

Chapter Three

“Bart.” Gram gives me that smile, the one that changes the coming request into a demand I’ll refuse at my own risk. “Will you be a dear and help me clear the table for dessert?”

“Sure.” I gather the plates before standing.

“I can help,” Tristan says, in the process of getting up.

“Nonsense,” she tells him. “You’re our guest. You and Emil talk with Franklin. We won’t be long.”

I’d tell Tristan there’s no point in forcing the issue, but I’m trying to come up with a way to vanish. This isn’t her needing my help. This is her isolating me. This is her setting the stage for a debrief.

Two trips and the table’s cleared. Which means I’m out of options.

“I like him,” Gram says as she takes a pie from the fridge.

“But?” come one, no one says that without adding the but.

“But does he treat you well?” He looks at me over her shoulder. “He isn’t the only one favoring his body. You came back from visiting him nearly two months ago with a limp. Franklin didn’t mention it, but he noticed too. I didn’t mention it before, because I wanted a look at him first.”

I silently take out plates.

“You don’t play baseball,” she said, her tone edging toward that of a training sergeant, as she pulls a cake from the oven. “What happened?”

I’d been wondering about the lack of debriefing after that visit. I’m not an idiot. I knew they’d noticed the limp. I was just hoping that... what, that they wouldn’t care enough about me to ask, eventually?

“I don’t know if it’s my story to tell.”

“It’s yours enough you were limping and favoring your side,” she says in a sharp tone. “Do I need to order you to strip so I can see all the fresh scars?”

“Gram!” I nearly drop the stack of plates. When I try to glare at her for even suggesting I’d get naked in front of her—yes, she’s seen me naked before, not the point. Those were because she was patching me up—she gives me an understanding smile.

“I’m not asking for the whole story. Just what applies to you.” She adds a second cake to the counter. I saw the boxes in the trash earlier. She doesn’t have the energy to cook in her off time anymore. I miss the smell of her cooking.

“Tristan had to go help someone who’d—”

“Emil?”

“Gram,” I reply to her interruption. She can’t help herself from prying.

"His reaction's too raw for someone who'd lived with it for a long time. I also get the sense Tristan wouldn't allow anything of that kind to happen to—" she hesitates "—his son."

"He is his son." But is that all he is to Tristan? I know what Emil represents, how through saving him, Tristan can convince himself he could have saved his brother if given the chance. If he hadn't been stolen from him by the child care system and then lost.

I'm Tristan's boyfriend, I remind myself and utterly ignore the nagging voice questioning that statement.

"And yeah, okay. Emil is who we rescued. It wasn't painless." That's putting it mildly.

"Is he a mercenary?"

I shake my head as I take the teacups from the cabinet. "That's not what he does for a living."

She turns the element under the kettle on. "What does he do for a living?"

"You said this is about me." Nice try, Gram.

"Alright. Do you love him?"

I pause as I reach for the saucers and smile. My heart swells and I feel hot, but in a good way. "More than I can say," I reply and I'm pretty sure my voice sounds like it's coming from a dream.

"Does he love you?"

And way to kill the good feelings, Gram. She catches my hesitation and I hurry to say.

"He needs me." I can't let her decide Tristan's taking advantage of me. That fight would end up... I actually don't know how it would end. But there would be a crater, somewhere, that I'm sure of.

"Being needed isn't the same as being loved."

"It's—" I stop. Do I have to justify myself, even to her? "Gram, not everyone can be as lucky as you and Gramps. You had the perfect romance. Meeting on the job, working things out, knowing you both loved each other. Tristan cares for me. I know that without a doubt. He wants me in his life. Isn't that what love is?" I guess I do.

Her smile's tainted with sadness. "You know that's not enough. It's good, don't get me wrong, but it isn't love. Will he cross an ocean for you? Will he follow you to the end of the world? Will you jump off a cliff to catch you if you're stupid enough to fall off it? And will he have a parachute? Trust me, if he's going to do that, you want him to have a way to stop the descent." She shudders at the memory.

Yeah, I've heard that story.

I don't have an answer for her. I can't even form words, because, not counting the jumping off the cliff part, Tristan has done that, but not for me. For Emil.

She rests her hand on my cheek. "You're right. Me and Franklin were lucky. Our love was tested early because of our work, so we never had to doubt it. When we argued, fought, or slammed a door in the other's face, we just had to think back to those days of trekking through hell to get back to the person we love to know that no matter how long it took to calm down. Once we did, we would hold each other again and still feel that love. I don't expect you to have that from the start. But Bart, you need to be careful you don't let your desire to be loved blind you to upcoming danger."

"Gram, he'd never hurt me like that."

"That implies he does hurt you," she counters and I'm pissed that she pulls this on me, yet again. I'm angry at myself, not her. I keep forgetting that under the loving exterior is a master intelligence gatherer.

I force a smile and I try to make it genuine. "We fight; I mean sparring. You've seen him. His punches do hurt, but that is part of what I signed up for."

She searches my eyes. "And that's all?"

"That's all. He can be a little thoughtless, and he gets consumed by his research, but—" my smile becomes warm as I continue "—he never sets out to hurt me." As infuriating as his lack of understanding and thoughtlessness is at times. Tristan hasn't, once, set out to purposely hurt me.

Not since we've been together. I mean, during those first two fights, he did try to kill me, but those were just dates, so they don't count.

She nods. She wants to say more but doesn't. "Come on," she grabs the pie and a cake. "We'd better bring those out before they storm the kitchen." I pile on the plates, saucers, and cups and follow her.

"There you are," Gramps says as we enter the dining room. "Any longer and Tristan would have been mounting a rescue. I'm not sure the wall would have survived."

Emil snorts. "There'd be nothing left of that side of the house."

The kid's got that right.

Tristan is glaring at Gramps, which leads me to think he isn't used to someone reading him like that. I

mean, he is a great actor. Had me fooled completely until I found out the Benoit identity he'd given me was false.

I smile at him. "I'm safe. That wasn't the worse debriefing I've had to endure." I distribute the plates.

"Serve yourselves," Gram says. "I'll be back with tea. That is okay with both of you? It's what we traditionally have with dessert. I can make more coffee if you like."

"You drink tea?" Tristan asks me in disbelief.

"It's what goes with dessert," I answer. Then I'm fighting not to blush as he smiles like he'd uncovered some secret I worked hard at keeping from him. And that I'm going to be punished for it.

"I'm okay with tea," Emil says.

"I'll also have tea." Tristan breaks eye contact, but he's still smiling.

I'm stunned he'll drink anything that isn't water.

With dessert is mundane conversation. My job, Gram and Gramps' work as bodyguards, but they don't mention who they are guarding. They have never mentioned my parent around me, due to what my father did to me.

Tristan doesn't ask, but I figure he knows.

Tristan talks about the security work he's done. Some of the dumb things his clients wanted. He tells entertaining stories, funny and sad at times. I'm not surprised he's such a good storyteller, but I'm still amazed at the ease with which he lies, even after seeing him do it so much. From their reactions, Gram and Gramps believe every word he says.

Emil is quiet through most of it. When asked about school, he says he's homeschooled because they live away from the school districts. That leads to questioning why Tristan lives so far from the city, which leads to him talking about how that makes perimeter defense easier, and then he and Gramps are talking guns.

Emil is captivated by it.

I try to pay attention, but once it becomes a measuring contest between which is better, the Desert Eagle or the Glock, I tune them out. I already know Tristan is all about power, and Gramps has shown me many times how precision can remove the need for excessive power. Grams falls right on the side of precision, but as a sniper, handguns are only her second choice of weapons.

She is deadly in hand to hand, but she'd rather blow you away a quarter of a mile from you.

Their... discussion continues through the clearing of the table and the evening ends when Gramps challenges Tristan to a shooting match.

Gram puts an end to that. "No gunplay around the house. You know better, Franklin."

"Gabbie, this is a special case; I have to show him he's wrong. There is no way a gun with that much kick has the precision to be useful."

Tristan looks amused; the expression of someone humoring another person. I think it's genuine. In the time I've known him, I haven't seen anything that makes me think he feels a need to prove himself. He knows what he's capable of and that's enough for him.

But I think this is the first time he's challenged by someone who might be on his level.

"Then you two can go to the gun range. I won't have guns fired here unless it's to defend the house." There's a finality to her words I'm familiar with. Gram isn't someone who argues long.

Gramps checks his watch. "How about it? There's a range ten minutes from here. I have the keys. I can prove that hand cannon you like isn't worth it."

Tristan smiles indulgently. "Maybe another time. It's getting late and we have a long drive. Emil might not have to go to school, but I still want him to have a proper structure, and that involves being up at a reasonable time."

Or unreasonable, depending on how you feel about getting up early.

"Dad," Emil replies with exasperation. "I'm old enough to decide when that is by myself."

Emil isn't a fan of being up early.

Tristan ruffles Emil's hair. "You'll never be old enough for that."

I swallow the pain at the act of familiarity. It is an act. One put on for Gram and Gramps. I know that. But I wish I'd be included in it.

"Another time, then," Gramps says, breaking the tableau. Gram is watching me and I force myself to look away, afraid I've revealed my fear to her, but she smiles.

"I'll see them to his car," I say as Emil and Tristan stand.

The floodlight comes on as we step off the porch.

"Thanks for doing this," I tell him as we reach his car. I can barely tell where the bullet holes were after

the repairs and replacement he did on it. "I know you don't enjoy this."

"You're wrong," Tristan replies, standing by the driver's side door. "I did enjoy it. Franklin is knowledgeable in firearms and astute in human behavior, although Gabrielle is the better of the two. It isn't often I need to be this careful with how I behave."

I hug him before I can think better of it. "Thanks anyway. It means a lot."

"This wasn't a chore." He holds me tightly, a hand on my ass. "I mean it."

I look him in the eyes and grind my crotch against his. He tightens his grip on my ass and kisses me. I moan at the pain and press against his erection.

Oh fuck, I want him so badly.

"Please don't do this here," Emil says, sounding embarrassed.

Tristan breaks the kiss but stays close, and his tone is firm. "Emil, you don't get to tell us what to do."

"I know, Dad. But Pop's grandfather's watching. I know neither of you gives a fu—cares if you have an audience, but do you really want to make out in front of him?"

"I don't—"

I cut Tristan off with a light kiss. "Emil's right. This isn't something Gramps should be seeing. We can pick this up tomorrow night, once I'm at your place." I grin. "Or, we can change it up and you can come to my place tonight. We could spend the weekend in the city."

He shakes his head. "You know how I feel about the city." He caresses my cheek. "It isn't for me. I will make the wait worth it." He kisses me again. His tongue pushes into my mouth, thrusting deep. Then his hand is on my crotch, stroking my hard cock through the jeans.

My responding moan is needy.

I'd been able to ignore he hasn't let me cum in two weeks. I can't anymore. "Please," I whisper when he breaks the kiss.

His grin is full of malevolence. "Maybe." He lets go and gets into his car. "If you put up a good fight tomorrow." Then it backs away, and he's gone.

I watch the tail light vanish, then stay there for a full minute, giving my body time to settle down. When I turn and head for the porch, Gramps is there, pipe in his mouth.

"Please don't comment," I say tiredly as I go up the steps. "Gram already—"

"I like him."

I eye him suspiciously.

"I do. He's clearly a gun for hire, regardless of how he wraps it up in security work, but he's a good guy. There aren't a lot of those in this industry. Most are after the easy money or the excuse to kill."

Gram's right. Gramps can be oblivious at times. But at least it means he isn't going to object and I realize I'd worried about that. They are the only family I have, and I'm glad I won't be put in a position to pick one family over the other.

"Why'd he lie about the kid?"

"What do you mean?" I reply as casually as I can manage.

"Come on, Bart. The kid definitely adores your boyfriend, but he's pretty detached for a 'father'. I've been one. You don't calculate your moves around someone when you love them. He'd be surprised if they've been in each other's life more than you have."

And then he picks up on stuff like this.

"Is it going to be a problem?"

Gramps shrugs. "Only if I find out he's taking advantage of the kid's adoration."

"Tristan wouldn't do that." The concept of Emil being safe means too much to Tristan for him to ever put that at risk... willingly.

"Then it isn't going to be a problem." He puffs on the pipe a few times. "He's the real deal, isn't he? He's the one you'll bring back for a second and third visit."

"If he wants to."

Gramps nods. "I should have guessed you wouldn't go for someone safe. I can't recall the last time safe was what you aimed for." He sounds sad as he says that, but his tone hardens as he adds. "Definitely not after that asshole kicked you out."

You have to admire his dedication to the job when he hates the man he protects.

"You and Gram, that was never safe, was it? I mean, how many guns are hidden throughout the house? You two still love each other in spite of how dangerous you both are."

"But is what you feel despite the danger, or because of it?" he replies. "I'm not judging, Bart. It's your

life. We raised you to know yourself. So I trust that you know what you're getting into. Just be careful not to let him go further than you want to."

"He wouldn't hurt me that way."

"Yeah," he says bitterly. "And the other ways that statement implies he could do it is my signal to say this conversation is over." He taps the pipe empty in the tin he keeps for that purpose. "You clearly love him, and he's definitely sweet on you. Enjoy what you have, and hopefully, it'll last." He heads for the door.

"I'll see you next Thursday," I tell him as he enters the house. "Tell Gram I love her."

I head for my car. One more work day. Then, a weekend of pain and pleasure.

And I fucking hope to God an orgasm.

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