

Chapter 15

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You have any idea just how annoying it is to have someone glance at you and frown... all the time? I'm just sitting here, in the passenger seat, minding my business, which in this case means dealing with the headache to track down and massacre all other headaches.

Tristan would be so proud of its work. Maybe that's why he keeps glancing my way with that frown.

I pull the bottle of Tylenol from the glove compartment again, and there he goes, glancing and frowning.

"Don't you think you've had enough?" he comments as I dump two in my hand.

I snort and swallowed them dry. "No. And we need to get more the next time we stop." There aren't many left. I throw the bottle back in the glove box.

And there is the frown again. "Those aren't meant to be taken every hour."

“Then maybe they should work,” I snap, still managing to keep my voice low.

“How painful are your injuries?” The concern is mild.

“I have a headache,” I growl. I want to scream since it’s his fault, but Emil has finally fallen asleep and Tristan made it clear I’d pay if I woke him up.

“It’s just caffeine withdrawal.”

I glare at him. “Which I wouldn’t have to deal with if you’d stopped at that gas station like I asked.”

“I didn’t need gas.”

“But I need coffee.”

“It’s just the addiction speaking. Ignore it.”

“Oh, like it’s that easy. Go away craving for the most wonderful of beverage, never bother me again.” I cross my arms over my chest and look out the window so he won’t see me pouting.

“Yes.”

I ground my teeth, turn to let him have it, then remember what he’s going through himself. Based on what he told me of the drug he took only two weeks ago and the little I’ve been able to unearth about it, his cravings have to approach what I’m feeling, but he doesn’t even have the shakes.

“I’m not you.” I settle for, then look out the window, then, because I just can’t help it look at him again and in the worse Negro accent I can manage, I add. “Please, oh great master, when will pour me can have more?”

“Be careful how you talk to me, Bart.” His voice is harder and hotter than I’ve ever heard from him. “My patience has limits and after everything I’ve dealt with since Portland, I am not keen on being

jeered.”

I mumble a sorry and look at the darkness outside the window. We’re between towns on some secondary highway, so there’s nothing to see outside the beams of the headlights.

“It’ll be four hours before I need to gas up again.”

I groan and rest my head against the window. There is not enough Tylenol in the world for me to last until then.

Headlights turn behind us, and my hand is on my gun when the reds and blues start flashing.

Tristan curses.

“How fast are you going?” I glance at the speedometer, but he’s slowing down.

“Sixty-five.”

“That’s it?” I asked. I thought he said we needed to hurry.

He looks in the rearview mirror as he drifts to the shoulder, then takes his gun out of the holster.

When he’s still holding it as the car comes to a stop, I worry.

“Tristan?” I asked, unable to mask my horror at what I can tell he’s planning.

There is conflict on his face, and there, there is nothing at all. “We don’t have the time for this.”

“That’s a cop. There’s going to be a dash cam.”

“Asyr can deal with that.” His tone is flat. “The Eagle isn’t in my name. You can follow me in the car. Having it will help us deal with the pursuit. Zephyr can turn it into a sculpture and I’ll dispose of the body. There won’t be any traces of what happened by the time the sun comes up.”

He’s listing the steps like he’s a machine. That might be the scariest thing I’ve seen him do.

Scary enough, I only now realize he plans on getting that hack to cover his tracks instead of me. We’re

going to talk about that when this is over, but first I need to keep him from acting.

“How are you going to dispose of a body?”

“Cut it into pieces, spread those in the woods over a few miles. Let the animals pick the bones clean and spread those even further apart. Three days and even if a bone is found and identified as human, no one will be able to link it to any other.”

Fuck, he’s really thought it through. I thought lye was the only way he did that. The officer gets out of the car and I can make out enough to tell it’s a woman.

“You shoot her and there’s going to be blood. The GPS will point to this location as where it happened, and don’t bring up that hacker. She reported the stop. If she doesn’t check in within minutes, someone is going to try to contact her. When she doesn’t answer, they are going to send an army of officers here.”

He looks at me and there is nothing in those eyes. “They still can’t link it to me.”

He won’t listen to reason.

She’s halfway to us.

I only have one card left.

“Please just say you lost track of the speed. I’ll go in and erase any evidence you were here afterward.” Still nothing. “Please. I don’t want you to kill a cop.”

She pauses at the back and shines her light down.

He blinks, and I open my mouth to plead as she moves again, but he puts the gun between the seat and lowers the window as she’s about to knock on it.

She shines the light inside and I’m blinded.

“License and Registration,” she said, and I’m so thrown by the fact the voice is familiar Tristan had handed them to her before I can ask.

“Sheriff?” I can now make out her features in the reflected light as she reads the information.

She looks in and I turn on the dash light. “Mister Crimson? I didn’t expect to see you here again.”

“You know her?” Tristan asks, his tone casual, but there is emotion in his eyes now. Cold anger.

“Mister Crimson fell asleep at the wheel and ended in the ditch,” she answers. “I drove him to the motel.”

“You know I was in a hurry to catch up to you,” I tell Tristan, distracted by lights now visible in the distance ahead of us.

“You changed cars again,” she says, “and you got a driver. I’d say that’s wise, but driving with a cast isn’t exactly safe.”

“Safer than if I’m driving.” Something’s off with those lights. I can’t make out any details, but I can’t hear what the sheriff is saying because I have to figure this out.

It’s when Tristan glances in the rearview mirror that it clicks. The horizon is three miles away. At sixty miles an hour, those lights should grow fast as they approach. I look over my shoulder. There’s another set of lights approaching.

He’s right. We don’t have the time for this.

Tristan is already plastered against his seat as I reach across him and grab her by the collar.

“Go-go-go,” I tell him as I pull her in and onto me.

Gravel flies as Tristan gets us back on the road.

I try to reach for my gun, but her squirming and shoving makes that impossible.

“Let go of me,” She demands. “I’m an officer of the law. Stop the car and let me out immediately.”

“Not a good idea,” I reply.

“Are they back?” a groggy Emil asks as he sits up.

“Can’t be the same,” I reply with a chuckle. “It’s not like we left enough of them. It does raise the question of just how many of them they have after us.”

“What?” she demands, then is thrown against the door as Tristan does a last-minute lane change and an SUV drives by us. I try to push her in the back as the SUV fishtails and follows up.

“That confirms it,” Tristan says. “Locals,” he adds. His expression is the thoughtful one he’s had each previous time cars have shown up out of nowhere to chase us. He’s gone over this car three times already, looking for the tracker.

“Go in the back,” I tell the sheriff in exasperation. “I need the maneuvering room.”

“What are you doing?” Tristan asks as I finally get her moving, my hand ending up in places on her body I’d rather not think about. Hopefully, saving her life will mean she won’t press harassment charges after this.

“Getting ready.” I take my gun out of its holster and check the clip.

“I mean with her.” His tone is hard. As much as he let me act, he isn’t happy about it.

“I wasn’t leaving her there for them to kill.”

“He has no reason to bother with her. She’s a police officer.”

“After he would have seen us high-tail it away from her? Are you willing to bet her life on it?” I

rub my temple as the headache tried to hammer its way out. “Fuck, I need a coffee.”

“Yes,” Tristan replies.

“What is going on?” she demands. She’s looking out the back, then at Emil who is squeezed against the door, away from her.

“Don’t,” Tristan orders.

“Get off it,” I snap. I am so going to pay for this later. “Context is going to help with explaining why we’re running.” I smile. “Might even get you out of that ticket, too. Do the driving and let me deal with this. Partners split the work, Remember that.”

“Remember what you just told me,” he replies as the car makes a right hard enough we’re on two wheels for a few seconds. “When I don’t hurt you later.” It drops back down. “What are you waiting for?”

I swallow. What I’m waiting for is the courage to tell him he’s being unreasonable. We’re just arguing. That’s not something warranting that level of reprisal. I know the delay is only making my situation worse, but come on, he knows I love how he inflicts pain.

I swallow the hurt. I’ll just have to not take it. I let out a breath and look at it. “Quick version,” I say as I wrack the slide. “Emil,” I nod to him, “was kidnapped. He,” I nod to Tristan, “left to rescue him without bothering to tell me what he was doing.” Anger slips into my tone. “I chased after him. That’s why we met. By the time I found him, he was a prisoner of—”

“I was not.”

“You were in a cell with Emil. That’s the definition of being a prisoner.”

“I was there on purpose. I’d rattled Gregory. I was waiting for him to be back to make some

point or another, and I would have ended him, and them, then.”

“Anyway,” I continue, and she’s looking more confused than informed. “I help them escape. We took down the bad guys there, hit the road and more bad guys have been chasing up since then.”

“I’m calling reinforcement,” she says, reaching for the radio clipped to her shoulder. “Jerry’s up and—”

“No,” Tristan orders as I grab her hand. “Involving more people will just get them killed.”

“When I said they’re bad people,” I tell her. “I mean really bad. The kind that have no problem killing a police officer.” I look at Tristan for confirmation, and I get a shrug.

“That’s more reasons for me to call for help,” she replies. “You can’t just keep driving and hope to outrun them.”

“We usually shoot them up.” Then I mumble. “I can’t believe you didn’t see the bullet holes as you walked by.” I lower the window and lean out. I fire three times and three headlights go out. I’m back in and hurry to close the window. “How the fuck is it still this cold? I swear the next time old man winter shows up, I am killing him.”

I find a clip with bullets in it in the box at my feet and slide it into my gun. When I look behind me to see what is going on with our pursuers, I see her horrified expression.

“That’s why she can’t stay,” Tristan says. “She’s not going to be of any use.”

“It’s not like we can just dump her on the side of the road now, is it?”

He glares at me, and I’m going to pay for that, too. If I don’t start shutting up, he might promise to never touch me again by the time we’re on the reservation.

“Well?” I demand. “I’m open to suggestions.”

Yep. I'm never feeling that sweet pain again.

"Where's the town?" he demands.

The tone snaps her out and she fumbles as she takes her phone out. "Make the next left. It's going to take you to Main Street. You can drop me off anywhere there."

Tristan glances in the rearview mirror, then turns hard enough I'm plastered against him. Against his injured arm. He doesn't even wince.

"You need to slow them down if you expect me to slow to let her out."

"You have any claymores?" I ask, watching behind us as lights take the turn.

"They aren't useful and I can recreate them with the C4 and what I find lying around if I need that effect."

"We don't have enough lying around in the car to make one. How about a drone? Maybe something equipped with a sniper rifle, no? Hovering mines?"

He looks at me, confused, then focuses on the road.

"I so need to get you watching TV," I grumble. "Emil, how are you with guns?"

"No," Tristan states.

"You can't think of giving a gun to a minor," the sheriff says.

"I'm nineteen," Emil replies, and she looks at him in disbelief. "I can shoot."

"No, Emil," Tristan says.

"I'm not lying!" he replies petulantly.

"I know. But after what you went through, I don't want you committing anymore violence until you've had the time to work through what's been done to you."

“I could really use a second shooter.” The one light is now five.

“You have her.”

“How are you at shooting at cars?” I ask.

She stares at me long enough the headlight gets closer. With a curse at people’s reluctance to commit violence, I lower the window and lean out. I empty half the clip and only remove three of the lights, but the intact set careens out of control and is then hit by another.

I slip back into the seat. “We should be good.”

“Who are you two?” she demands.

“No one you want to mention to others,” Tristan replies. Hints of threat in his voice.

I curse as lights appear over the horizon ahead of us, then relax as they keep going up.

Street lights.

“Left or right?” Tristan asks, looking in the rearview mirror.

“The station is on the right.”

“Switch with her. I don’t have the time to deal with that when I get there.”

“You heard the man.” I climb over the seat. Emil shies away from me. She stares at me as I’m hunched between the front and back. “Come on.”

“I can’t believe this is happening,” she whispers as she moves and I get in the clear space, helping her get to the front. Now that she’s not fighting me. My hands stay in respectable places on her body.

“You okay Emil?”

He nods, but doesn’t look at me.

“Hand on the handle,” Tristan instructs, and she stares at him. “I said; on the handle. You have three seconds to get out when I stop. If you’re still in the car by then, I will deal with you later.”

“Tristan—”

“Don’t you fucking say anything. You’re in enough trouble already.”

“Don’t talk to him like that,” she tells him.

“Lady,” he replies, and I can hear the murder in his voice. “You’re in my car. You’re going to be quiet unless you want me to throw you out.”

“Listen here. I don’t know what’s going on between you two, but you don’t threaten someone who—”

The car stops so abruptly that I hit the back of the seat. She lets out a cry of pain as I hear her impacting the dash. She’s holding her forehead when I manage to look around the seat. Tristan reaches past her with his injured arm and opens the door, shoving her out. Then we speed away.

“Don’t you fucking say anything.” He glares at me. “I had a plan to deal with her that didn’t involve all of this.”

“I was trying to—”

“I don’t fucking care! I’m not some bleeding heart out here to help people. I can make the hard decision and carry them through, no matter how much I’d rather not. And last I checked. You claimed to be a bad man.” He lowers the window and takes the gun from between the seats again, with his injured arm. He rests it on the windowsill and fires. I see a flash of pain on his face and that’s it.

I’ve felt the kick the Desert Eagle has. There is no way the pain isn’t ripping him apart right now.

Lights pass over us and then a car crashes.

“How the fuck do you do that?” I ask, getting in the front. Emil is back curled as small as he can make himself on the floor.

I check the clip in my gun, find one with more bullets, and lean out my window. Four shots at the other car following us and it swerves out of control, to slam into, to my horror, the glass front of a coffee shop.

The world is so unfair.

I drop into the seat and close the window.

We speed through the town, make turns with barely slowing, and once we're in a straight line again, he is speeding up. I glance at the speedometer, and we're approaching something close to reasonable highway speeds.

Then I catch his reflection on the instrument panel's protective plastic.

“You said we are partners.” His voice drops the temperature in my blood to the point I can feel the crystal forming.

“Yes.” My answer is almost a question by how unsure I am of myself.

“Do partners put each other in danger?”

My mouth is open, ready to point out that was never my intent, but his glare stops me. I swear to God his eyes flashed red just then. I know it's just the light from the dash, but there was nothing human about him at that instant.

All I can do is shake my head.

“Then why? Why did you pull her in? Why did you tell her what we did? Do you have any idea

of the danger you put us into by doing that?”

“I didn’t see you having any problem when I—” his hand is on my mouth and the back of my head hits the window hard enough that I see stars and wonder how it didn’t shatter. How the fuck does he have that kind of strength in his fucking injured arm?

“Watch your mouth, Bart. I understand you don’t care for authority; I even appreciate it. But don’t forget that I am not any authority. I am your life. You put yourself in my hands to do as I want with. Remember that if you want me to treat you the way you deserve to be treated.”

It’s in his eyes, the promise of pain and pleasure. His finger caresses my cheek.

I close my eyes to keep the tears from forming. Fuck, did I screw this up. He removes his hand when I try to speak.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think. I just didn’t want you to kill her.”

His face softens and there might even be the hint of a smile. “I’ve noticed you act without thinking.” He slows to a speed ‘normal’ people use, and with the next sign, I realize we’re back on the highway. “You need to understand something, Bart. She didn’t matter. No one out there matters. It’s you, me, and Emil. No one else.”

I look away as what he says registers.

“What is it?” the question is soft.

“Grams and Gramp.” I try to imagine a world without them in it. “I can’t forget about them. I owe them too much. I understand what you mean about it just being the three of us against the world, I think. But I can’t simply cut them out of my life. I’m sorry.”

“Your guardians.”

I'm surprised he knows who I mean. As important to me as they are. To anyone else, they are just Smith Security, and it's the rest of my family they keep safe. "I think of them as more of my grandparents than the piece of craps those Crimsons are."

"Do they love you, or do they just look after you?"

"They love me." No hesitation, not even any thoughts. They wouldn't have endured what I put them through after they took me in if they didn't love me.

"Then cherish them."

I do. I consider everything they did for me. The man they tried to make me into. The failure isn't their fault. My father broke me beyond repair.

I lean back and look behind Tristan's seat. "It's safe now, Emil." The only motion is the wince at my voice. "I don't think I can make him come out."

"Emil." His voice isn't soft, but it has a quality to it I haven't heard before, and I realize that all this wasn't only an obligation. It was more than righting a wrong. He said he cared about Emil, but now I can hear it. "It's safe to come out. We're not arguing anymore. We resolved it."

I stared at Tristan as Emil moves. We sent him into hiding? Not the chase and the gunfire, but us? I try to ask Tristan with my eyes how that can be. How can the two of us shouting at one another be worse than people trying to kill us?

I don't know if the shrug he gives me is about my unvoiced question, but it conveys one thing clearly. He, too, has no idea why we caused Emil to hide.

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