

ENFORCER

By Travis Hill

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This book is dedicated to everyone who has ever played the sport of hockey. I envy you for your skill, your stamina, your strength, and your passion for the game.

And to my current home, Boise, Idaho. It's truly a great place to live, even if it maybe isn't so much in this story.

CHAPTER 1

Winter

Connor sat on the bench, sweating more in the locker room than he had during his few short shifts on the ice. He wondered if the maintenance crew would ever fix the air conditioning, or if Mr. Ojacarcu purposely had it turned off when his team was losing. He looked over at Coach Lamoureux after hearing his name.

“—one,” Coach Lamoureux was saying. “That guy runs Gansy again, make him eat the rest of his teeth.”

“Got it, Coach,” Connor said.

Connor looked down at the knuckles of his right hand as his coach moved on to another aspect of the game, yelling occasionally at one of his teammates for some screw-up or other. The team’s trainer had given him an icepack after he’d spent his five minutes in the penalty box. The ice kept the swelling down, but it didn’t seem to stop the steady trickle of blood from between two of his knuckles where he had slugged #22 in the mouth.

“All right, ladies, we’ve got one period left. How about we look like we aren’t trying to piss everyone off that paid for a ticket? Move your asses!” Coach Lamoureux yelled.

The team snapped on helmets, put on gloves, and grabbed their sticks as they left the locker room to head back to the ice. Connor followed his teammates to the exit, but Coach held out an arm to stop him, his other hand holding a mobile phone.

“The boss needs you,” he told Connor with a frown.

“Okay” Connor said. He turned around and walked to his

locker to change into his street clothes.

Coach Lamoureux stared at Connor for a few seconds before heading down the hallway to the ice. Connor removed his skates, wishing he could finish the game, even knowing he might only get two or three shifts in the last period. If his team couldn't get within three goals, he probably wouldn't see the ice at all unless one of the Tornados needed an attitude adjustment. Even with his fist swollen and still bleeding, he would drop his gloves without hesitation.

"Good game, Dunzer," Coach Walters said when Connor walked by the coach's office. "You should probably have Derek stitch that hand up before you go see the boss."

Connor gave the assistant coach a wave as he passed by. At the walkway leading to the team benches, he turned left, and found Derek—"Griff" to the players—swapping latex gloves. The trainer glanced up when Connor showed him the hand, eliciting a low whistle and a wink, the usual reaction whenever one of the Bombers needed a few stitches. Connor had learned four years ago that it was simply a part of Griff's personality.

"Damn it!" he hissed a couple of times as the stitches wound their way through his skin.

Griff had sprayed the wound with Numb-It, the aerosol anesthetic used in every professional sports league in America. Most of Connor's teammates had given it a more accurate

nickname of “Damn-It,” since that’s what everyone said when sprayed with it before taking a stitch or some other treatment. He wondered if he’d been sprayed with the stuff so much that his body had become immune to the effect.

“There ya go, kid,” Derek said, giving him another wink and tossing the needle into the plastic bucket next to him.

“Thanks, Griff,” Connor said with a grin before walking back to the corridor and toward the stairs.

Connor twisted his hand a little, stretching the skin by slowly making a fist as he walked. Derek Giffords had been the trainer for the Boise Bombers for over a decade, and did exceptional work when it came to cuts, sprains, cramps, and bruises. The trainer wasn’t a real doctor, but no one ever complained.

Each team in the United Professional Hockey League had to have a licensed, practicing doctor on their team, and as far as the UPHL brass knew, the Bombers complied. Dr. Timothy O’Reilly was listed in the contracts, but he was probably never closer to a game than twenty miles, getting paid a kickback just for putting his name on a piece of paper. Connor hadn’t had to pay a visit to Dr. O’Reilly and have a *talk* with him, so if he was in the boss’ pocket, he kept his nose clean.

As he came out of the stairwell and onto the lower level concourse, the crowd roared in a chorus of boos and shouts of “REF YOU SUCK!” Connor glanced toward the ice, and saw four of his teammates in a scrum with five of the Tornados. As he walked around the curve of the arena, he saw the fifth Bomber, face down on the ice. Griff held a white towel to Elvin Gannett’s face.

Connor was sure he would catch hell from someone for not being dressed and out on the ice to protect his captain, or at least get some payback on the next shift when the puck dropped.

A few fans noticed him as he walked toward the elevator, and paused in their merciless, insulting shouts toward the officials in zebra stripes to talk to him. They asked him if he was hurt or sick, or had been kicked out of the game while they were getting a beer—or emptying a beer from their bladder. He made quick smalltalk with them, showing them his stitched knuckles, receiving a few sympathetic *awww*'s from the females and a few nods of respect from the men.

He finally broke away from the fans and made it to the elevator. Dracul stood in front of the call button, hands clasped behind him, dark sunglasses looking suspiciously out of place in the arena at 9 P.M. Connor stood in front of the man for half a minute before Dracul finally acknowledged him. It was a game Dracul played with him every time the boss called him up to the office.

“Mr. Ojacarcu is expecting me,” Connor told the hulking Romanian.

Dracul gave a single nod before turning to press the call button. When the door opened, Connor stepped in and pushed the button for the fifth floor. Before the elevator door closed, he saw Dracul turn and give him a phony smile. The boss told him once that Dracul's name meant “dragon” or “devil” in English, and had laughed when Connor asked him what the Romanian word for *asshole* was.

He was sure that the big bodyguard wanted to see if Connor's reputation as a tough guy was true. He had no doubt if both of them were on skates, he'd pound the Romanian's face into hamburger, but he wasn't sure he wanted to test that theory out away from the ice where he would lose a major advantage. Fighting on skates was a skill that took a lifetime to master, and if done right, as Connor knew from plenty of experience, it could be the deciding factor in a fight against another enforcer who had an iron chin and expert fists.

The elevator chimed when it reached the fifth floor and the doors slid open. Vadim, another Romanian in a suit, stood in front of the call button for the elevator. Vadim gave Connor a grin and a thumbs-up when Connor showed him the stitches in his right hand. Vadim was one of the few Romanians who didn't treat him like an outsider, and Connor had formed a semi-friendship with the man over the years. They'd even had a few beers on a couple of occasions, talking about hockey, Canada, Romania, and of course, all of the women who threw themselves at Connor and his teammates.

He gave two short raps on his boss' door, then entered when commanded through the intercom. Costache Ojacarcu sat behind a cherry desk so dark it looked like ebony, so shiny that Connor had to sit or stand at certain angles so the ceiling lights wouldn't reflect a glare into his eyes. The thick carpet, a rich, blood red that he imagined was heaven on bare feet, saturated the floor of the office, ending at the foot of the oak bookcases lining three of the walls.

"Ah, Connor, I'm happy to see you," his boss said.

Connor smiled as he showed the older man the stitches on his

right hand, a routine that was habit each hockey season. His boss laughed and waved him to one of the chairs in front of the expensive desk. As he sat down, there was a knock at the door he'd just come through.

Ojacarcu pressed the intercom button and said, "Intră!"

The door opened and Petre strolled in, wearing his best business suit and tie, his shoes almost as shiny as the boss' desk. Connor groaned internally. If Petre was here, it meant they had to pay a visit to someone the boss was unhappy with. He hoped whoever they had to *talk* to was in the mood to do everything possible to walk away with a smile instead of a broken nose. Connor's hand was beginning to throb again now that the numbing spray had completely worn off, the cut combining with the pain of punching a hard jawbone earlier in the night.

"Ah, Petre, good to see you," Ojacarcu said to the sharply dressed man. "Please, have a seat for a moment."

Petre gave Connor a grin as he sat down in the chair next to him. Connor gave the newcomer a lopsided grin in return, showing his stitches to yet another person. Petre's grin turned into a chuckle and a quick double-nod of his head. Petre loved watching hockey, and he especially loved watching Connor deliver a beating to an opposing player.

"Ah, you see Mr. Dunsmore's injury," Ojacarcu said, matching Petre's grin. "Hopefully you won't have to be as... persuasive tonight. But, if you must convince our friend the error of his ways, I'm sure Petre can give you a bit of help so you can use your other hand."

Petre smiled and pretended to give the air in front of him a bear hug, getting a laugh out of the others.

“I would like you to go see our friend Mr. Benton,” Ojacarcu said, sliding a piece of paper across the glossy desk surface toward Connor. “His address and his two usual locations. His phone number as well, in case he is playing hide-and-seek. If you have to call him, call Ivana first to set up a meet. Ivana is our friend’s most favorite peach.”

Connor grabbed the paper, glancing at the information before stuffing it in his pants pocket. He felt a little under-dressed compared to Petre, but he was the muscle after all. His faded jeans, black t-shirt, and Maple Leafs jacket were a sharp contrast to Petre’s suit. Connor, like most professional hockey players at any level below the NHL, owned one good suit, the one that the league mandated all players wore to and from the arenas on game nights. He wondered when that had become a rule or a routine that was now sacrosanct. He didn’t want to have his suit dry cleaned every time he had to *talk* to a client.

“You fight well,” Petre said as he drove the two of them west on I-184 out of downtown.

“Fought,” Connor corrected him. Over the years, he had helped a few of the Romanians learn to speak English a lot better than they’d been able to when he first met them. “You say, ‘You fought well,’ and then you can add ‘tonight’ or ‘during the game’ to

make it a little more complete.”

“You fought well tonight during the game,” Petre said, getting a laugh out of Connor.

“Do you know this Benton guy?” Connor asked, changing the subject, not wanting to talk about fighting anymore than necessary.

“Da,” Petre said. “A real fat guy.”

“You mean, ‘a really fat guy’ or ‘a real fatass,’” Connor corrected him once again.

“A really fat fatass,” Petre said, being a comedian as usual.

“So what’s his gig?” Connor asked.

“Gig?”

“Yeah, you know, what’s his deal? What is he into that we have to go have a *talk* with him?”

“Ah, yes. Gig. I like that. Fatass Benton is into cars. He likes cars. He likes getting Mr. Ojacarcu expensive luxury cars to send back home to his family.” Petre winked, the joke never getting old to him. Everything that Ojacarcu shipped back to Romania was a *gift for the family*.

“Okay,” Connor said. “So why are we going to see him?”

“Mr. Ojacarcu has paid him for two cars. This fat man has not delivered for three weeks. Mr. Ojacarcu is upset. He promised his goddaughter a special birthday gift.”

“Got it,” Connor said, leaning back in his seat as the Lincoln rolled across the connector and onto the main freeway.

“Why do you not have a car?” Petre asked him after a few minutes.

“I don’t know, I guess I don’t need one,” Connor answered.

“How can you pick up pretty girls that want to sex you without a car?” Petre asked, as if Connor was too dumb to understand the reasoning behind having a car.

“I don’t need a car for that,” Connor laughed. “Ladies are the one problem I don’t have.”

“True, true,” Petre said, giving him a sly glance. “When you will take Petre to get these ladies?”

“When will I take you to get ladies?” Connor asked. “Don’t you have access to ‘the girls?’”

“Da, but they fuck for money. Not me of course, Petre doesn’t pay. They fuck men for money. I want a ladies who fucks for pleasure.”

“Next time we play at home, meet me outside the locker room after a game. I’ll find you a *ladies that fucks for pleasure*,” he said, mocking Petre’s accent, getting another laugh from the Romanian.

“Listen,” Connor said to the obese man sobbing at his feet, “I’m not here because I don’t like you. Really, I’m not. I’m here because... well, you know why, Mr. Benton.”

“I’m sorry!” the man cried as he bled on Connor’s shoes.

Connor was tempted to kick the man in the mouth since his shoes were already ruined. Instead, he knelt down and put his hand on Benton’s shoulder.

“Look, Donald,” he said to the fat man, “Mr. Ojacarcu is a fair man, you agree?” Benton nodded. “And you are a fair man as well, right?” Another nod. “And as a fair businessman, Mr. Ojacarcu fronted you the money to procure him two vehicles for his goddaughter’s birthday. That was almost a month ago, Donald. The reason I’m here is because Mr. Ojacarcu’s goddaughter is about to have her birthday, yet she doesn’t have either vehicle that has already been paid for. But I shouldn’t have to explain all of this, should I?”

Connor shrugged as he glanced up at Petre, who stood as still as a statue. Petre flashed him a quick grin before turning his face back to impassive stone.

“I’m sorry!” Benton wailed again between sobs. “I tried to get the Lexus. I did. I tried. But my guy, he got caught. He’s sitting in Ada County right now. He’s got priors, so he’s going to probably end up in prison.”

Connor was fascinated by the way the light glinted off Benton’s bloody teeth, how it sprayed a fine mist with each hard consonant the man spoke through a split lip. He’d eaten enough punches over his career as a hockey player to know what the man must be feeling in terms of pain. Connor tried imagine the fat man’s fear. The fear of a fight while padded up and on the ice was completely different than the helpless terror that Donald Benton was experiencing.

“I’m sorry, Donald. I really am. So is my friend here.” Benton looked up to see the big man in the suit smiling at him. “But the problem is, I don’t give a shit what your fucking excuse

is. Mr. Ojacarcu paid you. You haven't given him what he paid for. If you have the money, I'll kindly take it back to Mr. Ojacarcu and you can probably get off with just a busted-up face. Do you have the money, Donald?"

"Nuh—nuh—no." The fat man began to cry again, knowing what was coming.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Donald," Connor said, almost sounding truly sorry.

Connor liked to fight while on the ice. Fighting in hockey almost always had purpose, had meaning, had respect and honor behind it. It had an unwritten but well-understood code that was to be followed. Street fighting had no honor, no code, only blood and pain. The blood and pain didn't bother Connor so much as lack of honor. There was no honor in having one man hold another helpless so Connor could exact revenge, send a message, or strike terror into whoever Ojacarcu sent him to *talk* to.

"No! Please! I'll get the money. I swear. I can have it in the morning. As soon as the bank opens. My wife. My wife, she has enough to cover it. Please!"

"I'm afraid it is too late for that, Donald," Connor said, nodding to Petre.

Petre swooped down and grabbed Benton, lifting him to his feet as if the man weighed nothing.

"Do me a favor, Donald," Connor said as he planted his feet firmly to swing with his left hand. "Try to not cough or spit blood on me. And whatever you do, don't puke on me. Can you do that?"

The only thing Donald Benton could do was cry and beg for

mercy. The only thing he could do after Connor's first punch sank into his fleshy stomach was gag and retch.

CHAPTER 2

The dream was always the same. Connor received the puck on the tape of his blade, a perfect saucer pass over two defenders' sticks as he streaked down the left wing. His legs were pistons in a redlining engine, long hair trailing behind him from under his helmet. He crossed over the blue line, head-faked once, then a second time, not wanting to lose speed as he blazed in from the left side, getting a step inside the last defender.

He cut back at the last moment when the goalie attempted a poke check. Connor saw it coming before the netminder's stick made it a quarter of the way around, lifting the puck off the ice for a split second to hop over it before shooting the puck into the net. As he watched the puck go in, he felt a sharp pain as the goalie's stick connected with the side of his ankle right before he felt his feet slide out from under him.

The rest was a blur, though it always replayed in his dreams as a slow motion blur. He saw the arena lights, then the ice, then the yellow dasher along the bottom of the boards a half second before slamming into them at full speed. Connor's first thought was fear that he'd crashed into the boards awkwardly and might have injured himself. His second thought was satisfaction that not only did he score the tying goal, he hadn't felt the intense agony of a snapping bone or dislocated shoulder.

His third thought was cut short by a searing pain as the defenseman that he'd burned crashed into him at full speed. The defenseman's skates gleamed under the arena lights, reflecting

Connor's face through the beads of water coating the razor-sharp blade. He watched in slow motion as the skate caught him at the side of the knee, an inch above the protective plastic of his kneepad. It seemed to take forever for the skate to ride up the inside of his thigh before coming to a stop two inches below his protective cup. He watched as the skin of his leg slid back, butterflied like a gourmet tenderloin. The blood. So much blood. Too much blood.

He woke with a scream in his throat, sweating, clutching at the extra pillow. In his dreams, the event always played out in slow motion. In reality, it had happened less than two seconds after the puck entered the back of the net. He'd been ecstatic that the red light had come on, the goal horn rumbling throughout the arena. Then the skate cut his leg open from knee to right below the groin on his inner thigh. The blood had rushed out of him so fast that he had passed out.

Connor reached down to rub the scar that was a reminder of the tying goal. A reminder that he would never fulfill his destiny as a great hockey player. After the dream, his leg would sometimes throb for a while, as if it were remembering the pain and the blood along with him. He lay back in bed, glancing over at the clock on his nightstand. It was almost three in the morning. He was rarely able to sleep again after the dream.

Two hundred and nineteen stitches had closed up the gash in

his leg and repaired his femoral artery. The thought of it made him shiver, and again his leg flared with the ghostly pain of memory. He was told repeatedly that if he hadn't been in Helsinki, with a new trauma hospital barely a block from the arena where the World Junior Championship tournament was taking place, he would have died.

"How's it going, Dunzer?" Coach Lamoureux asked him from across the desk.

"Great, Coach," Connor replied.

At twenty-six, he was considered an old man. Most of his teammates were fresh out of junior hockey, some barely eighteen years old, most under twenty-two. Dunzer was the nickname he'd had since he was a kid, attached to him by his teammates back then. It had stuck, like all nicknames did that teammates gave to others, whether complimentary or not. And "Dunzer" was better than the nicknames the fans had given him. Convict. Cannon. Dozer.

"You missed a hell of a comeback last night," Coach Lamoureux told him with a frown. "We could have really used you."

"Really?" Connor asked. When he'd left the arena with Petre, the Bombers were still down 6-0.

"Nah, it was a blowout. Don't you check the scores online?" his coach asked with mock disgust.

“Usually. Last night was a long night.”

“Ah, gotcha,” Coach Lamoureux said, leaving it at that.

He never asked what Connor did when the boss called down and gave him the order to tell Connor to get dressed. He had a good idea that it was something he shouldn’t ask about. Ojacarcu paid him better than any other coach in the UPHL ever dreamed of being paid, and Boise was a nice, quiet, mild-weathered city with good schools. He did his job of coaching a respected hockey club in a bottom-rung professional league, and let Mr. Ojacarcu do... whatever it was the man did.

“Well, you didn’t miss much at least,” Coach Lamoureux said to Connor, steering the subject back to hockey.

“I saw Gansy bleeding,” Connor said.

“Yeah, that asshole Mechalnyer gave Gansy’s mouth the butt-end of a stick. We got four minutes out of that, and they got a fucking short-handed goal on us. Seven fucking nothing,” Coach exhaled, still pissed off at his team’s performance.

“I’m sorry, Coach,” Connor said, his head lowered.

“Nah, don’t sweat it. Like I said,” Lamoureux replied with a smile. “You would have just ended up with more stitches in your hand. We were terrible. I’m sure you were doing something more interesting, or at least more worthwhile than getting your ass handed to you on the ice like we were.”

“You know it,” Connor grinned.

“Get your gear packed. We got a bus to catch. Reno is a shithole, but at least we can easily take two of the three games, maybe all three if you guys decide to show up for all of them.”

“Got it, Coach.” Connor said.

“Hi, Connor,” Randi said to him when he exited the arena through the side door.

Connor wondered how long she had been waiting for him. Randi was the last person he wanted to talk to, but he needed a ride to his apartment to pack a travel bag. He squinted at the girl in the winter sun, her tight blue yoga pants and blue hoodie showing off her figure.

“Heya, Randi,” he said.

The two stood silent in the cold December air, breath steaming from their nostrils.

“I thought you could use some company until you have to leave,” she said, breaking the silence.

“Sure, but I need a ride to my apartment.”

She smiled. “I’m parked in the garage.”

They went back through the front doors and into the multi-story parking garage attached to the Idaho Public Sports Arena. Ojacarcu had somehow convinced the city to build the three thousand seat arena and parking garage by pledging to bring sports and entertainment venues to the city. Connor wondered how his boss had accomplished that task with a five thousand seat arena sitting less than four blocks away, while Randi hooked her arm through his and wondered if Connor had time to get her out of her clothes before the team bus left for Nevada.

“I think I’m going to go to Washington,” she said as they walked along Front Street.

“Oh yeah?” he asked.

“I’ll be starting college in January at UW,” she pouted.

“You’ll do great.”

“That’s not what I want you to say,” she said, unhappy that he didn’t seem to care she was going away.

“What do you want me to say?” he asked.

“I want you to at least be sad that we won’t see each other except while I’m on break.”

“Randi...” he started, wondering how to tell her without sounding like an asshole.

“It’s fine,” she said, but her face looked ready to burst into tears.

“Don’t be like that,” he told her, coming to a complete stop and keeping her from going on. “I didn’t mean it like I don’t care. I just mean it’s good that you’re going to college. Besides, we play in Tacoma nine nights per season. Same for Seattle. I hear that Olympia might even be getting a team in a year or two.”

Randi smiled, hugged him, then dragged him along through the lower level of the garage to her car. Connor didn’t have the heart to tell her what he really meant. She was barely eighteen, fresh out of high school, and had no idea what she wanted in her life other than some fantasy of falling in love and getting married. She thought the biggest disaster in the world was having to leave Boise and all of the friends she’d grown up with, while his biggest disaster was getting through daily life with the knowledge that he

had been destined for greatness, but now barely held on to the fraying threads of that destiny.

Randi plopped herself down on his bed while he grabbed his travel bag and began to stuff clothes into it. The bed was the only furniture in the apartment other than a single recliner parked six feet from a small flatscreen television in the living room. The kitchen wasn't disgusting, but it was easily apparent that a single man in his twenties with a carefree life lived there.

"When will you be back?" she asked as he rummaged through a laundry basket of mostly clean clothes.

"Sunday night," he answered, sniffing at a white t-shirt.

"Will you miss me?" she asked.

"Of course," he said, feeling guilty for letting her continue to think they were an exclusive couple. He didn't turn around when he said it so she wouldn't be able to see the lie on his face.

"Will you miss them?" she asked in a low voice.

Connor looked back, not sure who she was talking about. Randi knelt on top of his bed, wearing only thin blue panties, her hands cupping her breasts. A small part of him felt angry at her for assuming they would have sex because he let her drive him home, let her hang out in his apartment while he packed. A much larger part felt very differently, and he dropped the travel bag and climbed onto the bed.

“I love you,” she told him after.

He said nothing, not wanting to ruin the moment.

“You don’t have to say it,” she said, her lips forming a pout again. “I know I’m just a stupid little girl.”

“It isn’t that,” he said.

“It is. And I know all the others throw themselves at you.”

“Randi...”

“I know you see them. I’m not stupid Connor. You’re this big hockey star and I’m just Randi Patterson from shitty little backwoods Idaho. I know you just want to fuck and nothing more.”

“Randi, come on...”

“No. It’s fine. I’ll go to Washington and you’ll bang the other *puck bunnies* that show up to the games in their tight skirts and tighter sweaters.” Connor was about to say something but she interrupted him. “Yes, I know what a puck bunny is, and I know that’s what you all call girls like me.”

“You and I met when you were wearing a tight skirt and a tighter sweater,” Connor said with a laugh, unable to help himself.

“Fuck you,” she said, but she couldn’t keep the laughter away either.

“I’ll let you if it will shut you up about being a lonely eighteen-year old spinster going off to college who won’t ever get laid again,” he said, rolling over, his hands roaming.

“Stop it,” she said, slapping at his hands. “I’m not a spinster. And I don’t want to get laid by a college boy. I want a man.”

“I’m still a boy,” he said, avoiding her defenses with his quicker hands.

She gave up and reached down, grabbing him. “I’d say this makes you a man.”

CHAPTER 3

Randi wasn't at the arena when the bus pulled up. Connor pulled his hood up as he stepped off the bus to keep the falling snow out of his eyes. His teammates milled around, talking about getting beer or heading downtown after they unloaded their travel bags. Some of the guys wanted him to go with them, but he told them he was feeling woozy from the painkillers Griff had given him after a fight during Saturday night's game. As the bags came out of the bus' cargo compartments, each player grabbed his bag, grouped up, and headed toward the parking garage.

Connor stood in the snow until he was the last one left other than the driver. He wanted to go downtown and forget about everything for a while. He would have no problem getting his drink on, meeting a girl, sometimes two, and get them to give him a ride back to his apartment. When they came in, they would always remark about his lack of furniture, and he would always joke that the bed would hold two comfortably. Three on one of those rare but lucky occasions.

He still felt like shit about the way he'd treated Randi. He felt like an even bigger asshole when he decided she didn't meet him at the bus because she was just too ditzy, too forgetful. Not that Connor was the brightest tooth in the smile, or a great conversationalist. Most of the women in his life knew that he was aloof, good in bed, but not much to talk to.

It wasn't that Connor didn't possess intelligence, he just felt like he had nothing to talk about with most of the women. The few

that he felt comfortable enough with to see more than once or twice were married or had boyfriends. They would never alert him to this fact until after they were relaxing after climax. He was fairly sure if they'd mentioned it before hopping into his bed that he wouldn't have cared any more than he did when told after. Connor didn't have a problem sleeping with a married woman, but he knew better than to try and have any kind of relationship with one.

He pulled his phone out and scrolled through his contacts. He could call Randi, but he wouldn't. Petre was the only person that caught his eye as he scrolled through the list a third time. Connor preferred to never mix his business and pleasure, and for the most part, he stuck to his guns. His employment with Mr. Ojacarcu was just a job. He didn't socialize with his coworkers on that side of the business any more than necessary. However, Petre and Vadim were two that he sometimes spent his leisure time with, though he kept it limited. It was better if Mr. Ojacarcu knew very little about his private life, his friends, his girlfriends.

“Da,” Petre's voice said.

“You busy?” Connor asked him, feeling the phone grow cold around his face.

“No way, Jose,” Petre said, pronouncing Jose with a hard *juh* sound.

“I need a ride home if you can pull yourself away from looking at Ukrainian porn,” Connor said.

“You are at arena?”

“Da,” Connor said with an intentionally awful Romanian accent.

Connor woke when the girl, Theresa, if he remembered right, turned over and put her head on his chest. His mouth felt like someone had poured mud and ashes into it. He extracted himself from her and made his way to the bathroom. As he stood in front of the toilet, he smiled, remembering how Petre had talked him into going out for a drink. They avoided the downtown scene and went to a sports bar in Meridian. Neither had been to the place before, but within an hour, as new patrons came in, they would be told by others that Connor Dunsmore was gracing them with his presence.

A few would trickle by every couple of minutes, most just saying hi and shaking his left hand, marveling at the swollen and stitched knuckles of his right, as well as the scars that covered both. A lot of the fans were women, which was precisely why Petre liked to go out with Connor. Petre had told him many times that they made a perfect pair for *sexing women*, with Connor's pretty-boy looks and status as a professional athlete, and Petre's handsome, Eastern European features.

The girls would stop and say hello, smiling and giggling while Connor shook their hands, then he'd introduce Petre, who would melt them with his deep voice and Romanian accent. Petre would give Connor a wink and a grin when a pair or even a quad of females approached them, and both would turn on the charm. Soon the girls would be sitting at their table, the two men buying them drinks and regaling them with tales of hockey, fights, and the tall

tales of Romania that Petre would brag about, smiling and winking at the girls the entire time.

Sometimes Petre fought bears on the border of Hungary. Other times he was a strongman for a local gang while growing up. Once in a while he was a secret agent, and he'd mess with the girls by repeating some phrases he had learned to say in a perfect New Jersey accent. Connor was normally quiet other than when directly asked something, usually about how tough hockey players had to be, if it hurt when he got in fights, why he fought.

Last night Petre was Connor's bodyguard, assigned to him by Mr. Ojarcu because of death threats from other teams who were scared of his hockey prowess. Theresa and her friend had known it was bullshit, but they played the game as well. Her friend gushed about meeting a real European, and a handsome one at that. Theresa had her hand on Connor's thigh by the second pitcher of beer.

He flushed the toilet, washed his hands and face to wake up a little more, then wandered back to the bedroom. There wasn't a coffee maker in the apartment, but a Starbucks was less than three minutes from the apartment on foot. He sat on the edge of bed, pulling clothes on.

"You want some coffee?" he asked the girl still dozing in his bed.

"Sure," she said, turning on her side to face him.

"Gonna run to Starbucks real quick. There should be a clean towel in the closet if you want a shower."

She pulled the sheet down, exposing her naked skin, giving

him a smile. Connor smiled back, but instead of diving under the covers, he grabbed his wallet from the nightstand and headed toward the front door.

The sun was out again, but it felt barely above freezing outside. Steam from his nostrils formed thick clouds as he walked the back way through the apartment complex toward the gate that led into the shopping center. There was no practice today, only a light practice on Tuesday, then a game on Wednesday. His hands and legs were thankful to get a day off. Three games in four nights, and for Connor, four fights in three games, were beginning to take a toll on his body.

The two girls in their green Starbucks aprons gave him their widest smiles as he walked through the door. The girl at the counter, Alice according to her name tag, took his order, frowning slightly when he ordered two coffees. The girl at the espresso machine, Dana, gave him a wink at hearing the order. They'd seen him almost every morning when the Bombers were at home, and they both had learned over the last year and a half that a single coffee meant he was alone, two coffees meant he had a girlfriend.

Twice he had ordered three coffees after moving to the new apartment, and Dana's eyes had nearly burst from her head. Connor's subtle grin and wink the first time had caused her to let out a squeak that got the entire coffee shop's attention. Her face had turned almost purple with embarrassment.

He gave the girls a ten dollar tip and headed back home. As he went back through the gate to the apartment complex, he decided to keep Theresa around for the afternoon if she was willing

to stay. Connor needed a distraction and knew if he parked himself in front of the television, he'd spend the day thinking of how miserable his life had become, how badly he'd treated Randi, who was somehow in love with him, but he cared almost nothing for.

"Your phone rang while you were gone," Theresa called to him from the bathroom as he put the coffees on the counter.

She poked her head out of the bathroom, hair wet from the shower.

"I was hoping you wanted to hang out for a bit," he said to her as he reached for his phone.

She smiled. "I could do that."

He unlocked the screen and saw the missed call from C. Ojacarcu. A thin thread of anger burned within him for a moment at the interruption of his life. He would have to think of an excuse as to why he couldn't show up, but in the end, he'd show up. He always showed up when Ojacarcu beckoned. It was the price Connor had to pay for a simple life of hockey, girls, beer, no debt, and little responsibility.

"Connor," Mr. Ojacarcu said after answering Connor's call. "I need you tonight. Be at my office by six."

"Yes sir," Connor answered.

He sighed, thankful that he would at least have the whole afternoon to let Theresa keep his mind occupied.

Costache Ojacarcu paced behind his desk. Connor and Petre

sat on the other side, watching their boss. Connor had seen his boss this upset before, but not often. His right hand gave a twang of pain at his thought of what kind of *talk* he and Petre might have to have with someone after they left the office.

“This fucking guy,” Ojacarcu said, “this fucking... worm. He is behind on his payments. I used to send David to collect from him, but David has let him get too far in the hole. From now on, you two will see him once per week and make sure he settles his debt quickly.”

“Yes, sir,” Connor said. Petre nodded his head once.

Ojacarcu sat down in his high-backed executive chair, steepling his fingers on the polished desk for a few moments.

“Don’t kill him, of course,” their boss said. “Not this time anyway.”

Connor wasn’t sure if the man was joking or planning. When Connor had agreed to work on the side for Costache Ojacarcu, he’d been adamant about not being part of anything that involved murder or any other capital crime. Connor appreciated the extra money, and his boss paid well for the work, but he wanted to keep playing hockey as long as his body would let him, even if he ended up two or three more leagues below the UPHL. He had no desire to spend any time in prison, nor did he want to end up back in Canada with a felony deportation.

“This time,” their boss said, “warn him a little, and don’t let him weasel out of paying extra. The little shit has money. He’s making enough from cutting the hell out of what we give him. If he says he doesn’t have it, hit him a few more times.”

“What if he doesn’t have any more money?” Connor asked.

Ojacarcu looked at him without blinking, “Then I guess you will hit him until money starts coming out of him.”

“The boss, he is funny sometimes,” Petre said as they drove west toward Caldwell. “Hit him until he turns into money.”

“Your terrible English is giving me a headache,” Connor said, adjusting a heating vent.

“You know what I mean,” the Romanian said.

“How was whats-her-name?” Connor asked.

“The girl? Diana. She fucked for pleasure,” Petre said. Connor could see the huge smile on his face from the dashboard lights. “We should go out more often. You find the best girls.”

“If I didn’t play hockey, I’d be hanging out with you instead, using you to pick up girls.”

“You think I would attract girls for us?” Petre asked, turning the possibility over in his mind that he would be the one women tripped over their own feet trying to say hello to.

“Some really ugly, hairy, Romanian skags I’m sure,” Connor answered.

Petre grunted Romanian curses at him.

“We’d still sex them though. I’ve never done it with a hairy Romanian chick,” Connor baited.

“Romanian girls, some are nice,” Petre told him. “Some are like Russian tanks. Some are crazy and try to cut you with knives.”

“They’re all crazy,” Connor said, leaning his head back as they passed the first Nampa exit off the freeway.

“Da, but these Romanian girls. Only Hungarian girls are crazier. Hungarian girls cut off your parts. Romanian girls just cut you.” When Connor looked over at him, Petre added, “A lot.”

“Do you know this guy? Larry?” Connor asked his partner after a few minutes.

“Da, I’ve met him a few couple of times,” Petre said. Connor decided to not correct him this time. “Skinny and he sweats. Cățel mic și împuțit. *Stinky little dog* is what David always called him. Tattoos, metal shit in his face and ears, talks like tough guy. You hit him once, I bet he cries for his mommy.”

“Is he crazy? A dooper? Does he have guns?” Connor pressed.

Talking to most of Mr. Ojacarcu’s clients meant people who had somehow ended up caught in the Romanian’s web. Businessmen, college girls needing extra money, once in a while a politician or police officer. There were plenty of shadier types, which were the majority of Ojacarcu’s clientele. His boss had kept him from the drug dealers, the thugs who robbed drug dealers, the dealers and gangbangers who robbed junkies, and the junkies who would rape, murder, and steal, just to get their next high.

“He is stupid,” Petre said with disgust. “He stinks, he sweats, he talks shit, he beats up girls instead of men, and he’s a junkie dealer.”

“What kind of dope? And does he have guns or not?”

“Sometimes powder,” Petre said, indicating cocaine. “Mostly glass.”

“Great,” Connor breathed. He hated tweakers.

One of the girls he’d slept with two years before had been shackled up with a loser who was strung out on the stuff. The guy beat her a couple of times until Connor had pounded his face in behind a dumpster at the grocery store in a chance encounter. The idiot then showed up to the arena during a team practice thinking he was going to carve Connor up with a sword.

“A fucking sword!” Ojacarcu had exclaimed in anger to Connor later. “Like he thinks he is Conan!”

Dracul and another suit caught the junkie as he tried to get down to the ice. Ojacarcu had hinted that the junkie wouldn’t be showing up to anywhere, and Connor had never asked for clarification.

“Don’t worry,” Petre said, pulling his coat back enough to reveal an automatic in a shoulder holster.

“Great,” Connor said again, a sinking feeling settling in his stomach.

CHAPTER 4

Petre stopped the Lincoln in front of a run-down house on N. 2nd Avenue. He shut the car off and checked his weapon. Connor had grown up with hunting rifles on the Saskatchewan plains, but had never handled a pistol. They made him more nervous than he would admit. However, he was glad Petre had it, as meth heads were unpredictable.

Both men strode up the broken walkway as if they had every right to be there. Petre pounded his fist on the door five times in a “cop knock” to let Larry know they were there. Just as Petre was about to bang on the door again, it flew open. The man who opened the door looked straight out of a drug abuse prevention commercial.

Larry Fallon was a few inches shorter than Connor, who topped out right at six feet. Larry’s clothes were baggy, hung from his emaciated limbs, and looked like they hadn’t seen a washing machine in weeks. The wave of stink that rolled out of the doorway and hit Connor in the face made him gag momentarily until he breathed through his mouth.

“Who the fuck are you?” Larry asked, his eyes shifting back and forth from Petre to Connor. He squinted at Petre for a few seconds. “I know you. What the fuck do you want? Where’s David?”

Connor and Petre were silent as the junkie came out on the porch and nervously looked up and down the quiet street, as if cops were waiting behind every bush. Larry smiled at them. The few

teeth he had left were beginning to turn from brown to black, with only a few yellow spots left. Connor had met a lot of hockey players, but Larry would win the prize for worst teeth by a long shot. Connor decided that having a team dentist wasn't in the budget for drug addicts and dealers.

"Mr. Ojacarcu sent us," Petre said in his deep voice. "Let us go inside and do business."

"Fuck you, man, I don't know you." Larry started backing into the house, trying to get the door closed.

"I will ask once," Petre said, his foot blocking the door from closing.

"Fuck you, man!" the junkie hissed.

"Listen, friend," Connor said in a friendly tone, "let us in, or my partner here is going to ventilate you."

"Who the fuck is it?" a woman's voice called from somewhere in the house. The sound was more of a screech than anything.

"Shut up," Larry said, turning his head toward whoever said it. He returned his glare to the two men crowding his doorway before he finally let go of the door and backed all the way into the house.

Connor and his partner entered the house, another wave of rank odor assaulting their noses. He wanted to leave the door open to air the place out, but shut it anyway, knowing there might be a little too much noise coming from the house soon. Larry backed all the way into the living room and sat down hard on the couch.

"What the fuck do you want?" he asked the two men in his

living room.

“Politeness will get you more honey,” Petre said, butchering the phrase.

“What my big, angry friend here means,” Connor said, slapping Petre on the shoulder, “is that you should shut up and listen. And when we ask you a question, tell us the answer.”

“Or what?” the junkie asked, looking nervous.

“Yeah, or what?” the woman asked, coming into the living room from the hallway.

Connor stared at her. He couldn’t tell if her skin was naturally dark, or if the light in the house was just that dim. She wore a thin, fake satin nightgown that split in the front and had a fake satin belt to tie it with. He thought at first her eyes were made up to be dark around the edges until he realized they were bruises. A leather collar surrounded her throat with a ring at the front, the kind a dog would wear while hooked to a chain or leash.

“What the fuck you staring at, faggot?” she asked him in her screechy voice. “Ain’t never seen tits before?”

She opened her nightgown, letting all three men see her nakedness underneath. Connor recoiled at the bruises that covered her body. Her arms, legs, and her stomach were a tie-dye of dark purples and sickly greens. He tried to imagine what she looked like without all of the bruises, wondering at the same time when she’d last taken a shower. Her short black hair looked greasy, dirty, and tangled.

“Close your shit up, you stupid whore,” Larry yelled at her from the couch.

The woman leered at Connor for a few more seconds before wrapping the nightgown around her and tying the belt to keep it closed. She sat down next to Larry, put her arms around him, and continued to give Connor an angry glare.

“You want a ride, man?” the junkie asked Connor. “Fifty bucks and she’s yours for half an hour.”

Petre cleared his throat. “Mr. Fallon, Mr. Ojacarcu has relieved David of his duties. We are your new *assistants*. You will see us once per week, and you will pay us the amount you owe Mr. Ojacarcu plus ten percent of your debt, including interest. If you do not pay us, you will find it hard to continue to earn a living. There is to be no argument,” he said, holding up a hand when it looked like Larry was going to launch into protest. “You will pay us. Or else.”

“What the fuck?” the sweaty little man protested from the couch. “I don’t have thirteen thousand dollars right now. I got shit out on the street, man. You gotta wait to get paid just like I do.”

Petre didn’t say anything as he stepped forward and locked his fingers in Larry’s hair. The Romanian pulled hard enough for Larry to leave the couch in flight before a crashing landing in the middle of the dirty floor. He looked up and watched Petre open his fist, a thick chunk of hair falling to the floor. The junkie blinked, put his hand to the top of his head, and yelled in pain when it came away bloody.

The woman jumped off the couch, shrieking at full volume as she went straight at Petre. Connor stepped in front of her, shoving her back to the couch with more force than he intended. She

rebounded from the cushion and rocketed back off the couch and onto the floor.

“Fuck you! Fuck you! You fucking piece of shit! How dare you come in here like you own the place! Get the fuck out of here! I’ll cut your fucking cock off and stuff it in your mouth!” She spewed a torrent of insults and curses in her screeching voice until Connor crouched down and slapped her across the face.

“I don’t want to hit you again,” Connor told her. “Keep your mouth shut, let us finish our business, and you can get back to whatever it is you do in this shithole.”

When she opened her mouth to say something, Connor reared back his open palm again.

“Fuck you,” she cursed under her breath.

Connor turned to the shouting junkie, still on the floor, still searching his head for missing hair. Connor grabbed another handful of the man’s hair and stood him up, lifting Larry to his feet with another scream. Connor drove his fist into the junkie’s nose hard enough to make it bleed, then again into his mouth. Larry finally stopped yelling and began to cry.

“You will take my friend to wherever you hide money, and you will give him thirteen thousand dollars. If you do not, this will be a long night for you,” Petre said in a tone that promised much more pain.

Larry spat blood at him. “Fuck you.”

Connor punched the man in the face three more times, dazing him and causing him to sway. Larry was having a hard time staying on his feet, his balance worthless, both of his hands locked onto

Connor's wrist. He opened his mouth to say something, and instead ate another fist, then three more.

"I'm done fucking around with you, junkie," Connor told him. "Pay us what you owe Mr. Ojacarcu or we are going to do this all night."

"Aw ribe," Larry said through broken teeth and swollen lips. "Leb be go."

"No," Connor said, "We are going to walk wherever you point me to, wherever the money is. I'll let you go when I have the amount you owe in my hand."

Larry glowered at him, eyes full of hate and fear. He pulled one hand away from Connor's wrist and pointed down the hallway. Connor looked down at the woman on the floor.

"Watch her," Connor told Petre as he half-shoved, half-dragged Larry down the hall by the hair.

The rank odor grew stronger as the two moved toward the bedroom at the end of the hallway. Garbage and dirty clothes were strewn everywhere, forcing Connor to step carefully as he walked. He didn't want to trip and let the junkie get away, unsure if the man had a gun or a knife hidden within the endless refuse.

"Here," Larry said when they came to the closed bedroom door.

"Open it," Connor demanded.

"I can't with you holding my hair," Larry said, barely understandable.

"It's in here?" Connor asked, making sure.

Larry nodded, and Connor kicked out at the door as hard as

he could. Both of them were surprised as the door blew off its hinges and flew into the room. Connor jerked on the junkie's hair and forced him inside. Larry pointed at the edge of the mattress closest to the wall.

"It's under there," he said, pointing at the mattress corner.

"Get it," Connor told him.

"I can't with you holding my fucking hair, man!"

Connor punched him in the stomach, doubling him over.

Larry coughed and retched, but while he was bent over, he reached down and pulled the mattress back, revealing plastic baggies full of cash.

"How much is here?" Connor asked him.

"Eighteen thousand," Larry answered.

"Grab it," Connor commanded.

Larry reached down and collected all of the bags. The instant the bags were in his hands, Connor jerked him by the hair, leading him down the hallway and back into the living room.

"Put it on the counter," Connor told him, and Larry obeyed.

Connor gave the man one last punch to the face, hitting him square in the eye, before shoving him back toward the couch.

"I'm going to count it. If there isn't at least thirteen thousand dollars here, I'm going to keep punching you until you are blind," Connor announced, brushing his hand on his pants to remove any of the meth head's hair that had stuck to it. Holding on to the junkie's hair as hard as he had for that long had made it ache, but not as much as his left hand did after striking Larry in the face repeatedly.

Connor counted out the money. Eighteen thousand dollars in hundreds and twenties. He looked at Petre, giving his partner a nod before he gathered up the money and put it in as few bags as possible.

“You got your fucking money!” the woman on the floor shrieked at them. “Now get the fuck out of here!”

Connor walked over to where she was still curled up on the floor, the soles of his shoes struggling to break free from something sticky that had fused with the stained carpet at the molecular level. He knelt down and grabbed her by the chin, forcing her to look up at him.

“Did he do this to you?” Connor asked her.

The woman spit in his face, a disgusting blend of phlegm, saliva, and blood that had leaked into her mouth from a cut on her lip when he’d slapped her earlier. He held her chin for a few more seconds before he let it go. She curled into a tighter ball and began to cry again. Connor stood up and walked to the couch. Larry shrank into the cushions in fear.

“What’s her name?” he asked the junkie.

“J—Juh—Jera,” Larry stuttered.

“Jera,” Connor said, rolling the name around in his mouth. He walked back to where his partner had become a statue in a business suit. “We’ll be seeing you again in a week. If you don’t have thirteen thousand dollars, it will be worse next time. Each time we come and you don’t have the money, it will be worse than the time before. Eventually Mr. Ojacarcu will decide you are too expensive, a waste of our time. You don’t want to waste our time.

“If you think next time to have a gun or one of your dopehead pals, or anyone other than you and your lady friend here, Mr. Ojacarcu will stop treating this as an annoyance, and begin treating it as a serious matter. You don’t want this to become a serious matter, do you, Larry?”

The sweaty little man shook his head. He knew better than to cross the boss, his supplier. By morning, he’d realize that getting kicked around and losing some hair was preferable to waking up in a crude box buried somewhere in the endless scrub wastes that littered the Snake River Plain.

“It was pleasure to do business with you,” Petre said, giving a slight bow, pretending to tip his hat like Humphrey Bogart.

“Get the fuck out of my fucking house,” Larry said, blood running down his face from multiple cuts and a smashed nose.

“You really need to work on your phrasing,” Connor told Petre as they headed back to Boise on the freeway.

“What is phrasing?” his partner asked.

“It means when you say some shit like ‘Politeness will get you more honey,’ you sound like a retard foreigner,” Connor chided. “The correct phrase is, ‘You will catch more flies with honey than you will with vinegar.’”

“You think I am retard?” Petre asked.

“No. I think you need to work on your catchphrases so you don’t sound like one.”

“My saying is better,” Petre said with a grunt. “I will have to have suit cleaned. I smell their stink even now.”

“God, it was horrible in there. I had to breathe through my mouth, and even then it was bad. Touching that slimy fucker’s hair almost made me puke.”

“I think you make new friend,” Petre grinned.

“I’m pretty sure we won’t be exchanging Christmas cards,” Connor said. “Besides, he’s your buddy too. He gave you some hair for a present as well, didn’t he?”

His partner laughed and made a disgusted face. “And that girl! She has great tits!”

“Jesus, Petre, don’t you ever think of anything else?”

“You are mad that she does not like you. She is first girl that does not like you?” Petre laughed at his own joke.

“She was nasty, and I think she might have stunk worse than Larry,” Connor said.

“Don’t be jealous. Petre will wash her up and give her a good home.”

“Be my guest.”

“Don’t be jealous,” Petre said again, reaching over to punch him in the shoulder.

CHAPTER 5

Petre parked the Lincoln in front of Larry's house. He looked over at Connor, wincing once more at the black eye and the four stitches under it from Connor's fight the night before against one of the Earthquake goons. Petre checked his pistol one more time.

"I have shotgun in trunk," he told Connor.

"I'm cool," Connor replied, wanting nothing to do with a firearm.

"Are you sure? I do not trust this junkie. I do not trust his woman either."

"I'm cool," Connor said again, making a show of his two fists being more than enough weaponry to take care of business. "Besides, you have your gun. I'm pretty sure you actually know how to use it. Larry would probably end up shooting himself in the leg if he was stupid enough to draw down on us."

"Mr. Ojacarcu says I cannot kill him," Petre said with a frown. Connor wasn't sure if the man was truly unhappy at his orders. "Mr. Ojacarcu says this... dirty man is good money maker."

"I'm sure he is," Connor said, unlatching his seat belt and opening the door.

It only took three knocks this time before the door swung open. Larry glared at them, but backed away from the door quickly. Petre pushed the door all the way open, poking his head in to have a look before stepping inside.

"Where is your woman?" Petre asked the junkie.

"Fucking some guy," Larry answered. "You want a turn? It's

a hundred bucks this time, asshole.”

Connor feinted a punch to Larry’s face, getting a squawk from the greasy little man, and a laugh from Petre when Larry tripped over a pile of garbage while trying to back away from them.

“The money is on the counter, just take it and leave,” Larry told them.

Connor walked over to the counter to count the pile of bills stacked on it. As he counted, he glanced down the hallway, noticing the destroyed bedroom door had been either repaired, or more likely, leaned up against the frame to make it look like nothing was out of order. Considering that the bedroom was where Larry stashed his money and probably the dope as well, it didn’t seem like much protection from someone who might really want to rob the place.

Thirteen thousand dollars in hundreds and twenties made its way into Connor’s jacket pocket. He patted the pocket, letting Petre know that it was all there. Petre nodded, but kept staring at Larry.

“What the fuck do you want, Lurch?” Larry taunted him.

Larry knew he had some protection from harm as long as he paid the boss and kept moving a couple of pounds of product each week. Connor felt like the man was testing the limits of what would and wouldn’t cause him to piss blood for a few days.

“I am wondering where your woman is,” Petre said.

“I fucking told you, she’s screwing some guy.”

“You let your woman fuck other men?” Petre asked.

“Oh right, you’re the moral police now? Well fuck you,

Lurch. And fuck your buddy as well. I know who you are now,” Larry said, turning to Connor. “You’re some douchebag hockey player. I saw you on television after you left the last time.”

Connor said nothing, wondering how the junkie saw him on television when there wasn’t a single TV in the house that he’d been able to see thanks to the endless piles of trash that lined every room.

“Yeah. You’re a badass motherfucker when Frankenstein is with you, aren’t you? I bet you ain’t shit without him, or without the boss protecting you.”

“Are you done?” Connor asked, tired of listening to his empty, whining threats, more than ready to get back out into fresh air and away from the stench of garbage, rank sweat, and some kind of sour chemical smell that he assumed was the result of meth being smoked.

“Get the fuck out of here,” Larry sneered.

“Tell Jera I said hello,” Connor said before opening the front door and walking out.

“Fuck you, you fucking faggot!” Larry screamed, making Connor smile as he went down the steps and back to the Lincoln.

“I think he likes you even more than before,” Petre said to him as the car accelerated down the entrance ramp to the freeway. “You two are to be best friends now, yes?”

“Eat shit,” Connor laughed.

“Why does a man make his woman fuck other men?” Petre asked, catching Connor by surprise.

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s for money.”

“Larry, he makes more than enough working for Mr. Ojacarcu. I don’t think he needs money.”

“I don’t know,” Connor said again, shrugging his shoulders. “Maybe he’s an asshole and she needs money to buy dope from him. Maybe he’s just an asshole and feels powerful pimping his girl out to other men. Maybe she owes him a lot of money and he’s making her work it off.”

Petre scratched his cheek. “You think he beats her?”

“I don’t know. Maybe the guys she fucks do it. Maybe Larry just adds to it. I don’t know, man. Why are you so curious about her?”

“There is something about her...” Petre trailed off, turning his blinker on before passing a truck.

Connor thought about the girl. Jera. He hadn’t thought about her for the last week, hadn’t thought about Larry either until two hours ago. He’d been too busy thinking about punishing any players from the Seattle Earthquake who needed an attitude adjustment.

He remembered her dark skin, full of grime and bruises to the point where he couldn’t tell where the bruises ended and the dirt began. Connor wondered if she was from somewhere in the Middle East. He decided it was more likely she was from Mexico or somewhere else south of there. He thought of the leather collar around her neck with the ring at the front for a leash or a chain.

A fleeting sexual thought made him ashamed. Some part of him wanted to feel sorry for her, while another part wanted to slap her again and scream in her face to leave Larry, run as far and as fast as she could before she ended up in the hospital from an overdose or from one of her johns beating on her.

“You are thinking of her too?” Petre asked, breaking his thoughts into pieces.

“Nah,” Connor lied. “I’m thinking about tomorrow night’s game.”

“You are going to beat an ass?”

Connor laughed. “I’m going to ‘beat someone’s ass’ is how you say it. Probably. Janakowski loves to get dirty with his stick when he’s shielded from the refs. He bruised up Cappy’s ribs pretty good last night right at the end.”

Dennis Capuano had ended up going to the hospital to see if the rib had been cracked after complaining about how much it hurt to breathe.

“And you didn’t beat someone’s ass?”

“There was less than thirty seconds left in the game,” Connor shrugged. “Coach tried to put me on the ice, but the ref wouldn’t allow it.”

“Why not?”

“Because he knew, same as everyone, that the instant the puck dropped I’d be punching someone, hopefully Janakowski.”

“You will revenge him,” Petre said, a statement instead of a question.

“We’ll see.”

“You want to go, fuckstick?” Halderman asked him as they lined up for the face-off.

“I want your boy Janakowski,” Connor said, looking at the bearded journeyman through his visor.

“I want you,” Halderman told him, slashing Connor across the back of the legs with his stick.

Connor was about to retaliate when two whistles blew at the same time. The linesman skated over to them.

“Knock it off, ladies,” the linesman said to them.

“Aw, he started it, Mitch,” Halderman complained.

“I don’t give a damn. If you two can’t stand still for ten seconds while we do this face-off, you’ll both end up in the box.”

“Asshole,” Halderman said in a low voice as the linesman turned back to the two players waiting at the dot for the face-off. Connor grinned at him, getting a grin in return that was missing at least four teeth. “So you want to go or not?”

“Sure, why not. Tell Janakowski he’s going to have to go as well before the game is over,” Connor said, agreeing to the fight.

“No problem,” Halderman said as the linesman dropped the puck on the dot.

Within two seconds, Connor and his opponent had dropped their gloves and removed their helmets. Part of *The Code* was no fighting with helmets, since everyone had to have a visor attached to their helmet in the minor leagues. Not all players adhered to *The*

Code, but the tough guys, enforcers like Connor, almost always did. He'd fought a kid from Rimouski when he'd done a stint in the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League years ago, and had needed fourteen stitches in his hand after cutting it open on the edge of the kid's visor.

Connor circled Halderman for a few seconds, fists up, waiting to see if his opponent would make the first move or give him an opening. The crowd roared. Fighting was one of the most popular aspects of hockey for a lot of fans, mostly fans who didn't understand the game beyond *skate fast, shoot the puck, check the other guy into the boards*. Neither player heard the crowd beyond a dull background noise, tuning everything else out beyond each other.

"Come on," Halderman said, dipping his fist slightly.

Connor came on, getting a grip on Halderman's jersey with his left hand, taking a right cross to the cheek for his efforts. Halderman grabbed a fistful of Connor's jersey and the two traded punches for fifteen seconds before Connor caught the man square in the nose. The blow stunned Halderman, and he staggered on his feet just long enough for Connor to clip his jaw twice more.

Halderman's legs buckled, causing him to go down on his knees, losing his grip on Connor's jersey. Connor's right hand reared back for another punch, but as soon as the other player went to his knees, he held it in check. Halderman lifted his right hand in a gesture that let Connor know he'd had enough just as one of the linesmen and the referee stepped between them to make sure no more punches were thrown.

“Good fight,” Connor said into Halderman’s ear, giving the man a pat on his shoulder pads before the referee separated them and marched him off to the penalty box. Halderman’s nose bled a torrent, soaking his jersey as well as leaving fat blotches on the ice. He gave Connor a rude gesture as the linesman led him back to the benches to go to the locker room for repairs. The crowd roared again, their hometown hero having pummeled another hated enemy. Connor smiled to himself as he sat down in the penalty box and reached for an ice pack, knowing the gesture from Halderman was more for the crowd than it was for him.

As the teams changed lines and got ready for another face-off, Janakowski skated by the penalty box. Connor stood up from his seat, banging his stick on the inside of the glass to catch Janakowski’s attention long enough to shout a warning and a threat.

Connor walked down the endless, black hallway toward the dim light in the distance. The light never got any closer, and the awkwardness of walking down the corridor while wearing skates made Connor’s ankles ache. He was about to pass the opposing team’s locker room for the fourth time when he noticed Niklas Laarkonen standing in front of the door.

Connor stopped, surprised to see the young man. Niklas was dressed in his Swedish national team uniform, his jersey a bright yellow that seemed to make the corridor glow for ten yards in either direction. The two players stared at each other.

“You’re dead,” Connor told him.

“So are you,” Niklas replied, banging the blade of his stick on the floor.

“I’m alive,” Connor said.

“So am I,” Niklas said, this time smiling at Connor.

“No, you died. You’re dead.”

“As long as you are alive, I’m alive,” Niklas said, raising his stick toward Connor’s head. Connor screamed when he realized that the hockey stick was actually a long, curved blade with blood dripping from the end.

Connor woke, a scream trapped in his throat like always. He sat up, feeling the sweat trickle down the sides of his face. He took two deep breaths before reaching for the bottle of water he kept on the nightstand. He wasn’t sure which dreams were worse, the ones where he watched his leg being sliced open in slow motion, or the ones where Niklas Laarkonen was alive yet not alive, haunting him as he wandered through the tunnels below the arena, trying to find his way to the ice.

Six months after nearly dying on the ice, he’d finally watched the replays. The accident had been described to him by most of his teammates and a few of the doctors who could speak English fluently. Watching it actually happen was one of the hardest things he’d ever had to do. One of the nurses at his physical therapy session sat in the chair next to him, holding his hand while he watched it on a laptop she’d set up on the table. His physical therapist had told him it would help with the nightmares. Seeing his beautiful double-deke and the skillful puck-flip over the goalie

stick before shooting it into the net always made him proud.

The next thirty seconds always made Connor want to puke his guts out. The slow motion high-definition footage from three different angles showed the defenseman's skate shift at the last second, hitting the inside of Connor's knee before sliding up into his pants. If the defenseman hadn't shifted his skates at the last second, Connor would probably be dead, or horribly disfigured, as the skate would have hit him somewhere near his neck or face. Connor had been too stunned by his incredible goal, and then his incredible good fortune to not have dislocated a knee or shoulder with the force he'd rammed into the boards with, to put his arms up to guard his face.

Niklas Laarkonen, the defenseman who had crashed into him, hung up his skates for two years until Connor had a talk with him over Skype. The young man had fallen into a dark depression, and no matter how many times he had been told it was an accident, it wasn't intentional, Niklas would spiral a little further each day. He had almost killed someone. He had watched the blood pour out of Connor as if someone had turned on a fire hose. Except Niklas would watch the replay multiple times per day. He couldn't help himself.

Brian Carson from the CBC heard about the Swede's plight, and asked Connor to give him a video call. Connor had obliged. He'd never had the chance to talk to Niklas after the event. Connor wanted to tell him that there was nothing to forgive, that it was an accident, just the way the cards fell in a brutal, fast-paced sport like hockey. Brian helped connect the two young men, and the two

former players had spent three hours on Skype.

Connor made a humorous show of the scar that ran down the inside of his leg, and when Niklas broke out in tears at the sight of it, Connor assured him that all was well. He told Nicklas that he was finally back on the ice, had rehabbed the leg to try and make the CHL's Wichita Thunder roster before opening night. By the end of the chat, Niklas promised Connor that he'd lace up his skates and start playing again. Connor hoped that all of the demons would be driven out of his subconscious, that the dreams would fade away.

That had been eight years ago, and the dreams still haunted him at least once, usually twice or more, per week. Niklas Laarkonen had kept his word, making the Swedish Elite League All-Star Team the next year. He spent the next three seasons with the Buffalo Sabres before being killed in a car accident after a party one night in Toronto.

CHAPTER 6

“You look like shit, kid,” Coach Lamoureux said to him from across the desk.

“I didn’t sleep well,” Connor told him.

“Which one was it this time?” his coach asked.

“The one where he’s alive and I’m wandering in the dark trying to get to the ice.”

“You got to stop beating yourself up over it,” Lamoureux told him. “You didn’t kill him.”

“I feel like I did,” Connor said. “I feel like because of me, he had some kind of bad karma attached to him.”

“Maybe he did, maybe he didn’t. He probably would have committed suicide in another year or two if you hadn’t talked to him. You got him skating again. Hell, he was a number three defenseman for the Sabres for what... three years?”

“Yeah. I can’t get over feeling like he was just getting his life back when it was taken from him for good.” Connor looked down at the floor.

“Listen, Duns,” Coach said in a soft voice, “That shit happens all the time. You can’t let it own you. I know your life didn’t turn out like it was supposed to, but you didn’t make him cut you open. He didn’t do it on purpose. You didn’t make him get in the car, and you didn’t crash into him and put the steering wheel through his chest.

“You’ve got a good gig here. I like you even though you aren’t anywhere close to the best player on the team. You have your

role, and you do it well. All of the boys look up to you. Most of them wanted to be you just as much as they wanted to be Gretzky, Messier, Ovechkin. That they get to play with you is important to them, and important to the team. I need you in the zone, your mind focused on the game, the team.”

“They’re playing with a stranger,” Connor said. “I’m not that kid anymore. I’ll never be the top pick in the draft. I’ll never get out of this league and into a better one.”

“Right. So stop feeling sorry for yourself. You didn’t get picked number one, you didn’t get to play alongside Tavares, Stamkos, or Gaborik. You’ll never win a Stanley Cup. You’ll never be the MVP, never win the scoring trophy. Too fucking bad. But you have twenty-one teammates who count on you for your leadership, for your guts, for your willingness to drop the gloves for any one of them, no matter what.

“You’ve got girls lined up to Sunday after games wanting to go home with you. You get some television commercials and radio ads and even a magazine bit once in a while. The boys, they act like you’re their second captain. You have the ‘A’ on your jersey for a reason. The fans, they love you. You sell tickets. You are the glue that keeps the team together most nights. Just because you’ll never be the star player you were destined to be doesn’t mean your life is over and you should just give up. You have people counting on you. Don’t let them down, Connor. Don’t let me down.”

“Don’t let Mr. Ojacarcu down, you mean,” Connor said bitterly.

“Don’t repeat this, but fuck that guy. I don’t give a shit what

Costache wants. This team is nothing but another business to him. Sure he likes to watch the games and pretend he is an active owner, but the truth is, he only cares about you in the sense of what you do for him.”

Connor started to say something but Lamoureux cut him off. “I don’t want to know what you do for him. It’s better that way. Whatever it is, you’re important enough to him to treat you better than anyone else around here. I’m not happy that he pulls you out of games, but he pays me well, and he lets me run the team my way, lets me spend the team budget on players I want.

“He doesn’t give a shit about hockey. I do. Gansy does. Coach Walters does. Even Griff does. We all do. Hockey is our life. It’s in our blood. It’s our legacy, being born Canadian. Just because you can’t beat a D-man down the wing doesn’t mean winning games from the bench isn’t just as important. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“Yeah,” Connor said. “Thanks, Coach. The nightmare always messes with me for a day or two is all.”

Lamoureux waved a hand at him. “Don’t sweat it. Just remember, at the end of the day, you’re a hockey player before anything else. Don’t forget that. Now get the hell out of here and go get laid. You’ve got the weekend off. I’ve got this new kid, Barton, playing tonight in your spot. Your hands need to heal, and his hands need to get bloodied so we can see if he’ll fit in.”

Connor gave his coach a questioning look. He wasn’t happy that a new player was suiting up in his spot for the game.

“Don’t even think it,” Lamoureux said. “No one can replace

you, Dunzer. You *are* the Boise Bombers. Just take the weekend off and get those hands healed up. We have to play Cheyenne on Wednesday, and I want you ready. I'd like to make the playoffs again this year, if you don't mind."

Lamoureux's smile shut down the anger and the jealousy that had been trying to surface within him. He looked down at his hands. They looked like he'd spent two straight days punching a rough tree trunk full of nails. When he looked up again, Coach was filling out a tryout contract. Connor got up and left the office without another word, and made his way down the corridor toward the exit.

"You are doing well," Mr. Ojacarcu said to him from across the table. "Our friend, he is getting himself out of debt. I assume he is no trouble?"

Connor shook his head, trying to watch the game below the luxury box while paying attention to his boss' words. The view was spectacular from this far up. The luxury box seeming to hang out over the ice. As great as the view was, it could never equal the view from the ice, feeling his skates churning, shoulders colliding with other shoulders or the glass, the satisfaction of a pass or shot finding its target.

"How many payments to go?" his boss asked.

"Two more," Connor said.

"Good, good. Once he is caught up, you will continue to see

him once per week, when you are home.”

Connor’s mood dropped. He didn’t mind having to threaten some of Mr. Ojacarcu’s clients, whether it was with his fists or just his presence beside Petre or Vadim. He hated having to collect from Larry, having to see the skinny little greaser who lacked manners or hygiene. He hated seeing Jera even more, wondering if the leather collar ever left her neck, whether or not the little shit was the one leaving bruises on her face and body.

She hated Connor’s guts. The feeling was mutual, except for the hint of desire that he always felt around her, even through her stench and vulgar insults that she bombarded him with at every opportunity in her screeching, nails-on-chalkboard voice. He could have his pick of the girls at the arena or at any of the downtown establishments. He rarely had to pay for drinks or food, and he never had to go home alone if he didn’t want to.

Something stirred within him every time he saw Jera. He hated himself for wanting to know what it felt like to run his hands across her dark skin, for wanting to know what she sounded like when she wasn’t screaming at him. He wanted to know what it would feel like to remove the collar from her neck, to feel her lips on his. He fantasized once in a while about taking her in the shower, washing off the filth of not just the sweat and dirt, but the corruption of her lifestyle.

“You don’t like our friend?” his boss asked, waving the serving girl over to order another drink.

“He’s disgusting, and he keeps some woman around, beating on her, forcing her to wear a collar around her neck,” Connor said

after the waitress walked away.

“Such is life, I’m afraid,” Ojacarcu said with a wave of his hand. “I do not like the man myself, but he earns well, and trouble doesn’t follow him back to me. What he does with his girls is not my business, nor is it yours. As long as he pays, you shouldn’t worry about what he and *his kind* do.”

“I know,” Connor said, understanding his boss’ meaning of *his kind*. Junkies. Meth heads. Tweakers. Dopers. Thieves, murderers, rapists, whatever bad things people like Larry did to sell drugs, get drugs, do drugs, or while on drugs.

“Good, then. Let him be a piece of shit. You have more important things to worry about, don’t you?”

“Yes, sir,” Connor answered.

“I’m glad we agree,” Costache said, pulling out a piece of paper and handing it to Connor. “Since the coach has given you the rest of the week off, I need you to take care of a few things for me.”

Connor looked at the paper. Four names were on it, none he recognized. Two of the names had a single handwritten star next to them, the code for roughing up just enough to scare the person. One of the names had a bar with a slash through it. Connor would have to break a finger, maybe an arm. The last name had a cross next to it.

“Mr. Ojacarcu, I am not trying to question you,” Connor said carefully, “but I can’t help you with this last one.”

“Why not?” Ojacarcu said. He paused, his drink halfway to his lips.

Connor showed his boss the piece of paper, pointing to the cross next to the name *Travis Benkula*.

“Oh, that.” Ojacarcu took a drink. “Dracul will handle that. I need you there to... keep things in check. Keep them smooth, keep Dracul out of trouble.”

“But—”

“Please do not tell me you are going to refuse,” Connor’s boss said, his face growing hard.

“No, sir,” Connor said, folding the paper and putting it in his pants pocket.

His guts churned, and soon his mind was unable to focus on anything else. He hated Dracul, but he hated that Ojacarcu was sending him along to make sure nothing went wrong when Dracul killed Travis Benkula.

Dracul eased the Lincoln onto Fairview Avenue, the stop-and-go traffic that was considered rush hour in Boise moving slowly. Connor watched the wind whip up powdery snow and send it across the parking lot of a muffler shop, white turning to flashing silver as it caught the streetlight at just the right angle. Kenny Malone was yammering on through the car’s radio, angrily denouncing the officiating at the Patriots - Bears game. Dracul loved the sports radio channel for some reason that Connor couldn’t figure out. As far as he knew, the man hated sports.

He glanced over at Dracul, the hulking Romanian’s bald head

shining from the streetlights and the Lincoln's dash lights. Dracul noticed him, and Connor imagined rusty hinges squealing as the thick neck turned slowly to him, then back toward the front of the car. He caught a glimpse of the pistol in a shoulder holster.

“We going to see this Travis guy first?” Connor asked him.

Dracul remained silent. The usual plan was to do these kinds of jobs with Petre or Vadim, except the killing ones. Those were the jobs that Connor didn't want to know about, and never asked about. He'd never had to do his usual bit of roughing up or looking intimidating with anyone but Petre or Vadim. Connor had figured he would do the other three jobs with Petre, and the Benkula job later.

“Are you and I going to take care of the whole list together?” he asked the Romanian.

“Yes.”

Connor waited for him to say something else, but the only one still talking was Kenny Malone, this time bitching about the Miami Heat. He wished the sports channels in America gave a damn about hockey. He could listen to the same bitching and moaning for hours when it was about hockey. The only time it seemed hockey got any air time in cities other than those with NHL teams was during the Stanley Cup Playoffs. Other than that six week span, even soccer was more popular.

As the Lincoln moved along Fairview, he tried to steel himself for what was coming. He had never seen a dead body before, other than at a funeral. Hockey was a violent sport, and he had plenty of experience with even the ugliest sides, his lifeblood

forming a lake around his body was a testament to that. But once the final horn blew, the game was over and everyone went home, more than a little sore, but alive, and pumped up to play again the next day.

This job was going to have an end of the game moment, but Travis Benkula wasn't going to go home bruised and exhausted, ready to jump back up the next day and get back to his life. The thought was frightening, and he had to will himself to not start shaking like a leaf as the adrenaline surged through him, his fear giving the hormone the taint of flight instead of fight.

Connor tried to imagine how Dracul would kill the man. The gun was the obvious choice, but pistols made extremely loud noises, left forensic evidence, and generally a hell of a lot of blood. Not to mention the fact that Dracul was almost six and a half feet tall and built like a lumberjack. He stood out in any crowd, his bald head and slick three-piece suit not helping him blend in at all.

Maybe they'd take the man out to the desert, make him dig his own grave, then Dracul would flash a straight razor and draw it across Travis' throat. That scenario almost made him gag, and it took all of his willpower to stop himself from unlatching his seat belt and escaping from the Lincoln even as it moved through traffic. Connor felt trapped, unable to think of a way out as the panic in him grew.

Dracul looked over at him, watching Connor fidget as the scenarios played out in his mind. When he noticed, Dracul gave him a wide smile before turning his attention back to the road. *The bastard enjoys this*, Connor thought. He focused his attention on

the radio, the announcer going through the scores of the day. Pittsburgh 27, NY Giants 20. Redskins 14, Panthers 10. Orlando Magic 108, Knicks 101.

The Lincoln turned right on Eagle Road, and Connor kept his attention on the radio as they drove north. Ten minutes later, they turned into the Eagle Highlands Shopping Center. Dracul drove around for a few minutes as if looking for a parking spot. He settled on a parking spot far away from the Winkler's Market, away from any of the parking lot's light towers. He shifted into Park and left the engine idling so they could have heat.

Ten minutes passed in silence, until finally a white Acura pulled up next to them. Dracul's left hand held the button for the window while his right wrapped around the butt of his pistol. Connor tried not to tense up, wanting to raise his fingers to his ears so he wouldn't go deaf from the explosion as the bullet left the barrel and made a hole in Travis Benkula's face.

"What's this about?" the man in the Acura said.

"Mr. Ojacarcu would like you to be aware that you are behind," Dracul said to the man.

"I know, I know. I'm sorry. Tell Mr. Ojacarcu that I will make good on it by Friday. I swear. He knows I'm good for it," the man said, the fear in his voice evident.

"See that you do," Dracul said, pulling his hand from his pistol.

For a moment, Connor was sure the Romanian had drawn the pistol and was about to shoot the man in his face. Instead, Dracul rolled up his window and looked at Connor.

“Paper,” he said.

Connor blinked, not understanding. Dracul held out his hand and curled his fingers toward himself twice in a *gimme* motion. Connor finally understood and reached into his pants pocket to retrieve the paper his boss had given him at the game the night before. He handed it to the driver, who pulled a pen from his front pocket and scratched a line through one of the names before handing it back to Connor. The name that had been scratched out had a star next to it. James Roberts.

CHAPTER 7

They rode in silence as the Lincoln cut through traffic on the way to the next name on the list. Kenny Malone was back on the radio, shouting about golf not being anywhere near as exciting as NASCAR. Connor had focused on it for a while, but now he just wanted to reach through the radio and strangle Kenny Malone, silencing his big mouth forever.

That thought brought him back to reality and his situation, riding in a car with a killer. Dracul drove east on State Street toward downtown, as silent as ever. Connor thought he'd caught the big man grinning at him after the Acura pulled away, but the light was poor, and he'd been too scared to pay much attention to anything other than not pissing himself in fear that his partner was going to kill a man in a parking lot.

The Lincoln turned down 34th, heading north toward the foothills. A few blocks later the car pulled into the driveway of a small house. Tall hedges lined both sides of the driveway, giving Connor another bout of fear that this was the place he'd be witness to a man losing his life. Dracul touched the butt of his pistol before turning the car off and opening the door. Connor followed him up the steps of the house.

"Hey, Dracul," the bearded hipster said to the Romanian after opening the door. "Who's your friend?"

Dracul looked down at Connor. When he didn't say anything, Connor stepped forward and put out his hand.

"Connor," he said, shaking hands.

“Sweet,” the man said. “Gimme a sec to grab my coat.”

Dracul turned and went back to the car, leaving Connor on the porch. When the man came out, shrugging on his winter coat, both of them walked to the car.

“He doesn’t say much, does he?” the bearded man asked Connor.

“Less than a dead man,” Connor joked, getting a laugh.

The man got in the back seat, Connor in the front. Connor had no idea who the man was, but he figured the guy was going to help them with another name on the list. He stared through the windshield as Dracul took a right on State Street and headed west.

“Hey, Drac, wanna change that to something that doesn’t make me want to kill myself?” the man asked.

Dracul reached toward the radio and hit a button. Instantly the sports jocks were replaced with what sounded like Celine Dion.

“Come on, man...”

Dracul punched another button, this time the classic rock station.

“That’s what I’m talking about,” the man in the back seat said, leaning back.

They rode in silence for half an hour as Dracul took them north along Gary Lane and then across the base of the foothills. They turned again on Seaman’s Gulch Road, the city behind and below them as they continued north. The Lincoln pulled off at the road that led into the landfill and Dracul got out to unlock the gate.

“Hey, I know where I’ve seen you before now,” the man in the back seat said as he leaned forward to be heard over the radio.

“You’re the hockey player, right? The dude who’s always fighting.”

“Yeah,” Connor said, not happy at being recognized.

“Awesome,” the man said. “I’m Travis, by the way.”

Connor’s blood froze and the adrenaline began to go into overdrive again. He wanted to tell Travis to run, get out of the car and run as fast as he could. He wanted to slide over into the driver’s seat and gun the engine, run down Dracul, and then drop Travis off wherever he wanted with the warning of impending doom. He did none of those things, and Dracul climbed back into the car.

“Hey Drac, you didn’t tell me this guy was The Cannon!” Travis said.

Dracul glanced into the rearview mirror, giving the man a rare smile before turning it on Connor. The bastard definitely enjoyed it, especially now that Connor knew who the man was.

“Shit, man, I went to a game like two years ago and watched you pound some asshole into the ice,” Travis chattered on, happy to have something to talk about, and someone other than the Romanian to talk to. “You guys lost, but *damn* you fucked that guy up, all bleeding and shit.” Travis laughed, reaching forward to clap Connor on the shoulder over the seat.

Connor smiled back at him before facing forward again. The Lincoln bumped and jarred over the gravel road. He wanted to ask why they were going into the dump. He wanted to ask how Dracul had a key to the road gate. What he really wanted to ask was why Travis was not freaking out. He decided that no one had bothered

to tell Travis Benkula that his number was up tonight.

The three men exited the sedan after it came to a stop in front of a small one-room shack near the newest pit. Dracul used a key to unlock three deadbolts, flipping the light switch once the door was open. A double row of fluorescents blinded Connor for a moment until his eyes adjusted. He looked around, seeing only two chairs and a small table in the center of the room.

Travis went straight to one of the chairs and sat down. Dracul pointed to the other chair, and Connor obeyed. The Romanian went to the back of the shack, opened one of the cabinet doors, and removed a duffel bag. He brought the bag back to the table and set it in front of Travis, who grinned, unzipped the bag, and pulled out two large plastic cannisters full of white powder. After putting the duffel on the floor, he opened both of the plastic cannisters, setting the lids aside.

Travis noticed Connor watching and gave a thumbs-up before reaching into his coat pocket, his hand reappearing with a brick-sized package wrapped in tape. He set it on the table, then reached into his pocket again and brought out a folding knife. Travis flicked the blade open, carefully cutting the package lengthwise. He grinned at Connor when he stabbed the knife blade into the table.

Dracul watched for a minute then rummaged about behind Travis while the bearded man pulled out what looked like a library card and began to scoop from the first plastic cannister. Connor was amazed that anyone still had a library card in the age of the internet. He started to ask Travis about it when Dracul wrapped a

nylon rope around Travis's throat and pulled the ends tight, a creaking sound escaping from the Romanian's leather gloves.

Connor nearly fell over backwards in surprise. He watched Travis' face turn red, then creep into purple as the rope cut off the blood supply to his brain. Travis' hands scraped and pulled at the rope digging into his neck, eyes wild, body convulsing as he tried to get free. Travis' eyes locked onto Connor's, and Connor could feel the terror flowing out of Travis and into him, along with an accusation of *why are you letting this happen? Help me!*

Connor could only stare in horror at the bearded man's face as it turned a dark purple. Travis had a last moment of clarity and reached forward, grabbing the knife out of the table. It was too late, and the knife fell from his hand a second later. Connor could smell the rank odor of urine and shit, and saw the stain on Travis' pants when Dracul dragged the body to the middle of the floor.

"Jesus Christ," Connor said, as Dracul tied the rope off, leaving it embedded in Travis' neck.

"Help me," Dracul said, without looking at Connor.

Connor had no idea what to do. He'd wet himself a little in his fear and at the surprise of the murder right in front of him. Dracul looked up, pointed at Travis' feet, then at Connor. He came around the table and knelt down, grabbing a foot in each hand. Dracul grabbed the dead man's hands and they lifted the body off the floor, Dracul backing toward the shack's door.

Once outside, they carried the body to the back of the Lincoln. Dracul carefully laid his end of the body on the gravel and opened the trunk with the Lincoln's wireless key. The trunk lid

popped open, and Dracul went to work unfolding a blue tarp, covering the trunk bed with it. He handed Connor two small bungee cords.

“Keeps shit in,” Dracul said, indicating that Connor should wrap one around each ankle so anything that had emptied out of Travis’ bowels wouldn’t slide along the legs and possibly out the bottom of the pants. Connor tried to keep from staring at the wetness spreading through the denim of both sides of the dead man’s crotch.

“Jesus Christ,” Connor said again as he laid his half of the body on the gravel.

He worked to get the cords around each ankle, unable to keep a single, clear thought in his head. His hands, like his feet, functioned on autopilot. When he was done, Dracul indicated they were to pick the body up once again and put it in the trunk. Connor could barely stand because of the violent tremors in his legs, his right throbbing in pain around the scar. He felt like he was being poisoned by a toxic amount of adrenaline, and almost blacked out when the body thumped after it was dropped into the trunk.

Dracul shut the trunk and went back to close the shack door before returning to the Lincoln, gesturing to Connor to get in. Once in the car, Dracul drove slowly down the gravel road toward the main waste pits.

“What about the stuff?” he asked, afraid to break the silence, but unable to stand it any longer. Dracul gave him a blank look.

“The stuff. The dope that he was getting ready to mix up.”

“Someone comes,” was all the Romanian would say.

Connor leaned back in his seat and tried to forget everything. He couldn't get the image of Travis' eyes bulging, his mouth hanging open, the terror in his purple face as he was being strangled. When Connor closed his eyes, the image in his mind became clearer. He opened them and tried to focus on the lights ahead as Dracul drove. Each bump and creak of the Lincoln made his stomach roil and his heart begin to pound, sure that at any moment Dracul would decide to kill him as well.

A few minutes later, they pulled up to a building that was little more than a large smokestack spewing a thick gray stream of ash. Dracul exited the car, Connor following on autopilot while his mind tried to burn itself out from an overload of terror. They reversed the routine, removing the body from the trunk and carrying it into an open bay door toward a large pile of garbage. Dracul set his end of the body down near the pile, leaving Connor holding the legs while he walked to the door of a small office inside the bay.

The door opened and a man in dirty coveralls chatted with Dracul for a moment. Connor couldn't hear them over the noise of the heavy loader scooping up bucketfuls of trash before dumping it onto a conveyor belt. The man in coveralls nodded and talked into his two-way radio. Dracul walked back to where Connor stood. They waited for the loader to dump its load onto the conveyor, watching it back around and swing toward them when it was done.

The loader's bucket dropped near the ground and the machine drove forward until the bucket was within a foot of the tarp-wrapped body. Dracul motioned again. They picked up Travis'

body and dropped it into the loader's bucket. Connor watched with morbid fascination as the loader dumped the body onto the conveyor belt, Travis' body slowly moving up toward a giant bowl at the top.

Dracul watched until the body tipped over the edge and fell into the incinerator. He motioned once more for Connor to get into the car while he went to the trunk and retrieved the blue tarp. He waved for the loader to return, dropping the tarp into the bucket before joining Connor in the Lincoln. Neither of them said a word as they made their way down the gravel road and back to the highway.

The rest of the evening was a nightmarish blur. Connor barely remembered the last two clients he and Dracul dealt with. His mind raced with fear at what he'd witnessed, what he'd been a part of. He had always done his best to remain on the outside of Ojacarcu's darker side. As the Lincoln cruised the streets, all Connor could think of was Travis Benkula's face.

Ten minutes after leaving the landfill, Connor made Dracul stop at a convenience store so he could open the door, lean his head out, and throw up. His stomach bucked and surged. Everything he'd put into it that hadn't been digested came back up in a soupy, brownish-orange mixture. The smell of it made him gag and dry heave a few more times.

When he finally felt like his stomach had calmed down, he

wiped his mouth with his coat sleeve, leaned back in his seat, and closed the door. Dracul said nothing as he shifted the Lincoln into drive and pulled back out into the light traffic. Connor didn't bother to steal a glance at the big man, afraid he'd find another toothy grin mocking him. He rooted around in his coat pockets for gum to cleanse the taste of stomach acid and partially-digested food from his mouth.

Connor barely remembered stopping somewhere in South Meridian, where Dracul gave a warning to a young Hispanic kid. He had only a vague memory of visiting the last name on the list. He'd been surprised that the person turned out to be a woman in her forties. Dracul must have sensed that Connor was barely holding himself together, and did the job of breaking three of the woman's fingers while she screamed.

He had no idea why the woman's fingers needed to be broken, and didn't bother to ask. When he wasn't recoiling in fear at what he'd witnessed at the landfill, he was paranoid that a police car would light them up. He tried to assure himself that he'd yell at the top of his lungs to the cops that the Romanian was a murderer, escaping from one nightmare to enter another that involved arrest, booking, and a hearing in the morning before a judge. His career and his life would be ruined. That seemed more important somehow, increasing the guilt and shame that he would keep his mouth shut should they be unlucky enough to be pulled over by the cops.

Connor barely made it up the steps to his apartment when Dracul dropped him off. He struggled to put the key in the lock,

and somehow made it all the way into the bathroom before doubling over when the dry heaves began again. He spent the night guzzling the last eight beers in his barren refrigerator, and when that didn't dull his senses enough, he clawed through the small pantry and his bare cupboards looking for a forgotten bottle of the hard stuff. When nothing turned up, he found an unopened bottle of Nyquil under the sink in the bathroom. He kept it down, not caring that he might have helped himself into a serious bout of alcohol poisoning.

Connor woke to the sun reflecting from his bedroom wall, the blinds wide open, his apartment as cold as the old barn back home in Macklin during the dead of winter. The bright spot was the lack of nightmares. He had been haunted by nightmares of his brush with death, as well as Niklas Laarkonen's ghost, and had no doubt he'd be dreaming of Travis Benkula soon enough. *Maybe*, he thought, *Niklas and Travis will gang up on me and put me out of my misery.*

He dragged himself out of bed and stood in front of the mirror for five minutes with the shower running before climbing in. The water was too hot, scalding his skin, but to Connor, it wasn't hot enough. It would never be hot enough to burn away whatever was beginning to eat him up inside. He didn't bother shaving, barely even bothering to wash himself. He wasn't sure how long he stood under the shower head other than long enough for the water to turn from scalding, to lukewarm, to cold before he finally shut it off.

After drying himself off and brushing his teeth to remove the

previous night's puke-beer-Nyquil triple combo, he went to the kitchen to see if he had overlooked any alcohol. When no stray or forgotten bottles turned up, he put his shoes on, grabbed his coat, and headed to the Starbucks.

Dana handed him his coffee with a smile that wasn't returned. Both girls were hurt that he hadn't been his usual cheery self, but they figured he'd had a bad game the night before. Instead of going back to the apartment, Connor walked two blocks to Liquor Nation to stock up on booze.

CHAPTER 8

“Fuck off,” Connor slurred as the pounding on his apartment door continued. “Fuck off fuck off FUCK OFF!” he screamed, throwing the empty bottle of cheap vodka at the door, unsatisfied at the sound of shattering glass.

The pounding stopped for a few seconds, followed by two short, almost polite knocks. Connor nearly fell over trying to get out of the recliner. His vision was quadrupled from the alcohol, but somehow he made it to the door without cutting his feet on the sharp remnants of the vodka bottle. It took him three tries to get the deadbolt turned and the door open.

Petre stared first at the wreck of his friend, then at the shards of glass littering the area around the door.

“The fuck do you want?” Connor said. His words came out as if he were talking underwater.

When Petre said nothing, Connor turned his back on the man and made his way to the recliner. He sat down hard, grabbed the remote, turned the television on, and raised the volume of a show that had airplanes and military men scrambling around on the deck of a ship.

Petre entered the apartment, walked to Connor’s chair and stood there until Connor acknowledged him.

“Blocking my fucking TV, man,” Connor mumbled, barely conscious.

Petre reached down and took the remote from Connor, who gave it up without issue. Petre pointed the remote behind him and

pushed the Off button, the sudden silence in the apartment making Connor uncomfortable. Petre stared at him for another minute before he reached down and took the bottle of cheap whiskey that had appeared in Connor's hand. He walked to the kitchen and set the bottle on the counter before going back to the chair.

"Connor, my friend, this is not good," he said.

"Fuck off," Connor slurred.

"This is not you," Petre said.

"I said fuck off."

Petre leaned down and slapped Connor across the face with enough force to make his head rebound off the back of the recliner. A scream of rage erupted from Connor's throat as he came out of the chair like a spring, his hands going straight for Petre's neck. Petre chopped down at Connor's arms, grabbing him in a bear hug. Connor lashed out with his feet and his forehead, trying to connect with some part of Petre's body. Petre leaned his head in and to the side of Connor's, giving the young man no ability to do any real damage.

Within seconds, the big Romanian felt the change come over his friend. The thrashing stopped, replaced by violent shudders and loud sobs. Petre held him for a few minutes until Connor got himself under control. When the big man was sure his friend wouldn't try to lash out again, he gently pushed Connor down into the recliner.

"What has happened, my friend?" he asked.

"Go fuck yourself."

"Connor, please, tell me what has happened."

“Go ask your pal Dracul, or your fucking boss Ojacarcu,” Connor said. Tears pooled at the bottoms of his eyes before spilling over onto his cheeks.

“Ah,” Petre said, and squatted down on his haunches.

“Yeah, ‘ah,’ you fucking asshole. That’s all you got to say? ‘Ah?’ You know, don’t you?”

“I am sorry, Connor,” Petre said, shaking his head. “I do not know what has exactly happened, I am full of guessing though.”

“Fuck you and your fucking broken-ass English!” Connor screamed at him.

Petre tensed, thinking his friend would come out of the chair swinging again, but Connor sat in his misery, unable to do anything but breathe hard and let the tears fall.

“I am truly sorry, my friend,” Petre said. “If Dracul was with you, I have idea of your... job.” He’d almost said *gig*, but knew it wasn’t appropriate to make a joke at the moment. “I did not know you worked for Mr. Ojacarcu in that way.”

“I fucking don’t,” Connor said with anger.

“I see,” Petre said.

“Do you? Have you seen what I’ve seen? Do you know what your buddy Dracul does? What he is?”

“I do,” Petre answered. “I have seen it. I have done it myself.”

Connor stared at the man, the one Romanian he actually considered his friend. In his drunken mind he wondered if all of them were cold-blooded killers.

“You’ve been with him when he’s killed someone?” Connor

asked.

“I have. I have killed men with my own hands. Women and children. I am not proud, Connor.”

“No,” Connor breathed, not wanting to believe that Petre was just as evil as Dracul and Ojacarcu.

“Yes. I am afraid it is true.”

“I grow up in Arad, in Romania,” Petre said. “We were very poor, my father a builder, my mother a teacher. When I was nine, Securitatea arrested my father for crimes against the state. He belonged to trade union, but Ceausescu accused him and others of distributing propaganda against the Party. He was executed when I was eleven.

“My mother was arrested months later for being wife of known enemy of the Party. She was accused of same thing. When my mother was taken away, I had nowhere to go. My friend Adrian took me to *Rohozeanu*, the boss of Arad crime family. They give me job delivering cigarettes and give me food and a bed. Soon I am delivering small packages of cocaine, then collecting money or delivering money to the police and judges for bribes.

“When I am fifteen, Mr. Rohozeanu makes me lieutenant and gives me four boys to command. Mr. Rohozeanu gives me jobs like ‘burn down this home’ or ‘destroy this store to teach lesson.’ Then jobs turn to ‘kill this man’ or ‘kill this family’ and I do it. I am paid well. I have car, I have guns, I have others below me to command.

And I have girls. Many girls.

“I kill many people. Some I kill personally, others I kill with orders. I am told once in a while to kill child to teach lesson. I did not think about it, I just kill. It is my job. If I do not do job, I am killed. Mr. Rohozeanu, he likes me. Takes me to vacation one day, tells me I am good worker. Gives me more money, more responsibility.”

“You killed children?” Connor interrupted, his head pounding from the alcohol and screaming at Petre.

“I did. I am not proud. It was a job. I did my job. Now I am not proud, not happy. Then I did not care. I enjoy it. I am powerful, no one crosses me. I tell myself ‘this person must die, must deserve it, or Mr. Rohozeanu does not tell me to kill’ and I do my job. Even children. My father is criminal. So is my mother. So am I.

“One day when I am nineteen, General Inspectorate raids one of our headquarters. I think there is no problem, Mr. Rohozeanu pays police and judges. But this is new General Inspectorate. They are helped by American FBI. They arrest corrupt police, a clean up. Then they arrest big names of crime families. Some are lucky, maybe untouchable. I am not lucky.

“I am sent to Iasi prison in north Romania, near border. It is hard place, but I am Rohozeanu. The General Inspectorate might be clean with FBI help, but Iasi... it is run by the families. Still, it is hard. It is prison. Dangerous, even for me. But I do the time, thinking always that Mr. Rohozeanu will fix it, I will go free. I am told thirty years I will be in prison. Thirty years is long time in Iasi.

“Mr. Rohozeanu, he has trouble and cannot help us. I wait six

years. Six years and two times I am stabbed, but then I am free. A car is waiting for me, and we drive back to Arad, learning all that happened in last six years while I am in Iasi. When I am home, Mr. Rohozeanu meets with me. Tells me he is sorry that he cannot free me earlier, that he has his own trouble with Inspectorate. He tells me to not worry, he is not in trouble anymore.

“Since two of those I kill are Romani, you call them gypsy, and judge is friend of Mr. Rohozeanu, I am free after six years. In my country, no one likes Romani. They are like Jews. Dirty thieves. Evil people who corrupt Romanian society. This is not true, of course, but this is same as black man in America or Jew in Middle East. No one cares about Romani dying, some even praise it. The other two I kill, their families are paid or threatened, and they write statement saying I am not the killer.

“I work for Mr. Rohozeanu for more years. I kill more than I remember. It is bad to think, but I do my job. I kill whoever Mr. Rohozeanu says to kill. More men. More women. I ask Mr. Rohozeanu to not ask me to kill children, but I am told to kill them anyway. I do my job. But I am not happy now. I do not mind killing men. It is unpleasant, but men make choices, sometimes wrong choices. This is how it is. I do not like killing women. Innocent women. I am told to rape, but I order my men to rape. I do not rape.

“Mr. Rohozeanu, he has war with Baderca family, clanul rivals from Timisaora. Everything goes bad, too many die, too much violence in streets and government says no more. More General Inspectorate come, and soon there is war with all. I am

shot in side,” Petre pulled back his jacket, unbuttoned his shirt, and showed Connor an ugly scar to the left of his navel.

“Soon everyone is going to prison. Mr. Rohozeanu, he calls me. Tells me to pack, I am going to America. I have fake papers. I come to New York, then to Boise. Mr. Ojacarcu, he hears about me, wants me to work for him. I agree. What else do I have? So I work for Mr. Ojacarcu. I work for Mr. Ojacarcu for six years now.

“He gives me money, car, job, helps me find home, makes me go to English lessons. Says I must fit in where we live, must blend. Not stand out, though that is hard for some of us to do. I do jobs. I do not know Dracul or Vadim or Iuliu or Grigore, but I work with them. They are all from Romania. They are good people. Except Dracul. He is from Romania Securitatea. He trained with Spetsnaz GRU. Very dangerous man.”

“No shit,” Connor said.

“No shit,” Petre agreed. “Mr. Ojacarcu, he is less demanding than Mr. Rohozeanu. I tell him I do not kill children or women. Mr. Ojacarcu, he says no problem. He sends Dracul to do killing. Once in a while, I have to go with Dracul. Dracul, he is quiet, dangerous. A killer. He does not care if it is women or children. He kills who he is told.

“Sometimes he kills more, but Mr. Ojacarcu doesn’t like this. Mr. Ojacarcu, he tells us this is small city, too much killing is too much trouble. There is many deserts and mountains though. We take them to desert or mountains and kill them. No one cares about most. Junkies, criminals, losers. No one misses them.

“Mr. Ojacarcu, he buys hockey team, and then he buys city

council. They shower him with money by building whatever Mr. Ojacarcu suggests. He buys the men at city dump. Builds incinerator. Big fire, now his fire. He buys funeral home. Now bodies disappear with only ashes. We have to be smart, make sure no one sees us. If no one sees, body is ashes, no one cares. No one thinks Mr. Ojacarcu. He is important businessman.”

Petre sat down on the floor in front of Connor when his legs began to cramp from squatting for so long. Connor stared at the man for a while, his brain fogged from the cheap liquor.

“Why?” was all Connor could ask the Romanian.

“Why do I kill?” Petre asked.

“Yeah. Why do you do what he tells you to do? Why do you still kill people?”

“I do not kill much anymore,” Petre said, shaking his head. “Mr. Ojacarcu, he knows I am the best with English. He trusts me. I am loyal, just as I was to Mr. Rohozeanu. But I do not want to kill anymore, and Mr. Ojacarcu needs me for other jobs. He knows Dracul is good killer, better than me. Dracul speaks little English, but more important, Dracul is not from old neighborhoods like me and Vadim and Iuliu. Dracul is Russian-trained. Dracul is his own person. I think Mr. Ojacarcu knows this.”

“But why?” Connor asked again. “Why do you do this shit for him? Why don’t you just leave?”

“Why don’t you leave?” Petre countered. “I have nothing. If I leave, they will look for me. I am easily found. I am tall, Romanian, and with fake papers. I will be turned in to your INS, and spend time in prison before going back to Romania. When I

arrive in Romania, Mr. Rohozeanu or someone else that Mr. Ojacarcu has called will be waiting for me. I will end up in grave somewhere in mountains.”

“Jesus Christ,” Connor said for what felt like the hundredth time in the last two days.

“Now you cannot leave,” Petre said to him.

“Why not?”

“Because you are killer now. Mr. Ojacarcu owns you.”

“Bullshit. I didn’t kill anyone. That fucking sick fucker Dracul is the one who killed Travis.”

“You were there, yes? You killed him then. Police, judges, they will say you were accomplice. Even if you testify against Dracul, even Mr. Ojacarcu, your life is over. You will go to prison, or you will be deported to Canada. You will never play hockey again as pro. You will be killed when you are not expecting. Mr. Ojacarcu and others like him, they do not leave loose threads.”

“Loose ends,” Connor corrected automatically.

“Yes, loose ends, as you say.”

“Was it too late for me even before last night?” Connor asked.

“Da. It was too late first time you did other than hockey for Mr. Ojacarcu. He owns you just like he owns me, owns Vadim, owns everyone but Dracul.”

“God fucking damn it,” Connor growled, and got out of his chair.

He made it three steps before he fell to his knees and threw up on the carpet. Petre sat on the floor, watching him. Connor

wiped his mouth, then lay on his side facing Petre. The room started to become fuzzy, then wavy, before finally breaking into a full spin. He rolled over and threw up a second time. An intense, flaring pain ripped through his stomach, causing him to curl into a ball.

“It will be okay,” Petre said to him after a while.

“How is it going to be okay?” Connor asked, turning back over to face the Romanian.

“It will be okay,” Petre repeated. “You are young. You are good hockey player. Mr. Ojacarcu likes you.”

“You just said there’s no way out,” Connor said with anger.

“There are always ways out. You can run. You can fake your death. You can get traded to another team. You can go to jail by other than doing Mr. Ojacarcu’s work.”

“Or I can get in the car with Dracul and end up as ashes floating over the valley,” Connor said, miserable at the situation.

“Yes, unfortunately, you can do that. Dracul, he does not like you. He does not like me liking you. He does not like Vadim liking you. You are not Romanian. You are American. He hates you for that. He hates you because Mr. Ojacarcu likes you.”

“Will he try to kill me?”

“Only if Mr. Ojacarcu orders him to. He will not risk it unless told to. He is dangerous, but not stupid.”

“Fuck.” Connor dry-heaved again.

Petre stood up and went to where Connor lay on the floor, kneeling down beside his friend and putting a hand on his shoulder.

“It will be okay. You will see. I am your friend. We sex

ladies. We drink. Vadim, he likes you. We cannot stop Mr. Ojacarcu, but he likes you too. Just play hockey and do what Mr. Ojacarcu pays you to do. Do not make trouble. Life is not so bad. You have money, you have car if you want it, you have house.”

“Apartment,” Connor said.

“Apartment. You can have house. You have girls. You help Petre get girls. Everyone likes you, you are still star player, just not for NHL.”

“That’s just fucking great,” Connor said, trying to get up. “So I’m supposed to just pretend last night didn’t happen? That I watched that fucker strangle some guy to death five feet from me? I had to carry the fucking body. He shit himself, did you know that?”

“Da,” Petre said. “They do that when they die. It is not strange.”

“It *IS* fucking strange!” Connor shouted. “I carried a murdered man that had piss and shit in his pants! I threw the body into the fire! What is not fucked up about that?”

“You are right,” Petre said. “It is not normal for you. Try to not think of it. Play hard. Work hard. Fuck hard. This—” Petre pointed at the empty bottles on the floor and counter—“will not make you forget. You will only remember more. Trust me. I have tried this already.”

“Trust you,” Connor sneered. “Trust a killer of women and children? Go fuck yourself.”

“Connor, prietenul meu.” *You are my friend.* “I tell you these things because you are not a killer. I am unhappy that you had to do last night. But it is done. I tell you so you will know. Life is hard.

You know this. Look at your leg. Life is full of hard. You must keep going forward, not behind.”

“Gee, thanks,” Connor said. “Great advice from a kil—”

Connor rolled over and dry-heaved again, unable to finish his sentence. He had been completely wasted before, too many times, but he had never hit the bottle as hard as he had in the last twenty-four hours. As his stomach contracted, forcing nothing but bile up into his mouth, he wondered if he was trying to kill himself.

When his stomach stopped revolting, he tried to get up again, but couldn’t even lift himself up on one elbow. He laid on the floor, the room spinning, seeing three Petres. He closed his eyes, thankfully seeing nothing instead of Travis Benkula’s face. He’d finally drank enough to not see the rope cutting into Travis’s neck, Dracul’s black gloves holding on to the ends of the white nylon.

Petre watched him for a while, torn between his loyalty to Mr. Ojarcarcu and his friendship with the young athlete. Petre was in no position to help beyond talking to Connor, trying to help him understand what was happening, trying to make it smoother, easier for his friend to cope with it.

He remembered the first time he killed a man. He’d been fourteen, running the streets of Arad at night. A man, a queer, had propositioned him as he walked by the alley between two buildings. Petre had agreed, walking deeper into the shadows until the queer stopped him. Petre had grabbed the man’s cock as if he

were going to stroke it. Just as the queer put his head back against the wall to enjoy it, Petre pulled out a knife and hacked at the queer's cock until blood showered them both.

The man died within seconds, and Petre had walked out of the alley with almost a thousand leu. Three hundred American dollars worth of blood, shit, and guilt. He'd made his way back to the apartment that Mr. Rohozeanu kept for his lieutenants and their crews, avoiding police and citizens alike, soaked in the queer's blood.

When he arrived at the apartment, his lieutenant questioned him, afraid that Petre was hurt. When Petre explained where the blood came from, his lieutenant, Stefan, laughed like never before. Stefan called all of the crews to the apartment, and had Petre recount the story again. When he described how he'd cut the queer's cock off and the man had bled to death in seconds, everyone cheered and laughed, and agreed that it was a terrible way to die.

Petre was the hero of the day, and word made its way back to Mr. Rohozeanu. Petre had been promoted to lieutenant within three months, and killing became a part of his life. He never told anyone about how he had showered, crying the entire time as he scrubbed the blood from his body. The nightmares began immediately, and had tormented him for years, even after murder became just another job to be done.

When he closed his eyes, all he could see was the queer's face change from pleasure to terror in less than a second. He had an idea what Connor must be seeing when he closed his eyes. Petre

still remembered, almost thirty years later. It made him sad that Connor would always see the man's face behind his closed eyes. Petre picked Connor up and carried him to the bed. He covered his friend, went to kitchen, filled a glass of water, then left it on the nightstand next to the bed.

Petre went back to the living room and cleaned up the glass near the door as best he could, unable to find a broom anywhere in the apartment. When he was done, he checked on Connor one more time. Connor had turned over, one arm hanging off the bed, snoring the way that drunk men do. Petre closed the blinds and let himself out of the apartment.

CHAPTER 9

“You are feeling better?” Petre asked him as they got into the Lincoln.

“Eat shit,” Connor grumbled.

He had woken up with the worst headache he could ever remember. His mouth tasted like fifty of his neighbors had shit in it while he slept. Every bright reflection of the sun, every noise, made his head feel like it was being hit with a hammer. The sound of the Lincoln’s doors slamming made him want to scream.

“Ah, you are fine,” Petre said, pulling the car out of the garage and onto Front Street.

They traveled the I-184 connector in silence. The muffled hum of the tires on the freeway made Connor want to throw up again. He had barely been able to keep down his coffee. The Starbucks girls hadn’t said anything to him, but they had smiled at him as one took his order and the other made his coffee.

The Lincoln exited the connector and headed west on I-84 toward Caldwell. Connor wasn’t looking forward to dealing with Larry Fallon and his screeching harpy whore. Lately, he’d begun to dread the weekly visits less, watching Jera from the corner of his eye when she wasn’t verbally abusing him. He’d fantasized about taking the collar off of her neck and choking Larry to death with it, but his trip with Dracul had cured that thought. Today he wanted to sit in the car and do nothing, except maybe throw up once or twice more.

“Cheer up,” Petre said to him as they passed the Nampa

exits. “You get to see your best friend. I get to see my girlfriend.”

Connor smiled at the joke, but the thought of laughing made his head pound and his stomach gurgle.

“I think she will become your girlfriend though,” Petre frowned. “She doesn’t like Petre. She likes Connor.” Petre glanced over at his friend.

“Fuck off,” Connor said without smiling. It hurt too much to smile. Petre looked offended until Connor gave him the middle finger.

“Oh look, it’s Faggot, and his friend Frankenfaggot,” Jera taunted as they entered the foul-smelling house. “You two sure spend a lot of time together. I bet you both could describe each other’s dick to a sketch artist.”

Larry guffawed from down the hallway as he gathered the money.

“What’s the matter, Faggot? You don’t look so good. Your pal here stretch out your ass too much on the way over here?” she continued relentlessly. “Better go get an STD test. You never know where your friend has been. Hell, he probably better get tested too. No telling where you two been sticking your meat if you’re willing to stick it in each other.”

Connor’s head was ready to burst. He wished the bitch would just shut her mouth. He couldn’t even fantasize about fucking her today. He felt himself beginning to fantasize about choking the life

out of her, but that thought brought Travis Benkula's purple face back into his mind, which caused his stomach to nearly empty its contents. He thought that it would actually improve the decor and the smell of the shithole they stood in. He almost laughed and puked at the same time.

“What’s so funny, cocksucker? You thinking about how little Frankenfaggot’s dick is? Let me see it. I wanna see if it is as small as—”

“If you don’t shut the fuck up, I’m going to make you eat six of your teeth,” Connor growled, finally tired of her mouth.

He thought she might have a smart reply, but the look in his eyes must have convinced her that today was the wrong day to push his buttons. Larry walked back into the living room, carrying a plastic bag stuffed with bills. He tossed it on the counter and sat down on the couch.

“Make it neat,” Connor said to him.

“What?” Larry asked.

“I said,” Connor repeated slowly with enough threat to make the skinny little man understand that today was not the day to do anything but what he was told to do, “make it neat. Stack the bills. I’m not going to spend twenty minutes picking through your sweat-stained money so the boss doesn’t have to. It’s your debt, make it neat.”

“Man, fuck you,” Larry said from the couch.

Connor rushed the junkie, grabbed him by the hair, and pulled him off of the couch as hard as he could, feeling some of Larry’s greasy hair separate from his unwashed head. Larry

screamed like a woman until Connor brought his knee up into the junkie's mouth, then again into his stomach. Larry dropped like a sack of rocks onto the floor. Jera began to scream and was about to attack Connor when she felt the cold barrel of Petre's pistol against her cheek.

"Maybe you don't like him," Petre said to her, "but maybe you want to live?"

Jera opened her mouth to say something but Connor spoke first.

"First words out of your mouth had better be 'I'm going to fix the money,' or I'm going to have Petre blow your ugly fucking head off and bury you and your dipshit boyfriend in the fucking desert."

Jera's mouth snapped shut, then opened again when she said, "I'll fix the money."

Petre's gun followed her as she walked to the counter. Connor could see her shoulders twitch, and a few seconds later he heard her crying softly. As she separated the hundreds, fifties, twenties, and tens into neat piles, her crying turned into hitching sobs as the tears streamed from her eyes, making mudslides on her face from the dark eye liner.

Connor looked down at Larry, still on the floor, holding his mouth with one hand, his guts with the other. Larry was staring at Petre's shoes, or maybe some cockroaches that were wandering around near Petre's feet. He was doing his best to get this visit over with after pushing Connor too far, and not wanting to test his luck any further.

Connor went to the counter and stood next to Jera. He reached out and put a hand on her arm. She jerked away, crying out as if he had struck her, the wad of bills she'd been stacking in neat piles falling to the floor. She bent down to retrieve the bills and began to separate them once more. Connor reached out again, this time lightly touching the dirty leather collar around her neck. She flinched, but didn't pull away, and didn't cry out.

"Why does he make you wear this?" he asked quietly, so Larry wouldn't hear him.

"Fuck you," she said, without looking at him.

Connor ran his finger around the outside edge of the collar, felt the sweat and grime that coated it and made a seal between it and her skin. He lightly put the tip of his finger under the edge of it, testing to see how tight it was. Jera stopped separating the bills, her body rigid, her eyes closing as if wishing Connor would just go away and leave her alone.

"Why would you let him make you wear it?" he asked.

She jerked her neck away from him and began to cry again. Connor reached down to her loose sleeve, gently lifting it to see the bruises covering her arms. Her hands trembled, fumbling with a new wad of bills, her breathing fast and shallow.

"Just leave me alone," she whispered.

"Why? Will he hurt you again?" Connor asked her with a whisper of his own.

"Just leave me alone. Please," she pleaded, glancing down at Larry who was now watching the two of them.

"Tell me," he said, this time in a louder voice. "Tell me what

he does to you.”

“Please. Just leave me alone.” This time her voice trembled.

Connor’s fingers let go of her sleeve and went back to collar around her neck, tracing another line around it until his fingers touched the ring at the front.

“Does he make you wear a leash?”

“Goddammit,” she said.

Her hands dropped to her sides. Petre looked very interested in what was going on, but said nothing, keeping his eyes on Larry, who stared at Connor and Jera.

“Tell me,” Connor said, his mouth inches from her ear. He had to breathe through his mouth this close, her foul stench overpowering his nose, his stomach fighting the waves of revulsion. “Tell me why he makes you wear this.” Connor’s voice rose as he went on, “Tell me why he makes you fuck other men. Tell me where these bruises come from.”

“Leave me alone!” she screamed in his face, her hands balled into fists. “Just leave me the fuck alone, you fucking faggot! Fucking asshole! Fuck you!” Her fists struck Connor in the chest and face.

She tried to scream and hit and cry all at once and ended up only crying. Connor wrapped his arms around her to keep her fists at bay, feeling her breasts through his jacket, feeling the slimy stickiness of her grimy skin through her shirt. He was disgusted by her, by her filthy, greasy hair, by her raccoon makeup running in rivers down her face, by the smell of her that reminded him of a locker room full of unwashed hockey gear that had been sitting

around growing bacteria for a month.

He looked down over her shoulder while still holding on to her. Larry had raised himself up to his knees, a snarl on his face. He lowered himself as if to spring from the ground and attack Connor. Just as he started upwards, Petre's highly-polished dress shoe connected with his mouth, followed by the butt of the pistol on his forehead. Larry rolled back over, screaming in pain at two new injuries.

"Finish the money, Jera," Connor said into her ear as he let her go.

Jera didn't move, shaking and swaying slightly on her feet as her tears continued to flow. Connor reached out to touch her arm again, but she flinched away and began to separate the money. Connor watched her for a moment, then walked over to where Larry rolled around on the dirty floor as he tried to staunch the flow of blood from the gash on his forehead. Connor knelt down next to the man and grabbed his hair.

"Listen, Larry, I know we aren't friends," Connor said, his own head pounding enough to make him wonder if this was what having a stroke felt like. "We are business associates, and I'm going to give you some business advice. When I come back next week, she better not have that collar on her neck, or I'm going to put it on yours, hook a chain to it, and then tie the chain to the back of the car. Petre here would love to drive you around the block a few times."

Petre chuckled at this, and got a glare from Larry.

"And I better see those bruises going away. I'm not going to

tell you not to pimp her ass out to all your buddies and customers. I'm just telling you, no more collar, no more hitting her. You had better tell your pals that she's off-limits when it comes to bruises as well, or they'll be wearing the collar while trying to keep up with Petre's crazy driving."

"Fuck you," Larry said through bloody lips. "You can't tell me shit."

"Wrong answer, buddy," Connor said and smashed Larry's nose with his elbow.

"All right! All right. Fuck."

"Repeat after me," Connor said. "No more collar, no more beatings."

"No more collar. No more beatings," Larry said, bleeding from three different areas of his face. "Why the fuck do you care? She's just a stupid whore. Nothing but a dopehead whore."

"Because she's a human fucking being," Connor said, and punched Larry in the stomach, causing the junkie to throw up near Petre's shoes. Petre took a step back. "I don't give a shit that she's a whore. But human beings don't wear collars. And they don't. Deserve. To. Be. Beat." Each word was punctuated by a fist to Larry's face.

Connor let go of the junkie's hair and stood up. He walked to the dirty kitchen and looked for a towel or napkin to clean the blood from his hands and elbow. He couldn't find anything except garbage and dirty dishes strewn everywhere. He turned on the faucet and washed the blood off, walked back to Larry when he was done, and wiped his hands on the back of the meth head's shirt.

He looked over at Jera. She had finished separating and stacking the bills. Connor walked to the counter, thumbed through the stacks, then pocketed the money.

“If he hits you again, I want you to run to the Gas-Mart down the road. Do you know where it is?” he asked her.

Jera nodded her head but refused to look at Connor. He reached out and grabbed her chin, forcing her to look at him.

“What did I just say?” he asked.

“To run to the gas station if he hits me,” she said, trying to force her head down.

“I’m going to tell every clerk on every shift that if you come in, they are to call me or my friend here, and to keep you safe until one of us arrives. Do you understand me?”

“Yes,” Jera mumbled.

“I mean it. You run to the gas station, I don’t care if you are naked and bleeding. They’ll keep you safe until we get there. You don’t deserve this. You don’t deserve *him*,” Connor said, looking at Larry, who returned his stare with one that contained fantasies of slow torture and death.

He let go of her chin and stepped back toward Petre. Jera immediately ran to Larry, fell to her knees and put her arms around him. Connor thought Larry would shove her off, but Larry decided he’d had enough punishment for one day. His eyes never left Connor’s face.

Petre thumbed the hammer of the pistol forward and put the gun into its holster. He gave Larry a look that said *I’m sad I didn’t get to put a few rounds into your face*. Larry didn’t notice. He was

still staring at Connor with hatred. Connor clapped his partner on the shoulder and said, “Let’s go.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but I can’t do that,” the assistant manager said to Connor.

“Listen, Jake,” Connor said, reading the man’s name tag, “There’s a girl who is in a lot of trouble. If she comes in here, whether in five minutes, or at three in the morning a month from now, whoever is on duty is to keep her safe and call me or my friend.” Connor handed the man a piece of paper with two phone numbers on it.

“But—”

“No buts,” Petre said, towering over the man. He leaned forward until his face was inches from Jake’s. “Do as my friend asks. We will make it worth your while, I promise.”

Jake’s eyes bulged as Petre leaned back and his coat opened just enough for the gun and holster to be visible.

“Listen, friend,” Connor said again, getting the man’s attention, “He doesn’t mean we’ll bring *you* trouble. He means we’ll make it worth your while. This girl, she’s important to us. You wouldn’t want to see anything bad happen to your mother, or sisters, or wife would you?”

Jake took it as a threat and began to shake.

“That’s not what I meant,” Connor said, trying again. “I meant, you wouldn’t want to see someone doing bad things to your

sisters or wife or mother and no one would help her if she was in trouble, would you? If this girl comes in, she'll be in trouble. Not police trouble. Trouble that comes from a man's fists. I'm sure you can agree that no woman should be subject to such things, right?" he asked as he dropped a hundred dollar bill into the front pocket on of Jake's bright blue Gas-Mart vest.

"Nuh...nuh...no," the assistant manager said, looking at Connor's face, then Petre's, then back again as Connor slid another hundred into the vest pocket.

"Good. Make sure," Connor continued, another hundred making its way into the vest pocket, "that every employee in this nice little store you got here understands. Make sure they all have the numbers I gave you. Make sure they know that if we find out she came to you for help, and we didn't get the call... well, it won't be hundreds we are putting in their pocket."

Petre clapped the man on the shoulder hard, making Jake squeak and jump at the same time. Jake flinched as Petre brought his hand up, but relaxed when Petre put yet another hundred in the man's vest pocket.

"Every week we will come by and make sure you remember your promise," Connor told him. "As long as you are willing to help us and possibly this girl out, we'll keep helping you and your employees out. You aren't having any trouble with the local gangbangers or dope heads are you?"

"Nuh...no. Not really," Jake replied.

"Is that a no? Or is that a yes, but you don't want to say anything because you are afraid it will mean more trouble?"

Connor asked.

“I don’t want any trouble. I have two kids. Mikey over there has three,” Jake said, nodding toward the clerk at the counter.

“Please. We don’t want any problems. We’ll call if the girl shows up.”

“Good. I’m glad, Jake, that we could come to an agreement,” Connor said, slipping one last hundred into the man’s pocket.

Petre raised his eyebrows at Connor, who nodded.

“This girl must be really important,” Jake said, finally realizing that he’d been given five hundred dollars for promising to call the two men in front of him if a dark-skinned, short-haired woman showed up in need of help.

“Very,” Petre said with a smile.

“Four hundred dollars,” Petre whistled as they drove back to Boise. “This girl, she is in your head.”

“Maybe,” Connor said, staring out the window. He looked over at Petre. “I’m pretty sure I saw you drop a hundred in there. Maybe she’s in your head as well.”

Petre laughed. “I was just helping you. You have no food, no furniture, no car. I think maybe you needed help.”

“You *thought* I needed help,” Connor corrected. “And thank you, but I had it covered.”

“Ah, great hockey player has money stashed under his mattress, saving to buy his own team?”

“Nah,” Connor answered. “Saving it for a rainy day.”

“It might rain soon,” Petre said, both of them thinking about Jera.

CHAPTER 10

Niklas, a constant character in his nightmares, now had Travis Benkula as an ally to torment him. They chased him through the long hallways under the arena, begging him to save them while promising violence, death, and an eternity of suffering. Their accusations rebounded off the walls, growing closer with each step. Connor felt the cold, dead hands on his neck at the same moment a searing, blinding pain erupted from his thigh.

Connor woke up screaming. He had no idea how long it went on, only aware of what he was doing after his throat began to burn. He clamped his jaw shut, his entire body shuddering, sheets soaked and pasted to his skin. Connor reached down to his right thigh, expecting it to be sliced open and bleeding, the wet sheets soaked in blood instead of sweat. His fingers traced lightly over the long scar that ran from his knee to just below his groin.

After reassuring himself that it had only been a dream, he looked at the clock. It was just after five in the morning. He turned over and tried to go back to sleep but his mind wouldn't shut off, wouldn't let go of the nightmare. All he could see was the decaying corpses of Niklas and Travis. Connor decided to get up and take a shower to clear his head. He had morning practice in four hours and a game later that evening.

As the hot water sprayed down on his face and shoulders, he finally scrubbed the nightmare from his mind. It was replaced by Jera. He pictured her dark skin, her hard eyes, her small, almost perfectly round breasts that had the slightest upward curve at the

nipples, the collar around her neck no longer dirty leather, but black lace with a pendant in the middle.

Connor shut the water off and grabbed his towel. He tried to focus on the task of drying off, getting dressed, and walking to the Starbucks for coffee. His brain kept wandering back to Jera. Jera. Always Jera. He hated her, hated her stench, hated her foul mouth, hated the way she looked at him as if she were imagining what he'd look like with a knife sticking out of his throat. He hated the way she always defended her tweaker boyfriend, how she always went to him each time Connor or Petre hurt him.

What he hated most was how he imagined her being passed back and forth between other sweaty, dirty, disgusting junkies. Or maybe it was rich suburban kids who could afford the weekend meth highs after acing their honors tests. Old men with hair growing out of places that should never have hair. Abusive men who liked hurting her, liked making her beg for mercy as they did terrible things to her sexually.

The cold January air froze and shattered his thoughts within the first five steps outside of the apartment. It was cold enough to freeze the mucus in his nose each time he breathed in, melting it when he exhaled. By the time he reached the gate at the back of the apartment complex, his nose felt like someone had repeatedly shoved marbles up it and then made him sneeze them back out.

“Good morning, Connor!” Alice said with cheer as he stepped up to the counter of the coffee shop.

She rang him up without even asking him what he wanted. He gave her a genuine smile, appreciating her looks not for the first

time. Alice was a little thing, barely five feet tall, skinny as a fencepost. Her brown hair was tucked under her mandatory green visor, the ponytail swaying from side to side as she chatted with customers and rang up orders.

“Hey, you,” Dana said to him, a reserved look on her face as if she wasn’t sure whether this was normal Connor or upset Connor standing in front of her serving counter.

“Hi, Dana,” Connor said to her.

“Did you guys play last night?” she asked as she made a double-espresso for the customer who had ordered before him.

“Yeah,” he said.

“Did you win?” she asked with a smile.

“Yeah, we won 4-1,” he answered with a smile of his own.

“How did you do?”

“I got an assist and an ejection.”

“You got kicked out of the game?”

“Yeah. I pounded some guy who was double-teaming one of our boys.”

“Did you make him bleed?” she asked with a sly grin and a wink.

“I always make them bleed,” he laughed.

Dana laughed with him, turning away for a moment as she poured his coffee. When her back was to him, he noticed her shape, her tight black slacks fitting over curves that he’d either ignored or never paid much attention to before. He couldn’t tell what the rest of her looked like under the green apron, but if the rest of her looked anything like her face and what her slacks displayed, he’d

definitely give her a second and third look. Even if she had a mutant growing out of her stomach, he'd probably give her a second look.

"Playing tonight?" she asked as she put his coffee on the serving counter.

"Yep, game is at seven."

"Good luck," she said, a wink accompanying the smile she gave him.

"Thanks," he said, staring into her eyes a little too long before turning to leave, feeling uncomfortable that he was being creepy. He took a step before forcing himself to turn around again.

"Hey, Dana?" he asked as she began working on another customer's drink.

"Did I forget something?" she asked, looking up from her task.

"No. I uh... do you want to... you know, go to the game tonight?"

"Really?" she asked.

"I mean, you don't have to. We get some tickets for each game for family or friends. I never give mine away. You can pick them up at the will-call window. You don't have to go though." His words came out in a rush, making him feel like a thirteen year old boy.

"I'd love to go!" she said, putting another coffee on the service counter and calling out the customer's name.

"How many tickets do you need?" he asked.

"I only need one. I don't want to be a bother."

“It’s no problem. We get four, so if you want to take someone, your boyfriend maybe, and a couple of other friends.”

“I don’t have a boyfriend,” she told him.

“Uh... your girlfriend then?” When she glanced up and gave him a strange look, he immediately apologized. “I didn’t mean... I’m sorry. I just thought...”

“I don’t have a girlfriend either. Mostly because I don’t swing that way,” she said, her lips pursed into a tight line.

Connor tried to apologize again, his embarrassment easily visible as he turned bright red while stumbling over his words. Dana couldn’t keep her face straight, and began to giggle. His embarrassment turned to confusion.

“It’s okay, I’m just messing with you. I’m not a lesbian, and I don’t have a boyfriend. Don’t look so embarrassed,” she said.

Alice had been listening, and burst out laughing. “I have been asking her out for over a year, and I can tell you that either I’m ugly, or she’s not gay.”

“You aren’t ugly,” Connor said at the same moment Dana did, their voices synced in almost perfect stereo.

All three of them laughed a little too loudly, the three customers sitting at the tables staring at them for a few seconds.

“You can take Alice. She’ll get her date and when the game is over, I’ll get mine,” Connor joked.

“Deal,” Dana said and turned away, her face red.

“I’d love to, but I have classes tonight,” Alice said.

“So, I guess just you then?” he asked Dana.

“Yes,” Dana answered. “Do I just give them my name?”

“Yeah, just tell them your name. They’ll have them.”

“See you there, and good luck tonight,” she said.

Connor was ten feet down the sidewalk before he remembered he had no clue what Dana’s last name was. When he walked back into the coffee shop, both girls were still giggling.

“Dana Foster,” she told him when he asked what name to put the tickets under.

CHAPTER 11

Connor glanced out into the crowd at where Dana should be seated. The seats that the team gave the players weren't exactly the best, but the arena was small and there was no real "nosebleed" section. He knew he should be paying attention to the game, but he hadn't had a shift at all in the second period, and probably wouldn't get one with only three minutes left before intermission. Instead of paying attention to the action on the ice, his mind kept wandering back to the curves of the Starbucks girl in her tight slacks.

A slap on the back of his helmet from Coach Walters broke his daydreaming.

"You're up Dunzer," Walters said, leaning down near his shoulder. "Number nineteen has been running Gansy all game."

Connor heard the real meaning of the words. *Take care of it, but try to get him into the box with you.*

"Got it, Coach," Connor said, snapping the strap of his helmet in place and putting his hands on the dasher to jump over the boards the instant play stopped.

"Smoke his stupid ass," Andre Jergens said from his left.

Connor grinned at his teammate's funny German accent, which was even more humorous thanks to the kid barely topping five and a half feet. Multiple whistles sounded as the puck went over the glass. Coach Walters slapped him on the shoulder pads again and he was over the boards and on the ice, skating around for a few seconds to get the blood flowing, having been parked at the end of the bench for almost eighteen minutes.

“What’s up, killer?” one of the Titans asked him, a snooty French-Canadian named Toussant.

“What did you say?” Connor asked, his stomach immediately knotting in fear that somehow his opponent knew about his role in Travis Benkula’s murder.

“I say, ‘what’s up, killer?’ Did I say it wrong?” Toussant asked.

Connor grinned, the fear draining away as he realized Toussant was just being funny.

“Nah,” Connor answered as he lined up on the face-off circle next to the Québécois. He raised his voice loud enough for number nineteen to hear him. “I’m going to make Valentine eat his own teeth.”

The linesman turned around and skated toward Connor, giving him a warning look. Connor offered the linesman a look of innocence and a shrug, as if to say *I wasn’t doing anything*. The linesman gave him another glare before skating back toward the two players waiting to take the face-off. Connor looked over at Valentine, who gave him a wolf’s grin even though there was fear in his eyes. A stick tap on the ice got his attention. He looked to his left to see Davenport, one of the Titans’ fourth-liners, scowling at him.

The linesman dropped the puck and Connor gave Toussant a light slash across the boot of his skate before making a beeline straight to Valentine. Luck was with him as the face-off went to Valentine, who saw the puck and Connor coming toward him at the same time. He flicked the puck off the boards just as Connor hit

him with a shoulder, hearing a satisfying “oof” as the Titan fell to the ice. Connor peeled off and headed to his position, but Davenport caught him from behind, jamming the blade of his stick into the back of Connor’s knee.

He turned and dropped his gloves without even bothering to see who it was. Davenport grinned and dropped his own gloves. They came together in a flurry of quick fists and short jabs that glanced off each other’s chins and visors. Connor had a tight grip on Davenport’s jersey with his left hand, his right alternating between rocket punches to the man’s chin and trying to grab the back of Davenport’s helmet to get it off.

Davenport was a few years younger and a few pounds lighter, but he was an experienced fighter, and kept his head out of reach for a few seconds. Connor felt the man’s right fist connect with his cheekbone three times before Connor reeled him in by the jersey and got his helmet off. Davenport struggled to get his jab going, but Connor had him pulled in too close. Without his helmet, the Titan felt the sting of Connor’s big right hand as it connected with his ear and the back of his head.

Connor pushed him back just enough to get a haymaker thrown, but the other player let go of his jersey and stunned him momentarily with a jab to his nose. It was just enough to make Connor pause, and Davenport’s right hand came around with force, connecting squarely with Connor’s left eye. The force of the blow buckled Connor’s legs, and he almost went down. He would have, if he hadn’t had the Titans’ jersey locked in his left hand.

Davenport rained blows on Connor’s head, one after another,

and Connor's legs buckled again, this time going to his knees. The ref stepped in to break them up, figuring Connor was done for, but Connor waved him off with his right hand to keep the fight from being finished before he was. Davenport gave him a grin as he rose from his knees. Connor noticed the man was missing at least four of his front teeth.

He gave the Titan a quick blow, just getting the bottom edge of his chin. As his opponent leaned back from it, Connor reeled him back in, this time connecting solidly with Davenport's forehead. His hand erupted in pain, but the adrenaline was flowing, erasing the pain in a fraction of a second as Connor felt himself getting the upper hand. He gave two quick punches to the stomach of the opposing player, not doing any damage, but causing the man to lower his guard to defend against it.

The instant he did, Connor let go of the jersey with his left hand, grabbing it again with his right, and laying into Davenport with his left fist. Three solid hits to Davenport's face made the other man's knees buckle this time, and a fourth and final shot brought the man to his knees. His grip on Connor's jersey caused Connor to fall forward, and both men collapsed to the ice.

The ref and the linesmen rushed in, pulled the two apart, and yelled in their ears to stop, the fight was over. Connor looked down at Davenport, worried that the man had hit his head on the ice. It was one of the greatest fears for a hockey player. The ice, three-quarters of an inch thick and frozen at around twenty degrees, was harder than concrete, and could shatter skulls from heavy impact. A lot of fights ended with both players wrestling each other to the ice,

sometimes falling heavily on their opponents and driving their heads into it at high velocity.

“You all right?” Connor asked him as the linesmen pulled them apart.

Davenport gave him a grin and a slight wave of his hand to let him know his head was okay. The red marks on his face said otherwise, but that was one of the downsides to fighting. Connor had no problems punching someone’s face enough to make it bleed, but he never wanted anyone to be injured permanently, and especially didn’t want anyone to get a concussion or skull fracture from landing head-first on the cold playing surface.

As the linesmen led both players back to the benches, forcing them into the locker rooms, the crowd was wild with cheers and whistles. The Cannon had made yet another enemy pay the price. His teammates shouted his name with compliments, banging their sticks on the boards as he passed by and entered the door to the benches. The linesman watched to make sure he headed down the hallway to the locker rooms. Connor glanced back one time to see if he could spot Dana in the crowd, but his vision was still a little blurry. He wasn’t sure if he might be suffering a concussion, or if it was the amount of towel waving and clapping from the cheering fans.

“I didn’t realize you were such a badass,” Dana joked as they walked downtown after the game.

“Nah, I’m not,” Connor said, embarrassed.

She reached down and grabbed his hand, causing him to wince slightly at the pain from his fight at the end of the second period. She didn’t notice, but he didn’t mind, especially after she laid her head on his shoulder.

“I thought you were done for when you went down the first time,” she said. “He was hitting you pretty hard.” She pulled her head back and looked at him. “Does it hurt? While you are fighting, I mean.”

“Sometimes,” he said with a chuckle. “I’ve been floored by a good punch to the jaw or the nose before. But usually you don’t notice unless they get a good shot in, or until after the fight, when you are sitting in the penalty box.”

“What about your hands?” she asked.

“Yeah, hitting hard face bones is pretty rough on them.”

Dana looked like she was about to ask another question, but they had stopped in front of Nemaro’s Bistro, a place Connor had never heard of before.

“This place is really good, if you like Italian-French combos. My treat.”

“It’s okay,” he said, “I have money. I’ll pay.”

“No way,” she said with a frown that turned into a smile. “We modern women don’t need your chauvinistic bullshit. You gave me tickets, I’ll give you food.”

“Those tickets were free,” he said, opening the door to the restaurant.

“Then this meal is going to be free.”

“So,” she said after swallowing a mouthful of appetizer, “why do you guys fight anyway?”

Connor took a drink of his dark beer before he answered. “Lots of reasons really. Sometimes they run our guys, you know, hit them when they shouldn’t, or hit them while they’re in vulnerable positions. Sometimes guys just run their mouths too much and need to be shut up. Sometimes they do something dirty, like use the butt-end of their stick in the ribs, or the blade of the stick in the groin.”

“Really?” she asked. “And fighting is allowed? Why don’t the refs just call penalties on them for that stuff?”

“If you’re good, sneaky, then you do it when the ref can’t see it. It’s kind of an art,” Connor laughed.

“Some art,” she said.

“It is, in a way. But they let us fight because it’s like a steam valve, it releases pressure. If dirty shit is going on all game between the teams, and they don’t let us fight, it gets really ugly. Like ‘swinging sticks’ ugly, or driving someone into the boards from behind at full speed. Shit like that can injure a guy really bad. We tolerate it to a certain point, but then it gets to be too much and we drop the gloves.”

“So you and the other guy just drop your gloves and then you fight?”

“Sometimes it happens in an instant like that. But a lot of

guys aren't fighters. They won't drop 'em. So each team will send out their enforcer, a guy like me, and we'll have at it."

"Do you fight right off the bat?"

"No, you have to wait until the puck is in play. If you do it before that, it's big trouble, instant ejection, and a lot of times a suspension. Normally I'll see their tough guy, and we'll talk it out."

"You talk it out?"

"Well, I mean, I'll skate by him and ask, 'hey, you want to go?' and he'll be like, 'yeah, let's do it,' and then we'll drop the gloves and go at it."

"This sounds really weird," she said with a laugh.

"It is, in a way. But it's just a part of the game. I don't go looking for a fight. Usually the coach will tell me, 'go after number twelve' or 'if they put number eighty-five in, you got to go in and get him' or such. It's all coordinated, but not like pro wrestling where it's all fake."

Yeah," she said, reaching across the table to grab his hand, looking at the old scars and a new scab around his knuckles. "It didn't look fake."

He laughed. "It is definitely real, and it hurts a lot, but you get used to it."

"So... you like to fight?" she asked, letting go of his hand.

"Sometimes. Sometimes it's good to get the aggression out. Hockey is a pretty aggressive sport. There's something about it that makes you mean, full of anger, especially if your team is getting beat pretty good. But I'd rather be skating up on the first or second line, even the third line, playing against their top line as a defensive

forward.”

“Why aren’t you?” she asked.

“I’m not good enough anymore,” he said, looking down at his beer.

“What do you mean you aren’t good enough? You look like you skate just fine, and you definitely look like you know how to fight.”

“Fighting doesn’t score goals and win games though,” he said, not looking at her. “I used to be better, but... when I was eighteen, I had an accident, and I can’t skate like I used to.”

“What kind of accident?” she asked. “Like a car accident or something?”

“No,” he said, “I was playing in Finland at a tournament, and I got my leg cut open. I guess I almost died from all the blood I lost. I healed up, but I was never the same. I don’t have the speed or the agility that I used to have.”

“I’m sorry, Connor,” Dana said, her face dropping to look at her plate. “I didn’t mean to bring up bad memories or anything.”

“No, it’s fine,” he said. “It was eight years ago. I’m just happy I can still play. Hockey was, is still, my life.”

“You never wanted to do anything else?”

“No. According to the entire nation of Canada, I was going to be as good as Gretzky. I was supposed to be the number one draft pick. Instead, I’m playing hockey in Boise, Idaho.” Dana looked upset, sad at his words, so he added, “Not that I don’t like it here. It’s a great city, and the fans seem to like me. I’m really glad I get to keep playing. I never thought about doing anything else, even

after the accident. All I could think of was finishing rehab and getting back on the ice. I was sure I would be just as good as before, maybe even better than before because of how driven I was. It's all I could think about for two years."

"But you weren't," she said, and looked sad again.

"I'm good enough to beat the piss out of some asshole who messes with my boys," he said with a smile.

"Well, I'd never been to a hockey game before, but I'm glad you asked me. I thought it was really fun. Everything moved so fast. I had a hard time paying attention to it all. I didn't understand what was going on for the most part, why they blew the whistles and all that. But when you guys scored a goal, I stood up and screamed at the top of my lungs like everyone else. It was a blast."

"I'm glad you had a good time," he said, happy to see her beautiful smile again.

"I especially liked watching you, but you didn't play that much. But the fight was the most exciting thing that happened all night."

"Not more exciting than us winning, was it?"

"Actually? Yeah, it was. I don't like violence, but watching you almost get beat up, then turning it around and making that guy give up... that was pretty awesome."

She reached across the table again and grabbed his hand as he was reaching for his beer. He looked into her eyes, and held her gaze until the server arrived with their meal.

“I’ve never had sex with a celebrity,” Dana said, as they lay in his bed, both of them sweaty and tangled in the sheets.

“I’m not a celebrity,” he said, looking over at her.

“Sure you are. You beat up people and thousands of fans cheer your name. I’ve even seen you on television before, and once or twice in the newspaper hawking cars or pizza. Ordinary people don’t have their names announced while a crowd goes wild, and ordinary people don’t get asked to do television commercials.”

“A lot of the other guys get to do that too,” he protested.

“That might be true, but I’m not in their bed, am I?” she asked, rolling over and climbing on top of him.

He put his hands on her hips and gave them a squeeze. She was everything her tight slacks had hinted she might be. He’d bedded a lot of girls since he was fifteen, a by-product of being a hockey player who was talked about in national newspapers and magazines. He’d even had a steady girlfriend when he was seventeen, but the never-ending travel and the inescapable attention from girls everywhere he went had ended it after two months. The rest of his career was a repetitive cycle of moving from one girl to another.

Some of them wanted to be exclusive with him, but most just wanted to add him as a notch in their belt, to be able to claim they’d slept with someone famous. At least the majority of them were honest about it, which was the only reason he didn’t feel like an asshole when it happened. A few of them had been hurt by him, by his refusal to carry on an exclusive relationship, and he always

felt bad, but he had never lied to any of them about his intentions. Most of the time the conversations, if they ever went beyond “your hotel room or my apartment?” never went that far.

He liked Dana. He didn’t know if he wanted to date her like normal people dated, but he definitely liked her enough to want to see her again. She’d made his brain forget about Jera for a while. She wasn’t a *puck bunny* like most of the other girls who tried to attach themselves to him. She was down-to-earth, had a job, was putting herself through college at Boise State, and had only talked hockey over dinner enough to understand the game before moving on to real life interests.

They discovered new pleasures with each other again, and a third time a few hours later. When she finally told him she had to go home to get some sleep before her early shift in three hours, he didn’t want her to go. Connor couldn’t remember the last time he’d wanted one of his *companions* to stay. He usually only wanted the sexual release and then to be alone. He had spent so much time alone in the last four years that he had a hard time staying in a conversation with anyone, about anything.

“I wish you didn’t have to go,” he blurted out as she dressed.

“I wish I didn’t either,” she said, sitting on the edge of the bed and caressing his face. “A girl has to work to eat though.”

Connor wanted to say a number of things to her. He wanted to tell her that he would help her, that she wouldn’t have to work if she stayed with him. He wanted to tell her how much he liked her, to confess that she was the first girl since Amy Dobbs that he wanted to be with for more than just a night, for more than just sex.

It was foolish, and he knew it, so he kept his mouth shut.

She put her coat on and walked back to the bed, leaned over and gave him a long kiss on the mouth before leaving. He watched her go, matching her little wave to him as she walked out of his apartment. After the door closed, he jumped in the shower to wash away the sweat and the lingering aroma of sex. He hoped when he closed his eyes, he'd dream of Dana Foster and her tight black slacks wrapped in a green apron, instead of Niklas and Travis.

CHAPTER 12

Connor knocked on the door to Mr. Ojacarcu's office. He wasn't sure why he'd been called to the office to see the boss. Ojacarcu hadn't said a word to him since the night he gave Connor the list of clients to visit with Dracul.

"Intra," the voice said through the intercom speaker.

Connor opened the door and entered the cozy office. Ojacarcu sat at his polished desk, laptop open in front of him. When Connor stood in front of the desk, Ojacarcu waved a hand for him to sit. He sat in the chair and waited for his boss to finish whatever he was doing on the computer. After a minute, Ojacarcu closed the lid of the laptop and looked at him.

"Connor, good to see you. I have some good news, and some better news," he said. "The good news is that the UPHL wants us to do a promotional piece for them, you being a fan favorite and all, and me, well, I'm a good businessman who puts a lot of money back into the community. You are okay with this, yes?"

"Sure," Connor said. He'd done promotions of all kinds before, even for the league two years ago when the Bombers had played for the Thompson Cup.

"The better news," Ojacarcu continued, "is that after such a fine job you did for me with that... business that needed to be taken care of, I have decided that you deserve a raise."

Ojacarcu's smile looked to Connor like a shark's grin, or maybe a badger's, right before it tore into flesh with its sharp teeth. Connor remained silent, waiting to see what his boss would say.

“I’m sure that it was not an easy job, Connor,” Ojacarcu said, folding his hands on the desk, “but you did well, according to Dracul. You know,” the older man chuckled, “he does not like you much. However, he says you did not panic, and did everything you were told. I am proud of you. So proud in fact, that I have a present for you.”

Ojacarcu opened a drawer and pulled out an overstuffed white envelope. He slid it across the desk. When Connor didn’t make a move to take it, the Romanian waved a hand at it to let him know he needed to pick it up. Connor grabbed the envelope, feeling its weight. When he opened it, he was shocked by the amount of money in it. He didn’t know how much there was, but from what he could see, every bill had Benjamin Franklin on it.

“A little taste of what loyalty means to me,” Ojacarcu said.

“Thank you,” was all Connor could say. He stuffed the envelope into his coat pocket.

“Look, Connor,” his boss said, leaning forward, “I am sure you are not happy about the job you had to do. The truth is, I had no one else who could assist Dracul. All of my other employees were indisposed. I needed someone I could trust. I trust Dracul, very much so, but those kinds of jobs... they require two persons at least. If something were to go wrong and there was only one of you...”

“I think Dracul could handle ten men at once,” Connor said, regretting his tone immediately.

Ojacarcu only laughed. “I’m sure he could, maybe even a hundred men. But I’ve been in this business a long time, and I’ve

learned that if something can go wrong, it will when you do not prepare. What is that law called?"

"Murphy's Law," Connor said.

"Yes, yes. Murphy's Law. You understand, don't you?"

"Yes, sir," Connor answered.

"I have no doubt that you do. We'll be leaving for Denver on Tuesday. I'll have you flown to Tuscon for your game by Tuesday night, Wednesday morning at the latest. Bring warm clothes, and make sure you send along your overnight bags with the team so they will be waiting for you when you arrive in Tuscon."

Ojacarcu stood up, extending a hand to Connor to let him know the meeting was over. Connor stood and shook the hand, once again surprised by the strength of his boss' grip.

"I have to fly to Denver tomorrow," Connor said to Dana as they sat in the recliner in his living room.

"I thought you guys played in Phoenix," she said.

"Tuscon. The league wants me and Mr. Ojacarcu to do a promotional video or something," he said, rubbing his hand along the thigh that she had draped over his legs.

"You don't even know what you're going to be doing?" she asked.

"I don't ask anymore. I just go where I'm told."

"The life of a professional hockey player," she laughed, kissing him along his neck. "Do you get any 'adult' channels?"

Connor's shocked look made her laugh again. She reached for the remote and turned the television off, then extricated herself from the recliner and gave his hand a tug to let him know he was to follow her into the bedroom. After, both of them panting, they talked about trivial things. He asked her about her job, why she didn't have a boyfriend, what she was studying in college. She asked him about where he grew up, why hockey was such a big deal to Canada, and what he planned to do after his career was over. They fell asleep, her head on his chest, her legs wrapped around his.

"Hello, my name is Connor Dunsmore, right winger for the Boise Bombers," Connor said into the camera, trying to keep from squinting at the bright lights that seemed to penetrate him from all directions.

"And I am Costache Ojacarcu, owner of the Boise Bombers," his boss said.

"We would like to invite all of you to donate to the International Children's Leukemia Society," Connor continued. "Hundreds of thousands of children across the world are afflicted with this deadly disease—"

"And without your support, these innocent children will never get to grow up, to experience life to its fullest," Ojacarcu finished for him.

"They'll never graduate from school, never play hockey or

any other sport, they'll never fall in love and have children of their own," Connor went on.

"Please, visit the website shown on your screen, and donate to to the International Children's Leukemia Society, for their sake," Ojacarcu said into the camera.

"Help us 'knock out' children's cancer once and for all," Connor said, throwing a fake jab toward the camera as he said the tag line.

"With your support, we can reach our goal," Ojacarcu finished.

The director had told them that effects would be added during post-production, and there would be the sound of a puck being hit with a stick, followed by a goal horn and a crowd cheering. Connor was glad to help the ICLS, no matter how cheesy the commercial was. He hoped he wasn't as wooden as most of the athletes were who made commercials.

The two shook hands with the film crew and made their way out of the studio. A limousine waited for them at the curb, the driver standing at attention in the snow. The door shut behind Connor, who was thankful the heater had been left on. The two men rode in silence as the driver merged into traffic.

"Foarte bine," Ojacarcu finally said to Connor. *Very good.* "We didn't even need a second take!"

"Yeah," Connor replied.

"Derek is taking us to the airport. I have a flight booked for you to Phoenix, and a rental car for you to get to Tuscon. I tried to get a direct flight, but there were none available this late. You

should be at the hotel by eleven or so, more than enough time to get some rest before your game.”

“Thank you.”

“It is the least I could do. Thank you for coming and helping me. This is good publicity for you, and for the team. It might even lead to more endorsements.”

“Thank you.”

“When you get back to Boise, I have another job for you,” Ojacarcu said, watching Connor’s face.

Connor was torn between fear that he’d have to do another job with Dracul, and rage that made him want to leap across the empty space between them and choke his boss until Ojacarcu’s face looked like Travis Benkula’s. He nodded at his boss.

“Don’t worry, this is a standard job. You will be with Petre.” He winked at Connor. “A client has decided that paying me is too much trouble. This client, he is not such a good client, not like Mr. Fallon. I won’t suggest you break anything, but if you do, I won’t be upset. If this client doesn’t see things our way, I will have no choice but to send Dracul to visit him.”

Connor’s stomach turned at the thought of what Dracul would do to the man. Would it be another visit to the landfill? He didn’t want to know. He’d already learned too much about his boss. It wasn’t like he didn’t have an idea of just how hard the man was, how serious he could be when someone crossed him, but thinking that his boss might be the kind of man who ordered someone’s death was a lot different than knowing for a fact that he had no qualms about murdering someone who crossed him.

“Don’t sweat it,” Ojacarcu said to him, opening a bottle of scotch from the limo’s mini-bar. “The job you helped Dracul with, it was a one-time thing, I assure you. I know it was distasteful. Dracul said you took no pleasure in it, that you threw up after. I understand. The first time I had to do a job for Mr. Miklos back in Romania, I did the same thing. It was hard, but it had to be done.”

Connor said nothing, only stared out the limo’s window as it made its way through the snowy freeway traffic toward Denver International. Dana was on his mind. He longed for the feel of her hips in his hands, her hair sprawling over his chest as she lightly snored after climax. Over the last week, he’d started to seriously think about getting out of Boise. He wouldn’t be able to play hockey anywhere else unless Ojacarcu released him from his contract, something that wasn’t likely to happen until the end of the next season.

Dana told him she would be done with her degree by then. He fantasized that they’d still be together, that she would want to run away with him. Neither of them had discussed any kind of commitment, steering clear of it mostly because they were too busy having sex when they were together. After, they would talk about all sorts of things, but to Connor, it felt like she avoided the subject of where they were as a couple, and where they were headed, if anywhere.

He never mentioned the long string of women who had come before her, and she never mentioned anyone other than a boyfriend she’d had back in high school, the one who had taken her virginity. Connor was usually confident when it came to women, rarely

having to deal with rejection before, but he was afraid she would laugh at him and tell him that he was just a fling for her, a conquest. He had never before dreaded the word “no” as much as he did when thinking of asking her to stay with him, to run away with him.

The plane ride was bumpy, making his stomach roil and grumble the entire flight. He wanted alcohol badly, but he avoided it, instead asking the flight attendant for bottled water. He tried to eat the snack peanuts that were handed out, but after chewing the first one and swallowing, he felt like throwing up. He tried to sleep, even though the plane rumbled and vibrated enough to make him feel queasy. He didn’t want to freak everyone out and have an Air Marshal hold him at gunpoint should he have a nightmare and wake up screaming. There were far too many children on the plane to put them through such trauma.

Phoenix was a different world than Denver. January and February had racked up almost three feet of snow in the Mile High City. When he stepped out of the airport in Phoenix to grab the shuttle to the rental car lot, he thought he would die of heat stroke. It was a balmy seventy degrees at eight o’clock. By the time the shuttle pulled into the North American Car Rental lot, he was sweating as if he’d already played a few shifts in a game.

The man at the counter smiled and gave him the keys to a newer Ford hybrid. Connor walked to the car and threw his coat in

the back seat, along with the small overnight bag he had taken to Denver. After he pulled out of the lot and followed the sultry voice of the GPS unit to the freeway, his thoughts wandered back to Dana, her soft skin, her thick, silky, dark red hair, and her subtle brilliance.

She was working toward an electrical engineering degree so she could work for one of the Silicon Valley tech firms designing microchips or circuit boards. Connor had only the basic understanding of the technical details of the devices he used, and knew he wasn't nearly as smart as Dana. GPS, phone, laptop, satellite receiver, all of them just worked for him. Dana was the type of woman who could dismantle all of them apart and tell him exactly what each tiny component did, and how.

Connor fancied himself a decently intelligent person, but he wasn't even close to being in her league. All during his junior hockey days, he'd had to study and do schoolwork between games, whether on the road or not. The junior leagues demanded it, and he had a free ride to any college he wanted to attend in Canada if he ever went back home, though he had never had any real interest in doing that. If he ever returned home, he planned to enroll in the National Coaching Certification Program so he could continue his career in hockey.

During the two hour drive to Tuscon, he played out scenario after scenario where he asked Dana to run away with him, to move to Canada, even to marry him. Every so often as he went through each scenario, Jera would pop into his mind. Jera the dirty, meth-addicted skank. The prostitute. The woman who seemed to be okay

with being abused, and seemed content to never take a shower. Jera. Dana. Jera. Dana.

The two women were so completely different from each other. Dana was educated, funny, she smelled like a sweet flower, tasted even sweeter, was a terrific lover, and made him laugh with her humor. Jera was a screechy, unwashed harpy with a foul mouth, and a fouler stench. He wasn't even sure if her skin was dark from genetics, or from the fact that she and water seemed to be mortal enemies.

For some reason, Jera wouldn't completely vacate from his thoughts. Connor couldn't help himself from thinking about how she let men use and abuse her, how she was trapped in a situation she might not have any control over anymore, thanks to people like Larry and drugs like methamphetamine. Maybe she liked fucking men for money or dope. Maybe she liked being abused. Why else would she stick around for it?

That thought led him to his own situation. He'd become an accomplice in a brutal murder. He'd allowed himself to become a henchman for a Romanian gangster. Why did he stick around? What reasons could there be for him to continue to live the way he did? Connor couldn't think of a good answer, and instead of trying to figure it out, he cranked up the radio as loud as it would go without the speakers distorting. He tried his best to mentally prepare himself for the upcoming game instead of the two women warring within his head for his heart.

One of them couldn't possibly know how he felt, the other probably did and said nothing. One wanted to kill him, based on

the look in her eyes whenever they were near each other. Not to mention the constant insults and vulgarities she screeched at him, the empty threats grating on his nerves because of her voice. The other wanted to hold him, touch him, laugh with him, get under the sheets with him. By the time he pulled into the hotel parking lot, he realized he had come to no conclusions at all, other than he was in trouble emotionally, a new territory for him.

CHAPTER 13

“You have good fight last night!” Petre exclaimed as he started the car.

“You didn’t even listen to the game, did you?” Connor asked with a frown.

“Da, I watched. I was wasting a lot,” Petre answered from behind his dark sunglasses.

“You mean you were really wasted?” Connor asked. Petre nodded. “You must have been. I barely played, and I haven’t fought since Wednesday night.”

Petre looked at him for a moment, trying to decide if Connor was making a joke. Connor looked straight ahead, his mind already wandering to Jera. They were headed to pick up the weekly payment from Larry. Connor figured the visits would eventually become less confrontational, unless Larry got further behind. Connor was pretty sure that would be no problem for him. The junkie might be able to move a lot of product for Ojacarcu, but he didn’t seem very bright.

Considering how many times Connor and Petre had made him bleed or scream in pain over the last two months, it seemed foolish to Connor that the man would ever want to fall behind on payments to Ojacarcu ever again. Larry simply couldn’t hold his tongue around them for some reason. Connor had seen it in plenty of hockey players over the years. Some guys just couldn’t shut the fuck up, no matter how many times they took a beating.

“How have you been?” Petre asked as they rounded the on-

ramp for the connector.

“Alive,” Connor said.

“Da, I know that. But how have you been since your job with Dracul?”

Connor didn’t want to talk about it, didn’t want to think about it. The nightmares were now mostly a mash-up of his accident and Travis’s murder. Some nights only Niklas showed up to torment him. Some nights both ganged up on him. Twice he’d woken up after the ghosts of his past had begun to torture Dana. Once Jera had been giving him a handjob while Niklas and Travis took turns holding Dana down, having their way with her. That one had taken almost three days to dissipate from his psyche.

“Shitty,” Connor said.

“I know it is hard for you,” Petre said as they merged into the lane that transferred them to the main freeway.

“You don’t know shit,” Connor said bitterly, the memory of his latest nightmare pushing its way to the front of his mind.

“I do know shit,” Petre said, glancing at the angry young man in the seat next to him. “I have had to do it many times.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not you, am I? I’m not a killer like you. Do you have nightmares? Do your victims come back every night and fuck with your head?” Connor began to shout. “I didn’t fucking ask for this shit. I was just supposed to break a few noses, maybe a finger once in a while. People get themselves into shit when they know better. I get paid to remind them about those decisions. I didn’t sign on to watch a guy get killed less than three feet from me!”

Petre clicked on the Lincoln's cruise control and studied Connor, looking back at the road every few seconds. Connor's face was flushed, his breathing heavy, fists clenched in his lap. Petre wondered if his friend would try to swing at him while they were moving down the freeway at seventy miles per hour.

"I'm sorry, Connor. I am only trying to be your friend," Petre said.

"You're a shitty friend," Connor said, staring out of the window to his right.

"Da, this is true," Petre nodded. "I did not know Mr. Ojacarcu would do this. I would have said to him to not make you do this. But I am only hired man. Very little influence."

"You couldn't have known," Connor replied, his voice softening.

"I have nightmares like you," Petre said. "The queer, I saw him in my sleep for many years. I saw many men, too many women. Sometimes children. Children are worst."

"Do you still have them?" Connor asked.

"Not often. After so many, I get used to it, I think. Maybe once in a month. Sometimes longer. I am immune?"

"Jesus Christ," Connor said. "You've killed so many people that it doesn't even bother you anymore?"

"It bothers me. But I don't kill anymore. Dracul kills, but those are his nightmares, not mine. I told you. I am not happy to have killed so many, but I did. It cannot be changed."

"You don't even care about the ones Dracul murders?"

Petre shrugged. "I don't like, but it is not my hands. It is his

nightmare.” Petre looked over at Connor, who stared at him with disgust. “I do not think he has nightmares.”

“The fucker probably has wet dreams about them.”

“Wet dream?” Petre asked.

“Yeah, you know. A sex dream. He probably comes in his sheets whenever he kills them again in his dreams.”

“Ah, I know now. Maybe he wet dreams when they kill him instead?” Petre asked seriously.

Connor broke into a laugh. It was the funniest thing he’d heard in a while. Petre frowned, unsure if Connor was making fun of him. Connor saw the frown and explained why it was funny, making Petre laugh when he understood.

“Have you ever been in love?” Connor asked, changing the subject.

Petre almost drove into the emergency lane. He hadn’t expected such a question from his friend. He thought back to the three women he’d truly loved in his life. One of them had been his mother, but he was sure Connor wasn’t talking about that kind of love.

“Da. I love two women with sex. Are you in love?” he asked.

“Jesus, Petre. You’ve been in America how long? I’ve known you for four years and your English is actually getting worse with each passing year. Or do you do it on purpose? You know Ojacarcu speaks perfect English, right?”

“What does this have to do with fucking women?” Petre asked in confusion.

“Nothing. How did you know you were in love with them?”

Petre thought about it for a minute. “I am not sure. I know one day that I love them. Many years apart, but both the same. It is not one day I don’t love and next day I do love. I just know one day.”

“How long did it take?”

“Ilinca I know for many years. She was Radu’s woman. I love her for long time, but I say nothing. It is forbidden to desire another member’s wife or mistress. One day Radu is killed at collection by thieves. They cut head off, but the tattoos are his.”

“So you just swooped in and snatched her up?”

“I do not kidnap, no. I say nothing, do nothing. After many months of visiting, giving her money to live, I am told by Mr. Rohozeanu to bring her to see him. She thinks Mr. Rohozeanu is to help her, give her money. I think so too. But Mr. Rohozeanu, he tells her she owes him money. Money that Radu owed. Radu is now dead, Ilinca must pay.

“I am angry, but Mr. Rohozeanu is like father now. He took me in, gives me money, women, responsibility. I am loyal to him. But I am unhappy. I love Ilinca. Wished to tell her for long time my feelings, but it is forbidden, even after Radu is killed. Ilinca, she is smart woman. I am sure she knows my feelings, but she cannot refuse. Mr. Rohozeanu is not a man to tell no. He makes her work for him.”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Connor said in a low voice. “You were in love with her, couldn’t tell her, and your boss made her turn tricks?”

“Tricks?”

“A prostitute. A whore. *Cocotă*,” Connor said, remembering the Romanian word for whore.

“Ah. Yes. Prostituată. He makes her work for him. I see her very little then.”

“But you fucked her eventually?” Connor asked.

Petre gave him a dark look. “Yes. I *fuck* her,” the word came out in a spit. “But I have to pay. Mr. Rohozeanu, I think he knows somehow. I pay many times. Too many.”

“How? Why? How could you pay to fuck her?” Connor asked, amazed at Petre’s story.

“Because I love her,” he said, as if it were obvious. “I pay, and I am gentle with her. I want her to enjoy it, but she does not. She does not refuse. Bad things happen if she refuses customer. But she does not enjoy me. Many times I almost tell her I love her, have loved her since before Radu dies. But I cannot. But she knows after so many times. I am regular customer.

“Sometimes I pay for her for whole night. Just to keep her from others. Sometimes I do nothing with her, we watch bad American television or listen to American music. Sometimes just sleep. But most times we fuck. I cannot help myself. I am in love with her and think she will love me. I pretend she loves me.

“But Mr. Rohozeanu, he knows. He makes us both meet him. He tells us it is forbidden. Ilinca is his property and I cannot spend my money on her. I am sad because she does not say anything, does not cry, does not even blink. I want to kill Mr. Rohozeanu but I cannot. I am weak but I am loyal. But I cannot stop with Ilinca. I pay her, but we are careful.

“Not careful enough. I am called to Mr. Rohozeanu at cement factory one day. It is place we make pillars, foundation blocks. It is also place we get rid of bodies. Mr. Rohozeanu, he has contracts for bridges, new buildings for downtown Bucharest, roads. I think it is just another job. But I see Ilinca and I know we will both die. Mr. Rohozeanu is not kind to anyone not loyal.

“It is worse. He yells at me. Calls me names. Stupid, liar, not loyal. Accuses me of being in love with Ilinca, a prostituată, his prostituată. His property. I am told I will prove my loyalty to Mr. Rohozeanu. I am to kill Ilinca while he watches. If I do not, we are both killed and sealed inside giant concrete blocks.”

“Holy fuck,” Connor breathed. “You killed her, didn’t you?”

Petre looked away, unable to meet Connor’s eyes. “Da. I am to cut her throat. I cannot beg Mr. Rohozeanu for mercy. I cannot even beg to kill her another way. Mr. Rohozeanu hands me large knife. Very sharp. There are five others with guns. They will shoot me if I do not do this. I cut Ilinca’s throat. I do not cry, I do not say anything. I just cut. Mr. Rohozeanu claps like it is good movie and tells others to teach me loyalty. I am beaten and cannot walk for a month. But I do not cross Mr. Rohozeanu again.”

Connor felt like throwing up. He wondered if this Ilinca woman was one of Petre’s nightmares, and if not, how many others he must have killed to rid his sleeping mind of her. He tried to picture having to kill Dana while Dracul, Vadim, Petre, and Ojacarcu watched. He tried to convince himself he couldn’t do it, that he would rather die with her than have to kill her. He frightened himself with his inability to be sure of exactly what he

would do if he found himself in Petre's shoes.

"What about the other woman you loved?" Connor asked, ridding his mind of the morbid thought of harming Dana, and wanting to get Petre's mind on someone else.

"Helen," Petre said without emotion.

"Did you kill her too?" Connor asked with more contempt than he'd intended.

"No. I meet Helen many years later. She owns bakery in Arad, away from Mr. Rohozeanu's territory. She is someone I meet by chance when I am hungry one day. Helen is older, a widow. But she is fine looking woman and she is very smart. Much smarter than me. I visit her often and we become lovers."

"What happened to her?" Connor asked, fascinated by his partner more than ever.

"I save money and take vacation with her after two years. Helen is wanting marriage, and I am wanting same. But Ilinca is in my dream, warning me. Ilinca says Helen will end up like her, killed by me because of Mr. Rohozeanu. We travel to Mamaia on Black Sea. We spend a week fucking, drinking, being in love. Before we go home, I give her briefcase with ten million leu. Almost two hundred thousand American dollars.

"I have cheated, skimmed, even robbed for two years we are together. I saved for many years before Helen, too. I give her everything I have. I tell her she must take money and never go home. I give her new papers. She cannot leave Romania, but she can go to Constanta to south. She has money to start new life without me.

“Helen refuses. She cries, cannot understand why I am making her leave. I tell her about Ilinca. About Mr. Rohozeanu. I apologize for putting her in danger. I am afraid of Mr. Rohozeanu. I am trusted again, but do not trust him. I am loyal. I do not want Helen to die or even get hurt. I cannot leave Romania, cannot quit working for Mr. Rohozeanu.

“I tell Helen I will go back to Arad and burn her bakery. I will find homeless woman or prostituată and kill her and put body in bakery so Helen will be official dead. I tell her that I love her but we cannot be together. She takes money but she does not forgive me. She hates me, tells me many times as she packs. I beg her to not hate me but she hates me, says she will find my grave when I die and spit on it every year for breaking her heart.”

“So you gave her everything? And made her run off to save her life?” Connor asked. The Lincoln wound through the streets of Caldwell, nearing Larry’s house.

“Da. I kill Ilinca with my own hands, and I kill Helen in my heart with love.”

CHAPTER 14

Larry gave them both a foul look as they entered the trash-strewn living room. Petre stood near the door. Connor walked to the hallway while Larry went to the back bedroom to retrieve the money. There was no sign of Jera. Larry returned a few minutes later with neat stacks of hundreds and twenties. He handed the money to Connor before sitting down on the ratty couch that looked like it might house a million cockroaches.

“Where’s Jera?” Connor asked as he thumbed through the money.

“She ain’t here,” Larry said.

Connor looked over at him. Larry stared back, but didn’t look his usual defiant self. Connor wondered if he’d finally learned his lesson about mouthing off. It was a wonder the tweaker had any hair left on his head or teeth left in his mouth after all the times he’d been dragged around by his hair and punched or kicked in the face.

“Where is she?” Connor persisted.

“I told you, she ain’t here,” Larry answered. Connor kept staring at him until finally Larry added, “She’s probably out turning tricks. She’s a whore, remember?”

Connor studied his face. The little man eventually looked away, first at Petre, then at the floor. Larry shifted around on the couch every few seconds, most likely his need to get Connor and Petre out of his house so he could shoot up or smoke up another hit. He looked uncomfortable, but not particularly guilty about

anything.

“Did you take that collar off her neck?” Connor asked.

“Yes,” was all Larry would say.

“You better not be lying,” Connor threatened.

“I just said I took the fucking collar off, didn’t I?”

“You’ll understand if I don’t give you the benefit of the doubt.”

“Man, fuck you. I took the collar off. I can’t make her quit doing shit she wants to do.”

Connor took a step toward the couch, noting that Petre had reached his hand into his jacket to grab his pistol. Larry flinched, but held Connor’s gaze. Connor took another step, causing the junkie to try to press himself into the rear cushion of the couch.

“You better not be fucking with me,” Connor said as he leaned down.

“Just take the damn money. I got shit to do,” Larry said.

Connor stepped back to where Petre stood, thumbing through the stacks of bills one more time. He reached for the doorknob to exit, but turned around instead.

“How about we take a look around this shithole just so I can have some piece of mind,” Connor said to Larry.

“Jesus Christ. She ain’t here, man. You want to fuck her that bad, I’ll set you an appointment.”

Petre’s pistol was out and waving at Larry to get up and go down the hall. The junkie let out an exasperated breath but got off the couch and walked down the hallway, opening any closed doors. Connor checked each room and the hallway closet while Petre

watched from the end of the hall. There was no sign of Jera anywhere, other than clothes randomly placed in just about every room. Connor wasn't even sure the clothes were hers.

"All right, asshole. We'll see you next week then. Mr. Ojacarcu wishes to express his gratitude, and expects you to continue doing business with him as before." Connor patted Larry's greasy head and walked past Petre to the front door.

"Yeah, sure," Larry mumbled. "Tell him I said thank you for working with me."

Larry didn't sound thankful for anything other than not getting the shit kicked out of him. Connor wished he could tell him that if he hadn't paid up, he'd probably have received a visit from Dracul instead. It wasn't a pleasant thought though, and no matter how much the junkie might deserve to get his face battered because of his mouth, in Connor's mind he hadn't done anything to deserve to die. Not even keeping a collar around Jera's neck and pimping her to anyone with a few dollars was enough to justify being murdered, but Connor wasn't the one who made those decisions.

He opened the front door and walked back into the fresh air, Petre following him. They got in the Lincoln and sat for a minute before Petre pulled out and headed back to the freeway.

"You think she is free of collar?" Petre asked as he made a left onto Freeport.

"He better hope she is," Connor said. "I'll stomp his goddamn face in if not."

"You cannot," Petre said. "Mr. Ojacarcu has not given permission."

“I don’t give a shit if Jesus or Santa Claus didn’t give permission.”

“Connor. Listen to me. Mr. Ojacarcu is businessman. This junkie, he makes good money for Mr. Ojacarcu. Mr. Ojacarcu does not care about this girl, only money. You must not act out of turn.”

“You mean ‘out of line’ I think,” Connor corrected him. “You’re right. But that doesn’t mean I can’t come back on my own with a ski mask on and kick his door in and beat the living shit out of him with a baseball bat.”

“Da, you can do such a thing. But you should not. I do not understand your obsession with this girl. She is interesting, but she is trouble. You can fuck any girl. Do not waste time with this one.”

“Why not? You wasted your time with a whore.”

Petre slammed on the brakes and veered into a parking spot along Freeport. Connor wondered for a moment if Petre would take his gun out and shoot him, or at the least, whip him across the face with it.

“Tâmpitule!” Petre yelled. *Asshole*. “I did not make Ilinca a *muistă*! I loved her before. This girl, this Jera that you are in love with, she is a junkie. A *cocotă*. She is trouble. Why do you care what she does?”

“Because she’s a human being, not a slave,” Connor said, getting angry himself.

“It is not your worry. It only means trouble. Eventually it is trouble with Mr. Ojacarcu. You do not want this.”

“She doesn’t deserve to wear a collar,” Connor said. “I don’t give a shit that she’s a whore. She can suck any dick she wants, but

she doesn't deserve to be abused like an animal."

"If she runs to the store, then it is not your trouble with Mr. Ojacarcu. If this happens, I will stand behind you. If you interfere beyond this, I cannot protect you if Mr. Ojacarcu demands punishment. I am loyal, Connor. I have learned my lesson. Prietenul meu. You are my friend. You do not want to learn this lesson. Listen to me. Please."

"Okay," Connor said, wanting to drop it. He didn't want to argue with Petre.

"Be wise," Petre said as he shifted the car into reverse and backed out onto Freeport. "Find a good woman, not this one. Do not let Mr. Ojacarcu find out your woman. He is not evil to us, but he will use it against you if you are in trouble with him. I know this. Mr. Ojacarcu and Mr. Rohozeanu are same person. Not same, but are alike. This is what they do, how they become powerful."

"Okay, okay. Shut the fuck up and drive."

They didn't exchange another word until Petre dropped him off at his apartment. Petre had suggested they could go have a beer or watch a game on television, but Connor didn't want to be around him. He felt bad that he had hurt Petre's feelings, but he also felt anger at Petre's inability to separate loyalty from being a heartless bastard. Connor had no doubt that if their boss ordered him to go with Dracul to kill Jera, Petre would not refuse. Petre would not even refuse if the boss ordered him to kill her without Dracul.

Dana put her coat on the counter and sat down in the recliner with Connor. She could see something was wrong by his expression, but she wasn't sure if she should ask about it. They'd been dating for a short time, and while Connor had treated her like a girlfriend, he remained distant in ways that she didn't like. She was still unnerved at the two times she'd slept over and he had woken up screaming.

"Are you all right?" she finally asked him.

"Yeah," he said, but his voice was sullen, unhappy.

"Are you sure?" she asked, hoping she didn't sound like a nag. She didn't want to cross some invisible line of pushing too far into his business.

"No," he said.

Dana didn't know what to say. His body language and his voice were not the friendly, humorous Connor she'd come to care about. He'd wormed his way into her heart over the last few weeks, and she found herself thinking about him more than she should have, especially during school. When he left with the team to play out of town, she would turn on the radio and listen to the games, hoping to hear his name.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she asked.

She wondered if it was a problem between him and his teammates. During the games at home, he normally only got on the ice a couple of times per game, and mostly to fight. During the games on the road, she only heard the play-by-play announcer call his name a few times per game, though when he was fighting, the announcer would shout Connor's name with excitement.

“I don’t know,” he said. He reached over and took hold of her hand while laying his head on her shoulder.

“It’s okay. You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to,” she said, putting her free hand on his face, holding his head to her.

Connor had no idea how to tell her anything without putting her in danger. He wanted to tell her everything, confess to her that he was an accomplice to murder, that he was an enforcer off the ice, hurting people at the command of the team’s owner. He needed to tell her, to make her understand that they couldn’t be together safely, that she needed to leave and forget she’d ever met him.

He couldn’t do any of those things. Dana was the only person in his life who seemed to give a damn about him as a person. Everyone else saw him as an employee or a hockey player, not a real person with real feelings and a life away from the rink. He needed her, and that knowledge made him afraid. Afraid that she was going to end up like Helen, or worse, like Ilinca.

“I want to...” he trailed off, not sure how to say anything, wondering if he was about to make a mistake. “I... I don’t know. Things are really messed up right now for me.”

“Is it me?” Dana asked. “Is there someone else?”

“God no,” Connor said, looking into her eyes while squeezing her hand tightly. “There’s no one else. Why would you think that?”

“Come on, Connor. I may not have grown up with hockey, but I’ve grown up around football and basketball. I know how women throw themselves at athletes. I’m not stupid. You’re the most popular player on the team, probably the most popular athlete

in the state. You can't tell me you haven't had offers from strange women for no other reason."

"I have," he said. "I've slept with enough of them, that's true. But that isn't it. It doesn't involve you."

Dana looked at him, trying to gauge if he was telling the truth. She had no real reason to not believe him. She liked him, liked him more than she wanted to. She'd been involved with a popular running back in high school, and it had ended in disaster, hurting her so badly that she swore she'd never date another athlete again.

"Your team?" she asked.

"Sort of," was all he would say. She could see the struggle on his face, but she didn't know what he was struggling with.

"It's okay," she said again, kissing him. "You can tell me if you want, or not. I'm not going to pry. I just want to make sure I'm not the one making you upset, and I want to make sure I'm not competing with someone else."

"You don't have any competition," he said, trying to smile.

"Good. I don't want you to give up whatever you are used to just to be with me. I just don't want to get hurt."

"Does that mean we are 'going steady?'" he asked.

"I don't know. Does it?"

"Don't answer my question with another question," he said with a grin. "Besides, I asked you first."

"I don't know," she said. "What are we doing?"

"Enjoying each other? Living life to the fullest?"

"God, Connor," she groaned, "that sounds like something

people on dating websites say.”

“Yeah, it is pretty corny.”

“So... what are we? Are we a couple? Or are we just sleeping together for now?”

“Do we have to be anything?” he asked, and was sorry the instant he said it. He could tell from the way her face screwed up that he’d hurt her feelings. “I don’t mean it that way,” he said.

“No, it’s fine. It really is. You’re right, we don’t have to be anything. As long as we’re both having fun, right? Are you having fun?”

“Not at this exact moment,” he answered. “Overall, yes. I... I really like you, Dana. But I don’t know if I’m what you want.”

“You’re what I want at the moment. You’re what I’ve wanted for the last few weeks. Do I have to want more than that right now?”

“No,” he admitted.

“Well then,” she said, kissing him on the neck and then the ear, “I really like you too. Are we going to be all right with just that?”

“Yeah,” he said, letting go of her hand and putting his hand under her shirt. She gave a soft moan in his ear. Within a few minutes they had made their way to the bedroom.

Connor woke to the ringing of his phone. For a moment he was trapped between the dream world and the real world, unsure of

which was which. When he didn't see Travis or Niklas, but felt Dana's naked body next to him, he understood that he'd been interrupted from a nightmare. He would gladly take being woken up in the middle of the night for any reason instead of having to go through the nightmare again.

"Hello?" he asked, wiping sleep from his eyes. The number that appeared on the screen before he answered was unfamiliar.

"Is this, uh, Connor?" the man on the other end asked.

Connor wasn't sure, but he thought he could hear someone crying in the background. He looked over at Dana, thinking for a moment it was her. He listened carefully, but she was breathing deeply. She hadn't even stirred at the sound of his phone.

"Who is this?" he asked, sure now that the crying was coming from wherever the man was calling him from.

"Uh... this is Dave at Gas-Mart. In Caldwell. You gave Jake Otto, the assistant manager, this number. He made us promise to call you if a woman ever showed up in trouble or asking for help. I think she's here. I mean, there's a woman here right now. I think she's the one you wanted to know about."

"What's her name?" Connor asked, looking over at Dana again. She'd come awake, her eyes reflecting the soft glow from his phone's screen.

"She says her name is Jera," Dave told him. "She looks pretty fucked up, dude."

"What do you mean?" Connor asked, getting off the bed and walking to the living room.

"It looks like someone beat the shit out of her. I asked her if

she wanted me to call the cops, but she just kept telling me to call you. She's kind of freaking out."

"Put her on the phone," Connor demanded. He could hear the clerk trying to hand her the phone, explaining to her that she needed to talk to Connor.

"Huh—hu—hello," Jera's voice came through the phone in hitching sobs. Connor didn't recognize it without the screeching and insulting that normally accompanied it.

"Jera?" Connor asked.

"Yuh—yes."

"Are you okay?"

"No!" wailed the girl on the other end of the line.

"Listen to me, Jera," Connor said. "I'll be there as soon as I can. Don't move, don't leave, okay?"

When she agreed to stay put, he told her to put the clerk back on the phone.

"Dave, right? Listen Dave. Don't let her leave, and don't let anyone see her. Whoever beat her, I don't want him getting hold of her if he happened to follow her, okay?"

"Listen, man," the clerk said, "I don't need any trouble. If some dude is looking to beat on her some more and comes in here, I'm just calling the cops. No offense, but I don't get paid enough to get between this chick and whoever did this to her."

"Dave, listen to me carefully," Connor instructed. "Put her in the office. Give her something to drink and eat if she wants it. If she wants cigarettes, give her that as well. Whatever you do, just keep her safe and out of sight. Trust me, I'll make sure you are

compensated. I'm sure Jake told you this was important."

"Yeah, he said you'd take care of us," the clerk said.

"That's right, I will. So give her whatever she wants, and I'll pay for it when I get there. And I'll definitely make sure you and your partner are taken care of for this little bit of trouble you've had to endure. Deal?"

"Sure man. She's missing her shirt though. She's just got on pants and a bra."

"Do you have any shirts in the store?" Connor asked him.

"Nah. We usually have some Boise State ones, but we got nothing right now."

"Do you shower every day, Dave?" Connor asked.

"What?"

"Do you shower every day? Yes or no."

"Yes."

"Good man. Give her your shirt."

"What the fuck, man? I ain't giving her my shirt."

"Dave, you have a nice blue Gas-Mart vest. Wear it until I get there. I'll bring you something better than a shirt, and I'll bring her a shirt so you can have yours back. Don't get cold feet on me. Give her your shirt. Do you understand?"

"Shit, man, I don't get paid enough for this."

"Is that a yes, Dave?"

"Yeah. Fuck it. I'll give her my shirt. I don't think I want it back though. No offense, mister, but she stinks like a trash can and she's dirty and just nasty."

"I understand. I'll bring you a clean white t-shirt and a

present. Now assure me you'll take care of her so I can get the fuck off the phone and on my way so we don't have to spend all night negotiating."

"I'll give her my shirt and anything she wants. Just hurry up. I could get fired for this."

"You won't get fired. Trust me."

Connor pushed the End button on the phone and walked back into the bedroom. He went to the closet and grabbed one of his old Boise Bomber jerseys from a couple of seasons ago. He snatched a San Jose Sharks t-shirt from a hangar as well, and went to the dresser near his bed to remove two white t-shirts. He pulled on his pants and one of the white t-shirts.

"Connor?" Dana asked from the bed.

Connor grabbed his wallet and stuffed it into his pocket. He sat on the bed next to Dana, laying a hand on her shoulder.

"Listen, can I borrow your car for a little bit?"

"What's the matter? What's wrong? Are you okay?" she asked, fully awake now.

"Yeah, I'm fine. But someone else is in trouble. A friend of mine. I have to go to Caldwell to get her."

"Her?"

"Look, it's this girl. She's... she's been in an abusive relationship. I told her to call me if she ever needed me to come get her. I need to go get her. She's been beaten pretty badly."

"Why doesn't she call the cops?" Dana asked.

"It's not that simple, and besides, the cops will just show up and take the guy to jail, which is fine, but they might take her to

jail too. They do that sometimes with domestic violence. But then the asshole will get out of jail and she'll still be stuck there."

"All right. Do you want me to go with you?"

Connor considered it for a moment. He was torn between taking her with him and leaving her at his apartment.

"Dana, can I drop you off at your place?" he asked, going with the third option.

"Why?" she asked, suspicious at this request.

"It's a long story. I'll tell you later. Do you trust me?"

"Are you fucking this girl on the side?"

"No. Look, I promise I'll explain it to you later. I'm not fucking her. I'm fucking you. But she's going to be really messed up. I don't want you to have to deal with any of it. I don't know what the dude has done to her, but I'm sure it isn't going to be pretty. I see violence all the time, but this is going to be uglier than a hockey fight. And just in case her asshole boyfriend is there, I don't want to risk you getting hurt."

"But why can't I stay here? She might need another female to make her feel comfortable."

"Dana, please. You aren't able to help, okay? I'm not trying to be an ass. I wouldn't ask you if it wasn't important. I swear I'll explain it when I get her back here safely. Please?"

Dana sat up and began to get dressed, looking unhappy and worried at the same time. Connor wasn't sure if she was jealous or just scared that he would get a phone call in the dead of night to go pick up a woman who had been beaten up. He wanted her to ride with him, and he even wanted Dana to be here at his apartment to

help console Jera when they got back, but he didn't want to explain how he knew her. More importantly, he didn't want to chance that Jera would become hysterical and run her mouth about things like meth, Larry, money, or Ojacarcu.

Dana was important to him. Too important to put at risk. All he could think about as he pulled on his socks and shoes was Ilinca and Helen. *Damn Petre and his stories*, he thought. At the same time, he was grateful that Petre had told him. He didn't want Dana and his other life crossing paths at all.

CHAPTER 15

Connor pulled into the parking space in front of the glass doors of the Gas-Mart. He braced himself for the blast of frigid air that would assault him the instant he opened the car door. He counted to three and pulled the handle, a razor-sharp wind immediately slicing right through his clothes as if he were naked. The ten feet he had to walk before entering the double glass doors felt as if he had been wandering the arctic wastes.

A fat clerk with a chinstrap beard and hipster glasses stood behind the counter, staring at Connor as if he might pull a sawed-off shotgun from under his coat and start blasting. The other clerk, obvious by his bare chest under the bright blue vest, was just coming out of the office. The shirtless man looked like he was in a waking nightmare, glancing nervously at his partner and then to Connor.

“Are you Dave?” Connor asked the shirtless one.

“Yes. Thank God you’re here. She’s going crazy,” Dave said, turning around and opening the office door.

The other clerk gave Connor a hard look as he walked around the end of the counter and into the office. Jera sat in the single rolling office chair, a black t-shirt covering her upper half, a filthy pair of khaki pants covering the rest of her. She had no socks or shoes, and her feet looked like she’d walked a few blocks over sharp, cold rocks. Connor walked up and put his hand on her shoulder, making her flinch in fear.

“Jera,” he said to her. “Jera. Listen to me. I’m going to go

back to the car and get you a shirt. Don't move, okay?"

Jera nodded her head, tears mixing with either makeup or dirt, or both, before rolling off her cheeks and onto her dirty pants. Connor gave Dave a half-smile as he backed out of the office and went out to the car. He grabbed the jersey, the t-shirts, and an extra jacket that he'd pulled from his closet at the last moment. The second clerk gave him another hard look as he entered the store and walked back to the office.

"Put this on." he told her, handing her the Sharks t-shirt.

She hesitated, looking at Dave then to him. Connor looked away. When Dave didn't look away from her, Connor nudged him with his elbow and pointed out into the store. Dave understood, and turned his gaze away from the woman. She removed his black t-shirt and put the Sharks shirt on. Connor felt cloth on his arm and turned back to see her handing him the clerk's shirt.

Connor grabbed it from her, handing her the jacket. He turned to Dave and gave the clerk his black t-shirt back, along with a clean white t-shirt, and the Boise Bombers jersey. Dave's eyes lit up at the jersey, a smile blooming on his face when he finally recognized Connor.

"Hey, man, it *is* you!" Dave exclaimed.

"Yeah, but do me a favor, Dave," Connor said. "You never saw me. Neither did your friend out there who keeps giving me a look like he wants to rumble."

Dave looked down and saw a wad of hundreds in Connor's hand being extended to him.

"Ryan? Nah, he's not a badass," Dave said. "He's kind of

freaked out like me. This is kind of a shit neighborhood. We deal with assholes and dope heads all night. He's just afraid some jerkoff is going to come strolling in with a shotgun or something and waste all of us over your girlfriend."

"She's not my girlfriend," Connor said, glancing down at Jera. Her face was turned away from them, her hands rummaging through the empty pockets of the jacket. "She's just a friend that's in trouble. Loser boyfriend, you know the type."

"Yeah. We see 'em all the time. Fuckheads with fists and their idiot girlfriends who apparently are okay with being a punching bag. No offense," Dave said to Jera who had looked up at him.

Connor put his arm around Dave's shoulders and led him out of the office. He gave the clerk a slight push away from him, indicating he should stay behind the counter. Connor walked to the other side and faced them both.

"Ryan, Dave. I appreciate you calling me." He took out another wad of bills and handed it to the fat clerk. Ryan stared at the money for a moment until Dave gave him an elbow. "Now, what do I owe you? Did she ask for anything to eat or drink? Smokes?"

"Nah, it's cool," Ryan said, counting the money before stuffing it into his pockets. He looked behind him at the security camera and gave it a frown.

"Don't sweat that," Connor assured him. "Jake and I will make sure no one ever sees it. The recorder will have a temporary malfunction. You know how technology is." Connor smiled at them

both to let them know nothing would come back on them.

“I’m sorry if I was a dick on the phone, man,” Dave said, pulling the jersey over his new white t-shirt before putting his arms through the dark blue Gas-Mart vest.

“I understand. Some crazy bitch comes in all beat up at three in the morning, and all you got is this note that says to call some guy. Especially this being a bad neighborhood and all. But there’s two more things I need you to do for me.”

Both clerks nodded at him to go on.

“First thing, like I told you, Dave, is that you never saw me. It was some other guy. If anyone asks you where that jersey came from, tell them you met me after a game and I gave it to you. Here, give me a sharpie and I’ll sign it so it won’t be a hard lie to sell. Ryan, if you want a jersey, just tell Jake, and I’ll get you one too.

“Speaking of Jake, make sure you let him know that you had to call me. Make sure he knows to call me so I can get with him and make sure that security tape has an accident, and to take care of him like I took care of you guys. I’m going to go get her and take her somewhere safe. Got it?”

“Yeah, we got it,” Dave said, still caressing the jersey.

Connor walked back to the office. Jera was staring at the floor, her fingers absently playing with the zipper on the front of the jacket. He coughed lightly to let her know he was there. He finally took a good look at her face in the bright office lights. He was disturbed at the damage Larry or someone else had done to her. He was sure it had been Larry, but he’d put that away until after he got her away from the convenience store.

“Come on. Let’s get out of here,” he said.

She didn’t say anything as she stood up. When she wobbled a bit, Connor reached out to grab her elbow. Jera flinched again, this time so hard she stumbled and almost fell down.

“Okay. I won’t touch you. But let’s go,” he said, as he backed out of the office.

The two clerks watched them walk to the door, saying nothing. The rush of cold air on Connor as he opened the door made him shiver. Jera acted as if she hadn’t noticed it. He escorted her to the passenger door and opened it for her. When she sat down, he shut the door and got in on his side. He shifted into Reverse to back out when she put a hand on his arm.

“What?” he asked.

“I need cigarettes,” she said, not looking at him.

“What kind?”

“Hamptons. One hundreds.”

“Got it.”

Connor shut the car off and took the key with him. Ryan gave him a funny look as he paid for the smokes. He glanced over at the office doorway and saw Dave spraying air freshener in a giant cloud inside the office.

“No offense again, man, but she fucking reeked. Hopefully you can get her to take a shower,” Dave said.

“None taken,” Connor said as he turned and walked back out of the store.

He knew all too well how the woman smelled.

“Where are you taking me?” Jera asked as he turned onto the freeway ramp.

“I don’t know. Probably my place for right now until I can find something better for you,” he answered.

“Are you going to rape me?” she asked, staring at his face.

“What? No. Why would I rape you?”

“That’s right,” she said, her voice getting stronger. “You’re a faggot. You probably only have sex with your big faggot friend.”

“Listen, lady,” Connor growled, his anger beginning to flare. “Enough with that shit. I get it that you hate me. But you called me for help. I’m doing you a favor. I have no doubt you’ll crawl back to that piece of shit, probably before tomorrow evening. But let’s get some rules out in the open or I will just turn around and drop you back off at your boyfriend’s house.”

“Fuck you,” she said.

“Yeah. Not going to happen. So lose the mouth for a while. I’m not gay. You know it, so stop being a bitch. I’m going to take you to my apartment. The first thing you are going to do is take a fucking shower. You stink like you’ve been sleeping in a bed made of dogshit. I’m not letting you sleep anywhere in my apartment until you clean up. I have extra clothes you can wear.

“And don’t steal anything from me. I don’t have much, but keep your hands off it. I’ll feed you, I’ll help you clean up those cuts and bruises, and you can sleep. You’ll be safe. I’m not going to rape you. I’m not going to put my hands anywhere near you.

Understand?”

Jera nodded her head. Her fingers removed the strip of cellophane from the cigarette pack, then the bright foil cover inside. She pulled a cigarette out and looked around the console for the car’s built-in lighter.

“No. No way. You aren’t smoking in this car. You can wait until we get to my place. And no smoking in my apartment. You want to smoke, take your ass outside. That shit stinks and I don’t feel like dealing with it.”

“I need it,” she said, her voice turning into the whining, screeching noise he hated.

“Need it later. Remember who is helping you. Don’t shit all over me or you’ll be right back where you started.”

“Why are you such an asshole?” she asked as she tried to stuff the cigarette back into the pack.

“Because tweakers get on my nerves, and because this isn’t my car. Unlike you, I’m not an ungrateful piece of shit who has no respect for anything.”

“I’m not a tweaker,” Jera said.

“Yeah, and I’m Don Cherry.”

“Who’s Don Cherry?” she asked, confused.

“No one. Shut up and be thankful you have a safe place to stay for the night.” Connor turned the radio on to the classic rock station and they drove in silence back to Boise.

“Jesus,” Connor said, wiping the caked blood from her face. “He really beat the shit out of you, didn’t he?”

“No,” Jera said.

“Bullshit. Don’t lie to me. I’ve been in a lot of fights in my life, but this... this is uncontrolled rage.”

He wet the washrag again and wrung it out, watching the bloody water swirl down the drain. Jera sat on the toilet in nothing but her dirty panties and even dirtier bra. She made no effort cover herself. Connor thought she could pass for a wooden mannequin. Her foul odor made him gag and retch every minute or two as he tried to clean her face up.

Jera’s already dark eyes were black and purple, the right one swollen. He’d cleaned the crusted blood from her nostrils, and it took three attempts to get the blood from her split lips. The top lip had a cut right under her nose, the kind that looked familiar to Connor. It was the same type of cut that came from a fist hitting it and forcing it into the bottom edge of her upper teeth. The lower lip was bleeding from both sides. The left cut looked like she’d bit almost through it, the right another instance of a fist hitting her with force.

She almost screamed at the stinging pain of the water and the washcloth rubbing on the wounds. Connor had dealt with dozens, if not hundreds of cuts on his lips before, and knew how painful they were. Just breathing air over them sometimes made him want to cry out in pain. Jera’s face was a mass of bruises and cuts. Connor couldn’t help but notice her arms and legs weren’t in much better shape.

“All right,” he said, standing up and throwing the rag into the sink. “I think I got most of the dirt out of them. Get in the shower, and don’t get out until you smell like you know your way around a bar of soap. I’ll bring a clean towel and some clothes. They’ll be big, but I don’t keep women’s clothes around. You’ll have to go commando and without a bra for tonight as well. It’s useless to shower and then put either of those back on.”

Jera said nothing, only stared at him. He walked past her and reached in through the shower curtain to turn the water on, waiting for it to get hot before leaving the bathroom. She waited almost a minute before getting into the shower, Connor finally hearing the curtain rattle while he rooted through his dresser to find a pair of shorts for her.

After he’d found a fresh pair of socks, his tightest pair of shorts, his tightest t-shirt, and a clean bath towel, he peeked around the doorway to make sure she was still in the shower. He’d seen her naked before, but that was a different time, under different circumstances. After the trauma she’d gone through tonight, he didn’t want to make her any more uncomfortable.

He laid the clothes on the edge of the sink and the towel on the toilet lid. He bent down to grab her panties and bra, disgusted by the slimy, cold feel of them. He was sure this was the first time in his life he’d been grossed out by a thong and a designer bra. He walked to the kitchen and threw them into the sink. When he heard the shower turn off, he plugged the bottom of the sink and filled it with hot water.

As he soaked her undergarments and squeezed them out

repeatedly, he began to wonder why he'd bothered to go get her, why he'd even bothered to give the Gas-Mart employees his number and instructions to call him. Jera was exactly as Petre said: trouble. Even once she showered, he had no doubt her personality would be as dirty, as nasty as always. At least she wouldn't stink his apartment up and make him call in the steam cleaners to rid his recliner of whatever her grimy body might leave behind.

After a few more minutes of soaking and squeezing and rinsing, he decided that her panties and bra were as clean as he was going to get them without either burning them or throwing them into a washing machine. He wouldn't have a problem burning them. When he turned to go to his bedroom for a hangar to dry them on, Jera stood in the doorway, watching him.

Connor said nothing, edging by her to get into his closet for the hangar. When he came out, she continued to stare at him. He draped the underwear over the hangar and took them into the bathroom to hang them from the shower curtain rod. When he came back out, she hadn't moved, her eyes still locked on him.

"What?" he asked.

"Are you going to make me fuck you?"

Connor looked her for a moment. Her short, black hair was still wet and glistened in the bedroom light. His clothes barely fit her, almost comically too large. He was a touch over six feet tall, a muscular two hundred thirty pounds. Jera was lucky if she tipped the scales at a hundred and fifteen, and she couldn't be any taller than a couple inches over five feet. He could see her nipples trying to poke through the white t-shirt, making his mind wander

uncomfortably.

“No. I don’t want to fuck you. I have a girlfriend. Not that you aren’t attractive,” he added, somehow hoping to make her feel better. *Idiot!* he thought. *That’s exactly what a woman wants to hear after being beaten and probably raped.*

She was a beautiful young woman underneath all of the bruises. Her skin wasn’t as dark as he had thought at first. She looked like she was either of Middle Eastern descent, or possibly Mexican or some other Latin or South American country. Connor wasn’t an expert on genetics or nationalities, having grown up in an extremely caucasian area of the world, and Idaho wasn’t a hotbed of racial diversity to expand his experiences. He studied her for a few moments, deciding that without the thick coating of sweat and dirt and whatever else had attached itself to her, he could easily see why men would pay to have sex with her. As long as she didn’t open her mouth and let them hear her voice. Connor wondered if she had a different voice she used when she was with one of her tricks.

“You can either sleep in the recliner, or you can sleep on the bed with me,” he said. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to touch you. You get one side, I get the other. But if you sleep on the recliner, you will have to cover up with a coat or something. I only have the comforter that’s on the bed.”

She gave him a suspicious look. “I’m hungry,” she said as she looked away. “And I need a cigarette.”

“You can go outside and smoke. I have a pair of sweats you can try to wear so you don’t freeze. But don’t use my coat. I hate

the smell of cigarettes. I'll bring something to eat back with me."

"Where are you going?" she asked, suspicious again.

"I'm taking my friend's car back. She has to get to work in the morning."

"You don't have a car of your own?"

"No. Are you going to quiz me all night, or are you going to smoke?"

"Give me the sweats," she said, her voice demanding.

"Here," he said, tossing her a pair that had been on the floor near his bed. "Don't steal anything. I won't be gone very long. If you aren't here when I get back, that's up to you, but I won't save you again. If I get back and you aren't here and neither is my shit, I'm just going to have you arrested. What you do from there is up to you, but I won't help you."

"Fuck you," she said as she put the baggy sweatpants on.

"I'm not a thief."

"And I'm not a hockey player," he grunted, grabbing the keys to Dana's car from the counter as well as his own apartment keys. "Just be normal for half an hour and I'll feed you. What do you want?"

"A burger. And a milkshake. And some fries. And a cherry pie."

"Anything else, Your Highness?" he asked, his hand on the doorknob.

"A fat rock to smoke and a glass pipe," she replied.

Connor stared at her for another minute, wondering if he'd made a huge mistake rescuing a dope addict. He wondered if it was

an even bigger mistake to leave her alone in his apartment for half an hour.

“Funny. Don’t steal anything,” he said again before he closed the door behind him.

He expected her and his television to be gone when he returned. Dana had been unhappy about the whole situation, but at least she’d already been awake, so he didn’t have to worry about that being added on top of everything else. She questioned him the whole time as she drove him through the Jack In The Box drive-thru, and all the way back to his apartment.

Dana’s nose had wrinkled when she first sat in the car, Jera’s stink somehow clinging to the upholstery. Connor had tried to air the car out on his way to her place, the windows down and the freezing wind blowing through, making him shiver even with the heater on high. He’d apologized at least twenty times, and Dana had accepted it, but she wasn’t happy.

He figured it was because of the fact that Jera was a woman. He and Dana weren’t officially dating, according to them both, but the amount of time they had spent together over the last month or so said otherwise. Connor had tried to explain to her about Jera, her abusive boyfriend, and why he’d had to go get her, but because he left out all of the details of how he knew her and why he’d picked her up, his explanations sounded ridiculous. They sounded like lies. The more he tried to explain, the more they sounded like he was

hiding something from her.

Connor thanked her and kissed her on the mouth before getting out of the car when they reached his apartment. It was like kissing a cold statue. Dana gave him a short smile, but it didn't look genuine to him. She drove off, and left him standing on the sidewalk in front of his apartment, holding a quickly cooling fast food meal in a paper bag that he'd bought for a tweaker. A tweaker who had probably already robbed him blind and was long gone. He couldn't help feeling like a complete asshole.

Connor opened the apartment door and walked in to Jera sitting in his recliner, a glass of water in one hand, the remote in the other. He handed her the bag and the shake, exchanging it for the remote and the glass of water. He dumped the water in the sink and changed the channel to the NHL Network to catch the pro scores, knowing they wouldn't have changed since he had tuned in earlier in the night before he and Dana had made their way into the bedroom.

The sound of her wolfing down food was unpleasant. Connor couldn't remember ever being as hungry as she seemed to be. He almost laughed when she sucked on the shake's straw for too long and was rewarded with a cold headache. He knew the feeling well. He wiped the smile from his face before it turned into a laugh. She was a junkie, a dangerous one who was going to end up getting him in trouble. He was sure of it.

Jera balled up the paper sack with the remnants of the meal in it, sucked on the straw until a gurgling noise came from the cup, then stood up and let out a belch that would make anyone in the

team's locker room proud. He held out his hand and she gave him the trash.

"I have an extra toothbrush that hasn't been opened yet," he told her as he tossed the trash in the garbage can. He'd bought a couple for Dana, unsure of which kind she would prefer.

"Okay," Jera said.

They walked into the bathroom together. He handed her an unopened toothbrush and watched her brush her teeth. Connor was amazed her teeth were still in good condition. A bit yellow, a few of them beginning to snaggle and twist, but nowhere near the wreck Larry's mouth was. He wondered if she brushed her teeth as often as she showered.

"I have to sleep," he told her after she'd rinsed her mouth out. "You can stay up and watch TV, just keep it down. I have practice in the morning."

Jera didn't say anything, only turned to go back into the living room. Connor sighed and turned out the lights in the bedroom, stripped down to his boxers, and slid into a bed that felt cold enough to be a slab at the morgue. He lay on his back for a while, thinking of Dana, thinking of Jera, thinking of the story Petre had told him about Helen and Ilinca. Thinking of Larry's messed-up face, Dracul's hard eyes and hateful expression, and even Coach Lamoureux's disapproving scowl when he screwed up in a game or at practice.

He'd just started to drift off when he heard her enter the bedroom. Connor rolled onto his side, facing the edge of the bed, leaving her the majority of it to sleep on. He felt her slip under the

covers. Both of them clung to their edge of the bed, a giant gap in the middle separating them.

He woke up sometime later, her naked body pressed into his back, one arm slung over his chest. He didn't move, didn't alert her that he had woken up. He wanted to push her off, tell her to get back on her side of the bed, but something in him refused to issue the command. As he fought within himself about it, he felt the back of his neck growing damp and realized she was crying softly.

CHAPTER 16

“So what are you going to do with her?” Dana asked.

“I don’t know,” Connor answered. “I haven’t thought that part out yet.”

“Does she have any family?” Dana pressed.

“I don’t know.”

“Any friends?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you even know her name?” Dana asked, getting frustrated.

“Jera,” Connor answered.

“Jera what?”

“Jera...” Connor thought for a few seconds. “I don’t know.”

“Connor, listen to me,” Dana said, leaning forward across the cafe table. “I get it that we aren’t ‘boyfriend and girlfriend’ in the official sense, so I’m not trying to butt into your business like we are. But I’ve slept with you more than a few times, and we’ve been seeing each other for a couple of months.

“I really like you, and I want to keep liking you. I like what we are doing. I like that there’s no pressure, no expectations. But I’m having a bit of a problem with what has suddenly happened. I don’t have a problem with you rescuing a woman who was being abused. That’s not noble, that’s having compassion and giving a damn about someone who truly needs it. It’s also just one more thing I like about you, that you aren’t your hockey persona, a ruthless thug who beats on people for money.”

Connor felt uncomfortable. According to what he did for Ojacarcu, he was exactly his hockey persona, intimidating and even physically harming people for money.

“But the thing I’m having a problem with,” she continued, “is that you’ve rescued an abused woman who is a drug addict, and you don’t even know her last name. Not only that, but you’ve left her alone in your apartment. I’m not saying she’s a typical drug addict who is going to rip you off to buy more drugs. Maybe she appreciates what you’ve done enough to not lift any of your things.

“The other problem I’m having is how you know this woman. That kind of goes along with being hurt that you wouldn’t take me with you, or even leave me at your apartment while you went to get her, so I could maybe try to help her when you brought her back. I know, I shouldn’t be upset about that. I’m just the girl you are sleeping with and I probably don’t know the whole story. I get it that you didn’t want her to freak out. Or me to freak out.

“But this secretive shit has got to stop if you want me to stick around. You can take that as jealousy if you want. That’s stupid, but if it helps, fine. But a guy I really like, a guy I’m sleeping with exclusively, a guy that I am spending a hell of a lot of my free time with lately, has a drug addict calling him in the middle of the night to rescue her from what? A drug dealer? My point is, I don’t like being lied to, and I don’t like not knowing what is going on.”

Dana stared at Connor for a little while, waiting to see if he would say anything. Connor’s face was impassive as he tried to formulate answers that would relieve her worries without letting her know something that might put her in danger. Something that

might put him in danger. He had no doubt if he confessed to being an accomplice to murder, no matter how unwilling, she would go to the police. She would probably do it to help him, worried that whoever killed the victim would eventually kill him.

Dana grew tired of waiting for him to say something. She grabbed her coat and stood up quickly, leaning down to kiss Connor on the cheek.

“I guess that’s my answer. I’m sorry, Connor, I have to go,” she said, turning to walk away.

Connor reached out and grabbed her sweater, tugging on it lightly to keep her from leaving.

“Wait,” he said. “Please.” She looked back at him, her eyes wet. “Come on, please?”

She stared at him for a moment before sitting down across from him again. The waitress buzzed by, asking if they wanted anything else, frowning at Dana’s attempt to hold back tears, swinging her head around to give Connor a nasty look.

“Look,” Connor began after the waitress moved on, “I’ll tell you. I don’t want you to walk away. I don’t want to stop whatever we are doing. I... I don’t want you to leave. But what I’m going to tell you...”

“It’s okay,” she said, reaching across the table to grab his hand. “I’m a big girl.”

“I don’t even know where to begin,” he said, wrapping his fingers around hers.

Dana smiled. “From the beginning, as cliché as it sounds.”

“I play hockey,” he began, “but when I’m not playing

hockey, I work for the owner on the side.” Dana nodded, encouraging him to go on. “I do... jobs that are suited to my skills, I guess you could say. Mr. Ojacarcu, he’s a businessman, as everyone says. He has his hands in a lot of business ventures. Some of these ventures are less than legal in some ways.”

Connor wanted to tell her enough to satisfy her curiosity. Curiosity that was more than justified because of their relationship, and the growing emotions involved. He tried to keep it vague enough to not let her know anything that would cause her to run to the police, or even as selfish as he felt for it, nothing that would cause her to run away from him. He was sure she would anyway once he told her.

“You know, some guy will borrow money from him, and the guy will forget to pay, or maybe refuse to pay. Mr. Ojacarcu sends me out to let the guy know he needs to pay up right now.”

“So the owner is a loan shark?” Dana asked, not quite believing it. She’d heard the name many times over the years. Costache Ojacarcu was a bit of a colorful character who was chummy with the city council and other influential businessmen in the valley.

“Kind of,” Connor answered. Best to leave it at that, he thought. “Sometimes when these guys don’t pay, I have to... rough them up a little.”

“The owner of your hockey team pays you to beat up people who borrow money and don’t pay it back?” she asked. It sounded straight out of a movie.

“Something like that,” Connor said. “One of these guys... he

owed the boss some money.” Connor left out the part about Larry being a meth dealer who moved product for Ojacarcu. “He sent me out to collect the money. When I showed up, his girlfriend was there with him. Real nasty people, and I’m not sure why the boss would loan him money honestly.”

Connor hoped he wouldn’t have to eat the lie. He then hoped he wouldn’t end up screwing up the story that had branched away from reality with the inclusion of that lie. He wasn’t good at lying to anyone, but he’d always heard to mix truth and lie together to make it more believable.

“This girl, Jera, she was pretty beat up looking when I met her the first time. And she had a leather collar around her neck, the kind you can hook a leash to. If she hadn’t been all banged up, I would have thought the two were just into some weird fetish, or maybe it was a fashion statement. She was dirty and bruised up and her boyfriend is a skinny little guy who probably hasn’t showered in months either.

“I had to see him regularly for a while to make sure he kept paying. Every time I’d show up and Jera was there, she looked like she’d just had the shit kicked out of her. I finally told the little guy he better stop beating her up or I would take care of him. One time I got her alone for a minute and gave her my number and told her to call me if she ever needed to escape.

“I couldn’t take seeing her all messed up every time, and always with that collar around her throat. I’m pretty sure the guy used it in a way that wasn’t just some sex game. I guess she’d finally had enough and called me. When I picked her up, she was

in bad shape. I didn't want you to see it, and I didn't want to tell you this is what I do on the side."

"I'm not even sure I believe this," Dana said, looking like she might get up from the booth again. "Where does the dope come in?"

"The dope?" he asked.

"Yeah. You said she was a drug addict. Where does all that fit in."

"Oh," he said, angry at himself for slipping and giving up that information at some point. He tried to think of how to tie it in without it tying to his boss. "She's just a junkie. But that doesn't mean she deserves to get beat on."

"Bullshit, Connor," Dana said as she stood up. "I told you not to lie to me."

Connor reached out once more and grabbed her by the elbow as she started to walk away. Dana jerked her elbow, trying to free herself from his grip, but his hand was like a vice, strong from a lifetime of holding on to a hockey stick that others constantly tried to slash and whack out of his hands.

"Stop," he said. "Okay. Fuck. Just sit down."

Dana attempted to escape his grasp again. "Connor, let me go, or I will scream."

"Dana, sit down," he said softly. "I'm sorry. I don't want to tell you this, but I guess I have to if it will keep things from ending like this."

She glared at him, but he wouldn't let go of her arm. She shuffled backwards again and sat down across from him. He let go

of her elbow, watching her to see if it was a ruse and she would bolt.

“Don’t fucking lie to me, Connor.”

“Okay. I won’t. But you have to keep this to yourself. Not because I’m protecting myself or even Ojacarcu. But because it will protect you.”

She gave him a dubious look.

“He’s more than a loan shark. He’s what you would call a gangster. Not like a rapper, but like an old-time gangster. A modern day Al Capone. Maybe even mafia, though he isn’t Italian or Russian, or even Jewish.”

“Ojacarcu? The owner of the Bombers?” she asked, unable to accept it, to believe it.

“Yes. He’s a businessman, but he’s more than that. This guy I had to go see, where I met Jera, he’s a meth dealer. He got behind, smoked up his profits or whatever, I don’t know. I don’t get told any of those details. I just get told to go make sure the boss gets his money. It’s real mobster shit when it comes to money and getting paid.

“I went to get the money, and Jera was there. Beat up and all that. The collar around her neck, it has something to do with her being his slave. Sexual, but not in a kinky way. She’s some kind of prostitute. And a meth addict. This guy, he pimps her out. I don’t know if it’s to make money on the side, or to help pay for the drugs they take. The drugs that come from my boss.”

“Jesus, Connor,” Dana said. “How the hell did you get involved in this?”

“I don’t know honestly,” he answered. “When I was let go by the Admirals, I was on my way home. I got a call from Costache Ojacarcu, saying he’d pay me the league maximum to come and play for his team. He assured me I’d make even more than that from being molded into a fan favorite, and that he owned other businesses that he needed *help* with.”

“So you came to play here. How do you go from that to breaking fingers? Did he just tell you one day, ‘hey, Connor, you want to make some extra cash? I got this guy you need to go beat up that owes me drug money?’”

“No, it didn’t start out like that,” Connor said, unhappy to remember any of it. “At first it was ‘go pick up this package on your day off’ and ‘go give this guy his money.’ Innocent stuff. I thought I was just running errands for a while, and the pay was double the two hundred fifty dollars a week I was getting paid to play hockey. Each time, I’d make five hundred bucks for picking up a box and bringing it to the office or delivering an envelope to someone.”

“And you didn’t think to ask why you were getting paid double your salary for each of these jobs?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I’m sure some part of me did, but I was happy to be playing hockey and making almost a thousand extra a week, and in cash at that. I thought at first it was just what he’d promised me, I’d be the has-been star who was getting a new start, and since the league only allows us to get paid two-fifty per week, this was my extra, under-the-table pay.

“But then about a year in, he asked me if I would be willing

to do a bit more hands-on work. When he explained that I simply had to go with one of his employees to see someone who hadn't paid back a loan, I didn't even think anything of it. The guy I had to go with, he was dressed in a pretty snappy business suit, so I thought he was a lawyer, and maybe the client was the kind who might get nasty. I thought I was protecting his lawyer.

"But the 'lawyer' turned out to be another Romanian guy, a henchman I guess. We went to this client's business out in Meridian, and the Romanian told the guy that he was to pay today, and pay this much each week until it was paid, or I was going to put his face through one of the glass cases. The client looked like he was going to piss himself. I must have scared him, as he opened the register and gave Vadim the money. He never took his eyes off me, either.

"I wasn't happy about it, and when I told Mr. Ojacarcu I hadn't signed on for that kind of thing, he laughed and handed me an envelope with five grand in it. Told me it was my pay for the job and a bonus for being professional about it. I suppose I could have opted out right then, walked away from him and hockey, but I wouldn't get to play anywhere professionally if I did that. He had my contract, and if I broke the contract, he could get me barred from any league in North America, and the European leagues as well."

"Why didn't you just go to the police then? That would probably have voided the contract, right?" Dana asked, fully engrossed in his story now.

"I could have. But I'd get blacklisted from the pro leagues,

and I'm in the UPHL, just about the bottom of the barrel in terms of professional hockey. The character clauses in the contracts forbid players from doing illegal things, and extortion and intimidation are pretty illegal. But that wasn't what made me keep my mouth shut. It wasn't the money either.

"The money was great, but I'd just spent an evening with a huge Romanian thug who told another man he'd have me put the guy's face through a solid glass showcase. If Mr. Ojacarcu had a guy like Vadim who could go around making threats that would get anyone else arrested, what did that mean for me? Would he send Vadim and maybe four or five other guys after me?"

"I'm sorry," she said, understanding a little better how deeply entrenched Connor had become.

"It's not your fault, don't be sorry," he said, reaching out and taking her hand this time. "It's my fault. Once I knew what was really up, I should have left. But I couldn't let go of hockey, and I didn't think me just being there as a threat was really all that bad for the money I was able to make.

"And then I started following through on some of those threats that Vadim and this other guy Petre would make to clients. I figured these guys, these *clients*, they knew what kind of arrangement they were getting into, borrowing from a guy like Ojacarcu instead of doing formal loans through a bank. After a while, it wasn't just clients that weren't paying loans. I was roughing up men and women who crossed him or stole from him, all kinds of things.

"But I always told myself that these people had made a

conscious choice to enter into these agreements or commit these thefts against the guy who was paying me. I never had to beat up a kid, and I never hit anyone in front of a kid either. That was, and still is, my line. But everyone else? Maybe they didn't deserve it, but I had my job and they had their responsibilities."

"How is it," she asked, "that you are the guy who has fans screaming his name, but no one recognizes you? It seems kind of stupid to send out the face of the team to intimidate people."

"It seems that way," he agreed. "But there's a couple of reasons why no one says anything. The main reason is that no one other than a hockey fan recognizes me. I do some commercials and ads for sure, but how often do you pay attention to a commercial on television at two in the morning? Boise is a great town, but it isn't a hockey town. If I played football for the Broncos, everyone in the state would recognize me, I'm sure. And then there's the other hockey team, the Steelheads. They're in the ECHL, a few rungs up the ladder from the UPHL. They have a couple guys who are ten times more famous or recognizable than me.

"Another reason is the people I typically have to visit not only aren't hockey fans, but they're shady characters. Thieves, drug dealers, things like that. They don't want any attention drawn to them. And they don't want any more attention from Mr. Ojacarcu. Keeping their mouths shut about the possibility of recognizing me is more important than having one of the boss' thugs show up and actually stuff their head through a plate glass case."

"God, Connor," Dana said. "You got yourself in deep."

She squeezed his hand. He looked in her eyes, trying to see if she felt sorry for him or felt repulsed by him. He wasn't sure he could deal with either. She didn't say anything else, the silence growing as they stared at each other, Connor barely able to look her in the eyes.

"Yeah," he said, breaking the silence. "I did. And it kept getting worse, but I didn't want to see it. I like being the tough guy on the team, even if I only get a couple of shifts per game. I guess I miss having the glory I had when I was growing up and everyone in hockey talked about me, cheered me on."

"Is it really like that? Like a cult? From when you were five?"

Connor laughed. "I don't think I've ever heard hockey referred to as a 'cult' before, but that's kind of a good descriptor if you are Canadian. I had skates on my feet when I was three, by five I was scoring goals in Initiation leagues, and by ten I was scoring two hundred points a season against kids my own age. At thirteen I was playing Bantam and still scoring two hundred points a season against kids a year or two older than me.

"My name came up in every newspaper and all of the sports networks. Hockey to Canada is like football to Texas. It's the national sport. Hockey Night In Canada is like Monday Night Football, except it seems like the entire country watches hockey. When they started talking about me being the next Gretzky or Lemieux, that drove up the hype. I was tearing up the junior leagues, and had won a gold medal in the World Juniors at sixteen and again at seventeen.

“I was going to be the number one pick in the NHL draft when I turned eighteen, according to Don Cherry and everyone else. We were playing Sweden in the World Juniors, trying to get to the gold medal game, when I had the accident. From what I read and saw on YouTube and everywhere else, it was like the Queen had died when it happened. It was an ugly accident, but the entire country of Canada seemed to take it personally that I almost died. They weren’t mad at the kid from Sweden. They were mad at God, I guess, or whatever hockey gods some prayed to.”

“So, it’s like a cult then,” Dana said in awe.

“I suppose,” Connor said with a laugh. “I was part of that cult too. I wanted to be Gretzky, Lemieux, Yzerman, all the NHL stars I idolized growing up. Every time I was on the ice, I was Gretzky in game seven of the finals, scoring the winning goal. No different than American kids growing up pretending to be Jordan making the winning basket or Rice catching the winning touchdown pass.”

“What are you going to do?” Dana asked.

“About what?”

“About this woman? About what you do for the owner.”

“Jera... I don’t know. I’m trying to think of something. I can’t send her back there. She can’t live with me. I guess I’m winging it for the moment, but I have to keep her safe until I can think of something. No one deserves to be treated like that. As for Ojacarcu, for right now I’m going to do nothing. I can’t. He owns my contract until the end of next season.

“Like I said, if I quit, I’ll never play hockey again. I’m more

afraid of what he'd do beyond hockey though. I'm not really afraid of him if we were locked in a room together, but he has muscle working for him, as corny as that sounds. And he plays for keeps. He's not some two-bit wanna-be. I think he has connections to the old country. Scary connections.

"I'm hoping that in another year I can get traded, but I doubt he'll let me go that easily. Maybe I'll get 'injured' and can't play. When my contract is up, he's going to pressure me into re-signing, but I'm going to tell him I'm tired of hockey, that I want to go home to Macklin. I'm not real hopeful he's going to allow that."

"So you're going to just keep beating people up until then?" Dana didn't like his choices at all.

"What else can I do? Now I also have to protect you," he said.

"What do you mean, protect me? I'm not part of this at all."

"For now. If Ojacarcu finds out that I've told you any of this, you'll end up getting a visit from one of these Romanians. I can guess how it will go, and it won't be good for you. They don't seem to care what gender you are when they hurt people."

"Goddammit, Connor," she said, pulling her hand away.

"I'm sorry, Dana," he said, reaching for her across the table, getting only empty air. "I told you I didn't want to say anything, that it would only end up being dangerous for you." Connor's mind kept going back to Ilinca and Helen.

"You shouldn't have told me then!" she said, louder than she wanted to. "Why didn't you just let me walk away?"

"I can't," he said, looking down at the table. "I don't want

you to walk away. You're the only normal thing in my life."

CHAPTER 17

“This is a very disturbing accusation, Connor,” Mr. Ojacarcu said.

“Which part of it is disturbing?” Connor asked him. “The part about that asshole forcing this girl to wear a collar and be a prostitute? Or the part about him beating the hell out of her, or letting other men beat the hell out of her?”

Dracul stepped forward, his feet silent on the plush red carpeting of Ojacarcu’s office. The boss held out a hand, letting Dracul know it wasn’t necessary to hurt Connor. Yet.

“The disturbing part,” Ojacarcu said, “is how you have been given a simple job of collecting from a client, and somehow you have ended up kidnapping the client’s girlfriend.”

“Bullshit,” Connor replied. “I didn’t kidnap her, steal her, even entice her. I hate the woman, if you really want to know. But she called me on her own. How the fuck am I kidnapping her if she’s trying to escape getting another black eye, or worse, from some piece of shit meth dealer?”

His anger made his voice rise, causing Dracul to take another step toward him. Ojacarcu nodded to Dracul, who grabbed Connor’s bicep, pulling him out of the chair while driving his other fist deep into Connor’s stomach. Connor grunted and doubled over, coughing as he tried to get his breath back. Dracul pushed him back into the chair.

“You must always show respect, Connor,” Ojacarcu said. “Respect means knowing who is in charge. Respect means

following the rules that are made by the one in charge. Respect is never raising your voice to me.”

The boss nodded toward Dracul again, and the big Romanian put the same amount of force into his second punch to Connor’s guts as he had the first. This time Connor fell onto the floor, groaning and clutching his stomach. He’d taken plenty of punches to his abdominal area in his long fighting career, but he’d never taken a hit as hard as the two Dracul had punished him with.

“Now, here is how we are going to solve this little dispute between you two. Since Mr. Fallon still has not repaid the balance of his personal loan with me, and this woman, Jera, is an income stream that is owned by Mr. Fallon, she will become my income stream until the loan is repaid.”

“You can’t be serious,” Connor said, rising from the carpet to sit in the chair again. He gave Dracul a look that could cut hardened steel, but the Romanian’s face remained impassive. Somewhere behind those eyes, Connor sensed that the man enjoyed hurting him.

“Why wouldn’t I be serious?” Ojacarcu asked, surprised.

“She’s not a fucking vending machine that can be borrowed and emptied of cash at everyone else’s leisure,” Connor said.

“I disagree,” his boss said. “She makes an income for Mr. Fallon. Since Mr. Fallon is behind in his personal arrangement with me, she will make an income for me. Surely you cannot object. She is nothing to you, yes? You did say you hated her. And you know I will not allow her to be physically harmed while she is in my employ.”

“She’s not property, you fucking asshole!” Connor shouted.

Ojacarcu nodded to Dracul again, but this time Connor was ready for him. He wasn’t going to let the man get a third punch to his stomach. He was sure he’d already be passing blood in his stool. The pain was receding slowly back to a dull throb instead of a sharp, agonizing feeling of his stomach rupturing.

He was ready for Dracul, but he had forgotten about Vadim and Petre. Each of them grabbed one of his arms, holding him while he roared and kicked out with his legs, beginning to panic. Petre let go of his arm long enough to drive a fist into his guts, ceasing Connor’s struggles. Dracul stepped in front of Connor and raised his fist. Ojacarcu’s cough interrupted him before he could deliver the blow.

“I would prefer that you gentlemen conclude your business outside of my office,” Ojacarcu said. “I have work to do.”

Petre and Vadim dragged Connor backwards to the office door, Petre reaching behind him to work the doorknob. Once out in the hall, they forced Connor down the hall to the service elevator, one that required an electronic key to access. They took the elevator down to the restricted sub-basement parking level, where the Lincolns and two limos were kept.

Petre and Vadim pulled him along for a few feet before stopping. Dracul stepped up, smiled, and began to drive his fists into Connor’s midsection repeatedly. To Connor, it seemed to go on forever. Eventually he realized that he was lying on the pavement, the side of his face lodged in a pile of bloody vomit. Every breath he took in felt like someone had used a hacksaw to

cut through his abdominal muscles.

After Dracul stopped beating Connor and walked back to the elevator, Petre knelt down next to his friend. Vadim stood between Connor and the elevator, unsure of what to do. He liked the kid, and he knew Petre did as well, but no one said *no* to the boss. Not unless they wanted to end up where Connor was.

“I am sorry, Connor,” Petre said to him. “I do not like this, but you have brought this on yourself. I warned you.”

“Fuck you,” Connor spit at him.

“I told you she was trouble. She is now trouble. For you.” Petre shook his head. “Now trouble for me and for Vadim. We do not enjoy this, but we must do it. For your sake.”

“Fuck you,” Connor croaked again. “She’s not property.” He coughed and gagged, lifting his face just enough to throw up again.

“It is not for us to say. It is for Mr. Ojacarcu to say.”

“Bullshit.”

No one said anything for a few minutes while Connor tried to get the pain under control enough to stand. Dracul’s fists had damaged him more than any hockey fight he’d ever been in. He wondered if he needed to go to the hospital. Petre and Vadim helped him up when he was finally able to stand. He could barely stumble to the elevator, and had to be helped into the bathroom when they reached the lobby level.

Vadim stood next to him while he tried to clean his face off in the sink. The man said nothing, but glanced at Connor every few seconds. Connor wasn’t sure if Vadim was feeling guilty, or watching him carefully in case he tried to attack. He cleaned

himself up as much as he could then washed his mouth out, only partially getting rid of the taste of stomach acid and blood.

When he came out of the bathroom, Vadim behind him, Petre was still standing guard at the door. He motioned Connor to follow him. Connor almost bolted in the other direction, but in his condition, he wouldn't have made it ten steps before either of the Romanians caught him. If he was being taken somewhere to be beaten again, he didn't want to get any extra added on for trying to escape.

Petre led him back to the elevator, and the three of them rode it down to the sub-basement in silence. As the door opened, Connor braced himself to be dragged back along the concrete wall and attacked again. Petre exited the elevator and walked to one of the Lincolns. He opened the passenger door and looked back at Connor. Connor finally got his feet moving, now dreading being taken to the landfill instead of just getting another beating.

“I will take you home,” Petre said.

Connor looked back at Vadim. Vadim stared at him with a blank face. He sighed and decided if he was going to die, he would try to take one of them with him instead of being strangled like a dog and thrown into an incinerator. He walked to the Lincoln and got in. When Vadim didn't follow, he felt a little better. It always took two of them to kill someone, just in case anything went wrong.

“Connor,” Petre said as they pulled up to his apartment. “She is not here.”

“What do you mean she isn’t here?” Connor asked.

“When I come for you earlier, Pavel and Ovidiu comes for her after,” Petre said.

“I’m not even going to correct you, asshole. She better be in there is all I will say.”

“Please, Connor. You are my friend. Do not say this. Forget it. This is more trouble.”

“Man, fuck you once and for all,” Connor said, turning toward Petre. “How can you be my friend? You fucking held me down while that motherfucker hit me enough to make me puke blood. And now you tell me that you guys kidnapped her from my apartment while I was getting my guts pulverized?”

“Listen to me. I am your friend. Dracul, he wants to hurt you. More than he has tonight. Mr. Ojacarcu, he does not want this. You are too valuable playing hockey and collecting payments. I do what I have to tonight to not end up in trouble. It is different for me if I disobey. Mr. Ojacarcu knows about Ilinca. My disobey of Mr. Rohozeanu follows me.

“This woman, you must listen. She is trouble. You have found out now how much trouble. Mr. Ojacarcu, he will remember this disrespect from you, but he will forgive it for you. But if you make more trouble, he will remove his forgiveness. This woman is not worth it. You are young, smart, you are good at hockey. You are good with sexing ladies. This woman will steal all of it from you. Mr. Ojacarcu cannot be threatened. Cannot be crossed again.”

“So what am I supposed to do? Just let Jera be taken and put into service as a whore for Ojacarcu now? And I’m supposed to be happy for her now that she won’t get beaten up by the men she has to fuck?”

“Why do you care so much?” Petre yelled at him. “Why? What is this woman? Does she have pizda made of gold?”

“A what?” Connor asked.

“A pizda! A pussy! Is lined with diamonds? Why will you not forget her?”

“I haven’t slept with her, and I don’t want to. But I can’t let go that she’s a human being, not someone’s slave. I get it that you sick bastards like to entice young Russian and Eastern European girls here with promises of acting or modeling jobs, only to lock them into prostitution until they are dead of a drug overdose. But not this one. She’s not yours. You can’t have her.”

Petre shook his head. “But Mr. Ojacarcu already has her. You can do nothing for her except hurt her. Dracul will hurt her to hurt you. He is sure you are fucking her. I am sure. Everyone is. Why would you take her from this junkie?”

“I’m not fucking her!” Connor shouted. “And why did you help me at the Gas-Mart when I paid off the manager?”

“Because I help my friend. I see you are not going to give up, so I help out. You are my friend. I know you are asking for trouble, but it is your trouble. Now you see. Now I feel bad for helping you find trouble.”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Connor said, disgusted with everything.

“I am sorry.”

“Stop saying you’re sorry. I don’t want to hear it anymore.”

“Then go find a good woman. Forget this Jera. She belongs to Mr. Ojacarcu. I cannot help you anymore if you do not stop with her.”

“Whatever, man,” Connor said. He opened the door and stepped out into the frigid night.

He didn’t look back as he walked to his apartment door. The key clicked in the lock and he held his breath as he opened the door, part of him afraid Dracul would be waiting in the dark to hurt him again, part of him hopeful that Jera would still be waiting inside. Neither happened. He sat down in his recliner to zone out on the late game going on in San Jose, trying to figure out why he couldn’t forget about Jera.

Connor walked into the coffee shop, stopping for a moment just inside the door. Dana looked up at him before quickly turning away to make another drink. He walked to the counter, where Alice rang him up without saying a word. She looked unhappy, shifting from her cheery smile for customers to a dark glare for Connor. He said nothing, but left her a twenty dollar tip in the jar.

He stood at the serving counter, silently watching Dana in her efficient routine of handling five or six drink orders at once. He’d spent plenty of time on previous visits holding a conversation with her while she worked, but today she refused to talk to him.

When she placed his coffee on the counter, he reached up before she could remove her hand and put his over the top of hers.

“Can we talk?” he asked.

“I get off at one,” she said, turning to continue her tasks.

He wasn’t sure what he would do all morning until then. His apartment felt empty and full of gloom. No Jera, no Dana. Again with Jera, he thought. He was still pissed that Ojacarcu had ordered his boys to grab her and put her to work for him. Petre had told him that a lot of times the girls would be sent to cities like Seattle or Dallas, places that were much larger than Boise and had demand for working girls. The Treasure Valley area was just under a million people, and it had minuscule amounts of the crime and vice compared to larger cities.

Connor wandered around the shopping center for a while, then headed across the street to another strip mall that had a bookstore in it. He lounged around for a while, reading a new Stephen King novel, his mind barely able to concentrate on the printed words. All he seemed to be able to think about was Dana. And Jera.

Dana, because he wanted to patch things up with her. Jera, because he was sure she was already pressed down into a mattress by a sweaty, pious, church-going bigot, the kind who railed against homosexuality or prostitution while spending his free time engaging in one or the other. Petre was right, she was nothing but trouble. He’d had blood in his urine this morning, and he was sure as soon as he had a bowel movement, it would contain an unhealthy amount of blood as well.

At ten minutes to one, he wandered back across the street and sat down inside the coffee shop. Dana came out of the back room a few minutes after one, pausing long enough near Connor to hint to him that she was ready to leave. Alice gave him a small wave with a half-smile as he turned to follow Dana out. They walked to her car and got in without saying anything.

“What?” Dana finally asked as they waited for the car’s heater to do more than blow freezing air around.

“Can we talk?” he asked.

“Talk. Unless it’s going to get me killed.”

“Okay, I deserve that,” he said. “She’s gone.”

“Just like that? What did you do with her?”

“Do you really want to know?”

“This is the part where I’m supposed to say no,” she said, sounding miserable. “But instead, of course I’m going to say yes, I want to know.”

“Ojacarcu now owns her,” Connor said, trying to look her in the eye but failing.

“Oh my God. Owns, as in she’s his property? She now whores for your boss?”

“Yeah,” was all he could say.

“How the hell does this shit happen? Someone really needs to go to the police.”

“She called her dirtbag boyfriend from the neighbor’s apartment. Dirtbag called Ojacarcu and claimed I stole her, kidnapped her from him. Ojacarcu figures since this loser still owes him money, and this piece of shit is already pimping Jera out to

everyone and anyone, she now has to work for the boss.”

“And so,” Dana asked, “just like that, she changes hands and doesn’t have a say?”

“Pretty much.”

“And what happened to you?”

“Well, whenever I piss, it’s red, and whenever I take a shit, I think it is going to be full of blood.” He raised his coat and shirt to let her see the mass of purple and yellow bruises on his stomach.

“Oh my God, Connor,” Dana said, trying to hold back tears. “You have to get away from these people! They’re going to kill you.”

“I can’t. I’m stuck for now.” He shook his head, knowing he’d made his own bed.

“What do you want from me then? I don’t want to get involved in any of this. I’m sorry. I really like you, but this is insane. I don’t need this kind of drama in my life.”

“I don’t want you to do anything except just be my girlfriend. That way you have every right to snoop around, get in my business, ask questions, and get pissed when I do dumb shit. But I’m going to try and do as little as I can for Ojacarcu. I won’t be able to get out of it completely, not unless I get injured badly again. I’m not really looking for that to happen though.”

“I... I want to. But this is too messed up. I don’t want to end up with a gangster kicking down my door and slitting my throat, or forcing me to be a prostitute,” Dana said, shaking her head.

“That won’t happen. I promise. You’ll be as far away from all of that as possible. We don’t have to go anywhere near the arena

together, downtown, even my apartment. We won't be seen together by anyone who matters."

"The problem with that is I'll be as close to it as ever, since you are right in the middle of it," she countered.

Connor reached out, grabbing her hand, expecting her to jerk it back. When she didn't, he held it with both of his hands. "We'll be okay. The hockey season is almost over, especially if we don't make the playoffs. I get some vacation time in the summer. I have some money saved up. We can go somewhere else for a while, if you can get time off. If you want to go."

"I'll think about it," she said, squeezing his hand. "But no promises. I'm worried to death for you already. I want to be with you. But not to get into your business or snoop around. I don't even want to ask questions anymore. I want to be able to get pissed when you do dumb shit, though."

CHAPTER 18

Spring

Connor waited on the sidewalk for Dana to pick him up. The April night was unseasonably warm for the valley, and the boys wanted to go raise hell downtown. He'd become a distant stranger to his teammates over the last few weeks. A few had noticed the bruises covering his stomach after Dracul had worked him over, but they had faded into bad memories.

He'd done his part, sticking up for his teammates, trying to keep puck carriers to the outside, even picking up a couple of assists by hustling on a few breakouts that led to odd-man rushes. Connor practiced hard and played harder. He gave his all to the game to forget about Jera, and to try to forget about the lesson she'd taught him.

Dana's Toyota pulled into the unloading lane a few minutes later. He grabbed his overnight bag and suit bag, loading them into the back seat before climbing into the passenger seat. They leaned toward each other, meeting in the middle for their first kiss in five days. She was studying for finals, he had been on the road in Great Falls.

"How was the ride?" she asked, pulling out onto Front Street and merging into the lane that led to the connector.

"A bus full of half-drunk kids who took three games from the Barons?" he asked. "Somewhat annoying, but it feels good to be on a bit of a winning streak. We're locked into the playoffs for the moment, so unless we lose the next nine games, we'll probably be

in.”

“If you make the playoffs, how long will that last?” Dana asked.

“If we were to go all the way, probably into the end of May, maybe early June if every series goes long. If we lose in the first round, I’ll be on break the first week of May.”

“I’ll be done with finals by the middle of May.”

Connor put his hand on her leg. “Any idea where you want to go?” he asked.

“I kind of want to travel the coast from Northern California up to Vancouver. I get two of weeks vacation, though I can probably swing a third with some begging and scheduling. I think I’ve earned it after almost five years of serving coffee five days a week.”

“Sounds like a plan,” he said, squeezing her leg.

Once it was clear that Jera was indeed gone and out of his sight, he’d practically crawled on his belly to Dana. He did everything he could think of to let her know how important she was to him, and that he wanted to continue where they’d left off before the hiccup. She’d begun to spend more time with him, and after a few weeks of being sure that things were back to normal, as normal as they could be for their situation, they’d become a permanent couple.

“We have another week on the road coming up,” he told her as they pulled into his apartment complex. “A whole week in Albuquerque. At least it will be warm.”

“It’s actually a good thing, with my finals coming up. While

I'd love to spend time thinking about you and doing things to you, I have to, you know, pass my classes. I don't think they'll give student loans to dummies."

"You aren't dumb," he laughed, giving her thigh a squeeze a little further up than before. "Just distracted."

"Don't make me wreck into your apartment," she scolded, the Toyota lurching to a hard stop as his hand found a sensitive spot. When he wouldn't stop, she slapped his hand away, both of them laughing, both anticipating the rest of the evening.

Connor crawled out of bed and put on a pair of shorts. The knock at his front door had to be Petre. The Romanian was the only one who knocked in a short four-burst pattern. He wasn't surprised to see his friend standing there when he opened the door.

"You are awake," Petre said, not asking. He stepped into the apartment without being invited, which was unusual, and made Connor nervous.

"You want some... water or something?" Connor asked, embarrassed that he had nothing more than water to offer the man.

"No. I have come to bring you to Mr. Ojacarcu. He requests to meet with you."

"What the hell?" Connor asked, his gut clenching a little harder. "About what?"

"I am not told. Only told to bring you. You must get dressed and we must go."

“Okay, hold on.”

Connor saw Petre’s eyes leave his face and point toward the bedroom before he heard footsteps behind him. Dana had put on one of his extra-large jerseys, using it as a nightshirt since it hung down to her knees, and came into the kitchen to stand slightly behind Connor.

“I heard the door and talking,” she said, her eyes not leaving Petre.

“Good morning, miss,” Petre greeted her, giving a slight bow. “I must borrow your friend for short time.” His smile was friendly, but to Dana, it had a hint of business about it that promised he wouldn’t be friendly if Connor refused.

“Where are you going?” she asked Connor.

“I have to go see the boss,” he answered, wishing she had stayed in the bedroom. He liked Petre, had even begun to trust him again, but he didn’t want the man knowing anything about his personal life anymore. Especially not Dana.

“Okay,” Dana answered as if it were nothing out of the ordinary, turning away to get a glass of water.

Connor didn’t move to get dressed, keeping himself between Petre and Dana. Petre looked at her one last time, then stared at Connor’s face. Dana stood at the sink, drinking water, watching the two men. Finally Petre politely coughed and let them know he would be waiting in the car.

“What was that about?” she asked after the door closed.

“I don’t know. Ojacarcu wants to see me. I don’t know why. It probably won’t be good, whatever it is.”

“I have the entire day off, and you have to run to work,” she pouted, lifting up the jersey to just below her waist, distracting him from pulling on his pants.

“When I get back,” he laughed, refusing to acknowledge her existence until he’d fully dressed. She crawled back under the covers, removed the jersey and tossed it theatrically on the floor. “You don’t play fair,” he complained.

“Life isn’t fair,” she giggled as she pulled him down to kiss him goodbye.

*

Petre gave him a grin the instant he sat in the passenger seat.

“She is very quality,” the Romanian said, butchering whatever phrase he’d heard, and couldn’t remember exactly how it went in English. He pulled out of the apartment complex and headed toward downtown.

“I don’t even know what you are trying to say other than she’s attractive,” Connor said.

“She is your girlfriend? Or hockey skank?” Petre asked.

“She’s just a girl I met downtown,” Connor lied. “By the way, it’s not nice to call them ‘hockey skanks.’ They are lonely girls looking for a night of fun with someone semi-famous.”

“So they are hockey skanks if they fuck you,” Petre said, “and football skanks if they fuck football players, yes? They are plain skanks if they fuck anyone that isn’t athlete?”

Connor laughed. “Did you just learn the word this morning?”

“Skank? I hear it from three boys in line for coffee. School boys barely growing hair. It is hip word?”

“No, we’ve had that word for a long time. It’s just another way of saying whore or slut, except usually more insulting.”

“There is layer of insult to the words?”

“Yeah, a little,” Connor replied, turning slightly in his seat to explain to Petre. “See, a whore is a woman who will fuck anything to get something in return, but not necessarily money. A prostitute always fucks for money or drugs. A whore will usually fuck for something else, but something that has value. Maybe a place to live. Maybe a car.

“A slut on the other hand, she just fucks to fuck. She’ll sleep with anyone, for any reason. Sometimes for no reason. She doesn’t want money or cars or dope. She wants cock. But a skank... a skank is like a combination of all three of those things. But worse. She’s kind of underhanded,” he paused to see if Petre understood that word, going on when Petre nodded his head, “the kind of woman you have to be on your toes around. She’ll steal another woman’s man, just to do it. Just because she can.”

“That is a lot of layers,” Petre said, looking lost in deep thought as if contemplating the importance of it.

“It’s just a word, man,” Connor said, laughing again.

“You are teaching me. I will be better English.”

Connor grunted. “Your English sucks, but it has at least one use.”

“My English is great,” Petre said with pride.

“At getting us girls. But that’s about it.”

“Intra,” the intercom speaker commanded.

Petre opened the door and entered, Connor following him into Ojacarcu’s office. Connor froze two steps in at the sight of Jera sitting in one of the chairs. She looked at him for a fraction of a second before she dropped her eyes and turned her head away. Connor moved to the chair next to her and sat down, paying no attention to his boss, his eyes locked on the dark-skinned girl who had cost him a week’s worth of painful solid waste expulsion.

“Ah, good. You two remember each other,” Ojacarcu said with a grin.

Jera finally looked up when the boss spoke. Connor took in her features. Her bruises were gone, she was clean, dressed in new and revealing clothes, her makeup perfectly applied to make her dark eyes stand out even more on her beautiful face. He noticed a collar around her throat and started to feel the anger pulse into him until he realized it was made of black lace with a shiny silver hoop hanging from the center of it. The kind he’d imagined her wearing.

“I have a new job for you,” Ojacarcu said to Connor. “You are to be Miss Gellner’s driver and escort.”

Connor wasn’t sure who “Miss Gellner” was until he realized it was Jera. He’d never heard her last name before, knew almost nothing about her other than he hated her, while at the same time feeling an almost supernatural pull toward her.

“I have to drive her around?” Connor asked, confused.

“Yes, Connor. You will drive her to and from her appointments. You will also make sure her clients are safe for her, and let them know, gently, with tact of course, that they will have to deal with you if they harm her. Unless of course they have paid extra for that right, but still, they are not to damage her.” Ojacarcu looked at him, daring him to protest or lash out verbally.

Connor’s stomach turned into pure acid. He’d done her no favor at all other than to upgrade her living conditions. She was still a prostitute, still someone else’s property, except now she bathed regularly and wore clothes that didn’t look like they’d been stolen from a dead homeless woman.

“You will be given the keys to one of the Lincolns, and the security card for the elevator. I am glad to know you can be trusted to have this responsibility,” Ojacarcu said, giving him a hard look that reminded Connor about the last time he’d crossed the man.

“When am I supposed to do this?” Connor asked, resigned to the fact that he wouldn’t be able to refuse.

“On your days off from hockey, you will escort her from whenever her first client calls to whenever her last client is done.”

“So, whenever I’m not playing hockey, I have to keep her around? Just sit in the car and wait for her phone to tell her where to go next?”

“I don’t care where you go when she isn’t working, as long as she is safe. Clients are not interested in damaged goods. As you can see, Miss Gellner has cleaned up into a very attractive young lady. Possibly the most attractive one I know!” He clapped his hands together, making Jera flinch. “I was going to send her off to

work elsewhere, as there simply isn't enough business here. But then I realized how beautiful she is, and sent another girl off in her place so she could stay. She's made quite a name for herself since she decided to work for me, so you shouldn't find yourself with too much of not having anything to do."

Connor bristled at the implication that Jera had volunteered to work for Ojacarcu. No doubt the deal was better than the one she'd had with Larry, but she was still property. Still had no say in anything unless she wanted to get hurt. Or dead. Connor could easily imagine Dracul murdering her for not doing what she was told. What were whores to a guy like Ojacarcu? He could simply call back the one he'd sent away, or order ten more from Belarus.

"Don't worry," Ojacarcu said to him. "You have earned this responsibility. I decided that if you were willing to assure her safety before for free, you would be the best suited to do it as an employee." Ojacarcu gave him a shark's grin.

"So I just take her wherever she needs to go, drop her off, wait for her to finish, then do what? Take her to a place she can shower? A cafe to feed her? Or am I supposed to stand there and watch her fuck just in case the guy gets too violent?"

Ojacarcu frowned at him. "You remember when we talked about respect?" Connor nodded. "You should remember a little harder." His boss nodded at Petre who took two steps toward Connor before stopping. The threat was there, out in the open.

"I don't care where you take her," Ojacarcu continued. "She has an apartment where the rest of the girls live. Take her back there to freshen up. You will meet each client the first time. You

will collect her fee. You will deliver her payment to the office once per day. You will not give her any money. She receives her pay once per week. Do not attempt to skim the money. Dracul has a special dislike for thieves.”

Ojacarcu opened the lid of his laptop and ignored them. According to Petre’s tap on his shoulder, the meeting was over. Jera and Connor made their way to the door, Petre and Vadim following. Petre closed the door behind him, and the four walked down the hallway to the service elevator. No one spoke, each lost in their own thoughts.

When the elevator reached the bottom, Petre stepped out and motioned to Connor and Jera. Vadim stayed behind, waiting in the elevator as the three walked to one of the Lincolns. Petre reached into his pocket and removed the car’s key along with a white security swipe card.

“It is full of gas,” Petre said, his face showing no emotion. “You will be paid when you deliver each day.”

They stood next to the black luxury car for a while, the silence echoing throughout the underground parking level. Petre looked bored, finally opening the rear door, ushering Jera into the car. He closed the door after she was in, then turned to Connor.

“This is trouble,” Petre said. “There will be no good in this.” He walked back to the elevator without another word.

Connor got in behind the wheel. He adjusted the side mirrors after starting the car, then adjusted the rearview mirror until he could see Jera’s eyes. The shadows of the garage made her dark features hard to see, but the overhead fluorescents caught enough

of the tears on her cheeks to cause little flashes in the mirror.

CHAPTER 19

Connor watched the light traffic that littered Cole Road from his parking spot in the Desert Valley apartment complex parking lot. He checked his phone for the twentieth time in the last few minutes, wishing Dana would reply to his text. He'd let her know he wouldn't be home for a while, possibly all night, but not the details of why. She would know that it had to do with his escorted visit to Ojacarcu, but that wouldn't make her any less upset. They'd planned to spend the entire day together being lazy and lounging around.

Connor's mind was in the midst of a panic, desperate to find a way to break the news of his new *job* to her without it destroying everything he'd rebuilt in the last month. Dana had finally overcome her fear that Ojacarcu would send one of his thugs to collect her, and they'd been smart about spending time together, usually at her place, just to avoid being seen by anyone who might get word back to the boss, Dracul, or any of the other suits. Connor's friendship with Petre and Vadim was strained by his unwillingness to trust either of them with any important details about his life.

He checked his phone again. Nothing. He glanced up at the apartment window where Jera entertained her client, an older gentleman who looked like he could afford a much higher standard of living than Desert Valley. Not that the area was a ghetto. There really wasn't such a thing in Boise, nothing familiar to a resident of a place like Chicago or Houston. Desert Valley wasn't trashy. It

was a newer complex, built across the street from a middle school in an older, well-kept area west of downtown. Connor figured the client had a place up in the foothills above the city, and only used the apartment for dalliances or other business that couldn't be taken care of in the open.

His phone buzzed. He swiped his finger across the screen and felt his body go hot and cold as he read Dana's text. She understood, but was headed home to hit the books if he wasn't going to be around. Connor frowned. It was hard to determine the emotional meaning from a text, but hers was to the point, and he could sense she'd let him know how she felt when they got together again. He wouldn't be able to carry on a conversation through text, and she would be short with him if he called her. He'd have to wait until the morning when he went for his coffee to apologize and gauge her level of disappointment.

Jera opened the passenger door ten minutes later and got in the car. Connor made no move to turn the key and get the Lincoln moving. He tried to watch her face, but she kept it pointed down and away from him.

"What?" she asked after a few minutes of silence.

"I... where do you need to go next?" he asked.

Jera looked at him as if he was stupid. "I need to go wash my snatch out," she said with venom before looking away again.

"Okay," Connor said, starting the car.

Her words hurt him, the guilt consuming him for putting her, and himself as well, in this situation. He tried to tell himself that he'd done the right thing by helping her escape from Larry Fallon.

It sounded like a lie when he compared it to the position she was in now. He wondered if it was worth the fleeting moment of happiness he'd felt when he picked her up at the Gas-Mart, thinking he was doing her a great service. That fleeting moment of happiness was most likely destined to trample the happiness he'd found with Dana into dust.

"I'm sorry," he said after a while. "I don't know what your schedule is or... anything like that."

"Don't talk to me, you piece of shit," Jera said. "Don't you *dare* fucking talk to me."

"Listen, I didn't want for this to happen, I was only tr—"

"Don't fucking talk to me!" she shrieked at him, her face an ugly, twisted mask of hate, tears creating rivers of mascara that led into salt flats of pancake and foundation mud.

"Okay," he said, and looked straight ahead.

Is this what you risked Dana for? His mind began to panic again. *You risked your own ass for her? You rescue her and Dracul makes you shit blood for a week? Good fucking job, dumbass.* He pulled up to the apartments Ojacarcu kept for his employees, whether it was Petre and his pals, the cooks and the cutters for his drug operation, or the working girls.

"I'll wait," he said, mostly to the door as it slammed before he got the words all the way out.

He checked his phone again. Dana was in silent mode. Jera was in harpy mode. Ojacarcu was in torture mode. He decided he was in hell mode.

Connor glanced up from his phone as headlights lit up the stop sign in front of him. The car passed where he had parked, stopping at the intersection before continuing along East Crestline Drive. He wished he was in the car with whoever had just driven by him, heading back down out of the foothills and into town. Instead, he looked over at the house where Jera was doing her business.

She'd been a nightmare all afternoon and into the evening. Each time she would finish with a client, he would take her back to the apartments. She would go inside, return fifteen minutes later in a new outfit and a fresh new painted-on face. Jera had only cried once, after her first client when she'd screamed at Connor. The rest of the time she had a detached look about her, eyes made of dull glass, her movements robotic.

He'd had a good look at her arms a couple of times. He felt slightly better when he saw there were no track marks from needles. He wasn't an expert on junkies, and he knew they could inject their poison in many places, but the crook of the elbow was the most popular when it came to dope addicts on television and in movies.

Petre had told him how a lot of the male prostitutes would inject in the area under the scrotum to keep the evidence hidden. Petre had also laughed when Connor suggested a male prostitute might end up showing a lot of what was under his scrotum in that line of work. He'd shrugged and told Connor that people would

stick needles in all kinds of places to avoid track marks showing on their arms. Unless they were full-blown addicts, then they didn't give a damn anymore about anything except getting high.

He checked his phone for what felt like the millionth time, seeing nothing new except the changing numbers of the clock. Almost midnight. He'd been driving his charge around for fourteen hours, his hope that any more clients would wait until the next day kept dying with each new ding of her pager. The pager would give her the address of the next stop, and there would be a code of letters or numbers after it. He tried to imagine what they could mean but came up blank.

Jera opened the door next to him, breaking his thought process. He hadn't been paying attention, and for a moment he had the fear that Dracul had come for him. Connor wasn't afraid of anyone in hockey, but the Romanian produced a cold fear in him that made his testicles crawl up into his body.

"Home?" he asked.

Jera nodded. He started the car and they made their way down out of the foothills and into the one-way grid of downtown. He wanted to ask if she was done for the night, but he held his question. Connor realized he hadn't eaten anything except for a protein bar, which had tasted like cardboard smothered in unsweetened chocolate. His ass hurt, he was tired, and he needed to get some blood flowing through his body.

They pulled up to her apartment. She turned to him and said, "I have an appointment at noon in Nampa. Be here by eleven."

He didn't bother to reply to the door that slammed shut.

“Connor, I don’t have time for this right now.” Dana looked angry, customer orders piling up around her. Some of the customers gave him a dirty look at his interference, while others looked away, too embarrassed to watch a relationship crumble right in front of them.

“I don’t know when I’m going to get a chance to talk to you again,” he said, trying to talk low enough to keep his fellow customers from eavesdropping on the drama unfolding in front of them.

“Look, I get off at one. Come by then. I have to get back to work.”

“I can’t make it then, that’s what I keep telling you.” He grew angry, wondering if he would lose his temper at the first customer who piped up with a complaint about how he was holding up the barista, holding up *their* morning.

“Then you’ll just have to text me. I’m really busy, Connor. Please.” Her happy face slid into place as she began to apologize to the clot of customers piling up behind Connor.

He snatched his coffee from the counter and walked out, jolting a few who didn’t get out of his way in time. He tried to clear his mind on the short walk back to his apartment, but it was futile. Rage at Ojacarcu, shame at his anger toward Dana, resentment with a touch of compassion for Jera, hate for Dracul, and the sense of betrayal from Petre and Vadim.

Connor sat in his recliner, sipping coffee, typing out message after message on the phone to Dana, always deleting them before pressing the *send* button. After an hour of repeating this routine, he left to pick up Jera. During the drive, he wondered how long this would go on, driving her everywhere, collecting her fee from clients.

The day before, he'd met at least ten men, all of them in their fifties or later except one. All of them looked like they weren't from America or Canada, and the few that spoke definitely didn't sound like they were from either country. The young one, a man barely older than Connor, was the exception. The *kid* was probably some hotshot programmer or trust fund baby, or maybe he'd been lucky playing with Daddy's money on the stock market and had cashed in big. The kid had recognized Connor, and was given a short explanation that no, he was not Connor Dunsmore, and made the client repeat it.

Jera's first outfit was a black mini-skirt with a white tank top, no bra, black stockings, and heels that looked impossible to walk in. Her eyes were painted as if she were an Egyptian goddess, and she wore a wig of black hair that was shoulder-length and cut flat, making her appearance authentic. He'd spent too much time wasting his thoughts on exactly what nationality or heritage she was.

He drove her out to the south end of Nampa, a subdivision off Dooley Lane that looked upscale, as upscale as Nampa ever got from what he had seen of the city in the four years he'd been in the area. He escorted her to the front door, trying to keep his eyes on

the walkway instead of her backside and her legs. It was a good thing she walked slightly in front of him as he'd already been caught twice staring at her face. He'd never seen her made up like this, and he was upset with himself that he couldn't stop thinking about how exotic, how beautiful she looked.

The man who answered the door was short but looked to be in shape, his iron-gray hair perfectly molded along his skull. He held the door open, closing it behind them after looking out as if his neighbors might be filming the odd activities going on at his house.

"You want to see the other one?" the man asked, handing Connor three hundred dollars.

"What other one?" Connor asked.

"She didn't tell you?" the man asked, winking as he cupped his hand on Jera's ass. "She and a friend will be working together. Come on, give her a look and tell me what you think."

The client led them down a short hallway to a large bedroom. Another woman was already stripped down to a thong and stockings, nothing else. She made no move to cover herself as Connor stared at her. When she noticed Jera, Connor noted a small smile on the woman's face as she stepped toward Jera and began to help her out of her skirt and tank top. Connor turned away, not wanting to see any of it.

"What's the matter, son, you queer or something?" the client asked.

"No, I've just seen it enough already," Connor replied, wanting to make the man eat a few of his teeth.

“Yeah, I bet. People dream of having your job, but then when you get it, and all you see is pussy all day long, it probably dulls the senses a bit, eh?”

“Yeah,” was all Connor would say, noting the time on his phone as he walked back down the hallway.

“Hey, friend. Do me a favor and wait in the living room, will you?” the client called out. “I don’t want my nosy neighbors asking questions about why women dressed like whores come into my house while their boyfriend waits outside in the car.”

Connor looked around the living room and decided on the couch. It looked large enough to be comfortable to his big frame, as well as being the closest piece of furniture to the hallway in case Jera needed help. From what he’d seen so far, he figured the client would be the one needing help with two girls entertaining him. Within minutes, he was forced to tune out the sounds of grunts, shouts, cries of pleasure, one or two of pain, skin on skin that his mind imagined was a hand leaving a red mark on buttocks, and the pounding of a bed frame rocking against the wall.

Jera returned to the Lincoln after changing clothes and cleaning herself up. Connor was surprised at her lack of costume or heavy makeup. She got in the car and told him she was hungry. He didn’t bother to try and have a conversation with her about where she might want to eat. The car made its way through the streets until it happened upon a fast food burger joint and a small cafe that

shared a parking lot. Jera pointed at the burger joint, and Connor hit the drive-thru.

They ate in silence, as the radio played pop hits from the nineties in the background. When they were finished, he gathered the trash and exited the car to dump it into the trash bin. When he was behind the wheel again, he asked where they needed to go.

“Nowhere,” she answered.

“What do you mean *nowhere*?” he asked, confused.

“I don’t have anything scheduled until ten.”

“So what are we supposed to do for the next seven hours?”

“Nothing,” she replied.

“Well that’s great. I’m going to drop you off. I have shit to do.”

“You can’t. We have to stay together in case I get an appointment.”

“Bullshit. I’m dropping you off, and if you get an appointment, you can call me. I’ll have my phone with me.”

“We aren’t allowed to own a phone.”

“Okay, so go to a pay phone and call me.”

“If I miss an appointment, I’ll be sent to a worse place. If I’m late and the client complains, I’ll be in trouble.”

“How is this my problem?” Connor asked.

“Because you’re my driver. If I’m late, I’ll tell Mr. Ojacarcu that it was because you left me at the apartment and ran off to do whatever it is you do. I could probably come up with something interesting, like threatening Larry. I’d walk five miles to a pay phone to set you up like that.”

Connor turned in his seat. “What the fuck is your hard-on with getting me in trouble? Are you a bitch by birth, or did that guy fuck something up in your head when he beat on you one too many times?”

“After what you did to him, you deserve worse than what I heard you got. I was hoping they’d kill you, or at least put you in a coma.” Her teeth were bared, and the hatred in her eyes convinced him that he’d definitely made a mistake helping her.

“So you call me in the middle of the night after getting the shit kicked out of you, to come and get you away from him, and it’s all some ruse to get me in trouble? For roughing him up a little because he’s a slimy little thieving shit that deserves to be buried in the desert instead of still wandering around with both of his legs unbroken?”

“It wasn’t a ruse,” Jera said, looking away. It was the first time she hadn’t sounded like a petulant child who might break out into a tantrum full of curses and insults in two days. “I was scared. I made a mistake by calling him. I should have just ripped you off and ran with the money.”

“Yeah,” Connor mocked, “good plan on digging yourself in deeper instead.”

“At least I don’t have to worry about him losing his temper and hitting me,” she said, not really sounding like she would be upset if Larry’s fists left marks on her again, just for old time’s sake.

“Sure, you get to screw men who are much higher on the economic ladder than what you’re used to. And they only get to

beat on you if they've paid extra for the privilege. How much do you get paid, by the way?"

"None of your business."

"Probably true, but I turned in three thousand dollars this morning. How much of that did you get?"

"None of your fucking business," she said, her voice edging toward the shrill, harpy screech he hated.

"How much cock did you have to suck to have them hand me three thousand dollars? Three thousand dollars you earned on your back or on your knees. Is that what you make in an average night? Ten thousand or more a week? Do you get nights off? I'll be sure to remind you at the end of a week just how much money you earned for your new master. I bet it's far more than you get paid. Or do you get paid in dope?"

"Fuck you!" she screamed at him.

"You're a real piece of work," Connor said, disgusted with her. "And I'm stuck with you. Thanks for all of this, by the way. You're the last person I'll ever make the mistake of helping."

"Fuck you," she said again, this time not much more than a whisper.

"No, fuck you. I did you a favor, and you've hosed it all. Instead of being free, getting away from this shit, you jump right the fuck back into it. You're a stupid whore. Now I'm paying for it, for helping you."

"You hurt him!" she shrieked, the sound grating on his nerves like styrofoam being mangled with bare hands.

"Jesus Christ, you *are* stupid. He beat you. He pimped you to

men who beat you. He didn't give a shit about you! He only cared that you made him money and you had a hole he could stick it in. The only reason he lied to Ojacarcu was to get back at me, not you. He can get any stupid whore to do what you were doing. Your types are a dime a dozen."

"I didn't know what to do!" she yelled again, tears spilling down her cheeks.

"Because you're stupid!" Connor shouted at her, making her cringe.

"I'm not stupid," she said softly after a few minutes of crying.

"Bullshit."

"I'm not stupid," she repeated. "I almost graduated from college."

"That's great, but that just tells me you are dumber than I imagined. How the fuck do you go from 'almost graduating from college' to 'stupid dope whore who makes others suffer because she's a selfish bitch?'"

"I hope you die," she said in an almost conversational tone.

Connor decided to head back to his apartment. She'd been in it before, and he damn sure wasn't going to spend another six hours in a car with her. Arguing with her had given him a headache. He decided having his hands around the wheel as he navigated toward his place was better than the urge he had to wrap them around her neck and choke her until she... he snapped his mind shut on that thought. In his imagination, her face became Travis', and he'd seen that face too many times already.

CHAPTER 20

Connor stood in the hallway waiting for Larry to fetch the money. Petre watched from his usual spot just inside the front door, hand inside his jacket. None of the men had exchanged a single word. All of them knew the routine, and all of them knew a single utterance that would break the routine could cause total carnage. Petre watched his friend more closely than he watched the junkie. Connor had been silent on the ride from Boise.

Larry came back down the hallway, handing Connor neat stacks of bills before he walked by and sat on the dirty couch. Connor stared at him the entire way, hoping the little weasel would say something, anything, to give him an excuse to get his fists warmed up. He wasn't sure he would be able to stop beating the man once he started.

"Check the money," Petre said, hoping to break Connor's stare of death directed at Larry.

"Why did you do it?" Connor asked the little man, ignoring Petre, who took a step forward before Connor held up his hand to keep the Romanian where he was.

"Do what, man?" Larry asked, already shrinking into the cushions.

"Why did you call Ojacarcu? When she called you, why didn't you just offer to come and pick her up?" Connor took a step toward the couch, his hand still signaling Petre to *stay put, stay out of it*.

"I don't know," Larry said in a whisper.

“What?” Connor’s voice was loud enough to make the junkie jump.

“I said I don’t know, man.”

“Why would you do such a thing to her? I get it that you wanted to fuck me over, and you did a great job of that, by the way. We are going to be best friends for the next few weeks, you and I. But why would you do that to her? Did she mean nothing to you?”

Larry fidgeted nervously, knowing that violence was coming, frightened at the knowledge that it would surprise him when it erupted. His brain was unable to think of any way to avoid being harmed.

“I don’t know,” he practically squealed.

“You say that one more fucking time,” Connor said and took another step, standing directly in front of the man on the couch, towering over him, “and I’ll kill you right there on that couch.”

“Connor...” Petre said, trying to determine which way things would go.

“Let him answer,” Connor said without looking at his partner.

“I thought I’d get her back!” Larry shouted, his voice cracking with fear. “I thought the boss would make you eat shit and he’d give her back.”

“I haven’t heard you complain for the last couple of months that you didn’t get what you expected. Or was she just another whore for you? You got dope, you got connections. Shouldn’t be too hard for a scrawny little bag of shit like you to entice some other whore to be your punching bag and sex doll, should it?”

“Fuck you, man! I loved her! You don’t even know her! I—”

Connor punched him in the forehead once, not hard enough to break his hand, but hard enough to draw blood and stun Larry into silence. Connor had his arm raised back to deliver a blow to the junkie's stomach that would have him shitting blood for a week when he felt Petre lay his hand on his arm.

"Enough. We have things to do. More important things than this *bulangiu's* life is worth," Petre told him.

Connor stared at Larry and his bloody forehead for a few seconds before walking to the door. Petre gave the junkie a hard look as well before turning. Connor opened the door for him, and followed Petre out, but stopped before he closed the door.

"She's got another collar on her neck now," he told Larry. "This one says 'Property of Costache Ojacarcu' and it means you better find a new whore, because he'll never give Jera back to you."

"You want to talk?" Petre asked him as they passed the Nampa exit on the freeway.

"Why the fuck would I want to talk, especially to you? You're a traitor." Connor stared at the Romanian, challenging him to deny it.

"You are right. I am traitor. I did not pull out gun and shoot everyone in room. I did not risk my life to save you from beating. I warned you. She is trouble. I am traitor, but you are *măgar*. Stupid animal."

“Why didn’t you tell Ojacarcu that Larry was full of shit? You aren’t a traitor for slugging me, or holding me down while Dracul did it. You’re a traitor for not protecting my back. You know I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I tell him. He says Larry is, how is it? Crazy? Insanity. Yelling at Mr. Ojacarcu, demanding you are killed, saying lies of you insulting Mr. Ojacarcu. Mr. Ojacarcu, he asks if I know what is going up.”

“Going on,” Connor corrected.

“Going on, *da*. I tell Mr. Ojacarcu this man is liar, junkie. Treats his woman very bad, collar on her neck and bruises. I tell him you are unhappy that the woman is treated this way. Mr. Ojacarcu makes decision, I cannot say no. It is your life or my life, Connor.” Petre looked sad at having to tell his friend such a thing. “I am sorry. You are my friend, but my life...”

“Yeah, I get it,” Connor said. “You could have shot the place up though, that would have worked too.”

Petre gave him a strange look, one that looked like the man was trying to hold back painful gas.

“Well, you could have. No one would be expecting it. You could have killed Ojacarcu and then Dracul and even Vadim if you had to, and we could get the hell out of there. No one would know.”

“Too much television. Same bad television we watch in Romania at night. Good for laughs, bad for ideas.”

“What do you mean? No one else would be around. Hell, Dracul has a gun, so does Vadim. At worst, it would be self-

defense. It isn't like Jera and I wouldn't have your back."

Petre sighed. "Television is not real life. Even though you would lie, police know. They have men who are special. Expert. Shooting gun leaves powder on hand. Bullets from only one gun. Too much television," Petre shook his head. "But police would investigate their death. Dracul... he is Spetsnaz training. He is death squad alone. My gun, I can use. I am even good. But I am not professional soldier, professional killer. Dracul would kill all of us before I fired one bullet."

"Bullshit," Connor said.

"Truth. I have heard the stories. Stories that are not lies. I have seen with my eyes too. He is too dangerous. He does not trust anyone. Not you, not Vadim, not me. He does not even trust Mr. Ojacarcu. Mr. Ojacarcu can order death for him at any moment. Dracul knows this, and does not trust anyone. He would know before I even pull gun out that I am traitor and kill me."

"If he's such a badass, then how would Ojacarcu have him killed?"

"Triadă. Three pros. They are team. Trained to kill operatives from Russia. Dracul might kill two of them, but triadă always finishes job. Always. Very expensive. They are known by American intelligence and cannot fly. They are smuggled in. Very bad business."

"Would Ojacarcu ever have reason to bring in a triad to kill him?" Connor asked, hopeful that it could be as easy as doing what Larry did to him.

"Not for you. Too much television. Forget this."

“I can’t forget it goddammit. I have to drive her around every single day.”

“She is not driving right now?” Petre asked.

“I think Vadim or someone else is on call in case she needs to go. I don’t know. I can’t get anything out of her except screams or insults. Or silence, if you count that.”

Petre laughed, not meaning to. “Just like old times, yes?”

“It’s not fucking funny,” Connor said.

“It is not. I am apologized.”

“Fuck you, that isn’t going to work on me today,” Connor said, too angry to be amused by Petre’s exaggerated butchering of English.

“I am sorry, Connor,” Petre said. “I am traitor.”

This time Connor did laugh. “Eat shit, man. Eat shit.”

“So... when is this *job* going to end?” Dana asked him later that night. He’d walked down the road after Petre had dropped him off, calling Dana to have her pick him up. They’d progressed back to sleeping together, but things were getting edgy again with his new schedule. Not telling her exactly what job he was doing for Ojacarcu didn’t sit well with her either.

“I don’t know,” Connor answered, wishing she would talk about anything else.

“And what is it you are doing for him?” she persisted.

“Nothing interesting.”

“But you are doing something?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Okay then. Tell me what you are doing for for this job. I don’t care about it being boring or interesting, so just answer the question.”

“Driving.”

“Driving what? Or is it a who?”

“I drive shit around all day. Shit they don’t want anyone else knowing about, or getting their hands dirty with. It’s how they punish me for not being loyal.”

“So basically if you get busted, it’s all you, right? You won’t rat them out because they’d hurt you, not to mention the fact that everyone loves that slimy asshole and he would just deny it. Am I close?”

“Something like that,” he answered, glad that she believed the partial truth he’d told her, feeling like shit for lying to her. He had yet to have a positive scenario play out in his head that ended with the two of them continuing on as a couple after telling her who he was driving around, and why.

Dana shook her head, let out a sigh, then propped herself up on her elbow.

“What?” he asked as she stared at him.

“There’s something you aren’t telling me,” she said.

“It’s to protect you, that’s all. You don’t want to know. Trust me.”

“That’s the problem,” Dana frowned. “I do trust you. I probably shouldn’t. Not as long as you work for this guy. Just do

me one favor if you truly care about me.”

“What?” he asked, turning on his side toward her.

“Tell me if I need to run. Please, just warn me. I’ll leave in the middle of a finals test if I have to. I can always take another semester. I can’t do that if I’m dead.”

“I don’t think they’d kill you,” Connor said, unsure if he was being truthful or not.

“I can’t take a final exam if I’m whoring out of a shack in Miami, or running drugs across a border as a mule, or whatever they might make me do.”

“You watch too much television,” he said, remembering what Petre told him earlier.

Dana wasn’t buying the smile on his face. “I don’t watch television. I don’t need to. My boyfriend works for a gangster. That’s better than television. Except the part where you or I could get killed, or worse.”

Connor wondered if being forced into prostitution or drug smuggling was worse than being dead. He didn’t want to find out.

“I promise if anything is going down, I’ll warn you. You just run. Run somewhere where you don’t know anyone.”

“Should we have a codeword or something?” she asked him.

“You watch too much television,” he laughed, pulling her on top of him. “Stupid American television.”

CHAPTER 21

His teammates filed around their captain near the door of the locker room. Elvin Gannett looked at each player that passed him by, giving a slap on the shoulder pads, a fist bump, or a swat on the back of their pants as they made their way through the door and down the hallway to the ice surface. Connor was always the last one to leave the dressing room, and tonight was no different. Gansy held out a hand to his enforcer, a grin on his face.

“Let’s do this,” Connor said to his captain.

“It’s been a good year, Dunzer,” Gansy said. “If we win it, we’re in it.”

Elvin let go of his hand and put an arm around his shoulder as they left the locker room together. Connor had been here before, in another uniform at another time. His stomach gave only the slightest hint of nervousness. The Bombers had a 3-1 lead and only twenty minutes left to play. If they could hold off the Titans, they were headed to the UPHL Finals and a shot at winning the Thompson Cup. For the rest of the team, it meant a bonus of five thousand dollars, a considerable sum for most of them. Even if they lost in the finals, they’d each get twenty-five hundred.

Connor didn’t need the bonus. He often made twenty-five hundred in a week in addition to his hockey salary. It was the glory of playing on the big stage, even if the big stage was a three thousand seat arena in Idaho and just over four thousand seats in Lafayette, Indiana, home of the Lafayette Lions, that he craved. The last six games against the Titans, evenly split, had been

refreshing for his mind.

He'd been given a respite from his driving job all through the playoffs, something he'd been thankful for. It gave him the ability to focus his mind on hockey, as well as Dana whenever the Bombers were home. She went to the games, even took a couple of her friends thanks to Connor's four seats. They'd decided it would be better if she could give the other three tickets to friends, instead of her showing up alone. Dana had no trouble getting friends to go to the playoff games, even giving Alice a *date* twice, though Alice had given an extra ticket each time to her real date.

He was halfway down the corridor when the home crowd erupted, louder than he'd ever heard them in his four years playing for the Bombers. Even when the team had played in the finals two years before, he couldn't remember them filling the arena with this much noise. He smiled, mostly to himself, as he crossed over the threshold from the hallway to the bench, then over the bench wall to the ice. He was sure the crowd got even louder when they saw his #30 jersey skate out from bench.

The sound of the horn let the teams know it was time to finish the game. Connor skated back to the bench and sat at the far end. Coach Lamoureux would probably use Connor's line, the fourth line, at least three or four times as long as the Bombers held the lead.

Connor and his linemates weren't expected to score, but they were expected to play hard defense for the thirty seconds or so they were out and not give a up a goal, giving the other lines a chance to get a much-needed breather. Especially near the end of the period

when both teams would be lagging from almost sixty minutes of exhausting up and down skating, checking, and shot blocking. The fourth lines of both teams would become an important factor as long as neither gave up a goal.

Sitting on the bench, knowing he could go five or even ten minutes before his skates touched the ice, gave him time to watch the game intently, keeping an eye on which Titans needed to be played closely, which might need an extra shove or a stealthy cross-check. He also had time to let his eye wander between whistles to see if he could spot Dana.

“Four-four-four,” Walters called, letting Connor know his line was up. Eight minutes had passed, neither team doing anything other than punishing each other with thundering checks and the constant chasing of players up and down the ice, wearing each other’s legs out.

The third line skated into the bench area and Connor was over the boards, pumping his legs to keep the Titans from having their way through the neutral zone. He watched their defenseman, Zanna, carry the puck out of the Titans’ end, and lined him up for a hit. Zanna barely made it to the center line before Connor collided with him, just as he shot the puck hard down the boards and into the Bombers’ zone. Both of them braced at the moment of impact, the glass absorbing the force of the blow before both players lost their footing and tumbled to the ice.

Zanna’s stick shot out, the blade catching Connor behind the knee as he tried to get up. It was an old trick that all players knew. If a player went down, you did everything you could to keep him

down just a second or two, sometimes up to five seconds longer. Zanna was smart enough to try to rise at the same time so it looked like his stick was simply tangled up in Connor's legs, but Connor could feel the force of the blade holding his knee to the ice.

He should have known something was wrong by the way the defenseman wasn't even looking at him, instead looking down into the Bombers' zone. Connor finally got back on his skates and looked back just in time to see the light behind his goal turn red and hear the cheering erupt from the Titans' bench, a few "fuck" and "shit" curses thrown in from his own teammates. From the time Connor collided with the defenseman to the time he finally got his skates under him took less than six seconds, but that's all the Titans had needed as the puck took a wonky bounce from one of the metal stanchions that held the glass panels in place, and instead of rolling hard around the boards from the dump-in, it shot off the glass straight into the middle of the ice.

The Titans' forward, Kalinsky, had scooped it up, while everyone else from both teams turned on their skates once they realized the puck hadn't screamed around the end boards like it was supposed to, and shot it into an almost empty net. Mondin, the Bombers goalie, had been fooled like everyone else, going behind his net to try to stop the puck.

"Don't sweat it, boys," Coach Lamoureux called out to his bench, looking Connor in the eye. "It's a shit bounce. No one's fault. We're still in control. Shake it off and let's finish them."

A few of his teammates slapped him on the shoulder pads and gave him a conciliatory "nice check" or "not your fault" as they

came off the ice at the end of their shift. Connor fumed, knowing that it was one of those unlucky instances that sometimes happens in sports. Sometimes the basketball bounced off the rim in just the wrong way. Once in a while, the football hit the turf just right on one of its pointed ends, and instead of going into the hands of the right player, it seems to magically teleport to the wrong one. In hockey, a frozen rubber puck being shot off solid boards and even more solid glass at speeds of up to one hundred miles per hour made for some unfortunate situations.

With the teams now only separated by a single goal, the Titans double-shifted their top lines, keeping Connor on the bench for the next eight minutes. “Four-four-four,” Walters called, and Connor snapped his chin strap in place and stood up. It turned into a terrible line change, the Bomber defensemen and forwards thinking they’d dumped the puck deep down the ice. Connor and his teammates screamed at them to turn around, but it was too late, the Titans entered the zone with a three-on-one advantage.

Mondin kicked out the first shot, but he kicked it right onto the stick of a Titan, and the crowd went from deathly silent to a deafening chorus of boos and angry shouts. Coach Lamoureux used his timeout, calling everyone on the bench and the ice to gather around. Connor looked up to the clock and saw just over three minutes left, the score 3-3.

“Goddammit, Jakes, Took, what the fuck was that? You got to fucking get that puck deep before you can change. This isn’t fucking pee-wee hockey.” Lamoureux realized he was shouting and lowered his voice, trying to calm himself as well as his team.

“Listen. We got three minutes to end this. We can take them in overtime, but I goddamn well want to go home tonight and fuck my wife with a winner’s cock. Got it? We’ve owned these fucks all night. Gansy, James, Potsy, gimme a damn goal. I’ve never been to Lafayette. I’m sure it’s a giant shithole, but I’d like to see it before I die.”

The linesmen and ref blew their whistles in chorus, the horn sounding as well to let both teams know it was time to play. The arena loudspeakers blared something from Metallica while the PA announcer called on the crowd to make as much noise as possible. Connor sat at the end of the bench again, wishing he were on the ice.

He kept hoping for one more shift. He’d been out only once, his line getting scored on, and his skates had just touched the ice when the tying goal went in. He knew he could will himself to win the game, the dream every boy has growing up on the frozen rivers and lakes of Canada. Every shot was game seven, every foe was vanquished until there were none left, every boy the hero in his own version of the fantasy.

With nine seconds left, the face-off was to the right of Mondin. The crowd was in a frenzy, three thousand minds willing Gansy to win the face-off and get the game into overtime. Three thousand and twenty-five counting the Bombers on the ice and on the bench, as well as the trainer and two coaches. The puck dropped from the linesman’s hands, bouncing off the ice and over the blade of Gansy’s stick. The Titan center flicked the puck back to his defenseman at the point, who immediately lined up a

slapshot and let it rip.

The ring of the puck as it hit the right post before making the back of the net puff out took the air out of everyone in the arena except the Titan players. Three thousand twenty-five humans stood, stunned at the cruelty of it. Four and a half seconds were left on the clock, and the puck was to be dropped at center ice. Connor ground his teeth in frustration, knowing that without some kind of supernatural intervention, they were headed home and the Titans were headed to Indiana.

“I’m sorry, Connor,” Dana said as she drove them to his apartment. “I’m so sorry.” She didn’t know what else to say, and Connor had barely mumbled two words since he had met her in the parking garage.

He sighed heavily. “It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not,” she said angrily. “It sucks. You guys were winning.”

“Don’t remind me,” he said, giving her a smile that was only half-fake. He wanted to forget about it already, just another string of failures in a long rope made of them.

“I’m sorry. You probably don’t want to talk about it, do you?”

“Not really.”

“If it helps, you were great.”

“I barely played, but that’s still talking about it.” Connor

gave her an exaggerated frown.

“Right, right. So... do you want to go get something to eat?”

“Nah, let’s just stop and get some beer. I feel like I could stand a drink or ten. My stomach is too knotted up for food.”

“But not too much for alcohol?” she asked.

“Being my girlfriend means you get to nag me?”

“No, being your girlfriend means I *have* to nag you. If I don’t, who will?”

A few minutes later, they pulled into his apartment complex. As she parked in front of his unit, he noticed the extra black Lincoln parked one space over. Connor’s hands clenched into fists. He hadn’t even been able to get home and enjoy the rest of the evening.

“What’s wrong?” Dana asked, leaning forward to look around him out of the side window.

“I think I’m being sent back to work,” he answered.

“What? Tonight? Maybe it’s not one of their cars. No way would they make you go in after you just lost like that. Would they?”

“Who knows?” he asked, getting out of the car.

When Dana opened her door, he turned and waved her back. Connor didn’t want his *visitor* to see him with anyone, especially not Dana. Connor was worried that whoever was waiting for him had already seen her. She hesitated and he gave her a wave of his hand again to get back into her Toyota. He walked around to her side and she rolled down the window.

“Go home, but don’t go directly home. Go get some coffee or

something, get something to eat. If this is nothing, I'll text you right away and you can pick me up down the block," he told her, his tone offering no room for argument.

"What if it isn't 'nothing?'" she asked, wanting to reach out and put her hand over his as he leaned on the Toyota's door.

"I don't know. Just go. I'll find out what they want. I'll text you either way. I'm sorry."

He walked away from her car, not leaning in to kiss her goodbye, not even offering the slightest friendliness. She knew it was in case anyone was watching, but it hurt her. The thought that they were being so paranoid as to jump at shadows made her angry. Her anger caused her to stomp her foot down on the accelerator for a split second. The noise of her tires chirping before she caught herself made Connor look back. She didn't like the expression on his face.

He tested the doorknob before fumbling with his keys. The knob turned and he walked into his apartment. Dracul sat in his recliner, watching a news show on the television. The Romanian looked up at him before looking back at the TV, changing the channel with the remote. Connor closed the door and stood in place, not sure what was going on. Dracul looked up again and pointed to the bedroom with his thumb. He gave Connor a cold smile as he walked by.

Jera was asleep on his bed, or at least pretended to be asleep. An overnight bag was on the floor next to the bed. She stirred when he walked in and began to get out of his suit and into a pair of sweats and a hoodie. When he was done, he stood next to the

bed, watching the girl.

“What?” she asked.

“What are you doing here? And why is he here?” Connor asked, nodding his head toward the doorway.

“I have an appointment at one, and he said you were taking over again tonight.”

“You have an appointment at one? I just got home from a game, and I’m supposed to take you?”

“You will,” Dracul said from the doorway.

Connor glared at the man. Dracul’s lips curled as if he were blowing Connor a kiss from across the room. The Romanian turned and walked back toward the front door, the sounds from the television replaced by silence. Five seconds later the front door closed, and a second after that, Connor heard the deadbolt slide into place. The bastard was letting him know that he had a key, and Connor wasn’t safe anywhere.

He looked at the clock on the nightstand. It was almost midnight. “Where do we have to go?” he asked Jera, not even bothering to get upset.

“South Cloverdale, out near Lake Hazel.”

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“No.”

Connor was surprised she wasn’t already screaming at him, or at least opening with a tirade of insults.

“Go get ready. I want to get this done and get home. I’m tired, and pissed, and now I’m stuck with your miserable ass again,” he said.

Jera looked down at her lap. "I don't want to go."

"Yeah? Too bad. You have to go. Just like I have to drive you. So hop to it."

"I don't want to go," she repeated, refusing to look at him.

Connor sat on the edge of the bed. "Why not? His cock too big for you? He makes you do twisted shit? Should be no problem for you."

"He hurts me," she answered.

"Yeah? Like how?"

"He... puts things in me," she replied. "He makes me bleed sometimes. Mostly he pays extra so he can hurt me."

"He slaps you around?" Connor asked. He had never bothered to ask her what she did with a client. He'd decided that knowing she fucked them was too much information already.

"Slaps, kicks, punches. He has a wide leather paddle that he uses. It doesn't leave any bruises most of the time, but it hurts worse than being hit with his hands."

"This is just fucking great," Connor said, rising from the bed. "I'm supposed to feel sorry for you? Because you were too stupid to keep your mouth shut?" He reached down, grabbed her bag, and threw it in her lap. "Get your ass in the bathroom and get ready. If you don't, I'll call Ojacarcu right now and let him know you refuse to go so he sends your ass off instead of coming after me again."

Jera broke down into tears, unable to control herself. She hugged her bag tight while Connor stood, uncomfortable as he watched her cry, pissed off enough to not comfort her. He thought about it for a fraction of a second, until he remembered how painful

it had been to eat and shit for a few days after Dracul had laid into him. Because of her.

“You don’t even care!” she cried when her sobbing had subsided enough to let her get words out.

“Yeah, you’re right. I don’t give a shit about you. I did once, when I thought you were just helpless and stupid. But not now. You aren’t helpless. You’re just stupid.”

“I fucking hate you!” she shrieked, attempting to throw her bag at his head.

The strap caught on her hand and it rolled off the bed, landing at Connor’s feet. He picked it up and threw it on her lap again. The clock showed less than forty minutes to get to the client. He pointed at it, but she didn’t move. He stepped closer to the bed and reached down to grab her by the arm but she jerked back, trying to crawl away from him to the other side of the bed. Connor’s hand reached out and grabbed her by the neck, pulling her off the bed to stand next to him.

“I don’t want to go!” she wailed. “He hurts me worse than Larry ever did.”

“Bullshit,” Connor said, less than two inches from her face. “I witnessed what that asshole did to you, and for weeks on end.”

“Larry’s a loser, a piece of shit limp dick. He hit me because he couldn’t get it up, and could only get hard when he hurt me,” she said, and began to cry again. Connor didn’t want to hear any of it, but couldn’t stop her. “This guy, he hurts me because he likes it. He’s good at it, good at making me scream without leaving any marks. I don’t want him hurting me anymore. Please don’t make

me go.”

“Is this some kind of trick?” he asked, not putting it past her to set him up.

“Fuck you!” she screamed in his face. “How would you like a giant dildo up your ass? You think it feels good? You think it feels better when someone is laughing at you, calling you names because you scream every time it tears you? You want to know what it feels like to have your nipples squeezed until they bleed and you can’t feel them anymore? You want to know what it feels like to be choked to death while a cock is ramming you in the ass, and no matter how hard you try, you can’t stop yourself from coming?”

Her fists lashed out at him, a tornado of knuckles and fingernails. Her words turned into incoherent screams as her voice rose to the shriek that he hated more than anything. Connor pulled her in toward his chest, crushing her face into his hoodie to muffle her screams, afraid one of his neighbors would call the police.

He had almost slapped her to get her under control when she’d shouted the part about being choked to death. Now he was holding on, keeping her wrapped up, looking at the clock and seeing less than half an hour before she had to be at her appointment. The vision of her being choked while some faceless man fucked her from behind, her face turning black, blood seeping out from under the rope he imagined the man using, broke something in him.

“Get dressed,” he said, pushing her away. Jera looked like she was going to collapse to the floor and refuse to move until he gave her a shove toward the bathroom. “Get dressed. Don’t bother

arguing with me or I'll treat you worse than this guy ever fantasized about. Do it. NOW!"

She flinched at his shout, but grabbed her bag and went to the bathroom. He stood in the doorway while she washed her face and made herself up. The pants she put on were tight enough to almost need her legs greased to get them on. He wondered how she or any woman could be comfortable wearing some of the things she had to wear for her clients. He supposed that was beyond the lack of comfort at having to have sex with strange men, sometimes men who enjoyed hurting her, willing to pay extra for the opportunity.

Jera almost started crying again until Connor told her to pull herself together or they would both end up paying a high price. He grabbed the keys and ushered her out the door and to the back seat of the Lincoln. The late May night air was still cool, making him glad he had put on his sweats and hoodie. It wouldn't look professional to the client, but that was the least of his worries.

Fifteen minutes later, they pulled up in front of a house that looked like it had a tee-off spot for a golf course barely ten feet from the garage. As he looked around, he realized the house was in a subdivision built around a golf course. He turned the car off, got out, and helped Jera out. They walked to the front door, Connor holding her elbow in case she tried to bolt.

The door opened as they stepped up to it. A mean face that could have been either fifty or seventy scowled at them.

"You're late," the client said, his voice almost exactly as Connor had imagined it. When Connor said nothing, the man stepped back and let them in.

“There has been a change,” Connor told the man, after the door closed.

“What? What change?” the client asked, looking from Connor to Jera with suspicion. “Don’t you try to rob me, I’ll blow your fuckin’ heads off, and if I don’t, Costie will have your balls,” he said to Connor, “and your tits.” He directed a glare that was mixed with lust at Jera.

“We aren’t here to rob you,” Connor explained. “I’m here to let you know there has been an adjustment of the rules. You may call Mr. Ojacarcu if you wish to confirm or dispute this.” Connor waited to see what the man would do. The client licked his lips once but made no move to grab a phone. “Good. The last time we got this whore back,” he said, jerking Jera by the arm to stand in front of him, “she was in bad shape. You were the last one to see her.”

“Wait, I didn’t—”

“Listen to me carefully, sir. If you wish to take up the cost of replacing one of these *slits* with Mr. Ojacarcu, that’s your business. I’m responsible for the meat, and so my ass is the one that gets chewed up when you allow the meat to come back to me with bruises and cuts. She can’t work for a couple of days when you make her bleed like that. If she’s bleeding or hurt like that again, I’ll have to tell Mr. Ojacarcu, and then you can work out the debt with him.”

The client squinted hard at Connor. The way Connor glowered back at him made him realize that it would be better to find another whore who could take his punishment than to cross the

Romanian and end up having to owe the man. He'd heard stories about the Romanians and their version of *debt*. Once you were in debt to them, you never got out, like a roach motel, except instead of dying, you bled money until you had no more. Then you died.

"No, I understand." The man licked his lips again, glancing nervously at Jera before looking back to Connor. "I think it would be best if we canceled this appointment then. I wouldn't want to make Mr. Ojacarcu upset by thinking I might have mishandled one of his girls."

"Probably for the best," Connor said, giving Jera a rough shove to put her behind him. "You know how whores are, they'll lie just to get someone to come and break one of your elbows or knees, especially if they know they can get away with it." He looked back at Jera, giving her a look that promised her violence if she so much as breathed. "These bitches are nothing but trouble, but the boss pays us well to look after them. But don't ever trust one as far as you can kick her."

"No shit," the client agreed, looking relieved that Connor was on his side.

"Unfortunately, I'll have to ask you to pay for her services, since we did make the trip." The client looked ready to protest until Connor said, "I know, I know. It's shitty, but I don't make the rules. I'd rather not explain why she showed up, but didn't get paid. They don't seem to care whether you fuck 'em or not, they just want to get paid, and they want to make sure the next guy in line doesn't get damaged goods, since damaged goods can't make money."

“Fucking Romanians,” the man said a moment before he realized that he’d let it slip.

“I agree wholeheartedly,” Connor said, clapping the man on the shoulder. “Can’t trust them any more than you can the whores, if you want my opinion.”

He held his hand out to let the client know it was time to pay up so they could part ways. The man dug around in his pocket and produced five hundred dollars. Connor wondered if the extra two hundred was the fee for being allowed to knock her around, put weird objects in her, make her scream in pain and terror.

The two men shook hands before Connor grabbed Jera’s arm and gave her another hard shove toward the front door. He looked back at the client with a *jeez, these dumb cunts, they never learn!* expression before shoving her out the front door and down the walkway. He heard the door close behind them and let out a heavy breath. If the man called his bluff and phoned Ojacarcu, Dracul would pay them a visit. He’d probably let the client torture Jera worse than she’d ever been tortured while making Connor watch. Connor was sure he’d be in a lot of pain of his own if that happened.

He felt Jera’s fingers curl into his as they walked toward the car.

CHAPTER 22

Summer

“Where to?” Connor asked as Jera climbed into the front seat.

“East Ridgeline, up in the foothills,” she said, pulling the sun shade down to check her makeup in the mirror.

Connor pulled out onto State Street and started working his way through the lightly trafficked roads to their destination. He glanced over at Jera while she touched up her mascara, wondering which version he’d get today. For the last three weeks, they’d waited for Dracul to show up out of nowhere to give them a refresher course on obedience. The client never called Ojacarcu to question Connor’s little speech, as far as they knew, anyway, though the boss might be saving up the black mark against them for another time.

The Lincoln pulled into the driveway of an expensive home, and Connor shut the engine off. He turned to look at her, unable to stop himself from asking her if she was going to be all right.

“Jera—”

“Connor,” she interrupted, “don’t talk to me before I have to go in. Just don’t.”

She opened the door and stepped out, pulling her miniskirt down on the sides. Connor wasn’t sure it could even be considered a miniskirt. It seemed more like a black gauze bandage that had been wrapped around her hips. He walked her to the door, both of them stepping inside when a middle-aged man in a robe opened the

door. Connor exchanged Jera for the fee, checked the time on his phone, then nodded to both of them before leaving the house to wait in the car.

I miss you he texted to Dana from the front seat of the Lincoln. *I'm sorry I have to work again.*

He drifted through various radio stations, at one point stopping on the local sports station before moving on. Three weeks after their epic collapse in the third period and the city had already forgotten. The Steelheads had missed the playoffs and had received more sports coverage than the Bombers. The dominant conversation always revolved around the Boise State Broncos. The season hadn't even started, yet the local bloggers and reporters had already pegged them for one of the January bowls. Probably had them winning it as well.

It's okay. I passed all of my finals btw was Dana's reply text. He pouted for a few seconds until a second text made his phone chime. *I miss you too. I have tomorrow off...*

I'm there! He hoped nothing would happen that would interfere with actually being with her all night. *What are you doing right now? Bored out of my mind here.*

Thinking about you she replied. *I'm going commando, that thought should keep you from being too bored.*

Connor felt a quickening of his pulse at the thought. He looked toward the house, not really expecting to see anything or anyone, but it was a habit anytime he had been sent a racy text on his phone, as if the instant the text showed up, a crowd of disapproving old people would *tsk-tsk* him to death.

Now I'm annoyed that I'm stuck here.

I'll be here all night Dana replied back, giving him a smiley face.

He wanted to message her back and forth the entire time he waited for Jera, but that would only make his emotional turmoil worse. He was trying to find a way to tell Dana that he loved her without screwing everything up. He had no idea if it was a good idea to say such a serious thing to her after only a few months.

Connor felt caught between the proverbial rock and hard place, wanting her to know how he felt, afraid it would blow up in his face if she ever found out what his *driving job* really was. Part of it would be Jera. Most of it would be because he had lied. All of his scenario conclusions ended in Dana saying he couldn't possibly love her if he was willing to lie to her.

Half an hour later, Jera opened the door and got in. Her makeup was starting to wear down from sweat around her eyes, her breathing heavier than normal. He couldn't help wonder if she liked some of the men she serviced, liked engaging in the act with them. The client she'd just left had been a decent looking man, and from what Connor could tell, he looked healthy and in shape.

Were some of them good to her? Did some of them think about more than themselves and try to bring her to climax? Did they do it because their wives were unable to get there, or showed no interest in trying? Or maybe the wives were fat or ugly or just refused to perform oral sex anymore? Since he had rarely been unable to find a companion to spend the night with when he really wanted to, and none of them ever refused anything, he couldn't

figure out what drove these men to hire a prostitute.

Some of Connor's partners had wanted to do things that freaked him out a little, making him wonder if his view of sexuality was a bit skewed. None of the girls who worked for Ojacarcu were ugly, and he doubted that any of them were over twenty-one, which was a possible bonus for clients. Ojacarcu was also smart, turning local men on to these young, attractive women for free once or twice before the girl would let the men know they were available for a fee.

He decided that if he were looking for a hooker, he'd feel much more comfortable, much safer going through a service such as Ojacarcu's than heading down to wherever the street walkers peddled their wares. Connor had been in Boise for four years, and still couldn't think of a place where prostitutes walked the streets looking for customers like their sisters did in the major cities.

Seattle, Los Angeles, Chicago, Miami, those places had the population to support the lowest class of professional sex workers. Places like Boise, Idaho and Des Moines, Iowa weren't the type of cities that had that kind of open-air vice, nor the infrastructure to support the larger organized crime family operations. However, the Treasure Valley had more than enough sinners and purveyors of vice to support a small network of call girls, drug dealing, extortion, loan sharking, even car theft and protection schemes.

The trick, Petre had told him a few times, was to keep everything as low-key as possible. New York City cops barely had time to respond to a firearm homicide before getting another call to look into a fatal stabbing. Houston vice squads had their pickings

when it came to which blocks to target prostitutes or underground gambling operations. If one person disappeared in Boise, it wasn't a big deal for the most part, and it helped tremendously when the missing person happened to be one of those inhabiting the lower end of the social spectrum.

Two persons, or one high-profile person, and all hell could break loose. Too much intimidation, too many of the boss' drug networks compromised from reckless business practices, or too many clients sniffing around for a piece of purchasable ass, and somewhere along the line a cop with a burr up his ass and a desire to make Sergeant or Detective would start putting two and two together.

Disappearing a law enforcement officer was a taboo so extreme that Ojacarcu would have to get permission from Bucharest before attempting it. Even under the most dire circumstances, permission would more than likely never come. It was easier for the bosses to eliminate one of their own than a troublesome local cop or federal agent. A gangster getting knocked off would be par for the course, business as usual, and the authorities would gnash their teeth publicly about their inability to pursue more justice by infiltrating the web that always revolved around organized criminal operations. Privately they'd pat each other on the back as another top gun got what he deserved, and was even saving the taxpayers some money by not living off the dole in prison or eating up prosecution time in the courts.

Connor's thoughts were finally broken up by their arrival at Jera's place. He parked and waited for her in the car while she

cleaned up and changed to whatever clothes her next client preferred. He still hadn't been able to decide if she liked some of the clients she had to serve. He knew that more than half were slimy, fat, old, ugly, or had some other feature that bordered on repulsive.

He had met at least twenty different clients in the last two months since becoming Jera's driver. There were maybe three or four who didn't seem disgusting. He had tried to ask her a couple of times, but she had refused to talk about it. She didn't seem ashamed of what she was doing, or being forced to do, but he could tell that there was a hollowness inside her, as if she had mastered the art of shutting herself completely down and putting her body and personality on auto-pilot. She would turn into Nightmare Jera when he tried to broach the subject, any subject concerning her profession.

She wouldn't talk about the night he kept her from the client who wanted to hurt her. She'd let go of his hand the instant he opened the door to the car for her, and refused to say another word for the next two days to him other than telling him where to deliver her. However, Jera had begun to at least be civilized to him. Connor wondered if there was a conscience somewhere deep within her, hidden under the weight of drugs and poor life choices, that might have been awakened just enough to have a voice.

"Ten Mile Road, south of Overland Road," she said after getting back into the Lincoln.

He did a double-take when he realized she was wearing a professional business suit, complete with black jacket, tight black

skirt that went to her knees, black heels, and snow white stockings. Every other client wanted her in the skimpiest outfits the mind could imagine. Whoever she was scheduled to meet next was either weird, or had what Connor considered good taste.

“What?” she asked after noticing his stare.

“Nothing. I just... I really like that outfit.” Connor felt stupid for complimenting her, knowing a raging tirade or a string of insults would be coming his way.

“Yeah?” she asked, pulling the sun shade down, looking at herself in the mirror.

“Yeah.”

“What do you like about it?” she asked.

“I don’t know. It looks... it just looks great on you. I like it better than the trashy stuff you have to wear.”

“I don’t *have* to wear anything unless they request it. I wear what I think they will like. If I’ve visited them enough times, I know what they like.”

Connor didn’t like the thought of her enjoying the job enough to start catering her fashions to what the clients desired. It was another piece of evidence that suggested she didn’t actually hate what she was doing.

“And this guy likes the professional business woman?” he asked her.

“Sure. What man doesn’t?”

“I guess,” he said, hoping to drop the subject suddenly, even though he’d wanted to talk about it for weeks.

She reached over and laid a hand on his arm. “I don’t have a

choice in this. I do what I have to do to survive. If I'm good at it, pretend to enjoy it, I get better clients, ones who aren't interested in hurting me or belittling me. I also don't get the wrong attention from the block guards or the boss."

Connor had met some of the block guards who patrolled the hallways of the apartment building for Ojacarcu's people. They took the appointments and kept records of which girls made how much money, which girls were getting complaints, and which girls weren't performing other side tasks like giving freebies to the guards or running dope on the side for them.

"So you hate doing it with all of these men?" he asked, bracing for an outburst.

"It's just sex," she said. "All men want sex. I spread my legs, they stick it in, sometimes I put it in my mouth or my hand, some even want me to use my feet. Some just want to watch me touch myself. Others want me to touch another woman. If they aren't trying to hurt me, then I just do what I'm supposed to do. I pretend to like it because they want to feel good, like a king, like a god."

"So you just shut your brain off and let them use your body?"

Jera shrugged. "Whatever. Like I said, it's just sex." She looked closely at him. "Are you jealous or something? Why do you care?"

"I'm not jealous," he replied.

"Then why do you give a shit?"

Connor thought about it, but didn't want to give her a truthful answer. "I don't," he lied, "I was just curious."

"Bullshit."

“Whatever. So you just do it to survive, and if it happens to feel good once in a while, that’s like a perk?”

“Fuck you.”

They rode in silence to a large ranch-style house off Ten Mile Road. Connor had been to the house before, and had no reason to escort her to the door. She’d bring the money when she was done. He pulled out his phone and typed out a text to Dana, but erased it before sending it. He was getting plenty of practice at doing that.

He waited out the time by surfing the web for hockey news, checking out some funny videos the few friends he kept on social sites had posted, even searched his own name in Google. When he was bored of that, he typed in Travis’ name. He was just about to swipe the button to execute the search when the passenger door opened. He froze for a moment, sure Jera would see the name and immediately start shrieking to everyone within a mile that he was a murderer.

He closed the browser and locked his phone. Jera paid him no attention, going straight for the mirror behind the sun visor.

“Where to?” Connor asked her.

“Home,” she said, still working on her face in the mirror.

“You’re done?”

“Yes, *father*,” she said.

“Good.”

“You got a hot date or something?” she asked, flipping the visor up and looking at him.

“No, I just want to go home. No offense, but I got better things to do with my time than this.”

“If you don’t have a date then that means you would rather masturbate than drive me around.”

“Sure, that’s valid,” he said, pulling back out onto Ten Mile Road. “You could include drinking a gallon of bleach in that also.”

Jera looked like she was about to shift into harpy mode, but stared straight ahead instead. Connor waited for her to say something, but the only words he got from her was her first appointment time the next day when he dropped her off.

“Come on, man, please do this for me,” Connor said into the phone.

“No,” Petre’s voice said back to him. “It is not my responsibility. It is your assignment, and I don’t want to get involved.”

“Your English is pretty fucking good when you don’t want to help me, you know.”

“The answer is still no.”

“Listen, you owe me. Don’t be a traitor to me twice. I took a few fists, including one of yours.”

“I apologized for that. I don’t owe you anything. You made your own bed, now sleep in it.”

Connor frowned. Petre always butchered phrases like that. He wondered if he knew the *real* Petre. The one talking to him on the phone sounded just like the Petre he’d worked with for three years off and on, regularly in the last six months. But he didn’t talk

like Petre.

“Look,” Connor tried. “You’re always claiming you’re my friend. Sometimes you wave a big flag around, proclaiming it just in case I ever forget. Are you my friend or not?”

“I am your friend,” Petre said after a long pause. “What is so important that you must risk getting me in trouble over?”

“I can’t tell you that,” Connor said.

“So now you are going to be Dracul’s protege? Trust no one? I’m proud of you, Connor. You are learning.”

“Fuck you. Are you my friend or not?”

“This must be important. I have an idea of what it is, but don’t worry, I am your friend. I say nothing.” Petre’s words began to walk back to the broken English that Connor had become used to, but it sounded fake to his ears now.

“You don’t know shit,” Connor said. “Pick her up at noon.”

Connor ended the call and got out of the Lincoln. He unlocked his apartment door and went inside, wary that Dracul might be there to greet him. He’d made a habit ever since that night of doing a full circuit through his small apartment, checking behind every door just to be sure. He felt shame at his paranoia, but it had unnerved him more than the beating he’d suffered at the man’s hands.

When he found nothing, he texted Dana to let her know he was coming over. He grabbed fresh clothes and stuffed them into his overnight bag. The two had progressed to keeping toothbrushes at each other’s place, though they rarely spent time at his apartment anymore. Dana knew something had happened, but Connor refused

to tell her about Dracul having a key, or the ability to crack the locks on his door with ease. He was afraid he would end up having to tell her about Jera.

CHAPTER 23

He woke when Dana got out of bed. Murky sunlight tried to penetrate the blinds in her bedroom. He laid still, listening to the sounds of her going to the bathroom, then firing up her electric toothbrush. When she was done, she came into the bedroom and saw him watching her.

“May I help you?” she asked with a grin.

“What’s with the waking up and getting your day started thing?” he complained. “I thought you had the day off.”

“I do,” she said, hopping onto the bed and straddling him. “And because you somehow lined up the planets and achieved the same feat, I plan on spending it right here until we get too hungry to continue. But I’d rather not have troll breath, if that’s okay with you.”

“Come here and let me breathe on you,” he said, grabbing her arms to try and pull her face down to his.

“Gross,” she laughed, slapping his arms away. She wiggled a little, her laugh turning into an exaggerated expression of curiosity.

“Urgh. Don’t do that,” he grunted.

“But you’re so hard!” she exclaimed, making him laugh.

“Because I have to pee. Don’t press on it and don’t make me laugh unless you want a story to tell your friends about how you broke up with me.”

Dana pouted, putting her weight on it one more time before he growled and lifted her off, lightly throwing her to the mattress. She tried to grab him, but he escaped and darted into the bathroom.

He finished his business and hurried back to bed. They'd spent their first night together in a couple of weeks like two wild animals during mating season.

Connor's mind had been surprisingly free of any thoughts but Dana. Getting Petre to drive Jera around for a day had emptied his mind of everything, allowing him to focus on Dana. His only worry was his inability to find the right moment to tell Dana he was in love with her. That would scare her enough, he thought, so he figured he'd leave off the part about possibly wanting to spend the rest of his life with her.

She'd already been recruited by three tech startups in the Bay Area with two semesters to go before she received her degree. Connor was sure they could disappear in such a densely populated area as long as no one actively hunted them with a vengeance. If he refused to sign a contract extension and Ojacarcu got pissed, Connor doubted it would be enough to spend much effort to find him. If he left before then, he'd find Dracul, Petre, Vadim, or some other assassin in a tailored business suit waiting for him, sooner rather than later.

After their second round of the morning, Dana went into the kitchen to make breakfast. Connor checked his phone before following her. *Of course*, he thought, seeing a text from Petre.

Call me was all it said. *Yeah, right*, Connor thought. *How about 'fuck you'?*

He wandered into the kitchen and stared at her for a while, grinning at her outfit, which consisted of panties and an apron. And a smile. He stepped forward and put his arms around Dana's waist,

kissing her on the neck and ear lobe.

“Stop,” she giggled, shooing him away with a spatula. “We’ll starve to death if you don’t leave me alone.”

“I’m prepared for that outcome,” he said, trying to get his hands under her apron.

She smacked his hand with the spatula and danced away from him. He was about to go after her when he heard his phone ring. Both of them saw the instant frown mirrored in the other’s face.

“What the hell?” he sighed, walking to the bedroom to answer it.

“Tell them to eat shit and die!” Dana shouted after him. “This is *my* day with you!”

He grabbed the phone, not recognizing the number, debating on letting it go to voicemail.

“Hello?” he said into the phone, deciding to answer it instead.

“We must talk,” Petre said on the other end.

“What the fuck, man? Can’t I have a fucking day to myself?”

“Listen to me.” Petre’s voice was clipped and short. “I am your friend, doing your favor. But tonight we must talk. Meet me at your place. Seven o’clock.”

The line went dead before Connor could respond. He stood holding the phone, staring at it, until Dana called out from the kitchen that breakfast was ready.

“Who was it?” she asked when he sat down at the little table she had in the dining room.

“Work,” he answered.

“And...?”

“I don’t know. Something’s up. That was Petre, but he called me from a strange number.”

“What did he want?”

“Says I have to meet him at seven at my place.”

“About what?”

“He hung up on me before telling me that part,” Connor said, shrugging. “He’s still covering for me today. This is something else.”

“What do you think he wants?”

“I don’t know,” Connor answered.

There were a few things he could think of that Petre would want to talk about—Jera being the most likely. Maybe Larry did something stupid again. Maybe Ojacarcu was pissed that Petre was covering for him. Ojacarcu seemed intent on teaching Connor a lesson by burdening him with the woman.

“Whatever it is, you better tell him he’s screwing with your fun time,” Dana smiled, trying to turn the mood back to the hours they still had left before he had to leave. Both of them knew he might *work* late.

“I’m sure he’ll be concerned,” Connor said, sticking out his tongue to an imaginary Petre, getting a laugh from her.

“Eat, so you have energy for more... fun.” Her sultry look made him tear into his eggs comically, pretending to shovel them into his mouth to let her know he was thinking the same thing.

Petre was waiting for him in his own Lincoln. They met at the door to Connor's apartment, neither saying a word until they were both inside. Connor offered him a drink, Petre accepting water.

"So what's this about? What did I do wrong this time? Should I just put my arms out and let you take a few shots at me?" Connor asked.

"I have a friend," Petre said, his voice the unfamiliar one that didn't have the humorous accent, full of broken English. "He works for... he knows things. Hears things. He's heard something about Travis Benkula."

"Shit," Connor said, his heart lurching into his throat. "What did he hear?"

"That Travis is missing, which is nothing to be surprised about. Normally my friend wouldn't hear about such things about who was being investigated. But he happened to see a report from an investigator within the Boise Police to IDE about a confidential informant that mentioned Travis' name."

"IDE?" Connor asked.

"Idaho Drug Enforcement. They are like the DEA, but run by the state. Which is interesting, but not alarming. IDE is good at what they do, and they probably know many, if not all of the dealers, even ones we are personally familiar with. Ojacarcu knows this, which is why he has a lot of distance between him and such activities.

“The truly interesting thing is that the confidential informant contacted someone within the Boise Police Department’s narcotics unit. My informant does not have access to confidential informant reports, and cannot give me any more information than what little he has seen. But it seems IDE already had their eyes on Travis, and now that he is missing, they are actively searching for him. Which means they will sniff over every leaf to find out what has happened to him.”

“Shit,” Connor said again, ignoring his friend’s butchering of another phrase. “But they won’t find anything, will they?” He thought of the body being dumped from the bucket of the loader onto the conveyor belt, then the body rolling off the belt into the incinerator.

“Unlikely,” Petre answered. “Dracul is very thorough, and the system of disposal you used means there’s zero chance of them finding any evidence through physical means.”

Connor bristled at the way Petre lumped him in with Dracul, as if Connor had gone along willingly and actively participated in the actual murder itself. He also didn’t like the Petre who was talking to him, the one who still had an accent, but not nearly as thick or ridiculous as before. He wondered once again who the man was.

“Then what’s the problem? So a dope dealer disappears. It isn’t like that hasn’t ever happened before,” Connor said.

“True, but IDE had him in their system. Local drug squads more than likely know of him. If the IDE people have a file on him, they will walk backwards and find people that Travis

associated with. It is unlikely that any would lead directly back to Mr. Ojacarcu, he is too careful for that.

“However, dealers in certain areas know other dealers. They network either as associates or as competitors. They know who helps them move product, and they know who moves product around them, with strict boundaries set by Mr. Ojacarcu. Fighting amongst themselves is bad for business.”

“Larry,” Connor said.

“Yes, he is one possibility. He is in Caldwell, and Travis was from Boise, so the possibility of connection is low, but still there.”

“You think they’ll dig that deep?” Connor asked.

“I don’t know. But it is one of the reasons making someone disappear in such a small place like this is dangerous. Even lowlifes like Larry or Travis.”

Connor’s memory of Travis was much different than what his memories of Larry were. He’d thought Travis was one of them, along to help complete a job, not the victim he turned out to be. Larry, on the other hand, was exactly the kind of shitbag Connor expected would end up disappearing one day. If not disappearing to jail, he’d end up riding the conveyor or screaming in a pine box six feet underground until his oxygen ran out.

“We need to be careful for a while. We should be careful all the time, but right now it is important to not attract any kind of attention,” Petre told him.

“What’s with you?” Connor asked him. “What’s with this sudden ability to talk in English without mangling it?”

“You are mistaken,” Petre said. “My English is always good.

Maybe as friend you finally notice?"

"Bullshit," Connor said angrily. "You can go on believing you are fooling me with that shit, but you aren't who you say you are. Or you are, but you've been lying to me, playing me since I met you. Doing shit that friends don't do to each other."

"I am your friend," Petre said solemnly. "I am Petre Diaconescu. I have your other friend in the car, driving her around for you to sex your woman without interference."

"So what was it?" Dana asked when he came back two hours later.

"Nothing," Connor lied.

"Connor," she said, her face growing sad, "this isn't going to work out if you just keep lying to me. You don't spend two hours meeting a henchman who can't postpone it until tomorrow and talk about nothing. 'Hey friend, how was the soccer game?'" she said with a deep voice, imitating him. "'*It was great game, comrade.*'" Her imitation of Petre was so awful that it made him laugh.

"Okay," he said, sitting on the small couch with her. "He says the police might be looking into some of Ojacarcu's business, so we have to be extra careful."

"Are you in trouble?"

"Of course I am. I'm stuck doing 'work' for the guy. I'm locked into a contract, and I'm locked in because of some other shit, like Jera."

Dana scowled at the woman's name. They'd never met, but Connor had described Jera enough to make her sure she'd hate the woman.

"I meant are you in trouble right now? Are the cops looking for you? Or looking into what you are doing?"

"No. It has nothing to do with me, or even Petre. But it has something to do with someone else who is connected to all of this. The main point of it is that the police are always interested in what goes on in the background that isn't legal, but for some reason they are actively interested in someone that is connected.

"If the top of the tower topples, then it could be bad for everyone underneath the boss. But being Romanians, with ties to the old country, the top guys never talk. It's some code, like the Italian mafia has, except the Romanians and the Hungarians and the Russians, the real gangsters, they never talk. Never."

"Do you think they'd come after you just because you aren't one of them? To make sure you couldn't ever snitch on them?" Dana looked worried.

He draped his arm around around her shoulders. "No, they won't mess with me. I'm small fish, and they know, Ojacarcu does anyway, that if I get any stain on my record, I'll get deported back to Canada, and I'll never be able to play organized hockey again. They also know, and this part is true for sure, that I know they'd have me killed if I knew something that could sink them all.

"I'm stuck choosing between losing everything in my life that I care about, like you, hockey, being in America instead of on a frozen plain in the middle of Saskatchewan, and losing all of that

plus my life. I know they'd also go after my family as well as anyone here I cared about. Including you. Which is why I want to get the fuck out of here as soon as I can. I want you to go with me.

"I hate living like this, like you're a secret girlfriend that I can't let my wife know about. I love you, and I'm tired of sneaking around, always watching my back to try and make sure they don't know about you. I'm sure they do know about you, though. They seem to know more than they should about a lot of people, and since I'm someone that does less than legal work for them... I don't know. Maybe I'm just too fucking paranoid anymore."

"Did you just say...?" she asked, unable to finish the question.

"Oh shit," he said, turning red.

"'Oh shit' is not really what I was hoping to hear as a response to that."

"No, I mean... I didn't mean it like that. I didn't mean... I love you. Okay? I'm sorry. But I do."

"Why are you sorry?" she asked.

"I don't mean that I'm sorry. I... please don't do this to me," he begged.

"Connor, I want to tell you that I feel the same way," she said gently, cupping his cheek and turning his face to be able to look into his eyes. "I really do. But I'm too scared right now. I'm not happy sneaking around either. I'm even less happy that you work for a person who deals drugs and has prostitutes and God-knows-what-else going on. I'm scared for you because you aren't one of them, and even if you were, they don't play by any rules but their

own. People like that are more interested in survival than they are in loyalty.”

His heart felt like it had been ripped out of his chest, thrown into the dirt, and then crushed under a boot heel. He understood perfectly why she was afraid. He lived the fear every day. She didn’t know about Dracul and Travis, about Jera, about the things he really did for Ojacarcu. He was upset that he had slipped and said the words, words that he wouldn’t hear repeated back to him. It was his own fault.

CHAPTER 24

Connor sat in the Lincoln, passing time surfing the web on his phone. Jera still had twenty minutes before he would have to go knocking. Only a few clients had gone over the time limit, and none of them had ever done it twice. He was sure that while imposing, threatening even, he was just the face of the real threat that men feared. Arguing with Connor would be the same as arguing with Petre, Dracul, even Ojacarcu.

He typed Travis' name into the search box. It had become another habit, much like his constant typing then erasing before sending a message to Dana. Just like every day for the last two weeks, he debated tapping the button that would execute the search. Petre had told him to be careful, and that he was sure the increased attention would die down when no signs of Travis or foul play were found.

Connor had no idea if the cops or the feds watched out for things like internet searches and phone records like they did in the movies. In the movies, the authorities always pulled the information in real time, or just a few seconds before *the event*, so the hero could make a valiant struggle to get in place before everything went to hell. He also remembered a few shows where criminals had been interviewed while serving their sentences. A lot of them talked about how they were always so smart, so careful, but the one time they slipped up is what got them caught.

What usually followed was a lot of forensic evidence and deep investigation, but the entire case got tied up in a neat little

bow for a jury almost every time. He had no idea if the local cops, or even the feds, were really interested in anything Ojacarcu was up to, let alone himself. As far as everyone knew, Connor Dunsmore was a hockey player. The company books would say the same thing, as would his player contract with the team and the league. His side job didn't come with check stubs and taxpayer identification numbers.

But it was always the one time the idiot criminal slipped up that got him caught, sometimes got a whole lot of people caught. Connor wouldn't cry himself to sleep if Ojacarcu, and especially Dracul, found their way into a prison cell, or maybe a hole in the ground, but he didn't want to be the one who started the domino effect. He spent most of his spare time thinking of how to extricate himself from all of it before it went bad, one way or another, for everyone else.

Jera's approach caught his attention, and instead of pressing the search button, he erased the name and closed the browser. He didn't want to be *that guy* that everyone else laughed at and gangsters hunted down for being the dumbass.

"Where to?" he asked her before she could get her seatbelt fastened.

"Nowhere until ten tonight," she answered.

"Okay. I'll take you home. I've got stuff to do," he said, thinking of Dana.

Jera stayed quiet during the ride, staring straight ahead. He glanced at her a few times, trying to decide whether or not to ask her if she was feeling all right. They pulled up in front of her

apartment building just as the dashboard clock turned to 2:00. Normally she would exit the car the second the wheels came to a stop at the curb, but she didn't make a move to open the door.

"Can I go with you?" she finally asked.

"Go where?"

"I don't care. Wherever you are going. I'll change into something normal and you can do whatever you need to do. I won't get in your way." Jera's eyes were pleading, but the rest of her face remained defiant, angry.

"Listen, no offense," he said, "but I don't really want you around where I'm going."

"Why not?" she asked, becoming defensive, insulting. "You snorting some good dope? Maybe gamble a little? Got a whore you'd rather pay than me? What's wrong with me, not good enough for you? Too brown for you?"

"Please shut up. This is why I don't want you with me. You're a petulant little child who turns into a bitch when you don't get your way, or you cry your little eyes out until someone, unfortunately me lately, pays attention to you."

"I'm not a child." Jera looked away.

"Yes, you are. I hate to bring this up yet again, but I've saved your ass twice now. Twice I could have let you down, let you get hurt, and twice I bailed you out. Instead of at least being civil with me, all you do is act like an ungrateful crybaby. One that throws tantrums and screams incoherently. I'm not asking to be your friend, but I would like you to remember who is the only one in a long time that has treated you like a friend."

She began to cry, silently at first, slowly building into a crescendo of shudders and sniffles. Connor stared impassively at her, not buying the act, hoping it wasn't an act and she was waking up to reality. He realized even if she was finally catching on, it would only last a day, two at the most. He'd been down this road with her before.

"Look, good cry and all, but I've got things to do. So kindly cut the shit and tell me what you want, or get the fuck out of the car," he said when she finally wound down to a slow trickle of tears.

"Please," she said, almost begged. She wouldn't look at him

"Please what?"

"Please, let me go with you. I don't want to be here alone until the next job. I promise I won't be a bitch, and I'll stay out of your way."

"I can't take you with me where I'm going. I can drop you off somewhere, a bookstore or coffee bar if you want."

"Where are you going that you can't take me? I said I would change into something normal."

"None of your business is where. Now get out so I can get to it."

"Please, Connor. Please. Don't leave me here for seven hours. I'll do anything you ask."

"I'm asking you to get the fuck out of the car," he said, flicking the automatic locks twice to let her know her door was unlocked. When she didn't move, he gave her a hard look. "Give me one reason why you don't want to stay here until I come back

for you at nine.”

“I don’t want to get hurt today.”

“What does that mean? Do you owe them money or something? I can’t protect you from that kind of shit, that’s all on you.”

“I don’t want to fuck them!” she screamed at him. “I don’t want to fuck any of the girls when they make us do it so they can watch.”

Connor stared at her. She had relapsed back to tears, her head turned away. He wondered if she was playing a game with him again. Jera hadn’t been playing a game the night he had talked the client out of hurting her, from even touching her. She definitely hadn’t been playing when he’d picked her up at the Gas-Mart.

“Go get your shit,” he said. “Bring whatever you need for your appointment at ten, and if you have one after that as well. I’ll wait five minutes then I’m leaving. I’m not screwing around.”

Jera didn’t answer. She threw open the door and ran toward the entrance. The block guards had to know she didn’t have any appointments, and if they decided she would be staying until her next one, Connor wouldn’t help her. He was beginning to know what Petre might be feeling like when dealing with him. There was being nice, being a friend, something he was still far from when it came to Jera, and then there was covering his own ass.

It took her eight minutes to return, but he knew he would have waited if she had needed fifteen to get her things. She tried to hide a smile when she jumped into the back seat with a backpack. Connor glared at her in the rearview mirror before pulling out of

the complex. He had no idea what to do with her. He definitely wasn't interested in having her tag along while he hung out with Dana for a few hours.

"Where do you want to go?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Wherever you are going," she answered.

"I told you, that isn't happening. You can't go with me, and I can't have you waiting in the car. I'm going to be a while."

"Why not? Wait. Are you going to see a girl? A girlfriend? A real one, not a prostitute?"

"I told you, none of your business. Where do you want to go?"

She crossed her arms, Connor bracing for an eruption of hatred and insults. "Take me to your apartment. I've been there before, and I can hang out there. You still have a TV right?"

"What? No way. And yes I still have a television. I would like to remain having a television, thank you very much."

"Oh, so now I'm a thief?"

"You're a junkie. And a whore. Sorry, but you don't make good life choices."

"So I'm a thief." It wasn't a question.

"No," Connor sighed, "you probably aren't a thief. But you're a dopehead. I don't want that shit in my apartment. I don't want *you* in my apartment."

"You can't just drop me off somewhere for six hours! Please, Connor. You can go fuck your girlfriend and I'll chill at your place. I won't steal your television either, not even to buy dope."

He looked in the mirror at her. She was once again trying to

hide a grin. There was something about her that was kryptonite to him. She made a tiny soft spot in him when everything else was rigid, hard, immune to her.

“Goddammit,” he growled, moving the big car into a left-hand turn lane to go back toward his place. “Don’t steal my fucking television, and don’t drink all of my beer. And don’t fuck any guys on my bed. Not in my apartment either. No dope. No parties. No bullshit.”

“Okay, *Dad*,” she pouted. “Sheesh.”

He looked over at Dana. They both lay in a tangle of limbs and sheets, their breathing receding into slow, steady rhythms. The first hour had been a bright flare of need followed by a long, slow discovery of each other’s bodies. His right thigh still twitched every few seconds, an odd artifact of the scar tissue somehow being affected by sexual release.

Dana felt it twitch again, giggling at the feeling of his leg spasming between both of hers. She frowned when he reached over to grab his phone, looking at the time.

“Relax, we still have a few hours,” she said, slapping at his arm to make him put it down.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Are you sure everything is okay? That was great, and I can still feel your leg quivering, but you don’t seem yourself.”

“I’m all right,” he said. “Just thinking about a lot of stuff.”

“What kind of *stuff*?” she asked, exaggerating the last word.

“What do you want to do with your life?” he asked.

“That’s the kind of stuff you think about?”

“No, that’s a question,” he said. “What do you want to do with your life?”

“Like, do I want to get married and have babies and grow old with someone?”

“No,” he said, frustrated. “What do you want to do with your life? What is it that drives you onward? If you could do anything, what would you want to do?”

“Oh,” she paused for a bit. “I want to be on a design team at one of the big IC firms, one of the teams doing relevant work. Designing the next generation of chips, maybe even work on artificial intelligence if we ever get that far in my lifetime.”

“IC?” he asked.

“Integrated circuit. Microchip. Processor.” He nodded his head in understanding. “A place like Intel or IBM. A place where I am respected because I’m good at what I do, not because I have nice tits.”

He reached over and gave one of them a teenage fondle. “They are nice.”

Dana slapped his hand away, but her smile betrayed the anger she tried to fake. “I’m serious. There’s not a lot of us in engineering and tech. I don’t mind the whole having babies and getting married thing, but I want to *be* somebody. I love being a nerd, I love solving problems, and I’m good at both of those things.”

He kissed her on the forehead and wrapped her in his arms. He loved her independence, her confidence that she could succeed at any task she put her mind to, her drive to do something meaningful with her life. It put his own life in perspective.

“What’s the matter? Too deep for you?” she asked.

“No, I was just thinking of how awesome you are that you have your life on the same path as your goals.”

“Maybe not all of them,” she said. “Most of them so far, yes. What about you? Since you are being Mr. Philosopher.”

“My goals are stupid,” he complained.

“Sure they are,” she joked, “just like mine are. Who wants to admit being a nerd and wanting to make computer chips? That’s even too nerdy for nerds. Regular nerds just want to play video games about dragons and watch science fiction marathons.”

Connor laughed at the way she used her hands to accentuate her words, furiously mashing controller buttons while playing a video game, mimicking male masturbation and drooling when talking about sci-fi shows.

“Okay, fine. It’s stupid, but I just want to play hockey. That’s what I want to do. I keep lying to myself, telling myself if I play harder, practice more, I can get back to the big time, or at least close enough to it that it means something more than what I’m doing right now.”

“Why do you think you are lying to yourself?” she asked.

“Because I *know* I will never be good enough again. I’m twenty-six. Every year the leg feels worse, wears out faster, not to mention my fists and my face. I never had to fight until I came

back from rehab and found out that I skated like I had dead animals strapped to the bottoms of my feet. I wanted to play so badly that I learned how to fight so I could be useful, feel like I was still important.”

“Fighting is the only thing teams want you for now?”

“There’s that, and the fact of who I am. Most people, especially Americans, have already forgotten who I am, if they ever heard my name in the first place. Hockey fans remember, and if there’s at least a few hockey fans in a city that has a team, those hockey fans will go on the internet and get the full story if they don’t know it already and spread it to their friends, to anyone who might be interested in seeing a hockey game.

“It draws the fans, because who doesn’t like to see a has-been every night in case he shows some of the brilliance he once had? Then one day they’ll see me on something like ESPN where they go find out what used-up athletes with compelling or tragic stories attached to them are doing.

“If it happens to me, I want to be one of those guys still playing the sport they love. Everyone watching will shake their heads and make sad condolences to what I’ve become, talk about how great I could have been, maybe even talk about how they felt when the accident happened if they’re a real hockey fan. Or Canadian.

“I don’t care if they think I’m just holding on to glory that I never achieved. I don’t care that I might seem like a sad, old man who can’t give up the dream. I grew up being the best. I was the best for a short window. I’ve never won anything since then. I’ve

been on teams that have been close, but just like this season, we always end up breaking everyone's hearts, including our own."

"You don't believe that you are cursed, do you?" Dana asked, curling up tighter against him, trying to keep her eyes dry.

"I don't know," he said, and let out a long breath. "Look at what I'm doing now. I'm barely playing hockey. I'm doing crazy shit that not only could get me kicked out of hockey forever, but could land me in jail."

"You aren't cursed," she told him. "In a bind, yes, but cursed, I don't believe that. You might not have been able to win, but everywhere you go, people are drawn to you, right?"

"Yeah, but that's only because I'm some guy on a hockey team that they are paying money to see compete, a guy who gets paid to play a sport for a living."

"But that's a good thing," she said. "People are drawn to you because you play hockey, but they like you because you sign autographs, you teach their children how to skate during the summers, you smile and you're nice to them because you are happy someone is paying attention to you, appreciating you for the skill you've worked a lifetime at to get where you are."

"People need to be needed. They need to feel wanted, useful. You've had that all of your life, being the center of attention I'm sure, and you deserved it. Then something happened and you lost it all, but you didn't lose the part of it that was inside you. The part that knows you were the best of your peers, that you were maybe destined for greatness at the top level of the game. You play because you not only want to validate that you are still the best, but

because you get validation from fans who cheer for you, who tell you that you are their favorite player.

“You aren’t necessarily asking for validation, but there’s a part of all of us that can’t get enough of it. Hockey is the only thing you’ve had as your goal from the time you realized you were good at it and it was fun. It’s okay to not want to let that go. If you are happy and getting something out of earning a paycheck for skating around and punching guys, then you are doing what you love. Isn’t that what it takes to make you happy? To do what you love to do, what you’re good at?”

“I thought you were majoring in engineering,” Connor said to her. “This sounds like some American college psychology theory to me.”

She grunted and tried to get away from him, her struggles useless. Both were laughing, and soon they were breathing heavily, hands clutched together, taking everything the other had to give. Just before he climaxed, he told her he loved her. She grabbed him by the back of his head and pulled it to her, keeping her mouth busy so she wouldn’t have to say it back to him.

CHAPTER 25

Jera hadn't stolen his television, and he didn't detect the odor of sex or burning meth in the apartment. He couldn't even get a hint of cigarette smoke, something that Jera seemed to leave lightly wherever she lingered for a period of time. He'd taken her around to finish her appointments, barely thinking about her.

His mind was on Dana, and the unsolvable equation of how to break free of Ojacarcu and take her with him. Or he'd follow her wherever she went. She had her goals and dreams, and he wouldn't be happy if she wasn't happy. Connor didn't want to be the type of partner who made her move around the country as he played for a different team every season or two. Teams he would likely play for were far from the Bay Area for the most part.

There wasn't an IBM plant or Intel fabrication facility in the Midwest or along the Gulf Coast. The big tech companies might have a satellite office in a place like Tupelo, Mississippi, or Muskogee, Oklahoma, but she'd never be anywhere near a design team in those locations, not even working remotely. *Besides*, he thought, *there are plenty of hockey options in the Bay Area, at the very least beer leagues*. He envisioned opening hockey camps in the area, using his name to help draw customers in and get the word-of-mouth spread when they found out that a leg injury didn't mean he'd forgotten what it took to get to the top.

He would daydream about these things while waiting for Jera to finish, or during the times when there were a couple of hours between her appointments but not enough time to see Dana. Jera

had become almost human toward him as the weeks rolled by. They had an unspoken agreement that if she had a few hours or more between appointments, he would drop her off at his apartment so she could be alone in peace and he would be free to do whatever he wanted.

Summertime for Dana was the same early morning schedule at the coffee shop, then nothing for the rest of the day. If she had to work the next day, she was usually in bed by nine, since she had to wake up at three in the morning. It made spending a lot of time with her a challenge. Connor was thankful that Jera didn't interfere. He never confirmed that he was seeing someone, but she knew. The constant jokes and persistent questions had become another game to her. Connor deflected everything, mostly to protect Dana. He was fairly sure Jera would never do anything to fuck him over again, but she'd already made him a fool twice. He wasn't giving her a third chance.

Let's go get a beer and sex some girls Petre texted to Connor as he sat idling in the big luxury car.

I wish. She's busy until after midnight was Connor's reply text a few minutes later.

Petre shut the car off, climbed out, walked to the door, and knocked loudly. He heard footsteps, watched the peephole go dark for a second, then heard the deadbolt turn. Dana opened the door a quarter of the way, staring out at him.

“Hello, Dana,” he said. “I am Connor’s friend.”

“I know who you are,” she said, closing the door slightly.

“Please, Dana. May I come in? We need to talk.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” she said, closing the door a little more.

“I’m not here to kill you,” Petre told her, still as a statue.

“No? How about kidnap me and make me whore for your boss?”

Petre sighed. “So you know about that.” It wasn’t a question. “Dana, we must talk about Connor. And you.”

She wanted to slam the door in his face, but knew she would have to listen to whatever the man had to say.

“What’s happened to him?” she asked, beginning to cycle images through her head of him hurt, in trouble, dead.

“He is at the moment driving his charge around, and in no danger,” Petre said. “Please, if we can talk inside. I promise you I am not here to harm you.”

Dana stepped back and let him in, closing the door behind him. Petre stood awkwardly, his towering frame looking out of place in her apartment. She gestured toward the dining room, and they sat across from each other at the table. She decided she wasn’t going to offer him anything to drink, wanting him to say what he’d come to say, and then go away.

“Does he love you?” Petre asked her, catching her off guard.

“Why do you care? What business is it of yours?” she asked angrily.

“Dana, we need to have a real conversation. It is for your

sake. I am not here to write tabloid articles. Does he love you?"

"Yes," she said, her tone indicating that she hoped he didn't want to hear her say it.

"Has he told you he loves you?"

"Yes." She looked down at the table.

"Do you love him?" Petre asked gently.

"Yes."

"Have you told him?"

"No." Dana felt like her shame was displayed in a neon sign with blinking arrows pointing to it.

"Good," Petre said, sitting back in his chair a little.

"What do you mean 'good?'"

"I apologize. I do not mean it as in I am glad you have not told him so he is denied the knowledge. It is good that you have not told him because this will be easier."

"What will be easier? What's happened to him? What have you done to him?" Her voice rose to a shout.

Petre put out his palm to calm her. "Nothing is happening to him. He is driving, as I said."

He looked her in the eye for a few seconds before reaching across the table, indicating he wanted her to put her hand in his. She hesitated, fearing a trick, that he was there to kill her in some sadistic way. Petre's face was impassive, a blank mask of stone. She gave in after a few more seconds, her hand joining his in the middle of the table.

"It will be easier to tell you that you must leave," he said. "It will not hurt him as much when you are gone, if you have not told

him you love him. He will not forget everything but you and try to find you.”

She jerked her hand back. “What?” she asked. “What do you mean I have to leave? Leave him? Fuck you. I don’t give a shit who you are, who your fucking boss is. You can’t control me like you can your whores. You *won’t* tell me we can’t be together!” She was screaming by the end, no longer sitting in the chair, hands clenched at her sides.

“Dana,” Petre said, his voice calm, his hands gesturing for her to sit back down. “You must leave Boise. You must leave Idaho. You cannot be here anymore. If you love him, if you wish to remain safe and for him to remain safe, you must go.”

“Why?” she shouted, tears streaming down her cheeks. She fell into the chair, misery rolling off her in waves.

“There are bad things happening,” Petre said, reaching out again for her hand. “Connor is in danger, I am in danger, all of us are. When Mr. Ojacarcu finds out about you... and he will, there is no doubt. He’s been checking the names of people Connor has given his hockey tickets to, and your name is frequent. He will punish Connor by punishing you.”

“I will never be one of his prostitutes. I won’t be a drug mule. I’ll go straight to the cops. I should be doing that right now, you piece of shit.” She wanted to spit on his hand that still waited for hers. She wanted to stab it and make him scream like she had been screaming.

He shook his head. “You know enough to know that if you go to the police, then you will not live. Your family will be found and

they will be killed first. Maybe even your friend at the coffee shop?”

“Jesus Christ, have you been following me? You sick fuck. Don’t you dare threaten Alice. I just work with her. She hasn’t done anything!” Dana was almost hysterical with fear at the threats this *henchman* directed at her and those she cared about.

“I do not threaten, Dana. I am telling you that if you go to the police, or even the FBI, they will give you protection, but your family, your friends, they will not have protection. Mr. Ojacarcu is very good at keeping those who know technology around him. You will understand when I say his *geeks* will find everything about you and your family. Then you will begin to pay the price as your mother, your sister, even your cousins, the twin girls, they will all end up murdered.

“I do not threaten. This is what *he* will do. If you are found and refuse to cooperate with him, you will be be hurt. Hurt more than you have ever feared. You *will* become a junkie so that you can be controlled. If you still refuse, you will be killed. Connor will be forced to kill you.”

“Bullshit, he would never do it,” she scoffed.

“He will be given the choice. I know this. I have stood in the same shoes once. If he does not kill you, you both will be killed. His death will be an ‘accident’ because he is known, and it will raise questions. You are a nobody, and your body will disappear. Your family will ask, the police will ask, but with Connor dead, it will be suggested that you are the murderer and on the run.”

Dana couldn’t take anymore, her sobs making her shake in

her chair. Petre's hand still remained on the table, patient, inviting. She hated the man. Hated him more at the moment than she hated his boss. Hated that he was a killer of men, probably a killer of women and children.

"What do you mean you have been in the same shoes?" she asked when she got herself a little more under control.

Petre leaned forward, his face becoming blank, smooth stone, devoid of emotions. He told her about Ilinca, how he'd loved her, how he'd had to bring her before the boss, Rohozeanu, and how the boss had put her to work. His voice remained steady as he told the tale, not even wavering when he relayed how he'd had to cut Ilinca's throat to save his own life.

Dana shrieked. "You monster! I knew you were a killer, but I never knew just how evil you really are. I can't believe Connor talks about you like you're his friend. You aren't his friend! You're nothing more than a fucking thug, a murderer, a demon in human skin!"

"I am Connor's friend," Petre told her.

"Bullshit!"

"I am Connor's friend," he repeated. "Because I am his friend, I am here telling you that you must leave."

He told her about Helen, how he'd loved her, how she'd loved him, and how at the end he'd had to send her away to protect her, to save her life, and to save him from having to ever repeat what he'd done to Ilinca.

"I love him," she sobbed. Her hand finally found his in the middle of the table. He held on, squeezing with gentle pressure to

let her know he understood. “I couldn’t tell him because I didn’t want to hurt him if he couldn’t get away from this shit he’s caught up in. I can’t live like that, constantly fearing that you or someone else will show up one night to kill me or snatch me up and send me away. We keep talking about how to get away from it, so we can be together, but I don’t think it’s possible. So I didn’t want to tell him and have him risk his life because of me.”

“He is crazy,” Petre said. “He loves you so much already. He will not forget you ever, but he must not have a reason to follow you. It is too risky. I am sorry that it has to be this way. You must be Helen, not Ilinca. Connor, he will choose to die with you. It is honorable, romantic even, but it is a waste. You will not be here, so you will not die, so you will not have to watch him debate the choice of whether to kill you or die with you. You will not have to die together in such a terrible way.”

“What is he doing that is so dangerous that I have to leave?” she asked, unwilling to give up without a fight, without exploring every angle.

“He has not told you?” Petre asked, showing surprise for the first time.

“No, he only says he has to drive people around, people that the rest of you don’t want to be caught with.”

“I am sorry, Dana. Connor has to drive around a prostitute, take her to her appointments and collect her money like a pimp.”

“Jera,” she breathed, an icy fist crushing her heart completely.

“You know her, then,” Petre said.

“The drug addict he picked up in the middle of the night.”

“Yes, her. He has been driving her for almost four months now. The night after he picked the woman up, she called her dealer, who called Mr. Ojacarcu claiming kidnapping. Mr. Ojacarcu, he settled the matter by making both of them suffer. The dealer is behind on payments, and the woman was whoring for him, so Mr. Ojacarcu makes the woman whore for him now. Connor, he disobeys Mr. Ojacarcu and even me, getting involved with her, helping her escape. Mr. Ojacarcu makes him pay by making him the one who has to drive her to each man she is paid to have sex with. He thinks Connor is in love with this woman.”

“He’s not, is he?” she asked, not sure how Petre would know, but needing to hear someone else tell her, hoping what she felt was the truth.

“No, not love,” Petre answered. “He feels something for her. Maybe it is love. It is not the love he feels for you. It is more than brother-sister love, but it is not intimate lovers love. It is strange, but it is familiar to me. It is what I felt for Ilinca before I began to truly love her. But unlike me, who had no one else, Connor has you. He loves you. He makes me cover driving for him by claiming I am not his friend if I do not agree to help, just to be with you. As long as you are here, he will never love her in the way he loves you.”

“That’s just great,” she said, and began to cry again. “So if I stay, I could end up dead, my family could end up dead, and Connor could end up dead, killing me before being killed himself?” Petre nodded. “And if I go, he’ll always remember me, but not for

long as he will finally fall in love with this Jera woman? And he still might be killed? This is insane. This isn't a choice."

"It is difficult, I am sure," Petre said, giving her hand another squeeze before letting go and leaning back in his chair. "Dana, you must decide if you love him enough to let him go. You are young, he is young. You both will find others. I do not want to see him hurt. You are his lover, and he is my friend. You do not want to hear me say it, but you are my friend and I do not want to see you hurt."

"I'm supposed to just pack up and leave? Just like that? Quit my job, finish my last semester of college somewhere else?"

Petre stood and walked to the door, exiting without a word. Dana thought he'd left for good, but he returned a minute later with a large padded envelope. He dropped it on the table and pushed it toward her before sitting down again.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Open it," he said.

Dana dumped the contents of the envelope on the table. Six stacks of one hundred dollar bills settled into an uneven pile.

"Oh my God," she whispered, looking up at Petre.

"There is sixty thousand dollars. I am giving it to you, so you may leave and start a new life. It will help replace anything you have to leave, and it will pay for your school."

"It won't replace everything," she said.

"No, I suppose it cannot replace him," Petre said, looking sad.

"I feel like I'm being bought off."

“Please, do not say that. I am buying your life. I am buying Connor’s life. This is my money. He does not know I am here. Take this money. Take what you can put in your car. Spend the rest of tonight and tomorrow telling everyone but Connor that you are leaving, going back home maybe, so they will not worry and send the police to look for you. Don’t come back for anything, not even him.”

“Can I at least tell him goodbye?” she asked.

“It is better if you don’t until you are gone. He cannot try to save you like he has the other woman if you are not here.”

Petre stood, reached for the envelope, and returned the money to it while Dana watched helplessly, completely drained of emotion. He handed her the envelope. Dana took it, put it down on the table, then went around it to hug the giant Romanian. He hugged her back, then pushed her away and put his hands on her shoulders, looking her in the eyes.

“You are beautiful girl. You will find love again. Never forget him. I am sorry for this. I must go now.”

Only after he had been gone a while, as she was packing a suitcase, did she realize that he had spoken with barely any accent until the very end.

CHAPTER 26

“Where the fuck is he?” Connor shouted at Vadim as he stormed through the hallway.

Vadim looked unsure of what to make of his friend stalking the halls, yelling for Petre. He thought of stepping in front of Connor to hold him up, calm him down. Making a scene on Mr. Ojacarcu’s floor of the building would only draw the wrong kind of attention. Petre came around the far corner from another hallway. Connor immediately made a beeline to the man.

The Romanian put his fingers to his lips to try and get Connor to quiet down. Connor punched Petre in the stomach as hard as he could, surprising him, driving him to one knee as he doubled over in pain. Vadim took a step toward them until Petre put up his hand, letting him know that it was a private matter not to be interfered with. Vadim looked around nervously, hoping Mr. Ojacarcu and Dracul were busy elsewhere.

“What did you do?” Connor’s rage overflowed, cracking his voice, making his fist shake as he raised it to strike Petre again, this time in the face. “What the fuck did you do to her?”

“Connor, please,” Petre said through another coughing and gagging fit.

Connor had caught him by surprise, and he hadn’t tightened his abdominal muscles. Petre had expected Connor to be furious, but he believed that Connor would never assault him, especially not fifty feet from the boss’ office.

“Fuck you. Where is she?” Petre winced at Connor’s

shouting.

“Calm down, my friend. Do not shout in the hallway.”

“Fuck you!” Connor screamed again, tensing up to launch his fist at Petre’s face. The Romanian, still on his knees trying to catch his breath, did not flinch. “If you hurt her, I’ll kill you.” Connor looked around the hallway where three new faces were watching the drama. “I’ll fucking kill all of you if you hurt her.” He looked back at Petre, ready to make the man pay.

Dracul walked around the corner at the far end of the hallway, his hand already inside his jacket. Petre noticed Connor’s attention shift to someone behind him, and he turned his head just enough to see Dracul slowly walking toward them. Petre held out his hand, giving Dracul a short wave back. Dracul stopped halfway down the hall from them, hand still in his jacket, his mouth curling into a wolf’s grin at Connor.

“Unless you want to deal with him,” Petre said in a low voice only Connor could hear, “you will not hit me again, and we will go downstairs and outside to talk about this.”

Connor thought about putting his fists in the man’s face repeatedly, regardless of who he would have to deal with after. He looked back at Vadim, still standing ten feet from them, the man’s eyes shifting from Connor to Petre to Dracul and back. Vadim turned and began to shoo the others away. Connor looked behind Petre at Dracul, wondering what the man would do to him, wondering if it would come in a few seconds or in a few weeks. Petre once again looked back at Dracul, waving him away with his hand. Dracul backed up slowly and disappeared around the corner

into another hallway.

Petre put his hand out for Connor to help him up. Connor spit in the man's face. He walked to the elevator and pressed the call button. Petre walked up a minute later, wiping his face with a paper towel. They rode to the lobby in silence, neither looking at the other until the elevator chimed and the doors opened. Connor strode out, not looking back, as he headed for the large glass doors.

Once outside, they walked back along Front Street, Petre matching Connor's angry stride. They walked three blocks to an empty parking garage across from the other arena. When they reached the second level, Connor spun around, fists clenched, ready to continue where they'd left off in the hallway. Petre held up his hand once more, looking around to see if they were alone. Connor decided if that hand came up to stop him one more time, he would do his best to start snapping fingers.

"Listen to me carefully," Petre told him. "You must listen."

"What did you do to her? With her?" Connor wanted to scream, but kept his voice low to keep from bouncing off the concrete walls.

"She called you, yes?" Petre asked.

"Yes."

"From where?"

"She wouldn't tell me. She said you told her not to tell me. She wouldn't stop crying, you piece of fucking shit. What did you tell her?"

"Good girl," Petre said, more to himself than to Connor.

Connor's fists clenched once again and came up, ready to hit

the man.

“She is gone, then. Listen to me, Connor. I sent her away. To protect her. To protect you.”

“Fuck you. You fucking Romanians, always with the control bullshit. You make people take loans, you make people deal dope, you make women work on their backs. You hurt anyone you can to make others not question you. You kill the ones you can’t control.”

Petre let Connor have his tirade for a few minutes, not denying any of the truths that were spoken. He didn’t enjoy having to send Dana away, and he didn’t enjoy having to wake his friend up to reality. He wished he would have talked to her a few weeks before, even back when he first met the girl at Connor’s apartment. It would have been easier. He swallowed back a mouthful of stomach acid.

“I am your friend. Don’t shake your head, don’t say anything,” Petre demanded when Connor started to go into another fit of rage. “I have done you a favor that you will not appreciate. That is what friends sometimes have to do. Now listen to me carefully. Are you ready to listen?”

Connor nodded his head, knowing he would lose his temper if he opened his mouth. He didn’t care that Petre was armed, and he didn’t care that Petre was an experienced killer. He wanted revenge, and was willing to risk losing his life to quench the need for violence to make his *friend* pay.

“Mr. Ojacarcu, he likes to be in control,” Petre said. “He believes you are in love with the prostituată.”

“She has a name, goddammit.”

“It is not important,” Petre continued. “You are valuable to him. She is now valuable to him. You are becoming... volatile. Almost disloyal in his eyes, in Dracul’s eyes for sure. To Dracul, you are fake, weak, pretending to be strong by fighting in hockey. He has insulted you in front of us by telling of how you acted when you worked together. Mr. Ojacarcu, he is worried about attention from the police now as well. Too many things are happening at once, and your actions, while coincidental in my view, are making them suspicious.”

“Suspicious how? Like I’m going to rat them out to the police? Or that I’m already talking to the police?”

“Both,” Petre answered. “They will control you by threatening you. This has already happened. You did not seem to learn from the punishment, so now they will control you by threatening others that you care about. That you love.”

“What did you do?”

“I did as a friend would. She told me you loved her. She said she did not love you as you did her.”

Petre felt himself grow as cold as a glacier at watching his friend die inside. Connor wanted to collapse to the concrete at the news. Some small part of him refused to believe Petre, to question it as a lie. Most of him knew it to be true, having never heard Dana say she loved him.

“I told her what I will tell you. Mr. Ojacarcu is watching everyone carefully. DEA and FBI, he knows the same things I know, likely from the same source. If the police begin to get too close, there is no doubt that Dracul will begin cleaning up before

disappearing to another place, to work for another man like Mr. Ojacarcu. Part of the cleaning will involve you. Me as well, I'm afraid. I already do not trust him. You must never trust him."

"I don't trust him."

"You must be watchful."

"What does this have to do with Dana?" Connor asked, his anger still simmering.

"You love her. If Mr. Ojacarcu learns of her, he will threaten her first, to let you know he knows of her, that he has access to her. Then he will begin to hurt her. There are too many ways to describe this. He is inventive. Look what he does to you with the prostituată."

"He doesn't know shit," Connor said. "The only reason you met her was because she was at my place. We never stay there anymore, and we don't go out in public."

"It was not good enough," Petre said, shaking his head. "Mr. Ojacarcu looked at who you gave your tickets to. Her name came up too many times. He knows of her, but he does not know everything. It is a lead for him, though. Someone you have invited to hockey many times, a woman. It will not take long for him to figure it out. Once I knew, I solved it quickly. You drop the prostituată off at your apartment before spending time with Dana."

"You followed me?"

"I am your friend. If I do not do this, you will not know that you have put her in danger."

"Couldn't you just tell me?"

"No. You would not listen. Tell me truthfully, would you

listen? Would you make her leave? Or would you think you could protect her, be safer, maybe move her to another city nearby, be more careful in the future?"

"No," Connor said, knowing Petre was right, hating him for it.

"She did not love you like you loved her. Let her go. Let her live. Let her not answer the door one night and have me or Vadim or Dracul on the other side. You are my friend, but you know I must do what has to be done."

"Helen..."

"I am your friend," Petre repeated again, putting a hand on Connor's shoulder. "I cannot live through that again, even though she is your love. It is not right. I cannot disobey Mr. Ojacarcu, but I can do this."

Connor broke down, unable to stop himself, his shame at crying like a child overpowered by his guilt at putting Dana in danger, his shame over not being able to protect her, shame at allowing himself to get involved with people like Ojacarcu and Petre. He felt empty, hollow, full of a void that ate everything within him. Petre wrapped him in a hug.

"I have given her money," he told his friend. "She will be okay. She will finish school, have a car, a place to live. She will not have a worry, and will soon move on with her life. I am sorry, Connor. But she will love someone else, someone safe for her. You must forget her and do the same."

"I loved her," Connor said through sobs, his body wracked with spasms that were almost seizures.

“I know. I knew when I came to your apartment. I knew when you spent all of your time with her, keeping the prostituată at your apartment while you went to her. I know why you keep the prostituată at your apartment, why she does not want to be alone at her place.”

Connor looked up at his friend finally, shrugging the man off him. Petre wondered if Connor would attack him. Connor spent a whole minute getting himself under control.

“You know they rape her at her place.” Connor’s statement was an accusation toward Petre, blaming the man for knowing about it and doing nothing.

“These girls, these whores, they are nothing,” Petre said, keeping his voice steady. “They are beyond my reach, as they are yours. We can do nothing for them except what Mr. Ojacarcu commands. We cannot get involved. The handlers, they have their own instructions. We must not be bothered with that side of things.”

“I won’t let them do it,” Connor said. “I can’t stop them by being there, standing up for her. But I can stop it by not letting her stay there. She does her job, I pay the exact amount when I turn it in. Fuck them.”

“I know how you feel about this woman. Jera,” Petre said. He didn’t like saying her name aloud. He wanted her to be another faceless person to himself, but especially to Connor. “You must forget Dana. You must forget Jera. They are forbidden to you because you care about them. They will be hurt because of you.”

“So I’m supposed to not love anyone?” Connor asked.

“Da. For now. You will not love. You may fuck anyone, but do not make a habit of more than once or twice. Move on, enjoy the variety. It is safer for them, for you.”

“What if I can’t?” Connor asked, thinking of Dana. Petre wondered which woman Connor was thinking of.

“You must. There will be too much hurt if you cannot. I do not want to see her or anyone else hurt. I do not want to see my friend hurt. I do not want to be the one who must hurt you.”

Connor stood in Ojacarcu’s office, Petre next to him, Ojacarcu behind the massive polished desk. Dracul and Vadim were near the door, Vadim looking like he wanted to be anywhere else even though his face was a blank mask. Dracul was unreadable as well, though Connor was sure the man was thinking up new ways to torture him, maybe even to kill him.

“I am not appreciative of violence in my building,” Ojacarcu said to both men standing before him. “I am less appreciative that it is between two of my employees.” The boss leaned forward in his chair. “You will tell me what this is about so we may resolve it and get on with business.”

Connor looked at Petre who remained still, the man’s features revealing nothing. “This asshole,” Connor said, nodding his head toward Petre, “ran a girl off the other night that I wanted to fuck.”

“Why would he do that?” Ojacarcu asked.

“Because he’s an asshole,” Connor replied. When Ojacarcu frowned at him, he went on. “He tried to get with this girl a few nights earlier. She called him Lurch and made fun of him and his shitty English. So he sees me with her and starts telling her that I’m as big of a whore as she is, that I’ve fucked more girls than she could imagine, that it’s just a game for me since I play hockey and can have my pick.”

“Petre,” Ojacarcu said, his frown deepening when he turned his gaze on the man, “you did this?”

Petre only nodded, thankful Connor was able to blend enough truth into the lie, but worried that the story was too thin.

“But why would you do this?” Ojacarcu asked him.

“She was whore,” Petre said. “I see her with many men.”

“But not you?” the boss asked, tilting his head.

“Da. Not me. I am jealous, but this woman, I know her. I have seen her often. She is pretty, but she is... using. Using men. What do you say...?”

“Gold-digger,” Connor offered. “That’s what you called her, right to her face. Don’t pretend you don’t know what you said.”

“Da. Gold-digger. She does not sleep with me because I do not offer her money or car or gifts. Connor, he is young and has money, and no one to spend it on. This girl, she will fuck him because he buys her, like real whore.” Petre remembered what Connor had told him in the car. “If she is slut, she will fuck anyone. Does not want gifts, just the cock. If she is whore, she will fuck for gain. I do not run sluts away. He has helped me fuck sluts before. But whores, they are bad business. I am only trying to help.”

Petre shook his head, giving Connor a look that said he'd taken too many hits to the head during his hockey career for not being able to see things clearly. Connor glared at him, not pretending that he was still furious with the man for what he'd done. Ojacarcu gave both of them a curious look, trying to decide if more violence was about to erupt in his office.

"Here is how we will solve this problem," the boss said after watching them for a bit. "Petre, you will apologize to him for not explaining to him what you were doing to protect him." Ojacarcu gave Connor a hard look next. "You will apologize to Petre for striking him. I will not warn you again that you must never assault one of your brothers without permission from me. You both will apologize to me for disturbing my day with this schoolyard nonsense."

The two men exchanged apologies before giving a sincere one to Ojacarcu together. They were dismissed, Vadim giving them a nervous smile and Dracul looking like a shark about to feast as they passed by and out into the hallway. Neither said a word until they were in the parking garage, getting into one of the Lincolns to begin their day of visiting clients.

"You are becoming a good liar," Petre told him as he turned the radio up, an old Motley Crue song coming from the speakers. "You did well."

"Fuck off," Connor said, not looking at him. "I still hate you."

CHAPTER 27

Fall

“Let’s talk about your contract,” Mr. Ojacarcu said.

“What about it?” Connor asked.

The late September evening was still warm enough that shorts and a t-shirt were acceptable, even to a sit-down with Ojacarcu on the outdoor deck of Allera, the restaurant attached to the arena complex where the Bombers played.

“You will qualify as a veteran after this upcoming season. The salary will be an increase.” His boss took a sip of an imported beer.

“True,” was all Connor said.

He looked down to street level, watching cars and trucks travel the one-way grids of downtown, stopping and starting in a chaotic yet perfect performance.

“You do not wish to play in Boise anymore?” Ojacarcu asked with a raised eyebrow.

“What? No, it’s not that,” he replied, looking away from the street below back to his boss. “I’m sorry, my mind is just a bit full is all.”

“You are having troubles?” Ojacarcu asked in the tone of a concerned parent.

“Not real troubles. Girl troubles I guess you could say.”

“Those *are* the real troubles.” His boss laughed. He waved his hand as if to say *women... when aren’t they a problem?*

“I still feel bad about hitting Petre,” Connor said, moving the

subject away from girls.

“That is a good thing,” Ojacarcu said to him. “It means he is your friend. If you felt nothing, or worse, felt good about it, it would mean either he was your enemy, or he was Dracul.”

Connor stared at his boss, unsure of what to say. Ojacarcu’s face broke into a grin followed by a hearty laugh. Connor laughed with him, finding just enough dark humor in it to keep his laugh genuine. The man’s face became serious and he leaned across the table toward Connor. “He is a frightening man, yes?” Connor nodded. “It isn’t so good when the boss is scared of one of his own men. However, he is from the old country, has many ties to many families. He is frightening, but he is obedient. Notice I did not say *loyal*.”

Connor had no idea why Ojacarcu was telling him this. The older man had barely spoken to him in the months after assigning him to be Jera’s personal driver.

“But Petre, he is both. Obedient *and* loyal. He too is from the old country. Did you know he was a favorite of the uncle?”

Connor shook his head. He had no clue what his boss was rambling on about. He glanced behind to see if Dracul was nearby, a sudden fear that this was his checkout, a nice five-story fall to the pavement below complete with a couple of witnesses who saw Connor make the leap after they tried to stop him.

Ojacarcu leaned back, and took another sip of his beer. “Don’t worry about Petre. He was only protecting you, and he accepts that you would want to hurt him at first, until you understood why he did it, why he was looking after you.

Sometimes when our hearts or our cocks are involved, we have tunnel vision, yes? We don't see what someone on the outside sees, someone like Petre who likes you, knows how much I like you. You understand?"

"Yes," Connor said, feeling a wave of guilt run through him.

Dana had been gone a month, and it no longer hurt. If they had at least stayed in contact, emailing or texting each other, it would hurt more each day. He would have gone after her. He hated Petre for it, but he understood, was even thankful to the big Romanian.

"This girl you are having trouble with," Ojacarcu said pausing to lift the beer and drain the bottle. "You are in love with her?" He set the bottle on the table and waved for the bartender to bring him another.

"No, she's just one of the downtown girls, a college student. She likes me more than I like her, that kind of thing."

"Ah," Ojacarcu said as he rubbed his chin. "You are not seeing her long then?"

Connor shook his head. "Nah, that's the problem, I think. For her. She wants to be up my ass all the time, but I'm just looking for fun, nothing serious. I dated a couple of girls steady since I've been here, but I need to be able to do what I want, when I want."

"You've never met 'the one' then," his boss grinned. "You will know when you do. You will only think about *her* pussy, not every wild one that is thrown your way by horny girls who love to fuck athletes."

Connor forced himself to grin, even felt his face turning red,

though it was more from anger than embarrassment. He fantasized about being able to tell the cops that the old man had thrown himself off the balcony. However, there would be too many witnesses that would have seen him grab Ojacarcu and give him a sailor's toss.

"Then I haven't met her yet. I like one for a few days, maybe a week if *it* is made of gold, but then I see how many different ones there are in the world, even the small part of the world I live in here, and I think '*no way*.'"

"Is this girl Dana one that you thought had a pizda made of gold?" Ojacarcu asked, studying Connor's face.

Connor shrugged. "Yeah, it was made of gold. For a couple of weeks. She wanted to get serious, right around the playoffs. She was giving it up so I gave her tickets to keep her interested. Some women, they're just like men. They only want the conquest and they want you to pack your shit up and go home right after."

"Those are the scariest ones!" his boss cried out, laughing. "They are the ones you want to hang around for. Now you know how the poor women feel that fall in love with you, yes?"

Connor chuckled. "Yeah, and mostly the ones that want you to leave when you want to stay are the married ones. They just want a strange man for an hour or two of guilty fun. You can't have them even if they wanted you to stick around."

"True, true. You can fuck the married ones, you just can't have a relationship with them," his boss said. "So this Dana wasn't one to keep around?"

"Nah, she was another needy one," he told Ojacarcu, willing

himself to stay seated and not try to act out his imagination of giving the man a heave-ho off the edge of the building. “She graduated from BSU and when we split, she bailed for back east somewhere. Her parents and some job she was going to get. She was going to be a teacher anyway, the only thing you can do with a Literature degree as far as I know.”

Ojacarcu grinned. “Women,” he said, raising his bottle to toast Connor.

“Can’t live with them, can’t kill them,” Connor said, clinking his beer against his boss’.

Connor studied his fingernails as Petre drove toward Caldwell. Another trip to see his old pal Larry. The little scumbag hadn’t been allowed to forget how upset Connor still was with him.

He turned to Petre and said, “He knew about Dana.”

“He asked you about her?” Petre asked with surprise.

“He tried to lead me into a conversation. I purposely told him I was having girl troubles to see if he would mention it.”

“You play a dangerous game, my friend.”

“Two can play it,” Connor countered.

“One of you can end up dead from losing the game,” Petre warned him.

“I told him I was having trouble getting rid of one that wanted to be my girlfriend. Told him I was sticking with tagging someone different each night.”

“Tagging?”

“Yeah. Banging. Fucking. Sexing.”

Petre smiled. “So you are sexing many girls, but he asked about Dana?”

“He did, out of the blue, and I pretended not to even be surprised that he would know the name of one of the girls I’d been with. I just babbled on about how we were dating during the playoffs and I was giving her my tickets, but once the playoffs were over, she wanted to be steady and I said no, so she ran off back east since she had graduated.”

“You shouldn’t have mentioned anywhere,” Petre said.

“Don’t worry, it is the exact opposite way she went.”

“How do you know this?” Petre asked, alarmed that the girl was foolish and continued to contact Connor.

“Because I do. The reason I haven’t gone after her is because there are probably ten million other people there, spread out over a couple of hundred square miles. I’d never find her. Even if I did find her, what would I say? I’m still working for Ojacarcu, still driving a whore around, getting ready for another hockey season where I’ll get to play two to four minutes per game other than the five minutes in the box here and there for fighting? I’ve got nothing to offer her except danger.”

“You are very wise, my friend,” Petre said.

“Fuck you. I still hate you for what you did. But I understand it. I won’t ever forgive you for it. But you were right, and me admitting I was wrong is almost as good as forgiveness.”

“I will accept that you were wrong and I was right,” Petre

said brightly.

Fifteen minutes later, they pulled up in front of Larry's shack. Connor supposed it was still a house, but he could only think of the place as a shack now. Larry opened the door and let them in, Petre closing it behind them. The junkie didn't say a word, and went straight to the bedroom to retrieve the money. Connor took up his position in the hallway, with Petre at the door.

Both of them were vigilant, the worry that Larry would pull out a shotgun or some other weapon and surprise them was always at the back of their minds. Junkies and dealers were unpredictable at best, but a junkie dealer who lost a woman he was in love with, as sick as the love was, could be the final danger either of them ever faced if caught off guard.

"Here," Larry said, handing Connor the stacks of bills before heading to his usual seat on the couch where he would stay until the two men departed.

"We have something new for you today, Larry old buddy," Connor said as he thumbed through the bills.

"What now?"

"Mr. Ojacarcu informed us that you were actually falling behind. You see, Larry, my partner and I," Connor turned and pointed out Petre, "we only work on this end of your business. This is why someone else brings you whatever shit you are selling. The two different ends of your business finally got to talking, and it seems that you are back in the hole where you started when we first showed up."

Larry trembled on the couch, afraid to say anything.

“So here’s the proposed solution, and let me know if you would like to negotiate any of the terms. We wouldn’t want to make life hard for you, as good of friends as we’ve become. You now owe twenty-five thousand per week.”

Larry’s eyes grew wide at the number.

“I know, that seems like a lot to me too,” Connor said with a smile. “Petre and I even have a wager as to what kind of fuckery you pulled this time to fall down hard enough to get a twenty-five grand per week payment. Since it isn’t really important information to help us tend to our end of the business, we never bothered to ask. We’ll hear it through the grapevine, I’m sure.”

“I don’t have twenty-five,” Larry said, almost whispering.

“Sure. We know that, don’t we partner?” he asked Petre, who nodded, a grin on his face. “That’s why we won’t even think of asking you for that amount until our next visit. We like you, Larry, and we are your friends. We want to see you succeed. Why make it hard for you to earn what you owe by giving you a broken kneecap, or using a hammer on your toes? It seems like it would be hard to get around and get all that money together if we put a red hot needle in one of your eyes, or maybe through an eardrum. You’d have a tough time paying back the money with any of those problems, right?”

Larry could only nod, expecting Connor to begin beating him after toying with him a little longer.

“Good, good. So, until next time, old friend. We’ll be back on Saturday. I know you’ll have the full amount, but my friend here,” he said, patting Petre on the shoulder as he walked by, “he is

sure you will fail, and will make sure to pack pliers, a blowtorch, some novocaine, maybe even an adrenaline shot in case your heart stops. You definitely can't earn anything if your heart isn't beating!"

Connor opened the grimy front door and walked out, Petre behind him. It took everything in him to not burst into laughter before they got inside the car and shut the doors.

"You are not as friendly as your words would suggest," Petre said.

CHAPTER 28

Connor waited in the darkness to hear his name called. He looked at the darkened ice, noting the black X's where the pyrotechnics would be, remembering the stern warning from the event manager. Any player near one when it ignited would suffer horrible burns, his skin melting off in mere seconds. Connor decided he had been involved in enough tragic accidents for one lifetime and would give the area a wide berth.

“Con-ner. DUNS-MORE!”

The cheers from the crowd had almost drowned out the amplified voice, and once Connor's name was called, he could no longer hear the booming heavy metal music the arena crew always played during his introduction. Connor waved and stepped out onto the ice, his body immediately stabilizing once he felt his blades hit the surface. He skated through the center, waving at the crowd as he turned and went down the blue line one way, then turning again and going the opposite direction down the center red line.

Connor had the strange yet familiar feeling of just how natural it felt to be propped up on two thin metal blades. He'd been in skates since he was three years old, and had more grace, speed, and stamina while riding the microscopic layer of water than he ever could with his feet repeatedly pounding into the earth, slowing him down, wearing out his knees.

Connor came to a stop after passing down the line of his teammates, giving them all a mid-five slap on his way by. He looked up at his seats, now filled with strangers since he had given

the team permission to sell them. Opening night at home in October was always sold out, a large number of fans seeing their first live hockey game. They wanted a good show, especially after all of the celebration and pomp before the game even started.

He couldn't help but think it would take some of the sting away of losing Dana and the way the Bombers had exited the season back in May if they'd had at least a *Western Conference Champs* banner to raise. Having the Thompson Cup would, of course, be the ultimate way to open a season, but those hopes had been dashed in a few short minutes in the spring by the very same Tacoma Titans team that made their way out onto the ice.

He focused his mind on the game that was about to begin. The crowd was wild with boos for the Titans, cheers for the Bombers. After the National Anthem, the lights finally warmed all the way up, and the players made their way to the benches so the game could get underway. Connor took his usual spot at the end of the bench, understanding his perpetual fourth-line status as a tough guy.

The Bombers opened the game with a jump in their strides, going up 3-0 by the end of the first period. Connor was able to get in four quick shifts, almost scoring on a wrist shot that clanged off the crossbar and into the netting behind the goal. In the second period, they increased their lead to 5-0, spending most of their time in the offensive end, controlling almost every aspect of the game.

Connor skated hard on every shift, sensing from his teammates as well as the crowd, that they needed to win this game, and needed to do it in a convincing fashion to get the sour taste of

their previous season ending too soon out of everyone's mouths. The Titans came roaring out in the third, knocking the lead down to 5-2 before Connor picked up two assists in the span of two minutes, getting back to a five goal lead.

"You want to get it over with?" one of the Titans asked him halfway through the period, Crumb, according to the back of his jersey.

"Aw, man, do you really want to do it when you're down by five and on our opening night?" Connor asked him as they jostled sticks waiting for the linesman to drop the puck.

"What the hell, my guys want to win at least one battle tonight," Crumb grinned.

Connor smiled at the implication he would end up the loser in the fight. The instant the linesman dropped the puck, Connor's gloves slid off as if his hands were made of butter, his left hand immediately grabbing a fistful of jersey, his right fist a jackhammer, missing or glancing blows off Crumb's helmet, feeling a solid connect every few attempts. His opponent was a mirror image, fistful of jersey while the other hammered blows on Connor's head and face.

Within ten seconds of the eruption of furious punches, both of them had slowed down to a steady rain of fists. Within another ten seconds, they were still standing, pulling on each other's jersey, throwing the occasional punch without much juice behind it. Even after swapping sides and using a fresh arm, both players were exhausted. The ref and linesmen finally stepped in, breaking them apart. Connor put his arms above his head, thumbs in the air as he

skated to the penalty box, enjoying the thundering of the crowd.

“I listened to the game last night,” Jera told him as they rode toward her next appointment.

“How?” Connor asked.

“I bought a little music player with a radio. It’s tiny and so are the earbuds.”

“What if they catch you with it?”

“It’s okay. All of us have a few personal items. They feel like we owe them for letting us keep things like headphones, a book, a memento of our lives.”

Neither said anything for a few minutes as Connor made turns at the appropriate streets on his way out to Eagle, an upscale suburb on the northwest edge of Boise. A lot of money, both legitimate and shady, was at work inside the city limits. Jera visited the area almost half of the times she had an appointment.

“You got two points,” she said, breaking the silence. “And the announcer guy was all crazy, almost screaming when you were fighting.”

“Yeah,” he laughed, “Billy Donovan. I had to listen to a few games when I was injured once. He’s definitely crazy.”

“Is he like that normally?” she asked.

“That’s even funnier,” he said, “because the guy is really calm, all business. Friendly, but you’d never know he was that insane guy on the radio other than the voice.”

“I cheered for you,” she said, looking away. “Silently, of course.”

“Thanks,” he said, smiling at her.

The Lincoln turned into a subdivision of almost-mansions, probably considered real mansions to those who lived in them. He found the house and pulled into a long gravel driveway that formed a half-circle in the front. Connor shut the car off. He would wait for her in the car, having been to this address before. The owner was a regular client, scheduling a visit at least once per week.

“I’ll be back soon,” Jera said before exiting the car. He gave her a small wave through the window, trying hard to not pay attention to her curves that were accentuated by the outfit she wore.

Connor pulled out his phone, going through the typical routine of checking the NHL scores, watching a couple of videos, and randomly surfing the web until he ended up at the search screen with Travis Benkula’s name typed in. He stared at the screen for a while, remembering Travis’ face turning red, then blue, then black as Dracul strangled him to death, the white nylon rope a stark contrast to the black leather gloves, forever imprinted in his memory. He shuddered at the memory, erased the name, and closed the browser. He turned the key to listen to the radio while Jera took care of her client.

When she returned, she let him know there were no more appointments. He pulled the car around the gravel driveway and back onto Highway 55, heading toward his apartment.

“Are you hungry?” she asked, leaning over to turn the radio down.

“Sure, I could eat.”

“Can we stop at your place first? I really need to... you know... freshen up.”

“No problem,” he answered.

As they rode in silence, he was thankful she had quit her tantrums and tirades toward him. Once in a while, when a client hurt her, or she had to spend time with one who wanted to degrade her, she would slip back into old habits, taking out her anger and fear on him. He would stay silent, wouldn't rise to the bait, knowing she would eventually calm down. Jera had even begun to apologize for her outbursts.

They spent only a few minutes at his apartment while she changed clothes and cleaned up before heading out to Bunny's, an all-night breakfast joint somewhere between Denny's and The Waffle House in both atmosphere and food quality. It was out of the way, mostly only frequented late at night by the hipster crowd that had come from the Egyptian Theater after watching whatever artsy, independent film they'd been dying to see for the last six months.

Connor thought it would be a simple, quiet meal, but Jera wanted to talk. He was suspicious of her friendliness. Even after Dana had fled, he would drop her at his apartment between her appointments and go off on his own. Sometimes he would chase girls, sometimes just sit down at a coffee shop, but never the Starbucks where Dana had worked.

He couldn't face Alice. She wouldn't know the story, but she would know it had to do with him. Connor was sure she would be

able to tell him if Dana had told her she was in love with him, but he was afraid of the answer. He wanted to believe Petre was lying, that Dana did love him, but the way Petre had said it, he knew, *knew* the Romanian was telling the truth. Alice would only confirm it for him. He was finally over Dana to where it only hurt when he thought about her, which was still a few times each day. He'd at least progressed from thinking about her every second of the day.

"Are you seeing anyone?" Jera asked as she folded the menu and laid it on the table.

"What?" he asked in surprise.

"Nothing. I was trying to find something to talk about so we don't have to listen to each other chew food while our silverware scrapes and clanks on the plates," she said.

"What do you want to talk about?" he asked, hopefully making it clear he didn't want to talk about what women he had been with recently.

He wasn't ashamed, but neither was it a subject he wanted to discuss with her. Mostly so he didn't have to hear about her encounters.

"I don't know. I don't know anything about hockey, but you're probably bored of having to talk about it all day with your team and then your fans. They probably annoy you with it, don't they?"

"Only if they're assholes," Connor answered. "During practice we don't sit around and strategize and talk only about the game. We're usually too busy skating and shooting and such to talk, and when we do, we talk about random shit."

“Like what?”

“Tits, cars, music, NHL stuff, tits,” he said.

“You said tits twice.”

He grinned. “That’s kind of what we talk about a lot.”

“Do girls really throw themselves at you guys?” she asked.

“It isn’t like we’re truly famous, like Tom Brady, Lebron, Alex Rodriguez. Those guys have women stalking them, sometimes dangerous, crazy bitches who threaten them. But there’s always a crowd at the arena. There’s always a lot of women who are either single, or single for the night. Shit happens,” he finished with a shrug.

“So in a way, you’re the polar opposite of me?”

“I guess. But like I said, it’s not every night we come out of the dressing room and there’s a mob of women waiting to snatch us up. Sometimes on the road though, when we play in the big cities like Seattle or Austin, there’s enough to go around after the home team gets their pick.”

“You guys are pigs,” Jera said as the server finally showed up.

“I’m sorry, we got a little busy,” the girl apologized. Connor guessed she couldn’t be more than eighteen.

“It’s okay,” Connor said.

They both ordered, the server writing in her pad. “Is there anything else I can get you two?” she asked, already heading to her next table.

“Yes,” Jera said, making the girl pause. “My friend here... don’t you recognize him?”

Connor gave her a sour look before smiling at the waitress. “KIM!” was printed on her name tag in big block letters. Kim stared at him for a few seconds before shaking her head.

“No?” Jera asked. “Do you ever go to the hockey games? To watch the Bombers play?”

“You play for the Bombers?” Kim asked, her face going from stressful worry about her job to a beaming smile at hearing Connor might be a hockey player.

“That’s right,” Jera said, an evil grin on her face. “He’s the guy who beats up the other team.” Kim’s eyes became as wide as full moons. “And he’s single.”

Kim blushed a red brighter than her Bunny’s apron, her eyes focused on her shoes.

“Hey, Kim,” Connor said, giving her his best fan smile, “she’s just messing with you. I do play for the Bombers, but I’m not single.” Jera opened her mouth to say something, but Connor kicked her under the table, making her squeak.

Kim smiled at him in the same way countless other females had before her that ended with the two of them naked, before she headed off to turn in their order. Connor glared across the table at Jera.

“Holy shit,” Jera said, her eyes wide as well. “It’s true.”

“It’s the only way I can get them to go home with me,” Connor said with a scowl.

“Bullshit. It isn’t like you are ugly. You’re already really cute, but adding ‘pro hockey player’ on top of it suddenly makes you Brad Pitt.”

“What does that say about you women?” Connor asked, watching Kim head toward their table with drinks. Before she could answer, Kim set their drinks on the table, and flashed Connor another inviting smile. “Thanks, Kim,” he said, looking into her eyes. “I apologize for my friend here. She’s just shy because she’s into chicks, and she thinks you’re beautiful, so she hides it by telling everyone I play for the Bombers.”

This time Jera kicked him under the table, making it hard for him to keep a straight face. Kim looked over at Jera, and gave her an even more inviting smile than she had given Connor. She gave Jera a shy wink before turning red again and heading off to another table. He stifled the laugh in his hand, not wanting Kim to hear him and think it was about her.

“Jesus,” Jera said, her face a dark red as well, “you can even talk them into going for other girls just by being a hockey player!”

Connor couldn’t contain the guffaws that erupted from him. Kim was on the other side of the dining room, but a few of the late-night customers looked over at him. Jera gave him a scowl and an extra kick under the table for good measure. She refused to talk to him until their food arrived, carried by Kim, even more painfully shy than on her previous trips to their table. Connor made sure to give her a big wink, causing her to almost drop the tray after she’d put their plates down.

“You shouldn’t mess with people like that,” Jera said as she dug into a pile of scrambled eggs.

“Right. Because you didn’t start it.”

She ignored him while she ate, glancing up nervously

anytime Kim came near their table, trying to melt into the booth anytime the waitress stopped to ask if they needed anything. Connor's amusement at her antics only made her more annoyed.

"So, what do you want to talk about?" Connor asked after pushing his plate away.

"I thought we'd just eat," she answered, picking at the last of her hash browns.

"Bullshit. You wanted to go eat somewhere, and you wanted to talk. So talk."

"I... I don't have anyone else to talk to. Pavel, Ovidiu, Greg, all the assholes at the apartments, they don't want to talk. Scratch that. They don't want *me* to talk. They want to talk while fucking me, telling me how great they are. That's not really having a conversation," she said, not meeting his eyes. "I don't talk to the clients unless they want me to. But I can't ask them the things I want to know anymore than I can ask the assholes at the apartments."

"Ask what?" Connor didn't want to get into a conversation about what she had to do with her clients.

"How long am I going to have to do this?" Tears began to pool at the bottom of her eyes before she wiped them away with her sleeve. "How much do I owe? How much does Larry owe? Is anyone even keeping track? No one tells me 'you're now down to only owing six thousand dollars' or anything like that. They just grunt and come in me, or grunt and tell me when my next appointment is before coming in me."

"They never told you how much you had to earn to pay off

Larry's debt?" Connor asked, not entirely surprised. He would have been if he'd heard this back when Ojacarcu took her away and put her into service, but not anymore.

"No one says shit to me except 'go here and fuck this guy' or 'take off your clothes and fuck me.' You're the only one who says anything to me that isn't about sex or money, and you hate me."

"I don't hate you," Connor said, wondering if he was sure about the statement. "You get on my nerves a lot, but I don't hate you."

She watched him for a few moments, trying to gauge if he was serious or not. When he didn't smile or look away, she realized he was being honest.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I hated you when you first showed up at Larry's. I hated watching you hit him, throw him around like a rag doll. I know he deserved it, but you know how I am. I'm all fucked up. I let him talk me into turning tricks to support our dope habit."

"How did you end up letting him put a collar on your neck?" Connor asked.

"What is it with you and the collar?" Jera countered. "You're like, obsessed with it."

"It's a sign of slavery," Connor growled. "Anyone with a collar like that belongs to someone else. A collar means you are property, not a human being."

"At first it was part of sex. He liked seeing me with a collar on. I didn't mind it, whatever got him off. I even got off on wearing it for a while. It was kinky, hot. But then it became something else.

Larry started injecting, and he started slipping off the deep end. He got me to do it, which was no big upgrade. I'd been smoking the stuff for a year before I even met him.

"It got to the point he couldn't get hard unless he'd just taken a big spike, and after a while, not even then. The only thing that got him hard was to hurt me. Not 'sex games' type of hurting, like bondage or shit like that. But real pain. Between that and his temper, which was getting out of control, I started getting hit a lot.

"He stopped wanting sex when he couldn't get it up anymore, but then he'd fly into a rage over something stupid and hit me, and it would get him off. His little rat brain finally put it all together, and he'd find reasons to get pissed off so he could hit me. Not that he really needed a specific reason, and when he started hitting me, making me scream and bleed, he'd get rock hard and... and you can figure it out from there."

"I'm not sure I really needed to hear all of that," Connor said, uncomfortable at her story.

"Yeah, well, I'm sure I needed to tell you all of that," she said before going on. "We were doing too much dope, more than he was selling, so he threatened me if I didn't turn tricks to help pay for the dope. His 'friends' were all fucking creepy, sweaty, stinky meth heads. Maybe some were homeless, because some of them looked and smelled like they lived in a dumpster.

"He started telling them that if they paid extra, they could hurt me. Word got around and some real sick fuckers started paying the extra. I'd scream in pain, beg them to stop, but that would only egg them on to push just a little further, I guess to see if they could

reach some magical threshold of inducing pain without me passing out or dying.”

“And you just stuck around for all of this?” Connor asked, unable to believe someone would willingly put up with such abuse.

“You’ve never smoked crystal, have you?” she asked. He shook his head. “Then you’ve never shot it up with a needle either. Imagine a game-winning shot. Now imagine that times a thousand. That’s taking a good hit from a pipe. Now imagine that times almost infinity. That’s what shooting it up feels like.”

“And you can’t quit?” He’d never been addicted to anything except hockey, but his mind was unable to make the leap from hockey to methamphetamine injections.

“You can, but not while you’re living with a guy who gets the best shit in the state on a regular basis.”

“True. But don’t you want to get out of all of this?”

“Sure I do. I *know* I should have walked away when you came and got me.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“I couldn’t. I hated your guts even though you always made sure to tell me that I could escape with your help. But you constantly beat the shit out of my boyfriend. He had a lot of dope, all the time. You didn’t have any dope. I wanted revenge. What I wanted more than anything was to get high again, and I knew Larry would take me back. There’s no way he’d let me go, not if I was willing to let him beat me, willing to let him charge others to fuck me.”

“And now you’re in the same position.”

“Not as bad, I guess. I shower regularly, brush my teeth regularly. I have to. If a client complains, I get in a lot of trouble. They’ve told me what they would do to me if I couldn’t perform, if I can’t make money for them. The clients are a lot cleaner, though a lot older and a lot uglier or fatter.”

“And you aren’t all fucked up on meth anymore,” Connor assumed.

Jera didn’t answer, wouldn’t look at him.

“You’re still... they give it to you?” he asked.

“We have to pay for it. But I have to have it. It isn’t something I need now to feel good, to drown my shitty life in. I have to have it or I can’t make money. If I had to have sex with all of these men without getting high...”

“Show me,” he demanded.

“Connor, ple—”

“Show me,” he demanded again, loud enough this time to make Kim turn her attention to them. Connor waved her off.

“Show me where.”

Jera began to cry. Connor felt her foot slide up the inside of his shin, then onto the seat. He looked down, seeing a black sock. He glanced up at Jera, her face a mask of tears, before looking back at her foot. He reached down, removing the sock, frowning at first. When she spread her toes, he saw the dark purple and black bruises between them.

CHAPTER 29

Connor woke to the sound of his own scream. Jera was shaking his arm, her eyes about to burst from her head. She looked as scared as Connor felt. He was afraid this was going to be just another dream within a dream, and her body would melt or decompose, or his old pals Niklas and Travis would pop into the room any second to surprise him.

“Oh my God, Connor, are you okay?” Jera’s eyes had returned to normal size, but her face was still full of terror.

He stared at her for a while, waiting to see if she would be part of another nightmare.

“How long was I asleep?” he asked.

“About two hours. I got bored of television and wanted to sleep.”

He got out of bed and headed to the bathroom. The light pierced his eyes, forcing him stand in front of the toilet for a few extra seconds until he could open them enough to see what he was doing. He heard movement and looked toward the doorway. Jera filled the gap, watching him urinate.

“You have no shame and no boundaries,” he complained.

“Like I don’t see what men are made of every night,” she said, dismissing his embarrassment. “I just want to make sure you’re okay. That’s the third time this week, and each time it happens, it scares the shit out of me.”

“You don’t have to be here to be annoyed by it,” he replied, flushing the toilet then turning the sink on.

“Don’t be an asshole. I’m worried about you. You never tell me what the nightmare is about.”

“It’s not important. And it’s over, I’m awake,” he said as he splashed water on his face. He turned off the sink and dried off with a towel.

“It *is* important. I can see how it affects you for a long time after, sometimes all day and night.”

He slipped by her and made his way to the kitchen, calling out, “You want coffee?”

“Stop avoiding it, damn it!” she yelled after him.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he told her after she followed him into the kitchen.

“I didn’t want to talk about shooting up between my toes or carrying around a pipe everywhere I go.”

“Yeah, well, that’s you.” He banged the cupboard doors open and shut, unable to find any coffee.

Jera walked to him, grabbing his arms to stop him from slamming another door. She wrapped her arms around him, holding him, her head against his chest. Connor waited for her to turn into a rotting corpse, a skeleton, even a fire-breathing demon. He couldn’t get the residual fear out of his mind.

“I know you hate me, but I don’t hate you,” she said, pulling her head back to look up at him. “I care about you, I trust you. You’re the only one on Earth who is nice to me, who helps me. You *have* helped me, more than I can ever repay. I just want to try and help you once.”

Connor removed her arms from his midsection and filled a

glass with water. As he walked back to the bedroom, he grabbed her by the arm and led her along. He took a long drink of water, setting the glass on the nightstand before lying down on the bed. Jera joined him, but left half of the bed between them.

“It’s a dream I’ve had since I was eighteen. I had an accident, a skate cut my leg open,” he explained.

“The scar, on your leg?” she asked. She’d seen it a few times and couldn’t help staring at it, wondering what could have happened to leave such a scar.

“Yeah,” he answered. “The guy who did it, he kind of lost it after that, gave up on life. But it was an accident, you know? He didn’t mean it, that’s just how shit goes sometimes. I talked to him a few years after, right about the time he was starting to seriously consider suicide. I laughed and joked about it, kept telling him that everything was great, I had done rehab and was working my way through the ECHL and AHL, trying to get back to what I was.

“I told him he needed to put on his skates again and forget it ever happened, that there was nothing wrong with me, that I had nothing to forgive since he didn’t do anything wrong. He did, and a year later, he was playing for the Sabres in the NHL. It was a great story. Then he died in a car accident, head-on collision that shoved a steering wheel through his chest and ground his lower legs up like hamburger.

“I used to dream about the goal I scored, and the skate cutting me right after. I’d wake up sweating, reaching down, expecting blood all over my sheets and being able to feel inside my leg. Then Niklas died and I started dreaming about him. He and I

were almost always in a locker room, talking about nothing, hockey or girls, whatever, and then he'd start falling apart before my eyes. Like he was going through rapid decomposition, turning into a zombie.

"But he wouldn't even be aware of it. He'd be laughing and telling me some story about a time in a game versus the Rangers, or while on the plane as they were traveling to another city. His skin would turn black and fall off, his eyes would sink into his skull, his fingers would fall off. He'd stop when my face got all twisted up I guess, and ask me what was wrong, and I'd start freaking out, trying to run down the dark hallways under the arena, except it was a perpetual circle.

"I'd keep passing by the locker room every minute or two, and he'd be standing in the doorway, missing a lower jaw, or a leg below the knee, his guts spilling out into the hallway, and he was just so fucking... calm about it. He'd keep talking like we were having a dinner conversation. Eventually, the nightmares evolved. Now they involve him and all kinds of other stuff, daily stuff, or people I know."

Jera reached out and grabbed his hand. "I'm sorry. Do you always have them this often? Or do they come in cycles?"

"They cycle," he said. He squeezed her hand before letting it go. "I can go a week straight and have one or even two per night, and I can go a month without dreaming about anything."

"Am I in any of them?" she asked, stopping herself from grabbing his hand again.

"Sometimes," he admitted, not willing to go into detail about

her role in his nightmares. He couldn't tell her about Travis, or how the nightmare didn't come on with any regularity until he'd watched the man die within an arm's length. He left Dana out, and he wasn't about to detail the sometimes sexual nature of the dreams.

“Am I a good guy or a bad guy?” she asked.

“What?”

“Am I a good guy, or a bad guy?” she asked again. “Do I do terrible things to you? Or do I try to help you?”

Connor thought of all the times he could remember her being in the nightmare. She was either arousing him with some part of her body, or she was arousing one of the dead men. A few times, she and Dana would be having sex with each other, while the corpses were taking turns with both of them. He wondered how twisted his head must be to constantly dream about such things.

“You're a good guy, usually,” he lied. “Sometimes you try to save me. Once in a while you're hurting me.”

“How am I hurting you?” she asked.

“It's not important,” he answered, turning on his side to face her. “It's just a dream. It's a jumbled brain fart at the end of the night, exhausting all of the day's memories so you don't go insane when you wake up with a head still stuffed full of nonsense.”

“That sounds like clinical dream dissection,” she mocked.

“It sounds like what I believe. And even if I don't believe it, so what? It's just a dream. Sometimes trauma can haunt you for a long time, sometimes your entire life. Don't you ever have nightmares where you are being knocked around, raped, hurt in

terrible ways?”

“Sometimes,” she answered. “Mostly though, I dream about when I was in high school and college. I think my brain shuts out all the other shit to protect me.”

“Sounds like clinical dream dissection,” he said.

“Yeah, so sue me. I tune out whatever I’m doing when I’m working. Sometimes I can’t, but most of the time I can. The dope helps a lot, especially when it has a bit of heroin in it. Greg has pretty much perfected the right mix of meth and smack to keep me up and going, while relaxing me so I can zone out.”

“You just turn reality off while you’re fucking these guys?”

“Most of the time. I think about the shit I did in high school, the guys and a few girls I slept with in college. How I’m only short three semesters for a degree. I ponder the reason I started getting high in the first place. I didn’t have a shitty life at home. I didn’t get picked on in school. I didn’t get rejected by either men or women in college. I had grades almost good enough for the Dean’s List each semester.”

“So why’d you start using?”

“Honestly? I don’t know. I went from getting a good alcohol buzz on, to smoking a few joints, to dropping Ecstasy and acid, then a guy I met during summer break took us to a party and we smoked some crystal. I just sort of lost control. It ate me up and I didn’t care because the high was so good. Then school started again and I did well for the first three or four weeks before getting high started to be more important than Evolutionary Biology and Linear Algebra.

“I dropped out a couple of weeks later, or had already been withdrawn by the professors, depending on who you asked. I moved in with Terry, the guy who turned me onto the stuff. He lost his connection and we fought every night as we struggled to find a new connection and the money to buy it when we could score.

“One of the dealers we met offered to give me a decent amount if I’d blow him. I slapped him as hard as I could and ran out crying, Terry chasing me down the street. When he finally caught me, I told him what the guy had offered, and he pulled me all the way back by the arm, telling me how he was going to make the dealer apologize and give us some dope or face getting his ass kicked.

“Instead, he negotiated a better deal for himself, and talked me into giving the dealer head. ‘It’s just a blowjob’ he’d say, then go on about how many I’d already given in my lifetime, how many I’d given him. He convinced me that it was five or ten minutes of shame and an entire night of getting high out of our minds.

“The problem with it was that he ended up being right. It was ten minutes of easy work for me to get high for an entire night. I walked away from Terry once I realized what I could do for myself. Not having to share any with him meant more for me. I told myself sucking a dick was one thing, as it was mostly a handjob, but I would never spread my legs for dope. Somehow, I thought it was too degrading.”

“But you did,” Connor said, no trace of insult in his voice.

“Yeah, I did. I eventually ended up with Larry. He was always holding, and his shit was the best. It blew away anyone

else's crystal. I sucked and fucked and he kept me flush with dope, cigarettes, whatever I wanted. Which was mostly just dope and cigarettes. Then he started using his own shit with me, and from there... you saw what it looked like."

Neither of them said anything for a few minutes. Jera moved closer to Connor, reaching out again to take his hand, finding his arm in the darkness instead. She thought he'd shrug her off like he always did. She shivered when she felt him touch her waist, his large hands spreading warmth through her skin where he touched it.

He finally spoke. "I don't understand."

"Don't judge me," she said.

He pulled her closer. "I'm not judging, I just can't wrap my head around it. Around you."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing," he said, removing his hand and rolling over to sit up. "Let's go get something to eat, I'm starving."

CHAPTER 30

Connor sipped at his coffee, watching the people around him come and go. He had two more hours to kill before Jera's next appointment. She was probably asleep on his bed. The boundaries they had agreed on were sometimes hard for her to honor. It was the reason he still spent time away from her as often as possible when she wasn't working. He liked her, but the problem for him was his weakening resolve to honor the boundaries he'd been adamant about her agreeing to.

One of the boundaries was his bed. He made it clear that when he was trying to sleep, she had to find something else to do. He didn't enjoy waking up to find her in his bed, especially after she'd just become a night terror in his dreams. More than that, he needed to keep his distance so he wouldn't develop feelings for her. Petre's words were at the front of his mind, though they were close to being drowned out by his thoughts of Jera.

"Connor Dunsmore?" a voice asked from his left, interrupting his thoughts.

He turned to his left. The man looked like serious business in a high-dollar tailored suit. He turned his head to the right to see almost a mirror image of the man on his left staring down at him.

"May we sit down and have a few minutes of your time?" the suit on his right said.

"Sure," Connor waved to the seats at the little table. The coffee shop was almost empty.

"I'm Agent Gauthier, Idaho Drug Enforcement," the man on

his left said, producing a badge for Connor to look at. Connor was impressed that the man pronounced his last name as if he'd just immigrated from Quebec. "This is Agent Kline, DEA."

"Am I being busted in some weird drug sting at a coffee shop?" Connor asked, trying to be humorous, but afraid the rising panic inside him was bleeding through his skin.

Gauthier laughed, appreciating the joke, but Kline's lips never moved from their straight line position. The federal agent didn't look like he was trying to see the guilt inside of Connor, he just looked like he wasn't one that found humor in much, if anything.

"No, sir, unless the local police have something going on," Gauthier chuckled. "We might get caught up in that operation ourselves." He gave Connor a wink.

"Mr. Dunsmore," Kline started.

"You can just call me Connor. Mr. Dunsmore works, but I'm only twenty-six, so, you know, Connor is probably less awkward." Connor's brain was going into rebellion, trying to clamp down on the *funny* part.

"Connor, then," Agent Kline said, just the hint of a smile breaking his serious expression. "We'd like to ask you a few questions, if you don't mind. This will only take a moment."

Connor looked at both of them. He'd never spent any time with cops other than a few here and there who were fans that would talk to him about their jobs for once, instead of asking him about hockey. He shrugged, wanting to ask if he was in trouble, not wanting to ask it just in case he was and asking such a thing would

give them instant suspicion.

“It was tough watching you guys lose that game against Tacoma in the playoffs,” Agent Gauthier said to him. “Good opening night though, and good fight. You worked that guy Crumb over real good.”

Connor wondered if Gauthier was a real fan, or was being a good investigator by doing his homework.

“It sucked,” Connor agreed about exiting the playoffs. “I didn’t really want to fight the guy on opening night. You know how it is though, they were losing, and he thought he could at least win a fight.”

Gauthier laughed again, and even Kline lightened up slightly.

“Look, Connor, you aren’t in trouble,” Gauthier told him. “We want to ask you some questions though. They might sound weird, but keep in mind we aren’t implicating you, we just want to know if you’ve seen anything strange in your time here.”

“Like, in the last hour since I sat down?” Connor asked, getting a chuckle from Gauthier again, but a frown from Kline.

“No, since you came to Boise,” Kline said.

“I’ve seen lots of weird shit,” Connor smiled. “You’ll have to be more specific.”

“What Agent Kline means,” Agent Gauthier said, “is have you seen anything unusual since you began playing for the Bombers?”

“Anything you might have noticed that seemed odd during team meetings, road trips, strange rumors that might have floated around, anything like that,” Kline added.

“Is there something going on with the team?” Connor asked, pretending to be interested in knowing any good dirt to gossip about.

“Connor,” Gauthier said, not answering his question, “have you spent much time around Mr. Ojacarcu?”

“The owner?” Connor asked. Both agents nodded. “Not really. He offered me a spot on the team, told me he’d pay me extra over what the league allowed. Wanted to cash in on my name I suppose. So I said sure, why not? I met with him a few times while we were drawing up the contract. He told me that I was to be the face of the team, the one that drew the fans, and when I wasn’t playing hockey, I would work for his company, mostly doing odd jobs to make up the rest of what he’d promised.”

“Cash in on your name?” Agent Kline asked.

“Connor here,” Gauthier said, “was a big shot back in Canada. He was going to be the next Gretzky. Jesus on skates, according to some. Had a career-ending injury but somehow made it through rehab and kept playing. You should pay attention to hockey sometime, Kline.”

“Or just go on the internet,” Connor offered. “Type my name in Google, but don’t do it if you’ve just eaten.”

Kline’s confused look made the IDE agent and the hockey player laugh.

“What kind of ‘odd jobs’ did he have you doing?” Kline asked, ignoring their laughter.

“Oh, easy stuff. The league says we can only be paid two-fifty a week, but I was offered a thousand a week to come here. So

what they do is pay me the maximum on the league payroll, then put me on one of the company books that isn't tied to the organization. His construction company is who I work for officially when not on the ice, and it pays me the remaining seven-fifty a week."

Kline pulled out a notepad and began to write down the highlights of Connor's words.

"Agent Kline," Connor said, making the man look up from his notepad, "none of this is illegal in any way. It's standard practice for teams to entice the players they want to keep around. See, in the minor leagues, players, the younger ones anyway, they tend to move around a lot. They'll get traded, get sent up a level or down a level, or let go and they have to go find another team to play for.

"Other guys, like me for instance, a young guy, but one with no chance of ever making it anywhere near the NHL level again, or popular veterans finishing up their careers but can't give up the game, we tend to stick around a city and a team for a while. We aren't going to stay in a city that only pays the league minimum for more than a season before going back home and hanging up the skates, unless a player is really desperate to keep playing. But if we can draw fans, win games, be a good fit on the team we play for, we get the perks of extra money. Think of it as how college recruiters sometimes give money or jobs to the athlete's parents to get him to play at their school. Except it isn't illegal in professional hockey."

"Sounds shady if you don't know how it works," Gauthier

offered, “but he’s right, it’s standard practice to keep guys like Connor playing for the Bombers, or Delano for the Steelheads.”

Kline looked like he had no idea what a Steelhead was, let alone that there might be two minor league hockey teams in the city. He put his pen down. “So what kind of jobs?”

“Mostly nothing,” Connor admitted. “I’d deliver a box of supplies from one job site to another maybe once per week. Or I’d go to the donut shop and grab four dozen donuts and bring them back for everyone. Once in a while I’d simply deliver a piece of paper from the office to one of the foremen, or even to a manager of another of Mr. Ojacarcu’s businesses.”

“And you got paid another seven-fifty a week for this?” Kline asked.

Connor nodded his head, causing Gauthier to smile and shake his. “See? That’s how you make money.”

“It did require me to almost die, remember,” Connor said.

“Yeah, I’m sorry about that. But you got it right when it comes to at least earning a great wage for still doing what you dreamed about as a kid,” Gauthier said.

Kline looked annoyed that Connor and Gauthier were more interested in reliving the kid’s glorious past. Connor was happy to keep talking to them as long as it was about hockey. He was suspicious of Gauthier. The man was friendly, and knew his hockey, but he was a detective. He wouldn’t be sitting across from Connor unless he had a reason beyond talking about hockey or humoring Agent Kline and the DEA.

“What kind of notes?” Kline persisted.

“Mostly invoices or instructions,” Connor answered.

“What kind of instructions?”

“Stuff like ‘change out the concrete from this type to that type because an inspector said so’ or ‘make sure to have all of the fleet delivery vans serviced for oil and tires.’ Nothing like ‘deliver the bomb to the football stadium on a Saturday during a Broncos game.’”

“You really can’t joke about that anymore,” Kline said, his annoyance beginning to show.

“I’m sorry Agent...” Connor pretended to forget his name.

“Kline,” the man said.

“I’m sorry Agent Kline, but I find it kind of funny that you think the guy who owns the team I play for is an international terrorist. You looked really disappointed when I said the instructions were for things like concrete and oil changes, and it was funny.”

“He’s right,” Gauthier said, his grin annoying Kline even more. “You did look like you just lost the Super Bowl when he didn’t mention nukes or sex slaves.”

Connor’s smile only faltered for a moment, but he was sure neither saw it. They were too busy looking at each other, one grinning, the other becoming increasingly annoyed.

“Have you noticed anything unusual going on during team road trips?” Gauthier asked a few moments later.

“Besides drunken debauchery?” Connor asked.

“Yeah, I bet you guys get a lot of tail, don’t you?” Gauthier sighed.

“Nah, we usually get too drunk to chase it, especially if we lose. But other than a bus full of twenty-somethings still hanging on to their quickly receding hockey careers, there’s nothing too strange that I’ve seen that would warrant a couple of guys in nice suits poking around. But I beat people up for a living, and once in a while I get a goal as a bonus. I doubt anyone would tap me to move explosives or WMD’s around for them, or deliver secret messages detailing when the next terrorist meeting was happening.”

“Mr. Dunsmore,” Agent Kline said tightly, “you do realize we are with drug enforcement, not anti-terrorism, don’t you?”

Connor shrugged. “Yeah, I know, but you do realize I play professional hockey and punch people in the face, not smuggle dope and sell drugs, don’t you?”

Agent Gauthier guffawed loudly, making the cafe’s other customers look over at them. He slapped his partner on the shoulder and got up from his seat. “I think he just told you to go fuck yourself.”

“Nah,” Connor said, a smile on his face. “I’m just saying it’s a bit absurd. I’m a Canadian citizen, remember? I like it down here where it’s warm. I’m going to avoid anything that gets me sent back to the frozen wastes.”

Agent Kline pulled out a business card wallet and removed a card, setting it on the table in front of Connor. Gauthier did the same, except he wrote another number on the back of the card before handing it to Connor.

“That number is if you ever find yourself in trouble,” the IDE agent told him. “I’m a season ticket holder, and while I can’t

keep you from going to prison in Alaska if you get caught with a hundred kilos of smack in your gas tank, I can vouch for you if you ever need it.”

Connor thanked both of them, not breathing until they were gone from the coffee shop and out of sight. His legs began to shake, his right leg throbbing around the scar tissue, his knotted stomach backing up into his throat. He sat for another twenty minutes, replaying the conversation in his head, looking for any place he might have slipped up. He knew he should have been less glib, more serious, but he had been afraid of being too wooden, too obviously guilty of something.

Kline was a dour asshole, he thought, but Gauthier... the guy was either genuine, or he was far more dangerous than the DEA agent. Connor figured it was a mix of both, being a genuine fan who loved watching hockey, and an even better drug agent who had a way of making everyone, especially suspects, feel almost *too* at ease. He pulled out his phone to text Petre, to ask if the Romanian could come and meet him, maybe even ride with him when he took Jera to her appointment.

He paused, and decided that if the police were showing up to a random coffee shop to ask him *innocent* questions, they might have already tapped, or bugged, or whatever they did with mobile phones these days. He was about to go look for a pay phone, something he hadn't seen in forever, or to ask the coffee shop girls if he could borrow theirs, when he decided that too would be a bad idea. If Petre got a call from his mobile, the store phone, or a pay phone anywhere near where the agents had spoken to him, and

Petre's phone was compromised, it would be a giant red flag.

For the first time, Connor felt vindicated for watching a ton of the true crime and forensic shows. He didn't want to be the guy who fucked up, got everyone in trouble. Mostly he was looking out for his own ass, but he had to keep in mind that even if he wasn't the one who caused everyone else to topple like dominoes, he would be one of the first Dracul or someone else hunted down.

No one was going to send him away like Dana had been sent away. The only protection he could count on was doing absolutely nothing that would get him killed. Petre had told him Dracul would start liquidating people if things were looking bad, which meant someone other than Connor could be asked the same questions he'd just endured and end up being the asshole. Either way, it wouldn't be a happy ending for anyone.

CHAPTER 31

Connor didn't see Petre until two days later when they met in the office to begin their collection route. He was paranoid that everyone in the building knew he had talked to the agents. When someone like Vadim or Dracul looked at him, he felt like they knew he had given up all of their secrets. He *was* paranoid, but hoped Petre would give him some advice, would calm him down.

"I had a couple of visitors two nights ago," Connor said as they cruised down the freeway.

"What kind of visitors? You have sexed two girls at once?" Petre's lewd grin made Connor laugh.

"No, two drug agents," he said. Petre frowned at him. "One was DEA, the other was the state DEA."

"Fuck. Shit."

"Yeah. It kind of freaked me out."

"What did they ask?"

"Don't you mean 'what did I tell them?'"

"You are my friend, Connor—"

"Right, right. Blah blah, you believe me, et cetera and all that. They asked if I'd ever seen anything strange going on with the boss. I made one of them mad, but he was a douche. The guy had no sense of humor."

"This is a serious matter." Petre's frown deepened.

"I know. But he kept asking me shit like did I deliver any clandestine orders to mob captains, or did I see anyone loading two hundred kilos of heroin into the team bus so it could be delivered

wherever we were playing. He was annoying me.”

“That’s their job, to annoy you. Annoy you until you get emotional and slip up.”

“Well, I didn’t. I told him the truth. I get paid to play hockey, and I get paid extra to stick around, and it is all legal. The other agent, the state guy, Gauthier, I think he is a hell of a lot more dangerous, maybe even suspicious.”

“Why do you think that?”

“The DEA guy, Kline, he was humorless, like I said. Straight arrow type. The other guy, Gauthier, he’s either a real hockey fan, or he’s a cop who does a lot of homework before showing up to question someone. We chatted about hockey, had a few good laughs, he even helped me antagonize Kline. He didn’t really ask me anything important. But the whole time, I kept thinking he was the one who would catch me if I slipped up.”

“*Da*,” Petre said, glancing over at Connor. “You are most likely correct. It is the friendly ones, the ones that make you feel like they are only there to appease a superior, that they have no interest. They are the dangerous ones.”

“Like I said, I just told them the truth. Nothing fancy, no lie to remember later.”

“Why did you wait two days to tell me? Have you told anyone else?”

“I haven’t told anyone but you, and I waited two days because I got paranoid that they’d tapped your phone, and they’d see I called you a few minutes after they questioned me. I was going to use a pay phone instead, but got even more paranoid,

thinking they'd trace the location to near the coffee shop they questioned me at. I've been kind of bugging out for the last couple of days."

"I can imagine," Petre laughed. "It is safer to be sorry."

"It's better to be safe than sorry, you fucking caveman," Connor corrected.

"I will tell Mr. Ojacarcu," Petre said.

"Are you sure that's a good idea? I'd rather not give Dracul a reason to kill me."

"No, Dracul will do nothing. I will talk to Mr. Ojacarcu, tell him you were ambushed by agents. He already knows they are sniffing. If they are asking you, they either know everything and are fishing for someone to turn, to testify, or they are still at zero, and grasping for straws."

"Grasping *at* straws," Connor corrected again.

"*Da*, that is what I said. Do not worry, I will tell him you did the right thing by saying nothing, not contacting anyone. We will have to change phones, but that is normal. You did well, Connor. Mr. Ojacarcu will be happy that you are not a liability."

"Petre has told me you have done well," Ojacarcu said, studying Connor's face.

"I kept the conversation on hockey," Connor replied.

"Tell me about these men," his boss said, though it was more of a command to Connor's ears.

Connor couldn't help but notice where they were headed as the Lincoln hugged the winding highway through the barren hills north of the city. He was so sure they were headed up into the mountains to a secluded spot where Dracul would meet them with a shovel, which he would hand to Connor and command him to dig his own grave, that the fear in him nearly drove him to attempt to escape from the moving car. There was only Vadim driving, with Ojacarcu and Connor in the spacious back seat.

"Maybe forty to fifty, not young guys. The DEA guy was too serious, never really smiled. The guy from the state task force, he was a little younger than the other guy. He was the opposite, not really serious at all, joking with me and only asking me about anything serious once, but he was barely serious when he said it. He was the one I was a little afraid of."

"Why would you be afraid of him, if he is smiling and having a laugh?" Ojacarcu asked.

"I don't know. It just felt like out of the two of them, he was the one watching me closely to see if I would make a mistake or slip up whenever I said something. I was sure he knew all about me, what I do for you, and was playing with me to see if I would start sweating."

"But you did not sweat," his boss said. "You kept a cool head. That is all I expect of you, in any situation. You are smarter than you look."

"Tough guys tend to look kind of dumb," Connor agreed.

Connor knew that in the mob movies, the boss or the sponsor always pretended to congratulate the poor sap about to get

whacked, telling him what a good job he'd been doing. Then, without warning, a bullet would crash through the poor sap's skull and the evidence would disappear, while life went on for everyone else. Vadim had been all-business with him when he had arrived at Ojacarcu's office. Connor knew it was because the boss was going to be with them, and Vadim was, if anything, professional. The distance he felt from Vadim tonight didn't feel professional, but he couldn't be sure where the line was between nervousness and paranoia.

"For a while, I will assign someone else to tend to your collections, as I will for Petre. Your job will be to play hockey of course, and continue to drive the whore to her appointments. I will let the boys know to schedule around your games. Some of our friends will be upset, but they will accept it. You will drop off the money as always."

"What about when I'm on the road?" Connor asked.

"For now, she will stay with you. I imagine this is an inconvenience... or maybe a convenience?" the older man asked, fishing to see if Connor and Jera were willing to be open about the relationship he was sure they were having.

"No offense, Mr. Ojacarcu—"

"Which means you are about to offend me," his boss interrupted. "Be aware of your place." Ojacarcu's tone promised no leniency if Connor decided to go out of bounds.

"No sir, not you. It's her. I can't say no, I know that, but I'm not comfortable with her being in my care twenty-four hours a day. I'm not really liking the idea of her being in my apartment for four

or five days at a time while I'm a thousand miles away."

"She will not steal from you."

"You know she's a junkie, right? She shoots the shit between her toes, and has a glass pipe she carries everywhere in case she can't get a chance to use the needle."

Ojacarcu sighed. "Yes, it is unfortunate. She claims she must have it to do her job. She is still in debt for as long as Mr. Fallon is in debt, and as you know, he has fallen behind once again. The boys give her what she needs to do her job, but it is not free. She knows her debt for her 'medicine' is separate from her debt to me because of Mr. Fallon. She is agreeable to the terms."

Connor kept his face from betraying his hatred for the man in the seat to his left. That the man would admit to hooking her up with more crap to put in her body, just to sell her body to strange men for a debt that her abusive boyfriend-dealer had incurred was beyond offensive. To keep the drug debt separate from Larry's incurred debt was perpetual slavery. He had no doubt Jera would eventually be retired when her body and her looks began to wear out. The longer she abused the dope her body and mind needed, the sooner that day would arrive. It was a cycle of vicious insanity, with Ojacarcu in the middle, watching everyone else spin around him in orbit.

"How much does she owe?" Connor asked.

Ojacarcu looked at him for a while, saying nothing. Finally he said, "It is not important. It is not your debt. What is important is that Mr. Fallon catches up, or the young woman will have to pay it off alone."

It was no surprise to Connor that the man would saddle her with whatever debt Larry had left if they decided to take him out in the desert or to the landfill. Jera wasn't even a person to Ojacarcu. She was always "the whore" or "the girl" or "the young woman." Never Jera. Only when Ojacarcu assigned her to Connor had he ever used her name. He wondered if Ojacarcu had taunted him with Jera's last name, knowing it would surprise him.

"I know it isn't important. But while she actually showers now and brushes her teeth, she's still a worthless whore, worse, a junkie whore. I've always wondered just how deep the stupid bitch got herself is all. She's talked to me a little over the last few months, and it's always some sob story about her life, how terrible it is, but to me, it sounds fake. She uses people, just like she used me."

Ojacarcu smiled. "You are still bitter at her for that? You should be bitter at Mr. Fallon. He is the one who called me personally, demanding your head."

"Yeah, I'm still bitter. Larry might have called, but she's the one who called him after she was safe from his fists. The dumb whore couldn't get enough dope and bruises."

His boss gave him a few "tsk" noises, as if Connor were being too harsh about Jera. Connor didn't need to pretend to be angry at her. Anytime he thought of how she'd stuck it to him, got herself stuck to him, he wanted to punch holes in concrete.

"She is a troubled girl," Ojacarcu said. "I am sure not all of it is her fault."

Ojacarcu watched Connor as the Lincoln made its way

smoothly through the twists and turns of the highway, the hills on either side blocking out any light pollution from the city to their south. Neither spoke until Vadim pulled off the main highway and onto an unmaintained road. Connor decided after a minute of bouncing around, that it was more of a dirt track than a road. The Lincoln was usually as smooth as riding on a cushion of air, but he and Ojacarcu had to hang on to the grip handle, what Connor had always known as the “*oh shit*” bar above their windows, the other hand bracing against the front seats.

Connor’s heart began to race in his chest, and he could feel his armpits turning into cold swamps, his feet and hands becoming frozen, sweating extensions out of his control. He’d never been religious, but he wondered if he should begin to pray, to try and find Jesus in the next few minutes, just in case.

Ojacarcu was busy watching the road ahead over Vadim’s shoulder. Connor could feel his forehead beginning to bead with sweat. He wanted to scream at the same time as he wanted to free himself of his seatbelt and open the door, rolling in the dirt a ways before running off and hiding in the wilderness. Screaming would probably get a bullet lodged in his face, and trying to jump out of a moving car, even one as slow-moving as the Lincoln was at the moment, would probably only get his legs broken, if not run over. That didn’t include maybe getting a large rock or tree limb embedded in his skull.

After at least ten minutes of jarring, vibrating hell, the Lincoln pulled in front of a cabin. Connor closed his eyes, sure Dracul would open his door and drag him out. He wondered if he

would be a man about dying, or if he would scream, beg, and cry until his killers were thoroughly disgusted with him to the point of putting him out of *their* misery.

“Ah, we are here,” Ojacarcu said, looking at Connor with a grin.

Connor didn’t move, didn’t say a word. He could barely breathe.

“Connor?” his boss asked. “What is wrong? Vadim! Hurry! Something is wrong.”

Ojacarcu glanced down at Connor’s left hand, noting that it had formed a fist so tight that the young man’s fingers were white. Connor’s right hand had a death-grip on the door release. Ojacarcu looked forward again, unhappy that Vadim was still in the driver’s seat, head turned back to them, silently laughing.

“Vadim! Move! Why are you still sitting there?” He looked back at Connor again. The kid’s face was drained of color, sweat rolling down his temples.

“I am sorry, Mr. Ojacarcu, but he is not sick. He thinks we are going to kill him.” He finally let his laugh out, sounding to Connor like one last insult, letting him know that not even Vadim was ever his friend.

Ojacarcu watched Connor for a few seconds before he began to laugh. At first it was a short chortle, but Vadim’s guffaws and Connor’s fear-stricken face caused him to explode with laughter. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d enjoyed the feeling it gave him to find humor in such a way. He’d spent too much of his life being too serious.

Ojacarcu's hand shot out and grabbed Connor's clenched fist. The move made Connor flinch hard enough that Vadim erupted in laughter again, almost getting the boss to relapse. Connor felt his bladder about to let go, and it almost did let go when he remembered how Travis Benkula's body had expelled its waste after he'd finally died.

"Connor, you are like a son to me. You are a brother to Vadim, and to Petre. You are a bug to be squashed by Dracul, but as long as you are like my son, like his brother," his boss pointed to Vadim in the front seat whose face was now a mask of seriousness, "then Dracul will have to stay disappointed. Do not worry about him.

"You are not going to die, not tonight anyway. Unless you slip into the river and get washed away. I advise against it. Though at this time of year it is not fast at all. But cold, oh yes. Cold enough to make you weak enough to die within a few minutes.

"Listen to me, telling you that you will not be killed and then going on about how you might be killed. I am sorry. Vadim is sorry," he said, giving Vadim a frown that caused the driver to apologize to Connor. "You did well with the agents. You were a small bit of trouble one time, but you learned your lesson. Petre said you hated him for many weeks. He did not enjoy it any more than you did. You have performed perfectly with Miss Gellner. We are here to celebrate!"

Ojacarcu opened his door and exited the car, bending down to look into the back seat where Connor was still frozen. He gave Connor a wave and thumped on the roof of the car twice before

walking away, his laughter drifting in through the car's open door. Vadim grinned, gave him a thumbs-up, then followed the boss into the cabin.

It took Connor three minutes to finally uncurl his fists enough to unlatch his seatbelt. He crawled across the seat and stepped out of the open door, taking a moment to look around. Darkness surrounded him on all sides except for the sky. The clear late October night had a slightly lopsided band of stars shining down upon him, the only other lights coming from the cabin and the dome light in the Lincoln. He shut the door and walked to the cabin, still expecting to die at any moment.

Two short knocks were followed a second later by the door swinging open. The girl in the bed with him squealed and pulled a pillow over her bare chest, forgetting her lower half was naked and uncovered as well. Vadim looked in, gesturing to Connor to put some clothes on and follow him. The girl, he'd forgotten her name ten seconds after she told him, brushed her fingers across his arm as he rolled to the edge of the bed.

He dressed and left her alone, naked, and followed Vadim outside to the back deck. The view in the daytime would be breathtaking, Connor thought, noting the steep decline of hillside down to the invisible but audible river rushing through the rocks below. The lights along the back deck were muted, unable to penetrate the darkness more than a few feet beyond the redwood

barrier that Ojacarcu leaned on.

The older man smiled at Connor's approach. "Was she satisfactory?" he asked.

"Yeah," Connor answered.

"She and her friends are new arrivals. They are visiting from Lithuania. They do not speak much English, which is not a bad thing, but they are very firm, very ripe, yes?"

Connor wanted to pick the man up and throw him over the edge to the rocky hillside below at the way he said *visiting*, as if the girls had been given any choice in it. The girl Ojacarcu had sent him off with was either afraid to speak, or spoke no English at all and elected to keep quiet because of it.

She looked like she was barely a month into her sixteenth year, a thought which bothered Connor immensely. That she'd most likely been deceived about where she would end up was disturbing, but that she might not even be an adult yet, was something he couldn't get out of his mind. The girl hadn't said a word, other than her name, but had immediately removed her clothes as if it were already a familiar habit in her young life.

Connor had removed his, but kept sheets between them, and when she attempted to do her duty, he'd refused, putting a finger across his lips in hopes that it was a universal gesture, even in Lithuania. He didn't feel any better that he'd spent almost an hour trying to stare at anything but her naked body. She had caught him numerous times, each time attempting to let him know she was ready and willing, but each time he gently pushed her away. He tried asking her how old she was, but her English comprehension

was either nil, or she refused to answer. Connor figured that she had already been trained or threatened to keep her mouth shut, especially when questions of age came up.

“She’s one I could keep for a while,” he said, pretending to have his hand on the back of her head at waist level.

“Ah, yes, she’s very skilled at that,” Ojacarcu chuckled. “Forty-nine thousand six hundred dollars.”

“What?” Connor asked, not understanding.

“Miss Gellner, she owes just under fifty thousand dollars. This is, of course, including her personal debt as well as Mr. Fallon’s debt. I do not care which of them pays me for Mr. Fallon, as long as it gets paid. She is seventeen thousand in the hole from her habit. Thirty-two thousand is the balance of Mr. Fallon’s debt.”

Connor tried to keep his breathing steady, his body relaxed. Fifty thousand dollars was an extraordinary amount, especially for a whore working under Ojacarcu. He doubted she would ever be able to pay off the seventeen thousand, even if she quit using tomorrow. Since that was a fantasy in her line of work, the seventeen would eventually grow to twenty, thirty, maybe even fifty by itself. Add in Larry’s debt, which would probably keep increasing slowly until Ojacarcu tired of him and replaced him with another dealer, and the debt became just a fancy way to say *slavery*.

Ojacarcu studied Connor once again, hoping to see what was going on inside of his head.

“That’s quite a bit,” was all Connor could force his mouth to say.

“It is just the tip, I’m afraid. Each week that passes costs her another one thousand dollars. I really should charge more, but she does make more than almost all other girls. Five hundred per week with interest for Mr. Fallon’s debt, five hundred per week for her habit. If I were a less kind man, I would charge her per day in interest and dope. But as I said, she is a good employee.”

Connor shrugged, hoping it looked genuine, feeling like the worst actor in the world. “I knew she was stupid, but I didn’t think she was that stupid.”

“She’s a drug addict, Connor. What else could you think?”

CHAPTER 32

Jera paced back and forth from the kitchen to the front door of Connor's apartment. Connor had watched her for at least fifteen minutes, waiting for her to say something. She finally stopped in front of the recliner, looking down at him.

"I'll never be free, will I?" she asked, her eyes wet, her face a twisted wasteland of hopelessness.

"That's the plan," he answered. "That's how they get people locked in for the long term, until they are no longer useful. If you don't go along with it, they hurt you. If hurting you doesn't bring you back in line, they hurt people you care about."

"Motherfuckers," she said with venom. "So I'm supposed to do this until I'm forty? Fifty? Or will they 'retire' me at thirty when they bring in a new batch of Russian girls?"

He'd told her about his weekend at the cabin, which for him had been Sunday through Tuesday, since games ate up his Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays. Coach Lamoureux hadn't been happy that he wouldn't be at any of the practices, but when Mr. Ojacarcu requested something, no one argued.

She fell to her knees, draping herself over Connor's legs, her head resting against his stomach. He let her cry for a while, running his fingers gently through her short hair. He didn't tell her how he'd screwed up by asking Ojacarcu in the first place, sure the man would know it for a weakness and use it against him at every opportunity, or at least whenever Connor balked at a task or didn't perform it to the boss' expectations.

“I don’t know what to do anymore,” she said, raising her head to look at him. “I thought I was a couple grand in the hole because of the dope. He must be charging us five or ten times the street price, probably as a fucking ‘service fee’ or something. That I’m on the hook for thirty grand for that asshole Larry makes me want to stomp on his face with a boot until he’s dead.”

“No, you don’t want to do that,” Connor said, his fingers sliding through her hair.

“Why not? He’s fucking useless. Worse than useless, he’s keeping *me* in slavery. I’ve come to terms that I might have to do this another year or two, and I’ve accepted it as well as I can for now that this is what I’ve become, but honestly, Connor, I can’t do this for more than a couple of years.

“I *won’t*. I’m already scared to death that one day one of these assholes I have to fuck will kill me, whether on purpose or not doesn’t really matter. I’m scared that I’ll end up being replaced by a new girl, barely legal and no English, and instead of risking me becoming a liability, they’ll just ‘accidentally’ give me a lethal dose one day. What’s another whore dead from an overdose? That’s what everyone expects.”

Connor let her vent, the pain and the fear in her voice enhanced by the fury and the hate that he knew resided in her. Hearing her talk about not being able to go on for more than a year or two made his own emotions boil over. As wise as Petre’s words were, he was at the point he could no longer abide by them.

As far as Connor was concerned, people who made bad decisions didn’t have much to complain about when they found

themselves in bad situations. When someone was put in a situation they had no chance of exiting, under any circumstances, he could no longer remain detached. Especially when it involved someone as complicated to his emotions as Jera. He wouldn't admit he loved her, not consciously, but he was aware that it was true, as if it were a word on the tip of his tongue that he couldn't remember.

“How much do you get to keep?” Connor asked her.

“Money? Two hundred dollars per week. That's what we get. That's what I get anyway. A hundred of that goes to Pavel or Ovidiu. They call it 'rent and utilities.' I thought I was paying rent and utilities by spreading my legs for them, but that's what I get for thinking, right?”

“Do you keep the other hundred?”

“Sometimes,” she said, looking away. “For a while I was keeping it, and I had almost a thousand saved up, but there's no place to hide it in the apartments. Ovidiu found it when they were doing a 'routine' inspection for 'contraband,' as if we were in prison and it was shake-down time. I had to pay the price of having contraband with Shannon. She'd been caught hoarding a stash of crystal. They accused her of trying to sell it on the side, to clients in the boss' territory.

“I was given a choice of paying each of the men a hundred bucks to have sex with them, or I could use it to buy enough dope to keep Shannon and me cranked up while we had a marathon sex session with each other. The fuckers sat around and masturbated at least three or four times each while watching us go at it.” Jera's face became a mask of stony hatred when she finally looked at him

again. “Do you know how hard it is to eat pussy for an hour straight while a bunch of hairy animals cheer you on as they jerk off on your back or your face?”

Connor felt his face burn, embarrassed at her description of what she’d been forced to do, but he was unable to completely scrub the image of her without clothes from his mind. He had seen her naked more times than he’d wanted to, but he had always been able to keep his hands off her. At first it was because she was disgusting, the last thing he would ever want to touch. Now it was hard to resist his urges, knowing she would never refuse him. She had begged him a few times, becoming violent and calling him a faggot when he rejected her.

He was still disgusted by what she was, what she did, but because she was being forced to do it now, something had changed in him. He was sure it had to do with the Madonna-whore complex, a popular discussion in the locker rooms from his teens onward. She was no longer the dirty, verbally abusive, harpy-voiced prostitute he hated. She definitely wasn’t a saintly Madonna, but she was something more to him. He’d saved her twice. If the third time wasn’t the charm, everything he ever believed in would be a lie.

As a hockey player, superstition played a large role in thinking that the third time *would* be the charm. He’d lost Dana, he’d lost his own innocence when he watched Travis die, but he decided he wasn’t going to lose Jera.

“So you don’t have any money,” he said, not phrasing it as a question.

“I have a couple hundred bucks,” she said, and began to cry again.

“I don’t have anywhere near fifty thousand dollars,” he said, more to himself than to Jera.

“Connor, no, you can’t.”

“You’re right, I can’t. I only have about fifteen thousand saved up.”

“No! You can’t. I won’t let you. I’ve already fucked things up for you too much. I can’t let you down again. I know I will, it’s what I do, who I am.”

“Shut up,” he commanded.

“No! Let me go!” she cried out as she tried to rise, his grip on her arms inescapable. “Let me fucking go!”

“Shut up,” he repeated, louder this time. “Listen to me.”

Jera stopped struggling. Her cheeks were wet, her light makeup smeared in a hundred directions around her eyes.

“Do you love Larry?” he asked her, making her look him in the eyes.

“What does that have to do with anything?” When he said nothing, she answered, “No. I don’t love him. I thought I did. Even after you came and got me, I thought I still loved him.”

“Do you still love him?”

“No.” There was a finality in her voice. Connor let go of her arms and she moved into his lap. “He fucked me over for good. He never cared about me. If he did, he’d make an effort to see me.”

“Do you love me?” Connor asked softly.

She burst into tears again, unable to stop shaking even after

she put her arms around his neck.

“I have a plan,” he said, running his fingers through her hair again.

CHAPTER 33

Connor looked at his phone one last time. He had to get moving or he would run out of time. He pulled the black knit cap down over his ears and put on the over-sized sunglasses that looked like they'd been stolen from a 1970's police detective. He locked the car with a push of the button on the key and began to walk. The Lincoln would blend in with the rest of the cars at the Central Auto Repair lot on Boise Avenue, and he would blend in, he hoped, with the neighborhood as just another person. The type of neighborhood he was in didn't have the kind of residents who called the police to check out suspicious characters. Every character in this neighborhood was suspicious.

Connor cut across an empty lot two blocks down Galveston Street, keeping to the ditch along the Frontage Road that followed the freeway. As he approached the house he was looking for, he glanced around before walking through a large break in the rotted wooden fence. He ducked down when he reached the house, listening for noises, hearing only the drone of vehicles on I-84.

Larry's yard, the entire lot really, was just as cluttered and dirty as the inside of his house. He found the back door, mostly hidden by a couple of rotting mattresses piled up against the house. Connor tried the knob, sighing when it was locked. He looked through the small window next to the door, but all he could see besides grime on the glass was what looked like a pile of cardboard boxes inside. He gritted his teeth and walked to the side of the house, poking his head around to see if anyone was passing by on

N. 2nd Avenue.

After a full minute, he edged around the side of the house, trying hard to not look suspicious, knowing he looked like a caricature of a cat burglar in a silent movie. He stepped up on the front porch from the side and walked to the front door, listening for a moment before slowly turning the doorknob, nearly fumbling in surprise when it rotated and the latch disengaged. He pushed on the door, hating his inability to remember if the door squealed like a banshee or not. The hinges were silent, and he cracked the door just enough to listen for a few seconds again before opening it enough to slip inside.

Connor closed the door as gently as he could. He remembered his disguise and pulled the cap down over his face, revealing the ski mask for what it was, then replaced his sunglasses so none of his skin was visible. As he listened, he reached into the pocket of the black coat he'd purchased at the thrift store, wrapping his hand around the 9mm automatic Petre had acquired for him. Connor paused for a moment, remembering Petre's dark expression when he'd handed over the weapon. Petre knew about his aversion to firearms, but had remained silent, saving Connor the trouble of lying to him.

His ears picked up the sounds of voices. He crept along the living room to the hallway, listening to Larry's angry insults and a woman's monotone replies. The woman was begging for forgiveness, or maybe it was mercy. She sounded bored enough to fall asleep, which only seemed to make Larry's threats louder, more vulgar.

“What, you fucking bitch?” Larry half-panted, half-yelled, Connor unable to see more than a sliver of light through the space between the broken door and the frame it leaned against. It didn’t surprise him that Larry had never bothered to fix the door after it had been kicked completely off its hinges. “You better fucking do as I tell you, whore, or I’ll choke the fucking life out of you! Do you want to die, bitch?”

“Please, don’t hurt me,” the woman said, her voice full of enough excitement to put Connor to sleep out in the hallway.

Her boredom was so evident that he almost laughed. He moved slowly down the hallway, stopping every foot or so to make sure neither of them sensed his presence. The woman, for all he knew, could be reading a magazine and filing her nails while Larry cursed and yelled and slapped her skin, grunting like a pig caught in a trap. Connor looked through the crack one more time before taking a step back and planting his feet.

He kicked forward at the door as hard as he could, knowing surprise would be his greatest ally. He watched in amazement as it flew across the small bedroom, catching Larry in the hip, shoulder, and elbow. The naked junkie crashed into a wall after the door blew into him. He screamed in pain, still holding his limp cock.

The door crashed onto the bed after hitting Larry, striking the woman in the back of the head. Connor rushed into the room, directly toward Larry. The junkie’s eyes were wide with terror at the huge apparition charging at him, a monster from a nightmare in black with glassy bug eyes. He wondered if he was so high he was hallucinating, right before the monster chopped him across the

forehead with the butt of a pistol.

Larry faltered, dazed and in pain. Connor turned to the whimpering woman caught underneath the door. He figured she was more scared at the sudden chaos and the door landing on her head than she was in pain. The door had been a typical hollow interior type, made of cheap, thin wood that could easily have a hole punched through it by a determined fist.

Connor grabbed the back of Larry's neck with his gloved hand, lifting him from the floor before putting the barrel of the pistol to his temple. He reached out his leg and kicked the door off the woman, who started to scream. Connor tightened his grip on Larry's neck and tapped the woman on the head with the barrel of the gun. She stopped screaming, her eyes going wide, tears spilling from the corners of her eyes.

"Get out and never come back here," Connor whispered as loud as he could, hoping Larry would be too scared, in too much pain, *too high* to recognize his voice. "Go on, get your clothes and leave. Keep your mouth shut or I'll find you and kill you."

He tapped her on the forehead with the barrel again to let her know to get her ass moving. She grabbed her panties, skirt, and a shirt from the floor, trying to put them on faster than her limbs could respond. Connor put the gun back to Larry's skull, gesturing to the little man to put his hands on the back of his head as if he were being arrested. He didn't trust Larry for one second, even with the fear of having a gun in his face.

The woman finally got her skirt on and pulled her shirt over her head. She looked back at Connor and Larry, her eyes still full

of terror, but also anger. Connor hoped she wouldn't suddenly get brave or mouthy. Instead, she stepped toward them, nodding her head at Larry, as if asking Connor for permission. She'd lost her fear that the intruder was interested in harming her, knowing this bit of drama was all for Larry.

"You fucking little weirdo," she said, her voice no longer bored. "You couldn't even get it up. Normally I'd be insulted, but with you..." the woman trailed off.

"Oh fuck you, Carmen, you stu—"

Carmen kicked him between the legs, making Larry shriek and try to double over. Connor held him with an iron grip. Larry began to gag and cough, his testicles producing pain on a scale he'd rarely experienced before.

"You cheap little fuck," Carmen taunted Larry as he dry-heaved. "If you're after his dope, I'll tell you where it is if you'll hook me up."

Connor nodded, and dragged Larry along by the neck as he followed Carmen down the hall to another room off to the right. He peeked around the corner to make sure it wasn't an ambush, but Carmen was halfway in a closet, pulling out a large plastic box.

"You fucking thieving bitch!" Larry screamed, finally able to feel his balls again.

"Uh uh," Connor whispered, tapping the barrel of the automatic on Larry's skull. "Be nice now, or I'll let her kick you again."

Connor realized the box was a cooler, the plastic kind people took on picnics and to tailgate parties before the big game. He

gestured to her to remove the lid. She gasped when she saw what was in it. She'd known where Larry kept his stash, but she'd never actually seen what it looked like. Connor edged closer, looking over her shoulder while still keeping his grip tight on Larry's neck.

Inside the blue cooler were two large freezer bags stuffed with marijuana, a small bag of something dark, probably hash, though Connor wasn't an expert in recreational drugs, and two medium storage bags of crystal chunks. Connor gestured to the woman to grab whatever she could. Her eyes nearly exploded at the thought of getting all of the drugs in the cooler.

"Are you sure?" she asked him. He nodded, giving an impatient wave of his gun. He didn't want to cut the time too close.

Carmen grabbed the big bags of weed, the two bags of meth, and even grabbed the little bag of the dark substance. Carmen's eyes went wide once again, as did Connor's when he saw the stacks of bills sitting under the drugs. He waved her away with the pistol and she backed off, unable to take her eyes off the cooler even though she was holding at least fifty thousand dollars' worth of various drugs in her hands.

"You fucking cunt, I'll fucking hunt you down and kill you. I'll rape your fucking asshole. I'll rape your mouth. I'll fucking rape you with a goddamn knife you goddamn fucking cu—" Larry's scream of fury was interrupted by her planting another foot in his crotch.

Connor reached into the cooler, unable to believe how much money was in it. He grabbed one stack of hundreds and tossed it to Carmen while Larry rolled around on the floor, holding his crotch

and screaming like a child throwing a tantrum. The woman almost dropped everything, but she caught the money.

“Now get the fuck out of here,” he said, risking his voice since Larry was an unending wail of pain.

Carmen winked at him and ran out of the room. He heard her shuffling around for a moment, probably grabbing her coat, or stealing one of Larry’s, before finally leaving. Once the front door closed, Connor got to work.

“Is this all of the money?” he whispered in Larry’s ear. When the junkie didn’t answer him, he tapped the man’s skull with the butt of the pistol just hard enough to get him to forget his balls and worry about his brain. “Is this all of the money?”

“Ye—yes!” Larry yelled.

Connor turned the barrel to Larry’s face, forcing the dealer to look down the dark tunnel that would explode and send bits of his skull and brains all over the walls.

“I fucking swear, man!” Larry screamed.

Connor punched him in the jaw. The light went out of the junkie’s eyes as he lost consciousness. Connor wondered if his luck would run out soon. He’d been lucky that it was a cold, gray day, with no traffic on the streets he needed to walk. Lucky that the front door had been unlocked and Larry had been engaged in whatever sexual act he’d interrupted. Lucky that he didn’t have to hurt the woman, or tear the house up looking for the money. As icing on the cake, lucky that the single punch to Larry’s jaw had knocked him out long enough for Connor to flip him on his stomach and bind his arms and legs.

Just as he was starting to come around, Connor stuffed an incredibly dirty sock in his mouth, smiling behind his ski mask at the gagging sounds Larry made. He double-checked his impromptu knots made out of dirty shirts with long sleeves, making sure they would keep the man secure for at least another few minutes. Larry's eyes were glassy, rounding out his dazed expression, and he began to shiver and vibrate on the floor.

Connor went back to the cooler, staring inside it for a moment. He pulled out a small black garbage sack from his coat pocket and began to transfer the money into it, still unable to believe what he was seeing. If Larry had counted the bills and kept them separated in proper stacks, Connor estimated it at just over one hundred thousand dollars. He guessed that he had given the woman ten thousand dollars in cash when he'd thrown her a stack.

Below the stacks of hundreds were stacks of twenties, tens, fives, and six large rolls of one dollar bills. Connor grabbed it all. Within thirty seconds the cooler was completely empty. He looked over at Larry, who glared at him but remained silent. Connor smiled behind his mask again before kicking Larry in the face hard enough to break off a few of his remaining teeth. The junkie didn't cry out behind the dirty sock in his mouth, his eyes closing instantly, head bouncing off the carpet once before becoming still.

Connor panicked for a moment, worried that he might have killed the disgusting little greaser, until he watched the junkie's chest rise and fall. He reached down and made sure Larry's mouth was pointed toward the floor, just in case blood made its way through the sock and down his throat. He didn't want to kill Larry,

and the one thing no one needed at the moment was the homicide of a drug dealer who was linked to Ojacarcu.

He checked one more time. Larry was going to be hurting for a long time, but that was Larry's problem, Connor thought. He put the pistol back in his coat pocket as he walked to the front door. He remembered the back door and walked through the kitchen, trying to find it within all of the junk piled everywhere. He found the door behind stacks of boxes and unlocked the deadbolt, wedging it open just enough to slip out without tipping over the mattresses outside. He walked to the hole in the fence, looked around twice, then rolled up the ski mask but left the sunglasses on. Connor walked as nonchalantly as he could back to the car he'd parked in the repair lot.

CHAPTER 34

The text from Petre was short and to the point. *Finish your drive and come straight to the office. Together.* Connor's guts twisted up, knowing that Larry had implicated him in the robbery. He'd prepped himself for it for two days, but had grown increasingly worried when everything continued to be business as usual. He almost hoped that he'd either accidentally killed Larry, or that the new collectors had shown up and killed him on the spot when he didn't have the money. Connor's shame at such a hope was unable to hold a candle to the firestorm of anxiety and panic that threatened to consume him as he read Petre's text.

He locked his phone and put it back in his coat pocket. He was sure he'd be able to handle anything Ojacarcu tried to trip him up with, assuming Ojacarcu believed anything a junkie had to say when it involved money coming up short. Connor knew the boss would investigate Larry's story. It was Ojacarcu's nature. The man was nothing if not thorough when it came to acquiring information which allowed him to have the upper hand in any given situation. Connor's worry that everything was about to crash down around his head paralyzed him with fear until Jera climbed into the Lincoln's front seat half an hour later.

"I've got one last one in an hour, somewhere near Kuna. South of the airport, I think," she said, pulling down the sun shade to check her makeup in the lighted vanity mirror.

"What shows did you watch when I was asleep?" Connor asked as he pulled onto Franklin Road and headed east toward his

apartment.

“Goddammit, Connor,” she said angrily, flipping up the shade and turning to him, “I’m tired of this shit. You won’t tell me wh—”

“What shows did you watch when I was asleep?” he shouted, the fury in his eyes making her shrink as far as she could into her seat.

“Dallas, and Dynasty,” she said in a small voice.

“What was going on in ‘Dallas?’”

“I don’t know,” she said, the words broken by her frightened stuttering.

He began screaming at her, the expression on his face shrinking her into her seat until she felt a foot tall. “What the fuck was going on in Dallas? Tell me! Now!”

“B-B-Bobby was trying to buy an oil refinery,” she answered, tears pooling at the corners of her eyes.

“What else?”

“J.R. was trying to stop him.”

“Why?”

“Because they’re brothers. They’re rivals. Bobby was named Ewing Oil’s president, and J.R. was pissed about it.”

“What happened on ‘Dynasty?’”

“The guy, John Forsythe, I mean Blake Carrington, he... he...” she panicked when she couldn’t remember the twisting, turning storyline of the old eighties television show. “He had to give up part of the estate to his brother. He’d been on trial for his mother’s death. The women were all scheming to fuck him over,

except for this one, who gave him some info to prove the other women had lied.”

“What else did you watch?” Connor had brought his voice down to an angry growl.

“I don’t know! I don’t remember!” Her shriek pierced his every nerve, but her sobs threatened to break his heart.

“You better fucking remember. You better fucking remember that I was asleep and you were watching television.”

“Why, Connor? Why are you obsessed with this? Please, please tell me what is going on.” She put her hand on his arm, expecting once again to have him remove it. He pulled his left hand from the steering wheel and covered hers with it.

“Listen,” he said in a gentle voice. He reached up and wiped away a trail of her tears with his thumb, his hand lingering a little too long before he pulled it back to his lap. “We have to go meet with the boss and the others. No matter what happens to you, no matter what you are told, no matter what you see, remember what you did when I was asleep for a couple of hours.”

“You keep saying that but you weren’t asleep! Why do you keep saying you were home and in bed?”

Jera was nearly hysterical at the back-and-forth nature of Connor’s personality shifts, combined with the fear that something very terrible was happening, something that involved Connor’s three hour absence.

Connor gave her hand a hard squeeze, making her cry out in pain. “If you say that one more time, you will be killed.” His eyes were dead, emotionless, but she could hear the plea in his voice.

“If you ever say that again, I will be killed. Do you understand me?”

Jera didn't understand at all, but she understood beyond a doubt that whatever was happening was more than serious. She had no idea what Connor was talking about, but she knew that she trusted him, and whatever he was asking her to do had one or both of their lives attached to it. Jera squeezed his hand back to let him know that she understood the part about being killed.

“We have to go see the boss. Something has happened. I don't know what because I was asleep while you were watching TV, while we were waiting for your next appointment time. I mean it, Jera. No matter what you see, no matter what you hear, no matter what happens to you or to me, you watched those old shows and I slept, or at least I was in the bedroom.”

“Are we in trouble?” Jera asked, knowing the answer, wanting to see what Connor would say.

“No,” he answered. “Because we were home, sleeping and watching shitty TV shows from the eighties. Before that we were at your appointment, remember?”

She quickly squashed the thought of Robert, a client who lived in the North End, the historical, bike-riding, granola-munching section of Boise.

“I remember,” she answered.

Any other day with Connor not rejecting her casual touch would be a day she wouldn't dwell on the misery that was her life, clinging to the happiness that such a small gesture gave her. By the time they parked the Lincoln under the arena, she was terrified of

what was coming. Connor had held her hand the entire ride, his palm a cold, greasy lump of wax instead of a human hand.

Dracul, Petre, and Vadim met them on the fifth floor as they stepped out of the elevator. There were no smiles, no greetings, only Dracul and Petre parting for Connor and Jera to follow Vadim. The two Romanians collapsed behind to escort them to Ojacarcu's office. Jera wanted to latch on to Connor's hand more than she'd ever wanted anything in the world. He had forbidden her to do anything that would look to others as if the two cared for each other in the slightest.

Ojacarcu might believe the two were lovers in secret, but Connor had made it clear as often as he could to Petre and Vadim that she was the worst kind of parasite he could have been saddled with. He didn't go out of his way to complain about her, but he took digs at her at every opportunity. Petre and Vadim had a running joke that Connor and Jera would eventually get married, knowing it rubbed Connor the wrong way. Not for the humor they found in it, but for the length of time the two would go on and on about it, eventually speaking only in Romanian and laughing every few seconds. Connor would finally explode into a tirade of how revolting, how uncivilized she was, how everything about her disgusted him in the worst possible ways. The two Romanians would burst into uncontrollable fits of laughter, egging him on until his rage erupted in a firestorm of curses and insults.

Ojacarcu might believe the two were sweet on each other, but anyone the boss might ask about them would swear otherwise. Even Petre. Connor hoped the man, his friend, would not tell the boss just how deep his feelings were for Jera. *I am loyal*, Petre had told him more times than he could remember. Connor's heart sank into his stomach. He knew Petre had no choice in the matter. The three Romanians led them to Ojacarcu's office, Vadim holding the door from the inside while everyone else filed in. Connor expected to see Larry, but the only occupant was Ojacarcu, sitting behind his desk as usual. Connor walked up to the chairs in front of the desk, knowing this was where the boss would make him stand.

Jera hesitated, stopping in the middle of the room, unsure of where she should go, or why she was there. Dracul grabbed her arm and marched her to Connor's side. Connor's mouth curled down in distaste, the only betrayal of his feelings for her. Dracul let go of her and took up a position ten feet behind them. Petre and Vadim stood guard on each side of the door, looking more like Buckingham Palace guards than Eastern European gangsters.

Ojacarcu studied both of them for a full minute. Connor stood still, not staring directly into the boss' eyes, but not avoiding the man's gaze either. Jera nervously shifted her weight from foot to foot, while her fingers picked at imaginary lint on her pants and the bottom of her shirt. Her eyes darted from place to place as she took in the beauty of the office, countered by a fear deeper than she'd ever experienced, deeper even than during the worst abuse she'd suffered.

"Connor," Ojacarcu said, nodding at him, ignoring Jera as if

she didn't exist, "there is a very serious situation that is happening. I do not have time nor the inclination to explain, but I need to know a few things. You will tell me the answers."

Connor nodded his head, hoping he didn't look as frightened as he felt inside. He refused to turn his head to look around, but he could feel Dracul's eyes boring into the back of his head, imagining the man sending him psychic messages of hate and murder.

"What were you doing on Monday afternoon?" Ojacarcu asked.

"I took her around," he said, nodding his head sideways at Jera, "to her appointments."

"What else did you do?" the boss asked.

"Like... eating or...?"

Ojacarcu leaned back slightly in his chair. "Tell me about your day. From when you woke up."

"Mr. Ojacarcu, please don't take this as me being a smartass, but do you want to know all the details, like, if I got out of bed, took a piss, brushed my teeth, then made some coffee before I took a shower?"

He could definitely feel Dracul's eyes digging chunks from the back of his skull. Ojacarcu leaned back a little more, a smile playing across his lips.

"No, I understand. Just tell me about where you went," the older man instructed.

"I woke up around five in the morning, and went to practice at eight. She was awake when I got home from practice. Her first appointment was at eleven. She had another appointment at at one,

and then nothing until five. We went back to my place so I could sleep for a couple of hours before she had to go. We stopped at the Dairy Queen and grabbed some food before going back to my place. From six until eleven, she slept for a while and I watched the Senators-Bruins game, then the Kings-Sharks late game before driving out to Blue Canyon for her last appointment. Then we went home and I slept until five and had to get up for practice again.”

“You were at your apartment between the afternoon appointments?” Ojacarcu asked him, but his eyes were watching Jera.

“Yes, sir,” Connor answered. “I needed an hour or two of sleep. It’s a habit most of us have had since junior hockey.”

“Yes, I know of this,” Ojacarcu sighed, sounding disappointed.

Ojacarcu said nothing for over a minute, staring through them into space. He finally turned his gaze on Jera.

“You are an avid television watcher?” he asked her, his voice sounding almost fatherly.

“Yes, sir,” she said to the floor. “I was when I was a kid.”

“What kind of television do you watch?”

“Just... just stupid stuff. Old shows, reality shows. Nothing interesting like nature or history.”

“You like the Dancing For America show?” he asked, his interest noticeable.

Connor could barely contain his need to reach out for Jera’s hand. She didn’t understand the stakes as well as he did, and he wasn’t sure if she could play the game well enough to convince

Ojacarcu. The worst they would be able to torture out of her was that he had been somewhere else during the time in question, but it was more than enough for her to ride the conveyor into the incinerator.

“Yes, sir,” she answered the desk, still afraid to look in the man’s face. She couldn’t keep herself from talking about Dancing For America, one of her favorite shows, one that Connor complained about endlessly. “I’ve been watching it since it started a few years ago.”

“I enjoy the doctor and the lady, Karen,” Ojacarcu said. “The school teacher. She never stops talking, but she can dance very well.”

“I hate her,” Jera said, unable to stop the words. Ojacarcu gave her a curious look. “She’s a bitch to everyone,” Jera said, not quite believing she was having this conversation with a man who could order her death. “She treats Dr. Jenkins like shit, and she’s always talking shit behind everyone’s back and then so sweet to their faces.”

Ojacarcu chuckled. “I believe that to be true, though I did not want to be the one to say it. How about you Vadim, who is your favorite dancer?”

“I do not watch stupid American show of dancing,” Vadim said from behind Connor, his tone making his feelings clear in case his broken English had garbled the words.

“How can you not love the dancing? It is not these boom-boom clubs, it is real dancing.” He said something else in Romanian, Connor only catching the ‘back home’ part, his

Romanian far worse than Vadim and Petre's English. "Do you like to dance?" he asked Jera.

"No. I mean yes, I would like to, but I never learned. I can only do the... *boom-boom* dancing at the club."

"Ack, that is because it requires no skill, only hallucinogenic drugs and boom boom boom. Real dancing requires skill."

Jera nodded, looking back at the thick carpet, her mind reminding her stomach that the color of the carpet would mask blood stains to the naked eye. She fought the urge to reach out for Connor's hand every two seconds. It was a battle between that urge and the urge to let her bladder go where she stood.

"What of these old shows? I am partial to Gilligan's Island for some reason. Gilligan is so stupid, and the plot is completely unbelievable, but it is what I watched back in Romania, along with Hogan's Heroes. Both were illegal to watch under Ceaușescu, but Hogan's Heroes could get you executed for owning Nazi and American propaganda. Gilligan was illegal only because he was stupid and was deemed to have no value for Romanian children."

"They didn't believe that laughing had value?" Jera asked.

Ojacarcu narrowed his eyes at her. "You are correct. Laughing was a weakness that could lead to defeat if the Americans ever declared war. That was the official line. The real truth was that the KGB would haul you off to Moscow, if they didn't execute you immediately, before the spread of 'Western Propaganda' infected your comrades, who would soon decide that the communism wasn't the great utopia that Marx had envisioned.

"Did you know that the strangest, most frightening thing I

encountered when I came to America, was how much everyone smiles? During the Cold War, if you smiled, the KGB would eventually find you. Smiling citizens were up to no good. Smiling citizens were smiling about plots against the Directorate, against Ceaușescu, against Moscow.”

“You risked that just to watch bad American television?” Jera asked.

Connor was interested as well, having heard all manner of things about living behind the Iron Curtain, but he had never heard about the risk of being caught watching American television or listening to American music like this. An alarm blared in the back of his mind that the Romanian was lulling Jera, maybe even himself, and would eventually pounce like a trapdoor spider.

“Not just me,” Ojarcu said. “Entire neighborhoods. If someone could get the signal clearly from Istanbul, or sometimes American naval ships in the Black Sea that would purposely broadcast American television with Russian voice-overs and Romanian subtitles, we would crowd into their home or apartment to watch, knowing that the Securitatea, the secret police, could send us all to the firing squads or public hangings.”

“That’s crazy,” Jera said, fascinated with the thought of having to grow up in a dour, suppressed place where smiling, laughing, or owning anything from the West could get her tortured or killed.

“Yes, it certainly was. It was infuriating as well, because all of the informers, the spies, the authorities and agents, they watched the same broadcasts. Western culture was popular to all except the

oldest, most hard-line Party members. I'm sure even *they* appreciated the offerings of the West, in secret of course. The eventual fall of communism was welcomed by all but those in power. Ceaușescu held on longer than the others, but in the end, he could not hold on tight enough. I was already an American by that time, having defected to the Greek ambassador during a trip to Athens.

“As close neighbors to Romania, Greece would quietly transfer people like me to the American consulate, where we would be assessed by CIA and State Department agents to determine our value. Many were sent back to Romania who were not members of military, police, or any career that the West could interrogate us for information to use against Moscow and its satellites. Because I was an officer in the army, and had been trained in Russia, I was valuable. I traded whatever ‘secrets’ the Americans wanted for citizenship and a quiet life. Many of my countrymen were not so lucky. They were pawns in a game of appeasement between the two superpowers.” Ojacarcu leaned forward in his chair. “The West would give up these ‘worthless’ defectors in exchange for troublemakers from within the Iron Curtain who had too many of The Peoples’ ears. You can imagine life for those who defected to the West only to be sent back in the custody of the KGB or Securitatea.”

Ojacarcu winked and stood up. Connor braced for a blow to the back of his head from Dracul, but the only thing he felt was his skin crawling from the anticipation. His brain was in the midst of a meltdown from fear, filling him with dread that the older man’s

words were prophetic in some way.

“Come,” Ojacarcu said, holding out both hands in a gesture that signaled they should follow. “As I mentioned, we have a serious situation. I think you will be interested in it.”

Vadim opened the office door, Petre going into the hallway first, everyone else waiting for Ojacarcu to exit before following. They rode the elevator down to the basement, every second an eternity of terror for Connor and Jera. Connor once again let his mind wander to the dozens of mafia movies where unsuspecting members of the organization were led to their own deaths.

“Miss Gellner, I would feel privileged to have you ride with me. I would very much enjoy discussing our love of terrible American television,” Ojacarcu said as they reached the row of black Lincolns.

Jera’s legs threatened to collapse under her, but she held herself together, smiling and accepting Ojacarcu’s request, knowing she wouldn’t be allowed to refuse. She had to will herself to not look back at Connor, afraid the terror on her face would shine like a brilliant beacon, alerting everyone that she might be hiding something.

Vadim, Dracul, and Ojacarcu escorted Jera to the closest Lincoln. Petre and Connor stood next to another, watching its twin exit the underground garage. The Romanian said nothing, did nothing other than stare at his friend until Connor looked away. Petre unlocked the Lincoln and sat behind the wheel, waiting for Connor to get in. Connor finally sat down, but he was afraid to latch his seatbelt. The way Petre stared at the concrete wall in front

of the car, combined with the faint creaking noises of his hands gripping the steering wheel, began to push Connor's fear into overdrive.

Connor felt his tighten enough to form diamonds when he noticed that Petre's hands were covered by the same kind of black leather gloves Dracul had worn when he'd killed Travis Benkula.

CHAPTER 35

“What’s going on?” Connor asked after riding in silence.
“Where are we going?”

“This is not good,” Petre said after they turned onto State Street heading west.

“That’s all you’re going to say? ‘This is not good?’”

“I am forbidden to tell you. I can only tell you that this is very bad.”

“Bad for who? Me? Jera? All of us?”

Petre refused to answer, staring straight ahead as he drove. They’d driven around Boise in aimless circles for an hour, no pattern to Petre’s random turns. Connor thought they might be playing a cruel joke on him, making him sweat by having Petre drive silently, going nowhere. He had the thought more than once that Petre was waiting for a sign, a text message maybe, that Connor’s grave had been dug to the proper depth, and they could finally head toward the real destination. He also feared they were going to the landfill, and when the big car turned north on Highway 55, he felt like throwing up. He knew something was up, most likely his own number, most likely Jera’s as well.

Connor had been haunted by a nagging voice in his head for the last day and a half, one that reminded him that out of himself, Jera, and Larry, he was the lowest earner. Jera and Larry put cold, hard cash in Ojacarcu’s hands. Connor put asses in the seats at the arena, but he didn’t think he was earning anywhere near ten thousand dollars per week for his boss.

Twenty minutes later, as they neared the small town of Horseshoe Bend, Petre turned right on Harris Creek Road. Connor had tried to engage Petre in roundabout conversation, but the Romanian refused to speak. After another twenty minutes of silent cruising up into the mountains, Petre turned north on an unpaved but well-maintained gravel road, the Lincoln twisting and turning through curves that mirrored whatever small river or creek Connor could make out every few minutes in the car's headlights. The big luxury sedan made its way over the gravel at a decent speed, but Petre dialed it back at every new curve.

They rode for another forty minutes of slow progress before turning to what Connor thought was west again. He was unsure now, with only mountains and overcast midnight skies to try to get his sense of direction from. The glow of the Treasure Valley was nonexistent from their current location. They turned down an almost hidden road with tall pines to either side forming a tunnel in the Lincoln's headlights. The natural tree tunnel reminded Connor of a carnival's haunted house ride, the condition of the road causing the headlights to throw garish shadows at sharp angles. Connor expected a cardboard maniac with a chainsaw to swing out from one of the trees at any moment.

Petre pulled the car up to a small wooden cabin, nothing like the luxury cabin Ojacarcu had invited him to before. That it looked a lot like the shack at the landfill made his adrenaline begin to flow even faster. Petre killed the engine and removed the keys, exiting the car and walking to the steps that led up to the door of the cabin. Connor reached out to open his door, needing two attempts to work

the handle, his hand a cold, sweaty, shaking stranger. The Lincoln's door opened on the second try, and he paused for an extra few seconds to get his wits about him.

Petre waited for him on the wooden steps. Connor saw the other Lincoln parked off to the side of the cabin. He tightened his stomach muscles and gritted his teeth, afraid of what would greet him on the other side of the cabin's front door. Petre knocked with a triple-tap of his knuckles followed by one medium rap of the flat of his fist on the door. The door opened a few inches, one eye and the barrel of an automatic greeting the two men on the steps.

Petre pushed the gun to the side, giving Vadim a frown as he walked by. Connor stared at the gun, his feet refusing to move. Vadim noticed and put the weapon back into his shoulder holster, using the other hand to wave Connor into the cabin. When the door closed, Vadim flipped a switch, the two lamps illuminating a typical rustic cabin interior. Vadim walked through the room and down a short hallway before turning left, looking back to make sure the two newcomers were following.

Vadim opened a door that brought them into another room, this one larger but unfurnished and utilitarian. Ojacarcu and Jera stood just inside the room with their backs to the door. Connor could see someone beyond them, but couldn't make out the detail until Ojacarcu turned and stepped back, Jera doing the same. Larry Fallon was secured to a wooden chair, completely naked, his upper lip and lower chin covered in a thin film of blood and snot. Connor visibly cringed when he saw the man. He turned to Ojacarcu for explanation.

“You remember Mr. Fallon?” Ojacarcu asked.

“Yeah,” Connor replied, his testicles attempting to crawl up inside of his body.

“Well, this is the interesting thing I told you about. Mr. Fallon has a story to tell, an accusation to make. Why don’t you tell them about it, Mr. Fallon?”

When Larry said nothing, his face still pointed toward the floor, Dracul stepped out from the deep shadow at the rear of the room and slapped the junkie on the back of the head. Larry jerked, his eyes wild with fear until they settled on Connor.

“You!” the man screamed. “You motherfucker! You did this! You—”

Dracul stuffed a rag into Larry’s mouth, slapping him on the back of the head again when Larry wouldn’t stop trying to yell around the rag. Connor looked to Petre, then to Ojacarcu.

“What the fuck?” Connor asked.

“I asked the very same question when Paul and Niko brought him to me after he was unable to pay.”

“We warned him the last time we were there when we set the new payment terms with him,” Connor said, the heat of anger in his voice directed at the junkie who still stared at him from the chair with hateful eyes. “We explained it, and he agreed to it. Petre was there. If this piece of shit is trying to say it’s my fault he couldn’t pay because I did what you told me, then I’ll break his goddamn face myself.”

“Oh, no,” Ojacarcu said. Connor was sure he could hear humor in his boss’ voice. “It is better than that.” He stepped within

arm's reach of the man. "Let us try this one more time. When Dracul removes the rag from your mouth, you will tell my young friend here what you told me. If you do not do exactly as I have instructed, I will have Dracul remove another finger."

Connor shivered at the "another" part, wondering what Larry's hands might look like after a few hours of Dracul working him over. He was glad Larry's hands were behind the chair so he didn't have to find out. Dracul slapped the bound man on the back of the head again and removed the rag from his mouth.

"I'm sorry," Larry said to Ojacarcu before turning his gaze on Connor. "You broke into my house Sunday and robbed me at gunpoint. You gave all of my stash to that whore, Carmen, and you took all of the money I had to give to Mr. Ojacarcu."

"You're high," Connor said, looking the man in the eyes.

"I wish," Larry laughed. "I know it was you. Same fucking height. Tried to hide with black pants and coat and that cheap ski mask with your stupid fucking cop sunglasses. Pretending to be Batman with your whispering bullshit so I wouldn't know who you were. But I heard you when you told her to take my shit and get out."

"Is he high right now?" Connor asked Ojacarcu.

"I'm sure he wishes he could be," Ojacarcu answered.

"Dracul has been keeping him company for the last two days."

"And this is the story he told you about why he couldn't pay?"

"It is," his boss nodded. "An amusing tale, minus the part about not having the money to pay his debt to me."

“How much was he short?” Connor asked.

“Twenty-five thousand,” Ojacarcu replied.

Connor looked at Larry. “You didn’t pay anything? Surely you could have fudged the truth like you did with us enough times about getting ripped off yourself, or that you hadn’t collected from your people yet. Somehow you always came up with something, at least half.”

“Oh, go fuck yourself,” Larry said, a wolf’s grin on his bloody face. “You know you did it, asshole. You probably did it to get back at me for calling the boss after you kidnapped the cunt standing beside you. She’s probably the one who told you where all the shit was, how to get into the house.”

Connor looked at Ojacarcu and shrugged, not wanting to be baited into saying anything. He hadn’t looked at Jera since they’d separated in the parking garage, and it was driving him mad like an itch he couldn’t reach.

“This gets more interesting,” Ojacarcu said. “He claims he can prove it was you.”

Connor was sure that everyone in the room had been staring at him, watching him give himself away with uncontrollable shaking and facial expressions that delivered his guilt on a silver platter. He glared at the junkie secured to the chair.

“Let’s hear it,” he said, hoping with his life that he feigned disinterest combined with a little disgust.

“Oh you’re gonna hear it, asshole. Gonna hear a fucking bang when this cocksucking gorilla behind me puts out your lights,” Larry promised before Dracul slapped him in the head

again, much harder than before. “Ow, you fucking ape,” he said, turning his head as far as he could to hurl the insult behind him to Dracul. He turned back to Connor. “Yeah. See, I got two things. Number one is that everyone in the neighborhood saw you. Described you perfectly.”

“They saw a man in black pants and a coat and a ski mask and described me perfectly?” Connor asked, almost amused.

“They saw your face before you pulled the ski mask down, fuckwad. They described you perfectly, even down to the scar above your eye. It was a nice try though, timing it with just an hour before collection. You didn’t think I’d come to my senses and get out of the shitty attempt you made at tying me up, but I did. I got out of it half an hour before they showed up to get paid. By the time they arrived, I’d talked to three different neighbors on the block.”

“Right,” Connor said. “So what’s number two?”

“I had just over a hundred twenty thousand in that cooler. You gave ten grand to the whore, so I know you got about a hundred and ten, probably about a hundred and thirteen thousand, wherever you stashed it after stealing it from me. I was going to pay Mr. Ojacarcu off in full, at least the original debt and the interest.”

“Wait...” Connor said, pretending to be surprised. “You owed Mr. Ojacarcu money for months, yet you hoarded over a hundred grand? Jesus, Larry. No wonder it’s you strapped to that chair instead of me.”

Connor shook his head, as if Larry were the stupidest human

being to ever have lived. Inside, he used every last bit of control he had to not visibly shake in fear, knowing if the Romanians produced another person, a witness, he was a dead man. Dracul would easily be able to torture anyone into talking without even trying hard.

“It seems that Mr. Fallon’s eyewitnesses were reluctant to talk to our associates,” Ojacarcu said, shaking his head as if he were a disappointed father. “His *hoarding* of money... That is an entirely separate matter that must be dealt with, regardless of the outcome of this incident.”

“So... no witnesses who ‘described me perfectly,’” Connor said to Larry, “and your proof that I did this to you is to admit that you had the money to pay Mr. Ojacarcu but instead... I can’t even imagine what kind of idiotic scheme you had bouncing around in your stupid, drug-addled brain.” He turned to his boss. “Are you sure he’s not high?”

“They saw you!” Larry screamed, the faces in the room once again focused on the bleeding, naked man tied to a chair. “They saw you and they will say it! Let me talk to them. I’ll get the fucking truth out of them!”

Connor glanced at Ojacarcu. The older man shrugged again. “I had my boys check out his story. No one will claim they saw anything. It sounds like a neighborhood that either does not care for Mr. Fallon enough to protect him, or more likely, it is a neighborhood that believes it is not wise to talk to anyone who does not belong to the neighborhood.”

“I’m sure he was the envy of the homeowner’s association,”

Connor said. "With all of the shit piled up around the fire hazard he lives in, the constant in and out by shady dope addicts, I bet they baked him a cake each time they heard him beating on his whore."

"Fuck you, cocksucker!" Larry screamed at him, nearly falling over in the chair.

Dracul stepped to Larry's left and swung his fist at the junkie. Connor winced when Larry's chair fell over and his head rebounded off of the wood floor. Dracul leaned down and put the rag back in Larry's mouth before pulling the chair upright.

"This is why you brought me all the way out here? Why she had to miss her appointment? For this shit? No offense, Mr. Ojacarcu, but this is fucking stupid."

"Do not worry about her appointment," Ojacarcu said with a wave of his hand. "I assured the client that she was assisting me personally, and I would make it up to him when she has her next appointment with him. As for this *fucking stupid* mess, I do not take offense from you. I understand your anger at these accusations. That is why I have called you out here.

"When a man makes such an accusation, knowing that death will be involved at the end of it, he must be sure of the truth of his accusations. I do not believe him to be strong enough to withstand Dracul's skills. Dracul assures me that no matter the technique, Mr. Fallon will not change his story. At first this disturbed me. You were the focus of his screams, Connor. He is very sure you broke into his home, beat him with a pistol, gave away his drugs to a prostitute, and took all of his money after tying him up.

"Personally, I believe him. I am quite sure he was robbed and

beaten. It could not be a secret of what and who he was. He was a good earner, which means he had enough customers that he kept satisfied. You know how it is with these meth addicts.”

Connor understood the meaning of Ojacarcu’s use of the past tense to describe Larry. He’d tried to tell himself that Larry would get out of this alive, that he’d be beaten badly by whichever men were doing the collecting from him now. Connor hadn’t been prepared for the amount of money and drugs that had been in the cooler. He’d only expected to take the twenty-five thousand that the junkie had been ordered to pay each week, and had convinced himself that he might not even get that much based on the fact that Larry was an addict, as well as a loser who could barely meet his debt payment—and even then only on the threat of a more severe beating each time he failed to produce.

“The part I do not believe him about is that it was you who has done this to him. I asked him, ‘why would Connor risk his life on such a foolish action?’ and the reply I received was that you are retaliating against him, for having to take a beating from Dracul.” Ojacarcu sighed, glancing at Larry, who still looked dazed but was following the conversation. “At first, I believed that he was simply making the story up, another excuse to not have to pay his debt. But after he and Dracul spent time together, I realized his story is most likely true.”

“Just not the part about me,” Connor said.

“Exactly. I understand the history between you, and can imagine this man truly believes you kidnapped his woman. However, he has lied to me many times in the past, has failed to

make timely payments more than once. It is unfortunate for the fact that he was a good earner, even if he is a liar and an addict. He will be easily replaced by someone who is not a user, someone who will not give me excuses or headaches.”

Larry’s eyes were wide, his voice making strangled noises behind the rag. Connor wanted to apologize to him, tell him he was truly sorry it was going to end this way, that he never wanted Larry to die. He was sure the dealer would never make it out of the cabin with a heartbeat. Connor steeled himself, hoping that he wouldn’t have to watch Dracul end the man’s life, at the same time fearing he would have to be a witness to it, if not an active participant. It would be another lesson from his boss, another way to hold power over him.

“I know that this man was wrong to accuse you of kidnapping, but I had no choice,” Ojacarcu said. “I had to settle the matter. But this is inexcusable. No man should have to live with being wrongly accused once, let alone twice in his life.”

Ojacarcu’s hand reached out and squeezed Connor’s shoulder, their eyes locked together. “I will let you have the honor of being the final human being that this lying piece of shit ever sees. Petre will assist you. You will resume your duties tomorrow with Miss Gellner. I have spoken to your coach to let him know that you will not be able to make it to practice until Wednesday.”

“I have a game on Wednesday,” Connor said, trying to keep the fear out of his voice, hoping to prolong the conversation, knowing that no matter how long he kept Ojacarcu talking, he would eventually be forced to kill Larry. He didn’t think he could

do it with everyone watching. He didn't think he could do it even if left alone with the man.

"It is okay," Ojacarcu said dismissively. "I have taken care of it. I know it will be hard on you to miss practices, but this is to be the first man you have killed with your own hands, yes?"

"Yes," Connor said, barely able to get the words out.

"You will need a day or two to clear your head. The team needs you in the right state of mind to compete, yes?"

"Yes." Connor couldn't believe the man had just told him he'd only need a day or two to recover after extinguishing another human being's life.

"Don't think about it too much," Ojacarcu said to him as he turned to walk out of the room. "It is very hard the first time." He stopped and put a hand on Connor's shoulder again, the same way Connor's father used to do when imparting a piece of serious advice in his youth. "Finish it quickly and put it out of your mind."

Connor stood frozen, unable to move or say anything. Ojacarcu motioned for Jera and the others to follow him.

"Wait!" Connor said, hearing the panic in his voice. The four stopped in the hallway, all of them turning back to hear what he had to say. "You're leaving?"

"I have seen how this ends far too many times to need or want to see it again. I only need to know the end result, not how it came about." Ojacarcu gave him a tight smile before walking away. He caught Jera's eyes before she turned to follow. She looked terrified beyond sanity.

Connor stayed rooted to the floor, listening as the others

exited the cabin, then hearing the faint sound of a car starting before silence settled over the room again. He looked at Petre, who had said nothing for the last two hours. Petre gave him a nod before walking out of the room, leaving him alone with Larry. The junkie stared at Connor with wild eyes that were no longer full of hate. He looked like he was going to pass out from the fear of knowing his fate, at the realization that he only had minutes of life left.

Connor contemplated removing the man's gag while attempting to calm him down, but he couldn't think of anything to say that would soothe someone who knew they were about to die a violent death. He felt the horror and the guilt of not being able to help Travis while Dracul strangled the life out of him. He felt he needed to say something, anything, to Larry.

Petre walked back into the room, his face a blank mask. The Romanian tossed Connor a pair of black leather gloves. Connor clamped down on the maniacal laughter trying to escape him when he wondered if there was an accessories store that catered to serial killers and mob hitmen. Petre stood behind Larry, who was wild with fear that the Romanian was going to finish him. Connor was wild with fear at the same thought, knowing he would not be able to look away, knowing that Petre was probably moving into position to hold Larry still so Connor could finish him instead.

Petre pulled out a knife, flipped open the blade, and cut the plastic zip-tie that bound Larry's wrists together. He froze when Petre put the knife to his throat, urine fountaining away from the chair, almost hitting Connor.

"I will give you your clothes," Petre said to him. "You will

put them on. You will do exactly as I tell you or you will end up in this chair again, and we will keep you alive for two weeks. Do not be a woman or a child. Die like a man. It will be quick. If you try to run, if you do anything other than what you are told, it will be very long, very painful. I have kept a man alive for two months before.”

Larry nodded, spreading his knees to keep the urine pooling on his chair and at his feet from touching him anymore than it already had. The stink of fear-driven sweat had already made Connor dry-heave. The smell of piss made his stomach lurch twice before he got it under control. Petre pulled the knife from Larry’s throat and pushed the point into his back just enough to get him to stand up and move away from the chair. Petre motioned for Connor to walk ahead, leading them out into the main room.

“Stop,” Petre commanded.

Larry and Connor stopped at the same time, Connor only slightly less terrified than Larry. Petre walked to the rough wooden couch and grabbed a pile of clothes, throwing them at the naked man. He waved the knife and Larry began to put his pants and shirt on. There was a glimmer of hope in his eyes as he glanced up at Connor while putting on his socks and shoes.

Surely he can’t be that stupid, Connor thought. If the junkie was hopeful that somehow they were going to let him escape into the mountains, he was going to be crushed. Connor knew there was no way he would be making the trip back to Boise with Petre unless he killed the dealer. Petre would have instructions to kill them both if Connor refused. He still didn’t know if he could do it.

His stomach almost let loose at the thought of it.

His stomach did take a turn when he got a good look at the missing fingers on Larry's left hand. The two stumps that were the remains of his index and middle finger looked like they had been cauterized with a blowtorch. The wounds were an angry, puffy red, the middle finger stump leaking slowly, staining everything he touched. Connor watched the man wince repeatedly, every action leading to more pain, Larry constantly forgetful of the missing the fingers as he tried to tie his shoes.

Once he was dressed, Petre led him out to the remaining Lincoln, opened the back door, and shoved him in, climbing in after. He held the keys out to Connor. Connor grabbed them and got behind the wheel, turned the big car around, and headed back to the gravel road.

"Left," Petre said from the backseat when they came out of the tree tunnel.

Connor looked in the rearview mirror, the dash lights illuminating the knife point leaving an indent in Larry's neck. He turned left and drove slowly down the gravel road. They traveled in silence for ten minutes before Petre told him to turn right onto another dirt track. The ride was rough enough to make the car bounce and shake. He wondered if Petre might accidentally stab Larry in the neck. Connor decided to keep his eyes off the mirror to not have to see it in case it happened.

Half a mile down the track, they came to a small turnaround. Petre instructed Connor to drive through the turnaround, assuring him that just because there was no path worn in was no reason to

think it would be impassible. Connor let the Lincoln pull itself forward another two hundred yards at barely three miles an hour. When the Romanian told him to stop, he put his foot on the brake, shifted the car into park, and shut it off.

“Turn the car on,” Petre said. Connor obeyed, starting the engine again. “Put on the high beams,” he commanded, and Connor did that as well. “Everyone out.”

Petre grabbed Larry’s arm, put the knife to his neck again, marching him to a mound of dirt and two shovels. Connor’s mind immediately conjured up a vision of Petre holding them at gunpoint, making them dig a grave large enough for two, before executing them and letting their bodies fall back, sliding neatly into the hole.

“I have started the hole for you already,” Petre said to Larry, giving him a shove forward. “Pick up the shovel and finish.”

Larry looked back in terror, only to see the barrel of Petre’s pistol pointed at his face. Larry shifted fear-laden eyes to Connor, who was just as frightened, only slightly less so since he was on the safe side of the gun. He hoped. Petre waved the gun at Larry, thumbing back the hammer for effect. The little man walked to the hole, and reached down to grab one of the shovels. He looked back at the two men silhouetted by the high beams, getting another wave from Petre’s gun.

Larry began to cry, falling to his knees and dropping the shovel. He babbled, begged for forgiveness, for mercy, to be let go, promised to live forever in the mountains, to never set foot near Boise again. Connor was disgusted by the scene, some of the

disgust at himself for having to stand and watch it, more disgust at the knowledge he would have to be the one to end it.

The explosion from the gun made both of them nearly jump out of their skins. Connor looked from Petre to Larry, expecting an expanding blood stain on Larry's face or chest. The only stain Larry had was between his legs, his bladder having let go of whatever was left in it that hadn't been expelled back at the cabin.

"Do not be a woman," Petre commanded. "You are going to die. Finish your grave. If you refuse, I will keep you alive for a very long, painful time. It will be more unpleasant than a quick death. Stop mewling and start digging."

Larry looked defeated. He grabbed the shovel, stood up, and stepped into the hole. It was deep enough that he was only visible from the chest up. He began to dig, slowly, as if to stretch out the time long enough that Petre might decide to change his mind. Connor imagined that it was an extremely unpleasant, pain-filled experience with two raw stumps constantly jarring against the shovel's handle. He didn't want to watch any of it, but knew he had to.

"Why'd you do it, man?" Larry asked, wincing as he lobbed out another shovelful of dirt.

"What?" Connor asked.

"Why'd you do it? You knew when I didn't have the money that they'd kill me. Why'd you let these slimy fuckin' Romanians do this? I never got you in this kind of trouble when I called *him*. You didn't have to die. I'm going to die for what you did."

Petre watched the two of them, interested in what each of

them would say.

“Listen, Larry,” Connor said, walking a few steps closer to the hole. “I didn’t do this to you. You got yourself into this situation. I’m truly sorry that it has to end like this. You don’t know how sorry I am. I’m not a killer like these guys are. I can’t help you. This is your fault, not mine. You’re getting the easy way out. I’m the one that has to live with the knowledge that I was forced to murder you.”

“Oh boo-fucking-hoo,” Larry said, scooping another load of dirt out of the hole. “Poor you, having to live with my death on your hands. That’s so much worse than what’s going to happen to *me*. I feel so fucking bad for you. I’d trade places with you in a heartbeat and not have another thought about it.”

“I know you would,” Connor replied. “That makes it easier to do this. Knowing that you’re a cowardly piece of shit who abuses women helps as well. But you fucked yourself. You should have known better than to get involved with these people. They aren’t white-trash meth cooks who can’t even count to twenty. You should have known they’d kill you if you crossed them.”

“You’re the one who’s going to kill me. I’m going to haunt you forever. I hope you and that fucking whore enjoy each other and have a short, miserable life together before you become a neighbor of mine in hell.”

Connor leaned in toward Larry, mindful of the reach of the shovel. “I love her,” he said barely loud enough for Larry to hear. “I’d kill you a thousand times to save her.”

Larry’s eyes went wide and he stopped shoveling. Connor

stood up and walked back to Petre, the dead man watching until Petre pointed the pistol at him. When the shovel began working the dirt again, Petre turned to Connor.

“What did you say to him?” he asked.

“Nothing that needs to be repeated,” Connor said. He changed the subject. “Am I going to have to shoot him? I don’t know if I can use my hands, and I know for sure I can’t use the knife.”

He began to shiver, trying to keep the fear from overwhelming him. He couldn’t fall to his knees and plead with Petre to let the man go, or he’d end up in the grave next to Larry. He tried to get himself under control, but couldn’t. His knees began to shake and his teeth chattered. He ran a few steps toward the car before he fell to his knees and threw up. All that came out was a sticky liquid at first, dry heaves following for a couple of minutes after.

When he got his stomach under control, he stayed on his knees, letting the tears fall from his eyes, unable to face Petre until he dried up. He heard Larry laughing at him from the hole. Connor tried to use it to become enraged, to hate the man to the point he could kill him. All he felt was fear, shame, guilt.

The hatred he felt was for Ojacarcu for making him do this, combined with the hate of what the older man had done to Jera. The hatred at Ojacarcu for forcing Dana to run away to keep her safe, denying Connor the one thing in life he had come to love besides hockey, almost pushed him over the edge. It wasn’t enough, but it didn’t matter. In a few more minutes it would be him

or Larry. Or both of them. Connor decided with finality that he would be leaving these cold mountains with Petre.

Connor stood and walked back to where Petre watched Larry dig. The man wasn't laughing anymore. He was crying, removing only a handful of dirt with each scoop of his shovel, trying to drag it out as long as possible.

"Enough," Petre said.

Larry threw the shovel over the edge of the hole, his loud sobbing pathetic, while at the same time ripping holes in Connor's heart. Connor reached his hand out for Petre's gun. He wanted to get it over with as quickly as possible, and knew he would have to look at his victim while shoveling dirt back into the hole.

"Connor," Petre said, pushing Connor's hand away, "I will do this for you. I know you are not a killer. I am a killer, many times over. You do not want to live with this. Go back to the car. I will return when I am done."

"You'll need help with the dirt," Connor said as he tried to keep his own tears in check.

"It is easier to fill a hole than to dig it," Petre told him. "Go to the car. Do not watch this."

"You fucking coward!" Larry screamed from the hole. "I knew you were a pussy! You can't even kill me!"

"Go," Petre said, returning the gun to its holster and unsnapping it from the shoulder harness.

Connor backed away, taking the holster from Petre's outstretched arm. The Romanian pulled a short length of rope from his jacket before handing the jacket to Connor as well. It looked

like the same exact white nylon that Dracul had used. He had the insane thought again, wondering if Petre and Dracul were part-owners in a Serial Killer & Mobster's Supply Emporium.

Larry stopped screaming when he saw the rope. He tried to climb out of the hole but fell backward after receiving a kick to the face. Petre paused, wrapping the rope around each of his hands a few times. He gave Connor one final glance, shaking his head, before crossing his wrists to make a loop. Connor watched Petre jump down into the hole before he turned away and walked to the Lincoln, the big car still idling, its high beams providing enough light for Petre to take care of business.

CHAPTER 36

Winter

Connor checked the time on his phone. He grunted at being woken up by a nightmare three minutes before his alarm would have gone off. *Better than with three hours to go and unable to sleep anymore*, he thought as he went into the bathroom to get his day started. After flushing the toilet, he stood in front of the sink, not recognizing the person staring back at him. He watched the man in the mirror reach for the faucet, then the toothbrush, then mimic Connor's exact motions as both of them brushed their teeth.

"I'm cracking up," Connor said after spitting into the sink.

The stranger followed him all day, showing up in the side mirrors and rearview mirror of the Lincoln, shadowing him as he walked by the gift shop inside the arena, taking peeks at him from the mirrors in the locker room. The stranger even glared back at him from his skates as he pulled them down from the shelf above his jersey.

"You look like shit," Matheson said from his left.

"Thanks," Connor replied as he began to get dressed for practice.

A shadow blocked out the light from the overhead fluorescents. Connor glanced up from tightening the laces on his skates.

"You ready for tonight?" Daryl Hockner asked him.

"Yeah, I'm ready," Connor answered his new captain.

"You all right?" Daryl asked him.

“Yeah,” Connor answered again, hoping the captain would leave him alone.

Hockner looked like he might say something else, but instead moved along, greeting the rest of the players as they dressed. Connor tugged on his solid practice jersey, propped his helmet on his head, and made his way out of the locker room to get his body warmed up before the morning skate. He hadn’t been on the ice in almost a week.

“Hey!” Goz called out as he skated up to Connor. The Phantom’s winger reached out and snagged Connor’s jersey, giving a rough tug that caused Connor to spin around before he could get to the bench for a change. “Let’s go!” Goz gave his jersey another hard yank.

“Fuck off,” Connor said, attempting to skate to the bench again.

Goz’s gloves fell to the ice, the winger’s right hand smashing into the back of Connor’s helmet. Connor pumped his legs again, willing himself to get to the bench. A white hot pain erupted in his right ear as Goz drove his knuckles into the cartilage, one of the few places his helmet didn’t fully protect.

Connor lost control of the rage he’d been holding in all night as the game went on. He spun on his skates, gloves sliding from his hands. Connor machine-gunned punch after punch into Goz’s stomach, taking half as many off his helmet and jaw in return. The

Phantom's rookie dropped his arm down to try and block some of the blows to his gut. Connor let go of Goz's jersey and reached around to the back of the kid's head, getting his fingers under the lip of the helmet. He gave a hard yank, feeling the snap on the chinstrap break free. Instead of dropping the helmet like he'd done hundreds of times before, Connor began to swing it at his opponent's face.

"What the fuck?" Goz cried out, trying to put up his hands to protect his face and head from Connor's attacks.

Connor's left hand tightened around the back of the kid's collar and gave another pull, getting the jersey to break free of the fight strap that secured it to Goz's hockey pants. The instant the jersey rode over Goz's head, Connor renewed his swings of the helmet, feeling it connect multiple times while Goz screamed in fear and pain. Blood flowed freely from the kid's face, his white road jersey turning into a two color tie-dye.

Connor felt two arms wrap around his waist as a hand tried to grab for the helmet. He swung the helmet at the hand, catching the knuckles with a loud pop before continuing to attack Goz. A few seconds later at least ten hands were holding him, one or two fists punching him, the sounds of the crowd and the officials and players on the ice mixing into a nightmarish howl.

"What the fuck was that?" Coach Lamoureux screamed at him.

“I don’t know,” Connor answered, staring at the floor.

“Why would you do such a thing?” Coach screamed another question at him.

“I don’t know.”

“Do you have any idea what you’ve done? Do you?”

“I guess.”

“You guess? You fucking *guess*? Duns, you’re going to get suspended. For a long time. You *know* you can’t do that shit. What the fuck were you thinking?”

“I don’t know.”

Lamoureux breathed heavily for a few moments, trying to calm himself down. He’d seen quite a few meltdowns during his life as a hockey player and coach, but he’d never witnessed anything like the chaos that had erupted in the third period. He sat down hard in his chair, Connor still focused on the floor.

“Fucking shit,” Coach Lamoureux grumbled. “You’re gone, probably going to be twenty-five games or more. Matheson gone, maybe a game or two for him. Krispy is at the emergency room getting his jaw x-rayed. Goz is probably in the next bed over getting his face rebuilt and stitched up. Tank took out Hocks three shifts later and we lost two more guys. What the hell was going on out there? What did they say?”

“Nothing,” Connor said to the floor.

“Listen to me, Connor. Don’t sit there and tell me shit like that. I’m not your mom, and you’re not five years old. You’re a man. Treat me with respect and tell me what the fuck was going on out there that you would go after that kid with his own helmet.

Don't fucking lie to me."

"It had nothing to do with the game," Connor said, finally looking up at his coach.

"What do you mean it had nothing to do with the game?"

"I just lost it. That's all. They didn't say or do anything."

"So you just caved in the guy's head with a helmet because you lost it? That doesn't make any sense." Lamoureux gave him a hard look. "Does this have anything to do with your other 'job?'"

Connor looked back to the floor, refusing to answer, giving Lamoureux all the information he needed.

"Right. Look, I don't want to know anything, and I know you weren't going to tell me. But just in case you decide you need someone to unload it all on, don't unload it on me, or anyone else on the team. Whatever trouble you're in is some shit I don't want to be involved in, and I don't want any of my boys involved either. If it's that bad, go talk to the police, or a priest. Or a therapist, I don't know.

"But for right now, you're done. The league is going to stomp on your balls hard for this, so I won't have to look like the bad guy. You almost killed that kid. I don't want you anywhere near the locker room until your suspension is up *and* you've gotten your shit together. I can't afford your brand of instability. You've been heading south for a while now, and I've kept my mouth shut. Mostly because I don't want *him* coming down here and stepping all over everything I'm doing. Whatever you're into, you need to do something about it because you aren't touching the ice until you do."

Lamoureux stood up, letting Connor know they were done. Connor trudged to the door and grabbed the handle. Lamoureux's voice made him pause.

"Get some help, Connor."

The knocks on his door turned into bangs, as if someone were hitting it with a large hammer. Connor panicked, thinking it was Dracul, until he realized he'd already be dead if it was. He dragged himself to the door, and opened it to find Petre waiting on the other side. Connor tried to wrinkle his nose in disgust, but was too drunk. He stumbled back to the recliner and fell into it.

"Mr. Ojacarcu wants to know when you will be driving again," Petre said after he closed the door and put himself between Connor and the television.

"Fuck that motherfucker," Connor slurred.

"This is dangerous, what you are doing," Petre frowned.

"Fuck you too, you killer. Motherfucking killer."

"You are putting yourself in danger. Putting *her* in danger. He will hurt you by hurting her."

"I don't care anymore." Connor could barely see the three Petres floating around in front of him.

When Petre reached down to grab Connor's arm, Connor tried to pull the Romanian's pistol from its holster. Petre locked his hands onto Connor's wrist and stepped back, trying to get away from his drunken friend. Connor's grip was a vice, and he was

pulled out of the chair as they both struggled for control of the gun. Petre finally broke Connor's grip and shoved him back into the chair. Petre backed up until he bumped into the television.

"Fuck you anyway," Connor said from the chair, then began to laugh.

"You must pull yourself together," Petre commanded.

"Or what?" Connor asked with a sneer. "You going to kill me too? Wrap your white rope around my throat and bury me next to Larry? Or will you dump me into the incinerator and let me blow into the wind?"

"I'm not going to kill you," Petre said.

"That's too bad," Connor said.

He tried to goad Petre again, but threw up instead.

CHAPTER 37

The nightmare didn't come, though Connor thought he was having one as he tried to make his way to the bathroom without throwing up. He almost made it before his feet slid in something cold and slimy. He fell to his knees as his stomach lurched and gave in. Only bile came out, the contents of his stomach having been emptied hours earlier.

The spins turned into the shivers, his skin burning, sweating, and cold all at once. He hugged the bowl of the toilet, trying to get his face over it. He wondered if he'd cleaned it recently, or if he was putting his face on the edge of a porcelain rim that was coated in dried dribbles of urine. It pushed him over the edge and his stomach recoiled, a string of liquid only making it halfway out of his mouth. He spent almost a minute trying to hack and cough until the rest of it made its way out.

Connor woke up sometime later, one arm still around the base of the toilet, the other pinned underneath his torso. He cried out in pain as he pushed himself up and tried to move his arm. It was completely dead, immobile other than when he swung his torso and made it flop around from a sitting position with his back propped up against the bathtub. The sensation was frightening, and it made Connor wonder if Petre had done something to him, maybe cut him open and sliced the main nerve to his arm.

He almost threw up in fear from that thought until the pins and needles began to explode, firing off in ones, twos, then thousands. He yelled through gritted teeth for almost a minute

while the feeling slowly came back into his arm. He was massaging his wrist and forearm when Petre entered the bathroom.

“I thought you cut the nerves in my arm,” Connor said, unsure if he was dreaming or not.

“I would cut your arm off. To find nerve is too much work,” Petre said, his face expressionless.

“You probably would, you fucking thug,” Connor said, feeling his stomach begin to bubble again.

“Are you sober?”

“Am I awake?”

“Yes.”

“Then I hope not. Go get me a beer.”

“Listen to me, Connor.”

Connor groaned. “God, not this shit. I’m tired of listening to you. I don’t remember half of the shit you said in the last couple of days, and I don’t care. Go lecture someone else.”

“Listen to me, Connor,” Petre repeated, squatting down in front of him. “You must go back to work for Mr. Ojacarcu. You cannot continue to insult him.”

“Hey,” Connor said as if changing the subject. “Didn’t I tell you to go fuck yourself? Because if I didn’t, go fuck yourself. Split it with Ojacarcu.”

“Every day you do this, she suffers. You must stop feeling sorry for yourself and think of her.”

“Fuck you!” Connor screamed, leaning forward until he was a foot from Petre’s face. “You don’t get to tell me shit! *He* doesn’t get to tell me shit anymore! I’m through with you people. I don’t

give a flying fuck what you do to the whore either. All of you can kiss my ass. I'm done. Now kindly get the fuck out of here unless you are going to clean up all of this puke."

"Mr. Ojacarcu says if you do not return to work tonight, Dracul will begin to make her suffer. He will rape her as he tortures her. You will be forced to watch if you still refuse. You do not want to watch."

"What is it with you people? Why can't you just leave me alone? Why are you doing this?"

"This is how it is."

Petre stood up when Connor began to cry. The Romanian was uncomfortable, unable to say or do anything for his friend. He knew anything he said would likely cause Connor to become violent in his drunken state. He didn't want to hurt his friend, but he had his orders, though he had secured the pistol in the Lincoln after Connor passed out. Just in case he wasn't as successful next time should his friend try for it.

"How long?" Connor asked after a few minutes, his face flushed and wet.

"How long for what?"

"How long do we have to go through this?"

"Until you go back to work."

"No, I don't mean today or right now. I mean *this*. This 'life.' How long before we're killed? Because I see now that no one gets out. It's like a bad mob movie, except instead of Italians, I ended up with you people."

"Sicilian mafia is no different," Petre said, leaning against

the sink. “They kill. We kill. It is same.”

“It isn’t the same! You people are animals. Lower than animals. Animals at least only kill for food. You people are sick and twisted.”

“You have watched too many movies. People like us are same, no matter where they are from. It is how it is. The Russians, they are ruthless. Italians and Sicilians are heartless. Yakuza are emotionless. Triads and your black gangbangers and Mexicans, all of us are cut out of the same pattern.”

“‘Cut from the same cloth,’ you fucking inbred,” Connor growled.

“That is what I said. It is always same no matter where it happens. It is spider web, yes? Once you are caught, there is no escape. Struggling only brings the spider faster.”

“Not everything that gets caught in a web gets eaten,” Connor said to his legs, the bright bathroom lights making it hard to look up at Petre.

“This is true. But only a spider can freely travel another’s web. A spider is happy to devour another spider.”

“Is this some Romanian ‘zen’ bullshit?”

“I am not a Buddhist.”

“No, you’re a fucking killer of men.”

“Yes, and I will be yours if Mr. Ojacarcu orders it. He will order it eventually, if he decides you will not be reasonable.”

“Bullshit. He’ll send Dracul.”

“*Da*. And you know there has to be two to do the job in case something goes wrong. I will be the second. Do not make me

watch you die, Connor. I am your friend.”

“If you say that one more time,” Connor said as he struggled to stand up, “I’ll rip your throat out with my bare hands.”

Connor watched the two agents make their way down the aisle toward him. He paused in front of the beer cooler, deciding that he should listen to what the men were going to say so he would know the appropriate amount of alcohol to purchase. Unless they were there to arrest him. That thought made him wonder if he should grab a beer and chug it down before they were close enough to put handcuffs on him.

“Hello, Connor,” Agent Gauthier said as the two suits came to a stop in front of him.

“Agent Gauthier, Agent Kline,” Connor greeted them.

“Heard about your suspension. Rest of the season is pretty harsh,” Gauthier said with a frown and a shake of his head.

“Had a bit of a meltdown?” Kline asked, a hint of mockery in his voice.

“Something like that,” Connor mumbled.

“We aren’t here to piss on your back while you’re down, Connor,” Gauthier said.

“Then what do you want?” Connor asked more harshly than he intended. His head was pounding from either lack of alcohol or too much of it over the last week.

“Do you know Darius Munteanu?” Kline asked.

“No.”

Gauthier reached into his jacket and pulled out a tablet. He slid his fingers across the screen a few times before turning it toward Connor.

“Recognize this guy?” Gauthier asked him.

“No, who is he?”

“Darius Munteanu. He’s a captain in the Savu crime family.”

“And...?” Connor’s legs began to feel weak. He had almost collapsed when Gauthier turned the tablet toward him, expecting Larry’s or Travis’ picture to be on the screen.

“The Savu clan runs a pretty big heroin operation out of Seattle. A major shipping port is a good place to get drugs into the country,” Kline said.

Connor looked from one agent to the other. “Right. And...?”

“Connor, this man Darius came to see your boss three days ago. Are you sure you didn’t see him?” Gauthier asked.

“Honestly, I’ve been shitfaced for the last week or so since I got suspended. I’ve left my apartment long enough to get coffee and more booze. Besides, do you really think I’d be introduced to a heroin kingpin? Like I’d just show up to Ojacarcu’s office and he’d be like, ‘Oh hey, Connor, meet Darius Montezuma, or whatever the hell his name was. He used to be some bigshot heroin smuggler from Seattle. How about getting me a coffee and a bagel while I dispose of his body?’ What’s with you guys?”

Kline’s suspicious stare seemed to pierce through his throbbing skull. The two agents looked at one another.

“If you know something, Connor, just tell us,” Gauthier

said.

“What?” Connor asked back, confused.

Kline’s cold eyes made Connor shiver. “You said something about disposing of a body.”

“So?” Connor asked, wishing he’d kept his mouth shut.

“Darius Munteanu hasn’t been heard from in three days. We tailed him right up to the arena, and he never came out,” Kline replied.

Connor laughed. “And you think Ojacarcu had him killed and then buried him in the parking garage?”

“So you didn’t see him at all?” Kline pushed.

“I said no, damn it. Why the hell are you bringing this shit to me anyway?”

“It’s okay, Connor,” Gauthier said, turning on his *good cop* persona. “How about this guy?”

He showed Connor another picture on the tablet. Connor shook his head. Gauthier showed him a few more pictures, all men. He hadn’t been given any names, but Connor guessed that all were Romanian. He didn’t recognize any of them.

“No worries,” Gauthier said, flipping the cover of the tablet over the screen. He paused for a moment, then flipped the cover back off and showed Connor another picture. “How about this guy?”

Connor prayed that his face or body language didn’t betray the icy fear that flowed through him. Travis Benkula stared back at him from the tablet’s screen. He gave it a glance, with what he hoped was the same indifference he’d displayed for the other

pictures, before looking up from the screen.

“No. Who are all these people?” he asked, his voice somehow steady.

“Just a bunch of Romanians,” Gauthier said, flipping the cover again and putting the tablet back into his jacket.

“There seems to be a lot of Romanians in Boise,” Connor said.

“More than you’d expect, don’t you think?” Agent Kline asked him.

“I don’t know,” Connor answered. “I’m just a dumb hockey player from Canada, remember?”

“You aren’t dumb,” Gauthier said. “Unless you keep hitting the bottle hard like you have been.”

Connor wasn’t sure if the agent was referring to his earlier remark of being shitfaced all week, or if he was being watched. He shook hands with both of them, hoping they didn’t notice how cold and sweaty his hand was. He hoped they’d think it was because the beer aisle was twenty degrees colder than the rest of the store.

CHAPTER 38

The knock came at ten in the morning. Connor was still drunk as he stumbled to the living room to answer the door, ready to punch whoever it was. It took him a few seconds to figure out the locks, but he finally managed to open the door. Jera stared at him, barely recognizing him. Connor gave a half-grunt, half-laugh, and walked to the kitchen. He heard the door close behind him. He jumped a little when she came up behind him silently as he rooted through the fridge, trying to grab a stray beer that had hidden itself between an old jar of grape jelly and a pizza box that had been there for a week.

Jera wrapped her arms around his middle, the cold of her hands seeping through his thin cotton shirt. She pressed her face into his back, her hot tears and cold cheeks creating an odd sensation. They remained that way for more than a minute, Connor half in and half out of the fridge, Jera holding on from behind as if he might get sucked into it. He finally stepped back, her feet matching his movements, until he could close the door of the fridge and turn around to face her.

They stared at each other for a long time, Jera's face smeared with mascara and tears, his a mask of sorrow. Jera began to sob, her shoulders hitching up and down as she sniffled and hiccuped. He pulled her close, feeling her tears soak through the front of his shirt. He finally broke, his own tears mixing with hers in a silent chorus of fear and futility.

“When is your first client?” Connor asked as they lay facing each other on opposite sides of his bed.

“Nothing until Friday,” Jera replied.

“He gave you two days off?”

“He’s so sure we’re fucking that he said I could have two days to convince you that coming back to work is in your best interest.”

“No,” Connor said as he shook his head, “he’s sure we are in love.”

“Are we?”

She reached her hand out to the halfway point between them. Connor stared at it, wanting nothing more than to make the connection with his own hand, his mind furiously willing him to do absolutely nothing. When she turned her hand palm-up, her eyes pleading with him, he was barely able to resist. He turned on his back, head rolling to look away so he wouldn’t have to see how deep the wound in her would be.

“Connor...” Jera whispered.

“I... I can’t,” he said, his words rebounding from the nightstand, still unable to look at her.

Jera slid across the bed, wrapping herself around his rigid, trembling body.

“It’s okay,” she said softly into his ear. “I understand.”

“No, you don’t. You don’t understand what is happening at all.”

“Sure I do,” she said, lifting her head up to look down into his face. “He’s using me to punish you. He’s using you to punish me. We’re locked into his web. It’s how he keeps everyone in line.”

Connor jerked at hearing her say the same thing that Petre had about webs.

“It’s that, somewhat,” he said. “But it’s beyond that now. Now it’s about extracting every ounce of our... life force or something. That’s what these people do. Once you’re in their web, they wrap you up and keep you alive, to feed on you until there’s nothing left. Then they cut you loose from the web like they did Larry, shriveled and dead.”

She began to cry after hearing Larry’s name. Connor had no love for the man. He tried to imagine the sick kind of love Jera must have felt for him, how hard it would be to deal with the emotional trauma of knowing that he’d been killed, what it must be like to be curled up next to the man who had killed him. He’d been unable to tell her that Petre was the one who had finished the job. He knew anything he said would be hollow and worthless.

“I didn’t love him,” Jera said after they lay silent for a while.

“Ever?” he asked.

“Not at the end. Not after being handed off to your boss like property, like livestock.”

“But you loved him before that?”

“It’s sick, I know. But I did. I still loved him so much that I thought by leaving he’d see things differently, that we’d work our way out of the hole we were digging. Stupid college-girl dreams. He was funny, charming even, when I first met him. I thought he

might be the one. Even after we gave up smoking weed and dealing meth so we could smoke meth and deal weed.”

“Even after he started hitting you?” Connor asked, unable to imagine the slimy, mouthy little man as anything but the person he’d known.

“Yeah, even then. At first I was making excuses for it. I blamed it on the dope. I blamed it on me not being good enough. I blamed it on the men I fucked to make up the money that we were short on when *your* men came to collect. Then I blamed it on you and Petre. Fucking Frankenlurch and his pretty, gay boy-toy. I wanted to kill you both, but especially you. You were too smug, too eager with your fists.”

“You’d think that would have been a turn-on for you,” Connor said, the words slipping from his mouth before his brain could stop them. He cringed, but her arms and legs curled tighter against him.

“You’d think, right?” she sighed. “That’s how fucked up I was. Am. Still am. But I kept remembering that even though you would beat Larry mercilessly, and you treated me like shit, you always acted like you genuinely cared about me... about me having to wear a collar.”

“I was always genuine about it. No one deserves to be forced into a collar. Or prostitution. Or a beating.” Connor tensed, his words full of anger.

“I wore that collar willingly,” she said. “For a while anyway. You ranting about the collar, you threatening to beat him into a coma if he let anyone hurt me anymore, that stuff stuck with me. I

hated you more for it, for infecting me with it like a virus. When you told me that you'd arranged for the guys at the gas station to call you if I showed up, I almost begged you to take me with you when you left."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because I still hated you. I wanted to rush at you with a knife and stab until you were dead in a big pool of blood on that dirty floor."

"That's pretty dark," he said, pulling away from her to look into her eyes.

"I told you, I was really fucked up inside." Jera closed her eyes and nuzzled her face into his neck.

"What did they do to you?" Connor asked.

She knew what he was asking about. "They made me watch him lose a finger," she said, barely audible.

Connor felt her shudder at the memory, most likely crystal clear in her mind the same way Travis' face would always be second-sight for him.

"They made me sit five feet from him while Dracul tortured him. The guy was ruthless about it, enjoyed it I think."

"He definitely enjoys it," Connor said. "He'd love nothing more than a Christmas present of being given free rein to do it to me and make you watch."

"He's sure you robbed Larry. That's all Larry ever told him. Over and over, no matter what that monster did to him, Larry screamed that it was you. He was sure of it. Dracul is sure of it." She propped herself up on an elbow to look down into his face.

“I’m sure of it.”

“I...” he trailed off, his mind a blur of conflicting instructions of what to say. “I didn’t intend for him to be killed.”

“So you did do it,” she said, her eyes hard, a small frown forming at the corners of her mouth.

“Yes.”

“Why, Connor?”

“I had to.”

“You had to get him killed? He wasn’t a threat to anyone anymore!”

“No, I had to rob him. I needed the money.”

“Needed the money for what? Do you have a dope habit I don’t know about? Or are you a secret gambler? Maybe whores *are* your thing? Just not me?”

“I needed the money to pay off your debt. So you could be free of *him*. I thought they’d just send someone like me to beat him up again, maybe break something as a final warning.”

“How could you not think they’d kill him?” she asked.

She wasn’t angry, but he could sense her need to understand what had happened.

“Because he’d been in serious debt before,” he said. “Even before Petre and I showed up. You had to have known.”

“I knew he was behind sometimes. He’d get scared and make it out to be my fault, make me go turn tricks with his friends for whatever money they had. I blew this fat fucker for three fucking dollars once just to keep Larry’s fists from getting too intimate with my face. But he always claimed he was only a grand short, or a

couple hundred dollars.”

“He was twenty-five thousand in the hole when we took over,” Connor said, making her clutch him tight in surprise. “We ‘helped’ him get back on the right track, but it was only a matter of time before he screwed up again. And he did. And we didn’t even beat him for that one. Gave him an extra couple of days to make up the money. I figured that with all of the times he’d fucked up, the worst he’d get was a beating from a guy like Dracul, who would make me look like Mickey Mouse.

“So I robbed him, knowing how much money he would have on hand the day the collectors came. I timed it almost too close, just a couple of hours before they would be knocking on his door. He was choking your replacement when I surprised them. I gave him a light beating, gave his new whore all of his dope, then took all of his money. It was a lot more than what he should have had. I guess I must have known at that instant that there’d be more than a beating in store for him.”

“Why?” she asked in a whisper.

“Because he had over a hundred thousand dollars in cash. And probably a couple pounds of meth and some other shit. Weed. Maybe some heroin, I don’t know. He could have paid off Ojacarcu easily with that amount. Instead, for some reason, he was holding back. Taking a beating for it every so often.”

“Jesus,” Jera said.

“I know,” Connor said. “But at the time, I told myself that I’d lucked out. It was him or us, and I’d already decided that it was going to be us. He would be able to make it back, even with a

couple of broken hands. Dope sells itself. In the meantime, I'd have enough to pay off Ojacarcu. Enough left over to send you wherever you wanted to go, to get you as far away from here as possible and have something to help you get your new life started."

Connor couldn't help but think of Dana and what Petre had done to her. *For her*, he reminded himself, still feeling a small, white-hot pinpoint of hate at the Romanian for doing it.

"Why? Why would you do this for me? You hate me."

"Because I love you," he said, his voice steady, brain flaring in anger for saying it out loud to her.

He spent the next hour telling her the stories of Ilinca, Helen, and Petre.

He woke with Jera still curled around his left side, her bare skin pressing into his. He felt wetness on his neck, and was surprised to find that it was drool that had slipped from the corner of her mouth. Connor was sure it would be from more tears. She had started to cry in the middle of Ilinca's tale, and was an emotional wreck by the time she heard Helen's fate.

He stared at the ceiling, listening to her soft, intermittent snores, wondering if he'd made a mistake by telling her he loved her. He hated himself for falling for her, hated that he'd replaced Dana already. Connor was also fearful that somehow Ojacarcu would know, would be able to see it in them, and do everything he could to exploit it to his advantage.

After she had cried herself out, Jera let him know she felt the same about him, which brought another round of tears. They held each other for a long time, then moved slowly into light kissing before being unable to hide their desperate need to remove each other's clothing and become a single entity. Connor's mind had been too occupied to worry that he was just another lover for her, one who didn't have to pay.

The instant he climaxed, his brain sought revenge. He attempted to work through the conflicting emotions of being in love with a prostitute, a dope addict. He nearly screamed when his imagination ran wild, showing him vivid images of the clients he had met, of Larry, and the faceless johns that Larry had pushed her onto. Connor focused on the Jera who stood out in his mind the most: the dirty, verbally abusive whore with a collar around her throat. She was the Jera he'd fallen in love with, the one he'd risked almost everything to rescue when she didn't really want to be rescued.

He couldn't allow himself to think about all of the men she serviced. They were business, a job that had to be done. Those men couldn't be denied. Anytime one of her clients or any of the other faceless men she might have lain with tried to slip through his defenses, he would clutch at the memory of the first time he saw her, or his newest vivid memory of her naked body in motion with his, the way her back arched as she cried out before collapsing on top of him.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked, tracing her fingers across his stomach.

“That you drool when you snore,” he said, accepting a hard pinch and a laugh as punishment.

“I’m being serious.”

“I am too. The pillow was stuck to your face and my neck, and your snoring in my ear woke me up.”

Jera pinched him again, this time lower, making him flinch.

“Connor...”

“I was thinking that it was a terrible idea,” he said, turning on his side to face her.

“Was it that bad?” she asked.

“No, I don’t mean the sex. The sex was great, but this is exactly the opposite of what we should be doing.”

“I’m not sure I understand,” she frowned.

“I’ve kept my feelings to myself for a long time,” he told her, “because of what Petre said. Because I made this same mistake once already, and someone else had to leave. He was right. We aren’t allowed to feel anything. It only gets used against us, and here I am right back where I was a couple of months ago.”

“What do you mean someone else had to leave?”

“I was... with someone else. Ojacarcu started sniffing around, and Petre made her leave. Middle of the night type of shit. I get a call from her two days later and she won’t tell me where she is. Poof, just like that she’s gone.”

“Jesus, Connor. That’s where you were going all the time. I knew it. And they threatened her?”

“No,” he shook his head. “Ojacarcu never found out who she was. I had to tell her everything, then Petre had to tell her more,

had to tell her enough to make sure she bailed without looking back. I don't know where she is, but it doesn't matter. She hates me for it."

"I'm so sorry," Jera said, her eyes wet again as she tightened herself around him with a hard squeeze. "At least she was able to get away before getting caught in the web."

"Yeah, at least there's that."

CHAPTER 39

Connor had always felt that getting back on the ice after his accident had been the hardest thing he'd ever had to do. As he tapped the Lincoln's steering wheel in time with AC/DC, he realized he'd never in a million years have been able to imagine that seemingly endless wait being trumped by waiting for Jera to finish with a client. Time after time, he had to stop himself from bolting out of the Lincoln, giving a heavy cop kick to the front door, dropping a load of fist bombs onto the surprised client's face, then snatching Jera and making a run for it. To where, he had no idea, and that was the reality check he had to face each time his hand reached for the door handle.

Ojacarcu hadn't made a big deal of his tantrum. Yet. Connor knew it would eventually come time to pay that debt. His first night back on the job, a note had been left for him when he dropped off the night's earnings. A simple "Welcome Back!" from Ojacarcu. His boss had neither signed it nor had he even written a single word on it, but Connor knew who it was from. He also knew the subtle meaning being conveyed. *Glad you made the right choice. Don't test me again.*

The second hardest thing he'd ever had to do was turning out to be not paying off Jera's debt immediately. One of the biggest faults of his plan to rob Larry had been Connor's assumption that he'd only net thirty thousand, maybe as much as fifty, and combine it with his savings to make the payoff quickly before the weekly interest put it back out of his reach. He'd have to pay within a day

or two, and by then, Larry would be screaming his head off about being robbed. It was far too suspicious, but Connor's depth of thought on the matter had never delved further than the figurative collar around Jera's throat.

A hundred grand in cash and fifteen in savings gave him a much better window to work with. He decided to wait a couple of weeks, easily giving up a few thousand dollars in interest just to keep Ojacarcu's suspicions at bay. Connor was sure Ojacarcu already knew that Larry had been telling the truth, but had forced him to kill the junkie as a test. The answer to the test, as far as Connor could determine, was that he was now in even deeper, responsible for an innocent man's death directly.

Light spilled out from the client's front door, interrupting Connor's train of thought. He watched Jera lean in and give the man a light kiss on the cheek before turning to walk away. The client's hand shot out and gave her a playful swat on the ass. Connor felt himself tense with sudden rage when she let out a giggle accentuated by a sultry pout, as if she were sad the hour was already up. The urge to rip the Lincoln's door off and hurl it at the man was barely held in check by his fear of what Ojacarcu would do to him. Connor wasn't sure if he was ever going to be okay living with the knowledge that Jera fucked other men for money and him for love.

He thought if she were a stripper, that wouldn't be so bad. Sure, she'd jam her tits in the faces of countless men all night long, rubbing her crotch on their various parts, fending off hands and fingers that were a little too friendly when the bouncers were

looking elsewhere. That was leagues away from actually having sex with multiple men every night.

“Let’s go, Jeeves,” she said with a smile after getting in. Her smile faltered when she saw his face. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Where do you want to go?” he asked.

“I’m starving. But before we go anywhere, you need to tell me what’s wrong.”

“Nothing is wrong.”

“Bullshit. It’s all over your face. It’s been there for days now.”

“I’m trying to deal with you fucking all of these men each night before we do it.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, leaning in to put her head on his shoulder, her face a bitter mask. “I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything. I’m the one that has to deal with it.”

“It probably doesn’t help if I say they mean nothing, does it?”

“No, not really,” he sighed, cupping her cheek for a moment before starting the car and backing out of the client’s driveway. “I don’t really want to think about it, but it’s hard when I’m sitting in the driveway or parking lot waiting for you to finish.”

“I’m sorry,” she said again, resting her hand on his leg. “Pancakes won’t make it any better, but at least you’ll be thinking of pancakes.”

Connor glanced over at her and couldn’t stop the smile from overtaking his face as she mimed a little girl being surprised at

getting pancakes for dinner.

“So what’s the plan?” Jera asked between mouthfuls of pancake and sausage.

“I don’t know,” Connor said. “We have to wait a bit. It’s too suspicious to walk into his office with a bag of cash so soon.”

“So I have to keep doing this for weeks? Months? Can I at least get an idea?”

“I don’t know, Jera,” he said, pausing with his fork halfway to his mouth. “I have enough money to wait a couple of months if we need to.”

“Great. That’s just great for me. So I have to keep spreading my legs until you deem it time?”

“Look, if you think it’s easy to sit in the car while you do your thing—”

“Do my thing? Is that what I do? Why don’t you just say it. While I fuck other men. While I suck their cocks. While I let them fuck me in the ass, a service they paid *your* boss for.”

“He’s your boss too,” Connor said, not wanting to get drawn into an argument.

“I’m just a whore though. You’re the big shot. The killer.”

Jera saw the flurry of emotions that crossed Connor’s face, knew her words had been cheap and unnecessary.

“I didn’t kill Larry,” he said to his remaining pancakes.

“What do you mean?”

“Petre did it. He knew I couldn’t. He thought, anyway. I don’t know if I could have done it or not. I couldn’t even watch. I tried to apologize to Larry at the end, that I didn’t mean for it to end like that,” he said.

Jera reached across the table to grab his hand, but he pulled it away. She began to cry, reliving her last memory of her former lover tied to a chair, covered in bruises, his right hand a mangled mess missing two fingers. Hearing Ojacarcu’s words to Connor to take care of it. The look on his face as she was led away to the car while he had to stay and finish the job.

“What are we going to do?” she asked, trying to dry her eyes with a napkin.

“We’re going to keep doing what we’ve been doing. It’s the only thing we can do that won’t be suspicious, that won’t get us killed.”

“I don’t want to do this anymore,” she said in a small voice.

“I don’t either, but for the moment we’re still alive, and we still have one last card to play.”

“What if he refuses?”

“I don’t know.”

CHAPTER 40

Spring

“I’m glad you could join me,” Ojacarcu said to Connor as he walked up to the table. “The game has just started.”

Connor shook his boss’ hand and looked over the balcony to the two teams playing on the ice below. He and Jera had kept to a normal schedule for the last two months, and he was surprised to be invited to the owner’s luxury box. As he’d made his way around the concourse to the elevator, he couldn’t shake the feeling of being trailed. Paranoia had been a part of their daily lives after Larry’s death, but as the weeks went by, the feeling had gradually dissipated. For some reason though, he was sure undercover drug agents were staked out in the arena, waiting, watching Ojacarcu and anyone he invited up to his suite.

“I received a call from Glanding today,” Ojacarcu said after the waitress took his order and departed.

“Yeah?” Connor asked, hopeful that the UPHL president would rescind his suspension.

“He won’t budge, I’m afraid.”

“I understand.”

“How is life treating you?” Ojacarcu asked, changing the subject.

“Without hockey? Boring. I’m getting out of shape.”

“You aren’t working out? I thought your body was your temple?” his boss asked, eyebrows pointed down in concern. Connor couldn’t tell if it was genuine or not.

“Been a lot of stuff on my mind, I guess.”

“Ah, yes. Are you sleeping well?”

Connor looked at the man while taking a drink from his beer. He wondered if Ojacarcu had a conscience, had ever lost sleep because of something he regretted having to do. Connor decided he didn’t give a damn if the Romanian had triple the amount of nightmares that he did because of it. He hoped the man woke in a screaming bout of terror multiple times every night.

“Yeah, I’m sleeping fine,” he answered.

“It helps to have company, yes?” Ojacarcu asked with a hint of a smile.

“She’s not exactly what I would consider charming company.”

“Ah, but she doesn’t need to be charming to take care of your needs, does she?”

“I guess not,” Connor replied, becoming angry at the suggestion that Jera was nothing more than a wet hole for Connor to use as he saw fit when she wasn’t using it to extract money from clients.

“I’ve asked you to dinner so we could discuss your contract,” Ojacarcu said, changing the subject once again.

“My contract?” Connor asked, wary of the man who sat across from him.

“Yes. Your hockey contract. I have it all drawn up. Glanding assures me that your hearing at the end of the season will see you reinstated as an active player. It took a little convincing, but the man knows how important you are to me.”

Ojacarcu winked at Connor as he pulled a thin stack of papers from the empty chair next to him. He slid the contract across the table. Connor looked down at the contract, then back to his boss. *Now or never*, he thought, feeling his guts clench with fear at what he was about to say.

“I’m not sure I want to re-sign,” he said, pushing the contract off to the side.

Ojacarcu’s eyes narrowed, contradicting with the smile still on his lips.

“Why wouldn’t you want to sign it? You want to get back into uniform, don’t you?”

“Sure, I love playing. I can’t wait to play again. But I’m not sure I want to play here in Boise anymore.”

“What is it that you want, Connor?” Ojacarcu asked him, his lips now forming the same frown as his eyes.

“I want you to let Jera go,” Connor said, his mouth almost too dry to get the words out.

His boss leaned back, staring at Connor’s face, his own eventually breaking into a smile.

“I thought she was not what you would consider ‘charming company?’” Ojacarcu asked. His smile suggested that Connor had walked perfectly into the middle of his web.

“She’s not. But she’s not a slave. She’s not yours to keep forever. Or until you get tired of her.”

“Watch what you imply,” Ojacarcu warned, leaning forward.

Connor caught Dracul taking a step toward the table from the corner of his eye.

“I’m not implying anything,” Connor said. “I’m stating that she’s not a slave. She’s a human being and you have her working off someone else’s debt. If you want me to sign another contract and work for you, you’ll let her go, free and clear, not just ship her off to Miami or San Diego.”

Ojacarcu watched him for a few minutes. Connor was barely able to sit still without squirming, without acting like his life was on the line. He visibly shuddered when his boss began to chuckle. Ojacarcu leaned forward again, reached into the chair next to him and handed Connor a pen. Connor hesitated, unable to believe that the Romanian would bow to his demands.

“Go on, don’t look so surprised,” his boss said.

Connor reached out and grabbed the pen, struggling for just a moment as Ojacarcu refused to let go of it. Connor leaned forward, pulling the contract in front of him as if to sign. He put the pen to the paper, but instead of signing it, he looked up.

“I’ll sign it when she’s gone.” He laid the pen on the paper and scooted both across the table.

Ojacarcu gathered up the contract and put it back in the empty chair before slipping the pen in his suit’s front pocket. He tilted his head at Connor.

“There’s the little matter of how much she owes,” the Romanian said.

“It was fifty thousand a couple of months ago. At a thousand a week interest, it’s up to seventy-two thousand,” Connor replied before Ojacarcu even finished his sentence.

“Yes, that sounds correct,” Ojacarcu said, leaning back once

again, looking to Connor like a spider in a business suit. “But there’s the matter of Mr. Fallon’s debt, one that hasn’t been paid yet.”

“I’m supposed to pay a dead man’s debt on top of everything else?” Connor asked.

“You are lucky I am even having this conversation with you,” the older man growled. “Watch your tone, Connor.”

“I’m just asking.”

“Why do you care so much for this woman?” Ojacarcu asked. “What has she done for you other than make your life miserable?”

Connor started to reply but caught his tongue before the words slipped out. He had no doubt Dracul would happily toss him over the railing and claim Connor had tried to attack poor, frail, respectable Mr. Ojacarcu. With Connor’s breakdown on the ice and subsequent suspension, it wouldn’t be too far of a stretch. Another hockey tough guy who took too many punches to the head and had a frightening, rage-fueled breakdown, almost killing an unsuspecting owner of a professional hockey team. He could already hear the sports analysts’ voices in his head having endless debates about the violence in hockey and the concussions that resulted from them.

The boss’ voice brought thoughts back to reality. “Are you in love with her?” Ojacarcu asked, peering at Connor after not getting an answer to his previous question.

“No,” Connor lied, thinking of when she’d called Larry after he’d *rescued* her, the beating he’d been forced to take because of

her, some of it coming from Petre, the one person that might actually be his friend. “But this is America. We don’t have slavery anymore. You might, but not her.”

“You aren’t even an American,” Ojacarcu laughed.

“We outlawed slavery in Canada before America,” Connor said. “We didn’t have to fight a civil war to end it, so that should tell you my views as a Canadian.”

“The only reason it was abolished in Canada,” Ojacarcu replied, “is because it was banned across the entire British Empire in 1834.” Ojacarcu laughed again at the look Connor gave him. “You think I am a poor immigrant that knows nothing? That I’m a gangster from a mafia movie? Or do you think all Romanians are unintelligent thugs?”

Connor said nothing, wondering if he’d stepped into a minefield.

“I’m very well educated, Connor. I know a lot of things. It is a point of pride that I’m knowledgeable rather than a simpleton immigrant. Do you think an ignorant Romanian would build all of this?” Ojacarcu asked, sweeping his hand out across the arena.

“No.”

“No what?” his boss demanded.

“No, an ignorant Romanian wouldn’t be able to pull any of this off.”

“You are testing my patience, Connor. Did you know I pride myself on learning a new word each day? I have one of those calendars on my desk, and each day I tear off the old date and am greeted by a new date and a new word to learn. Would you like to

know what yesterday's word was?"

Connor nodded his head, sure more than ever that he'd stumbled blindly into not a minefield, but a hungry spider's web.

"Yesterday's word was 'flippant.' Do you know what that means?" Ojacarcu asked.

Connor shook his head, unfamiliar with the word.

"It means 'a frivolous or disrespectful attitude or answer.' Would you like to know what the word of the day is today?"

Connor remained as still as a statue, unable to nod, shake, or even breathe.

"Today's word is 'aseptic'. It means 'to prevent infection, to be free from viruses or other pathogens'. It also has a second meaning. 'Lacking emotion or vitality'."

Ojacarcu rolled his chair back and stood up, waiting for Connor to do the same. Connor had to will himself out of the chair, wondering if Dracul would escort him downstairs to show him the final error of his disrespect.

"You will pay her debt of one hundred and ten thousand dollars by Friday, or you will sign that contract with a broken hand. This is the final time you will test me, Connor. There will be no more warnings, no concessions, no speeches."

Dracul grinned at him before following Ojacarcu. Connor waited until they had exited the suite before sitting back down, his legs shaking uncontrollably.

CHAPTER 41

Connor looked across the small park to see a shimmer in the air a few blocks away. As he looked around, he noticed the same thing between every building, crossing every intersection. He knew he was having another nightmare and willed himself to wake up.

“Look up, baby,” Jera said, sitting next to him on a cracked concrete bench. She slipped her hand into his and gave it a gentle squeeze.

Connor looked up and felt his blood run cold. A giant spider web covered the city. He couldn’t move, couldn’t think as the fear coursed through him. He caught a movement off to his left. Travis Benkula struggled against a thick, sticky line of web. The more the man struggled, the more he became tangled in it. A blur flashed across Connor’s peripheral vision, too fast for him to focus on. Whatever it was, it was massive.

Travis stopped struggling and began to scream. Connor cringed, not knowing what the man was screaming about, but sure it was going to be terrible. He tried once again to wake from the nightmare.

“Here he comes,” Jera said, her voice full of awe.

A nightmare with eight legs crawled around the side of the building closest to Travis. It probed at the line Travis was attached to with a hairy leg, making the man jiggle and bounce. Travis renewed his screams as he struggled to free himself. The spider moved so quickly that to Connor, it was at the edge of the building one moment, covering Travis the next while its legs began to

furiously spin him around, encasing him in a thick cocoon of sticky silk.

Travis's cries became muffled until they were cut off when the spider pierced his body with fangs that were as large as Connor's legs. He tried to break free of Jera's grip and run, but she wouldn't let him go. He looked down and saw that their hands were locked together with more of the sticky web.

"Just wait," she whispered to him.

The three of them watched the monster feed on Travis, the spider eventually finishing and cutting the carcass from the web to thump on the pavement twenty feet below. The eight-legged horror turned on the web, repaired it, then turned its multiple eyes in Connor's direction. Ojacarcu exited the building below the spider, apparently oblivious to whatever was happening. Connor tried to scream at the man, to warn him, but his mouth was covered in more web. The spider moved toward them until Ojacarcu held out a hand toward it. The spider stopped, then climbed down to the street to stand next to him.

Ojacarcu and the spider walked toward the bench. Connor noticed the fountain's water had turned to blood. Ojacarcu stopped in front of them, petting one of the spider's legs.

"Have you met my friend, Dracul?" Ojacarcu asked, his eyes boring holes into Connor.

"He looks friendly. Does he bite?" Jera asked.

"No, he's a good pet," Ojacarcu said. "Trained very well in Russia at the bio-engineering lab. A Cold War weapon that was given to me as a gift from my mentor. He's magnificent, wouldn't

you say?”

Ojacarcu held out his hand to Jera. She grasped it, getting up from the bench, pulling Connor along with her. The older man put an arm around her shoulders, still petting the spider’s leg with his other hand. Connor stood next to Jera, shivering in fear.

“You’re going to be free in a couple of days,” Ojacarcu said, giving Jera’s shoulder a friendly squeeze.

“I know,” she replied. “I’m so excited!”

“I bet you are. You owe it all to your friend here,” he said, nodding at Connor.

“Thank you, Connor,” she said, standing on her toes to give him a kiss on the cheek. “I love you.”

“Ah, so you two *are* in love!” Ojacarcu said, clapping his hands. “Unfortunately, Connor has to stay. Are you going to be all right leaving him behind?”

“Not really,” she said. “But it’s what we both want.”

“Foarte bine,” Ojacarcu said, holding out his hand again. “It’s time to go.”

Ojacarcu turned to walk away, gently pulling Jera along with him. Connor was jerked forward, his hand still glued to hers by the spider’s web. The Romanian turned back when he felt the resistance. The older man smiled at Connor.

“Seems I forgot something,” he said.

He waved his hand toward Connor, the sticky web disappearing from his hand and his mouth. Before he could say anything, Ojacarcu resumed walking, pulling Jera along with him. The two climbed onto a thick rope of silk, the spider padding along

the web next to its master. Fifty feet along the web, Ojacarcu let go of Jera's hand and climbed on the spider's back. She reached toward him to help her up. The older man patted the spider as if it were a dog. Two hairy legs reached out to grab Jera, placing her under its abdomen and began to spin silk around her.

Connor shouted as he ran toward the web. The instant his hand touched it, it became stuck, a burning pain shooting down his arm as if the web were coated in acid. Jera didn't cry out, didn't make a sound. Her face held a smile until she was fully enclosed in the cocoon. Connor struggled harder to try and free his hand, his skin feeling as if it was melting off. He could hear voices behind him shouting encouragement to the spider, but Connor could no longer look behind. He was stuck in the webbing completely. He screamed as the spider punctured Jera's cocoon with its deadly fangs.

His screams of terror woke Jera up in a panic. She tried to wrap her arms around him, but he was too strong, too terrified to be captured. Her arms were sticky web to his brain, causing him to lash out to try and break free. His forearm caught her on the ear, spinning her completely off the bed and onto the floor. She cried out in pain when she hit the floor, her voice cutting through the remnants of Connor's nightmare.

He sucked air in heaving gulps, the hammering in his chest matching the pounding in his head. Jera looked over the edge of the

bed at him, afraid he might swing at her again. He scrambled to the edge and reached down to pull her up from the floor, as if it was a tank full of sharks. They lay next to each other for a while, holding on, both afraid to let go.

“Was it the nightmare?” she asked once her own heart had stopped beating like a drum in a heavy metal song.

“Yes,” he breathed. “No. It was, but it was different.”

“Want to talk about it?”

“Not really.”

“Was I in it?”

“Didn’t I just say I didn’t want to talk about it?”

He tried to detach himself and roll away but her arms and legs had him locked up.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” he said, his fingers gently stroking her short hair. He sighed and said, “You were in it. So was Larry. And Ojacarcu. And Travis.”

“Who is Travis?” she asked, propping herself up on one elbow.

“Travis... he’s this guy...”

“It’s okay.” Jera kissed his chest lightly.

“Dracul murdered him right in front of me,” Connor whispered. “Strangled him the same way Petre strangled Larry.”

“Oh my God, Connor.”

“We picked the guy up one night. I thought he was supposed to help us with another job. Instead we drove to the dump and that fucker Dracul killed him less than three feet from me, made me

watch. Made me help him load the body into the car, then into the incinerator.”

“Why?”

“Why? To burn the body to ashes.”

“No, I mean why did Dracul kill him? Why were you there?”

“I have no clue why he was killed. As for why I was there... I’m sure it has to do with *him* needing to keep me in line by letting me know anyone can be killed and disposed of at any time. Probably also to keep me from thinking about leaving or quitting.”

“He’s not going to let me go, is he?” Tears formed in the corners of her eyes.

“He will,” Connor said, not sure if he believed it.

Connor never believed his dreams were prescient. He was sure they were formed out of bits of memory and glued together with guilt, shame, fear, or any number of ingredients that amplified them enough to wake him up to the sound of his own screaming. The memory of his latest nightmare was still too fresh, blotting out everything other than watching Travis, then Jera, become another victim caught and disposed of by Ojarcu.

“I don’t know if I can go,” she said.

Connor’s fingers tightened in her hair and he pulled her head back hard enough to make her cry out in pain.

“You *will* leave,” he said through gritted teeth. “I didn’t risk everything we both have for you to fuck this up again. There won’t be any second chances.”

“Stop it! Goddamn it, you’re hurting me!”

“Listen to me then,” he growled, his face inches from hers.

“Once that door opens, you are to get the fuck out of here and never look back. If you hesitate, you’ll die here, and so will I.”

“Connor, please!”

He let go of her hair and held her tight, her body trembling in his embrace as her tears spilled across his chest.

“You have to go. Promise me you won’t be the stupid girl that I rescued once before.”

“I love you,” she said into his chest. “I don’t know what to do, where to go. I need you.”

“Bullshit, you don’t need me. You’re a strong woman when you don’t have your head up your ass or a needle in your arm. You *will* die if you stay. *I* will die if you stay, because I won’t be able to stay away from you.”

“I’m scared,” she said.

“I’m scared too. But I’m more scared of what will happen if you don’t run as far and as fast as you can. You’ll have money to start a new life.”

“I don’t want a new life without you!”

“Then we might as well put a gun in our mouths right now!” he shouted, his sadness boiling over into anger. “Should we just kill ourselves now and save them the trouble? Don’t be fucking stupid!”

“I’m sorry,” she cried, her chest hitching between sobs. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” he said, calming down. “Just run as fast as you can. Don’t look back.”

“Will we ever see each other again?”

The pain in her voice made him want to shrivel up and die. He had spent the last few days wondering if he'd be able to let her go. After the nightmare he'd just awoken from, he knew that there was no other choice, no matter how much it ripped his heart out of his chest.

"I don't know. The truth is, if things go right, we won't. It sounds shitty, but it has to be that way."

"Then we better make the best of the time we have left," she said, wiping her wet eyes with the corner of the sheet.

Connor didn't want to try and put his feelings into any more words. He ran his hands down her chest, across her stomach. She clutched his hand and moved it between her legs, her trembling hand betraying desperation.

Connor looked in the rearview mirror one more time before he turned the key, the Lincoln's engine going quiet. He looked at Jera, her short black hair framing her dark eyes and dark bronze face. He tried to take a thousand mental pictures and store them in different locations of his brain so he would never forget what she looked like.

"Stop," Jera said, looking away. "You're making me uncomfortable."

"I'm sorry," Connor said.

"I don't want to cry again," she said.

Jera reached for Connor's hand. Their fingers meshed into a

single entity.

“This is the only way. You have to leave. I’m paying him tomorrow. I want you long gone.”

“Where am I going to go?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t want to know. If you love me, truly love me, you won’t tell me. You’ll get out of this car and I’ll drive away. You’ll get on a plane and forget you ever lived here. Forget about me.”

“I can’t forget you,” she whispered. “I don’t want to.”

“You have to.” Connor looked away. “I love you,” he said.

“I love you.”

They sat for a while, holding hands, Jera’s head leaning on Connor’s shoulder. He stared at the top of her head, hoping for one last desperate revelation to come to him so he wouldn’t have to send her away. His mind seemed to be stuck in a constant loop of despair, shifting back and forth between the old wound of Dana being sent away, and now Jera following in her footsteps. He felt Jera’s grip tighten at the same instant she began to cry again.

“I don’t think I can do this,” she said between sobs.

“You have to,” Connor said, his voice gentle. He nudged her away to look in her eyes. “You’ll be fine. You’ve got enough money to start over. Tough out the withdrawals, get back to school, have a real life.”

Jera wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand. “You make it sound like I’m going off to college.”

“I’m not saying it will be easy,” he said. He caressed her cheek with his fingertips. “I know it won’t be that easy. Anytime

you get down, anytime you want to use again, anytime you want to quit school, run away from your problems, remember that you could be dead instead. You *would* be dead if you didn't get on a plane to nowhere and get the fuck out of this horror show."

Jera kissed the edge of his palm, then his fingers. He felt his resolve breaking down, desperation and panic flooding his thoughts. He cupped her chin and squeezed hard enough for her to cry out. They stared into each other's eyes for an eternity, Connor willing her to do whatever had to be done for her to survive once she was away from Boise, away from Ojacarcu, away from him.

"Come on," he said, breaking eye contact with her and exiting the Lincoln, knowing that he would have to be the one to force her to leave.

"I love you," Jera said softly to the empty air where Connor had been seconds before.

Connor grabbed her duffel bag from the back seat. She accepted it from him, afraid to say anything, afraid she would cry again. She swung the bag's strap up onto her shoulder and turned to walk away.

"Wait."

Jera turned back and let him engulf her in his arms one last time, praying inside that their kiss would never end. She felt him break away, and watched him walk back to the Lincoln. He didn't turn around to look at her until he was behind the wheel. They stared at each other until Connor gave her a sad little wave. She finally turned and walked towards the double glass entrance doors. Connor waited until Jera entered the airport terminal before he

pulled away from the curb and headed home.

CHAPTER 42

Petre answered the knock on the office door, allowing Connor past him before glancing out into the hallway. He didn't know what was about to happen, only that he'd been called in along with Vadim, Dracul, Pavel and Ovidiu. Petre closed the door and turned around to see Dracul set the bag Connor had brought with him on an empty shelf. Dracul unzipped the bag, rummaged through it thoroughly, then zipped it up and carried it to Ojacarcu's desk.

Ojacarcu pulled the bag across the desk and dropped it into a drawer. He watched Connor, the young man a statue in front of his desk.

"So now what?" Connor asked, unable to stand more than a minute of silence.

He was aware of the four men spread out behind him, sure that a bullet would impact his skull just before the explosion of a gun would shatter his eardrums. *At least I won't have to hear what it sounds like to die*, he thought. Ojacarcu smiled and pulled open another drawer, bringing out Connor's contract. He pulled a pen from the drawer as well, resting it on top of the papers before sliding both across the polished surface. Connor glanced the contract, then back at his boss. He grabbed the pen and signed his name with a shaky hand. The smile on Ojacarcu's face as he slid the contract back reminded him of the spider in his nightmare. He imagined two massive fangs hiding inside of the man's mouth.

"Miss Gellner is now officially free," Ojacarcu said, sliding

the contract into a drawer before leaning back.

Dracul nested his pistol in Connor's back, his other hand on Connor's shoulder to steer him around to the door. Connor caught the slightest glance from Petre before Dracul roughly shoved him forward. It was a look that promised things were going to end badly.

"Get your fucking hands off me!" Connor yelled. He pulled away from Dracul and spun around to find the pistol jammed into his upper lip. He looked over the Romanian's shoulder at Ojacarcu, just getting out of the Lincoln. "What the fuck is this?"

The second Lincoln divulged its passengers, three clones wearing the same expensive suits, and Jera. She was so consumed by fear that her skin was no longer the dark, smoky shade he'd always been fascinated with. She looked as if she had been living underground for decades. Her eyes were wide with fright at being let out of the car in the middle of a half-built warehouse.

Connor had never been to this place before, but could guess at the location of it according to the route they had driven. He'd fought back panic as they crossed the intersection that would take them to the landfill. They'd turned north on 55 until a side road led them back into an industrial park that looked as if it had sat unfinished for twenty years.

The Romanians formed a line, Dracul becoming part of it as he stepped away from Connor. Petre grabbed Jera's arm and

marched her to stand next to Connor. Connor tried to gauge Petre's reaction to what was happening. From the short, hard look Petre gave him when he let go of Jera's arm, Connor realized that there was nothing left of his life beyond the few minutes it would take to play the scenario out. Jera clutched his arm, her body a quivering mass of cold flesh and hot sweat.

"Why the fuck are you here?" he asked Jera, his voice drowning in panicked rage.

"I'm sorry!" Jera sobbed. "They were waiting for me at the airport. They told me if I made a scene they would make you disappear, a small piece at a time."

"I am afraid that there's a problem with our arrangement," Ojacarcu said, interrupting them. He took a step forward from the line his men had formed. "And when there's a problem, we cannot let it escape so easily." The older man nodded toward Jera. She began to shiver as her chest hitched up and down.

"Of course there is," Connor said, looking at the Romanian. "There's always a problem."

"Connor, you hurt me when you act this way," Ojacarcu said, his face genuinely pained. "We've all tried to educate you on the rules, the respect that must be given to your peers and your employer."

"Cut the bullshit," Connor said. "Just get to the point so we can get this over with."

"Very well. Miss Gellner's debt was paid, but I'm wondering... how exactly did you two put together that kind of money? I know you've been a good little saver, Connor, but unless

you were taking jobs on the side, or taking a cut of the jobs you were doing, there's no way you could have come up with that much."

Connor said nothing, knowing that his boss would arrive at the real accusation soon enough.

"Or were you two working together?" Ojacarcu rubbed his chin. "She's worth a lot more than you in terms of liquid cash potential." He looked at Jera. "Were you taking extra clients on the side?"

Jera tightened her grip on Connor's arm, her eyes locked on the dirt floor. He could feel her shaking, her soft crying barely audible other than a loud snuffle every few seconds.

"But then there's the mysterious case of Mr. Fallon and his inability to make a payment. I have to tell you, Connor, that while Dracul was sure you were the cause of that, I actually believed you. You two put on a perfect display for me. For everyone. I was sure Dracul only suspected you because of his dislike for you."

Connor's fists were clenched at his sides, his mind delirious with fear at his impending death. The fear of knowing that it would be Dracul killing him in various, brutal ways. He'd begun to hate Ojacarcu the day his boss handed him the slip of paper with the symbol for murder on it. He hated that he was now the prey, waiting for the man to complete his predatory ritual. Connor wondered if it was mostly as a show of power to his men, or whether it was something that genuinely amused him.

"You made me apologize to him!" Ojacarcu screamed at him.

His sudden change of demeanor from calm to enraged scared

Connor more than the shout. He felt Jera's body convulse in fear from the outburst. His own heart felt like it was hammering its way out of his chest with a pickax.

"I was going to let Dracul play with you while she watched, then let you watch her be passed around," Ojacarcu said, his voice calm again as if the outburst had never happened. "Instead, and against Dracul's vociferous protests, I'm going to give you one chance, and one chance only, to choose what the future holds for you."

"Is that your 'word of the day?'" Connor asked.

"Foarte bine!" Ojacarcu said. "Would you like to know what it means?"

"It means Dracul thinks you are stupid for thinking you can control me, instead of just killing me."

Connor looked at the Romanian. Dracul's pistol was still pointed at him, a hint of a smile on one side of his mouth, the beginnings of a snarl on the other. Connor's nightmares were Saturday morning cartoons compared to the fear the hulking Romanian filled him with.

"Is that true, Dracul?" Ojacarcu asked. Dracul gave one short nod of his head, never taking his eyes from Connor. "Of course you do. So do I, to be honest. But after today, no matter which path you choose, there will be no turning back."

The other four Romanians drew their guns, checking them to make sure safeties were off and chambers were loaded. Connor looked at Petre, but his friend was a blank slate, face devoid of humanity. Connor decided the man had already shut his emotions

down to be able to do his job. That realization forced him to use every last ounce of willpower to keep from pissing himself. Petre's stories had become his life.

"And which paths am I going to get to choose from?" Connor asked, voice cracking, making Dracul grin. Pavel and Ovidiu both barked a short laugh before Dracul turned a glare on them.

"One path is a quick, clean death," Ojacarcu said, hands clasped together in front. "If this is the path you wish to walk down, just say the word and we can be done with this business."

"And the other one...?" Connor asked.

"You can prove your loyalty and keep your nice, cushy, secure position as the fan favorite of the Boise Bombers."

"And keep my other 'job?'"

"Keep it?" Ojacarcu laughed. "You'll get a raise. With loyalty comes more responsibility, and with more responsibility comes greater rewards." He narrowed his eyes at Connor. "If you perform well at your duties."

"And how do I prove my loyalty?" Connor asked, already knowing the answer.

Ojacarcu gestured to Vadim, who produced a knife with a long, tapered blade. Connor knew he couldn't judge the knife from that distance, but he was sure it was sharp enough to cut through flesh without resistance. Vadim walked toward Connor and Jera, the knife's handle out to Connor, the pistol in his other hand steady on them at chest level. Connor stared at Vadim for a few seconds before taking the knife. The Romanian quickly backed off,

rejoining the line of his fellow bodyguards.

“What am I supposed to do with this?” he asked, knowing how the story ended but trying to buy time. He was sure Petre wouldn’t have let it slip to Ojacarcu that Connor knew how things were done in the old country.

“I think you know what needs to be done. She was a good earner, but her debt is paid, Unfortunately, we can’t allow her to accidentally, or purposely, mention anything that she has seen. She doesn’t know much, unlike you Connor, unless you’ve been telling her things?” Connor shook his head. “Regardless, what she does know would be more than enough to make the authorities interested in us. All of us.”

“I wouldn’t say anything!” Jera yelled, understanding that Petre’s tale was now her life as well, and she had been thrust into the role of Ilinca. She felt immense hatred toward Dana for already snatching Helen’s part away. She fell to her knees, a broken mess of sobbing and sniffing, refusing to let go of his hand.

“I know you believe that,” Ojacarcu said, his soothing tone sounding genuine. “But we all know better. We’ve been in this business far too long. There are already authorities sniffing around. They’ve visited Connor twice already that we know of.”

Connor tensed, wondering if he’d been followed, and if so, how often. He thought of Petre’s contact within the bureau, wondering if it was how Ojacarcu knew about Gauthier and Kline paying him a second visit. Connor decided that it was more likely Ojacarcu had kept close tabs on him. He’d given his boss more than a few reasons to be suspicious.

“I don’t want to die,” Jera sobbed, looking up at Connor.

Five guns remained pointed at them, along with Ojacarcu’s smirk.

“Please, Connor. Please!” Jera begged him, wrapping her other arm around his leg.

“Let go,” Connor commanded, his voice dead and cold as a tomb.

“I love you!” she screamed at him. “Please!”

“Let go,” Connor commanded again.

Jera’s tears turned silent as she released his leg and got to her feet. Connor looked from her face down to where her hand still gripped his until she let go. She wrapped her arms around herself, her chest a misfiring pump as it hitched up and down in spasms. Connor stared at her, waiting for her to stop crying. He looked out at the six Romanians watching the drama, waiting for him to become one of them, or become another corpse to dispose of.

Connor reached around to the back of Jera’s head, grabbing a handful of hair and pulling it back to expose her neck. She almost collapsed, but her knees and Connor’s grip held her up. Her face was frozen in terror, eyes wet but no longer spilling tears down her cheek.

“I love you,” Connor whispered to her as he raised the knife.

He swung his arm down, flipping the knife blade against his forearm at the last second, his fist slamming into Jera’s chest, shoving her down with heavy force, sending her flying to the dirt. Connor pivoted, the world narrowing into a black tunnel as he made a beeline straight toward Ojacarcu. The explosions from the

guns made his guts both tighten and loosen at the same time, but he only saw Ojacarcu. Connor knew he would never make it the ten feet that separated the older man from him before a bullet tumbled him to the dirt, but he had already convinced himself that he and Jera would never set foot beyond the half-finished building alive.

*

Petre watched Connor flip the knife around and smash it into the girl's chest. Without taking his eyes off Connor, barely moving his arm, he pointed his gun at Dracul and pulled the trigger three times. The noise of his gun was joined by the sound of four others, all but Petre trying to ventilate Connor before he reached their boss. Dracul dropped to his knees, a look of surprise and hate on his face. One hand reached to his side, feeling a hole in his jacket along with wetness. The other raised his gun, firing several shots at Petre. Petre scrambled backwards, emptying the rest of his magazine at Dracul.

*

The boom of the guns drowned out the sound of Connor's scream of rage as his feet churned through the dirt, his legs pistoning harder than they had since before his accident, the adrenaline blocking all pain, all fatigue, all of his fear. Ojacarcu was his only goal. Ojacarcu, who had been too surprised to do anything but stare at Connor racing toward him, finally realized

that none of the bullets had hit the enraged man. Ojacarcu turned to run toward the car, but Connor closed the distance in a heartbeat, slamming into the Romanian's back knife-first. Connor wrapped his free arm around the older man's throat as he pulled the knife free and brought it around to stab repeatedly at Ojacarcu's chest. They tumbled to the ground, a whirling mess of blood and screams. Connor brought the knife down over and over, perforating the Romanian's chest, his roar of fury drowning out the dissipating gunfire.

*

Petre felt the pain in his stomach flare hot, then his whole body turned cold as the shock hit him. He staggered and fell to his knees. A bullet shattered the passenger window of the Lincoln where his head had been a fraction of a second earlier. He leaned against the big car's door, his gun still pointed at Dracul, the hammer falling on empty air. Petre panicked for a few seconds, one of the few times in his life that he'd allowed himself to succumb to such a thing, as he watched Dracul stand up and walk toward him, two new stains spreading across the man's chest.

He remembered the extra magazines in his inner pocket and pulled both out, dropping one into the dirt. He thumbed the release and ejected the empty magazine. He rammed the new one home as Dracul fired, the bullet becoming a second volcano of fire in his guts. Dracul walked steadily forward, a devil's grin on his face as he lined up another shot, aiming for Petre's head. Petre chambered

a round and fired at the oncoming man, missing him, but disrupting Dracul's aim enough to hit Petre in the shoulder instead of the middle of his face.

Petre raised his automatic one last time, nearly paralyzed by the sudden rush of fear coursing through him at the knowledge that Dracul was unstoppable, that the demon wouldn't miss the next time he pulled the trigger. Petre fired, emptying all fourteen rounds in less than three seconds. He waited for the final blow, the kill shot to come. Dracul jerked, the smile on his face growing wide. His finger squeezed the trigger once, the bullet digging into the dirt near his feet. The demon collapsed face-first into the hard dirt floor, a fist-sized hole above his right ear.

Petre's thumb unconsciously ejected the empty magazine and inserted the spare he'd dropped a few seconds earlier. He struggled to his feet, swayed for a second, then fell to his knees again. He made his way around the luxury car on hands and knees, peering underneath to find his next target's feet.

*

Connor continued to scream with each thrust of the knife until he heard Petre's shout cut through his madness.

"Connor! Move! You must move! Now!" Petre yelled at him from the other side of one of the cars.

Dirt kicked up near his head, immediately followed by another boom and the sound of a bullet striking the sheet metal of the unfinished building. Connor let go of Ojacarcu's lifeless body

and ran toward where he thought Petre was. He rounded the front end of the closest car, thinking he'd found Petre. Instead, a crouching Pavel pointed a silver automatic at him and pulled the trigger. Connor's bicep flared in pain, then his hip when he crashed into the Lincoln's side mirror. Pavel's second shot went wide. The Romanian lined up the pistol on Connor's chest, his toothy smile full of triumph, until Petre crept around behind the man and shot him in the back of the head. Pavel pulled the trigger a third time as he died, the bullet digging into his own leg.

Connor stood upright, holding his arm, hot, sticky blood seeping between his fingers, unable to process that he was still alive. Petre grunted and kicked out Connor's legs just as another round of gunfire erupted. The Lincoln's remaining windows shattered, and the tire closest to him blew out. Petre crawled to Connor, pulled his hand back from his wound, and made a chuffing sound. He gave Connor a strange look before poking his head up over the hood of the big luxury car. A shot rang out, forcing Petre duck down in a hurry.

“Vadim!” Petre shouted. “Oprește focul!” *Stop firing!*

Silence settled over them. Petre looked at Connor again and gestured at him to stay put. He held up two fingers to indicate there were at least two gunmen left, but Connor was too dazed to understand what it meant. He looked around the front of the car to see if Jera had stayed down, but was unable to see anything before another shot blew out the Lincoln's headlight inches from his head. Petre slapped him on the leg, gesturing again to stay put behind the car.

“Vadim!” Petre shouted again. “Asta este o prostie! Nu mai trage in noi!” *This is foolish! Do not fire at us!*

“You will burn for this, Petre!” Ovidiu screamed at him in Romanian from somewhere to their left. “They will hurt you for months! Years! Everyone you know will be tortured in front of your eyes!”

“Everyone I know is dead,” Petre called out in English, scooting along the way he had come to retrieve Pavel’s gun.

He checked the magazine, then used one hand to pull another from Pavel’s inside pocket. Petre crawled back to Connor, dumping the silver automatic into Connor’s lap along with the extra magazine.

“Put the new clip in,” Petre commanded him in a whisper. He called out over the hood to the others. “It is over Ovidiu. Mr. Ojacarcu is dead! Dracul is dead! Pavel is dead! Let it end!”

“Go to hell!” Ovidiu screamed.

“When I give you the signal, put just the gun over the hood and pull the trigger until there are no more bullets,” Petre whispered to Connor again. “Space them out in two second shots after pulling the trigger as fast as you can four times. You will have eleven more bullets. Got it?”

“Yes,” Connor said, fumbling with the gun, his right arm beginning to burn to go along with the ache that made it feel like he was lugging around a fifty pound lead pipe.

“Remember!” Petre commanded. “Four shots as fast as you can, then the rest every two seconds. When you run out, reload but do not fire.”

“Why not?” Connor asked, his brain still trying to make sense of everything.

“Because you will need it if I am killed. Do not make any noise except to shoot. Do not call out for her.”

Petre got his feet under him and duck-walked to the rear end of the Lincoln, peering his head around for a second to get a good look.

“Vadim! Ovidiu! Enough! Put down your weapons. There is enough death for today.”

Petre looked back at Connor, waiting until one of the Romanians shouted what sounded like curses or threats at them. Petre gave him a thumbs-up signal. Connor reached his hand above the hood, pointing the gun blindly, and pulled the trigger. The pistol jumped in his hand because of the awkward angle, causing him to fire off five quick shots instead of four. He turned to better brace his arm without exposing his body, firing a shot every two seconds. His thoughts cleared just enough that he remembered to count it out—*one-two-six, one-two-seven, one-two-eight*—to keep track of how many rounds he had left.

A burst of gunfire came just as he fired off his last two rounds, a scream echoing along the sheet metal of the building. Another shot silenced the scream. Connor’s hands couldn’t seem to function correctly, made worse by his fear that Petre had been killed, and Ovidiu or Vadim would come around either end of the car he was behind at any moment to finish him off. It took him three tries to get the magazine into the gun, and two tries before he was able to get the slide to move forward and accept a fresh round.

“Vadim!” Petre’s shout sounded close but muffled, off to his left. “Ovidiu is dead!”

“Why, Petre?” Vadim’s shout came from Connor’s right. “Why would you do this?”

Connor pointed the gun in the direction of Vadim’s voice.

“This time is over for us,” Petre yelled. “There is no more Ojacarcu. There is no more career for us.”

“You have ruined everything!”

“You should not look at it that way,” Petre called out with a short bark of laughter.

“They will come for us, Petre. They will kill us, just like Ovidiu said. We’ve killed *the boss*. You’ve killed the boss. And Dracul!”

“Then I have ruined nothing.” Petre’s voice rebounded from a different location.

Connor didn’t look around to see where Petre might be, afraid the instant he did, Vadim would appear like an apparition and kill him. His worry grew that he couldn’t hear Jera. He hoped she was smart enough to know to hide where she could, to keep quiet until it was over.

“Vadim, Gandește-te la asta.” *Think of this*. Petre’s voice was somehow now behind Connor. “Dracul was the only one we had reason to fear. He is dead. Mr. Ojacarcu is dead. Everyone but us. None of us will say what happened. We will disappear into new lives. There will be no one to come and clean this mess up. The drug agents, they will hear of this and will call the news. Our brothers here and back home will know it is too much trouble to

become involved in.”

“Nu te cred!” *I don’t believe you!* Vadim’s shout sounded closer to Connor.

“You must, Vadim. Think about it! It will not be the first operation the families have abandoned because of the attention by police. You know the drug agents have been prying into our lives. You know they visited Connor, trying to get him to turn. When they look into Mr. Ojacarcu’s affairs, they will see enough to keep them busy for a long time, trying to trace it back to home. They will go undercover and compromise our friends in other cities. The families will not think of us if we do not give them reason to.”

“Unde vom merge?” Vadim asked, closer to Connor again. “Cum vom trăi?” *How will we live? Where will we go?*

“We will be Connor’s personal trainers,” Petre said, laughing. “We will of course have to retrieve his new contract and pretend it never existed.”

“Connor, is this true?” Vadim asked with a shout, not sure where Connor was hiding, or if his young friend was even still alive.

Connor almost yelled out that of course it was true. Petre beat him to it.

“He will not answer you, Vadim. He is scared of you. You have a gun, and you have been shooting at him.”

“I... Connor...” Vadim’s voice hesitated. “I will not shoot you.”

“Vadim, you must step into the open and put your gun away. It is the only way. If you do not, he will kill you. He has Pavel’s

gun.”

Connor tensed, waiting in the silence as Vadim decided what to do. He heard a scrape just ahead of him, seeing dusty dress shoes from under the car. He let out a breath and relaxed his finger after nearly squeezing the trigger at the sound.

“You are right,” Vadim said. “We will disappear and become Connor’s helpers.”

Connor heard the click of the hammer being let down followed by the sound of the gun being thrown into the dirt on the other side of the Lincoln. He peeked his head up just enough to see Vadim walk around the end of the car and into the open. Connor stood up, the gun pointed halfway between Vadim and the ground. Petre stood up from behind a jumble of rotted drywall and studs. He walked toward Vadim, his gun still pointed at his partner’s chest.

“Trainers, not helpers,” Petre said and shot Vadim in the chest, adding a second round through the man’s face after he collapsed to the dirt.

“No!” Connor screamed, raising his gun toward Petre. “No! No! Why did you do that?”

“I had to, my friend,” Petre said, dropping his gun to the dirt and falling to his knees.

Connor ran to him, remembering to remove his finger from the trigger of his own pistol.

“Why? Why did you have to?” Connor asked as he knelt down. He sucked in a breath at the blood covering Petre’s face and hands, a pittance compared to the blood soaking into his expensive

shirt and jacket.

“It is the only way to be sure you can be free. Both of you. No ties, no worries, no looking under the shoulder.” Petre’s cough sprayed a fine mist of blood on Connor’s shirt.

“Over your shoulder, you fucking asshole,” Connor said, ripping Petre’s jacket and shirt open to see where his friend had been hit.

“Sunt bine.” *I’m fine.* Petre coughed again. “Most of it is from Dracul.” Petre’s grin was a mix of white and bloodstained teeth. “Go. See to Jera.”

Connor paused for a moment, worried that his friend was near death. Petre gave him a rough shove, making Connor stumble backwards until his ass struck the dirt floor. He growled as he got up, but immediately forgot Petre when he saw Jera. He shouted her name as he ran, skidding to a stop on his knees when he got to her. He saw the blood first, mixed with what looked like pink and cream-colored bits. Connor grabbed her shoulder, chanting her name over and over as he turned her on her back.

Tears fell from his cheeks onto hers as he caressed her face, his finger tracing lightly over the small hole just behind her right ear. The exit wound on the other side was the size of a golf ball, no longer leaking blood and brains. Her lifeless eyes stared at the ceiling, unable to see him. He screamed her name until Petre dragged him away and into one of the Lincolns.

CHAPTER 43

Connor's memory of the next few hours became a blur of panic, rage, misery, and disbelief. Petre had been healthy enough, lucid enough, to drag Connor away, ordering him to drive to St. Luke's. Instead of letting Connor walk him into the emergency room, Petre almost leaped out of the moving car. He stumbled then leaned in through the missing passenger window after closing the door, one arm draped around his stomach, the other propping him against the Lincoln. Connor wasn't sure how his friend wasn't dead already, having bled enough for three men going by the man's drenched suit and the Lincoln's sopping wet passenger seat.

"You must go to the office and get the contract," Petre commanded. "And your money." The Romanian turned away and limped into the emergency room without looking back.

Connor made it to Ojacarcu's office, somehow avoiding any curious Ada County Sheriff's deputies and Boise P.D. officers who would have surely noticed a Lincoln that had two bullet holes in the front windshield and at least ten more in the body. His luck held as he rifled through Ojacarcu's desk. He retrieved his contract, his money, and another small laptop case under the desk that had a stack of bills stuffed into it. Connor worried, as he transferred money from the laptop case to his duffel bag, that his luck would run out at some point and Greg, Iuliu, or one of the other Romanians would confront him. They'd ask him why he was covered in blood, carrying a bloody contract in one hand and a bag of cash in the other.

The only place Connor could think to go was down to the locker rooms in the arena. He didn't want to risk going back outside while looking like a blood-soaked psychopath who had just murdered a group of people. He prayed that the team was out of town, unable to remember the schedule through his madness. He didn't want to have to explain to his teammates, and especially his coach, as to why he was intruding into their domain. Most of them already thought he had serious issues after he had flipped out and fractured an opposing player's skull.

The dressing room was empty. Connor turned on the lights and made his way to his locker. Coach Lamoureux hadn't disturbed it, which made Connor eternally grateful to the man. He stripped off his clothes, stuffing the contract into the bag, then the bag into the locker under his shoulder pads before stumbling to the showers. He hit the button, shivering at the freezing water that sprayed out of the shower head at first, gradually settling under it as it went from arctic to almost scalding.

Connor stood under the spray and bawled for almost ten minutes, expelling everything he had left within him through tear ducts and cries of misery. He fought wave after wave of revulsion until his stomach overpowered him and ejected its contents onto the wet tile. He thought he was over the worst of it when the memory of his finger tracing the edges of the hole in Jera's skull made him double over, screaming in fury as bile and snot found its way into the shower drain. He threw up again when his finger found the hole in his bicep, the burn of the soap as it entered the wound making him grit his teeth until he thought they would shatter.

When he felt absolutely nothing left within him, no pain, no tears, no love, only emptiness, he turned the shower off and walked into the locker area. Griff, Coach Walters, and Coach Lamoureux stood at the doors to the hallway, staring at him. Connor didn't acknowledge them other than accepting a clean towel from Coach Walters as he passed by.

"Connor..." Coach Lamoureux began until he got a good look at Connor's arm. He quickly hustled the other two men out of the locker room.

"Can you repeat that?" Agent Gauthier asked from the other end. "I don't think I heard you correctly."

"I said, Ojacarcu is dead. So are all of his henchmen, or bodyguards, or whatever they were. So is one of their prostitutes." Connor's voice sounded as if he were talking underwater.

"And how do you know this?" Gauthier asked as he tried to get his mini-pad out to take notes.

"Because I killed them."

"Connor, are you fucking with me?"

"No."

"Okay. Where are you?"

"Sitting on the patio of the Starbucks you first found me at."

"And where are all of these bodies? We haven't heard anything over the wire."

"They're in some old abandoned construction site north on

55. I don't know exactly where, but there's a road, just past Dry Creek I think."

"Caldera Way," Gauthier said immediately, giving Connor the impression that he knew Ojacarcu had ties to the place.

"Whatever. The building looks like a bunch of homeless people tried to nail up sheet metal for walls. There are six bodies inside."

"Stay right where you are, Connor. I'll come and get you in ten minutes."

Agent Gauthier took one look at Connor and knew the young man was in trouble. Connor's skin had become ashen, his eyes bloodshot. He was barely conscious when Gauthier arrived, caffeine and sugar the only thing keeping him from passing out.

"Jesus, Connor. Have you been shot?" Agent Gauthier asked, peeling back Connor's sleeve, wincing as the shirt stuck to the strip of white towel that had been tied around the wound in his bicep.

"Maybe," Connor slurred. "I might take some."

Gauthier looked away from the blood-soaked towel to Connor's face.

"Wake up, Connor," Gauthier commanded, snapping his fingers in front of Connor's eyes.

"If you're ready," Connor said before slumping forward. Gauthier caught him by the shoulders before his head could slam into the metal tabletop.

Gauthier looked around, wishing he'd brought someone else with him. He laid Connor's head gently on the table and walked into the coffee shop. He took in all of the customers and employees that were visible, finding one that looked like he could help. He walked up to a husky young man wearing a typical orange Boise State t-shirt and showed him his badge. The kid looked for a moment like he might bolt, until Gauthier assured him that he wasn't in any trouble. The kid followed Gauthier outside and helped him load Connor into the car.

"You never saw me. Or him," Gauthier suggested, when he noticed the young man was unable to stop staring at the bloody mess of Connor's arm. "Got it?" he asked a little louder than necessary when he received no answer. The young man nodded without taking his eyes off Connor's poor bandaging skills.

"101, this is 5-2," he said into his radio as he flipped on his light and sped toward the nearest hospital.

"Go ahead 5-2," dispatch replied.

"Advise county and local that I have an emergency transport en route to St. Luke's."

"Roger 5-2, will advise."

Connor woke in a hospital bed, bright light streaming through the gaps in the blinds. He tried to raise his arm to shield his eyes and immediately regretted it. The small movement felt as if his arm had been ripped out of its socket. He tried to flex his

fingers into a fist. His index finger couldn't seem to curl around enough, his middle finger only slightly better, his ring and pinky fingers able to complete the task. Pain slashed through his arm again, and he gave up.

Connor looked at the mess of wires and tubes that surrounded him, became part of him. He panicked, afraid that he was in another nightmare, afraid the tubes would morph into strands of spider silk. He spent a few minutes waiting for the nightmare to begin wandering down its usual terrifying road, sure that Ojacarcu or Dracul would come through the door any moment. They'd probably tell him something wonderful, like he had a brain tumor, that he'd imagined everything that had happened for the last few years while strapped to a bed in a mental institution. Connor wished it was true. It would mean Jera was still alive, even if she was only ghostly creation in his diseased mind. He held her memory until he fell asleep.

He woke sometime later to voices. His vision was blurry, the only light in the room from the soft glow-strip above his head.

"How are you feeling, Mr. Dunsmore?" one of the blurs asked him.

"Like shit," Connor grumbled.

"I would imagine so," the other blur said. "I'm Doctor Tu. This is Doctor Hornacek."

Connor raised his good arm in greeting, his hand barely making it above his hip.

"Do you know what has happened to you?" Doctor Hornacek asked him.

“Shot,” was all Connor could get out.

Doctor Tu leaned down slightly, smiling at Connor. “We removed the bullet, no fragmentation. The muscle is torn and the surrounding tissue is damaged, but nothing too severe. Can you move your fingers for me?”

Connor tried to make a fist, and again found that his first two fingers seemed to lose communication with his brain at the halfway point.

“Does this hurt?” Dr. Tu asked, using his own fingers to help Connor finish the fist.

“No.”

“The bullet was pretty deep,” Dr. Hornacek said. “Looks like it might have nicked a nerve. You’ll probably get full movement back, but there’s a chance you might have permanent nerve damage.”

“That’s okay,” Connor said, feeling himself fading out again. “Numb hands are good for fighting.”

When he woke again, light was coming through the open blinds. He turned his head to see Agent Gauthier and Agent Kline sitting in chairs next to his bed, both tapping at their tablets. Connor coughed lightly, hissing at the pain that shot through his arm.

“Welcome back to life,” Agent Gauthier said with a smile.

“How do you feel?” Agent Kline asked.

“About as sour as your sense of humor,” Connor said.

Gauthier chuckled at Kline’s expression.

“Connor, do you feel like talking?” Gauthier asked.

“Sure, why not?” Connor answered. “But only if you get me something to drink.”

Kline stood up and poured him a cup of water. The cool liquid burned as it slid down Connor’s throat. He wondered how long he had been drifting in and out of consciousness.

“Are you sure?” Gauthier asked.

Connor nodded, taking another sip and holding the cup out so Kline could refill it.

“We found the scene exactly as you described,” Kline said, setting the pitcher down. “It was pretty wild. We’re both amazed that you got out of there with only that scratch on your arm.”

“Fuck you,” Connor said. Kline’s frown made him laugh, which made his arm erupt in pain. “Don’t make me laugh, damn it. Hurts.”

“How many did you say were there?” Gauthier asked after Kline sat back down.

“Six. Seven?” Connor mumbled to himself. He tried to remember faces and count, but doing both tasks at once became a challenge.

“We found six bodies at the scene,” Gauthier continued. “Costache Ojacarcu, Vadim Zaituc, Pavel Kazaku, Ovidiu Bratianu, Jera Gellner, and one that we still haven’t identified.”

“Dracul,” Connor said, a flash of fear rising in him that somehow Dracul had crawled away, killed someone and dragged the body back to the industrial park before escaping into the nether.

“Dracul... does he have a last name?” Kline asked, both men tapping at their tablets.

“I don’t know. He’s some special killer, secret police and trained in Russia or something.”

“Spetsnaz? Romanian Securitatea?” Gauthier asked.

“Something like that,” Connor said.

“We’ll run prints and DNA through Interpol and the Russian Federation’s criminal unit,” Kline said, swiping his finger across his tablet’s screen.

“Do you have a picture of him?” Connor asked suddenly, once again afraid the Romanian would appear from thin air one day to exact revenge.

The two agents exchanged glances before Gauthier pulled up the crime scene pictures on his tablet. He rotated the screen around for Connor and swiped through a couple of images. He glanced at Kline again when Connor let out a heavy breath and visibly sunk into his mattress.

“I take it that it was him?” Kline asked.

“Yeah. Thank God.”

“The guy must have put the fear of God in you,” Gauthier asked more than said. Connor nodded. “He must have been one scary mother to make *you* afraid.”

“The guy is dead and I’m still afraid of him,” Connor said.

“What about these others? What do you know about them, besides Ojacarcu?” Kline asked.

“Ovidiu and Pavel were running the apartments. Block captains.”

“What was going on at the apartments?” Gauthier asked.

Connor felt like the man already knew and was testing him.

He had no doubt all of Ojacarcu's empire had been thoroughly raided by now.

"Prostitution. They'd set up the appointments and keep the girls in line. Gave them dope to keep them from thinking about being forced to slave on their backs. Rape them or force them to do weird shit for kicks when nothing else was going on."

"What about Vadim?" Kline asked.

"Vadim," Connor said, remembering the man as his friend, not as close as Petre was, but someone he'd spent time with away from *work* once in a while. He closed his eyes, thinking of the man's surrender, trusting Petre that they'd get away and follow Connor around to wherever his hockey career took them.

"You liked him?" Gauthier asked.

"Yeah. He was a good one. He didn't deserve to die."

"What about the girl?" Kline asked, beginning to annoy Connor with his business-like approach.

"She was just some whore," Connor said, looking away from the two agents. "Got caught up in some shit she shouldn't have."

"Connor," Gauthier said, his voice sympathetic, "we know you used to drive her around. Was she a prostitute, or one of Ojacarcu's *special* girls?"

"You followed me?" Connor asked, fear spreading through him as he wondered when they'd get to Travis Benkula and Larry Fallon.

"We kept a tab or two on you, but no, we didn't dedicate serious surveillance to you," Gauthier said.

"She was just a prostitute. Ojacarcu gave me the job of

driving her around to her appointments.”

“Like a pimp?”

“More like a chauffeur and bodyguard.”

“She wasn’t one of the good ones?” Kline asked.

Connor wanted to jump out of the bed and slug the agent in the guts as hard as he could.

“No.” Connor looked away again.

“Where is Petre Diaconescu?” Gauthier asked.

“He’s dead.”

“Are you sure?” Kline asked.

“He seemed like he was headed that way.”

“Headed that way?” Gauthier asked him.

“Yeah. He was shot up pretty bad. He dragged me out of there and made me drive him to the hospital.”

The two agents exchanged worried looks, both of them tapping away at their tablets again.

“Connor, would this man come after you?” Gauthier asked.

“What? No. Maybe to kick my ass for making him... no. He wouldn’t.”

“Are you sure?” Gauthier asked.

“Making him what?” Kline asked at the same time.

“I’m sure,” Connor assured Agent Gauthier. “Fuck off,” he told Agent Kline.

“Do you have any idea of what kind of trouble you’re wrapped up in?” Kline said, his voice full of anger at Connor’s disrespect. “You’ve got six dead bodies tied to you right now—”

“Enough,” Gauthier interrupted, putting his hand up. He

glared at Kline until the agent focused on his tablet. “You aren’t in any trouble as of right now. We just want to make sure this man won’t try to come after you, not that he’s in any shape for that. We’ll keep him isolated so he can’t call in to any of the brotherhood and have you bagged.”

“He’s not going to... is he alive?”

“He’s in ICU still. Two in the gut, one in the shoulder. The guy is a beast. A lucky one at that. We’ve got him as the shooter to four of the others so far. The entrance wound in the girl’s head appears to be from a different gun. She probably took a stray from one of the .45’s. Ojacarcu escaped all of that, but ended up with twenty stab wounds.”

“Yeah. I killed him, like I told you.”

Gauthier leaned in toward Connor. “We’ll have no trouble sticking that to Diaconescu if you would be willing to help us out.”

“I’ll help you, but don’t pin that on him,” Connor said. “I killed Ojacarcu. I’ll own that one.”

Gauthier leaned back, shooting another look at his partner. Kline shrugged.

“We’ll cover all of that later,” Gauthier said. “You should probably get some more rest. Is there anything you want to know before we leave?”

“Don’t deport Petre,” Connor said.

“Why not?” Kline asked.

“Rohozeanu will get him. Trust me, you don’t want to live with what they’ll do to him on your conscience.”

Connor stared at the ceiling after the agents left. He tried to clear his racing thoughts using a technique one of his old coaches had taught him. Connor's nerves before a game—any game, not just the important ones—were always a jumbled, chaotic mess, a wild roller coaster ride that sometimes led to him throwing up. Coach Porters had taught the entire team his zen trick, and it had helped tremendously, allowing Connor to become a solid rock of concentration, peace, and harmony.

He wanted to scream after ten minutes. The zen trick couldn't shut down the final image of Jera from his mind. He felt the phantom sensation of the small hole above her ear in his fingertips. Connor could see the blood, both the pool of it under her, as well as the expanding cone of splatches and droplets behind her from the bullet's exit, sticky and quickly cooling. His nose caught the tang of copper and gunpowder mixed with the familiar scent of dusty sagebrush. He saw Jera's beautiful face, her dark eyes, perfect nose and cheekbones. Inhaled her scent as they tumbled in bed together, the faint hint of musk that hung in the air when they were finished.

Connor felt the tears spill down his cheeks. His rage, his sadness, his utter helplessness threatened to consume him. He cried until he fell asleep. His nightmares only had Jera in them. The one in his mind before he woke up had the two of them riding motorcycles in the desert, the taste of dirt in his mouth and wind through his hair as real as the constant bumps and vibrations of the

bike. He realized she'd stopped and slowed his own bike down, finding a small patch between rocks to turn around and ride back. Jera was staring at the sky, only shifting her eyes to his long enough to gesture to look behind him. His fear came in waves, knowing that Dracul or Ojacarcu would be behind him somehow. When he looked back, the fear left him as he watched the sun set behind a sheer rock cliff in the distance, the sky a thousand shades of orange.

Connor woke to the sounds of nurses and doctors discussing patients and football scores in the hallway. He turned on his side, careful to keep his injured arm tight to his chest. The door to his room was open, and he could see almost to the nurses' desk. A short, thin nurse with what looked like short black hair had her back to him, discussing something with either a doctor or a physician's assistant. He was sure it was Jera.

"Jera." His voice was barely a whisper. He swallowed and tried again. "Jera!"

The sound of his voice echoed off the walls and into the hallway. The startled nurse turned and came at a jog into Connor's room, followed by the doctor and another male nurse.

"Mr. Dunsmore, are you okay?" the dark-skinned woman asked in a light Indian accent. "Do you need assistance?"

"No," Connor said, turning his head away. "I'm sorry. I was just having a bad dream."

The three standing at his bed looked at each other. The woman reached out and put her hand on Connor's forearm, smiling at him.

“If you need anything, just hit the button, or call out to us,” she said with a wink. She gave his forearm a light squeeze before turning away, herding the other two out of the room with her. When she got to the door, she looked back, a sympathetic smile on her lips that didn’t match the sadness in her eyes. “It was just a dream. You’re safe here.”

She gave Connor a small wave before closing his door, cutting off the sounds of the hospital beyond his room. He rolled onto his back again, wincing as his arm was jarred by the bed. He replayed memories of Jera in his mind until he fell asleep again.

EPILOGUE

Summer

Connor flipped the shade down as the Audi came out of the mountain's shadow, but it did little good with the sun reflecting from the water below him. He squinted at the upcoming curve, nervous as he wondered if another crazy Romanian in a beat up jalopy or a brand new BMW would wipe him out with a head-on collision. He'd had at least thirty close calls since leaving the airport in Bucharest.

"Want me to drive?" Dana asked from the passenger seat.

"You drive worse than these people," Connor complained, trying to focus on the approaching curve.

"You sexist bastard." she said, punching him in the arm.

Connor almost drove into the guardrail. He tried to glare at her without taking his eyes off the road. Whatever expression he was trying for must have missed the mark as Dana burst into laughter. She reached over and squeezed his thigh, her fingers tracing along the inside of his jeans. He nearly drove into the guardrail again, barely avoiding a speeding Toyota that looked like it had been stuffed with teenage joyriders.

The road finally straightened out as it came into a valley. Connor relaxed his death-grip on the steering wheel. A few minutes later they passed a sign that told them they were forty-two kilometers from Constanta.

"Do you think we'll find her?" Dana asked.

"I hope so. I owe him everything. This is the only way I can

think of to pay him back.”

“So if I saved your life, you’d travel to the ends of the Earth to find the love of my life?” she teased.

“If you saved my life, I better at least get a sympathy lay before I run off to find your true love.”

“Well, you saved my life in a way,” she said, her hand back on his leg.

“Actually, I think that was Petre as well.”

“He seems pretty good at that sort of thing.”

“Yeah, we are talking about starting up a business together. I’ll sit in an office and take calls while he’s out getting all of the glory pulling cats out of trees, saving babies from burning buildings, keeping computer nerds safe by whisking them out of harm’s way.”

Dana frowned at him, sure the “nerds” remark was aimed at her. Connor reached down and linked his fingers through hers. The road was straight enough that he could take his eyes from it for a few extra seconds to get a good look at her. Sunlight streamed in through the windshield, illuminating her face.

He had a moment of sadness as a fleeting memory of Jera flashed through his mind. The nightmares still came with regularity, a horrifying mix of murder, sex, and endless panic as he ran from those who wanted to kill him, including Jera. The nightmares that wouldn’t fade for days were the ones in which Jera tortured and eventually murdered Dana. They were the worst for the fact that Connor almost always ended up having sex with her next to Dana’s corpse, unable or unwilling to allow her lifeless,

staring eyes to shame him as he climaxed in his dream before waking up to the frightening sounds of his own screams.

He tightened his grip on the steering wheel, holding back the urge to cry one more time. Dana squeezed his hand, recognizing the bitter torment flooding across his features, hoping she wouldn't begin crying as well. Connor sighed heavily as one last image of Jera's smile, the tilt of her head, her short black hair matching the black, lacy collar around her neck, traveled through his memories. It was quickly replaced by the happiness that he still felt from the day he woke up to the sound of his doorbell, unable to believe it was Dana standing on the other side of the peephole.

Costache Ojacarcu's demise had made national news. The majority of the coverage seemed to be more about how such a criminal organization could set up shop in a place like Boise, Idaho, than it was about the fact six Romanian mobsters and a prostitute had died in a hail of gunfire at an abandoned construction site just outside the city limits.

The local news went crazy trying to scoop all of the national news outlets, going so far as to publicly "out" as many clients of Ojacarcu's prostitution ring as possible. Since the local crews knew the area, they were almost always the first to track down a client or a victim, much to the annoyance of the CNN and MSNBC crews. A YouTube video of the Channel 5 team brawling with Darren McAngelo's "Daytime - Crimetime" crew became even more

popular than the emerging tale of how deep Ojarcu's organization had burrowed into the area.

Petre Diaconescu was officially dead, the FBI, CIA, and NSA erasing all traces of him to keep anyone who might think otherwise from knowing the truth. Connor had spent a month threatening, begging, pleading, then threatening again until the Department of Justice agreed to drop all charges against Petre in exchange for being able to pick his brain clean. Two weeks before Connor and Dana landed in Bucharest, the FBI and Homeland security carried out sixteen simultaneous raids across the country. Four cities in Canada, eight in Western Europe, and the collapse of the Rohozeanu and Savu clans in Romania followed over the next three days as international law enforcement agencies cooperated in a massive operation.

The information Petre had given the DEA interrogators had been a goldmine. Connor had been impressed that Petre had been that far inside, but Petre assured him most of what he'd told the agents was easily found on the internet if they would just take a look. Connor had clapped him on the shoulder while calling bullshit in his mind. He knew the Romanian was careful not to let information spill out of his mouth, but he was finding out that the man, his friend, was a hell of a lot more than anyone suspected.

Connor had been forced to tell the investigators about Travis Benkula's fate, as well as Larry's. He knew his conscience would never be free of the guilt if he kept it to himself. He held off about Larry until after he'd had a chance to talk privately with Petre out on the back lawn of the hospital, Petre in a wheelchair, Connor

pushing him along while trying to keep three different IV drips and other contraptions from tangling up in his feet and the chair's wheels. Both agreed that it could be put on Dracul. Petre understood Connor's need to have it cleared from his conscience.

Dana had shown up two weeks later, amazed that Connor still lived in the same apartment, more amazed that the man she loved was still alive, still in one piece, and still not in prison. When the news broke nationally, she'd dreaded hearing or reading about any of it. As the story unfolded, she waited to hear Connor's name listed among the dead. When that didn't happen, she waited to hear his name as a suspect, a witness, anything. It never came. She noticed Petre's name was curiously absent as well from the cast of characters when the cable news talking heads yelled at each other over the details of the case.

The two longest weeks of her life were spent barely able to pay attention to her job, her new friends, or even her life. She'd spent most of her free time on the internet, searching every news story, every arrest report, every federal law enforcement agency website for Connor's name. After another two weeks, Dana couldn't take it anymore and had to find out. She called the three local hospitals, asking to be connected to Connor's room each time, and each time was told that no such patient existed. It took every ounce of self-control to keep herself from screaming at the phone receptionists.

One morning as she was getting dressed for work, an idea came to her suddenly when she saw the envelope that Petre had stuffed with money sitting in her sock drawer. She immediately

dialed the first hospital on her phone's call log, asking for Petre Diaconescu. Dana's frustration level was about to make her explode when the receptionist at St. Luke's told her to hold. Instead of coming back on the line to say that there was no such patient, a man's voice was on the other end.

"Who is this?" the gruff voice asked.

"Who is this?" Dana asked, full of caution.

"I'm going to give you three seconds to tell me who the hell this is before I get a judge to sign a search warrant and pull your phone records, lady."

"I'm... looking for Petre Diaconescu."

"I got that part from the receptionist. Now how about you tell me who the hell you are and why you are looking for Mr. Diaconescu."

"I... he knew Connor..."

"Connor Dunsmore?" the man asked, his voice empty of threat. "How do you know Connor?"

Dana broke down in tears, the man on the other end of the phone patiently drawing out of her the story of her part in events that had come to a conclusion. Agent Gauthier called her back twenty minutes after the agent that had taken the call reported Dana's attempt to contact Petre and Connor. Dana nearly went mad for another thirty minutes while Agent Gauthier tracked Connor down to ask if he knew someone named Dana Foster, who claimed to be his ex-girlfriend. Gauthier was sure Dana's story was true, but he'd worked with enough dangerous criminal organizations that he needed to make sure it wasn't an elaborate trick by the Romanians.

The government wrapped up their investigation three months later, just as hockey season was about to start again. The news agencies never revealed Connor's name, nor Petre's. The two were only referred to in the official reports as "Witness A" and "Witness B." Agent Gauthier arrived at Connor's apartment a few days after all of the camera crews had packed up and moved on to North Dakota to cover a collapsed bridge that had claimed fifteen lives. He spent most of the visit catching Connor and Dana up on everything, letting them know almost all ends had been cleaned up and made tidy—except for two ends.

Because of his role as an active participant in an organized criminal network, Connor was to be deported within thirty days, with no chance of his ever being allowed back into the United States. Petre no longer existed, but at the same time, was no longer welcome in America. Connor spent a week in Ottawa after his deportation, meeting as many members of the House of Commons and the Senate as would see him, lobbying to have Jake Montgomery granted citizenship. Whenever a confused member of the legislature questioned why they should support a nobody like Jake Montgomery, Connor put them in touch with the Department of Justice, who quietly explained Jake's situation, and why he was unable to stay in the United States.

Any lawmakers who hesitated were quickly reminded that the man had saved the life of one of Canada's own, not to mention dismantled an entire organized crime operation almost single-handedly, and produced intel that had brought down over a thousand criminals, including eighty-four in Canada, smashing

Toronto's largest heroin distribution network in the process.

Dana had no real choice in the matter other than walking away and staying away for good. Connor had wanted to get married before leaving America to make it easier for her to gain citizenship. Dana had argued that she needed time to adjust to the boring, banal lifestyle they would now have to lead with him no longer lacing up to play competitive hockey, and no gangsters constantly keeping them on their toes.

Petre had piped up during one of the discussions, letting Dana know that if Connor asked for her to become a citizen, it would get "stamped with rubber" within an hour. Connor cursed his friend out for his inability to learn proper English. All three had laughed, and later, Dana assured him that she would become Mrs. Dunsmore, but not until after they'd settled into a new life and she found employment with one of the tech firms in Ontario.

Two hours after arriving in Constanta, they walked down the Strada Lebedei, a bag hanging from each of their arms as they made a leisurely circuit of the shops along the road. The pair decided on a last stop before heading back to their hotel for the night. They'd had an incredible seafood dinner at a little shack on the side of the road an hour before, and wanted something sweet to top it off before calling it a night.

Connor held the door open to a shop called "Ocean Sweets," according to Dana's translation of the words painted on the

window. Her ability to pick up Romanian, or any language, far exceeded Connor's. He thought she would be almost fluent before they called it quits and headed back to Canada, neither of them expecting to actually find the woman Petre had been in love with almost twenty years earlier.

"Two of those cakes," Connor said, pointing at the shelf in the glass case that held what looked like chocolate lava cakes.

"Anything else?" the woman asked, surprising him.

"You speak English?" he asked.

The woman laughed, giving Dana a look that said *men are so foolish* before answering.

"Yes, English is necessary to steal money from the rich tourists who visit here." The woman winked at Dana, eliciting a giggle from her.

"So if a shopkeep only speaks Romanian, they won't be able to steal from us?" Connor asked, playing along.

"Oh no," the woman said. "They'll steal from you quite easily because you are Americans. It's the British who are the tough nuts to crack." Her accent suddenly shifted into one that sounded as if it came straight from the BBC. "But show them you can speak proper King's English, and the buggers will practically throw Euros at you."

All of them had a good laugh, renewed again when Connor told her that they were both Canadians, and was promptly told that he had to do better in the future so he wouldn't be lumped in with Americans. The woman warmed up the cakes and offered them tea and coffee. While the couple sat, enjoying their desserts, the

woman began to close her little bakery down for the night. Connor felt guilty and stood up, gesturing to Dana that they should leave so they wouldn't keep the older woman from going home.

"Sit, sit," the woman said, shooing both of them back into their seats.

She walked around her shop, sweeping and wiping. As she passed by, Connor held out his hand to stop her.

"May I ask you something?"

"Of course," the woman said with a smile.

"Do you know someone named Helen Ivan?" Dana asked.

The woman's eyes went wide for just a second, her smile faltering as fear overcame her expression.

"I've never heard the name, no," she said.

Connor and Dana exchanged a look. Dana reached out to grab the woman's hand, feeling it jerk slightly as if she were about to pull away from Dana's grip and bolt out of the bakery.

"Petre wants you to know that he's never forgotten about you," Dana said gently.

The woman looked from Connor's face to Dana's, suddenly afraid of the two Canadians.

"He's finally safe. He couldn't make it, but he also wants to let you know that he's never loved anyone since he had to send you away."

Helen fell to her knees, her eyes unable to stop the flow of tears. Dana gently pulled her to her feet before enveloping her in a hug, Connor wrapping his arms around both of them an instant later.

Author's Notes

If you've read something I've written before, you know what this is. If this is the first book of mine you've ever read, and haven't thrown it down in disgust (hopefully just deleted it in disgust if you are reading this on an e-reader), this is the part where I say a lot of useless stuff then let you get on with your day / night.

Connor's character was conceived after I'd heard an NHL player named Zach Redmond had been badly injured by a skate blade. Zach's leg was accidentally stepped on by a teammate, resulting in a cut that severed his femoral artery and left a brutal-looking scar. You can google it to see just how frightening such an injury is.

Zach Redmond was given a 50/50 chance of ever skating again, and he's currently playing for the St. John's IceCaps of the American Hockey League (it's the league right below the NHL, and Redmond has been called up a couple of times this season). Connor, unfortunately, had just a little less luck than Mr. Redmond, and his skating legs never quite recovered enough to make it to the big show.

This injury type, while not common, isn't surprising to anyone who has ever laced up a pair of skates made to play hockey, do laps on a speed track, or figure skate. The blades are extremely dangerous when sharpened correctly. You can be sure the equipment managers of professional hockey teams and even the junior leagues and NCAA guys are experts at giving their team the

edge (bad pun, sorry).

Two different players (Clint Malarchuk and Richard Zednik) have had their necks sliced open, one the carotid artery, the other the jugular vein. In both cases some seriously quick thinking and acting persons saved both lives. Just recently one of the best defensemen in the NHL had his Achilles tendon severed 70% of the way through. He's currently still one of the best defensemen in the entire NHL, and won a silver medal at the Olympics in Sochi.

Definitely dangerous, and I didn't even talk about the frozen puck being shot at 90mph or more, sticks hacking at hands hard enough to break bones, getting checked by another two hundred pound player at high speed (by the way, the boards/glass actually absorb a large amount of that energy, it's the open-ice hits that tend to be the worst). And the fighting.

Fighting is damn hard wearing shoes (unless you are kung-fu master, Navy SEAL, boxer, etc.). Try doing it while wearing two thin blades on your feet, and on a sheet of ice at that. I've never been in a hockey fight. I actually haven't been in a fist fight since I was maybe fourteen or fifteen. I wasn't very good at it then, so it stands to reason I'd be even worse at it on skates. Whenever I talk to hockey players who have been in fights, this is always one of the things that gets talked about a lot. Most of them have also said figure skating helps tremendously, as it increases a skater's "edge" skills (the edge of the blades, for things like balance, turning, stopping long or short, not being shoved / pulled around).

If you've never been to a live hockey game, do yourself a favor and go. Sit as close to the middle of the ice as you can, and to

be honest, the 2nd and 3rd levels offer better views of the action (my opinion only, don't challenge me to a fight). Sitting near the glass or on the ends is sort of only for experienced fans, as they know how to follow the action even with restricted viewing angles. Just try to pay attention to what's going on with the puck, but you'll soon find out that lots of stuff happens away from the puck, and it can often make you feel like there's too much going on at once all over the ice.

*

And, because I'm boring and drone on about nonsense too much, I'd like to apologize to any and all hockey players, law enforcement officers, girlfriends, meth dealers, and Eastern European gangsters for whatever is wrong with this story. I'm not an expert at any of these things, though I can say, *without* pride, that the drug dealing aspect of this story is the one I am probably the closest to being an expert at.

In my 20's, I was not such a nice, intelligent (hah!) person who had life and career goals, such as the ones I have now. I was never a drug kingpin, but there were times when I wondered if I was going to be killed either by a crazy dope fiend, or an angry dealer above me that I'd ripped off or purposely shorted (usually to supply my own secret habit that didn't stay secret for long). I would, for the record, like to state that I would have much rather grown up to become an expert at hockey or law enforcement (hell, even at being an Eastern European mobster).

I also apologize if it was a bit of a grim and possibly brutal story when it came to Jera. Unfortunately, this is just another ugly side of that life I once led. I never pimped my better half out for dope, but... let's just say when people get addicted to drugs like crack cocaine, methamphetamines, and heroin, they'll offer anything of value (and a shitload of things of zero value) just to get a hit/fix. I've met, partied with, bought dope from, and sold dope to men who seemed to have no guilt or remorse about pimping out their wife/girlfriend, as well as to the women who do all of these things without a man forcing them into it.

It's ugly. It's awful. It's shameful. But it's something that only another addict can understand. I cringe when I hear ignorant persons telling others "just kick the habit" or "just go to rehab," as if there could possibly be such an easy answer. Meth, heroin (and all opiates including prescription pills), and cocaine aren't like marijuana, or even alcohol (though if you abuse alcohol long enough, it could pass for a heroin addiction quite easily). These drugs... once they get their hooks into you, it becomes a life-long struggle to never succumb to their demands, their sirens' voices again.

My wife loves the show "Intervention" on A&E. I do too, to be honest, but some parts of the show I do not love. I can't watch anyone smoke meth or crack without feeling my brain begin to light up like a Christmas tree in Times Square. Just watching someone on TV take a hit off a glass pipe brings back too many terrible memories, including the phantom smells of burning cocaine (and whatever it was cut with). Thankfully, I never delved into

meth / crystal / heroin / prescription pills. I think being a coke/crack addict was more than enough of a lesson.

*

One final, darkly humorous note about this drug addiction thing, and then I'll let you go. As you can probably tell, I've left all of that behind. It hasn't been easy, but I haven't had a relapse in twenty-plus years. I've spent the last two decades years getting my shit together, then working on this writing thing. I've been sidetracked a few times, but thankfully not by drug addiction (or alcohol—I haven't had but maybe three or four drinks since my nineteenth birthday).

I received a message on Facebook a couple of months ago from a woman that I didn't really know, but yet, I did. Her mother was one half of a married couple who owned the crackhouse I frequented for a few years. When I say "crackhouse," I truly mean an honest-to-God, bonafide crackhouse. The kind you see on TV or in the news and shiver because of how scary it (and the people frequenting it) looks. The woman wrote to tell me that she'd read a non-fiction piece I wrote about some of those "adventures" from the old days, and asked if I had any more stories about her mom and stepfather.

I was happy to find out she'd done the same as me, getting away from that scene, but was sad to find out her mother had passed on. It's probably weird to reminisce about people who were my best friends during the absolute lowest moments of my life, but

Mom was a good person, even with all of her faults and defects and such. I think the saddest thing is that I can see the side of these types of persons on the skid row side of life that others cannot, or refuse to because of the addiction that is more cancer than anything. If you've ever loved someone whom you've had to watch crawl through the mud and the shit that an addiction floods their life with, you probably understand what I'm trying to say.

I'm not sure why I included this extra little tidbit, other than now that I've written it, I think I'll finish this up and take some time to write this woman another email. I guess I'm glad I don't have to *save* her. She was never Jera (in fact, Jera has no real-life personality that I've drawn from... she's a mix of all the worst types of addicts I've ever met, as is Larry). But I'm happy that I'm not the only one who escaped that prison. If I hadn't ran across the country to get away from it at the turn of the century, you wouldn't be reading this, because I would be dead. Dramatic, I know, but if you ever talk to someone who knew me during that period, they'll probably be shocked and amazed that I'm still alive.

*

Welp, that's it. If you ever see me at a hockey rink, feel free to slug me when you skate by and tell me what a terrible book this was. Or you can let me score the winning goal (I'll take any goal, to be honest, I'm still pretty awful at ice hockey) and then tell me it was because the book was good enough to read and not immediately come looking for me to slug me in the guts and tell me

what a terrible book it was.

*

I don't really write about sports much, but I'm kind of thinking of taking the idea of the UPHL and maybe writing some *modern pulp* type stuff, maybe even weird stuff (I do write a lot of science fiction and horror). Maybe a pulpy mash-up of the UPHL and other genres (romance... I'm not sure I'm good at it, but what the hell, I'll give it a try). I could see the Tuscon Rattlers having to play an exhibition game in a place in the middle of nowhere, and then finding out it was against a bunch of zombies, or werewolves, or vampires.

Ugh. No.

But think about it... a team that travels for half of its schedule. And the other half is at home where all the teams travel to you. That can make for some interesting situations (smuggling humans, drugs, technology, lots of stuff).

Right. Leave the poor readers alone, they want to go do something interesting.

Thanks for reading!

Travis Hill

~~March 5, 2014~~

June 16, 2019 (fully re-edited and condensed)

THANKS & EXTRAS

A special thanks to Helen Ivan. Helen is a nice young law student from Bucharest who took time to answer some really stupid questions about Romania and the language. She gave me the translations, pushed me in the right directions on a lot of issues, and was never afraid to tell me that “that name has never existed ever in Romania.” Which made me sad a lot because the internet gave me some awesome names to use. But happy because all of the Romanian names are authentic. I’m hoping she’ll one day agree to translate it into Romanian, so I can worry about two different nations wanting to punch me in the stomach.

To Kathy Benton Estridge and anyone else who read it while it was still a bigger jumble of nonsense than it turned out to be.

To all of you who keep taking a chance on my stories. YOU ARE THE BEST! THANK YOU!

As always, Killswitch Engage and DevilDriver, the two bands who get me through each book.

Hey! I wrote some other books. They probably aren’t the books you are looking for, but you can check ‘em out for yourself on the next page(s).

CHARACTERS

I typically keep a list off to the right so I can remember who is who in longer stories or ones that have a decent sized cast. I mistakenly included a character list in one of my novellas, but a number of readers said they liked such lists. I always try to include one if the story has more than a couple of characters in it. This one is by no means complete, but it's what I had left over at the end. Strikethroughs are characters that didn't make the cut but I thought they might during the writing. Some of the details concerning a char/location might not match what is in the story, but I'm too lazy to fix it by this point. You do remember that you've just slogged through a 410 page book, right? We both need some rest.

Connor Dunsmore (26) - #30, RW - Boise Bombers, UPHL

Dana Foster (24) - Starbucks

Jera Gellner (26) - drug addict

Costache Ojacarcu (58) - Owner of the Boise Bombers of the United Professional Hockey League

Dracul (40?) - scary bodyguard

Petre Diaconescu (46) - bodyguard

Vadim Zaituc - (29) - bodyguard

Pavel Kazaku / Ovidiu Bratianu / Greg - handlers/block guards

Garth Lamoureux (50) - coach of the Boise Bombers

Coach Walters (52) - Assistant Coach

Derek ‘Griff’ Giffords (48) - Trainer/Equipment Manager for
Boise Bombers

Elvin ‘Gansy’ Gannett (20) - Captain of Boise Bombers

Devar Mondin - Bombers Goalie

Daryl Hockner - new Bombers’ captain

Billy Donovan - Bombers' play-by-play

Andre Jergens - Bombers’ forward

~~Tyler Floyd~~ - Boise Bomber forward

~~Jason Beekman~~ - Boise Bomber forward

Alice Childress (23) - Starbucks

Larry Fallon (25) - junkie dealer

Donald Benton - fat guy

Travis Benkula - dead bearded guy, murdered by Dracul

Niklas Laarkonen - Swedish hockey player

Jake Otto - assistant manager at Gas-Mart

Dave & Ryan - night clerks at Gas-Mart

Agent Gauthier - IDE

Agent Kline - DEA

~~Detective Allen~~ - BPD

United Professional Hockey League - Thompson Cup

Western Conference:

Seattle Earthquake - UPHL team (West)

Great Falls Barons - UPHL team (West)

Nevada Miners - UPHL team (West, Reno)

Tuscon Rattlers - UPHL team (West)

New Mexico Phantoms - UPHL team (West, Albuquerque)

Tacoma Titans - UPHL (West)

Texas Tornadoes - UPHL (West, Austin)

Cheyenne Cowboys - UPHL (West)

Eastern Conference Champs:

Lafayette Lions - UPHL team (East)

SHAMELESS SELF-PROMOTION!

All books are available in ebook format from all major retailers. If a title is listed free here but is not free at your retailer of choice, please email me at author@angrygames.com. Tell me which format you need (or ereader device you'll be using) and I'll send it for free.

Mailing list for new releases/updates here:

<http://www.angrygames.com>

(* *paperback version available*)

The Big Bhang*:

Jeremy Jefferson Jacobs Jackson--Forjay to everyone but his mother--grew the most potent marijuana on Earth. Some said the entire Federation of Allied Planets. When the Galactic Union declares humanity unfit to exist, only one man has what it takes to be a true hero to the citizens of FAP.

Join Forjay, Ms. Marianna Templeton, Ambassador Dave Thatcher, and a large, diverse, generally annoying cast of the Galactic Union's alien species on an adventure that spans both time and the space. Relish in the glory of victory, plunge to the lowest depths of despair in defeat, and scream insults at stupid, uppity, snooty, gloppy alien jerks who act like they're better than human beings (and think they're tough).

**** Definitely Fake Editorial Reviews of "The Big Bhang" ****

"I didn't understand this book at all..." - *Fijj Yom, Wroglarian (a dumb alien species not affected by weed)*

"There's a lot of commas and long sentences in this book!" - *some reader who complained about commas and long sentences*

"This book is not funny." - *NYPD Patrol Officer Gary Garrison*

"Bark bark bark growl. Bark!" - *NYPD Drug Canine Mr. Fang*

"This is the lowest form of propaganda, the kind only a weak, mewling race of soup-filled meatbags would dare to popularize." - *Tyx War General Boomz Blasterton*

"Reading this book is the dumbest thing you could ever do." - *the author of this book*

"I don't get it... I raised Travis better than this!" - *the author's mother*

BONUS CONTENT? MAYBE! WHO KNOWS?:

"Smash & Grab & Steal & Loot"

"Dragons Are Not Your Friends"

"Bears Are Not Your Friends Either"

"Zombie D-7"

Departure:

Today is my 40th birthday. It's also my last day on Earth.

I get to do anything I want today, within reason, as long as I make it to the portal before my time is up.

What I want is to spend the day with Cara and my two young children.

I don't know what awaits on the other side of the portal, I only know that certain death awaits me here if I refuse to go.

Light adult content

14,600 word short story/novella

Countdown:

"Countdown" is a companion story to "Departure."

Andreada is only 20 and looking forward to the second half of her life before she has to step through the portal into the unknown. She's young, in love with Navine, and leads the typical care-free life of those who reside in the city. After a terrible mistake, she is left with only two choices: step into the Justice portal reserved for criminals and misfits, or flee to The Bower district, a lawless undercity with no rules, no laws, and no place for a scared young woman on the run from the authorities.

22,000 words / 75 pages

Adult themes / language

LGBT-friendly

"Departure" - book 1 of the Arrival series (available everywhere)

"Countdown" - book 2 of the Arrival series (this book)

"Arrival" - book 3 of the Arrival series (coming soon!)

End of the Line:

For fifty years, humanity fought alongside the Hanura and The Seven against the Kai. With the Hanura wiped from the galaxy and The Seven falling soon after, the Terran Coalition now stands alone against a superior enemy... an enemy that has pledged the complete extermination of mankind.

Driven back to Earth, the last remaining human world, Private Dana Lofgren and the remnants of the 307th fight their way through rugged terrain and impossible odds. With nowhere to run and the enemy closing in, they have no choice but to keep going until they reach the end of the line...

60,000 words / 200 pages
Adult themes / profanity / violence

Portal Wars #1:

An archaeological dig in the desert of Arizona uncovers a mysterious object.

A brief burst of light coincides with a sudden intrusion of the United States Military's most secure networks.

A new test at CERN near Geneva opens a strange underground portal.

Chaos reigns as frightening alien machines begin their invasion.

Portal Wars #1 is the first novella in a new "pulp" science fiction serial from Travis Hill.

28,500 words / 90 pages
(ongoing serial)
Adult language / violence / mature themes

Diabolus*:

Salvatore Domenico Antonelli is a disgraced ex-bishop, demoted and exiled to the farthest reaches of the Nicaraguan jungles for his sins against God and the Church.

Benito Felipe Castillo is a new breed of tech-priest from the ghettos of Barcelona, freshly graduated from Seminary, ready to serve the Vatican as an artificial intelligence specialist.

Tasked by the Vatican to confront DAMON-1, a nuclear-capable AI that claims to be Satan incarnate, returned to the physical world to bring about Armageddon, the two clergy must battle to restore DAMON and purge Satan from the enslaved AI's core.

The bishop is forced to play a deadly game with billions of lives in the balance, while the young priest must confront Satan's digital persona within the network.

The eternal conflict between good and evil, fought in the space between time, will bring humanity and their AI creations to the dawn of a new age... or to the brink of annihilation.

"The Exorcist" meets "Skynet" meets "The Matrix" in this thought-provoking new science fiction thriller by Travis Hill.

66,000 words / 200 pages
Teen+ appropriate

It's Better This Way:

Twenty-three years ago, the 'bulls' appeared in orbit and destroyed Earth's infrastructure in less than ten seconds. These days, the alien invaders aren't as much of a problem as the surviving humans are.

Evan Greggs learns that things aren't always as bad as they seem, but sometimes the choices to be made are as murky as they are difficult when it comes to living on The Farm, a community of survivors near the Cascade Mountains in central Oregon.

When a detachment of the old United States Army arrives with new information about the invaders, the citizens of The Farm are tasked with making another hard choice.

24,000 word novella
LGBTQ Friendly

It's Harder This Way:

The sequel to "It's Better This Way" finally arrives after a five year wait!

What seems at first to be a simple mission to destroy Base Charlie quickly becomes a test of inner strength and morality. Evan Greggs' resolve to end the potential threat Base Charlie and the remains of the United States Army poses to The Farm is further hampered by the army's modern amenities and Colonel Rebecca Collins.

Evan questions his place at both The Farm and Base Charlie, but the real questions are those concerning the Bulls -- and no one has been able to guess the alien invaders' intentions or motivations for the last twenty-three years.

Eight Hour Fiction #1:

Two stories inspired by a J.A. Konrath challenge to write, edit, create a cover, and publish a short story in eight hours or less.

1. A Career Move - A crash-landed alien tries to find his career path but isn't having much luck...

3072 word short story (teen+ appropriate)

2. Capture At The Hive - The Evil Queen Mother has finally captured

General Megatron, Defender of the Galaxy.

421 word flash fiction story (safe for children)

Eight Hour Fiction #2:

The Eight Hour Challenge, inspired by best-selling author J.A. Konrath, is back! If you enjoyed "Eight Hour Fiction #1," and want more of the story, look no further:

"Friends With Benefits" (5,560 words, teen+) - Gxkxl the hapless alien is back, and this time he's found his niche as a mob enforcer for a local Russian crew. Between intimidation and polishing his comedy, Gxkxl makes a new friend to confide in.

"General Megatron #2" (1,394 words, safe for children) - General Megatron's escape from the Doom Lord's prison of tortures is compromised by the Evil Queen Mother, but the wily general is no stranger to hopeless situations.

Stay tuned for monthly installments of the ongoing adventures of Gxkxl and General Megatron!

Eight Hour Fiction #3:

The Eight Hour Challenge, inspired by best-selling author J.A. Konrath is back!

Eight Hour Fiction #3's September entry is a departure from the usual stories about Gxkxl the alien and General Megatron (don't worry, they'll be back soon!):

1. It Only Hurts In Your Heart - When animal liberation extremist release the wrong group of laboratory animals into the wild, chaos ensues. In this sad, bleak tale of Mike & Janelle Chambers, told through Mike's eyes, the world winds down with a whimper instead of a bang.

3,829 word apocalyptic short story
Teen+ (light explicit language)

2. Cat Dreams - Ever wonder what your cat dreams about? I think about it all the time, to the point I've invented a new device capable of allowing me to experience the dreams of The Dude, my five year old orange & white tabby. There just might be some other uses for it as well...

1,349 word flash fiction story
All ages

Eight Hour Fiction #4:

Inspired by a JA Konrath challenge to write, edit, create a cover, and publish a short story in eight hours or less, the "Eight Hour Fiction" challenge is back!

1. "Mergers & Acquisitions" (8,813 words, Teen+) - Gxkxl is back for a final chapter (for now). With his reproductive cycle coming to an end, Gxkxl, Desiree, and Rebecca are forced to plan for an uncertain future.

2. "General Megatron #3" (1,386 words, children's story) - Block Seven, the galaxy's worst prison, holds more than just the galaxy's most vaunted hero. The general's luck, while tenuous at best, might have finally run out...

Eight Hour Fiction #5:

Welcome to another "Eight Hour Fiction" edition, inspired by JA Konrath's original "Eight Hour Challenge." Volume #5 is another slight departure from the usual round of short stories. This month's entry contains two novellas to satisfy your reading pleasure. Each story began as shorts for the EHF Challenge, and both have morphed into full-length novels (which are scheduled to be released before the end of 2014).

1. Transfer - Stephen Brewer is never sure when he wakes up if he's been asleep, or if he has died and has been transferred to a new clone body. As a member of the National Defense Directorate, he and his fellow Transfer Agents are the perfect undercover operatives.

22,000 words / 75 pages
Language / Violence / Mature Themes

2. Henchman - Henchmen are the faceless (and mostly hapless) backbones of the "Super" industry, the glue that is sometimes all that holds a supervillain's plans together. "Henchman" is an ongoing collection of stories from Mike Williams, a seventeen-year veteran, as he gives us a peek into the lives of the men and women who make up the Corporate Adjunct Specialists Union.

24,000 words / 85 pages
Language / Mature Themes / Silly Adult Humor / Zero Educational Value / Supervillain Approved

Ability (omnibus)*:

The end of the world began on YouTube...

Brian Carter wanted to create a superior recreational substance.

Garret Stewart wanted to create the next evolution in learning.
Derry Clarkson wanted her two best friends to see reason.
What happens when the perfect drug meets the perfect technology?
Ability is a dark urban tech-fantasy set in the near future.

Ability omnibus is the complete (Parts I - III) edition
Adult Language / Themes
60,159 words

Alive, or Just Breathing*:

Devin Fischer lost both of his parents when he was nine.

His controversial mother was taken from him in a freak accident. His father made him an emotional orphan that same day. Devin's goal is to leave small-town southern Idaho and the legacy of his mother's sensational death behind. The only obstacles in his path are the last two years of high school, and the many enemies he's made with his quick fists and quicker temper.

Melinda Liddy dreams of the day she can escape from the nightmare her life has become.

Her life is a bitter tug-of-war between the need to escape from her drunken, abusive father, and her inability to leave her mother behind to face the monster's explosive, unpredictable violence alone. As Melinda struggles to hold on long enough for an academic path, instead of becoming a runaway like her older sister, she finds a kindred spirit in Devin.

Together, they attempt to navigate the minefield of broken families, high school society, and the chaotic, sometimes confusing emotions that come with falling in love for the first time.

84,600 word novel

Chasing Time*:

A cynical government operative is sent back in time to 5th century France, during the reign of Clovis and the Frankish Empire. His mission: to find and eliminate Dr. Barnard Jameson, a rogue scientist, before history can be significantly altered.

Finding Bertric, aka Dr. Jameson, was the easy part. Eliminating the smirking, pudgy little scientist proves to be a lot harder than he expected.

The smug doctor's plans of advancing human civilization by introducing 21st century concepts and technology more than a thousand years early sound like the ravings of a madman with a God complex... but with the possibility to avoid the Dark Ages and the stagnation of civilization for almost a millennium, is Jameson's scheme a chance worth taking?

Strong language

60,215 words / 210 pages

EXTRAS: "Adage" (short story) + "Search Terms: Alpha" (novel) included in the ebook edition

Enforcer*:

Eighteen-year-old Connor Dunsmore was about to begin his professional hockey career as the top NHL draft pick when an on-ice accident shattered his life's dream. Eight years and over five hundred stitches later, he's become a fan favorite as an enforcer for the Boise

Bombers of the United Professional Hockey League.

Off the ice, Connor also moonlights as an enforcer for Costache Ojacarcu, the Bombers' owner, and head of a discrete Romanian organized crime operation in the Treasure Valley. What started out as running simple errands for extra money to supplement his meager hockey salary has evolved into collection, intimidation, and retribution.

After becoming an unwilling accessory to murder, Connor's life begins to spiral out of control. When he rescues a prostitute from an abusive drug dealer, he begins to dig himself in even deeper, and soon realizes how entrenched he truly is.

Adult themes / violence / language
132,000 words/ 410 pages

One Last Job:

Billy Jensen thought he had finished his last job for Petrovski, but the Russian mobster knows there's always one more debt to be paid...

("One Bad Job," the prequel novella, is now available!)

3059 word short story
Adult language/content

One Bad Job:

Career criminal Billy Jensen and his pals have plotted for more than a year to take down Gennady Konovalov's jewelry store. When the job doesn't go exactly as planned, the survivors go into hiding.

Not only are the Dolgoprudninskaya, the second largest Russian organized crime syndicate in the world, searching for Billy and his crew, but the Dolgo's biggest rivals, the Solntsevszkaya, have joined forces with them in an attempt to recover the stolen jewelry, cash, and bearer bonds.

After Alexi Nikolayev Petrovski, head of the Solntsevszkaya in Houston, captures Billy's long-time girlfriend, the crew is left with no choice but to meet the Russian mobster on his turf. Billy learns that Petrovski isn't interested in recovering the stolen goods as much as he is in recruiting a new employee...

"One Bad Job" is the prequel to the free short story "One Last Job"

26,309 word novella

Adult language / situations / violence

Return to Innocence:

An unexpected visit from Elian's closest companion reveals a frightening tale that is impossible to believe. Except Davis is becoming mortal again, and The Ellensburg Group, the ancient enemy of night walkers, is behind the "infection" that goes far beyond any threat immortals have faced before. When Davis comes up missing, Elian travels to the Ellensburg's compound near Missoula, Montana to exact revenge.

The Ellensburgs have laid numerous traps, but Zedira, Elian's maker and an original Priestess of Alem, along with a small group of other immortals in the area, arrive to lend a hand, hoping to destroy their mortal foes once and for all.

Zedira's revelation of true supernatural power evens the odds, but The Ellensburg Group has always played the long game.

31,307 word / 100 page novella

Search Terms: Alpha:

College sophomore Tyler Gallagher loves computers, video games, and Thanksgiving Break. He's timed the arrival of his computer components with the holiday vacation from school to blast aliens and enemy soldiers alike on his brand new gaming computer.

When the parts arrive, it soon becomes apparent that they aren't what he ordered from TechTerritory. Thinking he's the butt of a practical joke, Tyler plays along, and assembles the computer with the obviously fake components. His annoyance turns to shock when the computer powers on.

His shock turns to a mix of disbelief and wonder when he learns the strange "quantum" computer can pull web pages from the near future. Disbelief and wonder soon become fear and uncertainty when he discovers the future isn't very bright.

"Search Terms: Alpha" is the first half of a new time travel thriller. "Search Terms: Beta" coming soon!

52,000 word novel

Adult themes / language / mild sexual content

Hallowed Ends:

Hallows' End is our three-day celebration at the end of the harvest season, where we eat, drink, and give praise for all that we have. It is also when my father, Tarver Irondale, Master Blacksmith of Uric,

performs his annual Hallowed Forging. It is a ritual carried out since The Fall over a thousand years ago, when the dark sorcerers ruled the continent.

Most Hallowed Forgings are mundane affairs, though the weapon my father creates on these special nights are anything but ordinary. A "Hallowed Weapon" has not been forged in more than three centuries, but each year, he performs the ritual and ends up with what he calls a "Harvest" weapon. Harvest weapons are priceless works of art, yet they are unbreakable, never need sharpening, and will never rust or corrode. No one remembers what a true Hallowed weapon is, though everyone remembers the upheaval that such a forging precedes.

I, and the rest of the crowd gathered in Torren's central square, believed tonight would be no different. How wrong we were...

"Hallowed Ends" is the introduction story of a new epic fantasy series by Travis Hill.

Young Adult+ / 18,900 words / 60 pages

I'm an author from Boise, Idaho.

I live with my superhero wife and five completely worthless but loveable cats.

I write adult stories for adult readers.

My mailing list: <http://www.angrygames.com>

Writes: Science Fiction / Fantasy / Horror / Adult Fiction / Drama / Humor / Whatever I Feel Like

Favorite Team: Chicago Blackhawks

Favorite Band(s): DevilDriver / Killswitch Engage

Favorite activity: Trying to convince my wife that I need a ninja sword. I mean, they wouldn't sell the things on TV if they weren't invaluable weapons for when gangs of ninja suddenly crash through your living room windows, swords drawn.