."

She glared at him. He put a cup of tea in front of her.

"Thank you for the clothes." There was no harm in trying to start the conversation again.

"You're welcome. I told you I keep my promises. I will even call you a taxi when you are ready to go."

"And when will that be?" She might as well acknowledge the power structure. Ignoring it hadn't done her any good so far.

"After you have had at least one cup of tea and some conversation." He sat down across from her.

"Oh, goody. Our conversations have been so interesting." Apparently, the power structure was insufficient to keep her from being sarcastic. She discarded the idea she could change that.

"At least you remember them. That is more than I had expected."

The routine he laid out for the next two weeks seemed perfectly normal. Well, if normal had had any meaning. The busy couple, getting together a few times dining in, of course. She needed to give her two weeks notice, negotiate an end to her lease, and pay off all of her bills.

Breaking a lease would have been a pain if she'd had one, but she wasn't going to bring it up.

"Sounds lovely. How am I supposed to accomplish this? Rob a bank? Hardly seems low profile."

"Your great-uncle recently passed away and left you a little money. I will have it wired into your account from a firm in Florida. Clean out your cards. We will cancel them later." This was routine for him, creating fictional relatives, erasing the traces of a real life.

"Okay, so you add that to my tab, right? I need to know what I'm going to owe you so I can figure out if I'm going to spend the rest of my life paying it off."

"You will." His smile was genuine. She found that deeply disturbing.

"So I become unemployed and homeless with no credit. How, exactly, am I supposed to live?"

"You will pretend to move in here. We will have a big argument and you will go away for a while to sort out your feelings about me." He had to be fairly clear on how she felt about him and was obviously indifferent.

"I don't like it." One badly chosen hiding place and the whole thing had spun out of control. Well, her control anyway.

"You do not have to like it. You have to do it." Considering the alternative, he was right.

"And where will I go when I take off to clear my head?" She sipped the tea.

"I have arranged for a place near where you will be training. I contacted someone who can refine some of your skills and give you a good idea of what to expect if you insist on moving forward with this. I suppose it is too much to hope your experience last night changed your mind?" The question was absurd. He couldn't be that much of an optimist.

"Way too much to hope," she answered. "This isn't some lark for me. My sister is dead, and I'm the only one who's willing to do anything about it."

"Is doing this going to make her less dead?"

"No. But it might let me sleep at night." She shrugged, finishing the tea. It was another one of those herbal things, but it didn't taste too bad.

"You think you get to sleep better after you kill people?"

"I have no idea. I haven't really slept since I killed the first guy." *And maybe the second.* "I don't count passing out in a drug-induced stupor, so don't go there, okay? It was a metaphor, anyway."

"Ah. For a moment, I worried about your intelligence. There is some chance you could be enough of a sociopath that killing people would not bother you, but I doubt it. If you are lucky, you will learn to deal with the nightmares."

"Did you?" The moment she said it, she knew she shouldn't have. He raised one eyebrow.

"I have had a lot of time to work on it."

The first time he had killed someone, he had been twelve years old. He'd lost track by the time he was fifteen. Of course, he had also been drunk or stoned a lot of the time, which may have made it easier to sleep. He could not really remember and did not want to.

"There is a reason I prefer to kill at a distance. Fewer nightmares." There were many good reasons to kill at a distance, but that one was paramount.

"I want to kill them close up. I want to watch them suffer. I want to see them die. I'll deal with the consequences later. And if that makes me crazy, then fine. I've got good reason to be crazy, and I might as well embrace it because it isn't going away on its own." She stared at her hands, unwilling to look at him.

"Most people try therapy," he drawled.

"I had enough of it when I was a kid. It obviously didn't take."

It had not worked for him, either. Psychiatrists were either horrified by what he had told them or thought he lied about the details. Often both. They obviously had not read his file carefully before taking him on. Social workers had been more understanding. Therapy had not been a total waste of time. He had discovered there are some things people don't actually want to hear about, no matter what they claim.

"You might reconsider it when this is over because your desire for blood is a little disturbing in someone so young." *Not so young not really.*

"Don't you enjoy killing people?"

"Not especially. I simply happen to be very good at it, and it does not bother me much. I have known people who like killing. I try to avoid them. If I can't avoid them, I do my best to kill them. People who like to kill are dangerous and very bad for business." He looked at her pointedly.

"So you're saying it's in my best interest to get therapy when this is all over."

"Not a bad idea."

Chapter 5 - Truth or Dare

Chapter 5 of 36

Testing the water leads to playing with fire.

□

Deira looked around her apartment. For most people, leaving a place they had lived for years would be difficult, or so she assumed. She felt nothing. This had always been a place to sleep, eat, and store a few things, nothing more. The location assured her acquaintances would not be eager to visit which suited her.

No amount of cajoling or bribery by her brothers had succeed in getting her to move to a better neighborhood. Eventually, they had stopped trying. They had both moved out of the city long ago and couldn't understand why she refused to do the same. They never would.

The last place she had cared about was her mother's house. It was warm and comforting and life had been normal there. After her mother's death, Deira had found solace in the memories scattered about the house the curtains they had made together, the way the spices were arranged just so, the carefully chosen art. Her father had seen the same things as a painful reminder of his loss, but he couldn't quite let go. So he had destroyed as many of the happy memories as he could and his family along with them.

She had been at college when her father had sold the house, returning only to collect the few things she had left behind. She had been to his new house, a thousand miles away, only twice since Kara had disappeared and not at all since her funeral. He did not seem bothered by the long silence. He had a new life and a new wife. She told herself that the ease with which he had let her go was a relief. Considering **her** new life, it was better for everyone in her family to remain distant.

Packing was not difficult. She had very little worth taking. She filled a gym bag every day for two weeks, transferring the contents to boxes at the storage facility across town. Since her job had let her go as soon as she had given notice, there had been plenty of time to take care of business. Her knives had been replaced, though she had not been able to find any to fit the wrist sheaths. Those had been custom, and she knew better than to contact the guy who had made them for her. She also knew better than to ask Gage to give back the one he had taken in the alley.

Dinners with him had been interesting. She had not expected him to be a good cook, nor to be presented with flowers at the door. He had said he was being thorough, and since she'd seen the police watching on more than one occasion, she believed him. She would have believed him anyway. The man was hardly a romantic. Still, the occasional flowers were nice.

They had revised the plan. She would move directly into the new apartment. She had been relieved to hear it. The less time she had to spend with him, the better. The idea of attempting to sleep in his house made her twitch. It wasn't his killing people for a living. She could hardly be squeamish about it, considering she had done it for free and would again. When she spent time with him, the control she had spent years honing went straight out the window, something she could not afford.

He sent her home in a cab after each "date." Well, home to a place she would never have lived. She went in one door and out the back. She didn't want to know what Gage would have over the doorman to make him look the other way. She had bribed the same guy to hold mail and discourage visitors for Ms. Sedoso, and the price had been high. The doorman had said he did it for Mr. Randall as a favor. He seemed to collect a lot of favors. Deira suspected none of the people who owed him were any happier about it than she was.

The knock on the door surprised him. Gage picked up a gun before hitting the switch to turn on the security cameras. Some people backed away if they noticed the tiny red light. Others didn't react as well. Most people never noticed the light at all. Looking at the screen, he swore softly and lowered the gun.

"You should not be here," he said as he opened the door. Deira stepped inside, noticed the gun, and moved past him into the kitchen. Slowly.

"Can't your 'girlfriend' drop by?" She smiled sweetly, but it didn't reach her eyes.

"Our dinner is tomorrow." He closed the door.

"That won't work for me," she said.

"I'm sorry, princess. I was not aware I was on your schedule. Go home. I have work to do." He walked past her, put the gun in a drawer, and closed it with his hip.

"Yes, well, there's a problem with that. My apartment is currently being tossed, so going back seems a bad idea."

"I assume, since you are here and not bleeding, you were not in it when you found out." There were only facts, no implied concern.

"Brilliant deduction," she snapped.

"So they know who you are." His voice was flat.

"Possibly. It's not like I live in the best neighborhood. It could be random. I didn't stay to find out. Should I have?" she asked.

His lack of reaction irritated her. He found it amusing.

"Did you come straight here?" The question seemed simple enough but they both knew it was a test.

"I'm not an idiot. I've been all over the city, trying to figure out the next step."

"Theirs or yours?" he asked.

"Ours," she countered. "This isn't just my deal anymore, is it?" She glared at him.

"No, it is not. What was left in your apartment?" He would not indulge her tantrum.

"Very little. Some clothes, the stereo, furniture. No personal papers or identification." She recited the list without inflection.

"Phone?"

"On me, as usual." She recaptured the tone of a bored teenager, or perhaps she had never fully relinquished it.

"I meant a land line."

"Land line?" She snickered. "I haven't had one of those in years. I don't see the point. So the only phone I have is my cell, which is pay as you go so there are no records. Good enough?" Her misplaced anger leaked out every time she spoke.

"That makes it harder for them." It was unlikely they would bother to do the work necessary to track a cell phone. Then again, he would take the time to do it, so it was possible. "I do not like this."

"No? I'm thrilled, myself. What the hell am I supposed to do now?" She was in danger of losing the last remnants of control. He always enjoyed those moments.

"What are we supposed to do, you mean. I thought we were clear on that." His apparent calm put her on edge, which was exactly what he wanted. "The new flat will not be ready for a week."

"Flat? How very continental. Where are you from, anyway?" She should not have asked, and knew it.

"Hush. I need to think. Sit down."

He tried to order his thoughts, but she was like intrusive white noise, even when she kept her mouth shut. He checked his calendar, then closed the computer on the counter. He would have to move things around, but it would not be difficult. He could see her simmering and trying to contain it. She was too reactive. *No discipline.*

"You will have to stay here." he said, wishing there was another way.

"Joy." She grimaced.

"And inside."

"Great. I've always wanted to see what house arrest would be like for the rich. I can enjoy your big screen TV. Eat bonbons or something," she taunted.

"I will keep you busy," he said.

"Oh? Doing what?"

"Whatever I ask you to do." He smiled at her. She tensed. "Yes?" he prompted.

"Yes." She glared at him. "Since my credit cards are canceled, I can't get a hotel. My other option is sleeping on the street, so I don't see that I have much choice."

"Good girl. You can start now. Come over here." He kept his eyes on her as she moved reluctantly towards him. *She should resist.*

"Yes, master," she said, not bothering to mask the sarcasm.

"You do not want to play that game with me, princess. You would not like it," he said mildly.

She stopped moving. His accent had never been so thick before. He was usually very careful about how he spoke. He did not seem to notice the change.

"What is it you want me to do?" She kept her voice steady.

"Kneel," he commanded.

"I'm sorry?" She did not move. His eyes seemed to have changed with his accent. They were much darker than usual.

"Drop to your knees." He obviously enjoyed her hesitation. "Can I say it another way you would understand?"

The signs of stress were clear to him. She began to breathe faster. Her heart would be racing. The adrenaline kick would take over. *Fight. Please.* He knew she would not.

She sank to her knees, dropping her gaze. The bright light made her hair seem paler. She lifted her face and fixed him with a glare. He did not look away.

"Now what?" she snarled.

He waited in silence until she could no longer hide her discomfort. To her credit, she did not move, did not speak. Eventually, her anger faded to dull acceptance. *A little fear and pain and she folds.* He shook his head.

"What do you see?" he asked.

"You," she answered.

"Very observant," he drawled. "What else do you see?"

She looked around the kitchen. There was nothing particularly different about it. Gleaming white counters, polished chrome fixtures, black and white prints on the walls, stainless steel cookware on a pot rack, everything in its proper place. Cataloging the extent of his compulsive clean streak wasn't particularly interesting, but it beat staring at him. After a few seconds, she began to actually see things.

"Your computer is on the counter. You didn't close it all the way, so it didn't go into sleep mode. There's a glass, half full, by the sink, probably water since I've never seen you drink anything else except coffee. You left the security cameras on, split screen to show front and back entrances. I assume the switch for it is at the edge of the counter. The drawer where you put your gun is open a crack." She turned her head to take in the rest of the room.

"And there's a gun in a holster under the table." She looked up at him. "Has it always been there?"

"Yes."

"Which is why you sit in that chair when we have dinner." Her eyes widened a bit.

"Yes."

"Did you expect me to try something?" she asked quietly.

"Yes." His answer surprised her more than the gun had. "It would be foolish to expect otherwise."

"But not anymore?"

"No, not anymore."

"Why?"

"Because I know you well enough by now to know I do not need the gun." He grinned.

"True." She grinned back. "And I know you well enough to know it won't be there the next time I look for it. Neither will the gun in the drawer."

"Very good, princess." He cocked his head, regarding her. "Are you comfortable down there?"

She snorted in response.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"World peace." At this point, flippant was the best she had. "In the meantime, I'd like to get off the fucking floor."

He extended his hand. She had to lean forward a bit to take it. Cautiously. He grasped her wrist, pulling her up, slightly off balance. She stumbled towards him, but his hold on her wrist stopped her shy of collision.

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "Very." She did not waver, did not look away.

"I thought so." He had not let go of her wrist. "So am I."

They stood there for a moment before he released her.

"I'm going to go wash up," she said. "Slowly. That should give you time enough to relocate the guns." She brushed past him, flashing a smile, and was pleased to hear his chuckle as she closed the bathroom door.

He relocated the guns. Glancing at the knife block he decided there was nothing to do about it if he intended to cook while she was his 'guest.' There were reasons he lived alone. Many reasons. Her presence over the next week would be a distraction. There was nothing to do about that either.

"You don't know I wouldn't like it," she offered as they sat down to eat.

"Like what?" He looked at the plates. He had served nothing objectionable.

"Playing the submissive." She sipped her wine.

"Do you?" He arched an eyebrow. This was not the dinner conversation he had expected.

"That's not the point. The point is you don't know. More than once you've told me I wouldn't like something you could do. When it comes to severe pain, you've got good reason to think that. But the other things? You don't know me well enough to know what I would and wouldn't like." It wasn't a challenge.

"I can make an educated guess," he said.

"But it's only a guess. That's rarely enough to go by," she objected.

"It would not be enough, if we were normal people. We are not." He was willing to leave it there.

She wasn't. "Considering our deviant nature, doesn't it make it more likely we would do things normal people don't?"

"Faulty logic, but I will go along. If you were naturally submissive, you would not be planning to murder people." It was not entirely true, but truth wasn't what she wanted.

"I don't think submission is something one comes to naturally." She swirled her wine. "But dominance is."

"Yes," he said quietly, "it is, though it comes more naturally to some than others."

"It can also be learned. And I think in you it was." She looked up.

He went rigid, his right hand clenched.

"Both can be learned." His voice was scarcely above a whisper. "You should think carefully about how far you want to take this. My 'education' is not a matter for academic inquiry."

"Yet you make assumptions about me based on a very short acquaintance. What's the difference?" This was a dangerous road.

"Ah, there is your mistake. My assumption was not based on what you might do. It was based on what I am capable of doing. Most people do not want to find out." He had relaxed slightly but held her gaze. "You do not want to find out." *I do not want you to.*

"Probably not," she conceded.

"And yet, you continue to push. Why?" He reached for his water, using it as an excuse to unclench his fist.

"Curiosity, I guess." She shrugged.

"Some things should not be explored. You want to keep that in mind." He set down his glass, then carefully laid his hands on the table.

"Considering you've admitted a willingness to kill me, I don't see what I have to lose."

"There are worse things than dying," he growled. He took a controlled breath.

"Like what?" She reached out and stroked his hand from wrist to fingertips.

"Don't," he warned. "Don't think I'm someone to play games with. I play to win or I do not play." He withdrew his hand. The other option had been to grab her wrist and haul her towards him. He didn't want to do that. *Not this one.*

"I don't see the point in playing at all if it's not to win," she said. "Besides, the way I see it, I'm already down a few hands. You've made it clear I may spend the rest of my life paying you back. I might as well see what I'm in for."

"You think you have to trade yourself for the debt." He shook his head. "That is not how it works with me."

"Nice euphemism. So, no sex for payment. Good to know." She sat back and smiled, having gotten the information she'd wanted.

"Well played, princess." He tipped his glass to her. *Such a lovely smile.*

"So, where do I sleep?" she asked.

"With me," he answered and cleared the dishes from the table.

Chapter 6 - Show and Tell

Chapter 6 of 36

There are many ways to be a prisoner.

□

Deira stared at his back, unable to move. She tried to think, tried to speak. Both attempts failed. He calmly washed the dishes, saying nothing. She looked down at her wine, red liquid in a half full glass. She had always prided herself on her ability to think quickly and come up with a fast retort. There was a distant irritation over not being able to do so now.

"I don't understand." She spoke slowly. He hung up the dish towel, and turned to face her.

"From such a clever girl, I find that surprising," he said quietly.

"You just said, " she started but could not finish.

"I said there is no trading sex for your debt. I did not say I was stupid enough to sleep when you were free to roam my house." Quiet, not soft. *No, never soft.*

"You don't trust me." The gun under the table had confirmed that.

He laughed, a harsh sound.

"I do not trust anyone. That is why I am still alive. The last woman who had free reign of my living space is currently regretting her curious nature."

"That indicates she's still alive." She looked up at him.

He nodded. "Quite."

"I'm not comfortable sleeping with you."

"Hardly surprising. I am not comfortable with you figuring out where the guns are." He shrugged. "And since this is my house, and you have put me in a situation where I have no choice but to put you up, my discomfort wins."

"The other room has a keyed lock. You could put me there and lock me in," she offered.

"I could, if I thought you were without skills to get out of it. The lock was installed for privacy, not imprisonment."

Deira was out of ideas, which aggravated her. At least her brain was working again.

"So what, I'm supposed to curl up at the foot of your bed like a puppy? What's to stop me from walking out once you're asleep?"

"I do not sleep so deeply. You would not make it out." His voice held no rancor. "I will provide you with something to sleep in and we will share the bed."

"You have to admit it's reasonable for me to be nervous about sharing a bed with you."

"It is. I really don't care. Once again, you have given me little choice as to how things will progress. But if it makes you feel any better, I have no intention of seducing you."

"Seduction isn't what I'm afraid of," she retorted. She had crossed her arms over her stomach without realizing it. "You've already proven you're faster and stronger than me, so it's not like I could stop you..." she trailed off.

"I am not a rapist." His voice grated like raw steel drawn over a stone.

She looked up. His eyes were hard, fixed on a point behind her. Whatever he saw, it was not her. He gritted his teeth; she could hear the grinding. He was right. There were some things she didn't want to know.

"Merely a murderer." She said the first thing that came to mind. Anything to break the silence. He turned his gaze back to her.

"Yes, but only when paid or provoked. I doubt you will provoke me."

"I won't." She stood up slowly. "I guess you should show me to your room."

"You know the way. I will be up when I am done." He took her wine glass to the sink as she headed for the stairs.

The comfort of his scent in the room struck her again. Considering there was nothing comfortable about the situation, she couldn't fathom why she would have that reaction. She hoped it would dissipate before he joined her. The night would be difficult enough.

She walked over to the window, standing to the side to look out. There wasn't much of a view, just the empty street, and the junk yard beyond. She shivered, remembering her fear the night they had met. Some things about that night remained clear, none of them pleasant.

She didn't hear him enter, so when he spoke, she flinched.

"Police outside?" He did not join her at the window, instead going to the closet.

He moved very quietly for a large man, but she supposed he would have to.

"Not tonight. They seem to have moved on." She turned to watch him. He might be comfortable with his back to her, but she did not have that sort of confidence around him. He handed her a pair of shorts and a tank top on his way out of the room. She found it amusing, as he'd already seen her naked. Still, she appreciated the gesture.

"Get into bed. I will join you shortly." His voice came from the stairs.

She wondered if he was making sure the guns were really secured, then rejected the thought. He would have done it right the first time. She changed, crawled into his bed, and lay staring at the ceiling. She was exhausted, but sleep was unlikely to come soon. The barest sound of him coming up the stairs started her heart beating faster. She closed her eyes and tried to control it.

"Sleeping?" he asked.

She did not answer. *Breathe slowly, pretend to sleep.* He must know she was awake. She sometimes thought he could hear her thinking. Not that she was good at it around him. She observed him beneath lowered lids, needing to know where he stood. He moved so carefully when he knew she was watching. It would be nice to see him off his guard.

He moved around his room with a loose grace. He had his back to her when he removed his shirt, stretching so the muscles stood out. He rolled his head, causing a series of loud pops. The sound always made her slightly ill, but she managed to not react. When he began taking off his pants, she turned her head towards the window.

"Tired of the show?"

He had known she was watching. She could feel herself blush and hated him for it. At least the darkness hid her reaction.

"There are some things I don't need to see," she said, giving up all pretense of sleeping.

"Don't worry, princess. I sleep clothed."

"I'm surprised you don't sleep armed," she shot back, and then fell silent. He had turned around. A long, ragged scar ran across his midsection, white even in the low light.

"Not when I have someone in my bed," he said. His smile was bright. She did not return it.

"I don't sleep well with others," she said. It was true; she never had.

"I told you that you would be safe with me," he offered, getting into bed.

"You said you wouldn't seduce or rape me. That's hardly the same thing."

"It's a start. Since we are not sleeping, what would you like to talk about?" He put his hands under his head.

"Scars," she answered. "You've seen mine, but they aren't nearly as impressive as yours."

He tensed. "No, but the one on your shoulder is going to be permanent. It's a pretty pink already." He fought the urge to reach out and touch it, instead running his hand over his own scar and considered how much he should say. *Very little*. It had always been the rule.

"I got the stomach wound when I was fifteen. It came close to killing me, but ultimately saved my life. I was carried to hospital in time."

"Who saved you?"

"My brother." His tone warned her to leave it alone. For once, she complied.

"Maybe a different topic," she proposed.

"That is hardly fair, princess. I have not had the chance to ask you an inappropriate personal question. How did you get the scar on your back? The triangular one at the base of your spine."

"I fell down the stairs," she said automatically.

"Really." He did not buy it. "I seem to have heard that from more than one woman. Who pushed you?"

She closed her eyes and then opened them quickly. Some things were not worth reliving, but as she had started it, she could hardly fault him for asking.

"I wasn't pushed. My father stumbled into me when he was drunk. I did fall down the stairs, and landed against a piece of modern art." Admitting it embarrassed her. His laughing at her did not help.

"Modern art?"

"It's the best description I have. My brother discovered welding and art at the same time and thought he could combine them. So there was a sculpture with multiple edges at the bottom of the stairs, demonstrating that my reckless disregard for life runs in the family."

"Now **that** is a good story." He continued to laugh.

"So glad the pain of my childhood amuses you."

"There are many things about you I find amusing, princess. That is part of why I've kept you around." *But only a small part.*

"And here I thought it was because getting rid of bodies is such a chore," she said.

"Not nearly as hard as you might think. I have had sufficient practice."

"For some reason, that doesn't make me feel any safer sleeping next to you. Go figure."

"You are safe. I will watch over you." As soon as he said the words, he tensed. How long had it been since he had heard the same promise? She had dug up memories best left buried, and he had let her.

"I know you will," she said softly. She had no idea why she had felt compelled to say it, much less why she believed it.

She felt him uncoil with no small relief. Whatever nerve she had touched tonight and she had touched it several times she was determined not to do so again. Raw threats were less frightening than his sudden tension. She shivered.

"Come closer." It was more a request than a demand, the words quiet in the dark. The streetlight had gone out and neither had noticed. She took a deep breath and slid towards the middle of the bed.

He moved towards her, a shadow, but warm and solid. She turned onto her side, back to him. It felt right. He curled around her. As she drifted off to sleep, she noticed that his arm barely touched her ribs. He planted his fist firmly on the bed in front of her. She was safe.

He woke up at five o'clock, as he always did. Some training could not be overcome. He turned his head. *Sranje*. He should not have allowed himself to sleep. He had not expected to.

Deira shifted, muttering something incomprehensible. Her hair covered part of her face. He resisted the urge to move it. The feel of it against his chest was enough. He watched her for a while, mesmerized by the sound of her breathing, the twitch of her hand in sleep, the way she pressed against him. *So alive*.

He slowly moved away from her, careful not to wake her when he got out of the bed. He didn't need coffee as much as he needed to be somewhere other than in bed with her.

Two years ago, he would never have gotten involved in this mess. Faking his death had seemed a way out of such complications, an opportunity to become someone else. He should have known better. His was not a life from which escape was possible, no matter how good the idea had seemed. Her arrival on his doorstep had proven that. He had been incapable of leaving her to die, and now he would pay for it.

Soft. The voice in his head was not his. He flinched. The memory followed him down the stairs. *You are too soft. We will fix that*. But they hadn't. Karol had stepped in to do what Gage could not, and things had gone from bad to worse for both of them. Karol might have forgiven Gage. They never spoke of it. Eventually, Karol had been able to forgive himself. It didn't matter. Gage would always remember, and always at the worst time. He shook his head to clear the memories. It never worked, but it did help him refocus. He hit the button on the coffee maker and headed back upstairs.

Deira still slept, stretched out on the bed. She looked young, vulnerable. He turned away.

Chapter 7 - Balancing Act

Chapter 7 of 36

History has a way of repeating itself - with teeth bared.

□

Coffee and work made it possible to get through the early morning without thinking too deeply. Gage did not like where his thoughts had been taking him. He called a cleanup crew for Deira's apartment and arranged for a mailbox where her belongings could be dropped. She had refused to tell him the location of her storage facility, and he had seen no reason to insist on it. That was before he had figured out the girl had a special talent for making simple things turn complex. He needed to get her out of his life quickly.

He made another call. Convincing Nicky to move faster on the set up was not difficult. She was eager to get started and to be finished. He rented the warehouse and arranged for the equipment through different holding companies. It did nothing to keep him from thinking about why he was going out of his way to help Deira.

Only one thing would work to distract him legitimate business. He gritted his teeth and got to work.

He normally avoided his office, but as the police might be checking him out, he had gone in twice this week. He ought to thank them; two shipping contracts had been renegotiated with more favorable terms, one supplier had been convinced to lower the minimum order, and his receptionist had been reminded that filing was, in fact, part of the job. Not only had he increased his profit, he had provided easily traceable, perfectly legal work activity.

It had been Karol's idea to start the business, in the hope that it would keep Gage from making money other ways, but neither of them had expected it to be so successful. Gage's lack of conscience made him particularly good at business. Unfortunately, it had never been interesting enough to keep him occupied for long.

For years, he had blamed the drugs for changing his brain chemistry, but knew it for a shallow lie, even then. If he had been left in his village, growing up as generations before him had, the war still would have twisted him, maybe not in the same way, but it was a matter of degree. Blaming chemicals for the for way he had turned out was pointless.

Karol had been able to walk away from violence. No, not walk run. He had pursued forgiveness with the zeal only true sinners possess. Eventually, Karol had radiated peace. It had made him hard to be around sometimes. Gage had made friends with his demons instead. It was the path of least resistance and let him make his own peace with the past as much as would ever be possible. It did not trouble him often.

He had assuaged what guilt he did have by paying for Karol to do missionary work. He had kept to his agreement to fund it only with proceeds from his legitimate business. Karol had done his best to pretend Gage had only one job. It had cut down on the fighting, if not the repeated promises to light candles for his immortal soul. He was not entirely sure he still had one. That did not bother him, either.

Deira got up and stumbled for the bathroom. She needed lessons in how to move quietly. Or maybe she wasn't a morning person. She needed to learn and unlearn a great deal. He was not inclined to teach her most things, so it was good Nicky had not fought him about the job. He would have to throw something her way to make up for it. He owed her that much.

He made three more calls and replied to his email before Deira came downstairs. The good thing about international business was that time zones made it possible to work at almost any hour. That, and people who let him call them in the middle of dinner without complaining about it. Custom often gave way before money.

"Were you speaking *Russian*?" Deira asked. She walked past him and poured herself a cup of coffee. His gaze flicked from the coffee maker to her cup.

"What? It's early. I'm bleary. Your coffee doesn't taste like crap. It's not so surprising. Do you have milk?"

"Cream, in the door." He began shutting down programs. "And it was Polish."

"Is that where you're from?" Her voice came from inside the refrigerator. She was looking for more than cream.

"No. I speak five languages enough to do business in them. Six, if you include English, but Americans never do. I understand four others well enough to keep people from cheating me or shooting me under the table. At least so far." He closed the computer.

"I'm sorry, I didn't hear you," she said, emerging with eggs, cream and cheese. Of course she had heard him. They both knew it.

"It was nothing important." He sat back and watched her cook. The view was not bad. She even refilled his coffee in an exaggerated pretense of domesticity. Everything they did was a game. He wondered if he was being played. *It would not be the first time.*

After breakfast, Gage called a cab to take them to the garage where he kept his truck. It was a bit inconvenient, but made him more difficult to tail. It did not seem anyone was following them, but after the apartment break in, he knew it was only a matter of time before connections were made. He could make it work to his advantage, but he needed to get her squared away first. He drove to the warehouse.

Nicky sat on one of the loading docks, cigarette in one hand and large coffee in the other. Her hair was braided in tight rows, with small beads at the end of each braid. She managed to make workout attire look fashionable. Silver nail polish flashed as she took a drag of her cigarette. She watched, impassive, as they got out of the truck. She made no move as they approached.

"If you shoot me, Nick, I will be very pissed off." Gage did not stop moving towards her.

"Good morning to you, too, asshole. As you can see, both of my hands are currently occupied." The beads clacked together as she shook her head slowly.

"For now." Gage finally stopped. "But if I recall correctly, you pride yourself on being able to ditch the smoke and draw quickly. I am almost certain you would not sacrifice the coffee."

"For you? Please. I wouldn't even drop the cigarette." She took a drag and blew the smoke in his direction.

"It is good to see you, Nick." He gave her his best smile.

"I wish I could say the same, but I wasted a perfectly good bottle of aged whiskey celebrating your death and I'm not sure I can forgive you for that." She got to her feet.

"This is Dee, the girl I told you about." Gage could feel Deira bristle, whether at the nickname or being called a girl, he didn't know. "Dee, this is Nicky. She is going to teach you how to stay alive for a little while longer."

"Getting right the hell away from him would be a good start," Nicky said.

"Play nice. She does not have any more choice in the matter than you do. I will be back in a few hours. That should give you enough time to get acquainted." Gage turned towards the truck.

"I thought you said you were out of this until I was done with the project," Nicky called. He looked over his shoulder.

"Change of plans. You know how that goes, Nicky." He shrugged his shoulders. " Sometimes things change just when you thought you had it all figured out." She flicked her cigarette at his feet, but she kept her hand where he could see it.

He got in his truck, shaking his head as he realized he had missed her.

Nicky ushered Deira through a metal door.

"What do you want me to call you?" Nicky asked.

"Deira. I don't know why he thought I wouldn't tell you. If he trusts you enough to train me, I can trust you enough to tell you my name."

"So what did you do to end up here?" Nicky asked, motioning for Deira to follow her deeper into the building.

"Gage suggested I not talk about why I need your help."

"Yeah, I'm sure he did, but that's not what I was asking. What I want to know is what stupid thing you did to get the motherfucker to notice you in the first place." Nicky stopped, turning to face her.

"Oh." Deira looked away. "I... uh... got in over my head, I guess, and he's helping me out."

Nicky's eyebrows shot up. "And how much is he charging you for this help?"

"He said we'd discuss it later. It won't be an issue. We'll work something out." Deira was startled by Nicky's laugh sharp, loud, and mirthless.

"No, honey, you won't. Not like you think. Gage doesn't do things to help people out. Gage does things out of necessity or because it amuses him or because he feels like it. Unless you agreed on a contract price, he sets his own, and it almost never involves money, and only he gets to decide when you've paid up. Best you realize that now."

"I got that impression. He's been consistently vague on the specifics of payment," Deira admitted.

"Of course he has. You still haven't told me what you did to make him take such an interest in you that he called me." They reached the end of the hall. Nicky held open the door to a large room full of gym equipment.

"I screwed up a job, and he stepped in to finish it. Said he watched for a while then decided to not let me get killed. I don't really know why." She shrugged.

"Shit, girl. You're going to pay for a long time. I wouldn't go asking him why he saved you either. He won't answer." Nicky put her gym bag on a bench by the wall.

"You aren't what I expected," Deira said.

"Which part surprises you that I'm short, fat, or black?" Nicky was direct, if nothing else.

"You aren't fat..." she started, then changed her mind.

Nicky snorted. "Enough talk. Let's see what you got."

"What do you want to see?"

"Whatever you want to show me. Run through your regular workout. It'll give me an idea of how you move and where your strength is. Basic fight warm up for starters. I'm going to stretch out over here. You let me know when you're ready." Nicky walked to a mat, secured her braids with an elastic, and began running through her warm ups, surreptitiously watching Deira.

She could tell right away the girl had no place trying to run with the pros. *What the fuck is he thinking?* She gave away too much. And she turned her back to strangers. Nicky sure as hell wasn't going to say anything about it, though. People got touchy about that, especially when it was true. She would find a way to work a fix into the program. After a while, Nicky sat on the floor and observed. Deira didn't seem to notice.

"I assume you trained with weapons. Have a favorite?" Nicky asked.

"Knives," said. "I prefer throwing them, but I don't suck at close in work. Well, not one on one, anyway. Without the element of surprise, fighting more than one person with a knife is dicey. At best."

"You shoot?" Nicky asked casually.

"I'm a decent shot. I don't usually carry, though. Hard as hell to explain when you don't have a license."

Nicky's sharp laugh echoed in the warehouse.

"When you set out to kill someone, you worry about being busted for concealed carry without a permit? Think about that for a minute, and tell me why I shouldn't consider you a crazy bitch." Nicky shook her head.

"I didn't say it made sense. When it comes down to it, knives feel better. More comfortable." Deira shrugged.

"And there's something awfully nice about the way it feels when you've taken down some guy with your own hands, isn't there? When someone who thought he was all that is bleeding at your feet, there's a sense of power and fulfillment. Nothing can touch that." For all the weight Nicky gave it, they could have been discussing shoe shopping. She stood up and stretched.

"Time to spar. Nothing intense. I want to see how you fight for real. Can you do that without actually trying to kill me? Because I won't be trying to kill you. This is play time." Nicky regarded Deira evenly.

"Yeah, I know the difference. But thanks for the vote of confidence." Deira frowned.

"Honey, I don't know you. For all I know, you're crazier than me. I figured we should establish our intentions before we beat the shit out of each other." A light shone in Nicky's eyes. As soon as Deira recognized that look, the fight started.

The first few blows were cautious. They were testing each other. Nicky blocked a strike to the head but missed the follow up, throwing her off balance. She'd been wrong in her early assessment. The girl wasn't bad, and she obviously needed to hit something. She moved well, kept her focus, timed her strikes. But she was too emotional and her style was too formal. Nicky feinted a few times, moving Deira backwards. Then she switched to straight-up street fighting and slammed into the girl, throwing her off balance. She smashed Deira in the shoulder as she moved past. If it had been a real fight, Nicky would have punched her in the head and laid her out. Then again, if it had been a real fight, Deira's next move would have caused some serious damage. Nicky was out of practice. She almost took a kick to the chest and wasn't able to grab the girl's leg. *Shit, now I have to work out more often.* She moved out of range. They both slowed down, trading blows almost methodically.

"Okay. That's good enough for an introduction," Nicky said. She was getting tired, but she couldn't afford to show it. *I should cut back on the smokes.* She rejected the idea

instantly.

"That felt good," Deira said, stretching. This time, she didn't take her eyes off of Nicky.

"You're better than I would have thought," Nicky offered.

"Thanks. I've been working on it, but I've got a long way to go," Deira conceded.

"Not like that road ever ends, honey. But you have a good foundation. We'll work on a few things. One thing you might want to do is build up your upper body. Most women don't have the arm strength they need to go up against guys."

"I noticed."

"That's why it's a good idea to work on evasion techniques and leverage. Then plan to fight dirty, every time," Nicky advised.

"Show me how," Deira said.

Three days later, Nicky still had not run out of moves.

Chapter 8 - Rattling the Cage

Chapter 8 of 36

Things done with the best intention can have uncomfortable consequences.

□

"I need to run," Deira said as Gage walked in the door.

"The treadmill is upstairs with the other equipment."

"It's not the same." She paced like a caged animal. It had been five days since she had been able to go on a decent run. Her skin was too tight.

"Chances are good they are searching for you. Running in any of your usual places would be dangerous. They will not have given up hunting you, and if they knew where you lived, they are likely to know other things." He set down a bag of groceries and began putting them away.

"So I'll run somewhere else." She would not let it go. "Besides, we don't even know Cavuto's men were in my apartment."

He regarded her evenly. "I would think the training would be tiring enough. But if it is not, I can speak to Nicky about it."

"I don't know if Nicky would speak to **you** right now," she said. "But that's not my problem. Running is what I do. I can't do it in the warehouse."

"What you do now is train for this job. When are you going to understand your life has changed? You cannot do what you have always done. Not now."

"Fine. Running is training for me. But if I can't run, I'll figure out something else," she huffed.

"Good."

"I suppose going dancing is right out, huh?" It was worth a try.

"Because drug dealers never spend time in nightclubs," he said dryly.

"There is that." She grinned at him.

He shook his head and set about making dinner.

"So what is it you do when you aren't...on a job?" she asked. He had an office beyond the living room, but he kept the door closed whenever he worked and locked when he went out. Wherever he went, he always came home late.

"Is that not like asking the superhero to reveal his secret identity?"

"Nice dodge, but superheroes don't go around killing people," she countered.

"That is not what I remember from comic books." He held out a spoon. "Taste this."

She took the spoon. "That's good." A hint of mustard and a stronger taste of horseradish rolled over her tongue.

"I have a hard time picturing you reading comics." The taste of the sauce lingered.

"I was young once," he said.

"You aren't old now."

He ignored that.

"Comic books helped me improve my English. I knew enough to get by when I came to this country, but I was still a boy. And I remember superheroes killing people."

"Okay, so they kill some bad guys."

"I am the bad guy," he muttered.

"So what do you call the guys who are worse than us?" She purposely included herself.

"Targets. I usually call them profit. It helps when there is nothing personal at stake." He frowned.

"I blew that for you." It was more apology than admission.

"I did not have to help you. I could have left you to die." Nothing in his tone indicated a lie.

"Why didn't you?"

"A dead woman in front of my house would raise questions I thought it best to avoid." He put two steaks in the broiler.

"Dead men in front of your house raised questions."

"Yes, but not as many and not the same sort. Also, I had not planned on killing anyone." He shrugged and stirred the sauce.

"Okay, but that's not what I was getting at. Why are you still helping me?"

"Perhaps it is because I rarely get the chance to do something good." He paused. "The men who raped your sister deserve to die." The steely tone returned to his voice.

So that's it or part of it. She was glad she could not see his eyes.

"But you're still going to charge me for the assistance."

"Certainly." He gave her a level look. "Profit comes in many forms."

"And you still aren't going to tell me what the charge will be."

"I will not know what will settle the debt until the time comes. For now, you can set the table." He waved her towards the cabinet on the other side of the room.

"That should be worth a quarter, at least."

"That is not even worth the effort it takes to feed you," he replied. "But you can work it off by doing the dishes." It was the first time he had not insisted on cleaning up.

When she had finished cleaning the kitchen, she found him practicing forms in the living room. Music played, turned down low. The couch had been pushed back against the wall. She leaned against the door and watched him. For once, he did not seem to notice she was there. There was beauty to it, a controlled flow from one move to the next. Done quickly, it could be deadly.

"It is like a dance," he said, looking up.

"I was thinking the same thing."

"You said you wished to dance. Come here and I will show you." He held out his hand. "I will slow down so you can follow."

She stood behind him, trying to mirror his movements. Years of dance training helped, but she still felt awkward. He repeated each move several times, eventually changing into a sequence she tried to follow.

"Now you show me," he said, stepping behind her.

As she moved from one form to the next, he quietly corrected her, lifting her arm, touching her side so she turned at the right moment, straightening her shoulders. She realized she was sweating. It had looked far easier than it was. But it was one more thing that might help her get what she wanted, one more weapon in her arsenal.

"Enough," he said. "You did well for the first time."

"We could do more," she protested.

"It is late."

She looked at the clock. An hour had passed.

"We should shower and go to bed," he said.

For a brief moment, she thought he had meant they should shower together. Her mind flashed on what it would be like, water running over his shoulders and down his back, dripping from his long fingers. She blinked. *Don't go down that road.* Sleeping beside him was difficult enough.

"Good idea. I'll go first," she managed to say without choking. Her throat was dry.

"I will finish first. The showers have instant hot water, and you take far longer than I do. I am not sure if it is because you are a woman or an American."

"It's the hair. Takes a lot to care for long hair." She tossed her head and smiled at him over her shoulder as she headed for the bathroom.

When she got to the room, he was already in bed.

"I bought you something today." He tilted his head, indicating a box on the chair.

He didn't have that when he came in. She opened the box. A pale blue nightshirt rested in tissue paper.

"You didn't have to do this," she protested. She picked it up. It was incredibly soft.

"I do not have very many pairs of shorts and I hate doing laundry," he teased. "You will be more comfortable in that. Put it on."

She headed for the door.

"I will turn my head and close my eyes," he offered, smiling. He kept his word.

"Thank you," she said, getting into bed.

"You are welcome, princess." It was the first time he had used the word as an endearment.

He had bought the nightgown because he had thought it would be more demure. Watching her approach the bed, he realized he knew nothing about women's clothes. The dim light in the room did not keep him from seeing the curve of her breast, the outline of her waist, the brush of fabric over her hips. His clothes did not cover her as well, but they revealed less.

The feel of her hair against his skin had been difficult to ignore. The soft fabric of the nightgown was worse. As she pressed her back against his chest, he resisted the urge to pull away. She would not understand.

She fell asleep quickly. Despite her protests, she had done so every night. To his consternation, so had he. Tonight was different. She shifted her hips and he stifled a groan. He turned on his back, moving so they were not touching. *She is too young for me.* That did not help.

He had not had a woman in his bed in a long time. Making her sleep next to him had seemed a smart move at the time, but he wondered if he should not let her stay in Katya's room until the apartment was ready. It would be safer for them both, but she would think it meant he trusted her. He could not afford to look weak.

She rolled over, moving closer to him. He listened to her soft breathing and stared at the ceiling. He could get up, do some work. Minutes passed. He had almost convinced himself to make a pot of coffee and place some calls when she snuggled closer. She put her arm over his chest and buried her face in his side. He lowered his head and drew in the scent of her still damp hair. Brushing it from her face, he let his fingers tangle gently in her curls. She sighed, soft and warm on his skin.

It was going to be a very long night.

Deira opened her eyes. Morning light filtered through the curtains, giving no indication of the time. He was already up, as usual. She closed her eyes again, trying to remember her dream. All she got was a vague sense it had been pleasant. That was a change.

For two years, her dreams had been filled images of suffering and death. She rarely slept more than a few hours at a time. At first, it had been a replay of seeing Kara in the morgue. When she had discovered what had happened, her subconscious had created variations of Kara's torture and death. *I should have been there for her, should have known, should have protected her.* The thought came to her over and over. It formed the background noise in her head. She had grown used to it.

She had thought if she learned what had really happened, the dreams would at least be consistent. Maybe she could live with that. It hadn't worked out that way. There was still blood and death but she was the one who did the torturing, who let the blood flow and laughed while the men who had hurt Kara died. The screams belonged to them, their suffering like a balm, filling up the hole left by her dead sister. Those dreams had told her what she had to do.

When she threw herself into training, the dreams stopped. Mostly. When she did have one, she fed it into her obsession. Those dreams were her fuel. And she hadn't had one since she'd begun sleeping next to Gage. She wasn't sure whether or not that was a good thing. At least she got regular sleep.

The sound of weights clanking in the next room interrupted her thoughts. It was odd. Morning was usually reserved for a leisurely breakfast and office work. She straightened her side of the bed as much as possible without getting out from under the covers then rolled over and did the same to his side before getting up and making the bed properly. He was picky.

Her muscles ached from the dual workout the day before. Since he was occupied upstairs, she stretched out in the kitchen while she waited for water to boil. He had brought home "real" tea for her. He had said if she insisted on drinking the stuff, she should at least follow the example of cultures where it was truly appreciated. It was stronger than what she usually drank, more fragrant, and delicious. He wouldn't go anywhere near it.

When he came downstairs, he found her sitting sideways on the couch, legs stretched out in front of her, a book in one hand and a cup of tea in the other. She still wore the nightshirt. This was the first time she had not gotten dressed before coming downstairs. She looked completely at home, relaxed and beautiful.

He closed his eyes for a moment. It did no good. He could see her pale legs against the brown leather of the couch as well either way. She did not look up from her book as he crossed the room. He closed the door to his office, took a deep breath, and began working. Maybe by the time he had finished, she would be dressed.

He found his reaction to her disturbing. She should be nothing to him, merely a random girl who had made his life difficult. It had not worked out that way. *This must stop.* It was too easy, this progression toward something surprisingly normal. Patterns of normalcy involving other people tended to end badly for him. Or them. She needed to go.

The living room was empty when he emerged from his office. He found her in the weight room, running on the treadmill. The look on her face warned him to not say anything about it. She looked at the display, nodded her head slightly and shut it off.

"Done working?" She grabbed a hand towel and wiped her face.

"For now. I have news."

"About the job?" she asked eagerly.

"No. It is about your apartment. They have finished early. I have arranged for furniture to be delivered tomorrow." It had taken a fair amount of persuasion on his part, but he was the persuasive sort.

"Oh." Her reaction was subdued.

"Did you want anything from your storage space? I can set up a time if you wish. Should you still be reluctant to tell me where it is, I will give you the number of the moving company and you can arrange it yourself."

"No, that's okay. I don't have all that much in there."

"So you will finally be free of me," he said, hoping she would be pleased.

"I guess so. Does this mean I can go running again, outside like a normal person?"

"Nothing about your situation is normal, princess. You would do well to remember that. I would not advise spending a lot of time on the street. They know what you look like."

"Fine." She walked past him and headed for the bathroom.

The hot water did not stop her from shaking. Raw anger overwhelmed her. It made no sense. All she had wanted since this whole thing began was to be free of him. *Really?* She shoved the thought aside. Now she would be able to spend her time as she wished. Whatever time was left to her, anyway.

She had not expected to live through her vendetta. It hadn't mattered. Maybe that was why she was mad. He had given her hope she would survive. She had no idea what she would do if that happened. Part of her took grim pleasure in the notion that if she didn't live, there would be no payoff for him. She suspected he wouldn't let it happen. That should have been comforting.

Chapter 9 - Vested Interest

Chapter 9 of 36

Invasion of privacy takes many forms.

□

Deira said nothing on the ride to the warehouse. Her quiet anger both surprised and troubled him.. He had expected her to be glad to be leaving, or at least relieved. He was usually better at reading people.

"I am going by the apartment to make sure everything is ready for tomorrow," he said as she got out of the truck.

"Okay." She grabbed her bag from the back seat.

"I will pick you up at the usual time."

"Okay." She still had not looked at him.

"I thought perhaps you might like to go out to dinner tonight, to celebrate your freedom," he offered.

"If you think it's safe." There was none of her usual sarcasm.

"They cannot be everywhere. And it might be best to have something different to look at, if we are going to eat in silence, don't you think?"

"Whatever you want." She shrugged.

He waited until she stepped away from the truck.

"Take out your anger on Nicky. She likes a challenge."

"I have enough to go around." She shouldered her bag and headed towards the building. He waited until she had gone in before driving away.

The apartment was not far from the warehouse. She would be able to get there on her own. Maybe she would run. The thought made him smile. He opened the hatch of the truck, took out two bags and went to prepare her new home.

The first floor was vacant and would remain so for the foreseeable future. Metal shutters covered the windows of the empty store. He did not plan on telling her he had bought the building. It had been cheap, and he could sell it easily enough when the job was over. He had already replaced the entry doors and had a security system installed. There had been none at her old place.

The apartment was on the second floor. It was small, but clean and well laid-out. The door opened into a large room, with the kitchen area open to a dining nook and the living room. He put his bags on the kitchen counter and opened the windows to get rid of the lingering smell of fresh paint.

The living room looked out over the street. The kitchen window in the kitchen overlooked the small back yard which was surrounded by a privacy fence. The motion detector would trigger an obnoxiously bright light. The perimeter was as secure as he could make it. It would be up to her to be paranoid enough to watch it. He got out his tools and set to work on the inside of the apartment.

The carpet pried up easily. He laid fine copper wire along the edge and tacked it back down, making sure he did not nick the wire. He removed the baseboard, drilled a hole and slid the wire through another hole, then connected it to a tiny microphone on the underside of the windowsill. A small hole drilled in the floor allowed him to feed the wire into the first floor apartment and connect it to a transmitter. He could access it remotely if he had to, but all sound from the room would be recorded. He would have to synch it with the video manually, but he had been unable to find a camera capable of recording sound accurately enough to be useful. It had been hard enough to get a wireless video camera with a wide enough angle to cover the whole room yet small enough to go undetected.

He hoped she would never figure out that he had her under surveillance. He doubted she would believe he had done it to ensure her safety, especially since it was not entirely true. If Cavuto's men breached the perimeter, at the very least he would need to be able to identify them. If they made it into the main room, she was already dead or worse. He did not want to witness anything worse. With luck, he would not have to. He had not bugged the bedroom. She deserved some privacy.

He powered everything up and set up the computer in the first floor apartment. It would only record when triggered by movement in the room, so he ran several trials from different locations. The video relay to his laptop had a slight delay, but it would have to do. He checked his watch. There would be enough time to run an errand before picking up Deira. He hoped her mood had improved.

"Do we have to go out to dinner?" Deira asked, getting into the truck.

"I thought you would want to get out of the house."

"I look and feel like hell. I don't think I'm up to going out in public and pretending every inch of me doesn't hurt."

"We can pick up something on the way back to the house." *Don't call it home.*

"I want to soak in a tub and go to bed." She leaned her head against the window.

"What have you eaten today?" he asked.

She thought for a moment. "Nothing."

"No offense, princess, but you are prickly enough when well fed. I do not relish spending an evening with you hungry, hurt, and angry. And since I cannot do much about two of those, I will at least make sure you eat. You should not train on an empty stomach."

"Since you already pointed out how cranky I am, could you dispense with the lecture? Especially since you aren't exactly the poster boy for calm most of the time."

"I had a reputation for being calm. Perhaps being 'dead' changed me." He wondered if it was true.

"Or maybe I bring out the worst in you," she muttered.

"Not the worst. That comes when the job begins. Then I will be very calm." *Or we will both be dead.*

"I would think that's when you would be at your best."

"They are the same."

The rest of the ride was spent in silence.

They ate Chinese food out of cartons, not saying much. He ran a bath for her, adding a solution to help her muscles relax. He left a cup of herb tea on the stand by the tub. It, too, should help her unwind. She thanked him quietly and closed the door. He hoped she would not fall asleep in the tub. Finding her drowned would be irritating after the effort he was making to ensure she stayed alive.

He ran through forms while she soaked. He found it harder to concentrate than usual. After a while, he gave up. He lit a fire and straightened the living room. It had always amused Karol how domestic Gage had become. They had joked about it right before Karol's last trip.

When she came into the living room, wearing his bathrobe, he was staring into the fire. She sat down next to him, curling her legs up under her.

"This is nice," she said softly. He nodded.

"Did the bath help?" he asked.

"It did. I don't know what you put in the water, but it worked. Smelled funky, but worked." She let her head rest on the back of the couch and closed her eyes.

"I am glad." His gaze traveled over her, lingering on the curve of her neck. Her wet hair spilled over the dark leather in rivulets of gold. He locked his fingers to keep from reaching out to touch it.

"I'm sorry about snapping earlier. I was," she started.

"Angry and distracted," he finished.

"Yeah. I got too comfortable here," she admitted. "It's been a long time since I felt comfortable anywhere. It will be easier when I'm in my own place."

"Which will also be comfortable," he offered, purposely ignoring her confession.

"I'm sure it will be. And thank you again." She stretched, the robe parting to reveal one thigh.

"It is all part of the bargain," he replied, a little rougher than he had intended.

"I'm never going to be able to pay you back, am I?" she asked quietly.

"Never is a very long time. The debt will be settled eventually. Otherwise it would be slavery."

"And you've already told me not to call you master, so that's off the table."

"Good to know you paid attention," he said wryly.

"You tend to make your points memorable. I guess I'll have to wait to see what you want from me." Her sigh was exaggerated.

"I am sure I will think of something," he said.

"I hate waiting."

"Patience is a virtue, princess."

"In case you hadn't noticed, I'm pretty short on virtues," she said. "I'm way more familiar with vices."

"I would say more with sins than vices, but you do not strike me as the religious sort."

"Not anymore. I can't believe in God, not after everything I've been through." Her voice was tinged with sadness.

"Nor I." His with resignation.

"Good thing, too." She purposely lightened her tone. "Otherwise I'd be all worried about being struck down and going to hell. I figure there's enough of hell here and if the afterlife is nothing more than quiet darkness, well, that suits me fine."

"You seem to have put quite a bit of thought into this."

"Up until I met you, odds were pretty good I was going to die trying to take these guys out. No offense to your legendary skill, but it's still a distinct possibility." She shrugged.

"It always is," he agreed. "But with proper planning you should survive. I will do what I can to see you do."

"Of course you will. No profit in it for you if you don't. And God knows that's the only thing that matters." She couldn't suppress a giggle.

"That is unkind," he said.

She raised an eyebrow at him and kept laughing, eyes alight, cheeks flushed.

He would remember her this way.

"I'm the one who's unkind?" she finally managed to say. "You're holding everything over my head, and I'm supposed to feel bad for you? I don't think so."

"But I am helping you, doing my best to make sure you survive."

"It might be easier to sell if you were doing it out of the kindness of your heart instead of with an eye to how it will benefit you." She began laughing again, softly this time.

"Trust me, princess, everything I do has been motivated by kindness. I simply recognize that everything also has a price."

"Ah. The school of prostitution economics. I don't think we covered that in my Econ classes, but I'm familiar with the idea."

"I believe they call it the free market," he said.

"And the difference would be?"

He threw up his hands. This contest could not be won. He was glad her mood had lightened.

She leaned over and very gently spoke, her lips almost touching his neck. "This prostitute, of whatever sort, is going to bed."

He stayed perfectly still, unsure of what he would do if he let himself move. She moved closer. The smell of her was enthralling.

"Good night." She held his gaze. "Master." Her breath caressed his lips.

He closed his eyes. When he opened them, she was walking away. He waited until the fire had died down to embers before joining her.

When he woke up the next morning, her head lay on his chest, one arm draped over his stomach, the other flung out to the side. His hand rested on her back, fingers threaded through her hair. He moved carefully, to avoid waking her, only to discover she was already awake. And smiling. She rolled out of bed and, with what could only have been an intentional swish of her hips, left the room without a backwards glance.

He made sure they ate before setting out for the apartment. She smiled during the whole ride. He tried to ignore it, which only fueled her amusement.

She reacted to her first glimpse of the apartment with stunned silence.

"Will it do?" he asked.

"I like it. Even empty, this place is far better than the dump I lived in before." She prowled about, checking out closets and cupboards.

"Nice clock," she said. It was the only thing on the wall.

"It is one of those that sets the time automatically. This is the only place it gets a good signal, so you should probably not move it." If she moved the clock, she might discover the camera. And even if she did not, it would render the carefully selected angles useless.

"Okay." She was bouncing. "When is the furniture coming?"

"Later this morning. I will let them in while you work with Nicky. It will not be much, only a couch, a bed, and a table with two chairs."

"Not like I'm going to be entertaining," she said then paused, "much."

He frowned.

"You have to let me make you dinner at least once," she explained.

"I would like that," he replied. "I will not be able to join you tonight, but we will stock your kitchen with food and cookware when you are done training this afternoon."

"Kaching," she said. He looked at her quizzically.

"One more thing to add to the tab," she said.

"I do not think that will be necessary. Your 'tab' is already difficult enough to calculate."

"Well then, I will have to make it a very nice dinner."

"I have something for you." He went to a kitchen drawer, one of the few she had not opened.

"A housewarming present? You shouldn't have."

"Not quite. But you may find it useful." He handed her a wooden box.

She looked up at him and waited for him to nod before opening it. Inside was a red velvet bundle, folded neatly. She hesitated, then flicked the fabric aside. There were her wrist knives, in new sheaths. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath before opening them again.

"Why?" She watched him closely.

"Because they belong to you. And because it is better to have familiar tools when you go into unfamiliar situations."

"I didn't think you still had them," she said.

"No need to throw away perfectly good weapons. At least not once the police have moved on to other matters. Try not to drop these, though. I may not be able to retrieve them for you again."

She snorted. "I'll see what I can do to avoid big guys in dark alleys, too."

"Didn't I tell you? It is part of the plan to flush them out. That should work nicely, yes?" he teased.

"I don't know. I sort of thought it would be better to blow the whole place up and then go out for a late dinner."

"As an alternate plan, it is not bad. But explosives are touchy, and I would rather not kill those who have no choice to be in the building."

"You're a real humanitarian," she drawled.

"You have no idea," he replied

Chapter 10 - Fits and Starts

The experts come out to play.

□

It took three days for Deira to realize that she had no way to contact Gage. It took him two more days to get around to synching the audio and video. She was railing about something, and it seemed like a good idea to find out what that was. When he finally stopped laughing, he decided to let her wait another day or two.

When the phone rang, he didn't check the caller i.d. It would be Katya checking in. Only it wasn't.

"Your girl is getting pissed," Nicky said as soon as he picked up.

"Good evening to you, too, duchess." He almost wished he could watch Nicky smoldering. She hated that nickname. "How are things at the warehouse?"

"It's going good enough. She's not as ignorant as you led me to believe."

"I didn't say ignorant. I said she was raw, and she is," he replied.

"In some ways, sure. But she's had some training, and she's got a few interesting tricks. Right now, what she has most is a whole lot of anger at you. It's getting in the way. You might want to do something about that before she decides it's your head she wants," Nicky warned.

He laughed. "She has to get at the end of the line."

"Please tell me I'm first."

"I think there is a government or two ahead of you," he said dryly.

"Figures." Nicky sighed. "I didn't call just to give you the angst update, though. That was gratis."

"Meaning the next bit of information will cost me?"

"Yes. Shall we set terms now?"

"I don't know the value of the information, so I am at a disadvantage," he replied.

"Welcome to my world." She paused, and he knew she was savoring the moment.

"Give me some idea of what we are to discuss, at least," he prompted.

"There's interest in your girl's job."

He sighed. Deira had done exactly what he had told her not to do.

"So she told you about it."

"No, genius. Finding out shit is what I do, remember? This little job you have me doing is a side line. All Deira did was confirm it when I asked if this was her deal."

"I wish you hadn't done that." He kept his voice even.

"Then you're an idiot," she snorted. "When Jack Cavuto loses three guys in one night and immediately starts looking for replacements, it's going to cause a buzz."

"Tell me what you know." *Deira only killed one.* That meant four targets, not three.

"Uh uh. Terms first."

"What do you want, Nicola?" He had to unclench his jaw to ask.

"Oh, **now** we're formal." She laughed.

"Terms," he ground out.

"I want a cut. Simple as that."

"This is new."

"What? My getting paid for my work?" she shot back.

"No. That there is someone besides Deira who is interested in the job."

"Very interested. So I want in," Nicky said.

"I haven't contracted out," he countered.

"Something tells me you're going to. And since I'm the only one who knows you're alive, and I'm pretty sure you want it to stay that way, you should probably deal." She was all business now.

"You are not the only one in the business who knows I am alive."

"And does this other person have a way to reach you?"

"Point taken." He realized he was pacing and came to a halt. "Why do you think I will take the contract?"

"Two reasons. First, because you don't work for free and that girl is never going to have anything for you that comes close to what the job is worth."

"Possibly. And the second?"

"I've seen the contract amount," she said with obvious glee.

"Which explains the desire for a cut." It all made sense, but he did not like it.

"So do we have a deal?"

"Not until I know the details of the contract," he replied.

"Damn. I was hoping you'd just go for it so I could screw you the way you did me."

"I believe the deception in our relationship was mutual on a number of levels," he said. "Shall I remind you how it played out?"

"No need. I know what we did to each other. And I know who ended up on top."

"Then let's get down to business, Nicky."

It took fifteen minutes to agree on terms and another twenty to ensure he had the information he needed. The conversation ended just before Katya called to check in. For once, he did not admonish her for being late. He looked at the clock. His next phone call would have to wait.

In the morning, Gage received the documents Nicky had prepared, carefully sealed, as always. He authenticated the offer but nothing else. She was one of the best in the business at finding information other people thought buried. He wasn't going to second guess her. The time for that had long passed.

He locked most of the papers in the basement safe, chose a gun and headed out. He would much rather have arranged everything on the phone, but he knew that would not work this time. Locking the door behind him, he wondered how long he would be able to keep the house and how he would explain to Katya why he had to leave.

The storage facility was outside the city, halfway between the last strip mall and the first farm. It looked like every other storage area long buildings in a row, evenly spaced roll up doors on each side. The units on the end were larger, with doors on both sides to make it easier to drive in, load, and drive out. No one would ask what was being dropped off or loaded. If you were coming all the way out here, your business was your own.

Gage got out of the truck, a nondescript, black SUV. He had dressed casually jeans, a work shirt and light jacket, obligatory sunglasses. A man his size in a suit always made people nervous, and that was the last thing he wanted. He grabbed his briefcase and headed into the office. With any luck, this would be a short meeting.

"Jacob Peters to see Mr. Strickland," he said to the secretary.

"You aren't on his calendar," she replied, not looking up.

"I'm aware of that. But I think he'll see me." His tone was neutral.

"Dude? He doesn't see salesmen. You're wasting your time." She was still focused on a pile of invoices.

"That's not the sort of business proposition I had in mind." Gage stepped closer to the half-wall that separated them.

"Which part of..." She finally turned around and for some reason her words failed her.

He looked down. The jacket was open; she could see the gun. *Sranje*.

"Perhaps you should call him and find out if he wants to talk to me." Gage spoke in what he hoped was his least threatening tone. She did not move. Her eyes flicked to the door. It was the only warning he had.

The first man came from the corridor to the right of the door. The name tag on his shirt said 'Bubba.' *Of course*. Gage dropped his briefcase. He pivoted to meet the lunge, grabbed Bubba's arm and threw him at the opposite wall. He was heavier than he looked, so he made a sizeable dent in the plaster. While Bubba extracted himself from the wall and the chair he had fallen over on the way, a second man jumped on Gage's back.

That one received an elbow to the head before Gage dropped his shoulder and slammed the man into the floor. He was not as quick to get up. *Fucking amateurs*.

Bubba was more cautious on his second attack. Too cautious. Gage blocked the punch to his head, wrapped Bubba's bicep in a modified hammer lock and wrenched it up and back. The scream that followed was a good indication that he had managed to dislocate the guy's shoulder. A leg sweep dropped Bubba to the floor, eliciting another scream as he landed on his shoulder.

The secretary had fled down the hall behind her desk, so it wasn't a complete surprise when Gage heard the distinct sound of a shotgun being cocked. He raised his hands in the air, keeping an eye on the two men on the ground. It wasn't likely they would get up quickly, but nothing was impossible.

"Turn around. Slowly."

Gage stepped away from the men and complied.

"I didn't tell you to move."

"Habit." Gage shrugged. "How's business, Mr. Strickland?"

"It was better before you trashed my front office, you son of a bitch." Sticks was leaning against the wall, but his grip on the shotgun was steady. He was tall and thin, with angular features. Years of working with chemicals had given a slight yellow cast to an already bad complexion. With hair that resembled tattered steel wool, he was the very picture of a mad scientist. A homicidal one.

"Sorry about that. I'm sure we can come to some agreement about restitution. I didn't expect to be attacked just for wanting to talk. Strange business you have here."

"Yeah, well, assholes carrying guns spook the help. You shoulda called first," Sticks grunted.

"I don't like doing business over the phone. Now, are you going to shoot me or let me fix that young man's injury?" Gage looked over his shoulder. The second guy was sitting up, but Bubba was trying very hard not to move at all.

Sticks glanced at Bubba.

"Popped the shoulder?" he asked.

"Pretty sure. Please tell me these men are not your regular security."

"Day help. And now I'm gonna have to find someone else for awhile." Sticks shook his head and lowered the gun.

"Shame."

"Let the bastard fix your shoulder, Bubba. Then go home, put ice on it, and have a drink. Call me after the weekend, and tell me how it feels. And next time, wait until I tell you guys there's a real problem before you go charging in. You're lucky this asshole didn't kill you both. And you're lucky I don't fire you." He looked at Gage. "Mr. Peters has been a very good customer over the years, even if his people skills leave something to be desired."

Gage knelt beside Bubba, who flinched and then moaned.

"This is going to hurt." Gage said simply. He put one hand on Bubba's chest, grabbed his right arm, and pulled. There was a crunching sound as the arm popped back into the shoulder joint. He could just hear it under the stream of epithets.

Gage picked up his briefcase and followed Sticks out of the room without looking back.

"Your American accent sucks," Sticks said, limping over to his desk. He put the shotgun behind his chair, still within reach.

"I have not had much occasion to use it lately." Gage took off his sunglasses and tucked them in his shirt pocket.

"Restitution? Jesus Christ. Only lawyers talk like that, and I'm pretty sure they've figured out you aren't a lawyer."

"Are they going to present a problem for me?" Gage asked.

"Nah. They're gonna go home and get drunk, then build up what happened so they can tell their buddies how they kicked some big guy's ass. By the time the weekend's over, they'll think it really happened that way." Sticks shook his head. "I don't keep them around for their brains."

"Clearly not."

"So what's so fucking important that you had to come down here and trash my place to tell me about it?"

"Where is your secretary?" Gage looked through the open door.

"I sent her home. She was shaken up. Dumb bitch shouldn't have hit the panic button, but..." he trailed off.

"You did not hire her for her brains, either?" Gage finished.

"She's smart enough, just new. But I'm pretty sure you aren't here to discuss my help. Close the door if it makes you feel better." Sticks put his hands on the table.

Gage shut the door without turning his back on Sticks.

"You have been making inquiries about Deira's little obsession," Gage began, "which you had not done previously."

"What makes you think that?" Sticks looked him in the eye, giving away nothing.

"Because if you had shopped the contract earlier, someone would have taken interest."

"I don't think so. It's a suicide mission. I figured she would give up on it if no one bit. Only one way to make sure they didn't."

"You miscalculated," Gage said.

"Yep. She's on a vendetta and those are hard to shake. I shoulda realized that sooner. But the kid is no match for these guys, and I told her as much. Didn't do any good. I get the feeling she's more than a little crazy, but she don't come across that way." Sticks shrugged.

"And when you found out I had an interest, you decided to see if anyone was willing to fund it." Gage narrowed his eyes.

"Pretty much."

"I am not happy that you shopped a job you knew I was doing without telling me about it. When were you going to contact me to let me know someone was interested?" Gage spoke quietly.

"That's sort of hard to do, considering I don't have a way to reach you," Sticks replied carefully.

"You do have a way to reach Deira. Did you not consider asking her to get in touch with me?"

"I thought about it, but I didn't want her to go off on her own like she did last time." Sticks cocked his head. "How did you find out?"

"It was brought to my attention that someone made inquiries about who might be," Gage looked for the right words, "performing the service."

"That doesn't tell me how you found out I had a hand in it, but I get the feeling I'm not gonna get an answer. So if you're interested in doing the job, how come you're letting me know?"

"Instead of doing an end-run around you as you attempted to do to me?"

Sticks nodded.

"Would you believe me if I said it was professional courtesy?" Gage asked.

"Not for a minute." Sticks laughed.

"I thought not." Gage chuckled. "I need your expertise. And you need to make amends, so it would be wise of you to give me whatever assistance I request."

"I know you've been gone awhile, but it's pretty common knowledge that I ain't what I used to be. I'm no good for hit work, so stow the threats."

"As you pointed out in our last conversation, your accident did not rob you of your ability to think, though seeing your security staff, I do have to wonder." Gage sneered.

"So much for professional courtesy," Sticks said. "I told you those guys are mostly labor, not muscle. I'm out of the business. Not sure I can be of help to you these days."

"Let me show you what I need before you try to back out of the job." Gage unlocked the briefcase and pulled out a sheaf of papers. "These are blueprints of Cavuto's manufacturing site. I need to know where you would suggest setting charges, on the off chance that we have to blow it up."

"That I can do. Are these up to date?" Sticks arranged the pages to show the entire layout.

"I'm not sure he would have filed changes with City Hall, but these are the most recent plans."

"No, I don't think he'd do that. You're going to need to recon the site. Find out if it's a 24/7 operation, if there are shift changes, the usual." Sticks kept his eyes on the plans.

"Of course. Once I have that information, would you be able to provide me with enough material to destroy the place?"

"Not for free. I may owe you, but I'd rather you took me out than try to explain to my suppliers why I can't pay them. It'd be faster," Sticks said.

"Payment will be made. Now answer the question."

"Based on this? I could get you what you want. But if you don't plan to blow it, there's the little problem of leaving evidence behind." Sticks looked up from the blueprints.

"Which tells me that you do plan on leveling it, no 'off chance' about it."

"I would lose no sleep if there was one less pump lab in the city," Gage conceded.

"I'm guessing that the contract doesn't say anything about that." Sticks gave him a calculating look.

"Accidents happen."

"One of these days, you're gonna piss off the wrong people and wind up being really dead. You know that, right?"

"I doubt that you would miss me," Gage replied.

"Depends on whether or not I get paid for this job before you go."

"You will be paid in cash before it even happens," Gage assured him.

"Then I'd miss the chance to do business with you in the future. I know you aren't gonna leave these plans with me, so settle in. I need to check my inventory and do some math."

"I have nowhere else to be this morning and plenty to keep me occupied."

When Sticks got up to check his supply levels, Gage transferred the gun to his pocket. He left the door open, listening for the front door buzzer and occasionally checking the hall. No customers came in. They worked in silence for the next two hours.

"Seventy-five thousand would take it down to the ground," Sticks announced, looking up from a note pad.

"Seventy-five thousand would set you up nicely in a warm climate with half-naked women bringing you drinks. I believe that is what you meant? I do not plan to level the block, just the building. And I would prefer it if there was no damage to the city gas line. For some reason, they do not take kindly to things like that." Gage's lips twitched.

"Can't blame a guy for trying. I'm guessing that whoever showed interest in the contract is willing to pay a lot of dough for the pleasure of taking over the pump business in town."

Gage said nothing.

"Okay. Fifty-five thousand. That includes everything you need, untraceable, a secure drop off location and my enduring silence." Sticks leaned back in his chair.

"That sounds reasonable," Gage agreed. "Not that I was worried about your silence. You have as much reason to keep this quiet as I do. Perhaps more."

"Should have gone for sixty-five thousand," Sticks laughed.

"That would only have prolonged the bargaining," Gage returned.

"So, providing you decide you need this, do we have a deal?"

"Yes." Gage gathered his papers. "I will make arrangements for us to meet, preferably not here, after I survey the building."

Sticks nodded.

"One question before you leave," Sticks said cautiously.

Gage waited.

"Are you taking care of her?"

"Yes." He was not going to give Sticks the satisfaction of details.

"Okay then."

Gage started out the door.

"Did you know she has a knack for explosives?" Sticks called after him. Gage turned around.

"She failed to mention that."

"Thought so." Sticks was still laughing when Gage walked out.

Approaching his truck, he saw thick scratch running the length of the driver's side. He shook his head. This was job was beginning to annoy him, and it had not even started.

Chapter 11 - Under the Gun

Chapter 11 of 36

Some fitness tests are harder than others

□

Gage sat against a wall, watching the two women fight below him. The view would have been better from the catwalk, but he did not want to risk exposure. Nicky had done good work over the past few weeks. Deira was much faster than she had been the first day, more confident, stronger. There might be a chance she would live through her vendetta. *And then what?* He would have to convince her to return to a normal life or as much of one as she was likely to have preferably far away from him.

First, he would have to make sure she made it out alive. *And not too broken.* He waited until they stopped sparring. Nicky said she was going to the bathroom, but he knew she would go out for a smoke. He had a few minutes.

He moved along the wall quietly, keeping an eye on Deira. She had no perimeter awareness. He would have to mention that to Nicky. He made his way down a staircase, one silent step at a time. Deira gripped the vault, stretching out her back, eyes closed. He moved up behind her, grabbed her around the hips and pulled her off the vault, dropping to the ground on top of her.

She struggled. *Too late.* She was pinned under him. He forced her legs apart.

"Hello, princess," he whispered in her ear. "Did you miss me?"

"Get the fuck off me," she growled.

"Now why would I do that?"

"Get the fuck off me," she said again, '**please.**'

He let her up. She whirled on him, swinging wildly. He caught her arm, pulled her into him, and twisted it behind her back as he wrapped a leg around one of hers and dropped her again, landing on top of her. She winced with pain. *Good.*

"What the fuck is your problem?" she screamed.

"I don't have a problem. You do. I am perfectly comfortable." His lips were almost touching hers.

He rolled over and threw her off of him. She landed against the legs of the vault. When she got up this time, she was wary. *Better.*

She kept Gage in her sights, but she was looking for an escape. She circled him. He turned to face her with a lazy insolence.

"Where are you going to go?" he asked.

He didn't really expect an answer. She didn't have one.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her bag. There were weapons in there. *But how to get to them?* She kept moving, increasing the distance between them. He was letting her, she knew. Three more steps and she thought she could make a play for the bag. If nothing else, she could throw it at him and slow him down enough to get away. She had a better chance of outrunning him than she did in a fight.

She made a dash for her bag. He was faster than she had thought. He grabbed her shoulder and spun her around, pushing her away from the bag.

"Not fair going for weapons." He was enjoying this.

"Like fair has anything to do with this," she spat, regaining her balance. She turned to run.

He slammed her against the wall, pressing against her as he had that first night in the alley.

"For a guy who doesn't like rape, you have the moves down," she snarled.

"This is what they do, princess, small-minded men with no imagination," he growled back.

She slammed her heel down on his instep, dropped her hips and pushed back, hard, causing him to stumble.

"And large men with no sense of balance," she said as she took off running.

He followed her. She got to the stairs and took them two at a time. He was gaining on her easily. He made a grab for her ankle when she was halfway up the stairs. *Time to end this.* She evaded the grab, leapt up another two steps, grabbed the railing and swung her body under it and out, rolling as she hit the floor. She came out of the roll on her feet and sprinted for the door. He hadn't seen that move coming. He vaulted over the railing and landed, not nearly as gracefully.

He closed the gap as she neared the exit. She veered away from the door, heading for the corner instead. He was disappointed. *She is going to be trapped.* This was exactly what he was worried about. She did not think.

She was not slowing down. He did not think she would slam her head into the wall just to be rid of him, but stranger things had happened. She leapt. He slowed down, surprised for the second time. She used the balls of her feet to propel her diagonally up the wall, grabbed a pipe and hauled herself up to the second level. She did not pause to be admired.

He could see her through the metal floor, moving away from him. He smiled and walked slowly towards the stairs that led down to the loading dock. It was her most likely option. If he was wrong, she had won. He was fine with that.

She had not explored the second floor so she kept moving, looking for an exit. She couldn't hear him. *Maybe he gave up.* She didn't believe it. He was not the kind who gave up. Neither were the men she planned to kill. She should have scouted out the entire building. *Shit.* She slowed down, keeping eyes and ears open for his next attack while trying to plot an escape route.

There were stairs leading down to the loading bay. She hesitated. He would expect that. She looked up. A series of pipes ran up the wall and across the building. She had no doubt she could run them. The question was whether or not they would hold her weight. She cursed herself again for not checking out the upper levels. If she tried the run and the pipes gave, she stood a good chance of being killed in the fall. She decided to chance it anyway. This was an industrial building, after all. The pipes should hold her.

She grabbed a pipe, hauled herself up and pushed off against the one next to it until she had a balance point. The upper body work was paying off. Repeating the move brought her to the parallel pipes that ran over the open space. She looked down but couldn't see him. Maybe he had gone onto the dock to look for her. The door was propped open; she caught a whiff of Nicky's cigarette smoke. She tested the pipes before standing up on them. They were solid enough. She quickly moved to the other side of the building, not looking down. There were stairs on that side, too. She didn't know where they led, but staying on the pipes wasn't a good idea. There could be one or two sections that were in bad shape.

She slid down a pipe, scraping her hands. She ignored the pain. Landing quietly was important. She moved carefully along the wall, scanning the open area below her as well as the walkway. There was a solid wall on either side of the other staircase. She would be hidden. She crept down the stairs, listening. No sound of him. She didn't relax. He was a quiet bastard.

There was a hallway at the bottom of the stairs. The only light came from a window set high at the end of the hall. The doors on either side were all closed. She assumed they led to storage or office space. There should be some sort of exit. Weren't there codes for that sort of thing? She relaxed a little. Gage was nowhere to be seen. She could find a way out.

She was looking over her shoulder when he wrapped her up, one arm over her neck, the other around her waist.

"Nicely done, princess," he whispered, pulling her through the open door to an office. He gently wrapped his leg around hers and lowered her to the ground, face down. "But I win."

She struggled, but there was really no point to it. He was on top of her, his arm still around her neck. She stopped fighting.

"Fine, you win," she growled.

He suddenly stiffened. She braced herself for whatever lesson came next.

"Wrong," Nicky said. "I win. Now get up off the bitch before I decide to cap both of you with one shot."

Gage released Deira and slowly moved his hands to where they could be seen. Nicky took the gun off the back of his neck and stepped to the side, but did not lower it.

He pushed himself up, then offered Deira his hand.

"Fuck you," she said, rolling over and standing up on her own. She moved to Nicky's side.

"Your hands look like shit," Nicky said. "You should clean up as best you can. Gage and I have to have a little talk."

"Is he going to be breathing at the end of it?" Deira asked.

"Yes."

"Too bad." She glared at him, turned her back, and walked into the warehouse, trying to reassemble her pride.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Nicky still hadn't lowered the gun.

"Helping," Gage said.

"Uh huh. That's not what it looks like you're doing."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning you coming in here to play games and tease the girl is not helping me, and it sure as hell isn't helping her. The stupid bitch is already half in love with you, like you're some kind of fucking hero." Nicky shook her head.

"You are wrong."

"And you're blind. You never did get it, did you? You think everyone can see the monster inside you, but they can't," Nicky spat.

"You do," Gage said.

"I knew what you were before we ever met. It was my job to know. Maybe my inner monster would have recognized it anyway."

"Your instincts would be better than mine, then. I never saw it coming from you." He hated admitting that.

"I'd have been dead a long time before that if I let muscle-bound dicks read me like a book." Nicky smiled.

"But this girl, she's easily read," Nicky continued. "She may see the monster, but she thinks that can be fixed, that you're a good person underneath. Maybe she's right, but it would take more digging into your past than I did before she found it, and I was pretty thorough."

You did not know where to look. "Deira knows what I am. She also had heard of me before we met."

"Oh, honey. She was raised on the idea of the romantic criminal. It's everywhere. You rescue her from death, take care of her, offer to help. Hell, you even rose from the dead to do it. What the fuck else is she supposed to think of you but that you're her own personal savior?"

"I am no one's savior." He grimaced.

"I'm not the one you need to convince."

"You think I should have left her to die." Gage leaned against the wall, fairly sure she wouldn't shoot him.

"Probably. Too late for that now. You have to finish this, one way or another." Nicky sighed. "But it isn't too late to stop trying to get her into your bed."

"She has already been there. Nothing happened."

"Nothing? Or just no sex?"

He said nothing. Nicky shook her head and sighed.

"Yeah, that's what I thought. You're getting too close to this. That's the kind of thing that gets you killed."

"Concern, Nicky? I would be touched if I thought it was genuine." He knew it was. "Trust me, seducing the girl is not my intention. I plan to get the job done and send her away."

"Who was it that said that plans have a way of changing, just when you thought you had it all figured out?" She engaged the safety and walked away.

Gage leaned his head against the cool concrete wall. *How could she think she was in love with me?* It took him a moment to realize he did not know which *she* he meant. He walked out onto the warehouse floor. Both women were gone.

Chapter 12 - Smoke and Mirrors

For some things, there is no forgiveness.

□

She knelt on the floor, arms slack, knowing she had no way to fight what was coming next. Her head was down, pale blonde hair almost touching the floor. Two soldiers lounged against the wall as Karol and Gage were brought in. Karol had talked quickly, making the case that he was responsible for his younger brother and should be there to witness the test. The men thought he just wanted to watch but allowed it. Only the two guards stayed to make sure he went through with it. There was no danger here. This was routine.

Gage stood awkwardly, not wanting to look at the woman. (She was called Nada; it meant hope.) The guards taunted him and finally got angry when he did not react. The woman looked up at him, brown eyes haunted. She began to shake. The soldiers laughed and told her what they expected to see and do. Gage just stood there.

The guards moved towards him. He knew they would grab him and force him to do it. He put his hands up, telling them he didn't need help. (She did.) They relaxed and said it would be a miracle if he could even get it up. When he did not start right away, they said worse things about him and a few about his mother. Karol stepped up then and whispered in his ear.

"I will go first. Show him how it is done," Karol said. The guards laughed and said that was a good idea. More show for them.

She never stopped looking at Gage. He could not look away. He wanted to tell her it was not his choice, not his fault. Behind her fear, he could see hatred. As his brother moved on top of her, Gage watched her soul die. She did not make a sound. The guards were disappointed.

Karol stood up and straightened his clothes. He did not look at Gage.

"Maybe you will make her cry," the guards said to Gage. He felt sick. "Now it is your turn, boy."

He knelt on one knee beside her.

"Kill me." There was no pleading in her whisper. "I am already dead. Be a man and kill me."

"Forgive me," he whispered, cradling her head, moving in to kiss her. With his other hand, he pulled his boot knife and plunged it into the soft hollow at the base of her skull, severing her spinal cord. They had taught him to do that years before. This was his first time trying it. Blood ran over his fingers as he lowered her head. He left the knife inside her.

The guards rushed him, snarling. Karol tripped one and stabbed him in the neck. The other one attacked Gage. He was no match for a trained soldier, but he fought with everything he had. When he landed a punch to the soldier's head, it infuriated the big bastard. It also slowed him down. Gage moved backwards, trying to see an escape and tripped over her body.

Everything slowed down. He felt himself falling backwards. He saw the soldier draw a knife. He felt the slice, cutting him in two. He was going to die on top of her. It would be poetic.

Karol slammed a piece of wood into the soldier's head. It made a terrible cracking sound. Blood flew from the soldier's mouth as he fell to the ground. Karol hit him again. And again. The last thing Gage saw was the look of triumph on his brother's face.

Gage woke up, shaking. He barely made it to the bathroom before vomiting. It had been years since he'd had that dream. He rinsed out his mouth, then splashed water over his face. In his reflection, he saw a haunted look, her eternal gift to him.

His hand had gone instinctively to the scar, a long, irregular ridge. His eyes found the smaller scars that had followed on his arms, his chest, his shoulders. There were more on his back. They were the map of his life, but he did not remember receiving most of them.

He turned on the shower, filling the room with steam, clouding the mirror so he did not have to see what he had become. He stepped into the scalding water, the nightmare still playing in his head.

It was always the same dream, the product of his teenaged mind trying to make it seem less terrible. He wondered why it did not change over time. The waking memories were far worse. They did not begin and end in that moment and were not so clear. The drugs they had given him had left him with scattered images filled with pain, dirt, hunger, humiliation and blood. Yet none of that compared with the horror of her rape. He purposely did not examine why.

He shook his head. He had done this to himself, first when he rescued Deira and again yesterday. He wanted to know she would fight if they caught her. He needed her to do that. She had not been able to hold him off. There was no way she would survive if Cavuto's men took her, and she did not seem to realize how bad it could get before they killed her. Perhaps now.

Perhaps now he should apologize. If he explained his motivation, she would stop thinking he was a good person. That would be safer for her, but he did not want to do it. He did not want to see how she would regard him then. It was selfish and stupid. But true.

He forced himself to check the video feed to make sure she was home. She was running through forms in the living room. Her gym bag was on the floor by the table. If she went for it when he got there, he might let her. One more scar would make no difference to him. Foolish thought. She could do some damage and there was work to be done. Bleeding might be easier than conversation, but it was not productive.

He drove by her apartment twice, checking to see if anyone was watching it. The cars were all empty, and there was no one out walking. He parked two blocks away and did another perimeter check as he walked. He thought briefly of calling her but decided against it. She was angry with him, so it was best not to give her any warning. He let himself into the building. By the time he got up the stairs, she was standing at the door.

"What do you want?" She was scowling.

"To talk."

"About what?" She had not moved out of the doorway.

"Many things. Shall we have this conversation in the hall or would you like to invite me in?" He tried not to get irritated.

"I'd like to kick you down the stairs, but you'd probably live through it."

"You might get lucky. But if I survived, I would be very angry." It was a statement, not a threat.

"Great, then we can go for another round of assault. That was so much fun last time," she sneered.

"I give you my word that I will not touch you."

"Fine. Come in, say what you have to say and get the fuck out, okay? I have things to do." She turned her back and walked toward the kitchen.

He stepped into the apartment and closed the door, keeping his eyes on her. When she moved past the table, he relaxed. She filled a kettle and put it on the stove, then leaned against the corner, as far from him as she could get.

"Speak."

"I wish to apologize for what happened yesterday," he began.

"And you couldn't do that over the phone? For some strange reason, having you looming in my apartment doesn't make me all that comfortable right now." Her eyes narrowed. "No, you didn't call because then I would have your phone number."

"That is not why."

"Why come here then?"

"Because apologies should be made in person."

"Well aren't you just the soul of courtesy." She rolled her eyes.

"And because there are other matters which I prefer not to discuss on the telephone." He should not have mentioned the phone.

"Get on with it then." She glared at him.

"I am sorry that I hurt you."

"What you did was humiliate me." She looked out the window.

"I am sorry for that, as well."

"Okay. That's done. It doesn't change anything." She folded her arms. "You said you had something else to discuss?"

He took a piece of paper out of his pocket and laid it on the counter. She glanced at it and back up at him.

"What's that?"

"Ways to reach me." He stepped back. "I should have left that with you before."

"Not like I have a lot to say to you." She took the paper and shoved it in her pocket.

"You may yet."

"Can we cut it the fuck out with the cryptic? I'm sore and tired and all out of patience with that sort of shit. Get to the point."

"Your water is boiling." He nodded at the stove.

"Jesus Christ! Can you not just tell me what the fuck you came to say?" she yelled.

"I will. But as it will take some time, you might as well make your tea." He kept his voice even.

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath and blew it out again. He went over to the couch and sat down. She thought about dumping hot tea on his head but decided against it. Still, the idea made her feel better. She took her cup into the living room. He twitched when she sat on the windowsill. She looked over her shoulder and shrugged. There was no one outside. There was never anyone outside. It wasn't what you would call a 'walkable' neighborhood.

"Okay, I'm here. I'm listening."

"I have been working on the plan for the job."

"One would hope," she said.

"If you feel you are ready, we should be able to do it in a week."

"I felt I was ready the night I met you, but that didn't work out so well for me, so maybe you and Nicky should decide if I'm ready." It galled her to admit that. He just nodded. It didn't improve her mood.

"There has been another... development. It seems that Sticks found a buyer for the contract after all."

"So where does that leave us? I still need to pay you back for finishing what I started that night."

"I think you misunderstand," he began.

"And I was a bit more flush when I asked Sticks to help me find a contract."

"Let me finish," he said. "Sticks found a buyer for the job. We are the ones who will do it. And we will get paid."

She stared at him for a moment, waiting for her brain to start working.

"I'm sorry. Did you just tell me that someone is willing to pay for something I was planning on doing for free?"

"Yes."

"So if you're getting paid by someone else to do this, am I off the hook?" she asked, wary.

"When the job is complete, yes," he answered. "I will need your... expertise to fulfill the contract."

"What do you mean?" She held herself very still, waiting for the catch.

"Sticks tells me that he trained you to work with explosives. He believes you to be rather good at it."

"Not as good as he is."

"Few are. But he believes you have the necessary skill to do this job."

"If he thinks I can do it, I probably can." She hadn't expected Sticks to have that much confidence in her. "What are we blowing up?"

"The warehouse."

"I assume we aren't going inside to set charges."

"That would be inadvisable." His mouth twitched with amusement.

"Good. That makes it a lot easier."

"I do not recall you telling me that you had that kind of training."

"Didn't I? How careless of me." She smiled at him.

"Very funny, princess. Perhaps you have other skills I should know about?"

"Oh, I have other skills," she said. "But nothing I care to show you. Let's just stick to murder and blowing shit up, shall we?"

"That should suffice," he drawled.

"Good. Are we done here? I need to get to the warehouse. Nicky will be waiting."

"You did not ask about the money."

"I don't care about the money. I care about the job. You want to pay me, then figure out my cut, take what you want, and transfer the rest into my account." She pushed off the windowsill and took her cup into the kitchen, leaving it in the sink with the other dishes. *Twitch over that, you anal retentive bastard.*

"Would you like a ride to the warehouse?" he offered, standing up.

"No. I'm going to run." She slung her bag over her shoulder and opened the door, looking pointedly at him. He walked into the hall.

"Next time you want to see me, call." She locked the door and followed him down the stairs, setting the alarm before leaving.

He followed at a distance until she reached the warehouse parking lot.

Chapter 13 - Basic Principles

Chapter 13 of 36

Setting the stage makes for a more successful production.

□

Gage pulled his truck into the parking lot of a small gas station. By the time he made it into the office, the owner was coming in from the garage, wiping his hands on a rag. Manuel Torres was short and a bit on the round side, but solid. A talented mechanic, he could have been running any number of repair shops at high-end dealers, but he said he preferred to stay in the neighborhood.

"How you doing, Mr. Randall?"

"Pretty good, Manny. How's business?"

"It's okay. I can pay the bills and feed my kids. That's what counts." He was being modest. All of the lifts were occupied and there were three cars on the lot that were either waiting for service or pick up. All of them were late models.

"Any way you can service the truck today? I'm thinking of taking a little trip up North, and I want to make sure it's in good shape."

"For you, I'll make the time." Manny's smile was genuine.

"I told you before, I don't need special treatment."

"Sure you do. You made this happen." He gestured at the garage. "Six guys plus me have work because of you."

"I just put up the money. You did the work. And you paid me back a long time ago. I'm just another customer now."

"Yeah, okay." Manny leaned to look out the window on the truck. "You want me to take care of that scratch?"

"If you have the time."

"Like I said, I can make the time. It can be done by the end of the day, if you want." Manny was writing in his appointment book.

"That works. In the meantime, do you have a loaner car? I need to run some errands in town, and I don't feel like dealing with a rental if I don't have to."

"All I got are a couple of beaters. You don't want them." Manny waved towards the side lot.

"Beater suits me fine. It's just errands." Gage looked at the two old cars. Nondescript American sedans. Perfect.

"If you say so." Manny handed him a set of keys. "Take the blue one. It's cleaner."

"Registered and insured?" Gage asked.

"I took your advice. Everything is legal here, even those guys." He motioned to the mechanics, grinning. "Papers are in the glove box. It sticks a little."

"Thanks, Manny. I'll take good care of it." Gage headed for the door.

"Not like you could make it much worse," Manny said.

Gage transferred his bag into the passenger seat of the blue car. Despite Manny's description, the car was in very good shape. The smell of cigarettes lingered under the scent of pine, and there were a few holes in the upholstery, but that was the extent of the damage. He rolled down the window and headed for the highway.

It took less than fifteen minutes to get to the industrial park. He drove past Cavuto's warehouse doing just over the speed limit. Any slower would look suspicious. There was an empty guardhouse with a tall fence on either side and just enough room for two cars or one big truck to pass. The access road led past another warehouse with an empty parking lot. After that, it turned up a service road which was blocked at the end by a chain link gate.

The sign said the road beyond the gate was under repair. Grass growing through the cracks and the lack of equipment told him that the repairs were a fiction. He turned off the car and got out. The only thing securing the gate was a length of chain and a rusted lock. Keeping alert for the sound of cars, he grabbed a pair of bolt cutters. It took a few minutes to cut through one of the links. He cut another one on the other side but left the chain hanging. Unless someone checked on it, he would be able to remove it easily when the time came.

There were trees on the hill overlooking the industrial park. He took a camera with a high powered zoom lens and walked into the woods. Only two businesses were operating, Cavuto's and an industrial building supply company on the far side. He had passed it coming in. That business was not likely to operate at night. Blowing up Cavuto's site might interrupt their power, but there should be no other damage.

He had expected the windows of the drug lab to be darkened, and most of them were. From where he stood, he could just see the empty loading dock. If Cavuto was moving enough stuff to need trucks, they would be loaded at night. That would have to be factored in. The office faced the access road. Those windows were not covered with paper. He could make out a waiting room with a desk at one end. The lights were on, but no one appeared to be working there. He waited. After a few minutes, a man passed through the office and walked towards the guard station.

Gage returned to the car and took out the bag. He was going to have to wait until the guard took another break or risk taking Manny's beater over the rough road, so he might as well make good use of the time. He walked back and forth to find the right angles, then set up cameras on several trees. They wouldn't give great detail, but they would record the shift changes. It was better than sitting there all night.

There was no fence on this side of the lot, a careless oversight on their part, but he was not inclined to get closer. Getting an audio feed would not be possible. The trees thinned out towards the bottom of the hill. If he was smaller, he might try it. Deira could probably get close enough but he didn't want to involve her yet. Chances were an audio feed would not produce much in the way of useable information anyway. Too many voices mixed with whatever equipment they had running would result in a jumble that he did not have time to sort out.

Cloning the cell phones would be the tricky part. It had been easier before digital technology. Nicky had given him a contact for decent equipment, but the stand of trees was barely within range. He needed to get control of at least one cell phone, preferably more. If he had their phones, he should be able to get all the targets to the warehouse.

As plans went, it was dicey, but it was the best he could do. That irritated him. Hits should be planned out to the last detail, all variables examined, and contingency plans put in place. That was much easier to do when there was only one target. It had been a long time since he'd done a multiple hit. They never went according to plan.

He watched the warehouse for several hours. Occasionally, someone would step onto the loading dock to smoke, but otherwise there was no movement. The guard did not leave the station. Gage checked his watch. He needed to get back to Manny's shop in time to get the truck. It looked like he was going to have to take the abandoned road after all. It was a good idea to find out if it was open on the other end anyway. If he damaged the car, he would pay for it.

The sound of an engine made him pick up the camera. A white SUV was approaching the warehouse. Gage zoomed in, trying to see the passenger, but the windows were tinted. He took a picture of the license plate instead. Nicky could run that for him. The SUV was waved through the guard station and parked by the office door. Three men got out.

Jack Cavuto was easily identifiable. He had never been one to keep a low profile. Pictures of him in the newspaper were usually found in the society section. All the best criminals were legitimate businessmen during the day. Everything about him screamed money, from his styled hair to the way his tailored pants fell at just the right point over expensive shoes. He was shorter than the other two men, but their body language made it clear they deferred to him.

He recognized the bodyguards from photos Nicky had provided. They were standard issue thugs, large and a little slow, much like the ones Gage had killed in front of his house. They were better dressed, of course. Cavuto would insist on it if they were going to be seen with him, in whatever capacity. Gage took pictures of all of them. He would need to make sure these were the men Deira was targeting. Not that he would mind killing all of them, but there would only be so much time.

All three men went into the office. One of them sat down at the desk. Cavuto disappeared into the warehouse. Gage wished he had pictures of the manufacturing set up, but the blueprints would have to do. He knew what sort of equipment would be inside. Sticks had assured him that the small explosives on the perimeter would be enough to start fires. The chemicals inside should do the rest. With luck, the workers inside would escape before the place blew up. Gage mentally added masks to his equipment list. There would be enough pump in the air to affect everyone in the area. One strong breeze and he'd get a face full of it. No telling what would happen then. A mask wouldn't keep it off his skin, but at least he wouldn't be inhaling it.

He checked the cameras to ensure they were working, then headed back to the car. Removing the chain, he tested the gates. To his surprise, they moved easily. He drove the car through, grateful that Manny's care kept the engine noise low, then got out and replaced the chain.

The surface was in bad shape, but it was not difficult to avoid the larger potholes. The road curved along the edge of the industrial park but so did the tree line, so it was unlikely he would be spotted. He checked constantly anyway. There was a barrier at the end of the road but nothing on either side of it. The car would be returned with a bit more dust for its brief foray into off-roading, but Manny would not care. Gage made sure there was no one on the road before he pulled out, heading for the highway.

He considered stopping by Deira's apartment to give her the rundown on the lab, but decided against it. She would need time to get over her anger at him. Time. It all came down to that. There was not enough of it. She might not be ready for this sort of job but there was no way to exclude her now. Having her handle the explosives should keep her from the actual fight, providing she didn't get the insane notion to go off on her own. He would have to impress upon her how badly that would turn out.

At least Nicky knew enough to stay away from the action. She could set up anything, or anyone, from the comfort of her home. In a tight spot, she was useful, but she knew her strengths and stuck to them. He had always admired that except when he had found out he was her target. She now knew more about him than any person alive. If not for their romantic involvement, he would have killed her as soon as he had figured out what she was doing. She said she had already turned on her employer by then, but he still had doubts. At least the person to whom she had been passing information was no longer a threat. Unfortunately, Nicky still was. He would have to stay on her good side once her obligation to him was fulfilled. The best way to do that would be to leave her alone. In the meantime, he needed information. It was best to get all the recon out of the way. He dialed her number.

"You're a pain in the ass. What do you want now?" Music blared in the background.

"I need the address for Cavuto's whorehouse," he said.

"Oh, you're going to love this." She turned down the music and gave him the address.

"That is not his territory," Gage said.

"That's because it's not his business."

"Explain."

"I just love it when you get all terse and demanding, especially when you know I'm going to give you what you want anyway."

He said nothing.

"Seems that Jack's boys have branched out on their own. Someone smart must be running the side business because he hasn't figured it out in two years."

"He will notice eventually, and I imagine he will not be pleased when he does. That would be a shame."

"Why do I get the feeling he's going to notice a lot sooner than eventually?"

"Because you have very good instincts," he said.

"Maybe you should check the place out. You could use to get laid."

"Goodbye, Nicky." He disconnected.

Chapter 14 - Saving Grace

Chapter 14 of 36

Holding your own is a victory – of sorts.

□

Deira ran. This was the first day she had had to herself in weeks, and she was going to spend it doing exactly as she pleased. She could see the path a few yards away but had no intention of using it. *Might as well be a treadmill.* She smiled at the thought as she leapt, pushing off a tree with her right foot. This was her second circuit around the man-made pond. They called it a lake, but she wouldn't.

She knew the path curved ahead. She hoped no one was sitting on it. People tended to get spooked by folks racing out of the woods. She pressed her hands against the two sides of a forked tree and swung her feet forward, arching to get the most distance. She landed well and kept running. There was no one on the bench. She headed full tilt towards it. She only had to use one hand to push off and got good height on the vault, turning her body mid-air and landing on the path. Everything she had held wrapped up tight seemed to unfurl with the impact. For the first time in months, she felt free.

She raced down the path. There was a metal gate blocking a footpath ahead, a futile barricade designed to keep people from riding their bikes down it. She grabbed the top bar and flipped over it, landing on the balls of her feet so she could take off again. Free running was like flying or as close to it as she was likely to come.

This was what she needed, what she could not explain to Gage or even to Nicky. He was invested in teaching her how to get away. She knew how to run away. She had done it all her life. At least Nicky understood that what Deira needed was to know how to stand and fight. The lessons were going well, but after a couple of weeks she had felt like all of her muscles were tied up. Running was the only way to restore her balance.

The trees on either side were a blur. The footpath was clear for a full out run. She let herself go, lost in the pounding, aware of her breathing. Control was the key. The dirt path would lead to the area behind the playground. It was just about dinner time, so it was unlikely there would be anyone on the equipment. The whole park was her playground now.

She vaulted the bench where mothers would sit chatting, landing in the sandbox. That was tricky, but she managed not to stumble on the uneven surface. She leapt for the fort-like structure, fingers grasping the edge. There was no wall to push off of, so she had to use her arms alone to haul her up. A year ago, she wouldn't have made it. She paused for a moment, savoring the small victory.

She measured the distance to the low wall around the sandbox before flinging herself off the fort, landing in a squat position and holding for a second, then pushing off towards the path. She was almost back to the park entrance, just a quarter of the lake path left. She decided to use that distance to cool down, slowing her pace and deepening her breath. It had been a good run. She was looking forward to soaking in the tub when she got home.

She was almost to the end of the path when she saw a man. He wasn't doing anything threatening, wasn't even looking at her. Alarm bells went off in her head anyway. There was no one else in sight.

She kept her pace as she drew nearer. There was probably no need for her paranoia. Gage would have disagreed, but he was always paranoid. *There's a reason for that.* His voice in her head was not what she needed, so she shoved it aside.

She could see the street through the archway. There was steady traffic there, so if she made it out of the park, she should be fine. If the man planned to attack her, he would not want witnesses. He had not moved, so maybe she was jumping at shadows.

He called out to her. She couldn't hear what he said. She smiled, hoping it signaled a lack of concern. He smiled back. Oops, wrong tactic. She dropped the smile instantly. So did he. *Second mistake; shit.* She picked up speed, but not much. She was almost parallel to him. She veered a little bit, ostensibly to give him room. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a second man rush towards her. He was bigger than the first guy. *Third strike, you're out.*

She put on a burst of speed and almost made it to the archway before the second guy grabbed her left arm. She used his hold on her to pivot so he was between her and the first guy, then she slammed her foot into his stomach. Nicky would have liked that side kick. They had worked on it for days. The impact made the guy let go of her arm, wrenching it in the process. He stumbled back, gasping.

She measured the distance to the archway, but she was to the left of it now. The smaller guy was between her and the freedom of the street, and he was closing fast. She realized he wasn't that much smaller. *Shit, shit, shit.* She dropped into a crouch. He was wary after seeing her kick his buddy, but the look on his face was more annoyed than worried. Anger replaced her fear. *Fuck this.*

She stepped into his approach and hit him with an uppercut to the chin. His head snapped back for a second, but he didn't go down. She used the opportunity to circle

closer to the entrance. He swung at her head. She ducked, but his fist grazed her temple, causing an instant burst of pain. She blinked away the tears, stumbling backwards.

Think. The voice in her head was not hers. This time, she listened to it. She opened her eyes wide and waved her arms.

"Over here!" she yelled, focusing on a point over his shoulder.

He glanced behind him. The only person there was his partner.

It was the second she needed. She raced for the street, knowing she would not make it.

She was just at the archway when one of the men wrapped his arm around her neck. *Not again.* She bent her knees, dropped her shoulder and twisted sideways, dropping him onto the pavement. In front of her. It was not nearly as smooth as in practice, but at least she could breathe again. She sidestepped his grab for her ankle, kicked him in the face, and pivoted to look for the second guy.

The punch landed squarely on her jaw, snapping her head sideways. She stumbled back against the arch, unable to focus clearly through the pain. The second punch landed on her ribs. She kicked out blindly and made contact with something. She thought it was his leg. He swore and came at her again. She braced her hands on the wall and pushed off at an angle, turning at the last minute and shoving him sideways. He was caught off balance and stumbled. She kicked his ribs. *Payback, asshole.*

The smaller guy grabbed her around the waist and lifted her from the ground. She slammed an elbow into his head, and he dropped her. She jumped away from him. She was that much closer to the street but knew better than to turn her back on them. They approached her. She backpedaled quickly, hoping she wouldn't step too far and fall off the curb. She could hear cars whizzing past behind her, but she knew it was unlikely anyone would stop.

She flicked the catch on the wrist knife and shook it into her hand, wishing she had brought both. She hid the knife in the sleeve of her sweatshirt. She was not going down without a fight. When the big guy swung at her, she dodged, slicing his arm as she danced past him. The cut wasn't deep enough to take him out. This was familiar. Gage was not here to save her, so she doubted it would end as well as the last time. Or maybe her recently acquired skills meant she wouldn't need him.

The smaller guy was back up. He grabbed for her again and managed to get a handful of sweatshirt. He pulled her closer to him and tried to trip her. He wasn't as good at it as Gage. She switched her hold on the knife and slammed it into his side. He let go of her sweatshirt and grabbed her wrist with both hands. Gage had only needed one. Blood covered the side of his shirt. In a few minutes, he would pass out, but he didn't seem aware of that.

The slap across her face made her see stars. She tasted blood and glared at the bigger guy.

"That was for kicking me, you bitch," he hissed.

"My pleasure," she spat.

His eyes narrowed. He hit her again, this time in the stomach. If the other guy hadn't been holding onto her, she would have doubled over. She wished she could because it was very hard to breathe. She suddenly went limp and dropped to the pavement, pulling the smaller guy down with her. He landed half on top of her, their legs tangled. She locked her legs, rolled, and threw him off. She had learned something from Gage after all. He didn't go as far as she would have liked, but the fact that she had managed it without practice gave her confidence.

The kick to her ribs doubled her over. Strangely, the position didn't help her breathe better at all. She curled into a ball, protecting her stomach and chest, so the next kick landed on her arm. She managed to keep a grip on her knife. If she could cut him, she had a chance of getting away.

"Fucking bitch!" The big guy snarled. Deira wondered if the smaller one was mute.

The next kick landed on her back. She waited for the one to the head. That should finish her.

"Ease off, Danny. He said not too damaged." The smaller guy did have a voice.

"She pays before we drop her off," Danny snarled.

"Okay, but she has to be alive." The smaller guy paused, "And able to talk."

Deira was aware of their conversation, but she still couldn't move. If she could get enough air into her lungs, she might try to get up. They would probably just kick her back to the ground, but it was worth trying. Her head swam with the possible meanings of 'she pays'. If she didn't do something, things were going to turn very, very bad. She had the image of her body, cold, blue, ruined like Kara's had been. She struggled to stand.

The big guy hauled her to her feet but her legs weren't working properly so she fell against him. He slapped her. She tried to get a good hold on her knife, but her hand wasn't working properly. He must have hit a nerve when he kicked her. When the feeling came back, she would kill him.

"Hey!" The voice came from a distance. It was not the voice she wanted to hear. "You boys stop that right now!"

The two men laughed. Deira turned her head. A small man in an old suit was crossing the street, waving his arms.

"Back off, old man. This is none of your business."

"You don't hit a woman!" The old man was incensed. Deira wondered if he had seen her fighting and whether that would matter.

She let her legs fold and twisted sideways, breaking free of her attacker. Pain shot through her back. It was nauseating. She dropped to the ground, rolling away from him.

"Don't think this is over, bitch." Danny had a limited vocabulary.

Deira curled into a ball again, trying desperately to get control of her body. The old man was a distraction for them, but she wasn't sure he would keep their attention long enough for her to get back on her feet.

"Get back in your car and drive away, if you know what's good for you." That was the smaller guy.

"Jacob has called the police. They are on their way. And there are five people on that bus," he gestured behind him, "reaching for their cameras so they can take your picture."

Deira tried to focus on the old bus across the street. She couldn't read the words. What she could see was four younger men, also in suits, running across the street. Two of them were almost as big as the guys who had attacked her.

One of the young men raced to stand over her. She could just see the hem of his pants. She really hoped she didn't throw up on him. The other three took off into the park, chasing away the bad guys. She silently hoped the boys would turn around before they got hurt. She closed her eyes and cried.

"They're gone, dear." The old man was crouched down beside her.

Deira sobbed as she uncurled. The young man beside her helped her up. It was excruciating. She clutched her ribs.

"Did you really call the police?" she asked. Her voice sounded thin. She wiped her eyes. Even that small gesture hurt.

"We don't have cellular phones," the old man said. "Or cameras. But there is a pay phone nearby. You just wait here and we'll get help." He nodded to one of the young men. They had all returned unscathed.

"No!" Deira gasped, shaking her head. They looked at her as if she was crazy.

"I have a phone. I just want my husband." Something about the men in suits made it seem the right thing to say. She had no idea why.

"You need medical treatment," one of the boys protested.

"He'll take me," Deira said. The old man looked skeptical. "Police officer at every hospital for this. Won't have to wait." She hoped they accepted that explanation. It barely made sense to her.

She had her phone out. She couldn't see well so she hit the only speed dial number in it. Nicky picked up after two rings.

"Miss me that much, girl?" she teased.

"Nicky," Deira gasped. "I need help." The tears were back.

"What happened? No, fuck that. Where are you?"

"Langer Park. By the entrance."

"You gonna be okay until we get there?"

"Think so. People helped me."

"This isn't a set up, is it?"

"No, no. They're," she broke off, looking at the bus full of neatly dressed people, "Jehovah's Witnesses."

"Okay then, we'll be right there." Nicky hung up.

"Thank you," Deira said to the old man. He was looking at her with concern and pity.

"That didn't sound like your husband," he said softly.

Deira almost laughed.

"No." And then it hit her that Nicky had said 'we.' Twice. She paled.

"We'll stay with you until your friend arrives," the old man said.

"My husband will be with her." Deira wondered why she felt the need to reassure him.

"That's good." The old man looked at her. "You should sit down, dear. You look terrible."

Deira laughed, but it came out as a wrenching cough. She grabbed her ribs again.

"I'll bet." She lowered herself to the curb with a groan.

The old man nodded to the group of young men, and they returned to the bus. He sat on the curb and waited with her. She could tell he was praying.

Chapter 15 - Black and Blue

Chapter 15 of 36

Complex dances in too small a space.

□

Gage was returning from his office when his pager went off. He checked the number; it was not one he recognized. He pulled into a gas station to make the call.

"Hello, this is..." He didn't get to finish.

"Where are you?" Nicky's voice was strained.

"In my car."

"Good. Head to Langer Park. Your girl needs help."

"She's not my girl, Nick. And what sort of help?"

"My guess? The sort of help that requires immediate medical attention. I'm on my way, but I don't have a car right now."

"I may need your assistance. Give me your location and I will pick you up, either before or after."

It took an act of will to pull out of the gas station slowly. Driving the speed limit was even harder. Nicky was waiting at a street corner on the way. Under normal circumstances, he would have teased her about it. Instead, he focused on getting to the park as quickly as possible without drawing attention. His knuckles were white on the steering wheel.

"What the fuck was she doing in the park?" he growled.

"How should I know? She told me she was going to spend the day reading in the tub," Nicky replied.

"It was a rhetorical question." He knew exactly what she had been doing in the park just what he had told her not to do.

"When did she call?"

"About thirty seconds before I called you," Nicky snapped. "You think I'd wait?"

"No. I am not thinking straight."

"A lot of that going around today, apparently." Nicky looked out the window.

They were coming up on the park. Gage saw a group of women in dresses standing near the entrance, but no sign of Deira.

"Where is she?" He could hear the thinnest thread of panic in his voice and mentally stomped on it.

"Probably in the middle of that group of Jehovah's Witnesses," Nicky snickered. She couldn't help it. "I forgot to tell you. They're the ones who broke up the fight."

Gage blinked. There was nothing to say to that.

He pulled up to the curb and turned on his emergency flashers. Traffic had slowed since rush hour, but it wouldn't be legal to park on that side of the street for another hour. He motioned to Nicky to stay in the truck. She ignored him, as usual.

An older man was walking towards him. "You must be the husband," he said.

"Excuse me?" He pretended he had not heard.

"She said she was waiting for her husband to take her to the hospital. She wouldn't let us call the police." The man shook his head.

"She's had bad experiences with the police taking a long time to respond," Gage said automatically. "We had a break in a while back, and it took them forever to show up." He did not slow his stride.

The man trotted to keep up. Nicky held back, scanning the area in case Cavuto's men were watching. Unless it was random. He did not believe in random, not when Deira was involved.

"We should have called an ambulance. Those men did awful things to her. I thought I should warn you before you see her." There was terrible sadness in his voice. Gage flinched and walked faster.

The women were speaking softly to each other, but they grew quiet when they saw Gage. More than one looked at him with barely concealed fear. They stepped aside quickly to let him through.

Deira was curled up on the grass. He knelt down beside her, reaching out a hand but stopping just short of touching her. He did not know the extent of her injuries, but she was definitely a mess.

"Honey?" The word stuck in his throat and sounded rougher than he had intended.

She tried to uncurl and moaned.

"Shhh. Lie still, princess. I'm here." Those words came more easily.

He could hear Nicky talking to the women. "... just worried about her.... Good doctors...." She was thanking the old man for his help. Gage turned his head and nodded his thanks. The women were hesitant to leave, looking over their shoulders as the old man herded them back towards the bus. Gage turned his focus on Deira.

"I'm going to help you stretch out so I can see if anything is broken," he said. She shook her head, then took several ragged breaths. He ignored her protest.

She could not straighten out. Gage ran his hand over her legs, checking for broken bones. Up until that moment, she had been able to ignore her legs. There were so many other parts to focus on. She tried to control her breathing to minimize the pain. When he touched her ribs, she screamed. It hurt her throat.

"Get me out of here, now," she whispered. She kept her eyes closed. She did not want to look at her reflection in his eyes.

"I will, but it will be painful."

"Already is." That made her laugh and set off another coughing fit, causing her to curl up tighter. All of her muscles were cramped.

She felt him slide an arm under her legs and flinched involuntarily. He positioned his other arm to support her back and neck. Pain exploded along her spine as he lifted her, but it was nothing compared to the blast of pain in her head. She heard a high pitched keening. After a moment, she determined that it was coming from her. She could tell he was walking carefully, but every footfall made her feel like she was tumbling over rocks. Big, sharp rocks. She clenched her jaw, and the next wave of pain reminded her of why that was a bad idea. There was no part of her that did not hurt.

He laid her on the back seat. Nicky was searching the first aid kit, finally coming up with three instant ice packs. She laid one on Deira's cheek. It was hard to determine where the others would do the most good. The side of her face was beginning to turn purple. Nicky slid one under Deira's neck and put the other over her eyes. If nothing else, it would keep her from trying to open them.

Every bump in the road made Deira sob. She imagined this was what it would feel like to be drawn over a cheese grater. Gage and Nicky were silent. *He's mad at me.* It was her last thought before she passed out.

Gage pulled into the alley behind his house. Deira did not regain consciousness when he took her from the truck. He tilted his head towards the garage. Nicky slid into the front seat and parked the truck. When she entered the back yard, Gage was standing in one of the few shadows left by the flood lights. Deira was limp in his arms.

"I did not leave the lights on," he muttered, flicking his eyes to the window.

Nicky pulled her gun out of her purse and stuck it in her pocket, nodding at him. She cautiously moved to the door. It was locked. She stepped back and looked at Gage. The door opened a crack.

"Move and I will shoot you," a woman said.

"Then I'm not moving," Nicky brought her hands up, empty.

Gage stepped into the light, his face tight.

"Put the gun down, Katya," he said carefully.

"Uncle Charlie?" There was relief in her voice. "You scared the shit out of me!"

"I'm sorry, kitten." He kept his voice light. "I am coming in now." His thoughts were racing. *She should not be here.*

Katya was standing in the middle of the kitchen when Nicky pushed the door open. She gaped as Gage walked in.

"Tell me you did not do this." Katya crossed her arms.

"What?" He was stunned.

"Tell me you did not do this," she repeated, her blue eyes hard.

"Of course not!" He had not meant to raise his voice. She stepped back.

"Then wait here." Katya ran out of the kitchen. She quickly returned. She placed a folded blanket on the table. A small pillow was in her hand.

"Set her down and get out of my way," she said calmly.

"Wait in the next room. I will see to this," Gage said, carefully lowering Deira to the table. As he laid her head back, he shook off the phantom feeling of blood running over his fingers. *This is not that day.* He leaned over her to make sure she was breathing.

"Pokret, grodica!" Katya yelled. *Move, curr!*

Gage automatically stepped aside, then glared at her. "Where did you learn that?"

"Dad said if you ever got crazy, I should say that to you. That it would buy me time. I guess he was right." She looked up at him. "Now stay out of my way while I see how badly this woman is hurt."

Katya's movement was quick, efficient. She obviously knew what she was doing. She slid the pillow under Deira's head, having determined that her neck was not broken. She called out for scissors to cut off the sweatshirt and the tank top underneath. More demands followed. She did not look at Nicky or Gage, just held out her hand when she heard them arrive with whatever she had asked for. Half an hour later, she looked up.

"I'm going to need help with this."

"What do you need?" Gage asked quietly. He had a list of other questions, but they could wait.

"Her fist is clenched around something. I can't move her fingers."

Katya stepped back. Gage took Deira's hand. Her knuckles were scraped but that did not account for the blood that caked her fingers. He had not seen it when he had picked her up. He pressed on the tendon just below the heel of her hand, causing her fingers to move. He gently pried the knife free and straightened her hand. The blade had sliced open her palm. The wound began to bleed again.

"What did you do, princess?" he whispered.

"She can't hear you, Uncle Charlie." Katya gave him a little push. "Let me finish so we can get her to a bed, okay?"

"Does she need to go to hospital?" he asked.

"Of course she does," Katya grunted, "but that won't work for you, so we'll do what we can and see how things stand in the morning."

Gage looked at his niece. She was lean and strong, like her mother. She had that same air of grace and determination. Her hair was coming out of the clip that held it back. He didn't remember it having been so dark before. She seemed to have gotten taller, too. Or maybe it was just that he no longer saw the little girl she had been. He closed his eyes.

"Asleep on your feet?" Nicky asked.

"No. I doubt I will sleep tonight."

"Fucking martyr." She looked up at him. "This was not your fault."

"But it is my responsibility now," he said.

Katya sighed and turned to them. She pushed her bangs out of her eyes.

"You need to move her to a bed," she said. "She can stay in my room. I'll sleep on the couch."

"No," Gage replied. "You can have your room. I will put her in mine. I can watch over her there." *Again.*

"You'll have to wake her up soon. She may have a minor concussion. For now, though, let her be. She's woken up a few times, so she's in no immediate danger."

Gage just nodded.

"Will you stay, Nicky?" Katya asked.

"I don't think so. I have things to do tonight."

"Let me call you a cab," Gage offered.

"You do that. But first get that girl to bed. She's going to feel like shit tomorrow no matter what, but the less time she spends on the table, the better," Nicky said.

Gage took Deira upstairs and tucked her in. Her hair had been braided but it was coming undone. He smoothed a stray curl from her swollen face.

When he returned to the kitchen, Nicky and Katya had cleared the table and were slumped in chairs.

"Thank you for your help tonight," he said to both of them.

"You're welcome," Katya looked at him. "If you really want to show your gratitude, you'll pay for take out. I'm starving."

"Done." He smiled at her.

Nicky looked at Gage with a promise of long conversations to follow.

Katya turned to her. "Are you sure you won't stay? I could make up the couch."

"As interesting as I think a slumber party would be with you, Katya, I need to go home and finish some work." Nicky watched Gage relax. "Maybe some other time," she said.

His tension was back instantly. *He thinks I'm a threat to her. How fun.*

Katya went in search of a phone book. Nicky looked at Gage. If he was feeling antsy about her, she was going to make it work in her favor.

"I like your niece."

"She is easy to like and very smart. I expect her to do great things after college." *Do not fuck with my family.*

"Nice house." Nicky glanced around the kitchen, then back at him. "Your sense of décor has improved." *I know where you live now.*

"I hated to leave my last place," he replied pointedly, "but it had bugs."

"Don't you hate that?" Nicky smiled at him.

"Yes, very much. This place is much cleaner." *I have better systems now and know your weaknesses.*

"That's good. And just think, in a few years, the gentrification squad will arrive and your property values will go through the roof." *People are going to find out where you live.*

"I have a hard time staying in one place, so perhaps I will not be here long." *Disappearing is easy.*

"Where would you go?" *I can find you.*

"The world is a big place, Nicky. You never know. I could end up living right on top of you."

"Providing any of us make it through this mess," she muttered.

"We will." It was the most direct threat he could make, accompanied by his best smile.

Nicky laughed. She heard the cab horn blare and headed for his front door.

The game was over, for now. Neither of them had won. It didn't matter. She liked the game.

Chapter 16 - Beyond the Pale

Chapter 16 of 36

Family matters. That's why they're a pain to have around.

□

Gage set about putting his first aid kit back together, mentally making a list of things that were missing. He had not needed it often in the past two years. When he returned to the kitchen, Katya was grinding coffee.

"I thought you drank tea," he said.

"College corrupted me," she replied, not looking at him.

"Katya, I..."

"I hope you like Indian food. I may have ordered more than we need. They said it would take half an hour to arrive, but that's probably what they always say." She was opening and closing drawers.

"I need to talk to you." Gage tried again. She had moved on to the cabinets.

"I can't find coffee filters. Where do you keep them?" She still had not looked at him.

He reached past her, took a reusable filter from the dish strainer, and handed it to her. She took it and finished making coffee in silence. He leaned against the counter next to the refrigerator, waiting. She finally turned around but did not meet his eyes.

"You have questions," he stated.

She just nodded.

"You are hesitating to ask them, though." He paused, giving her a chance to speak. She said nothing. He sighed.

"Are you afraid of me, Katya?" He did not want the answer.

"I should be," she replied slowly. "What happened tonight isn't normal."

"Not even for me," he offered.

"Everything is swirling around in my head. I don't even know what to ask first."

"Start anywhere. I'll tell you what I can." *As little as that is.*

"Who is she?" She gestured towards the ceiling.

"She is a friend of mine and a student of Nicky's." Simple answers were safest.

"What happened to her?"

"She was attacked in the park. She called Nicky and Nicky called me."

"Okay. And you didn't take her to the hospital because...?" Her anger was building with each non-answer.

"Because she did not want us to." The fact that he was not lying did not make Gage feel any better.

"Oh, well, that makes it all right then." She rolled her eyes.

"It is complicated."

"Criminal enterprises tend to get that way." Her tone was biting.

Gage's hands clenched the edge of the counter.

"What did you say?" His words came out half whisper, half growl.

"Law abiding people don't bring home seriously injured people to tend them on their kitchen tables," she said. "Criminals do that. Regularly. At least I have your assurances that this doesn't happen all the time with you. That's something."

He didn't remember her being so sarcastic.

"How would you know what criminals do, regularly or otherwise?"

"Because I spent almost every summer growing up surrounded by people who were doing things their governments didn't approve of. People who couldn't go to the hospital because they were in the wrong militia or from the wrong tribe or followed the wrong religion."

Gage stared at her as if she were a total stranger. *She is.*

"What did you think we were doing when we did missionary work? Handing out bibles?" she snapped.

"I didn't..."

"Care? Pay attention? Want to know? I'm going to go with answer D, all of the above." She shook her head. "No, it was enough that you paid for it. That's what Dad said." She could not hide the bitterness.

"Want to know what else I spent my childhood doing? Praying for you. Every night. Lighting candles for you on Sunday. After years and years of this, I finally asked Dad why he was so worried about you."

"What did he say?" Gage tensed in anticipation of her answer.

"He said that people do terrible things in war and that we should pray so that you could find forgiveness. And maybe find God. He didn't seem too convinced you would."

"Be forgiven or find God?" He tried not to smile.

"Find God. Dad had faith that even you could be forgiven. But he worried about you all the time. And when he didn't think I could hear, he talked to Mom about how you constantly put yourself in danger. About how you couldn't let go of the things you had learned in the war. I could never figure out what he meant. You seemed so normal."

"I am as normal as the next person."

"Normal people do not have multiple security systems! Normal people don't keep guns in every room!" she yelled. "Normal people don't insist that their grown nieces have to call them every night so they're sure nothing bad has happened."

"No, they don't," he barked. "Normal people answer the door when salesmen come, and then normal people buy guns after they have been robbed or worse. And normal people ask themselves 'what could I have done differently?' when their loved ones end up missing." *Normal people answer the door when their neighbors knock and end up violated and dead in their own beds.* He shook his head. There were some things no one should know.

"If my wanting to know you are safe is not normal, I am fine with that."

"My safety is not the point," she huffed.

"It is for me," he said quietly.

"Oh, no, you don't." She glared at him. "You do not get to derail this conversation with the caring uncle shtick. I have had enough of being jerked around because people **cared** or were trying to **protect** me. For once in my life, I want to know what is going on."

"No."

"No?" she sputtered. "Just no?"

"No. You do not want to know what is going on. And you should not know. What you need to know is that I did not hurt Deira." *Tonight.*

"So she has a name."

"I am trying to help her. She did not want to go to hospital, so I decided to get her to safety and see how badly she was hurt. If I had thought she needed to see a doctor, I would have taken her to one. And then I could look forward to an argument with her about what a bastard I am instead of having it with you." He looked at her levelly. "I have done nothing criminal." *Tonight.*

"I believed you when you said you didn't cause her injuries," She conceded. "But I'll be damned if I believe there is nothing strange about this whole business."

"Strange I will grant you. This is not how I live, Katya. This is not what I do."

The truth of the words hit him. This was nothing like what he normally did, which might explain why nothing was going smoothly. He ran his fingers through his hair and

sighed. She poured two cups of coffee and handed him one.

"Speaking of how we live, what brings you home on a Thursday night? I did not expect you." He hesitated. "You are always welcome. I was just curious."

"I know I'm welcome," she said. "This was sort of an emergency. The landlord must have gotten some sort of notice or something because we found out this morning that our apartment is being sprayed and we needed to get out for a couple of days. I don't have any classes tomorrow, so I had the time to make the trip down here."

"Such perfect timing," he murmured.

"Sorry I didn't check with you to see if you were going to be bringing home any battered women tonight," she returned, dryly.

"It was not on my calendar." He smiled at her. For a wonder, she smiled back.

"You should go check on... Deira, was it?"

"Yes." He headed for the stairs.

"This conversation isn't over," she called after him.

"Yes," he called back, "it is." She was right, of course, but he was not going to let her think so. At least checking on Deira gave him time to think.

Deira had curled up again, protecting her stomach and chest without realizing it. He could see the bruises purpling at the edges of the bandage Katya had applied to her ribs. The bruise on her jaw was also darkening. Most of the damage was bruises. If the old man had been right about the two men attacking Deira, the fact that she was not in worse shape was a testament to her improved skills. She had survived. *But she did not win.* That was a problem.

He would have to make sure she did not face a similar situation again. Contrary to her belief, he had never intended to let her get near Cavuto's men. Taking them out from a distance was a far better plan. He would have to consider whether or not Deira should set up explosives. He was not sure if she would be up to it. The time table might have to be altered.

He knew he was stalling. He did not want to go back to the kitchen and resume arguing with Katya. He wanted to climb into the bed and watch over Deira. *Fool.* He woke her up instead. She asked for water, and he held her up while she drank. He gave her a muscle relaxant and a pain killer, but nothing that would knock her out. The ease with which she had awoken told him she was unlikely to have a concussion, but it was better to be safe. He covered her up again and went back downstairs.

The smell of the food made him realize how hungry he was. Katya was already at the table.

"Sorry I didn't wait. I was getting sort of dizzy." She looked genuinely apologetic. She had always had good manners.

"No problem." He joined her. For a few moments, they ate in silence.

"How is she?" Katya asked.

"Not as bad as she might have been. I gave her something for the pain. I will continue to wake her throughout the night, though I doubt she will thank me for it."

"She may later. It would be better if she could see a doctor. I can do basic stuff but I wouldn't know if she had internal bleeding."

"I will see if I can convince her to go to the doctor. She is," he paused, "stubborn about certain things."

"Well, try, okay?" she pleaded. He nodded.

"You learned how to do all that doing missionary work?" Gage asked.

"Most of it. When you're in the jungle and the nearest hospital is 50 kilometers away and you're fairly sure they'd kill you instead of treating you, it helps to know how to see to things yourself. I paid attention when other people were doing it and later took a couple courses in emergency medicine." She looked at him. "But I am not a doctor. Or a nurse."

"You showed more skill than many medics I encountered." He stopped suddenly, looking away from her.

"Dad used to do that," she noted.

"Do what?" It was safer to pretend he did not know what she meant.

"Stop talking whenever he got close to saying something about the war."

"It is not something I like to remember." His jaw tightened.

She nodded. "I don't blame you. He wouldn't talk about it, either."

*But he would take his wife and child into war zones on behalf of his God*Gage closed his eyes.

His brother had turned out more like Gage than he had known. Karol had combined the desire for righteous action with the need for massive adrenaline rushes. If the rush was born of fear and anger, it would be better. It would come close. Gage had found nothing righteous about the war, no matter how many nationalist slogans they had drilled into him. Maybe believing them had made it easier for Karol to live with himself. With the war behind him, religion would have filled that void, but it was the adrenaline he craved or he would not have done such dangerous work.

Apparently, their need for adrenaline spikes was not as easily shaken as the drug addiction had been. He almost laughed. The addiction had not been easy to shake by any standard. There were times when he tasted the metallic edge at the back of his mouth, felt the desire to use so strongly that his muscles quivered. The urge to feel that alive again was hard to resist, but he had managed. So far. It would always be a struggle.

"He did that, too." She said quietly.

"What?" Gage opened his eyes.

"Went away for a few seconds." She could not hide the sadness in her voice. It was reflected in the way she looked at him. "I'm sorry for bringing it up."

"My memories are not your fault, Katya. They are not anyone's fault." *No one who still lives.* "They just are."

"I know." She sighed, rubbing her eyes. She was trying not to cry.

"I miss him, too," Gage said softly.

"I know you do. I miss them both." She gave him a sad smile. "You want to hear something funny?"

Gage nodded.

"Dad told me to look after you if anything happened to him. He said you would be like Pinocchio without his cricket."

"He did not think too much of himself, your father." Gage laughed. It was better than focusing on his loss.

"Not too much," she snorted.

"I don't think I've made a very good cricket," she admitted.

"You would be surprised. Should I start calling you cricket? I like that," he teased.

"Don't you dare."

He knew the détente could not last. She refilled their coffee cups and sat across from him, folding her hands around her cup. *Just like Deira, that first night.* He shook off the image.

"Maybe I should be a better cricket. If tonight is any indication, you aren't doing so well in the conscience department."

"I told you I had nothing to do with that, except for picking her up when she called for help," Gage stated calmly.

"I was actually referring to the fact that Nicky was holding a gun when I saw her through the security camera. And the fact that you had a loaded gun in a kitchen drawer. I found it when I was looking for a knife." She kept her voice even.

"This is not the best neighborhood. Many people keep guns for protection. It does not mean anything." He shrugged.

"Uh huh." She raised an eyebrow. "Remember how I told you that I listened when Dad thought I couldn't hear him? He used to go off on how he was worried about whether or not you were paying for our summer trips with 'honest money.' Why would he do that if there wasn't the possibility that there was dishonest money funding them?"

"I could not tell you." Gage sipped his coffee. It tasted bitter.

"In case you've forgotten, I'm not stupid." She scowled. "I figure you were into something he didn't approve of. I know it wouldn't be drugs because, believe me, I got enough lectures from both of you growing up. I figured it was either gambling or smuggling. But something you were doing pissed him off or he wouldn't have raised the roof about it when he thought I was sleeping."

"I did not need to break the law in order to pay for the trips. Your father was involved in my business, which is both successful and legal. He knew where the money came from. If you enjoy boredom, you can look at my tax records for the past ten years and see for yourself."

"I'll pass. But I still don't believe that all your money comes through legitimate business. It makes me wonder if my college education is the result of nefarious deeds." She raised her eyebrows.

"When I was younger, I may have done some deals that skirted import laws," he said lightly. "But that has not happened in many years. And I would point out that your college education is largely a result of you earning scholarships. If this wicked fiction amuses you, by all means keep it, but the money I provide for your expenses is, and has always been, clean."

"I doubt you would tell me if it wasn't." The anger had gone out of her voice.

"Possibly not. But that is not an issue."

"Good to know." She yawned. "This coffee is doing me no good. It was a long trip down here." She didn't mention the evening's events.

"I'm going to go to my room, figure out what clothes I'm taking back with me, and go to bed," she said.

They both stood. She started to clear the table but he stopped her, motioning towards the stairs. She handed him her coffee cup and went to her room. He had just finished putting away the last of the leftovers when she called down the stairs.

"Uncle Charlie? Where's the silk shirt you gave me for my birthday?"

He cursed silently. It was in the downstairs closet, still in plastic from the cleaners.

"We will find it in the morning. Get some rest." He relaxed when she agreed.

A few minutes later, he heard her door close. He washed the dishes and went upstairs to watch over Deira.

Chapter 17 - Plenty of Rope

Chapter 17 of 36

Dominoes fall, forming a pattern that doubles back on itself.

□

Deira had kicked the covers off again. Gage sat down on the bed and woke her, a glass of water ready on the nightstand. He held her up while she drank, then lowered her down to the pillow.

"I feel like hell," she muttered.

"Of course you do," he replied. "You will likely feel worse come morning, but you will get through it."

"How bad do I look?" she asked.

"Bad," he answered. There was no point in denying it. "But you managed to escape with no broken bones. And your life."

"What happened to my hand?" she asked, trying to flex it.

"You clenched your fist around your knife."

"I didn't want to drop it again," she whispered. "You weren't there to pick it up."

"Not this time." His voice was hard.

"Are you mad at me?"

"No," he lied. It would not help her to know the truth.

"You should be. What I did was stupid."

"Yes. Had it been Cavuto's men who found you..." he started. She cut him off.

"It was. Or I think it was. I hadn't seen those two before, but they said that someone wanted me alive, and he's the only enemy I have." She closed her eyes again but did not go back to sleep.

"His close associates would have been more efficient," he mused. "I will find out what is going on. Don't worry about it tonight. You need to rest." He got up.

"Stay," she pleaded, reaching for him. Pain swept over her with the movement.

"I will be right here." He moved to the chair.

"Please?"

"It is not a good idea. You are badly hurt. If I fall asleep next to you, I could hurt you more." *So much more.*

"But you won't leave me?"

"I will keep an eye on you tonight. Get some sleep. I will wake you in a few hours." He leaned his head back in the chair and waited for the sound of her breathing to deepen before going downstairs for another cup of coffee.

He called Nicky. Since she knew there would be no training tomorrow, she would probably be working, delving into other people's secrets while they slept. They were more alike than he cared to admit. He told her what Deira had said. She promised to find out what she could and call him in the morning.

There was nothing left for him to do but wait and think. Without information, that proved pointless. He finally gave up and went to work out, leaving Deira sleeping soundly.

Katya was studying in the kitchen when he got downstairs. The sun was barely up.

"I thought college students slept in," he said, his voice rough from lack of sleep.

"They do. That's why I get up early. It's quieter, so I can get more work done." She marked her place and closed the book.

"You should enjoy the luxury of sleep while you can. Soon enough you will be forced to get up early for work." He sat down across from her.

"I thought I would go into the family business and avoid all that." She laughed when he tensed.

"Funny girl. I am not paying for college so you can spend your life chasing invoices."

"As you pointed out last night, my expenses are largely covered by scholarships." She gave him a wicked smile. "Don't you want me to be like you?"

"No," he answered automatically, then softened his tone. "I want better for you than that."

"Better than to be so successful at business that I can put someone through school and still manage to see the world? Really, Uncle Charlie, I don't see that your life is so awful."

"It is hard to see from the outside," he said. He regretted it instantly. She did not seem to take offense.

"Not to worry. I think I have a promising career in medicine," she said, getting up. "I think I'll go check on my latest patient."

A few moments later, he heard the bath running. Katya called for him and he went to assist her.

Deira was trying to get out of bed on her own. He shook his head and moved to pick her up.

"I don't need your help," she snapped.

"I think you're wrong, princess. I saw what they did to your leg." He lifted her easily.

"That wasn't them. They were more intent on beating the living shit out of me. It was Nicky who bruised my leg." She grimaced.

"She has improved, then." He didn't want to think about what that could mean. The conversation regarding what had gone wrong when Deira had been attacked could be saved for later.

"Lucky shot," Deira grumbled.

"If you say so. It still results in you needing my help. Stop being stubborn." There was no point in her arguing anyway. He deposited her in the bathroom.

"You going to help me into the tub, too?" she asked, arching one eyebrow.

"I think I'll leave that to Katya."

"Coward," she called as he walked out.

Katya watched the exchange thoughtfully but said nothing. She removed the bandages, got Deira into the tub, and brought up a cup of tea.

"Thank you," Deira said as Katya turned away. "For everything." *Who the hell is she?* If he had a daughter, he'd never mentioned it. At least the mystery of the clothing was solved.

"You're welcome," Katya hesitated. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure," Deira said warily.

"How long have you known my uncle?"

"A couple of months."

"And you're friends?" Katya asked, still standing in the doorway.

"In a manner of speaking," Deira answered.

"I see."

"I doubt you do," Deira said. "It's complicated."

"Very little with him is not complicated," Katya muttered.

"God's honest truth." Deira hesitated. "Are you really trying to ask if we're romantically involved?"

"I suppose I am."

"The answer is no. I met him through business channels, and he was kind enough to introduce me to Nicky." It was a safe enough answer.

"What business are you in?" Katya asked.

"Real estate."

"That makes sense." Katya nodded her head. "It just seemed that there was more to it."

"Probably because he was rescuing me from my own stupidity. I should have known better than to be in that neighborhood alone."

"It wasn't your fault that you were attacked," Katya protested.

"I was lucky he was around when Nicky called him. At any rate, I seriously doubt your uncle would be interested in someone like me. But it was smarter to ask me than him. From what I've seen, he's not much for straight answers."

"He never has been."

"Glad it's not just me," Deira said.

"I'll leave the door open a bit," Katya said. "Call if you need help getting out."

Gage had listened to the exchange as he stripped the bed, admiring the way Deira danced along the edge of the truth. He hoped it had been enough to satisfy Katya. He took the bedding down to the basement. *More laundry.*

Deira was determined to make it down the stairs on her own. Katya insisted on helping her. They found Gage standing at the stove, making breakfast. He waved them to the table, but Katya declined, opting to take her computer into the living room so she could write a paper. She closed the door behind her.

Deira and Gage ate in silence. There was a comfort to this routine. They both attempted to ignore it.

"How are you feeling?" he asked when they had finished.

"Spectacularly bad. How about you?" She winced as she shifted. There was no comfortable position.

"Tired. You have a talent for keeping me up all night."

"I have to be good at something," she said.

"From what I saw in the warehouse, there are many things you are good at."

"You mean getting caught?" She snorted. "I'm a fucking pro, apparently."

"I was referring to your impersonation of Spiderman," he said. "I did not expect that."

"Yeah, well, the parkour moves didn't help me much in the park." The pain was making her words sharper than she'd meant them to be.

"You fought two men and lived."

"If this counts as living."

"Better than the alternative," he countered.

"Yes." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I think it would have been much worse, even before they delivered me to Cavuto."

"He would want you alive and relatively whole," Gage said.

"They said that, too. But they said that they would make me pay for hurting them first. I think they would have..." she could not finish.

She didn't have to. He could see it in her eyes.

"Then I will kill them for free," he growled, looking away. Control slowly returned to his features.

"Can I watch, at least?" she asked, eyes glittering.

"Certainly."

"Can I help?"

"If you'd like." He shook his head. "You constantly surprise me, princess."

"What? That I want to kill people who hurt me? That should be a given, all things considered."

"No, that you are so eager about it."

"Oh, that. I thought we'd already established that I'm seriously unbalanced." She grinned at him.

"Indeed."

"Probably not all that far from sociopath now." She watched him for a reaction. There was none. "Besides, it does seem a shame to waste such an offer from the world's scariest guy."

"Not even close to the most scary," he warned.

"Especially since, for once, it won't cost me a thing," she continued as if he had not spoken.

"Why is it always about payment with you?" he asked.

She stared at him, stunned. He laughed.

She started to laugh, then gasped. She cursed him roundly for that. He brought her some pills and water, still chuckling.

He was not going to tell her that he had no intention of letting her anywhere near the men who had attacked her, nor those who had attacked her sister. Thus far, she had killed only one person. If he could keep her from committing a second murder, she had a chance at a normal life. *One without me*. It would be better if she stepped away now, left the job behind.

"Your injuries are fairly bad," he began slowly.

"You have a flair for the obvious." She rolled her eyes.

"If we are to keep to the plan, you may have to sit out."

"The hell you say!"

"Considering your...encounter...yesterday, it would be a bad idea to put it off." He remained calm. "The longer it takes us to move, the better chance they have of finding out about the contract. All they would have to do is shut down and set up somewhere else. We would have to start from scratch. Providing the buyer was still interested."

"You make it sound like they could move shop easily," she said slowly.

"They could."

"We had planned on a week, right?"

"Yes." He tensed.

"You're right," she said reluctantly. "I won't be able to help with the hit."

He relaxed. "No. You won't."

"But as long as I had cover, I could still handle the explosives. I'm bruised, not broken."

"We may have to rethink that. You would still need to be able to move well, in case something went wrong."

The phone rang, preventing her from replying. Gage answered. He stared out the back window, listening, occasionally nodding. She could not hear what he said, but the conversation played across the muscles in his shoulders. He opened and closed his fist repeatedly. Whatever he was hearing, it did not please him. He hung up and turned slowly to face Deira.

"That was Nicky," he said.

"What did she want?"

"It seems your attack was not random." He was speaking slowly.

"We figured that," she said, confused. "Cavuto wants me to suffer. The feeling is mutual."

Gage gave her a calculating look.

Deira shifted. The drugs were kicking in, so it didn't hurt as much. Gage began pacing. *That's never good.*

"What is it?" she asked. "Is Nicky okay?"

"Nicky is fine," he said, still moving.

"Stop pacing and tell me what's up," she insisted. He stopped.

"You are a target."

The kitchen seemed to narrow into a tunnel with him at the other side. Deira tried to remember how to breathe.

"Shit."

Chapter 18 - Grave Concerns

Chapter 18 of 36

Playing connect the dots...

Gage's mind was churning with possibilities. Nicky's news had not been entirely unexpected. The break in at Deira's old apartment and yesterday's attack indicated a pattern. He had known they were looking for her. What he did not know was whether or not her connection to him had been discovered. Much depended on that. Nicky was finding out what she could as fast as she could. Until he knew more, there was little he could do in the way of planning. It irritated him that he was relying so heavily on Nicky. If this kept up, he might well end up owing her, and he did not like owing anybody.

Deira sat perfectly still. Gage was distracted. Not that it mattered. She would never be able to move fast enough to get away from him. For the first time, she thought about what it would mean to die. How would it feel? Would her father mourn her? What would it do to her brothers to lose their sister? She wasn't sure she wanted to know the answer to any of those questions.

In a single moment, the men she had killed became real people. She hadn't thought about what their deaths had meant to anyone but her. She was glad there wouldn't be much time to dwell on it. She didn't want them to be anything but the monsters she remembered them being. She let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. *So this is where it ends.*

Gage looked at Deira. She was staring at him with a mixture of fear and resignation. He frowned. She had known Cavuto was looking for her. He took a step towards her and she flinched.

"Easy, princess, handling these situations is my specialty."

"At this point, I'm resigned to rolling over and dying," she returned calmly.

"I would have thought you would fight a bit harder to stay alive."

"Would that make it easier for you?"

"Of course it would." His tone was dismissive.

"Sorry. I may not be able to stop you, but I'll be damned if I make it easy," she spat. He stared at her.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You just said I was a target," she answered.

He regarded her a moment, trying to understand. And then he did. He let anger wash over him.

"You think I meant you are **my** target?"

"You said..." Her voice trailed off.

"God's teeth," he muttered. "I did not think you were that thick."

It was her turn to stare.

"I do not burn my associates," he growled. "And even if I did, I would hardly announce my intention to do so beforehand."

"Oh."

"No more drugs for you if they are going to make you an imbecile. Did you really think I would kill you?"

"I believe you threatened to do so twice on the night we met," she said.

"Things have changed since then." He cocked his head. "Perhaps I should have asked if you really think me so heartless that I would tell you that you were about to die."

"I make no assumptions about your heart," she said wryly.

"Probably wise," he said, anger fading. "It is not my best feature."

"I know." She sighed. "So what do we do next?"

"Well, the first thing to do is make sure they have not been to your apartment. I will have Nicky go by there." What he would do first would be review the video feed, but he was not going to tell her that.

"I'm going to need to go back there. For one thing, I could use some clothes. I can't spend the whole day like this." She gestured to the bathrobe. "And for another, my weapons are there."

"You are in no shape to go anywhere. I will get what you need once we have determined it is safe."

She arched an eyebrow at him. "Not sure I want you in my place without me," she said.

"I will not be going there to pry." *I already know where you hide things.*

"Oh, yay. Round two of house arrest, here we come." She wasn't as irritated as she sounded.

"Only a day or two. You will need that long to recover anyway. By then, we should also have a plan in place to deal with this latest complication." Nothing was easy with her around, but he did not mind the idea of her staying.

"About that," she started. She had to swallow before continuing. "We knew Cavuto was looking for me, right?"

He nodded.

"So what changed that made you tense up?"

"He put out feelers for a contract hit. From what you heard in the park, he originally wanted you alive. He has obviously changed his mind."

"Obviously. But why?"

"I would guess that they have made the connection to your sister," he said quietly. "If you know about the abductions, you could testify against him."

"Right," Deira snorted, "because after I killed a few of his people, I'd just run to the cops."

"You did not kill 'a few' of his people," Gage said.

"No, but he doesn't know that. Two died in the warehouse and two on the street. That makes me a definite threat, but it doesn't explain why he would think I'd talk to the cops."

"He knows that you are not working alone," Gage said carefully, "or you would have just as easily dispensed with the men in the park. There is something else." He hesitated. She needed to know, but he did not want to tell her.

"Great, because I need something **else**. What more could there be?"

"You only killed one man." Gage watched as she blanched.

"Shit." The list of expletives continued in her head. It took a while to run out.

"We can adjust the plan to account for four instead of three," he said, not mentioning that he already had.

"Man, when I screw up, I do it all the way." She shook her head, then winced. She could still feel the stiffness in her neck and jaw, despite the pain killers.

"It is not uncommon to make mistakes. Especially your first time."

"That doesn't make it easier to swallow," she replied.

"Prior to meeting me, you believed I was dead," he stated.

"Everyone did." The abrupt change of topic confused her.

"Would it not have been reasonable, then, to assume I had made a mistake?"

"But you didn't. You faked your death, obviously."

"Yes. Because I made a mistake, one that could easily have killed me. One that almost did," he said evenly. "I took the opportunity to get out of the business."

"Until you met me," she said, looking down.

"It was not likely that the world would have allowed me to stay dead, princess," he said. "If it had not been your predicament, something else would have tempted me out of the grave."

"You don't seem like the kind of guy who gives into temptation that often."

"You would be surprised. Now, you need to rest. Do you want me to help you back to bed, or would you like to insist on doing it by yourself? Either way, I end up carrying you up the stairs."

"Funny." She rolled her eyes. "I'll go nuts if I spend the day in bed."

"Then I will ask Katya to abandon the couch and write her paper in here or in her room." He went into the living room.

Katya came out a moment later. She put her laptop on the table, refilled her coffee cup and turned to regard Deira.

"His bathrobe is a bit big for you," Katya said with a smile.

"He's a big guy. I didn't have many options." Deira shrugged.

"I have sweats upstairs," Katya offered. "Unless you prefer to hang out in his clothes?" Her lips twitched.

"No. Sweats would be great. Thank you."

Katya flew up the stairs and returned just as quickly. Deira refused her offer of assistance and changed in the bathroom. She looked in the mirror for the first time since the fight. A purple and blue bruise lined her jaw on the left side of her face. Her ribs were worse. She touched them anyway. *It could have been worse.* Moving was difficult. Where she was not bruised, she was stiff. She was glad that there was no one to witness the contortions she underwent to get the pants on. The t-shirt went on more easily. It was loose and hung past her hips. She realized it must belong to Gage. She wished it smelled like him.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. Her attraction to him was both crazy and fruitless. She found a comb and viciously worked out the tangles in her hair. It felt good to be the cause of her own pain for once.

Gage entered his office and locked the door. A review of the video from her apartment only showed her preparations for her run. He reran it, watching her stretch. She had beautiful legs. The training had given her muscle definition in her shoulders and back that he had not noticed before. He entered the code to erase the tape. It would do no good to look again on her, so unsuspecting, so unblemished. He sighed and left the office, locking it behind him.

Katya and Deira were on either side of the couch, their knees drawn up, feet almost touching. The TV was on, but neither was watching the movie. It was clear that he had interrupted a conversation. If not for Deira's injuries, it would have been a picture of normalcy. He wished it was.

"I am going out," he announced. Two blonde heads turned. He addressed Katya. "If you have no objections, I would like Deira to stay another night."

"It's your house, Uncle Charlie," Katya said.

"And yours, kitten." He ignored her snort.

"It's fine with me if it's okay with Deira," Katya replied. "You need to get groceries, though. Your refrigerator has a bad case of bacheloritis."

"That was on the agenda." He turned to Deira. "Did you want me to get anything from your apartment?" He eyed her clothes. "So you can be more comfortable?"

"Yes, thank you. I think I should make you a list, though." She carefully shifted to get up.

"Stay. I will bring you paper and pen." He went back in his office and returned a moment later.

Katya dictated a grocery list. He did not write it down. Deira handed him a page listing items and where he could find them in her apartment. Her handwriting was no better than his.

"I will lock the door behind me. The security cameras are on," he said. Katya rolled her eyes at him.

"Don't worry about us," she said.

"I do worry about you. Both of you. I will not be long. I have my cell phone if you need me."

"And I have access to your guns," Katya said. "We'll be fine."

He left after checking to be sure the gun in the kitchen was loaded. The sound of laughter followed him out. At least he didn't have to worry about them shooting each other. They were getting along far too well.

When Gage was gone, Deira turned to Katya.

"Kitten?" She grinned.

"Princess?" Katya shot back. Deira blushed.

"Does he have pet names for everyone?"

"Almost. He tried to give my mother a nickname but she would have none of it," Katya answered. "She just swore at him in Russian whenever he tried. I think he even blushed once. My mom was inventive with curses."

"So he does speak Russian," Deira mused.

"Oh, God," Katya groaned. "Don't tell me he trotted out how many languages he speaks."

"Pretty early on," Deira said, laughing.

Katya rolled her eyes. "You know that two of those are basically the same language, right? There's not much difference between Serbian and Croatian, or Albanian for that matter. It's all in the pronunciation, but the distinction matters to him. The other Slavic languages aren't hard pick up from there."

"So which one is his native language?" Deira asked.

"Serbian. Do yourself a favor, though. Don't ask him anything about that. He's a little sensitive about his homeland."

"Sensitive is not a word I would have associated with him."

"Maybe touchy is more accurate." Katya shrugged.

"That I'll buy," Deira said. It felt good to have a normal conversation. She would keep what she learned of Gage to herself.

For now.

Chapter 19 - Straight Lines

Chapter 19 of 36

The simplest things can change perceptions.

□

Gage welcomed the silence of his truck. He took side streets on his way to Deira's apartment, doubling back from time to time. The fact that he was not being followed was a relief but did little to reduce his tension. He felt it like an old jacket, just a little too tight but familiar.

He circled the block before turning down an alley down the street from the apartment. He crossed the street, keeping his head down. Everyone did in that neighborhood. That worked in his favor but could also work in theirs. He waited a few minutes, watching. A large dog trotted down the street, triggering the motion detector.

His gun was in his hand as he entered the building. He made his way quietly up the stairs. The building was silent. He hoped it meant that they did not know where she lived. The lock turned with only the barest click. Sun shone through the windows to reveal an empty room. He headed straight for the bedroom.

He looked around her room. The bed was unmade and there were clothes in a small pile on the floor. He frowned, then shook his head. Moving quickly, he gathered the things she had requested. The nightgown he had bought for her was at the foot of her bed. She had not asked for it, but he added it to the duffel bag. He pulled the shades and turned on the lamp on his way out.

Her gym bag was on the kitchen counter. He resisted the urge to run water into the empty cup beside it. At some point, he was going to have to address that particular obsession. He checked the bag against the list she had given him; everything was there.

He closed the door behind him and pulled out a roll of clear tape. He put a piece across the door and jamb, near the floor. It was a simple trick, but one that would alert her if anyone had come in while she was gone. He changed the security code before leaving. For the time being, it was the best he could do to make the building safe.

On the drive between her apartment and the supermarket, he was followed twice. The first car turned into a restaurant parking lot. A well dressed couple got out, laughing. The second car stayed with him all the way to the store. He put his gun in his pocket when he got out of the truck, keeping an eye on the other car. The man in the car did not move. Gage opened the back of his SUV and pretended to rearrange the contents. After a few moments, the driver of the car opened his door. He was young, maybe 18, in tight jeans and a close-fitting t-shirt nowhere to conceal a gun. A cloud of smoke drifted out of the car before he closed the door. The boy ran across the parking lot and entered the store.

Gage did not linger in the store as he usually did. The quality of the produce, still a delight after so many years, was not a priority today. He had to remember to buy enough for three. He desperately wanted to send Katya away, to know she was somewhere safe, but he could not. It had taken months to convince her that he wanted her to stay with him whenever she could. Last night's events had done nothing to bolster her trust. He did not want to lose the only family he had left, and she was perfectly capable of walking out of his life forever. *Like you will do to her.* He ground his teeth. There had to be some way to make it work, but he did not know how.

When he got home, Katya was at the kitchen table, books spread around her, working on her paper. She jumped up to put away the groceries, waving him away as he began helping. He set one bag at the foot of the stairs and went to check on Deira.

She was asleep on the couch, an ice pack on her ribs. Her breathing was normal, so he left her and went into his office to call Nicky. She had no new information for him. He thought about trying to do some work, but the tension had settled into his skin. It felt normal, and he realized he had missed it.

When he came out, Deira was sitting up. She gave him a questioning look.

"Nicky has not found out anything useful," he said.

She sighed, moving the ice pack to her jaw. Her bruises had shrunk, the edges faded to blue and yellow. He felt another swell of anger over her injuries. That felt right, too. The pieces of his old life were falling into place, and he welcomed them.

"So mostly I get to wait again." Deira tucked her hair behind her ear.

He gave her a calculating look.

"There are a few things we can do to prepare," he said.

"Like what?" Her hand went to her ribs.

"How attached are you to your hair?" His grin was wicked.

"Why?" Her eyes narrowed.

"They know what you look like. The simplest way to change that is to dye your hair." He did not know how she would take that.

"Okay," she agreed.

"I did not expect it to be that easy," he said.

"It's just hair." She shrugged and got up. "Should I go do that now?"

"We might as well," he answered.

"We?"

"You will need help," he began. "As will I."

"I can't see you dying your hair."

"No, I suppose not. Come. I will help you upstairs." He offered her his arm. She ignored it and walked out of the room. *Stubborn*. He took a calming breath and followed her.

Katya did not look up from her computer as they passed through the kitchen. He picked up the bag he had set by the stairs. Deira managed the ascent on her own with the help of the railing. If he had not seen her cringe with the effort, it might have been amusing.

Deira almost laughed when he set out four boxes of hair color in various shades of red and brown. He placed her brush on the counter next to them. For a single man, he was surprisingly astute. She looked up at him.

"No black?" she teased.

"It would not look natural on you." He shrugged. She did laugh then. He looked confused.

"When women dye their hair, looking natural is rarely the goal," she said. "But these are good choices. Do you have a favorite?"

"It makes no difference to me which you choose," he said.

"I meant for you."

"I am not dying my hair. I am shaving it off." He went to the linen closet and took out a box containing a hair clipper kit.

"They don't know that you're involved, do they?"

"Not to the best of my knowledge. I needed to shave before we did the job anyway. Which shall we do first, yours or mine?"

"Yours," she answered. "But I've never done this before, so you'll have to tell me what to do."

"Finally," he said, turning to her with a grin, "you ask my advice before acting."

She stuck her tongue out at him.

He took his shirt off, hanging it on the hook by the door, then put a hand towel in the sink. He affixed the shortest attachment to the clipper, plugged it in, and set it on the counter.

"It is simple. Run that over my head until the hair is gone." He leaned over the sink, head down.

Drifts of hair brushed her hand as they fell. The furrows of short hair left behind felt like a violation. He turned his head so she could get the side. When it came time to do the front, he leaned against the counter, head tilted back over the sink. His eyes were closed. She stepped in closer, running the clippers over his scalp until the hair was as short as she could make it. She brushed the stray strands off his head, enjoying the texture under her hands. His breath came just a little faster. She liked watching his chest rise and fall, knowing she had made it quicken.

For the first time, she noticed a scar on his shoulder, round, with irregular edges. *Too close to the heart*. She set the clippers down and ran her fingers over the scar. His eyes flew open, wary, intense. She did not back away. She traced another scar, and another. Those had mostly faded. She wondered if they were from his childhood, like the one on his stomach. That one would never fade. She reached down to touch it. His fingers wrapped around her wrist, gently stopping her, eyes never leaving hers. He took her other wrist, his thumb running down the tendons on the underside. Her breathing increased, matching his. Without a word, he stood, moving her backwards until she was up against the door. He held her hands at her side for a moment, searching her face. Then he turned away.

He swept up his hair from the floor and dumped it into the wastebasket. The hair on the towel followed. Turning to the mirror, he reached for a can of shaving cream.

"Almost done," he said.

"Let me," she said, taking the can from his hand. "I've done this much. Might as well see it through to the end."

She smoothed the shaving cream over his head and reached for his razor. He snapped his head to follow the movement. Her hand paused over the straight razor, wondering if he would let her. She noticed the pulse in his neck jump and smiled. *Not that much trust*. She didn't blame him. She picked up the safety razor.

"Warm water will help," he offered. She did as he suggested.

He looked at her steadily as she carefully drew the blade over his scalp. He clenched and unclenched his fist, making the muscles in his forearm flex. Trust was warring with tension. She rinsed the blade and repeated the action, taking her time. The razor scraped over his head. It could have been drawn across her nerves; he was not the only one feeling it. *Careful.*

He turned around and braced his hands on the counter, dropping his head so she could reach the back. She had to lean against him to get it all, feeling a twinge of pain as she stretched. She took a washcloth and washed away the rest of the foam. He closed his eyes and let her. *Trust.*

"Thank you," he said quietly.

"I can take care of you in the morning, if you'd like." She ran her hand over his cheek and looked pointedly at the straight razor.

"We shall see," he said, fighting a smile.

She stepped back to admire her handiwork. He looked good bald. She hadn't expected him to.

"Your turn," she said, reaching for the scissors on the stand. He raised one eyebrow as she handed them to him.

"Are you sure?" he asked. "You do not have to do this."

"Yes," she answered, "I am. I do." She turned her back to him.

He gathered her hair, lifting it from her shoulders, feeling the weight of it fill his hand. It was softer than he had expected. He let it fall over his fingers, down her back. He did not know how many times he had wanted to do that. *Many.* Her hands shook when she picked up her brush. He set down the scissors and took the brush from her, gently working out the tangles.

"Start at the bottom," she murmured. He did as she suggested.

The curls turned into gentle waves as he worked, then sprang back into place. *It has a life of its own.* Brushed out, it fell to just above her waist. He wanted to do this for hours. *For years.* This would be his first and last chance. When he finished, he ran his hand down the length of it, then again. She sighed, a contented sound. He hesitated.

"Are you sure?" he asked again.

"Yes," she answered.

She faced away from the mirror and stared straight ahead. *She does not want to watch.* He took a deep breath and made the first cut. Ribbons of gold spiraled to the floor to pool at their feet. Her hands pressed into her thighs, occasionally sliding up and down. It was the only sign of apprehension she gave. He took his time, each cut careful. She deserved that. He would not leave her ragged.

"More," she said tightly.

"I don't," he started, but she cut him off.

"More," she insisted. He complied.

When it was done, he stepped away from her, afraid of how she would react, what she would think of him now. She turned around, looking at her reflection at last. She ran her fingers through her hair. It did not quite touch her shoulders.

"This is not something I normally do," he said cautiously.

"You have a hidden talent," she returned. A smile formed slowly on her lips as she looked at him in the mirror. "I'm glad you did it."

He bent to scoop up the hair on the floor. There was so much of it, but it was no longer heavy. A curl wrapped around his finger. He ran his thumb over it before dropping it on top of the others, his back to her so she could not see.

"You should shower," she said, brushing hair off his back. "I'll finish cleaning up."

He moved to the door, but she reached a hand out to stop him. Her fingers were warm on his arm.

"I'll turn my head and close my eyes," she offered. She was true to her word.

While he showered, she dyed her hair for the first time in her life. The stuff smelled terrible. She was glad he couldn't see her. She kept trying to go past the end of her hair, years of muscle memory refusing to believe there was nothing more there. Despite the fact that it had been her idea, she had expected to feel sad. What she felt was relieved. Another piece of her old life was gone.

He turned off the water. She watched him reach for the towel that should have been on the hook. She handed it to him. Water dripped from his fingers onto her hand, warmer than it should have been. His silhouette was barely discernible through the shower curtain. She wished she could dry him off but could not think of how to ask. He would likely refuse. She stepped over to the closet, looking for an old towel. When she turned around, he had left the room.

When he came back, she was kneeling by the tub, testing the water. He took the sprayer out of her hand and began rinsing her hair. Red-brown liquid splattered her neck and splashed the walls on the tub. He had to steady his hand and was glad she could not see him. Eventually, the water ran a muddy pink. He began to breathe normally. A few minutes later, the water was almost clear. She wrung out her hair and reached for the conditioner.

"I need to get cleaned up," she said.

"If you need help," he started. *Then what?*

"I think I can manage," she replied wryly.

"I am afraid you have ruined your shirt," he said on the way out.

"No," she said, "I've ruined yours." Her laughter followed him down the stairs.

Chapter 20 - Playing with Fire

Chapter 20 of 36

Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! - James 3:5

□

Nicky closed her eyes and leaned back in her desk chair, a high-backed, Italian leather indulgence used so often that there was a permanent dent from her butt. Light from the dual screens made patterns on the inside of her eyelids. The one program would run without her help for now. With any luck, it would divulge what she needed in a neat little package. The other screen was static. She was waiting for a message on a secure bulletin board, not sure if she wanted it or not. She didn't mind waiting. She had other things to do. She glanced at the second screen, then turned away from the computer, reluctantly leaving the world she liked best.

The music needed to change. Alternative metal was exactly what she wanted while working, but in any other setting it annoyed her. The laptop on top of the book cases in the living room had one purpose, to fill her house with sound. She switched play lists and looked around the room. *Red hot mess*. She sighed. The time had come to clean.

Despite her reluctance to begin, cleaning was always cathartic. She made a pile for pieces of clothing that had somehow ended up on the couch, the floor, a shelf. She ran her fingers over the soft, thick blanket that normally lay across the back of the couch. It was the same brick red as the walls, cozy and comforting. The blanket was balled up and half under one of the cushions, the result of a night when she was too tired to wait for a message but too afraid of missing it. She had fallen asleep. The message still had not arrived. She threw the blanket into the laundry pile.

Clearing the coffee table took some time. Books had to be put back in the proper place. Other things could be out of order, but not her books. Organized shelves and pictures that hung straight were the only thing she was fanatic about. The few magazines were dumped in a basket by the bookshelf. Those were fleeting; books were forever. She took a rag and polish from the closet and set to work on the wood shelves, tables, the frame of the couch. She liked the pattern of the different grains, the shine, the warmth they gave to the space. The smell of her favorite polish, sandalwood with a hint of orange, filled the room. The best part of all was that polishing took no real thought, leaving her brain to scroll through subjects at random.

No matter where she started, her thoughts turned back to Gage. It had not been a complete surprise that he was alive. She had suspected that the devil would not die that easily. She really had mourned him, but that didn't mean she was glad he was back in her life. He complicated things for her and always had.

Now he would complicate Deira's life, too. Nicky was not invested in the girl, except as a way to clear her debt, but it irritated her that the pattern was being repeated. *Or maybe I'm just jealous because he wants her*. She wanted to ignore that thought, but this wasn't the first time she'd had it. Gage was her personal devil and she didn't want to share. It wasn't the sex she craved, it was the way they sparred with words regardless of whether their ideas were in conflict or harmony. If he got himself killed for real over some blonde bitch, there would be no one she could play with that way. She had missed him. There was something seriously wrong with that.

A soft ping came from the computer, barely discernible under the Bhangra coming from her speakers. She was almost afraid to look at the message. Everything turned on this, though she was the only one who knew it, the only one who would. She took a deep breath and began reading. A smile slowly formed, wicked and satisfied. *Game on*.

Katya was cooking when Gage came downstairs. He identified the mixture of smells as her mother's beef stroganov. It was what Irina had made the last time he had visited. He wondered if Katya remembered that. She moved around the kitchen like her mother, efficient yet relaxed. She even had her hair piled up the same haphazard way, secured with a pair of take-out chopsticks.

"Are you going to just stand there or help?" Katya asked. He opted to help.

Deira came downstairs and made her way slowly to the table. There was a glass of pineapple juice waiting for her. It was supposed to help heal the bruising, and it seemed to be working. Of course, she had also been applying witch hazel and comfrey cold packs throughout the day, so there was no telling which home remedy was responsible for the fading bruises. In combination with the drugs, she was recovering faster than she would have thought possible. She still hurt like hell, though. She leaned back on the bench.

Katya glanced over at the table and dropped her spoon in the sauce. She arched an eyebrow at Gage. He just shook his head. They were not going to discuss it. Her mouth set in a straight line. She turned back to the stove, retrieving the spoon.

"You can't tell me something isn't up," Katya murmured while he was draining the noodles.

"I told you there was, just not what. And that will not change." He could not control her any better than he did Deira.

"No, you skirted around it, but it doesn't matter. I know all I need to know anyway."

"The important thing," said Deira, "is do you like it?"

"I do," Katya answered. "You look good with red hair. It just shocked me."

"Auburn, to be exact, and thank you. I always wanted to see what it would be like to be a redhead. My dad used to say that if I dyed my hair, he would cut it off. Better to save him the plane trip and do it myself." She shook her head. Her curls were wilder without the extra weight. Gage nodded at her, a silent appreciation for derailing the conversation.

"I am going to sleep on the couch tonight," Katya announced after dinner. "Deira can have my room."

"That is not necessary," Gage said.

"Oh? I think Deira would be more comfortable in a bed, don't you?" She smiled sweetly.

"Since I'm right here, I can tell you that sleeping on the couch will be fine." Deira tried to head off the argument.

"No." Gage and Katya said together.

"I'm going to be up late working on my paper. I might as well set up in the living room. I work better with the TV on anyway. And that's a really comfortable couch." Katya looked at both of them. "Please don't argue with me."

"Thank you," Deira said.

"I will clean up." Gage cleared the table.

"Big surprise," Deira whispered. Katya laughed and went into the living room, closing the door behind her.

"She thinks we're sleeping together," Deira said.

"We have."

"That's not what I mean."

"I know that."

She sat back and watched him, not wanting to leave. *Ever*. There was more to say, but neither one of them was ready to say it. After a few moments, she got up and made her way painfully upstairs. The bag with her clothes was in the corner of Gage's room. She changed into her nightshirt, dug out her toothbrush and went into the bathroom. She left the bag where it was, her clothes in a pile on top of it. When she returned, he was sitting in the chair. The lights were off.

"Do you want to stay here?" His low voice slid over her skin.

"You know I do. But I've caused enough trouble between you and Katya."

"Let me worry about that."

"Do you want me to stay here?"

"Why else would I have asked?"

She stood still, trying to separate thought from emotion. He hadn't answered her question. Not really. She wished she could see his eyes. *As if he's not capable of hiding what he's thinking.*

"Why do you want to stay?" he asked.

"Because I don't remember my dreams when I sleep next to you. Because I like the scent of you on my clothes when I wake up. Because it reminds me that I'm human."

He said nothing.

"I shouldn't have told you any of that."

"But you did."

"And you've told me nothing."

"No? I have told you I want you to stay. Is that not enough?"

She let out a breath she'd not known she was holding. "I don't know. I don't know anything when I'm around you. I'm tired of being confused. God, I'm so tired."

He rose from the chair, a fluid movement that brought him to her. She could feel the heat of him. He smelled like home. It was all wrong. It was all she wanted. He took her hand and led her to the bed.

"Stay because you want to," he said. "Let that be reason enough."

She gave in and crawled into the bed. He closed the door and joined her. He took her hand and kissed it gently, then placed it over his scar. She turned to look at him.

"You wanted to know how it felt." He lay still, controlling his breathing, as she ran her fingers over the scar.

"You won't tell me how you got this." It wasn't a question.

"No."

"And this one?" Her hand traveled over his chest to rest on the circular scar.

"I told you. Sometimes I make mistakes."

"Is this a mistake?" she asked, continuing to explore his skin.

"Yes."

"I could go."

"You could, but you won't."

"You seem very sure of that."

He chuckled. "You are in my bed of your own accord, princess. And you have admitted that it is where you want to be. I am quite sure of that."

She slid her fingers under the waistband of his pants. He took her wrist, rolled, and pinned it to the pillow over her head. He looked down at her, his body over hers, not quite touching. He leaned down and kissed her for the first time since the night they had met. She put her other hand on his chest, feeling his heart race. The kiss was gentle but there was tension running through him, a fight for control. He was trying not to hurt her. She arched towards him, ignoring the twinge in her back, the ache of her ribs, seeking a better pain. He let go of her wrist, placed his hand over her hip and pushed her flat on the bed. He ran his hand over her stomach and she quivered.

"You want more," he whispered in her ear.

"Yes."

"There will be more." He moved away, trailing his hand down her thigh. "But not tonight."

"Please," she whispered.

"I like the sound of that. I think I will make you say it. Repeatedly. But not tonight." He lay on his back, hands behind his head.

She tried again. "Don't stop now."

"I have to. You are hurt. I will not make that worse."

She pushed herself up, swung a leg over his hips and straddled him. "You just did."

She leaned down and kissed him, not careful, not caring if it hurt. He was hard against her. She tightened her legs and began to move. He groaned into her mouth. Then his hands were on her hips, lifting her off him, rolling her under him until he was towering over her, his body just out of reach.

"I have only so much control," he growled.

"Lose it."

"Oh, I promise you I will." He lowered himself so their bodies barely touched, then kissed her again.

He pulled away from her. "But not tonight."

She lay there, waiting for the ache of her injuries to be stronger than the one between her legs. He was on his side, watching her.

"Consider this another piece of unfinished business between us," he said.

She turned her back to him. He curled around her, careful not to jar her. She pushed back against him out of spite. His laugh washed over her, his breath warm on her neck.

"Good night, princess. Sleep well." For once, he fell asleep first.

Chapter 21 - Shadow of a Doubt

Chapter 21 of 36

Uneasy alliances abound.

□

Katya was already working when Gage went downstairs. He wondered if rising early ran in the family or if she had picked it up from Karol.

"Nicky called." Katya looked up. "Asked you to call her back as soon as you can."

"Thank you for taking the message." He poured himself a cup of coffee.

"No problem." She closed her computer. "After you talk to her, can you take me to the train station?"

"You are leaving?"

"Thus the train station." She smiled at him. "I talked to Jenny this morning. The bug guys were done in one day. We're allowed back in today. She'll be there early to air the place out."

"You don't have to go."

"Yeah, I do. I forgot to bring a couple of books, and I really want to get this paper done this weekend. And I think it would be best." She left it at that.

He knew she was right, but it still felt like he had failed her. Again.

"After breakfast, then." He took his coffee and went into his office.

Nicky did not answer her phone. He left no message. She would know he had called. There was no such thing as a secure call to her. He checked with his service. She had left him an address with no explanation. He didn't need one.

He did not want to make the next call. Just thinking about it made his skin crawl, but it had to be done. He had the service place the call double-blind, just in case. There were some people who should not know where he was, and Viktor Stepanovic was at the top of that list.

The receptionist droned a normal, bland greeting.

"Give me Viktor." He wasn't in the mood to be polite.

"I'm sorry sir, but..."

He cut her off with a few choice words in Croatian.

"I'll see if he's available," she replied curtly. A few seconds later, she connected him.

"I don't know who you are, but if you ever speak to my receptionist that way again, it will go very bad for you." Viktor always opened with threats. Gage ignored them.

"How's business, Viktor?"

"Who is this?"

"How are Ana and the girls? Lejla must be almost ready to graduate, no?"

"Drop dead." He was angry. The old tricks always worked.

"I did." There was silence on the other end of the line. Gage waited.

"Shit. It's you, isn't it? I knew I wasn't so lucky as to be rid of you. What the fuck do you want?" Anger was replaced by genial hatred.

"I want to give you something."

"A bullet to the head? I don't think I'm interested."

"I have no reason to kill you." *Not today.*

"Of course you do. It's in the blood. But if you aren't trying to kill me right now, tell me what you want or stop wasting my time. I'm a busy man."

"I just thought you should know that Jack Cavuto's boys are poaching on your territory." He hoped Viktor took the bait.

"I'm listening."

"It seems they have branched out to prostitution, and they are doing it in your backyard."

"And you know where?" He couldn't hide the eagerness in his voice.

"Yes." He gave Viktor the address Nicky had found.

"What did Cavuto do to piss you off that you would tell me this?"

"Rape and murder."

"So which one bothers you, that some girl got raped, or that you didn't get paid to kill her?"

"I don't kill women unless they try to kill me first. You know that."

"You always were a pussy that way. So what's in this for you?"

"Consider it a peace offering." He smiled, knowing each would happily kill the other, given the chance.

"As if such a thing could exist between us. I'll look into it, providing you tell me why you care." He would look into it either way.

"An associate of mine is concerned. She does not approve of their business."

"She? Are you talking about Cavuto's stalker girl?" Viktor laughed.

"Someone is stalking Cavuto? What kind of person would do that?"

"A stupid, blonde party girl who used to hang out at one of his clubs until she went nuts. Attacked one of his guys a couple years ago. No one knows why. Then she tried to set the police on him. You know how well that works out in this town." Viktor's tone was light, friendly. "He looked for her for a little while, but she dropped out of sight. Everyone thought she was dead. Now word is that he's looking for her to make sure she is. Tell me you did not pick up that trash."

"Interesting story, but not my concern." Gage kept his voice even.

"No? Here I had hoped you were fucking her. It would be what she deserved, to have scum like you on top of her. And it would be what you deserved to have a junkie whore convince you to do her dirty work." Viktor was less subtle about the bait he threw out.

"I do not do charity cases, and I don't care what happens to Jack Cavuto or his whores. I did expect that you would, as it affects your bottom line."

"So your interest in this is not personal."

"Of course it is. I have a potential real estate deal in the area and his whorehouse is driving down property values."

"Legitimate business? I don't know that I should encourage you. Your kind tend to cause trouble wherever you live."

"Only when your kind decide to start killing us."

"This is a new world. We should leave the old fights alone," Viktor cautioned.

"You mean that we should leave each other alone. I agree that would be best. I have given you information. Do with it as you will."

"And if I do nothing?"

"I have said I have no reason to come for you. Do yourself a favor and keep it that way."

"It's almost worth pissing you off to see who would win. But I'm getting old, and such things are better left to young men."

"Stupid young men with nothing to lose," Gage agreed. The threat was implicit.

"We have no other business. God send that it will ever be so." Viktor hung up.

Gage sat in his office until he was calm. There was nothing he would like more than to target Viktor Stepanovic, but it would not be wise. Once, that would not have mattered, but Viktor was right. They were getting old. Besides, if Viktor was a target, he would just go to ground, and Gage much preferred to know where the clever bastard was. With luck and planning, their paths would never cross again.

Deira was still asleep when he got upstairs. Viktor's words stayed with him. *Party girl. Junkie whore.* She had been an addict. *Is an addict.* He knew there was no past tense when it came to addiction. He stood by the bed watching her, as if he could learn more from her sleeping form. She did not look so innocent now.

"Wake up," he said, pulling the covers back.

"What time is it?" She barely opened one eye to regard him.

"Time to get up. We have things to do today."

"Okay." She sounded confused.

He dressed in silence and went downstairs.

Katya was packed, her bags by the door. She was making breakfast and humming a tune he remembered from his childhood. He listened for a moment, then went to the basement, emerging to set a locked case beside her bags.

Deira came down a few minutes later. Katya waved him to the stove and led her to the bathroom to check on her injuries. It didn't take long, which told him that Deira would be recovered in time to do the job. He knew she would insist on being there. He just wasn't sure he wanted her to be.

They ate breakfast quickly so Katya could make her train. On the way, she and Deira talked like old friends. He did not hear what they said. When Katya got out at the train station, Deira gave her a hug and thanked her for her help. Then she got in the front passenger seat and waited.

"Take care of yourself up there." Gage tried to shake off the feeling that he sounded like his father.

"I always do, Uncle Charlie." She regarded him seriously. "You take care, too. It's hard to be your cricket from so far away, and I think you need one right now."

"Don't worry about me, kitten. I will be fine. We will all be fine. And you will call me when you get home so I don't worry, yes?"

She rolled her eyes at him but agreed. He kissed her forehead and whispered a blessing in her ear. It was what Karol would have done. She smiled and turned away, disappearing into the station.

"So," Deira said as he got into the truck, "what are we doing today?"

He didn't answer, instead concentrating on getting through traffic that was thicker than usual for a Saturday. They were on the highway before he spoke.

"The night we met, you were on pump," he started. She was instantly wary.

"Kind of hard to hide that," she said.

"It was not the first time."

"No. I'm not so stupid as to try a drug for the first time when I've got a job to do. What's this about?"

"How often?" He stared straight ahead.

"Once in awhile when I was younger. Then not for a couple of years. Not until that night. I don't really like the way it makes me feel. Never did. Why are you asking me this?"

"I need to make sure you are not going to be tempted to take drugs when we do the job."

"Hell no! I just told you I don't like it. I'm sure as hell not going to go out looking for it when every dealer in town is probably looking for me. Jesus!" She threw her hands up.

"That is good. Because if I think you are on drugs that night, I will kill you myself." He glanced at her.

"Well thanks for the warning." Her eyes narrowed. "What brought this on?"

"Planning. I need to have complete control of what is going on that night. You need to understand that. If you do not follow my lead, it would be safer to kill you."

"Safer for you maybe."

"Safer for all of us."

"That was twice," she said, looking out the window. "Just like the night we met."

He frowned but said nothing.

"I don't see how killing me protects anyone." She looked over at him.

"If you are caught, you will tell them everything. I might be able to escape, but Nicky might not. I do not want to think about what could happen to Katya."

"I wouldn't tell them shit. I'm not as weak as you think I am."

"It is not weakness to break under torture. It is what happens."

"Had a lot of experience with that?" She forced herself to ask.

"Yes." He kept his eyes on the road.

"And would you rather someone had killed you?"

"At the time, yes."

"So you would prefer take me down yourself instead of seeing if I could survive."

"It would be kinder. You have no idea what men are capable of doing to get what they want."

"You'd be surprised at the things I know about men."

"These men will not worry about being careful. They will not worry about getting caught. They will hurt you in ways you did not know you could be hurt. And when they have tired of that, they will kill you. Some of them will enjoy the torture more, some the killing. The end result is the same. I would spare you such an end." He looked at her. "Do not force me to that."

"I will do whatever you say. As usual." The last was muttered.

"Good choice."

He kept his eyes on the road, his face still. He would not tell her that he had not been the one being tortured. Some things should remain secret.

Chapter 22 - Target Practice

It's a good idea to know what you're aiming for.

□

Gage took the next exit, merging onto a two lane road. Deira stared out the window, though there was little to see, just fields on either side, the occasional farm house providing the only variety. He could not tell if he had hit a nerve or just insulted her. The end result was the same. She was angry, but at least she had learned to hold it in check.

He turned down a country road. She looked at him sharply.

"Assuming you aren't going to shoot me and bury me in a field, where are we going?"

"You will see."

They were nearing a long, low building at the end of the road. They passed a sign with multiple warnings against trespassing. Gage ignored it and parked between a rusty, black pickup truck and a pristine, grey Saturn convertible. The latter made him smile. He got out of his truck, taking the metal case from the back seat and motioning for Deira to follow him.

"What is this place?" she asked.

"A private shooting range. I want to see how well you handle a gun."

"You could have said so."

"It was more entertaining to annoy you."

"Sometimes I hate you," she said with surprisingly little malice.

"Most people do."

They walked into a small office. A young man was sitting behind a low counter, the back of his chair tilted to rest against the wall. He looked up from his magazine. Gage nodded to him and signed the register.

"Good to see you, Chuck. It's been awhile." The chair legs hit the floor. The man ran his hand through already tousled brown hair.

"Good to see you, too, Jake," Gage said. His accent was gone again. "I've been wanting to come, but you know how it is."

"Yeah. Who's your friend?" He dropped the magazine and regarded Deira, stopping just short of ogling. She had expected that the bruises would shield her from that sort of attention but apparently not.

"Gina, this is Jake."

Jake got up to shake her hand, a lopsided grin on his face as he looked from Gage to her.

"You licensed?"

"Of course," Deira said. She showed him her firearms ID card.

"Gotta ask." He held up his hands and backed away. Gage put the guest fee on the counter.

"Rifle range is all yours. Kelli is trying out her new Glock on the pistol range. I have no idea where Frank is. Probably on the patio drinking. His wife doesn't let him do that at home anymore."

Gage looked at him sharply.

"I have his gun and his keys. You got nothing to worry about. Have fun shooting." Jake sat down and picked up his magazine.

"Chuck?" Deira whispered as soon as the office door closed.

"Let it go, princess," Gage murmured. She laughed quietly as she followed him down the hall, towards the sound of gunfire.

A petite brunette stood in the middle bay, firing steadily. Her brown hair fell to her shoulders, bangs just brushing the protective glasses. She finished up the clip with a huge smile on her face. Gage watched her for a moment, amused. When she pushed the button to retrieve her target, he moved past her, then turned to regard the target. The chest area was sprinkled with bullet holes, and there was a perfect head shot. Just one. He whistled his approval when she removed her earmuffs.

"I think I missed my calling as a hit man," the woman laughed, removing the glasses. Deira flinched. Gage did not react at all.

"You'd be a better cop, Kelli. You like order," he said.

"True. My Viking heritage is inclined to raids on the unsuspecting anyway. Come to think of it, the Irish side favors that, too. But the Irish cop thing is so overdone." Kelli took down the target and turned to face him, her brown eyes bright. "My talent will just have to be wasted, I guess."

"The Irish explains the short," Gage said.

"You do realize that I already have a gun out and loaded, and you don't, right?" She tucked her hair behind her ear and stepped back towards the gun, smiling. He didn't move. She didn't reach for it.

"Gina, meet Kelli, the woman who keeps every man here from feeling smug."

"Not likely. Most of them don't know how to feel any other way." Kelli stepped past him to shake Deira's hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Nice shooting," Deira said.

"Thanks." Kelli looked down at the target and then at her gun. There was something akin to lust in her gaze. "I waited years for this gun. Now all I want to do is shoot it. Good thing I can come here or I'd be tempted to shoot every squirrel in sight, and I'm pretty sure the condo association would frown on that. Still, it'd be wicked fun."

"You have my card if you need someone to bail you out," Gage said, moving to the last bay.

Deira began to follow him, but Kelli touched her arm lightly.

"Don't worry about being nervous. He knows what he's doing, and rumor has it that he's pretty good. But don't treat him like a god or anything. He's just another yahoo with a gun." Kelli kept her voice low.

"Thanks for the advice," Deira answered, trying very hard to suppress nervous laughter.

Kelli loaded another target and replaced her earmuffs and goggles. Within seconds, she was back in her trance.

Gage had the case open and was checking the guns. He suspected the Glock would work for Deira. Her hands were big enough for it. There was no science to it; some guns just fit and others didn't. In the end, it would be her choice. He hoped she chose that one. He didn't want to let go of the other two. They were much harder to trace. He had never brought them out here. He was glad Kelli had her new toy to keep her occupied. She was less likely to be watching. He closed the case.

Deira waited patiently while Gage put the gun together. He handed her a pair of glasses.

"I assume you were taught to shoot," he said.

"Fine time to ask, but yes. That was part of my training." Neither of them would mention Sticks by name, even if there was no one around to hear.

He loaded a target, handed her earmuffs and put on his own. Then he handed her the gun. It was the single most trusting thing he could do. She took it from him and checked it. *Smart girl.* He could see her checking her grip, testing the weight of the gun and the sight. When the target was in place, she glanced over her shoulder at him. He nodded, and she began firing.

Her smile didn't match Kelli's for intensity, but he was glad to see it. Her stance was acceptable, despite obvious tension. He watched her shoulders drop as she laid the gun down and waited for the target to come forward. There was a line of holes from the lower chest to the shoulders. A quick count told him that several rounds had missed.

"I shifted up," she muttered, shaking her head.

"Not unusual," he said. "Compensate on the next round."

He put a hand on her shoulder when she reached for the gun.

"Let me help." He stood behind her and positioned her arms, then stepped back, letting her make her own adjustments.

The second target was much cleaner. Any one of them would be enough to stop an assailant, if not kill him.

"Is your injured hand giving you any trouble?" he asked.

"It hurts a little, but it's not affecting my shooting. I'm just not that good."

"Good enough, if it comes down to it. With planning and luck, it should not be an issue. Go again."

He switched out guns. She didn't care for the Magnum at all, saying it was too heavy. He was glad. That had come from Israel, via various channels, and would be hard to replace. The HK USP was better, but she still preferred the Glock.

"Your turn," she said, stepping back.

He picked up the Magnum and set up a target. The world fell away. There was nothing but him, the gun, and the target. He knew Deira was behind him. He was aware of Kelli's target as it slid towards her, but he was not with them. When his target came forward, there was little left of the center. Of course, there wasn't a lot of distance between him and the paper target, and it was neither shooting at him nor running away. It was much harder in the field.

As he switched pistols and set up for another round, he wondered why firing a gun did not trigger war memories the way low-flying airplanes or backfiring cars did. Maybe it was familiarity. He had spent years shooting at people and being shot at in return, though never with weapons of any quality. Gun battles made sense to him. Watching villages explode as the attackers flew away did not. It was amazing that he had lived through his early years. Target in place, he began to fire. The results were the same no matter which gun he used.

He finished with the Glock. It was a very good weapon but not his favorite. The others were already in the case when Kelli approached to see how he had done. He glanced at the case to make sure it was closed. She wasn't looking at it. Her eyes were fixed on the target.

"Damn. You really are as good as they say." Kelli looked up at him.

"I didn't know they talked about me." Gage said.

"You know this place, it's a cross between pissing contest and gossip with most of these guys. Not many of them have seen you shoot, but the rumors are out there anyway."

"Oh? What do they say?"

"They figure you for ex-military. Best story is that you were a sniper. "

"Is that so? I'm flattered. The truth isn't that exciting. I just grew up around guns and like them. I was never in the army. You can tell them that if you want."

"What, and burst the bubble? Not me. Let them think what they want. It gives them something to do instead of razzing me about shooting like a girl." She rolled her eyes. "They haven't seen me with the pistol yet."

"That ought to shut them up."

She grinned at him, nodding. "I'm really looking forward to the shoot on Saturday. You should come."

"Unfortunately, I have plans this weekend. But the next time I run into you, I want to hear all about it." Gage returned her smile.

"Deal." Kelli walked away, humming.

Gage put away the Glock and locked the case. Deira followed him out, thanking Jake on the way. There were more cars and trucks on the lot now, and the sound of gunfire could be heard from the outdoor range, punctuated by the occasional whoop. The grey convertible was gone.

"So where do we go from here?" Deira asked.

"Back to the house. I need to clean the guns and make a call."

"I could use a bath and a nap, if that's okay."

He nodded. "If the security system has not been triggered, I will take you home tonight."

"You can check that remotely?"

"Yes."

"You didn't tell me that," she said sharply.

"You never asked. I did not think it was important. The alarm will send me a coded alert if it is triggered or shut off. I configured it that way for situations such as the one you are currently in."

"Where's the code to tell me you're keeping an eye on me?"

"I should have thought that my wanting to know what is going on would be a given, princess."

"You're a control freak."

"Of course I am. That also should have been clear to you from the beginning. Were you not paying attention?" He could not suppress his amusement.

"Not well enough, apparently."

"You should work on that."

"Next time I hook up with a hit man, I'll keep that in mind," she said.

"If it is anyone but me, I would suggest you be particularly wary." His amusement was gone.

"Even if I live through this, there won't be a next time. I need to do this for my sister, but when it's over, I'm done."

"I am glad to hear that." He glanced at her. "You could leave the job to me and be done with it now."

"Nice try, but no. I'm going to finish what I started, one way or another."

"So will I."

Chapter 23 - Kiss and Tell

Chapter 23 of 36

When certain lines are crossed, there's no going back.

□

Gage cleaned the guns while Deira soaked in the tub. His thoughts kept going back to what Viktor had said about her. He was not inclined to take anything at face value. The background he had done on Deira had confirmed the basics of her story, but he could not confirm her drug use unless she had been arrested and there was no record of that.

He needed more information. He sent a message to Nicky, then secured the guns. Until he knew more, he was not giving Deira a gun. He went to his office and closed the door. There was no way Nicky would have been able to find anything in such a short time, but he called her anyway. She picked up on the third ring.

"We have a problem," she said.

"Not your usual greeting, Nick." He leaned back in his office chair and closed his eyes. "Tell me about the problem."

"There's something wrong with your girl."

"Other than being battered, bruised and in my house?"

She snorted. "Yeah, besides that. Her story doesn't pan out."

"In what way?"

"Well, for one thing, she doesn't have a sister."

He went still, stifling the alarm bells in his head.

"I want everything you know. Now."

"She's mostly what she says. Middle class, college grad, two brothers, even the jobs match up. There's a six month gap in her employment, variously explained as traveling abroad or going back to school or the ever popular family reasons. Whatever it was, she dropped out of sight for a little while, two years ago."

"I found the same information." Gage said.

"I'm sure you did. What you probably don't know is that she did rehab. That's the missing six months."

"How do you get this information?" he asked.

"Do I ask you how you get your work? No. So don't ask me how I do mine."

"So she has no arrest record, but she does have addictions. That is not unusual. What about contacts on the other side?"

"I love how you think there are sides. It's cute."

"There are always sides. Mine and the target's."

"Other than the fact that she used drugs, I can't find any connection to Cavuto, but that doesn't mean it isn't there." She did not bother to say she would keep looking. It was what he would expect.

"Is she setting me up?"

"If I thought that, she'd be dead already."

"You do care." He never doubted it.

"Please. Let's not go there. I just thought I should give you the heads up, since she's already in your pocket. What you do with that is up to you, but I'm done."

"With the job?" he asked.

"No, with spending time with her alone. I'll finish my end of things. There wasn't much more I could teach her anyway. If you trust her enough to do the job, fine. But she's your problem now, and we're square."

"Fair enough. I will deal with this. You dug all this up before I asked for it. Why?"

"It's what I do. I had a feeling that something wasn't right so I followed the data."

"Thank you."

"I didn't do it for you. I'm in this, too."

"I will find out what is going on and let you know if it means a change in plans."

"Watch your back," she said, then hung up.

He took several deep breaths. Nothing Deira had told him was true. If he had to, he would drop her and walk away. *Would you?* He did not want it to come to that. He wanted her to have a good reason for lying to him. For her sake, he hoped she did.

He was standing by the window when she came into his room, wrapped in a towel. She went to the corner where she had left her bag. He closed the door behind him and leaned against it. She turned to look at him.

"We have unfinished business."

"Does it involve killing me?"

"No."

"Well, then, let's get to it." She held the towel with one hand, the other on her hip. She was expecting conversation.

He moved towards her with feral grace. Her eyes widened as she realized his intention. He stopped in front of her, just a little too close. She tentatively reached up to touch his face, faltering when the towel slipped. He removed it and threw it at the hamper, not looking to see where it landed. She took a deep breath.

Without a word, he picked her up and carried her to the bed. She watched him get undressed, eyes shining. She reached out for him when he got into bed, but he caught her hand, shaking his head. As he kissed her, he took her other hand. He pinned both wrists on the pillow above her head, holding them with one hand. His free hand slid across her hips, then up to her ribs. The bruises were healing, but she gave a sharp intake when he brushed them. His hand kept moving, palm gently sliding over her nipples, making them pucker.

"I want —" she started. He stopped her with a kiss.

"That is a good game to play, princess. Tell me what you want."

"You."

"Not specific enough. Tell me exactly what you want."

"I want you to touch me more."

His hand slid over her breasts, her stomach, her hip. Her breathing came faster as he stroked her thigh.

"Like this?" He slipped a finger inside her.

She arched her back. "Yes," she groaned as he continued to explore, teasing her.

He knelt between her legs, still holding her wrists.

"What do you want?"

"I want to touch you." She struggled to free her wrists.

"Not this time. What else do you want?"

"I want you inside me."

"Are you sure?" He needed her to be sure. *Say no.*

She did not hesitate. "Yes."

"Remember you said that," he whispered. He slid inside of her as she arched to meet him. And then he did not move. She pushed against him.

"I want —"

"No, princess, it is not your turn."

He supported his weight on the hand holding her wrists, satisfied by her reaction to the momentary pain. He opened a drawer on the nightstand and took out a small black case, flipping it open with his thumb. Inside was a syringe. Her eyes flicked from the box to his face.

"Do you know what that is?" he asked, beginning to move again.

She shook her head, confusion and fear warring with lust.

"That is an artificial adrenaline cocktail, hospital grade. No pump on the street is that strong."

She licked her lips unconsciously.

"There is a part of you right now that would like nothing more than to throw me off of you and slam that needle into your arm." He stopped moving, watching her eyes, not knowing if the need was for him or the drug.

"I told you..."

"You told me lies, princess. Many of them." He began to move, slowly sliding in and out of her. "But not about this. This you were honest about."

She tossed her head from side to side as she moved with him. He settled his weight on his hips, pinning her so she could not move. She tried again to free her hands.

"This is better than fighting, no?" He thrust hard.

A sound escaped her lips, half moan, half cry, all pleasure.

"Fighting me does not work out well for you. Lying to me will not either." He stopped moving. "So now it is time for what I want. And I want the truth. Were you a junkie?"

"No," she spat, not looking at him.

"Then why rehab?"

Shock combined with shame, then morphed into anger. "Because I didn't want to become a junkie, and I sure as hell wasn't going to be anyone's whore."

She turned her head, facing away from the needle. She was still. And furious.

"You were the one dosed in college." It was a guess.

"Yes."

He kissed her neck.

"That was not so hard to admit, was it?" he murmured in her ear.

She shook her head. "I didn't want anyone to know," she whispered. "My brothers got me into rehab. And while I was gone, Kara disappeared."

"It was not your fault," he said, slowly beginning to move again.

"Everything is my fault."

"Not that." He drove into her. "And not this. This was a choice. Tell me to stop and I will."

"Interrogating me or fucking me?" She slammed her hips to meet his.

"I will have answers from you. The sex can stop at your request."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that."

He let her wrists go and braced himself for what she might do.

She reached over to the nightstand and shoved the case off of it, twisting to grind against him as she did. She grabbed his arm, pulled herself up as if to kiss him, then sunk her teeth into his shoulder.

He dropped onto her, grabbed her waist and rolled so she was on top of him. His shoulder throbbed but did not bleed. He slid his hands to her hips and thrust up. Then he took his hands off of her.

"Your choice, princess. What do you want?"

She slapped him hard. He caught her hand when she tried it again, locking his fingers with hers. She pushed backwards, using the resistance of his hold to push him deeper into her. He released her hand and held her hips as he rose to meet her. There were no more words. Her eyes glazed over as she rode him, taking out her fury on his body until she came, screaming. Then she laid her head on his shoulder and sobbed. He stroked her back, saying nothing.

A few moments later, she began to move again. He rolled her under him and stopped, waiting. She lifted her hips in assent. Her hands slid over his chest, his arms, his stomach. It was no longer a fight. She wrapped her legs around his hips, drawing him deeper, moving with him. Then she dug her nails in and raked them down his back, and he exploded into her.

"That was not right," she muttered a few minutes later. He was curled around her.

"Which, the interrogation or the sex?"

"Both. Couldn't we have had that conversation at the dinner table?"

"We can have the rest of it there, if you would like. Or we could do this again." He kissed the back of her neck.

"You think I'd want to do that again?" she snarled, moving away from him. He pulled her back to him, slipping his hand between her legs. She gasped when his fingers stroked her.

"You might. As torture goes, it is better than most."

"You're sick."

"I am also right." He continued to play with her.

"I hate you."

"You want to, but you don't."

"I should."

"Yes, you should," he whispered as she came again. He held her until she fell asleep.

Gage leaned against the counter, waiting for the coffee to finish brewing. He turned the black case over in his hands. The needle was full of saline solution. He took it out and depressed the plunger, watching the liquid shoot into the sink. He put the empty syringe back in the case and returned it to his first aid kit. Taking his coffee and a cup of tea, he went to get Deira up.

She was face down in the middle of his bed, her head resting on one arm. Her hair covered her face. The sheet had bunched at her waist. He set down the cups and reached out to stroke her back. She was so lovely. And he was an animal for what he had done. He sat down on the bed and rubbed his temples.

He turned his head when she stirred. She sat up, shoving her hair out of her face. It fell back again in a tangled mess. The sheet slipped off as she reached past him for the tea. She leaned back against the head board, knees drawn up.

"So, what do you have in store for me next? Waterboarding?" She sipped her tea.

"I hate mopping more than laundry. I would rather you volunteer the truth."

"Would you? I thought you enjoyed that." She waved her hand over the bed.

"We can continue this in the kitchen," he said, rising.

"I think we should finish up here. No reason not to. Ask me whatever you want."

"Are you setting me up?"

"Would I tell you if I was? Not likely, so there's no point in answering that, but I will anyway. The truth is that I thought you were dead, just like everyone else did, so I couldn't have been setting you up. Meeting you was a mistake."

"You mean an accident."

"That, too."

"Why are you going after Cavuto's men?"

"I told you the truth about that. They raped and killed my sister." Her hand shook. She set down the cup.

"You don't have a sister."

"Not anymore. But I did."

"Nicky found no record of her."

"Ah, the information goddess stumbles. Nicky didn't look at foster records, did she? Kara was my foster sister from the time she was three. Her crackhead mother wouldn't release custody so my parents couldn't adopt her. That didn't make her any less my sister. I'll give Nicky Kara's information so she can confirm that if it will make you happy."

"None of this makes me happy," he said.

"Some of it did." She stretched and got out of the bed. "Anything else you need to know, or can I get dressed now?"

"One more thing." He waited until she turned to face him. "Did you attack one of Cavuto's men in a bar several years ago?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because he was trying to whore me out. I would have happily killed him, but I didn't know how. Now I do." She pulled on a pair of jeans and raked her fingers through her hair.

"I should take you home," he said, turning to leave.

"Because you're afraid if I stay you'll take me and mean it," she said softly, leaning down to grab a bra and t-shirt.

He leaned against the door frame and closed his eyes. *I am sorry.* He could not say it. There had been enough lies between them.

Chapter 24 - Devil to Pay

Chapter 24 of 36

There are ways and ways to make amends.

□

Deira stared out the window of the truck, letting her focus go soft. The streetlights were a blur, a line of halos mocking the damned. She didn't want to see, didn't want to think. She couldn't stop feeling. Her ribs ached a little, her wrists more. She shook her head, not wanting to catalog the other sensations. The scent of him was everywhere.

"I understand if you are angry with me." His voice filled the truck.

"Not at all," she said.

"I want to," he started. She cut him off.

"I think I've had enough of what you want for one night. I don't need an explanation. And if you offer me an apology, I might have to hurt you."

"It would only be fair."

"There you go again with the idea that things should be fair. They aren't. Never have been. So if you're looking for me to assuage whatever guilt you have over what happened, you're shit out of luck." She finally looked at him. His hands were tight on the steering wheel.

"I liked that," she said, clearly articulating each word. "It was exactly what I expected from you."

He responded as though she had slapped him. She sat back in the seat and smiled. A few minutes later, he pulled up in front of her apartment.

"I would like to come up," he said.

"Why not?" She laughed and got out of the truck. She took her bag from the back seat and headed for the door.

"Wait!" he called, grabbing a case and following quickly. "The code has changed. I forgot to tell you."

"Distracted, were you?" She unlocked the door, stepping aside so he could disarm the alarm. He glared at her, then punched in the numbers.

"I will write it down for you."

"Six, seven, zero, five, three, five, one. I got it."

She followed him up the stairs. He bent down to check the tape.

"Sort of low-tech, don't you think? I mean, there is an alarm."

"I know how to disable such things, so I am fairly sure others do. Sometimes the old tricks are useful, especially if people are thinking all the security measures are state of the art."

"Good point." She unlocked the door and turned on the light.

She dropped her bag by the couch and went to the kitchen. She put the cup in the sink and ran water in it.

"So," she said, leaning against the counter, "are you here for the obligatory after sex nightcap?"

"No. I have things to do yet tonight."

"And you never drink."

"You noticed."

"I notice a lot of things. Someone taught me observation was key to survival."

"I am glad you took it to heart."

"You say that now." She laughed. "So you aren't here for a drink. And I know you're not here for more sex. So what is it?"

"This." He set the case down on the counter.

"That's a gun case."

"Very observant." He handed her a key. She put it in her pocket.

"Are you going to open it?"

"Is it the Glock?"

"Yes."

"Then there's no need. I'll take it into my room when I go to bed." Giving her the gun had been a huge act of trust. There was no way she was going to take it out while he was there. His shoulders loosened, and she knew she had done the right thing.

"Thank you," she said. "I'll return it to you when this is all over."

"That will not be necessary. You may find you enjoy shooting as a hobby." He stressed the last word.

She snorted. "Yeah, I suck at knitting. And scrapbooking is right out."

"I need to go," he said, turning towards the door.

"Of course you do."

"I will call you tomorrow to discuss the final arrangements for the job."

"Sure you will." She was too drained to moderate her tone.

He turned to regard her, raising one eyebrow.

"Men always say they'll call the next day." She walked past him. "But they rarely do."

"I will."

"Uh huh." She opened the door. "Get out. I'm tired and sore, and there's a big glass of whiskey with my name on it."

"Get some sleep," he said as he walked down the stairs. "And do not drink too much."

"You need to decide if you want to be my lover or my guardian," she called as he walked down the stairs. Then she closed the door.

He was left in darkness. He cracked the front door, reset the alarm, and got back in his truck. He took out the cell phone Nicky had given him to track Cavuto's men and checked the call volume. It had been slow for most of the day. In the past twenty minutes, there had been eight calls. He put in an earpiece and began to drive. If something was going down, there would be more calls.

He did not have to wait long.

"What is it?" The voice belonged to one of the bodyguards Gage had seen at the warehouse. He checked the number and confirmed it. Butch. *Another fucking dog's name.*

"There's been a lot of traffic by the house." The voice belonged to Franco, a small, squirrely man with bad teeth who ran the whorehouse when he wasn't selling pump to kids. It wasn't difficult to figure out how he managed to work both jobs.

"So? Maybe you'll do good business tonight. You could use it. The numbers have been down this week. The other guys want their cut, so make some fucking money for us, or I'm going to tell Cavuto you're working on the side."

"I'll tell him you're part of it." Franco said.

"Like he'd believe you over me. Just do your job. Invite whoever it is in and put those bitches to work for a change." Butch wasn't known for his kindness to women. Or dogs.

"Well, they ain't getting out. A coupla cars have been by a few times. Something ain't right." Franco had better instincts than Butch, who had never run the streets.

"You're getting worked up over nothing. Don't call me again unless there's a real problem." The call ended abruptly.

Gage pulled into an abandoned gas station and closed the cell phone. He changed into an oversized sweatshirt, covered with stains. It was not much of a disguise but there was little need for more. If Franco was correct, the Croatians were getting ready to move in. The timing was right. Butch would have a lot of explaining to do after tonight. That's what Cavuto got for hiring muscle out of the gym. Too many blows to the head had resulted in Butch being unable to see possible consequences to his actions. It would not matter soon.

He turned into a residential neighborhood. It had been nice a generation ago. Most of the big houses had fallen into disrepair. The few grassy yards seemed to have grown a collection of cars up on blocks. The ones with bare ground were littered with garbage, some of it human. He wished he had borrowed one of Manny's beaters, but instantly rejected the notion. He would not put the mechanic at risk. Drug dealers had nice cars, and this neighborhood was rife with them, so his truck did not stand out.

He pulled into the parking lot of a convenience store that was shuttered for the night, parking in the shadows next to the dumpster. He put the gun in the pocket of the sweatshirt and waited.

Franco was right about one thing. Someone was cruising the block. A couple of someones. Two cars drove by twice in forty-five minutes, older American models, more than a little beat up. Both held at least two men, possibly more. It was difficult to tell. Gage hoped this was more than sloppy recon. If they did not act in the next hour or so, he would, but he preferred to wait until chaos erupted.

Not for the first time, he regretted giving up cigarettes. They would help pass the time. Of course, they would also make it difficult to remain hidden, which was why he had quit in the first place. He only craved them when he was doing a job.

It was almost midnight when the cars parked, one at either end of the block. If they weren't worried about getting back to their cars quickly, they were planning a bloodbath. Three men got out of one, two out of the other. They had not bothered hiding their guns. Gage recognized the leader and suppressed the urge to start shooting. He would have other chances. He picked up the phone and dialed Franco's number.

"Butch?"

"Get the girls out the back door. Now." He hung up before Franco could ask questions. It was the best he could do.

Lights came on in several rooms. Viktor's men were almost to the door. Gage pulled up the hood of the sweatshirt and got out of his truck. Hunching his shoulders, he shuffled across the parking lot, hands jammed in the pocket of the sweatshirt.

The door flew open and several women ran out. Some were obviously drugged and seemed to have no idea of what to do once they got outside. Gage dropped his head as some of the more sober ran past him, towing their strung out friends.

Viktor's men stepped up to the door, effectively blocking the stragglers. There was nothing to be done about it. A fair amount of screaming came from the house, only some of it from the women who had not gotten out in time, but no gunfire. It would not be long. With the Croatians, chaos was assured.

He walked down the sidewalk. When he passed the first of the battered cars, he doubled over as if he was throwing up. Taking a metal spike from his boot, he slammed it into one of the tires, then straightened up and continued down the sidewalk. They might all get away in the second car, but it would cost them a few minutes, maybe enough time for the police to show up.

The gate next to the house was opening slowly. He stepped into the shadow and leaned against the privacy fence surrounding one of the few decent looking houses. As the first shot was fired inside the house, the gate flew open. Franco dashed out, looking around wildly, clutching his cell phone. *He should have taken a gun.* The slimy rat had slipped out the back and left the women to face the Croatians alone. Gage pushed off the wall as Franco dashed across the street.

"Hey, buddy," Gage slurred, stumbling into the little man and clutching his arm.

"Don't touch me, you fucking wino." Franco pushed at Gage's hand.

"You're in a hurry to leave," Gage said, straightening a little. He grabbed Franco's hand, pulled it back, and snapped his wrist. Franco screamed, dropped the cell phone and reached for the gun he didn't have. Gage grabbed him and slammed him into the fence. He looked up and down the block. The whores had left and no one had come out of the house. There was plenty of noise from inside.

"You fucking lunatic! I'm going to kill you!"

"You won't have the chance." Gage pulled his gun. "This is for Kara."

"You're gonna kill me for some piece of shit junkie? Why?" Franco was trying to stall him but the inevitability of death was in his eyes.

"Because I was a piece of shit junkie, and I have no use for people like you." Gage shot Franco in the chest. He bent over and picked up the casing and Franco's phone. Both were shoved in the pocket of the sweatshirt before he turned and shuffled down the street.

He cut through the dark alley behind the houses and headed back to his truck. He could hear sirens in the distance, but he did not increase his pace. A perimeter check told him the convenience store parking lot was still empty. He opened the back of the truck, took off the sweatshirt and put it in a plastic bag. He used baby wipes to ensure his face and hands were clean, then added those to the bag before placing it in a small tote.

He got in his truck, threw it in reverse and turned out of the parking lot, away from the carnage. As much as he would enjoy watching Viktor's men scramble, he needed to be gone well before the police showed up. He did not turn on his headlights until he rounded the next corner. He tried like hell to fight the adrenaline rush so he could keep to the speed limit and mostly succeeded. There was nothing he could do about the smile on his face.

Chapter 25 - No Place Like Home

Chapter 25 of 36

There's more to where you live than a building.

□

Deira opened her eyes, then quickly shut them again. The open curtains made the room too bright. She stretched, cataloging the aches. Not all of them were bad. She sighed, looking at the clock. It had been a long time since she had slept in. Of course, it had been a very long time since she had put herself to sleep with whiskey. Nicky would be pissed. Her head throbbed. Pouring the extra tumbler to spite Gage had been a bad decision. He seemed to inspire those.

She stumbled to the bathroom, took three aspirin, and got into the shower. Twenty minutes later, her skin had wrinkled, her headache was fading, and she still had not come up with a good lie about why she was running late. She got out and wrapped herself in a towel.

She took two steps into the hallway before the smell of coffee made her stop.

"This is a good look for you," Gage said, glancing up. He held a cup of coffee and a newspaper.

She turned around and stalked to the bedroom, slamming the door behind her. It was juvenile but satisfying. She put on standard workout gear a white tank top and stretch leggings. Looking in the mirror, she decided nothing could be done about her red eyes. She ran a comb through her hair, pulled as much as she could away from her face and secured it with an elastic. Composure restored, she walked out to face him.

"What are you doing in my apartment?" She poured herself a cup of coffee.

"I brought you breakfast." He motioned towards the counter. "And a coffee maker."

There were bagels next to a container of cream cheese. Sliced melon had been arranged on a plate. Her stomach flipped. She poured herself some coffee and went to the refrigerator for milk. He had brought cream.

"You could have left me in your bed and saved yourself the trouble."

"Then we both would have gotten up late," he said.

"You're a cocky bastard."

"So I am told."

"What are you really doing here?"

"Waiting for you to recover from your hangover. We have work to do."

"Did you tell Nicky? I was supposed to go back today."

"That part of your training is over."

"Explains why she didn't call and yell at me for being late." She did not ask what had happened, doubting she would get an answer, but she had strong suspicions.

"What part of my training isn't done?" she asked.

He gave her a wolfish smile. She considered rolling up the newspaper and hitting him with it.

"Sticks called this morning. He was able to get the necessary components. I have a list you need to look over to ensure it is everything you need."

"You were supposed to call."

"I did not want to ruin your opinion of men. It would be unfair to the rest of them."

"You're maddening." She flopped down in a chair and instantly regretted it. Aches became pain with the impact. She worked to hide her discomfort.

"I have been told that, too." He went back to reading the paper.

"What's so interesting?" She took the paper and scanned the page, her eyes stopping at a photo.

Her heart raced. The paper shook in her hands. She set it down and looked at him. His expression gave away nothing.

"I know this guy," she said, pointing to the picture of Franco.

"Knew." He sipped his coffee while she read the article.

"Was this you?"

"No. I would never be so careless."

"Not the mess inside the house, the dead guy in the street." It was easier to focus on Franco than think about what had happened to the women imprisoned in that house. She could have ended up there. Kara had.

"The article says it was gang related. I believe it was more organized."

"You didn't answer the question."

"I did not need to. You know the answer."

"So we're back to three targets, not counting the jerks from the park."

"Smaller numbers make the job simpler. With Franco having been murdered, Cavuto will be more likely to keep two men close. Unless he kills them himself, which would be convenient but highly unlikely." He could have been discussing any business deal.

"Why would he kill his own men?"

"Because until last night, he did not know the whorehouse existed."

"I find that hard to believe."

"Everyone makes mistakes, princess. Even professionals. Work quietly enough and you can fool anyone, including your friends and lovers, into believing that everything is fine." Bitterness lined the assertion.

"I don't think I could do that. It's easier to walk away from friends and family, not worry about who knows which story."

"Was it so easy to leave your family?" His look was pointed.

She took their cups into the kitchen and refilled them, ignoring his question.

"So it's not really Cavuto gunning for me right now. It's his guys."

"That does little to change your situation. People want to kill you. Perhaps today it is not Jack Cavuto, but the job specifies he be removed, so that is what we will do." He took the paper from her.

"Oh, he wants to kill me, too or did." That wasn't what he'd wanted to do two years ago, but she was fairly sure there was a standing order to kill her now.

She managed to choke down half a bagel while going over the list Sticks had sent. He wasn't going to like the changes she'd made, but he wasn't the one who had to set the charges. He was used to working with bigger bombs. They were better suited for his hands. They were also extremely difficult to place discretely. Most of his clients didn't have to worry about discretion.

"Aren't you going to write this down?" she asked.

"It is not necessary."

"Yeah, it really is. If you screw up a part, I'm the one who has to deal with it. I don't care how good your memory is. Write it down. You can burn it later if it will make you feel better." She repeated the information for him. He wrote it down, the corners of his mouth turned up in the barest hint of a smile.

"What's so funny?"

"This is the first fit you have thrown that has not made me want to strangle you."

"I do not throw fits," she said, glaring at him.

He raised an eyebrow.

"You think anyone arguing with you is throwing a fit." She crossed her arms and sat back.

"That is why I work best alone."

"I'll make you a deal. I won't second guess you when it comes to the rest of the planning. You won't question my ability to do my part of the job. Okay?"

"It seems a reasonable compromise."

"You know, if your neck wasn't so thick, I'd have strangled **you** a long time ago."

"I do not think you would. You need me."

"I need you?" She bristled.

"More than you know." He put the list in his pocket and got up. "It is time to go."

He picked up the plates and went into the kitchen. She thought about stopping him from cleaning up but decided to hand him the cups instead. She went into her room and packed a bag. By the time she returned, the kitchen was spotless.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"To the lab."

"And why are we going there?"

"So you can figure out where to set the charges."

She stared at him, mouth slightly open. And then she began to laugh.

"Is there a problem?" he asked.

"Yeah." She kept laughing. "Give me a minute here."

She took a deep breath and figured she had enough control to speak.

"Going to the lab will give me a visual, but it's not going to do a damned thing to determine where I set charges. How I get in and out, sure, but that's about it. I need blueprints if you want to make sure we don't blow up the whole industrial park. Or us." She had expected Sticks to explain things to him.

"I have blueprints."

"Good, we'll need them when we talk to Sticks."

"That was not the plan."

"We have an agreement, remember? I'll do what I need to do, but if you want to make sure everything is perfect, then I need to talk to Sticks." She really needed to argue with Sticks about his faith in her, but that was another matter.

"That might be a problem."

"Why?"

"His staff is not fond of me. "There was an... altercation," he said.

"Shit. You beat up the moron twins, didn't you?" She didn't wait for an answer. "Not that I didn't want to beat on them fairly regularly, but it sort of complicates things."

"I will arrange to meet off-site."

"That won't work. He has reference material I may need." She shook her head. "Let me talk to him. We can probably do this in the training area without being seen."

"I will need a different vehicle," he said.

"They know your truck?" She could not stop the edges of her mouth from twitching, but she managed to suppress open laughter. It would only set him off.

He answered with a curt nod.

"Well then I guess a different car is in order. At least they're too stupid to have traced the plates."

"I was not stupid enough to have the real plates on the car." Now he was offended.

"Well that's a relief."

"You call Sticks. I will be back shortly. Change your shirt before I get back. White stands out too much." He turned and left.

She waited until she heard his truck start before she allowed herself to giggle. There was no stopping it after that.

Twenty minutes later, he returned in a primer gray pickup truck. She had managed to get herself under control.

"Nice wheels," she said, throwing her bag behind the seat and getting in. There was a Mexican blanket over the seat. She didn't want to see what the upholstery underneath looked like. The truck smelled of cigarettes and grease.

"Nice shirt," he said, looking her over. The only clean, dark shirt she had found was a tight, forest green V-neck. She had managed to find a pair of clean jeans. She'd even dug up matching socks.

He drove to the industrial park and turned on to the unfinished road. She gritted her teeth as the truck jolted and creaked. The suspension was almost nonexistent. She wondered if he had picked it to punish her.

"Great. The only thing that wasn't bruised in the fight was my ass, but now that's taken care of," she ground out.

"If you are not up to this, we can forgo the explosives, and you can stay home," he said.

"Shut up and drive."

She couldn't hide her relief when he pulled up to the stand of trees. He motioned for her to stay in the truck while he scouted the area. When he waved, she got out. She stuck the Glock in the waistband of her pants in case something went wrong. She was getting used to things going wrong.

He glanced at her, removed the gun and replaced it at the small of her back. He was not armed as far as she could tell.

The recon was relatively quick. He collected the stationary cameras while she looked at the lab through the camera zoom lens. She took pictures so she could compare locations with the blueprints. He assured her he had already done so, but Sticks would be irritated if she came to him without the right shots. They loaded the equipment into the truck and took off.

He pulled into an empty lot by a coffee shop advertising free wi-fi with purchase. He made sure the stationary cameras had uploaded the images then adjusted the rough schedule of the shift changes. He posted a message to Nicky on her secure bulletin board. She specialized in analyzing patterns and might see something they had missed.

Deira dumped the pictures from the camera onto the laptop. Then she hopped out of the truck and went to buy coffee as a way to repay the boosting of internet service. She was many things but not a thief.

It wasn't far to the storage facility. Familiarity warred with tension as they approached. She had spent over a year there. It was more like home than her old apartment had been. A very dysfunctional home, but it had been so long since she'd had a functional one that it hardly mattered.

"Go past the storage facility, and turn down the next road. There's a dirt driveway half a mile down on the left. Follow it and park by the bunker."

"Bunker?"

"It's good for training with stuff that catches fire."

The low, concrete building was barely visible from the turn. From a distance, it looked like ruins. The perception wasn't far off. At least one corner of the building had a hole in it. She remembered putting it there and smiled.

The accidental explosion had happened fairly early in her training, but she still thought Sticks was a lunatic for saying she could handle the explosives for this job. Not that she had a choice. She had figured out that Gage did not want her to kill anyone herself, and she would let him think she accepted that.

Sticks stood in the doorway. He lowered the shotgun when he recognized them. His eyes narrowed at the sight of Deira's bruised face and arm.

"He do this to you?" Sticks called, bringing the shotgun back up. Gage stiffened.

"Nope. This was all my doing. Cuz I'm just that good." Her drawl matched his, tone for tone.

"Want me to shoot him anyway?"

"Not right now." She approached Sticks. He set the gun down and smiled.

"Welcome home, baby. You coming back to stay?"

"Thanks, but I can't. Work to do. Besides, the way I figure it, you sold me for good money, and I'd hate to break a deal even if you did broker it behind my back."

Both men stared at her.

"What? You think I didn't know?" She looked from Sticks to Gage. The two men turned to each other, wary, accusation in their eyes.

"You two are a pair." She turned to Gage. "You're willing to give me a gun when I have plenty of incentive to shoot you." She looked at Sticks. "And you think I've got the

skills to blow up a building on purpose for a change. But neither one of you thinks I'm smart enough to figure out what you think and how you talk about me when my back is turned. Like that's a challenge."

She walked into the bunker, shaking her head.

Chapter 26 - Chain Reaction

Chapter 26 of 36

All sorts of things get cooked up.

□

The two men followed her in. She ignored them and inspected components laid out on a table. She glared at Sticks, then cleared a space on another table.

"I was told you wouldn't be back," he said.

"There's no reason to let it get like this." She waved her arm to encompass the work area.

"She's a neat freak," Sticks said to Gage.

"I would not have guessed."

"You should have what you need, sugar. How 'bout you make a Baby Bella?" Sticks turned to Gage. "Watch this."

Deira pulled her hair into a ponytail, put on a pair of latex gloves and began arranging components. Her movements were sure and efficient. Her focus did not waver. This was not a demonstration. She connected wires, twisted them in intricate patterns, and flipped the small package over to insert the fuse. She finally looked up.

"These aren't the right detonators."

"They'll do," Sticks said.

"No, you cheap bastard, they won't do. I don't like them. I don't trust them. So find me the ones I do like."

"I may not have what you want."

"Bullshit. You did know I was coming back, so you stocked up on things I prefer. Gage has a list. I want everything on it."

"She's a little pushy sometimes." Sticks shrugged.

"I have noticed."

Deira glared at both of them, turning the small bomb over in her hands. Sticks looked at her and left through a side door. She turned to Gage.

"You said you would leave this to me. I'm the one who has to set the explosives, so I'm going to do it my way."

"I am not the one standing in your way, princess."

"Then back me up."

"It would be foolish of me to do otherwise. You are holding a bomb."

"Without a detonator." She held up the device.

"Without the one you want. There is something that would do close to hand, yes?"

"Yes." She frowned at the clunky parts Sticks had brought her.

"Then you have my full support."

"Gee, thanks."

Sticks returned, set a box on the work table, then retreated to the far wall. Deira went back to work. Making bombs calmed her. She ignored how wrong that was.

"She's the best I've ever trained," Sticks said proudly. "Fastest, too."

The row of small packages grew in front of her. She continued building the deadly devices until she ran out of components. There would be plenty to do the job. She did not affix the detonators.

"I have not seen explosives like that," Gage said.

"That's because she designed these. They're small but beautiful." Sticks spoke with reverence.

"Easy to carry yet capable of blowing the hell out of a building. Well, properly placed, anyway." Deira glanced up. "So one of you should get the blueprints out."

Sticks cleared another table and began unrolling blueprints. Gage pulled up the images of the warehouse on his laptop and left Sticks to study them. He walked across the room until he had a clear view of the door, his truck, and Deira.

Watching her work was fascinating. Her movements had a rhythm, a strength of purpose, a sense of certainty. In her element, she was fearless. He knew he could not keep her out of danger. Certainly not on this job. Probably not ever.

She finished checking the packages and moved on to inspecting detonators, making a pile of those that were acceptable. She walked to a set of shelves and moved things around, coming back with a small box. She lined up the detonators, added extra wires and a pair of needle nosed pliers. She looked up. She was bruised and hung over, but her eyes were shining and her smile was brilliant. He had never found her so beautiful. He knew better than to say so.

She joined Sticks. "You have schematics for the gas and power lines going into this place?"

"Of course. Your friend was thorough."

"Yeah. He's known for that." She looked over at Gage. "Come here. I want to go over this with you."

"We need the sprinkler system to go off in order to clear the building. The only exit not padlocked is the loading dock, so they'll head out that way. If we start a fire in the office, it should trigger the sprinklers throughout the warehouse. I'd rather not use an explosive to do it because it would tip our hand. I don't want them locking people in to keep us from blowing more."

He nodded, looking at the blueprints.

"So I'm looking for suggestions," she prompted.

"I am thinking. Give me a moment."

"Take all the time you need." She turned to Sticks. "I'm not taking the explosives with me. I'll call you and arrange for a drop location."

"Now, see, that's not fair. I was thinking I'd like to see your first big job."

She looked up to see Gage's reaction to the idea, but he had left the building. She cleaned up her work station while she waited for him to come back. She examined the bombs, knowing they were the finest she had ever made and probably the last she ever would.

"I believe I have a solution to the sprinkler problem," Gage said from the doorway. He put away his phone as he crossed the room. "Nicky will arrange to have them malfunction."

"How?" she and Sticks asked at the same time.

"It turns out Cavuto never disabled the connection to the security company that installed the system." First the whorehouse, now lax security. Gage would not be the only one gunning for Cavuto's boys.

"Great, so they get an alert and we've got cops everywhere."

"That is what would have happened. Nicky is going to hijack the connection and set the sprinklers off herself."

"The timing will have to be exact," she said.

"The timing on all of this must be precise, or we will all be in trouble."

"God forbid we should get in trouble for blowing up a building and shooting people."

"I would prefer if neither of us ended up in prison."

"Any of us." She looked over at Sticks. He leaned against the table. He'd been standing too long. The strain of it showed on his face.

"Excuse me?" Gage's opposition to the idea showed in the set of his shoulders.

"Sticks wants to be there."

"No." At least he wasn't pacing.

"I'm not planning on getting in your way. I just want to see this. Think of it as a graduation ceremony," Sticks said.

"I think of this as a job. And it is already too complex for my taste."

"I'm not gonna screw with your plans. I'll sit back and watch. Besides, I don't think you want explosive residue in your truck." Sticks crossed his arms, unable to hide a smug smile.

"And you do?" Gage raised one eyebrow.

"I have a license to blow shit up. I do demolition jobs all the time. They'd have a hell of a time separating out all the kinds of explosives that have left traces in my truck. And it's a lot easier to run my truck through the car wash than to steam all the carpeting in the back of your SUV."

"Sranje," Gage muttered.

"He hates it when other people are right," she said.

"I will contact you with the information as soon as it is settled," Gage said.

"You mean you'll call me the day you plan to do the job so I can't sell you out or otherwise fuck it up," Sticks replied.

"Do you blame me?"

"Not at all." Sticks straightened. She moved around the table to help him, but he shook his head.

"We're done here." Gage turned away.

She stepped over to Sticks, handing him the cane that had been leaning on a table. He tucked it by his leg where it couldn't be seen.

"You did good work, baby."

"Thanks, old man."

"Be careful," he warned, nodding towards Gage's retreating back.

"Too late," she said.

"You'd better catch your ride."

"Someday you're going to have to tell me what made you let me go so easily."

"It was simple. I didn't have a choice." Sticks leaned on the cane.

"You weren't the only one." She turned away from him. Gage sat in the truck, engine running.

He kept quiet on the ride back. She wasn't sure if that was a good sign or a bad one. As the lights of the city approached, she turned to look at him. He didn't seem upset, but it was always hard to tell with him. Until it wasn't.

"So, what's next?"

"I am taking you home."

"Okay, but we can stop at the supermarket first? I need some things."

"Certainly. I need to pick up something for dinner, as well."

"No, you don't. I'm cooking tonight."

"I am taking you to your place, not mine."

"Yes, I got that. And strangely enough, my apartment has a kitchen in it. I am making you dinner tonight. I promised you I would, and I keep my promises. Time is running out, so there's no point in arguing with me."

"There rarely is."

"It was so much easier when you ruled by fiat, wasn't it?"

"What makes you think that has changed?"

"Woman's intuition," she laughed.

"I would not rely on that," he said.

"That's because you don't have it."

She had refused to tell him what she would be cooking. He resisted the urge to look in the refrigerator while she showered. It was not the only urge he resisted. He made coffee, put the paper in the recycle bin and sat down at the table to wait. She emerged a few minutes later, wearing a T-shirt and shorts.

"Are those mine?" he asked.

"Souvenirs," she replied and set about making dinner.

He got up and poured himself another cup of coffee. The tantalizing combination of garlic and ginger made his mouth water. She chopped vegetables, throwing them into a pan where they sizzled and popped. He realized he had never seen her use a knife. The same comfort and efficiency he had seen in the bunker were evident. She knew her strengths.

"You're cheating," she said, stirring the vegetables and adding meat.

"It was not the food that held my attention."

"Right. Because I'm so hot in this outfit."

He smiled at her. "I was admiring your cooking skills. You have been holding out."

"There's no way you would have let me take over in your kitchen and you know it."

"I might have."

She snorted in response. He walked into the kitchen and pulled out plates, setting them on the counter next to her. He washed the cutting board, dried it, and rubbed it with salt. She snickered. He ignored it and washed the knife while she filled their plates.

"Thank you for dinner," he said when they had finished. "It was excellent."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it. Dessert will be better."

"I do not eat dessert," he said.

"I know."

Chapter 27 - Double or Nothing

Chapter 27 of 36

All about control

□

Deira put away the rest of the food while Gage cleared the table. She did not protest when he started doing the dishes. He liked cleaning things, and she didn't. She left him to it and headed to her room. When she returned a few minutes later, he was humming softly.

She stepped up behind him and slid her hands over his back. His shoulders tightened as he grasped the counter. His first instinct had been to fight. Something would have to be done about that. He let the water out of the sink and turned to face her. She ran her hands over his chest and down his arms, grasped his wrists, and lowered herself to her knees.

"I do not think," he started, shaking his head.

"Good." She cut him off. "Try not thinking for once." She stroked his thighs, then rested her cheek on his hip. When she reached up to unfasten his pants, he closed his hand over hers.

"No."

"I seem to remember you enjoying me on my knees in the kitchen," she purred.

"That was different."

"Yes, it was. I didn't have a choice then." She rubbed her cheek on his thigh.

"This is not a good idea." He held himself still, but his muscles jumped under her caress.

"I know." She trailed her free hand from one hip to the other, watching the pulse jump in his neck. "I'm good at coming up with bad ideas."

He pulled her to her feet. She pressed her hips against him and smiled.

"Some parts of you think this is a very good idea." She leaned in and kissed his neck, running her tongue over the pulsing vein. His grip on her hand tightened.

"I have more control than most men." He moved her back gently and let go of her.

"I know that, too. And you told me you would lose it. I guess you don't keep all your promises." She shrugged and walked down the hall. "Stay or go. It's your choice," she called over her shoulder.

She had almost made it to her room when she found herself pressed against the wall. She pushed back against him as she had in the warehouse. He leaned into her harder.

"There are different kinds of control, princess," he breathed in her ear. "How many should I lose?"

He straightened, pulling her back to him and slipped his hand under the shirt, sliding it over her stomach and up. Her breath caught as he cupped her breast and rubbed his thumb over her nipple. His other slipped under the waistband of the shorts. He stroked his thumb along her hip bone but did not go further.

"No words? I did not think it possible." He kissed her neck.

He took a half step back and turned her to face him, her back against the wall. His eyes were very dark. He took her wrists and raised them over her head. Her heart pounded. It wasn't fear.

"You do not want me to lose control." His kiss tasted of coffee. "What you want is to blame me for doing exactly what you want me to do."

He pulled her wrists up slightly. She gasped as the bruise on her ribs stretched.

"Very pretty." He regarded her with the barest hint of a smile.

He leaned in, one leg sliding between hers, pressing up against her. She had a vague awareness of her trembling legs. When he released her wrists, she gripped his shoulder so she didn't slide down the wall.

"It is easier when you don't have to be responsible for your own desires." His arm went around her waist, pulling her closer until she straddled his thigh.

"Such a thing should not be easy," he said, lips brushing hers.

"Nothing with you is easy." She backed away from him and went into her room. She turned to look at him, waiting for whatever would come next.

He kept his eyes on her as he walked into the room, stopping a few feet from her, waiting for her to make the next move. She stepped up and hooked her fingers in his waistband. She sat down on the edge of the bed, pulling him closer. He didn't stop her when she undid the button his pants and lifted his shirt. She kissed his stomach, exploring the cut of his muscles with her tongue. She trailed kisses along the length of his scar. He shuddered and stepped back, shaking his head.

"Please," she said.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"Please." She drew the word out.

"Please what?"

"Drop your walls." It was not what she had intended to say.

"Did it never occur to you that the walls are there to keep other people safe?"

"I don't like safe." She took off the t-shirt.

"So you think." He did not move.

"Try me." The shorts dropped to the floor.

"This is a dangerous game, princess." His voice was rough.

"Then let's play." She climbed onto the bed and looked over her shoulder at him. She crawled to the head of the bed, movements exaggerated, holding his gaze.

"I told you I am not someone to play with," he said, removing his shirt and dropping it on the floor.

"And yet," she said, lying back against the pillows and watching him undress.

"And yet you push. Always you push." He wasn't bothering to hide his accent.

"You like it when I push."

"Let us see how you like it when I push back." In one move, he was on the bed, his hands pinning her shoulders. His smile was feral.

Maybe this wasn't such a good idea. She had one moment to hesitate. It came one moment too late.

His kiss was fierce, possessive. He stroked her arm, tracing the bruise. The heat of his fingers was a comfort. The pressure was pain. Wherever he touched her, she was remade, her body taking shape under his hands. He trailed kisses across her collar bone, then dipped his head to flick his tongue over her nipple before taking it into his mouth and sucking gently. Her groan was met with a dark laugh. His fingers continued to play, applying just the right pressure, skirting the edge of pain. She had to remember to breathe.

He kissed her bruised ribs, his shoulders tightening when she gasped. He did it again, then moved lower. She trembled when he tasted her. He flicked his tongue and the trembling turned to shaking. There was too much sensation.

"No, no, no." Her hands grasped for something to hold onto.

He lifted his head. "No?" His fingers barely brushed her.

She shook her head. "The safe word is stop."

"I will try to remember that." He continued to play, making her writhe.

"I can't take this." Her voice was raw.

"Yes, you can. And you will. This is what you wanted, yes?"

He stole her words. There were patterns of light and the shadow of his touch. She grabbed his shoulders, digging her fingers in as she arched, making a bridge to forever and nowhere. When she thought there was nothing left but to break, he filled her. A scream formed in her throat and emerged as a broken cry.

He answered it with a triumphant snarl. Whatever leash he had kept on his beast had been broken. There were no words, no thoughts, only movement, friction, the scent of him washing over her. He rolled so she straddled him, his hands on her hips driving her down repeatedly as he pushed up. She climaxed, then collapsed on his chest. She could not stop shaking.

He locked his legs over hers and twisted, flipping them so he was on top again.

"That was the first, princess. There will be more." He smiled down at her. "I keep all my promises."

Gage opened his eyes, turning to look at the alarm clock. It was not there. He snapped awake, looking around the room, remembering. Deira lay in a tangle of sheets, her hair spread over the pillow. He should never have let himself fall asleep. He knew he should leave before she woke up. She snuggled back against him, and he kissed her shoulder. He closed his eyes for a moment. Control waited at the edge of conscious thought. He left it there for a while longer.

Deira had the coffee brewing by the time Gage emerged from the shower. She sat on the couch, sipping tea. Leaning back, she closed her eyes, enjoying the sun on her face. When she opened them, he stood at the window, cup in hand.

"Good morning," he said, not turning around. She wondered how he did that.

"Very. Did you sleep well?"

"When I slept, yes." He turned to look at her.

"That was " he started.

"Delicious," she finished.

"Reckless." He was on the verge of saying something else, but she held up her hand.

"This is the part where you say that whatever it is between us won't last or will lead to badness, et cetera."

"Is it." There was no inflection in his voice.

"Yes. Don't bother. I'm clear on the whole 'no future for us' thing."

"I see." He leaned against the window frame, glancing down at the street automatically.

"You do realize that when I'm gone you're going to miss the hell out of me, right?"

"You seem rather sure of that."

"Considering you were in my bed all night, obviously by choice, and came back for seconds? Yeah, pretty sure."

"Thirds," he corrected, trying hard to fight a smile. He hid his failure in his coffee cup.

"Thank you for making my point for me. Of course what you'll really miss is my sparkling wit and the fact that I make life exciting."

"You do. But I prefer my life to be a little more..."

"Controlled?" She smiled at him.

He shook his head and went to refill his coffee. "There is nothing wrong with a little control, princess."

"I know. It's how I got you to do what I wanted you to do last night. And since that worked out so well for both of us, how about you call me Deira instead of princess from now on." She joined him in the kitchen.

"It would be so much nicer to have a name, just like a real girl!" she gushed.

"I thought last night was about proving how good a toy you are." He looked her over, assessing.

"I am a very good toy, as you found out. And before I showed up, you didn't play nearly often enough. Maybe I should stick around."

"Simply for my benefit?" He raised an eyebrow.

"No, to amuse myself. Between banging you and watching you beat yourself up over what a bad person you are, I could stay entertained for a long time." She smiled brightly. "Besides, I like hanging out with your niece."

He tensed up, as she had known he would.

"You're so predictable." She laughed. "Relax. I'm no threat to Katya. For one thing, I think she's a blast. For another, she could kick my ass around the block without

thinking about it and then shoot me when she got bored."

He choked on his coffee. She handed him a napkin.

"Oh, hell. You don't even know how hard she is, do you? When this job is over, you might want to spend some quality time with her. She's got some good stories."

"I will be sure to do that."

"I suppose I should ask what's on the agenda for today." She gave an exaggerated sigh.

"More of the same," he said.

"Which same would that be?" It was her turn to quirk an eyebrow.

"Planning, princ..." He stopped himself.

"D E I R A." She spelled it out in sign language as she spoke. "Deer-a"

"I never felt it necessary to name my toys," he replied, setting down his cup.

"How about your pets?"

"They all had names. And none of them objected to my choices." He stepped up to her.

"Should have stuck to pets." She stepped back.

"They are difficult to take with you when you have to leave suddenly. And I disliked asking other people to watch over them." He backed her out of the kitchen.

"Too complicated, huh?" Her back hit the wall of the hallway.

"Much too complicated," he whispered. "Not to mention my regret when I have to put them down."

"I suppose you're not the kind to give them away to a nice home," she said.

"No. I have control issues." He kissed her. "What is mine, I keep or destroy, depending on the circumstance."

"Guess it's a good thing I'm not yours then, huh?" She pushed him away and walked back into the kitchen.

Oh, but you are, princess. He could let her walk away, and he would. Walking away was not the same thing as being free. It would be best if she did not realize that for quite some time.

Chapter 28 - Fast and Loose

Chapter 28 of 36

Games of chance and their possible outcomes.

□

The phone was ringing when Nicky got out of the shower. She dried her hands and face as she reached for it. The number displayed as 'unknown.' She hoped it had been jammed by her relays. The other possibility would not be good.

"Speak," she said.

"Very professional." The voice on the other end was masked, but she recognized it.

The chill on her spine had nothing to do with the water dripping off her. He was not supposed to call her directly, and this was the second time he'd done so. She was slipping.

"You call me to check on my phone manners or do we have business?"

"We do. You've been contracted to do a very specific job." He talked down to her out of habit, something she had never tolerated.

"Which I'm in the middle of doing, so what's your problem?" she snapped.

"The time table doesn't work for me."

"Come again?"

"The weekend isn't a suitable time for this operation. It needs to happen during the week." He was worried about the news cycle. She should have seen that coming.

"I can't tell the people involved that they have to wait until next week some time to do this. They'll want to know why, and I've got no good reason."

"You have a very good reason. Because I asked." He thought that was enough. For the circles he moved in, it would be.

"You want me to tell them that? I'm sure they'd be interested. And then they'd shoot me in the fucking head and come after you. You don't want the kinds of presents disclosure would buy you."

"Threats are unnecessary. And unwise." He tried to intimidate her with words. Without his particular connections, he wouldn't scare her at all.

"It wasn't a threat. Just a reminder that you really don't want to meet these people."

She wondered who would get to her first. It didn't matter; details of both contracts would spill out all over news wires if she died. After the news cooled, her trade secrets would hit the internet, starting the fire all over again. Not much in the way of insurance, but post-mortem revenge was a commendable legacy. At least the journalists would remember her fondly.

"Change the timing. This week." He thought he was being forceful, but she could hear the whine underneath.

"I don't think you understand. There is no way I can do that."

"I don't need to understand. Our agreement is that you'd do this to my advantage. It isn't to my advantage to have this happen on the weekend. So see that it happens sooner or I won't provide the assistance you need afterwards."

"Fine. I'll do what I can to move it up. But you do need to understand a couple of things. First, if we move early, it's going to be a lot messier than we'd discussed. Second, if you don't hold up your end of the bargain, you will spend the rest of your life looking over your shoulder because these motherfuckers don't give up."

"Such language," he said, amused.

"Take my advice, and do what you've said you'll do. I'll let you know what the arrangements are." She knew he had no idea of what was really involved. That was probably a good thing.

"Fine."

"And don't bother to call. This number is about to be out of service."

"I can find you." He sounded amused.

"Not as fast as I can find you. And every newsroom in this city. You don't want to fuck with me. You can't afford it." It had been a long time since she'd had to remind a client that she was dangerous. At least he finally got it.

"Then I suggest we each play our part and leave it at that." He disconnected.

Nicky reached for a towel, shivering. This job was turning into a nightmare, and it was her own fault. The first contract had been straight up take out Cavuto and don't worry about the aftermath. The new boss would take over with most people none the wiser. Deira would have her revenge, and Gage would be able to cut the girl loose. It was clean and simple, the way things were done in this business.

She never did things the way they were supposed to be done, and that usually worked out just fine. This time, the complexities were multiplying faster than she could sort them out, all because she had decided she could do two jobs at once.

She considered ways to convince Gage to change the schedule, rejecting each one as too obvious. He would be suspicious. He was always suspicious, especially when it came to her. *You earned that.* The truth irritated her. She would have to lie to him. Again. The fact that it would save his life was little comfort.

She got dressed and found the phone she'd purchased for this operation. It, too, would go dead soon. She began to dial Gage's number and stopped. She could learn something here. She called Deira instead.

"Nicky?"

"You sound out of breath, girl."

"Phone was in my gym bag. What's up?"

"I haven't been able to reach Gage. Either his phone is off or his battery is dead. You know where he is?" She struggled to keep her voice neutral.

"He's here. Hold on. I'll get him."

So much for cutting her loose. Nicky shook her head. He was an idiot, but there was nothing she could do about it.

"Duchess." The caution in his voice would have set her off if it hadn't been a constant.

"Check your phone. I haven't been able to get through."

"I turned it off."

"That's a really bad idea," she chided. She clutched the counter for balance, overwhelmed by relief.

"I had my reasons."

"And I'll bet they had something to do with a naked blonde." *Shit.* She should have let it go.

"Is that why you called, to save me from my baser instincts? Or to save her from them?"

"No. I don't give a damn what you do in your spare time."

"You used to be a better liar," he said, obviously amused.

She swallowed her fear. *Let him think that's the only lie.*

"Time, spare or otherwise, is the problem. Things are moving fast on Cavuto's end. I don't know if he has anything solid, but the hit on the whorehouse has made him very nervous."

"Good."

"No, not good. He's moving money around fast. That's never good. I'm probably not the only one who's noticed. At some point, banks will have to report it."

"How is this my concern?" he asked.

"Because, you thick bastard, if he's shifting funds openly, he's trying to draw attention to himself. It keeps people interested in his finances, so they won't notice when he closes or relocates the lab. The window of opportunity just shrank. We need to move the job up."

"To when?" Schedule changes had always aggravated him.

"Best guess? Two days, three at the outside." She held her breath. If he didn't go for this, the whole thing would fall apart. And sometime shortly thereafter, she would be killed. It hardly mattered by which party.

"That will be difficult."

"No, it won't. You told me yesterday everything was set." She hoped he missed the panic in her voice.

"We still need to arrange for delivery of the devices," he said.

"Which you can do with a phone call. My part of this is ready to go, too."

"And if I am not ready to move yet?"

"Why are you being like this? You can get a call in the middle of the night, be on a plane, do what needs to be done and be home before anyone knows you're gone. With weeks to plan, I know you're ready." She hated appealing to his ego.

"I don't like this," he said. She could almost see him pacing.

"I'm sorry the big, bad drug dealer is messing up your plans, but we don't really have a lot of options here." Her desperation bled through.

"I will make the necessary arrangements and call you back." His accent was in full force, so he was truly pissed off.

"I'll be waiting." She disconnected.

Gage paced. Deira kept quiet even after he got off the phone. Nothing good came of talking to him when he was like this. She wanted to get up, pour them some coffee, find out what was happening. When he began muttering in another language, she decided it was safer to remain where she was, perfectly still.

When he grew quiet, she went to the kitchen, filling his cup and handing it to him without a word. He closed his eyes for a moment, took a deep breath and let it out softly.

"There has been a change of plans." He almost hid his ire.

"I figured. So tell me what I need to do according to the new plan, and I'll do that."

"The details are essentially the same, but we have to move faster."

"Okay. We're ready, right?"

"I am ready. I had hoped to give you a few more days to recover, during which we could have timed the placement of the bombs."

"This isn't the first time I've set explosives," she said.

"It is the first time you might be doing it under fire. It is different when you know you are surrounded by people with guns."

"Does it change what has to be done?"

"No, only how much your hands shake while you try to do it. Seconds count."

"Were you planning to shoot at me while I practiced?"

He glanced sideways at her and shook his head, exasperated.

"Then it would have been academic anyway. Unless you think we should call the whole deal, we're going to have to accept a less than perfect plan"

"Those tend to have unfortunate results. Like dying." He regarded her carefully. "You would accept it if I canceled the job?"

"As long as I walk away with no obligation to you, yes." It startled her to realize she meant it. "But you aren't going to."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because you keep your promises."

"I did not promise to do this job for you," he said softly.

"No, but you did contract out, and I'm pretty sure that counts as a promise in your book. You have a reputation for finishing what you start."

"This job is anonymous. Nicky is the one holding the contract," he said.

"Right. And you told her you would do the job. You might find a way to get out of doing something I want, but you aren't going to break a promise to her." She was sure of it.

"You think I would deceive you but not her? Why?"

"She obviously knows more about you, and knowledge in Nicky's hands is extremely dangerous."

"As am I."

"Yes, but that doesn't change how dangerous she is to you."

"And you are not?"

"Not really. Nicky can erase people, screw with their finances, set them up and take them down in all sorts of ways. I'm not nearly that caliber of dangerous. Hell, I can't even get you off me when you knock me down."

"I have not noticed you trying lately." He smiled for the first time since the phone call.

"Cute, but not what I was talking about. You expended a fair amount of energy trying to get me to let you handle this on your own. If I hadn't been clear on what you thought of my skills before, that would have told me all I need to know."

"So you see my attempts to keep you out of harm's way as an insult?"

"No, just an indication you think I'm not up to this. Don't get me wrong. It was sweet of you to try to protect me if I can even use that word about you but the impetus behind it was your uncertainty about whether I could hold up my end."

"If I thought you were not capable, I would not have bothered setting you up with Nicky in the first place. I certainly would not have suggested you make the explosives." The slight amusement in his eyes belied the serious tone.

Deira looked at him. "What would you have done?"

"Let you go off on your own and get killed." He shrugged.

"Huh."

"That was not the answer you expected."

"No." She tilted her head and looked at him. "Why didn't you?"

"Because dead you would be no good to me."

"I'm not going to be any good to you when this is over, either," she pointed out.

"We shall see."

"Oh, no, you don't. You told me that doing my part cancels my debt to you."

"It does. I was referring to mutually beneficial endeavors." He did not elaborate.

"As long as we're clear. I won't end up owing you like Nicky did."

"The circumstances are different. Nicky burned me. Clearing her debt by having her train you was a gift, as she knows. I could easily have killed her and did not. That was also a gift. If I decided to walk away from this job, I would feel no obligation to her and she would not try to harm me."

"So what's stopping you?"

"You are."

"I said I would accept you backing out."

"You did not say you would abandon the job because I did. You have access to a truck full of explosives, blueprints, and a reasonable plan. You know how to use your gun well enough to take out at least a few targets. And there is a great deal of money to be made in seeing it through."

"So you think I'd go ahead without you."

"I know you would."

"Shit. Am I that easy to read?"

"No, Deira. You are that dangerous." He paused. "Which is why you may be of use to me in the future."

"I told you this was it for me," she said.

"I would never ask you to do anything you are not willing to do."

That doesn't narrow the field much. She wisely kept quiet. Some things he didn't need to know.

He got up and looked for his keys. She got the gun case from the bedroom and packed her gym bag. By the time she had finished, he had done the dishes and was waiting by the door.

"You scare me sometimes," she said lightly.

"Good." He carried a bag downstairs, leaving her to lock up.

Chapter 29 - Clock Watching

Chapter 29 of 36

Timing is everything.

□

Gage went over the plans again on the drive to his house. The third time, Deira said it with him. After that, it ran continually in her head. She lost herself in the rhythm. She was startled when he pulled into the garage.

"Where did you go?" he asked quietly.

"To the lab." She looked over at him. He nodded his understanding.

She got to the back gate first, opened it and walked through. He stepped in front of her and moved her to the side, looking quickly around the yard. Everything seemed fine.

"Do not get so distracted you forget the basics," he said, crossing to the door. He entered his security code and went inside. She followed him.

If he had done a check of the interior, it had been fast. He was on the phone, explaining the situation to Sticks. She set her bag and case by the door, then sat down to await instruction. The plan began running in her head again. As he spoke, she added details in the right places, increasing the rhythm and complexity. It calmed her.

"You two want me to set off some of the explosives before we do the job." Her voice sounded odd against the noise in her head. Gage said something to Sticks, then frowned at her.

"We have not discussed testing the devices."

"So? You're both thinking it. He's got a place where he tests things. You wanted me to practice the timing. We might as well meet there, do a trial run, and finalize details." She went back to staring at her hands on the table, simultaneously listening to the conversation and his voice reciting the plan in her head. She added the preparations as he made them, until it had a beginning rhythm to go with the middle. She could not tell what the end would sound like, but she was certain it would be punctuated with explosions. She liked big endings.

"We will meet you there." He disconnected and picked up his keys. She got up without a word and waited while he reset the alarm. He looked at the bag and case in her hands.

"You don't need to take those."

"Yes, I do. We don't know how long this will take, and the demo spot is on the other side of town. Out of town, actually. There's no point in coming back to retrieve my stuff afterward."

"I would rather you stay with me until we finish the job."

"Would you." She kept her tone neutral.

"It reduces the chances of something going wrong."

"Depends on what that something is."

"We do not know how close Cavuto is to finding you. He has proven to be clever or lucky when it comes to intercepting you. I cannot watch your apartment. I have work to do."

"If you had told me this before we left, I would have packed."

"I did it for you this morning before I showered. Your things are in the truck."

"So I didn't really have a choice, did I?"

"If you wish to go back to your apartment, I will take you. But I would not advise it."

"I guess it doesn't matter where I stay. Everything I have is yours anyway." She set the bags down. It wasn't worth arguing with him. She never won.

"Not everything."

As soon as she got back in the truck, the plan began running in her head again. It was like a mantra. She was fairly certain she could set up the demolition test to be a close approximation. She visualized the building on the lot or what had been left of it the last time she'd seen it. It would have to do.

"What did you say?" His voice interrupted her thoughts.

"I didn't say anything."

"Yes, you did. It sounded like the plan, but with something more." He glanced at her.

She recited the revised plan. He asked her to repeat it. Then again, until he could say it with her. She'd expected that hearing him speak aloud would override his voice in her head, but instead it created a stereo effect. When she began again, he stopped her.

"Well done."

"It's your plan," she said.

"It was. Now it is our plan. But remember, if there is a need to deviate, we will have to decide on the spot what to do."

"You mean if I screw up, I'm on my own."

"No. I mean if some part of the plan fails, I need you to remember where I am and what I had planned on doing, and take it into account before you act."

"I'll do my best."

"I know." It was the closest he would come to expressing confidence in her. She'd take it.

The demolition lot was in a long-abandoned junk yard. Embankments rose steeply on two sides. Heaps of twisted metal, mostly from cars she had blown up during her training, formed a strange half-circle on one side of the lot. She had never asked why Sticks had wanted her to blow up cars, and she wasn't going to start now.

The area around the old office trailer had been cleared. It wasn't the best surrogate for the lab, but it would have to do. At least it still had walls. She walked around it, checking to make sure there were no tanks attached. Sticks would have told her if there were hazards, but this was her job. *Better to be safe.* She laughed. Safe was a relative concept when explosives were involved.

By the time she had finished her inspection, Sticks had arrived. He talked to Gage, gesturing with his hands, so she knew he was excited. He had left his cane in the truck, probably because he thought it made him look weak. She shook her head. Men were idiots.

She ignored them, going to the back of the truck and jumping in. The bombs would be in the large metal toolbox. She held her hand out for the key.

"I fixed up a remote for the detonators," Sticks said.

"Did you remember to check the batteries?" The first time he'd brought her here, she'd pulled out a dead remote. He'd never let her forget it, so she thought it best to get it out of the way.

"Of course." He wanted to say more, but one look from her and he closed his mouth, handing her the remote.

"It's a cell phone." Using phones as remote detonators was standard, but he had always avoided them.

"It was. I figure you can set three for the test. Trailer won't take much more than that. Turn it on, and punch the number of the bomb to set them off."

She put the phone in her pocket and placed three bombs on the tailgate, instantly recognizing the flaws in them. They would do, but these had to be the worst three she'd made yesterday. She checked the detonators. The numbers were not sequential. She looked up at Sticks and shook her head. He had done it to test her. At least he had the decency to look embarrassed.

"Is this about the same distance we'll be from the lab?" She surveyed the area, looking for potential obstacles.

"Close. There is no hill here so you will have to compensate," Gage said. She nodded.

"Say when," she said.

"Go!" he barked.

The adrenaline rush hit instantly. She grabbed the bombs and ran towards the trailer, checking the perimeter on the way. The gravel around the edge made her lose her footing, but she found her balance and went with the slide. She placed the first bomb, checked the area again, and moved on to place the second, making sure the adhesive set before attaching the third. When she finished, she did a visual sweep of the area to make sure the lot was empty.

She raced back towards the truck, pulled out the remote, spun around, and hit the button. She had a small measure of satisfaction watching the men jump as the first explosion took out a corner of the trailer. She hit the next key. The center of the trailer crumpled. The final explosion took out the back, blowing through both walls. The trailer shuddered and collapsed. It was spectacular. She grinned like a maniac.

"Where in that did you tell me it was about to blow?" Gage asked.

"Yeah, kid. A 'fire in the hole' would've been nice." Sticks held onto the truck door. She shot him a look that said she knew he'd almost fallen.

"I thought it was sort of obvious when I started running. I'm not likely to call out to you when we do the job, so this was a pretty good approximation." She continued to stare at the smoking trailer. "How did I do?"

"Third one was heavy," Sticks said. She nodded her agreement.

"If you can move that fast tomorrow night, it should work out." Gage stared at the flames.

"Should isn't definitely."

"No, but short of my planting men here who wish to see you dead, it will have to do."

"One thing at a time. If I go into this thinking about getting shot, it's going to screw me up."

"It is reality, or a possible reality. I will do what I can to neutralize any threat, but there is always the chance you will find yourself in a situation that prevents me from taking out a target."

"How comforting."

"This is not a comforting business."

"No kidding? Well then count me out. I expected a Sunday stroll." She walked to the back of the pickup and locked up the toolbox.

"I'm gonna need the remote back." Sticks held out his hand. "I need to synch it to the bombs for the job."

"Someday, you're going to have to show me how you made that. It's much better than the ones I used before."

"Come around after this is all over. I got a few new tricks you're gonna like."

"Sounds like fun."

Gage regarded her with curiosity. There was something he wasn't saying, but that was normal. She sat on the tailgate as the rush from the test faded. In an instant, it returned.

She snapped her head to look at Gage, his words finally sinking in. "Tomorrow night?"

He nodded.

"Shit." She jumped up and began pacing.

"There's my cue to leave," Sticks said, limping to the driver's side. The door squeaked. She tried to tell him to oil it before tomorrow, but no words came.

"Call me if anything else changes." He looked at her, not Gage. He was offering escape. She shook her head. When he pulled out, he left a trail of dust and scattered gravel.

Gage reached into his truck, brought out a fire extinguisher, and handed it to her. "Put it out."

She headed towards the trailer, glad to have something to do. Pacing didn't seem to help her the way it did him. She doused the small fires sputtering in the remains of the trailer, taking note of the blast radius. The bombs had done their job, but it wasn't pretty close up. She would have to come up with something more elegant next time.

When she got back to the truck, he had the engine running. She put the extinguisher away and got in, her brain still preoccupied with possible ways to modify the Bella. Designing something new held appeal.

"You said you were done after this job." The hard edge of his voice surprised her.

"I am."

"Yet you made plans to see Sticks again."

"That's different."

"I fail to see how."

"Learning how to do something new doesn't mean I plan to become a criminal."

"You are a criminal." He let the words hang for a moment.

"Fair enough, but that doesn't mean I want to make a career of it." She turned to regard him. "You think I lied to you."

"You have."

"And you've been nothing but honest with me?"

"I have not lied to you." He kept his eyes on the road.

"So not telling me about the camera in the clock doesn't count?"

He sighed. "You found it."

"Yep. And the audio, too. I seriously considered doing a strip tease for you, but you didn't deserve it."

"Why did you leave it in place?"

"Because you like to know what's going on, and I figured it was better than having you hanging out in my apartment all the time."

"It did not seem to bother you last night."

"It was my choice last night."

"It is always your choice."

"That right there? That was a lie."

She sat back and let the plan run again. This time, the voice in her head was her own.

Chapter 30 - Willing and Able

Chapter 30 of 36

Last minute choices.

□

Deira rolled down the window of the truck. It didn't help. She smelled of sweat and smoke. Gage had remained quiet. They had little left to say.

When he pulled into the alley behind his house, she got out. She did a perimeter sweep while he parked, nodding to him when he joined her. As soon as he opened the door, she took the bag he had packed and headed for the bathroom. She had not worn gloves, and her hands were beginning to itch, adding to her desperate desire for a shower.

"Did you want to eat first?" he asked.

"Residue," she answered and disappeared down the hall.

He checked his service. Nicky had left a message for him to call immediately. He rummaged through the refrigerator and cabinets, set the water to boil, and checked his computer. She had emailed, too. It was not like her to be this jumpy. As much as he would love to annoy her by making her wait, this was not the time. He picked up the phone and dialed, mentally calculating the time it would take to make dinner.

She picked up on the first ring. That was not like her, either.

"About fucking time."

"I told you I would call you back when arrangements had been made."

"So is everything set?"

"As much as it can be on a shortened schedule." He let his irritation bleed through.

"So when do we move?"

"Tomorrow night."

"So soon?" She could not hide her panic.

"You said we should move quickly." He could not shake the feeling that something was wrong. "Is there a problem? You assured me you were ready."

"No problem. Now that I know when, I can set up my end of things. I'll check in with you in the morning. Or you call me." She was flustered. "Whichever you prefer."

"If you encounter any difficulties, call. I will do the same. If everything is going smoothly, we should not need to talk until the job begins."

"Yeah, okay." She hung up.

He set down the phone and closed his eyes. She was up to something. He could feel it the way some people know they're going to get sick well before the first sniffle. There were a thousand ways she could set him up, and a million reasons for her to do so, but he did not think she was trying to eliminate him. She needed him to finish the job. Afterwards, he would deal with whatever trap she had set for him. He hoped fervently he would not have to kill her.

He was cooking when Deira came into the kitchen, still toweling dry her hair. For the first time since the night they had met, she wore a skirt. It softened her, made her look younger.

"I like this style on you," he said.

"You should. These were the only two things in the bag that were clean."

"There was not much choice," he said, then flinched inwardly.

"Don't you hate it when that happens?" Her smile contrasted with the bitter edge in her voice.

"You can do laundry after dinner. It is almost ready."

She draped the towel over a chair, knowing it would make him twitch. She wasn't disappointed. She almost felt bad about tweaking him. Almost. She set the table. When he put a wine glass by her plate, she picked it up and returned it to the cabinet. As she closed the doors, the towel hit her in the back of the head.

"Hamper," he said and proceeded to serve dinner.

She returned the towel to the bathroom, then joined him at the table. The food had a complex, delicate flavor, delicious, as always. She would miss dinners with him. She pushed the plate away and leaned back, looking around the kitchen. It wasn't home, but it was as close as she'd had in a while.

"So this is it," she said.

He looked up at her, puzzled.

"This is the last supper," she elaborated.

"I hope you are not planning to betray me. That never works out well."

"Thirty pieces of silver pales in comparison to the payout for the job." She looked him in the eye. "And you're closer to the anti-Christ than Jesus."

"At best, I am a low-level demon. I am hardly capable of destroying worlds."

"I suppose that depends on whose world it is."

"Destroying Cavuto's world is the goal, yes?"

"Then I guess I'm as much a demon as you are."

"Not quite."

"Why is it there are so few female demons, anyway? You never hear about them."

"Perhaps because they refused to be confined to hell." He looked at her pointedly.

She smiled and went to do laundry. He had packed everything she would have chosen, except the clothes she wore. She had been surprised to find the skirt.

When she got back upstairs, the kitchen was pristine. Gage was not there. She wandered into the living room. The door to his office stood open. He sat with his back to her, staring at his computer. She had expected him to be looking at the recon pictures. A family photo filled the screen. A much younger Gage stood, smiling, his arm draped over the shoulder of a slighter man. To the side, a tall woman with severe features held a toddler.

"My brother," he said, looking over his shoulder at her. "His wife, Irina, and Katya. It was her third birthday. We had gone on a picnic after church."

"How old were you?" she asked.

"Twenty-three. I had recently graduated college. I thought I knew everything." He smiled at that. "We had gotten our first business loan that week, so we could expand. Life was as normal as it could be. I had not killed anyone in eight years, and no one had tried to kill me."

"How long was it before that changed?" She forced herself to ask.

"Three months." The smile faded.

"What happened?"

"I was late for work. You would think it would not matter, but Karol was particular about such things. I cut through an alley and was attacked." He was lost in memory. "I killed the man. Threw him into the side of a building, then broke his neck. I stepped over his body and walked away. I was ten minutes late for work. Two hours later, I sealed the biggest deal we had ever made. I don't remember doing it." He clicked the mouse and the picture disappeared.

"Did it bother you?"

"Yes. I would like to know what I said."

"I meant killing the guy in the alley."

"No. Killing was... is natural for me. I had allowed myself to forget. The adrenaline rush reminded me. It was like turning on the light in a dark room. I like it better when I can see."

"So you kept doing it."

"I simply remembered how and honed my skills so I would not forget again. The business aspect of it came later."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because there are some things you should not forget and many you will not be able to. No matter what happens tomorrow night, you will never be the same."

"You still want me to back out." Her voice was flat.

"No. I want you to know the price you will pay."

"I paid in advance," she said and turned away.

"That is what I used to think," he said softly. He closed the computer, locked the office, and went to find her.

She stood in the hallway, right hand on the banister, looking up the stairs. As he approached, she turned to him. Her eyes looked beyond him, to a place he recognized but could not go. He no longer doubted the story about her sister. Death was the only currency that could buy that look.

He stopped, giving her a chance to focus. She closed her eyes and rubbed her temples.

"This has all been too much," she said. "And it isn't over yet."

"Soon." He tried to soothe her.

"And never."

"That is how this sort of thing works."

"Death or unhealthy relationships?" She glanced up the stairs.

"Both."

"I'm leaving town when this is over." She met his gaze.

"It would be best." It sounded harder than he had wanted.

"Where am I sleeping?" Weariness crept into her voice.

"Wherever you want. I will switch your laundry. You should go to bed."

"I don't know what I want." She shook her head as she walked up the stairs. He wondered what she was saying no to.

When he got upstairs, his room was dark. A light came from Katya's room. He sighed. That, too, was probably for the best. He did not bother turning on his light. At least he would not have to sleep clothed. It would have been a polite fiction in any case.

He lay awake, staring at the patterns made by the streetlight filtering through his shades. Faint lines crossed the walls and were absorbed by the floor. He liked the room, the house, his routine. It would be difficult to leave.

Shadow fell on shadow. He turned his head. She had stepped into the room and stopped, silent.

"Make a choice, Deira."

"What if it's the wrong one?"

"You will discover it is wrong. Then you make another choice. It is the only way to live."

As she approached, he took the gun from under the pillow and put it in the drawer of the nightstand. He lay back as she got into bed. He put his hands under his head, then went still. She moved closer and laid her head on his chest. He put his arm around her, fingers playing in her hair. She sighed and relaxed against him. Moments later, they were both asleep.

He awoke when she cried out. She curled up, shaking. He reached for her, but she shied away. Pushing up on one elbow, he realized she still slept. He could not hear what she muttered, but the shaking gave way to thrashing. He caressed her back, shushing her. She relaxed under his touch, moving closer. He inhaled the scent of her hair, her neck. She sighed.

"Nightmare," she mumbled.

"I know."

"It's been so long. I thought they were gone," she whispered. "I always felt so safe with you."

It was a strange thing to hear. He had never been told he made someone feel safe. He put his arm over her, hand flat on the bed.

"You are safe tonight," he said.

"As much as I'll ever be." She stroked his arm, settling her back against his chest. He wondered if she could feel his heart pounding. He slowed his breathing, willing his body to relax. It did not work.

"This is the part where you make love to me," she murmured. He complied.

Five a.m. He was beginning to hate his internal clock. Deira lay curled up beside him. He wanted to memorize the feel of her skin under his hands, the softness of her curls tangling in his fingers, the fine trembling of her body when he stroked her, to take one last opportunity to lose himself in her. He closed his eyes, listening to her steady breathing. He let her sleep.

She had admitted they had no future. He was glad she had realized it. *Liar*. After tonight, his wish for her would be fulfilled. She could have a normal life, without people like him complicating it. He wondered if he could let her. He slipped out of bed, got dressed, and went downstairs.

Deira woke up and stretched. She turned her head, looking for Gage. She rubbed her eyes and got up. Her bag sat on the chair, clothes neatly folded on top of it. The sound of weights clanking filtered in from the next room.

"Idiot." She shook her head and got dressed.

Chapter 31 - Slash and Burn

Chapter 31 of 36

"There was supposed to be a terrible kaboom." - Marvin the Martian

□

The morning passed in a blur of preparations. As she loaded the truck, the plan began running through her head. She couldn't shake the feeling she had missed something. She called Sticks to make sure everything was in order. The feeling did not dissipate. Checking her gun, she realized what was wrong.

"The security guard," she said aloud.

"What about him?" Gage looked up, continuing to assemble his gun.

"What happens to him? He's not one of Cavuto's regular guys. I'd be surprised if he knows what it is he's guarding. According to the pictures, he never goes past the office, and then only to use the bathroom."

He said nothing.

"So what happens?" she demanded. "Does he die because he works for the wrong guy?"

"He might."

"It's not right," she protested.

"And killing the others is?"

"He didn't rape and kill my sister. He shouldn't have to die for the bastards who did."

"What happened to your assertions that life is not fair?"

"That's different. This is probably a regular guy with a regular job, and I don't want to be responsible for his death."

"It is good to know you have a conscience."

"I'm not a total psycho," she huffed. "So what do we do about this?"

"I will take care of it," he assured her.

"How?"

"Do not worry about how. If he does not attempt to shoot me, I will not kill him. Will that do?"

"I guess it'll have to."

"Good. Then check your gun again. You stopped looking at what you were doing."

"You aren't looking."

"I do not need to but I am looking. I am good at doing two things at once, and I have done this many times, far more distracted." He looked at her gun. "We cannot afford to have an equipment failure."

"I thought there was always that chance."

"There is. Which is why I want you to check again."

She sighed and started the process over. The plan mantra returned. This time it sounded right.

Nicky stared at the phone. Her fear was irrational. Everything would work out. She dialed the number and waited for the call to pass through. She could track the filters he had in place, but had no reason to do so. Yet.

She had never liked dealing with his kind. They were all smiles and assurances on the surface and ruthless as hell underneath. Working with them was the ultimate crapshoot. If you rolled snake eyes, they denied any knowledge of you. If you did well, they tried to tie a leash to you so they could spend the rest of their lives jerking your chain. So far, she'd avoided that, but this was higher up and deeper in than she had ever gone. Maybe there was some logic to the fear after all.

"Talk to me." They were all curt when no one was looking.

"It's on for tonight." Two could play that.

"I need your assurance this will work as you've promised."

"I didn't make any promises. I presented you with an opportunity. If it doesn't work out exactly as planned, you're going to have to improvise." Another trap sprung and avoided.

"I don't like making things up as I go along. It always backfires."

"It's a little late to be thinking of that." She wanted him on the defensive. "You know what sort of operation this is."

"And you know what's at stake," he replied.

She wasn't taking the bait. "So do you. If you don't hold up your end of this, your career is shot and my friends will kill you. So I wouldn't be so quick with the tough talk. I'll do my part. They'll do whatever they do. You need to be able to respond fast, or bring in a proxy right now who can. You've got three hours, so I hope you know someone who lives close and looks good on camera."

"You're a real bitch."

"And you're a stupid motherfucker if you just figured that out."

"We're done talking."

"We'll be done talking when you pay me."

"The deposit is set for midnight. That's the last contact I expect to make." He hung up.

Nicky exhaled and slumped back in the chair. She had made sure he was fired up enough to do what needed to be done, and scared enough that he didn't want to collar her. All she could do now was wait. Her computer pinged, telling her airline tickets were waiting, a small precaution in case things didn't work out well at all.

Shift changed at eleven o'clock. Everything needed to be in place before then. Gage sat in his truck, looking out the windshield. Deira carried the box of explosives. She had thought to have it painted black. Given enough time, she would take care of the little details as a matter of course. He shook his head. She would not need to learn that.

He glanced to the bushes where they had hidden the pickup so Sticks could observe without interfering. It was almost impossible to make out. The situation was less than ideal, but nothing could be done about it now.

Deira set down the box and began filling the pockets of her vest with bombs. He could not imagine being willing to do that. She had dressed all in black, her hair tucked into a baseball cap pulled low over her face. When she stood in the shadow of the trees, she practically disappeared.

His phone vibrated. She was ready. He got out of the truck, laid the case on the seat and took out his rifle. The tripod was already in place, though he would have to check the footing again, in case she had bumped it. She was headed down the hill by the time he made it to the spot. She did a perimeter check when she neared the bottom. Fear mingled with pride, however misplaced, as he observed her. It would irritate the hell out of him if she got herself killed.

Deira stopped at the bottom of the hill, staring at the side of the building. This was it, the end of everything. She took a deep breath and strolled across the parking lot. There were no cars on this side, which meant less chance of being seen. And fewer places to hide if she was. She'd never been much good at hiding anyway.

The first six bombs were placed easily. No water or gas pipes to worry about. The seventh proved a little trickier. She tried not to think about how close she was getting to the office. This was where it got dicey. The backup plan provided small comfort. She wasn't entirely sure Sticks would go through with it. She desperately hoped he wouldn't have to. The ninth bomb presented a problem. It wouldn't stick. She gave up and leaned it against the side of the building.

The office door banged shut. She turned, hand going for her gun. One of Cavuto's guys had stepped outside for a smoke. She didn't take the time to try to identify him. Slipping the final bomb out of her pocket, she tossed it towards the office and backed away. It landed shy of the wall, half under some flowering bush that had seen better days. It would have to do.

She was almost out of his line of sight when he turned. He threw his cigarette down and walked towards her. Shit. She took the cell phone out of her pocket and pretended to dial, making sure she did not come near the buttons. She began pacing, each trip taking her a little further away from the building. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the guy approaching. At least he wasn't pointing a gun at her. Yet.

"Hey! What the hell are you doing here?"

She recognized the voice. Danny had been promoted. Fear surged through her, instantly replaced by anger as her bruises throbbed. She kept her head down, staring at the phone. There had to be another way to do this.

"Good. Someone who might help. Where the fuck is Bobby Gonzalez?" she snarled.

"Who? You can't be here, lady."

"Yeah? Well tell that to Bobby. He stole my fucking car while I was at work, left me a note saying his wouldn't start. Like I care."

"You need to leave."

"Fine. Just tell me where my car is. I'll jack it and he can walk home. Then he can collect his shit from the sidewalk and get the fuck out of my life. Loser."

"I don't care about your car or your boyfriend. Get the fuck off this property or I will shoot you in the fucking head." He drew his gun.

"Oh, god!" She didn't have to fake the fear. "I'm sorry, okay? I'll go. But I got dropped off here and I don't have any way home."

"Not my fucking problem."

"Well, can you at least have your rent-a-cop drop me off at the entrance? That's a long walk before I can even start hitchhiking."

"Again, not my problem. Just turn around and walk away."

"Okay, I'm going." She held her hands up, still clutching the cell phone.

He intercepted her as she tried to pass him. "Then again, maybe you should stay. We haven't had any fun tonight, and you look like a whole lotta fun." He reached for her hat but she sidestepped.

"Yeah, so much fun Bobby got himself another girlfriend on the side. I'm kinda spoiled on men right now."

In the distance, the security guard stepped out of the shack. He walked around the side of the building. A car pulled up by the gate. The guard returned and leaned over to speak to the driver. He looked her way, got in the car, and left.

Danny said something. *Shit*. She had let herself get distracted.

"What did you say?"

"I said that by the end of the night maybe you'll find the right man." Danny said.

"Yeah, right." She knew who the right man was. "Like that's gonna happen."

"It's gonna happen if I want it to," he said, pointing the gun at her.

"You gotta be kidding me," she said. "This night keeps getting better. First my loser boyfriend, and now you thinking a gun makes you a man. Please."

"Let's take a little walk." He grabbed her arm.

"Fine. Whatever." There was no point in resisting. The timing was bad. "You can let go of me. I'll come with you. After all, you've got a gun."

He released her. "I guess that beats your cell phone, huh?" He laughed.

"Seems that way."

They had gone five steps when the fire alarm went off.

Danny jumped and swore. "What now?"

"I think maybe your cigarette set a fire." She stepped back. "I'm not going into no burning building."

He turned his head, trying to spot the fire. She punched zero on her phone and the tenth bomb went off, taking out the side of the office. Danny dropped his gun and bent to pick it up. She drew hers and placed it at the back of his head.

"Don't even try it, asshole."

"You aren't going to shoot me." He reached for the gun.

She pulled the trigger before she could prove him right. He dropped to the pavement. She took off running and did not stop until she made it back to the trees. Sticks stepped out and poured water over her head.

"What was that for?" she hissed.

"Spatter," he said. "But I brought it in case you set yourself on fire."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome." He had missed the sarcasm. "You okay?"

Her body shook. "Yeah, fine."

"Then finish the job." He handed her a dry cell phone.

People were streaming out of the building, most of them running for their cars. One of Cavuto's men raced out of the office, looking first at the empty guard shed and then at Danny's body. He said something into a cell phone. Then he looked right at her, raised his gun and began firing.

She dove to the ground. Another bomb went off. She didn't know which number she had hit. She looked up. Number seven, of course. She hoped no one remained in that part of the building. She hadn't missed the gas line after all. A column of fire shot upwards.

The rain of bullets ceased abruptly. She sat up, punching the rest of the numbers in proper sequence. She turned to Sticks, sure he would give her grief for screwing up, but he wasn't watching. He wasn't moving at all.

Chapter 32 - Shot in the Dark

Chapter 32 of 36

Timing is everything.

□

The explosions had come too soon. Gage had thought he would have to take out the man threatening Deira, which had distracted him from the targets at the other end of the lot. It also meant he was looking in the right direction when the second man began firing. Emptying his mind, he set his sight for the shooter. He took a breath and checked the sight again, then fired. The man dropped to the pavement.

Workers raced across the parking lot and jumped into their cars. Tires squealed as they raced for the exit. More people poured out through the loading dock. Their fear and confusion added to the chaos.

He had no time to look for Deira. She was on her own. He calmly located Butch, re-sighted, and fired. The shot was not perfect, but Butch went down. That was all that mattered.

Getting a clear shot at the remaining targets proved difficult. One of them had grabbed a worker and was using him as a shield. Gage waited, ticking off the seconds without thinking about it. He needed to finish soon. The target turned to yell at someone, opening a gap between him and his hostage. Gage had no time for a second look. He fired. The hostage fell to the ground screaming, but not because he had been hit. People rarely responded well when covered with brains.

Two down. The first two did not count. He scanned the parking lot for Cavuto but could not locate him. He was there somewhere or ought to be. The guard had confirmed his arrival. Time was running out. He would have to take out the other targets and hope Cavuto surfaced.

It was easy to find the remaining thugs. They were the ones shooting back. They didn't have his range, but were still too close. Deira had been heading for the trees. If the first shooter had not taken her out, the others might. He did not want to think about it. Could not. There was a job to do.

He picked up the rifle and collapsed the tripod. He moved further up the hill at an angle to the loading dock until he found the right spot. He searched for Cavuto's bodyguards. They would not be far from their boss.

They shouldn't have worn suits. It made them easier to find. He looked through the scope, picking out the one further away. He hadn't needed Deira to identify Jamie Kittredge. The little bastard was well known for his rage and his sadistic treatment of women.

He took the time to sight again, then pulled the trigger. Kittredge moved at the last second. The shot missed. True to form, Kittredge began firing wildly, hitting one of the workers. Those who had not made it to their cars dove for cover or hit the ground. Most of them would be used to gunfire.

The second shot was cleaner and hit as intended. Kittredge crumpled, his hands clutching his stomach. He might live, though with that much damage it was doubtful. He would suffer either way.

Another bomb went off. He was sure he had heard all ten detonate. This time, the ground shook. *What did she do?* The next explosion was bigger and took off part of the roof on the other side of the building. Some of the workers who had gotten to their feet were now covering their faces and stumbling around blindly. Others were ripping off jackets or shirts. Those who had not apparently gone insane were once again running for their cars.

Sranje. The chemical vats had blown. He stood far enough away that burns would be unlikely. It gave him little comfort. The air sparkled. The wind shifted, or maybe the explosion had pushed the air. It did not matter which. He knew what was coming next. *One more and it is done.*

He could finally see Cavuto, running for his truck. He would have done better to carjack one of his employees. Gage looked through the scope, following Cavuto's movements. He had no qualms about shooting the man in the back. He took a deep breath, then another. One of the blinded workers got in the way of the shot. Gage waited and a few seconds later took aim. His hands began to shake, just slightly. Trying to still them made it worse. If he fired, he would miss or hit the wrong person. He had run out of time.

It was too dark to see the sparkling particles settle into his skin. He breathed deeply, taking in the poison. The sickness sang in his blood. It was good to be alive.

He lowered the rifle, grabbed the tripod, and ran for the truck. He put the equipment in the back and covered it with a blanket. Then he looked around for Deira.

She should have been waiting for him. He raced towards the trees, heart pounding. His vision was sharper than it had been for years, but he could not see her. She was smart enough to not make any noise. He slowed down once he got to the trees, scanning the ground, not wanting to think about what he might find yet unable to stop. Light glinted off of something metal on the ground. He crept forward.

They were lying still, two bodies in the darkness. The reflection came from the end of Sticks' cane. He stepped over it. Screams echoed from the parking lot. Sirens joined them, getting closer. He leaned over. Sticks wheezed through clenched teeth. Deira's hand rested on his hip. Her eyes were closed.

Animal rage rose up, demanding. He growled, then shoved it down. She was breathing. Blood seeped through her fingers. He bent down and placed his hand over hers.

She opened her eyes and pointed her gun at him. He froze. She lowered the gun.

"I need to see."

"He'll die."

"We will all die if we do not leave right now." He pushed her hand away.

The wound looked bad, maybe fatal. He had seen men survive worse, but not without immediate attention. He stripped off his shirt and pressed it on the wound. Deira got to her feet, strangely graceful.

"Keep pressure on that. We have to get him back to my truck." He lifted Sticks.

The walk back to the truck took an eternity. The sirens got closer, overpowering the cries of the injured workers. Deira opened the door, climbing in as Gage laid Sticks on the back seat. He used a bungee cord to secure the shirt. Sticks tried to scream but it came out a choked cry. A moment later, he passed out.

"We need his keys."

"They'll be in the ignition. He says no one would bother stealing his truck."

"You will have to drive it." He stepped aside so she could get out of the truck, balling his hands into fists so he did not reach out for her.

"I'll follow you to the hospital."

"No hospital."

"Well, you can't patch **this** up on your kitchen table."

"No. We are going to your place. A doctor will be waiting."

She panicked. "My place is even worse!"

"Not your apartment, the storefront. There's no time to argue. Get in the damned truck!" he yelled. No one would hear him over the sirens. Cavuto would be long gone, and all other threats had been neutralized.

She turned and ran into the trees. He ground his teeth and got into the truck, looking over his shoulder to check on Sticks. She would be heartbroken if the old man died. It was a distinct possibility. When he turned back, she skirted the edge of the woods. Under her arm, she carried Sticks' cane. A gallon jug was in her hand. *Details.* He started the truck and pulled up as she angled the battered pickup out of the trees.

They passed through the gate, headlights still off. The moon gave enough light to see the road. The sirens were very close. He eased onto the access road and turned on his headlights. She did the same.

They were half-way to the exit when the first police cars turned onto the road. He did not stop, but pulled to the edge of the lane and coasted. They blew by without slowing. Fire trucks followed, ambulances close behind.

He kept his speed down, knowing that each minute wasted brought Sticks closer to death. The flashing lights disappeared down the road. He sped up. As they approached the exit, two more police cars turned onto the road and slowed. He tried to control his breathing, to no avail. He fought the urge to stomp down on the accelerator. It would not help. There was no way they would make it out.

The flashing lights went dark. Inside the cars, the officers stared forward, not one turning to look at the trucks. They sped up, passing the abandoned road. It was almost enough to make him believe in miracles. If God was looking out for him tonight, he would not waste the blessing. Sticks coughed, then whimpered. Gage turned onto the main road and slammed the gas pedal to the floor, hoping for another miracle.

He had to slow once they were on the highway. If he got pulled over for speeding with a car full of guns and a dying man, not even God would be able to save him. He pushed the button on his headset and called Nicky.

"Is it done?"

"No time. Get The Medic and meet me at Deira's apartment. Security is six, seven, zero, five, three, five, one. First floor door is unlocked. Open the gate to the back yard."

"Deira?" Nicky's voice cracked.

"Sticks."

"What the fuck?!"

"No. Time!" He hung up. *Let there be time.*

Deira caught up to him on the highway. Her body trembled, screaming for movement. Cars raced up behind her, the headlights too bright. She blinked away tears. All she could think about was the blood on the pavement, her hands, Sticks. The bullets had been meant for her. He had been hit because of her, was dying in place of her. This was not how it was supposed to be.

She gripped the steering wheel harder to stop her hands from shaking. The other cars blurred into streaks of light and color. She focused on the taillights of Gage's truck, silent screams in her head urging him to go faster. She opened the window, flooding the car with cold air. She took a deep breath, the first since the cloud of pump had surrounded her. They had forgotten the masks.

Details. She could hear his voice as if he were sitting right next to her. She laughed hysterically. By the time they pulled off the highway, the laughter had dissolved into choking sobs.

The tension in his shoulders dissolved as he made the turn onto Deira's street. Ragged breathing from the back seat told him Sticks yet lived. *For now.*

He pulled into the back yard. The motion detector flooded it with light. The door flew open. Nicky and The Medic ran to the truck, carrying a stretcher. Gage helped load Sticks, tilting his head towards the pickup as it pulled in behind them. Nicky nodded and stepped away. She was a very good soldier.

Chapter 33 - Disorderly Conduct

Chapter 33 of 36

The aftermath poses as many dangers as the main event.

□

Deira slammed on the breaks and yanked the keys out of the ignition, tossing them onto the dashboard. She almost fell getting out. Nicky steadied her.

"He's dying!" It was all she could say.

"I know, honey. They've taken him inside. The Medic will see to him."

She shook off Nicky's arm. "He needs a hospital! He needs a surgeon, not some goddamned medic."

"He is a surgeon, just not in this country. He'll get Sticks patched up until we can get him to a real hospital. But you can't go freaking out while he does his thing."

Nicky stood in the doorway, blocking it. Deira resisted the urge to punch her. She wiped her eyes with the edge of her shirt. The immediate pain was astounding. She blinked away more tears.

"You're a mess, girl. Let's get you cleaned up." Nicky pulled a handkerchief from her back pocket and wiped away the tears.

"I need to see him."

"You cool?"

"Yeah," Deira lied. She followed Nicky into the hallway.

Bright light filled the store. Nicky led Deira to a corner where they could watch without getting in the way. Sticks lay on a gurney, covered by a sheet. A short, dark man spoke to Gage in a language she did not recognize. Gage said something to him and they switched to English.

"The bullet passed through. It didn't hit any organs, but the damage is bad. I can deal with most of it. He shouldn't die tonight." He had an African accent.

Deira sagged against the wall, sliding down until she folded up on the floor. Nicky walked over to the doctor. She took something from Gage's hands

"I'm steadier right now. See to your girl."

Gage practically vibrated as he approached the corner. He looked down at her and frowned, extending his hand to help her. When she took it, he yanked her to her feet.

"What happened?" His voice was rough and low.

"He came to make sure I was okay." At least her tears were silent now.

"Old fool," he muttered.

Her head snapped up. "Fuck you! He was there for me. Because of me. Where were you?"

"Doing the job. Do not blame me for this. I did as I said I would."

"Then how the hell did he get shot?" The tears had stopped.

"It happens. It's war. People die. That is the point, no? He knew it was dangerous to come along. I stopped the shooter, and because I took the time to do so Cavuto got away."

"He what?" she screamed. He blocked the punch she threw to his shoulder.

"You do not want to do this," he growled. "Not tonight."

"Upstairs, both of you!" Nicky barked, running around the gurney. She flung open the door, shoved them out, slammed it shut, and locked it.

They raced up the stairs. Deira fumbled with the key and cursed. Her hands were shaking too hard. He snatched the key ring and slammed the key into place, almost breaking it as the lock turned. They fell through the door, panting, eyes wild.

He kicked the door closed and leaned against it, fighting for control of his breathing, trying to focus, failing. He felt the sickness crawling through his system, corroding everything he had tried to become. He wanted to feel this way forever.

She stumbled to the kitchen. She stuck her head under the faucet and turned it on. Closing her eyes, she let the cold water wash over her face, drinking as much of it as she could without choking, praying she would throw up, knowing it would not help. She opened her eyes slightly, enough to flush whatever chemical might be left. Crying had probably done that already, but it couldn't hurt.

The water took the edge off the pain, or maybe it just gave her a way to not feel so much. It would be good to not feel. The water was a song, her heartbeat the percussion. She tilted her head and let it fill her mouth, breathing it in.

He put a hand on her shoulder and turned off the water to keep her from drowning. She coughed, water pouring out of her mouth, then twisted to face him. He sidestepped the knee to the groin. Her punch caught him on the jaw, snapping his head sideways. Blood trickled into his mouth, the taste of coming home.

She braced herself on the edge of the sink and kicked him in the hip, sending him crashing into the counter. He should have seen that coming. She stumbled towards the hallway, water dripping down her face, into her eyes.

Her drug-induced attack had been wild, fast, and stronger than normal. That's what the drug did, why he had loved it, why he needed to wrap her up until the worst had passed. She got two steps out of the kitchen before he dropped her to the floor, pinning her.

"Stop," he growled.

"Fuck you!" She pushed her hands against the floor, lifting him just enough to plant a knee and drop one hip. He rolled off of her back. He didn't give her the chance to get to her feet before grabbing her again.

Arms wrapped around her waist, he stood, lifting her off the floor. He tossed her down the hall and stepped back, breathing hard. She managed to land on her feet. He stood still, regulating his breathing. He didn't know if he could fight the drug and her at the same time, but she gave him no choice.

He braced himself as she launched at him. He deflected the blows directed at his head. He missed the kick to the knee. It started to buckle. There was no way he could let himself go down. He felt something pop as he regained his balance and knew that he would pay for whatever it was later. Pain pushed aside reason until there was only one fight. He snarled and threw himself at her.

She danced backwards, keeping just out of his reach. She made it to the bedroom and grabbed the door, slamming it shut and throwing the bolt. Her breath came in gulps. Sweat stung her eyes. As she turned to look for a towel, the door splintered, pieces of it falling around her. She spun so he could not grab her from behind.

He picked her up and threw her onto the bed. She rolled and came off the other side. The only sound in the room was the rasping of breath as they stared at each other. She had no way out and they both knew it.

She shrugged out of her jacket and threw it at him. He caught it and tossed it into the corner.

"There are better ways to do this." Her voice was ragged, raw. She took off her shirt and dropped it on the floor, then climbed on the bed, her eyes never leaving his.

He watched her crawl towards him, slow and deliberate. She had purposely not removed the bra. It was outrageously wrong for the sort of job they had just done. He walked to the bed, ignoring the screaming in the back of his head that told him to hurt her. Something was wrong. Everything felt right. She grabbed the edge of the mattress and lowered herself, a sinuous movement. Her hair hung over her face as she dropped her head in submission. The rush it gave him was profane.

When she looked up, he smiled down at her. Pushing herself into a kneeling position, she smiled back. He pulled off his shirt. She sat back on her heels, and as he leaned in to kiss her, she flipped the knife in her hand and sliced a line through the bullet scar on his shoulder.

"So you won't forget," she said.

His hand flew to the wound. It was shallow. She could have done worse. His fingers came away sticky with blood. He looked at them, then slammed the heel of his hand against her shoulder. She collapsed on the bed, breathing hard. Her arm was numb. He took the knife and threw it across the room.

"Scars are not free," he growled.

"I've already paid." She wiped flecks of his blood off her cheek.

"Not for this."

He grabbed her ankles and pulled her toward him. She sat up and swung at him, but he was ready for it. He caught her wrists, transferred them to one hand and undid his belt with the other. She struggled when he pinned her hands to the bed and straddled her. He fastened the belt around her wrists then fed the end through one of the slats in the headboard, pulling it tight and tying a knot.

She pushed and twisted while he fashioned the restraint, maddened by the feel of him hard against her. He pressed down harder as he tied her to the bed. She thought she would scream from the need, but it was all she could do to draw breath. Her heart pounded like it would come out of her chest.

"This is not how it should be," he said.

"This is exactly how it is," she answered.

He sat back, looking down at her. She whimpered and struggled. When her legs wrapped around him, he realized she was not trying to get away. He let her draw him closer.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"You." It had become ritual.

He grabbed her thighs and pushed them down, making her release him. He straddled her again, pressing her legs together with his knees. He leaned down and licked a line from her cleavage to the hollow of her throat.

She lifted her hips as he removed her pants. Her underwear, as insubstantial as the bra, followed. His hands slid up her thighs, spreading her legs, opening her to him, stroking her until she cried out, the sweetest sound. He wanted to play with her all night long, to please her and deny her pleasure until she broke. There was no time for that. If they didn't burn through the drug, it would burn through them.

He got off the bed and stripped. She watched him, eager, afraid she had pushed him too far. *It's the drug.* She recognized the lie. The drug was about to give her what he had refused.

"Say it." His voice was low, his eyes almost black.

"What?" She would say anything.

"Tell me you want me."

"I want you."

"Like this?" He gestured to the headboard.

"No. This can stop."

"Will you try to kill me if I let you go?" He spoke of more than the moment.

"Maybe, but not tonight and never with a weapon." Her smile was wicked.

He released her, tossing the belt into a corner.

She licked her lips, wanting nothing more than to explore him with her mouth the hollow by his hip, the lines defining muscle, the length of his fingers. It would not happen tonight. They had taken too long already. Her hands were shaking.

"Say it again."

"I want you. Now."

He rolled her over and pulled her to her knees, keeping his arm wrapped around her. She pushed back against him as he entered her.

"Like this?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And this?" he asked, driving deeper.

"Yes!" She tossed her head. "Take me. However you want. I won't break. I promise." She drew the last word out, a mocking challenge.

"We shall see." He stopped holding back.

She fought as hard as she had before, letting her own beast meet his. He snarled, rising up and grabbing her hips. His control began slipping away as he thrust harder. He could not let it happen. *Not like this.*

She growled when he pulled out of her. He flipped her over and leaned down to kiss her. He needed a moment to recover his breath, to think. She would not allow it. She beat on him until he was inside her again. He pulled back and stopped. She stared up at him, her eyes too wide, desperate, haunted.

"Please," she whispered. "Please. Take the pain away."

The sound of her pleading undid him. The sickness won. He thrust into her, pounding, driven on by her broken cries. She struggled to meet him, twisted, still pleading for more. He lost control, lost himself inside her, lost in her screams as she came. Lost beyond reason, he spilled into her, roaring one word.

"Mine!"

She lay beneath him, stroking his back. She had not kept her promise. Something inside her had broken, or perhaps been fixed. She could not tell which.

"What did you say?" she murmured.

"Hmm?"

"You said something in Serbian."

He kissed her neck. "Nothing that would make sense."

She let it go. "Do you think that did it, or is the shaking coming back? God, I hate that stuff."

"That is good." He rolled over and pulled her to him.

"We need to check on Sticks." She winced as she thought of her mentor.

"You should shower. I will check on him." He kissed her forehead and got out of bed.

She wanted to stay there forever, but he lifted her gently. She put her arms around his neck as he carried her to the bathroom. He let her down, turned on the water and motioned for her to get in.

"I will be right back."

As she stepped into the steaming stream, she heard the door shut.

Chapter 34 - Tender Mercies

Chapter 34 of 36

What to do when all is said and done.

□

Nicky stood by the gurney, looking down at Sticks. Across the room, The Medic had his hands in the sink. Bits of song drifted across the room every time he turned his head. Gage did not recognize the language.

"Well?" Modulating his tone proved difficult, but explaining would be worse.

"He's breathing." Nicky walked to the sink.

The Medic had finished the cursory cleaning of his instruments. He set down the tray, picked up a stethoscope and came around the gurney.

"Sticks is a tough old bastard. He'll pull through, providing I get him to hospital soon." Without asking, he leaned in to check Gage's heart. He stepped back, crossing his arms. "You'll live too, but you should lay off the drugs."

"Very funny. You are well aware of what happened tonight."

"I am aware of nothing I am not paid to know," The Medic said. He reached into his pocket, pulling out a vial. "Split this with the young lady upstairs, providing she is still alive." There was no judgment in his words. It was not his business. He handed the vial to Gage.

"What is it?"

"Poison. What did you think?" The Medic raised his eyebrows, then laughed. "It's something I've been working on for years. Field tests have proven it effective."

"Field tests?"

"On junkies, mostly. It's a shame no government will certify me. That little gem could dent the pump epidemic. Might even be enough to win me a Nobel prize."

"How would you get the prize? Europe is still off limits to you unless something has changed."

"A misunderstanding between governments." The Medic shrugged.

"Governments who would be interested in your cure. This could be your ticket back."

The Medic snorted. "Any government that got its hands on this would do everything in its power to ensure it was never manufactured. Pump is a tool of war, and war is profitable, if not for the people fighting it. We are all better served if it gets around through the black market. Some lab will eventually claim to have made it and there will be no hiding it then."

"So you give it away and with it potential millions."

"No. I'm a professional. I add it to the cost of the visit. What do I need with millions? That kind of wealth would ensure my death."

"Give me a few minutes to take care of this." Gage held up the bottle. "Then I will drive Sticks to the hospital and drop you off."

"You can't go. I have a van coming. The man driving will have his story, but he doesn't want to be known. I will tell you where Sticks is, but it is too dangerous for you or the young lady to visit him."

"Tell me," Nicky offered. "I can check up on him and report back."

The Medic nodded. "I need information if this is to go smoothly. How well do you know him?"

"We have crossed paths from time to time, but are not close," Gage said. "The girl knows more. I will get her out of the shower." He turned to leave.

"Let her finish. It will be some time before the van arrives. He is in no immediate danger. You, on the other hand, should get out of this business before it kills you. Again. Find something less dangerous to do with your time. Like wrestling alligators."

Gage smiled. "I will take it into consideration."

The water was still running when he got upstairs. Deira was sitting in the tub, knees drawn up, crying. She turned to look at him, stricken. He drank half the liquid from the vial and handed it to her.

"This will help."

"Will it erase what I did tonight?" she hiccupped.

He sighed. "No. It will counteract the drug."

She drank and handed him back the bottle. "Is he alive?"

"He is. You need to finish your shower. The Medic needs to talk to you."

"I'm almost done, but you look like hell. Get in." She stood, adjusted the showerhead, and held the curtain aside.

The water was still warm but would not be for much longer. He let it run over him for a few minutes. She handed him the soap after putting some in her hands. While he scrubbed his arms and face, she washed his back, her fingers digging into his muscles. When she had finished, she leaned against him, wrapping her arms around his waist.

"I absolve you," she said.

"You cannot."

"Not for everything, but for whatever sin you think you've visited on me, I absolve you."

"Only God can give absolution. Only priests can recommend it."

"We've lost our faith, so take grace when and where you can get it." She released him, rinsing her hands. They were scrubbed raw.

"Chemical burn?" he asked, taking one hand gently and turning it over. He pulled her into the water to rinse off.

"No. I had a Lady Macbeth moment." She took a ragged breath. "I shot a man tonight, point blank. I've never done that before. Somehow it seemed more real than killing with a knife. How stupid is that?"

"He would have raped and killed you, likely with help. You did not have a choice."

"There's always a choice." She stepped out, wrapped herself in a towel, and walked out the door, leaving a trail of damp footprints.

The Medic was talking with Nicky, but his gaze was fixed on Sticks. Afraid of what she might find, Deira approached the gurney. Her hand fluttered over her mentor, finally coming to rest on his cheek.

"You'd better pull through, old man, or you'll never know how the story ends. And I won't let you haunt me while you figure it out." She knew he couldn't hear her. His eyes were closed, his breathing shallow.

"You are friends?" The Medic appeared at her side. He had a soothing voice but did not presume to console her.

"Yeah." She couldn't say more.

"Does he have guns?"

"Of course he has guns."

"Do you know what kind? Can you get to them?"

"Two nine millimeters, a .22 caliber. Too many rifles and shotguns to catalog. The handguns are accessible. Probably a couple of shotguns if I looked in the usual places."

"I need a nine millimeter handgun."

"I have one." She looked up.

"No, it must be his. The hospital will be required to report a gunshot wound to the police."

"I don't think I should drive," she said.

"That is taken care of." Gage's voice wrapped around her, heavy but not comforting.

"I have a pass key to the building. The gun safe is in his office. Same pass key will get you in there. Key to the safe is taped to the wall behind the water cooler, in the room across the hall." She turned and walked out of the room, numb.

Gage met her on the stairs, took the pass key, and told her to wait in the apartment. She retreated without a word.

Handing the key to Nicky, he hesitated. "We will need to talk tomorrow."

"See to your girl. She's not handling this well. I'll call tomorrow or if anything comes up you should know about." She got into her car, the engine too loud in the night.

The van pulled up a few minutes later. Gage helped load Sticks.

The Medic handed him another vial. "You may find some use for this. You have connections I don't."

"You know a bit too much about my business dealings, my friend." He put the vial in his pocket.

"Enough to know you're as fond of rescuing people as I am and as wary of governments."

"Is the usual payment arrangement sufficient?" Gage asked.

"Nicky has taken care of that." The Medic hesitated. "It's not my place to say, but that's never stopped me. If that young woman is yours, I can't think of a better reason to get out of this business." He got in the van. Gage locked the gate and the storefront. Nicky and The Medic had cleaned it up well enough. Professionals could do the rest.

He reset the alarm and climbed the stairs, drained but not tired. The drug was still working. The Medic's antidote only took away the side-effects. Time would take care of the rest.

Deira paced from the living room to the kitchen. The apartment shrank in on her. She picked up a knife and threw it at the wall. It landed with a satisfying thunk, handle quivering.

"Practicing? Or did the wall offend you?" Gage stood by the open door.

"I hate feeling helpless." She retrieved the knife and set it on the counter. "At least I don't feel like throwing up anymore. What was that stuff you gave me?"

"My future." He turned on the radio, flipping through stations until he found what he wanted. Classical music filled the room, a testament to her insistence on good speakers. She didn't press him about his answer. Or his choice of music. It suited him.

"We will not be able to sleep." He walked over to the couch, his glance an invitation.

She shook her head. "I can't sit. I'll go nuts thinking about Sticks."

"We cannot do anything but wait. I will call Nicky in the morning for an update." He sat on the couch, laid his head back and closed his eyes. His hands moved with the music. He knew the piece.

She had to move. Pacing had not helped. She took a broom from the hall closet and went to clean her room. Splinters littered the floor. She stacked the larger pieces and swept up the rest. Then she turned to the regular mess. Most of her clothing joined the shards of wood in the trash bag. She stripped the bed, throwing out the sheets. There were too many traces on them. She threw a clean quilt over the mattress.

The pile on the bed grew, made up mostly of her remaining clothes. She found her knife by the dresser and added it to the stack. It would be enough. She threw everything in her suitcase and returned it to the closet. Then she went to clean out the bathroom.

For once, he did not want to help her. She had to do what she thought was right. She was following the plan, and he would not stop her. But he couldn't watch.

He let the music wash over him, intricate patterns giving way to soft strains. He picked out the themes and followed them, all the while listening to the rhythm from the other room. She moved in time to the music. He wondered if she noticed.

In his mind, they were dancing. The strings slashed at him, leaving ribbons of welts. Each strike of the drums landed like a blow until bone deep bruises throbbed, keeping time. The keening oboe pierced him, a final sacrifice. Underlying all, the clarinet mourned. He turned his body to shield her so she would never have to know he bled.

Chapter 35 - Nothing to Lose

Chapter 35 of 36

Parting is such sweet sorrow.

□

The pale fingers of dawn traced the edge of the window. She stood behind the couch, wanting to rest her hands on his shoulders, hesitating lest she wake him. He tilted his head and opened his eyes.

"Come to bed." She held out her hand. He let her lead him to the bedroom, her hand light on his. Everything was neat, orderly, empty. He took a deep breath.

"It's okay," she said. They lay down on top of the covers and fell asleep.

The ringing of church bells woke him. He stared at the ceiling, cataloging his injuries mostly bruises, none bad. He sat up, waiting for a wave of dizziness that did not come. When he stood, pain shot through his knee. He groaned, reaching for the headboard to steady himself. Deira stirred and opened one eye.

"How bad is it?" she slurred.

He pulled himself to his feet, gritting his teeth against the pain. Careful steps got him across the room without falling. He leaned on the doorframe, breathing heavily.

"Let me help you." She rolled out of bed.

"I am fine," he lied. He hobbled to the bathroom and closed the door.

Four bottles of painkillers were lined up on the sink next to a glass. Everything else had been cleared out. *Details.*

The scent of coffee drew him to the kitchen. She leaned against the counter, her back to him, looking out over the yard. The coffee maker dribbled and hissed, too slow for his needs.

He opened the freezer and removed a bag of frozen peas. He limped to the chair, lowering himself gingerly to keep his knee from popping. He propped his foot on the other chair and applied the makeshift ice pack. Eyes closed, he waited for the combination of drugs and cold to bring relief.

"I'm sorry I hurt you." She set a cup of coffee in front of him.

"As am I." He sipped the coffee, a taste of heaven in a cup. It was the only salvation he would know. The church bells had stopped ringing.

"We've got some things to sort out," she said.

"Nicky would have called if she had news of Sticks." He purposely ignored her intent.

She sighed. "She'll be waiting for us to call." She handed him his phone. "You do it."

He checked in with his service, then had them place the call. Several seconds passed before Nicky picked up.

"About time." Despite precautions, she had identified the call.

"We had trouble sleeping."

"I'll bet."

"Nicola," he growled.

"Chill. If you're calling to check on the old man, relax. He's stable. Won't be up and about for awhile, but that's what happens when you shoot yourself in the side." She gave him enough information to confirm the hospital had believed their story. He passed the news on to Deira.

"About the mishap on the job," he started.

"What mishap?"

"I was unable to fulfill the contract." The admission irritated him. He had never failed to finish a job before.

"Taken care of," she said with relish.

"How?"

"Turn on any cable news station. Call me back in half an hour." She disconnected. He stared at the phone, then set it down. Deira didn't have a TV.

She set the laptop on the table and went to refill their cups while he found a news web site. He carefully moved his leg so she could sit. Then they stared, unable to speak, while the video played. The ticker ran underneath, augmenting the story in truncated sentences. None of it made any sense. In the corner of the screen, time counted down, promising more details.

The politician stepped up to a lectern, reporters jostling for position on the stairs below, and began his story. A major pump ring had been broken up. Raid planned for months, several agencies cooperating. Street value. Forced labor. Police under fire. Four killed. More injured. Explosions. Attempt to destroy evidence. Cavuto arrested, held without bail.

The words blended, creating a detailed fantasy. They glanced at each other, then back to the screen. The politician took questions. He practically glowed. Gage closed the browser and let out the breath he had held for too long.

Deira found her voice. "What just happened?"

"Nicky did."

She left him to check the news wires. The stories were consistent. It was over. She set her suitcase by the door, took their cups from the table, and washed them.

"Can I leave the rest of the clean up for you?" She dried her hands and hung up the dish towel.

"You are ready to leave?"

"That was the plan. I figure I'd best get out before some enterprising fire inspector turns up with lab results that unravel," she waved her hand towards the table, "whatever that was."

"I do not think it will happen that way." He shifted in the chair and closed the computer.

"Doesn't really matter, does it? The job is done. It's time for me to go."

"I bought you a plane ticket."

"Did you." She gave him a level look.

"Do you want to know the destination?"

"No. I'm not getting on a plane, so I hope that ticket is transferable."

"You need to leave the country," he argued.

"No. What I need is to go home."

"Which is where?"

She said nothing. He didn't need to know.

"You may still be in danger. Cavuto answered to someone, and they will not be pleased."

"Everyone who knew my connection to Cavuto is dead or in no position to bargain with that information. I don't care if there's some asshole who may or may not have it out for me. At this point, I have nothing to lose."

"There is always something to lose."

"Right up until there's not." She looked away. "Are you going to give me a ride to a used car dealer, or do I have to call a cab?"

Supporting his weight on the edge of the table, he stood. He winced as his knee straightened. He walked steadily to the door and held it open for her. She picked up his computer and her suitcase and walked out.

He waited in the parking lot while she registered her truck. Manny had assured him it would run for several years, at least. She had chosen well. A small, old SUV with dated, two-tone paint drew little attention. She would probably trade it before she got to her destination or very soon after.

She held herself rigid as she made her way through the queue. It meant nothing. Some day, the full extent of what had happened would overwhelm her. He knew she would recover, but she would never forget. That was the price.

"It's done," she said, getting in and closing the door. She turned to look at him. "Thank you."

He nodded. "I'll take you back."

Manny waved as they pulled in. Her truck sat out in front, freshly washed. One of the mechanics came over to attach the license plates while she transferred her belongings.

He leaned against the truck. She walked towards him, hesitated, then stepped up.

"So this is goodbye," he said.

She nodded. "Thanks for the loan."

"And the rest?" he asked.

"Figure out what I owe you and give the rest to Nicky. She set up an account for me." She opened her mouth to say more but closed it again, looking down.

"In case I did not survive," he finished for her.

"I'm glad you did." She leaned in and kissed him on both cheeks. "Dovidjenja," she whispered, then got into her truck.

He closed his eyes, waiting for the sound of her engine to fade.

Nicky sat at her desk, waiting. When the last transfer was confirmed, she reached over and shut off her machine. Everyone had gotten what they'd asked for, and she was still breathing. She unplugged the external hard drive and put it in her safe. Tomorrow, it would go in a safe deposit box. Then she could wipe her hard drives and start over. *If only it were that easy.*

Her phone rang. She had known he would call. He never let anything go.

They sat at a table in the back of her favorite restaurant. Nicky had insisted he reserve this particular table, in a quiet room near the back. He suspected she'd done it to buy time; it was a popular spot for private parties.

She fidgeted throughout the meal. He had not felt the need to mention the double contract, preferring to let her think he would collect at a later time. She would eventually figure out that he had let it go. He needed the few friends he had, and for the moment, only she and Sticks qualified.

He poured the rest of the wine and sat back, turning his glass in his hand, savoring the color. He took a sip, letting the taste run over his tongue. He had been right; it was a good year.

"She hasn't contacted you."

"No."

Nicky laughed. "That's really not working for you, is it?"

"It does not bother me."

"Good thing you aren't in marketing. You couldn't sell that if your life depended on it. Well, maybe if." She was enjoying this.

"Believe what you wish. I have other pursuits."

"You always do," she said. "But here's the problem. That girl woke something in you, and you're searching for a way to feed it. That's what this dinner is about."

"Did you think so?" He set down the empty glass.

"Oh, I know it. You're wound so tight you're going to snap, and that never works out well. So do what you need to do to get her out of your system, but you won't be doing it with me."

"My only concern is that she remains a loose end. I do not like those."

"There's nowhere she can go where she can't be found," she said.

"That is part of the problem."

"I mean found by me. She'll be careful not to show up on the general radar."

"She is reckless."

"Not as reckless as you think. She has two ways to go. She can make a lot of noise and get killed. Or she can stay quiet and alive. That's it. She's going to live or die and there's not a lot you can do about it now." She sat back, head tilted. "Except kill her if you think it's necessary."

"I am trying to avoid that, but she is keeping the option on the table by staying in the country."

"Look, she needed to go home and make peace with her father. She needed to say good-bye. After that, no matter where she goes, I can find her. Unless she decides to go off the grid and eschew all modern technology and banking, and we both know she's not the sort to go live off the land."

He nodded, but it was as if he had not heard her.

"You feel like finding the girl, let me know and I'll make it happen."

"Would you?" he asked.

"For a fee." She smiled. She didn't need his money. "I'd curse you for a fool, but I'd do it."

"Why?"

"Because I love you." She shook her head in disgust. "You made me go and say it. Couldn't figure that out on your own. I don't know why I put up with you at all."

"Because I love you," he said.

"I know. You're the worst best friend a girl can have."

"You would not have it any other way. Normal people bore you."

"Go ahead, rub it in, asshole. I'm going to take my very rich, very exciting self home and take a bubble bath. Don't call me unless you have a job that's worth my time."

She dropped her napkin on the table and left him with the check. He smiled and picked it up. He had gotten what he wanted, and for once, the price he would pay was small.

Epilogue

Chapter 36 of 36

It was only a matter of time.

□

Deira stepped out of the elevator, instinctively moving away from the crush of people. She made it to the end of the courtyard before Tom Kennedy caught up with her. His lanky form was reflected in the polished metal column. She found herself checking her own reflection and looked away. Pretending she hadn't heard him would not work. Best to get it over with now. She turned to face him.

"I'm so glad I caught you," he said, smiling broadly. He pushed the hair out of his eyes. It fell back instantly.

You couldn't catch me if you tried. Even wearing ridiculous heels, she could escape him. It would be pitifully easy. He'd done nothing to make her think she'd need to.

"A bunch of us are going out for happy hour. You in? I'll buy you a drink." His big blue eyes filled with hope and anticipation.

"I can't. I have class tonight." Her trainer had canceled the session, but it worked as an excuse.

"That's a shame. Maybe next time." He couldn't hide his disappointment.

"How about you buy me that drink at the pub next time you play out?" she offered. It was easier to avoid his attempts at courtship when his fan girls were around.

"It's a date," he said. He practically bounced as he walked away.

No, *it isn't*. She shook her head. He was a sweet young man, which made her exactly the wrong woman. She would have to set him down, and soon.

She stepped through the door, putting on her sunglasses against the unusually bright afternoon. The weather was perfect for running. She turned towards the garage. If she didn't get stuck in traffic, she would have two hours in the park. She couldn't think of a finer way to burn off the frustrations of the day.

Her phone vibrated at her hip. She had forgotten to turn on the ringer after the meeting. She didn't recognize the number, but she hadn't expected to. She wasn't here to make friends. She let it ring three times before answering. Most people gave up at that point.

Her greeting met with silence. She frowned and stepped away from the building. The reception could be dicey at times.

"Sorry, bad connection. Who am I talking to?" More silence, and then soft breathing.

She stepped back to where the building and overhang provided protection, if only on two sides. *When did I stop doing perimeter checks?* Months ago. She glanced down the street as she offered up a silent prayer. To whom, she didn't know. At the other end of the block was a sidewalk café. Half the customers talked into cell phones.

"Whoever you are, you're beginning to piss me off, and that's never a good idea."

A soft chuckle, and then...

"Hello, princess. Did you miss me?"

She froze. When she had her breathing under control, she looked up. He leaned against a pillar across the street, relaxed, smiling. He pushed off the building as soon as she'd spotted him. She closed her phone and stepped out of the shadows, waiting.

She was wearing the wrong shoes to do anything else.