

Tristan doesn't slam the RV's hood shut. I would have slammed down so hard its mother would have felt it. You know, if feats of family vacation vehicle engineering had mothers. Maybe the inventor counts as its father?

Yeah.

I'd have slammed this thing down so hard for daring getting filled with holes and no longer working that its father would have felt it.

Tristan simply closes it, then checks to make sure it latched. As if we were about to get back in and drive off to continue our family adventure. Instead of, you know, being stranded in the middle of nowhere, Missouri.

"It's beyond your masterful skills?" I ask tactfully.

He just nods. "One of the bullets nicked the coolant line, another shattered the control board for the electronics in the engine, which is why we never got the warning the engine was overheating. We might have made it further, but the block took so many hits it weakened its integrity and it's cracked."

"Not that getting further would have helped," Emile says, looking at his phone. "The closest place is six miles in either direction, and neither has anything resembling a garage, as far as I can find from my searches."

"Where is the closest one?" Tristan asks.

"Thirty miles that way." He points east. "In Macon." He reads. "It's the only one for a population of five K, so it's got to have everything you'd need."

"Are we pushing this thing thirty miles?" I ask. "I'd rather walk the six in either direction and get a car there."

"Wouldn't stealing someone's car this far from anywhere basically end their livelihood?" Emil asks.

"I'd pay for it." I consider something. "You think anyone around here does electronic transfers? Unless you managed to hide some bricks of cash in here, like you did with all your other vehicles, I hadn't had that kind of money on me since, basically, when we left Phoenix."

"Staying away from all major roads and population centers meant not having access to my storage sheds."

"Do you have one near here?"

"Kansas City and St-Louis," he replies without having to think about it.

"A hundred and twenty-miles for Kansas City," Emil says before I can take my phone out to check.

"Can you order one from your family's fleet?" Tristan asks.

"Not really," I reply. This time, I'm the one who doesn't have to think about it. "Dear Old Dad doesn't own any businesses outside of Arizona, so having a car delivered anywhere outside, let alone this far from it, will draw attention from the penny pinchers. And I don't have the kind of gear I'd need to get in there and do the kind of juggling of accounts to cover it up."

"Doesn't that mean they notice anytime you take money?" Emil asks.

I laugh. "Dear Old Dad might not have anything out of states, but Mommy Dearest had charities everywhere. So she had contact accounts through every financial institution in the country. Hiding what I take as one of her donations is the simplest thing in the world.

But I'm serious. I'd pay for whatever car we'd take."

"What will be the quality of the vehicle?" Tristan asks, ever the overly practical one. "How are we going to ensure the seller won't turn around and alert the authorities?"

"You really think the FBI's all point bulletin made it this far? And is still being watched, two months later?" I ask. "I've been monitoring the site's traffic, and it dropped down to basically nothing after two weeks. You have to accept it, lover. We are old news already."

"There is still a risk someone will have seen it, and will be in dire need of the reward money, on top of what you will pay them. Greed is the most common vice people suffer from."

"I'm pretty sure that's lust," I comment.

"Definitely is for you," Emil says.

"Take a good look at your dad and tell me you wouldn't bang him every chance he'd give you."

"Don't be Weird Boy," Emil replies with a perfect cartoon Russian intonation.

"Yes!" I fist pump. "I told you, you were going to like that show."

He flips me the bird, while Tristan gives both of us an uncomprehending look.

"I've had him watched Road Rover," I say, which isn't trigger enlightenment. "You know, the cartoon? You have to have watched it when you were a kid."

"My childhood was spent in a forest being put through torturous exercises by a man claiming to be my father with the goal of ensuring I would be able to survive the world," he replies. "There were no televisions there."

I sigh. "Okay, so we are going to have nineties cartoon marathon as soon as we find a place to spend the night." I brighten up as I realize something. "That means you get to watch Reboot! You are going to love that show. It's one of the original digital production and it takes place inside a computer and—"

"Incoming," Emil says, and I roll my eyes at him for the utterly ridiculous attempt at an interruption, only to make out the engine getting louder.

I flick the safety off my APX as I glance at Tristan. He drops his harness behind the RV's wheel.

"We're just having engine trouble," he says, sitting on the grass next to Emil. "We called in a tow and are just waiting for them to arrive." I keep leaning back against the engine compartment.

"And how do we explain the bullet holes in the side?" Emil asks casually.

"They were there when we purchased the RV from the previous owner," Tristan answers without hesitation. "We felt they added personality to the vehicle."

"And we're surprised the engine cracked?" he replies with sincere astonishment.

Emil has this knack for going along with any story Tristan establish as if it was a truth he'd always known. When I asked him how he does it, he shrugged and said. "It could be true, couldn't it?"

Our son might be a little odd.

When the car becomes visible, I make out a sedan of some sort. Definitely older because of how boxy it is. It slows well before reaching us and I slip my hand behind my back. When the car is closer still, I make out the driver; her head just barely making it over

the steering wheel.

I'm still staring as the brown sedan comes to a stop. The passenger side window goes down without her having to reach over. Not that I think she'd have that much reach. She smiles, and her face lights up the way I'm pretty sure grandmother's faces can only do in movies.

"You folks in a spot of trouble?" she asks.

"Engine died, Ma'am," I reply, defaulting to a level of 'respect your elders' I don't think my actual grandmothers ever instilled in me. Grams engendered a completely different type of respect.

"We have a tow on the way," Tristan says, getting up.

"Who from?" she asks.

"Some company from Macon," I reply, taking my phone out.

"And when are you expecting them to be here?"

"I..." falter completely.

"They said they have another tow before us to finish with," Tristan answers. "But they'll be here before dinner-time. Is this a seventy-three or seventy-four De Ville?"

"My Henry bought this when we got married, right out of factory, so that'd make it a seventy-four. You know your cars, young man."

"Thank you. I can't afford a classic, so I read about them instead."

"It wasn't a classic then," she says with a chuckle. "Then neither was I."

"And like it, you became a classic no one can forget in time," he says, and I swear to God, she blushes. What is it with my man and being able to swoon any woman he comes across? I swear, if I didn't know he doesn't swing that way, I'd been worried about him being faithful.

"Quite the charmer you are," she replies, then looks beside him at me. "Hang on to him."

I stare, again.

She laughs. "The rings might not be identical, but two men, a RV and a young man... it's not that much of a reach. Unless you're kidnappers and he's your victim." She looks at Emil. "Have they kidnapped you?"

"No, Ma'am. They rescued me from my kidnapper, actually."

"Fathers should do that," she replies with a nod of approval. "How about I help you, instead of letting you wait hours for that tow from Macon?" she asks.

"Unless you carry the tools needed to maintain your De Ville in the trunk," Tristan answers, "I doubt you will be able to do much for us."

"Oh, I don't know how to even change spark plugs," she replies with a chuckle, taking out a notebook and pen from the inside breast pocket of her jacket. "But my mechanic does. The kid's a wiz with cars. I thought I'd have to send Henry's De Ville to him years ago, but this young man took it in, and returned it working like brand new." She lowered her voice and leaned closed. "Actually, I think it's running better than new. I haven't had to pay nowhere near as much in gas since he fixed it up."

"A well-maintained vehicle will be like that," Tristan says.

"I suppose that's true." She writes on a page and hands it to him. "It's his number. You won't have come across him in your searches, he isn't listed. But he's the best I've come

across, and trust me, I have come across a lot of mechanics since my Henry passed. Tell him Myrtle gave you his number and he'll be here under the hour, I promise."

"Thank you very much Myrtle," Tristan said, stepping away.

"You're welcome. And you three be careful. You never know the kind of people you'll come across out here." The window closes, and she drives off.

"Okay," Emil says. "She's observant enough to have noticed your wedding bands. Neither of you can convince me she didn't see the bullet holes in the side of the RV."

"She came from the direction we were attacked," Tristan says.

"Are you really thinking that sweet old grandmother would have been involved with that?" I ask, utterly unable to reconcile who we just met with the kind of people who have a habit of hunting down other people. Even Grams couldn't come across this sweet and innocent. And she has training in that kind of stuff.

"But she has seen it getting here."

"I guess she took one look at us," Emil said, "and knew we were the good guys in what happened."

"Which definitely shows you can't go by appearances," I reply. "What are we doing about the number? I mean, we could use a good mechanic. And worse comes to worse. We can just kill him and use his truck to make it to a city large enough to get something decent."

"Really, pop?" Emil exclaims. "Murder just to get a ride?"

"It's just a thought," I offer innocently.

Tristan hands me the paper. "It would be a shame to deprive her of someone who can maintain a De Ville this well, but if her mechanic proves to be a threat, that is an option we have."