



A.J. Thomas

**HOLDING OUT
FOR A
FAIRY TALE**



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CHAPTER ONE

RAY SMILED against the other man's lips, laughing as they crashed through his bedroom door and tumbled onto the bed in a tangle of limbs. He pulled the man on top of him, so he was wedged between the man's legs, then ran his hands up thighs and over denim. He bucked his hips up, enjoying the friction of the other man's ass against him. He was about to pull his date down for another kiss when he saw the uneven shades of gray silhouetted against the door. He rolled for his gun.

He didn't spare a moment. The only person who had a key to his apartment was over a thousand miles away, and he had never come into Ray's bedroom, even when Ray had wanted him to. Ray grabbed the loaded Glock he kept under his pillow and rolled off the bed, firing into the dark doorway. Knowing he only had seconds, he rolled into a low crouch against his closet door and lined up for a second shot. The gray outline of the intruder had moved.

Ray was vaguely aware of his date screaming, but he could block out the noise. He focused on the moving shadow. Whoever it was, they were fast, evading the first shot by lunging to the side, putting Ray's date between them.

"Stop shooting or she dies," a callous voice shouted in the darkness.

"That's a man, you moron," Ray snapped.

"A man?"

Ray's date started screaming again, and in the darkness, Ray could see him kneeling on the bed, right where he had been before, with his head jerked back painfully. "Okay, then. Stop shooting or *he* dies. And really, Raymond, if I wanted you dead, I'd have killed you years ago."

He knew that voice. From childhood memories of sun-drenched

basketball courts and a hundred lazy afternoons at their grandmother's house, Ray would always know his cousin's voice. Unfortunately, he knew Alejandro Munoz well enough to have no delusions about the man. Alejandro would have no qualms about saying he was there to talk and then shooting him in the head the moment he let his guard down. Of course, he also wouldn't hesitate to shoot through the man he was using as a human shield either.

He pulled the slide on his pistol back to shift another round into the chamber. Keeping the pistol trained on the bulky outline crouched behind his terrified date, Ray sidestepped toward the door, hoping to get a clear shot. Alejandro turned Ray's date to stay behind him.

"I'm serious, Raymond. I need your help," said Alejandro.

"I won't help you." Ray spat the words he felt as if he'd been repeating for a lifetime. "Get the fuck out!"

"It's not about me." Alejandro's growl made the man frozen between them yelp, his head jerked backward even farther as Alejandro's fingers tugged at his hair. "You know everything is blowing up? That those Garcia fuckers are trying to push me out?"

Ray knew all too well that the Tijuana drug cartel had descended into chaos. The DEA had arrested the last of Ray's great uncles, who had shared leadership of the most powerful drug cartel in Tijuana, just a few years ago. Now the leadership of the cartel was up for grabs, and all the different families who could claim kinship with the cartel leaders were grappling for power, including Ray and Alejandro's family, and enemy cartels from other parts of Mexico. The prize was control over the flow of virtually all narcotics pouring into California.

"I don't give a fuck. Whoever tries to move in, I'll arrest them too."

"You think you're safe? You think any of us is?" Alejandro laughed. "They've taken Sophia. She vanished on her way to class two weeks ago. Do you want Carmen and her kids to be next?"

Ray kept his gun steady even though his vision was beginning to narrow as tunnel vision set in. He forced himself to take several long, slow breaths. Sophie Munoz, the youngest of Alejandro's siblings, was one of his many cousins. Like every teenager, she'd had trouble getting along with her parents and her brothers, and so she'd been shuffled among extended family until she finally settled in and found a place with Ray's sister Carmen.

Sophie had spent most of high school living with Ray's little sister, helping Carmen with her kids and watching old science fiction flicks with Ray. The extra help had made it possible for Carmen to finish her nursing degree, and in return, Carmen had been helping Sophie through school. Even though Sophie was fifteen years younger than him, Ray and Sophie had always been friends. At twelve, he'd kept her entertained by writing little video games that ran on her graphing calculator. At thirteen, she'd learned enough about Java programming to put those games on her new cell phone, complete with full-color graphic interfaces and expanded levels. She was nothing short of a genius, and since she was the only other member of his family who had resolved never to have anything to do with the Tijuana criminal organization their great uncles had once controlled, Ray had more in common with her than anyone else in his family.

"Do not threaten Carmen, Alejandro. If anything happened to Sophie, I'd have heard about it. I'm more of a brother to her than you ever were."

"You think I don't know that? I just heard about it," Alejandro continued. "One of her professors reported her disappearance to the police, and because she's my sister they handed the case over to the FBI. They're not even looking for her, just watching me."

"Did they watch you break in here? Because if those fuckers are out there laughing, I'm going to shoot them in the head."

Alejandro scoffed. "They think they're watching me...."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"I told you, Esteban Garcia's trying to push me out. I can't tell you the details, but he set me up to look like a traitor just so he can take over my fucking territory once and for all. I can't look for her without handing myself over to the feds because they're hovering around her dorm."

"Why would they go after her? She's got nothing to do with you."

"She's family."

Ray shifted to a two-handed grip as his right arm began to shake under the weight of the gun. He sidestepped again, hoping Alejandro wouldn't notice. His cousin moved his human shield to match him. The man he'd brought home tonight was trembling, probably hyperventilating, and blubbering all over his bed. Ray sighed. He knew he'd have to change his sheets anyway, but he was kind of hoping he'd get laid first.

“No,” said Ray. “I’m calling bullshit. Sophie’s missing, and you just happen to hear about it before me or Carmen? And you come up with all this crap about Esteban Garcia targeting you? You’re trying to start a fight. Is she actually missing, or did you arrange it?”

“You insult me, Raymond. You think I would exploit my own sister’s kidnapping just to have an excuse to pick a fight?”

“No.” Ray shook his head. “That’s not your style. I think you would *orchestrate* your own sister’s kidnapping for an excuse to pick a fight. Especially if it meant going back to the way things used to be.” Back to the ever-escalating violence that shocked every other Mexican drug cartel into leaving Tijuana and San Diego alone. Alejandro had been in his element during those years, indulging every perverse and disgusting creative impulse that arose in his mind. With all of the old leadership in jail, a tense peace had been established, even though the Tijuana drug cartel had become little more than a puppet empire ruled over by their former rival, a massive central Mexican cartel controlled by a drug lord named Esteban Garcia.

Over the last month, Ray had been hearing rumors that Alejandro’s dealers were trying to track down someone who’d siphoned millions of dollars from dummy accounts they used to launder money before sending a sizeable chunk of the money off to Garcia. Since only Alejandro’s own enforcers had access to the accounts, his own men were all on edge, wondering which of them was guilty and which he would kill just on the chance that they were guilty. Ray knew the smart ones were hedging their bets, making side deals with Esteban Garcia’s enforcers, in hopes of surviving no matter which man came out on top in what was shaping up to be an all-out war.

In the darkness, Alejandro’s chuckle grew into a full-blown laugh. “I think I should be grateful that you broke with us when you did, Raymond. If you hadn’t betrayed us, poor old Garcia and I would be doomed to be your lackeys. If I thought the way you do, I wouldn’t have to pick a fight to accomplish anything.”

“Are you really trying to suggest that you’re the victim here?”

“Raymond, you might not believe this, but I prefer things as they are now. Peace has its advantages. But not everyone likes it. Do you think Garcia is happy taking a cut of everything that moves through San Diego

when he can reach out and take it all?”

Ray narrowed his eyes. “If Sophie gets hurt because of you—”

“I want to get her home alive and in once piece. Find her. Or at least find out what the FBI knows?”

“Let him go and get out of my place.” Ray nodded toward the door.

“When there’s a wall between us.” Alejandro dragged Ray’s date off the bed by his hair. “Hey, when did you start doing men? Did you piss off every woman in San Diego?”

“What fucking business is that of yours?” Ray followed Alejandro’s movements with the barrel of his gun.

Alejandro chuckled. “None. I tried a guy once. I didn’t see the appeal. It’s not what I’d expect from you, that’s all.”

He was glad it was too dark for anyone to see him roll his eyes. “Get the fuck out!”

Alejandro backed down the hallway, keeping Ray’s date between them. As soon as they made it to the living room, Alejandro threw the terrified young man back toward the bedroom and bolted out the door.

Ray just had time to move his finger to the trigger guard before his date tumbled into him. He scooped the man up and set him on his feet, then began gingerly touching his hair and back, checking for wet spots where Alejandro might have ripped his hair out. “Are you hurt?”

“Am I hurt?” The man’s voice was a high-pitched shriek. “You fucking psychopath, you nearly shot me!”

Ray chewed on his lower lip for a moment. He knew he hadn’t come remotely close to shooting his date. He’d rolled away before firing to make sure the bullet went behind him. He’d pulled the shot too far to the left to actually hit Alejandro just to avoid even the possibility of grazing the other man. The bullet, Ray was certain, would be embedded in the left side of the doorframe. It was possible the bullet casing had hit him when it was ejected from the chamber, but he was pretty sure he’d been far enough away that the casing would be somewhere in his sheets. Still, that wasn’t the type of reassurance called for.

Ray smirked, realizing the situation didn’t call for reassurance at all. “Blaine, I’m sorry you had to go through this. I know—”

“Blaine? It’s Bruce!” The man stumbled away from him, his eyes

narrowing. His hunched posture straightened, and he dropped his hands to his side. He didn't relax his curled fingers, but he clenched them into fists at his side rather than holding them up to instinctively guard his face. "You sick fuck! After all that, you can't even remember my name?" He shoved Ray away from him. "Are you going to call the police or what? And can we turn a goddamned light on?"

Ray batted Bruce's hand away from the hallway light switch. "Yes, but wait. Let me sweep the rest of the apartment first. I don't want to kill my night vision and then walk into a dark room if I'm not sure that it's secure."

"What? Who the fuck thinks like that? Someone broke into your place, held a gun to my head, and you're worried about your night vision!"

Ray sighed. Maybe getting the man angry wasn't the best approach. "I'll take care of it, okay?"

Bruce rubbed his hands over his face, obviously disturbed. He eventually took a deep breath. "Okay." Bruce nodded. "I'll call the police while you're—"

Ray froze as he stepped back into the dark hall. He didn't want to imagine what the rest of his evening might look like now. Calling in the shooting and the break-in would mean he and Bruce would both have to give statements, and his would have to include an explanation about who Bruce was, why he was in Ray's apartment, and why he was in Ray's bed.

Ray didn't have anything personal against admitting that he enjoyed the company of men as well as women, but working alongside an openly gay partner for four years had shown him just how little tolerance his fellow detectives had for gay police officers. They had put up with his partner because he'd been friendly, likable, and so much better at their job than everyone else, that anything else would come across as petty, jealous bullshit. But he had also been honest about it from the start. They already didn't like Ray, but they trusted him enough to be able to work with him. If he came out as bisexual, every officer he worked with would be left wondering what else he had lied about over the years. They would never trust him again. Deep down, he suspected he really was a complete bastard and that their mistrust was probably justified. He tended to color the truth at the best of times. On a professional level, though, he couldn't afford to lose their trust.

"Hold off a second," Ray shifted his pistol to his left hand and took

Bruce by the elbow. "It might be best if I call it in. You said you wouldn't be able to stay the night because you've got an early shift. If you're still here when they show up, you're going to be stuck giving statements until dawn."

"Someone broke into your place and held a gun to my head!"

"And he's long gone." Ray used the same gentle tone he might use with a frightened witness. "I'm sorry you had to go through this, but spending the night being interrogated at the police station will only make it worse. I'm a police officer. I can take care of filing the report tonight. You'll be called to testify when we arrest him, of course."

Ray knew Bruce was already tired, he'd already had a few drinks, and the fight-or-flight response that had him trembling was tapering off. The adrenaline was fading, and Bruce was already starting to crash. He was too tired to argue, too tired to think.

"You... You can handle the whole police report thing?"

"Absolutely." Ray wrapped his arm around the man's shoulders. "And I'll call you tomorrow, just to follow up and make sure you're all right." He steered Bruce toward the door.

Ray ducked his head into the hallway to make sure it was empty, then walked Bruce to the elevator, keeping his pistol in his hand as discreetly as possible. "I just wish our evening had gone better. Hazards of a career in law enforcement," he lied. "Maybe we could pick up where we left off sometime next week?"

Bruce gaped at him. "You're unbelievable. You nearly shoot me, forget my name, and now you're still trying to get laid?"

"You're right, that was kind of crass." Ray slipped his arm off Bruce's shoulders. He slipped his hand down Bruce's arm, took his hand, and kissed his knuckles. "Get some rest. I'm sure you'll be all right."

Five minutes later, Ray had secured his apartment, turned on the lights, bolted the door, and set the intrusion alarm. Having stumbled in trying to get Bruce naked as quickly as possible, he hadn't bothered with the alarm earlier. He found the spent shell casing in his sheets, right where he expected it and made a mental note to buy wood filler to patch the hole he'd made in the doorframe. Then he pulled out his laptop and began to comb through his cousin Sophie's social media accounts. The pages and accounts where she had posted hourly status updates since she turned

thirteen hadn't been updated in fourteen days. He tried calling her cell phone, not caring about the time. It went straight to voice mail. He pulled up a GPS application that usually pinpointed her location, but it couldn't find her phone.

Frustrated, he tried calling her dorm room on the University of California campus, but there was no answer there either. She had paid extra for a single room, so she didn't even have a roommate he could question. Despite not being able to get in touch with Sophie, Ray refused to worry.

He sent a text message to his sister, instead. Thirty seconds later, his phone rang.

"You are awake." Ray tried to keep his tone casual.

"Of course I'm awake!"

Ray pulled the phone away from his ear as his sister shrieked over the frantic sobs and cries of what sounded like an entire army of worried mothers.

"Aunt Louisa's been here going through Sophie's room since noon. Now she's crying at my kitchen table. Mama and everyone are here. Do you know Sophie's missing?"

Ray switched her to speakerphone. "I heard something like that. I was just checking up on her Facebook stuff and trying to get a hold of her. Has Aunt Louisa talked to the police?"

"No!"

Ray winced, pretty sure that Carmen's shout wasn't directed at him.

"Jose, we do not throw balls in the house! Damn it, hold on...."

He listened to the muffled sound of his sister putting her youngest back to bed and smiled. She was trying to calmly explain that it was past his bedtime, past the dog's bedtime, and past her bedtime too. With an exhausted sigh, she returned to the phone. "No, she hasn't talked to the police. I guess the FBI is in charge, but no one will tell her anything about what's happened. They said they'd have some *family liaison* person call her in the morning. Can you imagine that? Raymond, if you ever have to call a mother and tell her one of her children has been missing for a week, you will *not* tell her someone else will get in touch with her in the morning!"

"Yeah, no shit. How are you holding up?" He didn't have to point out that she had just as much reason to be worried as Sophie's mother, if not

more. Carmen had spent eight years taking care of Sophie like one of her own—she was far more of a mother to their cousin than Aunt Louisa had been for a long time.

Carmen let out a bitter laugh. “How do you think I’m holding up? I’m a wreck. She hasn’t been home for a week, and the entire family is treating me like I’m some kind of monster for not knowing something was wrong. Apparently I’m not even allowed to be upset because I should have somehow magically sensed she wasn’t on campus.” Her snuffle squeaked through the phone. “So what are you going to do?”

Ray sighed. “Not panic. Carmen, I’ll go to her dorm first thing in the morning. I’ll check in with her professors, talk to the girls on her floor. If none of her friends or her boyfriend have reported that she’s missing, odds are she isn’t actually in danger. But I’ll find her, okay?”

“Can you talk to the FBI?”

“The FBI doesn’t like me.” Ray bit the inside of his cheek, surprised at how hard it was to keep from laughing. “I can find her without them.”

“Raymond, just because one FBI agent kicked your ass doesn’t mean they’re all jerks....”

“Technically, last week brings the total number of FBI agents who have kicked my ass to two. Although, the first guy might have been justified.”

“First guy?” Carmen giggled.

Ray smiled and didn’t even try to fight the flush through his cheeks as he remembered the week he’d spent screwing a hot federal agent not eight months ago. Even though he’d ended the week with a black eye and a cracked rib because he said something to piss the man off, it had been one of the hottest weeks of his life.

“Yeah, I’m not telling you *that* story. It’s personal.”

“Suit yourself. You’ll call them in the morning?”

“No. He was an okay guy, but the rest of them are assholes. Every single one of them.”

“They’re the ones investigating. And I know Alejandro has gone to look for her, too. Things could get really nasty if you two run into each other....”

If Alejandro was actively looking for his sister, Ray thought it would be nice to have someone else on his side. Alejandro was a psychotic enemy,

and he lived in a world where there were seldom good explanations when someone disappeared for a few weeks.

On the other hand, Sophie wasn't a part of that world. Sophie was twenty-one, a college student, and tended to party too much. San Diego was only a five-hour drive from Las Vegas, and Ray knew she'd been eager to go ever since she was busted trying to get into one of the casinos with a fake ID at nineteen. She was also just as much of a closeted nerd as Ray, and he wouldn't put it past her to spend days at a time lost in a programming project, forgetting about mundane things like attending class and eating. Maybe she'd had a fight with the new guy she was dating and had gone off with some friends for some girl time. He'd never heard her use phrases like *girl time*, but anything was possible.

Even the FBI's involvement didn't necessarily mean something was wrong. If they could identify her as a relative of Alejandro Munoz, they might jump at the chance to investigate, even if they were just investigating a college co-ed spending the week letting loose in Vegas.

He gritted his teeth and tried to think of any alternative. He sighed. "I'll talk to them. But, she might just have gone to Vegas for the week. Do you still have her spare key card?"

THE NEXT day, Ray swung by his sister's house to grab the spare key to Sophie's dorm room. He reassured his sister once again that Sophie was probably just fine and headed north on the I-15 to the regional FBI office. The newer office building was four stories, with sleek black windows and equally shiny black siding. It looked like any other office building until you realized the twelve-foot ornate iron fence encircled the entire building and parking lot and that it was topped with a thin line of razor wire.

Ray hated coming here. Aside from his issues with individual FBI agents because he was just a police officer, he had to check his weapons with security in the lobby and wait for an escort from the Regional Gang Task Force office—if they decided to see him at all.

He fidgeted in the blue plastic chairs in the lobby, watching a dozen men and women in virtually identical dark suits shuffle in through metal detectors.

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

The shout came from a massive blond man at the edge of the crowd. He had furious brown eyes, one of which was still slightly black. He had features that were often called chiseled, although with his nose bent and still taped, he didn't look particularly handsome.

“Good morning, Special Agent Hathaway.” Ray waved and smiled brightly.

He'd spent the last week suspended from work because of new FBI agent James Hathaway. When Ray had left a message with the task force office to have someone collect his report about the money leaking out of Alejandro's accounts and the gang war that was looming as a result, Special Agent Hathaway read enough back reports to know about Ray's relationship to the cartel leadership. He hadn't bothered to note Ray's position as a homicide detective. Hathaway assumed Ray was a criminal informant in police custody rather than a police officer and had treated him like a criminal. Once he understood the magnitude of the theft Ray had heard rumors of, he tried to handcuff Ray and put him in protective custody—inside a solitary confinement cell in a federal detention center.

In all fairness, if Ray had been a criminal informant, protective custody would have been the way to go. But Hathaway hadn't even bothered to check, much less listen to Ray as he tried to explain and find his ID. Special Agent Hathaway had tried to throw Ray into a car, so Ray threw him into a wall, elbowed him in the face, and then threw him into a food cart. It had seemed like a good idea, at the time.

Ray sighed as he remembered the jeers and laughter from his fellow detectives. Not one of the fuckers had volunteered to clarify things.

Hathaway stopped just two feet from him, standing with his shoulders hunched and his fists clenched. “What the hell do you think you're doing here?”

“Like, in this world? In an existential sense? Because that's a big question, and I need a beer or two to really nail it down.”

“This isn't the police station, jackass!”

Ray pursed his lips and made a show of looking around carefully. “I think,” he said slowly, “you might be right about that. Glad to see those finely honed investigative skills being put to use. I'm here for information on the Sophia Munoz case.”

Hathaway's glare turned into a vicious sneer. "No."

"Hmm?"

"You think anyone in this office is going to hand information on that cartel bitch over to you? The SDPD might not care who you're actually working for, but everyone here knows the truth."

Ray pulled out his phone and found something to pay attention to.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

"Ignoring a raging imbecile," said Ray, swiping through the home screens on his phone but keeping his eyes on Hathaway. If the fucker lost his temper again, Ray would have to take the first hit, but he wanted to know what direction it was coming from so he could minimize the damage before dealing with him.

He should have just gone straight to Sophie's dorm room. He wasn't going to get anything here, except another write-up.

"Hathaway!" a woman shouted. "If you don't get your ass upstairs, we're starting the progress meeting without you!"

Hathaway glared to the side, grumbled, and stalked off. Ray dove out of the chair and slipped to the side as soon as Hathaway turned away. A few quick steps, and he'd put a half dozen of the other man's colleagues between them. He made sure his jacket was open and his badge and ID were visible as he wove through the crowd.

"Hey!" Hathaway shouted behind him. "Hope you're enjoying your time off!"

Ray waited until he was by the security desk near the front door before he turned and waved. "They told you I'm still getting paid for these two weeks, right?" He ducked out quickly, determined to get the hell away from the damn FBI before he really did get into another fight.

He'd likely find out more on his own anyway, so he got back on the highway, heading west.

The wealthy Bohemian neighborhood of La Jolla was perched on a series of green mesas and cliffs on the north side of San Diego County. Its thriving branch of the University of California had been founded on a repurposed Marine Corps base. It had injected racial and cultural diversity into an area where racism and bigotry had been so ingrained that the

original builders included restrictive covenants for race, religion, and ethnicity in the very deeds of the homes they sold.

Thanks to the university, it had evolved to become a haven for successful artists, politicians, and professionals from every background imaginable—provided they could afford the multimillion-dollar homes and the pricey shops. Ray had been just as in love with La Jolla as every other student who went through the university, but the reality of a working-class wage had sunk in after graduation. He still loved visiting the area, even if the downtown nightlife surrounding his condo was more his style.

The university itself was divided into six colleges, each with their own little section of campus and their own academic philosophy. Ray didn't even remember them all now, but he knew that Sophie had enrolled in Warren College, named for Supreme Court Justice Earl Warren, just like Ray had when he was a student. It was an odd choice for a computer engineering major, since Warren College tended to focus on social justice issues, but Sophie seemed to enjoy it.

He had to park at the far end of campus and walk to Warren College, and to the huge six-story residence hall where Sophie lived. He followed a group of students into the building and only had to use Sophie's keycard to get into the suite her room was in, and again into her dorm room. Another girl walked by as he opened the door. He smiled at the glare the girl sent him and slipped inside without a word.

The dorm room was neat, clean, and meticulously organized. Because it was a single room, it was tiny, with a sturdy lofted bed and a matching desk shoved beneath it. The desk had a hutch with a single shelf, half of which was cluttered with framed snapshots of Ray's nieces and nephew. The other half was filled with pictures of Sophie with various groups of friends. She was smiling in every picture, and with her bright eyes and long wavy hair, she was the sparkling center of every single photo.

In the back corner of the desk was a toy Ray had given her during her third Christmas at his sister's house. It was a tiny robotic arm. They had built it together, once Ray convinced her that plugging the insulated wires into their slots wouldn't electrocute her. She'd kept the younger kids entertained for hours, programming it to wave and then to throw tennis balls for their hyper Australian shepherd. It had worked perfectly, provided the younger kids kept putting the tennis balls back in the right spot.

Sophie had grown up so much since then.

Now the center finger of the robotic claw was raised, flipping off the entire world. He couldn't help but chuckle, despite the dire circumstances. The USB cable used to connect the robotic arm to a computer was sitting loose on the desk, along with the charging cable for Sophie's cell phone.

Ray pulled on a pair of latex gloves out of habit and began at the front of the room, searching everything. He moved around the room, from one side to the other, checking everything systematically. He searched through Sophie's armoire and desk, trying not to disturb anything. A dozen empty hangers were scattered among the clothes hanging in the armoire, and her laundry basket was empty. There was no makeup bag, and the basket of toiletries sitting next to the laundry basket held some obscure beauty products Ray had never heard of, but was completely lacking in basic things like shampoo and toothpaste. There was also no sign of her luggage, her backpack, or her laptop case. Since her laptop and phone were also gone, Las Vegas was beginning to look more likely.

When he searched Sophie's desk, he was a bit surprised by how empty it was. There was no address book, no schedule, nothing except a bundle of notebook paper still wrapped in plastic. He knew she did most things on her computer or phone, but almost everyone kept scraps of paper or a pen around a desk.

Finally, Ray climbed up to the top of the bed. It was neatly made, with one of their grandmother's quilts draped over a knit blanket. And aside from the bedding, there was nothing else there.

He hopped down and called his sister.

"Did you find her?" she asked, without bothering with a hello.

Ray sighed. "No, and before you panic, hear me out. I'm pretty sure she's fine. Half of her clothes are gone, along with her luggage, her laptop, her makeup bag, and all that stuff. Odds are she just needed a break. There are no signs of a struggle, and wherever she's gone, she took the time to pack."

"Are you sure? Mama and Aunt Louisa are meeting with some woman from the FBI this morning, but she won't tell them anything over the phone and...."

Ray rolled his eyes, grateful that they were on the phone, because she would have smacked him for it. "No. Stop right there. You're not allowed to

get hysterical and start screaming. I swear I will hang up on you if you do. The whole family is worried because Alejandro wants them to worry. He's the one who came to me, and I'd bet ten bucks the only thing they know is what he's told them. Am I right?"

"Yes, but..."

"Not *buts*. Whatever Alejandro's game is, if he hurt his own sister, even Aunt Louisa would disown him. And wherever Sophie is, she is ten times smarter than him and you know it."

"It's not just Alejandro! The FBI is sending someone here to search the house, too! They're worried, Raymond!"

Behind him, Ray heard the soft buzz as the electronic lock opened. "Hang on, this might be her now."

Ray pulled the door open quickly, expecting and hoping to see Sophie looking hungover and tired. Instead, he saw a tall, slender man in a loose pinstriped suit. The build didn't match Alejandro's, and Ray wasn't willing to open fire in a crowded university residence hall for anyone besides his own dear cousin. Ray took in the man's posture, assessing him as a potential threat. His suit jacket was unbuttoned, giving the man easy access to the pistol in his shoulder harness. His hand was frozen a few inches from the pistol's grip.

Then he took in the way the man's suit hung off him and felt a stir of instant lust. He ran his gaze over tightly muscled arms and shoulders. His mind was swirling, sorting through a dozen different scenarios that might come to pass as soon as the man spoke, and planning how he could manipulate those scenarios to drag this man home with him tonight. As he brought his gaze up to the man's angular, handsome face, he gaped at the familiar features, the soft pale green eyes, and the furious expression on the other man's face.

"You?" Special Agent Elliot Belkamp pointed an accusing finger at him. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Ray swallowed hard. He hadn't seen Elliot in nearly eight months, when they had spent the better part of a week blowing off steam in a northwestern Montana hotel room before Ray had fled back to civilization. The sex had been one of the hottest things Ray had ever experienced, and not just because it was one of his first forays into having sex with other

men. He'd thought so at the time, but diving into San Diego's gay scene headfirst afterward had resulted in one long series of disappointing hookups after another.

Ray had never expected to see him again. Aside from being separated by a thousand miles, Ray had made an ass of himself before they parted ways. To this day, he was utterly confused about just *how* he'd screwed things up, but he was pretty sure he had. He had tried to explain that he was nervous about being with another man, tried to find the words to say that he felt like letting another man fuck him would make him weak, make him less of a man. Elliot had just smiled and said he didn't fuck around with people who didn't respect him and headed for the door. When Ray tried to stop him from leaving, the other man had efficiently knocked him on his ass. Skinny or not, Elliot Belkamp could fight.

Still, even if it meant getting his ass kicked, Ray would gladly do it all over again.

"Carmen," Ray grinned, "I'm going to have to call you back."

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CHAPTER TWO

ELLIOT TOOK a deep breath and forced himself to step back a few inches. “What the hell are you doing in my crime scene?”

Raymond Delgado’s smug smile and infuriating eyes had made Elliot want to hit something every time he had thought about him over the last eight months. To see the man here and now, insinuating himself into Elliot’s case again, made Elliot want to punch the fucker all over again. The fact that he was still just as sexy as ever, still had the same inherent and unquestioning confidence, made it so much worse.

Ray’s smile flickered for a moment, his eyes widening. “Two things.” Ray slipped his ever-present cell phone back into his pocket. “Why is *this* a crime scene? And why is it *your* crime scene?”

Elliot couldn’t believe the man was still so condescending and disdainful. Hathaway had called him to warn him that someone from the SDPD was taking an interest in the case, but Ray couldn’t actually think that Elliot was just going to stand down. This case was the next step in bringing down one of the biggest drug-trafficking organizations on the West Coast, or at least one of the most vicious drug dealers, and there was no chance in hell he was just going to roll over and let some arrogant homicide detective take over.

Elliot felt his fingers try to curl into fists and consciously forced his hands to stay relaxed and open. “It’s my case, so it’s my crime scene. Get out.”

“No.” Ray shook his head quickly. “Why is *this room* a crime scene? What happened here?”

“The student who lived here is the subject of a missing-person investigation. She was a distant relative of the leaders of one of the most

violent drug cartels in Mexico. It's a federal case. Get lost."

Ray squeezed his eyes shut and held up his hand, all but dismissing Elliot. "Do not talk about Sophie Munoz in the past tense. Any idiot can see that the personal effects from this room have been packed with care, so unless you have a body or actual evidence of foul play, do not talk about her like she is dead. Ever."

"God, you never let up, do you?" Elliot snapped. "The snide comments, the insults, the ridicule, it never ends!" He grabbed Ray by the front of his button-down shirt and dragged him out of the dorm room, using his height to pull the heavier man off balance. He slammed the door shut and threw Ray up against it. He pinned Ray by the neck, holding him high enough to make sure Ray couldn't get any leverage with his feet. "This is my case. Even if you were assigned to the task force handling it, it would still be my case. Stay the fuck out of this, or I will arrest you for obstruction of justice, is that clear?"

"She's family...." Ray gasped, clawing at Elliot's forearm. "And I refuse to let anyone talk about her like she's dead...."

Elliot rolled his eyes. "Yeah, try another one. A family liaison officer has already contacted her next of kin."

"She's my cousin.... Hates her family.... My sister and I practically raised her...."

Elliot eased up the pressure on Ray's neck.

"Me and Carmen are the ones listed as her emergency contacts with the college, and I paid most of her fucking tuition this term!"

"You can't seriously expect me to believe that?" Elliot growled. "There is no chance in hell you're her family. No one in her family would ever be able to pass the background check necessary to become a cop. Why don't you tell me what you're actually doing here?"

"You'd be surprised what the San Diego PD will overlook if you're totally honest about it. No one in my immediate family has ever gotten into trouble, so the fact that my grandma's brothers are sociopaths didn't mean I was automatically disqualified. Even so, I had to spend the first eight years of my career chasing around my own cousin's enforcers, with a supervisor ready to call Internal Affairs on me if I so much as bought a new car because of my family! I've never had anything to do with them and neither has Sophie! But that doesn't mean the crap they're into can't hurt her. Hell,

it doesn't mean her own brother wouldn't hurt her, and if he's decided to, I'm the only one who can do shit about it!" Ray kicked against the door and pulled harder against Elliot's arm. "Would you put me down?"

Elliot leaned in close and smirked. "On one condition."

Ray cocked an eyebrow at him. "Tonight?"

Elliot sneered and dropped Ray, stalking away. "Go home. I'll add you to the family liaison officer's contact list. Stay the fuck away from me."

"No!" Ray shouted behind him. "You don't understand. I have to find her. If I don't, her brother is going to use her disappearance to start a fight, and when he starts fights, people die."

Elliot stopped and stared down at the dark hand on his arm. This was a far cry from the cool, intelligent, and supremely confident man Elliot remembered. This man was sincerely afraid. He was keeping his voice down and his tone casual, but Elliot could hear the barely concealed tremors that accompanied his words. Elliot sighed and jerked his arm out of Ray's grasp. "Don't touch me. And she is a Munoz. She's the great niece of the founders of the Tijuana drug cartel."

"It's a big family. She's one of three hundred great nieces and nephews living in the United States. You think every single one of us makes a living by cutting people into little chunks and letting them dissolve in barrels of lye? Because assuming we're all like her brother Alejandro really isn't fair."

"That..." Elliot turned away, hoping Ray wouldn't be able to see the disgust on his face.

"*That's* why I need to find her. Look, you know I'm good at this. And I'd bet a thousand dollars that I know San Diego better than you do. Let me help you! At least tell me if you think she's all right?"

"Do you think she's all right?" Elliot asked, regretting it instantly.

"Yes," Ray said. "She had a set of matched luggage. It's gone, along with half of her clothes. Everything else is still folded or on hangers, and the laundry basket is empty, so she packed, and she wasn't rushed about it. Her makeup bag, toiletries, and laptop are gone too. Since you're treating it like a crime scene, I'm guessing you didn't go through and tidy up."

"Duh." Elliot rolled his eyes. He stalked out of the residence-hall suite and then stopped in the open stairwell as his brain finally pieced together

the last five minutes. When Ray had been asking what made the room a crime scene, he might not have been being a condescending asshole after all. He had been terrified that his cousin had been killed or injured there. With Ray Delgado it was very hard to tell when he was actually insulting you and when he was hiding his own insecurities behind insults. Elliot had seen Ray Delgado do both, when Ray was coming to terms with the fact that the love of his life was in love with someone else. Elliot sighed and started down the stairs. “If I leave you alone, you’re just going to keep digging on this, aren’t you?”

“Yes. It’s not obstruction to look for a missing member of your family, is it? I was planning on talking to her professors today and her friends if I can track them down. If you’re asking if I’ll share information with you, I’d have to say that really depends. If you’re just here to nail Alejandro Munoz and not to find Sophie, then I’m not sharing shit with you. How are you handling this case?”

“I’m looking for Sophie Munoz,” said Elliot.

“Then give me your number, and I’ll call you after I ask around.”

Elliot sighed. He should have known Ray Delgado would take his question to mean that he wanted access to Ray’s information, rather than as an offer to let Ray have access to his own. The last of Elliot’s cases Ray Delgado had insinuated himself into had been a disturbing mess in which a murderer and pedophile had kidnapped and nearly killed Ray’s partner. It had taken Ray Delgado a few hours to assess the situation and find them, in a town he’d never been to, with nothing more than a cell phone. Elliot had been in charge of an entire team of federal agents, with search teams, tactical units, satellite uplinks, and helicopters—and Delgado had beaten him to it with a cell phone.

Elliot didn’t particularly like him, and he didn’t want him interfering, but he also didn’t want to walk into the federal building Monday morning and find out that Ray Delgado had once again swept an entire case out from under him over the weekend. This was his first case since being assigned to the East County Gang Task Force, and if he didn’t make a good impression, the six-year assignment he was promised would probably be over in a year. Then he’d have to move on, again. He was getting too old to deal with transferring between field offices every year, no matter how much it had helped advance his career.

He sighed. “Look, I’m going to talk to the professor who filed the

initial report on your cousin. He's been a pain in the ass to get hold of, so I haven't gotten a chance to interview him yet. You can tag along if you promise to keep your mouth shut and not interfere, agreed?"

Ray's eyes narrowed, obviously suspicious. "My lips are sealed. I was wondering about this guy anyway."

Elliot led the way across the enormous campus.

Despite agreeing to be quiet, Ray kept talking. "I mean, Carmen just figured Sophie was busy with classes the last few weeks, and I don't expect to see her outside of special occasions. I know she's got to have a social life. She's got friends, a boyfriend, hobbies, all that shit. I can't figure out why none of them would have reported her missing, but one of her professors did."

Elliot slowed his pace down so he'd have time to properly dissect Ray's concerns. "Who's Carmen?"

"My sister."

"Hmm. Are you so sure that your cousin had a lot of friends?"

Ray began to nod and then stopped, rolling his eyes. "Honestly, no. I know she had a boyfriend, though. I had to babysit while she and my sister went dress shopping the week before her birthday. Apparently he's romantic."

Elliot froze, his focus on the case shattered by his own imagination conjuring a picture of Ray being tackled by a dozen squealing children. It was cute and disturbing at the same time. "You babysit?"

"When I have time." Ray nodded and pulled out his cell phone. He swiped his finger across the screen and showed Elliot a picture of the victim and three young children. They were ridiculously cute. "That's from just after Jose's second birthday. Family is still important to me, even if most of them hate me."

Elliot caught himself smiling at the picture and stopped. "If she did have a boyfriend, she might have told him where she was going. There's no reason to call the police if he knows she's fine." Elliot doubted she had a boyfriend, though, or that she had as many friends in real life as Ray believed. Despite her continuous presence on social-media websites, he hadn't been able to track down many people in the real world who recognized her from a photograph, including her neighbors in the residence hall and other students in her classes.

Elliot turned to cross the main commons, heading toward an enormous building that looked like it belonged in the downtown business district, or maybe in a futuristic science-fiction city, rather than on a university. When Elliot stopped to stare at the building directory, Ray took the lead. “Come on.”

“How the hell do you know where *I’m* going?” Elliot raced to catch up to him.

“Sophie is studying computer engineering. I studied computer science. It’s not like they’ve moved the entire department. Which professor are you looking for?”

“Computer science?” Elliot gaped at him. “Really?”

“What, you think I can’t do computer science?”

“But you went into law enforcement?”

Ray shook his head dismissively. “The guys on my team who are always whiny little dicks when I blow their success rates out of the water were the ones who majored in criminal justice. You know the thing about people who are intelligent enough to succeed in college majors that require calculus instead of just a passing grade in algebra? They’re generally intelligent enough to succeed in damn near anything. Which professor?”

Elliot shook his head and smirked. “Holland. Nathaniel Holland.”

Ray’s eyes drew together. “She’s talked about him. I’ve never met him, but his office will be on the third floor.” He charged up the stairs, then stopped and stared down at Elliot. “Oh, hell no. I know that trick. You’re not falling behind me just so you can watch my ass all the way up the stairs.”

Elliot jogged up the stairs. “Not interested in your ass, Delgado.”

Elliot hurried up five more steps. When he didn’t hear Ray’s footsteps behind him, he stopped and glanced back down the stairs. Ray was grinning up at him like he was edible. “What? I never said it was a *bad* trick. Go on....” Ray gestured up the stairs.

“Well, I’m glad to see you’re just as annoying as ever.”

Elliot ignored him all the way to the open office door. Inside, a younger-looking man in a pair of blue jeans and a sweater was glued to a computer monitor, typing so fast that his fingers were a blur.

“Dr. Holland?” Elliot rapped his knuckles on the wall by the door.

“My office hours are on Tuesdays and Thursdays.” The man didn’t

even break the rhythm of his typing.

Elliot shoved the door open, not really caring about the stacks of books he was knocking over in the process. “Mr. Holland?” Elliot dropped the honorific and barged in the rest of the way. “I’m Special Agent Elliot Belkamp, with the Federal Bureau of Investigation.”

The typing stopped instantly. The man glanced up and pulled a pair of plastic-rimmed glasses off. He looked so young it caught Elliot off guard. The man was younger than him. He had neatly trimmed short brown hair in a style that would have looked appropriate on an old politician, and he was good-looking.

“Oh. Sorry about that.” He stood up and held out his hand. “I’ve usually got a steady line of students waiting outside the door. Please, come in, come in. Sorry for the cramped quarters,” Professor Holland quickly moved stacks of books off the rickety wooden chairs beside his desk. “All of the big offices go to tenure-track professors.”

Dr. Holland looked around the cluttered shelves lining each wall, then set the stack of books down on top of another stack on the floor. He moved more books off a large black coffee pot. “Coffee? It’s fresh.” He found a stack of disposable cups and poured them each some before Elliot could refuse. “I don’t have cream, but I’ve got sugar. Somewhere.” He moved more books still and found a plastic bag filled with a mixture of tiny sugar and sweetener packets.

“No thank you.” Elliot sat down and motioned for Dr. Holland to return to his chair.

“Again, I’m sorry for the lack of space. But you know what they say—everyone’s got to pay their dues...” Dr. Holland sat down and gripped the arms of his chair. His fingers clung to the faded wood so hard that his knuckles were white. “What can I do for you, Special Agent Belkamp?”

“We’re here to ask about the last time you saw Sophie Munoz.” Elliot pulled out a small notepad.

“You are? The FBI, not the police? It was the police department I called.”

“It’s a joint effort with the local police department. Can you tell us about her? About the last time you recall seeing her?”

“Sophie...” A blush crept up the professor’s cheeks before he continued. “Sophie is one of my brightest students. She’s a brilliant young

lady. She's in my Artificial Intelligence and Advanced Network Security classes. She's been in my classes for two years now. She's always my best student."

"Artificial intelligence?" Elliot prodded.

The professor smirked. "I know what it sounds like, but we're not making giant robots set to go on a rampage or anything like that. It's working with algorithms that can analyze new and unknown problems, run projections based upon a list of variables, sometimes through an enormous series of variables, and then decide on a solution to the problem."

"Huh...." Elliot jotted down the names of the classes. "Sounds complicated."

"Most things in this field are. But not for a programmer of Sophie's caliber."

"She enjoys your classes, too," Ray cut in. "She told me a bit about her project—a control system for unmanned navigation. Basically, an onboard remote control that can navigate a toy car and video camera over an unpredictable landscape, mapping out its path as it goes. It could be used in bigger vehicles, too, like a fully armed Hummer. If it gets to an obstacle it can't find a way around, it backtracks and takes another path."

"That's right!" Dr. Holland smiled brightly. "The program can be adapted to just about anything. Military applications, space travel, toys, evolving encryption systems.... I told her that once it was debugged she could walk into a job with any of a dozen different defense contractors, no matter what those national security yahoos said." Dr. Holland froze, his mouth still open and poised to continue. "How do you know Sophie?"

"What national security yahoos?" Ray ignored the professor's question. Elliot glared at him, but Ray ignored him too.

"She was hoping to get an internship with the National Security Agency, hoping to work for them full-time after graduation, but they turned her down after a preliminary background check. Some of her relatives aren't US citizens." He waved his hand dismissively. "How did you say you knew her?"

"We're family."

Dr. Holland kept smiling, but his flushed cheeks turned white. Elliot watched the way he shifted back in his seat. "Family?" The professor's tone

rose to a squeak as he repeated the word.

“That’s right.”

Elliot settled back in his chair and smiled brightly. “So did you and Miss Munoz work together outside of class?”

“No. I.... That is, I helped her with some of the object development, but the algorithm is entirely her work. She likes to work alone. She won’t even work with other students on group projects and only occasionally participates in class discussions. It’s a pity, she’s got something of an undeserved reputation for being... well, for being an airhead.” The professor glanced between Elliot and Ray, his gaze never lingering on either of them for more than a moment. “She was dating this boy in Advanced Network Security, though. Luca Garcia is his name. He was always trying to help her with her assignments, even though his scores are dismal compared to hers. She never pointed it out, trying to spare his feelings I’m sure, but when they first started dating, she spent more than a few evenings in the UNIX lab fixing the code sections he *helped* with.”

“Luca Garcia?” Elliot added the name to his notes.

“That’s right. She was running to meet him before class, the Friday before last. Neither of them was in class that day, but I didn’t think much of it. He was in class again Monday, but she hasn’t shown up to either class since.”

“Why did you wait until two days ago to call the police?” Elliot asked.

Dr. Holland glanced at Ray again. “I suppose I thought her friends and family would report it if something was wrong.”

“Did her boyfriend offer any kind of explanation about her absence? Maybe that she was out sick?”

The professor shook his head. “I asked, but he said they broke up and that he hadn’t seen her.” He spun in his chair, turned his head toward the computer monitor, and then looked back at them for a moment. “Although, I saw him using her laptop in class a few days ago. His own laptop is covered in stickers and decals, but hers is plain black.”

Elliot made a note of that and an abbreviated note of the way Dr. Holland kept turning away. Whether he was turning his entire body, his head, or just his eyes, the man was looking anywhere but at the two of them.

“Is your coffee okay? I swear I made it just twenty minutes ago.”

Dr. Holland nodded at the cup Elliot had set aside. Elliot tried not to grimace. “I’m sure it’s fine.” He wrapped his fingers around the cup and took several long sips. “It’s perfect. Thank you, again.” Elliot drank the rest quickly and felt like cursing. He was already dealing with an encroaching headache because his blood sugar was low, and the coffee was all it would take to throw him into a full-blown migraine.

“I think we got everything we need.” He stood and fished a business card out of his pocket. “I just need your full name, address, and a phone number where you can be reached this weekend in case I have to follow up on anything.” Elliot handed the man his own business card and took one of Dr. Holland’s in turn. “And if you think of anything else, anything that might help us track down Miss Munoz, please give me a call.”

He waited until they were well away from Dr. Holland’s office before he glanced at Ray. He could tell from the scowl on Ray’s face that he’d picked up on Dr. Holland’s body language, too. He waited for Ray to say something, since the shorter man looked like he was going to burst if he didn’t. Despite the nervous energy, Ray kept his mouth shut. As they headed back across campus, past the library, which looked more like homage to the Starship *Enterprise* than a library, Elliot finally gave in to the silence. “So was your cousin the type who would fool around with her professor, or do you think the professor just has a crush on her?”

Ray’s silent glare was the only answer Elliot got.

“Did she ever mention this Luca Garcia to you?”

“He was lying!”

“Yes.” Elliot just smiled. “But you said she had a boyfriend. Does Luca Garcia ring a bell?”

Ray slowed down and kicked at the ornate paving stones at their feet. “Luke. Carmen said Sophie’s boyfriend is named Luke. But she wouldn’t put up with some moron who couldn’t keep up with her intellectually. She wouldn’t.”

“And the reputation as an airhead?”

“It’s bullshit. Look, the professor having a crush on her I can understand. Maybe he was throwing her boyfriend’s name out as an easy way to get rid of the kid.”

“What?”

“I think he just mentioned her boyfriend because he’s hoping I’ll kill him.”

Elliot stopped and gaped down at Ray. “What kind of sense does that make? Delgado, her professor thinks she’s dead. He thinks her boyfriend killed her, and he didn’t want to come right out and say it. What the hell is going on in your head?”

“He became defensive when I told him I was a member of Sophie’s family, you saw it! He leaned back, he crossed his arms and legs, and he tried to put as many barriers as he could between him and me. And he looked at *me* when he talked about her boyfriend.”

“And no one can look at you without expecting someone to die?” Elliot laughed. “How is it that your department hasn’t pulled you off duty? You’re reading too much into this.”

“I am not!” Ray shouted. The volume of his own voice seemed to catch him off guard, and he glanced around as the ever-moving sea of students stopped to stare at them. “I am not. He knows Sophie. She must have told him about her father and brothers, and he thought I was one of them.”

“Delgado, listen to yourself. Even you have to admit that you sound insane. If you’re going to act all psycho on me, you need to go home.”

“I do not need to go home. Which professor’s next?”

“Holland was the last one. I interviewed the others yesterday. Two of them teach in big lecture halls, they don’t keep track of attendance and didn’t have a clue who she is. Her math professor was pissed because she missed two quizzes and a test, but he started ranting about it in what sounded like Farsi, and all I got after that was that she was going to have to retake the class at this point.”

Elliot rubbed his right temple, feeling the ache of the headache kicking into high gear. If he had eaten something to slow down how fast he digested the coffee, he might have been able to buy enough time to get home. The ache inside his head began to throb in time with his heartbeat. Within seconds, splotches of glowing light and darkness began to float across his field of vision.

He was fucked.

He knew that within two hours the icepick throb would set in, and then he’d be out of commission until morning at least.

Ray just wasn't going to let this go, though. "Are you going to go talk to her boyfriend?"

"Duh...." Elliot cringed as his own voice pierced the throbbing rhythm. "You can't even give me credit for being able to manage my own fucking investigation!"

"That's not what I meant. I was trying to ask if I could come with you, Special Agent Oblivious."

"Are you going to keep acting crazy?"

"I can be professional."

"And if this guy killed your cousin?"

"It's your case. You'd arrest him, wouldn't you?"

"And if it's gruesome? If it's a bloody, horrible mess and we walk in to find him jacking off right in the middle of it?"

Elliot was impressed by the way Ray adopted a calm smirk rather than throwing a punch at him. Right now, a punch to the head would really hurt. "So you don't intend to knock? Because most guys will tuck it back into their pants if they have to go answer the door...."

"Not the point."

"I can count on you to flay the bastard alive in lockup, right?" Ray managed to turn his smirk into a pleading, puppy-dog grin.

"Hell no. Did that look work on Superman?"

"Superman?"

"Your old partner."

"Always!" Ray cackled.

Elliot stalked away, but Ray caught up with him. "Who's the one not giving credit for professionalism now, hmm? I am not going to interfere. I still have every confidence that she's alive, and if something bad has happened to her, there are a lot scarier people in her life than this Luca Garcia. If I'm wrong, I know you'll arrest him."

"And if I don't?" Elliot asked. He felt as if he was talking to a child, taking Ray by the hand and guiding him to the obvious conclusion that he was just too damn close to have any part in this investigation.

Ray shrugged again. "If there's evidence, and you won't or can't arrest him, I will."

"You swear? You can look at a suspect, knowing he's hurt someone you love, and arrest him? If you had already drawn your weapon and were

just one fraction of an inch away from making the world a better place? You'd arrest him?"

Ray's grin softened for a moment, melting into an expression so severe Elliot wasn't sure he'd believe the man before him and the grinning asshole were ever the same person. "Yes," Ray said seriously. "I've done it before."

Elliot wanted to call that one as bullshit, like almost everything else Ray Delgado said, but something in the man's expression was too raw, too solid to question.

"Look, if you're so convinced I'm going to murder your suspect, then go without me. But at least let me look at the case file after? I just—"

Elliot hissed as his vision darkened around the edges. Having someone to back him up when he was like this was a smart idea, he knew. Most of the Gang Task Force was mobilized already, trying to track down Sophie Munoz's brother, so it would be hard to get somebody else. Elliot interrupted him. "You can tag along."

"Huh?"

"If you leave your sidearm behind, if you don't say a fucking word, you can come with me when I interview this Luca Garcia."

Elliot was relieved when the stoic expression vanished from Ray's face and his carefree, million-dollar smile returned. As the warmth of Ray's eyes sank into him, Elliot turned away fast. There was no chance in hell he was going to start thinking about Ray as anything other than an annoyance this time around.

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CHAPTER THREE

RAY KNEW something was very wrong with Elliot as they walked across the campus parking lot. His long legs and tight muscles just weren't moving with the same grace and fluid confidence Ray had come to expect. He was taking short, hurried steps. The way Elliot kept brushing his fingertips over his temple was starting to seem less like a nervous tic and more like pain. Every now and then, Elliot slowed down and swayed slightly, rubbed his eyes, and then continued.

If Ray hadn't seen Elliot composed and put together just a few minutes ago, Ray would think he was drunk. It got so bad that by the time Elliot fished his keys out of his pocket, dropped them twice, and finally managed to get his silver Honda Civic unlocked, Ray had seen enough.

"I think I'll take those." Ray swiped the keys and looped his hand through Elliot's elbow. He steered Elliot to the passenger door, getting more worried when the stubbornly independent FBI agent didn't resist at all. "You're in no shape to drive."

"Hmm...."

"Yeah, eloquent. Get in the car."

Ray thought about calling Elliot a cab but decided against it. He was confident Sophie was fine, and he was pretty sure he could find her on his own, but he was curious enough about Elliot's involvement that he wasn't willing to let the other man get away from him yet.

"Where am I going?" he asked, pulling out of the parking lot.

"Take the I-5 to Highway 52 East. Tierrasanta exit."

Ray rolled his eyes. He knew how to get to the regional FBI headquarters, but whatever had hit Elliot on the walk across campus wasn't something he was going to be able to work through. He was in no shape to

head back to the office right now. “You sure going back to work right now is a smart idea?” he asked, in a tone that he hoped said *Going back to work right now is not a smart idea*.

“Tierrasanta,” Elliot insisted. “This is a six-year assignment, so I bought a place close to work.”

“Oh. Tierrasanta it is.”

There was always traffic in San Diego, but outside of rush hour, the highways rarely ground to a halt, so they made good time getting across the northern half of the city. “Tierrasanta. Which way now?”

“Left.” The direction was uttered so quietly that Ray thought Elliot might be about to pass out.

They drove past an ornate sign proclaiming the quiet residential neighborhood’s name and then drove up one hill after another, with Elliot guiding him through a maze of nice stucco homes before finally telling him to pull in to a smaller, single-story house on the edge of a gigantic canyon.

Ray studied the neighborhood as he pulled in to the driveway. “I never realized there were this many houses up here. I always just thought it was the federal offices across the highway. Well, and the city and county offices, too. Looks like a nice place.”

“Give me my keys. I’ve got to get inside.”

Ray obliged and followed the FBI agent past a two-car garage and through the front door. Inside, the house had the same open floor plan that California builders had been recreating in tightly packed suburbs for the last twenty years. The living portion of the open space was designated with lush carpet, and an updated corner kitchen was separated from the rest by a granite-topped kitchen island with a long breakfast bar. Vaulted ceilings and gigantic windows made the normal-sized living space feel huge.

“Nice place.” Ray watched Elliot for a moment, but Elliot wasn’t paying attention.

Elliot was bent over a kitchen drawer, pulling out a first aid kit and a mess of white and amber pill bottles. Ray leaned over his shoulder and watched as he fiddled with what looked like an EpiPen.

“Allergies?”

“No.” Elliot took the device and two prescription pill bottles and

disappeared through a door on the other side of the kitchen.

Ray stared at the closed door for a moment, then glanced down at the open drawer. He only hesitated because he wasn't sure how angry Elliot would be if he caught him snooping through his shit. Even if Elliot became furious, Ray figured it would be worthwhile to know what he was dealing with. Inside, he found a dozen more of the devices in a box with a prescription label calling it Imitrex. The amber pill bottles in the drawer ranged from prescription strength ibuprofen, to a full bottle of Vicodin and a full bottle of Percocet. The prescriptions were new, filled by the Naval Medical Center, and Elliot had a hell of a lot of each.

Ray shoved everything back into the drawer and slipped his phone out of his pocket. After a few minutes of research, he had a basic idea of what the injectable migraine medication Imitrex was. It was a drug intended to constrict blood vessels inside the brain, to relieve the pressure of severe migraines. It was typically used with an additional painkiller, and it worked best if taken at the first signs of a migraine. If the caliber of painkillers Elliot had been prescribed were any indication, the man's migraines were severe.

Ray looked up the symptoms of severe migraines, trying to get a better idea of what Elliot was dealing with and how long he was going to be out of commission. The list of symptoms sounded unpleasant, but there was no solid information about how long they could last. He read a dozen different time frames, ranging from two hours to three days. Even two hours meant that there was no way Elliot would be up for tracking down Luca Garcia today. Enough pain medication might be able to dull the migraine, but it would probably also knock Elliot out for the night. Ray pulled the drawer open again, trying to match the shapes and sizes of the prescription bottles to the two Elliot had taken with him. He hoped Elliot had just taken the ibuprofen along with the Imitrex. If he had, they might stand a chance of getting something done tonight.

Noticing that nausea was one of the most prominent symptoms, and that most of the painkillers in the little drawer also tended to be hard on the stomach, Ray shucked his jacket off, tossed it onto the breakfast bar, and began to dig through Elliot's fridge and cabinets.

Elliot Belkamp, Ray realized, ate nothing but crap.

"Pop-Tarts?" Ray groaned. "That's just sad." Wedged between five

boxes of Pop-Tarts and Hamburger Helper, Ray found a few packets of powdered miso soup mix. He glanced into the fridge in hopes of finding some vegetables or chicken to throw into the soup, but came up empty handed. "Plain miso it is...." Ray muttered.

He heated the soup in a small pot on the stove, turned the flame down to low, and then went in search of Elliot. He knocked on the door quietly, waited for an answer that never came, and then cracked the door open. There were no lights on beyond the door, and even though the sun was still up, heavy curtains blocked out most of the light from the windows. He stepped inside and closed the door behind him, then blinked until his eyes adjusted to the gloom. Elliot was sitting on the end of a queen-sized bed. His jacket was gone and his button down shirt was rumpled and open to the waist. He was hunched over with his head cradled in both hands.

"Don't start." Elliot hissed, not looking at him. "Not now."

Ray wanted to snap over the accusation in those words, but that was precisely what Elliot was asking him not to do. It would only make things worse. "You should eat something." He made sure to keep his voice low and soothing. "I made some miso soup. Figured it might be easy on your stomach."

Elliot glanced up at him but didn't move. "You made me soup?"

"Not much choice. Everything else in your kitchen would probably just upset your stomach. If you don't like miso, though, it's your own damn fault for keeping it in your kitchen."

"Stomach?"

Ray shrugged. "Painkiller... Headache... Nausea... Look, do you want the soup or not?"

Despite the way his features were contorted in pain, Elliot smirked. "You recognized the symptoms?"

"No. I looked up the medication."

Elliot started to shake his head and grimaced. "You're not even going to make up some kind of excuse? Apologize?"

"For making you soup? No."

"You really are a sociopath, you know that?"

"No, I am not," said Ray. "Having some sociopathic tendencies isn't enough for the diagnosis. You've got to nail all of them."

"Which criteria don't you satisfy?"

“I don’t engage in criminal conduct, and I do not have a personality disorder.”

“Could have fooled me. You definitely don’t seem to see others as real people, with a basic right to privacy.”

“I wanted to help. And I wanted to know if I was dealing with a junkie going into withdrawals or something legitimate. So is that a ‘no’ to the soup?”

Elliot sighed and tipped over, his entire body curling into a ball. “Soup sounds great.”

Ray felt like shouting, declaring victory. Instead, he sighed too. “Okay. I’ll bring it in. You need anything else?”

“Water?”

“Sure.”

Ray poured the soup into a bowl, grabbed a glass of water, and returned to the room just as Elliot was slipping out of his undershirt. He stopped near the foot of the bed, letting himself stare. He told himself there wasn’t any harm in staring. Since Ray already knew he was gay, the worst that could happen would be making Elliot angry.

Elliot Belkamp was worth staring at, even if it spiked his temper. With his tightly compacted muscles and smooth skin, he was one of the few men Ray had ever thought of as beautiful. He’d tried to tell himself that was illogical, because no part of him was technically beautiful, even for a man. His features were angular. He had a narrow face that was handsome, but not striking. His body was densely muscled, but he wasn’t stacked like the bodybuilders Ray occasionally ogled at in the gym. But somehow, the slender body, sharp features, and blunt personality clicked some switch deep inside Ray’s head and turned him on every time he looked at him. He didn’t remember if it had been that way from the start, but it had become so ingrained in his mind that he couldn’t even look at Elliot without thinking about sex.

Ray left the soup on the nightstand and helped Elliot recline against a pile of pillows. He set the soup in his lap and put the glass of water on the nightstand. He hesitated for a moment and sat down on the bed beside Elliot’s legs.

Elliot took a sip of the soup and glared at him. “Delgado, I don’t mean to sound ungrateful, but why are you doing this?”

“Sophie Munoz... Boyfriend... Case file...” Ray shrugged and kept his gaze away from Elliot’s topless chest.

“I’m going to need a couple hours, at least, and it’s already six o’clock. Interviewing Luca Garcia isn’t going to happen tonight. Don’t you have work or something?”

Ray tried not to smile, but he couldn’t help it. “Uh, no. Two weeks of paid administrative leave. You Feds really can’t take a joke.” He shook his head seriously.

“Huh?”

“I still hear stuff from my family every now and then, although most of them know better than to come anywhere near me. What I do hear, I report to a collaborative gang task force. I don’t work gang enforcement anymore, but I keep up on what’s going on. With the Tijuana leadership all arrested, it’s not like it’s that big of a deal anymore, but.... Someone’s started a rumor that a member of the Munoz family stole a whole lot of money from the cartel and was planning to break from them. I reported it, and some uptight little twerp named Hathaway seemed to think he could treat me like an informant rather than a colleague.”

“Hathaway?” Elliot’s eyes bulged. “He’s huge....”

“Size isn’t a determining factor in being a little twerp.”

A huge grin spread across Elliot’s face, despite the pain he was in. “You were the informant he couldn’t press charges against? The one who refused protective custody a week ago? He’s been whining about that nonstop.”

“I am not an *informant*. I might not say no to short-term protection in a hotel, but I’m not going into full-blown protective custody. I’m not going to jail, and I see no point in going to go hide in some shitty east-side hotel with an FBI babysitter when there’s no risk. It’s a rumor, not solid information, and I’m not the only one who could have brought it to the task force’s attention.”

“Do you have any idea why he wanted to put you in protective custody?” Elliot gaped at him.

“Yes....” Ray drew out the word. “Didn’t I just say that? You get a bit loopy with those drugs, huh? Anyway, the rumor is that millions have gone missing from accounts used to launder money between the cartel and

Alejandro Munoz's dealers. To me, that means that one of the bankers they're working with is really, really stupid. No one inside the family would do it, but I know a lot of people who wouldn't mind framing Alejandro for it to get him out of the way. Apparently Agent Hathaway's vast experience with the Munoz family leads him to think they're going to use me telling other law enforcement agencies about it as an excuse to kill me. If that moron knew a damn thing about the Munoz family, he'd know they have all the excuses they need to kill me already."

"What did you do to Hathaway, anyway? No one in the office who knows will talk about it, and the report is still sealed. The bomb squad submitted part of the report, though."

Ray squeezed his eyes shut and tried not to laugh. "I did not blow anything up! This time. It's gotten to the point where if they hear my badge number on the radio, they just show up." He glanced up when he felt Elliot flinch, caught himself, and lowered his voice. "Sorry. Seriously, though, you play with a dry-ice bomb one time, and fuckers on the bomb squad stalk you for the rest of your career. Special Agent Hathaway tried to handcuff me and throw me into the back of an SUV. So I threw him off me. I couldn't get leverage to throw him into the car. I had to turn to get any leverage, so he ended up spinning too. I had no idea that food cart was sitting right there. Right where it's been every weekday afternoon between eleven and three for the last six years. He kind of knocked it over when he ran into it."

Elliot took a long sip of soup and leaned back, shutting his eyes. "I thought he was exaggerating about the informant in this case being a pain in the ass."

Ray let his palm slip over Elliot's knee and studied his face, trying to gauge his reaction. If the pained grimace on Elliot's face was any kind of hint, he didn't even notice. "*This* case?" Ray whispered. "It's the same case. You think there's a connection between Sophie disappearing and the rumor about the money."

"Do I?" Elliot chuckled.

Ray watched the way his head rolled to the side, then slowly righted itself. "Loopy. You're adorable when you're loopy."

Elliot's gaze seemed to lose focus for a moment, then locked on to his eyes. "I don't know." His tone dropped low. "Is there a connection between

Sophie Munoz vanishing and millions of dollars vanishing from illicit accounts controlled by her big brother?”

“So you think she stole the money, and she’s trying to disappear.” As much as Ray hated saying that out loud, it made sense. Sophie hadn’t been taken from her dorm room, she had packed her things and left. And Alejandro wanted to find her badly enough to risk looking for her right under an FBI investigation—or rather, he wanted to find her badly enough to con Ray into looking for her. He’d been wondering why Alejandro was suddenly so worried over the fate of a sibling he openly detested.

Ray couldn’t assume Alejandro’s motives were normal, because they never were. If the rumors were true, he’d lost a lot of money, and the Tijuana drug cartel was going to expect him to get it back. If he had that much at stake, he might be inclined to forget about flesh and blood ties altogether. If Alejandro suspected his sister stole that money from him, Ray had no choice but to assume that if Alejandro found her first, he’d kill her.

“I really hope you’re wrong,” said Ray.

Elliot shook his head, the motion exaggerated and slow, as the painkiller made him groggy. “Been following the money, tracing electronic funds transfers since your report came through the system last week. None of the funds have stopped moving yet, and our guys haven’t even said how much money is involved. But they traced it back to an IP address at the UCSD campus. You really think it’s a coincidence?”

“I...” Ray didn’t think it was a coincidence. “I’m a cynical bastard. I want it to be a coincidence, but it’s a bit much. She told me she wanted to go into federal law enforcement. She’d throw away her chance if she got involved with something like this.”

“She got turned down. Her brothers, and father, and uncles came up on a standard background check. It was about six months ago. Right before she hooked up with this Luca Garcia, if her professor’s account of things is right.”

“Two months before the rumors about someone draining those accounts started running around.” Ray nodded to himself. “Well, fuck. He played me.”

“Who?”

Ray plastered a reassuring smile on his face, and since Elliot seemed

to be too high to object, squeezed his knee a little. “Don’t worry about it.” Ray waited to see if Elliot was going to shove his hand away. Ray swallowed hard when Elliot didn’t get angry. “Hey, since you’re stoned, can I ask you a question?”

Elliot almost managed to glare at him.

“Was it that bad, being with me?”

Elliot let out a sound that was half-way between a chuckle and a huff. “You should go home, Delgado.”

Ray slipped his hand away, knowing he’d pushed Elliot’s tolerance too far. With his former partner, he could always count on the other man calling him out when he got carried away, whether he was making too many bad jokes or crossing the physical boundaries he had imposed on their relationship when they were first assigned to each other. Without Hayes there to smack him in the head, he wasn’t always sure when he’d upset someone, but he was pretty sure he’d just crossed that line with Elliot. Again.

“Whatever it was I said, whatever I did... I’m sorry.”

Ray couldn’t help smiling down at Elliot. The way Elliot couldn’t keep his eyes open was cute. When his breathing evened out, Ray took the half-empty bowl of soup back to the kitchen. He thought about calling a cab to get back to his car, or back to his place downtown, but he had a whole three dollars in his pocket and knew there was no way that was going to get him home unless he took the bus. Most of the cabs in the city didn’t accept credit cards yet, and he didn’t particularly want to bother finding the nearest ATM. Instead, he washed the pot and bowl, stole a strawberry Pop-Tart from Elliot’s pantry, and sat down on the threadbare green sofa sitting in the center of the beautiful living room like an eyesore.

He wanted to smack himself.

He wasn’t supposed to get worked up over people, especially not people he’d already slept with. But over the last few months, some treacherous part of his mind began conjuring images of what it might be like to be with the same person, not just for a few days, but every day.

The spectral hopes and longing had become annoyingly persistent. They were also addictive. They had started with Ray’s ridiculous fixation on his partner Hayes, and when he had chosen someone else rather than

even give him a chance, he expected the idea to fade. Instead, he found himself sizing up everyone he slept with now, trying to fit them into some warped vision of a future he knew he could never have. He'd never been with a woman he could see having a future with, but with men, the fantasy of a life together felt real, possible. So Ray had spent many of his nights off pursuing men rather than women, just to indulge in the fantasy for a little while. What had always been just random sex suddenly carried the promise of something more. Like a new spice transforming his favorite food, that *something more* was tantalizing.

Maybe it was just because he was getting older. Most Latino men his age were settled down and raising families of their own, and Ray knew he wasn't immune to the stereotypes and customs he'd been immersed in as a child. It was possible the loneliness he'd been feeling since his partner took off nine months before was getting to him. Whatever it was, the idea of finding someone special, someone who would be there past breakfast, had gone from terrifying to exciting.

No matter how exciting it became, though, Ray knew life wasn't that easy. He'd never known anyone who'd had a relationship last beyond a few years. After the first night of sex, when people stopped adhering to a standard hookup script, Ray's own social ineptitude ruined any chance he had of finding something that would even last for a few weeks, much less years.

He had screwed up whatever chance he might have had with his partner from the start by not being honest with him. Ray still wasn't sure how he'd screwed things up with Elliot, but the way Elliot kept trying not to smile when they talked gave Ray a bit of hope that he might be able to fix things.

Before he could think about that, he had to find Sophie.

He unbuckled his belt, grabbing his holster as the leather slipped through the belt loop, then set it down on the arm of the couch. He never slept well when he was alone, not until he was utterly exhausted. He hadn't slept in nearly two days, and he was so tired that he felt like scratching his eyes out, so he figured getting to sleep now wouldn't be a problem. He stretched out on the ancient sofa, surprised by the comfortable way it seemed to swallow him, and buried his face against the cushions. After twenty minutes, the silence in Elliot's living room began to make him so

anxious, he knew sleep wasn't going to happen. He pulled his phone out of his pocket instead and played a word game. When he couldn't stand that anymore, he went back to Sophie's social media posts and pored through them again.

Before, he'd been looking for excited notes about travel plans and parties, but now he studied the messages she exchanged with Luca Garcia, trying to glean some insight into their relationship. Luca Garcia's Facebook page announced his affiliation with a Mexican gang based in Texas. The profile picture next to Luca Garcia's comments showed a young man holding a pistol, throwing up gang signs, and glowering at the world.

The name Garcia could be a coincidence, Ray knew, but he never let any connection go unexplored in his investigations. Since the violence in Tijuana had settled down, the Tijuana drug cartel was slowly being swallowed by the central Mexico cartels, under the direction of one of the last of the older generation of cartel bosses, Esteban Garcia.

No matter how much he thought Sophie was too smart to be manipulated by some gang punk, their conversations painted her as a woman who was quick to agree, quick to give in to arguments, and always conciliatory. As he skimmed her responses to the young man, Ray began to recognize the clipped tone and figure of speech responses Sophie often used with Carmen when the other woman annoyed her. The few declarations of affection in the posts came from Luca, and Sophie responded with single word replies. From any other girl, it might have come across as affectionate, but it was Sophie's way of brushing his comments off.

“Dating some kind of gangster wannabe she can't stand...”

Not long after sunset, his phone's battery died completely, and Ray finally dozed off. He managed to sleep until just before dawn. He found Elliot's guest bathroom, which was empty except for half a roll of toilet paper, and then poked around Elliot's laptop hoping to find a power cord he could use to charge his phone. When that turned up nothing, he tried turning on the laptop itself, desperate for something to keep his mind busy. He hit the space bar, then held down the power button for a few seconds. Nothing happened. Ray sat down in front of the computer at the breakfast bar, content that he'd found something to keep himself busy.

CHAPTER FOUR

ELLIOT WOKE up to a smoky, chemical smell that left him panicking and wondering why the hell his smoke detectors weren't blaring. He leapt out of bed, nearly fell flat on his face as a wave of dizziness swept over him, and stumbled out of his room to find whatever was on fire. He stopped cold as he entered his kitchen and saw a mess of electronics spread across his counter. From end to end, the counter was covered with small circuit boards, oddly shaped pieces of plastic with wires attached to them, and metallic rectangles covered with stickers and warning labels. At the end of the counter, hunched over a small green circuit board, was Ray Delgado. He was holding a small silver coil of solder in one hand, and a smoking soldering iron in the other. He touched the circuit board and a puff of acidic smoke drifted up.

Elliot tried to make sense of what he was seeing, including what was left of *his* dismantled laptop at the far end of the counter.

"Good morning, sunshine." Ray grinned up at him. "I made oatmeal, but it's probably cold by now."

"Oatmeal?" Elliot glanced at the stove and saw that the man had, in fact, made him breakfast. "I have oatmeal? What is that smell?"

"Resin." Ray bent down over the circuit board again. "It's in the solder, it helps stabilize the alloy, keeps it solid at room temperature, and then it burns away once the solder melts. Sorry, I know it stinks. I'm almost done."

"Do I want to know what you're doing?"

Ray kept his eyes on the circuit board and touched the coil of solder to it quickly. Another puff of smoke rose. "I am replacing two blown capacitors."

Ray didn't take his attention away from the circuit board.

"Is that what was wrong with it?" Elliot asked. That laptop had been sitting on the counter for nearly a month, waiting until Elliot remembered to take it down to one of the electronics waste collection drives that different stores around town offered occasionally. Since it had been out of warranty when it died, he'd just replaced it with a new one—albeit, one he'd been leaving at the office most days.

"Yes. I'm replacing them with higher-rated ones, so they shouldn't blow out again. The rest of it.... When it comes to electronics, you get what you pay for."

Elliot shrugged. "Or you get something that's cheap enough to replace when it breaks. Do you carry random electronic bits with you?"

Ray waved the soldering iron. "There's a hardware store down by the freeway ramp. They opened at seven. It's next to a grocery store you should totally visit more often. I grabbed you oatmeal and turkey and stuff."

Elliot took in the mess on the counter again, wondering how long it had taken Ray to disassemble, diagnose, and fix the computer. The repair guy Elliot had consulted said it would need a new circuit board and take a week to repair. Ray was still dressed in the same slacks he'd worn the day before, but he had stripped down to a plain white undershirt that clung to every inch of his darkly tanned skin. Even though Elliot wouldn't admit it out loud, the man was definitely worth drooling over. But his normally handsome face was marred by dark circles beneath his bloodshot eyes. He'd obviously slept on Elliot's couch, and slept so poorly he looked hung over. "How long have you been awake?"

"Too damn long."

Elliot watched him set the soldering iron down, and then he grabbed a tiny set of wire cutters and clipped the thin pieces of metal he'd just attached to the circuit board. Ray spun the circuit board in his hands, then carried it over to the gutted shell of Elliot's old laptop and set the small circuit board into place. With a screwdriver so tiny that he had to hold it between two fingers, Ray began to secure the rest of the components, clipping things back into place and reassembling the laptop as if he'd done it a thousand times before.

"You fix a lot of computers?" Elliot asked.

“Yeah. They’re neat. And don’t give me that look.” Ray wagged a finger at him without looking up from his project.

“What look?”

“That *you’re a closeted geek* look. Being a geek hasn’t been something to be ashamed of for decades now.”

“There was no such look,” Elliot lied. “Will it work?”

Ray glared at him for a long moment, then went back to clipping things into place. “Eat so we can get going already.”

“So you can leave this mess for me to sort out?” Elliot gestured to the counter. Even he had to admit that the mess was rapidly disappearing back into the thin laptop case.

“I doubt you could sort it out. I’ve fixed your computer, bought you groceries, made you breakfast, and I’m helping you with this case. You’re *welcome*.”

“I didn’t ask you to do any of that. I also didn’t need you to drive me home last night, I’d have gone a bit slow, but I’d have gotten home in one piece. And you know damn well that you’re more of a liability on this case than an asset.”

“Too proud even for a thank you?” Ray sighed. “Hey, Belkamp, catch!”

Ray tossed a tiny metal cylinder at him. Elliot reached out and caught the cylinder, then dropped it again as it stung his hand hard enough to make his knuckles ache. “Hey! What the hell?”

Ray’s lips were pressed together tight and he was shaking. After staring at Elliot for a few more seconds, Ray burst out laughing, then held up another cylinder. “I can’t believe you fell for that! Didn’t you take shop in high school?”

“What the hell did you do?”

Ray took in a deep gulp of air and finally managed to get the laughter under control. “I charged an extra capacitor. It discharges when you touch both leads. I’m sorry, they came in a four pack, and I couldn’t resist.”

“Did you pull this kind of shit with Superman?” Elliot asked.

Ray straightened, the laughter dying quickly. Elliot regretted the question as Ray’s back and shoulders tensed.

Even though the arson case Elliot had been assigned to in

northwestern Montana hadn't actually gotten Ray's partner killed, it had left him physically broken. Elliot had gathered afterward that Ray cared about his partner as more than a friend, and though his partner didn't return his feelings, nearly losing him must have been hard.

"He has a name."

"He must have the patience of a saint. I think Superman fits."

He glanced sideways at the pot of oatmeal, grabbed a packet of Pop-Tarts from the box in the cabinet, and headed back to his room to eat and get cleaned up fast. The sooner he got Ray Delgado back to his own car, and out of his house, the better.

"Okay, I get it." Ray followed him into the bedroom. "It really was just a joke. I used to do that to guys in my shop class all the time. Once to the teacher, even."

Elliot stopped at the bathroom door and spun around. "Tell me something; did the guys in your shop class actually *like* you?"

Ray pursed his lips for a moment. "Do *you* actually like me?"

"No, I don't. I doubt any of the guys in your shop class did, either."

Ray's cocky posture shrank and his shoulders slumped forward. "Okay. I'm sorry, man, I... I'll cool it. No more practical jokes."

"Yeah, right. Get the hell out, I want to take a shower."

Ray didn't move. "You shouldn't eat that crap." He gestured to Elliot's foil-wrapped breakfast.

"You know what, Delgado? I'm actually a grown man. I've been feeding myself, tucking myself in, and working my own cases for a while now. If I want to eat Pop-Tarts for breakfast, I will. I don't need nutrition advice from a psychopath who's going to try babying me one minute and electrocuting me the next! It's patronizing, it's annoying, and if you don't knock it the hell off I will throw your ass out!"

"I didn't mean it like that, I'm just...."

"Get out."

Ray shut his eyes and took a long, slow breath. "I can never do anything right with you, can I?"

"Do anything right?" Elliot wanted to scream. Being treated like a child in his own home was bad enough. He hated the way Ray just turned Elliot's accusations back on him, shifting the focus away from Ray's own behavior

and making him feel as if he'd done something wrong. Elliot felt like he was sixteen and shouting at his ever-calm, open-minded parents all over again. Elliot grabbed the front of Ray's T-shirt and tried to lift him up. The few inches of height he had over Ray didn't give him much of an advantage, but he managed to lift him a little. Ray was a lot heavier than his slender frame made Elliot suspect.

Elliot was going to shout at him, to shove him out of his bedroom and toss him out the front door, but the way Ray's cheeks darkened and his lips opened, the way his breath seemed to come in shallow huffs even though he wasn't moving, sabotaged Elliot's rage.

Ray's gaze shifted from Elliot's eyes to his lips and back again, and then the other man rose up on his toes and crushed his lips against Elliot's. Elliot stumbled backward, his fingers still wrapped in Ray's T-shirt, pulling the other man with him. He felt Ray's hands on him, felt Ray caressing his shoulders hard enough that his skin stayed warm even after Ray shifted his hands down Elliot's chest to his waist. All the while, Ray's moist lips rubbed against his, not forcing his lips apart, but maintaining a pressure and insistence that left every nerve in Elliot's body tingling. He tugged on Ray's T-shirt, pulling until the other man's body was flush with his own. Ray rocked his hips against Elliot's body, shoving the bulge in his slacks against Elliot's rapidly swelling cock.

Elliot gasped at Ray's frank arousal and used his grip on Ray's T-shirt to shove him away. He would have followed up the push with a punch or a throw, but his head was spinning, and he was already out of breath. He settled his weight on the wall behind him and forced himself to take a few deep, slow breaths to calm down. He glanced up at the obnoxious man in his bedroom, thankful he wasn't the only one standing there with a stunned expression and an obvious hard-on.

When Ray took half a step toward him, Elliot held up both of his hands, stopping him. "No."

The disappointment in Ray's eyes made Elliot want to take it back. It made him want to drag Ray over to his bed and give them both a chance to get this stupidity out of their systems. But that was all this attraction was—a stupid mistake that shouldn't have happened in the first place. It was a mistake Elliot was not going to repeat.

"It's not that it wasn't good. It was good." Elliot stepped into the

bathroom. It had been amazing, but Elliot had no intention of saying that out loud. The last thing Ray Delgado's ego needed was reinforcement. "I'm not going to fuck around with someone close to an active case. It'd be professional suicide."

"Nobody would have to know." Ray's voice was quiet, almost pleading.

"That's not the only reason." Elliot shifted from one foot to the other. He wasn't sure why he was nervous. "I'm just not looking for a hookup. I've got a chance to stay in one spot for more than a year with this assignment. I've got a chance to actually get to know someone. That might not mean anything to someone like you, but it's a chance I've never had before, and I don't want to waste it."

Ray looked like he was about to protest, then he stopped, his head tilting to the side. "Never?"

"I joined the ROTC so I could pay my own way through college." Elliot shrugged, trying to explain. "Training to be an officer, serving in the Reserves on weekends."

"Did you change schools a lot?"

"I started college in the fall semester of 2001. I was called up to active duty three weeks after 9/11, and six months later I was invading Iraq. Being stuck on an infantry convoy in the middle of a war zone isn't exactly the place to start thinking about dating."

"So we're the same, you and me."

"You served?"

"No, I just mean the relationship thing. I've never really been involved with anyone, either."

"I know that's a lie. I think I was number three on the list of people you hooked up with during that week in Montana."

"Number two." Ray shrugged quickly, as if it didn't matter. "But I mean a real relationship. You know, where you can come home and someone's there waiting for you. Where you don't have to keep up all the flirting and shit."

Elliot scoffed, knowing that had to be bullshit. "You've got to be kidding me. What's the longest you've ever dated someone?"

“You mean with actual dates? Like going out and doing something, or just sex?”

“Either.”

“Ten days.”

“Ten days?” Elliot didn’t mean to laugh. “I think I might actually have you beat.”

“What was yours?” Ray asked.

“Two months, during workups for that first tour in Iraq.”

“Workups? Like, training? What, did you sleep with your drill sergeant or something? ’Cause that would be really hot.”

Elliot laughed and leaned his head back against the wall. “He wasn’t *my* sergeant, but he was a drill instructor. Hand-to-hand combat instructor, actually. I met him when I went through basic training during the summer, and when I came back and he wasn’t my instructor anymore, we hit it off. And he was hot. I was eighteen, skinnier than I am now, and I’d only ever seen men built like him on calendars. That was in the middle of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell. I had to deploy with my unit, and.... It never would have worked anyway.” He smiled as he remembered the fierce man who, despite yelling loud enough that he made some of his trainees wet their pants, turned out to be a surprisingly accommodating and attentive lover. Elliot had felt so alone, so isolated by the secret he carried into the Army, he had clung to the older man during those two months. When he got back from his first tour, he’d tried to look him up only to find that he’d been deployed, too. He tried once more when he finished school only to learn his lover had been killed providing cover fire for three of his subordinates to escape from a sniper in the streets of Kabul.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bring up bad memories.”

Elliot shrugged, wondering how he’d let his guard down so far that Ray could tell he was upset. “What about you? Who was amazing enough to last ten whole days with Ray Delgado?”

“Her name was Patricia.” Ray smiled whimsically. “We were sixteen. She was gorgeous. I thought I’d fallen in love at first sight, and she left me for my cousin Martin. One of Sophie’s brothers, actually. He rubbed it in my face for months. About a year later, she got pregnant and he dumped her as soon as she told him. He told everybody in the family it was my kid so

they wouldn't give him shit about it."

"Was it?" Elliot had to ask.

"No. I would have taken care of them both anyway, because I really thought I was in love with her. But she was totally in love with Martin, no matter how he treated her." Elliot was surprised by how disappointed Ray sounded. "Sometimes I wonder how my life would have turned out if that had gone different."

"You haven't been with anyone for more than ten days since you were sixteen?"

Ray shook his head. "Absolutely not. You don't understand, though. Martin didn't go after her because she was beautiful or because he actually wanted to date her. He went after her because his brother Alejandro told him to, just so they could put me in my place."

Elliot laughed, assuming he was joking. His laughter died as the serious look in Ray's eyes solidified. "That's a bit paranoid."

"No," said Ray seriously. "I'm afraid not. We were always competitive, me and Alejandro. He was always older, faster, bigger, and smarter than me. He always won, until I got smarter. As I got older, he expected I'd work for him, running drugs to his dealers and being his errand boy. Even then I didn't want any part of it, and after Patricia was humiliated and abandoned by her family and Martin's, Martin and Alejandro flat-out told me that they set it up to get to me. He wanted me to understand that if I didn't play by his rules, he would take away anything and everything I cared about."

Elliot stepped toward him, stunned. "You haven't let yourself get close to anybody since then? Just because you're afraid your cousin might try to steal a lover away from you?"

"Well, it was partly that." Ray grinned. "Being good-looking, horny, and young had a lot to do with it too."

"I think that's a bit more believable." Too late, he realized that if Ray really was related to Sophie Munoz, some of Ray's cousins had FBI profiles containing the most gruesome violent crimes Elliot had ever heard of. They could very well be the type of people who would do far worse than steal a lover away to punish someone who betrayed them. "Is that why you went into law enforcement?"

"Yeah. I was angry. I figured if I was going to spend my life being

afraid anyway, it might as well be for something worthwhile. At least this way, I occasionally get the chance to scare Alejandro, too.”

“Does he know Sophie is missing?”

Ray nodded slowly. “He was the one who told me she was missing. And before you say anything, yes, I know the person who reports the crime in kidnappings, disappearances, and murders, is usually the one responsible for it.”

“It’s a statistical fact.” Most often, people were killed by someone they knew, and once the perpetrator realized that there was no way to hide what they’d done, they would report the crime themselves in hopes of avoiding suspicion once the crime came to light. “He could very well have killed her.”

“I work homicide, and if I had evidence to indicate she’s dead, Alejandro is the first person I’d suspect, siblings or not. But until I see a body, I don’t have a homicide. No body, clothes and toiletries packed, no signs of a struggle. I also know that Alejandro is ultimately responsible for tracking down that stolen money, and if you’re right about her taking it and trying to disappear, he could be playing me just so he can find her and kill her.”

Elliot pursed his lips, surprised yet again. “Money?”

Ray rolled his eyes. “Do you remember our conversation last night?”

“I wouldn’t have discussed my case with you.”

“I am part of your case, you twit. Do you remember me telling you that I’m the *informant* Special Agent Hathaway was pissed at?”

Elliot tried to sort through his admittedly groggy memories. He knew that Ray had made him a bowl of soup, and he knew that Ray had groped him, but their actual conversation was a bit of a blur. “You’re the one who threw him into a big bucket of ketchup?”

Ray shrugged. “Ketchup... mustard... taco sauce... it doesn’t matter. The point is that I’m pretty sure Alejandro *thinks* she stole his money. He wouldn’t have asked me to find her unless he had some stake in her being found. He’s got no qualms about killing a woman, a member of his family, or anyone else. But if he’d already killed her, he’d keep quiet about it. If he’s still trying to find her, and I think he really is trying to find her, then he hasn’t killed her yet. But if he’s trying to find her, she’s in trouble.”

“You’re Hathaway’s informant,” said Elliot, trying to make sense of Ray’s role in this case.

“I’m a police officer. I was filing a report with the East County Gang Task Force. I’m not some fucking informant. I will not be intimidated and tossed around like some kind of criminal who’s providing information to save my own ass from jail.”

Elliot tried to remember if anyone had mentioned that the informant Hathaway had been so determined to put into protective custody had been a police officer. Hathaway himself must have known, but he’d ranted about the man being some kind of gangster. Jurisdictional rivalries aside, there was a minimal amount of respect owed on both sides, but Hathaway was definitely the type of agent who tended to forget that.

Finally, Elliot cocked his head to the side. “You realize you’re in danger, too?”

“No more than usual.”

Elliot folded his arms across his chest and glared at Ray, who was more than capable of the kind of theft his team suspected Sophie Munoz was responsible for. Even if Sophie Munoz was actually the one who siphoned millions out of those dummy accounts, Elliot wouldn’t be surprised if the Tijuana drug cartel blamed it on Ray, just as an excuse to get rid of a difficult informant. Hathaway had been correct about Ray being in danger, even if he’d been an ass about trying to protect him.

Elliot suddenly didn’t want to let Ray out of his sight. Given how Ray had responded to Hathaway, Elliot had a pretty good idea of just how far acting overprotective would get him, but the urge was undeniable. Letting him tag along during the course of this investigation was unacceptable, too, but it would give Elliot an excuse to keep him close and make sure he was safe. He’d be in deep shit at work if his supervisor found out, but he was pretty sure he could talk his way out of it.

There were other ways Elliot could convince Ray to hang around, of course. Elliot’s gaze lingered over the line of Ray’s shoulders, the tiny dip of his collarbone, and the bulk of muscles beneath his T-shirt. No matter how tempting Ray’s body was, Elliot didn’t want to get involved with him again. When they had slept together, Ray had still been exploring the idea of being bisexual for the first time. And even though he seemed to enjoy fucking men as much as women, the idea of switching roles had freaked

him out so badly that he'd spent half an hour detailing just how degrading he thought the act of letting another man fuck him would be. If Elliot gave in now, it would be the same shit as before—he'd become nothing but a hole to fuck in Ray's mind, just like all the women Ray had slept with.

Elliot would rather face his supervisor and chalk Ray's presence up to a professional stupidity than fall into a relationship where he was treated with that kind of disrespect.

“All right, I've got to take a shower. You're welcome to use the guest bathroom yourself.”

“There's nothing in your guest bathroom. You don't even have hand soap.”

“Oh, come on, I just moved in. If you really need a shower, you can wait until I'm done, then we can go find this Luca Garcia. But you have to swear to me that you won't say or do anything when we talk to him.”

Ray nodded. “Not a word.”

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CHAPTER FIVE

RAY FELT weird riding in Elliot's car. He was used to being in the driver's seat, in every sense of the word, and watching the freeways of northern San Diego pass by from the passenger's seat of the little silver Honda felt surreal. Awkward as it was, it gave Ray ample opportunity to stare at Elliot when he was too distracted to glare at him. In the cockpit-like driver's seat, Elliot's tall body reclined against the seat back in a pose that screamed of confidence and power. His long arms stretched to the steering wheel and stick shift, guiding the car through traffic at speeds that would have had most people clinging to the seat cushion. Elliot's focus and effortless confidence eased Ray's anxiety over not being in control a bit, but it also increased the tension he'd been battling since he impulsively kissed Elliot that morning.

Watching another man drive wasn't supposed to be sexy. But it was. Every time he tried to pay attention to something else, Elliot downshifted and the movement drew Ray's gaze to his lanky body. At first, Ray had thought Elliot looked too damn skinny, but he'd quickly realized that half of his skinny appearance stemmed from having to buy larger sizes because of his height. His slender build made the loose fit look relaxed and approachable, touchable. Knowing that the tight muscles beneath the loose jacket were so defined that Elliot looked like he was chiseled from a block of pale marble made it impossible for Ray not to stare. He remembered the way it felt to run his hands over Elliot's arms and shoulders, remembered the way Elliot's pale skin held a hint of pink everywhere Ray touched him. Ray shifted to try to hide his hard-on, but from the way Elliot smirked at him, Ray suspected he wasn't fooling him at all.

That morning had proved Elliot was still attracted to him, too, no

matter how much Elliot wanted to deny it. Now just wasn't a convenient time to do anything about it.

He pushed the memories of their week together aside and tried to focus on Sophie. Once he found her, he could devote his full attention to stripping that loose suit off Elliot's body. Elliot's insistence that he wanted to find someone special flashed through Ray's mind, but he told himself it was irrelevant.

Elliot's goal was naive at best. Ray had watched everyone in his life fall in love at some point, but no one ever fell in love, built a relationship, and managed to make it last. Even his own parents had only managed a peaceful marriage while his father was assigned to a ship and deployed a lot. The few shore tours he had served had each been eighteen months of shouting, arguments, and miserable afternoons being shuffled off to his grandmother's house so his parents could shout at each other without holding back. By the time Ray was twelve, he'd spent more time at his grandmother's house than his own. They'd divorced when he was thirteen. He'd watched his older cousins go through the same cycle, and then his sister too. A happily ever after was the stuff of fairy tales and soap operas, and if that was what Elliot was waiting for, he'd likely be doomed to spend his entire life waiting. It'd be a damn pity to waste that creamy skin and delicious body waiting for a happy ending.

The address listed for Luca Garcia with the California Department of Motor Vehicles turned out to be a dorm room, and its current resident told them he'd never heard of Garcia. Visits to two different administration offices followed before Elliot finally got a current address—a student apartment complex reserved for upperclassmen, six blocks from the north end of campus.

The young man throwing up gang signs on Sophie's Facebook page opened the door, except that he was wearing nothing but a pair of plaid boxers and a threadbare white undershirt. The boy's fierce glare looked more like terrified bravado in real life.

"Mr. Luca Garcia?" Elliot flashed the man his ID and shifted his weight, setting his foot against the half-open door.

Instead of trying to slam the door on Elliot, the young man backed up into the apartment, shaking his head.

"Are you Luca Garcia?"

“I...” The young man shook his head again, his eyes dancing from Elliot to Ray. “Yes! I mean, yes, I’m Luca Garcia. You’re with the FBI?”

“That’s right. I’m Special Agent Elliot Belkamp. I was hoping to ask you a few questions about a Miss Sophie Munoz. May I come in?” Elliot shoved his way into the apartment without waiting for an answer. “Thank you.”

Ray followed behind him, keeping his face set in a neutral mask while he scanned the entryway, looking for any immediate threat and assessing as many details as he could. The apartment was a mess. The thin brown carpet was stained, and every inch of it was littered with garbage, clothing, pizza boxes, and empty beer bottles. No matter how much his cousin liked to party, he couldn’t picture Sophie walking into such a mess and responding with anything other than disgust.

“Where are you from, Mr. Garcia?”

“Texas.”

“Texas? You came a long way to go to school.”

“I didn’t get into UCLA.” Garcia rolled his eyes. “You said you wanted to ask about Sophie?”

“Yes,” said Elliot seriously. He pulled a small notepad out of his breast pocket. “Your girlfriend. Sophie Munoz. Her family is concerned because they haven’t seen her in nearly two weeks, and she hasn’t been attending classes. When was the last time you saw Miss Munoz?”

The man opened his mouth, stuttered, and ran his hands through his hair. “I guess... it was a few weeks ago.”

“Why don’t you sit down and tell us about it?” Elliot smiled and steered the boy to an unfolded futon. Ray watched Elliot begin to question Garcia, but he stayed by the door, listening while he tried to pick out anything of his cousin’s within the filth.

“Okay. Uh, we dated for most of this year. The school year, I mean. Then about three weeks ago, she said we were done. She left. I haven’t seen her since. But I haven’t exactly been looking to run into her, either.”

“That was the last time you saw her?”

“Yes.”

“Where was this?”

“Right here.” Garcia gestured around at his apartment. “We got into a fight on our way to class, we came back here to try and work things out.”

“Aren’t you in a couple of the same classes? You haven’t seen her in class? Around campus?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“You don’t sound all that concerned about the fact that she’s disappeared.”

“I’m not.” He shook his head slowly. “She said we were done. She said she was tired of pretending, as if the entire last year was nothing but bullshit. I don’t know, maybe it was. It seemed like the only reason we even got together was because she wanted my help in class, and when she found out fucking that old hack would get her an easier A, she was done with me. That bitch used me. So you’ll have to excuse me if I don’t think she’s worth being concerned about right now.”

“Easier A?”

Garcia huffed and dropped his head into his hands. “Professor Holland.” He sneered at the name. “She was always going on and on about him, as if she didn’t notice the way he stared at her. She was willing to string me along for help with her homework, but he could offer her an automatic A and money and shit....”

“She’s involved with Dr. Holland?”

Garcia rolled his eyes. “She has to be. There’s no way she could get the kind of grades he’s been giving her. She’s....” The boy shrugged and reached for a half-empty package of cigarettes. Rather than pulling one out, he turned the pack over and over in his hands. “She’s just a girl. She never got even the basics of Java programming, no matter how many times I tried to walk her through it. Eventually, I just let her copy my assignments, but apparently that was too much work, too. I don’t know how she got as far as she did, but now that she’s got that rich prick taking care of her, maybe she decided she doesn’t need to bother with class anymore. Either way, I don’t care. She’s more trouble than she’s worth, and she’ll fuck him over too.”

Elliot scribbled a few quick notes. Ray strolled toward the futon and tried to make out what Elliot was writing, but the notes were just a random line of loops and scribbles as far as he could tell. Less than ten minutes of questions and nervous answers followed. Elliot managed to get Garcia to tell them how he and Sophie had gotten together, how their relationship had

progressed, and finally, hit the young man up for the names and contact information of any friends she might go to if she was in trouble.

“Friends?” Garcia sneered. “She didn’t hang out with anybody. She was never exactly social, even though she was totally hot. There were a few people from her other classes she would argue with, but they weren’t *friends*.”

“Can you think of anyone she’d go to for help? Other than Dr. Holland, perhaps? Family she was close to?”

“Family?” He barked out a laugh. “Yeah, right. If you knew the first thing about her family, you’d know she would never go to one of them for help.”

Elliot took more notes, including copying down the young man’s full name and phone number. “Until I’ve located her, I’d like you to stay in the area in case I need more information. Here, I’ve got a business card that has my office number on it. If you see her, if you talk to her on the phone, see any sign of her—give me a call.”

“Yeah, sure.” Garcia took the card and added it to the top of a stack of *Playboy* magazines.

“May I use your bathroom really quick?” Elliot tucked his notepad away.

“Yeah, whatever. It’s the first door on the right.” Garcia nodded toward the hall.

Ray wanted to curse, but he kept his mouth shut. Elliot obviously wanted to look around the rest of the small apartment, but Ray wasn’t comfortable being left alone with the disgusting young man Sophie had apparently dated. After the fuss Elliot had made about Ray not interfering during this interview, the last thing Ray expected was to actually have to deal with the younger man.

“So....” Garcia stood up nervously. “Do you think she’s okay?”

Ray shrugged. He glanced down at the pile of magazines and papers where Garcia had placed Elliot’s card. The magazines had shifted enough that Ray could see the black matte finish of Sophie’s laptop peeking out beneath the stack. “How much stuff did she leave here?”

“Huh? Stuff? She didn’t leave anything here.” Garcia shook his head fast. “She lived on campus.”

He watched Garcia try to shift the stack of magazines and he moved

fast. “This is her laptop.” Ray scooped up the heavy computer.

“No it’s not. That’s mine.” Garcia reached for the laptop, but Ray held it back, turning his side toward Garcia to put more distance between the young man and the computer.

“It’s a custom-designed unbranded laptop running a Unix-based operating system with a custom user interface. It’s one of a kind. And I let her recycle my old laptop case to build it. Since you broke up, I’m sure you won’t mind if I take it with me. I’ll be sure to return it to her when we find her.”

“It’s not hers! I don’t care if you are with the fucking FBI, you can’t come in here and take my shit without a warrant!”

“FBI?” Ray raised a single eyebrow at the young man. “I never said I was an FBI agent. You couldn’t pay me enough to put up with those fuckers. No, Mr. Garcia, I’m just a concerned member of Sophie’s family, and I will be taking her laptop. Did she leave anything else here that I should know about?”

Luca Garcia’s eyes bulged as he stumbled backward until his knees hit the edge of the futon. “You’re one of them?” He tried to crawl backward over the futon.

“I’m her cousin. What else?”

“Nothing!” He shook his head frantically. “She didn’t leave anything else, I swear! And I never touched the damn thing! It’s just been sitting there! I thought... I thought I could pawn it, you know?”

“Pawn it?”

“That’s right.” The boy’s frantic nod was almost funny. “I never even turned it on.”

“Then you won’t mind if I take it?” Ray forced himself to smile.

“Take it! Take it, go ahead!”

Ray glanced up when he saw movement in the hallway. Elliot leaning against the wall, his arms folded across his chest. “We’re done here. Thank you for your time, Mr. Garcia.”

Ray followed Elliot out of the apartment with the laptop in hand. As soon as the door slammed behind them, Ray heard the scrape of a deadbolt clicking into place.

“Seems like you made quite the impression.”

Ray knew Elliot was going to be angry, and he had every right to be. Ray had promised he wouldn't interfere at all, just observe. He'd already blown that, so he might as well minimize the damage. "Take this now," Ray insisted. "Do you have an evidence bag?"

"Hmm?"

"It's Sophie's," Ray explained. "If she was the one who stole that money from the Tijuana cartel, that laptop might have the only evidence to prove it. He said I could take it, and you weren't gone long enough for me to even turn it on."

"There is no fucking way I can construct a secure chain of custody for anything on that laptop."

"Take it and try! I won't set another finger on it! My prints are only on the outside and top of the case, except for really old stuff, because I used to own it. If it's clean, you can take it over to Carmen's and leave it in Sophie's room there."

"And if it's not?"

"If there is evidence that she stole that money?" Ray shut his eyes and took a deep breath. "If the evidence is there, you need to find her and arrest her. Protective custody within a prison is safer than being on the run with her brother after her."

Elliot pulled a pair of gloves out of the case in his pocket and carefully took the laptop. "If you're that worried about it, we'll take it straight to the federal building, okay?"

Ray sighed. "Thank you."

When they got back to the car, Ray placed his gun back into his shoulder harness while Elliot sealed the laptop in a large plastic bag and took a photograph of the seal with his phone. Ray studied the student apartments across the street, trying to pick out which, of the patchwork of windows, might belong to Luca Garcia.

While he was watching, he noticed a sleek gray suit jacket with white pinstripes. Flashy, the kind of thing Alejandro typically wore. He jogged back across the street, resisting the urge to draw his gun. He stopped when he reached the front of the building, watching the crowd of pedestrians.

"Ray?" Elliot was right behind him. "What is it?"

"I just... I thought I saw a gray suit."

“A gray suit?”

Ray bit his lower lip. “I thought I saw my cousin.”

“Sophie.”

“No. But now I don’t see him.” Ray gestured up the sidewalk. “This whole thing’s made me a little jumpy.”

THE DRIVE back to the FBI headquarters just off the I-15 wasn’t nearly as much fun as the first drive across town had been. Ray was too busy replaying his conversation with Luca Garcia in his head to ogle Elliot. He was a cynic, and he was used to people lying to him, but he wasn’t sure how to sift through all the lies from these two interviews.

His first instinct was to defend his cousin, to swear that she wouldn’t get involved with either man, and that there was no reason to suspect she might steal money from her family. He wanted to believe that Garcia was just a bitter, manipulative asshole. If he knew how good of a programmer Sophie was, Ray could easily picture him conning her into stealing money from her brother’s accounts. And if he was related to this Esteban Garcia who Alejandro was so afraid of, it was likely that Sophie had just been a pawn in a sloppy bid for power on Luca Garcia’s part. He couldn’t think of any plausible reason why Sophie would waste her time on someone like Garcia, but if she thought she was in love with him, anything was possible.

He also couldn’t deny that Dr. Holland had sounded more like a man with a crush on a woman than a professor who was concerned about his student. Holland was the one who had reported her disappearance, and that alone made Ray curious. The part that kept his head spinning was the possibility that whether she stole that money or not might be irrelevant. Luca Garcia was bitter and angry about Sophie breaking up with him, and if she tried to leave him for their professor, his resentment could have easily exploded into violence. It might have nothing to do with the money at all.

The FBI thought she stole it because they had traced the theft back to a computer IP address on the UCSD campus, and he didn’t believe for a moment Alejandro was interested in anything but recovering the money. That was more than enough reason, as far as Ray was concerned, for her to pack her bags and disappear. Proving her boyfriend was responsible for the

theft might not help Ray track her down, but it might help convince her to come out of hiding.

Ray waited in the lobby while Elliot took the laptop into the quiet federal building. It took nearly an hour, and by the time Elliot got off the elevator, Ray was going insane trying to find something to distract him from thinking about alternatives to his theory, because every alternative he could come up with meant Sophie was dead.

He was also hungry, tired, and he wanted fresh clothes. He wanted to get back to his car and go home.

He was skimming through news articles on his phone when Elliot kicked him in the foot gently. “Sorry that took so long. No crime-lab analysis without a report, so I had to type up a report from the interview. Come on, I’ll buy you lunch.”

“Lunch?” Ray tucked his phone away and stood, stretching the kinks out of his neck and back.

“Yeah. There’s a little taco place in the shopping center down the street.”

“Tacos? You think just because I’m Latino that all I eat is tacos?”

Elliot rolled his eyes. “Can you let the egotistical bit go for a few hours? The only options nearby are the taco place or McDonald’s, so all I eat is tacos. If you’d rather have a burger that’s fine too. Or I’ve got Pop-Tarts.”

“Oh.” Ray deflated. He hadn’t meant to snap at Elliot, but he was exhausted and more on edge than he wanted to admit. “Okay.”

“Okay for a burger, or tacos?”

“I like tacos.” Ray dropped his eyes sheepishly. When he felt Elliot’s hand on the small of his back, turning him toward the door, he nearly yelped. He kept his eyes down as they passed by the uniformed security guard sitting by the door, acutely aware of the fact that Elliot’s hand was still touching him. The shame that swept over him when he saw the Hispanic security guard turn away to hide his smirk made the empty ache in his stomach spread through his entire body. Ray didn’t want the contact to end, but he couldn’t let someone look at him with that much disdain. He quickened his pace, put some distance between himself and Elliot, and glared at the security guard as he strode out.

When they climbed back into the car, Elliot turned and looked at him.

“What was that about?”

“Hmm?”

“The guy working security?”

“You wouldn’t understand.” Ray slumped into the passenger’s seat.

Elliot started the car and pulled out of the gated parking lot, then turned toward the shopping center. “You know, just because I can’t relate to something doesn’t mean I can’t understand it.”

Ray shook his head quickly. “You wouldn’t.”

“Try me.”

“You’re out, right?” Ray asked, trying to decide on the best way to explain why he felt uncomfortable.

“Out? Yeah, I guess. As much as I need to be, anyway. I really don’t think anybody outside my friends and family has any business knowing who I date.”

“Well, you *could* be out, if you wanted to, yes?”

“Yes. Can’t you?”

Ray shook his head frantically.

“Is your family religious?” Elliot asked, pulling in to a parking spot in front of a small, busy shop. “Or just really conservative?”

“An actual taqueria?” Ray read the Spanish sign quickly. The city was filled with tiny authentic taco stands, but far too often going out for tacos with a coworker meant finding the nearest Taco Bell and smothering the food in salsa so it was palatable. A real taco place was a mixed blessing—he knew the food would be decent and the tortillas would be fresh, but he also knew there was no way he and Elliot could finish this conversation, either.

“The food’s good, and the portions are enormous for the price.”

Ray glanced at him, running his eyes up and down Elliot’s lanky body once more. “You need to eat more real food.”

“I’ve got a fast metabolism, and I work out a lot. I eat plenty.”

“I just meant that you’re skinny. Not that I mind the way you look, but I was wondering if you just live off of Pop-Tarts.”

“Sometimes.” Elliot stared at him. “So you’re Hispanic. That means you’re Catholic?”

Ray nodded.

“Me too. My family’s Dutch and Italian, so there’s no escaping the Catholic Church. My grandparents weren’t exactly thrilled when I came out, but my parents were okay with it.”

“Being Hispanic means more than just being Catholic.” Ray watched a couple with three young children leave the taqueria, smiling and laughing. The oldest boy held the door for his sister, the man held the door for his wife. “Gender roles are a bit more definite in Hispanic families. Real men are always tough, they take care of their families, even if they fool around, and they demand respect. And they will mock, humiliate, and alienate anyone who doesn’t fit in.”

“I know that’s not true,” said Elliot. “I’ve been to Tijuana. There were just as many men hustling as women, most of the time.”

“You think they want to be out there?” Ray laughed. “You think that they would be out there selling themselves if they still had family? If they had homes, or if *anybody* would give them a job, they’d never be caught dead out on those streets.”

“*If* they still had family?”

“Yeah. Most Hispanic families, the traditional ones anyway, will disown a child who comes out. They’ll kick them out, take down their photos, pretend they never existed.... At least, my family would. And everyone in the neighborhood will know the kid is gay, so no one else will look at them, no one will talk to them, and *no one* will help them. And I know it shouldn’t matter,” Ray threw his hands up in frustration. “I know it. I’m dead to most of my family anyway. But not to Carmen.”

“She doesn’t know?”

Ray could only shake his head.

“Does Sophie know?”

Ray shook his head again.

“So don’t tell them. You’ve always gone after women, and from the sound of it, you’ve gone after so many women that I doubt anybody would believe you if you suddenly announced you were involved with a man. So long as your sister and your cousin don’t know, what do you care what one random stranger thinks?”

“Because that security guard isn’t one random stranger. Every traditional Hispanic guy responds the same way when they see anybody acting gay. And the mocking and the laughter aren’t the end of it. Once you get enough people together, once they get angry and drunk enough....” Ray shook his head again.

“Are you sure you’re not being paranoid?”

Ray wanted to insist that he wasn’t being paranoid. He’d seen the guard smirk; he’d seen similar expressions every time his old partner had been open about being gay. There had definitely been a smirk, but Ray wasn’t sure how to explain it.

Elliot stared at him for a long time, then gave a shallow nod. “Okay.” He reached down and gave Ray’s thigh a gentle squeeze. “No nonmacho touching in public. I think I can manage that.”

Ray glanced pointedly down at Elliot’s hand.

“From now on, I mean.” He withdrew his hand, sliding his fingertips over the curve of Ray’s thigh as he moved.

“That is not fair.” Ray hissed, almost laughing despite himself.

“And it definitely wasn’t macho. So I guess that kind of thing is off limits.”

“No.” Ray sat up quickly. “No, I didn’t say that.” Ray took in the mischievous grin on Elliot’s face and felt like smacking him. “You’re totally fucking with me, aren’t you?”

“Just a little.”

Ray led Elliot to the most secluded table the place offered. Ray got a funny look from Elliot when he positioned his chair so he could keep a passive eye on the dining area and watch the door. Elliot’s gaze lingered on Ray’s hands as Ray carefully adjusted the way his jacket fell across his waist to make access to his holster as quick and efficient as possible.

“You are getting jumpy.”

“It’s a very distinct shade of gray.” The explanation was out before Ray could stop it. “Reflective, with white pinstripes. I don’t think I imagined it, but there have to be other people who wear gray suits.”

“At Garcia’s place?”

Ray nodded.

“You think one of your cousins was following us.”

“Yes.” His own confidence surprised him.

“We left from my house this morning, in my car.”

Ray nodded. He hadn’t forgotten about that, but he knew what he saw.

“Someone would have had to be following you since Friday morning to pull that off.”

“I guess it does seem kind of crazy....”

“It does. And we spent the last hour in the federal building. Even the parking lot is secure. I’m sure you’re just stressed.”

“You could help me relieve some of that stress,” Ray whispered.

Elliot’s gaze slid to the side. “Our waitress....”

Their server was a cute younger girl with impossibly red hair, and Ray found his focus shifting from the rest of the room to the skin just above the top buttons on her shirt. It was mostly out of habit, since the girl didn’t have much of a neckline to show off. He noticed the way she undid another button as she approached their table and began to relax a little. Flirting was something he could do in his sleep, and it was always fun. Beyond appreciating an attractive body, and being appreciated in return, it would mean they’d get better service, and she’d get a better tip. It really was a win-win situation.

But the charming smile Ray pulled up evaporated the moment she approached their table and greeted Elliot by bending down and setting her hand, with perfect white-tipped fingernails on Elliot’s forearm. “Welcome back. I’ve got such a treat for you today. We got four coolers of Baja shrimp in two hours ago, caught just this morning. I had a shrimp taco on my lunch break and I swear, they melt in your mouth.”

Elliot’s smile grew soft and flirtatious, too. “Sounds perfect. Can I get those and a Coke?”

Ray knew he shouldn’t be glaring. If he’d been here with Hayes, he would have been cataloging details to rib his partner about later. If he were with another coworker, if he were with anyone else at all, he’d have toned things down and backed off. But it wasn’t the flash of cleavage or the girl’s smile that was throwing him off. The way Elliot returned her smile and

leaned forward to confirm his order left Ray cold and furious. Elliot's body language screamed *interested*.

“¿Y qué te pongo?” She asked Ray for his order casually.

“The same,” Ray growled.

To her credit, the woman's smile only flickered a little. “And what can I get you to drink?” She shifted into perfect English.

“Just water.”

“It'll be out in a few.”

Elliot watched her go and quirked an eyebrow at him from across the table.

“You eat a lot of tacos, huh?”

“Is your ego so fragile that you can't handle a pretty girl paying attention to anyone other than you?” Elliot smirked.

Ray's mouth dropped open before he could school his features. He tried to turn his shocked expression into a bright smile, but it was already too late. He saw the understanding sparkle in Elliot's eyes, noticed the way the smirk grew into a real smile.

“Oh.” Elliot shifted in his chair, crossing his legs.

Ray needed to get control of himself. It was ridiculous to get jealous over someone he'd already slept with. The only people he had repeat encounters with were ones who understood they were just getting together for a bit of fun, people who wouldn't get jealous and possessive when Ray picked up someone else. Ray had always figured it was only fair not to act possessive in return, and he'd never had a problem with that approach. Of course, when he wanted someone, he was used to commanding their full attention.

He needed to distract himself, so he decided to try changing the subject. “So what are you going to do while your tech guys are dissecting Sophie's hard drive?”

“Don't know. Probably check in with Sophie's parents, this sister of yours, too, since you said Sophie lived with her. I've talked to each of her professors now, and her neighbors in the dorm, but I've obviously got to talk to the last professor again.”

“You know that little shit was just spouting accusations because she broke up with him.”

Elliot chuckled and shook his head. “I was going to ask if you wanted

to tag along, but it might be better if you didn't."

"I'm fine, just tense. I need to go workout, or go get laid. Probably both, then I'll be fine."

Elliot's grin just grew. "You want a real workout?"

Ray felt his pulse pick up at the implications. He glanced around fast to make sure no one would overhear them. "Was that a proposition? 'Cause with guys, I'm never sure. But if you were a woman I'd be throwing money on the table and dragging you out the door right now."

"You can't be that hard up," Elliot laughed. "It wasn't a line, I'm serious. It's Saturday, and I wasn't actually planning on spending my day off working unless I had to, and I need to get a workout in."

"Oh."

Across the table, Elliot laughed at him again. "You're pouting."

Ray just shrugged. "An actual workout wouldn't be as much fun. I'm not like Hayes. I work out because I have to, but I don't have the willpower to be enthusiastic about it."

"You might enjoy this."

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CHAPTER SIX

LESS THAN an hour later, Ray found himself following Elliot into an unmarked door in a dark alley. There was no sign on the door, just a plain number. The door wasn't locked, and Elliot walked right in, so Ray assumed it was fine. Just past an empty bathroom, the floor was covered with thick blue gymnastic mats from one end to the other. Three walls around the mats were covered with mirrors from floor to ceiling. A dozen men and a couple of women, dressed in everything from judo robes to yoga pants, were scattered across the mats, matched into sparring pairs.

"Some friends of mine own the place," said Elliot. "This is the advanced adult class."

"A martial arts class?"

"Sort of. It's a mixed martial arts club. I agreed to help out in some of the evening classes, when I have time, in exchange for a place to train. It's fun, and it's a great workout. You must have taken some basic ground fighting classes through the department, right?"

"Uh...." Ray had, but they had been years before. He personally believed letting a suspect get close enough for ground fighting tactics meant letting them get close enough to slit his throat. Ray felt that a gun, or any other projectile, was a better option in his case.

Elliot waved to a few of the fighters, called out greetings to others, then stopped by a locker with his last name on it. He pulled out a large duffel bag and began to pull out workout clothes. He tossed a T-shirt and loose pants at Ray. "If you haven't, it doesn't matter." He glanced sideways at Ray, then tossed a sports cup to him, too. "I teach beginners workshops all the time. I'll go easy on you. You can get changed in there." Elliot pointed back to the bathroom.

“You teach judo?”

“Yeah. This place is why I wanted to transfer to San Diego. One of the owners works for the Bureau. We met during my first assignment out of the academy, almost six years ago now, when we were both looking for decent sparring partners. She’s a good friend. She’s permanently assigned down here now, so her husband decided to open up his own dojo.”

“Damn it, I knew you were too good to be true.” Ray waved an accusing finger at him. “If it’s not ultramarathons, or people who treat CrossFit like some kind of cult, it’s martial arts.... Sometimes I think I am the only person on the planet who would rather be a couch potato.”

“You’re not, though. You’re in good shape.”

“Only because I have to be. Just because I *want* to be a couch potato doesn’t mean I can afford to be. If it weren’t a requirement for the job, I’d take a science-fiction movie marathon over the gym any day.”

Elliot just laughed at him.

“Don’t look at me like that. I already told you, being a geek has been sexy for decades now. I have nothing to be ashamed of.”

“When I was a kid, I took karate. I earned my first black belt at fifteen, and when I walked into ROTC basic training the summer before I started college, I thought I could hold my own. The first time I got into a real fight was a few weeks into the first phase of training, when three other guys found out I was gay. The moment the fight went to the ground, I panicked. I flailed and spent all of my energy trying to get back on my feet. A really hot shorter man, dressed as a civilian had come to my rescue. Honestly, I figured we were both going to get our asses kicked when the guy just let them tackle him. But he just knocked two of the guys unconscious and broke the third guy’s arm like it was a twig. Afterward, I found out he was going to be one of my unarmed combat instructors and he convinced me that the karate I’d spent so many years practicing was worthless once a fight went to the ground. So I started judo instead.”

“One of your instructors? The instructor?”

Elliot nodded. “He made one hell of an impression.”

“Give me the clothes.” Ray took the bundle of clothes and turned toward the bathroom. There was no way he was going to let a look like the one Elliot was giving him go without challenge.

Four hours of throws, joint locks, and tumbles later, Ray was too tired and too sore to stay on his feet. He'd managed to keep up with Elliot for the first hour, but after that, the other man had thrown him around like a rag doll. He collapsed against one of the walls where some of the other fighters were resting. All of them were covered in sweat, and some of them were still red and panting. They all quietly watched Elliot and one of the club's owners wrestle in a full-contact match.

Ray cringed as Elliot's opponent knocked his head to the side with a sharp jab of his elbow. "They don't fool around, do they?"

"They're instructors," said a young man farther down the wall. "They've got enough experience to play rough without hurting each other."

When Elliot swept the other man's feet out from under him and took them both to the ground, they hit the mat with a loud smack that made Ray jump. Ray stared at the focused, painful expression on Elliot's face for a moment and realized that the last time Ray had seen a similar look on his face was in a mirror mounted above the hotel room bureau as Ray buried himself inside the other man's body. He wanted to see that look on Elliot's face again, that solid grimace of concentration before his climax slammed into him and left him drifting and droopy-eyed. He always made sure to take care of his lovers, but seeing another person orgasm had never thrilled him, until Elliot. Ray wanted to be the one responsible for putting that expression back on Elliot's face.

He sighed and turned away. Sports cup or not, a hard-on wasn't going to be comfortable.

"That's just what they tell you kids to keep you from hurting each other." That came from one of the two female fighters who added, "They want a real challenge, not a sparring match. They both know it, so they won't whine about getting hurt afterward."

Ray wanted to make a joke about not knowing that Elliot was a masochist, but he didn't want to piss the other man off. He briefly imagined what it might be like to be the man Elliot was pinning to the mat, but he crushed that thought immediately.

There were some elements of gay sex he hadn't found the courage to explore yet, and being pinned down and fucked by another man was at the top of the list. Anal sex itself wasn't strange, he enjoyed it as much with

women as with men, and it was easier to talk gay men into it than women. He'd been with a few men over the last eight months who had tried to convince him to switch roles, but no matter how good they said it felt, Ray just couldn't do it. Fucking another man might make him bisexual. He could accept being bisexual. But in his mind, bottoming for another man was where the line between bisexual and gay was drawn. In a culture where strength was everything, where machismo was hardwired into every social sphere, it was unthinkable to cross that line.

Either way, fantasizing about it here and now was not a good idea.

"I know I've seen you before." The woman beside him was staring at him. There hadn't been time for introductions since most of the fighters were already sparring when they arrived, and there was nothing flirtatious in her expression. "Do you compete?"

Ray looked at the woman carefully, trying to place her face. She was pretty and short, with silky dark hair pulled back in a tight braid. Her face was makeup free, but she was flushed from the sparring matches, giving her cheeks a soft glow. She was also so muscular, she qualified as butch. In her midthirties, she had muscle definition not only around her arms and shoulders but around her abs as well. Ray hadn't met many women who could pull that off. Impressive as it was in terms of fitness, it had never been something that turned Ray on. He ran through as many memories of all the brunette lovers as he could call to mind, just in case. The last thing women he'd slept with liked to hear was *How nice to meet you*. Ray shook his head fast. "No. No, I don't do any of this. You look kind of familiar to me, too, though."

"How do you know Belkamp? He hasn't been assigned here long enough to meet many people outside of work and the club."

"Work," said Ray, and then immediately regretted it. A friend would call him Elliot, not Belkamp, so this woman was probably a colleague. Ray must have run into her professionally, too.

The woman's eyes narrowed. "Bullshit. You don't work with him."

"I've run into him on the job. I'm with the San Diego Police Department."

On the mat, Elliot grunted. "He's the detective who kicked Hathaway's ass...."

The woman's eyes widened and a huge smile lit her face. "You're

Captain Jenkins' poster boy?"

"Poster boy?" Ray was too exhausted to figure out what his captain, who was still furious with him over his less than professional rant about the intelligence, civility, and decorum of Special Agent Hathaway, had to do with anything.

"You're the officer who handed Hathaway's ass to him in front of the downtown district office with fifty other officers watching? You're Raymond Delgado?"

"I am Ray Delgado, yes. I don't think we had that big of an audience, though."

"The same Raymond Delgado with a seventy-one percent resolution rate for your cases?"

Ray leaned back, confused. "Seventy-three. And are they publishing this shit now? That's supposed to be internal data."

The woman grinned. "Everybody talks about it. You're Captain Jenkins' golden boy, the one who can get away with *anything* because they can't afford to lose you."

"You make that sound so dirty." Ray shifted nervously, panicking about just how much this woman might know about him. "And I can't get away with *anything*. I was suspended for two weeks over that little spat with Special Agent Hathaway."

"When anyone else would have faced felony charges. Shit, I'm glad he didn't show up tonight."

"Hathaway?" Ray smirked. He was tired, but he could still deal with an idiotic twit like Hathaway. "He trains here? I'm tired, but that could be fun."

"Don't you dare! Don't you even think about it!" The woman's smile was fixed in place, but her eyes were hard and serious.

"It's all just sparring, isn't it? It's not like either of us would actually hurt each other. Much."

"I'm still dealing with paperwork from the last time. Hathaway might not be able to kick your ass, but I assure you detective, I can. If I have to do another disciplinary report because of you, I will. I'm Penelope St. Claire. Special Agent in Charge, Penelope St. Claire."

Ray took a deep breath and shifted away from the woman, his memory sufficiently jogged that he was ready to bolt. “You’re Hathaway’s boss.”

“I was on the phone with Captain Jenkins for part of your debriefing.”

“I am so sorry, I was....” He sighed and shook his head. “You know, I’m too tired to make up an excuse. I’m not sorry. Not for what happened with Hathaway or for my choice of words in the captain’s office. I stand by what I said.”

“What was it you said?” She giggled. The feminine sound seemed so very out of place it struck Ray as odd. “You said he was ‘an imbecilic dick who was abusing a position of power for...’. You know, I don’t remember the rest.”

“I said he was a sadistic, imbecilic dick who thinks abusing a position of power is the equivalent of exercising control over a situation. I might have said something about him being too caught up in his own power trip to practice basic mindfulness or be aware of his situation and surroundings, and that even a patrol officer is professional enough to engage in a dialogue to sort out situations rather than making stupid assumptions.”

“You called him a gorilla.”

“I did not. I said a gorilla in a suit could behave with more professionalism. I’ve hung out at the zoo, and gorillas are awesome, so I refuse to retract a statement that is fundamentally true. I don’t know how he passed whatever mental health evaluation the FBI requires, but whatever doctor cleared him for federal law enforcement should lose his license. The guy’s the type who gets a kick out of hurting people.”

“Hathaway might not be the most tactful agent when he’s angry, but that’s kind of extreme. I heard you were an asshole, too.”

“I’ve never claimed to be anything but what I am. I form opinions of people based on first impressions, and I don’t change them without a logical reason. His behavior confirmed my first impression of him. I don’t tolerate incompetence in my coworkers, and I don’t appreciate it in others.”

“Yes, I’ve heard you’re pleasant to work with. So what is your first impression of me?”

Ray huffed. This could get him into a lot of trouble, but lying to this woman wasn’t the way to go. Lying and being tactful weren’t quite the

same thing, though. “You’re intelligent, dedicated, tactful, and an efficient supervisor. You’re a mother, married but not inclined to put sentimentality above practicality, which I respect and admire. And you’re scary.”

“How’d you figure?” she laughed.

“Intelligent.... You recalled my approximate success rate from memory after two weeks. Dedicated.... Look at you,” Ray gestured to her body. “I have no idea how many hours of training it takes to look like you. I bet it’s a lot. Tactful is obvious, since you didn’t press charges against me. Thank you for that, by the way.”

She smiled sweetly.

“And you defused the thing with Hathaway, so you’ve got to be a hell of a boss.”

“And my family?”

Ray leaned close. “Stretch marks,” he whispered. “They’re a pretty specific scar pattern. I noticed them when your tank top rose up during your last match. And you’ve got a tan-line from your wedding ring. You wear it, but not when it would get caught on things, like now.”

“And how am I scary?”

Ray looked at her as if she were insane. “Seriously? Combine all of that into a woman with no reason whatsoever to like me and give her power over my career. The entire equation adds up to *scary*.”

“All right, I get it now.”

“Get what?”

“Why the SDPD puts up with an officer with your reputation, which Captain Jenkins assured me, is entirely deserved. You’re a regular Sherlock Holmes.”

Ray relaxed and smiled. This he could handle. “He is prone to exaggeration. I have decent observational skills, and I don’t have the most appropriate sense of humor, but I’m not a bad guy.”

“Your captain said I should ask the bomb squad volunteers what they think of you.”

“Don’t believe a word they say about me. The bomb squad guys overreact to *everything*.” Ray leaned back and chuckled to himself, remembering the paint bomb that had splattered most of the bomb squad’s

tactical gear with permanent neon green paint. None of them had succeeded in getting the paint out yet. “I swear I’ve only blown up one or two things, but they’re always on my case about it.”

“One or two things?”

“I don’t count the dry-ice bombs,” Ray explained. “Those really just make a lot of noise, but nothing actually explodes. Unless you drop a piece of dry ice into a gallon of neon green paint. Then paint explodes, so I guess that one has to count. Two or three things, then.”

On the mat, both men cracked up laughing. “I can’t go anymore,” Elliot gasped. He released his grip, shifted his hips, and collapsed beside the other man, finally exhausted. He tilted his head up and smiled. “I am never bringing you to a real match.”

“I’ve totally behaved myself.” Ray pouted. “Nothing caught on fire, nothing has been reprogrammed or formatted, nothing has been replaced with adult novelty toys, and I haven’t hit on anybody.” He counted on his fingers, ticking off all the things his fellow detectives tended to complain about.

Elliot dropped his head back down to the mat, shaking as he tried not to laugh.

Ray tried to wipe as much of the dried sweat off his skin as possible in the tiny bathroom sink. Once he couldn’t feel the salt and grime on his face and neck, he changed back into his rumpled suit again. He checked the holster on his belt, making sure the leather top strap was unsnapped, then replaced the small single-shot Ruger pistol he wore in an ankle holster on his right leg. Once he was armed and reasonably grime-free, he felt better.

When he came out of the bathroom, he saw Elliot talking quietly to Penelope St. Claire. From the serious expression on both agents’ faces, Ray knew he shouldn’t interrupt. Instead he made small talk with the few lingering fighters and wandered outside to enjoy the cool winter air. The weather downtown was always moderate, but this far inland it tended to get cold in the winter months. January was the worst, and Ray knew the temperature would get down into the thirties just a few hours after sunset. He was still hot from the sparring session, so walking out into the cold was a relief. Elliot, gulping the last of a bottle of water, shuffled out after him, carrying the duffel bag from his locker. He was still wearing his thin workout clothes.

“Am I going to be stuck driving you home again?” Ray asked, noticing the way Elliot was dragging his feet.

“No. I’m tired, but my blood sugar’s okay, and I haven’t had any caffeine, so no headaches. I’ll drive you back to your car.”

“All right.”

On Saturday nights, rush hour into the university district tended to last until two in the morning, so it was forty minutes before they made it back to La Jolla. Ray wasn’t looking forward to traffic tonight, when getting back to his downtown apartment would take over an hour. Still, as much as he didn’t want to make the drive, he needed to eat real food, take a long shower, and sleep in his own bed.

“Where’d you park?” Elliot asked, as they turned into the enormous parking lot. It was packed with student vehicles, all bearing the UCSD student parking decal.

“Right there.” Ray pointed to a spot in front of a light pole. “But that truck isn’t mine.”

“Hmm?”

“That truck’s not mine. I drive a little Nissan.”

“So you parked somewhere else. Farther down, maybe?” Elliot continued through the parking lot. “What model? What color?”

“A black Nissan 370Z, and it’s not here.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because I made a point of parking across from that coffee cart back there.” Ray motioned back toward the small trailer that was locked up tight for the night. “And now I’m feeling like a fucking idiot.”

“You think someone stole your car?”

“No. It’s been a long time since I went to school here, and I forgot about parking decals...” He dropped his head back against the seat and groaned. “Stop for a second.”

Elliot pulled to a stop between two long rows of cars. A small white sign announced, in small nondescript letters, that parking was by permit only. It listed the name and number of a towing company, followed by an announcement that violators would be towed at their own expense. “Can I borrow your phone?” Ray groaned.

Elliot leaned across his lap so he could see the sign. He cracked a half smile and held his cell phone out to Ray. “Your car got impounded?”

“That or stolen.”

“What’s wrong with your phone, I thought you had it surgically attached to your hand.”

Ray rolled his eyes. “The battery died. When I came here yesterday I wasn’t expecting to follow a hot FBI agent home.” Ray dialed the number, listened to a recorded voice announce that the impound office was closed, then groaned as the recording rattled off different phone numbers to call for immediate roadside assistance. Overhead, the streetlights flickered. Elliot fumbled with a cell phone car charger, plugged it into the cigarette port by his radio, and pointed at the dead cell phone in Ray’s other hand. Ray handed it over without a word. When the recording ended with a beep, he ended the call and passed Elliot back his phone. “Closed.”

“Okay, give me directions to your place.”

“Take the I-5 south.”

Traffic was just as bad as he knew it would be. Once the highway snaked its way into downtown, traffic slowed down and finally stopped. It took an hour for them to inch along the highway to Ray’s exit. Once they got into the narrow city streets, the mass of cars, buses, people, and sedan chairs pulled by bicycles kept the pace slow.

“There’s never parking out front.” He pointed to a turn as they drove past the front of his building. “Turn right here, then there’s a garage entrance about halfway down the block.” Ray told Elliot the code for the ornate gate and began to fidget as the other man pulled in to a guest parking spot. “You’ve got to be starving,” he whispered, with a calm he didn’t feel. “Since you bought me lunch, why don’t I repay you by making you dinner?”

“You want to make me dinner?”

“Yeah. I’ve been told I’m an incredible cook, and it’ll give traffic out there a chance to sort itself out. I’ll make some pork chops, we can have a drink.” He watched Elliot’s eyes widen slightly, caught the way he licked his lips. Elliot Belkamp had fewer tells than most people Ray seduced, but Ray knew what to look for. He knew Elliot wanted to say yes.

Elliot turned his gaze forward and drummed his fingers on the

steering wheel. “I think I’m going to pass.”

Ray had been expecting that. “Just dinner, then? I’m starving, and you did a lot more sparring than I did.”

“It’s a no.”

“You sure about that? It didn’t seem like an automatic *no* this morning when you kissed me.”

“I didn’t kiss you. You kissed me. And kissing someone turns every guy on.”

“Definitely if tongues are involved,” Ray agreed. “Yours was practically down my throat.”

“It still doesn’t mean I’m going to sleep with you again. You should go.”

“I get that you’re looking for *somebody special*.” Ray heard the sarcasm in his own voice and instantly regretted it. He took a deep breath, determined not to fuck this up. “But we could have fun together. You can’t tell me that the idea of never having sex until that somebody special turns up is appealing.”

“You think I’m going to hide at home and just hope that somebody pops out of thin air? You make dating sound like living in a monastery.”

“Not if you date the right type of people, but...” Ray shrugged and tried to sound casual, even though his heart was thudding like a jackhammer.

“I’m not actually opposed to fucking around with someone, but I don’t fuck around with people who don’t respect me.”

“What did I do that made you think I don’t respect you?”

“Are you that dense?” Elliot laughed. “You all but said that men who bottom aren’t men at all. You said it was demeaning and went on and on about how you could never do it. You think it’s something to be ashamed of, that it makes me less of a man that I let you do it.”

Ray stared at him, trying to catch up.

“And when I heard that, I figured out pretty damn quick why you sleep around as much as you do. It’s not that you can’t find somebody to be with, or even that you don’t want to. You don’t respect anybody you sleep with. Not a single one of them, including me, has ever been a real person in

your head. You might as well be fucking blow-up dolls each night. No lover is going to hang around someone who treats them the way you do.”

“That isn’t what I meant! I wasn’t talking about you. I was trying to explain why I didn’t feel like I could let you do me, too. I was trying to ask if you’d be okay giving me time.” Ray clenched his fingers in the air.

“Don’t give me that bullshit,” Elliot snapped. “Just because you’re too self-centered to think about how your insults might come across to other people doesn’t make them any less insulting. You think anyone who lets someone else fuck them is weak and pathetic.”

“I never thought less of you for what we did in bed. Jesus, I was hoping we could.... But it doesn’t fucking matter because you’re looking for *someone special*. Even though it never happens, it’s a fucking statistical impossibility, you’re holding out for a goddamn fairy tale! That’s about as naive and pathetic as it gets!”

Elliot face softened a little. “Hoping to find someone you can build a life with isn’t naive. It’s what everyone wants, including you.”

“Like hell I do! It never happens! Not for anyone! I’ve never seen a single relationship where people have actually stayed together. It might be good for a year or two, or even ten, but it always fails.”

“So why are you still waiting for Superman?” asked Elliot, his voice cold and even. “I’m not counting on some kind of happily ever after falling into my lap. I know things aren’t that easy. But I also *know* relationships can last, if both people are willing to work at it. Falling in love with someone is the easy part. When making it last gets hard, people quit trying, but that doesn’t mean it’s not worth trying anyway. You’re still texting Superman, hoping he’s going to come back. So which of us is more pathetic, Delgado?”

“You’re right,” Ray whispered, his stomach sinking all the way to the floorboards with those words. “It is pathetic. Thanks for the ride, Belkamp.”

Ray climbed out of the car and headed for the elevator, not looking back even when the purring engine behind him died. “Ray, wait a second!”

When the elevator opened, Ray stepped in and pushed the button for the sixth floor. Elliot, jogging to catch up with him, slipped through the doors just before they slid closed.

“I’m not really in the mood to cook anymore.” Ray didn’t look at

him.

Elliot held out Ray's cell phone. It was still turned off. Ray shoved it back into his pocket without a word.

"Look, I'm sorry. That was a cheap shot. I didn't mean it."

"Yes you did. It's true."

Beside him, Elliot sighed. "So what if it's true? I still shouldn't have said it."

"Why not? I would have."

Elliot shook his head, his mouth open. "You're fucking impossible, you know that?"

"No, you said it yourself, I'm just pathetic. And you're right. The really pathetic part," Ray laughed miserably, "is that it's not even about the sex. I mean, I like sex, but that's not it."

"What is it about, then?"

"I do it to sleep."

"Huh?"

"When I was a kid, my dad was always on duty or deployed. My mom worked all the time, and when she didn't work, she partied. So my grandmother raised me. She raised all of us—me, my sister, my cousins. I shared a bedroom with anywhere from two to four other cousins on any given night. Alejandro, Martin, and I were always there. We were more like brothers than cousins. When we got older and could take care of ourselves, we were still inseparable. But when I decided to walk away from my family, when I broke with them, I never regretted it. Not once in my life have I ever wished I had stayed. Even though my mother pretends she never had a son, and my sister can't keep pictures of me with her kids around the house because she doesn't want our entire family to cut her and her kids off, too, I have never regretted it. Hell, I'm lucky they've just decided that I'm dead to them. Martin's kids are growing up without a father or a grandfather because I helped send them both to prison. And even though they hate me, I don't regret it because I know those kids are better off."

"You can't sleep alone?"

Ray shrugged. "I sleep best if there's someone else in the room. I wake up, and if I hear someone else breathing, if I can reach out and feel someone

else there, I sleep better. I don't like to get involved with people because that's just inviting Alejandro to try and ruin their lives to fuck with me. And Martin's kids are growing up, and they're not going to be as subtle or as nice about it as Alejandro. They'll just kill people. But I like sex, and I like to sleep through the night, so I pick up strangers. I honestly try not to remember their names, but I make sure they get off, and I make them breakfast in the morning. Is that really so bad?"

When Ray looked up at Elliot, he wanted to punch the other man. The anger that had made his expression hard and cold in the car was gone. Now, his dark eyebrows drooped and deep wrinkles crossed his forehead. His pale green eyes looked sad and full of pity. "No," he said at last. "It's not so bad. But it's not what I want."

Ray saw the clutter spilling out from his apartment door the moment the elevator opened. He shoved Elliot to the wall and ducked low while he drew his Glock. "Stay there!" He took off down the hall.

"Like hell." Elliot moved forward along the opposite wall, crouched low. He had a small pistol, no larger than the Ruger Ray carried, in his hands. Ray got to the apartment door first, paused to listen, and then risked a quick glance inside. Elliot took up a position across from the door, his pistol held in a low ready position. Ray watched his eyes scan the room beyond the open door. When Ray saw him nod, he moved into his living room, shifting across the doorframe so he could keep his back to the wall. What he could see of the living room was an extreme mess. His books were strewn about the floor, shelves were pulled down, and broken glass and shattered bits of electronics were everywhere. He kicked the open door hard, just in case someone was waiting behind it. The door bounced off a shredded couch cushion.

He kept his pistol pointed between the hallway to the bedroom and the entrance to his kitchen, then gestured out the door. Elliot moved in fast, crossing the room and checking down the hallway before creeping toward the kitchen. When he stopped before rounding the blind corner, Ray moved ahead of him, trusting Elliot would provide cover fire if Ray needed it.

The kitchen was empty, too. They swept through the rest of the apartment quietly, checking rooms, then closets, and finally under Ray's shredded bed. Even his pillows were scattered, and the Glock he kept under his pillow was gone. Everything in his apartment was trashed, but they were alone.

Elliot tucked the small pistol into the waistband of his workout pants and found his cell phone. "What's missing?" He was already dialing 911.

"That I've noticed... One semiautomatic nine millimeter and two laptop computers."

"Anything else?"

"My TV and stereo were smashed instead of stolen...." Ray was thinking out loud. Whoever had broken in wasn't looking for anything they could unload quickly. "Call it in. My phone's still dead. And how fast can you find out what was on Sophie's laptop?"

Elliot shook his head. "It's Saturday night," he said, covering the phone with his hand. "I've got no idea."

"Lazy-ass, nine-to-five Feds...." Ray watched Elliot scoop up a tuft of pillow stuffing and fling it at him. It fell two feet short. "Really? That's the best you can do?"

Elliot covered the phone again. "Would you shut the fuck up?"

Elliot reported the break-in, ended the call, and then picked up a book from the floor and flung it at Ray. "Calling me lazy when you couldn't do one measly hour in a judo class?"

Ray stepped forward, out of the book's trajectory. "And tampering with a crime scene!" Ray gasped and splayed his fingers over his heart. "Not winning the FBI many points for professionalism tonight, Agent Belkamp."

"Okay, okay. Get your ass back out into the hall, I'll find something out there I can throw at you." He paused by the door. "Hey, is that a bullet hole?"

Ray groaned. "It was already there."

"Rough neighborhood?"

"My cousin Alejandro came by three nights ago, to ask me to look for Sophie. I told you about it, didn't I?"

"No, I think I'd remember you mentioning it. You tried to shoot him?"

Ray stared at him for a long moment, wondering if Elliot had been briefed about Alejandro Munoz at all. "Yeah."

"What would you have done if you actually shot him?"

Ray tilted his head to the side. Elliot couldn't be serious. Given all of the things Ray had seen Alejandro do, all the things that he'd heard rumors

about, the only logical thing to do if he actually managed to hit the other man would be to empty the rest of his clip into Alejandro's head. "I'd have shot him again."

"Is he that bad?" Elliot laughed.

"Yes. On the streets, he's known as Alejandro the Soup Maker, because his favorite method for getting rid of inconvenient bodies is to hack them to pieces and seal those pieces in a barrel of lye for a few months until all that's left is a thick brown soup."

"This is the cousin you talked about? Sophie's brother?"

"Yeah."

"Why did you miss?"

"He was using my date as a human shield, and I'm not going to shoot through a hot guy just to get to Alejandro."

"He was what? Was he injured?"

"No, he was fine. Now do you see why I need to find Sophie before he does?"

Ray stalked out, trying to make sense of the mess, to see what else might be missing, and what was destroyed. He worked his way back out to the living room to wait for an on-duty officer to respond. He was still hungry, but he didn't dare touch anything in his kitchen now. He was also still angry, and admittedly still turned on, from his argument with Elliot, and he couldn't do anything about that either.

He gritted his teeth, strolled out to the hallway, and smacked his forehead against the nearest wall. "This is going to be another very long night."

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CHAPTER SEVEN

“AND THEN there was Kowalski’s wedding!” One of the older detectives slapped Elliot across the back. “Not the reception, but the rehearsal dinner. Kowalski’s fiancé was from this superconservative Baptist family, and he was pretty conservative too, right? So a week before, Delgado overheard Kowalski saying something... less than polite... to Delgado’s partner. They’d only been in the division for about a year, but Hayes tended to make more gay jokes than all of the straight guys did, so no one thought anything of it. Except Delgado, who was pissed. But Delgado doesn’t say anything when he’s really mad. The rehearsal dinner comes, Delgado says he can’t make it. He broke into the catering truck before the dinner and replaced all of the individual flan deserts with, I kid you not, Jell-O penises.”

“What?” Even Elliot didn’t believe that. The half-dozen homicide detectives sitting around him chuckled and nodded.

“I’m totally serious.” The detective fiddled with his phone for a moment and turned it toward Elliot.

On the phone was an old photo. The china was ornate, set at a table with formal silverware and white linen. In the center of the plate, standing straight up, was a light pink modeled Jell-O *thing* that did, in fact, look like an erect penis. “I don’t know how he managed making one, much less three hundred. I don’t know how much he had to pay the servers to get them to add those scoops of ice cream and the white chocolate drizzle, but it was a nice touch.”

“Are those sprinkles?” Elliot asked, trying not to laugh at the small brown specks decorating the ice cream. “The sprinkles are supposed to be pubic hair?”

“Yeah! Our Delgado’s got one hell of an eye for detail.”

“Kowalski’s fiancé and her family were mortified, but he didn’t want to piss them off more, so he actually sat there pretending nothing was weird about the dessert,” one of the few female officers in the room added.

Sanchez, Elliot recalled her name. *She* had definitely surprised Elliot. When the stories of Ray Delgado’s exploits had turned dirty, she had been the first one to break out pictures and begin telling jokes.

“Kowalski transferred over to the sheriff’s department after that.” Another detective nodded, smiling brightly.

“Dicks for dick, I say.” There was a chorus of agreement. “The sheriff’s department can keep him.”

“Yeah, Delgado might be a bit psycho, but he’s never been one of those guys who’ll sit there quietly and watch someone act like a prick. He’ll call you on it, and if you do something shitty enough to really piss him off, he’ll do it in the biggest, most public way he can think of.”

“But it’s not like he was mean about it,” said Sanchez. “He was doing what any of us would have done. What we all should have done. He was standing up for a member of the team. And sometimes when he’s over-the-top, he’s trying to be sweet. When I had my last baby, he made this gigantic *thing* out of origami paper cranes. It was like a giant bouquet, but shaped like balloons. It was a bit too big. It didn’t fit in the door of the hospital room. But he did it because he knows I’m allergic to everything from latex to daisies. It was really sweet.”

“That is actually pretty cool,” said Elliot. “So why does he have such a shitty reputation? The way we heard it, every partner he’s paired up with requests a new partner within a week.”

The detectives around him grew quiet, their smiles turned serious. “It’s not that he’s not a standup guy. He’s psycho, but he’s great. You couldn’t ask for a more loyal partner. It’s just that he’s such a perfectionist. No one notices it until they have to work with him, but if you’re paired up with him and fuck up once, even over some little detail, he doesn’t hesitate to rip you a new one. He and Hayes transferred over here together, so no one really had a problem with it before Hayes left. We had to put up with his practical jokes, but not his attitude.”

“I was paired up with him for about two weeks when Hayes left,” said Sanchez. “Everybody warned me that if he so much as smiled, I should file sexual-harassment charges.” She shook her head sadly. “I forgot to double-

lock a subject's cuffs one night. It had been six nights straight on duty, and we work twelve-hour shifts, so I was exhausted. He made a very quiet comment about me being an incompetent rookie who shouldn't be writing parking tickets, then didn't let me do anything the rest of the shift. It was a stupid mistake, and I was tired, but it's not like I just made detective. The only time he even acknowledged my existence after that was when he left a hundred pages of reports about nerve damage from accidentally tightened handcuffs on my desk. Once we were on different assignments again, he went back to being him. Regardless of department policy, some people work better alone, and he's one of them."

"He was being nice because you're a girl," said the first detective. "I saw him spend twenty minutes screaming at some poor guy from traffic who was assisting at a scene. The kid fucked up his chain of custody on a cigarette butt or something, and he nearly put the kid's head through a wall. If you get on his good side, he'll have your back through anything, but if you don't make a good first impression.... Ah, never mind, I take it back. He's an ass even if you get on his good side."

"Well, ass or not, I need him alive." Elliot managed a resigned smile. He'd caught a few glimpses of Ray's reactions to what he perceived to be incompetence, and he knew that Ray's coworkers weren't exaggerating. At the time, he'd thought it was just because his partner was in trouble, but when the fallout from that case began to settle, he had learned just how wrong he was. Ray's reaction hadn't been especially harsh because his partner was in trouble, it had been toned-down because he'd been distracted by the fact that the *man he loved* was in trouble. Ray was often insensitive and cold, and the fact that he was almost always right was infuriating.

Elliot was beginning to see that, behind his flirtatious smile and the scathing criticism, Ray Delgado's life was defined by absolutes. Elliot doubted any officers except the people on his team knew how seriously Delgado took his job, and he'd bet none of them knew why he was so dedicated. Delgado's decision to devote his life to working against his extended family left him in a position where any attachments he formed made him vulnerable, where any mistakes he made could prove deadly. He lived each day of his life with the very real fear that the next time he saw a member of his own family, he may have to kill or arrest them. Everyone he had grown up believing he could depend on had become an enemy. Anyone he became attached to would just become a liability. Becoming a detail-

obsessed asshole was probably the reason Ray was still alive.

He glanced toward the small office door with a bronze nameplate that had nothing but the name *Jenkins* on it. Ray had been inside the office for over an hour now. Elliot had seen him pacing, gesturing wildly, and sitting down with his head cradled in his hands. The old man behind the desk had hardly moved. Elliot hadn't seen his lips move either, and he was beginning to wonder if the captain had said anything at all.

“Think they're going to be much longer?” he asked.

“That's up to Delgado.” The detective who had been sharing stories of Ray's many practical jokes over the years glanced through the window. “He talked himself into being suspended last time.”

“Huh?”

“Captain Jenkins knows how to deal with Delgado. He just lets Delgado rant about what happened, lets Delgado explain why he was wrong, what he thinks his punishment should be, and why he shouldn't be fired. I think Delgado even typed his own write-up last time around.”

“Really?” Elliot hopped off Ray's desk and studied the captain closely through the glass wall separating them. The old man occasionally narrowed his eyes, but he wasn't saying anything. The more he stared at Ray, the more Ray filled in on his own. “That's impressive.”

The detective nodded. The radio clipped to his collar buzzed to life and he turned away to respond. The charge room echoed with radio traffic, and all at once, the officers who had been chatting with him were racing out the door, leaving Elliot alone. Since it was a specialty division, there was no duty officer left behind to man the office. Inside the captain's office, the old man behind the desk was up and moving, too. He was on his feet and talking quickly into the phone. For the first time in an hour, Ray was quiet and still.

The old captain hurried out a moment later, nodding to Elliot as he passed. Ray shuffled behind him, running his hands through his hair. “Can I get Hathaway's cell number from you? Apparently I get to submit to the FBI's short-term protection scheme or get transferred back to the patrol division.”

“Did your captain suggest that?” Elliot smirked. “Or did he wait for you to do it yourself?”

“Fuck you, man.”

Elliot shoved Ray toward the door. “Come on. Hanging out with me should work just as well as hanging out with Hathaway, and I’m less likely to kill you.”

“Uh, I don’t have anything. Not my phone charger, my car, or my clothes. Can we stop by a store on the way?”

Elliot shook his head slowly and shoved Ray toward the door. “No. It’s nearly midnight. There’s food at my place, and my clothes will fit you better than me.”

Ray kicked his own desk. The finish was scuffed where he kicked it, and Elliot guessed it was probably the usual target of Ray’s frustrations.

“Come on.”

“You know the crap in your kitchen doesn’t count as food. And as for your clothes....”

“My clothes aren’t good enough for you?”

“Your clothes aren’t good enough for *you*. They’d be fine for me. You should get your shit tailored.” Ray’s gaze travelled up and down Elliot’s body suggestively. “Or just go naked.”

“Maybe if you ask politely,” said Elliot.

Ray turned a wide-eyed smile at him, then hurried ahead of him toward the elevator.

On the way home, Ray was silent, and out of the corner of his eye, Elliot saw his head droop. The other man’s gurgling stomach reminded him that they both needed food, along with showers and clean clothes, before this night could finally end. But Ray was all but dead to the world in the car, and Elliot was surprised when he made it into the house under his own power.

He left Ray sitting on the couch while he rinsed off and changed out of his workout clothes, and when he was finished, he steered Ray into the bathroom and hoped for the best.

He leaned close to the bathroom door. “I’m going to order some food!”

The only answer was the shower starting again.

Elliot had a routine. He usually got home way too late, opened up his empty fridge and stared at the shelves for a few minutes, then ordered pizza. This time, though, he found that the top shelf of his fridge was full. He had

vegetables, turkey, and even cheese. “Ray went shopping,” he reminded himself.

He threw together a couple of quick sandwiches and then tried to remember which of the boxes he hadn’t unpacked yet had extra blankets and linens. After three tries, Elliot found a clean set of sheets and a blanket. He pulled an extra pillow from his own bed and set the whole bundle on the couch. He loved his couch almost as much as his bed. They were the only pieces of furniture he’d left in storage when he was assigned to what he expected was the middle of nowhere in northwestern Montana two years ago. Since he’d lived in a tiny apartment before that, and a tiny apartment during that assignment, he didn’t have enough stuff to fill up the twelve-hundred-square-foot, two-bedroom home he’d bought this time around. He didn’t dare buy anything new yet, though. His mother’s weekly e-mails each ended—after a dozen detailed paragraphs about his uncles, their children, and how the family restaurant was doing—with a promise to fly down and help him get settled in. The only other time his mother had helped him get settled into a new place, she and his uncle had arrived with a moving truck filled with all of the extra furniture his parents, uncles, neighbors, and random customers had on hand to donate. The last thing he needed was to try to fit enough mismatched furniture for a five-bedroom house into his living room, again.

If he was going to be stuck with Ray until this case was over, he was going to have to pick up curtains, and maybe an air mattress, too. He would also have to find a way to ease some of the tension mounting inside him and start keeping his migraine medication on him, because he could feel another headache creeping up on him. Exhaustion and stress tended to magnify the effect of things that normally triggered his migraines.

Dehydration and low blood sugar were two of his worst triggers, and if the only way he could keep from jumping Ray was to work out until his muscles trembled and threatened to fail, he was in for more headaches. He casually grabbed an Imitrex needle from his medicine drawer and slipped it and his pills into his suit jacket. He took another injectable cartridge out and shot it into his arm, then dropped the empty cartridge into the trash. Since he wasn’t in the middle of a migraine yet, the medication would stop the headache in its tracks.

Elliot stretched his arms over his head and then bent down to ease the kinks out of his lower back. He hung there, bent at the waist, and folded his

arms over the top of his head. He let his forehead rest against his shins and stayed there as some of the tension drained from his muscles. He rolled up slowly, then twisted to either side to try to stave off the muscle aches that were already settling into his shoulders. After, he slumped to the counter where half of his turkey sandwich sat on a plate, next to the one he'd made for Ray. He took another bite and drained his beer when the thrum of the shower in the master bathroom stopped.

He heard the soft tread of bare feet enter the kitchen and turned to tell Ray to eat, but froze as he realized what he'd forgotten—clean clothes. Ray stood there with nothing but a thin towel wrapped around his waist. There was nothing else blocking his body from Elliot's hungry gaze. His tanned skin glistened, and his dark hair, finally free of gel and dried sweat, dripped in a tousled mess. Ray padded over to him with a devious smirk, swaying his hips with each step.

“Is that one for me?” He nodded at the sandwich and open bottle of beer.

“Yeah.” Elliot turned away quickly. “I'll grab you some clothes.”

He practically ran to his bedroom, hoping Ray didn't notice he had a hard-on.

He took a few deep breaths and forced himself to calm down as he dug out a pair of boxers and a T-shirt, but he just ended up picturing Ray's bare chest, then pictured him wearing the plain black boxers. Elliot sighed and shook his head. If he was so hard up that his own boxers were turning him on, he really needed to get laid. He set the clothes on the end of the bed, tried not to let his fucked-up imagination make him think about what Ray would look like waking up in his bed, and hurried back out to find the most erotic domestic scene he'd ever seen in his kitchen.

Ray was bent over and leaning into the fridge. The short towel was doing its best to keep his bare ass covered, but it was loose and drooping over his hips, revealing nearly an inch of Ray's crack and the abrupt curve of his ass. Elliot licked his lips. He wanted to rip that towel away so bad his fingers twitched. Elliot caught himself as his legs, drawn by his cock, unconsciously moved him toward Ray. He swallowed hard and turned toward the counter. He was not going to fuck Ray Delgado. Not while the man was leaning into his fridge, anyway.

Ray emerged a moment later with his arms wrapped around turkey,

cheese, mayo, and a tomato. He was trying to hold the loosening towel up with his elbow.

The sandwich Elliot had left on the plate for him was already gone.

“I’m so hungry even those nasty Pop-Tarts sound good,” said Ray, dumping everything on the counter. “Workouts like that are why you’re so skinny.”

“So?” Elliot stared down at the edge of Ray’s towel. It had slipped over his hipbone. One quick tug, and Ray would be completely naked. “There’s a T-shirt and shorts for you on the bed. I’ll make you another sandwich. Go get dressed.”

“You should have another one yourself. Do you realize how many calories you’ve got to burn, doing that judo shit?”

“About six hundred calories an hour.”

Ray cocked a single eyebrow at him. “My guess was higher. Still, that means you burned twenty-four hundred extra calories tonight, just in your workout. You’re tall, so you probably need at least two thousand more calories a day just to live, and so far, I think you’ve eaten fifteen hundred. You can’t train like a fighter and eat like a supermodel. It doesn’t work.”

“Well, I normally manage dinner before two in the morning. I eat.”

“Another sandwich wouldn’t hurt.” Ray hiked up his towel and reached for the bread.

“Go get dressed.” Elliot elbowed him out of the kitchen, then started putting together two more sandwiches, using up the rest of the turkey.

He also tried to clear his head. If he had to take another cold shower to be able to sleep, it really would be sunrise before he got to bed.

“I was thinking I’d go to a hotel after I got some sleep!” Ray’s voice came from the bedroom. He came out a moment later, wearing the boxers Elliot had left for him but no T-shirt.

“You don’t need to go to a hotel. Didn’t I put out a shirt for you?”

“I don’t like to wear them to sleep.” Ray stared at him for a long moment. “I prefer not to wear anything.” He glanced pointedly down at Elliot’s bare chest. “Fair’s fair, though. Anyway, I was thinking that losing those laptops was too much of a coincidence. Someone thinks Sophie stole that money, and they must think the way to get it back is somewhere on her laptop. The only time I’ve been anywhere near it was this morning, which

means someone had to be following us. I wasn't seeing things."

"Again, my car, my house. I've only been assigned here a few weeks."

"If Alejandro has been following me since Friday, he could have been watching us this morning. It'd be a safe bet that he followed us here, too."

"If he was following us, wouldn't he know that you didn't go back to your place with the laptop?"

"I don't know." Ray shrugged. "But going to a hotel would be safer than staying here with you, for both of us. Your alarm system's not even hooked up, and I don't want you getting hurt because of this mess."

"It's not monitored, and I don't turn it on, but the alarm system works just fine."

"Even if it works, the only thing it can do is make noise. Noise isn't going to scare someone like Alejandro. It's not going to stop him, either."

"I'm not arguing that. But it would give us an extra thirty seconds to get oriented and line up a shot." Elliot began slicing tomato to add to their sandwiches. "I'd rather not shoot holes in my woodwork. And a hotel would have the disadvantage of having a single point of entry. Easy to get trapped."

Ray stole a slice of tomato from under Elliot's hands and ate it plain.

"I just don't think it's worth panicking about yet," Elliot continued.

"You don't think it's worth panicking about? Do you have any idea what type of man my cousin is?"

"If I didn't have a decent idea of what type of man he is from his dossier, I think the 'Soup Maker' thing summed it up. Definitely the kind of guy where you need to shoot first."

"And ask questions later?" Ray rolled his eyes.

Elliot smirked. "If he's still capable of answering questions, you're a lousy shot. So it's a good thing I can aim. I don't think it's worth panicking about yet because we don't know if he was the one who broke into your place. You're forgetting that someone else knows you took Sophie's laptop—Luca Garcia. You can't tell me he was happy with you taking it."

"He doesn't know where I live," said Ray.

"He doesn't know where I live, either. All I'm saying is, it could have been totally random. An ex-lover could have broken in and trashed your place just to fuck with you."

Ray let out a defeated huff. “Can we turn on the alarm, at least?”

Elliot set two extra slices of tomato on Ray’s sandwich and dropped the top slices of bread on. He shoved Ray’s sandwich toward him. Ray’s eyes focused on the sandwich, all thoughts of cartel stalkers forgotten.

“I don’t even know how to turn on the alarm system,” Elliot admitted. He hesitated for a moment, then traced his fingertips up Ray’s side and over his bare chest. “I guess we’ll just have to keep an eye on each other. And we can’t do that if I’m here and you’re in a hotel.”

Ray swallowed hard. “Okay, no hotel.”

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CHAPTER EIGHT

RAY WOKE up less than an hour after he got to sleep. The light cascading through the gigantic windows overlooking the Rueda Canyon filled Elliot's living room with a golden glow. If Ray was a morning person, he might have appreciated it more. It made the entire room agonizingly bright, and even burying his head in the black hole that was Elliot's couch didn't block out enough light for him to stay asleep. Since he was going on four days with very little sleep, he was so exhausted he considered digging through Elliot's medicine drawer to find something that might knock him out. But if he was going to risk getting his ass kicked for a bit of rest, he'd rather it be for something more worthwhile than a mixed narcotics hangover.

Groggy and stumbling, he wandered into Elliot's bedroom where heavy curtains masked the glaring sunlight outside. Elliot stirred as Ray slipped into bed beside him.

"What the hell?" Despite the grumble, Elliot rolled over to give Ray space.

"You don't have curtains in your living room," Ray said. "I'm tired, Belkamp. I'm so tired I think it would take a lethal dose of Viagra and a blowjob for me to get it up right now. Your ass is safe from me."

He scooted under the blankets and moved close enough to feel the warmth of Elliot's body. The cocoon of body heat and the deep, even rhythm of Elliot's breathing lulled Ray into the first deep sleep he'd had in days. At some point, he felt Elliot try to shift away from him, and Ray automatically dragged him back across the bed. He was well aware of what he was doing, but he kept his eyes shut and hoped Elliot would assume he was moving in his sleep. Once Elliot's warmth and steady breathing settled

in his grasp, he drifted off again.

When he awoke next, it was still dark, but he could still hear Elliot breathing. He rolled toward the weight of the other body in bed and found he was trapped by the blankets. “Come back,” he muttered, trying to grab Elliot through the blankets. “Still tired.”

“It’s almost six. I was tired enough to sleep most of the day, too, but food has to happen at some point. You should wake up.”

“Don’t want to,” Ray pouted.

He looked up and saw Elliot, dressed in jeans and a black T-shirt that actually fit him, reading something on a new, thin laptop. Ray tried to squirm closer, but with Elliot on top of the blankets and him underneath them, it wasn’t working.

Elliot glanced down at Ray and rolled his eyes. “You’re ridiculous.”

“You’re comfy.”

“I ordered pizza, it’s on the counter if you want some,” said Elliot.

“Coffee?”

“Gives me headaches.”

“Caffeine?” Ray tilted his head up in panic. He could technically survive without coffee, but the withdrawal headaches would be a bitch. He wondered how they compared to Elliot’s migraines.

“There’s a gallon of sweet tea in the fridge. It has caffeine.”

“Thank God....” Ray dropped his head onto Elliot’s hips, nuzzling closer to use the other man as a pillow and to catch a glimpse of what was on his laptop screen. “Thank you for letting me sleep too.”

“Letting you?” Elliot huffed. “The only time you’ve shown any signs of life was when I left the room. So long as I’m nearby, I think you could sleep through anything.”

“Thank you for staying so I could sleep. I feel so much better.”

“Sure.” Elliot clicked something on his laptop.

“Got anything on Sophie’s laptop yet?” Ray asked

“It’s Sunday night; of course I don’t. Our boys in Technical are calling in encryption specialists from the National Security Agency to get into the hard drive.”

Ray sat up. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. If it turns out she went to all this trouble to secure her diary or some shit like that, neither of us is ever going to live this down.”

“It’d be funny though, right?”

“No.”

Ray sighed. It would be hilarious, in a career-ending, mortifying kind of way. “You really think she would go to all that trouble to hide something that wasn’t important?”

“I wouldn’t have bothered handing it over to the guys in Technical if I didn’t think it was important.”

“Ouch. Usually I’m the one getting annoyed when someone restates the obvious.”

Elliot shrugged and went back to scrolling through the file.

“I’m starting to think you’re right about her stealing that money,” said Ray.

“Since we’ve interviewed everyone possible, St. Claire has decided to elevate this to a full-blown missing-person investigation. She’s preparing an official press release, and she’s got agents and volunteers combing the campus grounds today. Better today when there aren’t as many people. Tomorrow I’m going to go help interview Munoz’s classmates and talk to that last professor again.”

“Call him now. Garcia suggested they were involved. We’ve got to follow up on that.”

“I’ve tried twice today and once yesterday when I was submitting the report for the laptop. Both numbers he gave me are forwarding calls to his office. It’s Sunday night, so no one’s there. You’re welcome to come with me tomorrow, if you think you can keep your temper under control this time.”

Ray rubbed his eyes and shimmied under the blankets again, dropping his head back into Elliot’s lap. “I didn’t lose my temper. And the more I think about it, the more likely it seems that they were involved.”

“How so?”

“Sophie’s smart. She might have thought that little shit Garcia was cute, but she resented having to act like an idiot just so she wouldn’t offend

him. It's in the tone of her Facebook messages to him. It's the same way she talked to Carmen every time Carmen made her clean her room. I think he was totally oblivious while they were together. Garcia might have thought she was exchanging sexual favors for a boost to her GPA, but I think that was because he didn't know her well enough to know she didn't need to. The professor is more her type, and he obviously knows her better."

"So why did he bring up Garcia?" Elliot asked. "And would you sit the hell up? Or at least stop trying to burrow into my crotch?"

Ray rolled up on his elbow and closed the screen on Elliot's laptop. "I was comfortable." He set his fingers on Elliot's zipper, hesitating for a moment to give Elliot time to stop him if he wanted to. Elliot's mouth hung open slightly, but he didn't move to stop Ray. As Ray pulled Elliot's zipper down, his knuckles grazed the thin cotton of Elliot's boxers and the swelling cock hidden beneath the fabric.

Elliot grabbed his wrist and squeezed, stopping him instantly. Ray met Elliot's dark green eyes for a moment, seeing the lust he was feeling mirrored in Elliot's gaze. Ray ignored the pain in his wrist and tried to grin. "We need to sort this out. I want you. I'm pretty sure you want me. I've had a constant hard-on for the last three days because I can't look at you without getting turned on."

"We've already had this conversation." Elliot's grip on Ray's wrist was like a vise as he set the laptop carefully on the floor. He pinched Ray's wrist just a bit tighter and shifted his weight, pulling Ray across the bed while he rolled up onto his hands and knees. He shifted his body over Ray's, grabbing Ray's other wrist and pinning both of his hands to the mattress. Even with the blanket between them, Ray could feel Elliot's erection poking out of his boxers. He bucked his hips up, tried to grind against Elliot to show him just how turned on he was, but he couldn't get enough leverage. "Why should I let you fuck me if you won't be able to respect me when I do?"

"I wasn't talking about you when I said that."

"Does it matter?" Elliot whispered. "You don't think you can respect yourself if you take it up the ass, why should you be able to respect anyone else who does?"

"I... I was just planning on sucking you off." Ray tried to twist his wrists free, tried to shift to get Elliot's thumbs off the pressure points that

were making both of his arms ache. “I wasn’t going to do anything you wouldn’t enjoy.”

Elliot shifted his weight forward so his head dropped down beside Ray’s ear. “Have you ever tried it?”

“A couple times. I may not be a pro, but I know what I enjoy.”

“I wasn’t talking about giving someone a blowjob.” Elliot chuckled and leaned close. “I was talking about letting yourself be fucked. Have you ever asked a girl to finger you? Ever done it to yourself just to see what the big deal was?”

Ray shook his head and tried to keep his pulse from racing out of control. His heart was hammering so hard he was sure Elliot could feel it, despite the layers of fabric between them. Fabric that was quickly disappearing. Ray tried to use his feet to help Elliot shift the damn blanket away. Even when the blanket vanished, Ray wanted to get closer. He wished he could take Elliot’s T-shirt off, but no matter how much Ray tried to move, Elliot didn’t release his wrists.

“Fine, then, just remember that you started this...”

Ray tried to yank his arms free as Elliot closed his long, thin fingers around both of Ray’s wrists and held him with one hand. He couldn’t move. He didn’t want to move. The only thing between them was their boxers, and those thin layers of cotton were too much.

He focused on Elliot’s face, just a few inches from his own.

Elliot brought his own hand up to Ray’s mouth and ran two fingers along his bottom lip. “Suck,” he whispered.

Ray wasn’t sure why he obeyed, but he did. He sucked on Elliot’s fingers, lapping at them with his tongue until they were as wet as he could manage. Elliot pulled his fingers out with a pop. Ray shuddered as Elliot ran his hand down the side of Ray’s arm, over his ribs and hip, to the bunched-up fabric of his shorts.

The other man didn’t hesitate. He reached into Ray’s shorts and pressed a single spit-soaked finger inside Ray’s body. Ray didn’t mean to hiss, but he was nervous and couldn’t help clamping down around Elliot’s finger. If Elliot noticed, or cared, he didn’t show it. His face was stoic, almost unreadable.

“I’m surprised your sex life hasn’t been a bit more adventurous.”

Elliot's tone was light, conversational, and completely out of place when he had one of his fingers shoved knuckle-deep into Ray's ass.

"Hard...." Ray gasped. "Hard to be adventurous when you're only with someone a few times...."

"That's too bad. But to do this right, I need a better angle. I'm going to let go of your wrists now. You're going to stay there. You're not going to move, if you can help it."

"I'm not some fucking masochistic slave, Belkamp."

"I didn't suggest you were. But I'm a good three inches taller than you, I've got more muscle mass, and the United States Army spent a lot of money training me to restrain people. You'll sit still, or I will make you sit still."

Despite the pain in his wrists and his ego, Ray nodded. The moment his wrists were released, Ray cradled them with his opposite hands. "That hurt." He kept his tone light, trying to sound casual about the finger that was still in his ass.

"Sorry. Habit. You should relax, bear down a little."

Ray was about to ask why, to ask what the hell Elliot was getting at, when a wave of pleasure erupted from where Elliot's fingertip was and ricocheted through Ray's body traveling all the way to his toes. The shock just made him clench harder around Elliot's finger.

Elliot laughed. "It's not quite the same, when you've only got your partner's reactions to go by."

"You seemed to enjoy it."

He felt another jolt radiate through his body as Elliot stroked inside him hard. He tried to push back against the pressure, but Elliot held his hips down.

"I did," said Elliot, stroking his finger back and forth, keeping the pleasure vibrating through Ray constant. "You were attentive. Considerate even. But judging the right angle based on a stranger's reactions isn't quite the same as knowing the right angle from personal experience. Maybe knowing how it feels, knowing what makes it so worthwhile, can change your point of view."

Ray wasn't sure how the hell Elliot expected him to pay attention with

the constant pressure inside his body. He'd never felt anything like it, but everything from his balls to his gut tightened as the familiar tension of a hard orgasm began to build inside him. He couldn't be that close. His cock was as hard as rock, straining against the waistband of his boxers, but it was completely neglected. He wanted to come, he was so damn close already, and he reached for his shorts desperately. Elliot moved in a flash, trapping his wrist before he could touch himself.

"I said don't move."

"But I..." Ray panted and bucked his hips up, trying to rub against Elliot's body, trying to get even a bit of friction. Elliot kept stroking his finger inside Ray's body. The individual shocks of pleasure merged into a constant hum that sent him crashing into a full orgasm, spilling inside his shorts, shaking all the way to his toes. Elliot's finger drew out the aftershocks, reducing Ray to a quivering, tender heap beneath him.

Elliot slipped his finger out of Ray's shorts and rolled off him. "Now imagine how my cock would feel doing that to you."

Ray took a minute to catch his breath, to will some feeling back into his legs, then tried to answer. "Your cock?"

Elliot's grin was evil as he nodded. "Bigger, thicker, longer...."

Ray swallowed hard. Elliot had just given him one of the strangest, fastest, hardest orgasms of his life—with a single finger inside him. He wasn't sure he could imagine Elliot using something bigger right now.

"But, just a little advice, you need to work on your timing."

"My timing?" Ray asked. His stamina was one of the few things he'd heard nothing but accolades about. He knew from direct experience that he could outlast Elliot.

"When you're on top, you come first."

"I always made sure you came first." He loved watching Elliot come. The sight had driven him over the edge all by itself once.

Elliot sighed and leaned over Ray again. His hand went back up Ray's shorts, and two fingers ghosted over his entrance. "Hey!" Ray flinched, curling his legs up, blocking Elliot's access to the tender ring of muscle. The spot that drove him from mildly turned on to full-blown orgasm in about a minute was tender and still throbbing. Ray tried to imagine what it must have been like for Elliot, as he continued to pound into him afterward.

Women never seemed to complain, and the men he'd been with since hadn't either, but they usually went from meeting him thrust for thrust to just sitting there, taking it.

“See?”

Ray sat up, still trembling. The shame and embarrassment were mixed in equal parts—shame because he knew he'd probably hurt Elliot, embarrassed because he felt as if Elliot had made a fool out of him. But that wasn't exactly fair. Elliot had tactfully not said anything while Ray made a fool out of himself. And now he was doing it again. Elliot had just given him one of the strongest orgasms he'd had in a long time, and instead of accepting the lesson, he was sitting there feeling resentful. “You should have said something. I like being able to get rough with guys, but I never meant to.... I'd have stopped.”

“I know.” Ray felt Elliot rub his back, up and down over his spine. “It's not a big deal. Just a preference, that's all. I really did have fun.”

Elliot's hand on his back was warm and comforting, but Ray felt a tension in Elliot's fingers that reminded him how unfair he was being. Ray turned his head over his shoulder and smiled down at Elliot. He was casually stroking himself, not hard enough to get off, but with smooth, languid motions.

“That was fun,” Ray admitted.

It was more than fun. It had shaken him to his core. And now he was just more confused about where they stood. He didn't want to fuck things up again, but he had to show Elliot how good they could be together. He had to make the other man give him another one of those silent screams before he went droopy-eyed again. He wanted Elliot to want him, to need him the way Ray felt like he needed Elliot, to be so crazy with desire that he ended up just as fucked up as Ray was.

He didn't hesitate. He ran his tongue up the length of Elliot's shaft, circled the head twice, and swallowed him. He heard Elliot's breathing become ragged and deep, felt Elliot dig his fingers into his hair.

“Please don't stop,” Elliot whispered.

Ray shifted down, taking as much of the other man into his mouth as he could. He wrapped his fist around the base of Elliot's cock and bobbed his head up and down. Ray was surprised by how clean Elliot tasted, like

Irish Spring soap with hint of natural musk and salt. He bobbed his head fast, working his tongue around the tip each time, until Elliot shuddered beneath him and spurted into his mouth. Elliot relaxed his grip in Ray's hair, massaging little circles around his head. "Fuck, you're good at that."

He sucked Elliot clean and looked up to see those pale green eyes fixed on him with an intensity that made him shiver. The look on Elliot's face wasn't quite the *fucked-to-exhaustion* look Ray was hoping for, but it was beautiful. "You're...." Ray ran his hands up Elliot's abs and chest. He couldn't call another man beautiful, it felt too weird, but he wanted to.

"What?" Elliot smirked.

Ray tried to think of something else, something that would fit but wouldn't offend Elliot. *Intoxicating* fit, *addictive* was a definite possibility, but *beautiful* was perfect. "Beautiful. I'm sorry, I know you're a guy, but you're gorgeous."

"Save the bullshit." Elliot shook his head with a smile. "Go shower, then we'll eat."

Ray narrowed his eyes. "It's not bullshit. Do you have any idea how pretty your eyes are? How weird it is to see green eyes with black hair?"

"Whatever." Elliot sat up and pulled Ray close, silencing him with a quick kiss. "Be serious, okay?"

"I'm a serious guy."

"Hmm? Serious enough that your coworkers don't invite you to any catered special events anymore?"

Ray tried to keep a serious expression on his face, but he couldn't. "They told you about that?"

Elliot nodded.

"That wedding was so uptight it was more like a funeral anyway. And the only real problem was that the bride didn't want her family to know she had any clue what a dick looked like."

"Go shower." Elliot laughed. "I'll find you some clothes."

Ray slipped off the bed and stretched as he stood up. He was stiff and a bit sore from yesterday's sparring sessions, and a hot shower sounded like the perfect remedy. "You said it's already six o'clock?"

"Yeah."

“Damn. Think we could go back to the campus, help look?”

Elliot got up and began rummaging through his dresser. “Even if you skipped the shower and food, the sun would still be down before we could get there. Besides, you were the one who pointed out that Sophie Munoz probably left campus of her own free will. Clothes, toiletries, makeup bag missing—remember?”

“I didn’t forget. But new factors have come into the analysis. Someone was willing to break into my place to get Sophie’s laptop back.”

“You said yourself they don’t need an excuse to try and kill you.”

“Yeah, but if they wanted me dead, Alejandro would have killed me and what’s his name Thursday night.”

Elliot gaped at him, his eyes wide. “Your cousin used the man as a human shield, and you don’t even remember his name? I guess I should be flattered that you could still call my name to mind after eight whole months.”

“His name is Bruce Kershaw, he works at Balboa Medical Center,” said Ray. “It’s just easier to brush people off if they’re already pissed. And that’s not the point. If they can’t get the laptop itself, it’s only logical to go after her.”

“Which would explain why she packed up and disappeared,” said Elliot. “The team St. Claire has looking for her is made up of top agents, and if I can’t get in touch with Professor Holland tomorrow morning, I’ll pull his address from the DMV. We’ll find her. We’ll get her somewhere safe. We might send her to prison, but we’ll keep her safe.”

Ray sighed and nodded slowly. He knew Elliot was right.

“The best thing you can do right now is to take a shower, eat, and try and catch up on sleep so you’ll be focused tomorrow.”

Ray hesitated at the bathroom door. “Can I stay with you tonight?”

“Am I going to be another *what’s-his-name* three days from now if I say yes?”

Ray met his gaze, then looked away. “You never were.”

Ray thought Elliot’s wide-eyed expression looked panicked for a moment. Elliot tossed a pair of sweats, clean boxers, and a T-shirt at him. “Go shower.”

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CHAPTER NINE

ELLIOT HAD to admit, Ray looked better in his clothes than he did. In a borrowed polo shirt and black jeans that were snug in all the right places, he looked amazing. He looked right at home among the few young men who were willing to brave the UCSD campus Monday morning. No one, Elliot realized, could panic an entire academic community and its surrounding neighborhoods quite like his colleagues.

The modern, open campus that had been flooded with people Friday was now quiet and tense. Small groups of determined students huddled together as they moved from building to building. Posters of Sophie Munoz had been plastered everywhere, and right beneath most of them were fliers listing a phone number for the campus's volunteer security escort service, a late-night program that had mobilized to offer services during the day until people calmed down. The thriving energy that always seemed to permeate universities was gone. Now it was as peaceful as the grave.

Hundreds of volunteers had searched the campus on Sunday, and now were searching the surrounding canyons where students and area residents retreated to hike and run. Elliot didn't recall if Sophie Munoz had been a particularly active girl, but the canyons of San Diego were as much a dumping ground for impulse criminals as the Los Angeles National Forest was. The only difference was the canyons were everywhere. There were over a hundred miles of trails to search just in this part of La Jolla.

Dr. Holland's home phone and cell were both forwarding calls to his office, but hammering on his office door at nine o'clock Monday morning hadn't turned up the wayward professor. St. Claire had gotten Dr. Holland's address and employment history from the university human resource office,

but his home was two hours north in a little suburb called Rancho Bernardo, and tracking him down all the way up there would mean Elliot would have to waste most of his day on the road. Thirty seconds of chatting with other faculty members who shared offices in the computer science department had gotten them a rough approximation of Dr. Holland's teaching schedule, though, and Elliot was really hopeful they would be able to catch him after his first class.

The lecture hall had two entrances, so they had taken up station in the hallway where they could keep an eye on both. They'd arrived ten minutes early, watched roughly fifty students file in, and watched all of them walk out grumbling five minutes after the class was scheduled to start. He heard a few pissed comments about filing a complaint and comments that their tuition shouldn't go to pay the salary of a professor who can't even bother to show up half the time.

Elliot watched Ray fidgeting nervously beside him, quietly amused by how he tapped his foot so fast it seemed to blur. He kind of liked the quiet, exhausted Ray Delgado more than the edgy, overcaffeinated man twitching beside him.

"We should just go out to his house," Ray was even more impatient than the students leaving the auditorium.

"We will." Elliot was having a hard time keeping his voice soothing. "Let's give him a few more minutes."

Ray grunted. He managed to sit still for almost ten seconds, then began to pace. A few more stragglers wandered out, giving Ray a wide berth. Elliot checked his watch. "Okay." He gave in. "Let's go find him."

"Finally!"

Elliot followed Ray down two flights of stairs, then grabbed Ray's shoulder to stop him on the third-floor landing. Trudging up the stairs below was Dr. Holland, still in blue jeans but with the ever-professional addition of a tweed jacket with leather elbow patches.

Ray met his gaze, then nodded for Elliot to follow him into the computer science faculty hall.

"He's probably rushing to the class that just gave up on him," said Elliot.

A few moments later, the professor proved him wrong. He turned

down the hall toward them, his attention focused on digging his keys out of his pocket. Ray smirked at him.

“Dr. Holland!” Elliot moved forward and clapped his hand on the professor’s shoulder before he could retreat.

The professor’s eyes grew wide, his mouth popped open, and he stumbled trying to take a step backward. It might have pulled them both off balance if Elliot hadn’t been expecting it. He shifted his weight away from the professor and pulled, a little bit harder than he needed to, just to keep the professor off balance but still on his feet.

“I’m sorry, I’m really very late.”

“You’re not late. Your class took the liberty of canceling itself. So you have more than enough time to help me sort through a few details from Friday.”

Dr. Holland looked flustered but went back to sorting through his keys. “A faculty meeting,” he tried. “I’m late for a faculty meeting. I really do have to go.”

“You arrange faculty meetings during the middle of your regular class sessions and then don’t inform your class?” Elliot asked. Beside him, he heard Ray snort, but he ignored it.

“Today, yes.” Dr. Holland nodded. “After you spread Sophie’s face all over the news, yes.”

“I’m sorry, Dr. Holland, I presumed when you reported her missing that you wanted her found. Was I mistaken?”

“Of course I want her found, but it’s just rattled our department, that’s all.”

“Dr. Holland, my agency was reassured by the university president that the entire staff would provide any assistance we needed. I’m sure your fellow instructors will let you slide on this one. Why don’t we talk over a cup of coffee?”

“I really don’t have time. The entire campus is in an uproar, and—”

“I’m sorry if us taking *your* report of a missing student seriously has somehow inconvenienced you, Dr. Holland.” Elliot smiled and spun him around. “But then, Sophie Munoz wasn’t just your student, was she? I can only imagine the hell you must be catching, now that your colleagues have

learned a student you were fucking has disappeared.”

“Would you shut up!” Dr. Holland pulled his hand away. “Anybody could hear you!”

“If you don’t want to sit down over coffee and be honest with me, I will take you into custody for questioning. Do you think there will be anyone left on campus who won’t know you seduced a student and were later arrested in connection with her disappearance once word of your arrest goes public? Do you think there will be any major university in the country that won’t hear about it, sooner or later?”

“You wouldn’t! That would ruin my career!” The professor’s tone was frantic.

“It would. And I will. But I’ll buy you a cup of coffee, either way. I’m nice like that.”

Ray clapped the professor on the shoulder and helped Elliot guide him toward the stairs. Elliot would have to thank the man later. He’d been nervous about allowing Ray to continue tagging along with him, but as the odd man out in the task force, he was working solo, and he wasn’t used to it. He didn’t want the headache of getting to know a new partner in the middle of a case. He definitely didn’t want to be stuck training a partner fresh from the FBI’s academy in Quantico.

Ray read him better than any partner he’d ever worked with. He responded intuitively to every nonverbal cue, knew the routine for every subject they’d spoken with so far. On the job, Ray Delgado was the consummate, detached, and attentive professional—which probably had a lot to do with why the SDPD put up with him. Surprising as it was, Elliot was grateful.

They took Dr. Holland to a coffee cart by the library where Elliot bought them all coffee. Elliot caught Ray’s eye and nodded toward the line of students patiently waiting for their drinks. Ray gave him a half nod.

“Come sit down with me.” Elliot turned Dr. Holland toward a bench where they would have a bit of privacy.

Elliot pulled out a small digital voice recorder and turned it on. “I don’t want to take notes, so I’m going to record this. My name is Elliot Belkamp, I am a Special Agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation,” he said into the recorder. “Is it all right if I record this conversation?”

He pointed the recorder at Dr. Holland, who looked flustered. "I... Yes. It's fine. I've got nothing to hide."

"Could you state your name and occupation, please?"

"Nathaniel Holland. I teach in the computer science department for the University of California, San Diego."

"Thank you." Elliot set the recorder down between them. "So was Sophie Munoz the first student you seduced?"

Dr. Holland shook off the bumbling, nervous expression and narrowed his eyes in indignant outrage. "How dare you?"

"Blatantly, as a rule," Elliot admitted. "I've found it works better to just ask what I need to know. My associate over there would take a more subtle, professional approach, I'm sure. If you want to trade euphemisms and innuendo for hours before you're taken into custody, we can wait for him."

"You have no proof. And even if you did," Dr. Holland narrowed his eyes, "it's not a crime."

"Are you suggesting that there is nothing wrong with having sex with one of your students?"

"I never said that."

"It's time for you to start saying things. You concealed your relationship with Sophie Munoz and have been evading me ever since. So if you don't offer up some kind of explanation, I will take you into custody. I can only hold you for forty-eight hours unless a search of your property is productive. Tell me, professor, what will we find when we search your home?"

"You can't do this! I'm not being evasive! I just...." Dr. Holland ran his hands through his hair, his gaze darting around at random. "We started seeing each other over the Christmas holidays, the year before last. And it wasn't the kind of relationship you're imagining. I didn't seduce her. From the start, it was obvious that she was in my classes because she needed the credits, not because she needed the education. She's smarter than most of my colleagues, and she spent her break working as a monitor in the department computer lab. The computer science department has the newest equipment in our student labs, machines that can run the full range of graphics and design software our students need for user-interface design.

She would spend a lot of her shift working on projects that were nothing short of amazing. If she had been a grad student, if she had ever showed them to anyone but me, the department would have been grooming her for a teaching position. All she wanted, though, was to go into law enforcement. She studied every form of modern encryption, network security protocols, everything she could get her hands on. I was helping her with a project when one thing led to another. We fell in love. But she didn't understand how dangerous this was for me."

"She didn't understand?"

Dr. Holland nodded. "She didn't like hiding. She didn't understand why a relationship between two people who were both of age had to be viewed in such *archaic* terms. At the beginning of the fall term, she started flirting with Luca Garcia to make me jealous. It worked." Dr. Holland shrugged. "When I got angry and accused her of acting immature, she got angry too. She said if I wanted to date someone more mature, I should stick to women my own age. She started dating Luca the next day. Seeing her with him made me crazy, but being with him made her miserable, too. Three weeks ago, we talked, we worked things out. The last time I saw her, she was on her way to break things off with Luca. She was going to move in with me...." Dr. Holland added. "But she never showed up. She wasn't in her dorm room, she wasn't answering her phone, and she didn't even come to class. But that little bastard did."

"Luca Garcia?"

"He had the audacity to sit there using her laptop in my class! As if I wouldn't recognize it!"

"Why didn't you tell me you were involved with Ms. Munoz when we spoke last Friday?"

"Because I was ashamed." Dr. Holland's voice dropped so low Elliot worried the recorder might not pick it up. "I'm still ashamed. But that doesn't mean I'm not worried about her."

"When was the last time you saw Mr. Garcia?" Elliot asked.

"My networking security class, last Friday." After a moment, Dr. Holland looked thoughtful. "Look, I know I should have been honest from the start, but being involved with a student would destroy my career. I'd be blacklisted for the rest of my life. I never meant for it to happen, and I was hoping her family or her neighbors might report that something had

happened to her so I wouldn't have to. But weeks went by, and I was the only one who even seemed to notice. I know you think I had something to do with it, but why would I report it at all if I was responsible?"

Because of a misguided assumption that it might let him stay in control of the situation, Elliot knew. To give him a chance to waylay suspicion by accusing his rival. Of course, the rival Dr. Holland was accusing was a violent ass, so his accusations might be fair. "Tell me, Dr. Holland, do you know where Luca Garcia might be now?"

The man shook his head. He seemed to notice the voice recorder all over again. "No," he said out loud. "Since I told you about him Friday, I assumed he was in jail." The professor shrugged. "Maybe when Sophie's disappearance came on the news, he ran. I didn't know him that well, and Sophie didn't talk about him when we patched things up. I can't even tell you if he's from the area. You can try the student directory to find his address, though."

"We may do that. Just a few more questions, Dr. Holland, and we'll be done. How long have you been with the university?"

"Six years now. Two years as an adjunct, then this full-time position."

"And you're not tenured?"

"No." Dr. Holland laughed. "There are only a few tenure-track positions, so they're competitive. What's that got to do with anything?"

"Just standard questions." Elliot offered him a reassuring smile. He continued asking about Dr. Holland's past, constructing a rough history in his own head and trying to glean a clear image of the man's life.

Finally, he turned the conversation back to Sophie. "Last time we talked, you mentioned Ms. Munoz's family. Can you tell me about them?"

Dr. Holland looked across the tiny courtyard at Ray, who was leaning on the coffee cart flirting with the blonde girl working the cash register. Elliot almost groaned.

"She never mentioned anything about her family. Not a word."

"That's not what you told me last time."

"Nothing," Dr. Holland insisted.

"She didn't mention having a cousin who worked for the San Diego police department?" Elliot looked meaningfully at Ray. "It's my

understanding that they're quite close."

"She might have said something like that, I suppose. She was excited about going into federal law enforcement, like I said. She wanted to join the NSA, and she was heartbroken when something came up that cut her from the application process. She detested most of her family; she never talked about them if she could avoid it."

"Do you think the rest of her family might have been her inspiration to apply with the NSA?"

Dr. Holland nodded. "I suspect her family was the reason. The reason she wanted to serve her country, and the reason she couldn't."

Elliot stared at Ray for a moment, wondering if he would have to throw something at the asshole to get him to look back in their direction. He didn't have to, though. As if he could still see them, Ray turned away from the cart with two white cups of coffee in hand. Ray strolled over and presented them each with a cup of coffee. "Well, Dr. Holland, that's everything for now, except for contact information." Ray produced a notebook and pen like magic and copied down the same phone numbers and the man's home address again.

"That's it? I can go now?" Dr. Holland clung to the coffee with both hands.

Elliot took his coffee, switched off the voice recorder, and slipped it into his breast pocket. "Yes. If you have call forwarding on your cell phone or home line, you should turn it off. Both of those numbers routed me through to your office over the weekend."

"I..." Dr. Holland looked like he might panic. "I thought I turned it off. I'll be sure to double check." The professor hurried off without another word.

Ray followed him with his eyes for a moment, then turned back to Elliot. "I don't imagine it was the caramel macchiato that scared him off. How'd it go?"

"Weird. He admitted he was involved with her but basically said the same thing—that he thinks Luca Garcia killed her. He said she was planning on moving in with him the day she disappeared, so that kind of changes things as far as the packed luggage goes."

Ray sat down beside him and chewed on his bottom lip, his entire body

becoming tense. Elliot knew Ray had been forcing himself to assume Sophie was alive, and that assumption was based entirely on Sophie leaving her dorm room under her own power and packing for a trip.

“I think it’s time to get a warrant to search Luca Garcia’s place and bring him in.” Elliot let the warmth of the coffee cup seep into his fingers. “Something still feels off with Holland, though. I want to pull his financial records, get a better idea of who he is. You want my coffee?” Elliot offered Ray his cup. He’d ordered the same thing Dr. Holland had—a cheap bid to bridge some of the tension between them.

“You’re not going to drink it? They’re good.”

“Go ahead. I’ll order a decaf, and then I’ve got to make some phone calls.”

Ray nodded, pulled out his freshly charged cell phone, and settled in on the bench with a smile on his face.

Elliot rolled his eyes as he hurried to the coffee cart. He didn’t like not being able to include Ray in his interview with Dr. Holland, but Ray’s mere presence had already caused him enough headaches in this investigation. He was grateful to have someone else to work with, to bounce ideas off of, but he couldn’t risk his entire case just because they worked well together. He also didn’t want to think about the way Ray had smiled at the girl behind the counter. It was just one more reminder that when Ray got the whole bicurious thing out of his system, he’d still be straight.

He ordered a decaf coffee, ignored the girl’s flirtatious grin himself, and set to work loading it with flavored creamer at the counter. When he looked up to find a trash can, he was surprised to see Ray in front of him as well as behind. The bench, where Ray was sitting, was reflected in the glass door of the counter-top cooler next to the cash register. From the spot where he was standing, where Ray had been standing so he could flirt with the girl, Elliot could see the entire bench perfectly. There was a hungry smile on Ray’s face, his eyes locked on Elliot’s back. Ray’s phone was forgotten in his lap.

The blonde held up a small trash can and got his attention with a swish of her ponytail. Elliot realized he’d been staring at the reflection. He dropped his eyes to his coffee, scooped up the empty creamer cups, and tossed them in the trash. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” The blonde smirked at him. “You two are cute together.”

Elliot knew he was blushing, but he didn’t want to look up and see the fact confirmed in his own reflection. “We’re not together. We work together. Work.”

“Uh-huh. I’ve got regular cream, if you’d like that instead of those little packets.”

“No thanks. Fake hazelnut flavoring is the best stuff ever.”

Elliot tried to force the smile from his face before he turned back to the bench, but he blew it. Ray pulled his phone halfway up, pretending to be engrossed in what Elliot realized was probably a black screen. All so Ray wouldn’t be caught staring at *him*. Elliot couldn’t stop grinning.

The sight hit something deeper inside Elliot, something that felt like pity. Ray was so used to hiding the fact that he was attracted to men, so careful about it, that he camouflaged his interest without even thinking about it. He had done the same thing himself, years ago before public attitudes began to shift toward acceptance. He’d even kept an old copy of *Playboy* hidden inside his history book, so none of the guys he spent his high school years staring at would suspect the occasional hard-on he got in class was because he’d been staring at them.

How had he so easily forgotten what it had been like, living with the constant fear someone would find out? It had only taken witnessing a few fights in middle school to warn Elliot, no matter how many friends he had or how well he could take care of himself, he was fucked if anyone learned he was gay. He had spent his four years of high school terrified that he’d slip up, say something wrong, and that everyone in his school would discover the truth. He had nightmares about being lumped together with the effeminate kids who were always the target of their ridicule and scorn. Sometimes he worried they would resent him for not being obviously gay and beat the shit out of him for deceiving them. Worst of all, he’d been terrified they would tell his family. He’d spent weeks imagining all the different ways his family could react to finding out he was gay, and every imagined scenario was horrible and heartbreaking. The reality of his family’s reaction—the acceptance, support, and even frank curiosity he’d received—had been such a relief, it had all but erased the shame he’d felt during those years.

He didn't know why he hadn't realized Ray must be dealing with those same fears and feelings, but he hadn't. He felt like an ass for not considering the probability the day he walked out on Ray in Montana. Ray was reaching, exploring, trying to come to terms with all those feelings Elliot had put behind him at eighteen, and Elliot hadn't recognized it. Not that anything he could have said or done would have taken the shame and fear away—that was something Ray would have to manage to overcome on his own—but he could have listened and thought about what the man was trying to say, rather than assuming that everything coming out of his mouth was an insult.

Elliot took another sip of his coffee and watched Ray's reflection in the glass once more. He wondered if all of Ray's insults and jokes were just a deflection, like hiding behind his phone.

Elliot reluctantly turned his attention away from the open and honest reflection. Sure enough, by the time he'd turned around completely, Ray was poking at his phone again. Elliot sat down on the bench beside him, thought of a thousand reassuring things he could say, and realized that anything he said would just be met with scorn or a joke.

"I've got to call St. Claire." He fell back to the safety of talking about work. "I've got to get started on a search warrant application for Garcia's place. Do you want me to drive you out to the impound lot to get your car?"

"Assuming yours hasn't been towed yet?"

"I left the flashing light on top," said Elliot. "Mine will still be there."

"Yeah. Am I returning to house arrest at your place?"

"Yes. Unless you'd rather stay in a cheap hotel. There isn't enough money in the task force budget for the Four Seasons."

"Chez Belkamp it is. Give me your key?"

Elliot handed him the spare key he'd dug out that morning.

"Good. I'm going to stop on the way home and get more groceries. It'll stop me from feeling so damn useless."

"Just so long as you don't take anything else apart, we're good."

"No promises," Ray shook his head seriously. "Your alarm system has two points of entry where there's a fault in the circuit. I checked the magnets on everything I could find, so the fault is somewhere in the

wiring.”

“Oh God, why did I say anything?” Elliot felt like smacking himself in the head. He thought about how Ray had so carefully positioned himself to keep an eye on him and Dr. Holland without being intrusive. A week ago, if Ray Delgado had asked to take apart one of his computers and play with a soldering iron, he’d have had the same reaction. Every time he would have expected Ray to screw something up, Ray had managed perfectly. “You know what? It’s fine.”

“Hmm?”

“I trust you,” said Elliot. “From everything the other detectives on your team said, I’m a fucking idiot to trust you, but I do. I already trust you not to fuck up this investigation, to back me up like you did with Holland, and to back me up with a gun if one of your relatives stops by to visit. If I can trust you with my life and my career, why not my sheet rock?”

Ray’s grin flickered for a moment. His expression was thoughtful, concerned.

“What?” Elliot glanced around him, wondering what Ray looked so worried about.

“You shouldn’t ignore the warnings of seasoned homicide detectives, you know. They know me.”

Elliot shook his head with certainty. “No they don’t. They know the practical jokes and easy smiles you want them to see. I don’t think anyone on your team, outside of Superman and maybe your captain, knows you. But I think I’m starting to, and behind the practical jokes and laughs, you’re the most detail-oriented, focused, analytical man I’ve ever met. I trust you aren’t going to tackle a project you can’t handle.”

Ray’s smirk returned quickly. “Well, now I’ve got to do my very best to make it look like a team of contractors tore your house apart, you know.”

Elliot shrugged. “If that’s what you need to keep yourself busy.”

The smirk died again.

“Come on, let’s go get your car.”

Elliot stopped in front of the impound lot and waited until Ray, in a sleek black Nissan sports car, drove out through the twelve-foot chain-link fence and waved.

Elliot watched him drive away, wishing he had an excuse to keep Ray with him. He wasn't sure how he'd gone from resentfully attracted to Ray to having a full-blown crush on him, but Elliot had. The more he stuck to his resolution to keep an eye on Ray, the worse it was going to get.

When he got back to the office, he began the warrant application and went to brief his boss. She promised to rush the paperwork through so they could search Garcia's apartment that afternoon, but she called him back into her office ten minutes later, looking grim. "The warrant application's pointless."

"What's happened?" Elliot's stomach sank as he imagined Sophie's body being found by one of the search teams combing the canyons.

"Your suspect is dead. According to SDPD Homicide, a body with Luca Garcia's ID in his pocket was found downtown early this morning. Officers responding to a report of shots being fired found him dead on the scene. The serial number of a gun found on the body matches a handgun registered to your friend Detective Delgado."

"Delgado's gun?" Elliot tried to recall the details of Ray's police report from Saturday night. "Saturday night his place was ransacked. He said a gun was stolen, along with some computer equipment."

When St. Claire pointed to one of the chairs in front of her desk, he sat down obediently.

"Belkamp, building security says you brought Detective Delgado with you when you brought in the laptop surrendered by Luca Garcia Saturday afternoon. You brought him to class Saturday night. How do you know his place was broken into?"

"I gave him a ride home. I was just going to give him a ride back to his car, but it had been impounded Friday morning."

The twisted smile on her face was not a look of amusement. "Spill it. Every detail."

Elliot took a deep breath to buy himself a moment to think about just which details he could safely omit. "Sophie Munoz is his cousin, he was worried about her, and he was looking for information regarding her whereabouts on the UCSD campus Friday morning. We've run into each other before. We're friends. When I found out that he was also the

informant Hathaway was worried about, I thought I'd keep an eye on him and try to reassure him that we're doing our best to find his cousin. Since the information he provided was the basis of this entire investigation, and he is a police officer, I didn't think there'd be much risk in letting him tag along while I filed a report. He didn't come past the lobby."

"So you ran into him Friday morning?"

"Yes."

"And you brought him into the building Saturday afternoon and to class Saturday night. And you brought him back to his place Saturday night."

The accusation in that statement was obvious, but Elliot very carefully pretended not to notice. "Technically, I brought him back to my place Friday night. His car was impounded from the UCSD parking lot. Like I said, we're friends. We spent the evening catching up."

"You filed a preliminary report saying you interviewed Luca Garcia Saturday morning."

Elliot nodded. "I did."

"He was there when Luca Garcia surrendered Miss Munoz's laptop?"

"Yes."

"You brought one of the victim's relatives along to interview your suspect?"

"It looks that way, doesn't it," said Elliot.

"And now the suspect is dead."

"Delgado couldn't have done it." The words came out too fast, with too much emotion. "Someone broke into his place Saturday night. He still didn't have his car, and his phone was dead, so I reported the break-in and gave him a ride to the police department to file a report. Since his apartment is still a closed crime scene, he spent the entire weekend on my couch. I took him to get his car this morning."

"Belkamp...." St. Claire shook her head, squeezing her eyes shut hard.

"He would have gone to talk to Garcia on his own anyway. He's a criminal investigator, he knew she had a boyfriend, and he would have tracked him down. I was with him the entire time, I made him leave his

sidearm in the car, and I can personally account for his movements from that point until about two hours ago.”

“Do you realize anything we find on that laptop is going to be thrown out of court? Elliot, I would expect this kind of fuck-up from a rookie, but you’re a better agent than this!”

“I know I screwed up, but you were all for assigning an agent to watch him before. I thought the break-in just proved that Hathaway was right, that he really is in danger, so I didn’t want to let him out of my sight.”

“In a hotel! Not on an active investigation! Oh God, Elliot....” St. Claire groaned, a bit of the woman he counted among his best friends seeping through the sheer iron wall that was his boss. “Tell me that doesn’t mean what I think it means?”

“What do you think it means?” He kept his face blank, oblivious.

“Tell me you’re not involved with him!”

“I am not involved with him. That first night, he didn’t have his car to get home.” Elliot didn’t want to tell her about the migraine. St. Claire knew that he’d suffered from migraines since he left the Army, but she had no idea how debilitating they could be. So long as he could push through them with medication, he could usually keep them from interfering with his job. If she knew how close they came to knocking him out of commission, she would have to take him off investigating work altogether. “The impound lot was closed until Monday, but I tried to drop him at his place after class Saturday night. When I realized Hathaway wasn’t just being a moron, I was worried about leaving him alone. I am not presently involved with him.”

“*Presently?*”

“Come on, St. Claire, I’ve only been on your team four weeks, and even I’ve heard what kind of reputation he’s got,” Elliot said. “He’s a ‘new girl every week’ kind of guy. He’s *obnoxiously* straight. I’ll be the first to admit he’s hot, and if he swung my way, I’d jump at the chance.” Elliot shrugged and smiled. “But I’m not masochistic enough to go after straight guys, especially my friends. Straight guys don’t magically turn gay. Not even if they want to.”

St. Claire fell back into her seat, sighing with relief. “Thank God. Although, I’m not so sure his reputation is valid.” There was a hint of amusement in her voice. “There was nothing about the way he was staring

at you that said *just friends* to me.”

He felt the heat flush his cheeks before he could hide it. “I wish. I think he stares at everybody like that,” said Elliot.

“Not that I saw.” She grabbed a legal pad and a pen. “Give me a time line from your weekend, starting Friday morning. I want every single hour accounted for.”

Elliot squeezed his eyes shut. “Yes, ma’am.” Elliot edited out everything that involved physical contact, but otherwise told her exactly what had happened over the course of his weekend. She began taking more detailed notes when he began to describe the break-in at Delgado’s apartment.

“What else was taken?”

“He said two laptop computers and a nine millimeter. A lot of easily pawned stuff was left behind or smashed. Also, he had a hell of an alarm system and lives in a secured building, so I doubt it was just a casual break-in. I believe whoever broke in was looking for the laptop I got from Garcia’s place.”

“The laptop Luca Garcia surrendered to Delgado?” St. Claire asked.

“Yeah, that’s my guess. Delgado didn’t introduce himself except to say he was related to Sophie Munoz. Without knowing his name or address, I’ve got no clue how Garcia could even have found out where he lived.”

“No one would be stupid enough to assume that a laptop surrendered to a federal agent would end up anywhere but in an evidence locker.”

“I’ve thought of that.” Elliot leaned forward over her desk. “See, he didn’t think he was surrendering it to a federal agent. He thought he was handing it over to an enforcer for the Tijuana drug cartel, or at least to someone who works for Alejandro Munoz. If the key to stopping that money from jumping between accounts is on that laptop, he probably figured only an idiot would hand it over to us.”

“You said Delgado became paranoid after the meeting with Garcia.”

“He did. He got his sidearm out of my trunk while I was sealing the laptop in an evidence bag. Ten seconds later, he ran across the street reaching for it. He said he saw what he thought was a gray suit he’s known Alejandro Munoz to wear. I...” Elliot shook his head helplessly. “I thought he was just

being paranoid. But now I'm not so sure."

"I suppose he's had to become paranoid." She tossed the notepad down and leaned back, grinning. "It's a damn good thing you brought Delgado along to class Saturday, you know."

"It is?"

"Yeah. If you were his only alibi, I'd have to arrest him. But since I was talking to him personally at the estimated time of death, and there were two other federal agents, and one member of the border patrol present, I'd say we don't have to consider him a suspect."

"Saturday night?"

"Just past ten. That's based on body temperature, and since they found the body within twenty-four hours, it's accurate to a fifteen-minute window. Things found in his possession include a nine millimeter Glock registered to Detective Delgado. Speaking of, do you know how many registered fire arms Detective Delgado owns?"

The last time Elliot had undressed Ray Delgado he'd found three firearms and two knives. That had been while Ray was technically on vacation. He wasn't sure he could venture a guess about how many he owned in all.

Elliot stopped watching the boxes of equipment go by and stared at her. "You said it yourself, he's become paranoid."

"Eleven."

"Not that surprising, all things considered. So Garcia broke into his place?"

"That's what it looks like."

"Was he mugged afterward?" Even as he suggested it, Elliot knew that wasn't a possibility. If he had been shot during a robbery, he would have actually been robbed. He had his own wallet and ID and Ray's stolen handgun, on him. The handgun could have been sold in a matter of minutes on the streets of downtown San Diego; no mugger would leave it behind. It also hadn't done him any good in terms of personal defense, so whoever had attacked him either didn't give him enough time to draw his weapon or was someone he didn't consider a threat. "No, of course not." Elliot answered his own question. "He was executed."

St. Claire nodded slowly.

Elliot was glad they had found the body within the first twenty-four hours after death. The medical examiner could give an amazingly accurate estimate of a victim's time of death based on how far the body's temperature had fallen since death. After that twelve-hour mark, the estimate became a larger and larger window, making it far more difficult to isolate who might have had an opportunity to commit the crime. After forty-eight hours, body temperature was useless and a much less reliable guess based on the body's rate of decay was the only thing they had to go off of.

"As far as Detective Delgado," St. Claire said carefully. "Maybe it would be better to house him in a hotel. Keeping a family member informed in the search for a potential murder victim is one thing, but this is getting dangerous. Hathaway was absolutely right. He's being targeted. Whether because of the information he provided to the task force or because of Sophie Munoz's laptop, he's in danger."

"Absolutely," Elliot agreed. "I'll have him relocated by tomorrow at the latest."

"You're going with him."

"I am?"

"You know how badly this could have blown up in your face. You've admitted you're too close to a subject in this investigation. You can't be actively involved in this anymore. I can't let your indiscretions go, but I'm not going to reprimand you for it. I'm going to do something so much worse than a reprimand."

Elliot squirmed under the weight of her mischievous smile.

"You're the only agent in the history of this task force Raymond Delgado hasn't hit on, assaulted, or tie-dyed." She grinned wickedly. "He's in danger, and you're going to keep him alive. I'll arrange for a hotel room tonight and send you a text with the hotel address and room number. Since there is a very real possibility that someone's been following him or you, you should check out a vehicle from the motor pool, too."

Elliot knew he shouldn't argue. This was his first case in San Diego, and being pulled off it because of poor judgment wasn't going to go over well. Aside from making his coworkers think he was incompetent, it would

be reflected in his performance evaluations, too. His six-year assignment could turn into twelve months, with him being shuffled to LA or the East Coast afterward.

“Look, you’re not off the case,” said St. Claire. “You’re just stuck working the part of it no one else wants.”

Elliot wandered through the office, grateful that St. Claire hadn’t written him up. He tried to check out a car from the motor pool, but the administrative office was closed and locked for the night by the time he wandered down.

He didn’t think it was necessary anyway, so he took his own car home, trying not to let Ray and St. Claire’s paranoia get to him.

A newer model gray Lexus SUV pulled out behind him after a block. He thought it was a little strange that the Lexus stayed with him through rush-hour traffic, crossing the interstate instead of pulling onto the ramp. He was a bit surprised when he saw the same Lexus two cars behind him at a stoplight near the neighborhood community center. He took his time driving through Tierrasanta, doubling back and going through a busy shopping center parking lot, and all the time he thought he saw the same silver Lexus behind him.

Fed up, he pulled to a stop beside a public trailhead where a bench and sign marked one of the many trails down into the maze of the Rueda Canyons. He checked the safety on his sidearm, made sure his jacket was loose, shifted to remind himself that his vest was there, and stepped out of his car. He leaned against his car, watching traffic glide by. Each time a newer SUV drove past, his hand twitched toward his gun.

When ten minutes had passed without any sign of the gray Lexus, Elliot got back in his car, locked the doors, and dropped his head against the steering wheel. “Get a grip, Elliot,” he said out loud.

Ray’s paranoia, and the news of Garcia’s death, was starting to rub off. Now that his brain was beginning to beat through the impulsive nervous energy, he wanted to smack himself. If someone like Alejandro Munoz had been following him, driving to a secluded corner of his neighborhood and confronting the man on his own was just stupid. It was likely to get him killed.

He watched for the SUV as he made his way back up the hill to his

house, made sure the street was empty, then pulled in to the garage rather than just park in the driveway.

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CHAPTER TEN

RAY HAD stripped down to a pair of pants and a white undershirt because he didn't want to get plaster dust and paint all over the only respectable thing he had to wear. He was twisting two wires together with a yellow plastic cap when Elliot came through the door, his sparkling eyes marred by a grim expression.

Despite his threats, Ray hadn't made a mess of Elliot's house. He'd removed a section of drywall almost four inches square where he was working, but he had a matching square set aside for a patch, and a tiny bucket of spackling paste sat beside it. He'd even put down a dust cloth.

"What happened?" Ray rolled up from his knees in a fluid, rocking gesture. "Did the search teams find her?"

"Not yet. SDPD searched Garcia's place this morning. Apparently they didn't find any traces of blood and nothing that might belong to Sophie."

"SDPD is working this?" Ray narrowed his eyes. He'd asked around last Friday, and everyone he'd spoken with told him the case had been handed off to the FBI.

"They found Luca Garcia's body in an alley in Hillcrest. Shot through the back of the head. There was no sign of her."

Ray forced himself to take a deep breath. News of Garcia's death was a surprise, but it wasn't something he was going to get upset about. He ran through a list of potential suspects associated with Sophie's disappearance who might have killed him, realized he was third on the list himself, and smirked. He began to twist another set of wires together. "Give me a minute. I want to get this done and turn the breaker back on before I lose

the sun.”

“Delgado, I...”

“I’m almost done. You can arrest me before or after I patch the drywall, but let me get your power back on first.”

“Did you do it?” Elliot laughed.

“You know I didn’t. But I’d be the most likely suspect, after Holland and Alejandro, wouldn’t I? I’ve been with you since Friday, but that’s not really something we can type up and submit.”

“You’re on the top of the list, Delgado, with Alejandro Munoz and Professor Holland coming after.”

“Am I?” Ray knew he shouldn’t think that was funny, but he couldn’t help it.

“He had your Glock in his jacket.”

Ray was very careful about not flinching. He finished connecting wires, then plugged the bundle of wires back into the alarm control box. “So he was the one who broke into my place?”

“Probably.”

“Huh.”

“His estimated time of death was ten o’clock Saturday night. I’m not your only alibi. My boss, her husband, and the rest of my judo class all vouched for you. Besides, I told my boss I could account for the rest of your weekend too.”

Ray swallowed hard, hoping Elliot had just told his boss they’d been together, rather than giving the frightening woman a play-by-play account of how they’d spent Sunday afternoon. He prided himself on being able to keep a straight face regardless of the circumstances, but that revelation was just too much. “Everything?”

Elliot scoffed. “Give me a bit of credit. I didn’t tell her that I fingered you until you came in your shorts or that you sucked me off afterward.”

Ray sucked in a desperate breath as Elliot reminded him just what they’d done.

“I told her we were friends.”

“Did she believe that?”

“She thinks I’ve got a crush on you.” Elliot shifted, not meeting Ray’s gaze.

Ray dusted off his hands, clipped the cover on the control box closed, and turned toward Elliot. “Do you?”

“No. No sane gay man lets himself have a crush on a straight guy. It’s just inviting misery.”

Ray bit the inside of his cheek for a moment. “I’m not straight,” he whispered.

“So you’re gay?” There was venom laced in the question.

“I...” Ray slapped his mouth shut. This could so easily end up exploding in the wrong direction, and Ray didn’t want to risk having Elliot walk out on him again. Especially not if he walked out before sex this time. “I am bi. I’ve been attracted to men and women. I am attracted to you.” And the idea of Elliot harboring a crush on him made him want to scoop the other man up and do something about that attraction, but Elliot was obviously on edge.

“The rumor mill says you’re the definition of straight. I guess it’s a good thing. She let it go.”

“What?”

“Well, she didn’t let everything go. I’m done with the investigation. I’ve been assigned to your protection detail instead of getting a formal reprimand.”

“I’m a punishment?” Ray laughed and grinned. “That’s awesome. Give me a minute to turn the breaker back on. I want to test these before I put your wall back together.”

“Delgado, I need to move. Finding out Garcia was killed that night has me jumping at shadows. I think I’m going to go down to the club. Do you want to come with me?”

Ray ran his fingertips around Elliot’s hips as he strolled toward the breaker box in the garage. “You sure you wouldn’t rather just throw me around here?”

Elliot let out a heavy sigh. “I don’t think you’d enjoy it much, with the mood I’m in.”

Ray looked Elliot up and down, finally taking in the balled-up fists,

the tense shoulders, and shaking tendons in his neck.

“I need to go,” said Elliot, not looking at him. “Unless you’re up for me bending you over the back of that couch and fucking you until you can’t move, I need to go.”

Ray looked over his shoulder at the worn green couch. “Is that what you need?”

Elliot’s fists tightened until his knuckles turned white. “I don’t want to hurt you. I’d rather go find someone to pick a fight with.”

“Give me five minutes to get ready to go.”

In two hours, every muscle and joint in Ray’s body hurt. He was thirsty, tired, hungry, and every time he looked at Elliot, his dick kept trying to get hard. The borrowed sports cup made even a partial erection uncomfortable, but Ray’s body seemed to care more about fucking Elliot than random, insignificant things like pain.

To make things even worse, Special Agent Hathaway walked through the backdoor at five minutes past eight. Ray was ready and willing to crack a few jokes and avoid the fucker for the night, but the moment Hathaway’s eyes had settled on Ray from across the room, he charged forward, screaming.

And in what seemed like half a second, Hathaway was on the ground whimpering.

Elliot had moved so fast he was a blur, and when Ray’s brain finally caught up to reality, he saw that Elliot had thrown the heavier man to the mat and gotten him into a painful arm bar that held him completely immobilized.

“Hi, Hathaway,” said Elliot.

Elliot was covered in sweat from his match, but he wasn’t even out of breath. Hathaway, on the other hand, was gasping for air.

“You remember *Detective Delgado*, don’t you?”

A few of the dozen people watching them exchanged curious glances. The rest of the FBI agents training there, Ray realized.

“Turns out he and I are old buddies. Small world, huh? Since he agreed to indulge us with this whole babysitting him thing, I figured I’d volunteer to hang out with him and save you the trouble. No one wants any

trouble with a *colleague*, even if they're with a different agency, right? Hey, you want to spar? I've got to cut out early, but I've got a few minutes now."

"You're breaking my arm!" Hathaway cried out. On the mat, his face was turning red.

"Am I?" Elliot cocked his head to the side and stared down at Hathaway's arm and then at his own hands. "No, no I'm not. It would take at least five more degrees of rotation to break your arm. I could safely rotate it another two to three degrees without even straining the tendons. Cool, huh? So are we going to spar? If you're not up for it, I think Delgado and I will get out of here."

The choked, high-pitched sound that came from the large blond man on the mat was almost a clear no.

Elliot slowly untwisted Hathaway's arm, then lifted the man by the shoulder. "Well, maybe next time." He slapped the beet-red man on the back.

Ray met his gaze, saw Elliot glance toward the door. Ray offered his sparring partner a sheepish grin. "Thanks for the match."

By the time Elliot got all of his stuff and they made it out the door, Hathaway was quietly fuming, but he didn't come near them again. It was just as well, because Ray was already sore, and his muscles were so worn out, they were twitching.

He had to start picking people up in libraries, or even at his regular gym, where 90 percent of the people he might take home didn't actually want to be working out until they felt like a life-sized Jell-O mold. Just like on Saturday night, Elliot seemed to thrive on the endless motion, the constant push and pull of bodies as he fought for dominance with a half-dozen different sparring partners.

The worst part was, even when Elliot was locked motionless in that struggle, he was breathtaking. Ray might have been able to focus on learning the throws being used on him if he could just stop trying to imagine all the ways he could turn a sparring match with Elliot into sex. He'd never had a problem staying focused before. But the moment he saw Elliot's eyes droop in utter concentration, his libido smacked his focus aside and demanded his full attention.

"You look miserable." Elliot laughed at him as they staggered out of

the dojo. “You dehydrated?”

“Probably.” Ray pressed his lips tight as he turned toward his car. He wasn’t sure why Elliot had insisted he drive, but he wasn’t about to complain about it. Driving home would give him a chance to work out a little frustration, at least. He stopped and grinned, remembering that he wasn’t going home. He was driving back to Elliot’s house. Back to an awkward conversation about the merits of sleeping on the couch, or possibly back to sex and a comfortable bed. If he pushed for that chance, if he followed Elliot into his bedroom, into the shower, or just kissed him, he didn’t know if Elliot would punch him or kiss him back.

“What is it?” Elliot asked. “You know, you didn’t have to come along.”

“It’s nothing,” Ray lied.

“Nothing?”

Elliot set his hand on Ray’s shoulder. Ray felt the heat of his touch send a spark up and down his body. The added stimulation woke up the dwindling erection he’d been trying to ignore for the last two hours. He was just grateful the damn sports cup had allowed him to maintain an illusion of decency, at least. Unfortunately, his cock kept trying to get hard, despite the pressure from the cup making a full erection impossible.

Ray tried to shake Elliot’s grip, but the other man just spun him around.

“You weren’t in a bad mood before. If it’s about that shit with Hathaway, I’m sorry. I know you’re probably the type who likes to deal with crap like that yourself. But this way, both of our agencies won’t end up at each other’s throats over another fight.”

Ray pressed his lips tight together and sighed. He shoved his hands into his pants pockets and tried to shift the damn sports cup without being obvious. “Watching you play with Hathaway didn’t help the situation.”

“I said I’m sorry.”

“I’m not. It was the best way to handle the situation. It was perfect.” It was the sexiest thing Ray had ever seen.

“What’s wrong?”

Ray glanced around at the quiet sidewalk. The dingy yellow glow of

streetlights and the occasional flash of headlights lit up the streets around them. Beyond the passing cars, they had the street to themselves.

He swallowed hard. “Can I fuck you?” He forced his voice to stay casual and indifferent, as if the answer didn’t matter.

“What?” Elliot stepped back and smirked. “Here?”

“It’s a bit bright, but...” Ray shrugged and ran his hands through his hair. The drying salt from his own sweat made his hair feel gritty and reminded him just how badly they both needed a shower. “No. Not here. Maybe we could go back to your place, rinse off, and.... You know, fuck it, I don’t care where. I want you. I want you so bad, I’ve managed to get a hard-on in a sports cup for the first time ever. But I don’t know where we stand after Sunday. I don’t know if I can kiss you, if I can even touch you, or if you’re going to hurt me if I try.”

“Hurt you?” Elliot softened his smirk a little.

“Yeah, totally not my thing. I’ve got nothing against that scene, don’t get me wrong, but I don’t need the endorphins to enjoy sex.”

Elliot buried his face in his hands, shaking. “My god, you’re something else. After a two-hour judo class, you want to fuck?”

“Are you kidding? That....” Ray flung his hand back toward the judo club a block behind them. “That was worse than sitting through two hours of live porn. Do you have any idea how hot you look when you’re fighting?”

“Worse than porn?”

“Well, yeah. A hell of a lot worse. Do you watch porn in a jockstrap and cup?”

Elliot’s entire body started to shake as he stifled a laugh. “You’re turned on? You’re insane. Isn’t that a bit tight?”

“That would be the problem. I can’t help it. When it’s you, everything is hot. I don’t want to screw this up, so I figured I’d just come right out with it and ask.” Ray glanced around again, to make sure they still had the sidewalk to themselves. He traced his palms over Elliot’s jaw slowly, giving Elliot plenty of time to break his arm or throw him to the sidewalk if he was so inclined. When Elliot didn’t move, Ray kissed him. It wasn’t the hard, wet grind of teeth and tongues Ray desperately wanted. Just a soft touch, a tentative request for more. Elliot gasped against his lips, returning his soft

kiss curiously. Despite the subtle touch, Ray's pulse was hammering when he pulled away, licking the salty taste of Elliot's lips off his own.

He watched Elliot open his eyes, the pale green of Elliot's irises were tinted with a golden sparkle from the streetlights. Ray stared at him, struck mute by the sight. Even standing on the sidewalk, Elliot took his breath away, and Ray couldn't even begin to understand why.

Elliot was so normal. His hair was a soft black that made his pale skin look like fresh cream, and when Ray saw him smile, he felt like smiling too. Elliot Belkamp wasn't strikingly handsome, but there was something about his green-gold eyes that made Ray want to stare at him forever. "Why do I want you like this?" he asked. "Like I can't breathe unless I can touch you."

"You're so full of shit, Delgado." Elliot smiled, but he didn't pull away.

"Can I?" Ray asked again, tilting his lips forward so he could feel Elliot's breath mix with his own.

Against his lips, Elliot nodded.

Ray pushed up on the balls of his feet to close the distance between them, pouring every drop of his desire into a desperate kiss that drove Elliot back, leaving them both staggering. He wrapped his arms around Elliot's neck and drove his tongue into his mouth. Ray couldn't touch him enough, couldn't taste him enough, to satisfy the lust setting every nerve in his body on fire. After shifting closer, tasting the other man's tongue and teeth and lips until he needed to surface for air, Ray was willing to rip Elliot's clothes off right there on the street. "Car...." He kissed Elliot again and dragged the other man toward his Nissan.

"My place. Shower."

He let go of Elliot long enough to sprint around to the driver's seat, but he didn't start the car. As soon as Elliot's door was closed, Ray dove toward him, meeting his lips with a punishing, brutal kiss. He felt Elliot's fingers squirm into the waistband of his workout pants, lift the jockstrap carefully, and slip the hated sports cup out. "Better?"

Ray shook his head slowly. "Not even close." Ray kissed him again, leaning over the gearshift so he could reach Elliot's shoulders, pulling him closer.

Elliot returned the kiss, leaning into him and pushing him back into the driver's seat. Elliot was still moving his hands beneath Ray's waistband, rolling his pants down until he could peel the jockstrap off, freeing Ray's cock. Without the constraint of the jockstrap, his cock pulsed and hardened instantly. Elliot ran his fingers up and down Ray's erection, teasing him rather than stroking, but Ray wasn't about to complain. Elliot pulled his lips away from Ray's with a wet pop, then bent down and took the tip of Ray's cock into his mouth without warning.

Ray hissed and tried to buck up into the wet heat. The angle of the seat didn't give him room to move, but he tried anyway. He ran his hands through Elliot's hair and over his tight shoulders, urging Elliot to take him deeper. Elliot sucked him in until Ray felt his tongue and throat along his entire length. "Oh fuck, you can...." But the words evaporated somewhere between his brain and his lips as Elliot swallowed him. He leaned back and tried to keep still, letting Elliot stay in control. He watched Elliot's closed eyelids as the other man bobbed up and then slid back down Ray's length to bury his lips and nose in Ray's pubic hair. Ray refused to close his eyes, refused to blink, just so he could burn that image into his memories.

"El, I'm...."

Elliot huffed and sucked him in deeper still, swallowing as Ray exploded down his throat. Ray curled over Elliot's shoulders, riding out the aftershocks as Elliot sucked him clean.

"Fuck...." he breathed again.

"Let's get back to my place for that."

Ray collapsed back against the seat, trying to catch his breath. "You expect me to drive after that?"

"I seem to recall you being able to bounce back pretty fast." Elliot squeezed his thigh. "Consider it a thank you for enduring two hours of judo porn."

"If that's my incentive, I will be in class every single night."

After he caught his breath, Ray covered the mile and a half up to Elliot's house dangerously fast.

He pulled in the driveway, spared a quick glance at the empty street, and practically crawled into Elliot's lap, claiming his lips, his entire mouth, in a demanding kiss. Elliot ran his hands over Ray's thighs and hips, then

reached around and cupped his ass.

Elliot pulled away, grinning. “I forgot how eager you get. Let’s go inside.”

They stumbled into the house, clinging to each other. Ray released Elliot long enough to type the new code into the alarm system, then rearmed it fast, before reaching for Elliot again.

“Hey.” Elliot grabbed his wrists and held him still. “How did you set that up?”

“I just programmed it.” Ray leaned forward and nipped at Elliot’s lips, determined to touch him even if Elliot wouldn’t let him use his hands.

“You didn’t think to mention that?”

“You wanted to go beat people up. Your code is 3927.” He stepped close against Elliot and tried to maneuver him toward the bedroom while he kissed Elliot’s jaw and neck. Ray felt the chuckle deep in Elliot’s throat as Elliot gave ground. Halfway through the kitchen, Elliot stopped him. “What’s up?”

“I need to take some medicine,” Elliot whispered.

“Another headache?”

“Not yet. I can usually tell when they’re coming, though, and it’s easier to stop them before they get bad.”

Ray licked his way up to Elliot’s earlobe, then stepped back. “If you let go of me, I can get you a glass of iced tea. Or water. You said caffeine makes them worse, right?”

“Yeah.” He didn’t release Ray’s wrists, though. He just held Ray’s hands still and stared at him, his eyes glazed.

“Elliot?”

“I’m not sure I want to let you go.”

“That’ll make it hard to open a pill bottle....”

Elliot sighed and eased his grip. Ray scooted past the other man and poured him a glass of water. When Elliot still didn’t move, Ray set the water down and moved to the drawer where Elliot kept his prescriptions. “Is it getting bad already? What do you need?”

Ray heard Elliot move, felt the warmth and steel-tight muscles of Elliot’s chest press against his back. “I’ll get them.” Elliot’s breath ghosted

over his ear. “Then I think we need to talk about just how you want this to happen.”

Ray couldn’t help thinking about the way Elliot had gotten him off just by fingering him and the unspoken promise that Elliot was capable of doing so much more to his body. He shoved his hips back, experimentally, and winced in sympathy as he felt the bulk of the sports cup that was still keeping Elliot from getting hard. “Talking wasn’t exactly what I had in mind.”

Elliot reached around him and pulled two amber pill bottles and an Imitrex pen out of the drawer. “We’re going to talk.”

He fished out his pills, drained the glass of water Ray had left for him, then disappeared for a moment, fumbling with the Imitrex. Before long, though, he was back, pressing himself against Ray’s back again. In addition to administering the migraine medication, Elliot had shed the sports cup and jockstrap in favor of loose boxers. Ray could feel just how turned on he was.

Ray shivered as Elliot ran his hands over his shoulders and down his arms, where he took hold of Ray’s wrists again. Ray felt Elliot’s lips graze over the nape of his neck. He dropped his head forward to give Elliot more access. Elliot’s teeth scraped over the ticklish skin at the base of his neck. The sting made Ray hiss and made his half-hard cock spring to full attention again.

“What was it...?” Ray gasped as Elliot bit down on his shoulder and then sucked on the same spot tenderly. “What did you want to talk about?”

“Things that turn you on.” He trailed a line of kisses from Ray’s shoulder back to his neck. Still holding Ray’s wrists, he wrapped both of their arms around Ray’s body and held him tight. “Do you know, most fighters don’t get turned on during a fight? Even if they’re grappling, even if they’re both gay and both attracted to each other. The adrenaline stops it, even if the cup doesn’t. When I fight, I’m too focused on the match to think about sex.”

“I’m *me*,” Ray muttered. “Damn near everything turns me on.” Technically, damn near everything Elliot Belkamp did seemed to turn him on, but that was just a minor detail.

“You didn’t spar with me.” Elliot’s voice was husky and laced with need. “But I saw you watching. What were you thinking about? What were

you imagining that got you so hot you managed a hard-on with a jockstrap?”

“Being your sparring partner. When you fight, legs and arms and hands get tangled together... sliding together.... It’s fucking hot....”

“You imagined being tangled together?” Elliot asked. “What else did you imagine?”

Ray felt Elliot nip at his neck again. “I have a vivid imagination.”

“Hmm. I want to know just how vivid. Did you imagine us naked? Did you imagine us fucking right there on the mat? Who, I wonder, won the fight? Because, if we’re totally honest with each other, I think we both know you’re no match for me without a weapon.”

Ray would never admit that aloud, but it was true. But the reality of how unevenly matched he and Elliot were didn’t dampen his fantasies; it fueled them. Remembering the way Elliot had touched him, Ray’s subconscious didn’t even bother trying to create a scenario in which he overpowered the other man. While Ray had watched Elliot win match after match, his treacherous brain had kept replaying potential sex scenes in his imagination, and each one started with Elliot pinning him down. Each one ended with Elliot buried inside him, driving him to another mind-blowing orgasm.

Ray’s cock pulsed painfully as his own imagination fed off the contact and Elliot’s tight hold.

“You said you couldn’t let another man fuck you. But did you imagine it?”

Ray nodded his head frantically.

“You want it?”

Ray nodded again, wishing Elliot would touch him, kiss him, or even just move.

“You want me to fuck you?” Ray felt Elliot’s breath ghost over the shell of his ear with the words. “Rough and hard?”

“Yes. Fuck yes.” Elliot released his wrists, withdrew his arms, and the warmth against Ray’s back vanished. “Hmm?” Ray whimpered.

“Hot as you are right now, I’m not going to let your first time be hard and messy against my kitchen counter.”

Ray whimpered at the thought of that. “I’m okay with the kitchen counter.”

“Not this time.” Elliot took his hand and pulled him into the bedroom. “I really should rinse off first. Dried sweat is gross.”

“Shower with me after?” Ray suggested.

“Before?”

Ray followed Elliot into the bathroom, watching him strip off workout clothes with a comfort that seemed surreal. He dropped his sweat-covered clothes into a wicker hamper and turned on the water. Ray shucked his clothes fast and stepped into the shower behind him. He stood there for a moment, staring at the sharp angles of Elliot’s back. Ray’s dick throbbed at the sight of Elliot’s muscles, every inch hard and defined. Too defined, in some spots. He reached out with his hands and traced the way Elliot’s shoulder bones and hips seemed to be wrapped by nothing more than a tight layer of skin. He was going to have to make a point of cooking Elliot real food. If the man ever actually managed to eat enough calories each day, he’d have the body of a god.

Ray ran his hands over Elliot’s back, drawing the hot spray of the shower down with his fingers. He wiped the sweat and grime away, then rubbed every inch of skin and muscle, from Elliot’s neck to his ass. When he reached the crack of Elliot’s ass, he hesitated for a moment, then trailed his hand straight down, grazing his fingertips over Elliot’s entrance and then reaching forward to cup his sac. Elliot dropped his head to the side and groaned.

Ray slipped his hand back as Elliot turned to face him. He rose up on his toes and met Elliot as he ducked in to claim his lips. He let Elliot take control of the kiss, opened up and let Elliot explore his mouth and lips with his tongue. He grabbed onto Elliot’s hips to brace himself as Elliot worked his hands up and down Ray’s body. Everywhere Elliot touched him was left smooth, clean, and tingling. Elliot didn’t break the kiss as he spun them around, maneuvering Ray under the spray of the shower. Elliot pulled away and tilted Ray’s chin up so the water tumbled through his hair, and rubbed the sweat from Ray’s thighs, balls, and cock. He stroked Ray gently, teasing and letting his cock jut against Ray’s without any drive or friction. Ray thrust forward, hoping for relief, but Elliot just smirked at him, shut the water off,

and reached for a towel.

When he dragged Ray out of the bathroom and pulled him into another brutal kiss, Ray consciously forced himself not to fight for dominance, not to push back and try to shove Elliot onto the bed. The more Elliot pushed him, the faster his pulse raced and the harder his cock became.

Elliot shoved him back onto the bed and crawled over him, licking and kissing him. He pulled away for a moment, dove for a drawer in the bedside table, and came back with lube and a foil-wrapped condom. He stroked Ray's cock softly and stared down at him; the green of his eyes looked darker and more intense than Ray remembered. Ray shifted back and spread his legs so Elliot could settle between them.

Elliot just stared at him for a moment, then ripped the condom packet open and put it on with a snap. Ray watched him coat his fingers in the cold lube and watched his hand drop low between Ray's thighs. His heart raced inside his chest, and it took a few focused deep breaths to force himself not to draw his legs together. He remembered the way Elliot had made him feel last time and forced himself to relax. He wanted to feel that pressure, that hard blinding orgasm, again.

Elliot slipped a slick finger inside his body. It went in easier this time, gliding in and out with only a slight sense of pressure.

“That’s not as bad as before.”

“Lube helps.” Elliot shifted forward and kissed him again, distracting him as he slipped another finger inside. Ray tried to shift his hips up, to angle Elliot's fingers to find that spot inside him that made the pleasure ricochet through his body, but Elliot wasn't pushing in deep enough. He kept his fingers near the tight ring of muscle, stretching him slowly. Elliot pulled away from his lips, panting. “It’s still going to hurt at first.” He slicked himself up quickly.

“I figured it would all hurt.” Ray tried to shift his hips against Elliot's fingers again.

Elliot shrugged, kissed him again, and dropped in between his legs. Ray felt the tip of Elliot's cock against him. He grabbed Elliot's shoulders, squeezing hard, as the other man pushed inside him.

It hurt, but not nearly as bad as Ray had always feared. Beyond the

burning, the sensation of being filled was strange and unexpected, not painful but awkward, until Elliot pushed in balls deep and glided over Ray's prostate.

"There." Ray squeezed his eyes shut as the throbbing pleasure shot through him. Elliot pulled out halfway and sank back in, grazing Ray's prostate with each movement. Before the throbbing pulse could fade, Elliot moved again, never holding still long enough for the pleasure to ebb. The burning sting was lost somewhere in the mess of movement and pleasure, and Ray shoved back to meet Elliot, thrust for thrust, as the pleasure built inside him. The building sensation reached the point where it was nearly unbearable before Ray slammed into a gut-tightening climax, squirting over his own stomach.

Above him, Elliot grinned wickedly. Another two thrusts, and Ray felt the heat of Elliot's come, muted by the condom, inside him.

"Fuck..." Ray panted, trying to catch his breath.

"I didn't even have to touch you." Elliot slipped out of him and rolled to the side. He was glistening with sweat again. "Told you it's worth it."

Ray managed a feeble nod. "With you? Definitely worth it."

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

ELLIOT WAS up earlier than he would have liked. The sun was already starting to rise, and his stomach was so empty the sharp pangs of hunger overwhelmed everything, from the urge to stay in bed to the need to pee. Even the twinge in his ass as he leapt out of bed seemed irrelevant as he headed for the kitchen.

Three packages of brown sugar and cinnamon Pop-Tarts and a large glass of water later, the stabbing hunger finally ebbed, and Elliot realized that he wasn't alone. Ray was sitting at the counter, fully dressed, and playing with his phone.

"Is it that late already?" Elliot asked, opening the last of the Pop-Tarts. "You shouldn't have let me sleep in."

Ray kept his eyes glued on his phone. "You looked like you needed the rest after yesterday."

"After last night, you mean." Elliot's smile fell as he took in the other man's hunched shoulders and narrowed eyes. Sometime during the night, he'd woken up to feel Ray's lips against his. After a bit of fumbling in his nightstand in the dark, Ray had fucked him slowly from behind, using Elliot's entire body for leverage and bringing Elliot to the brink of finishing a dozen times before he finally kept moving when Elliot got close. Ray was so damn observant, so careful about his angle, his pace, his hands, that when Elliot had finally come he'd felt utterly drained. It had been amazing. But then, sex with Ray Delgado was always amazing.

The cocky, self-assured smile that he remembered seeing on Ray's face the morning after sex was nowhere to be found this morning. "You okay?"

Ray kept staring at his phone for a few seconds too long. “Fine,” he said at last.

“I guess I’ll get dressed.” Elliot set his last Pop-Tart on the counter.

“I...” Ray slipped off the bar stool. “I’ve got some things I’ve got to take care of this morning. I’ve got to run in to work, see if I can get some more information about the search of Garcia’s apartment and maybe check the medical examiner’s report.”

“It’s not your case, Ray. The police handed everything from Garcia’s death and the search over to my office yesterday.”

“Yeah. I know. But the officers involved will still have copies of their reports. I just need to work,” Ray muttered, rolling his shoulders awkwardly.

Elliot sighed and forced himself to smile. He’d known this was likely to happen, even if he hadn’t wanted to believe it. Ray was still struggling with the idea of being bisexual, and last night Elliot had tried pretty damn hard to help him expand his acceptance of the idea. No matter how eager Ray had seemed, Elliot had pushed him too far. Giving in to an urge wasn’t the same as coming to terms with redefining your entire sense of self-identity. He’d known what he was getting into, but it still stung more than he’d expected. “It’s all right, you know. I don’t need some bullshit excuse. You can’t go to work, you’re still on administrative leave, and your boss all but ordered you into FBI custody. But I’m not expecting anything here. Hell, I was expecting you to bolt last night.

“My boss set up a temporary protective order, so there’s a hotel room already booked for you. Go there. If you want, I can even arrange for another agent to check in with you.”

“No, I...” Ray met his gaze for an instant and then pulled his phone up again. “That might be a good idea. If I stop getting you in trouble, you can get back on the case, and I could get out of your hair...”

“You’re no trouble.” Elliot dug his own cell phone out of his jacket, found the text message from St. Claire, and forwarded it to Ray’s phone. He knew the moment Ray got the text message because Ray looked up at him and almost flinched. “It’s no big deal,” said Elliot, keeping his face passive. “You can stay in the hotel, you can stay here. It’s your choice.”

“I should go.” Ray tried to smile. He failed, but Elliot smiled anyway. Ray tucked his phone away and headed for the door, his keys already in his hand. “Maybe I can give you a call?”

Elliot barked out a bitter laugh before he could stop himself. “I said it’s no big deal. Things don’t have to be awkward here, so just don’t worry about it, all right.”

Ray seemed to shrink a little. “Okay.” he nodded, slipping out the door quickly.

Elliot stared at the closed front door and listened as Ray’s car roared to life outside. Ray drove away so fast his tires squealed. Elliot leaned back against his kitchen counter, nibbled on his last Pop-Tart, and resisted the urge to hit something.

“Way to fuck things up, Elliot,” he said out loud. Ray was nervous, conflicted, and ashamed of the desires he was battling, and Elliot hadn’t done a damn thing to help him get past it. Worse still, he’d scared Ray away when Ray really didn’t have anywhere else to go. He’d been assigned to keep an eye on Ray, to keep him safe, and he had totally fucked it up.

He finished his breakfast and glanced at the clock over the oven.

“Fucking hell!”

As if his morning wasn’t off to a bad enough start, if he wanted to get into the office before St. Claire started the case-status meeting, he had less than twenty minutes to shower and get to the federal building.

He ended up coming in near the end of the case-status meeting. “Sorry,” he glanced around the small conference room at the array of irritated expressions. “I got caught up dealing with Detective Delgado this morning. He’s a bit of a handful.”

Hathaway, a heavysset man with a short crew cut, sneered. “Thought you were buddies?”

“We are. He’s still a handful.”

“Detective Delgado is in a secure location?” St. Claire asked.

“Yes, ma’am.” Elliot kept up a reassuring smile. “He’s at the hotel you arranged and secure. He also doesn’t want me hanging around and has requested someone else.”

“Not much of a punishment if you can’t even last one day,” said St.

Claire.

“I didn’t say I was giving up, just giving him time to cool off. Apparently me bringing him Pop-Tarts is some kind of cruel and unusual punishment, and he’d like to file a complaint.”

“Did you bring him anything besides Pop-Tarts?” one of the agents from judo asked.

Elliot turned his smile into a perplexed frown. “I don’t need to. They’re vitamin fortified. Everything a body needs.”

“Bring the poor detective real food tonight,” St. Claire laughed. “But since you’re here, we need some more agents in the field today. Let’s get started. Hathaway?”

“Right. The NSA guys, from what I’ve been able to translate out of all the technobabble, have managed to pin down an IP address where data packets with new encryption keys were uploaded to different bank servers. They’ve been uploaded three times over the weekend and once this morning. The IP address is in Rancho Bernardo, they’re working on getting us an address. We’ve got a tactical team on standby, so as soon as we get an address, we’re going to move in.”

“Rancho Bernardo?” Elliot looked around the conference table. “Munoz was involved with one of her professors. I pulled his credit after I talked to him yesterday, to see if he might have any money coming in that didn’t match his salary. Nothing strange about him financially, but his address is in Rancho Bernardo.”

St. Clair’s eyes bulged. “The professor who reported her missing?”

“That’s right.”

“Get the address to Technical, see if it matches the data uploads. Belkamp, you came in, so I’m putting you to work. You’ll just have to pull double duty and babysit Delgado tonight.”

Three hours and three cups of regular coffee later, Elliot felt like he’d come closer to finding Sophie Munoz but was cursing himself for not taking Dr. Holland into custody when he had the chance. He stood fuming, supervising officers as they hauled boxes of computer equipment from Dr. Holland’s two-story Rancho Bernardo home.

The search had turned up two suitcases still packed with women’s clothing, a small makeup bag, and a suspicious lack of other toiletries in

any of the bathrooms. The soap scum rings on the edge of the tub were still wet, the heater had been turned down, but the house was still warm, and the fridge was filled with fresh, perishable food. Sophie Munoz had been there, alive and well, but something must have tipped her and Holland off that morning. There was no sign of either of them. A leased BMW that showed up on Holland's DMV record was also nowhere to be found.

"You can see the road coming into the subdivision from the master bedroom." St. Claire joined him by the front door. "They had to be watching for anyone coming after them. Odds are we missed them by a few minutes."

"That figures." Elliot shoved his hands into his pockets, trying not to get pissed. At least the tech guys were thrilled. Before they began dismantling things, a preliminary scan of the computer hard drives turned up the series of encryption keys they needed to decipher where the money Sophie Munoz's ever-evolving computer program had stolen was being deposited. They'd been working around the clock to shut the program down, tracking the funds in both directions in hopes of freezing the cartel accounts the money originated in, as well as whatever accounts the money was heading toward, but every time they froze an account or stopped a transaction, the program initiated another series of fund transfers. The most thoroughly encrypted parts of the code eluded them, because the encryption algorithms seemed to change every time a new transaction was initiated while the code executed. Sometimes the code changed for no apparent reason whatsoever.

Elliot had listened to them rant about it for a whole ten minutes before he'd gone to Sophie's backpack. He dropped a textbook entitled *Artificial Intelligence and Evolutionary Programming* into one man's lap, then went to help catalogue the seized equipment. St. Claire put in a call for help from the Rancho Bernardo police and assigned teams to watch Holland's house and office, then sent agents back to the city to watch Sophie's dorm room in case she went back there.

St. Claire patted him on the back as they left the scene. "You did good, Belkamp. Finding them and the money is just a matter of time now."

"If we find them before Alejandro Munoz does."

"You've got access to our best informant on that front," she reminded him.

Elliot thought about Ray again, about the way he seemed ready to panic that morning. He nodded slowly. "I'll see what he has to say."

"You should go get some food," she said, without looking at him. "I can hear your stomach growling from here."

"Sorry. Hard class last night."

"Yes, I heard you brought Detective Delgado again. He did get settled into the hotel, didn't he, Belkamp?"

Elliot kept his face perfectly still. St. Claire's husband owned the dojo where he trained. He knew them both from tournaments over the years and counted them both as friends outside of work. But that didn't mean gossip she heard from her husband would stay out of the office, even if she was tactful enough to wait until after the status meeting to bring it up. "Well... I passed the hotel information on to him and he left. He said thank you, promised he'd lay low, and left."

"Who left?" Hathaway waddled out of the house with two sealed cardboard boxes.

"Detective Delgado. I don't actually know if he went to the hotel we arranged for him or not. Like I said, he's a handful."

Hathaway grunted and shifted his grip on the boxes. "We can ask a few of the city's officers to go by and check on him." He shifted his grip again and then smirked at Elliot. "Take these for me, Belkamp? My arm hurts like a bitch after last night."

Elliot braced himself. Hathaway shoved the boxes into his arms before he could answer, but Elliot caught the weight, shifted it slightly, and grinned. "It's always a risk when you jump into something you're not prepared for. You should ice it."

"Having the PD check on Delgado is a good idea. Maybe he'll be more polite to them." St. Claire scribbled the information on a sticky note and handed it to Hathaway. If she knew what had happened during class last night, she didn't let on. "Call and see if they have a unit that can swing by."

Hathaway took the note and stretched his arms over his head. "If they don't have anybody, I'll go check on him. Belkamp's been stuck with him for almost a week, so it's probably my turn."

"Think you can behave yourself this time?" St. Claire smiled up at him.

Hathaway flushed brightly. “Yes, I can behave myself.”

“See if the city can do it, first. I have complete faith in you, but let’s not make things worse,” St. Claire ordered.

“Will do.” Hathaway nodded at each of them and hurried out.

Elliot shook his head slowly, wishing he could have seen the mess between Hathaway and Ray first hand.

As if reading his mind, St. Claire swiped the screen on her iPhone a few times. She held it up for him to see.

She’d managed to get a fairly discreet photo of Special Agent Hathaway, scraping salsa off his dress shirt and out of his hair. Elliot let himself smile, but didn’t say anything, and she returned the phone to her jacket pocket.

“Sometimes,” St. Claire said, as she grabbed the top box from Elliot’s stack, “I wish I’d been assigned here while Detective Delgado was still working with us. Apparently he kept things interesting.”

“Huh?”

“Detective Delgado. When we were still trying to keep up with the interagency assignments, he worked with the task force for two years. Back in 2008, when things across the border were getting bloody. The SDPD has their own gang enforcement unit, and he was one of their senior officers.”

“I had heard something like that, but I didn’t actually think about it. Maybe we should see if the PD will let us borrow him.”

“So tempting....”

They loaded the boxes in the back of a cargo van, and she nodded toward Elliot’s car. “Don’t worry about Delgado tonight. Whatever happened—and I’m totally happy with the ignorant delusion that nothing happened at all—you’ve looked miserable all day. Go eat, if nothing else.”

He sighed and relaxed a little. St. Claire had been a friend for years, and she was a good friend, but she was also one of the few people he thought might be worthy of a *World’s Greatest Boss* coffee mug. “Thank you.”

Elliot tried not to think about Ray on the drive home. He kept telling himself that he should have been the one to go check on him, even if Ray didn’t particularly want to see him after last night. He kept his gaze relaxed,

driving up the hill in Tierrasanta on autopilot. Even after eight years away from the desert and the army, the lessons learned driving around the streets of Kabul were etched into his mind forever, and he found himself pulling over half a block from his own house, staring at the glowing front porch light and the dark windows. He knew he left the living room lights on, and he intentionally left the front light off. He was particular about that. The light over the front door was on, but from what he could see of the living room windows, there were no lights on inside. Aside from the porch light, the entire house was dark.

He turned off his headlights and scanned the cars on the block, looking more for movement than for anything in particular.

He took a deep breath and reminded himself that Ray had been messing with the electricity the night before. He might have screwed something up. But Elliot knew Ray well enough to know better. Not only was Ray not the type to make mistakes, Elliot had watched him flip the breaker back on, and, of course, without power the porch light couldn't be on.

Elliot kept his eyes unfocused, taking in details of the cars parked on the street and comparing them to the cars he'd seen parked there since he moved in. When he caught sight of a familiar-looking silver SUV, he leaned forward and tried to make out the plate number. "Fuck. Whoever that is, they're persistent." Elliot kept his eyes on the silver Lexus and called the field office quickly. After he was transferred to the police department's dispatch office and gave the operator his badge number, he read the license plate back to her twice and thrummed his fingers on the steering wheel while he waited to find out who the car was registered to.

"Special Agent Belkamp, the plate is registered to a 1998 green Ford Taurus, owner is listed as a Jennifer Yung, age nineteen, no current warrants, outstanding tickets, or alerts. The address listed is in Salinas, in Monterey County."

"A Ford Taurus?" Elliot asked, just to make sure. Salinas was almost eight hours north of San Diego.

"A 1998 green Ford Taurus," the operator confirmed. "Do you need anything else, Agent Belkamp?"

Elliot considered asking for a car to respond, but he didn't want to overreact. "No, but thanks." He hung up the phone and stared at the empty

SUV again. It was just a strange car parked across the street. A car that might have followed him from a subject's residence immediately after he searched the house. A car that had a set of clean plates matched to a different car, so he couldn't run an ID check. Still, if he called in a full tactical response only to find Ray sitting on his couch playing with his phone, everyone on the gang task force would be making jokes about it for the next year. It was a bit too much of a coincidence to imagine he'd left the lights out, but there was a slim chance Ray might have come back after all.

He dialed Ray's cell phone and listened to it ring five times before the call went to voice mail. He tried Hathaway's number next, but he didn't answer either. Frustrated, he dialed the hotel Ray was supposed to be staying in, figuring the desk clerk could transfer his call to Ray's room.

"Why the fuck isn't the hotel answering?" he whispered.

Out of options, he called the dispatch office back. Once he got through all of the formalities, with a different operator this time, he asked for a list of vehicles registered in Ray's name. When the dispatcher informed him that Ray only owned the little black Nissan he'd picked up from the tow yard, Elliot took a deep breath. He asked for a patrol car to respond to his address.

It would inevitably lead to paperwork, and teasing, from the other agents he worked with, especially if it turned out he was just being a paranoid idiot.

"I'm sorry, Special Agent Belkamp, all available officers are responding to another incident at the moment. I'll send a car to your location as quickly as possible, but it could take up to half an hour."

A request to investigate a suspicious person or vehicle was not a high-priority call anywhere. He sighed and hung up the phone.

He checked his sidearm, rubbed his hands over his shirt to drive home the reminder that he was wearing a vest, and reached for the door. It was his house. He knew the layout. He knew all of the points of entry. And he could easily go around to the back porch and look through the windows without being spotted.

If someone was inside his house, he had no chance of getting inside without them knowing. Ray had been kind enough to fix all of the magnetic switches on his doors and windows, so anything he opened would make the

alarm system chime. So the most he could do was hope to get a decent view through the windows and decide on a course of action from there.

“I am never leaving him alone without a fully charged cell phone again,” said Elliot.

Elliot made sure the street was empty, turned off the dome light above him so it wouldn't turn on when he opened the door, then climbed out of his car. He jogged down the street to a small opening between residential fences where there was access to the canyon-trail system that bordered his property. The canyon was usually filled with hikers, joggers, and kids, but with the sun setting early and the weather getting chilly, the canyon was empty at this time of night. He followed the trail up until he was next to his neighbor's fence, listening for dogs or other people more than looking for them. The canyon smelled like juniper, sage, and sand—it was so different from the scent of the redwoods he'd grown up in outside of San Francisco, and different still from the vast evergreen forests in his last duty station in Montana. He'd spent enough time sitting on his back patio in the darkness that the smell already felt like home.

He dropped from a jog into an easy stroll, giving his eyes a chance to adjust to the darkness. He walked along the perimeter of his neighbor's six-foot privacy fence, then along the five-foot chain-link fence that separated Elliot's property from the canyon beyond. He studied his empty yard, which was just as wild as the canyon, and the wood patio that ran along the entire length of his house. No one was in sight and nothing moved. He took a few more quick steps, then hooked his elbow over the fence and let his momentum swing his legs over the top. He hurried into a shadow and stared out at the yard again. There was still no movement.

Sticking close to the fence, and then to the side of the house, he crept up the back steps to the patio, where his living room windows offered an unobstructed view of three bulky shapes. For a moment, he remembered similar moments before storming into dark buildings, when he could make out the shape of assault rifles through night vision goggles. The details weren't as clear, and he was in a different desert, but the shapes were similar enough to recognize the short angles of rifles held up and ready.

Elliot ducked beneath the patio and dialed 911, hoping the glow from his phone wouldn't attract any attention. He gave the dispatcher his badge number and the address for what felt like the hundredth time, informed them

of his previous call and reported the presence of the intruders, then asked that officers responding be made aware that a plain-clothed FBI agent was already on the scene. He covered his phone as three loud cracks echoed above him. His heart nearly stopped as he scanned the darkness, looking for whoever had spotted him. He wasn't hit, though, and the only sounds to be heard were muffled thuds from inside the house. There was no breaking glass, no running footsteps.

Elliot peered up over the edge of the patio, then ducked back down. Someone was still moving inside. He inched back up the stairs and stopped when a soft glow illuminated the living room and kitchen. The light in his laundry room, between the kitchen and the garage, had been turned on. In the kitchen, Elliot saw the familiar profile that left him frozen. Ray, holding a very big revolver, was standing in his kitchen in a sleek gray suit. Where the three hulking figures with assault rifles had stood, now there were three bodies on the floor, all dressed in dark clothing, all very dead.

“Fuck!” Elliot sprinted to the side door. He raced into the garage, trying to keep to the shadows but desperate to find Ray and stop him. As he spun on the concrete, he stopped. A triangle of light cascaded out the laundry room door, spilling onto the concrete. A man in a black hooded sweatshirt was standing behind the door, a small assault rifle tucked into his hands. He was leaning into the laundry room, aiming the rifle into the kitchen.

Elliot moved fast. He ducked low and sprinted forward, then surged to his feet when he was close enough to disarm the man. The intruder had no clue he was there, and Elliot managed to pop the rifle out of his hands quickly. He had no hope of turning the gun or keeping control of it, so he settled for flinging it toward the wall. He swept the man's feet out from under him and brought him to the ground in a smooth, easy motion. As usual, the moment the fight went to the ground, the other man flailed, and Elliot took control.

Elliot slipped his arm around the man's neck, locked the intruder's right arm up against his ear so it was useless, and squeezed. In less than thirty seconds, the choke hold cut off the blood flow through his carotid artery, and he slumped into unconsciousness. The entire mess had taken less than forty seconds. Elliot gently lowered him to the concrete and checked to make sure his pulse was steady.

He heard a pistol cock and glanced up into the barrel of a gun and eyes that looked very much like Ray Delgado's. "That was impressive."

"You're not Ray." Elliot said, glancing between the barrel of the gun and the man in the gray suit.

"Neither are you," the man laughed. "Poor Raymond never lets himself have any fun. Alejandro Munoz." The man introduced himself but stayed still, keeping his gun raised.

"Put the gun down."

"Are you a friend of Raymond's, perhaps? A bodyguard?" Alejandro smirked and shifted his feet. "A boyfriend?"

"I am FBI. Special Agent Elliot Belkamp. This is my house. Put the gun down."

"Hmm. No. If you're a friend of Raymond's, I expect you'll just try to kill me, even if I put the gun down. He would. Where is he?"

"I've got no idea."

"Really?" Alejandro clicked his tongue. "I hope you're telling the truth. I went to all this trouble thinking I was keeping him alive. What a waste."

"If you're here to keep him alive, isn't the gun a bit counterproductive?" Elliot asked, holding both of his hands up, fingers wide.

"Hardly. I think that little shit at your feet is the last of them. Stand aside." Alejandro flicked his pistol to the right. "I'll deal with him."

"You won't touch him," Elliot growled, holding his ground.

"Are you kidding me?" Alejandro rolled his eyes. "He was here to kill you, moron. Him and three other motherfuckers Garcia hired."

"Don't care," said Elliot. "I disarmed him, I knocked him out. That makes him my prisoner. My prisoner, in my custody. Put the gun down and put your hands on your head."

Alejandro cocked his head, smirking. "After that stunt you tried yesterday, I knew you had balls. Or a single-digit IQ. But I never expected this. Do you have any idea who I am, Mr. FBI?"

"What stunt?" Elliot asked, hoping to keep Alejandro talking to buy himself a bit more time. He'd been hearing sirens for what felt like twenty

minutes, but no one had stormed into the house yet.

“You tried to lure me into an open confrontation, all by yourself. No backup, no cover, just you and me. At the time, I thought it was beyond stupidity. But you took him out like it was child’s play.”

“That Lexus outside is yours, then?”

“Nice, isn’t it? You can relax. If I wanted you dead, Mr. FBI, I’d have cut you to pieces yesterday afternoon.”

“If you don’t want me dead, you can put the gun down.”

“Again, no.”

“What do you want, then? Why were you following me?”

“Because these dogs want Raymond dead. And the rumor is you’re the one hiding him.”

“Why would they want Ray dead?”

“Why else? Retaliation. Esteban Garcia sent his brat to seduce my sister so he could fuck us over. He thought they could make me out to look like a traitor and a worthless thief. He didn’t think to send someone with more than half a fucking brain cell, so I really consider his death a kindness. Esteban thinks that Raymond killed him, though.”

“What? Esteban Garcia? Luca’s father?”

“He’s a smart man,” Alejandro said simply. “But his son was a waste of flesh. I did the man a favor, putting him down.”

“You killed Garcia?”

“The boy used my sister, turned her against her own flesh and blood. He disrespected me. And he disrespected Raymond, too. He violated his home, destroyed his property. If I let that kind of disrespect go unanswered, what kind of man am I?”

“A sane man?” Elliot knew he should keep his mouth shut, but he couldn’t help it.

“A weak man. I wasn’t cruel about it. After the way he used Sophie, I should have been, but I didn’t want to offend his father.”

“Killing him wasn’t supposed to offend anyone?”

Alejandro shrugged. “I left him in one piece, and I left the body so his family can bury him, all out of respect for his father. I even told this to his

associate. But I suspect he orchestrated his son's game here anyway, so he must have known what would come of it."

"Associate?"

Alejandro shrugged. "One of Garcia's men, I'm sure. He has them everywhere. I am the only thing keeping Esteban Garcia himself out of San Diego, and what better way to make room to move in than to convince my uncles that my sister and I have betrayed them? The only thing I can't believe is that she was stupid enough to get taken in by him."

"Mr. Munoz, I don't care what kind of pissing match you're involved in with other drug cartels. Murder is murder. Put the gun down, now."

"Stop playing pig for a minute and think. These men knew you, Mr. FBI. Your name, your home address, and that you were playing host to Raymond. I had trouble tracking you down. I had to follow you all afternoon to find you. I lost you, doubled back here. And then I found these men. And you know what? They didn't wander around looking for your car; they didn't waste time watching this house to make sure it was yours. They knew where you lived. They knew what kind of car you drive. And they wouldn't have hesitated to shoot the first person stupid enough to walk through the front door. Someone sold you out, Mr. FBI."

"Esteban Garcia has someone inside the Gang Task Force...." Elliot whispered.

Alejandro nodded slowly, his smile gleeful and manic. The barrel of the .45 weaved through the air for a moment, then exploded in a crack that seemed to shake the entire garage. Elliot dove to the side and rolled, hoping to disarm Alejandro before he could line up a second shot. Alejandro sidestepped quickly, leapt over the unconscious man, and sprinted toward the road. Elliot chased him to the curb and fumbled with his phone as he watched the silver Lexus SUV speed away.

"St. Claire!" he yelled, when his boss finally answered the phone. A half-dozen police cars and an ambulance turned the corner onto his street. "St. Claire, somebody just tried to kill me. Three people, armed with assault rifles, were waiting in my fucking house! Have you heard from Hathaway? Is Delgado safe?"

"Belkamp?" There were sirens on the other end of the phone too. For a moment, he thought she might be in one of the cars racing toward him.

“Belkamp, are you safe? Is Delgado with you?”

“Someone broke into my house and tried to kill me! They were after Delgado!”

“Was he with you?” Elliot could barely make out her voice over the din.

“No.”

“Delgado’s hotel room is completely destroyed! The bomb squad won’t let anyone inside yet. Get back to headquarters and stay there!”

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CHAPTER TWELVE

RAY LISTENED to the phone ring, but he didn't answer it. He was simultaneously wishing he'd had less to drink and wishing he had more alcohol. The quiet around him was suffocating, and with nothing but the damn phone's ring tone to cut through the silence, Ray felt like his skin was crawling. Being able to talk to someone, *anyone* really, would help. But the caller ID said the call was from Elliot, and he was the last person Ray wanted to talk to.

Ray had played every video game on his phone twice, and flipped through two of the cheesy police procedurals his ex-partner kept on the shelf with his very limited DVD collection. He forgot about breakfast and lunch, microwaved dinner, and drank four beers out of the six-pack he'd picked up that morning.

He didn't drink enough to get really drunk, just enough to take the edge off.

He was totally out of distractions, and he really needed one right now. All day, he'd been thinking about the way he felt with Elliot inside him, working his prostate until he couldn't think, until he couldn't breathe. It had been devastating and amazing at the same time, and it had left Ray feeling like he'd been struck by lightning. He wanted to feel it again, to make Elliot feel the same mind-numbing shock. He'd been overwhelmed by how badly he'd wanted to just be close to Elliot afterward. As close as physically possible. When he'd taken his turn later, he'd rocked his cock past Elliot's sphincter muscle, he'd forced himself to go slow, setting an agonizing pace that dragged the sex out, giving him the chance to stroke, kiss, and caress every inch of Elliot's body.

He'd meant to get it out of his system. And he'd totally failed.

All he'd wanted when he woke up was to touch Elliot again. It freaked him out, how much he wanted it. How much he wanted to keep his fucked-up domestic fantasy alive. Indulging in the fantasy was one thing, but he'd let things go way too far. Way, way too far.

Desperate, he'd called his former partner, hoping for advice. Hayes was the only openly gay man Ray was friends with, and he was the only one who might be able to help him. As usual, though, Christopher Hayes was impossible to get a hold of. Hayes was about as comfortable as Ray himself was with the idea of being in a relationship, so he figured Hayes would be able to tell him what to do about Elliot Belkamp. Even though his partner had essentially moved in with a cowboy he'd hooked up with nearly nine months ago, Hayes still wasn't willing to give up his apartment or his ties to the city. Ray knew his partner, and he knew that Hayes and his cowboy would probably be growing old together before Hayes was willing to nail down just what their relationship amounted to.

Because Ray was determined to prove he was still Hayes's friend, he'd been stuck playing property manager ever since. He'd rented out Hayes's condo overlooking Seaport Village as a vacation rental throughout the summer and over the Christmas holidays, but in the middle of January, it was as empty as any hotel. It was also comfortably familiar, and it had a kitchen.

So Ray had bought a few days' worth of groceries, notified the building manager that the apartment would be occupied for a week or so, and made himself at home.

He finished his beer and buried his face in Hayes's couch. Being in Hayes' apartment helped remind him just how badly falling in love with someone tended to fuck up his life.

Ray had been alone for so long, isolating himself from everyone, that he'd been caught off guard by how Christopher Hayes had wormed his way into Ray's life. For a long time, he'd thought he might be in love with the guy. Since he'd managed to keep his interest in men confined to his own head up until that point, it freaked him out. He'd been more freaked out by the idea of losing Hayes to the gunshot wound that had nearly ended his career, though, and he'd made an ass of himself trying to hold on to a man who had never been his to begin with.

He'd resolved never to let himself be so stupid again, but he was barreling along the same course with Elliot. And he'd made an ass of himself again.

That was nothing new. Somehow, Ray could make an ass of himself pouring coffee in his own empty kitchen in the morning.

Every time he thought he had people figured out, he did something that managed to upset somebody, or more often *everybody*. It was better, he knew, to be the office clown than to admit he really didn't know how others expected him to act. He could analyze body language, tone, and connotation as easily as he could analyze a computer program, but he had a hard time actually employing the things he observed. Hayes had recognized how socially awkward he could be, but he had taken it in stride, just like everything else. Hayes was the only one who had ever managed that.

Until now, anyway.

His phone rang again. Carmen's ring tone, this time, so Ray didn't hesitate to answer it.

"I haven't found her," he said, not bothering with hello. His sister, at least, he always understood.

"I figured." He could hear the disappointment in Carmen's voice. If they were together, he knew she'd be pouting. "I finally got the lady running the investigation to realize that Sophie's parents and brother don't give a shit about her. I thought I'd check in with you anyway. You sound like hell, by the way."

Ray sighed. "I feel like hell."

"You're drunk." There was no mistaking the comment for a question.

Ray tipped his empty beer bottle up, wishing that he had brought more beer with him. "Come on, Carmen, you don't think that's a bit unfair? I'm having a bad day, and you automatically assume I'm drunk? What kind of sister does that?"

"Uh-huh. How much have you had to drink?"

"Not nearly enough," said Ray. "But that's not the point."

"Sophie's missing, and you're getting drunk...." she sounded exasperated for a moment and then she gasped. "No! You think something's happened to her?"

“No. I don’t think anything’s happened to her. She was dating one of her professors at the same time she was dating a guy in his class. She packed up her stuff and left her dorm room on her own. I don’t know why she left, but I don’t think she’s hurt.”

“What?” Carmen called out something to one of her kids. “All this crap because she was dating some creepy old man?”

“Not quite. All this because she stole a butt load of money from Alejandro. Don’t pretend you haven’t heard about it, I know you have. I don’t know what the professor she was dating has to do with it. I think maybe she went to him for help.”

“Sophie wouldn’t steal! Not from family, Raymond, you know that!”

Ray huffed. Twelve years as a police officer, and a lifetime tied to organized crime, had convinced him anyone was capable of just about anything in terms of crime. The fact that Sophie was family didn’t absolve her of responsibility for the theft—if anything, it made Ray more likely to believe she was guilty. “The FBI called in tech personnel from the NSA to try and get into her laptop, Carmen. They’ve traced the program she used. And, honestly, from what I’ve heard, I think she was the only one who could have created this program. I told you she’s smart. But no matter how smart she is, they’ll find her.”

“But if she stole from Alejandro....” Carmen’s voice to the barest whisper.

“The FBI will find her first.” Ray tried to sound reassuring, even though he didn’t quite believe they’d find her before Alejandro. “They’ll be able to protect her. And I probably won’t be able to find out anything else. As soon as I started looking into it, her ex-boyfriend broke into my apartment and trashed the place. My apartment is a closed crime scene, and the FBI wants me under house arrest.”

“What? That’s ridiculous. You’re a police officer, they should—”

“He’s dead, Carmen. The body they found in Hillcrest was Sophie’s boyfriend.”

“The one they’re talking about on the news?”

“Apparently, someone shot him just after he broke into my place. He still had my gun on him.”

“Dead? But they didn’t find any sign of Sophie?”

He spent another ten minutes trying to be reassuring, promising her that Sophie was in trouble but likely fine. He listened to the sniffles through the phone, listened to Carmen’s sobs vanish as she said something strong and reassuring to her children. “Why do you sound like the world is ending, then?” she sniffled.

“Personal stuff.” He hoped she’d drop it, but he was never that lucky.

“Personal stuff? Sophie’s missing, and you’re hooking up with some new girl? Raymond, I swear, sometimes I want to strangle you!”

“No, not a new girl. An old lover walked back into my life when this whole mess started. Since I haven’t been able to stay at my place, we were hanging out together. It’s been... weird.”

“*Lover* is kind of a big word for you, Raymond. The longest you’ve been with a girl is what? Two weeks? Three? And that was in high school.”

“Oh, sure, I try pouring my heart out, and you make fun of me.”

“That’s what siblings are for,” said Carmen. “So some girl has managed the impossible, after all this time? Who is she? When are you bringing her for dinner?”

Ray wondered how much shit he’d catch if he just ended the call. “It’s complicated.”

“Real relationships tend to be.”

“It’s really, really complicated. This lover was kind of a rebound thing for me. I thought I was in love, I thought it might be real, and it wasn’t. And then, well, I thought the person I used as a rebound fu—fling.” He caught himself. “I thought this one was perfect, too. At the time, I thought I was imagining things, just because of how weird the situation was, but now they’re still perfect.”

“If she still seems perfect this time around, then she might actually be perfect, you know. And when were you ever with someone long enough to go through a rebound relationship? Why didn’t I hear about it?”

“Because it wasn’t a relationship. I fell hard for somebody who didn’t want me.” Saying those words aloud still hurt, and the pain made him feel even more pathetic.

“Oh. I’m sorry, Raymond, I shouldn’t have joked around about it. So

this rebound girl, she's back in the picture? And you've been staying with her?"

Ray grunted. So long as he didn't say anything to confirm her belief that Elliot was a woman, it didn't feel quite like lying. "Not anymore. I'm at Hayes's apartment until I can go back into mine."

"Not anymore? What happened?"

"Things got weird. Kind of *clingy* weird. So I left."

"But, if you like her, is clingy such a bad thing?"

"I started feeling clingy," he clarified. "It freaked me out. So this morning, I left."

Her sigh echoed through the phone. "Raymond, I love you. I do. And you know I think you're brilliant, right? But sometimes you're a fucking idiot. You finally find a girl you really like, and you walk out on her first thing in the morning? Because you like her?"

"I did say it was complicated. There's work stuff between us, too."

"So what? A lot of relationships start at work. If she still seems perfect after all this time, go after her."

Ray grunted again.

"It's worth it, you know. Having someone to come home to each night."

Carmen didn't have the best track record with men, having been married twice and engaged a third time. She'd kicked her most recent boyfriend out just six months ago, after he got drunk and pushed her down a flight of stairs. Ray wanted to ask her if it was worth the weeks of pain she endured each time, not to be cruel, but because he sincerely wanted to know. Every relationship seemed to end the same way.

She would interpret it as him being cruel, though, and hang up on him. Then it would take a month of groveling before she would talk to him again.

"If you decide to bring her to dinner, you know you're welcome any time." Any time their mother or grandmother wasn't visiting, but he didn't need the reminder. "Call in advance, of course."

"Of course."

"Do you have any idea how relieved I am?" She laughed. "After all

this time, I was beginning to wonder if you'd ever find a woman willing to put up with you past the first night."

"Carmen, what would you say if...." Ray tried to think of a tactful way to tell her that the lover in question was a man, but he was pretty sure anything he did say would result in her screaming at him. Screaming at him wasn't so bad. She screamed at him if he stole the chocolate she kept hidden on top of her refrigerator. If anyone in the world would be okay with him sleeping with a guy, it was Carmen. "What would you say if I told you it's not a woman?"

"What?" Her voice became icy. "Raymond Louis Delgado, if you are trying to tell me you're hooking up with some little teenager Sophie's age, *again*, I will castrate you myself!"

"He's not a girl at all, Carmen." Ray held his breath, half hoping she wouldn't hear him.

"*He?*"

"He. And if it makes you feel any better, he's only two years younger than me."

"She's a *he*? Raymond, are you trying to say you're gay?" He could hear the disbelief in her voice, hear the defensive anger he'd been dreading.

Why the hell had he decided to try this over the phone? He couldn't see her expression or evaluate her body language, and he couldn't read her stunned silence at all. "Jesus, Carmen, please don't be mad at me. I'm serious about this. I don't know what to feel right now, and I'm probably just being an idiot anyway.... I mean, it's not like we were serious." Ray didn't know what he and Elliot had been. The only thing he was sure about was that walking away from Elliot, as if last night was just sex, hurt.

And now he'd fucked things up with the only person within a thousand miles he might have been able to talk to about it. "I'm sorry...." he whispered, ending the call before she could blow up.

He set the phone on the couch and spared it a single glance when it beeped once more. A text message from Elliot demanding he call had been sent while he was on the phone.

Ray pulled up Elliot's phone number and almost called him. He silenced his phone instead. Finishing off the last two beers and falling asleep might not help him regain his sanity, but it seemed like a pretty

decent option. Ray opened up another beer, pulled a blanket out of the linen closet, and popped *Pirates of the Caribbean* into Hayes's DVD player. It was one of those perfect movies Ray never had trouble sitting through again. Halfway through the movie, someone hammered on Hayes's front door hard enough to rattle the doorframe.

No one knew he was here except the building manager, and if he was knocking on the door, it was probably important.

Ray let the movie run and checked the peephole. His sister, holding a brown grocery bag and looking furious, stood tapping her foot impatiently.

He swung the door open. "How did you get into the building?"

"Please! There's a party every other floor in this place. I just followed a bunch of drunk kids through the front door. Take this; it's heavy." She shoved the bag toward him. Wine and beer bottles clanked inside. She calmly tossed her jacket onto the coat tree and let herself in. "Now, I'd like to know where you get off thinking you can say something like that, on the fucking phone of all things, and then hang up on me? What the hell, Raymond?"

"Come right in. Make yourself at home."

"Don't start!" She turned a long, beautifully manicured nail on him. "You hung up on me! What choice did I have? Besides, Mama was there, and I'd never be able to keep my mouth shut after something like that!"

"She's watching the kids? And you brought beer?"

"I brought *you* beer. But from the smell, I'm guessing you already thought of that. I brought some wine, too, in case you needed someone to commiserate with. I don't commiserate over beer."

"You're not mad at me?"

The slap across the cheek stung, but it didn't catch him off guard. "I am absolutely furious."

"But you're here."

"I'm furious that you think so little of me! Jesus, Raymond, did you honestly think I hadn't wondered why you never found someone to settle down with? If it weren't for all the women who hate you, I'd have just come out and asked you years ago. How long have you known? How long have you been lying to us all?"

“It hasn’t been a lie. I do like women, so I’m not gay. Bisexual, but not gay.”

“But you like a guy? Come on, spill. I want the whole story.”

Ray knew that when his sister was in this kind of mood, there was no way he’d escape unscathed. “Let me set this down.” He slumped next to her on the couch with a fresh beer and tried to hold out under her silent glare but failed. He told her an edited version of everything, one that might not scandalize his mother too much when it finally got back to her. “I just feel pathetic. Of all the fucked-up times to get weird about sex, this was the worst I could have picked. And the worst part is, Elliot’s called, like, five times tonight. I want to answer the phone, but I don’t know what to say.”

“You haven’t answered your phone?” she asked, looking at him as if he was insane. “Who are you, and what did you do with my big brother?”

He shrugged and checked his cell phone again. He’d missed another call from Elliot, and Hayes had actually called him back.

“He’s the guy in charge of the search, isn’t he? The FBI chick mentioned his name. You can’t ignore his calls, Raymond. What if he’s calling about Sophie?” she asked.

“Uh...”

“Raymond, I’m sorry you’re freaking out, but really, how weird can this be? You’ve had to work with women you’ve slept with, haven’t you? I think you need to put your ego aside and think about the bigger picture here, before I kill you.”

“My ego?” Ray squeezed his eyes shut.

He didn’t think that feeling like his world was spiraling out of control was just a question of being egotistical. But Carmen was right. He couldn’t seem to separate sex from the whole tangle of emotions warring inside him this time around, but that was no excuse for ignoring Elliot’s calls. The man was doing him a huge favor by keeping him informed during this investigation, when he could have done everything from refuse to share information to arresting Ray for obstruction of justice. He was the one who had pushed things too far; he was the one who had made things awkward, and Elliot was still trying to help him. Elliot Belkamp was a better man than he was, there was no question of that.

“You’re right.” He stared at his phone again. “I’ll call him back, see if

there's any news."

"Might want to wait until morning, Romeo." She poked him and staggered to her feet. "It's nearly midnight. I've got to get home and come up with some excuse for being out this late."

"If Mama cared, she'd have called."

"Oh, she cares." Carmen sneered. "She's probably loving this. You know what she'll do, just like I do. When I get home, she'll be all quiet smiles. Then she'll talk about me being out with strange men until the middle of the night the next time she goes to see Aunt Louisa, and within a week the whole family will be calling me a whore behind my back."

"Yeah. That sounds about right."

"Call him. If he's heard anything, let me know."

"I will."

Less than ten minutes after Carmen left, there was another knock on the door. Ray wrenched the door open without bothering to look through the peephole. "What did you forget?" he asked.

Instead of his sister, Elliot Belkamp stood in the hallway, his eyes bloodshot and furious. He was holding a cell phone to his ear. Ray glanced at his phone on the couch. He hadn't called Elliot back, but he hadn't turned his phone off again, either. "I've got him. Thanks again for the help." Elliot rang off and put his phone away, then moved in a blur. He lifted Ray off his feet and spun him around, throwing him into the doorframe. "Why the fuck haven't you been answering your phone!" Elliot shouted.

"Got distracted." Ray had to close his eyes to try to stop his head from spinning. "Slow down a minute, all right?"

"You're drunk?" Elliot gaped at him. "The entire fucking world is blowing up, and you're drunk?"

Ray looked Elliot up and down. He was drunk, but he wasn't totally out of it. Elliot was technically in a suit, but it was filthy, covered in red dust, mud, black soot, and speckles of what was probably blood. "You're hurt?" Ray tried to check Elliot for injuries despite being pinned. "Put me down." The moment his feet touched the floor, he dragged Elliot inside. He shut the door and set the deadbolt fast, then shoved Elliot's jacket aside to see if he was actually bleeding. "Where are you bleeding?"

“What?” Elliot deflated. “No. Why the hell haven’t you been answering your phone?”

“I was visiting with my sister. She brought beer. What happened?”

“What hasn’t happened?”

He cupped Elliot’s face in a gesture that was far too intimate for his current state of mind. He dropped his hands fast, as if Elliot’s skin burned him.

“Four men with assault rifles were waiting for us at my house when I got home tonight. Along with your cousin Alejandro.”

Ray felt like his heart stopped. “And you’re not hurt?” He bent down to check the dark stains on Elliot’s shirt and jacket closely.

“Stop that!” Elliot grabbed Ray’s shoulders. “I’m a soldier. I’m still a bit paranoid about walking into an ambush, even after all this time. I’m not sure that ever goes away. Oddly enough, I have your cousin to thank for not getting shot. Your cousin took out three of the others while I was calling for backup. I disarmed the fourth, but Alejandro stood there rambling until my backup showed up. He warned me they were after you, so I called St. Claire because someone was supposed to go to the hotel to check on you. After that, a lot of people went to the hotel to check on you, because it blew the fuck up!”

“What?”

“Dozens of firefighters, the entire bomb squad, and a dozen cops spent the night sifting through burned crap looking for your body! Don’t you care about that? And you couldn’t be bothered to answer your phone!”

“Someone blew up my hotel room?”

“That’s what I’ve been saying!”

“Like, with a bomb?”

Elliot gaped at him.

Ray thought about his own question and shrugged. “Yeah, yeah, stupid question. I’m sorry, I didn’t know what was going on. And I should have answered anyway. But why were they after me?”

“Luca Garcia wasn’t some small-time Garcia brat. He was the son of one of their top enforcers, and your cousin Alejandro shot him in the head because Luca had the audacity to date your cousin’s sister and break into

your apartment. I think that's bullshit, personally. I think he went to confront Garcia about the money, the kid said he handed the laptop over to you and told Alejandro he could get it back, and your cousin shot him when he couldn't deliver. Somehow, Esteban Garcia has come to the conclusion you're the one who killed him."

"I didn't kill him."

"Do you think he cares which one of you killed him?"

Ray shrugged. He grabbed Elliot's arm to steady himself as the world swayed. "Do you need to call your boss? Let her know you tracked me down? And, while I'm thinking about it, how did you find me? Because if someone went to the trouble of finding you at your house and going after the hotel your boss set up, they could have followed you here. We should move."

Elliot's lips turned up at the corner. "The only person who knows either of us is here is your partner, Hayes. I called him to ask if there was some place in the city you'd go if you felt threatened. He said he didn't know about that, but that the GPS signal from your phone said you'd been in his apartment all day."

"Oh yeah." Ray grinned and glanced at his phone. "Still, someone could have tailed you easily enough."

"Doubt it. I got an SUV from the motor pool, and I've been driving around at random for the last hour. And they didn't need to follow me to find my house or your hotel."

"They have someone in your office?"

Elliot dropped his hands from Ray's shoulders and shrugged. "St. Claire is looking into it."

Ray didn't want to point out that his new boss was the one likely to have given away his name and address. They were obviously friends, even if Elliot hadn't been assigned to San Diego for long. "You know, her phone might be compromised, if someone has access to your office." He let the unspoken suggestion hang there. *She* might be compromised.

"Gee, thank you for pointing that out." Elliot rolled his eyes and pulled out his cell phone and turned toward the empty apartment. Ray stared after him, listening as Elliot told his boss that he'd found Ray alive and safe and that they were somewhere secure. He ended the call with a

clipped, “Understood.”

Ray took a deep breath, relieved that Elliot hadn’t actually told her where they were. He’d trust most of the people in Homicide, and Elliot for some reason, but the only thing he knew about Penelope St. Claire was that she was fairly new to the Gang Task Force, she could still potentially charge him with assaulting a federal officer, and she could probably kick his ass. As impressive as that list was, it wasn’t enough to persuade Ray to gamble his life.

Elliot rubbed his eyes and groaned. “St. Claire said I should take you home to San Jose for a while.”

“You’re from San Jose?”

“No. And she knows it. There were other agents in the office with her.”

“Smart and violent—I like her. You look horrible, by the way.”

Elliot glared at him.

“Which I realize is partly my fault, I know. I just meant you should sit down, maybe go take a shower. I’ll get you some food and a drink while you do that.”

The glare softened a little. “Is there food? I’m starving.”

Ray touched Elliot’s elbow and pulled him toward the kitchen. He shoved Elliot into a chair at the small kitchen table and pulled out the leftovers he’d been planning on eating tomorrow. “I made salmon.” He arranged a plate of salmon, asparagus, and brown rice and popped it all into the microwave. “It’s never as good the second day, so you’ve got good timing.”

“How is it Hayes’s stuff is still all here? Does he own this place?”

“Yeah, he owns it. This apartment is the first real home he ever had, and he worked his ass off to get it. Six years of overtime, and even then, if the housing market hadn’t tanked, he never would have been able to afford it. Even if he isn’t being an unrealistic sap about this fling with his cowboy, I figure hell will freeze over before he thinks about putting it on the market.”

“An unrealistic sap?”

“I’m feeding you, you can put up with my being a cynic.” When the

microwave beeped, Ray set the plate on the table and opened Elliot a beer.

“How much do you think I eat?” Elliot laughed, digging into the pile of brown rice.

“Not enough. If you finish that, I’ll make you something else.”

Elliot glanced out at the large balcony while he ate. “This place has one hell of a view.”

Ray was very familiar with that view. He and Hayes had sat out on the balcony and shared a beer when Ray helped him move in. The apartment’s balcony had clear views of Mission Bay, Coronado, and the downtown skyline glittered in the darkness. That alone was worth the price Hayes paid to hold onto it each month.

Ray grabbed another beer for himself and sat down across from Elliot, wondering what the hell he should say to the man. Before yesterday, conversation had been so easy, so effortless. Now, when he didn’t even want to *think* the things he wanted to say, Ray wasn’t sure what to do. Through the alcohol haze, he decided to focus on work instead. He glanced up and met Elliot’s smiling expression. “What?”

“Never would have figured you for a quiet drunk.”

Ray spared Elliot’s plate an approving glance. The salmon, vegetables, and the three extra servings of rice were all gone. “I’m not sure what to say,” he admitted.

“I told you it was no big deal.” Elliot shrugged and took a long pull from his bottle of beer. “You were hard up. So was I. It was fun. I don’t see that there’s anything to talk about.”

“You don’t?” Ray almost choked.

“Not really.” Elliot sat back and sighed. “If you want to talk, feel free, but I think we can both be professional about things. I mean, you were the one who suggested we could fuck each other, and things wouldn’t be weird. I thought we were on the same page.”

“What happened to looking for someone special?” Ray asked, unwilling to think about the stab of disappointment he felt. Elliot writing off last night as if it didn’t matter was the best solution he could have hoped for. Ray wasn’t supposed to feel disappointed over it.

“That hasn’t changed,” said Elliot. “But until this case is over, and

Luca Garcia's father gets it through his head that you didn't kill his little boy, we're stuck together. And we're stuck here."

Ray took another drink, even though the world was starting to sway when he was sitting perfectly still. He held Elliot's gaze for a moment, then dropped his eyes. He stared at the mouth of his beer bottle, trying to analyze why Elliot's green eyes made him feel uncomfortable.

Being so blatantly scrutinized made him squirm, as if Elliot's gaze was stabbing straight through the jumbled thoughts in his head, ripping away the logic and analysis he used as a shield and laying bare the fact that he just wasn't good enough. He would never be good enough. When he'd been too confused and too relaxed to think about what he was saying, he'd said things that were too stupid and too insulting to take back. He'd slept with too many people, used too many people, for someone like Elliot to ever consider Ray eligible for a starring role in the fairy tale he was so damn committed to. He couldn't think of any way to fix it. He didn't even know why he wanted to fix it.

"What's wrong?" Elliot asked, his voice quiet, his face unreadable.

Ray kept his eyes on the bottle in his hand. "I think I've had too much to drink."

Elliot shoved his chair back and rose to his feet. He drained his beer fast and pulled Ray up out of his chair. "Come on, it's time to tuck you in."

Ray stumbled as Elliot half carried him back to the apartment's one bedroom. Elliot lowered him onto the bed and tried to slip away, but Ray snaked his arms around Elliot's neck, wanting to hold on to him.

"Delgado." Elliot laughed and tried to escape. "I need a shower. I need sleep. And you're about to pass out."

"Please wait." Ray took a deep breath and forced himself to look up and meet Elliot's gaze. "Can I ask you something?"

Ray felt the world spin as Elliot nodded.

"Since we're stuck together anyway, do you think maybe we could just sort of pretend?"

"Pretend?"

"Yeah. Just pretend that you're not holding out for a fairy tale? And pretend that I can be...."

“Pretend you’re not an asshole?” Elliot suggested, grinning.

Ray shrugged and smiled. “Pretend I’m worth a damn? That I can be what you want? Just until this shit is over?” he asked.

“I still need a shower.” He shifted out of Ray’s grasp, then bent over him again. Elliot brushed his lips against Ray’s gently. “But I think I’m up for that.”

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ELLIOT FULLY expected Ray to be hungover. Ray had been so wasted the night before, he should have been battling a throbbing headache and nausea. Elliot expected to wake up to Ray rolling around on the bed groaning. He'd even set a bottle of water and one of his own pain pills out on the nightstand in case Ray needed them.

The last thing he expected was to wake up to the smell of breakfast and the brush of lips and stubble along his neck. Elliot tried not to laugh as Ray kissed the ticklish spot beneath his ear. Ray's hands and lips roamed across his shoulders and down his back. Ray's cold, slick fingers eased inside him, coaxing him to wake up and respond. Ray leaned over his shoulder, and Elliot met him halfway, crushing their lips together. He felt Ray's fingers brush against his prostate and shoved back. Ray broke their kiss and lined himself up behind Elliot quickly. Since Elliot was still loose from the last time, Ray's silicon-encased erection rocked into him smoothly.

This time, Ray didn't seem concerned about dragging things out. He shifted in and out of Elliot's body, moving fast and hard. Elliot shoved his hips up, meeting Ray's urgent pace eagerly. Ray grabbed his hip and shoulder, using his body to get more leverage. Elliot arched into the motion, amazed at how fast his orgasm was building. When he felt Ray shudder against him, Elliot didn't hold back, letting the tension inside him break as Ray rode out the aftershocks buried inside him. Elliot came against the sheets, then dropped back down onto the bed. Ray slipped out of him as he moved, then rolled to the side, panting. Ray smiled at him and pressed a surprisingly tender kiss to his temple. "Good morning."

When his nerves finally stopped firing, Elliot shifted into Ray's outstretched arms. He could too easily get used to waking up like this.

“Definitely a good morning.”

“There’s bacon and eggs.”

“How long have you been awake?”

“About an hour. I’m lucky I managed to stay asleep as long as I did. Alcohol always messes with my blood sugar, makes me too hyper to sleep.”

“Hangovers make you hyper? And you can stomach the thought of food?”

Ray’s humongous grin was unnerving. “I know. I’m a lucky bastard. I’m sure it’ll catch up to me eventually, but for now I’m not complaining. Do you want to shower before breakfast?”

Six hours after breakfast, Elliot was nestled in Ray’s arms on the couch, feeling warm and comfortable, despite how awkward he was sure this would be. Whatever hang-ups Ray had had on Tuesday morning seemed to have vanished, along with the endless machismo and snide comments that seemed to make up Ray’s entire personality. Beneath the asshole facade of Detective Delgado, Elliot found that Ray was an affectionate guy. He was downright cuddly, even. Ray was constantly reaching out to touch him, to kiss him, or just to drape a long arm across his shoulders. As the morning faded into afternoon, Elliot relaxed and let himself enjoy it. He knew better than to expect it to last, but it still felt nice.

Being cut from the case and effectively grounded, they didn’t have anything to do except hang out and explore each other. And watch television. Hayes’s apartment didn’t have cable, but Ray kept old episodes of a lot of different science-fiction shows on his phone, and he soon had it plugged into the flat-screen TV. Elliot wasn’t really a fan of science fiction, but Ray made such a fuss about how amazing *Firefly* was that he’d paid attention anyway. It turned out Ray was right, and the show was growing on him more with each episode. As the familiar theme song came to a close, Ray unwrapped himself from Elliot and got up to pause the show.

“Were you just shitting me when you said they canceled this show without finishing it?”

“I wish I was joking about that.” Ray stretched with his arms above his head. “It’s one of the greatest tragedies in television entertainment, canceling *Firefly*.”

“I don’t know if I’d go that far. What’s up?”

“Popcorn. Or real food. It’s a couple hours past lunchtime.”

Elliot shot up from the couch and followed Ray into the kitchen. “Hey, you made dinner and breakfast, let me handle lunch.”

“I didn’t buy Pop-Tarts.”

“You bought garlic, and there’s olive oil and pasta in the pantry. It’ll do.”

“Ah, will it? For what?”

“Aglione et Olio,” Elliot said in a singsong voice. “My mom always said it was too plain for anybody but poor bachelors, but I remember serving it as a weekly special at least once a month growing up.”

“Huh? You totally lost me.”

“Trust me,” Elliot grinned. “I grew up in an Italian restaurant, and this dish was always on the menu. Even when it wasn’t on the menu, people still ordered it.”

“What? You grew up in an Italian restaurant, and you live on Pop-Tarts? That’s wrong on so many levels.”

“I do actually know how to cook. I just don’t usually have time. Real Italian food takes all day.” He pulled down a skillet and a large pot, then pulled everything he’d need out of the pantry.

“You really grew up in an Italian restaurant?” Ray asked dubiously. He hopped up onto the counter, well out of the way of the stove, and watched Elliot move around the kitchen. “And since when is Belknap an Italian name?”

“My dad’s family is Dutch. But I did grow up in an Italian restaurant. It’s in a little part of San Francisco called North Beach. The neighborhood was mostly Italian, once upon a time. My grandparents opened up the restaurant in the fifties, and it’s done okay through the years. My mom and her brothers own it now. My dad worked there as a waiter while he put himself through school. Now he owns an accounting firm, but he takes care of the business side of the restaurant and lets them run the place. My uncle Gianni cooks. My mom....” Elliot smiled as he thought about the way his mom always seemed to be everywhere at once, chatting with everyone, and keeping everything alive and vivid. He set a pot of salted water on the stove and turned on the heat, then cracked the garlic with the flat side of a steak knife and peeled it quickly. “Honestly, my mom just chats with customers and bustles around the kitchen smacking cute waiters on the ass.”

“Your dad’s okay with that?”

Elliot grinned. “That’s how they met. They were both hippies in the 1960s, and they’re pretty open-minded.”

“Really? You know, you’ve just totally fucked with my assumptions about you.”

“Have I?”

“Ah, yeah. Decorated Army veteran, hard-ass FBI agent, psychotic martial artist, and stoic bastard,” Ray ticked off items on his fingers. “Budding Italian chef and son of open-minded San Francisco hippies doesn’t fit.”

“Sorry to disappoint you.”

“How did you end up...?” Ray swept his hand up and down, indicating Elliot’s entire body. “How did you end up as *you*?”

“Well, growing up in San Francisco is probably why I don’t have a lot of guilt or shame over being gay. Not anymore, at least. My family’s Roman Catholic, so it took a while before they came around, but since they were from San Francisco, it wasn’t so bad.” Elliot poured a lot of olive oil into the hot skillet. He swirled it for a moment, then tossed in the garlic he’d minced, then added some pepper and dried parsley from the pantry. “As for the veteran bit, my dad wasn’t happy about that. He was never that active in the peace marches and stuff in the sixties, but he still holds to the same values. He’s not happy about my job, either. He’s okay with me being gay, but not with the rest of my life. We’re just different people. Very different people.” When the water came to a boil, Elliot emptied an entire box of spaghetti into the pot.

“How did you get past it?” Ray’s tone was quiet and serious. “How do you reconcile being gay with everything else?”

Elliot had been prepared for this. He’d been trying to think of what he could say that might help Ray come to terms with being attracted to men as well as women, trying to sort out what it was in his own life that had shifted being gay from something shameful to something he could accept. His family had been a huge part of his own self-acceptance, but there had been more to it than that.

“I guess I realized that who I’m attracted to doesn’t change who I am. It’s a part of who I am, but honestly, not that big of one. I’m still a man, I’m still a soldier, and I’m still a federal agent. My accomplishments, my hobbies, my life isn’t going to change because I’m gay. Being gay doesn’t

make me less of a man. It didn't make me less of a soldier, and it doesn't make me less of an investigator now." Elliot shook the skillet to keep the garlic from burning. "It'll make having a family tricky, but even that's not impossible these days."

"You're lucky," Ray whispered, his gaze locked on the floor.

"You know, you're too smart for your own good."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You overthink everything." Elliot used a fork to strain the pasta, keeping just enough of the water to thin out the oil and thicken it into a creamy sauce. He dumped the noodles into the oil and shook the pan. "I don't want to feed your ego, so I'm not going to point out that you're probably the smartest person working in homicide. You remember every line from *Firefly* and details about potential nerve damage that can happen if you fail to double-lock a subject's handcuffs. And I'd actually be willing to bet that you make a point of remembering to double-lock them, every single time."

"Sanchez ratted me out!" Ray looked insulted, and then he smiled.

"And it took you less than a second to come to that conclusion," Elliot pointed out. "You might not like her. You might not hang out with her. But you know enough about her allergies to know flowers and balloons wouldn't cut it when she had a baby, and you put a lot of time and effort into a gift that wouldn't cause problems. How were paper cranes special to her?"

"Her husband is half-Japanese. Origami seemed appropriate."

"You analyze everything else in the world, too, including yourself. It might do you some good to stop overthinking your life and just live it for a while."

Ray slumped forward. "It's not that simple."

"No, I imagine it's not. Grab some plates?"

After devouring the spaghetti, Ray sat back with a satisfied smile. "All right, I've been proven wrong. The Pop-Tart addict can cook. That was really good, and creamy. How'd you manage that with garlic and olive oil?"

"Some of the cooking water from the pasta. It's got enough starch in it to thicken everything and make the oil creamy."

"It was really good. So now I've got to know, if you can manage this with a box of pasta and a few cloves of garlic, why the Pop-Tarts?"

“It takes about ten seconds to rip open a packet of Pop-Tarts,” Elliot explained. “This takes fifteen minutes. When I get really hungry, fifteen minutes is just too damn long.”

Ray rolled his eyes. “Even fast food is better for you than Pop-Tarts”

“I like them. They’re easy, calorie-dense, and they never go bad. I can toss them in my duffel bag and leave them in class until I need them. And they come in every flavor from strawberry to cake batter,” said Elliot, feeling defensive. “Just about the only bad thing about them is the way they squish when they end up at the bottom of my bag. Then I’m not crazy about them, but I eat them anyway.”

“Ice cream comes in every flavor imaginable too. That doesn’t mean it’s healthy.” Ray stared at him for a minute, cocking his head to the side. “Hell, I love Italian food. Can I bribe you into making dinner, too?”

“Hmm. I don’t know. Dinner’s a big deal. You know an Italian dinner is usually a five-course meal, right? If you count dessert. That would have to be one hell of a bribe.”

Ray looked up at Elliot with a predatory smirk. “I’m sure I can think of something that would make it worthwhile.”

“I guess you’ve got all afternoon to try, but I’m still doubtful. However, I reserve the right to order takeout if I’m inexplicably worn out.”

“El, you can spend four hours straight sparring with men fifty pounds heavier than you. I’m flattered you think I could wear you out, but realistically,” Ray’s smile didn’t falter for an instant, “I’d have to build up to that.”

“You know, you don’t have to analyze every comment I make to find a way for it to feed your ego.”

Elliot let Ray tug him back toward the bedroom, trying not to wince at the thought of another round of rough sex. Ray pushed him down on the bed and crawled over him, rolling Elliot’s shorts down and hovering over his half-hard cock. The moment Elliot felt Ray’s breath pulse against him, his cock swelled, popping up far enough that Ray’s lips grazed him. Ray swallowed him, letting Elliot slide into his mouth and down the length of his tongue. Elliot gasped as he felt Ray’s carefully controlled breathing ruffle his pubic hair while Ray cupped his sac, massaging each orb in a teasing rhythm. Ray began to bob his head slowly, sucking Elliot in deep

each time.

Elliot watched his cock slip past Ray's dusky tan lips, over and over. When he felt his body begin to tighten, he touched Ray's head, warning him. Instead of adjusting his throat and swallowing like he had last time, Ray slipped off his cock and palmed him, stroking him so fast that he didn't have time to mourn the loss of Ray's tongue. He came in Ray's hand, shaking as Ray scraped his thumb over the head of Elliot's cock slowly, keeping Elliot trembling. "Do you have any idea how hot you look when you come? I love watching you."

"What about you?" Elliot asked, after he came down.

"I'm supposed to be the one bribing you, aren't I?" In the living room, Ray's phone rang. "Fuck. El, that ringtone's my office. I've got to get that."

"We're in the same job, remember? I understand." He dropped his head back while Ray sprinted for the living room. After he caught his breath, he cleaned himself off in the bathroom and wandered out to find Ray holding the phone to his ear, looking grim.

"What happened?" he asked, forcing himself to focus.

Ray held his phone out and swiped his finger across the screen. "My captain wanted to make sure I was okay. Things are blowing up." After a few more swipes, he held the phone out to Elliot. On the screen was a series of San Diego headlines. *Sixteen Dead as Gang Violence Escalates* was the top headline. Elliot scanned the article fast, cursing. Three shootings had occurred since the mess at his house yesterday. Two in run-down residential neighborhoods and one in the middle of a busy street in the southern neighborhood of Chula Vista. The gang war Ray had warned them about was materializing on the streets, putting innocent bystanders at risk.

"I need my phone back. I've got to make sure Carmen's okay."

Elliot passed the smartphone back. He swallowed the urge to suggest they do something stupid like go back to work. St. Claire would call if she needed him to come back in, but she'd made it very clear that if she didn't call, he would do more harm than good by being involved in the rest of this case. He listened to Ray's conversation with his sister long enough to know that she was fine, then went into the kitchen to wash their dishes from lunch. If he let himself sit still, he was going to start fidgeting and feeling useless.

The afternoon faded into evening and Elliot cleaned most of the

kitchen while Ray paced back and forth through the apartment. Elliot thought he heard the other man growling. When he glanced up from cleaning the cabinet baseboards, he met Ray's furious glare for a moment. Ray looked more like a caged, frustrated animal than Elliot would have thought possible. He reminded Elliot of a puma or a jaguar, lazy and more inclined to nap in the sun than do any regular work, but all claws, teeth, and confident strength when something he loved was threatened.

Elliot couldn't blame him. He wished he could go spar with someone, just to burn off the anxious energy eating away at him. The prospect of tackling Ray, which had been so damn appealing just a few hours ago, didn't seem right. He had no clue what made Ray get off on watching Elliot spar. The adrenaline effectively killed anything approaching a hard-on for him while he was fighting, and there was just as much adrenaline coursing through his body now. He suspected Ray was worse off, because his pacing had carried him back to the bedroom for a moment, and when it resumed, Ray had found a pair of slacks and an undershirt.

"Think Hayes would care if you tried remodeling the place?" Elliot asked.

Ray froze and stared down at him. All at once the fury and anxiety faded from expression, and he flashed Elliot a goofy smile. "He'd kill me. You're the only one I've ever known who's trusted me with power tools. And that sucks, because recessed lighting would look awesome in this kitchen."

Elliot barked out a sharp laugh and sat back on his heels, surprised at just how tightly wound they both were. "Eh, not like we can run to the hardware store anyway. I found a deck of cards shoved into the back of the junk drawer over there. We should play."

"Cards?"

"Yeah. There's beer in the fridge and pretzels in the pantry. Cards."

Ray's smirk grew into a wide smile. "What are the stakes?"

He rocked to his feet, tossed the ancient sponge into the sink, and padded toward him. "We'll just have to be creative. But I'm not playing strip poker unless I can get dressed first."

They spent the night playing cards and making jokes across the kitchen table. By the time they finished dinner and went back to playing cards, Elliot felt the tight spring coiled inside him loosen a bit. As he finally

relaxed, he also found himself noticing the flashing lights floating across his vision that usually came in the hours before a migraine left him practically crippled. He eyed the rest of his beer, wishing he could drink it but knowing he couldn't, and noted the time on the microwave oven. He'd have to wait at least an hour to be able to take his migraine medication. If he could take the medication before the throbbing pain actually started, there was a good chance he would be able to prevent it altogether.

He rubbed his eyes and tried to focus on the cards in his hand, but the floating lights appeared wherever he tried to focus.

"El?" Ray was beside him in an instant, his own cards forgotten.

"Just tired," Elliot whispered.

Ray stared at him, fixing him with a gaze that Elliot knew meant Ray was analyzing him. Ray ran his palm along Elliot's cheek, then withdrew his hand and left the kitchen without a word. He returned a moment later, carrying the two pill bottles Elliot had been carrying since this case began to fall apart around them. "Which of these do you need?"

Elliot huffed. "Am I that obvious?"

"Come on, El, which one?"

"I can take them both in about an hour. And the other one, it's in a long cylinder."

Ray disappeared again and returned with the only Imitrex cartridge Elliot had on him. "I've got to wait for the beer to wear off. Hell, the beer is probably what brought it on."

"An hour?"

Elliot nodded. Nodding was beginning to hurt.

"Let's get you to bed. I'll set a timer on my phone for one hour."

Elliot rubbed his eyes and tried to focus on the cards once more. Frustrated by the flashing strings and dots, he tossed the cards down and followed Ray back to bed.

IN THE days that followed, helpless to do anything about the series of gang shootings and murders announced each day in the news, they checked in with St. Claire and Ray's captain by phone once a day and otherwise tried not to go insane. Ray remained the attentive, affectionate man he seemed to only become behind closed doors. They watched the same movies and

television shows all over again, ordered pizza, and spent the days and nights distracting each other while the world seemed to be falling apart outside of their tiny sanctuary. Every day, Elliot tried to remind himself that the Ray Delgado who kept touching him, kissing him, and fucking him wasn't real. Outside of this apartment in the real world, Ray was still in the closet. He might not be as conflicted as he had been a week ago, but Elliot knew the shame and fear Ray was battling wouldn't just evaporate. No matter how warm Elliot felt when Ray touched him, no matter how much he wanted this to last forever, he kept reminding himself that Ray Delgado was still pretending.

"How long have you been getting these migraines?" Ray asked, as they worked together to clean up their lunch the next day.

"Since the war," said Elliot, surprised by the question. "We were out on patrol, and the Hummer I was riding in hit an IED. I got thrown about twenty feet, and when we got out of the ambush they'd set for us, my neck hurt. Lots of doctor appointments followed, along with lots of tests, and they all said there was no damage, just bruising. Two days later, I had my first migraine. The neck pain went away in a few weeks, but the headaches never stopped. They're not usually this bad."

"Do you know what causes them? I read that it's different for everyone."

"Letting my blood sugar get too low. Getting dehydrated. Coffee. Alcohol. Normal stuff, as far as migraines go."

"Are you going to need to call your doctor, get him to call a prescription into a drugstore for more of those shots?"

Elliot shrugged. "I've got painkillers. I can get through another one. The shots will actually stop mine, if I take them soon enough. Not having one sucks, but it'd be no worse than that first night you were with me."

Ray nodded slowly. Elliot was surprised by how relieved Ray looked.

On the counter, his cell phone rang. He stretched across from the table to grab it. "Belkamp."

"Belkamp, it's Hathaway." The other man sounded annoyed, as always.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

Elliot saw Ray's head jerk toward the living room, where a scratchy heavy-metal guitar riff could be heard. "Mine too. Wonder what blew up

this time?” Ray wandered into the living room to find his own phone.

“Belkamp, listen, now that things are starting to quiet down, St. Claire needs to get a start on the report for that shit last week and all of the budget paperwork for the new site. She needs the name and address of the second hotel you dumped Delgado in.”

“Does she?” Elliot glanced toward the living room, trying to remember the details of his conversation with his boss nearly four days before. He’d told her that he’d found Ray, that he was fine, but he hadn’t told her where they were staying. She hadn’t asked, either. He’d talked to her once a day since then, and she hadn’t asked for their location then, either. “What do you mean, now that things are quieting down? I’ve been watching the news.”

“We haven’t had a single incident yet today, so she wanted to get caught up on reports. And it’s not fair to make you pick up the tab for this.”

“This isn’t going through the task-force budget. There is no paperwork for this.”

“She still needs it for the report,” Hathaway insisted.

Ray hurried into the kitchen, his face pale. He was pleading with someone on the phone to give him just another minute and making frantic gestures toward Elliot.

“Hang on a second,” Elliot whispered. He covered the microphone on his cell phone with his finger.

Ray hit the speakerphone button and frantically gestured for Elliot to be quiet.

“All right, just tell me again what you need,” Ray whispered.

“The laptop,” a frightened woman’s voice said on the phone. “Ray, he’s going to kill me! He’s going to kill all of us! Carmen, the kids, it’s like he’s gone insane!”

“When and where does he need it?” Ray asked, keeping his mouth close to the phone.

“Carmen’s house! You have to bring it to Carmen’s house! It has to be today! The FBI is all over the place. He said if he sees a police car, he’ll kill us all! Please, you have to help me!”

“Sophie, listen to me, I need more time. The laptop is in a FBI evidence locker. I can’t just walk in and get it,” said Ray, his voice calm and

soothing. “I need a day, at least.”

In the background, Elliot heard the scrape of metal moving against metal. The distinct clink of a revolver being cocked. “Tell him he has two hours.” The voice was angry and familiar.

“Two hours,” the woman’s voice cracked. “You have to bring it within two hours. Please, Ray, I—” The screen of Ray’s cell phone went black as the call ended.

“Hathaway,” Elliot returned to the phone. He locked his gaze on Ray, trying to ask what he wanted to do. Ray half nodded toward the phone in Elliot’s hand and gave him a look that all but screamed for him to hurry up. “We have a location on Munoz and Holland and a potential hostage situation.”

“You’ve found Munoz and Holland? What’s their location? I’ll call out the troops.”

Ray was frantically scribbling his sister’s address on the back of an envelope. Elliot read the details back and repeated as much of the call as he had heard, word for word. “Obviously,” he swallowed hard, “Delgado’s too close to this to be involved. I know you don’t like him, but this is his family. Do you think you could—”

“As soon as we’ve got a tactical team on the way, I’ll call you back so you can keep him updated.”

Elliot sighed. “Thanks.”

Elliot watched Ray’s gaze shift wildly around the kitchen, not focusing on anything, not seeing anything. He tossed his phone onto the table and moved toward Ray, helping him back into his chair before he fell over.

Elliot set his hand on Ray’s shoulder, but he didn’t respond at all. “I’m going to get dressed. I’ll grab your clothes, too.”

Ray looked down at his clothes, as if just noticing that they were both still in boxer shorts and T-shirts. He nodded slowly.

Elliot pulled on his slacks, his shirt, and holster. He checked his sidearm, checked to make sure his ID was in his jacket pocket, and slipped the jacket on too. Ray stalked into the bedroom behind him, his eyes dark, and began to dress too.

“Ray, you know you can’t run in there.”

Ray checked the clip in his pistol, slapped it back into place, and

nodded. "I'm well aware of that."

"But we can go down to the scene and wait for news."

Ray slipped the pistol back into his holster, then ran his hands through his hair. "Yeah. Okay."

"Ray?" Elliot cupped his jaw, not sure what comfort the man might accept, what he needed. "Holland's a nervous, cowardly little shit. When he sees he has no way out, he'll give up. Don't assume things will go bad, because then you won't be any good to your sister or Sophie. Wait and deal with what actually happens, all right?"

Ray started to shake his head, his eyes darting around again. He closed his eyes, swallowed hard. "Yeah."

"Come on." Elliot tugged on Ray's elbow. Elliot grabbed his phone on the way out and guided Ray down to the plain brown SUV he'd checked out from the bureau motor pool. Before he started the car, he dialed his boss fast.

Ray turned on the police radio in the SUV and hunched forward to listen. There was no buzz of frantic calls. No shout-outs for extra cars to block off the area, no notice to clear the radio except for emergency traffic. "It's been nearly twenty minutes. Why haven't they done anything?"

Elliot shrugged. He expected every agent in the office to be mobilizing, so he was getting ready to leave a message when St. Claire's exhausted voice answered the phone after three rings. "St. Claire, it's Belkamp. I know you don't have time, but I wanted to give you a heads-up that Delgado and I are going to Carmen Delgado's house. They're his family, his sister and her kids."

"What?" He heard his boss fumble with the phone. "What are you talking about?" Elliot heard her clearly. There was no loud chaos in the background, no wail of sirens, not even the shifting noises of a woman walking and talking on the phone at the same time. Elliot could hear the rhythmic clicking of a keyboard in the background. "You both managed to stay off the radar these last four days. I really don't think exposing him by taking him to visit his sister is such a good idea."

"What?" Elliot felt his throat seize. "What is Hathaway doing?"

"Hathaway? He just went down to talk to Technical," said St. Claire.

"She didn't have Hathaway call you?" Ray said quietly, keeping his eyes glued to the radio.

“What? That’s not right. No. We got a call from Sophie Munoz! She said she and her cousin’s family were being held at gunpoint by Holland and that if Delgado didn’t deliver her laptop to his sister’s house within two hours, Holland is going to kill them all. I gave the details to Hathaway when you had him call for our location. He said he’d—” Elliot pulled the phone away from his ear as the woman on the other line shouted a dozen different orders in a voice that would make a drill instructor cringe.

“Elliot, if you’re there, stay put!” And then she hung up on him.

Elliot stared at the phone, dropped it into the center console, and started the car. He took a deep breath and flipped on the blue-and-red emergency flashers.

“If Hathaway called Garcia’s men, they’ll just kill them all,” Ray whispered.

Elliot knew that Ray was right. A hostage situation with one desperate maniac, with a secure perimeter, a tactical response team, and a trained negotiator was frightening. A team of hit men hired by Esteban Garcia wouldn’t bother wasting time with a safe point of entry or worrying about the safety of the hostages. If there were any hostages left alive after they gunned down Sophie and Holland, they would kill them too, just to guarantee they didn’t leave any witnesses behind.

“St. Claire has a team on the way.”

Ray nodded like a zombie.

“And there are vests and rifles in the back.”

Ray met his gaze for the first time since Sophie called. “No. Not you. I’ll go, but you.... No.”

“Ray, you’re a detective. You investigate after the fact. How many times have you walked into something like this?”

“Two or three times,” said Ray.

Elliot shifted into gear. “It would take three years in combat for you to catch up to me. Besides, if we’re the first ones on the scene, we can try to clear out the house. If Holland knows who’s coming for him, he’ll likely just piss his pants and run. If we don’t have time, we can use the car, use the vests and the rifles, and set up a show of force outside. It might buy them time to run.”

“You think showing these guys that each person they’ve been paid to kill is all conveniently gathered in one spot is going to be a deterrent?” Ray

managed a frantic laugh.

Elliot turned on the sirens and glared at Ray. “Stop being an asshole and give me directions.”

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“LOOKS LIKE we beat them here.” Ray didn’t look at Elliot as he spoke, scanning the street instead. “Vests are in the back?”

“Yeah.” Elliot popped open the SUV hatchback and climbed out. They’d parked two houses down, to avoid being seen from the windows of the house. It was a two-story Spanish-style tract house with an orange tile roof and a lemon tree in the front yard. It was set close to the road, freeing up some of the small lot for a backyard. Over the faded wooden fence, Ray could see the frame and safety net of the kids’ enclosed trampoline. The backyard was dead quiet.

Elliot joined him near the back of the car and began strapping on a bulletproof vest.

“Elliot, I want you to stay outside.” Ray was adjusting the slide on his pistol and staring at the house, the movement automatic. He bit his bottom lip.

“If Holland does something stupid, I can take him out quieter and faster than you. Your sister’s kids are in there, right?”

Ray shrugged. “Carmen didn’t answer her phone.”

“They don’t need to see their Uncle Ray shoot someone,” said Elliot.

“I know. Just don’t do anything stupid, okay?”

Ray didn’t want to take his eyes off the house, but he glanced at Elliot for a moment. He had too damn much to worry about. If Holland was desperate enough to use Sophie and Carmen’s family to try to get her laptop back, he could do anything. And whoever Hathaway had sold them out to might arrive at any moment. “You’re a soldier,” Ray whispered, more to himself than Elliot. “I’m serious, all right? Don’t do anything stupid.”

“I’ll follow your lead, okay?” He tucked one side of his hinged handcuffs into the back of his pants.

“Okay. I’ll go in through the front, since they’re expecting me. There are two rear entrances. One through the garage that provides access right between the dining room and the living room, and a sliding glass door that opens from the dining room into the backyard. Carmen never keeps the blinds pulled across the glass door so she can keep an eye on the kids when they’re playing. The garage will provide the most cover.” Ray dug his keys out of his pocket and worked one key free. He offered it to Elliot. “This opens both doors.”

Elliot took the key and shoved it in his pocket. “Give me two extra minutes to get into position?”

“Two minutes.” Ray checked his watch. “Elliot?”

“Yeah?”

“If things go wrong....”

“If things go wrong, St. Claire is on her way with a SWAT team. We’ll deal with it.”

Elliot nudged him in the shoulder. Ray turned toward him, opened his mouth to tell him to wait outside, and then closed his mouth again. Either one of them could get shot as soon as they walked through the door, and Elliot was still keeping things casual in public. It made Ray want to scream. “Elliot?”

“Hmm?”

Ray tugged at Elliot’s vest, pulling him in for a fast, desperate kiss. There was nothing arousing about the kiss, just a brutal need to touch the other man, to be close to him one more time, in case it turned out to be the last chance Ray had. “Don’t do anything stupid,” said Ray, against Elliot’s lips.

“Two minutes.” Elliot nodded, kissed him softly one more time, and took off in a low crouch.

He stayed close to the house as he went through the gate beside the garage.

Ray watched him go and glanced at his watch. He strolled toward the front door, keeping his pace slow and letting the seconds tick by. He was

trying to time his steps so he ended up ringing the front bell at the two-minute mark, but when he got to the steps, he saw that there was no point. The front door was open, the wooden frame around the metal door shattered and cracked. He tightened his grip on his pistol and hurried in, sweeping the empty living room and the dining room fast. He carefully stepped around a splatter of blood on the cream-colored tile and headed for the side door. Elliot opened the door, gun raised, and stared at him.

Elliot cocked a single eyebrow at him. Ray shook his head and nodded toward the stairs. They swept the top floor of the house, checking all four bedrooms. The house was empty. There was no sign of his sister or the kids. There was also no sign of Sophie and Holland, but selfish as it was, Ray found they didn't worry him as much.

As the sound of sirens exploded outside, Ray stood hunched over the single splatter of blood. He didn't even flinch when the living room was filled with men in black tactical gear, shouting orders for them to drop their guns and get down on the floor.

Once IDs were sorted out and Carmen's house was secure, Ray saw Elliot talking to his supervisor, but he couldn't hear what they were saying. Frantic gestures were involved on the part of Elliot's boss. Each of Ray's senses felt numb, dead. Even the din of the SWAT team around him seemed like the faint echo of real noise. Through the haze, he didn't immediately understand why his ass was vibrating.

A gloved hand nudged his shoulder. "Detective Delgado, are you going to answer your phone?"

Ray peered through the man's riot helmet, then down at the nametag on his chest. The yellow embroidery read *Price*. "Stewart, right?"

"Yeah," Price seemed genuinely surprised. "Your phone is ringing," he said again.

Ray pulled his phone out of his back pocket. It vibrated in his hand. The ringtone and caller ID were his sister's. A thousand nightmare thoughts raced through his head at once. He hadn't wanted to think about what finding an empty house could mean. There were a lot of possibilities and none of them was good. The most likely explanation, given the broken door and the bloodstains, was that Hathaway had beaten them to Carmen's house. If he had Ray's family, Ray knew he would never see them alive again.

“Hello?” he answered, not even trying to keep his voice from shaking. He didn’t give a fuck if the men around him knew he was scared.

“Raymond?” Carmen’s voice sounded far away, scratchy. And annoyed.

“Carmen?” Ray let out a breath he didn’t realize he was holding. “Carmen, are you okay?”

Through the static, he caught a few words. “... sunburned... and the girls are bored stiff.... Mrs. Ramirez from across the street called... my house is under siege?”

Nothing she was saying made any sense. “Carmen, where are you?”

“Joshua Tree,” she announced, the words coming through crisp and clear. “And there’s hardly any reception in a quarter of the park. Even where there is reception, it sucks. Is that better?” The sound muffled again. “No! Get down! Only Mommy climbs the boulder!”

“Joshua Tree?” Ray laughed out loud, so relieved he wanted to cry. “The national park? What the hell are you doing there?”

“Hiking, mostly. And getting the kids out of San Diego until things calm down. Everyone’s so on edge with Sophie gone, and every day there was more violence on the news. Even if they can’t understand what’s going on, the stress isn’t good for them. And it’s dangerous to take them camping out here during the summer, of course. But Mrs. Ramirez across the street just called and said there are a hundred police cars outside my house. Do you know what’s going on?”

“I’m at your house right now. I’ll take care of it, all right? You need to stay there, do you hear me? Stay there. Go hiking. Go climbing. Don’t come home.”

“Is Sophie....” The phone crackled again.

“I’ll take care of it,” Ray said again. “Just stay there.”

A loud beep announced that the call had been lost. Ray dropped his head back, smiling like an idiot.

“She okay?” Elliot asked, right beside him.

Ray swallowed and took in a huge gasp of air. “She’s camping,” he laughed. “She wasn’t here. The kids weren’t here.”

“Just Sophie and Holland, then? She said he’d kill Carmen and the

kids, though.”

“She did,” Ray laughed. “I’ve never been so happy to be lied to in my entire fucking life.”

“Come on.” Elliot spun him around and steered him toward the front door. “We’ve got to talk.”

Ray stopped walking when he realized Elliot was taking him back to the motor pool SUV. “Where are we going? What about statements? Reports?”

“St. Claire said it can wait. Hathaway made one stop before he left the FBI field office. Want to guess why?”

Ray didn’t need to give it a lot of thought. Hathaway had just ended his career and become a wanted felon. He wouldn’t have walked away without something to fall back on. “He took Sophie’s laptop. Who the hell regulates access to secure evidence over there?”

Elliot nodded slowly. “He’s been working with the NSA staff to figure out what’s on that laptop. He’s checked it out a couple of times over the last week. We’re following St. Claire and the rest of my team to Hathaway’s address.”

“We are?” Ray’s eyes bulged. “She’s okay with me being involved?”

“She’s willing to say that it was an unfortunate mix-up in the final report. Get your ass in the car, we’ve got to hurry.”

“Your boss is awesome.”

Ray hung back nervously as Elliot and a team of special agents raided a small townhouse an hour north. Elliot came out ten minutes later, and Ray knew, just from the slight shake of his head, that the townhouse was empty. As he watched the FBI agents arguing in a small circle, he pulled out his phone, desperate for something to do with his hands, something to do with his thoughts.

The text message notification at the top of his phone was blinking. Ray swiped his finger down the screen of his phone, opening the message. A grainy picture of Sophie, her mouth covered in duct tape and her eyes glaring furiously at the camera, appeared on his phone. Below the picture was an address off Interstate 8, a time, and detailed instructions to arrive alone if he ever wanted to see his cousin again. Ray bit back the urge to shout for Elliot, to scream that they had to move. He kept his mouth shut

and began to analyze every potential outcome.

He knew the address was near the outskirts of the city, off the highway before the city disappeared and the desert rose in a series of arid mountains that became the Cleveland National Forest. It wasn't desolate, but the small stores and suburbs that were out there didn't extend more than a mile beyond the interstate exits. He pulled up the address on his phone's GPS, and with a satellite overview, he saw that the address looked like nothing more than a shed, but from the way the road curved with the land, he suspected it would back onto a sandstone wall. It probably had an open view of the highway it overlooked and an unobstructed view of the access road leading up to it. It would be an easy location to secure, and since it was still on the I-8 corridor, there would still be cellular coverage and regular Internet access, which Hathaway would need if he wanted to lay claim to the money Sophie stole from Alejandro.

Still feeling numb, Ray texted back a single word. *Why?*

The reply came before they even made it downtown. *Your head's worth more than hers.*

Ray couldn't slow his frantic thoughts as Elliot drove back toward downtown.

Elliot was pensive, clenching the steering wheel in a white-knuckled grip. "I guess there's no point in saying I'm sorry. But I am sorry."

The comment ripped Ray from his thoughts. "What have you got to be sorry about?"

"Hathaway." Elliot braked fast and swerved to avoid rear-ending the car ahead of them. "If it weren't for me, he wouldn't have found them."

"You don't know that," said Ray. "Think about it logically. Luca Garcia wanted that laptop. Alejandro wants it, I'm sure. Sophie and Holland wanted it badly enough to risk exposing themselves and to risk pissing me off. But even the NSA guys had trouble decrypting the hard drive. What good would that laptop be to anyone without Sophie? If it hadn't been Hathaway, it would have been someone else. Now the only question is, which side is Hathaway working for?"

"Garcia," said Elliot immediately. "His guys came after me in my own home, and they couldn't have gotten my address from anyone outside of work. And he was the one who was supposed to send a city PD unit by the

hotel to check on you.”

“I’m not suggesting he didn’t sell us both out, but I’m not so sure about who he sold us to.”

“Alejandro killed the guys at my place.”

“Yeah, so? Do you think that means he didn’t order them there to begin with?” Ray laughed.

Elliot’s eyes narrowed. “But why would he kill his own guys?”

“Would you have sat there listening to him convince you that there was a leak inside your agency if you didn’t have a reason to think he was on your side?”

“But he was right.”

“I’m not disputing that. But Alejandro doesn’t play fair, El.”

“All right. So there’s no way to know who he’s planning to deliver them to. What do we do?”

Ray held his palm over the outline of his phone in his pocket. “I don’t know,” he whispered. “Food. Rest. Then we’ll go from there.”

At Hayes’s apartment, Elliot made him a tomato sandwich without a word. Eating it made Ray feel warm and anxious. He didn’t know how Elliot knew he loved tomatoes, but knowing Elliot paid so much attention, that he cared enough to bother, left Ray feeling like a bastard for not telling him about the text message.

And it made him more determined than ever not to say anything. Going into Carmen’s house this afternoon had been torture, not just because he expected to find his sister and her family shot dead behind their front door, but because just imagining Elliot getting hurt left him feeling as if he’d been shot himself. He hadn’t been able to focus, to think, and he knew he wouldn’t have been able to react with his normal speed or precision.

When they finished eating, Ray dragged Elliot to bed without a word. He undressed Elliot himself, then took him slowly, each of them stretched out on their sides so Ray could plaster every inch of his body to Elliot’s, so he could hold him while they made love. After, Ray held Elliot close and breathed in the sweaty scent of his hair until he felt Elliot’s breathing even out.

Ray watched Elliot sleep for a few quiet moments, then slipped away.

It was already ten o'clock, and if he was going to have a chance in hell of surviving to come back to Elliot in the morning, he had to make some phone calls and start heading out of town.

RAY KNEW the area was filled with hiking trails and old sections of road that had been blocked off by gates to make walking paths. He cut the lock on a Forest Service gate on one of the roads and drove along the broken concrete of what had once been a two-lane highway, stopping when he was about a quarter of a mile above the address in the text message. He had a little over half an hour before all hell was going to break loose, so he worked his way down the loose gravel slope as quickly as he dared, catching himself before he tumbled over a six-foot drop over the road below. Less than a dozen feet down the road, set back against a hill, was an older trailer house that was on a crumbling foundation. There were lights on in the living room, but the sharp angles of the lights meant they were probably from flashlights or a lantern rather than from powered lights. Somewhere inside the trailer, Ray heard a low hum that reminded him of camping trips with his dad and sister when they were kids. His dad would always complain about the big RVs running electrical generators throughout the night, and he still recognized the hum.

Ray slipped up to one of the lit windows, stayed flush to the wall, and glanced inside. The room beyond was gloomy and dark. He recognized Hathaway's bulky form standing over a makeshift desk made by setting a piece of half-rotten plywood over a faded recliner. Sophie's laptop was open on the plywood, casting a cold blue light through the room. Sophie herself was huddled in a corner, her ankles and wrists handcuffed, and then handcuffed together so she couldn't move.

At the computer, still in the same blue jeans and tweed jacket he'd worn when Ray watched Elliot interview him, was Professor Holland. Ray moved down to the window closest to them, surprised that a jagged triangle of glass was already missing from the windowpane.

Holland was typing frantically, watching three different tiny windows of text on the screen. He hit a combination of keys over and over, then slapped the keyboard and groaned.

“Now what’s wrong?”

Holland gestured at the screen and shook his head, as if Hathaway might have a chance in hell at interpreting the streaming code sections. “You don’t understand what I have to go through to remove these encryption keys. She set this up as a trap for that worthless little twerp Garcia. All of the files still on the hard drive are designed to generate a new encryption key for every file every time someone tries to access them without the original key. And every time it does, it accesses the network again, too. It’s probably starting another series of transfers, but without the encryption key, I can’t tell what the hell it’s trying to do.”

“Yeah, I get it. Every time you try to hack it, it moves the money somewhere else. I’ve spent the last week listening to smarter guys than you explain it. But you said you already had the damn key.”

“I have *her*.” Holland snapped his head toward Sophie. “It’s her program, her encryption algorithm. I wasn’t kidding when I said you’d need her.”

“There are headlights.” Hathaway moved toward the front window, staying well to the side.

Ray almost cursed out loud and ducked down to check the time on his phone. He was still supposed to have twenty minutes. He moved to the corner of the house where he could see the road beyond. Sure enough, a single set of headlights was slowly making its way up the side of the canyon, taking each switchback carefully. The car stopped in the shadow of a long cottonwood tree, nearly a half a mile and one switchback down. The headlights stayed on, but the dome light didn’t flash. Ray slipped back to the window quietly.

“Personally, I can’t believe the dipshit was stupid enough to actually show up. Looks like you might be off the hook, Holland. I’m going to go out and say hello. If you’re not in that seat when I get back inside, I’ll shoot you in the foot.”

Holland rolled his eyes and went back to typing.

Instead of leaving, though, Hathaway knelt in front of Sophie. Despite being hogtied with three pairs of handcuffs, she still managed to glare at him. He peeled the duct tape off her mouth, just far enough for her to speak. “I have to admit, I didn’t think he’d show up.” Hathaway smirked. “I wonder if he would have come if he knew how much of a bitch you really

are?”

“If you think it would matter, you don’t know Ray very well.” She managed a soft laugh. “He doesn’t put anyone above his job. Not his sister, not the people he fucks around with, not me. If he’s coming, he’s coming to arrest us all. And you’ll be lucky if it’s him, because he will just arrest you. If it’s my big brother, he is coming to kill us all.”

“I guess we’ll see.” Hathaway rocked to his feet, drew his gun, and slipped out the door.

Ray listened to the crunch of gravel along the road for a few moments, then moved back to the corner of the house. He saw the bulky shadow of Hathaway’s back disappearing into the underbrush beside the road. He wasn’t moving down to the car at all, but staying in sight of the house, waiting to ambush whoever was coming up the road.

But no one was coming up the road. The headlights of the car were still on, but the interior was still dark. Ray didn’t think anyone had actually gotten out.

Ray wouldn’t be able to move around the house to the door without walking straight into Hathaway’s line of sight. It was dark, but this far from the city the stars provided enough light to spot movement and shapes. He went back to the window and stepped into the dim light shining through.

A slight wave was all it took to get Sophie’s attention, and when she saw him through the glass, her eyes went wide. To her credit, she didn’t cry out, but she did shake her head as subtly as she dared. Ray nodded and slipped back when Holland turned toward Sophie.

“What?”

“You,” she giggled. “He’s going to kill you, you know. Whether you manage to break my encryption or not, that guy’s not going to let you go.”

“You’re not as tough as you think.” Holland’s eyes narrowed. “I know you never gave a damn about me, and you played Luca just the same, but I know you care about your fucking cousin. Do you really think you’ll be able to stand there and watch him die?”

She smiled. “I think it won’t matter. I’m surprised you haven’t figured it out yet, Nathan. The answer is right there on the screen.”

“The answer?” Holland curled his fingers into claws, as if he was trying to strangle the air in front of him. “You still think this is a fucking

game?”

“Have you ever played Monopoly?” she asked, out of nowhere.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I used to watch my brothers and my cousins play when I was little. They stopped playing because of my cousin Ray, and do you know why? When I asked my brother, do you know what he told me?”

Holland shook his head and let out an exasperated sigh. “What did he tell you?”

“Alejandro told me that they stopped playing because Ray won. Permanently. Ray and Alejandro both always played to win, but as they got older, they realized that the real winner isn’t the one who ends up with the most paper money or the most property, not even the one who ends up with a whole city of little plastic houses crowding their section of the board. The winner,” her smile turned dark, “is the one who can step away from the game and smash the board.”

“This isn’t a fucking game, Sophie! You’re throwing your life away, and mine! Luca’s dead because of you, and you don’t even care!”

“You’re right.”

“Why can’t you just be reasonable about this?” He smacked the laptop screen.

“I am being reasonable.” Her tone was surprisingly calm. “I told you, there’s no other way. I just want to make things right. I can’t even get a job trying to make up for the things my brothers have done, just because they exist.”

“You told me you could still get to the money!”

She smiled brightly. “I lied. It’s scattered. In about a year, the algorithm will run its course, and the transfers will stop in random banks and be divided evenly into every account owned by a registered nonprofit organization held by each bank. I knew Luca would try to get to it before Alejandro killed him,” she nodded to the laptop. “I knew he would. So instead of saving the original source code, I modified it a little. Every time you manage to access an individual set of wire transfers, or whenever the algorithm is interrupted for any reason, the money in those transfers is deleted. It’s all just numbers. If the algorithm stops, even if I try to stop it, it all resets to zero.”

Holland shook his head slowly. “You’re a good liar, but not that good. You wouldn’t have locked yourself out of the program. Without that money, we’ve got nowhere to go! Either your psychotic fucking brothers or Luca’s family will find us. Even if you’ve got them both convinced you had nothing to do with it, we’ll be killed in the crossfire!”

“Probably,” she admitted. “But so long as Alejandro wants his money and Luca’s father wants revenge, they’ll never stop trying to kill each other. My little bid to make the world a better place.”

“You want to know something really fucked up?” Holland glared at her. “If the NSA hadn’t turned you down because of your brothers, you never would have passed their psychiatric exam, you fucking bitch!”

She just giggled. “Keep trying new encryption keys. See how well that works for you. At this point, I’d estimate that every time you try to access an individual data packet, about a hundred grand disappears.”

Holland pulled at his own hair and groaned. “I will figure this out,” he hissed. “And if I can’t, when that maniac brings your cousin in here, I will torture him myself until you tell me how! I’m not going to die because you want to start a fucking gang war!”

“Want to bet?”

Ray stepped back and flailed as his step fell short. Massive black-clad arms wrapped around him, a gigantic hand covered his mouth. He was lifted off his feet as if he weighed nothing and hauled back into the darkness. He tried to reach for his gun, but he couldn’t free his arms. Despite his struggling, the man holding him quietly slipped down the road, in the opposite direction of the house, away from the car below and it’s still blazing headlights.

When he was pulled into a dark crevice along the road, he tried to fight harder. “Quiet, Raymond,” Alejandro chuckled against his ear. “I’m going to release you, but I strongly suggest you keep your mouth shut and don’t shoot me. Unless you’d like to get us both killed, anyway.”

Ray pulled out of Alejandro’s grip, spun to face the darkness, and caught himself with his gun half-drawn.

“What are you doing here?” Ray asked, forcing his hands to his side.

His cousin straightened and laughed. “There now, was that so hard?”

“Alejandro....”

“What? I’m just saying it shouldn’t take Sophia or Carmen being kidnapped for us to have a civil conversation.”

“Answer me, or I will shoot you.”

“I’m here to deal with this shit, the same as you.”

“So if you’re here... and I’m here... who’s in the car?”

In the darkness, the light reflected off Alejandro’s too white teeth. He checked his watch. “Esteban Garcia.”

Ray didn’t know if he should be panicking or calculating. Panic always made things worse, so he began to guess at how the presence of the Mexican drug lord, along with however many bodyguards the man travelled with, would affect his own plans.

“Why is Garcia here?”

“I thought he deserved to know that his pet has the person responsible for the unfortunate misunderstanding with his son, and for stealing six point eight million dollars of his money from me. It turns out that the pig promised to deliver your body, and Sophie’s, tomorrow. Garcia’s a grieving father, so I imagine his temper is strained.”

Ray felt his stomach plunge all the way down to his ass. “They’ll kill her. You heard what she said. She can’t get the money back....”

“Yes.” Alejandro’s constant smile vanished and a cold, rigid expression replaced it. “I heard her admit to destroying all of my profits from the last two quarters. I heard her admit that she set up the Garcia brat so he would get caught with the laptop and be blamed for the theft. I heard her admit that she set him up so I’d take him out, to get his father to try to kill me. I wish I could say I have no idea what was going on inside her head, but I’d be lying. It’s convoluted, ruthless, and manipulative. And almost effective. I feel like I should be saying I’m proud of her, but I’m just not feeling it. You?”

Ray forced himself not to reach for his gun out of frustration. “No. *Proud* doesn’t cut it.”

“Well, at least we’ve found one thing we can agree on.”

Ray heard a series of quiet pops from the other side of the house. He drew his gun and calmly checked the clip. “We can’t just let them kill her.”

Alejandro drew a massive .45 and loaded the revolver with a practiced

ease. “No. No we can’t let them kill her. But if you go in there, you’re going to die. I won’t be able to keep you safe, Raymond.”

“You think I need you to protect me?”

Alejandro rolled his eyes and shoved him aside. He slipped back into the darkness, toward the faint glow of the house.

Too late, Ray analyzed the resigned expression on Alejandro’s face and considered the words his cousin had uttered. He couldn’t believe he’d been stupid enough to imagine that his plan to get Sophie safely out of the picture before the police and sheriff’s office descended on the house would also be on Alejandro’s agenda. Too late, he forgot that he and his cousin lived in two very different worlds. Alejandro had no intention of rescuing his sister. He just intended to make sure she didn’t fall into Esteban Garcia’s hands.

He staggered into the road, back toward the house. In the glow of the headlights and the dim light from the house, he saw Alejandro greet four men outside the front door. Two large men held Hathaway dangling between them, while an older, slender man in a brown suit stood talking with Alejandro, chatting amiably even though Alejandro held a pistol and the man held a small assault rifle.

He wasn’t close enough to hear whatever passed between them, but he saw the man with the assault rifle nod slightly. Alejandro set his hand on the man’s shoulder in a morbid display of sympathy. The slender man with the assault rifle raised the gun, shook his head sadly, and shot Hathaway in the head. The men holding him didn’t flinch, they just let his corpse fall to the ground.

When Alejandro turned toward the door, Ray broke into a run.

He didn’t know if it was the angle, or if the light from the laptop and flashlights inside had ruined Garcia’s night vision, but they didn’t see Ray until he nearly ran into them.

Garcia shouted something, but the words were lost under a din of gunfire. Ray brought his arms up to try to shield his face, even though he knew at just a few yards away, a bullet was likely to go straight through his arms. He ducked down and kept running, his heart hammering as he braced himself for the explosion of pain he knew was coming.

Another shape rose out of the darkness, moving with a terrible grace

that was efficient, fluid, and deadly. Limbs moved, weapons spun, and two quick shots from a small automatic pistol dropped Esteban Garcia's bodyguards. In another half second, the assault rifle in Garcia's hands was kicked up, just to knock his finger from the trigger, before his body convulsed as the probes from a high-powered stun gun embedded themselves in his neck and chest, dropping him to the ground. Elliot pivoted as he completed the kick, then spun toward Ray, gun raised.

His eyes seemed to focus on Ray for the first time, and he lowered the gun slightly.

"Elliot?" Ray stared, open-mouthed, at the suddenly deadly man. There was so much Ray wanted to say, so much he knew he'd never find the words for.

Elliot lowered the gun but rotated the shoulder of his free hand fast. The punch connected with Ray's cheek over the bone, hard enough to send him sprawling against the side of the house.

"Was that really necessary?" Ray fumbled his gun into his left hand and poked at his cheek tenderly.

"Yes."

Overhead, Ray heard the rotary blades of a helicopter coming up fast. Red-and-blue flashing lights sprang to life on the highway below. "They're early," Ray laughed. "Thank God."

Elliot glared at him. "You actually called for backup?"

"Uh, yeah. I don't go out of my way to do stupid shit."

"But you didn't call me."

"No, I didn't. How'd you find this place?"

"I loaded that GPS app Hayes used to find you on my phone. You think, after the hotel blowing up, that I want to tell St. Claire I lost you again? But that's not the damn point! You didn't call me!"

"Of course I didn't call you! I can't fucking lose you!" Ray screamed, knowing how ridiculous it must sound. "I damn near had a panic attack this afternoon because I thought that I was about to lose everyone I have left in the world! I thought I'd lose Carmen, and Jose, and the girls, and you! I couldn't move, I couldn't react, I couldn't even think! I was so fucking scared of losing you! I didn't—"

The loud crack of a high-caliber gunshot was unmistakable. It shook the house from the inside out. Then came another shot and the clink of broken glass.

Ray crashed through the door, gun raised, and too late. Holland's body was still hunched over the laptop, his eyes open and frozen. Sophie was still in the corner, still handcuffed like an animal. Her long hair had fallen over her face like a curtain, but it was wet with blood. Ray dropped his gun and checked futilely for a pulse, for a wound he could apply pressure to, for anything he could do at all.

Her limbs were still handcuffed together, and in the darkness the pen-style handcuff key he kept clipped to his holster didn't seem to work the way it needed to. He dropped it twice, groped for it in the dark, and finally screamed.

"Here," Elliot knelt beside the girl and opened each of the three sets of handcuffs quickly.

Despite being uncuffed, her body was stiff. Ray told himself it was from being restrained. He managed to roll her onto her back and press down on the wettest spot on her chest, intending to start CPR. As he pressed down over her tattered shirt, his hands sank in too deep and he recoiled, stumbling backward into Elliot. It felt like an eternity before he forced himself to move back to Sophie's side. A white cloth, which he belatedly realized was Elliot's shirt, found its way under his hands so he could apply even pressure over the wound.

ELLIOT SET his hand on Ray's shoulder and squeezed hard, trying to stop the other man from shaking to pieces. Ray glanced up at him, his eyes shimmering like glass. "He must have parked on the road up above. I'll...." Elliot didn't know what the hell he was trying to offer, what he was promising. Ray's own cousin, a man who had once been his friend, had reduced Ray to this trembling shell hovering over Sophie's body as if he could somehow bring her back to life. Elliot wanted to catch Alejandro and break every bone in his body. He wanted to kill him. "I'll see if I can find him."

"No!" Ray shook his head frantically.

Elliot knelt beside him and rubbed his hand. “Hey,” he palmed Ray’s cheek, “I trust you with power tools, don’t I?”

Ray was shaking too hard to answer.

“I trust you because I know you know what you’re doing.”

The trembling didn’t stop, or even slow, but Ray shut his eyes and nodded his head once. “I’ll send backup, tell them you’re in pursuit on foot.”

Elliot squeezed Ray’s shoulder again and left. The first police cars they’d seen from the highway were still making their way up the treacherous, winding road. In a flash, he was caught in the spotlight of a helicopter for a moment. He held his badge and ID toward the spotlight when the loud speaker blared to life and told him not to move. A four-man team rappelled down, surrounding him. Over the whoop of the helicopter blades, he tried to report everything fast, his words running together. In a frenzy of activity, Esteban Garcia was handcuffed while two of the crew went inside to help Ray.

“The last suspect fled that way on foot! There’s another road, up the embankment!” Elliot shouted. “He has to be looking for a way to climb up!”

The officer from the helicopter radioed up and, after a burst of static Elliot couldn’t make out, nodded. “Once we’ve got a unit on the ground, we’ll go after him!”

“I’m in pursuit on foot! Don’t shoot me!” Elliot shouted, taking off at a sprint before the officer could object.

He ran down the road, blinking fast to try to recover his night vision. Around the corner the road came to an end where the ancient concrete had cracked, broken, and been reclaimed by the slowly growing desert. Up the slope, a large concrete box, almost the size of a building, was half-buried in the hill. There were similar structures in the canyons behind his house, abandoned water cisterns that had made life away from the coast possible before water pumped in from the Sierra Nevadas had been readily available. On the far side of the concrete, gravel was trickling down the slope like water.

He held his pistol ready as he slowed down.

If Alejandro was going to climb up the crumbling embankment, the

cistern was his only hope for a solid handhold.

“Alejandro Munoz! Drop your weapon and put your hands on your head and come down now!” Elliot shouted.

“Mr. FBI?” Alejandro stood up near the base of the cistern, smiling at him. In the darkness, Elliot could barely see if his hands were empty. “Or what? I saved your ass, saved him, and now you’re going to shoot me? You and Raymond deserve each other, Mr. FBI.”

“I’m arresting you! Come down and put your hands on the wall, then step back with your feet apart!”

“Ha!” Alejandro laughed and more gravel shifted. He made it to the middle of the cistern. “I was wondering if you’d be able to order me to spread my legs without cracking a smile! Are you always this serious?”

“I’m very serious,” Elliot growled.

“Eh, too bad.” Alejandro hauled himself to the top of the cistern, turned to face the slope and began to pull himself up with the few spots of solid rock that didn’t crumble under his touch.

“Why?” Elliot called up, hoping he could at least keep Alejandro talking long enough for the helicopter to get back into the air.

“Why? Because life’s too short not to laugh,” said Alejandro.

“Why did you save me? Why did you save him and then shoot your own fucking sister!”

“Honest? I figured you and Raymond were together. A few days ago, Carmen was upset. The news had her frightened, and Raymond was nowhere to be found. She called me to say Ray wasn’t going to find Sophie because he was too hung up on a lover to focus. She didn’t say anything else, but I know Raymond. He doesn’t fall in love. He doesn’t get hung up on people. But Carmen insisted it was serious, and she knows him better than me. She said he wouldn’t even call his contact in the FBI to ask about the investigation because he was so depressed. You showed up with him tonight. No cavalry, no other officers, just you.”

“We just got here first,” said Elliot, hoping the damn cavalry would hurry up.

“But you were together. You were with him when Sophie’s lover forced her to call him, yes?”

“Does it matter?” Elliot asked, taken aback.

“For me? Certainly. For Raymond himself, I’ve got no idea.”

“Why the hell do you care so much about his love life, anyway?”

Alejandro stopped climbing for a moment. “Do you have brothers?” he asked.

“No. I’m an only child.”

“You’re lucky. Brothers are a pain in the ass. Sisters too, obviously. Raymond and I were more than cousins growing up. We were friends. I’d have traded both of my actual siblings to have had him as a brother. But when we got older, I thought everything was a competition. I thought one of us had to come out on top, and I really thought that nothing else mattered. When I was young, it never occurred to me that our lives wouldn’t be us striving to outdo each other, but us against the entire fucking world. It should have been us against the world...” He shook his head sadly. “I let things get carried away. I betrayed him, and I drove him away. And when our parents and our uncles found out what happened, I let them shun him. I told them he betrayed us.”

“You lied to them?”

“Yes. I lied to them. But Raymond didn’t help. He’s always been so black-and-white, so fucking sure that there is only one path he can take in life. It’s all or nothing with him, and it always has been. I thought we were just kids playing a fucking game, and when things got personal, he decided the fastest way to win was not to play at all. He’s a hard guy to care about.”

“Some people might say that.” Elliot didn’t mean to smile, but he couldn’t wipe the expression from his face.

“But I still care about him. Since him leaving us was my fault, I took responsibility for it. I took responsibility for him. I put the word out that anyone who touched him, anyone who messed with him, would answer to me. And then I made sure that I had a reputation as the scariest fucker in this city so no one would dare try and take him out. I’ve kept an eye on him ever since. If someone threatens him, I kill them. If someone tries to hurt him, I kill them. If someone breaks into his place, or messes with his shit, I kill them.”

“Is there anything you don’t kill people for?”

“I don’t have the most creative approach to problem solving, but it’s

effective.”

There were police vehicles on the ground now, but the helicopter was still hovering over the house. “I’m not going to kill you, though. Fucking with his life cost me my best friend. It cost my family more than I can ever say. It even cost me my own sister.”

“You killed her.”

“I did. But I made it quick. I promise you, Garcia wouldn’t have been so kind.”

“I have to arrest you.”

“You don’t think it’s a bit rude, to arrest a man who just kept your lover from getting killed?”

Somehow, Alejandro had found a solid surface to grab onto. He disappeared over the top of the bank in a flash.

Elliot scrambled forward, tucking his gun away and climbing up the gravel slope as fast as he could. He made quicker time than Alejandro, but Alejandro was already on the road above, already running. “Fucking hell...”

Elliot ignored the way the jagged rocks and thorn bushes cut into his hands, scrambling up the slope until he could pull himself up onto the concrete pavement above. Just twenty yards away, he saw Alejandro climbing into the silver Lexus. “Stop or I will shoot!” Elliot shouted.

Alejandro froze for a moment, his head peeking above the driver’s side door.

Elliot kept his finger on the trigger. “Step away from the car!”

“Do you think he would have survived the last twelve years as a police officer if it hadn’t been for me?” Alejandro sneered. “How long do you think your lover will last when I’m gone?”

A knife of doubt and fear cut straight through Elliot’s bravado with those words. For one horrible moment, he imagined walking into his house and finding Ray gunned down on the living room floor, just like the killers Alejandro had shot. The thought of losing Ray left him feeling hollow and dead himself. Bringing Alejandro to justice felt meaningless by comparison.

He thought about how desperate Ray had looked when Elliot had confronted him about taking off on his own. *This*, Elliot realized, was the

fear that had paralyzed Ray that afternoon. This was why the other man had left him alone in bed without a word of explanation. Just as Elliot had come to care about Ray despite his best effort not to, Ray cared about him, too.

The idea filled him with warmth and fear simultaneously. He wanted to laugh, to fucking giggle, it felt so good. At the same time, realizing just how much Ray meant to him, how much he meant to Ray, compounded the icy fear inside him. Alejandro's words, the thinly veiled threat they carried, cut through Elliot's brain and left him helpless.

He ground his teeth together. Ray might care about him, but if he didn't stop Alejandro when he had the chance, Ray would never forgive him.

"I will shoot you!" Elliot shouted again, trying to convince himself as much as Alejandro.

In the dim glow from the dome light, Alejandro smirked at him in an open challenge. "No, you won't."

"Fuck you!"

The SUV spun out on the gravel, then began the reckless descent to the highway below.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

FOR A long time, Ray didn't want to move.

He went through the debriefing and interrogation-style interviews that followed on autopilot. Somehow coffee happened. Carmen had come into the police station and been forced to prove she'd had nothing to do with Sophie's actions, grilled about whether or not she'd actually taken her children out of town like she said. He'd watched his sister wander out of the police station, still crying. She looked at him for a moment, and the flood of tears came back. As much as he wanted to go to her and tell her it was all right, he didn't think he could find the words. Nothing was all right.

He knew she felt guilty for leaving San Diego, for leaving when she might have had the chance to talk some sense into Sophie if she had stayed. Ray would never hold it against her. He was proud and grateful she had the strength to put on a brave smile and distance her own children from the nightmare their family had become. Still, he had no idea how he could tell her any of that when they couldn't look at each other without him breaking down and her bursting into tears.

Somehow, he'd ended up back at Hayes's apartment. Weird potato dumplings in a heavy marinara sauce happened. Cheap blended whiskey happened. He ended up in bed with Elliot's warm body wrapped around him, enveloping him in the other man's welcome and familiar scent. And Ray would have been content to stay there, wrapped in the cocoon of blankets and Elliot forever.

But that just wasn't possible. At dawn—maybe dawn on the second day, maybe dawn on the third—Ray woke up to obnoxious laughter and the smell of freshly brewed coffee.

“I can’t believe you won.” A voice he didn’t know well but that he hated all the same came from somewhere across the room.

“I didn’t actually *expect* to be right. I made the bet as a joke.”

“Hayes?” Ray tipped his head up to see his partner, with sparkling eyes, sympathetic smile—and goddamned cowboy lover in tow—standing at the foot of the bed. The cowboy wrapped his arms around Hayes’s waist, rubbing it in. Ray was all but numb inside, but even so, he was surprised when the resentment he’d felt every time he looked at the two of them together didn’t burn back to life. There was nothing now.

“Seriously, Delgado? Six depressed, frantic voice mails, and I rush down here to find you with some random guy, in my bed. What the hell, man?”

Ray stared at them both, then sighed as Elliot’s arms tightened around him. “Come back in a week.” He dropped his head back down.

“Delgado?” Ray could hear the concern in his partner’s voice. “Is that the skinny FBI guy? Belkamp, right? What’s up?”

Ray glanced up at Hayes again, cocking a single eyebrow. “Have you thought about the full range of possible answers to that question, Hayes?”

That brought a little smile to his partner’s face. “Actually, he’s right, I don’t want to know. Didn’t really expect to see you again.”

“Yeah. Shit happened. Drug cartels, break-ins, contract killers, Internet theft, creepy professors...” Elliot nuzzled against the top of Ray’s head. “Ray lost his cousin Sophie. His place got trashed, mine...”

Ray felt Elliot’s sigh ruffle through his hair. “Did the crime scene clean-up crew say if they can get the blood out of the floorboards yet?”

Elliot groaned. “It’s soaked into the damn subfloor. And the last hotel we booked got blown up, so we figured this would be all right.”

There was silence at the foot of the bed. Ray kept his head down, buried his eyes and his senses in the crook of Elliot’s neck.

“Well, fuck. That’s two.” Hayes’s lover laughed.

“Two?”

“We saw the explosion at the Hilton on the news in the airport. Christopher said he bet that was you.”

Ray glared at both of them. “You’re worse than the damn bomb-squad

guys, Hayes. Besides, this time I wasn't anywhere near the explosion. The FBI wanted to stash me there, but I came here instead. Good thing, too. There was a drug-cartel leak inside the FBI's Gang Task Force."

"What? Who?"

"Nobody you'd know. Some new asshole named Hathaway. Sanchez misses you, by the way. Jenkins, too. You should stop in and say hello since you're in town."

"Delgado." Ray felt the bed dip slightly with the added weight of another body. "Sophie...."

"I don't really want to talk about it. Like I said, come back in a week."

"No, I don't think that's a good idea. Why don't we give you guys a chance to get dressed, then we'll get some lunch."

Ray tilted his head up again, glaring. The sudden anger burning inside him was irrational but consuming. "We're not naked you shit! Jesus, you really think so little of me? You think, after the girl I helped raise bled to death all over me that the first thing on my mind would be getting laid?"

"Delgado, you know I didn't mean it like that."

"I know what you meant! I know you're trying to be supportive! I know I shouldn't be pissed about what you said, but.... Do you think knowing you didn't mean anything by it makes me feel any better about the way you automatically assumed?"

Elliot's grip on his shoulder made him twitch. "Over. Thinking."

Ray sighed and pushed himself upright. He ran his hands through his hair. "I know. I know. I'm just a mess right now."

"Yeah, I get that." Hayes smiled. He grabbed Ray's T-shirt and hauled him across the bed. His larger, taller frame was huge compared to Elliot's, and the crushing bear hug his partner pulled him into enveloped him completely. He tried to get away, to get back to the anger and rage, but Hayes just held him tighter. "You can't go to lunch in boxers and a T-shirt. If you need to read too much into everything I say so you end up too angry to think, go ahead. If you need to skip the bullshit and just smack me, go ahead. I might be a bit out of shape, but I can still take anything you can dish out."

Ray accepted the hug. He needed it. He needed the reminder that he

still had some human connection in the world. But the one thought that broke through the grief and anger was that Hayes didn't feel right. Sitting there with Hayes's arms wrapped around him didn't feel right.

He forced himself to nod and slipped back up to the pillows, back to Elliot. He ran his fingers through Elliot's close-cropped hair. "Lunch?"

Elliot leaned shamelessly into his touch, and Ray found something inside him pinging from the simple gesture. Elliot shrugged. "Food is overrated. There are still two boxes of strawberry Pop-Tarts from the last time I ran to the store."

"That's settled, then," said Ray. "We're going to lunch."

THE SKY should have been overcast. It was two days into February, and of all the months of the year, February in San Diego should have been cloudy and depressing. Instead, it was bright, clear, and nearly seventy degrees. Just as the weather seemed to delight in not matching the occasion, the mourners didn't seem to have the class to be stoic and reserved either. Ray's aunt, mother, and grandmother stood in the front with Carmen, and their devastation was etched on their tear-streaked faces. But the rows of family around them were aloof, there to keep up appearances and nothing more.

Sophie's father and remaining brother were absent, but that was because Ray's testimony had put them in prison years ago. Ray had to wonder if they believed the police account of what had happened or if Alejandro had lied to them all and blamed it on him or Garcia. He half hoped Alejandro had done just that. As much as he hated Alejandro, he didn't hate his Aunt Louisa enough to subject her to the truth.

He'd kept his distance, staying over fifty yards from the grave site, but even that was too close for his extended family. Across the cemetery lawn, his nephew held up a red matchbox car and waved at him. Ray smiled and gave the boy a little wave before Ray's own mother shot a cold look his way and turned the boy around. Carmen was the only one who hadn't glared at him. But she hadn't looked at him at all, and somehow that felt worse.

He felt as if he deserved their accusations. Regardless of who had pulled the trigger, he was the reason Sophia had always hated their family, the reason she'd tried to go into federal law enforcement, why she'd started

this entire fucked-up mess. But even if he felt like he deserved their scorn, he still needed to say good-bye. There was a part of him that would have given anything to be standing there beside his mother and sister, to feel their arms around him, to be able to mourn without any doubts about whether he even had the right to be upset.

Their glares and callous attitudes just confirmed that he'd made the right choice.

A massive hand landed on his shoulder, the force catching him off guard. His partner Hayes stood behind him, clad in a respectable suit and a soft smile.

"Hey. You came." Ray had given up hope that the other man might show up.

Hayes had stuck around for the better part of a week, helping him clean his apartment up, install a new security system, and get back into a normal routine again. As great as it had been having his best friend back in his life, he knew that Hayes's damn cowboy was getting impatient and broody. Ray couldn't blame the man for getting a bit annoyed by having to share Hayes's attention. Months ago, Ray would have gotten a kick out of rubbing it in the fucker's face, but now it just made him feel awkward too. And as much as he appreciated having the help getting his apartment sorted out, he hadn't had an excuse to hang around Elliot for the last six days. Each night in his empty apartment, he thought about going out to a club and finding company to bring home, and then he thought about calling Elliot instead. Without the case and an army of drug-cartel hit men tying them together, though, Elliot had no reason to put up with him anymore, so each night Ray convinced himself not to bother. Instead, he fell asleep watching TV in the hours just before dawn and dragged his tired self through the days that followed.

It would be better once he got back onto regular shifts, once the interviews and internal affairs crap was behind him.

"Hey, yourself. I see your family is as charming as ever."

Ray didn't even have to glance at him to know the exact expression he'd have on his face. Hayes had this way of smiling at grief that always left Ray feeling grounded and stable. Over the years they'd spent working together, Ray had come to do the same thing, and he was always amazed at how the simple act of forcing a smile onto his face could make utter chaos

manageable again. So Ray smiled, too. “I don’t have a family. Not anymore. Even Carmen doesn’t want anything to do with me. Sophie was the only one who ever did.”

Hayes squeezed his shoulder tight.

A moment later, a slender hand clasped his other shoulder. Ray glanced to his left, surprised at the way his heart rate spiked. Elliot stepped close to him, pressing his body close to Ray’s without quite hugging him. It was hard not to reach out and kiss him, not to pull him into a hug.

He didn’t dare, though, because they weren’t alone.

He scanned the mass of people behind him, wondering how the hell he’d missed the way the shadows had appeared on the lawn at his feet, silhouettes of dozens of people. His fellow homicide officers, men and women he had worked with in the police department’s gang-enforcement unit, patrol officers he went drinking with so he could keep up on gossip from different neighborhoods, they were all there. His captain and the detectives he worked with on a daily basis were standing right behind him. There were even six members of the bomb squad, dressed in the tactical gear he’d splattered with neon green paint.

“You’ve got a family, kid.” Captain Jenkins smacked him in the back of the head.

“He’s right.” Sanchez ruffled his hair. “You might be the eccentric brother we’re embarrassed to invite to special occasions, but you’re still *ours*.”

“Goddamn it, Sanchez.” Ray sniffled, fumbling in his breast pocket for his sunglasses. “I was totally cool and calm until you came along. Then you have to go all mushy on me, and then I get all mushy....”

She poked him in the back hard. “Being mushy is how we show we care. And speaking of mushy, *someone* had fun with superglue and thumbtacks around your desk. You might want to be careful when you come back on duty. You could end up mushy, yourself.”

“You didn’t....” He managed to keep himself from laughing, but only because it would have been too inappropriate, even for him. He looked at Hayes, who was still smiling. “The woman turns my desk into a thumbtack bed-of-nails while I’m gone, and I don’t think I’m loved. Now I know better.”

“Sounds a little kinky to me.” Hayes glanced back at her with a raised eyebrow. “Didn’t think you’d be into that kind of thing.”

“I have a life outside of work. But this time, I swear it wasn’t me.” She grinned, obviously lying.

Beside him, he felt Elliot chuckle.

“What?” Ray cocked an eyebrow at him.

“Just thinking it takes a special kind of person to make homicide investigation a fun job. You guys are interesting.”

“Now you see why I won’t jump ship? Aside from beating the shit out of each other for a good time, you Feds are kind of dull.”

“Professional decorum has its place,” said Elliot. “I’m kind of envious, though. Most of our guys get transferred every few years. We get to express a preference about assignments, but ultimately we have to go wherever the bureau sends us. It would be nice to build the kind of close team you guys have.”

Behind them, Jenkins cleared his throat. “Well, just be aware. If you start hanging out in the homicide office too much, they’ll stop thinking about you as a guest.”

“He’s right,” said Ray. “Hang around too much, and you’re fair game.”

“Of course, Delgado is the only one you’d really have to worry about, so if you can put up with him, you’re fine.”

Ray opened his mouth, tried to think of some argument that could possibly dispute his captain’s warning, and then shrugged. “Yeah, that’s fair.”

Elliot laughed and squeezed his shoulder tighter. Ray knew he couldn’t hug him, couldn’t kiss him, but he shifted closer to him anyway.

As the distant ceremony came to an end, Ray looked to the men and women who had gone to so much trouble just to stand beside him. He wanted to make a joke about it, to ease some of the awkward tension in his throat, but he was out of jokes. He met his captain’s gaze, the old man’s eyes shining with a concern Ray had seldom seen. “You set this up?”

Captain Jenkins shrugged innocently. He didn’t say a word.

“Of course you set this up. I don’t know what to....” Ray would never be able to express just how grateful he was. “Thank you.”

A slight incline of his head was all Ray would get for a nod, but it

spoke volumes.

“Has Internal Affairs decided to let me come back to work yet?”

Another slight nod.

Ray felt like a weight had been lifted from his chest. “You know I make things fun.”

“Fun,” Jenkins agreed. “Monday morning, Delgado.” With a quick half nod, the old captain strolled away. The rest of the homicide office trailed off to their cars.

“*Fun* is the new word for coming up with fill-in-the-blank forms for things like decorating the bomb squad and rigging the copy machine to spit out porn?” Hayes asked.

“How cool is that?” Ray smiled proudly. “I have redefined *fun*.”

Hayes patted him on the shoulder, nodded at Elliot, and left them alone.

Ray turned toward Elliot, hesitating. “Hi.”

“Hi.”

“How’s the remodel going?” Ray asked.

“I have new floors. Dark cherry to match the cabinets. And I’ve been informed by two contractors and my neighbors that I will never, ever be able to unload the house on anybody. Apparently, people getting shot there is something that has to be disclosed when you put a house on the market.”

“People get weird about that kind of thing. It could be a selling point, with the right crowd, though. You know, Goth chicks and vampire fans.”

“I’m okay holding on to it. Even if I get transferred somewhere else in a few years, this seems like a decent place to settle down.”

“It is.” Ray took a deep breath and steeled his resolve. “I could show you around a bit, if you want? Maybe this weekend?”

Elliot grimaced, and the warm grasp he had maintained on Ray’s shoulder vanished. Elliot nodded toward the parking lot, and Ray followed him. “I wish I could. I’ve got to go up to LA this weekend. Maybe some other time, though?”

“Oh.” Ray kept smiling, trying to recall how many times he’d used that line to get someone out of his place the morning after sex. Too many times. “Yeah, okay. I need to go into the office anyway, get caught up on new case files I’ve missed this week. I’ll see you around!” He jogged to his car, hoping he could escape without looking like more of a fool.

He pulled out of the parking lot fast, aiming for the highway where he would have to focus on staying alive in traffic, where he wouldn't be able to think.

He didn't know why he was acting like such an idiot. Elliot really didn't have a reason to put up with him anymore, and he'd made no secret of how much he didn't want Ray in his life. Ray had never meant to hurt any of the men or women he'd let down the same way, but now he wondered how many of them had felt like he did right now. How many people had read too much into their conversations, too much into the sex?

He felt empty and worthless.

He wanted to feel angry. Anger would have been so much easier, but he was too emotionally exhausted to lie to himself. He was too emotionally exhausted for much of anything.

RAY FIGURED hiding in his apartment and drinking alone to avoid reality just wasn't healthy. Hiding in his apartment and drinking alone to avoid sobriety was probably fine, and so he stuck with that approach, even if it wouldn't work forever.

Monday morning he ended up typing up reports about the last two weeks. He signed formal statements for the FBI and made copies for his captain. He couldn't blame his captain for wanting to keep records of what happened. If Internal Affairs ever decided he was more trouble than he was worth, detailed paperwork would be the only thing that would keep his entire chain of command from being fired along with him. After paperwork, he sat in on the interview of a suspect in a domestic-violence case that had ended in murder, and typed up yet more reports. By late afternoon, he was ready to start bouncing off the walls. He had to find a way to stop thinking about how Elliot had blown him off.

Every time he tried to think of something else, he just ended up thinking about how many times he'd done the same damn thing. He found himself driving by the hospital where he knew Bruce worked. He wandered into the ER, flashed his badge to get the information he wanted, and saw the frazzled young doctor typing away at a workstation in the middle of a cluster of computers.

"Ray Delgado?" Bruce frowned. "I didn't expect to see you again.

You're not hurt, are you?"

"No. I shouldn't have come to bother you at work, but I really wanted to talk to you."

Bruce rubbed his eyes and shoved himself away from the computer. "I was going to grab some coffee anyway."

At an espresso cart in the hospital food court, Ray bought the other man a latte and bought himself a plain cup of coffee. He took a deep breath and dove right in. "So I wanted to apologize."

"For what?" Bruce chuckled.

"Everything. For pushing you out the door, not calling, not getting your name right. Not being interested in much besides sex. All of it. I was kind of an insensitive dick that night. Traumatic shit or not, I shouldn't have treated you like that."

"Did I say I was looking for more than sex?" Bruce turned the apology back on him. Ray saw a glimmer of what had attracted him to the man in the first place. He had a comforting smile and an easy confidence that Ray found attractive in all of the men and women he'd pursued. Now, though, that confidence was nothing but a reminder of what he really wanted.

"Believe it or not, I wasn't sure. I'm actually sorry for the whole night."

"That night was totally fucked-up."

Ray uncurled fingers he didn't remember clenching, relieved. "But you weren't mad at me about it?" Ray asked.

"A little." Bruce shrugged. "I'm a big boy, though. I can get over shit like a bruised ego pretty fast. Honestly, escaping that night with just a bruised ego was probably a lucky break."

"Yeah, that was psycho. I'm still sorry. I really was an ass that night." Ray took a sip of his coffee and smiled.

Bruce finished his in a series of long gulps. "Are you fishing for another chance to hook up, or is this something else?"

"Would you believe me if I said *absolution*?"

"Probably not."

"Well, it's recently occurred to me that I've treated a lot of people bad. I mean, sex is just supposed to be fun, you know?"

Bruce nodded and took a long sip from his latte. "I couldn't agree

more.”

“But sometimes, I get clingy and people get the wrong idea. People think, when I want them to stay the night, I really want them to *stay*. And I’ve recently been reminded of just how much it sucks to be the one with mixed-up signals in that kind of hookup. It feels shitty. So I figured the least I could do was come apologize.”

“Really?” Bruce gaped at him.

“It’s not that lame, is it?”

“No. No, it’s not. It’s actually kind of cool.”

“No, it’s lame.” Ray kicked at the hospital linoleum, embarrassed. “But in my line of work, if you let go of the whole personal responsibility thing, you end up letting go of everything. Like that Hippocratic oath thing you’re stuck with, I suppose.”

Bruce’s smile softened. “You know, if you ever want to go hit a club together, or just have a bit of fun, you should give me a call.”

Ray knew he was blushing, but it was nothing more than the flush from feeling flattered. “Any other time, I’d love to take you up on that. Not right now, though. I’ve got a lot of stuff I’ve got to work through.”

“Were you involved in that big explosion on the news? The one they said was linked to some big money-laundering case?”

“No.” The lie came easily. “No, just personal stuff.”

“Yeah, right. If you ever change your mind, give me a call?”

“Yeah.”

When Ray left the hospital, he felt a bit better. Since hookups were a normal part of most single men’s lives, he knew that the majority of his encounters had been just as casual for his partners as they had been for him. There weren’t many people who had been unhappy with him afterward, but he called the ones he could remember. Of the six people he ended up calling, two of them hung up on him. He managed to leave messages apologizing to the other four, trying to be as polite and neutral as he could.

FEELING BETTER than he had in days, Ray went back to work and said good-bye to Hayes before he flew back to the middle of nowhere.

“Are you going to be a year between visits each time?” He punched Hayes in the shoulder rather than hugging him.

“We’ll see.” Hayes was unusually gloomy, which Ray knew meant he was actually being sincere. “I kind of like it up there. This whole city holds so many memories, you know? I never realized how on edge I was all the time, living down here. Up in Montana, there are just mountains and forests and fields.”

“And psychotic locals who run you down and try to kill you.” Ray mimicked Hayes’ smile. Hayes grimaced, and Ray felt like an ass. The case that had lured Hayes away from San Diego had resulted in a suspect hitting him with a truck during an early-morning run and dragging him out into a remote stretch of forest to finish him off. It had shattered his leg, ended his career, and left him stuck in a cast for months. From the expression on his face, Ray realized it wasn’t a memory Hayes was comfortable joking about yet. “Guess that was insensitive, huh? Right. Sorry.”

The damn cowboy grumbled. “It was just the one guy. It’s not like everybody in town does it.”

Hayes conjured up his plastic smile and laughed at them. “It’s amazing up there. It’s nice to be able to really relax. And the town’s so far away, it doesn’t really matter if a few folks there aren’t crazy about me.”

Ray stared at his partner for a long moment, wondering just how he actually felt about his lover’s Montana home. Hayes had always kept his feelings to himself, but Ray had become decent at reading him over the years. He might be out of practice, but he’d bet money that Hayes was lying. But if Hayes felt like staying with his lover was worth lying to himself for, it wasn’t Ray’s business. He shrugged. “If you’re happy, then whatever, it’s all good.”

Hayes’s smile shifted into the lopsided goofy expression that Ray knew meant he was actually pleased. “We’re coming back down in the summer. Doug promised he’d teach me how to surf.”

“Teach *you* how to surf?”

Hayes glowed and nodded his head up and down like an eager ten-year-old.

Ray turned toward Hayes’s lover. “A cowboy from a landlocked state knows how to surf?”

“I haven’t surfed for years,” he admitted. “But it’s like riding a bike.”

“Fall off a few times, and then it’s like you never forgot?” Ray

grinned as he coaxed a begrudging smile out of the other man.

Hayes wanted them to be friends, and Ray promised he'd try. It would be easy to try being friends from a thousand miles away. When they left to catch their plane, Ray went back to work and back to annoying his coworkers. Being a pain in the ass was the best way he knew to make sure Jenkins assigned him a full case load quickly, and it was a more entertaining way to pass the time than filing the hundreds of report pages he'd typed over the last week.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE FINAL case-status meeting was scheduled to last one hour, but so far it'd been dragging on for three hours. The deputy director pored over every detail of the last incident report, verifying the physical descriptions of Alejandro Munoz and Esteban Garcia, making Elliot draw a diagram of the roads, the house, and the cistern, comparing trajectories calculated from the impact angle of each stray bullet and injury. Elliot was fine wasting time on details. So long as the conversation didn't shift back to Ray or to how Elliot had so miserably failed to do his job in the end, he was just fine.

He'd skirted around his time babysitting Ray, cataloging every piece of potentially disastrous information he'd shared with him, but pretending that there'd been nothing more to their relationship than keeping a worried colleague informed. The glare that St. Claire sent his direction left no doubt in Elliot's mind that she knew the truth, but she didn't say anything, so he didn't have to actually deny it.

"So when you chased the subject up the embankment, your report says you had your sidearm drawn. You ordered him to stop, and then...." The deputy director flipped through the file in front of him. "You didn't shoot. Care to tell me why?"

"I didn't shoot." Elliot kept his face still, his expression absolutely neutral. "It was dark. He had the cover of the SUV and the driver's side door. The chance of getting a clean shot seemed slim." He was parroting what he'd written in the report.

"You couldn't get a clean shot?"

"That's right."

"Agent Belkamp, your personnel file includes your list of military

commendations. You've never scored less than an excellent rating in marksmanship. You were qualified, with an expert rating, with a dozen different weapons. Your last assessment at the academy was exceptional." The deputy director held up a scored copy of the man-shaped target students in the FBI academy used for firearms qualification. Elliot had received a perfect score.

"Yes, sir. I am well trained in assessing my line of fire, and I have enough combat experience to know when I can and cannot make a shot. I can't list all the factors I took into consideration because it was a split-second decision. I couldn't get a clear shot."

"And you didn't think to shoot out one of his tires?"

"No, sir. That was a lapse of judgment on my part. I was already calling in the vehicle description hoping the helicopter crew would be able to follow it from the air. I also assumed that one of the fifty or so cars down below would be quick to respond."

"And they weren't?"

"No, sir. I guess I underestimated how much Detective Delgado's fellow officers care about him. When word got out that he was in trouble, half the city rushed out of town to help, and no one wanted to leave the scene."

The deputy director nodded and scribbled a note in the margin of Elliot's report. "Belkamp, I don't think you need me to point out just how reckless your conduct was during the course of this investigation, particularly with regard to Detective Delgado."

Elliot kept his mouth shut. He knew how badly he'd fucked up, but he didn't dare admit the full extent of it aloud. He had been right to trust Ray, though. In the end, Ray had stayed professional, calm, and functional. He'd been able to distance himself from Elliot and do his job. In the end, it was Elliot who hadn't been able to separate himself from his emotions. It had been Elliot who let his feelings cripple him.

In a moment of desperate insanity, filled with dread at the idea of Ray being gunned down by Alejandro's replacement, Elliot had been the one who choked.

"Now, having reviewed Detective Delgado's personnel records and his report, I can understand why you presumed his input would be useful in

this case. But son, that's not a decision for a field agent to make. Next time, I expect written reports to reflect that outside consultation was discussed and authorized beforehand, is that clear?"

Elliot blinked. He couldn't be getting off that easy. "Yes, sir."

"So we lost our chance to nail Alejandro Munoz, but we have Esteban Garcia on first-degree murder in the death of Agent Hathaway."

St. Claire leaned forward, her elbows on the table. "On the other hand, Garcia was instrumental in forcing things in Tijuana to settle down. With him out of the picture, the situation could just become more violent."

"Well, think of it like duck hunting." The old director pointed his pencil in the air like a shotgun. "You aim for the flock. What you hit, well, sometimes that's a matter of luck. I can't say that this operation was a complete success, but it was hardly a failure, either. Not bad for your first assignment with this task force. Not bad at all. I think, once you get settled in, you're going to be a valuable asset to this team."

Elliot wished he could share the deputy director's confidence. "Thank you, sir."

"Oh, by the way, how did you get a hold of the GPS coordinates from Detective Delgado's cell phone? We have to get a court order to do that."

"It's a trail-running app," said Elliot. He dug out his own cell phone and showed the deputy director the program. "So long-distance runners can keep track of their running partners if they run at a different pace. His old partner suggested it, and I set it up on his phone after the hotel explosion."

"With his permission, I'm sure?"

"Of course."

"Go on, then. And send Detective Delgado in after you."

Elliot almost flinched. He caught himself quickly, but not quickly enough to stop St. Claire from pursing her lips. "I'll send him in."

It had been almost four weeks since Ray walked away from him at Sophie's funeral. Four weeks without seeing or hearing from the other man at all. Ray had been so miserable at the memorial service, Elliot knew if he let himself be alone with Ray, they would fall into bed again, fall into the comforting easy game of pretending that they were in a relationship. No matter how long they drew out the game, Elliot knew it would all come

crashing down when Ray learned that he'd had Alejandro's head in his sights and choked. Elliot had had a chance to stop Sophie's killer, and instead he'd let him go. Elliot wouldn't blame Ray if he tried to kill Elliot himself.

Elliot could handle Ray's fury, but not while he still remembered the giddy warmth he'd felt when he realized Ray cared about him. Not while he could still remember the taste of Ray's lips and the warmth of his body. He'd pulled away, knowing that the truth would come out, sooner or later. He wondered now if Ray turning on him as a lover would hurt half as much as watching Ray walk away had.

Seeing Ray sitting outside the conference room, avoiding his gaze and keeping his face locked in a cold, professional mask, hurt more.

Ray stood up when Elliot met his gaze, flashing that sexy smile that made Elliot's resolve crumble. He balled his hands into fists so he wouldn't be able to reach for Ray. "They're ready for you." He nodded toward the conference-room door. "Sorry if you were waiting long."

Ray's smile drooped. "I get paid by the hour. Don't worry about it."

Elliot dug his fingernails into the palms of his hands. His entire body tried to reach out for Ray, to bring his smile back. He just stared as Ray shuffled into the conference room.

Elliot found a spot to pretend to work where he could keep an eye on the door. It wasn't half an hour before St. Claire and the deputy director followed Ray out. Finalizing his statement was the last step in closing out Sophie Munoz's case once and for all.

Elliot watched them shake hands, then nonchalantly followed Ray toward the elevator. "Delgado, can I talk to you?"

Ray stepped into the elevator, and Elliot hurried in on his heels.

"Changed your mind?" Ray asked.

"Huh?"

"Are you still holding out for your fairy tale?" Ray's voice dripped with mockery.

"This isn't about what happened with us. Can we talk? Please?"

When the elevator door slid open, Ray gestured for Elliot to lead the way. Outside, Elliot headed for a set of picnic tables used by the few agents who still smoked.

Ray flashed him an empty smile that hurt almost as much as the broken expression at Sophie's memorial service had. "What's up?"

"Now that everything with your cousin's case is wrapped up, I need to tell you the truth."

"The truth?"

"Yes. But, don't kill me, okay?"

"Kill you?"

"That's right."

"Just spit it out already."

Elliot sat down on the picnic table and set his elbows on his knees. "When I tried to arrest Alejandro, he started talking. He made a break for it, and I caught up to him. I had a clean shot, but he just kept talking. I didn't take the shot. I couldn't."

"They let me read your report. It would have been a difficult shot."

"You probably read the report, went to the scene, and tried to recreate the angle," said Elliot.

Ray's smile softened a little. He didn't dispute any of it, Elliot noticed.

"I said I had a clean shot. But he kept talking, and I let him get inside my head. He didn't escape, Ray, I..." Elliot tried to force the words out, hoping to finally voice the guilt and doubts screaming inside him. "I fucked up."

"What did he say?" Ray's smile was gone and his tone unreadable.

"He talked about driving you away as a kid. He said he felt responsible for it, so he'd taken personal responsibility for you. He said he'd spent the last twelve years keeping the rest of the cartel from killing you, and that if he went to prison, you'd end up dead."

"You think prison would be all that hard on him?" Ray smirked.

"I know! I knew it the moment he drove off! He figured out how much I care about you, and he used it to manipulate me. I just figured I owed you the truth."

Ray stared at him for a long time, not saying a word.

He dropped his gaze and shoved his hands into his pockets. "I'm sorry."

“You never did answer me.”

“Huh?”

“Are you still holding out for a fairy tale?”

Elliot felt his breath catch in his throat. He was ashamed by how much he wanted the no-strings hookup Ray was offering. He already liked Ray too damn much, and if he started fooling around with him again, he knew falling for him would be inevitable. He’d just been setting himself up for misery from the start. Ray would probably never settle down, and if he did, it sure as hell wouldn’t be with *him*. Elliot had let a psychotic killer convince him that the world would be a better place if Elliot allowed him to go free, all because for one moment Elliot couldn’t imagine *his* world without Ray Delgado in it. That moment of weakness was a twisted irony, because Ray would never get involved with someone who was so weak and easy to manipulate.

“Well, are you?”

“Holding out for a fairy tale?” Elliot let out a bitter laugh. “No. I think I’m over that. I don’t think I deserve to be that lucky. I had a chance to make things right, and I blew it. Like you said, in real life, things don’t work out like they do in stories. In real life, bad guys win, people die, and relationships crumble. I think I finally get where you’re coming from with that. So why bother when I’d just be setting myself up to be miserable?” Elliot stood up and ran his fingers through his short hair.

“Elliot, that’s not fair. You—”

“I fucked up.” His tone dropped to a hush. “Believe me, I know. Whatever you feel like you need to do, if you need to report it, I won’t hold it against you.” He stole a glimpse at Ray for a moment, then turned away. He didn’t want to see the contempt he was sure would be in Ray’s eyes. “Whatever you need to do, do it.”

Elliot didn’t look back as he hurried back into the building.

ELLIOT MUDDLED through work each day for the next week, throwing himself into case analysis. After work, he spent hours letting anyone who was willing to spar with him throw him around a judo mat. By the time he

staggered home each night, he was too tired to think, much less remember the few days he'd spent caught up in the whirlwind that was Ray Delgado. He almost felt normal again by the following Monday.

But as soon as he began to feel like himself, things got weird.

Monday morning, he knew something was up when everyone stared at him the moment he got off the elevator. No one said anything as he walked through the office, and when he got to his desk, he found a strange tower of thin, gift-wrapped rectangles stacked on his desk. They were held together with a dark blue ribbon. Elliot untied the ribbon and carefully opened the folded wrapping paper. Inside was a cheap plastic case with the Pop-Tarts logo printed on the front in white. He unwrapped five more just like it. Inside the last one, he found a folded piece of notebook paper.

You said you burn 600 calories an hour fighting, so four hours of fighting means you need six packets of Pop-Tarts at any given time. Now you don't have to put up with mushy ones.

There was no signature, but there was no doubt that the plastic cases were from Ray. No one else cared if he got enough to eat each day. No one else knew enough about his quirks to know how badly mushy Pop-Tarts annoyed him. He tucked the plastic cases into his messenger bag and tried to get to work.

Throughout the day, he wondered what Ray was thinking, leaving him a gift. And at the office, of all places, where anyone who saw him was likely to get the wrong impression.

When the week rolled on with no sign of Ray, Elliot assumed the gift was meant as a peace offering. He chalked it up to a message that there was no resentment between them, and he hoped that they might be able to act like friends if they ran into each other again. As he walked back toward his desk after lunch on Friday, though, his "no animosity" theory was blown straight to hell.

Sometime over his lunch break, his desk had been covered in boxes. There were no frilly baskets, no wrapping paper or ribbons, but there was a box of every flavor of Pop-Tarts Elliot had ever seen. There were even a few he'd never seen before.

"Who the hell did this?" Elliot stared at the stack of distinct blue boxes. They'd been lined up and stacked like children's building blocks, built into the shape of a castle. There was no way Ray could have gotten all

of those boxes of Pop-Tarts into the building, and built a castle out of them, in the forty minutes it had taken Elliot to grab lunch.

But Ray didn't seem to be daunted by little things like impossibility, or even by the armed security in the lobby.

"St. Claire said the FedEx guy did it. Said someone tipped him two hundred bucks to make you a fairy-tale castle."

"A two-hundred-dollar tip? That didn't seem a bit suspicious to you? Were these even x-rayed?"

"Of course they were," St. Claire said from her office door.

"Accepting Pop-Tart sculptures from some random stalker is a good security practice, now?"

"Oh, come on, Belkamp, it's only stalking if the attention is unwanted, and I doubt you could look me in the eye and tell me you don't want his attention."

"Granted," Elliot admitted. "But it's still freaky."

"Are you kidding? I wish my husband knew me well enough to do something like this. Delgado is really serious about you."

"How do you know it's from him?"

"His name was on the delivery slip," she said. "I've heard about a few of his exploits, and this seems like it'd be his style. Although, those stories were all about women, so maybe they were bullshit."

Elliot shook his head quickly and sat down, staring at his Pop-Tart castle. "It's been my experience that Delgado's exploits are often toned down in the retelling. I'm sure everything you've heard is the edited, approved-for-all-audiences version of whatever he actually did."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Because I heard that when it comes to relationships, he's the type who never looks back."

Elliot looked up at his boss and saw the sparkle in her eyes. "He cleared this with you, didn't he?"

She didn't answer him. "Go take that mess down to your car, then you can take off for the day."

Elliot knew he shouldn't read too much into Ray's over-the-top gift, but it was hard not to. He should be hoping Ray meant the gifts as a sign he wouldn't hold Elliot accountable for letting Alejandro escape. But he couldn't help hoping that maybe Ray meant the gifts as something more. He loaded the boxes into the trunk of his Honda with a sad smile. "Even if he wanted to try, it's not like it'd work out anyway."

He helped teach an introductory judo class that afternoon, but he didn't stay to drive himself into an exhausted stupor this time. He couldn't focus enough to handle a rough sparring match. His thoughts constantly wandered back to darkly tanned skin and the deep brown eyes he missed.

When he got home, he found that his garage door was blocked by a sleek black Nissan. There was no sign of its owner out front, and Elliot wasn't sure what he'd be walking into if he strolled through his own front door. The alarm system had been repaired after the break-in, but he suspected Ray could make short work of the entrance alarm.

Elliot approached his house cautiously, slipping in through the backyard. He thought he'd get a decent view of his living room through the windows off the patio, but instead he saw Ray himself, reclining on Elliot's patio chair, dozing in a rumpled brown suit.

Elliot stopped a few feet from the other man. "You can fall asleep anywhere but in a bed."

Ray's eyelids twitched, but he didn't move. Elliot sat down on the chair and shook Ray by the shoulder. Ray snaked his arms around Elliot's shoulders and pulled him down, enclosing him in a surprisingly gentle hug, before he opened his eyes. "I like waking up this way. Welcome home."

"Should I ask what you're doing here?"

"No." Ray scoffed. "It's obvious that I'm waiting for you, isn't it?"

"Does this mean you're not pissed at me?"

"Over Alejandro? No. If I had a dime for every time he's manipulated me, I'd have...." Ray narrowed his eyes in concentration. "Two dollars and eighty cents. Three bucks even, if you count the mess with Sophie. Can't really blame you for his behavior if I don't blame myself for it."

"But I could have stopped him," said Elliot. "I should have stopped him."

"Elliot, I think you're being too hard on yourself. He is a manipulative

bastard. Men like Alejandro are capable of changing in an instant. He wouldn't hesitate to kill anyone, including his own flesh and blood. And if he hadn't managed to manipulate you, he would have killed you."

"I had a clear shot," Elliot whispered.

"You've survived tours in two different war zones, and I know you killed people when you had to. After all that, and working in law enforcement too, you're still reluctant to take a life. Even a life like Alejandro's. But somehow, you've got yourself convinced that makes you *less* worthy of that fairy tale you wanted?"

"You think I give a damn about his life?" Elliot barked out a harsh laugh. "I did it because he threatened you! Because I was so hung up on you, the thought of you getting killed had me terrified. I was being selfish. I should have taken the damn shot. How many more people are going to die, because I didn't?"

Ray shrugged, as if it didn't matter. "Who knows? Maybe none. Maybe a few. But he'll answer for them all eventually. His crimes don't become yours just because he got away."

"But he wouldn't..." Elliot shut his eyes, although he couldn't block out the guilt in his own head.

"Nope. I refuse to allow that argument. If I let you say you're responsible for everything he does in the future, how much would that make me responsible for? Imagine how I could have changed the world if I had just stepped over that line and made the world a cleaner place when I was sixteen."

"You'd have gone to prison."

"Because it would have been murder. And then, someone else would get to live with a guilt trip for not stopping me. See? It'd never end. The only way to stop the cycle, and the guilt, is to do things the right way. For a police officer to arrest him, for a court to prosecute him, for the state to incarcerate him. It's just a thin line between arresting someone and cutting out the courts altogether."

"Our job is to enforce the law. To stop criminals."

Ray nodded but argued. "Our job is *not* to cross that line. Because if we break down—if we take on the job of judge, jury, and executioner to stop a criminal—then that makes the police nothing but another gang. It

would make us no better than him.”

“You sound like you actually believe that,” Elliot whispered. Ray cupped his cheek and forced Elliot to turn back to face him.

“It’s true. Whatever he said, whatever he did, you still tried to arrest him. And more than that, you took it upon yourself to do it. I don’t know what I’d have done if that had fallen to me. Something that would have made me no better than him, I suspect.” Ray’s smile turned into a sexy grin. “And you said you were totally hung up on me.”

Elliot groaned at the self-satisfied expression on Ray’s face.

Ray lowered his arms to Elliot’s waist and nudged Elliot into his lap. “Staying a decent human being in this job is pretty damn impressive.”

Elliot met Ray’s gaze, surprised by how relieved he was to hear the certainty and absolution in Ray’s voice. How anyone who’d lived Ray’s life could still believe in justice was a mystery to Elliot, but Ray did believe.

And somehow, Ray also believed in him.

Ray dropped his arm over the side of the chair and pulled up a plastic bag. “So I brought takeout. Join me for dinner?”

“Ray, I don’t think I’m up for much of anything tonight.”

“You’ve got to eat, Elliot. And we’ve got to talk. I’ve spent the last few weeks talking to people I’ve slept with, tracking down old flings and hookups. I wanted to make things right with everybody I...” Ray squirmed beneath him.

“Everybody you used as a blow-up doll?”

“To be fair, a lot of that was mutual.”

“I suppose some of it must have been.” Elliot shifted in Ray’s lap, trying to get more comfortable. “It was mutual with me.”

“I think I’ve apologized more these last two weeks than I have throughout my entire life.”

Elliot tried to ignore the way Ray was rubbing small circles against his hips. “Yeah? How’d that go?”

“It was a mixed bag. Some people took it okay, a few people told me to fuck off. But I’m glad I did it. If I hadn’t, you’d just think I was fucking with you, coming here like this.”

“Aren’t you?”

“Hmm.” Ray ran his hands up Elliot’s back beneath his T-shirt. Elliot rolled his hips forward, rocking against Ray’s body. He felt Ray, hard as steel, beneath him. “That’s tempting. But then we might not finish this conversation, and it’s important.”

“All right.” Elliot sat back, pried Ray’s hands off his hips, and set them on Ray’s own chest.

Ray pouted but continued. “That week at Hayes’s place was nice. It made me realize that having something like that all the time... well, it’d be....”

“Nice?”

“Yeah. Seeing the way my family looked at me at the funeral, like I was the one who shot her, it made me realize what I’ve really been looking for isn’t just a chance to get off and get a decent night’s sleep. I want that week back. I want somebody to have dinner with and to watch *Firefly* marathons with. A family.”

“So I’ve made you a fairy tale convert?”

“You made me feel like shit, that’s what you did. You convinced me that maybe there could be someone out there who would put up with me, who wouldn’t throw me away like my own family did. Someone who would trust me with power tools. You made me feel like a fairy tale might be worth trying for, and then you told me you don’t think you deserve one.” Ray shook his head and glared at him. “That’s bullshit, Elliot.”

Elliot tried to scoot back, but Ray held on to him again.

“El, you trusted me with rewiring your security system. You trusted me with fixing the backlight on your laptop screen. And with backing you up on the job.” Ray ran his finger down Elliot’s cheek and then down his chest, stopping over his breastbone. “Now I want you to trust me with something else.”

“Oh?”

“My next repair job. I’m going to make you believe in fairy tales again.”

“So the Pop-Tarts were what, exactly?”

“A big romantic gesture. Fairy tales are supposed to be all romantic, right? But flowers aren’t really masculine. Jewelry is kind of girly, too.

Then I thought maybe cooking stuff, like a few bottles of nice olive oils, and I second-guessed that because I worried you might think I wanted you to change or that I was hoping you'd cook me dinner. Chocolate, coffee, and liquor are my go-to gift ideas for guys, but I didn't want to give you a gift that would mean another migraine."

"So you got me Pop-Tarts?"

"Yes. I think I hate Pop-Tarts. I hate that you live off Pop-Tarts. I hate it. But I like *you*—every part of you, including your strange obsessions with chemically processed food substitutes. So can I persuade you to give me a try?"

"Give dating a try?" Elliot laughed, not sure how he'd ended up feeling flushed and nervous and giddy, all at the same time.

Ray searched his gaze for a moment, and Elliot saw Ray's eyes dart to the side, avoiding him. "If you don't want to, it's fine." Ray's voice cracked. "But maybe we could just try pretending for a little while? Like we did before?"

"No." Elliot grabbed Ray's chin and forced the other man to face him. "Hell no. No pretending. I told you before, I trust you. I don't need an easy out in case things get difficult, and I'm not about to give you one. If you're actually on board for a real relationship, we will make it work."

"We will?"

"You wouldn't have even suggested it unless you were convinced you could hold up your end. I trust you."

The worried lines along Ray's forehead softened, and he smiled, his entire face lighting up. "Okay."

"But you know this isn't going to be easy, don't you? Someone's bound to find out, no matter how we act in public."

"In public?" Ray blushed so deeply he turned purple. "No matter what people might have told you, I'm not *that much* of an exhibitionist."

"That's not what I meant." Elliot dropped his arms around Ray's neck. Ray wrapped his arms around Elliot's waist and adjusted them both so Elliot was straddling him. "People are going to wonder. I'm not obvious about things, either, but I don't like to lie about my life."

"Don't worry about that. I've already totally fucked us over as far as

keeping this private goes.” Ray’s smile was so bright, Elliot wasn’t sure if he was trying to be reassuring or if he was just fucking with him.

“Huh?”

“I needed advice. So I asked Maria Sanchez, because she’s awesome, and she’s the last partner I had. And she asked for advice from everyone else in the office, because she’s evil and knows I won’t actually hurt her when I get revenge. After a lot of catcalls and teasing, they all suggested talking to your friends, talking to someone who knows you really well. I was going to call St. Claire, but I didn’t have her number. I had to tell my captain what was going on, because he wouldn’t give me St. Claire’s cell-phone number without an explanation.”

Elliot wasn’t sure if he should be impressed or mortified. St. Claire knew he was gay, but from the sound of it, Ray had just outed them both to every law-enforcement agency in the city. “You got advice from my boss?”

Ray pouted. “No. She said if I didn’t know you well enough to figure out how to ask you out on my own, I could go fuck myself.”

“She *what?*”

“I thought of the Pop-Tart thing on my own. She smuggled them into the building for me, though.”

Elliot didn’t mean to laugh, but he couldn’t help it. “The guy who was so worried about funny looks from strangers came out so he could ask for romantic advice?”

“It was important.” Ray leaned up to kiss him gently. Elliot met him halfway, pressing his lips to Ray’s softly. Ray pulled him close, deepening the kiss with a hunger that left Elliot lightheaded.

When Elliot lifted his head away to take a quick breath, he was stunned by the warmth in Ray’s eyes. Ray moved his hands to the tie holding Elliot’s pants tight. Elliot caught his hands quickly. “Thought you said something about takeout?”

“After.” Ray leaned up to kiss him again. Somehow, Ray slipped his hands free and went back to loosening the tie.

Elliot enjoyed the kiss for a moment, but then he felt Ray slide his fingers around the waistband of his pants. Ray slipped his hands inside, cupping his ass and shoving his workout pants down. “We should go inside,” Elliot gasped. “The canyon trails run right along the fence. It’s

chain-link.”

“I totally lied.” Ray nipped at Elliot’s neck. “I am that much of an exhibitionist.”

Elliot laughed as the stubble on Ray’s chin tickled his collarbone. “I’ve got neighbors.”

Ray chuckled against his pulse point. “Do you think, after the sirens, the shootings, the crime-scene cleanup, and all the crap in the news, *anything* else you do could shock your neighbors?”

Before Ray managed to obliterate his capacity to think, Elliot wondered just what he was getting himself into. Whether they made it all the way to their own fairy-tale ending or not, he was sure he was in for one hell of an adventure along the way.

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A.J. THOMAS writes m/m romance, mostly for her own amusement. She began writing as a child, but never attempted it seriously until later in life, penning naughty fan fiction and then original stories. Her time is divided between taking care of her three young children, experimenting with cooking and baking projects that rarely explode these days, and embarrassing her husband with dirty jokes. When she's not writing, she hikes, gardens, researches every random idea that comes into her head, and develops complicated philosophical arguments about why a clean house is highly overrated.

She has earned a BA in English Literature and has worked in a half-dozen different jobs, from law enforcement officer to librarian. Originally from the Northwest, she has traveled all over the United States and currently lives in California. If she ever stops moving around long enough to call any place home, her heart is set on settling down in the mountains of Virginia.

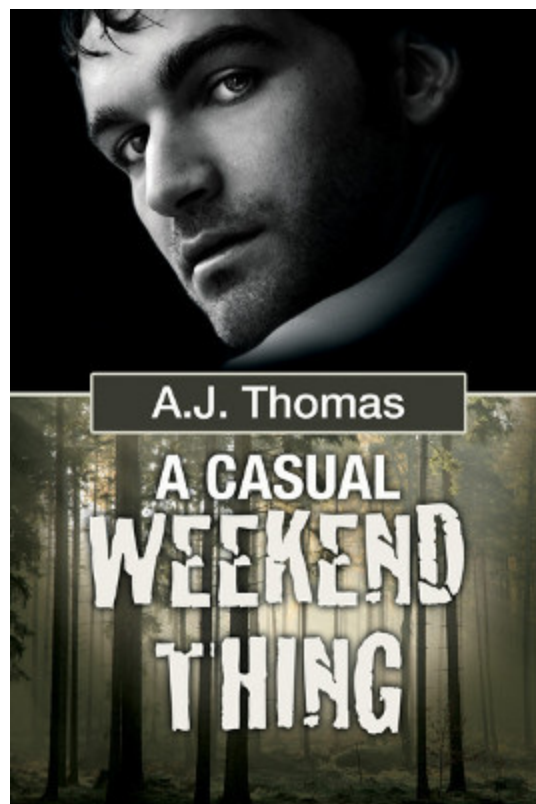
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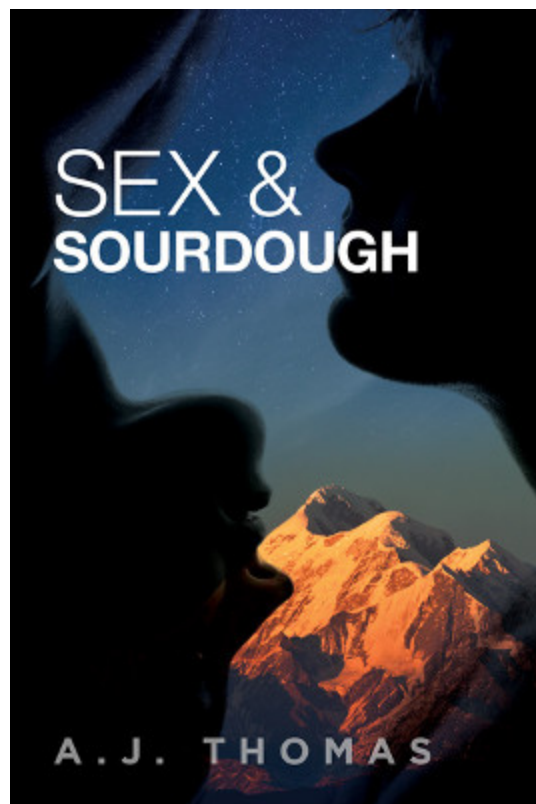
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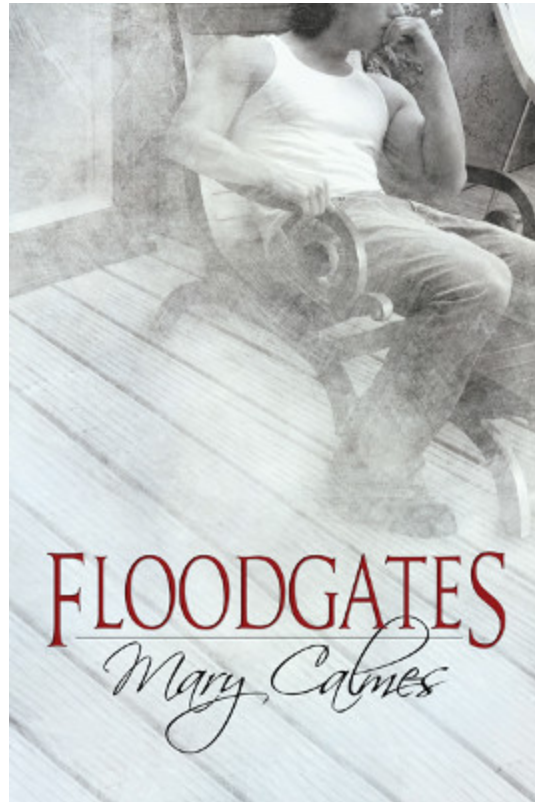
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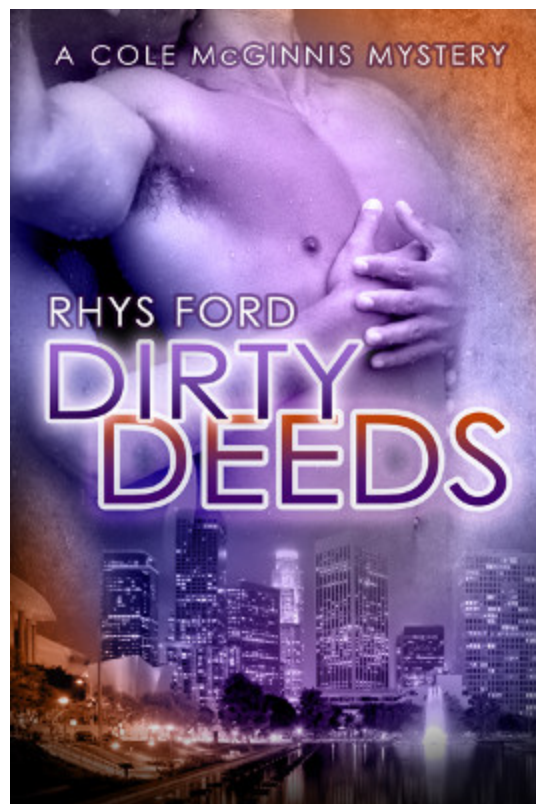
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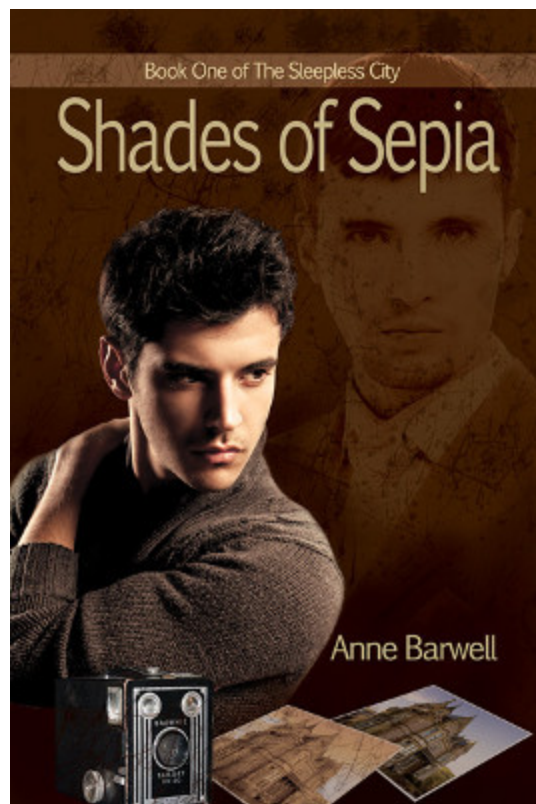
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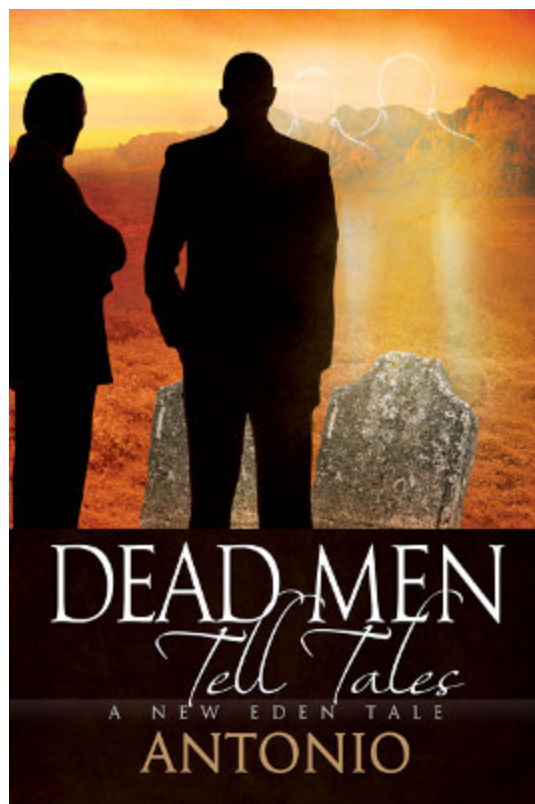
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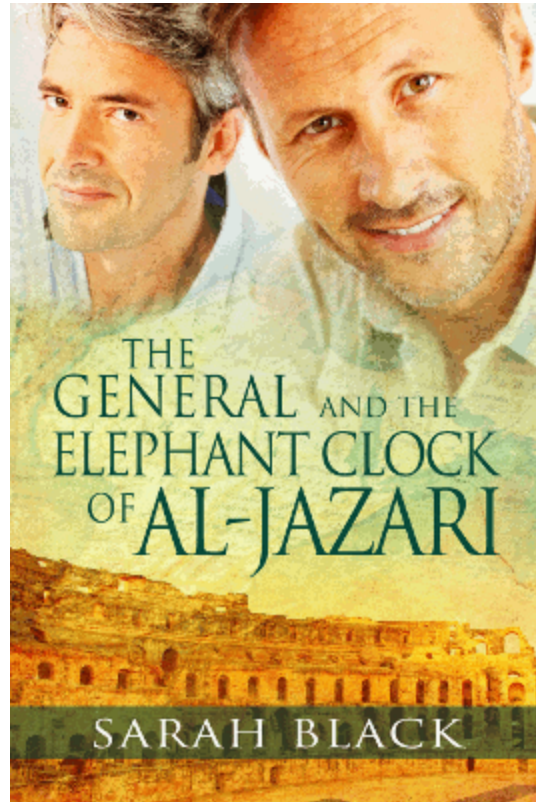
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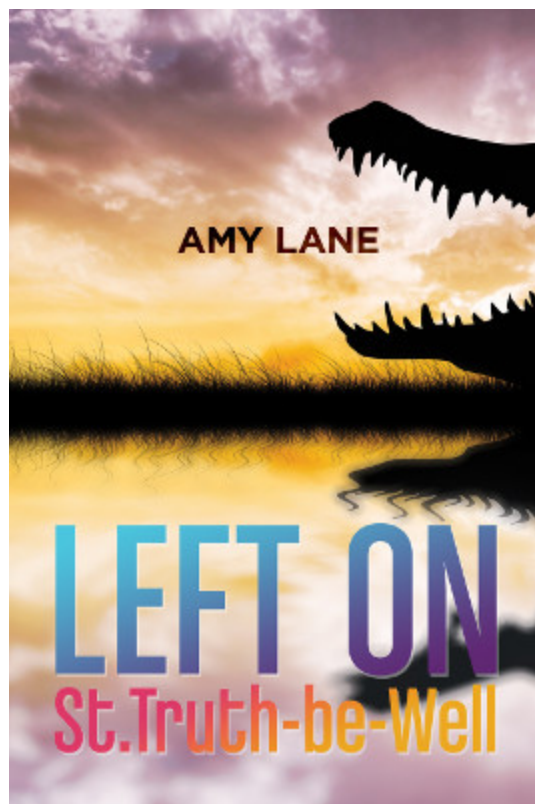
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