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CHASING SILVER
Jamie Craig
We'd like to thank Stephanie, Craig, and Jaime. Our success would not be possible without you.
CHAPTER ONE

Sweat rolled down Nathan's neck as he gripped the gun with slick palms. He walked lightly, but each step against the solid iron grate beneath his feet echoed in the abandoned warehouse. The air didn't move. It clung to his body, heavy and stagnant, layered over a coating of fine dust covering his exposed skin.

Nathan sensed Tian in the building. Somewhere ahead or above, the other man crept around the stacked boxes. Tightening his grip on the gun, Nathan strained to hear, every bit the predator. In the distance, a siren howled to life. Nearby, a dog barked in response.

Nathan slowed as he approached the end of the narrow corridor. Tian could be waiting behind the sharp corner, gun drawn. After three failed attempts to bring the man in, he had a healthy respect for Tian. But this time, Tian was coming out in cuffs or a black plastic bag; Nathan didn't have a preference.

He moved against the wall, sliding around the corner, his finger on the trigger, but an empty hallway greeted him. Taking a deep breath, he scanned the dark length of the corridor. Tiny, filthy windows lined the top of the wall, but they allowed only the faintest hint of dirty, orange light. He saw a flight of stairs at the edge of the hall, and a door in the middle, but otherwise, the concrete walls stretched on without a break.

Nathan moved quickly to the door, testing the unlocked handle before releasing it. Dark paper blocked the narrow rectangular window, obscuring his view of the room.

Holding his breath, he pressed his ear against the door and listened for movement. He heard nothing except the steady pounding of his own heart.

He eased back, raising his gun in a ready position, and prepared to kick the door open. A mere second before he moved, a window shattered overhead, sending a cascade of glass to his feet. Nathan looked up in time to see something the size of his fist fly through the hole to land on the floor.

Nathan moved cautiously, forgetting about the door behind him. The object's shape took form as he closed the distance, his narrowed eyes picking out each small detail.

A grenade. "That cocksucker."

Kicking the grenade down the hall, he ran back to throw the door open. He dived into the room without hesitation, slamming the door shut behind him. The explosion shook the building and, even behind the thick walls and steel door, he felt the fresh wave of heat rolling down the hall.

Staying low, Nathan scurried behind a large desk. He peeked over the edge to scan the layout of the large and cluttered room. Dust billowed around him as he moved, irritating his nose and clogging his throat. He pulled his shirt over his nose, stifling the urge to sneeze. The room reeked of abandonment and sweat. His own and somebody else's.

"Nathan," Tian called in a singsong voice. "Did you like my little present?"

"You can add attempted murder to your list of charges," Nathan responded

"Attempted murder? Did you take that shit personal? I was just playing around." His words echoed off the walls, mocking Nathan.

Nathan risked looking over the desk again, trying to find the source of Tian's voice, but there were too many places to hide.

"Is Cesar waiting outside?" Nathan asked. "It's going to be a big night for me."

"You think I let you follow me because I wanted to be caught?"

Nathan pulled the knife from his boot and began creeping to the right. "Why did you let me follow you, then? To blow me up with a grenade?"

"Look, I've got shit to do. The cops don't care about me anymore, why are you all over my ass?"

His voice was closer now, but Nathan couldn't risk taking the shot and exposing himself.

"Your ass is worth a lot of money," Nathan pointed out, thinking of his empty bank account. "Somebody still cares about it."

The slight sound of plastic scraping against concrete caught Nathan's attention. He froze, his eyes scanning the area. Light from a passing helicopter flashed through the dirty windows, giving Nathan a glimpse of Tian's white shirt and black hair. He was only twenty feet away, crouched behind a desk and an overturned table, still facing the door.

Nathan smiled grimly. In a single motion, he straightened, flicked his wrist, and released the knife. It buried itself in Tian's right arm. Screaming in pain, he whirled around to face Nathan, gun drawn.

"Put it down," Nathan warned. "I've got this pointed at your head and I'm tired of fucking around."

Tian opened his mouth, but Nathan would never know what the other man intended to say. A series of minor explosions, like shots from an automatic weapon, went off just inches from his ear. Nathan spun around, prepared to shoot Tian's accomplice, but he saw no one. The small rapid blasts continued. His skull vibrated from the pressure of the sound and his ears throbbed.

Bombs. Must be bombs, Nathan thought as he moved for cover.
Tian began to run, clutching his stained arm. "Stop!" Nathan shouted, firing after Tian, but his shots were wild. "Stop!"

A burst of blinding violet light sent Nathan reeling back, stumbling over the debris. Recovering his balance, he looked up, expecting to see the helicopter, but the light wasn't coming from the high windows. It pulsed from the ceiling, from the walls, from the floor, its beat matching the rhythm of his pounding heart. He tried to look away, protecting his eyes from the final explosion, cupping his ears to shield against the thunderous noise.

The air crackled with electricity. With the light flaring to an ice blue, one last reverberation shattered the high windows, sending Nathan diving to safety. Glass shards showered down in a lacerating rain. As abruptly as it had arrived, the sudden brilliance vanished, leaving the warehouse in darkness.

The ensuing silence was almost as painful as the explosions had been. The discomforting quiet was broken when a soft groan echoed from the murk, followed by a muffled, "Fuck."

Nathan stiffened. The curse didn't come from Tian or Cesar. That was a woman's voice.

He blinked several times, chasing the black dots from his eyes, before focusing on the almost shapeless form on the floor. He raised the gun, leveling it at her head as he approached. "Who are you?" he demanded. "A friend of Tian's? Are you armed?"

She didn't respond.

He stopped within ten feet of her and pulled back the hammer on the gun. "Put your hands up where I can see them."

Slowly, the shadows shifted like oil on brackish water, something metallic catching a sliver of light to glint in the darkness. A pale cheek became visible as the woman lifted her head, but her hands remained out of sight. "This has gotta be Hell." Her voice was a husky alto, sharp with annoyance. "Is this supposed to be my punishment? You torture me for all eternity with bad movie clichés?"

"What the fuck?" He circled her without looking away, keeping a safe distance as he approached the open door. A quick glance down the hall proved Tian had high-tailed it out of there.

"Fuck. Fuck." Nathan turned back to the strange woman, sudden fury overriding any confusion or shock at her mysterious appearance. He marched over to her, grabbed her arm and hauled her to her feet. "Who are you? Did you help him plan this?"

Her eyes widened, as if he'd surprised her by being tangible, but it lasted only a moment before she twisted in his grasp, her back pressing into his chest. A sharp elbow slammed into his diaphragm, followed by her booted heel stomping on his toe. In the fraction of a second Nathan loosened his grip, the woman wrenched free and bolted for the freedom of the open door.

"Fuck. Fuck." Nathan turned back to the strange woman, sudden fury overriding any confusion or shock at her mysterious appearance. He marched over to her, grabbed her arm and hauled her to her feet. "Who are you? Did you help him plan this?"

The only sound she made was a muttered curse of discomfort. He pulled her arm tighter until her rapid breathing was choked off by a pained cry.

"Remy," she growled. "You want to know my cup size, too, asshole?"

Nathan didn't know the name, and he knew all the names surrounding Tian. He would keep his guard up in case she was lying about her name, but she seemed as confused as he was. "Maybe later," he muttered, easing the pressure on her arm.

Something warm and sticky coated his stomach. Holstering his gun, he put his hand between their bodies, searching for the source of the blood. Did something get me? Shrapnel, maybe. But there weren't any holes in his stomach.

Nathan stepped back without releasing her and pulled the back of her shirt up. It felt like it was made of tissue paper, like he could rip it right from her body if he wasn't careful. Curious, he gave it a light tug, but it didn't tear. He lost all interest in the odd material when he saw the deep cut stretching across the small of her back. The black blood glistened in the murky light. He brushed his fingers across her skin, pulling back quickly as she hissed.

"You're hurt. How did this happen?"

The contact made her squirm, her spine bowing away as if to get as far from him as possible. "Felt like a knife," she admitted. "I didn't bother to stop and ask for details. I was a little busy running for my life."

Nathan examined the wound. It did look like a knife injury. He imagined the assailant, slashing at her ... as she what? Where had she come from? Who was chasing her? How did she end up in the middle of a third-story room of an abandoned warehouse? Maybe she was right and this was hell. Maybe he hadn't moved fast enough when the grenade came through the window.

"If somebody's chasing you, I think you should get out of here. I know a back way out."
She snorted. "That's all well and good except, you know, when you've got your face shoved into a wall and your arm twisted behind you."

"Well, I hope you'll forgive my caution around strange women who fall out of thin air and hit like a man three times their size. I'm going to let go and step back. You don't run, and I won't slam you into another wall. Deal?"

Her mouth opened as if to argue, and then snapped shut. Instead, she gave him a curt nod in agreement.

Keeping one hand ready to grab his gun, Nathan let her go and stepped back, waiting to see if she would be true to her word. Remy immediately pulled her arm to the front of her body, stretching the muscles in her back in the opposite direction to loosen the constraint he'd forced upon them.

"Is that what happened?" she asked. When he didn't answer right away, she glanced back, her face shadowed with unanswered questions. "I fell out of thin air?"

Nathan shrugged. "All I know is, one minute I was here ready to take that fucker down, and the next, he's flown the coop, and you're bleeding all over the floor. Might as well been out of thin air." He narrowed his eyes. "You mean you don't know what happened? How you got here?"

"I don't even know where here is." As she swung her gaze around the warehouse, her features passed in and out of the stray light filtering through the shattered windows. He caught sight of her full, sensual mouth and dark eyes glittering with intelligence before the murk swallowed her up again. "I'm going to go out on a limb and say this isn't Washington, DC."

"No. Los Angeles. Culver City, technically." He moved to take her elbow, but she stepped back, shifting to a defensive position. Nathan put up his hands, trying to flash a soothing, I'm-just-here-to-help, smile. "Sorry. There's a lot of debris in the hallway. There's a flight of stairs to the right. We're going to go up to the next floor, then take the back stairs out."

Her eyes jumped back and forth between him and the doorway. With a feral grace, Remy edged along the wall toward the exit, only turning her back to him once she stepped into the corridor. Even then, frequent glances over her shoulder betrayed her anxiety.

"You've got the trump hand." She kicked an empty box out of her way. "I don't even know your name."

"Nathan."

He watched Remy as she walked, noting she held herself straight, hiding any signs of weakness. But he knew she was in pain. She moved a little too stiffly, a little too hesitantly.

"Here." He fished the pen light out of his jacket pocket and handed it to her.

Their fingers brushed against each other as she took the light from him, her skin surprisingly cool in the swelter of the warehouse. "Thanks."

The added illumination sped their steps through the hall and up to the next level. As they began to descend the back stairwell out of the building, though, Nathan saw the whiteness of her knuckles where she gripped the handrail. She was fighting to stay upright, but refusing to ask for help. A flicker of respect began to glow in his gut.

He closed the distance between them, but didn't make any move to touch her. She looked like she was ready to jump out of her skin, and Nathan wasn't interested in catching her fist with his nose. Halfway down the stairs, he detected a slight trembling in her legs, and her foot slipped only two steps later. Nathan reacted without thinking, wrapping his arm around her chest and pulling her back against him.

She tensed, ready to fight. "Calm down. I'm not going to hurt you."

The beam from the penlight wavered along the far concrete wall. "So says the guy who had the hardware aimed at me a few minutes ago." Remy matched his subdued tone. "Give me one good reason to believe you."

Nathan tightened his grip. "Because if I wanted you dead, I would have shot when I had my gun on you. But I didn't. Now you're bleeding, confused, possibly insane, and in a strange place. Do you want my help?"

"No," came the automatic response. She sighed and sagged against him. When she spoke again, there was a resignation in her voice prompting him to wonder why she found it so difficult to accept aid. "But I'll take it anyway."

"Please," he muttered, half-carrying her down the remaining stairs. "Stop with the gratitude. You're making me blush."

Nathan took a deep breath as they stepped out of the building, relieved to breathe air not reeking of mildew and dry dust. The back of his throat burned, and at that moment, he would kill for a tall, cold pint of beer.

"I suppose I could drop you off at the hospital."

"No, no hospitals." Tensing again, ready to flee or fight, Remy shifted wary eyes to his. "I don't trust doctors."

Nathan sighed. Out of the dark and blistering hot warehouse, he had enough light and inclination to study her. He had caught a glimpse of her beauty before, but now he felt like she had sucker-punched him. She had used her looks like a hidden weapon, and it wasn't fair.

Dark, round eyes, full lips, high breasts, and long black hair, not to mention her nice ass, which had been tight yet
soft against his body. Her clothes accentuated each of her curves, the odd material hugging her body. Her collar wasn't high enough to cover her throat, and the pale skin stood out starkly against the tightly fitted black shirt. Her fingers were long and elegant in what could have been leather gloves, but they didn't look quite right—they were too thin, like they were painted on. The cut of her pants drew his eyes down her shapely legs to her boots. He didn't know much about fashion, but these looked like the type of shoes one wore for practical purposes, made for comfort and speed, not to impress. Like her gloves, they seemed to fit like a second skin.
The sight of her made his brain itch, like there was something he should see, something he should know about her. Like a forgotten name, or a song lyric only half-remembered, the feeling danced at the edge of his mind and then was gone.
He absolutely should drop her off at the hospital.
"What do you suggest then?"
It was her turn for a visual assessment, thick lashes dropping as she swept her gaze down his long, lean form. By the time she dragged her eyes back to his again, there was a calculating gleam in the brown depths. "You get me a first aid kit, and I'll sandbag it myself."
Nathan frowned, perplexed. *This one is trouble. Forget the hospital, I should take her to the police.* "I can patch you up at my place. My car's about a block away." Nathan hoped it was a block away, and in one piece. "Let's go."
CHAPTER TWO

Experience was screaming at her to make a break for it.
Reality had different ideas.

Her back stung from the knife wound, and Remy was pretty sure the fall she'd taken from the second-story window of the Henryk mansion had sprained her wrist. Somewhere on the back of her left thigh she felt the tickle of blood seeping from another injury, while her clothing hid other scrapes and bruises, all courtesy of trying to get the fuck out of Dodge before Kirsten and her brute squad managed to make a blow stick. If this Nathan had any sandbag serum, at least she'd be able to stop the bleeding long enough to start healing. She wouldn't get far if she was leaving a trail of blood-crumbs behind her.

Which led to the absolutely cracked idea that she could, in any way, be in Los Angeles. How the hell was it possible to get all the way across the country in seconds? The answer was easy. It wasn't.

She stole a glance at the man walking at her side. Though hidden by the dark shadow of stubble, his jaw was tense, lips thin from how tightly he held his mouth. A raw power emanated with every movement, from the controlled swing of his arm to the sure stride of his step, and while his anger inside the warehouse had been real, the grim silence surrounding him now was worse. She knew how to deal with dogfights; dealing was how she'd lived her whole life, after all. Strong and silent left her floundering.

There would be no more fighting for her right now, though. She had felt the taut, lean muscles of his arms when he'd pinned her to the wall. This Nathan might like his guns, but he had helped her down the stairs as if she weighed nothing. If she was forced into hand-to-hand, Remy had no doubt she would end up the loser.

Her gaze flickered over him again, this time lingering on his long legs and slim hips. The jeans he wore looked heavy, the denim thick and unwieldy compared to what she was familiar with, but the old-fashioned detailing made it work anyway. Sweat and dust from his scuffles at the warehouse molded them to his body, leaving very little to her very active imagination. She licked her lips. Maybe she wasn't up to a fight, but anything else was fair game.

He walked with purpose, leading her down a block and around a corner before stepping off the curb and popping the trunk of a parked car. Remy came to an abrupt halt, eyes going wide at the sight of the classic Mustang. She had never seen one on the streets before. This one even had an exhaust pipe, which meant he'd stuck with the original gas engine. No government tags on the retro plate, though. She bit back a smile. Someone obviously didn't care about ridiculous bureaucracy. One more reason to follow her gut and trust this guy.

"This is yours?"

Nathan didn't look up as he put his gun in the trunk and reached for a ratty old blanket. "I've got the title to prove it." He thrust the blanket into her arms. "Sit on that. I don't want blood all over my car."

Her eyes were still fixed to the Mustang's sleek lines as she walked to the passenger door. Maybe he'd inherited it or something. A car like this had to cost a fortune, and she had this guy pegged as some kind of PI or cop or something. No way could he pony up for it on his own.

It took staring at the old-fashioned handle for a few seconds to figure out how to open it. By the time she did, Nathan was already behind the wheel, fingers tapping impatiently as he waited for her to get in.

"Not bad, Nate." The grin she'd tried to contain on the sidewalk escaped when she saw the vintage radio. Unable to resist, Remy reached to fiddle with the dials, watching the indicator slide back and forth behind the tiny numbers in amused fascination. "Not bad at all."

He worked the old-fashioned stick, shifting the car into first gear. "Nathan. My name is Nathan."

Remy smiled. His English accent, which was already dead sexy, thickened when he was annoyed.

She saw him look at the radio as she pushed through static and fuzzy stations playing what sounded like mariachi bands, but he didn't say anything about it. And you can see Rilo Kiley on August 18th as KROQ's special guest. Just call 1-800 ... The DJ's voice blasted in the car.

"Turn that down," Nathan mumbled, reaching for the dial.

Remy let him adjust the volume on the radio, turning it until the DJ's voice was barely audible. There was no point in arguing; she'd never been a fan of oldies anyway.

It gave her the perfect opportunity to satisfy her need to know. "So what kind of work do you do that lets you have a car like this?"

Pulling onto the deserted street, he glanced at her with what appeared to be confusion mingled with curiosity. "What do you mean, a car like this?"

His question made her pause. Nathan had struck her as intelligent, but if he didn't know what his car was worth, maybe she needed to re-evaluate her initial assessment. "It's a classic. And it looks like aces. You'd never see anything like this on the streets back in DC."

"I'd hardly call this a classic, Remy. I picked her up for a few grand and slapped a new coat of paint on her. She
doesn't look too bad though, does she?" The question was asked with just a hint of a smile.
Her fingers stroked the smooth surface of the dash. "She looks amazing." No reason to wonder about his street
smarts. If he negotiated a car like this for just a few thousand, there was nothing wrong with his brain.
"So where's your place?"
Nathan didn't answer until he eased onto the abandoned freeway. "Glendale. It's only a few more miles. This time of
night, it won't be more than ten minutes." He looked at her out of the corner of his eye. "How is your back? Are you
still bleeding?"
Gingerly, Remy peeled off her gloves before leaning forward to slip a hand beneath her shirt. Her fingers came away
sticky, but the blood felt too cool to be fresh. "Looks like it's slowing down."
She looked around for some kind of wipe-ee or tissue to use to clean her fingers off. Nothing was obvious, but just
as she was about to swipe them across her already-ruined pants, Nathan spoke up.
"There are some napkins in the glove box. A few of them probably aren't covered in ketchup."
Glove box. It took her a moment to realize what he was referring to, and she leaned forward to examine the round
knob. Taking a risk, she twisted it and was pleased when it popped open, revealing a dark compartment crammed
full of papers and junk. Something small and rectangular tumbled to the floor, but she was too absorbed by the other
contents to pay much attention to it. There were napkins right on top, while underneath was what looked like the
original owner's manual for the Mustang and a small square piece of stiff paper with facts about Nathan and the car
typed across it. But he didn't actually have any gloves in it.
Thoughtfully, she grabbed a napkin and closed the compartment. Maybe Nathan was a historian of some sort, or one
of those people who did re-enactments for a price. It would explain the obsessive detail.
"Who got you?"
Wiping the blood off her fingers, she settled back into her seat, looking out her window to watch the lights of the
city streak past in candy-colored stripes. His obvious concern knocked her for a loop. The last time anybody had
asked about her health and meant it was before Kirsten's strike at the safe house. Remy didn't want-or need-to be
reminded she was all on her own. Not right now. There were too many other problems to consider first.
Like how in hell she was going to tell a guy she didn't know from jack that the woman who had sliced her back open
was a cop.
The silence stretched before she finally said, "There was a fight. I tried to run, and this bitch who's been after me
didn't like that idea."
Nathan didn't reply for several seconds. She risked a glance at him, but he was staring straight ahead. The car slowed
and drifted to the right, the next exit looming. They rolled down the ramp, and he pulled into the parking area of a
brightly lit shop. Its illuminated sign showed a red numeral "7" with the word "eleven," in green, superimposed
across it.
"And then you fell through a hole in the time-space continuum and ended up on the other side of the country?" he
asked dryly, pulling the keys from the ignition. "I'm going to get some food. Are you hungry?"
The shift in attitude left her gawping at him. Where the hell was the sarcasm coming from? But his face was
unreadable, eyes dark pools shadowed from the brilliance of the nearby storefront.
Nathan repeated the question, enunciating clearly as if he was speaking to a child.
Something inside her snapped. "I'm not bleeding out my ears. I heard you the first time."
Nathan sighed, looking at her before saying, "Fine, I'll just grab you some chips or something." He opened the door
and made it two steps away before pausing and circling back. Opening the passenger door, he announced, "You're
coming in, too. I don't know you well enough to trust you with my car."
Finally, a response she understood. Climbing out, Remy followed him into the store, her stomach rumbling at the
scent of the warming hot dogs.
When he glanced at her with a raised brow, his mouth curving into an amused smile, she flushed in embarrassment.
"Maybe I am a little hungry."
Nathan went to a drink dispenser and filled a huge plastic cup with "Big Gulp" emblazoned on it with liquid. He
didn't seem interested in what she was doing, but she knew he was listening to every step she took, keeping track of
her as she moved through the small store. Once he had his drink, he grabbed some packaged sandwiches from the
nearby cooler, as well as a few flat boxes marked with an Italian name and "pizza" and two cylindrical containers
that said "Ben and Jerry's."
"Grab something if you want it," he threw over his shoulder as he headed for the counter. When she didn't react, he
paused and added, "What are you gawking at?"
Remy barely heard his question. Her attention had been riveted by a newspaper stand next to the cooler. Ignoring
headlines about strife in the Middle East and sports scores she focused on the way air from the overhead vents made
the edges of the newspapers flutter in their minute breeze.
Who in the world still printed the news?
As if hypnotized, she skimmed a fingertip across the bold type, glancing down afterward to see a faint black smudge on her skin where she'd touched it. Nobody used paper any more; it had been outdated for decades. So why was there rack after rack of them? Supposedly, California was one of the most eco-conscious states in the country.
That was when she noticed the tiny date emblazoned under the masthead.
That can't be right.
Followed almost instantly by...
What the fuck did I fall into this time?
Nathan dumped his food on the counter and turned back to her. "What? What are you looking at?" he asked, annoyed.
When she didn't look up, he walked over to her and took her elbow. The door chimed as a new customer arrived, and Nathan pulled on her arm, but she didn't move. He tried again, but she smacked his hand away, her attention never shifting from the newspapers.
Nathan grabbed her, his grip tighter this time, and pulled her against him. "Look," he said under his breath, "you're going to start attracting attention. Your back is covered in blood and you look like you're on something. I don't want to deal with the police and I'm sure you don't. So get your ass in gear."
Her heart was already hammering inside her chest, but the hot stream of his words along her neck made her skin stipple in goose bumps. Letting him drag her back to the front of the store, Remy noticed for the first time the costs of the items he had picked up, how he pulled cash from his worn leather wallet to pay for everything instead of offering a debit card. A small box of rolled horoscopes near the register proclaimed the same year that had been on the papers, and the stereo perched on a shelf behind the aging cashier had a cassette deck in the middle of its display. A cassette deck. She had only ever seen one of those in the movies.
She still hadn't said a word by the time they stepped back out into the cool night air, but when Nathan tried to lead her to the car, Remy yanked herself away from his grasp to go fumbling into her back pocket.
The tiny piece of plastic she extracted was wet with blood that had seeped from her wound. Wiping away a smudge in the corner, she felt the air rush from her lungs as she stared at the date, achingly familiar, decades away from what the papers and rags inside had declared. It was the year she had been born.
2058.
If she believed the headlines, she wouldn't even exist for another fifty years.
How was that possible?
The sound of the slamming door startled Remy into lifting her head. Nathan stuck his hand out the window and waved. "I'm leaving now."
As if to emphasize his words, the Mustang's powerful engine flared to life. She took a stumbling step forward, but that wasn't fast enough for Nathan. The car rolled beside her, and he leaned over the passenger seat to push the door open. "What the fuck is wrong with you? Get in the car."
As soon as she was seated, Remy thrust her ID into his face. "Tell me what that says. A note of panic crept into her voice, but she couldn't hold it back any longer. "Tell me I'm not losing my fucking mind."
Nathan plucked the ID from her fingers and held it up to the light. "Remy Capra. Classification: C. Date of birth..."
He looked at her with narrowed eyes. "What is this? A fake ID?" He snorted. "You should get your money back."
She snatched it back. Her fingers were trembling. "It's not fake. It's..."
But she didn't know what it was. The situation, that is. It wasn't possible for her to be sitting in front of an Eleven-7 store with a guy fifty years before she had even been born.
On the other side of the country.
Fuck. What the hell did I grab?
Her hand plunged back into her pockets, pulling out the coins she had stolen from the Henryk collection. Under the orange lights of the convenience store, they gleamed back at her, silver and gold reminders of the life she'd ran away from. She had no idea what any of them were; Remy only knew they were valuable and Kirsten Henryk protected them as fiercely as she fought. Kirsten's paranoia had been the only reason Remy needed to take them. Even now, though, they offered no clue as to their purpose, not even a date to prove she wasn't crazy.
But they were real. As real as the newspapers inside. And somehow, some way, they had helped her escape.
She glanced over at Nathan. He was still regarding her with the same intense gaze he'd leveled at her earlier, waiting for some kind of explanation. What was she supposed to say? He was going to think she was crazy, no matter how she painted it.
Then it dawned on her. She was free. This was her chance to get away from her old existence and start over. There would be no cops coming after her, no psycho bitches who saw everything in only black or white. There wouldn't be family, but hell, Kirsten had slaughtered that possibility when she attacked the safe house. For Remy, this was the
break of a lifetime.
She smoothed her composure, shedding the crippling anxiety for the swagger she was more accustomed to wearing. "Are we just going to sit here all night?" She sounded normal again. Thank god.
"No, my ice cream is melting," he said under his breath as he eased off the brake and rolled out of the parking lot.
At the next red light, he spared a glance at her. "Fake ID. Precious coins. Maybe I was right about your desire to avoid the cops, huh?"
Remy refused to back down. "I seem to remember hearing somebody tell me to get my ass in gear because he didn't want to deal with the cops, either." As she slipped the coins back into her pocket, it occurred to her she couldn't afford to lose the lone ally she had just yet. Nathan could still tow her off to the funny farm if he wanted. "So ... are we good?"
"I didn't want to deal with the cops because I am armed and you are injured, and they'd draw certain conclusions." The streets darkened as they made their way further from the freeway and deeper into the city, winding down side streets and rolling through empty intersections without stopping. "Yeah, we're good. Your ID is almost cartoonish, which makes me think you're no criminal mastermind. And what do I care about a handful of coins?"
He turned into a gated driveway, except the gate was broken and all the lights were dark.
He led her up a sidewalk path to a narrow set of concrete stairs. Walking honed her attention back on her injuries, but while it took every ounce of her strength, Remy made it to the second floor without stumbling. She even refrained from leaning against the wall when he paused to unlock a door. It wouldn't last long, though. Her back was starting to spasm and her wrist to ache. Nathan hoped he wouldn't waste any time in getting her fixed up.
Nathan turned on the small apartment's single overhead lamp and gestured towards the vintage couch—the only piece of furniture in the room. There was a small clunky monitor on a stand in the corner, but she didn't see a keyboard near it; maybe it was rolled up out of sight. A bookshelf dominated the wall, stretching from the floor to the ceiling.
Antique books, the sort she used to read in the detention center's library, lined the top three shelves. Glossy-covered magazines were stacked haphazardly on the next shelf, and her fingers itched to touch them, to see if they were as smooth as they looked. Beneath that were rows of thin, multi-colored boxes. They were too small to be more books. She supposed they could have been computer software of some sort, but they were larger than most computers, even the cheap ones. The other walls were bare, the floor uncluttered, and the kitchen counter empty of everything except what could have been a microwave, except it was enormous. A short hallway led to what must be the bathroom and bedroom, and he disappeared into the dark corridor after telling her to make herself comfortable.
When he returned, he carried a small plastic box, white with a red cross on the top, a large white T-shirt, and a bottle labeled "hydrogen peroxide." Noticing she still stood in the middle of the room, Nathan nodded towards the couch again. "Lay down and take off your shirt."
Remy gave him her best smirk. "Kind of hard to get the shirt off once I'm already down." Grabbing the hem, she whipped it over her head, ignoring the painful twinges in her back. It left her in cargoes, boots, and a tiny black bra barely covering her nipples. By the time she tossed the shirt aside, Nathan's eyes were no longer on her face.
She took her time crossing to the couch, enjoying the heavy weight of his gaze on her body. This was better. A known situation. Remy had had to spend too much of her life using her looks as a weapon not to know when a man found her attractive.
She sat down and bent down to take off her boots, making sure to display her breasts to their very full advantage. As she stretched out on her stomach, Nathan detoured into the kitchen for a bowl of hot water. Kneeling beside the couch when he returned, he set to work, gently wiping the blood from her skin. His fingers were light and skilled, as though he regularly cleaned and bandaged injured damsels in distress. But occasionally, his hands strayed, brushing against skin she knew couldn't be injured or stained with blood.
He paused long enough to drench a cotton ball with the hydrogen peroxide. "This might sting a little." He touched the edge of the injury lightly, then rubbed it across the length of the cut without further warning.
"A little" was an understatement. With a sharp hiss of breath, Remy buried her face in the pillow she'd grabbed, steeling herself against the deliberate swabs across the wound. To his credit, Nathan worked quickly. By the time she was starting to relax again, he was done.
She lifted her head and met his concerned gaze. The brilliance of his blue eyes made her mouth go dry, and for a second, she forgot what she was going to say. All that seemed to compute was, God, he's gorgeous.
Nathan nodded before leaning over to blow across her burning skin. Goose bumps erupted across her back, and the base of her spine tingled. If Nathan noticed her reaction, he didn't give any indication as he placed folded pieces of gauze over the cut.
"I think you're going to survive. But it was touch and go there for awhile."
Again, he worked efficiently to bandage her, but she felt his fingers drifting, his skin rough against her smooth back. "Do you have any clotters to stop the bleeding?"
"No. I've got some painkillers."
His careful tone and the slight draw of his brows told Remy what might be street common in her time wasn't quite as universal now. She made a mental note. No blood clotters. That meant being a little more cautious than she would normally.
"Painkillers are great."
"Where else are you hurt?"
"My leg's been bleeding since the warehouse. But since that means taking off my pants..."
She stopped, rolling onto her side to face him. Truth be told, she was ready to strip out of the rest of her clothes right then. His fingertips had scalded everywhere they'd touched, and her pussy was slick and ready, clenching every few seconds in anticipation of being fucked. But Remy Capra had never had to ask a man for sex and she sure as hell wasn't going to start now, even when that man looked like Nathan. If he ignored her innuendo, she'd have her answer. Maybe it was even better if he did. But if he didn't...
She swallowed, wetting her dry throat, and waited for his response.
Hesitating for only a moment, Nathan looked at her with unwavering dark eyes before nodding. His gaze was drawn to her hands as she unzipped her cargoes to reveal the black outline of her briefs on her smooth, white thighs. He hooked his fingers around the waistband, pulling the stiff cloth down to her knees, his knuckles skimming over her skin. His impassive mask had slipped a bit, and now unmistakable hunger marked his face.
"Turn on your stomach." Once she was facing the ugly green of the couch again, he began washing the blood away from the scrape. "It's not that bad," he added, his words even. "You're missing a bit of skin, but it'll be fine."
His fingertips danced across her thigh, first one side, then the other. Every fiery contact went straight to her pussy, but not once did he stray from attending her wounds. Remy had to bite the inside of her cheek to keep from clenching muscles he would be able to see. If he could play it cool, so could she.
"So..." She glanced back over her shoulder to look at him, her hair slipping away to expose bare skin. ". . . You never told me what it is you do."
"I'm a bounty hunter."
In spite of the heat pouring off his fingers, everything inside Remy froze. A bounty hunter. Someone who didn't give a shit one way or another about anybody but himself. Someone who took money to go after people like her. Someone Kirsten could buy without blinking an eye.
She almost fell off the couch as she scrambled for her clothes, her pants slipping through her suddenly clumsy fingers as she tried to put as much distance between her and Nathan as possible. "I can't believe I fucking fell for it," she muttered, trying to find the bottom of her shirt in order to get it back on.
Nathan grabbed her wrist before she could get far, but he didn't pull himself to his feet. His firm grip didn't give her a lot of options, but she still struggled to pull away. "Fell for what? Is this about those coins? I already told you I don't really care."
It was on the tip of her tongue to make a retort about how she was sure a wad of cash might change his mind about that, but Remy stopped herself in time. The less he knew about her, the safer she was from getting turned in. And the truth of the matter was, he already knew she was on the run. If he wanted to use that to his advantage, he'd had plenty of chances long before bringing her to his apartment.
Plus, Kirsten wasn't here. If Remy really had traveled back in time like she thought, there was nobody alive who cared one way or another about her. Her gaze flickered to the strong fingers gripping her wrist. Maybe Nathan didn't care, but he wasn't indifferent to her either. He was tending to her injuries. He'd insisted on taking care of them.
And he was still holding her.
"If you don't care, then why are you helping me?"
Nathan tilted his head, regarding her with clear eyes for a long beat before he finally answered. "Because you needed my help."
His direct response took her by surprise, and her mouth twitched in amusement. "Your Mustang's not exactly white."
Nathan shrugged. "Neither's my hat. But I couldn't have left you alone in that district. Tian might not have been interested, but Cesar would have started circling like any predator smelling blood. Speaking of blood." He looked pointedly at her thigh. "Are you going to let me finish?"
Remy glanced down at the cut only half-cleaned off and tossed her clothes aside. Stretching back onto the couch, she propped her upper body up on her elbows as soon as Nathan let her go in order to watch him work. "You've got good hands."
He glanced at her briefly, something like a smile in his eyes, before diverting his attention back to her leg. "Thanks. I've had years of practice."
The antiseptic stung just as much on her leg as it had on her back, but Remy refused to look away this time, too
absorbed in the strong sculpture of his face and the almost caressing dance of his fingers to break the spell. "Guess that means I'm holding aces then. I don't suppose you take personal requests?"

The corner of his mouth lifted as he tossed the cotton ball aside. "It depends." He dug through the white box for more bandages and a small, yellow tube. "There is a basic standard of service I aspire to, but I do aim to please."

"Maybe you should tell me what to expect then," Remy dared. "'Cause the rate you're going, a girl could think she could spend the night if she wanted."

"Do you want to spend the night?"

She decided to be honest. "I don't have anyplace else to go."

Nathan spread a clear gel over the cut and reached for a bandage. "You know, that's actually not the worst excuse a girl has used to stay at my place."

"Should've known a guy like you would have em lined up around the block. Which means I'm even luckier for falling into your lap like this." It was impossible to resist a quick glance at his crotch, and her mouth went dry at the clear outline of his cock. "A very nice lap."

Nathan snorted. "I wouldn't say lining up around the block. In fact..." He stopped, offered her a quick smile, and refocused on his task. "But you are welcome to stay tonight. Maybe after some sleep, we'll be able to figure out what the hell is going on."

"Thanks." It was a relief to have one less thing to worry about. And maybe the light of day would reveal everything to be either a figment of her imagination or give her new perspective on this whole time travel business. She waited until he'd reverted his attention back to the last of the bandages before adding, "Something tells me I'm either not going to sleep much, or I'm going to have the dreams of the century. One of the two."

"For what it's worth, I doubt I'll be getting much sleep myself," Nathan muttered.

He pressed the last piece of tape down along the edge of the bandage, his fingers straying to the bordering skin. Remy suppressed the shiver his touch elicited, but hiding her soft gasp was unavoidable.

"Is it tender?" He asked, not pulling his fingers away.

She swallowed. "That's one word for it."

Nathan lingered for another moment before breaking the contact. "They weren't too deep. You should feel better in the morning." The words sounded forced, like it was taking some great effort for him to speak.

Without the excuse of first aid, she felt more than a little exposed lying on the couch in front of him. Normally, she had no problem with her sexuality, but he'd done nothing more than remain friendly with her, maybe flirt a little back when she'd deliberately baited him. He was being a gentleman, and no matter how attracted she was to Nathan, she wasn't entirely sure what she was supposed to do with that.

"What about you?" Swinging her legs over, she sat up on the edge of the couch, reaching out at the same time to swipe her thumb across a cut on his temple. "You're not the only one with a bedside manner, you know."

Nathan touched his forehead and pushed himself to his feet. "I'm fine, thank you." After a moment of hesitation, he leaned forward and cupped her cheek. He brushed his thumb across her mouth before dropping his head and touching her lips with his.

Her face had been flamed ever since Nathan's first touch, but now, the mere contact of his fingers left her scorched, all the air sucked from her lungs as he surprised her with the kiss. It wasn't hungry, and it wasn't aggressive, and he didn't even part his lips to pursue deepening the caress. But it still charged through her like a jolt of electricity, his hot breath washing over her cheek as his mouth worked along hers. It still left rampant images of how his sweaty body would feel against hers, how long and hard he would be and how pliantly she could mold around him. It still brought a whimper to the back of her throat.

The moment she reached to satisfy even one of her racing wants, though, Nathan pulled away. His breathing was ragged, his pupils blown with desire, and Remy was transfixed by the sight of his tongue finally darting out to lick across his lower lip, as if chasing the taste of her.

"You win. Your bedside manner is definitely better than mine."

Nathan backed away from the couch and gestured towards the plastic bag. "You can help yourself, if you're hungry. Get some rest." Each word carried him further away, until he was nearly out of the room entirely.

Her mouth slanted into a soft smile before she leaned over to retrieve the T-shirt he'd left for her to sleep in. "I think that might actually happen now. Thanks. Again." By the time she'd pulled the shirt over her head, he was gone.
CHAPTER THREE
Nathan awkwardly stripped off his clothes, desperate to get out of the tight, sweat-soaked pants. His mind was a mess of incoherent thoughts and vivid images of Remy's nearly naked, ready, willing, body, and he could still taste her soft lips, still smell her sweat, her hair.
Nathan stepped into the shower, welcoming the hot frenzy of water against his skin. He basked under the spray for a moment before reaching for the soap with shaking hands, working up a desperate lather before allowing the bar to slip from his fingers to the floor. Nathan ran his hands over his chest, the back of his neck, his arms, and his thighs before finally wrapping his slick fingers around his erection, with a sigh of mingled relief and regret.
What was he doing jacking off in the shower? What the fuck was he doing? She wanted him. She wanted him, and he wanted to do a hell of a lot more than just kiss her. Nathan moaned. What was keeping him in the bathroom when every cell in his body was calling for hers?
From the first good look he had of her, Nathan had been attracted to Remy. No, before that. He wanted her as soon as he pushed her against the wall and pressed his body against hers. In his defense, he imagined a dead, blind, gay man would be physically attracted to her. Even when she had her episode in the gas station and insisted her fake identification was real. So, she was a little weird. Maybe a little insane. Nathan didn't know. All he knew was that the heat of her skin had made his head spin, and when he kissed her ... he just wanted to taste her again.
Fuck. When had a girl affected him like this? Ever? He had barely touched her; yet, the arousal was something bone deep and excruciating and sweet and very heady. The sort of agony that both needed to end and be pleasantly prolonged. Remy would be good. He knew it.
But she was probably crazy. Delusional. And her insanity was contagious because he was not the sort to pick up strange girls, bring them home, and kiss them like a nervous teen on his prom date. And he wasn't the type to leave the girl and jack off in the shower.
Nathan pushed those thoughts out of his mind. They were important thoughts he should consider very carefully. In the morning. Right now, the only thing he wanted to consider was the friction of her body moving against his, her soft, soft lips against his mouth, against his skin.
Why am I in here? Why aren't I out there? Why aren't I inside her right now?
Fair questions, all. The answer was not simple. So, she was crazy? So what. Weird? Not a problem. Violent tendencies? He'd ignore them. But she was confused, and for a moment, she had been frightened of him. If he left the shower right now and went to her still wet, still hard, she wouldn't turn him down. But he didn't know if she wanted him, or if she wanted to thank him, or if she wanted to placate him, or bribe him. Or rob and kill him, which he was obliged to accept as a possibility.
Still, Nathan knew how she'd fit around him, how she'd wrap her body around his. He sensed something primal about her, something a little feral. He imagined her shouting his name, imagined her tight muscles clenching around him, her pulse pounding against his lips as he pressed his mouth to her neck.
Nathan even felt her come against his body, pulsating heat around his shaft. The vivid image, so intense he couldn't help but wonder if it had already happened, that pushed him over the edge. The orgasm rushed through him, something bittersweet. It was enough to take the edge off, but she was still mostly naked on his couch, and he was still hard for her.
Sighing, he rested his head against the cool tile and let the water pound against his back. At least he could think now. Did she have any idea how much, possibly misplaced, self-control it took for him to walk away from her? Did she even care?
Even if she wasn't injured, she could still be crazy.
What the hell am I going to do?
He'd start by finishing his shower. Nathan soaped his body and hair, his mind far from his task. First, he would need to figure out just who this girl was. That should be easy enough if she wasn't giving him a fake name. Next, he would have to find out where she belonged and who was chasing her. Letting her crash on his couch indefinitely was not an option. Finally, he might have to drag her to the hospital against her wishes, because if he couldn't figure out who she was, where she belonged, or who she was running from, then she could be somebody else's responsibility.
Nathan rinsed the soap from his body, watching the suds as they fell from his skin and swirled down the drain. Remy wasn't even his biggest problem.
Tian had escaped again, but not unscathed. The knife had done serious damage to his shoulder, and he would want a bit of revenge. An eye for an eye, that's how it always worked. And Tian wasn't some punk off the streets. He had fifty grand on his head, and with this most recent failure, the reward would almost certainly go up in an effort to attract every bounty hunter on the west coast.
Nathan resisted putting his fist into the wall as a new, sharp anger sparked. He almost didn't care about the money—though he needed it very much. He just wanted to bring that fucker in.
He turned off the water and stepped out of the shower, feeling refreshed. The air was momentarily cool against his wet skin, and the grit had been washed from his eyes. Slinging a towel around his hips, he stepped out of the bathroom and listened in the darkness for Remy. Her breathing sounded deep and even.

Nathan knew he shouldn't see her right then, but if she was asleep, how much damage could it do? He crept over to the couch, not making even a whisper of sound. Light from the neighbor's back porch filtered through the blinds and fell across her sleeping face. She was stretched out in his T-shirt, a blanket draped over her breasts, and another pillowing her head.

Nathan swallowed hard. She looked so soft, so inviting, but he suspected she knew how to be hard, unbendable. Despite her confusion and injuries, she didn't seem vulnerable. She had the look of a hunted animal—but one clever enough to outwit its predator.

Who are you?

He watched her for another moment before bending to scoop up her discarded pants. Once again, he was struck by the oddness of the material, but he didn't linger on that. He rifled through the pockets, ignoring the coins in favor of her fake card. He thought the card might tell him more about the creator than the girl sleeping on his couch, but it could still be useful for Isaac. If anybody could figure out who this stranger was, it would be him. And it was Nathan's good luck that Isaac never slept. He padded back to the bathroom and fished his cell from his pocket. Isaac's number was at the top of his address book.

It picked up on the first ring. In the background, a slamming door cut off the low hum of the police station, and then there was only quiet until a baritone came over the line. "McGuire."

"Isaac, it's me. I've got bad news and a favor to ask. Which do you want first?"

A stream of low curses whispered under Isaac's breath. Nathan pictured him running his hand over his closely shorn hair. "The day I've been having, make it the bad first. Unless your favor means I have to do some ass kissing, in which case, the order doesn't fucking matter."

Nathan sighed inwardly. Of course, he'd caught Isaac at a bad time. But then, maybe the possible wild-goose chase would raise his spirits. "Bad it is. Tian got away. But," he added before Isaac interrupted him, "That's not the bad part. Apparently, he's armed with grenades now. And he's not shy about using them."

"Where the hell did he get grenades? I thought we cut Cesar off at the knees when we locked up the Vasquez brothers."

"How should I know? You're the detective, you tell me. But if you check out the warehouse on Center and 10th in Culver City, you'll see the evidence for yourself." Nathan slapped his palm against his knee. "I almost had him, Isaac. He was mine."

"Well, I'm sure you'll get him next time. You're not the best for nothing." Though the words were meant to be reassuring, the tone was not. The creaking leather of Isaac's chair came over the line as he got more comfortable. "What happened? Did you lose him because of the grenade?"

"No." How to explain the next part without sounding like the crazy one in the story? "There was a girl. She, well, she came out of nowhere. At first, I thought she was an accomplice, but I didn't recognize her name. In fact, that's the favor."

"You want me to tell you who she is?"

"And if she has a history of violence or psychotic behavior." He held the card up to the light, narrowing his eyes thoughtfully. "The name on her identification, which was probably fake, is Remy Capra. Date of birth is March 15."

He paused, staring at the unexpected numbers. "I don't know the year."

He heard Isaac scribbling down the information. "Anything else you can give me? Age, stats, something actually helpful?"

Nathan searched his memory for any details he could recover from the strange night. "She claims she's from DC. Mid-twenties, perhaps. Brown hair, dark eyes, maybe five and a half feet. She's the sort of girl you'd remember seeing."

"Pretty, huh?" He was tapping away at his computer; Isaac was one of the few cops Nathan knew who didn't have to hunt and peck. "Just give me a sec. If she's with Tian, she'll come through here pretty quick."

"I don't think she is. I hope she's not." He trusted his gut on this one. Despite the initial suspicion, it seemed her arrival was just a remarkable coincidence, not a conspiracy. "I think somebody is after her, but she wouldn't give me any details, or let me take her to the hospital."

Silence filled the line. Nathan patiently waited for the question he knew was coming.

"So ... where is she now, Nathan?"

He hesitated a moment before answering. "On my couch."

"Are you out of your mind?" The sudden switch in his friend's tone had Nathan rubbing at his eyes, wishing he had avoided this entire line of questioning. "You're not even sure if she's not psychotic, and you're putting her up on your
couch? Since when did you start thinking with your dick instead of your brain?"
"If I were thinking with my dick, she wouldn't be on my couch, now would she?" Nathan considered explaining his heroic and noble sacrifice, but decided that wouldn't make Isaac feel better about the situation. "What was I supposed to do? Leave her bleeding in the warehouse?"
"Well, no." He sighed. "Look, I'm sorry. It's just been a hell of a day. I know you wouldn't do anything so stupid if she was a real threat." Chuckling, he added, "I mean, it's not like you fucked her, right?"
"Right. Anything come up yet?"
"No, not yet. There are Capras in DC, but none matching your girl's description. Hang on. If she's running, there might be something in missing persons." More beeping from the computer. "Nope. That comes up clean, too. Huh. You sure on the name? If her ID's fake, the name might be, too."
"I can't be sure about the name. Do me a favor and keep an eye out for anything matching her description." Nathan paused for a moment before explaining, "Her ID looks all wrong, of course, but the year of birth was 2058. Shoddy work."
"Probably some new game cooked up by the college kids. See how bad they can make their ID's before someone notices and they get busted. You wouldn't believe some of the shit they've been trying to pull." Isaac's chair groaned under his weight again. "The only thing I can tell you for sure is she's not part of Tian's gang. Unless it's a dye job and she's not a brunette. He was banging this blonde named Josie a few months back. Think it could be her?"
Nathan snorted. "No, Josie is sucking cock for money in TJ." Frustrated, he ran his fingers through his damp hair. "I'll let you go. But I'll be sure to keep you posted on any new developments with my mystery girl."
"Thanks, but ... your mystery girl? Just how pretty are we talking here?"
"She's an eleven."
Isaac whistled. "She would have to be. I don't think I've seen you notice anybody with breasts since before we broke up Parker's gang."
Nathan winced. The mention, or thought, of Parker was enough to make his throat rise. Shuffling over to the bathroom, he pulled the chalky antacid tablets from the medicine cabinet. "Yeah, it's been awhile. Hopefully this one doesn't plan to kill me."
"Crazy never strikes twice in the same place," Isaac assured. When he next spoke, his voice had grown contemplative. He was shifting out of cop mode and into his friend shoes. "You want me to come over and check her out? I'm going off-duty anyway, and if there's one person's judgment I trust more than yours, it's mine. I could even get her set up someplace else if you want. Get her off your couch."
He knew, based on the still present ache in his groin, he should accept Isaac's offer. But he also knew Remy would react poorly to the presence of a cop, even if he assured her Isaac wasn't a threat to her. Nathan didn't know why, but the thought of her panicking and fleeing was not an appealing one. "I appreciate it, but not tonight. Maybe if she's still around tomorrow."
"Well, offer's there. And if something comes up on my end, I'll let you know." He paused. "Just be careful. Brains, not dick, okay?"
"Right. Thanks." Nathan disconnected the phone, placing it on the charger. "Brains, not dick," he muttered, stretching out on the bed. "Easy as that. No problem." He stared at the ceiling, considering the wisdom of the simple statement. It was the best advice he had ever heard. He pushed the towel away, running his palm over his shaft before gripping it lightly. Brains, not dick. Right.

* * * *

It felt like she'd been dragged tits first through an electric socket. Kirsten decided then and there the first thing she would do when she got back home was give her father a piece of her mind. Easy, my ass.

The coin had, however, worked as he had said it would. Pushing up from the rough concrete, Kirsten stretched the kinks out of her still-humming muscles, scanning her surroundings at the same time. The smell of rotting garbage coated the air, making her nose wrinkle in disgust. A green-and-red sign glowed against a night sky lightened with the orangey illumination of lamps on tall poles. Heavy dumpsters overflowed in wait of garbage day. It was some type of uninviting store. Kirsten wondered why in hell Remy would want to go to it. Her hard-heeled boots clicked against the concrete as she rounded the corner of the building. The darkness sucked away the red taillights of a vintage Mustang as it pulled from the lot, but other than that, the place was deserted except for another old-fashioned car. Her head swiveled toward the brightly-lit store. Through the windows, she spotted an older woman behind the cash register and some customers milling around, but none of them looked like Remy Capra. That didn't matter. Kirsten knew the coin wouldn't have brought her here without a reason.

Inside the door, the bright lights made her hesitate, her eyes adjusting to the difference in illumination. The mirror over the counter showed a tall, willowy woman, eyes a pale blue, skin like porcelain. Kirsten grimaced, self-consciously lifting a hand to smooth down her short blond hair. She looked like hell. That was something else to
complain about once she got home again.
When Kirsten didn't move from the entrance, the cashier offered a tight smile. "Can I help you with something?" she asked, her voice high and wavering with age.
"Actually, yeah." Adopting her friendliest smile, Kirsten walked up to the counter and leaned against it, bringing her down to the shorter woman's level. "I'm looking for a friend of mine. She said to meet her here, but..." She glanced back, making sure Remy wasn't lurking in a corner she hadn't seen from outside. "...I think I might have missed her."
"What does she look like?"
"My age. Ish. Long dark hair, brown eyes. About five-five and a hun-" She stopped. Friends didn't give weights out when looking for each other; that was a cop thing. "Curvy. But still in shape. She likes to wear clothes to show off her ... assets."
The cashier frowned. "Well, there was a girl in here like that a couple minutes ago. But I don't think it's your friend."
Kirsten tried to hold back her excitement. Maybe she could end this once and for all right now. "Why not?"
"She was with some British guy. They took off in an old Mustang." The cashier patted her hand, as if consoling her.
"But, honey, if she's your friend, get her into a program and away from that boyfriend of hers. I'd bet my youngest grandkid she's strung out on something, and I'm pretty sure he's beating her up, too. She had blood all over her clothes."
Though she made noises of disappointment, inwardly, Kirsten was rejoicing. It was Remy, no doubt about it. Just before the bitch had crashed out the gallery's window, Kirsten had sliced her with her best blade. It had been the ultimate in satisfaction until Remy vanished right before her eyes.
Somehow, she'd found an ally already, though it was hardly surprising her new friend was male. Remy knew what her strengths were; she would exploit them to get what she wanted. Chumping a guy into helping was the sort of stunt she would pull.
Thanking the cashier, Kirsten left the store, then stood in the cool night air, debating what to do next. British guy in an old Mustang.
Even out of her element, she knew that one was easy.
Even better, it would lead her straight to Remy Capra.
CHAPTER FOUR

Nathan became aware of two things. One, the morning sun was much too bright and hot against his face. The shades had been drawn the night before, but now it felt like nothing protected his eyes from the summer light. And two, he was being watched. He felt the weight of her gaze moving along his skin, heard the soft rhythm of her breath, and if he held very still, the whisper of his T-shirt against her legs.

"What do you want?" he asked, without opening his eyes.

"Well, I was looking for the bathroom." Her voice was even lower than it had been the previous night, still rough from sleep. "But damn if this view can't make a girl forget her own name."

Nathan groped for the towel he had discarded and pulled it over his hips. It had been far too hot to even consider sleeping with a blanket. He didn't even remember falling asleep—his lust-fueled thoughts had seamlessly blended into dreams. This could have been another dream. He had two separate fantasies beginning this way with very different outcomes.

Covering his eyes with one arm, he pointed to the hall with the other. "Obviously, you made a wrong turn. It's the door to the left."

"Not so wrong," she countered. A floorboard creaked. "But thanks."

Nathan waited until he heard the bathroom door close to open his eyes and sit up. He had been a little afraid to look at her; it was possible the sight of her would prompt him to throw her to the bed and make all the fantasies and dreams realities. He had never, in his life, devoted so much mental energy to a single girl.

Pulling on a pair of pants, he stumbled into the kitchen, his tongue dry and heavy, his stomach growling. After starting the coffee, he raided his cupboards until he found the almost expired box of pop-tarts tucked behind a very expired box of cereal in the pantry. Grinning, he tore the cellophane wrapper open with his teeth.

Soft footsteps padded into the room behind him. He barely had time to glance back before Remy was standing at the counter, leaning over the coffee pot and inhaling deeply.

"God, nothing has ever smelled so good," she murmured. The bend of her body forward was exposing the lower curve of her ass. "What's a girl got to do to get some of this?"

"There are cups..." He paused, forgetting where his coffee cups were. It was difficult to remember minor details when she stood so close. After a second, it struck him. Above the sink. He grabbed two mismatched mugs and handed one to her, along with one of the crumbling pastries. "Did you sleep well?"

His gaze was fixed on the sight of her nimble fingers turning the pop tart over in her hand more than once before breaking off a corner and putting it in her mouth. A crumb lingered on her full lower lip, and he had to turn away before he succumbed to the desire to go over and lick it off.

"As well as can be expected, I guess," Remy was saying. "Every time I rolled over, I'd wake up. You've got a broken spring that kept sticking in my back. Guess that's why I'm up so early." Flushing, she busied herself with filling her cup. "Not that I'm not grateful. I am. I just pissed off I'm hurt in the first place."

Nathan felt a slight pang of guilt. He should have offered his bed. "Yeah, sorry about that." Pouring his coffee, he glanced to her face and noticed she looked pale and a little drawn. "How did you get hurt?"

She smiled. "I thought we agreed somebody attacked me with a knife."

"Yes, I'm quite certain someone tried. What I mean is, why would someone want to skewer you?"

Her humor fled. "Because she's a schiz who thinks she has the right to say who lives and who dies, and I had the sauce to tell her to fuck off. That's why."

Nathan broke off a piece of his pop tart and dipped it into his coffee. Had the sauce? Who talked like that? And he thought Californians mangled the English language. "I've met a few of those, and they don't like it when you tell them to fuck off."

Who did this girl get mixed up with? What sort of shit would he find himself neck-deep in if he let her stay around? And why couldn't she keep that shirt pulled down?

"I imagine she's also the sort to hold a grudge?"

Abandoning the food, Remy cupped her steaming coffee between her hands and headed back to the living room. Nathan trailed after, watching her settle in the far corner of the couch, her legs curling Indian-style in front of her. His mouth went dry as he forced himself to tear his gaze away from the black line of her briefs between her thighs.

"Not only does Kirsten hold a grudge..." Oh. She was talking again. "...she rocks it, feeds it, and tucks the fucking thing into bed at night." Her dark eyes seemed even larger as she looked up at him. "I think I've managed to shake her once and for all, but I shouldn't stick around for too long. Better to be safe than sorry."

Nathan couldn't disagree with her. She shouldn't stick around. She should go back to whatever passed for her life, and he'd go back to whatever passed for his, and he'd think of her some dark nights and chastise himself for being the biggest idiot on the planet. He meant to open his mouth to wish her well, but instead asked, "Where will you go?"
It took a second for her to shake her head. Her subsequent smile was meant to be cocky, but he saw straight through it.

"I'll figure something out. I mean, do I look like the sort of girl who doesn't know how to take care of herself?"

"I don't know. Last night you looked like a girl who was scared, confused, and bleeding all over herself. Honestly, you don't look that much better this morning." Nathan lifted one shoulder in a half-shrug. "I'm sure you can take care of yourself. Or you'll die trying."

"Way to stroke a girl's ego, big guy." But the front she'd been putting on crumbled right before his eyes, and her smile faded. "Under normal circumstances, I wouldn't even be sitting here right now. I don't damsel, okay? I've spent too many years having to be the strong one, having to take care of everybody around me. But..." She looked down at her coffee cup, turning it in her hands. "...These aren't normal circumstances. And what you did for me last night... well, I know you didn't have to. I'm just... not used to anybody giving a damn."

Nathan wasn't accustomed to giving a damn. That particular urge had been beaten out of him over time. And now he was feeling sorry again-though not for her. Just sorry life had to be the way it was. Sorry, and a little baffled.

He sat on the opposite edge of the couch, resting his cup on the arm and looking at the floor instead of her. "I don't know why, but I don't want to see this Kirsten person, whoever she is, finish what she started. I think you should talk to a friend of mine. He might be able to help."

Before he finished, she was shaking her head. "No. Nobody else. I'm sick of people getting killed because they were in Kirsten's way." Abruptly, she rose from the couch, setting her cup down on the floor before scooping up her pants. "I know you're used to getting settled. I don't even know if these are worth anything. But maybe..."

She fished out the coins he'd seen the previous night and proceeded to dump them onto the couch cushion next to him. "Let me hire you, Nate. Just for a few days to watch my back while I let all this heal up. This friend of yours... you might trust him, but I don't. I trust what I see. What I know."

When she sat back down, her weight tilted the couch so that some of the coins slipped between her leg and the cushions. Her eyes were solemn when they met his. "I trust you. But if you don't want to do this, I'll disappear. You won't have to worry about me any more."

Nathan picked up the largest silver coin, surprised by the weight against his palm. He held it up to the light, studying the engravings. They were almost familiar, but he couldn't place them immediately. Examining the gold coin with the same markings, he realized they could fetch a great deal of money. There were a few traders and collectors who might pay top dollar. It would almost make up for the money he lost last night.

_Are you really going to take this girl's money?_

Nathan silenced the small voice. They could both agree to a job. Services rendered in return for payment. Nothing personal. Nothing but business. It put a wall between them, a shield he would need if he were going to help her.

Scooping up the rest of the coins, he nodded. "You have a deal."

Her reaction was instantaneous. Beaming, Remy launched herself at Nathan, looping her arms around his neck to knock him off-balance and against the back of the couch. He didn't even have time to push her off before her mouth found his, her tongue pushing past his feeble defenses to sweep inside and remind him of all the dreams that had plagued his sleep. But just as quickly as it started, it stopped, and she pulled away to gaze down at him with that wicked smile he was learning to recognize.

_Deal._

He couldn't resist sweeping her hair away from her face. Both paused. From the dark depths of her eyes, his reflection stared back at him, and Nathan couldn't look away. Remy might have trapped him like that forever, but she shifted against him, grinding against his growing erection, and it snapped him out of his trance.

His mind told him to push her away, but his body had other plans. He buried his fingers in her hair and smashed his lips against hers. He plundered her mouth, allowing his self-control to slip for a moment-just long enough to kiss her the way he had wanted to kiss her the night before. Just long enough to explore every bit of her mouth, and taste the bitter coffee against her tongue. Just long enough to hold her against him, just long enough to hear her moan.

"God, Nate..." Her nails scratched at his nape, sending shivers down his spine. Somehow, she wormed her legs around his hips, half-burying them in the back of the cushions, until all he felt was the heat of her pussy seeping into his cock. "Tell me I'm not the only one who dreamt of this. Tell me you couldn't get thoughts of me out of your head last night, too."

"You're not the only one." His hands sliding under her shirt. "I was hard for you all night." The words were hurried, distracted, as he pulled the T-shirt over her head. A piece of cloth had never been so maddening. As soon as she was free of its confines, he pulled away from her mouth and slid his lips down her neck.

Nathan cupped one full breast, moving his palm over her nipple in a slow circle. Remy gasped, arching toward him, grinding against his erection. He'd just have to unzip his pants and he'd be inside her...?

The pounding on the door came from a great distance, but it was enough to penetrate the thick layer of fog
surrounding his mind. "I am going to kill him."

"Leave it." Her hand slipped between their bodies, nails catching on his bare stomach, and grasped his straining cock through his pants. It was his turn to gasp as she squeezed, and his head swam as her hot mouth descended to catch his ear lobe between her teeth.

Nathan moaned, taking her wrist to pull her hand away. "I would. But I have to..." Remi kissed him, cutting off his explanation. Isaac pounded on the door again. Obviously, whatever the other man wanted, it was urgent. Urgent enough he'd break the door down next. Nathan turned, lowering Remi to the couch and tearing his mouth away from hers. "It might be important."

She let him go without further protest, but she didn't look happy about it. "I'm coming," he shouted as he crossed the apartment. Except now I'm not. So, this better be good.

The pounding continued all the way to the door. Nathan had barely opened it when a far-too-chipper Isaac pushed his way inside, a folder in one hand, a bulging bag of warm bagels in the other.

"You are never going to believe the break we got. One of my sources tipped me on a meeting that's supposed to go down tonight between Tian and one of the other gangs. So far, it's holding water, so I've got food, I've got maps, and you and me are going to-whoa."

Nathan followed his friend's widening gaze to see Remi leaning against the corner of the wall. Though she had at least put the T-shirt back on, the mess of her hair and her swollen mouth made it all too obvious what they had had been doing.

"Who's your friend?" she asked.

Isaac's announcement cooled Nathan's ardor, but he was the only one in the room interested in Tian. Remi and Isaac continued regarding each other. Isaac appeared to be awestruck by her. Not that Nathan blamed him.

"Remi, this is Isaac McGuire. Isaac, this is Remi. Now that we have the introductions out of the way," Nathan took the bag of bagels and gestured towards the kitchen, "let's talk about this tip."

"You don't need me then." She jerked her head toward the bathroom. "Mind if I use the shower? I'm feeling a little-" her lashes ducked to glance at his crotch. "-sticky."

"Feel free. There should be a clean towel in the closet." They both watched her saunter out of the room without speaking. When she disappeared down the hall, he looked over his shoulder at Isaac-who was looking at him with accusing eyes. "What? Like you would have been able to resist her?"

"That's not the point. That..." He jabbed a finger at the space Remi had just filled, like a specter of her still lingered. Nathan wasn't so sure one didn't. "...is begging for trouble. You're the smart one, remember? Or you were until..."

His gaze slid back to where she had disappeared, leaning to the side as if to catch a last fleeting glance of her. "No wonder you didn't want me to come over last night. I'm surprised your knees are still working enough for you to get up and answer the door."

"Nothing happened last night. Well, not what you're thinking. We can discuss it after we talk about Tian. When and where's the meeting?" Nathan didn't think Isaac even heard his question. He was still looking down the hall. Water roared through the old pipes behind the thin walls. "She'll be back in a few minutes. You can gawk at her then. Now, Tian?"

Though Isaac followed him into the kitchen, it took another mention of his original purpose for him to focus enough and answer Nathan's question. "I ran with your info on the grenades. Turns out Tian's courting a new supplier, a group from down by the border. We don't know anything about them except they started down in South America. Argentina, actually, near Buenos Aires. They're trying to expand into the American market, and Tian's looking to be their primary distributor."

Nathan nodded. It made sense. It wouldn't be enough for Tian to dance just out of the reach of the police; he'd want to build his power. Tian had big plans. "So we break up their little tête-à-tête, I get my bounty, and you get the new name in town. Works for me. When?"

Isaac pulled apart an onion bagel, stuffing a piece into his mouth. "Ten o'clock. But there's a little problem."

Nathan sighed. "Of course there is."

"You're on your own. I'm on strict orders to keep my nose clean with this one, so I can't back you up."

He sighed. There was no point in arguing. "Well, I appreciate the information anyway. Did your source know how many people would be there? Are we looking at just Tian and his supplier? Or will there be more?"

"So far as we know, it's four guys. Tian, the new supplier, and one muscle apiece. Neither one of them wants a big scene, so the meeting is supposed to go down at Rojo. I guess they're considering the club neutral territory."

Nathan was familiar with Rojo. He considered the layout of the popular nightclub, and thought the small alcoves along the balcony might be the perfect place to bargain over drinks. He could slip in through the back and up the service stairs. "I think I can handle it on my own."

"You sure? It's going to be crowded. The other reason they picked Rojo is because there's some fancy shindig going
on there tonight. Lots of people around. Lots of people with money. There can't be a scene or this will explode into an even bigger mess." He picked up the folder he'd brought. "That's why I thought we'd go over the maps. You follow Tian out and snag him somewhere else."

"If there are as many people as you claim, I might lose him in the crowd." Nathan didn't want to admit Tian could outsmart him, but judging from their last four encounters, it seemed like a real possibility. "Give Tian the chance to run, even a small opening, and he'll take it. Plus, Cesar is never far. He may not be part of the meeting, but he'll be nearby."

"Even more reason not to try and take Tian when you can't see who's there," Isaac argued. "You're good, but let's face it. He's learning your tricks. He's going to anticipate that you might make a play for him at the club, and he's going to be prepared. Get him out, get him alone, get him down. That's how this is going to work."

"If Nate says he can handle it," Remy said from the doorway, "maybe you should give him the benefit of the doubt." Isaac's eyebrow shot up.

"Nate?"

"Nate," she corrected him. Remy folded her arms and leaned against the doorframe. She was wearing a clean shirt from his closet, a white button-down falling to her knees. The sleeves covered her hands. Despite her near nudity, and despite the fact she was barely a guest in his home, she stared back at Isaac with unwavering eyes, daring him to say something.

"It's okay, Remy. He's right. I do need to get Tian alone, somehow."

After a long moment, her gaze shifted to Nathan. While it was just as bold, something softened in the set of her mouth. "Is this the guy you lost last night because of me?" At his nod, she shrugged. "Then it's royal. Let me get to him. I can have him anywhere you want."

"Hold up." Isaac stepped between them, his head swiveling back and forth before settling on Nathan. "She's your partner now? What the hell happened here last night, Nate?"

Nathan held up his hands. "She's not my partner. Nothing happened last night. And no, Remy, I'm not going to let you be bait. It's far too dangerous. Tian isn't the only one learning about tricks, and I don't want you anywhere near him."

She snorted. "If you think I can't hold my own, think again."

Chin held high, she marched past both men to the counter and picked up the knife Nathan had used to cut his bagel. Her eyes held his, a hint of a smile curving her mouth, while her arm whipped behind her, releasing the blade. Both men flinched as it sailed past them and embedded itself in the wooden jamb.

"Okay, maybe she can be my partner," Nathan murmured, looking to Isaac. He knew his friend was impressed with Remy, but not convinced she wasn't bad news. His gaze slipped from Isaac's face to her extremely nice legs. "You'll have to find some different clothes, though."

"And here I thought you liked me better out of them." She sauntered past, heading back out of the room. Nathan was sure the sway of her hips was deliberate. "Guess I better make myself presentable for a shopping trip then. Be right back."

Just as before, they were left staring at an empty doorway.

"You are so fucked."

"Yes, and broke." He looked at Isaac pointedly. "The woman's got to have some clothes. You know I'm good for it." Nathan sobered, folding his arms across his chest and leaning against the sink. "I think it'll work, though. Tian would follow her anywhere. Who wouldn't? She won't have to be alone with him for more than a few seconds. We can end this tonight."

"And you trust her with this?" In spite of the query, he was going for his wallet, thumbing through worn bills before extracting all but two. He passed them over. "I mean, yeah, okay, the knife trick was kind of cool, and yeah, you're probably right about her and Tian. The man's crooked, not blind. But last night you weren't even sure she wasn't crazy, and now she's wearing your shirts and calling you Nate? You hate being called Nate."

Nathan folded the bills and tucked them into his pocket. "I know. I'm still not sure she isn't crazy. But either way, I'm going to be stuck with her for a few days. He held the kitchen door open and pointed to the coins littering the couch and the floor. "She's hired me to help her. If she wants to, and she can take care of herself, why shouldn't I let her help me?"

Isaac brushed past and walked over to the couch, bending over to pick up something from the floor. When he straightened, Remy's little black bra dangled from his fingers. "Is that what we're calling it these days? Helping?"

Nathan snatched the bra from Isaac and tossed it to the couch. "Is that all you think about?"

He held up his hands in mock surrender. "Fine, she's Mother Teresa and you have not let her get under your skin." He paused, lips twitching from a smile he was having trouble containing. "Nate."

"Yeah, remember that time I broke your nose?"
"Popcorn still doesn't smell right. But my ears are working just fine, and yet, I can't for the life of me decide if your new favorite saint really did say something was royal or if I'm just hearing things. What the fuck does royal even mean?"

"You noticed that, too, huh? Earlier she said she had the sauce to tell somebody off. I just figured it was an East Coast thing."

Isaac grimaced. "I've been to the East Coast. It's definitely not a thing."

"Hell, if she can help me get Tian, I don't care how odd her slang is."

"And here I thought you were more interested in what came out of her shirt than what came out of her mouth." Isaac shook his head. "Maybe you're the one who's crazy. It would explain a lot."

Nathan sighed. "Isaac, you have no idea how right you are."

"Yes, I do, but it doesn't mean I always like it."

"Please, you love it. My craziness is a constant source of entertainment. If I told you what really happened last night, you'd be laughing for days."

Isaac held up his hands in surrender as he retreated for the exit. "Let's let me keep the delusions I harbor where you're actually getting some, okay? It means I worry less."

"This is you worrying less?" Nathan shrugged as he opened the front door. "Have it your way. I certainly don't want to share the humiliating details." With a smile he added, "Thanks for the tip and the food. And the money. You'll hear from me tonight."
CHAPTER FIVE
Swiping the lipstick over her mouth one last time, Remy leaned away from the mirror in order to examine her handiwork. For being as out of practice with make-up as she was, it hadn't turned out half-bad, she decided. Smoky liner deepened her dark eyes, and the slash of scarlet across her mouth made her lips seem fuller than normal. Even her hair had behaved, falling into loose waves around her bare shoulders that gleamed under the lights. Subtle without being slutty. Just enough to catch Tian's attention in case the outfit didn't do it for her.
The clothes were another matter. After she realized shopping wasn't nearly as fun as it sounded when you had no idea what the current fashions were, Remy had kicked Nathan out of the one shop she thought she could afford and gotten help from one of the clerks. Everything had felt so heavy when she'd tried it on, buttons too big and fabrics too stiff to make wearing them comfortable. She'd also quickly vetoed most of the skirts the salesgirl had suggested. They made Remy feel like a little girl playing dress-up with clothes found in her grandmother's attic instead of an attractive young woman supposedly on the prowl. Everything was too loose, and in her world where anyone and anything was looking for a way to grab you, loose was never good.
In the end, she had chosen fake black leather pants that looked like they had been painted onto her shapely legs and a tiny black camisole. The top was held in place by a string around her neck and a wide band around her waist. The front view was modest, but as soon as she turned around, the bare slope of her spine made promises the rest of the outfit didn't. While the extra fabric at the waist covered her knife wound, she had to be careful with the side view. It would only take one wrong move for the soft swells of her breasts to become visible. No wrong moves. Do exactly what Nate tells you.
Taking a deep breath to steady her skittering nerves, Remy grabbed her new purse and opened the door to go join Nathan where he waited for her in the living room.
He was slipping his shoulder holster over his arm when she stepped into the room. She waited until he looked up, and her patience was rewarded by the sudden widening of his eyes. His gaze swept over her. Twice. He lingered on her braless tits; she didn't have to look down to know he saw her hard nipples. She cleared her throat, and Nathan jumped, as if she had startled him.
"You look ... nice."
Remy smiled. The words might have been neutral, but the look in his eyes was anything but. His pupils had dilated to swallow the blue, matching the sharp black lines of his shirt and pants. Nathan looked like a living shadow—a fucking gorgeous one—which she guessed was the effect he was going for. It kept him unnoticed by the people he was hunting. It didn't keep him unnoticed by her.
She did a slow circle, giving him a good view of her bare back and then deliberately shifting her arms to allow a glimpse of breast as she turned to face him again. "Think it'll get Tian's interest then?"
"And the attention of every other man in the room." He pulled on a light jacket, covering his holster. "Here." He pressed a switchblade in her hand. "I don't think you'll need it, but better safe, right?"
It took a moment of looking down at her clothes for her to figure out where to put the knife, finally opting to slide it into the side of her boot. "You're going to tell me the angle one of these days, right?" She straightened, a teasing gleam in her eyes. "I mean, other than find Tian, use whatever means I need to get him alone, and then give him to you."
"No, that's it. We're going to wait until he's done with his deal. He'll work the club a bit. Mingle. Talk to the right people. Tian isn't small time anymore, and he likes to take advantage of that fact. Now, near the restrooms in the back is a fire exit leading to an alley. Get him to follow you out that door." He gestured with his hands as he spoke, as though they were standing in the middle of the club instead of his living room. "Lead him north, to the narrow road behind the buildings. There's another parking lot at the edge of the block. Tell him you're parked there."
"And you're going to be there in the Mustang?"
"I'll be there. But if he's with a man a little taller than me with brown and white hair and a stud in his nose, then it's off. That's Cesar, and he's crazy." Nathan's tone and eyes were dead serious. "You avoid him. Isaac doesn't think he'll be there tonight, but he's Tian's shadow. He shows up, you leave."
"Avoid the crazy. Got it."
With one last nod, as if he was confirming the plan to himself, Nathan led her out of the apartment and down to the car, silent the entire way. Remy was dying to talk to him about, well, anything, but he seemed lost in the grim reality of the night stretching in front of them, focused on the job at hand. She wasn't even sure he had looked at her again since first appraising her attire. Her disappointment that his work was more interesting to him than she was took her by surprise.
It also left her more determined than ever to distract him.
"So, this Isaac," she said, once he had pulled onto the freeway. "What's his story?"
Nathan checked his watch and drifted into the far left lane. "What do you want to know?"
Remy shrugged. "I don't think he likes me very much." She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, but his attention was still on the road ahead. "Does he go mama bear on all the bounty hunters he hires, or does he hold a special spot just for you?"

Nathan smiled. Well, only the corner of his mouth moved, but Remy thought it counted as a smile. "Isaac doesn't have anything against you. As for his mother bear tendencies, he's just cautious." Nathan paused before explaining, "We used to be partners."

"Really? Huh. I wouldn't have pegged him for a bounty hunter."

Nathan chuckled. "No, Isaac would never be a bounty hunter. He's LAPD."

That explained more than if he'd offered some lengthy dissertation on what his relationship with Isaac was. If there was something Remy understood, it was cops.

She froze.

Fuck. She was lusting after a cop.

Ex-cop, she hastened to correct. Used to meant Nathan had quit, and now hired out his services for what he was worth, rather than relying on altruism that would only get him an early grave. Being hot for a bounty hunter was still twisted, but more realistic than if he'd still had a badge.

"It's good to have somebody watching your back. I miss that."

"He's always been there." He looked at her and opened his mouth, closed it again, focused on the road. Long minutes passed before he asked, "Does it bother you?"

This time, she shifted to look at him. A bevy of potential answers tumbled through her head, but without being certain what he meant, she wasn't sure which one he was looking for. "Does what bother me?"

"Isaac? That I used to be a cop? That you miss having somebody to watch your back, somebody you can watch after in turn?" Nathan shrugged. "Take your pick."

His barrage of questions could have meant he was interested in knowing the answers or he was filling time until they got to the club. Remy decided she was going to believe the former.

"I've never been friends with a cop before. Or an ex-cop. It doesn't ... bother me. It's just new." Her gaze caught the landscape blurring past her window. "A lot of stuff is new."

"I know the feeling." Signaling, he switched lanes. A large sign proclaimed the Wilshire exit was only one mile away. "Look, Remy, are you sure you want to do this?"

Her answer came without pause. "I don't do anything I don't want to. That goes double for people. If I wasn't interested in you, I would've sallied off long before you rolled out of bed this morning."

"I didn't mean..." He paused, seemed to consider something for a moment, then nodded. "I'll take your word for it, Remy." He exited the freeway and pulled to the red light at the foot of the ramp. "Traffic permitting, we'll be there in about ten minutes."

He was changing the subject. It dawned on her she wasn't done with the old one.

"Listen to me." Unbuckling her seat belt, Remy slid across until her thigh was pressed to his,startling his attention away from the stalled traffic in front of them. "I don't trust easy. If there's one lesson I've learned in life, it's people will always find a way to stab you in the back. I didn't have to do this tonight. I could've stayed at the apartment, waited for you to get home, then jumped your bones when you got in. Hell, that would've been smarter for me anyway. But I heard you and your friend talking this morning, and the only thing I knew was.... "She had to lick her lips; her mouth was dry. "You didn't have to help me last night. But you did. No way am I going to turn my back on that now."

The light turned, flashing green across his face. He rolled through the intersection before stopping again behind a long train of cars. When he turned to look at her with intense eyes, she sensed he wanted to say something, but instead of speaking, he dipped his head and kissed her softly. His lips touched hers so briefly she barely had a chance to respond.

It left her floundering in the wake of her roaring nerves to try and understand.

Carefully, she scooted back to her side of the car, eyes intent on his. She couldn't read him; hell, she wasn't sure she had ever met a man as unfathomable as Nathan Pierce before in her life. But she did know one thing. She hadn't been this excited about someone new in ... ever. Maybe the fresh start that had been offered with this escape back in time could mean sticking around LA for longer than she had angled for. Anything was possible. She had the ID from her own time to prove it.

The traffic didn't thin as they crawled through each intersection, and ten minutes stretched to twenty. Nathan didn't seem perturbed, but he didn't look at her or speak, so it was impossible to tell. Remy was about to say something—anything—to break the silence, when he made a sharp right turn without warning. The side street was crowded with pedestrians, and she couldn't believe the way they swarmed down the middle of the road without thought or consideration for the oncoming traffic. Nathan just pushed the Mustang through, until they reached the end of the block and the small parking lot.
"We're here." He put the car in park and killed the engine. Glancing at his watch, he added, "Tian might be finishing up with his meeting by the time you get inside."

Remy nodded as she watched everyone stream in and out of the club area. There was laughter and drunken stumbling. One girl was holding another girl's hair back as she got sick in the gutter. She smiled. In spite of the chaos, it was good to see some things never changed.

"Give me half an hour." Her eyes twinkled as she pushed open the door. "If I'm not back by then, send in a search party. Just make sure he's tall with a killer accent."

His ghost of a smile followed her as she slammed the door and headed for the club. The distant music made the air pulse, echoing through her skin and into her blood, charging her for what she was about to do. She wasn't scared, but the anticipation of the encounter had her a little jumpy. For Nathan's sake and for her own peace of mind, she didn't want to fuck this up. She needed to know she could survive here. She needed to know once she and Nathan parted ways, she wasn't going to be worse off than if she'd stayed in 2082.

Every step drew an appreciative glance from both men and women as she strode toward Rojo's crowded entrance, ignoring the line to get in. The ends of her hair tickled along her spine, the slight breeze lifting loose tendrils around her face, so that by the time she reached the burly black bouncer, the slightest touch could have set Remy off.

His eyes bored into hers. "You on the list, doll?" He didn't even have to raise his voice. The deep bass undercut the music like sliding across silk.

Though her smile didn't waver, a moment of panic sent Remy's mind racing to improvise. She leaned forward, pressing her breasts along his tree trunk biceps, her mouth hovering at his ear. "I'm here for Tian. And he was expecting me ten minutes ago."

Mentioning the gang leader did as she'd hoped. The bouncer tensed against her, head snapping up as his gaze swept over her one more time. Remy didn't have to wait more than a few seconds before he was stepping to the side, releasing the catch on the red velvet ropes to clear the path for her to enter. Giving him a wink, she walked past and went into the club.

Pounding music and the intoxicating scents of sweat and alcohol assaulted her as soon as she crossed the threshold. There was a second where she hesitated, eyes flickering closed as she focused on how alive the place seemed, wondering if it was possible to forget everything she had promised to let the crowd swallow her up. It would be easy. Too easy. She was a pretty girl, and nobody knew her here. A fresh start. That was what she wanted, after all. But with her eyes shut came the image of Nathan's solemn face, the green light strobing across his skin, as he'd looked at her in the car.

She straightened. Opened her eyes.

She wasn't going anywhere.

Spotting Tian was simple. Nathan had shown her picture after picture of the gang leader taken over the years. As she watched Tian rise from a table tucked in an upper alcove, Remy decided the photos didn't do the man justice. He wasn't tall, but his compact build was clearly displayed in the silk shirt and trousers he wore, and his dark eyes were bright with intelligence, even from that distance. His black hair was shorn close in the back, but a long lank fell across his forehead, making him seem almost boyish as he worked the crowd.

Her gaze scanned the rest of the crowd. Nobody matched Cesar's description.

Here goes nothing.

She navigated through the crowd, ignoring the various pinches and grabs from wandering hands along the way. Once or twice, she lost sight of him, taller bodies blocking him from her view, but then the masses would thin and she'd spot the purple shirt gleaming under the lights a few feet from where he had last stood. She was about to brush against his arm and get his attention when a man with a stud in his nose melted out of the crowd to stand in front of Tian.

Remy stopped. It was the crazy Nathan had warned her about.

Cesar leaned down to whisper in Tian's ear, but the music and the distance made it impossible for Remy to hear what he was saying. The smile Tian had sported since she'd spotted him vanished, and for the first time, she saw the danger Nathan had hinted at settle like a mask over the gang leader's face. Without a glance at the others surrounding him, Tian pushed past the crowd, angling for the front of the club, Cesar close on his heels.

It only took a moment of disorientation for Remy to take off after them.

Nathan leaning against his car, checking his watch every minute. As soon as Remy left, he regretted sending her. Not because he thought she would fail. If anybody could lead Tian out of the club, it was her. But he shouldn't have involved her in the job at all. Shouldn't have involved her in his life. She wasn't his partner, and though she thought she owed him something for helping her the night before, he didn't want anything more from her.

Nathan couldn't stop thinking of what she had said. He couldn't stop hearing her husky, honest words. They were the
sort that were too good to be true. And what had he learned about words too good to be true? They never were. But he was beginning to think Remy didn't have an insincere bone in her body. She told the truth and damned the consequences.

Or she was a convincing liar. One of the best he had ever seen.

He knew he needed to focus. Tian would be out of the club any minute, and he wouldn't have a second chance. No hesitation. No distraction. He needed to neutralize Tian before he had the chance to analyze Remy's role in his capture.

Straightening, he paced to the edge of the parking lot, then back to his car, marking the seconds with each impatient step. She should be back. A woman skirted the lot, but she was too tall, and the man she was with was too short. They were laughing as they got in their car. Their headlights illuminated the dark lot, flashing across another couple attached at the mouth. The second pair fell into the backseat of an old Cadillac, oblivious to the world.

"Come on," he murmured. "Come on."

The lot was silent once again. Silent enough to hear footsteps approaching from the north end of the lot. From the wrong direction. She'd be approaching from the club. But the back of his neck tingled, and the chills spread down his arm, to his fingertips. Nathan reached for his gun without thought, but his fingers were still inches from the holster when the footsteps stopped.

"I want to see your hands, Officer Pierce," Tian said, in his familiar, mocking tone.

Nathan raised his hands slowly. Tian had known just where to find him. She told him. The thought was immediate and heavy and undeniable. She told him.

"What are you going to do, Tian?"

"Turn around. I don't shoot people in the back."

"I do," a second voice drawled.

"Cesar does," Tian agreed. "But I promise, Cesar won't be shooting you. Turn around."

Nathan turned to face the two men, careful to keep his face a mask of cool composure. "Are you going to kill me right here? You're surrounded by witnesses. You won't get down the block before the police swarm the area."

Cesar smirked, looking left then right. "I don't see anybody around."

But Nathan did.

She slipped between the parked cars, each lithe step silent as she crept closer to the Mustang. The blade he'd demanded she take was poised expertly in her palm, but Remy's solemn gaze wasn't on Nathan. It was on Tian and Cesar. Neither man seemed aware of her approach.

Nathan focused on Tian, careful to keep his eyes away from her. Both men had their guns pointed at his head, and he knew the threat of one hundred witnesses wouldn't stop them. Nathan knew Tian's type. Men like him came and went in Los Angeles, each of them thinking they were invincible until time or the law caught up. "How's your arm? I'd like my knife back."

"Yeah, I've got it right here in my pocket."

The only reason he knew she had thrown the knife at all was because the streetlight caught the blade and sent slivered reflections dancing across the lot.

Cesar's scream of pain shocked Tian more than Nathan. His head whipped around to see the knife protruding from the other man's back.

Nathan took advantage of Tian's distraction, moving to pull his gun free. His finger was slick against the trigger, and there were no obstacles between the bullet and his target's chest. But Tian wasn't even looking at Nathan. All his attention was on his fallen friend. Nathan had lost sight of Remy, but he hoped Tian hadn't caught a glimpse of her. Just as Nathan was about to fire, somebody shouted, "Look out!"

Whether the warning was meant for him, or for Tian, Nathan didn't know. His body moved on instinct, the gun shooting bullets rapidly even as he rolled behind a nearby car. Tian had thrown himself to the ground at the warning, his body covering Cesar's. The Cadillac roared by him, its headlights like angry eyes, its tires only an inch from Nathan's feet.

The driver braked hard just as the bumper of the car loomed over Tian. Nathan didn't hesitate. He jumped to his feet, shooting in Nathan's direction as he dragged Cesar's body with one arm to the open passenger door. Nathan stayed low as the bullets whizzed by, shattering the windows of the BMW to his right. He looked up as the barrage ended, in time to catch the red taillights of the Cadillac disappearing down the road.

Pounding footsteps grew louder, and then warm hands were tugging at his jacket, pulling him back and upright. "Are you okay? Did he get you?" Her fingers slid beneath his coat, seemingly everywhere at once as they searched for signs of blood. "The bastard took off as soon as Cesar came up to him. I didn't even get a chance to talk to Tian. He didn't hit you, did he?"

Nathan caught her wrists, holding her against him. "No, no, I'm fine."
His first impulse was to doubt her story. Tian even had backup in the car. It felt more like a trap they'd sprung instead of his plan. But she was looking at him with genuine concern. And more, he wanted to believe her. He didn't want to push her away, didn't want to walk away from her.

"Did Tian see you at all?"

She shook her head. At least she wasn't fighting him. "I only wish I'd had two knives." Something caught in her voice. "I would've taken them both down for you then."

"You did enough. If you weren't there, I'd be..." He didn't need to finish the sentence, they both knew. And he knew then she hadn't betrayed him. Or he wanted to believe that enough that he convinced himself it was true. The end effect was the same.

Nathan knew they needed to get out of the area, in case Tian came back with his entire gang, but at the moment, the danger didn't matter. He held the back of her head, guiding her mouth to his, and kissed her without hesitation.
CHAPTER SIX
Remy's legs were tight around his waist, her hands buried in his hair, her mouth hungry on his. Nathan clutched his keys with one hand, stabbing at the general area of the doorknob, but he couldn't pull away from her to find the lock, resenting even the bare seconds it took to breathe. He had never tasted anything like her, never tasted anything so sweet, never felt anything as soft as her lips. Her nails raked down the back of his neck before one hand disappeared entirely. Slipping between their bodies, it scratched down his stomach until it found the hard outline of his cock wedged against her pussy. One squeeze was all it took for him to gasp and break away from her mouth. Her eyes were black with desire as her tongue skated over her lower lip. "I think you're hard for me again," she murmured.
"I think you're right." Despite his trembling fingers he fitted the key into the lock on the first attempt, but without the latch holding the door in place, the weight of Remy leaning against it made it fly open. They fell into the apartment, her laughter pealing through the silent room. Kneeling, Nathan kicked backward to close the door while his hands moved to the waistband of her pants. "How do you get these off?"
With a wicked grin, Remy pushed him away and rolled onto her stomach, exposing the nearly hidden zipper running down the middle of her ass. Her hair spilled into a soft curtain over her shoulder when she looked back at him, but she didn't say a word as she bent her knee and ran her foot along the inside of his thigh. Nathan moaned at the novel contact, his muscles tightening. It burned everywhere she touched him, either deliberately or incidentally, until all lingering doubts drifted away like smoke. He didn't hesitate to cup her ass with both hands, flexing his fingers around her tight flesh, feeling the heat of her skin through the thin material. She pushed against him as he found the zipper glittering in the dim light. He pulled it down, revealing her firm, round cheeks.
Nathan skimmed his fingers over the curve of her ass and up to the small of her back, coming to a stop at the band of her bra. He unsnapped the material with a flick of his wrist, and, unable to resist the urge to taste her skin, ran his tongue down the smoothness of her spine, along the top edge of her briefs, and down to the sensitive skin of her inner thigh.
The faintest of tremors in her leg accompanied Remy's sigh of satisfaction. "You have no idea how badly I wanted you to do this last night. When I woke up this morning, and you were still asleep--" She shuddered when he began to nibble along the swell of her ass. "-I almost said to hell with it and climbed on right then."
Nathan thought climbing on sounded like an exceptionally good idea. Possibly, the best idea in human history. He tugged off her boots before dragging her pants and underwear down her legs, leaving them in a pile at her feet, before focusing on his own pants. He sighed with relief as he freed his erection, and stretched out on the floor beside Remy, pulling her onto him. She straddled him without hesitation, their mouths coming together once again. Nathan didn't know what he was doing. He didn't understand the raw hunger running through his body like bolts of electricity. He couldn't think. Somehow, it would all make sense once he was inside of her.
"Can't wait," Nathan said against her mouth. "Can't..."
"Then don't." Without breaking the contact with his lips, she lifted just enough to allow the tip of his cock to slide down her wet slit, then sheathed him in one long, drowning stroke. Nathan pulled on the string keeping her flimsy camisole clinging to her body, whisking it away as soon as the knot was untied. Her hard nipples scraped against his chest, sending a low thrill through his blood. Her hair fell around him, tickling his shoulders. Her tongue moved against his in slow strokes, and beneath the lingering smell of sweat and alcohol from the club was the tantalizing scent of her arousal and skin-the same soft smell that had haunted his dreams.
But the reality was better than his fevered fantasies. The reality of her hot skin, her tight flesh, her pounding pulse was beyond his imagination. Remy felt so right. Like they fit each other.
He didn't know why, but she kept slowing, hips rocking in longer slides, hands skimming over his shoulders, until the only thing moving was the deliberate sweep of her tongue. Then her tongue stopped as well, and she was sitting up, leaving him stripped of everything she'd given him. Everything but the fierce heat of her pussy around his cock. Her fingers traced the line of buttons down the middle of his shirt. Even in the dusky light, he saw the high color in her cheeks. "I don't get this," she whispered. The bottom button came free, and her hands began to slide upward, undoing each as she spoke. "I don't do this, you know? I don't look at guys and throw caution to the wind. I don't..."
She stopped. The delicate line of her throat rose and fell as she swallowed, but her fingers continued to peel his shirt away until the cool air made his exposed nipples tighten. It relieved Nathan to know he wasn't the only one who felt out of control. Her behavior might be out of the ordinary, but his was so far out of character he wasn't even sure he recognized himself. Placing his hand against her back, he forced her down until her breasts were pressed against his chest. The sultry fire of her flesh still astonished him, her
warmth seeping from her body to spread through his skin. Is it always like this? Nathan couldn't remember. It had been too long. He moved his hand down her body to her hip, encouraging her to rock against him.

"I don't do this either," Nathan murmured, drawing his mouth along her jaw and down her neck. "But I just... Needed this. Needed you. "Never had a chance."

"So maybe that's what this is for us. A chance."

She squeezed around his aching shaft before accommodating his urge for more, keeping her upper body still as she began to slide up and down his length. Her tongue dragged along the rough edge on his neck where stubble met skin before coming to a stop at his ear. When her breath hitched, Nathan's fingers dug into the soft flesh of her hips, guiding her, holding on, keeping her steady when a tremor rippled through the muscles beneath his palms. The seconds stretched longer and longer while he waited for Remy to speak.

Her whisper came on an exhalation. "A fresh start."

The promise behind her words sent something hot and sharp through his chest, like an electrified dagger. A fresh start was not something he had ever considered, or hoped for. His life had been in limbo, stuck in the gray, shapeless place before the end. A fresh start. Her madness was catching, because he almost believed it.

The echo thrummed through him, pulsing to the rhythm she was setting. Nathan needed more from her, needed her to move faster, needed to feel the glorious burn of her body as they broke and came together again. He was sure she saw the desperation in his eyes, and if he had the energy he would have tried to mask it, would have tried to hide it from her. She sat up, her back arching, her breasts thrusting forward. Her flesh trembled beneath his hand as she clenched, moving harder, moving faster, drawing him deeper into her body.

"God..." The rest of it was lost in a breathy stream as Remy braced her hands against his chest, clinging to his sweat-slicked skin as her hips slammed against his. Nathan couldn't discern the individual words, but he didn't need to. All he needed was to see the fiery hunger in her eyes, feel the ever-quickening strokes of her pussy around his cock.

When her fingernails curled into his skin, he gasped, but the ensuing cry ripped from her throat distracted him from the momentary sting. With a single, violent drive, Remy buried him inside her quivering heat, her spine bowing impossibly back, her inner muscles fluttering around him. The word falling from her lips then was more than understandable. *Nate.*

Nathan's skin felt tight and hot, his balls ached, and his heart thundered in his ears. Each convulsion sent a series of tremors though his flesh, pushing him closer to the edge. He struggled to hold the last threads of his control, prolonging the moment, because he didn't know what was on the other side. But Nathan couldn't resist the swell of physical need mingled with unfamiliar and confusing emotions sweeping through him, burning him.

Remy fell forward, capturing his lips just as he groaned. He thrust his tongue into her mouth as he pushed forward one final time. His muscles constricted and then everything seemed to expand for a scant moment before collapsing. Nathan relaxed against the rough carpet, Remy's weight pushing him into the floor.

"Oh, god..."

"I thought that was my line." A faint note of laughter undercoated her words, but when she lifted her head to look down at him, there was nothing mocking in her eyes. "Is it redundant to say that was fucking unbelievable?" She smiled. "Or unbelievable fucking. Take your pick."

"I don't think it needs to be said," Nathan sighed. His fingers slid down her spine, and her soft sigh of pleasure made his cock twitch. It wouldn't be long until he was ready for her again, but he'd rather the second round be in his bed.

***

It was hard to not stare at him.

Sweat gleamed on Nathan's brow, and his eyes were impossibly blue even in the dim light. Beyond his heavy lids, though, lurked something darker, something deeper. Remy thought if she only watched long enough, she'd be able to understand what it was. If she asked, he wouldn't tell her; of that, she was certain. What she wasn't so sure about was whether he would even know what it was she meant.

Though his cock was still inside her, he had gone half-soft in the aftermath of his orgasm. If she moved, their contact would be broken, but the prospect of spending the night on the floor was far from appealing.

"I don't want to sleep on the lounger again," she blurted.

Nathan chuckled. "I'm sure something else can be arranged." He brushed the hair away from her face. "If you let me up, we can arrange something else now."

A playful smile curved her lips. "Don't tell me the big bad bounty hunter is pinned by a girl." She tightened her thighs around his hips. "Maybe all those muscles I saw this morning were just for show."

"Maybe." Nathan rolled and pinned her shoulders to the floor. "Or maybe not." Dipping his head, he licked the swell of her breast, his mouth falling over her nipple. She moaned as he pulled it between his teeth, and his cock responded, growing hard inside her once again. He moved back, as if he were pulling away, then thrust forward, driving into her even more deeply. "What were we talking about?"
Between his teeth on her tit and the fresh grind against her clit, Remy wasn't sure what they had been talking about
either. But then another thrust slid her back against the carpet, and a sharp sting made her cry out in pain.
Immediately, Nathan froze, his eyes clearing. "Oh, shit. I forgot." He pulled out of her and sat up, kneeling between
her legs. "Are you okay?"
"Yeah." She couldn't curb a small wince as the knife wound on her back pulled as she sat up. "But maybe I should
be on top for awhile."
Remy took his hand when he offered it, allowing Nathan to help her rise to her feet. Her legs felt like rubber, and it
took a moment of unsteadiness to feel like she could walk again, but she flashed him a reassuring smile. "Just have
to get my sea legs again. I think you fucked them offa me."
He gripped her waist and lifted her off the floor. "Let me help with that."
She wrapped her legs around him, the tip of his cock nudging against her wet folds. His mouth was all over the
place, moving over her lips, along her jaw, and down her neck.
"You've got to stop doing this," she murmured, though she tilted her head to allow him better access. "At this rate,
we're never going to make it to the bedroom."
He didn't answer, too busy tasting as much of her as he could reach. Remy whimpered when he nibbled at her breast,
but when he began to slide her back down onto his cock, she tightened her legs around his hips, stopping the motion.
"Bed," she prompted, her voice a rough whisper. "And I can satisfy all those naughty thoughts I had about eating
you up this morning."
Nathan navigated down the dark hallway to his bedroom without pausing to turn on any lights. She felt the tension
under his skin, feel the muscles tremble beneath her fingers. Nathan sat on the bed without releasing her, holding her
against his chest as he fell back onto his single blanket. "You were having those sorts of thoughts too?"
Every time he gave voice to his own desires, Remy relaxed a little bit more. It was hard enough coming to grips with
the intensity of her attraction to him; knowing he was as much awash in confusion as she was gave her an anchor to
grasp.
"Yeah." Fighting against the power in his arms, she pushed herself up to see his features shadowed in the dark. "My
head was a pretty interesting place last night. I had all these dreams, and I think every one of them had my mouth on
you in some way."
As if to prove her point, Remy bent her head to run the flat of her tongue along his shoulder, dragging it up to his
neck. When she felt the texture change, going from smooth to rough and back to smooth again, she stopped, pulling
back far enough to notice the thin scar running across the base of his throat.
Her fingers were gentle as she reached up and skimmed them along the raised skin. "Someone got a piece of you."
Beneath her, Nathan stiffened, and her eyes flew to his face, fearful she'd said something wrong.
He was frowning, but she didn't think it was anger marring his features. Catching her fingers, he pulled them away
from the scar and brought them to his lips. He kissed her knuckles before placing her hand over his heart, covering it
with his own. "It happened a long time ago," Nathan murmured.
The slight melancholy in his voice kindled the sudden desire in her to find out more, to hear the story of who he
would allow to get so close and then hurt him so viciously. But just as suddenly as the want appeared, Remy tamped
it down. That kind of probing went beyond a simple physical attraction, and the implication terrified her. Better to
focus on the here and now, on the sinuous muscles stretched out beneath her, on the fact he wanted her.
And she wanted him.
Beneath her palm, Remy felt his heart battering to escape. Slowly, she lowered her tongue back to his neck, skating
past the scar to the hollow at the base of his throat. His skin was salty and sleek from their coupling on the floor, and
the combination of taste and memory made her groan as her mouth watered.
"Fuck, but I don't think I can get enough of you." She continued to lick downward, finding the taut tips of his nipples
and circling them with the tip of her tongue. If at all possible, they grew even harder at the contact. "How the hell
did I let you walk away last night?"
Nathan arched towards her, moving against her mouth.
His hands were busy exploring her body, covering her back. "It feels like it's been longer," he said, his long fingers
skimming the curve of her ass. "Doesn't it?"
Slipping between her thighs, he teased the sensitive skin, probing her slick channel before removing his hand.
Without looking away from her, Nathan brought his fingers to his lips, his tongue darting out to lick his damp skin
clean.
The sight of him tasting her sent a jolt of electricity straight to her clit. Remy barely had the breath to agree with him
before she was slithering further down his body, over the ripple of his abdomen, past and around the wiry hair
thickening at the base of his cock. She was desperate to get him into her mouth, feel him slide past her lips, taste the
lingering evidence of his come and her juices drying on his shaft. She almost wanted it more than she had wanted
him inside her earlier.

Almost.
Nathan jerked forward as soon as she wrapped her lips around the head of his cock. His body was taut, the hard muscles in his thighs flexed and bulging. He reached for her as she slowly moved the length of his shaft past her lips and into her throat, but his hands brushed against her hair before falling away. Remy watched him through her lashes, noting the tendons standing out in his neck. He looked at her with fathomless eyes, watching her, as though he was afraid she was just a figment of his imagination.

That's when it hit her.
This wasn't about what she wanted. This was about Nathan, about making it good for him. He looked at her, and Remy didn't feel worthless or less than human like she had back in DC. He didn't see labels or have expectations that she couldn't be like she professed. He hadn't even pushed the issue of her ID. He saw her.

How was it possible that she had only known him for twenty-four hours?
Remy didn't care. This was their fresh start. Fuck if she was going to mess it up.

Her lips tightened around his cock, sliding down the velvet shaft as her hand slipped between his legs to cup his balls. They were heavy and hard, and the moment her fingertips grazed over the soft skin behind them, Nathan bucked further into her mouth. It drove the head to the back of her throat, but when his muscles tensed to draw back, Remy closed her eyes and swallowed.

"Remy..." Her name was a plea, cloaked in a whimper. His fingers were brushing against her hair again, getting tangled in the sweat-dampened tresses. "God, that feels amazing, Remy. You feel ... amazing..." His last word was nothing but a soft breath, as though he had lost the ability to speak.

It was enough. Shallow inhalations through her nose allowed her to suck down the rest of his cock, keeping him in her throat for long, heavy seconds. Then she began the slow slide back up the pulsing length, her tongue outlining every vein and every ridge until her lips caught on the head. Dipping her tongue into the dripping slit, she savored the pre-come collecting there and breathed in the scent of sex clinging to his skin. Was that her? Did she smell like that? As many blow jobs as she'd given in her lifetime, she couldn't remember her senses being as attuned as they were with Nathan. She tasted and smelled and heard and felt every little twitch and whisper from his body. And it only made her want him more.

"Remy ... fuck ... I can't..." He sucked his breath in and gently tugged on her hair. "I don't want to come. I want to fuck you."

She looked at him with wide eyes as she let his length slip from her mouth. Nathan sat up with his legs stretched in front of him, reaching for her. As she straddled his thighs, he pressed his body against hers, tangling his hands in her hair and thrusting his tongue in her mouth.

Her arms wrapped around his shoulders, crushing her breasts to his chest, as she answered the demands of his hungry tongue. It took only a slight shift to position his cock at her ready opening, and even less to bury him inside, dropping her weight onto his thighs until she felt his balls against her ass. Both of them sighed at the same time.

"Okay." Her brow rested against his while she adjusted to his thickness. "You were right. This is better."

"Better," Nathan breathed. "Much better." He brushed her hair from her neck, drawing his mouth along her shoulder to the soft skin beneath her ear. He smoothed his hands down her back to cup her ass, guiding her into a slow rhythm.

His strong grip kept her spread as she began riding his cock again, leaving her more exposed and open than she had felt sprawled across him in the living room. Every slide scraped her pebbled nipples across his chest, and every stroke back down ground her clit into the coarse hair at the base of his shaft, and still she wanted more. More. More of him, more of his mouth, more of his cock.

Just more.
Gradually she picked up the pace, clenching hard enough on every stroke to have Nathan groaning into her skin. "Like that?" she asked, and was shocked at how hoarse she sounded.

"Yes, yes, yes..."
The words fell heedless from his lips. His eyes were clouded, laying bare how close to the edge he was, and his hands tightened against her with almost bruising pressure. Remy thought he would have agreed to anything. She was rapidly reaching the same pinnacle. The relentless pounding against her clit had her scrabbling not to collapse against him, every thrust sinking him deeper, harder, flooding her pussy anew. It would take so little to push him over, to feel him crashing with her when they came, but all she could do was forge ahead, try not to believe too much in the glimpses of emotion she kept catching in his eyes.

When it became too much to bear, she squeezed hers shut, seeking out his mouth instead of trying to make sense of what was probably nothing. Nathan responded like a starving man, attacking her with both tongue and teeth, and when she had to gulp for air, he forced her back for more.
Coming was almost a relief. Remy clamped down around his cock, screaming into his mouth as the shudders wracked through her slim frame, exploding bright and hot and so fucking fierce she was sure she was going to have friction burns everywhere they touched. Somewhere she heard him say her name, but beyond the confines of her flesh, everything else seemed far away, too far to notice except for that which directly touched her. Cock, chest, hands, skin. And that mouth. Back on hers. She could drown in that mouth.

* * * *

Kirsten hated Los Angeles. It was hot and smelly and, for as crowded as it was, everything moved at a snail crawl that made her want to scream out loud in frustration. It didn't help that she had discovered Remy's escape had taken her not only across the country but also back in time. Seventy-five years might be a drop in the bucket in the history books, but for practical purposes, she might as well be in the Dark Ages. She was dealing with Neanderthals here. Sooner or later-and probably much, much sooner-she was going to shoot someone through the eye just for being stupid. She hoped it was Remy Capra.

A day of searching had given her zero information on the mysterious British guy and his Mustang. Her original idea had been to get into the police computers and do a simple search with her parameters, but getting in had been her first stumbling block.

As a civic employee, she had been implanted with tracking chip technology for years, and while it gave her instant wireless access no matter where she went back in DC, Kirsten learned almost immediately she didn't have the same capability here. Incompatible technology, she decided. There were enough Internet cafes around to still let her online, however, but the second she saw the old-fashioned computer, complete with clunky keyboard and mouse, she knew she needed a new plan. She hadn't had to deal with such antiquated interfaces since before starting school.

The only way she knew to navigate computer files was by talking to the damn things. And that was before she realized you had to pay to use the supposedly public access in the cafes. Her cashcard and Fedcred were as worthless here as beads and trinkets. What cash she had-she'd hocked her watch, an antique, as soon as she could-was for food and shelter, not to waste fucking around with clunky computers and their ridiculous programs.

She didn't have time to wait for voice-activated interfaces to become the government standard. So if she couldn't get in through the back door, that only left the front.

She made sure she showed up at the police station after the day shift had clocked out. Nights meant fewer people around to ask questions she might not be able to answer; if they were doing their jobs, they would be out on the streets. Darkness gave criminals comfort and the opportunity to take more risks.

With only her chip to prove she was a cop, and no way to scan it for another forty years, Kirsten had few options to get inside with a minimum of questions. She stuck with the tried and true, lying about being the head of a private security team from DC. It was half-true, anyway, and she knew enough of the lingo to be able to convince the weary officer on duty to let her talk to someone higher up. That was all she wanted. Walking back and forth in the confines of an interrogation room, though, she wondered if she'd be able to sell her story without the benefit of red tape on her side.

Again, she cursed Remy's name. None of this would have even been necessary if the bitch had just died with the rest of her gang.

She stopped pacing when the door opened and a man walked in. He was tall, much taller than she, with broad shoulders designed for football and long legs made for more carnal games. Short dark hair seemed even darker next to his tan skin, and the liquid eyes that met hers were eerily shrewd. Her mouth curved into an automatic smile. This one would be easy to manipulate and fun to boot.

"I'm Isaac McGuire." He thrust his hand out in greeting. She took it and smiled even wider at the heat pouring off his skin. "They tell me you're from DC, right?"

Kirsten nodded. "I'm tracking a fugitive on the loose. My sources say she's here. I need your help finding her."
CHAPTER SEVEN
Gradually, Nathan pulled himself from sleep, swimming through layers of fluffy darkness to open his eyes to the bright morning sun. He blinked the grit from his eyes, looking over to the empty side of the bed. He stretched, smiling at the slight, almost unfamiliar ache in his muscles. The vague smell of sweat and sex lingering in the room made him hard again.
By the time they had collapsed in exhaustion at some point in the early morning hours, Nathan had thought he would never be able to have sex again. Apparently, he just needed to rest for a few hours. Nathan wanted to lure Remy back to bed, fold her body around his, and start where they left off the night before.
He imagined Remy was in the kitchen, scavenging for food. She shouldn't have to scavenge for food. He should go to the grocery store.
With the money he didn't have.
Nathan didn't allow that thought to dampen his good mood. He didn't want anything to dampen his good mood. He wanted to squeeze every last drop of pleasure from it before the novelty wore off. Besides, he had enough cash left over from the day before to take her out for coffee.
Digging a pair of shorts and a T-shirt out of the dresser, Nathan reflected on what Remy was wearing. Or not wearing. If she was wearing the T-shirt from the day before, he might be forced to carry her back to bed. He might be forced to carry her back to bed, regardless.
He didn't find Remy in the kitchen as he had expected, but sitting on the couch, one foot resting on the cushion, the other leg folded beneath her. The white T-shirt she stole from his dresser drawer was stretched tight across her breasts, and her long legs were bare. His cock twitched, but he didn't make a move towards her-yet. She was rolling something through her fingers; it looked like one of the coins she had given him, except larger. Whatever it was, it engrossed her and allowed him a few uninterrupted moments to study her.
There were purple marks the shape of his mouth on her neck, and her lips were full and swollen. Her dark eyes were thoughtful but distant. She rubbed the back of her leg, and he noticed a light bruise the size of his thumb marring the soft whiteness of her thigh. Nathan knew his skin was marked as well, from her teeth and nails. He wanted to caress the bruises on her skin with his mouth, lick the sensitive marks.
He wandered into the kitchen and dumped the old coffee out of the pot. He wouldn't be able to keep this from Isaac-the man had eyes after all, and they had done quite a number on each other. Of course, that meant he'd have to put up with Isaac's lectures about not bringing crazy women home, and not thinking with his dick, and having safe sex ...

"Oh." Nathan closed his eyes. "Oh, fuck."
He hadn't thought of grabbing condoms, not once. And it wouldn't have mattered because he didn't have any condoms. Fucking the probably-crazy girl was understandable, but fucking her without any protection? He didn't need Isaac to tell him how stupid that was.
Nathan abandoned the coffee pot and returned to the living room. "I think we need to talk."
Her fingers stopped dancing, the object of her attention disappearing into the palm of her hand. "Yeah." She scooted over to make room for him. "I think so, too."
Nathan took a deep breath. She probably wasn't protected either. He settled beside her on the couch, but pointedly didn't touch her. He needed to have a clear head for this conversation-if he touched her, he feared he'd compound the problem. He decided to just get right to the point. "I'm sorry, I didn't even think about using protection last night. I know I'm clean, but if you're worried about getting pregnant, we could probably go to the clinic."
Remy frowned. "Pregnant? Oh, no, that's no problem. My shot won't run out for months yet."
"Oh, well, that's good then. But pregnancy isn't the only thing we have to worry about. I mean, I don't know how clean you are."
"Clean? You don't mean taking a shower, do you?"
"No. I mean, I don't have any sexually transmitted diseases. But you might. You might not even know about it."
"Oh." Remy's frown cleared. "You don't need to worry about that. I've been fully vaccinated."
"Oh. Wait. What? What are you talking about?"
"Actually, that's what I wanted to talk to you about." She flipped the coin in her hand onto his lap. "You ever see anything like that before?"
"No. What does this have to do with vaccinations?"
"Just ... answer my question, okay? I promise, it'll make sense soon. Or maybe not."
Nathan held the heavy coin between his forefinger and his thumb, studying it. One side of the coin was blank, with a dull shine. The edge was smooth and uninterrupted. The engraving on the other side was elaborate. Nathan had never seen anything so fine, so detailed on a coin before. It depicted a woman in motion, looking over her shoulder. The artist had been so careful about the detail of the work that Nathan saw the fear on her face—but the fear was
almost hope. As though the one chasing her could be her death or her savior. There were words arched across the top that he didn't understand and more along the bottom, from what looked to be a second alphabet.

"No." Nathan handed it back to her. "Never. Where did you get it?"

She almost seemed disappointed in his response, letting it rest in her palm for a long moment, her hair hiding her face as she continued to regard the coin. When she spoke, her voice was even more subdued than it had been when he'd walked in. "That... is a very long story."

Nathan thought this very long story was the same story he had been waiting to hear from her since the moment she showed up at his feet. Perhaps he would get some answers to his questions. Who was she, really? Where was she from? How did she end up in that warehouse at that precise moment? What were the lights and the explosions? And why did he feel this strange connection to her? "I think I've got the time to hear it."

Remy nodded. It was as if he'd said what she had been expecting to hear.

He didn't anticipate her rising from the couch, though, or going to the pile of her clothes she'd left folded in the corner. As she crouched and grabbed her pants, digging around in the pocket, he frowned. She was pulling out the fake ID that had upset her at the gas station.

She returned to the couch, facing him with her legs tucked beneath her. "I want you to look at this again," Remy said, holding out the card. "I want you to tell me what you see."

Nathan had no idea what she was on about, but he humored her and took it. He read aloud as he had before.

"Remy Capra. Classification: C. Date of Birth, March 15, 2058. Residence, District of Columbia. The card is about as thin as paper, though stronger. There's a hologram behind your picture." He looked up at her solemn face.

"The picture doesn't look quite right anyway. It looks almost like a ... mug shot? I suppose you're going to tell me this isn't a poorly done fake ID?"

"Yeah, that's what I'm telling you."

Nathan turned the card over, looking for any more clues, but found nothing but a barcode and a black strip. He knew she wasn't lying to him. Or rather, she believed what she was saying. Nathan had seen it a thousand times before. Facts and truth were nothing compared to the delusions the human mind could conjure and accept as reality.

"Then what is it?"

Exhaling in frustration, Remy snatched the card back. "You think I'm crazy. Fuck, if I didn't know the truth, I'd think I was crazy, too. But this..." She waved the ID in the air. "...Is all I have left of who I am. Who I was. This and those stupid coins."

"So, you're telling me you were born in the year 2058. Fifty years from now and three thousand miles away. And somehow you managed to travel ... what? Seventy-five years back in time?" Nathan kept his face professional, as though he were talking to a particularly confused witness. "Even if I granted time travel was possible, why would you end up in a deserted warehouse in Culver City?" Even as he asked the question, he realized the absurdity of it. What was he expecting? That she'd have a convincing explanation?

"I don't know." For the first time since he'd come out, Remy looked agitated. The color was rising in her pale cheeks, and her fingers couldn't seem to stop moving. "I've lived in DC all my life. Born, bred, thought I'd die there. One minute, I'm jumping out the window of Senator Henryk's house, and the next, it feels like somebody's trying to scoop out my insides with a pitchfork and I'm on the floor of that warehouse on the other side of the country."

She stood up and began to pace in front of the couch, looking everywhere but at him. "I know what this looks like. I've been up since five-thirty, trying to talk myself out of telling you the truth. Because it's cracked. I know that. You know that. But after last night..." Her gaze caught on the camisole lying discarded on the floor. It took a moment for her to speak again. "I guess I'd rather you think I was cracked than a liar. But I'm not either."

Remy's eyes were bleak when they met his, but her words made him look away. Running his hands through his hair, Nathan focused on the floor, unable to bear the sincerity of her gaze. He could make her leave. Tell her to get her clothes, and her coins, and find somewhere else to be crazy, because he couldn't help. Didn't want to help. Except he could no more push her out his door than he could, well, travel through time. But if he didn't kick her out, what was his other option? Continue to humor her? Feed her delusions? Encourage this flight of fancy?

He couldn't do anything until he had exhausted all possible explanations. He'd go through the standard questions systematically, until he could begin to narrow things down. "Remy... have you ever used drugs? Were you under the influence of any drugs that night?"

She was shaking her head before he finished the question. "I haven't touched anything since I was sixteen. I've seen too many people frag on the stuff, and as much as I might spoil for wanting to escape, no way would I do it that way."

Nathan nodded. Short of hauling her in for a blood test, he had no way of confirming that. "Frag?"
Nathan was half-tempted to keep a running tally of the words he didn't recognize, or were used in the wrong context. "Have you ever been hospitalized for mental illness? Does your family have a history of mental illness?"

Remy snorted. "Hospitals require money, Nate. But no, never been locked up for that. I don't think my mom ever was, either, but I can't tell you about my father's side. I never knew any of them." She collapsed back onto the far end of the couch, curling up into a defensive ball. "You think I didn't already go through all this? I'd love for this to be some grand delusion, because at least then, it would make sense. I mean, LA, and the warehouse, and ... you."

She suddenly looked very small and nothing like the fierce girl he had come to known. He hated seeing her like that. So what are you going to do about it?

Nathan leaned back on the couch, staring at the ceiling silently, as if he could find the answers there. After several moments of tense silence, he said, "I don't think you're on drugs and I don't think you're crazy, Remy. But time travel? It's not logical and it's not ... it's not possible." He slid his eyes sideways to look at her, but he could tell he wasn't saying anything she didn't already know.

Her thick lashes lowered for a moment as she considered his words. "I don't know how to ... oh!" With an unexpected burst of energy, she uncoiled and twisted around, sweeping her hair over her shoulder with one hand to expose the smooth column of her neck while the other grabbed his wrist. "Feel," she ordered, and lifted his hand to the base of her skull.

Nathan ran his fingers over her soft skin until he felt a slight rise, an unexpected bump, just below her hairline. He pressed his thumb against it lightly, but it didn't give. It remained impressed against her skin, hard and unmoving. A part of him flinched, disgusted on some vague, primal level, but he didn't understand why. "What is it?"

"A tracking chip. I got it when my mom left me and I ended up in the system. The feds do it to keep an eye on all their delinquents, but I hooked up with someone a few years ago who fried it for me." Remy turned to look back at him, her eyes begging him to believe her. "You don't have these now, right?"

"No, no, absolutely-" Nathan stopped, thinking about radio-frequency identification chips and that if problems of size, power consumption, and maybe antenna performance were solved, a GPS tracking implant wasn't such a far-fetched idea. "Well, not yet anyway, and if we had the technology it would be unconstitutional..." He stopped again, considering Homeland Security's demand for a national ID card. Hadn't the federal government already mandated some sort of required ID? "No, we don't have them now."

She let her hair fall back along her spine and settled to face him again. "I know what it sounds like. It's why I wasn't going to say anything. But after last night ... you deserve to know at least as much as I do. One thing I can't stand is liars, and it was killing me thinking that's what I was doing with you."

Nathan took her hand, absently rubbing his thumb over her knuckles. There was one big reason to dismiss her—it was all crazy. But there were a lot of smaller reasons to believe her—her odd way of speaking, the bizarre ID card, the unfamiliar clothes, and, of course, the computer chip—if that was what it was—embedded in her skin. Perhaps it was best to accept the possibility that there was more in heaven and earth than dreamt of in his own philosophy, and give her the benefit of the doubt.

He looked up. She was staring at him, waiting for him to say something. She had dropped into his life and somehow changed everything without doing anything, and now she was asking him to trust her. The way, he realized, she already trusted him.

"Okay, Remy. I believe you. There's too much evidence to ignore right now."

Relief bloomed in her eyes, and she visibly sagged as if she was a marionette whose strings had just been cut. "God, I've been trying to find the sauce to tell you for hours now," she admitted. "I was dread sure you were going to lob me as soon as I gabbed."

Nathan quickly translated. "No, I wouldn't want to throw you out." He swallowed, clearing his dry throat. "Can you tell me everything that happened before ... before you showed up at the warehouse? Were you stealing these coins?"

"Yes. Not because I needed them—well, I did need them, but it was more than that. Kirsten was so fucking paranoid about her father's collection, and then she led the raid on the safe house ... all I could think about was getting back at her."

The more she spoke, the faster her words came, though even she seemed to realize her answers were coming out in a jumble. "Maybe this would be easier if you asked me direct questions. Otherwise you're going to get my entire biog, and I can't think of a single reason why you'd want that."

Nathan thought of several reasons why he'd want her biog, but now wasn't the time for an in-depth interview. "So, you broke into ... Henryk's house to steal the coins as revenge. You grab a handful. Kirsten gets a piece of you and then, poof?"

Remy nodded. "So we start with the coins. What are they, where they came from, what the engravings mean, previous owners." He almost couldn't believe the words coming out of his mouth. He was going to investigate this. He was going to
research and interview some one and treat it like a case. The warm, electric feeling he always got before a new hunt, a new mystery, a new puzzle, already sizzled away in his gut at the thought of it. Her hand shot out and caught his wrist when he began to reach for the other coins. Nathan looked up and saw her dark eyes fixed on him.

"You could still kick me out." The shock in her voice gave it unexpected strength. "Why aren't you?"

Nathan considered her for a moment, watching the surprise and hope flash in her eyes. He had two choices, but only one option. "You could be crazy. You could be telling the truth. But it doesn't harm me to check out both possibilities and get a confirmation either way, does it?" But Nathan saw the answer didn't quite satisfy her. "Because I don't want you to leave."

The disbelief held in her face for another second. Then a brilliant smile lit her up, dispelling much of the sobriety that had shrouded her since he walked in. In a flash, Remy was straddling him, arms around his neck, hot mouth raining kisses across his brow, down his jaw, tickling to his mouth. "You have no idea how fucking scared I was. I didn't want to think last night was all in my head."

Nathan wrapped his arms around her, happy to hold her. Whatever had happened during the night, they had both felt it. It wasn't just a strong physical reaction; it wasn't chemicals and blood reacting to certain stimuli. Even now, even with no secrets between their bodies, he wanted to explore her with his mouth and hands, to be as close to her as possible, touch as much of her as he could, taste the salt on her skin.

"We'll get to the bottom of what happened to you," Nathan promised around her hungry mouth. He still hadn't ruled out the crazy option. He knew she could be caught in an elaborate fantasy. But hadn't it been his job, his very life's work, to gather evidence? To analyze, and verify, and investigate?

**But what if you're wrong again? Remy seems handy with a knife. Do you want to risk it? Again?**

She broke from the kissing to twist and reach for the coin she'd discarded. "Let's start with this one," She pressed it into his palm. "This was the last one I took, and I dropped it right before everything went tits up. I stopped running, picked it up out of the grass, and the next thing I know, I'm here. It could be a coincidence, but at least it's a place to start, right?"

Nathan thought it was an excellent idea. The coin was the most distinctive of her little collection. It felt cool initially, but after a second, it began to warm. He pulled away before it became uncomfortable, but there was a distinctive pink circle on his flesh. Gingerly, he reached for it with his other hand to inspect it more carefully. People would remember it, and if the dealers he spoke to didn't know it, he had no doubt they'd be willing to do a bit of research for him.

"Yeah, we'll start there. We can start with the coin and antique shops." He paused a minute before adding. "There's an occult shop in Santa Monica. Might as well cover all our bases."

Remy seemed pleased with his suggestion, but before she expressed her support, a sharp knock on the door interrupted them. "Christ!" Nathan shouted. "What do you want now?" He knew the answer as soon as he asked. He had never checked in with Isaac. "Oh hell."

"Does he do this every day?" Remy complained when he pushed her off his lap. "Because let me tell you, if he does? He needs to seriously get laid."

"No, he doesn't do this every day. But he needs to get laid anyway." Nathan opened the door with a guilty smile, but he didn't expect Isaac to look quite so worried. "Did you bring bagels today?"

The first thing Isaac did was look over Nathan's shoulder. "Is that girl still here?" His voice was so hushed Nathan had to strain to hear him.

"Yes." Nathan studied Isaac's face and realized the other man wasn't here on a social call. He wasn't even here to talk about Tian. The deep furrows on his forehead and the lines around his bloodshot eyes told Nathan he had something far heavier on his mind. He stepped out of the apartment and shut the door behind him. "What is it?"

Rubbing his hand over his hair, Isaac sighed before answering. "You've got to let me take her in. Something's going on, and until I get it figured out, I'll sleep a hell of a lot better knowing she's not anywhere near you."

Nathan's heart stopped. He wanted to tell Isaac no, it wasn't going to happen. All he mustered was a single word. "Why?"

"Someone showed up at the precinct last night looking for her. Knew her name, knew what she looked like." If it was possible, his eyes grew even more serious. "She even knew Remy had been with a British guy with an old Mustang two nights ago. At a gas station. Did you stop somewhere between the warehouse and coming home?"

Nathan frowned. "Yes. We stopped for food at the 7-Eleven off of Oak." He leaned against the railing. "But how could anybody track us to that particular gas station and not, say, the one across the street? Isaac, what was this woman's name? Was it Kirsten?"

It was his friend's turn to frown. "How'd you know her name? Has she been around here?" He held up a warning finger before Nathan replied. "Don't let her in again, if she shows. Her story isn't checking. That's part of what I'm
trying to figure out."
Nathan almost laughed. Of course, Kirsten's story wasn't checking. It was probably just as farfetched as Remy's.
"No, she hasn't been here. But somebody tried to slice and dice Remy, and she's got the injuries to prove it. She
claims a woman named Kirsten is responsible." He thought about everything Remy had told him, picking out small
details from each conversation. "She doesn't know Kirsten is here. She thinks it's over."
"Oh, it's not over. I haven't seen anyone this determined to catch someone since Tian slipped through your fingers
the first time." Isaac's gaze grew speculative. "She was good, I'll give her that. I almost didn't check her creds, she
was so convincing. Everything she said seemed to fit. How Remy was part of a gang back in DC. How dangerous
she was. Good with weapons. The only thing that didn't fit was she didn't even mention those coins you showed me
yesterday. That's why I checked her out."
Nathan thought every word Kirsten told him was the truth. It made sense. Remy's insistence that she "didn't damsel,
hers references to the safe house, the way she didn't hesitate to attack Cesar, even going as far as to apologize for not
getting both of them. Remy was no stranger to violence.
"I can't let you take her in, Isaac. But you're right. We need to figure out what the hell is going on before we get
caught in the crossfire." Nathan crossed his arms, shifting the topic slightly. "Things did not go as planned last night.
They knew right where to find me." He shook his head. "And I know what you're thinking. It wasn't Remy."
"And you're sure of this because ... ?" "She put a knife in Cesar's back instead of my throat."
The announcement caught him by surprise, his shoulders lifting for the first time since arriving. "You're kidding
me." When Nathan shook his head again, Isaac whistled low under his breath. "Nobody's got a piece of Cesar in
years. How the hell did she do it?"
"Quietly. Cesar and Tian were more caught up in taunting me than paying attention to their surroundings. She was
practically on top of them when she threw the knife. They had backup in a nearby car. As soon as Cesar went down,
they fled. I imagine one of their goons saw me in the parking lot and tipped them off."
Isaac's eyes flickered to the closed door. "This doesn't make me feel any better about her, you know. I thought we'd
learned our lesson with Susanna."
Nathan paused, the full weight of Isaac's concern finally hitting him. Isaac never spoke her name, if he could help it.
Neither of them did. "I know. But I don't know what to do. I've thought more about her in the past twenty-four hours
than I have in the past two years. I wish I could tell you to just trust me on this, but we both know you don't have
any reason to."
"If it was anything but a girl, you know I'd trust you without hesitating."
His voice was low, his tone resigned. When he moved next to Nathan to lean against the railing as well, though, he
couldn't quite meet Nathan's eyes. Both of them were too busy staring at the apartment, both of them lost in thoughts
about the woman on the other side of the wall. "Want to tell me what it is about this one? Other than the obvious
reasons, of course."
"I don't know." Nathan would have liked nothing more than to tell Isaac why he was willing to take such a huge
chance on Remy. He longed to describe the conversation they had just had, and his reaction to her announcement.
He wished he could tell somebody what happened, somebody who could make sense of what the hell was going on.
"I don't know. I felt something with her last night I haven't ... it's like I already knew her on some level. Knew who
she was. Which doesn't help my case, I know."
Isaac didn't answer, but Nathan didn't know what he could have said under the circumstances anyway. Together,
they continued to regard the closed door, neither seemingly willing to move.
"Would you at least let me run her prints? Someone like that has to exist someplace, even if Kirsten Henryk isn't
telling me the whole story about where."
There was no reason not to agree. "We can have a Live Scan done this morning. She won't like it, but she's going to
have to deal with it, I guess. You find out what you can about her prints and Kirsten Henryk, and I'll see what I can
learn from Remy this afternoon. We'll compare notes tonight. Oh. I also have a good sample of blood. You can take
it in and see what the lab says."
"Sounds like a plan." Pushing away from the rail, Isaac gave him one last lingering look before heading toward the
stairs. "We can meet for dinner at The Barn. It's all you can eat rib night. Bring Remy." He paused, one foot on the
first step. While his tone was light, his eyes were not. "And try not to get yourself killed before then."
Isaac only made it a couple stairs before stopping and turning. "One more thing. Turns out, the way Remy talks is an
East Coast thing. Kirsten Henryk called something royal when we were talking." He shrugged. "Guess you learn
something new every day."
"I guess so," Nathan was tempted to tell Isaac it wasn't an East Coast thing at all. But he couldn't get into that with
Isaac. Not right now. "Funny we never heard it before."
"Oh, it'll probably turn up out here sooner or later. They probably picked it up from a TV show we never have time
to watch.” Isaac resumed going down the stairs. “See you tonight.” Nathan nodded, watching as Isaac took the stairs two at a time, then disappeared around the corner. His head was spinning, and he needed to be alone, to have a bit of quiet to piece everything together. But that wasn't going to happen any time soon. Before he could even consider having a quiet moment to himself, he needed to tell Remy about Kirsten.
CHAPTER EIGHT
She couldn't stop thinking about Kirsten. Ever since Nathan had come back inside after talking to his cop friend, Remy had been consumed with worry about how this would change things, how it could have happened, why she couldn't manage to catch a break no matter what she did. When he asked to let Isaac print her, she agreed without hesitation. It would be one more reason for him to believe her story when nothing came back as a match. It didn't ease her anxiety about Kirsten, though. Even knowing she had Nathan sticking up for her with Isaac, Remy couldn't get away from the very real fear that things were going to go from bad to catastrophic as soon as Kirsten found her.

Once they left the police station, Nathan angled the Mustang toward Santa Monica and the tiny occult shop he thought might be their best bet in discovering the origins of the coin. He had been quiet ever since telling her about Kirsten, and the silence was beginning to wear. Though she didn't want to bother him any more than she already had, the fact he could be sitting there, making judgments about her that were very likely valid, gnawed at Remy's stomach. She wanted to know what he was thinking. Did he believe her? Did he trust her? Did he think this was all some kind of grift?

She couldn't ask. She had already asked for too much. An accident slowed traffic to a crawl. The air within the car grew heavier with each passing minute, until finally, Remy couldn't take the confusion of her thoughts any longer. "So how long have you known Isaac?" she asked, shifting in her seat to face Nathan. Conversation about anything that wasn't Kirsten could only be good.

"I guess it's been about twelve years now." He sounded as if he couldn't quite believe that much time had passed. "We were partners for seven years, until I quit the force."

She was dying to ask him why he quit, but the tight set of his mouth and the memory of how he'd reacted the last time the subject had come up had Remy stomping that urge into the dust. Instead, she smiled and swept her gaze over him in a frank appraisal.

"And how does a British guy get to be a cop?"

Nathan shrugged. "It's not a terribly interesting story, though I never planned to be a cop. My father married an American when I was fifteen. Candace was in London on a temporary work assignment, and when she returned to the States, she brought us with her. My mother was American too, so I had a dual-citizenship. Once I turned eighteen, I decided to stay in California for school. I developed an interest in sociology, which led to criminology." It might not have been interesting to him, but the prospect of living overseas had fantasies tumbling inside Remy's mind faster than the images could settle. Already, this was better than brooding on Kirsten. "Are they still around? Or did your old man whisk her back to jolly old England?"

"They live in Palm Springs," Nathan answered mildly. "I guess Dad never wanted to experience temperatures below eighty degrees again."

"Can't say I blame him." She looked out the window, at the crystal blue skies overhead. It still shocked her to see such vivid brightness.

The absurdity of their conversation struck her as soon as the words were out of her mouth, but when Nathan glanced curiously in her direction, her slight chuckle turned into audible laughter. "We're talking about the weather," she offered in explanation. "I can't figure out how in hell I'm going to shake Kirsten, and here we are, discussing the benefits of living in California." She shook her head. "That's weird, even for me."

"There are many benefits to living in California." As the car moved forward a foot, Nathan sighed. "However, the freeway system is not one of them. Well, you more or less know my life story now. What about yours?"

Remy shrugged. "Boring. My parents split up when I was born, and then my mom took off when I was fourteen. I've been pretty much on my own since then. The state tried to stick me in foster homes, but none of them took. So I tested out to get them off my back. Once I got my equivalency, it was hard for them to use my education as a reason to keep me in the system."

"Not boring. More common than it should be. I can't even tell you how many times I saw something like your story play out. What did you do after the state got off your back?"

"Anything I could." It was pointless to try and whitewash her past; Remy was convinced Kirsten had been more than blunt with the details she'd shared. Which meant Nathan already knew, and anything Remy said would only be fuel for the fire. "I bounced around a lot until about four years ago. That's when I fell into a gang that didn't expect me to sell myself in order to have a place." She looked out her window, unwilling to see the disappointment in his face. "I've done a lot of things I'm not proud of, but that is not one of them."

Silence met her words. She didn't know what he was thinking, and she didn't risk a glance over her shoulder. The soft brush of his knuckles against her cheek shocked her, but she still didn't look at him. He tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, his fingers trailing down her neck and shoulders before he pulled away. "So they became your family." His voice was gentle, free of condemnation. "And now they're gone because of this Kirsten Henryk?"
"Yeah." When the tears sprang to her eyes, Remy didn't know if it was because of the sudden memory of what she'd lost or the unexpected tenderness from Nathan. Either way, she kept her face averted while she rubbed the traces of them away.

So much for not thinking about Kirsten. But better to get this out now before the truth came back to haunt her later. "She's a cop," Remy explained. "But her dad's one of the most twisted senators on the Hill, and he likes to use her as his personal bulldog. We never knew why, but he targeted my gang about a year ago. Kirsten started hunting us down, one by one. A group of us tried going legit, but that wasn't good enough, and we ended up going underground to try and stay alive." She could still smell the smoke and burning flesh from the fires, and a rash of goose bumps erupted along her bare arms. "It didn't work."

"If you're worried she's going to ... finish the job here, don't. Isaac isn't going to tell her anything. And if she does manage to track you down..." Nathan didn't finish his sentence, but he didn't have to. The implied threat against Kirsten shook Remy even more than his gentle reaction earlier. There was no doubt in her mind he would do exactly that—he would stand in front of Remy and shoot pointblank at anybody who dared to attack her. It was the why of it she didn't understand.

Why did she trust Nathan? Why did he trust her? Why would he be so protective of her, even with the partner and friend he'd had for twelve years? Why did the thought of Kirsten hurting Nathan fill her with such dread?

She wasn't accustomed to having a world in such turmoil. In DC, life was simple. Everything was about survival. Staying ahead of the Henryks. She had worried about her adopted family then, too, but once they had been slaughtered, Remy had closed off her heart. It was too hard to think you could make a difference, only to lose in the home stretch. She wasn't going to watch people she cared about die again.

How had Nathan fallen into that category so swiftly?

"So has Oakland ever made it to the Super Bowl?"

The question came out of the blue, and Remy grinned at how absurd it was in the grand scheme of things. "Football's not my sphere. But the Super Bowl's still around, if that means anything."

"Well, I guess I won't ask about the World Series, then. Unless baseball is your ... sphere?" He flashed a grin at her.

"What's the deal with cars? I'm thinking your reaction to my Mustang wasn't because of the paint job."

"More eco-conscious. You have to have special tags for gas-powered cars." Remy laughed. "When I couldn't find one on your plate, I figured I could trust someone who didn't give a fuck for legal. Guess I got that wrong, huh?"

"You can still trust me, though." Her smile softened. "I know."

Nathan tapped the wheel thoughtfully. "What about that chip? Was it just for tracking, or did they use it for ... behavior modification as well?"

"You watch too many movies," Remy joked. "It's mostly just for ID. They tried making them street common, but they're not cheap and people screamed about Big Brother and all that shit. So the only ones holding aces for them are juveniles, cons, immigrants and legals, federal employees." She paused, a sudden thought striking her. "Kirsten has one. Here."

"Cops have them in their hands because they have to have them scanned all the time. Instead of carrying badges." Nathan shook his head. "I'd rather just deal with the inconvenience of holding a badge."

The memory of his reaction to her chip made her pause. "Does mine bother you?"

"No. Well, the idea of a chip bothers me. For a lot of reasons." He touched her hand. "But it's not a big deal. I would just be one of those people screaming about Big Brother."

Lacing her fingers through his, she watched him divert his attention back to the moving traffic. She knew how much he had to be going through his head, but the fact of the matter was Nathan looked more relaxed than she'd ever seen him, a long hand resting on the wheel, his mouth soft and at ease. A shiver ran through her when she flashed on how his expert tongue had dived into her the previous night, how his rough cheeks had scraped against her inner thigh, and she smiled in spite of herself.

"Do you even own a razor?"

Nathan released her hand and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Why? Do you want me to shave?"

"You're kidding, right?" Unbuckling her seatbelt, Remy slid across to run her fingertips over the dark stubble. Another shiver went straight to her clit. "Do you not remember how hard I came when you ate me out?" She couldn't resist. She leaned forward and dragged her tongue across his jaw, her mouth watering from the pleasurable rasp, ending at his ear. "There's so much right about this I can't even start."

Nathan swallowed hard. "No, I remember quite clearly. And I think, you better get back in your seat, or I'm not going to be responsible for what happens, or the resulting arrest for indecent exposure."

Her lashes ducked to see the clear outline of his erection beneath his jeans. It was so tempting to lean down and pull him out, suck him in and swallow him down until he spilled down her throat. Remy wasn't so sure Nathan didn't
want that right then, either. But he had a point about the exposure and really, it was more than enough to know she
could do that with just a few words and the touch of her tongue along his jaw.
Her eyes were twinkling as she slid back to her own side. "Party pooper."
"I know," he said, smiling as the gridlock ended, and the cars in front of them began to pick up speed. He drifted to
the right as the 1A exit approached, and Remy couldn't help but remark on the incongruity of the exit names. Every
other exit had featured a street name, but this was just 1B and 1A. Nathan only shrugged. "Not a lot about the Los
Angeles freeway system makes sense. You get used to it."
The traffic didn't thin once they exited, but Remy figured that was because the day was gloriously beautiful. Santa
Monica sparkled. Beautiful men and women with tan, taut bodies lined every sidewalk, while slender teenage girls
with wide smiles and blond hair navigated through the mayhem. Nathan patiently moved down narrow streets to a
dark parking garage, fishing out a handful of ones to hand to the parking attendant.
"Eight dollars," he muttered. "Better be worth it."
Her eyes shot to him as he maneuvered into a tight space. "You're not having doubts, are you?"
"What? No." He slid the parking pass onto the dashboard. "I just hate paying this ridiculous price for parking. It's the
biggest scam in the city."
As he led her through the murk out into the brilliant sunshine, Remy had to bite her tongue to keep from teasing him
further. Eight dollars for parking? If Nathan had any idea how much it cost in DC in seventy-five years, she was
pretty sure he'd have a heart attack.
She couldn't help but glance at all the people they passed as they made their way to the shop. While many of them
had to be tourists, there were enough on the perfect end of the spectrum to be considered locals. Self-consciously,
she pulled herself a little straighter, tugging at the bottom of her top as if that would make her stomach look flatter.
"Is this guy buying any of the other coins? Because I'm thinking we can use the money right about now."
"I'm sure he'll make an offer we can't refuse," Nathan said, his hand a light touch against the small of her back. He
guided her down the busy block, expertly winding his way through the crowd, to a shop so small she wouldn't even
have noticed it. The narrow door and blackened window were wedged between a juice bar and a Starbucks.
The blast of cold air as soon as she stepped through the door was a welcome relief, and Remy paused in the entrance
as the fan overhead blew across her sweaty shoulders. She hadn't realized how hot she was until faced with the
alarming difference in temperature, but when she caught Nathan's amused glance, she hastily straightened and
moved on, flushing with embarrassment.
The shop was even smaller inside, glass-covered shelves lining each of the walls. Dust seemed to cling to every
crack, but when she stepped close enough to try and peer through the grimy glass, the assortment of oddities on the
other side made her wrinkle her nose. All that was missing were the monkey paws and shrunken heads.
Nathan was not fazed. He went straight to the low counter and rang the bell sitting next to the register. Through the
door on the rear wall, a tiny Hispanic man with a humped back scurried in, but the moment he saw who his customer
was, his lined face lit up and a fluent torrent of Spanish came flooding out of his mouth.
Her brows shot up when she heard Nathan respond in the same language.
Huh. Is there anything he can't do?
Remy couldn't follow the conversation at all, but she caught the gist. Nathan handed the other man the silver coin,
his brow furrowed, his words soft. The shopkeeper nodded enthusiastically and took the coin, putting it beneath a
piece of paper and rubbing a pencil against it. As soon as Manuel passed it back, Nathan fished out two of the
smaller, silver coins and slid them across the table.
The atmosphere seemed tense, even solemn, as the man put on a pair of thick glasses and studied the coins. After
several beats he looked up and said what sounded like a number. Nathan smiled and nodded. As the little man
scuttled into the back room again, Nathan looked over his shoulder and asked, "So ... you want to go shopping?"
* * * *
After the mall's air conditioning, the sun felt glorious on her chilled skin, prickling it to life as she leaned against the
pier's railing. Remy pushed her new sunglasses more firmly into place, then tilted her head back to expose as much
of her face and neck to the heat as possible, her long hair tickling down her spine. A contented sigh escaped her
parted lips.
His low chuckle alerted her to Nathan's arrival, but she didn't turn around as his arm wrapped around her waist.
Pulling her against his chest, he gently kicked the bags at her feet with the toe of his boot. "You didn't spend all that
money, did you?"
Remy nestled into him, relishing how he tightened his arm when the space between them lessened. "Not even close."
Her fingers strayed up and down his strong arm. "What have you been up to? Get an answer yet about the coin?"
"No. Manuel said he'd ring as soon as he had the answer. Knowing him, that means we can expect a call at three in
the morning." He kissed the top of her head. "I've been trying to figure out what to do with you."
She stiffened. Twisting in his arms, Remy looked up into Nathan's face, wishing he didn't have sunglasses on to hide
his eyes from her. "What do you mean?"
"Well, I could take you to the Barn to meet with Isaac, but I don't feel like listening to his doom and gloom. Unless you want all-you-can-eat ribs, then I don't mind. Or I could take you over there." He pointed over the golden beach to a small restaurant. "It has great crab cakes. Or, and this is the one I'm partial to, I could just take you home, and we can worry about dinner much later tonight."
The moment he started talking about food, she felt ridiculous for jumping to any kind of negative conclusion. After those first few hours on their first night together, Nathan had done nothing but accept her for who she was. Just because she was worried about what Kirsten was going to do, how he was going to get hurt, didn't mean those same kinds of doubts plagued him.
She launched herself at him as soon as he finished speaking, making him stumble backward to regain his footing as she wrapped her arms around his neck. Deliberately, she rubbed her chest against his, feeling her nipples pebble beneath the thin fabric of her top.
"You'd cancel out on your buddy to spend the evening with me?"
"I'm sure Isaac will get over the heartbreak of being stood up. Besides, we were supposed to compare notes, and I didn't learn anything today..." Nathan smiled. "Well, nothing that would be appropriate to share with him."
Stretching, Remy caught his bottom lip between her teeth and tugged playfully. "And we'll have a whole ride back to your place for you to learn something else," she said before taking his mouth in a short, demanding kiss. Her lips were tingling when they parted, and she slipped away before she jumped him then and there. "Come on. Let's get out of here."
CHAPTER NINE

"We'll go to the Barn tomorrow. It'll be on me, all right? All right. See you then."
Nathan hung up the phone, shaking his head. Isaac had seemed pretty annoyed. He hoped that was because Isaac really wanted those ribs, and not because he was upset Nathan had somebody else to spend time with. Though after five years of only spending time with each other, Nathan supposed the new situation was a little unsettling.
"Come on. They're not going to hold our table."
He glanced up as Remy stepped into the room, then froze as his surroundings tunneled around him, focusing in on her. She had done her hair and make-up much as she had for Rojo the night before. Dark waves tumbled down her back, while smoky eyes and a scarlet mouth highlighted her features. It was the dress she had chosen and how it clung to her curves, however, that left him speechless.

The deepest of blacks, its design was simple, with thin straps curving to a deep vee at the neckline. With her full breasts so deliciously accentuated, the dress then tucked in at her slim waist before flaring out again, ending at mid-thigh in a swirl of fabric that drew his gaze down her toned legs. Three-inch heels completed the ensemble.
"What?" She fidgeted as she tried to smooth down the skirt. "It's not too bad, is it? I don't do dresses."
"No," Nathan rasped. Clearing his throat, he added, "You should do dresses more often. Wait, you've got a little something." He reached out and picked a piece of lint off her skirt.
"Are you sure?" She sounded unconvinced. "Because I can always change. It's got to be easier to get out of than it was to get into." Sweeping her hair aside, she twisted her upper body to show him the back and the slight gap in the fastenings near her neckline. "I couldn't even finish the fucking zipper. And I know there's a hook or something there, but damned if I can put it together."
Nathan fingered the smooth material. "Yeah, there's a hook here." He didn't make any effort to fasten it-the bare bit of skin just below her neck was far too distracting. Unable to resist, he leaned over to brush his lips against the small patch. She shivered against his mouth, a slight tremble that seemed to echo in his body. Placing his hands on her hips, Nathan forced her to turn around completely. "I don't want to see you out of it," Nathan murmured, moving his hands down her hips to the hem of her skirt.

Her head tilted to the left, the soft waves of her hair falling away to expose the delicate line of her neck. "And yet, we're not leaving. What happened to worrying about our table?"
"I'm sure it's not going anywhere." His hands snuck beneath her skirt. The tips of his fingers scraped against the lacey tops of her stockings. He couldn't even remember where they had reservations. Some restaurant in Pasadena. It hardly seemed to matter now. His hands moved higher, sneaking over her inner thighs, and eliciting the softest moan from her throat.

With one hand still beneath her skirt, he slid the other up her back to snag the tip of the zipper. "Unless," he said, as he pulled the zipper down, "you're worried about it."

Her no came out as a mere breath. Slowly, Remy reached back to run her hand up the front of his thigh, brushing against his erection but not stopping until she found the top of his waistband. There, her fingernails traced inward, causing the muscles in his stomach to twitch, until they reached his belt.

"You're the one who said he was hungry for food now." He heard the smile in her voice. "I was more than happy to stay in bed a little longer. But if I get to get out of this dress, I'm definitely not going to complain."
"I was hungry." Nathan smoothed his fingers down her spine, smiling as she arched towards his touch. Skimming his mouth across her shoulders, he inhaled deeply, catching the subtle aroma of honey and flowers. "New soap, too? It's nice."

But it was more than nice. The soap had mingled with the natural musk from her skin to create something sweet, and enticing, and entirely new to him. Curious, he buried his nose in her hair, enjoying the way the heavy silk strands brushed against his face and throat. He couldn't distinguish a single scent, just the combined perfume of soap and shampoo and water. Nathan moved closer, folding her body against his. Sliding his hands over her breasts and along her stomach, he freed her upper body from the loose material of her dress.

Remy's sigh of relief resonated through her. "You like that word a lot." Her deft fingers had managed to undo his buckle, and now they were pulling his shirt from his pants, sending shivers along his skin from their heat. "Nice. That's what you said last night, too."
"Hmm. What about some of your favorite words? Royal? Sauce? I don't know what you're on about half the time."
"You're just lucky you've got a killer accent. A girl can forgive anything when you put it to work."
He pushed the dress past her hips, watching as it slipped down her thighs to pool at her feet. "I can think of words besides nice. How about delicious? Enticing?" Nathan cupped her breasts through her lacy bra, fingering her nipples until they were hard. Moaning, she dropped her head forward. She felt both supple and tense. Her muscles tightened as she grew more aroused, but he knew she could melt around him like butter.
"That's not quite right either." Starting at the nape of her neck, he licked a slow path down her back, following the curve of her spine, and sinking to his knees behind her.
Without being able to touch his stomach any longer, Remy moved her hands to cover his, guiding them as they molded over her stomach and onto her hips. Her satin skin pulsed beneath his touch, and as his fingers traced the smooth edge of her briefs, a long, shuddering sigh escaped her throat.
"Know what else isn't right?" It was a whisper. As if she were afraid speaking louder would shatter the spell surrounding them. "Wanting you more now than I did yesterday. I thought being together like we have been would take the edge off, but..."
She didn't finish the thought. Nathan finished it for her.
"But it's not enough." He dropped soft kisses along the curve of her ass. He reached the top of her thigh and paused to inhale again, enjoying the heady fragrance of her arousal beneath the softer blend of soap. She held his hands tightly, still guiding them over her body, and while he didn't want to pull away from her, he did want to feel the tight heat of her pussy.
Nathan kissed a trail in the opposite direction, pausing as he reached the briefs band. Without warning or hesitation, he slid his tongue down the silk, his mouth moving along her crevice, until he reached the wet material acting as a thin barrier to her slick opening. Nathan teased her with his mouth, sucking, and scraping, and probing her flesh through the flimsy silk.
Her gasp made his cock jump. Beneath his palms, her muscles flexed as she parted her thighs, giving him clearer access to her pussy, but the movement caught her heels on the carpet, knocking her off-balance. Their entwined hands kept Remy from stumbling. As soon she was firm again, she let one of his go, leaning forward in order to brace herself against the wall.
"Don't stop," she breathed. "God, please. Don't stop."
Like he could. He snagged her briefs with his free hand, dragging them down her thigh and the length of her leg, the soft silk gliding against her skin. She lifted one leg, daintily stepping out of the briefs and letting them loop around the heel on her other foot. Nathan never took his mouth from her pussy, his tongue lapping at her hot skin. Remy guided his hand between her thighs, pushing his fingers against her clit.
He pressed his finger against the bundle of nerves, caressing it as he took his time exploring her. Pushing his tongue into her tight channel, her juices coated his lips as he fucked her with his mouth slowly, almost mockingly. Remy tightened against him with each soft thrust, her muscles tight and sweet around him, her clit jerking beneath his finger.
It dawned on him there were words buried in her panting breaths. Most were lost, melting into less than the air it took to make them, but enough broke through, took form to reach Nathan's ears, in spite of the taut thighs cushioned against his cheeks.
There was please and more and others he remembered from encounters years ago. But her want you, Nate struck the deepest chord. Every time she said his name, her body trembled, sometimes convulsed, always reacted in some way. And each time her skin flamed hotter.
Nathan's cock strained against his pants, jerking with each of her moans. Each small tremor against his tongue sent a quake through his body. Blindly, he reached for his zipper, freeing his erection from the confines growing tighter by the second. He sighed against her skin as he gripped his shaft, stroking himself in time with his thrusting tongue. It didn't help ease the pressure.
When he felt Remy rocking against his face, driving him further, deeper, harder against her clit, Nathan knew she was close. Her pussy walls were starting to flutter through his tongue. All he craved at that moment in time was to feel her release. To taste it. To know she was coming because of him. He pushed on, determined to get it.
The cry wrenched from her throat, her thighs tightening around his head as her body went rigid. Her juices coated his chin, and Nathan sucked them down, unwilling to tear his mouth away and lose even a second of her orgasm. Even as she began to beg for him to stop, he didn't move.
As soon as Remy's muscles went lax, her body spent, he pinched her clit. Enough to make her muscles twitch like a bolt of electricity had been shot through the bottoms of her feet. Nathan grunted triumphantly as her muscles clenched around him again, and this time, she began to whimper, incoherent words falling from her mouth. Nathan thought he could torment her like that forever, but his balls were tight, and his cock slick with pre-come.
Grudgingly, he moved his mouth from her, licking his lips as he straightened. Wrapping his arm around her waist, he pressed his chest against her back, pausing for a moment to feel the heat of her skin.
"Remind me to thank whoever it was who taught you how to do that," Remy breathed. She was slick with sweat, already grinding back against his aching cock. "As soon as my brain starts working again."
Nathan chuckled as he adjusted himself, the head of his cock slipping easily against her wet flesh. Taking a deep breath, he thrust inside her completely, putting his hand out to brace himself against the wall. He steadied himself,
preparing to slide out and slam into her again, but her soft sigh stopped him short.
He rested his brow against her head. "Please tell me I'm not hurting your back. Because, Remy, I'm about to lose it."
"No, it doesn't hurt," she confirmed in a voice so low he had to strain to hear her. Her hand ran up his tensed arm before settling over his, their fingers entwining without breaking his contact with the wall. "It's just..."
She stopped. Nathan waited for her to speak, his body bowstring tight. He was sure he was going to break before she said what was on her mind.
"I keep forgetting how right you feel," she whispered. "And then you get inside me again, and I wonder how it is I could ever forget."
Nathan knew what she meant, but it still felt like she had elbowed him in the stomach. Being with her, being inside her, did feel right. But the fact he felt it at all, that she felt it too, overwhelmed him.
"I know." He thrust into her again. "I know." He increased his tempo gradually until he found a rhythm to satisfy the blistering lust rolling through his body. "I know," he panted as he pounded into her, losing himself in her exquisite heat, and the chorus of moans, and the burn in his muscles and chest, and her slick skin, and the erratic beat of his own heart thudding in his ears.
She began spasming around his cock far too soon. Cries too incoherent to be words carried with every thrust, and Remy's head fell back, her free hand reaching around to cup the back of his neck. She pulled Nathan down so that his lips skimmed the saturation of her skin, his name tumbling from her mouth, her pussy clamping around his shaft, but beneath it all echoed her earlier words.
Nathan was unable to withstand the force of her third orgasm as it swept through her. He wasn't ready to stop, wasn't ready to let her go, but it was out of his control. He was at her mercy, and as the heat rolled from her skin to suffuse through his flesh, he thrust into her a final time. He came with a deep shudder, his body shaking with the needed, but not quite welcome, release.
Twisting her neck, Remy's mouth sought his, finding first the corner and then the full press as she kissed him with her breath catching in her throat. It was possible he imagined the quivering in her lips, though in the wake of his orgasm, Nathan realized that could have been his own lips trembling. Regardless, the caress swept them both back down from their peaks.
"Think we can forget dinner and head straight to your bedroom for dessert?"
"We'll order in," Nathan said, somehow finding the strength to pull away from her. He began tugging at the buttons of his shirt, adding, "Dessert is nice, but we've got to keep your strength up."
Without his body pinning her, Remy turned around in order to lean against the wall. Her skin was flushed a rosy pink, the hard tips of her nipples prominent through her lacy bra. His mouth watered with the sudden desire to lean down and pull one between his teeth.
Reaching for his shirtfront, she pulled him back, guiding his hands to her plush hips. "Better get me off my feet then."
Nathan smiled, tilting his head to tease her lips with his tongue. "With pleasure." He lifted her up, waiting until her arms and legs were locked around him before carrying her back to his bed.

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Nathan's cancellation soured Isaac's already foul mood. Snapping his cell phone shut, he marched away from the noisy entrance of the Barn, his footsteps heavy against the sidewalk as he headed back to his car. Nothing to tell, my ass. Nathan was fucking the girl, and he didn't have the balls to admit it. Under any other circumstances, Isaac would have been the first to wave the flag and lead the parade; god knew, if there was anybody who needed some companionship, it was Nathan.

But these weren't other circumstances. These were fucked up beyond all belief circumstances. And Isaac would choose the life of his best friend over a civilian any day of the week.

The girl didn't exist. Fingerprints had turned up nothing; every database he fed information into had come back blank. He had gone as far as he could with the name she claimed to have, but everything ended at a stone wall. It had to be an alias, because nothing else made sense.

Her ID card was an interesting twist, though, he had to give her that. Remy had argued more about giving the card up than she had the prints, which lent some weight to Nathan's insistence it was important. The dates on it had made Isaac scoff out loud, but questioning her had led to more walls when she refused to answer them, and he had been left watching their retreating backs while they went and did...something Nathan refused to elucidate. Find answers, he'd said cryptically.

Remembering the conversation as he snatched open the door of his Toyota deepened Isaac's scowl. If he found out they spent the day fucking back at Nathan's apartment, there was going to be hell to pay. He'd lock Remy up, whether Nathan wanted him to or not.

To add to the confusion of the girl's real identity were the blood samples Nathan had given him. There wasn't much
you could tell from the quicker tests; DNA testing would take at least a few days and, without any cause to make it a priority, a number of weeks. The techs had been half-assed with what tests they had done claiming she had antibodies for infectious mononucleosis to indicate a vaccination at some point in her life. But according to them, that was impossible since there were no available vaccinations for the disease. Isaac was writing it off as a contaminated sample. What did he care what kind of shots Remy Capra had gotten as a kid anyway?

Beyond Remy was the issue of Kirsten Henryk. That, more than anything, was why he wanted to speak to Nathan. After palming the ID off on one of the few tech guys he knew could stay discreet, Isaac had spent as much time trying to figure out her story as he had Remy's. She was convincing; that was the big problem. Plus, she had money. The contact information she had left for him had her holed up in one of the swankiest Beverly Hills hotels. The only thing was, she was as much of a ghost as Remy. No records with any government office he could find, no credit reports, nothing to suggest she was in any way affiliated with any type of security back in DC. He'd even contacted a friend at the FBI to see if maybe she was working something covert that wouldn't leave a trail, but that had come back cold as well.

It didn't make sense. His gut screamed at him that she was a cop of some sort, and he didn't like to ignore his instincts. He didn't want to ignore them now. But Isaac wasn't sure what other alternative he had left.

Waiting at a red light, his fingers drummed along the steering wheel while he weighed his options. Part of him was tempted to drive by Nathan's and interrupt, just for the perverse pleasure of witnessing his friend's lips disappear from how tightly he would purse them at seeing Isaac. That would be fun. There was also the fact that, dangerous or not, Remy was hot as hell. One more look at her shapely legs, maybe a flash of tit, could be worth it.

A better idea came to him as the light turned green.

It took half an hour to get through traffic to the posh hotel in Beverly Hills Kirsten Henryk had claimed to be staying at. Flashing his badge at the valet, Isaac waited on the curb long enough to make sure they treated his car as they would any of the more expensive models that rolled through the drive, then pushed his way inside, heading straight for the front desk.

The wonders of being a cop got him into the night manager's office within two minutes. Within five, he had everything Kirsten Henryk had supplied them in order to secure a room. Within ten, he was standing outside her door, waiting for the manager to let him in.

The room was empty.

She had slept there, he was certain. But beyond some fresh toiletries and a single bag from the hotel's laundry hanging on the closet door, there was no other sign of her. No luggage. No litter. Another dead end.

He took the few strands of blond hair entangled in the brush before he left. He would have taken the brush itself, but with so few belongings marking her territory, Isaac knew anything else would be missed.

"Is this woman dangerous?" the manager asked as they waited at the elevator to go back downstairs. "Should I alert the staff?"

"No, don't talk to anyone about this," Isaac warned. "Right now, she's not considered a threat, and I don't want her to find out she's under suspicion. She could be a flight risk."

"So ... do you want me to call you if she checks out?"

"Definitely." He handed over his card as the doors slid open. "And remember, mum's the word."

He saw her as he stepped off the elevator, her chin high, back ramrod straight as she came out of the small sundry store near the front desk. For a moment, Isaac debated ducking out of sight, but then her eye caught his and he knew it would be pointless. They both froze. No emotion flickered across her porcelain features, but somehow he knew she realized what he had been doing.

Kirsten was the first to move. Long strides took her to the closest doors, and she was already melting into the darkness on the street by the time his feet took flight. Isaac reached the exit a few seconds later. Jerking his head in both directions, he saw a flash of blond hair disappear around the far corner of the hotel, and took off at a dead run in pursuit. Fuck protocol. He was going to arrest the bitch and figure out what the deal was later.

He had his gun ready in his hand as he rounded the corner, but the night swallowed any stray light from the streets. Slowing to a walk, he pressed further, eyes darting around as he tried to figure out where she was hiding. He never heard the shot. He only knew he'd been hit by the sudden searing pain across his shoulder.

Slumping against the wall, Isaac fired on instinct. Her gasped cry was the only indication he'd hit her at all, but no more shots went whizzing by. All he heard were running footsteps, growing fainter as she fled the scene. He banged his head against the wall, his eyes squeezing shut. Damn it. The bitch got away and he got shot. The perfect ending to his oh-so-perfect day.
CHAPTER TEN
Nathan fumbled through the darkness for his phone, his stomach growling and his head full of cotton. Remy had expressed a desire for pizza before falling into a light doze. He had forgotten about ordering food as he watched her sleep, captivated by the soft rhythm of her breath, the gentle rise and fall of her bare breasts, and the slight parting of her full lips. The spell was only broken when she smiled sleepily and asked where her dinner was.

He sorted through the stack of junk mail and flyers resting on the floor near the door until he found one promising delivery until two in the morning. Nathan began to dial the number, only to have a minor heart attack as his phone lit up and began to howl. Cursing under his breath, he brought the phone up to his ear.

"What do you want?" Nathan snapped, his voice low.
"Well, gee, a fine hello to you, too." Sarcasm laced Isaac's greeting. In the distance, traffic rumbled through the line. "Let me guess. I'm interrupting."

Nathan regretted his harsh tone, especially now his heart rate was back to normal. "No, not interrupting anything except my ongoing quest for food. But, well, what do you want?"

"World peace, the perfect steak, and, oh yeah, to stop bleeding from this fucking gunshot wound."

As soon as Nathan heard bleeding, he was moving back to the bedroom, gathering up the clothes he had discarded earlier and dressing quickly. A dozen questions came to mind, but he focused on the important one. "Where are you?"

Isaac gave him the name of an exclusive hotel in Beverly Hills. "Not inside, though. In the southside alley. I go back in and there's going to be a scene, and I don't need that right now."

"How serious is the wound?" Obviously, it couldn't be too bad if Isaac was hanging out in an alley and indulging in sarcasm, but Isaac also had the tendency to downplay his injuries.

"Through and through. Left shoulder. Hurts like a bitch, though." He chuckled, a dry, wracking sound. "Only thing that makes it better is knowing I hit her, too."

Nathan paused, his shoe hanging off his foot. "Her? Her who?"

"Who do you think? Kirsten Henryk."

"Kirsten?"

A tight fist with ice fingers clenched his heart as he began to understand the danger they were in. Dull rage replaced the initial shock. He'd be damned before that bitch got a second shot at Isaac, or within a hundred feet of Remy.

Kirsten Henryk had been a vague concern before, but now she was at the top of his list. With a bullet.

"Don't move. I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

The bed squeaked as he was pulling on his pants. He looked up in time to see Remy turn a sleepy smile to him.

"What's going on?"

"I need to go get Isaac." Nathan buttoned his pants. "He's been injured ... well, shot."

She sat up, pushing the blankets away. Swinging her legs around, she grabbed the underwear hanging from the nightstand. "Is he okay? Why isn't he going to the hospital?"

"He's survived worse. And he doesn't like hospitals. But I'll drag him into Emergency if I think he needs to see a doctor." He put a hand on Remy's arm as she moved to stand up. "You're not coming with me."

"What?" Her eyes flashed. "Why the hell not?"

"Because the bullet came courtesy of one Kirsten Henryk, and I don't know if she's still in the area." Nathan released her arm and stood, walking over to his gun safe. Winding through the combination, he added, "I want you to be here where it's safe."

The bed squeaked again as she shifted her weight, but a brief glance back showed Remy hadn't risen. She was staring someplace at the wall behind him, her features clouded. "If she can get to Isaac, she can get to anyone," she murmured. "There is no safe any more."

"Well, she hasn't gotten to us yet. Look, I'm leaving this out for you." He held up a small handgun before placing it on top of the shelf. "If I don't have to take him back to the hospital, I'll be back within the hour." He walked over to the side of the bed, bending to brush his lips against her forehead. "Just stay right here in bed, yeah? I want to find you where I left you."

Her hand shot out to grab his wrist, keeping him from walking away after he straightened again. When Nathan met her eyes, he hesitated at the choked panic he saw lurking in the dark depths.

"Kirsten's merciless." It was surprising how even her voice was, in spite of the look on her face. "And nobody knows her better than I do. I want to go."

"And what if she's waiting for you? All it takes is one bullet, Remy." He gently pulled his wrist from her. "I don't know why she shot Isaac, and he doesn't know where she is now. I'm just going to pick him up. We're not going to look for her or go after her."

"You're making a mistake." But she wasn't moving from the bed, only watching him with those fathomless eyes. He
had to turn away and grab his shirt in order to escape the pin of her gaze. "She's not going to give up, you know. And you're as vulnerable to a bullet as I am. More even, because you're not taking her seriously."

Nathan took a deep breath. He knew Remy could be headstrong, but he hadn't expected to be detained by this debate. "If I weren't taking her seriously, I wouldn't have an issue with you tagging along. Most likely, Kirsten doesn't know Isaac has a connection to you. Which means, she doesn't know who I am. She's not after us; she's after you. Do you want to give her more clues about where to find you?" He didn't wait for an answer, tucking in his shirttails. "Now, Isaac is bleeding in some alley, and I don't have the time to stand here and have this argument."

She didn't stop him as he stepped into his shoes. She didn't do anything until he was heading for the door. "Kirsten doesn't do anything without a reason. And she's not stupid. But you're right. I'm the one she's after. You're just the one in the middle of the line she's going to draw from Isaac to me." Lying back down, Remy rolled over so that her back was to him. "Go help your friend. Try not to get killed."

Nathan hesitated for a moment, looking at her back and feeling oddly helpless. He had trusted her to keep her head in a situation far more dangerous than this. She had already saved his life once, and he knew she'd be quick to do it again. But that concern wasn't at the core of the issue. He didn't know all the facts. He didn't know what happened or why. He didn't know if Isaac had hit Kirsten. He didn't even know if Isaac's injury was as minor as he claimed. But Nathan had been trained to go into dangerous situations without all the facts.

Remy was not. And he couldn't let her join him. Not in good conscience.

"We'll be back soon. Then we'll sort out what happened and decide what our next move should be."

He waited for some kind of a response, but when none came, Nathan grabbed his cell and keys and walked out of the room. Part of him expected Remy to follow him to continue the debate. Another part was relieved when she didn't.

The apartment was silent as he locked the door behind him.

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She didn't move for long seconds after she heard the lock snick into place. Every inch of her was screaming in fury at Nathan's inflexibility, but she had been able to tell from the firm set of his jaw he wouldn't budge. Arguing was futile. A waste of energy she could direct elsewhere.

Like finding Kirsten.

Pushing back the blanket, Remy dressed swiftly, ignoring most of her new purchases to slip on jeans and a T-shirt. She would have much preferred leaving in the clothes in which she'd arrived, but those had been torn up by Kirsten's knife. Why Kirsten would go to Isaac for help just to turn on him twenty-four hours later, Remy didn't know, but whatever the reason, it couldn't be good. Nathan was blinding himself to the very real danger she was presenting if he refused to see that. Odds were good Kirsten had found the connection back to Remy, so it was only a matter of time before she showed up on Nathan's doorstep. And what if she found Nathan on his own somewhere? Kirsten would eliminate any obstacle in her path.

How many times was Remy going to have to tell him that?

It didn't matter. She wasn't going to stick around long enough to put Nathan in any more danger. As much as she didn't want to go, she didn't want to see him hurt even more. One bullet. That's all it would take. He'd said so himself.

She took only the essentials. Half of the clothes she had purchased in Santa Monica would be useless if she was on the run, so those got left behind. One of Nathan's shirts found its way into the pack as well as a bar of his soap, but Remy rationalized that as practicality rather than the hungry need to have a piece of him. She took the gun as well. It wasn't her first choice as a weapon, but killing Kirsten would be a hell of a lot easier if she could do it from a distance.

When she saw the money on the nightstand, she hesitated. Cash was necessary; there was no getting around that. But she had promised it to Nathan for helping her and the thought of reneging on her word left Remy uneasy. She could always steal more later, after all, whereas he was bound more stringently by the law. In the end, she only took a few bills, but surely, she thought enough for a cheap hotel room and food for the next couple days. Nathan would understand. She hoped.

She was almost out the door when it occurred to her to leave a note. With Kirsten in the forefront of Nathan's thoughts, it was likely he would fear the worst when he got back and found Remy gone. She didn't want that. This was going to be hard enough as it was.

But what to say?

* It would kill me to see you get hurt.
* The past two days have been amazing, but ... ?
* I'm going to miss you. I'm sorry.

Nothing was good enough. It either said too much or not enough. In the end, Remy scrawled the briefest of truths
about what she was going to do and prayed Nathan would see the emotion behind the words.

As she hurried down the stairs to the street, her pack slung over her shoulder, she refused to give in to the temptation to turn around and go back. It was better this way. Safer.

She would come back once Kirsten was dead. She only hoped it wouldn't be too late for her and Nathan to pick up where they had left off.

* * * *

Silence greeted Nathan as he pushed the door open and ushered Isaac inside. Isaac had insisted Nathan drop him off at home, but Nathan had ignored him. Not only did he not want to take any extra time in returning to Remy, he wanted to be sure Isaac was fine. Plus, they did need to have the discussion he had promised Remy they would have.

"I'll get a clean shirt," Nathan said, as Isaac headed straight for the bathroom.

"As long as it's not that awful green one that looks like you shop at Sears." Isaac flicked on the light, stepping inside as the fluorescent flooded into the hall. "I look bad enough as it is."

Nathan rolled his eyes. "You know I keep only the finest designer threads for you, Isaac. Would you like the hand-stitched silk...” His words faded as he entered the empty bedroom. He looked over his shoulder, as if he expected to see Remy standing in the hall behind him, but she wasn't there.

Turning on the light, he stepped inside the room to investigate. His first thought was that Kirsten had found her, but there were no signs of a struggle, no blood, nothing to indicate Remy had been removed against her will. He ran his fingers across her pillow. It was still warm. He glanced up and noticed the gun he had left her was missing. A quick perusal of the closet confirmed some of her clothing was missing as well.

"I think you have a problem."

Nathan's head snapped around to see his friend standing in the doorway, his bloodied shirt half-undone. Between his fingers was a torn sheet of paper, a piece of tape stuck to one edge as if it had been pinned to something. "She left you a note.

He was across the room in a flash, snatching it away from Isaac and scanning over its brief contents. Her handwriting was childish, large and bold. It reminded him of somebody else's handwriting, but even in the haste he knew she had written it, the words were all too clear.

I'm sorry, Nate. I can't let her shoot you, too. Like you said, all it takes is one bullet, and then you're dead and it's all my fault. I'll fix it. I promise.

She didn't sign her name. There was only a scrawled R and a scribble he couldn't decipher.

Something inside him snapped. "Well, that's just brilliant, isn't it? She doesn't know Los Angeles at all. She doesn't know anybody in Los Angeles. She wouldn't have the first clue where to find Kirsten. And, oh yeah, Tian got a good look at her face last night. He has half his gang out trolling the city for her right now. Or all of them, if Cesar died."

The angry rise of Nathan's voice had Isaac holding his hands up in mock surrender. "Don't shoot the messenger, okay? Maybe she's not as helpless as you think. We don't know anything about this girl, remember?"

"I don't think she's helpless. I think she's a bit clueless. Look at this." He gestured towards the money on the nightstand. "She took some, but not enough to take care of herself. Where is she going to stay tonight? Where does she even think she's going?" He looked at Isaac. "She's not far. Will you help me find her?"

"Of course," came the automatic response. "Whatever you want." But he didn't move out of the doorway.

"Except... maybe her taking off isn't a bad thing. That Kirsten is batshit crazy. This is your chance to get out while you still can."

"I know. I know I can just let her run, and she can keep running until Kirsten, or Tian, or somebody else catches up with her." Nathan crumpled the note in his fist. "But I won't."

Dark eyes solemn, Isaac nodded as if he hadn't expected anything less. "Let's patch up this hole in my shoulder and I'll pop some painkillers. We'll find her. She doesn't stand a chance with both of us on her tail."
CHAPTER ELEVEN

The night was sticky, the air wet and close without the benefit of rain to take the edge off. Leaning against the pole, Remy peered up and down the deserted street, wondering why in hell the city would put a bus stop in a place that never had a bus come by. How did people get around in this town?

She stiffened when she saw the Mustang's lights in the distance, rounding the corner for the parking lot on the other side of Nathan's apartment complex. Damn it. She had hoped to be long gone by the time he got back. Now she didn't have the luxury of waiting for a bus; she had to get moving if she wanted to make sure he didn't find her.

So distracted by Nathan's Mustang, Remy didn't notice the massive, silver Lexus LX until it rolled to a stop beside her. She ignored it and began walking in the opposite direction, head down, but it followed, crawling to match her pace. Finally, at the end of the block, the passenger window slid down to expose a smiling young man with crooked teeth.

"It looks like you might need a ride," he said, almost pleasantly.

"Looks can be deceiving." Keeping her features placid, Remy didn't stop walking. She shifted the backpack around on her shoulders to make it easier to reach for the gun should the need arise.

"Where are you going, little girl?" a second voice asked. Remy couldn't see his face. "Where's your daddy?"

She had to fight not to roll her eyes.

"Idiotic pick-up lines will never change.

Before she responded, the Lexus sped up enough to pull ahead of her, the back door popping open and three more men pouring out of the seat. The closest grabbed at her backpack, but the moment her foot came up to try and defend herself, he yanked and pulled her off-balance, causing the pack to slip from her shoulder and land on the ground between them.

Another grabbed her from behind, wrapping his arm around her throat. "I believe I asked you a question. Where is he?"

Her first thought was, that was a real question?
The second was, fuck, he's strong.

The Lexus pulled up to the curb, the engine quieting as the two remaining men in the car emerged. Remy's eyes widened when she recognized the passenger, and for the first time, fear began to seep into her muscles.

It was the muscleman who'd accompanied Tian at Rojo the night before. The one who had been tailing him before Cesar had shown up and interrupted.

Deliberately, Remy relaxed her body, knowing that tensing would only make the situation worse. "My old man's been dead for years. You're welcome to go talk to him, but it'd be a pretty one-sided conversation."

The muscle nodded towards the car. "Get her inside."

The man holding her didn't move. "Tian made it pretty clear he wanted Nathan, not his little slut."

The muscle narrowed his eyes. "Put her in the fucking truck and shut your fucking mouth. He may want to fuck over Pierce, but I think this one will keep him satisfied for a few days."

Their disagreement was the distraction she'd been looking for. Slamming her elbow backward, Remy hooked her foot around her captor's ankle, snapping it forward to make him pitch back. His arm loosened enough for her to wrench free, but she had only taken a few running steps before someone else tackled her to the sidewalk.

Her head cracked against the concrete. For seconds afterward, stars danced in front of Remy's eyes. It didn't take much longer than that for her to realize two of the stars were the approaching headlights of Nathan's Mustang.

"Hey, look who it is," the muscle said from behind her, his voice gruff with excitement. "Let's give him a proper welcome."

The man on top of her hadn't moved, his weight crushing her against the sidewalk. Though she couldn't turn her head, she heard the distinctive clicks of a handful of guns being cocked, and she knew Nathan must have seen them all, but the Mustang didn't veer or slow.

There were two rapid gunshots, but Remy didn't know where they were coming from. After a moment, something sickeningly hot landed in a fat drop on the top of her head. The man slumped on top of her, suddenly much heavier. Horrified, she shoved the body away, noticing a perfect round hole in the top of his head.

"Get down," a familiar voice shouted, and then everything happened very fast.

Remy had lived with violence for far too long to ignore orders from a trusted source.

Diving back to the ground, she rolled away from the street, using the dead body of the man who'd been pinning her as cover. Only when she was tucked behind did she dare to see what was going on. Her blood froze at the tableau.

The Mustang was parked to a stop half-on the sidewalk, the dead body of the young man who had first offered a ride crushed beneath its tires. Isaac stood behind his open door, using it as a shield as he trained his gun on the men remaining, while Nathan stood over the prone form of Tian's muscleman. Blood was filling the cracks of the walk.

The three men on their feet moved fast, ducking into the still-running Lexus. The tires squealed as the driver floored it, sending a cloud of burning rubber and exhaust into their faces. Isaac fired after them, but the SUV didn't slow.
Remy wanted to shout at Nathan to get down, they could still be armed, but she didn't speak, he didn't move, and nobody fired again.

"Did you get the plates?" Nathan asked over his shoulder as the taillights disappeared into the night.

"Got em."

Nathan turned back to her, his face marked with concern. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah." Her hand rose to her head, feeling gingerly for any signs of blood. All she encountered was the rather large knot where she'd smacked against the sidewalk. "Yeah."

"You better call this in," Nathan said to Isaac as he holstered his gun. "I'll take her upstairs."

Remy was frowning as she pushed herself upward, ignoring the wave of dizziness. "I'm not going back, Nate. I can't."

"Why not?"

She stared at him. He had asked that with a straight face.

"Kirsten shooting your buddy ringing any bells?" Her eyes flickered to Isaac. "Of course, he's standing, so maybe that was an exaggeration, but it doesn't change facts. Kirsten's dangerous, and I'm not going to let you be the next one she goes after."

Nathan rolled his eyes. "And the preferable alternative is for you to get kidnapped? Look around you, Remy. This is my life. Kirsten may be new, but she's hardly unique. You don't want to listen to me? Isaac, you tell her."

Isaac started to shrug, and then winced, his shoulder slowly settling back down. "He's right. I'm pretty much his only friend. Everybody else wants him dead." He seemed to consider his assertion for a moment. "Well, except for you, it would look like."

Nathan turned back to face her. "That's the long and short of it, Remy. I can understand if you don't want to be caught in the middle of my shit." He gestured to the dead bodies. "But don't think you're doing me any favors by running."

The thought that he was the one with the muddle of problems made her laugh out loud, though she was quick to stop when her head throbbed from it. He frowned, casting a glance back to Isaac, but didn't say a word, waiting for her to respond.

"Why did you come looking for me? Why didn't you let me go?"

"Because I don't want to see you dead." Nathan held up his hand as she opened her mouth to protest. "Yes, I understand, Kirsten is the big bad boogie monster, and if you don't leave, we'll all die. She's the worst human being ever on the planet. In twelve years of fighting the dregs of Los Angeles, I couldn't have met a more profoundly evil person. Right, I get it. But you running off alone to be kidnapped and murdered is not going to make the situation better."

Her lips twitched and before she could stop it, Remy was smiling, bending to scoop up the backpack from the ground. "I'll give you the better off not dead part." She closed the distance between them, stepping around the dead body and the blood still flowing from the man's wounds. When she tilted her head back to look up at Nathan, her smile softened, and she was pretty sure her eyes reflected the burn in her gut at knowing he'd cared enough to come chasing after her so damn quick.

"We've got to start being more selfish, I think."

"You first. Here." He took her arm and led her away from the bodies, pausing to study her forehead beneath the streetlight. "But Isaac probably thinks I'm pretty damn selfish." He looked over his shoulder. "How are you doing over there?"

"Just enjoying the floor show." Isaac waved a hand in dismissal. "Carry on."

She still didn't like the idea, but the more Nathan talked, the more Remy saw his point. Her eyes flickered to the dead bodies, then back to his unperturbed face. This was his life. Violence. Walking a knife's edge with death. The reason Isaac had gotten shot was because he still lived in a world of rules; he hadn't anticipated Kirsten's attack because he expected her to act in a certain way.

It was all too clear that Nathan had given up anyone's rules but his own years ago. He wouldn't be as easy a target, especially now he was on alert.

Safety in numbers. Hadn't she learned that lesson with the gang years ago? When you were surrounded by people you trusted, it was irrefutable. Even when the number was only two.

Meeting his waiting gaze, Remy held out the backpack, waiting for Nathan to take it. "I was wrong. I shouldn't have run. Sorry."

Tilting his head, he studied her with a bemused expression.

"Well. All right, then. Glad that's settled." Nathan took the backpack, looping it over his arm. He brushed his fingertips across the growing bump on her forehead then leaned over, his mouth near her ear, his words meant for
Remy only. "I would have missed you."

She indulged in a soft sigh, leaning into his hard body as she lost herself in his musky scent for the briefest of moments. "That makes two of us," she whispered back. Stepping away before he replied, she ducked around to head for the Mustang. Her smile when she reached Isaac was playful. "So which one of us walking wounded gets shotgun?"

* * * *

After leaving Isaac to deal with the bodies-and vowing he would pay him back in some spectacular fashion-the numbness that had settled over him when he saw Tian's thugs grab Remy lifted, leaving a combination of fear and anger. He wasn't accustomed to the bitter taste of fear, and he didn't like it. Kirsten might be dangerous, but he knew Tian. And worse yet, he knew Tian wouldn't stop at anything to get his revenge if Cesar had died from his injuries. He took Remy back to the apartment without speaking, too caught up in the unfamiliar emotions and frightening implications of the attempted kidnapping to speak. They were only a few blocks from his home, which meant they were watching him. Tian was going on the offensive now, striking first. Possibly in retaliation, possibly because he was just tired of their cat-and-mouse game.

The touch of her hand on his arm jolted him from his thoughts, and Nathan dropped his keys from where he had been attempting to unlock his door. Remy knelt down and scooped them up, slipping between him and the knob to finish what he'd been too distracted to. It was almost a relief to step inside the comfort of his apartment; as spare as it was, it was still home.

"I don't know about you, but I could use a drink." Her gaze twinkled with amusement as she leaned against the arm of the couch and watched him drop the backpack to the floor. "You have anything? Or is that too Philip Marlowe?"

"I don't drink, but I think I might have something." Actually, he hadn't had a drop to drink in the past year, but he still had a few bottles of whiskey left over from the hazy days when he drank everything.

Nathan left her on the couch while he went into the kitchen for ice, Jack Daniels, and two glasses. When he returned, she was stretched out on the cushions, her eyes closed. He pressed the ice pack in her hand, sitting on the edge of the couch near her legs.

"Did they ... say anything?" Nathan asked, pouring her drink.

"The usual shit." She cracked open an eye as a grin curved her mouth. "Apparently, you're my daddy. I'm assuming that means the same thing now as it does in my time."

Nathan returned her grin. "Yes, it probably does. Other than that, did they mention where they planned to take you? Anything useful?"

Remy shook her head. "The only thing off was they couldn't agree on grabbing me. The guy holding me said Tian wanted you not me, but the other one, the big guy you shot there at the end, said I'd be a good stand-in for the time being." Her smile faded, her eyes fluttering shut again as she rested the ice pack against her head. "I wish I could tell you more."

"No, that's enough." If Tian didn't want Remy specifically, that was a pretty good indication Cesar had survived the knife to his back.

He handed her the cup, watching as she brought it to her lips without opening her eyes. She downed it in an easy gulp. Her cheeks flushed as the alcohol moved through her, and when she looked at him again, her eyes were bright. Nathan leaned forward, the tip of his tongue darting out to lick the trace of whiskey from her lips.

Remy moaned at the contact, her mouth opening to encourage him to deepen the caress. Blindly, her hand fell to the side of the couch, setting the glass down on the floor, then came up to the back of his neck, dragging him even closer.

"This was worth coming back for," she murmured in between kisses.

Nathan settled on top of her, his thigh between her legs, his arm between her body and the couch's plush back. Closing his eyes, he kissed her deeply, and as her tongue playfully toyed with his, it struck him that he would have missed her a great deal. He would have missed the sly curve of her smiles, the way she tasted, the way she fit against his body, the way she looked in tight, black dresses.

Nathan sighed, happy to focus on her heat, on the rhythm of her heart slamming against her chest. He groaned in protest as she broke away for air, finding her mouth again.

"Well, damn if the floor show isn't even better in here," Isaac's wry voice said from the doorway.

Nathan considered ignoring Isaac and continuing the floorshow. He'd leave eventually. Or maybe he wouldn't. Maybe he'd turn it into a battle of wills.

"I take it," Nathan said, easing himself away from Remy, "given your swift return, there weren't any problems?"

Isaac didn't linger on the edge of the room once Nathan and Remy were separated, coming in to sit on the coffee table. "No, I really am that good." His eyes flickered to the empty glass on the floor and the full one Nathan had yet to touch, his brows lifting in surprise. "We got the girl this time. Why are we hitting the Jack?"
"Remy wanted a drink. The bottle was a bit dusty but..." He offered the untouched glass to Isaac. "Here, you deserve it for being just that good."

As Isaac took the glass and downed it as easily as Remy had, she took the opportunity to sit up and curl into the corner of the couch. "You're looking pretty good for someone who got shot only a couple hours ago."

Nathan stiffened, watching Isaac as he licked the last few drops of whiskey from his lips. "And you're looking pretty good for someone who almost ended up another one of Tian's statistics," came Isaac's reply. "I guess we've both got nine lives."

The wariness in her eyes melted. "Thanks to Nate."

The two men exchanged a glance at the familiar nickname, amusement flickering on Isaac's face. Nathan was well aware Remy wasn't Isaac's favorite person at the moment, but at the same time, Isaac seemed at ease. More at ease than he had been the other morning, despite the caution he still exhibited. Remy seemed relaxed as well. She had proclaimed once she only trusted what she knew and, Nathan hoped at this point, she realized she could trust Isaac. But as he sat there with the two of them, he couldn't help but be reminded of the first time Isaac had met Susanna. She had been funny and quick-witted, charming both of them until they would have happily licked the bottom of her shoe. There had even been a bit of jealousy between the two of them until they would have happily licked the bottom of her shoe. Those memories were the source of his vague anxiety now. He didn't want to lose Remy, not while everything was still new, but he didn't want another rift with Isaac. They owed each other too much.

"Yeah. He's a real tom cat that way." His eyes narrowed in speculation, and Nathan's anxiety took a different turn. He knew that look. "You, on the other hand, I know next to nothing about. Well, except for the fact that you've got a crazy bitch after you who thinks it's funny to shoot at cops and you've managed to get my best friend thinking about sex for the first time in five years."

"And surprisingly, you've hit on the only two interesting things there are about me," she shot back.

Nathan jumped to his feet, stepping between the coffee table and the couch. "It's been a very long night. Remy, why don't you go and ... unpack your bag. I'll be there in a few minutes."

For a second, he thought she was going to argue with him. Anger was starting to spark in her dark eyes, and the firm set of her jaw was all too familiar. When her mouth opened to speak, Nathan was convinced all the good will he'd been trying to sow with Isaac for her was about to be wrecked.

"Don't be too long," she said instead. "It's been a long day and we never did eat. Who knows how long I'll last?"

She started to step away, but apparently thought better of it, turning back to face him. Coiling her arms around his neck, Remy gave Nathan a resounding kiss that lasted just long enough to take him by surprise. She then slipped down his body and skirted the couch, retrieving the backpack before disappearing into the bedroom. The entire display took less than thirty seconds.

"Something tells me I know what you were too busy eating to get around to joining me for dinner."

Sighing, Nathan sat across from Isaac. A very annoyed Isaac, by the look on his face. "After we left you this morning, I took her to Santa Monica to see Manuel. You remember him, right? Anyway, I figured her coins were distinctive enough, it might be a lead to figuring out who she is or where she's from. He said he'd look into it."

Nathan paused. Isaac looked at him steadily, as though he expected Nathan's story to get much better.

"I'm sorry we blew you off?" Nathan tried.

Isaac didn't say a word for over a minute. "Answer me one thing and we'll call it even."

"Anything."

"Is she worth all this?"

Nathan had always been honest with Isaac, and there was no reason to stop now. "She's not worth you getting shot again. But she's worth my time, and she's worth helping, and she's worth fighting for. I'm sorry you got caught in this mess, Isaac."

He nodded. "Good enough, then." Though his eyes remained solemn, his mouth was starting to twitch, as if he was trying to refrain from smiling. "Now are you going to sit out here and keep me from getting any sleep tonight when you've got an incredibly hot, potentially dangerous woman like that waiting in the next room to jump your bones?"

Nathan's smile was interrupted by a yawn. "No. But I am dead on my feet." He yawned again, emphasizing his point. "Don't disappear tomorrow morning. We need to talk when my brain is functioning."

This time, Isaac did grin. "And if I needed any proof at all you're exhausted, it would be that too easy opening you just lobbed in my direction." He waved toward the closed bedroom door. "Go to bed. You can favor me with your brilliance in the morning."
CHAPTER TWELVE

Nathan undressed without turning on the light, moving silently in the dark bedroom. After the very long day they had had, he was certain Remy was already asleep. He knew his eyes would slam shut as soon as his head hit the pillow. He wasn't shocked to see it was already after three, and though he fantasized about sleeping in past noon—as he typically did—he knew he wouldn't have that luxury.

He crawled into the bed, careful not to disturb Remy, and stretched out on the cool sheet. The window was open, but there wasn't a hint of breeze to disturb the heat, and the city outside the apartment was eerily silent. Nathan closed his eyes, drifting away, but Remy shifted beside him, pulling him back from the brink of slumber.

"Thank you for coming after me."

"You didn't have enough money." Nathan realized it was an absurd statement, and yet, it made perfect sense to him. The pillow shifted, and he opened his eyes to slits to see her staring down at him. "Just when I start figuring you out..."

The question didn't surprise him. In fact, it was exactly the sort of question he'd expect Remy to ask. "Yes. It's been five years since I've done a lot of things."

"Why?" Her breath was the only thing moving in the air, the faint traces of the whiskey lingering between them. "What happened?"

"I met a girl," he answered, before he even realized he was going to speak. Remy wouldn't be happy to leave it there, and Nathan knew he didn't have to tell her more. It wasn't any of her business. But he found he wanted to tell her. He took her hand, bringing it up the raised scar on his neck. "She did this to me, and then tried to kill Isaac as well."

Her thick lashes lowered, her gaze shifting to his neck as she traced the thin line, reminiscent of the first time she had noticed it. He barely felt her fingertips, and if it wasn't for the subtle shift of the tiny bones within his grasp, he didn't think he would have known she was touching him.

"Well, that explains a hell of a lot." There wasn't a trace of anything but grateful realization in her quiet voice. "But why? Why would she do something like that?"

"Because she was a whore. She worked for a small-time pimp named Parker. Of course, we knew Parker, knew what he was up to, but we had bigger concerns. As long as he stayed out of our way, we didn't bother him. Until we got wind he was dealing in more than just girls. A young man was murdered, and our investigation led us right back to Parker, and the automatic weapons he had brought to town."

Nathan paused, his throat dry. He had never talked about this to anybody, and though he relived those days over and over, trying desperately to figure out how and when it all went so wrong, the story he was telling sounded foreign to him. Unknown.

"We decided to set up a sting. Easy enough. Nothing we hadn't done before. Except Parker had his own sources. And he fancied himself quite the evil genius."

Her hand stilled. "Did you know what she was when you met her?"

"No. She was fresh off the bus when she met Parker. I don't know how long she had been in town before he set her up to meet me. She always claimed she came to L.A. to be a dancer. That part was probably true. I don't know. She looked like the sort of girl who could do whatever she wanted when I met her. At the time, I used to frequent a bar in Santa Monica, and she offered to buy me a drink." Nathan swallowed hard. "She was ... beautiful. Dancer's body, pretty smile, soft southern accent."

Nathan could still see her clearly, see her as she was that first night. Blond hair pulled back in a braid with wisps like cotton candy hanging around her face, long legs covered in black silk, and pink lipstick that matched her tight sweater. His first impression of her had been just one word—sweet.

Lost in his memories, he was only partially aware of Remy settling back down into her pillow, pulling her hand from his to tuck it under her cheek. "Well, see, now that was your first mistake." When he turned his head to look at her, she was smiling at him. "Girls like that are always too good to be true."

"Yes, I learned that lesson the hard way. But she seemed genuine, of course. That's the worst part. Going over every conversation we ever had, wondering if every word was a lie or if it was all true, and wondering which is worse, and wondering if it matters at all. I still don't know what the master plan was, and if everything went, or almost went, the way they hoped. I suppose I never will." Nathan rolled to his side, his hand resting on her stomach. "We had a standing date, after my shift ended, to meet for drinks for a few weeks. Then I introduced her to Isaac and..."

The fading of her smile revealed the darkening of her thoughts. It took a long time for her to say anything. "No wonder he doesn't like me." Her hand came up to settle over his. "Look, if you don't want to talk about this, we don't have to. I didn't mean to be dragging all this up for you."

"I don't mind," he assured her, understanding it was the truth. "If you don't mind hearing it."
She shook her head. She seemed unwilling to speak and break his rhythm even further.

"There was tension between her and Isaac, which caused tension between me and Isaac, which in turn, distracted us. We let stupid things get by us. Made stupid mistakes. And every time we had a problem, she'd be there. Making things worse. But I just couldn't see it because ... finally though, Parker slipped up. Another dead body. One of his girls. One of his weapons. Even Susanna couldn't distract us from that."

Nathan shifted again. He had said he didn't mind telling her, but this part would always be too painful to even think about, much less describe.

"So, we were going to go ahead with the sting, as planned. Susanna knew because of me. I didn't ... I let her overhear us discussing it. Of course, things went bad. Very bad. I had my gun on Parker, and she came right up behind me and put a knife against my throat. I was fast enough to get away from her, but she had the advantage. There's the element of surprise, of course, but I didn't think she had it in her."

"Because you trusted her." All of a sudden, she was pressed against him, her lips on his, her arm slipping around his back. Her breath was sweet when she broke away, but she remained close, her heat rising between them. "You know I wouldn't do that, right? I don't want ... I couldn't."

"I know." He knew it now. He didn't think it would do any good to tell her about the times he had doubted her. "I did trust her. But obviously, she did have it in her. Isaac saw her, shot her, drew Parker's attention. He shot Isaac. Another officer brought Parker down. Isaac and I both ended up in the hospital for about a week, and when we got out, I handed in my badge and I disappeared. Well, I tried to. Isaac didn't take the hint when I stopped returning his calls."

"That's because he cares about you."

"Yes. Enough to worry about saving my life even though I very nearly ended his. He's a good man to have on your side, Remy."

That was what it took for her to draw back. "I already have a good man on my side."

"I'm asking you to trust him, because you'll need his help if you want to stop Kirsten before she can stop you. And he'll help because I asked him. I just want you to understand he doesn't hate you, he doesn't have anything against you personally."

"I know," Remy conceded. "It's just ... he's a cop. I've spent most of my life on the other side of the fence, with guys like him trying to run me down. Forgetting that's not so easy."

"This entire situation is something new and unexpected for all of us. I never thought I'd ... well, find somebody like you." He remembered what Isaac had asked him, his own words echoing back. "Find somebody worth it."

She fell silent again. Somewhere in the far distance, a dog barked.

When she moved, Nathan wasn't sure what to expect. She was liberal with touches, physical at moments that surprised him. Remy seemed to relish exploring every little nuance, perhaps to see how far she could go before he would tell her to stop. A woman testing her new boundaries. It made sense in light of her current situation.

So it came as a mild shock when he felt her fingertips on his face, tracing the scope of his nose, outlining the curve of his mouth. Then her lips were pressed to his, but where she had always turned previous caresses into something sexual, this remained simple.

"I'll try." He felt her mouth shift against his and realized she was smiling. "And for the record? Five years without sex did nothing but make you amazing."

"I was just trying to keep up with you;" Nathan yawned. "But I think you wore me out."

When he rolled onto his back, Remy followed, settling her cheek against his shoulder as his arm curved around to pull her more closely. "No way am I taking all that credit. I think some of that was Tian's fault."

"No, I'm pretty sure I can lay most of the blame at your feet." He kissed her temple, her hair tickling his lips. "Not that it's a problem. You can wear me down anytime you like."

"Tomorrow," she promised. Her soft breath skimmed along his skin, an even rhythm that was more hypnotic than the heat of her pressed to his side. "Now ... sleep."

"Yes ... sleep." His mind was still turning, though, working through everything he had been through the past forty-eight hours, everything he had told Remy. He felt almost as if a burden had been lifted. He had been honest with Remy, told her how much he had fucked up, and she ... well, she was still there. That was one less thing to worry about, one less obstacle. But Nathan knew they still had much larger problems headed their way.

* * *

No more running away for her, Kirsten thought grimly as she examined her reflection in the mirror bolted to the closet door. McGuire's bullet had grazed her calf, leaving a deep enough furrow to have her worried about blood loss. She had gone straight to the nearest hospital, dropped a wad of cash-almost all that was left from her watch-onto the counter in lieu of an insurance card, and then passed out.
An hour later, she woke up with her leg throbbing and her pants leg cut away to show a dozen stitches spidering along her pale skin. Primitive, but probably effective. The elderly doctor had instructed her to stay put while the police came in to take a report—and the irony that she had forgotten gunshot injuries still had to be investigated in this time didn’t escape her—but that was all Kirsten needed to make a run for it.

It wasn’t like they could find her anyway. She wouldn’t exist for another fifty years.

The cheap no-tell motel she’d found was a far cry from her lush accommodations in Beverly Hills. Since she had nothing else she was willing to pawn, "cheap" was a necessity, and it offered anonymity when McGuire came to look for her again. She had no doubts he would. Her evening out had given up the one piece of information she wished she’d had before meeting up with the cop. His ex-partner was the proud owner of a vintage Mustang that had been involved in a shooting at a club called Rojo. A woman matching Remy Capra’s description had been seen leaving with him. Somehow, Kirsten had managed to find the one cop in Los Angeles who could both help her in her search and thwart her at the same time.

She had a name, though. Nathan Pierce. And McGuire’s appearance at her hotel with the manager meant she had to be more covert in finding him. That was why she had run. She wasn’t going to get slowed down by questions McGuire wouldn’t like the answers to. Kirsten had already spent far too much time in the past for her own comfort; the longer it took to find Remy, the worse her odds in retrieving the Silver Maiden coin. Returning without it wasn’t an option.

With a sigh, she stretched out on the lumpy bed and closed her eyes. McGuire wasn’t an obstacle. She wouldn’t allow him to be. Pierce was a mystery, but Kirsten had little doubts he would prove as easy to get around as McGuire.

And behind Pierce was Remy. And the Silver Maiden. Only once Kirsten killed Remy to get the coin could they both go home.

*I * * *

"I hate this place," Cesar muttered, his voice barely carrying over the crashing waves outside the bedroom window. Stretched out on the bed, he was staring up at the ceiling, a permanent scowl affixed to his features.

Tian looked up from his cell phone, glancing around the dark but luxurious room. "You've been waiting your whole life to live in a place like this."

"Fuck it."

Tian ignored him, thumbing through the text messages that had been coming from Alex every fifteen minutes like clockwork, until twenty-seven minutes ago.

N-in his apartment. With that girl.

Then ... N-still there.

No change.

Things got interesting about an hour before when Alex reported Pierce had left his apartment-without his new little girlfriend. Alex had been waiting to act on Tian's word, eager to do whatever he said. And now, there was nothing but silence.

"Should have done it yourself, man. You know Alex isn't smart enough to bring that fucker in," Cesar rasped.

"And what? Leave you here alone? Alex may be big, but he's not dumb. He'll get them both."

"Whatever. You know Gabriel was expecting to hear from you tonight. You've been so caught up in this shit and you're going to piss him off, and then what are we going to do, huh?" Cesar asked, pushing himself up in bed.

"He'll get his answer tonight," Tian snarled. "And we have to do something about Pierce before we can go through with this little arrangement. He's just going to fuck it up if he's not out of the picture."

"Should have just told them to shoot on sight."

Tian slammed the phone shut and stood, crossing the room to the window. The moonlight sparkled against the waves as they relentlessly pounded against the beach. When Gabriel had set them up in his private beach house, Tian thought he was where he belonged. Until the first night. Goddamned waves keeping him up until dawn. At least Nathan Pierce didn't know to find them there, and Cesar needed the time to recover.

But Tian hated it there too.

"What are you going to do if they manage to bring him in anyway?" Cesar asked Tian's back.

Before Tian answered, his phone chirped. Excited, he hastened to read the message, but his excitement dimmed as he deciphered the shortened words. "Alx ht. N escaped. Po involved," he muttered. "Fuck."

Cesar grunted from the bed. He didn't say anything else. He didn't need to. I told you so, motherfucker.

"He's expecting us to come after him." Tian began to pace. "But I bet he's not expecting Gabriel's crew."

Cesar smiled. "Sealing the deal with a hit?"

"Something like that. You still want that girl?"

Cesar’s eyes flashed in the dim light, and his smile widened. "Fair's fair, Tian. See how she likes getting knifed in
the back. And the front."
Tian nodded. "Right." His black mood lifted as he dialed, and by the time he heard Gabriel's familiar deep voice on the other end of the line, he was almost chipper.
CHAPTER THIRTEEN
She liked watching Nathan sleep.
It was more than the freedom to stare and appreciate how gorgeous he was. It was getting to witness a few moments when his guard was down. To see the man he could be if the world didn't force him to wear such heavy armor during his waking hours.

His mouth was softer, for one thing. Remy knew from his kisses how gentle Nathan could be, but beyond the physical, when life happened and he stared down the barrel of his gun and dared anybody to even think about fucking with him, he had a tendency to keep it tight. It was the same impenetrable line he had drawn around his life, keeping outsiders out and only Isaac in. And Remy in, too, now, it would appear.
The faint lines around his eyes weren't as deep, either. In his sleep, Nathan let go of the strict control that made him so effective at his job. She couldn't tell if he dreamed, but regardless, it was enough to give him a few minutes of peace from the specters of his past. Knowing who and what at least some of them were made all the difference in appreciating what he gave her.

Propping up her head, Remy ghosted her fingertips over the scar at the base of Nathan's throat. It astonished her that he had admitted as much as he had about his past. She still didn't understand why. Maybe enough time had passed and the need for a confessional was too great. He could consider her safe, after all. A stranger who wouldn't judge. But she did judge. Not him. Not even Isaac, whose antagonism was now more than understandable. Remy passed judgment on this Susanna who had stripped five years from Nathan's life with the calm slice of a knife. It was one thing to do what you had to survive; there were enough violent crimes in Remy's past to make it too much pot and kettle for her liking. However, there was a line to be drawn at emotional manipulation.

Kirsten was a chilling master at that. It was another reason why Remy hated her so much.
Without thinking, she bent and brushed her lips over Nathan's, needing the warm reminder of his breath fanning across her cheek. She almost moaned at the contact, but instead of deepening the caress and risk waking him, she let her mouth slide along his jaw, nuzzling his cheek with hers in as faint a touch as she could manage.

Nathan surprised Remy by wrapping his arm around her, pulling her tight against him. He turned his head, finding her mouth without opening his eyes and kissed her softly. "Good morning."
"Hey," she breathed. "I didn't mean to wake you. Go back to sleep."
He shook his head. "No, Isaac is already up. I can hear him in there. He'll be knocking on the door any minute."
"Then let him knock."
She had heard Isaac, too, but Remy wasn't in a hurry to have another face-to-face with him. That would come soon enough. However, if Nathan knew Isaac was up, that meant he had been awake much longer than the few seconds after her kisses. She wondered if he was aware she had been watching him.
"How did you sleep?"
Nathan's free hand slid down her ribs to rest on her hip. "Not too good."
In spite of his touch, Remy stiffened. "Why? And don't tell me I snore because I know for a fact I don't."
He kissed the corner of her mouth. "You do snore, but that's not what I meant." Smiling at her gasp of indignation, he added, "I had all these dreams. Like the other night, except worse."
"Dreams?" she squeaked when he rolled on top of her, nuzzling his cheek with hers in as faint a touch as she could manage.
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"Dreams?" she squeaked when he rolled on top of her, pinning her to the mattress with his long length. His morning erection pressed into her stomach, and when he took her wrists to pin them over her head, a fresh surge of arousal rushed through her veins. "Do I want to know what happened in these dreams?"
"I could show you," Nathan said, running his tongue along the curve of her neck. His free hand slid between them, skimming past her stomach to the damp juncture of her thighs. He slid his finger between her lips, teasing the tip of her clit. "But you have to be quiet."
She answered him with a silent nod. As she spread her legs, curving them around his hips, her gaze went to Nathan's mouth, noting the soft set of his lower lip. It took only a slight lift of her head to catch it between her teeth and even less for him to respond, his tongue hot and languid as it pushed past hers.
Nathan continued kissing her as he settled the head of his cock against her slick opening. He was just beginning to thrust forward when a soft knock on the door stopped him. Anger flashed in his eyes before he shouted over his shoulder, "You're lucky I can't reach my gun!"
"And you're lucky I even bothered to knock!" Isaac shot back. "Manuel called. He's faxing some stuff over he wants you to look at, said it might be important-so get your ass out here." There was a pause. "And make sure it's dressed. I'm not as interested in what you look like naked as Remy is."
Her mouth was twitching into a smile by the time Nathan shifted his attention back to her. "I'm not sure anybody could be as interested as I am," Remy teased.
Nathan smirked, the anger dissipating like a summer storm. "Some day, I'll tell you about the night he was," he murmured, then called out, "We'll be right out!"
He released his hold on her wrists, dropping one last kiss to her mouth before climbing off and grabbing his pants. Scooting down to the end of the bed, Remy leaned over the edge to grab Nathan's shirt that she had commandeered after her shower the previous day.

His voice stopped her as she slipped her arms into the sleeves. "No, I don't think so."

Remy looked up, confused.

Opening the closet, Nathan grabbed some of her new clothes and tossed them on the bed. "You can wear your own shirt this morning."

Though she was pretty sure she knew why he was insisting, Remy feigned ignorance and stood up on the bed, smoothing the material down over her hips. The front still hung open, leaving her breasts covered, but the flicker of his eyes said her pussy was more than exposed. "What's wrong with this? I like it. It smells like you."

"And you're more than welcome to wear it. Later." He skimed his hands over her shoulders, pushing the shirt down her arms. "When I don't have to worry about how distracting you look."

"Deal." Flashing him a brilliant smile, she abandoned her game to grab the jeans he had pulled out for her. "Besides, my ass looks great in these."

"Mmmm," Nathan agreed, slapping her bottom playfully before pulling on a clean shirt.

Isaac was waiting for them on the couch, his feet propped up on the table, a jelly doughnut in one hand and a stack of papers in the other. He had red frosting on his upper lip, but he seemed too engrossed by what he was reading to notice.

"You bought doughnuts? Did you get any chocolate ones?" When Isaac didn't respond, Nathan lost interest in breakfast and peered over the other man's shoulder. "What is it?"

"Look like fairy tales to me."

He passed back one of the pages without looking around. Even when Remy sat cross-legged on the corner of the couch, reaching across his legs to grab a doughnut from the box, Isaac didn't stop reading. "I thought you said you were getting intel on a coin."

Nathan frowned. "I was."

"And it is about the coin."

His eyes widened as he continued to read. "And I think it might be the intel we need."

"What does it say?"

"It's the legend of the Silver Maiden."

"The who?"

Nathan shook his head. "Not the who, the what. It's what the coin is called. According to this, there are actually two, or rather, two sides. The one in our possession is the front side." He began reading from the page. "The Silver Maiden is made of pure silver and was forged by hand on the banks of the Silver River, appropriately enough. Nobody knows who made it or when, but the story is that a young woman was carried across the Silver River and forced into slavery by the men who mined the river for its riches. It was discovered she had a certain talent as a silversmith, and so they took her out of the kitchens where she had spent most of her life, and put her to work with the silver.

"She saved the tiny shavings of silver, keeping them well hidden so nobody could accuse her of stealing, and she labored over the hot fires, smelting and molding the silver into bars. Finally, when she was old, and very sick, she took the bits and pieces she had scraped together and melted them down. She created a mold for the coin she intended to make, both sides carved painstakingly, but frightened she would be caught, she couldn't melt all her silver at once. She melted enough for one side one night, and the other side the next week, creating a pair of coins instead of one."

Nathan took a deep breath and looked at her before continuing. "She intended to use the coins to buy her freedom. They would hold a certain value beyond the price of the silver because she was a Priestess before she had been enslaved. It doesn't say to which god-it just mentions a popular and powerful cult. Apparently, the iconography of the coin was inspired by this cult, and she hoped it would create enough local interest to exchange for her freedom. She also anointed the coin with ... oils of some sort. Perhaps the essences of flowers? It's not specific. And tears. Once it was completed, she prayed over it for a full day and night."

"Prayed for what?"

"Her freedom. She prayed the coin would take her away. But she had been a captive for too long, and the followers of her god had been scattered and killed through the years, until the cult had been all but forgotten. Nobody recognized her coin, and nobody was interested. She knew she was dying, but she wasn't willing to give up on her plan. She wanted to take her last breath as a free woman."

Remy straightened. "Did she?"

"Hand me the next page."

Isaac did so without speaking or betraying any of his thoughts about what he had heard so far.

"But as the days passed, she realized her final wish would not come to pass. They did take her out of the sweltering
heat where they melted down the silver, but they didn't grant her freedom. One morning, she was sent to gather fruit from the riverbanks. They gave her a sharp knife to cut through the brush. She never returned. When her captors realized she was missing, they sent a few men to look for her, but they couldn't find her. After searching for three days, they found the coins, the bloodied knife, and the tracks of an unknown beast. The second coin was stained with her blood."

"So ... what?" Isaac asked. "After all that she just died? What a great story."

"Or she turned into the beast," Remy suggested.

Nathan's voice was as subdued as hers. "She finally got the one thing she wanted more than anything. Her freedom."

Isaac gaped at him. "You don't believe this bedtime story, do you?"

Nathan caught Remy's eye before looking down at the pages in hand. "I don't know."

"I do." Because it made sense. Finally, a piece of the puzzle was slipping into a place that fit, and Remy was starting to see the big picture.

When both men turned curious gazes toward her, she refused to look away. They didn't understand. They weren't the ones who had found themselves dumped in the middle of a warehouse in a place and time that shouldn't have been possible. While Nathan was giving her the benefit of the doubt for now, Isaac had no reason to believe in anything but what he saw with his own two eyes.

Once upon a time, Remy would have been the same way. But once upon a time hadn't even happened yet.

"He needs to know the whole story, Nate," she said, her voice even.

Nathan shook his head. "No, I don't think he does. Not right now. Not until we know more, at least."

"How much more do we need?" She snatched the sheets from him, then rose from the couch to cross to the small box on the shelves where he was keeping the coins. Pulling out the large silver coin, she held it up next to the sketching on the fax. "They're the same. And it fits. It all makes sense now."

Nathan crossed the room and took her arm. He pulled her aside, his voice low. "Isaac is going to need every piece of evidence you have, and even with that, it'll be a hard sell."

"And your apartment isn't big enough for you to think I didn't hear that." Both of them glanced back to where he sat on the couch, leaning forward, hands clasped in front of him as he rested his forearms on his knees. His shrewd eyes were narrowed, his annoyance visible. "So either you two drop this right now or come clean. The choice is yours."

Remy looked up to Nathan. "Weren't you the one telling me last night I had to trust him?"

The tightening of his mouth was the only response she needed. Pulling from his light grasp, she dashed for the bedroom to retrieve her torn clothes, then returned to perch on the arm of the couch. Though Isaac shifted to face her, Remy held on to the garments. It wasn't yet time to offer them as evidence.

"You're not going to find anything on my fingerprints. And you're not going to find anything on Kirsten, either. Because those records don't exist."

A muscle twitched in his tight jaw. "That sounds like fed doubletalk to me. And if you're a fed, then I'm Buffy the Vampire Slayer."

"I'm not." Remy took a deep breath. She sensed Nathan coming up to stand behind her; she only wished she could see his face. "Everything Kirsten told you about me was true. Being in DC, part of the gang, her chasing me. The only thing she didn't tell you was none of that has happened yet. Somehow, some way, because of this coin..." She flipped it so that it landed in Isaac's lap. "...I went from running across a senator's lawn in 2082 to crashing Nathan's showdown with Tian in 2008."

The room was silent for an exhaustive minute while Isaac stared at her. Then his bark of laughter split the calm.

"You know, if you didn't want to tell me, you could've just said so. Not that I don't appreciate the good laugh, but I get a little tired of people thinking they can jerk my chain."

Nathan stepped forward. "She's not jerking your chain, Isaac. I know how it sounds. But think about it. Have you been able to find any trace of Remy's existence? Any trace of Kirsten's? Think about her ID card. Yeah, it looked fake, but how did it feel? It's lighter than other cards, isn't it? And look at her clothes. I know you have quite the impressive collection of fashion magazines, do these clothes look like anything you've ever seen before?"

At Nathan's words, Remy thrust the clothing into Isaac's lap, watching as he took each piece, rubbed the fabric between his fingers, and held it up for inspection. His frown deepened. He even went so far as to turn her shirt inside out to look for the label, though what he read there obviously didn't make him happy.

Abruptly, Isaac tossed the clothes aside and rose from the couch. Grabbing Nathan's elbow, he dragged him away from Remy, though he made no attempt to keep his voice lowered. "What the hell has gotten into you? You used to be the smart one. Since when do you start buying into cons like this?"

"I know it's unbelievable, Isaac. But it's not just her clothes, or the way she talks, or the fact she doesn't exist. She has a chip embedded in her skin, Isaac. Have you ever seen or heard of anything like that? It's right on the back of
her neck."
Without prompting, Remy leapt from her seat and positioned herself between the two men, scooping her hair out of
the way to expose her nape. The room was dead silent for a moment while she waited for someone to do something.
Then, out of the corner of her eye, she saw Nathan lift his hand and rest a fingertip right over where the chip was,
holding it there until Isaac sighed and did the same.
"What the...?" he muttered.
She didn't give Isaac time to start another argument. "We can show you the warehouse, too. The one where Nathan
found me. Third floor. No way in. No way out." Letting her hair fall, she turned around and jerked her chin at the
coin he'd left sitting on the couch. "Except through that."
Isaac held her eyes for only a moment before lifting his to Nathan's. "That true?"
Nathan nodded. "The grenade blocked the front stairwell to the third floor. She wouldn't have been able to get in that
way. And the back stairs are a fire escape with the doors locked to the outside. She wouldn't have been able to get to
the third floor that way either. Tian was waiting in the one unlocked room on the third floor. If she were there before
him, he would have seen her and killed her."
He said it so matter-of-factly Remy wondered if it was an argument he had already resolved in his head. Was that
why he'd been inclined to believe her?
It didn't matter. The logic of Nathan's assertions made Isaac pause.
"What about windows?"
Nathan shook his head. "The warehouse was secure, Isaac. I wouldn't have followed Tian otherwise. But the
windows in the room were blown out. All of them. Several minutes after the grenade exploded."
She hadn't known that. She had assumed the damage she'd seen was because of the explosion he had told her about.
"Let's go."
Already, Isaac was moving, going back to the table and picking up the box of doughnuts. When he went
to pocket the coin as well, Remy darted forward and snatched it away, retreating to put it back in the box they were
using for safekeeping. "You want me to believe you so badly, I want to see where her little time machine dropped
her off. Then we'll talk."

* * * *
By the time they walked around the rear of the abandoned warehouse, Isaac's clenched jaw ached more than his
shoulder. Just as Nathan had said, the front stairwell was blocked by debris. It would take someone much smaller
than any of them to get through it, which meant, according to Nathan, there was only one other means of entry. With
every step closer, Isaac felt his stomach tighten.
It was crazy. All of it. Girls showing up out of nowhere, pretending to be from the future, wearing clothes probably
picked up at some cut-rate Hollywood costume shop, talking about magical coins capable of ... what? He didn't
know. Nathan didn't know. Remy sure as hell didn't know. Yet, they both expected Isaac to accept it, to believe
someone had shot Remy up with techno gadgetry as if it wasn't like something off the SciFi Channel.
What bothered him more, though, was how reasonable Nathan was about the whole thing. He was giving Remy the
benefit of the doubt with little hesitation when he had always been the first of them to be skeptical. Well, the first
since Susanna. That entire debacle had opened Nathan's eyes to the world. There hadn't been a single person in five
years-female or otherwise-who had managed to alter that.
Until now.
Remy stayed out of their way, letting the two men lead to the back of the building. When Nathan came to a stop
outside the door, Isaac nearly collided with him, frowning as he glanced over his friend's shoulder to see him test the
steel door handle.
It didn't even move.
"Damn it." He glanced at Remy out of the corner of his eye, but it didn't change the only conclusion he could draw.
There was no way she could have entered this way.
"Do you want to bust the lock?" Nathan asked. "I have some tools in the trunk. And a small blow torch."
"I hear a hard head might do the same thing." Isaac snatched the offered car keys and whirled on his heel, marching
back to the street to retrieve the tools. The answer had to be inside. That's all there was to it.
By the time they got the door open, the sun was high overhead and Isaac's back was soaked with sweat. Stepping
from the brilliant light of day into the murk of the warehouse was almost soothing, even if it was hotter than hell
itself inside.
"You want me to wait out here?" Remy's eyes flashed in defiance. "I'd hate to contaminate the evidence."
Isaac was tempted to tell her exactly where she could wait, but one glance at Nathan had him shaking his head.
"Better to keep an eye on you." He swept an arm out, indicating Nathan should go first. "Lead the way."
"Gladly," Nathan muttered, turning on his flashlight. The stairwell was thick with dust and stale air, and the three of
them moved slowly through the heat, Isaac bringing up the rear.
The door on the third floor was hanging open. Light filtered in through the filthy windows, clouds of dust dancing around their heads.

"Watch your step," Nathan warned as they picked their way down the corridor. He paused outside a door and pushed it open with his shoulder. "This is where I found Tian." As they entered the room, Nathan pointed to a makeshift blockade of tables and boxes. "He was hiding behind there." Then he turned to the right, pointing to the empty center of the room. "Remy was there."

Shattered glass covered every available surface, the sunlight streaming in pale yellow stripes through the broken windows. Isaac stepped gingerly forward to the patch of floor Nathan indicated and crouched down to inspect it more closely.

"When did the windows break? Before or after you saw Remy?"

"It all happened fast. There were some explosions, and then it felt like a mild earthquake, and then the glass shattered, and there she was. I was too distracted by Tian to notice when she ... arrived."

Nathan's choice of verbiage was what Isaac didn't want to hear. Because Remy hadn't arrived. She had only left. After the glass had already broken.

There wasn't a large enough patch of floor bare of the shards that could indicate Remy was there before the windows had shattered. There were footsteps in the dust showing someone had fled from the spot Nathan had pointed out, but nothing leading up to it. By all appearances, the only way someone could have come to that spot was if they had dropped from above.

Isaac tilted his head back to look up. The smooth ceiling stretched above him.

"Thin air," Nathan murmured over Isaac's shoulder.

He was beginning to see that. Unbidden, his gaze slid sideways to Remy, but she stood, large-eyed and silent, watching them. Waiting.

His phone rang shrilly from his pocket, startling Isaac into straightening and pulling it out. He didn't recognize the number on the display, but that didn't mean a whole hell of a lot. "McGuire," he snapped. "And this better be fucking good."

"It's Ronnie, Detective McGuire. You asked me to call when I got something on that ID you gave me yesterday?"

Isaac calmed at the young man's nervous voice, turning his back on Nathan and Remy. "Yeah? What do you have?"

"Oh, man, detective, this shit is incredible..."

As Ronnie descended into an almost unintelligible stream of technical geek-speak, Isaac rubbed at his eyes in a vain attempt to lessen his growing headache. He had been expecting to hear the funny-looking piece of plastic was a cheap knock-off of a Hollywood prop. He hadn't anticipated the department's best tech guy to get a hard-on for the microchip he'd peeled away from the holographic picture, and he hadn't bargained on said tech guy calling in his buddies from some computer company Isaac didn't recognize to help him figure out the technology it contained.

By the time he disconnected, Isaac decided it was better for his personal sanity to just accept Remy's story and pray nobody from the station found out.

"So," he said, shoving his phone back into his pocket as he looked back to Remy, "who do I put my money on for next year's Super Bowl?"

* * * *

Nathan knew Isaac needed some time to process everything and double-check his conclusion before he'd be ready to talk about it. He could see the wheels turning behind Isaac's eyes. He'd repeat all the doubts, re-ask his questions, and re-think the evidence until he was satisfied his conclusion had been the correct one. Nathan could be patient, but Remy kept sending worried glances Isaac's way. The only time Isaac spoke was when he indicated he wanted to pick up his car.

Nathan was just relieved Isaac hadn't had them both carted off to the madhouse. He had expected his skepticism, his impatience, his annoyance. He had even expected Isaac to insist on seeing every piece of evidence with his own eyes, and he hadn't been annoyed when Isaac demanded a tour of the warehouse.

But he had never expected Isaac to believe Remy's story.

Of course, after Ronnie's report on the card, what choice did he have? Nathan wondered if they were fucking up time somehow by selling the coins she had stolen, or letting geeky kids with computer fetishes look at her identification card. Allowing parts of the future to interact with the past always seemed like a pretty big mistake in the books he'd read and the movies he'd seen, but everything seemed to be fine now. Now being the operative word.

Maybe he was fucking up shit twenty years in the future and wouldn't know it until then.

Nathan decided not to think about everything he was probably destroying, shifting his attention to the story of Remy's coin. It had been a nice story. A little dire for his taste. He wasn't sure what it had to do with time-travel, though. If the legend was to be believed, the woman who created the coin hadn't jumped backward seventy-five years; she had turned into some sort of animal. Or she had died. Either way, she wasn't moving through time.
So how did it apply to Remy?
Nathan wasn't surprised when Isaac asked to be dropped off at the valet stand. "Did they pass the test?"
"All I ever ask is they treat me like any of their other customers," Isaac shot back. He pushed his door open and stepped out. "There's nothing wrong with wanting a little respect."
Nathan opened his door as well. "Wait here, yeah? I need to talk to him." He followed Isaac to the stand. "You're LAPD. You already get as much respect as you deserve."
"Probably." Isaac handed his parking stub to the valet and turned his back to the stand, folding his arms across his chest. "Make me feel better and tell me you didn't know about Remy all along."
"She told me yesterday morning. She said she didn't want to lie to me. I didn't really want to believe her at first either, but ... I don't know how else to explain everything."
Isaac nodded. He seemed to be taking Nathan's answers more in stride now, though if it was because of the overwhelming physical evidence or because he was tired of arguing, Nathan wasn't sure. After a moment of more contemplation, Isaac exhaled loudly and almost smiled.
"You're fucking her, right?"
"Yeah. Yeah, I am."
"And you do know you're robbing the cradle, right? I mean, your new girlfriend hasn't even been born yet."
Nathan smiled. "Now I'll have something to think over during those long winter nights."
"You really think she'll be around that long? If all this is true, she showed up without any warning. Who says she's not going to leave the same way?"
Nathan looked down, unable to answer immediately. It wasn't that the question hadn't occurred to him before, he just didn't want to think about it. It was easier to take things one step at a time. "I don't know, Isaac. I really don't. But what can I do?"
Isaac's car appeared at the parking garage exit and pulled to a stop in front of them. "Get this bitch Kirsten off her back, for starters," Isaac said, stepping around the front of the car to the driver's side door. He took the keys from the valet, but paused before getting inside. "Maybe all we have to do to get rid of her is find her parents and keep them from dancing together at the senior prom. Less chance of getting shot again."
"Isaac. If all of this is too crazy for you ... if you don't want to risk another trip to the hospital for some girl you don't even know ... I'll understand."
"And miss out on the grand finale? Not on your life." Ducking his head, he started to get in the car, only to hesitate at the amusement, but the anger was gone as well. All that was left was sincerity. "I won't lie and tell you I trust her now. But I've got eyes. I can see she's important to you. That means, whatever you want from me from this point on, you've got. No questions asked."
Nathan wasn't surprised by Isaac's response. He was the one person on the planet Nathan could count on, regardless of the situation. There wasn't anything to say except, "Thanks. Don't let Kirsten get another piece of you."
CHAPTER FOURTEEN

After they took Isaac to the hotel, Remy was uncharacteristically silent, and Nathan, lost in his own thoughts, wasn't been eager to strike up a conversation. At her tentative request, he drove them to the beach again, more than happy to follow her around the pier as she walked through the throng of people. He bought her a pretzel, and frozen lemonade, nachos, and an ice cream cone. She accepted everything with a warm smile, but her eyes were a hundred miles away.

He followed her when she wandered down to the shore. There was a moment when she slipped off her shoes that he thought to warn her about the hot sand, but after a quick glance at the sun, Nathan changed his mind. It hung low on the horizon, orange streaks licking across the smooth surface of the water, and a cool breeze eased the earlier heat. There would be no danger of burned soles at this hour.

"You have got to be the most patient guy in the whole world," Remy said out of the blue. Her voice was quiet, nearly lost in the distant roar of the waves, and her eyes were still fixed someplace far away. "I'm the one all this shit is happening to, and I still only half-believe it. You even stuck up for me with Isaac before you had half the proof you do now. You are an interesting man, Nathan Pierce."

Nathan didn't know why he had been compelled to defend her, and her ridiculous claims, to Isaac. Except ... he believed her and her ridiculous claims.

"Some would say interesting. I'm sure others would say foolish." Nathan paused. How could he explain that more than he wanted to trust her, he wanted to trust himself? He wanted to have faith in his own feelings, in what his senses and his gut told him.

"Well, not me."

Her pacing wasn't even, stopping and starting as she dug her toes into the sand or kicked away a shell from her path. Still, Nathan matched her strides, content at the moment to watch.

"What did you think of the Silver Maiden story?"

Nathan shrugged. "It was intriguing. I suppose I expected the punch line to be something about disappearing in a big flashing light, only to show up, I don't know, a hundred years in the future. What did you think of it?"

Stopping as a wave rolled onto the sand, Remy curled her feet into the surf as she contemplated his question. "It hit a little too close to home," she confessed.

He frowned, comparing the details of the story to what he knew of her life. "The overall theme of the work?"

Her affirmation would have been lost if it wasn't for the shallow dip of her head. When she began walking again, Nathan was almost surprised but resumed his place at her side anyway.

"You know the last thing I remember thinking before showing up in the warehouse here?" Her head was high, eyes soft with memory. "That it could be over. All the running. All the hiding. That I could find the one place I could call home. Funny, huh, thinking about what the Silver Maiden wanted?"

"Not so funny. I mean, isn't that what everybody wants at some point? I suppose maybe it's that basic desire that ... makes it work, somehow. What's funny is, why a warehouse in Culver City? Because when I think of home, I tend to think of someplace not quite so disgusting."

"I don't know. I've been trying to figure that out ever since I realized what had happened to me." Her gaze drifted toward the ocean again. "I've never even been to California before. How could I wish for someplace I've never seen?"

Nathan bent to pick up a small shell. He rolled it through his fingers, watching the dying light catch the subtle pinks and greens. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Remy studying the seashell with curiosity.

"I don't know what it's like seventy-five years from now, but doesn't everybody secretly want to live in California?"

Nathan asked, pressing the shell into her hand. "What's not to love? I mean, besides the rampant crime, pollution, earthquakes, mudslides, and wildfires?"

Her plush mouth curved into a half-smile as she traced the delicate lines of the shell. "Don't forget the shoot-outs and attempted kidnappings. Those make a girl feel welcome."

Nathan returned her smile. "At least you missed the grenades." He nodded towards a distant outcropping of rocks. It was a bit difficult to see against the setting sun, but there were a handful of sea lions catching the last rays of sunshine. "But it's not all bad, right?"

He looked down, catching her fingers with his. She wasn't looking at the sea lions in the distance. Instead, her luminous eyes were upturned toward his. The moment their fingers made contact, her grip tightened, her skin sticky from the sweets she'd consumed on the pier.

"No. It's not all bad."

They had only walked a few more feet before she tugged him to another halt. Without letting go of Nathan, she positioned herself so that she was standing directly in front of him, blocking him from going any further. "Do you think you're foolish for believing me?"
"I don't think I can spend the rest of my life doubting everybody, everything," Nathan said, unable to meet her eyes. When Isaac had relented, it felt like he had been validated, and with that, came a sense of relief. They couldn't both be wrong again, could they? "I don't think I'm foolish, and I hope I'm not making another mistake."
"You're not. I promise you."
Gently, Nathan stepped around Remy, tugging at her hand to begin walking again. "Judging from the story and what you told me, I think the Silver Maiden might be a one way pass."
His feet slipped in the wet sand as the water crept higher up the beach. "Though Kirsten might have the second coin. That's probably how she followed you. Which means she must think there's a way to get back."
Her hand stiffened in his, though she continued at the pace he set. "But ... I don't want to go back."
"I didn't mean to suggest you would."
"But you said..." Her voice trailed off, and he glanced out of the corner of his eye to see her shaking her head.
"Never mind. I've been thinking too much today. I guess I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop."
"No, I was just thinking about the nature of the coins. She needs the one in your possession to get back. We might be able to use that." Nathan noted her shoulders were still tense, and despite her dismissive words, he thought she was upset. "Why? What did you think I meant?"
It took a long time for the answer to come. "That this was the nice-guy way for you to say you were done with me, which, you know, would be understandable."
She turned her head away from him, but what captured her attention, he had no idea. "I mean, no harm, no foul, right?"
"After I spent the entire morning trying to convince Isaac you weren't crazy?" When she didn't respond to his light question, he pulled her around to face him. "What have you been thinking too much about today?"
The solemnity in her eyes was unsettling. He was accustomed to seeing her playful or aroused or even angry; he wasn't sure what to make of this.
"You," Remy admitted. "Freedom. Why it is a wish for someplace safe, someplace just for me, would land me in a dingy warehouse practically at your feet." Her lashes lowered. When she spoke again, her voice was so low, her words so rushed, he had to strain to hear her. "And maybe the Silver Maiden knew what she was doing when she brought me here."
Nathan thought he knew what she meant, but he couldn't ask her directly. Couldn't say the words himself. So, he settled on the simple question. "Why?"
Her head snapped back up again, and this time, the light in her face burned with unexpected fervor. "Because I don't do this. I don't meet strangers and hand my life over to them with a big red bow and say, Here. Do whatever you want. I trust you not to fuck me up. And yet, there you are, and I look at you, and I think, everything is okay because I'm with you. That ... the world makes sense. That I make sense. I think ... there's no place else I want to be."
She whirled on her heel and began marching back up to the pier. "Do you know how fucking scary that is?"
Nathan knew how fucking scared he was at that moment. He could accept her showing up in the middle of the warehouse, injured, with no explanation. He could accept the fact he wanted her from the minute he first touched her. He could accept the fact she was from the year 2082 and grew up in a street gang in Washington fucking DC. But he didn't know what to do with this.
"Me. You think she sent you to me? But, Remy, I'm not those things. I'm not safe. You've nearly been kidnapped and murdered because of me, because of my life. I'm not..." She was moving away from him, and he knew she had misunderstood. He wasn't trying to push her away, but he thought she needed to understand. "I'm not anything." Everything about her blazed. "Guess what, Nate? People were trying to kill or hurt me long before you came into the picture. The only difference now is that I feel like it's okay if I well and truly fight back. So don't tell me you're nothing." She whirled on her heel and began marching back up to the pier.
"But why me?" he wanted to shout after her. Goddamnit, why me? If the Silver Maiden had the power to send her into the past and across the country, it had the power to send her anywhere in the world at any time. There were far, far better men than him. Better women, too. Better choices all around. Hell, why not drop her off at Isaac's feet? Isaac would have warmed to her eventually, and taken care of her.
"But he wouldn't have loved her."
"Remy, wait," he called, hurrying to catch up, but she didn't pause or acknowledge him. "Remy." Nathan caught her elbow and pulled her against him. Her eyes were flashing when she looked up at him, but she didn't resist when he lowered his mouth to hers.
Her palms were flat against his chest, like she was ready to push him away at a moment's notice. But the pressure of his lips to hers, the heat exchanged in spite of the cooling night air, melted Remy's body to Nathan's, and he forgot everything but the familiar dance of her kiss, coiling the fingers of his free hand in the thick tresses of her hair.
"You're not nothing," she breathed when he tore away. "Not to me."
Nathan pressed his lips against her forehead before replying, "Well, if some mystical coin forged centuries ago with tears and blood says we're meant to be, who am I to disagree?"

Her laughter chased off even more of his confusion. "Oh, sure. Make me sound more cracked than I already do."

He shared her smile. "That's an impressive feat." Nathan kissed her again, playfully biting at her bottom lip. When she pulled her mouth away from his, he nipped his way down her neck, tasting the moisture and salt from the ocean on her skin. She laughingly fought off his attack, twisting out of his arms.

Nathan caught her again, now sliding his lips along her skin to ease away the light scrapes from his teeth. "But regardless of the crazy reason, I'm happy you're here."

Remy sighed, softening in his embrace. "Me, too."

Neither noticed the sun slipping below the horizon as they found each other's mouth again.

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Gabriel gestured for another drink, leaning across the bar to watch the waitress as she sauntered over. She smiled, her eyes twinkling as she set another round of beer in front of them. "Thanks, sweetheart."

"No problem." "She sure is easy on the eyes," Gabriel commented, his eyes trained on her as she walked away. "Yeah, real easy," Tian murmured.

Gabriel lifted his beer. "What's wrong with you? Do you have money on the Angels game or something?"

"Look, I thought we here to talk about business," Tian said, squeezing the lemon into his drink. Gabriel rolled his eyes. It had been nothing but business since he arrived in Los Angeles. Sometimes, he just wanted to go to a bar and have a beer. "We have plenty of time to talk about business."

"No." At Gabriel's raised eyebrow, Tian glanced away, muttering, "Look, we don't have a lot of time. That's the point."

Gabriel took a long swallow from his drink, his gaze steady on Tian's worried face. He was a smart young man, and Gabriel liked doing business with him, but he was so uptight. The men at the end of the bar moaned, a long, tortured sound.

"Well, I hope you didn't have money on the Yankees."

"No," Tian said tightly, "I don't have any money on the goddamned Yankees."

Gabriel rolled a pretzel through his fingers. He could string Tian along for hours if he wanted to. Days, even. Tian would hate it, resent Gabriel, and not make a secret of it, but he'd go along with the game. And that was the interesting part. Tian didn't play well with others. He was accustomed to being the head dog, and that's how he liked it. So why was he rolling over now? And how could Gabriel stop himself from kicking the other man's exposed stomach?

He popped the pretzel in his mouth and chased it with a gulp of beer. "Okay, why don't you tell me what we're doing here?"

Tian straightened, clearly relieved to be getting to business. "There's this bounty hunter, been on my tail ever since I jumped bail. He's good. And he's persistent. But when he was just playing with me, you know, I didn't mind. But the other night, he killed a few of my boys. That shit ain't right."

Gabriel shrugged. "I'm sure they were great guys, but I'm not sure why I should care."

Tian's eyes flashed, a hint of his infamous temper rising to the surface again. Gabriel thought it was rather remarkable he was able to keep his true face so well hidden. Beneath his intelligent mask he wore, something like a dark asp lurked.

"Because I'm paying you to care," Tian answered with measured calmness.

"My concern comes at a heavy price. What makes you think you can buy it?"

"You will care," Tian countered. "You'll care a lot when Nathan Pierce is coming after you. He's not just some guy, Gabriel. He's powerful. He's got a lot of friends in important places."

Gabriel cocked his eyebrow. "He's a bounty hunter. I don't have a bounty on my head."

"He hasn't always been a bounty hunter." Tian leaned forward. "Look, you've got big plans here in L.A. I know you're not just here for the grenades. He's on the streets. All the time. I might kill him, but if he gets me first, it'll just be a matter of time before he starts coming after you."

"You make him sound like the boogeyman," Gabriel said with an easy smile.

"No, he's just a guy who doesn't give a fuck. About anything."

With a shake of his head, Gabriel slid his gaze away from Tian and back to the television in the corner, only to stop midway when he saw Salvador weaving his way through the crowd. He frowned. Sal wasn't supposed to be here. He had left him back at the house to keep an eye on things there. What the hell was he doing disobeying orders?

It wasn't until Sal was almost abreast that Gabriel realized the tall blonde behind him wasn't just another pretty face in the crowd. She was obviously with Sal, and stood silently off to the side. There was an icy beauty to her fine...
features, but whatever attraction she might have held for his minion was lost on Gabriel. Too skinny and too cold. He liked women who didn't require added electric blankets to warm his bed.

Tian glanced at Sal and the strange woman without interest, turning back to his drink with a sigh. Gabriel ignored him, standing to greet their new guests.

"Salvador, I don't remember inviting you to join us." He pushed the other man aside, extending his hand to Kirsten. "But you're welcome to join me anytime."

The strength in her grip surprised him. "That's good to hear. Your father said I'd find you more than accommodating."

Gabriel offered her his seat, much to Tian's barely disguised annoyance. "My father? I'm sure old Pedro would have mentioned somebody like you before."

"We've never met." A calculated gleam appeared in her pale blue eyes. "But our families have been friends for many years. My name's Kirsten."

Gabriel frowned, feeling very much at a disadvantage. "Kirsten." He nodded towards the glaring young man. "This is Tian. We were just having a chat."

Her disinterested gaze flickered to Tian, but returned to probe Gabriel's. "Your father said you could help me. I'm looking for a young woman who's in town, but I don't know the city and I can't go to the police. She's already gathering supporters, including a cop and his ex-partner, so I have to find her and this Pierce guy she's hiding with before she's untouchable."

Tian turned, his hand hitting the half-empty glass and sending it flying. Beer splattered across the bar and Kirsten's face. Gabriel's eyes widened, but Tian seemed oblivious to the danger he was in.

"Pierce. This woman you're looking for is with Nathan Pierce?"

She took the napkin Gabriel offered and dried off her cheeks. Her earlier aloofness had narrowed into something brittle, something viperous lurking in her gaze. "You know him?"

To Tian's credit, he didn't wince or look away from the poison in Kirsten's eyes. "Yeah, I know him. I know the little girl you're looking for, too. Unless he's running with more than one these days."

She moved like liquid fire, slender fingers wrapping around the back of Tian's neck to slam his face into the bar. Though Tian squirmed, the wiry tendons in the back of her hand testified to how strong her grip was.

"I already shot one of his friends for trying to get in my way. I won't hesitate to shoot you, too."

"Suck my dick," Tian muttered, his free hand connecting with her stomach. Kirsten looked comically surprised, and she edged back, giving Tian just enough room to break free of her grip.

Gabriel moved between the two of them, a soothing smile on his face. "Kirsten, I'm sure Tian will be more than happy to help with whatever you need." He stepped back, smashing Tian's foot. "Isn't that right?"

Tian grunted.

"I need..." Her voice had gone as cold as her beauty. "Remy Capra picked up before it's too late. She's dangerous and volatile, and if we're not careful, we'll lose the Silver Maiden before we even have a shot at getting it. That's unacceptable."

Gabriel forgot about Tian, his attention focused on Kirsten. "The Silver Maiden? It's here? How? I would have..."

He realized she wasn't going to answer his questions. Her eyes were flinty. "Who the hell are you?"

"I told you. A friend of the family. Now are you going to help me or not?"

Gabriel smiled. "Of course." It was a truly win-win situation. Tian would be mollified, and the Silver Maiden would be his. He didn't expect Kirsten to give it up without a fight, but then, he didn't expect Kirsten to have much fight left her in when he was finished. "But let's not discuss this here." He looked around. "It's getting far too crowded for my taste."
CHAPTER FIFTEEN
She kept glancing at him out of the corner of her eye. Though he never said a word, every once in a while a bemused smile would soften Nathan's face, his hand stealing across the distance between them to stroke the back of hers. Remy refrained from asking what he was thinking. She had enough going through her head not to add the confusion of his to it.

He held her hand all the way up the stairs to his apartment, fingers laced as he unlocked the door. It shouldn't have felt as normal as it did to watch him toss his keys onto a small table, but it did. Like she'd seen it a thousand times before. Maybe that was why Remy pulled away.

"Okay if I take a shower?" She plucked at the sweaty shirt sticking to her skin. "Between the dust at the warehouse and the sand at the beach, I'm almost ready to give up on ever being clean again."

"Do you want...?" Nathan paused, smiling a little self-consciously. "That's fine. I'll call Isaac. See if he's managed to track down Kirsten yet."

Before he could reach into his pocket for his phone, her hand was on his arm. "Maybe you could take a look at my back first." She swallowed against the dryness that had appeared in her throat. "We haven't checked it since that first night."

"You're right." He gestured towards the vanity. "I should change your bandage, at least."

She had her hands on the hem of her shirt, pulling it up and over her head, before she was halfway across the room. Nathan followed behind, and his hand found the light switch on the wall, drowning the small alcove in bright fluorescent as she stepped in front of the sink. The reflection staring back at her took Remy by surprise. Toned skin gleamed with light perspiration. Her long dark hair was curling slightly in the heat, faint wisps clinging to her forehead while the rest pooled around her shoulders. Even her eyes, nearly black, shone from the raised temperatures.

"It doesn't hurt," she said, resting her palms on the vanity and leaning forward to make it easier for Nathan to look at. "I'm not sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing."

"Probably a good thing," Nathan murmured, peeling the tape from her skin. She watched him through the mirror as he bent to study it, his face only inches from her back. After a few seconds he straightened, but he didn't step away from her. "Make sure you clean it in the shower, but it looks fine."

The cool porcelain against her hands was warming swiftly, though Remy suspected it was as much about Nathan's proximity as it was the heat of her body. Her eyes flew to his in their reflections, searching, wondering what was going on behind their bright depths.

"Kind of an awkward place to get to." Her head tilted toward the closed door of the bathroom, the offer tumbling from her lips before she asked herself where her earlier fears had disappeared to. "Maybe I should have some help."

"Maybe you should," Nathan agreed, his hands sliding over her bare stomach to the top button of her jeans. He paused, studying her reflection before freeing the button and dragging the zipper down. She leaned back as he began to work the stiff material over her hips, not protesting as the jeans fell down her legs.

It was easy to step out of the denim. It wasn't as simple to ignore the hard press of Nathan's erection into her barely covered ass.

Remy whimpered when his hand skimmed back across her abdomen, long fingers splaying against the taut muscles as he held her against him. "How are you supposed to shower with so many clothes on?"

"Good point." He stepped back, pulling his shirt over his head, then pressed his body against hers again. She reached behind her, her hands sliding over his hard cock before finding his zipper. He covered her fingers with his, guiding the zipper down before pushing his pants away. "Better?"

"Definitely."

Her gaze drifted to the broad outline of his shoulders. Though her head and body blocked most of Nathan's chest, she could still see the thin scar at the base of his throat, the tight cording of muscles as his arms came back around her. She could feel his cock nestled against the thin material of her briefs, but Nathan did nothing to otherwise move. Instead, his hands rose to deftly undo the front clasp of her bra, the dark lace springing lax to expose her already hard nipples to the air.

Nathan's palms moved over her breasts, his skin rough against her. She shivered as he began caressing, his fingers kneading the heavy flesh. His hips moved forward, his cock sliding between her thighs, the stiff heat taunting her through her underwear. Remy raised her eyes to the mirror, but his gaze was intent on her breasts, his eyes darkening as he brushed his fingertips over her taut nipples, bringing forth a light moan from her throat.

As she rocked back against his hips, allowing his cock to glide in and between the tender skin of her inner thighs, she lifted her hands to cover his, molding fingers over fingers as he massaged her breasts. The promise made her clit tingle, and the muscles in her legs tightened in response. But it was the sudden pinch of her nipples that made Remy gasp, eyes flying wide as she stared at their reflections.
Nathan rolled her nipple between two fingers, steadily increasing the pressure until she was writhing against him. She was so distracted by the sharp pleasure radiating from her tight skin she didn't notice his other hand sneaking between their bodies, positioning the head of his cock at her slick passage.

"Remy," he whispered, gripping her hip.

She didn't know why he was asking. Hadn't their time together proven to him yet that she was his for the taking? She had never known another man who could so thoroughly render her helpless, whether by the simple call of his voice or the gentle touch of his hand.

Still, her tongue darted out to moisten her dry lips, her arm arching back to tangle her fingers in his hair. "Please," she replied, her voice as hoarse as his. You know I'm yours. "Don't stop."

"I won't." Nathan thrust forward. He filled her completely, holding her tightly as he paused inside of her. She caught her breath, studying his face, straining to read his thoughts. His eyes were dilated, and he seemed a little awed, a little dazed. Remy restrained herself, waiting for him to move, even as her thighs began to tremble.

Her blood was pounding in her ears by the time he began to pull out. Carefully, she exhaled, quivering with every jagged second, but it did little to quell her runaway thoughts. If Remy thought Nathan's were inscrutable, hers were a maelstrom of confusion, at once offering answers while in the next moment, posing further questions. The Silver Maiden and her confessions at the beach and his subsequent chase danced to distraction inside her. It shouldn't be possible. There was no such thing as fate. The only one to control your destiny was you.

And yet, here she was. Doing the impossible. Finding both exhilaration and peace in a near-stranger's arms.

Not a stranger. Nathan. You know this man.

Nathan continued to move, his long, slow strokes pushing her close to the edge. Her eyes fluttered shut, but his grip on her hip tightened. "Remy. Remy, don't close your eyes."

She obeyed without pause, chin lifting as well as her gaze to find him watching her in the mirror. "Why?" she breathed.

"Because I..." Nathan kissed her shoulder, looking at her reflection through his lashes. "Because I want to see you. I want you to see us."

She did. She could. The words failed her, but the sight of his arms around her, his mouth pressed to her skin, his shoulders bowed to swallow hers, left her surging with the need to tell him. Somehow.

Her fingers left Nathan's nape to ghost along the side of his face. She traced his cheekbone, found the rough edge of the stubble that refused to ever go away, lingered at the corner of his mouth as he continued to rain kisses up to her neck. Still, it wasn't enough. And she knew it.

"Magic."

His mouth paused, but his hips continued the same maddening rhythm, his eyes clashing with hers in the mirror. "What is?" he asked, his mouth still near her skin. His hot breath sent a shiver down her spine, and she felt the question more than heard it. "This? Us?"

"All of it." Her eyes fluttered shut for a moment at the electric onslaught of sensations but Nathan's tightened grip forced them open again. Any barricade she might have managed around her emotions splintered at the naked need she saw reflected back at her. "I don't know what else to call it. All I know is that ... I don't want it to stop. It can't.

You're the first man I've ever thought..." Remy stopped. That would be too much.

Nathan froze, wrapping his arm around her stomach to hold her against him. Her chest rose and fell with his, and his skin almost burned her. "What?" he asked, his voice faint. "What, Remy?"

Everything was roaring inside her head, caught in the flame of his gaze as he waited for her to speak. Her mouth was dry, and she swallowed in a vain attempt to regain control.

It failed.

"I've always been alone. Even when I had ... family, I guess you'd call them. I would have died for any of them, but that didn't mean they were inside me." Her fingertips caressed his cheek. "You've been there almost since the start. I don't know how. I don't even know what to call it. Because magic doesn't seem strong enough."

Nathan opened his mouth as though he was going to respond, but closed it again. He hesitated for a moment before he began moving, thrusting into her as slowly as before. The silence stretched between them, until Remy felt a flicker of panic. Had she gone too far? Had she said too much? He had asked and it wasn't fair if...?

"I know." His tone matched hers. "I know ... me too."

It wasn't the words that released the torrent of emotion through her battered system. It was the unaltering hold of his gaze with hers in the mirror, the surety reflected within it as he continued to stroke in and out of her body. Remy sagged against him, grateful for the hard wall of his chest. She almost hadn't dared to hope, and yet here he was, professing to feel the same way. Why? It defied explanations, but maybe that was part of its power.

"It scares the shit out of me," she confessed.

Nathan exhaled, in what almost sounded like a light laugh. "Me too. God, me too." His fingers moved over her
stomach, caressing her before sliding between her thighs. She took his wrist, guiding him to her throbbing clît. "But we'll have time to figure it out," he added, before he began to massage her.

Remy nodded, incapable of anything more coherent with his talented fingers and throbbing cock playing her to such a fevered pitch. Her breathing quickened, air coming in audible gasps, but always, Nathan maintained the same steady tempo, in and out and back and forth until every inch of her skin screamed for release from the fire he was stoking. Her nails clawed into his nape, and her head pressed back against his chest. She would fall if not for his strength holding her up.

She almost did when her knees buckled as she came.

"I love watching you come," Nathan said, his voice strained as he thrust into her a final time. His words forced her to focus on their reflections one again, and she watched the relief wash over his face. He gasped, his chest hitching against her back as he climaxed. His muscles immediately went lax against her, and he stumbled backwards against the wall, without releasing her.

They regarded each other in the mirror for a long moment, only their ragged breath breaking the silence.

"Looks like we have an even better reason for that shower now." Her fingers stroked the strong muscles of the arm banded around her waist. There were so many other words straining to come out, like a floodgate had been thrown open inside her heart, but she bit her tongue against them, waiting to see how Nathan was going to act.

Nathan released her, pushing away from the wall. But almost as soon as he let her go, he was touching her again, his hand light on her arm. "I can think of several good reasons," he said, guiding her towards the bathroom.

She set the taps to a lukewarm temperature, unwilling to bear any more heat than was necessary. Nathan held aside the shower curtain for her, allowing Remy to step beneath the driving spray first before climbing in after her. The first contact against her slick skin made her sigh out loud, and she tilted her head back to let the water drench her body.

As Nathan pressed to her back, the gentle prod of his still half-hard cock made her aware of her sticky pussy. "First things first," Remy said. Lifting her leg, she rested her foot on the edge of the tub as she reached for the sponge in the corner.

"Here." Nathan took the sponge from her, "let me help with that." He worked it with the soap until he had a thick lather, then reached between her thighs with two soapy fingers. Bracing one hand on her thigh, he caressed her lips with the other, his fingers gliding along her hot flesh.

Her pussy contracted at his initial touch, her breath hitching as she swayed back against his chest. "I hope you have a lot of hot water. Because if this is the way you clean, I don't think I'm ever going to want to get out of here."

"I just want to make sure you're very..." He slid his fingers down her slit. "Very..." He teasingly pushed his finger into her channel, but pulled away. "Clean." He emphasized that by moving his hand from her pussy to her ass, smoothing his fingers over her curves before sliding them between her cheeks.

"Liar."

But the epithet was lost when his soapy finger found her puckered hole, probing past the tight outer ring to sink well past the first knuckle. There was no burn, the slick from the lather easing his entry, but still, Remy cried out at the invasion, her body arching away from Nathan as her hips pressed against his hand. Her hands flew to the wall in front of her, desperate to brace herself from toppling, and she had to squeeze her eyes shut against the flood of lights dancing before her eyes. It had been a long time since anybody had played as Nathan was, but she didn't think it had ever felt like this.

Nathan began moving his wrist in a slow rhythm, pushing his finger a little deeper each time he pushed forward. With each small thrust, he gave her a moment to adjust around him. He quickened the tempo, until she was accustomed to the almost stinging pleasure, but he caught her off-guard again when he slid a second finger past the tight ring of flesh. His other hand slid up her thigh, the back of his thumb brushing against her clît.

She clamped down around his fingers at the slightest contact, her body locking as Remy struggled to contain the shudders rippling through her flesh. "Am I ... clean yet?" she managed to gasp. The water pelted her skin, but she was barely aware of the rivulets running into her eyes or the barrage making her nipples tingle. All sensation was focused on Nathan and his hands and the deliberate way he seemed determined to make her come again.

"No," Nathan murmured, the word clear despite the thundering water and her own harsh breathing. "Not quite. Not yet." His hands moved down her thigh. "I just sort of skimmed over this area, after all," he added and pushed two fingers into her pussy.

Any attempts to respond dissolved under the onslaught of his touch, her body moving in an eager bid to match his strokes. Remy couldn't think, couldn't speak, couldn't do anything but ride his hands, her fingertips slipping against the white tiled wall as she struggled not to collapse. His name fell from her lips, and somewhere amidst the cacophony inside her head, she was pretty sure other things came out as well, but she was too far gone to worry about what true confessions were escaping her control. All she wanted was to come. All she wanted was that release.
All she wanted was *him*.
"I don't think it's magic," Nathan murmured, his accent more pronounced. "I think you're some sort of miracle."
Her eyes flew open, her every nerve surging to burst through the surface of her skin as if to escape and catch his words before they were swept down the drain and lost forever. Remy came, not with a cry but with a breathless whimper, releasing her hold on the wall to sink onto the fingers buried inside her, her weight born by Nathan's lean body. She felt his mouth against her neck, lips and tongue tasting and teasing, but it was the echo of his voice inside her head carrying her through her orgasm.
She was trembling by the time it ebbed.
"Well," Nathan breathed, his voice a little uneven, "I think you might be clean enough."
On wobbly legs, Remy turned in his arms to seek out his mouth, clinging to his shoulders as she kissed him as deeply as she could manage. His hands left her hips to tug her more tightly against his chest, and his cock nudged her thigh as it grew even harder. By the time they parted, they were both panting, and she lifted her head at the same time she slipped a hand down between their bodies.
"Your turn," she said, wrapping her fingers around his throbbing shaft.
CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Nathan watched Remy sleep, his chest tight. Something was wrong. Not very wrong, but just enough to make him nervous, to make sleep impossible. He had woken with a pressing sense of dread, and now he couldn't shake it. But looking at Remy's full lips and long eyelashes, it was almost impossible to believe anything bad could happen. What is this? Did I leave the oven on? The car unlocked? What?

In an attempt to comfort himself, he pulled her against him, her back curving against his chest. He buried his face in her hair, inhaling her sweet fragrance, and closed his eyes. She still felt so new, so unexpected. And everything she said still echoed in his mind—each word, each inflection, each breath imprinted on his mind.

But the vague sense of unease continued to plague him.

Nathan eased himself away from her, rising from the bed, too nervous to remain still. Was it something she had said to him? One of the many things he couldn't forget? He looked down at Remy, studying her once again, noting the slight smile on her soft lips. She was too good to be true, and could she have been right? Had she been sent to him? To him, specifically?

Nathan didn't know how it worked, how it could have happened, or why. But he didn't want to see it work firsthand. The Silver Maiden was far too precious, and dangerous, to leave lying around his apartment.

"You got up." Her sleepy voice came from the doorway, and he almost dropped the box as his head whipped around to stare at her. Remy leaned against the jamb, legs bare beneath the hem of his shirt that she seemed to have permanently appropriated for sleeping. The full mouth that had been smiling only moments earlier in his bed now bowed into a pretend pout. "I thought we were going to have a lazy morning and sleep in."

"We are ... well, we were." Nathan's relief was palpable when she began to turn away to go back into the bedroom. Then she stopped. His heart began to thud again.

"That's going to gyp me out of breakfast, isn't it? Because you know and I know that you don't have a thing in this place that's edible." Nathan smiled. "Fair point. There's a grocery store around the corner. I could drop you off."

"A wicked gleam appeared in her heavy-lidded eyes. "Do we have time for a shower before we go?"

Technically, they had time to do many things before they left, but Nathan would be uneasy until the coin was someplace safe. "No. But I'll make it up to you when we get home."

She smiled, and in that moment before she turned and disappeared down the hall, any doubts he might have had about his decision fled. He couldn't lose her, not so quickly and not because they were so foolish as to leave the coin lying about where almost anyone could pick it up. Better to lock it away until they understood its secrets once and for all.

Her voice floated back to him, snapping him from his reverie. "Last one dressed is the last to come when we get back!"

Nathan located the small key on his key ring and slid it into the tiny lock. The safety deposit box wasn't big, and it was far from full, but it held everything that was important to him. It was the only place safe enough to keep the coin. He didn't think even Kirsten Henryk would have the means or the stupidity to break into a bank.

He placed the small box holding Remy's coins near the back, but he was unable to resist the temptation to look at the Silver Maiden one final time. He slipped the coin out and cradled it in the palm of his left hand, staring at the fine work and the mysterious woman etched into the silver. As he studied it, it began to warm as before, the heat spreading up his arm.

A sudden image flashed in his mind, painful in its clarity. He saw Remy running, but he didn't just see it, he felt it. Felt her fear, felt her pain, the sharp flash of horror, and then, longing so strong it made his chest ache. For a
moment, he could see her face. Her eyes were flashing, and she turned to look over her shoulder, just like the woman on the coin.

The vision was interrupted by a searing pain shooting up his arm. Yelping, he dropped the coin in the box. Holding his injured hand against his chest, he stumbled back from the drawer, too stunned to quite understand the extent of the burn. Tears stung the back of his eyes, and his palm was throbbing. A faint purple light pulsed from the box, and Nathan was afraid to look away, worried the coin would disappear, or worse, make him disappear.

But as quickly as it all began, the light faded, as did the pain in his arm. Tentatively, he stepped forward, peering into the drawer. The Silver Maiden was resting on a tattered, wrinkled envelope, looking dull and harmless again. Nathan considered it for a moment, watching to make sure it didn't burn through the paper. He paused, distracted from the coin by the envelope he barely remembered putting in the deposit box. But the throbbing in his palm stopped him from grabbing the coin again. He decided it was fine where it was. Taking a deep breath, he closed and locked the box with his unburned hand.

Nathan's heart was still hammering when he returned to his Mustang. The image of Remy kept flashing in his mind, distracting him. It took three attempts to find the correct key and start the engine, the pain in his fingers not helping. The moment he touched the wheel, fresh agony flared through his arm. Sighing, he wrapped a rag around his fingers. Why didn't Manuel's information mention the bit about first-degree burns?

Remy's emotions had been imprinted on his mind, overlaying his own shock at the experience. He could recall them, as though he had experienced it himself, but at the same time, they were foreign and even disconcerting. Even as Nathan navigated into traffic, he couldn't quite push them away and focus on the simple task of driving.

Nathan checked the familiar landmarks, assuring himself he could give in to the temptation to analyze the experience later. When he was at home. The bank was only a few miles from the grocery store, which in turn, was only a few blocks from his flat. Nathan just wanted to pick up Remy and go back to bed. He needed some time to think and-

The Mustang lurched forward, yanking him from his thoughts. Alarmed, he checked his rearview mirror, seeing nothing except the intimidating grill of a very large truck. Swearing under his breath, he pulled into the right lane, noting the plate number as the truck passed. What the hell was wrong with that asshole?

The truck cut him off without warning, its back fender nearly brushing against the Mustang's bumper. Nathan laid on the horn, signaling to move left, but another truck pulled even with him. They all rolled to a stop at an intersection, and Nathan noticed a third truck slipping into the lane behind him.

The light turned green. Nathan made a sudden right turn, stepping on the gas to pull away from his new friends, but he only got made it a single block before one was on his ass again. "Fuck."

Nathan took a sudden left, then a right, then another quick left, and finally a quick U-turn to double back. For a moment, he was alone on the narrow street. Before he could congratulate himself on his clever driving, the first truck rounded the corner in front of him, bearing down hard. Nathan swerved to the left, the wheel rubbing against his burnt hand.

The Mustang fishtailed, only a few feet between it and the truck. The second one appeared out of nowhere, its tires squealing as it hit the passenger-side of the car. Nathan slammed against the door, his head hitting the window hard enough to make him see stars. When his vision cleared, he noticed the third truck behind him.

Nathan didn't recognize the two men who approached his car, but he did recognize their colors. He reached for his gun automatically, but there was nothing there. They yanked his car door open, shoving their guns into his face. '"You're coming with us."

"Fuck you."

The man raised his hand and brought the gun down across his temple. Everything went black.

She squinted into the brilliant morning light, searching up and down the busy street for the familiar shape of the Mustang. Nathan had rushed her out of the apartment so fast she had forgotten her shades, and already her head was punishing her for the oversight. It was going to take more than a few days to get used to all this California sunshine. Either that, or find more reasons to stay inside.

Remy grinned, in spite of her increasing agitation. Staying inside was not a problem.

If she didn't think too much about the greater implications, the entire notion of her and Nathan had her stomach dancing, her heart humming. She hadn't lied when she'd said she was scared. What Remy hadn't mentioned, though, was that the thrill outweighed the fear. She looked at him, and the adrenaline from every fight she had ever been in and every win she had ever accrued coursed through her veins. Nathan made her feel like anything was possible. That she could take on Kirsten, face-to-face, one-on-one, and win with a single hand tied behind her back. Blindfolded. Hopping on one foot.

With Nathan, she had something she had never had before. She had hope. Who knew it came with five o'clock
shadow and a killer kiss?  
A squeal of tires had her attention shifting in the opposite direction, scanning the parking lot to see a gray minivan slamming on its brakes to avoid hitting a teenaged boy on a skateboard. Still, there was no sign of Nathan. Had she misunderstood his instructions? Was she supposed to meet him back at the apartment instead?  
Remy twisted to peer through the front window of the store. The clock on the wall over the deli counter read ten-forty. Forty minutes longer than the latest Nathan had promised he would be. She had to have screwed up the directions.  
Picking up the plastic bag sitting at her feet, she let it swing from her fingers as she walked out of the lot. The beating sun made her neck itch, and she tilted her head from side to side to relieve the pressure building up at the base of her skull. The apartment would be hot, too, but Nathan's promise to make it up to her when they got back had her unconsciously squeezing her thighs together in anticipation. A cooling shower, maybe. And this time, she'd make him fuck her with more than his fingers.  
She spotted the Mustang as soon as she rounded the corner. It was a narrow street with little traffic, and as soon as she saw the car turned sideways in the middle of the road, Remy knew something was wrong. She broke into a run, the groceries banging against her leg with every step. Her breathing wasn't labored, but her heart thudded so loudly inside her chest it made it difficult to suck in air.  
It got even worse when she saw the empty interior.  
Dropping the sack to the ground, Remy ran around the front to the driver's side. The door was shut, though not properly latched, and there were spidery fractures webbing the window. She yanked it open, hoping the glare of sunshine off the glass had created the mirage of the inside being empty, but found only the bare seat. A rag lay discarded in the footwell, but a glint off something metal slid her eye past it, had her bending in and over to reach down and pick it up.  
Her throat went dry as she recognized the weight resting in her palm. Nathan's phone. He never went anywhere without his phone.  
Her search became more frantic, sliding behind the wheel to look for any other clues about what happened. His keys dangled from the ignition, heavy and unmoving until her movements sent them jingling again. But other than what she had already found, Remy saw no other clue as to why Nathan would abandon his car. Had he been chased? Forced to flee on foot? But then he wouldn't leave his keys and phone behind. It could have been an accident, but cops and paramedics wouldn't just leave his car like this, blocking the road.  
Remy's head turned to look at the driver's window again. The epicenter of the break was at head level. Even worse, when she peered closer, there was the unmistakable fleck of blood caught in the cracks.  
It was all too obvious to her what had happened. Hadn't Tian already proven they were keeping an eye on Nathan? And they had a penchant for using their cars as weapons. The events of the other night had not been a fluke.  
Her hand was shaking as she opened his phone, fumbling with the unfamiliar buttons until she figured out how to retrieve the number she wanted. It rang only once, and the brusque greeting did nothing to ease the knots in her stomach.  
"Isaac? It's Remy." She fingered the rag from the floor, wondering what it had to do with Nathan's disappearance. "Nate's in trouble."
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

He had never driven this quickly outside of a work situation in nearly four years. In fact, the last time Isaac had pulled out his siren for a non-work-related emergency had been about Nathan, too. Nobody else in his life had the power to put the fear of god in Isaac more than his best friend. Nobody else had ever mattered as much.

When he pulled into the narrow street, his wheels squealing as he made the turn, Isaac saw the Mustang pulled up to the curb, Remy's familiar form leaning against the dented side. He jerked to a crooked halt behind it and was out and onto the walk before the engine had barely stopped.

"What the fuck happened?" he growled, marching toward her.

Immediately, Remy straightened, shoulders squaring, chin lifting as her hackles rose. Isaac didn't even have time to register the way her top clung to her full breasts or the fact she seemed to have poured herself into the hiphugger jeans she wore. He was too focused on the dangerous flare in her dark eyes.

"You tell me," she shot back. "He was late picking me up so I decided to walk home and found the car like I told you." She jabbed a finger into his chest. Though he swatted her hand away, Isaac was surprised at how much the poke had hurt. "Maybe something you told him this morning had him so distracted, he wasn't paying any attention when Tian's gang decided to run him off the road."

His mouth was open to argue with her when her words sank in. "What do you mean, something I said? I haven't talked to Nathan since yesterday."

She looked ready to swing at him, and his muscles tensed at the unspoken threat. "That's why he wanted to go out this morning," Remy explained. "Nate said he needed to find out what you might have learned about where Kirsten is."

Isaac shook his head. "For one thing, that's ridiculous. Nathan knows the first thing I'd do is pick up the phone and call him if I had a bead on her."

"So why would he say he needed to see you then?"

"I don't know." He folded his arms over his broad chest and pulled himself to his full height. He might not be as tall as Nathan, but he was a hell of a lot broader and he would use whatever advantage he could over Remy. "Maybe he felt the need for a little fresh air."

The implication of his words sank in as soon as they were out of his mouth. Her cheeks flared crimson, and this time, the anger sparking in the chocolate depths of her eyes tindered directly at him.

"This is not about me. Me and Nate, we both want whatever this thing that's happening between us is. He's been on my side from the get-go, even before I had real proof about what was going on. So just because you're going a little green around the edges, don't try and turn this around on me."

"That's the only thing I need to know something's wrong. And if you give half a rat's ass about Nate like you say you do, you'll help me find him before Tian's gang makes it too late."

Though he didn't move right away, Isaac knew she had a point. Nathan's disappearance was a hell of a lot more important than any of his concerns about her loyalty. Nathan trusted her, after all. Besides, if Remy didn't care about him, she would never have called Isaac in such a panic when she found the car. She could have sat on the information instead of bringing him in as early as possible.

Isaac jerked his head back to his own vehicle. "Get in," he ordered. "We'll check out the apartment first. Make sure he's not there or they didn't toss the place."

Nathan's keys jangled from her fingers as she followed him. "Nate doesn't have anything of value. They didn't even take his car."

It was hard not to slam his door even harder than he did. "No, he's got you and those coins. In my book, that's a hell of a lot more dangerous."

She didn't say a word the few blocks back to Nathan's place, but she dogged his heels as he took the stairs two by two. Though he had a spare key, Remy pushed ahead of him when they reached the door, slipping Nathan's into the lock with a familiarity that made Isaac grind his teeth. He followed her in, but a quick glance around the living room was all he needed to know nobody had been around.

Remy didn't seem so sure, rushing off to the bedroom before he spoke. He had already looked over the kitchen by the time she came back out.

"Everything looks the same." There was a tinge of disappointment in her voice, and it dawned on him that she had been hoping for a disturbance. Probably because she knew a disturbance would give them more information on whoever it was had snatched Nathan.

"I think the fact we had to unlock the door to get in was our first clue. Tian's boys would have had to bust it down since they left the keys with the car."

Her eyes drifted to the front door, finely arched brows drawing together in a small frown.
Isaac pulled his phone from his pocket and punched in the number for the station. "I'm going to have someone check out all the hospitals." She seemed oblivious to his explanation, wandering back into the living room with a listlessness he hadn't seen from her before. "Maybe Tian just had Nathan roughed up a little bit. He might." "They're gone."

The secretary Kathy came onto the line at the same time Remy made her little announcement, and Isaac had to clumsily ask her to hold while he asked Remy what the hell she was talking about. His gaze followed her as she went to the bookshelf, and it was only then he realized the box that had stored her coins was gone. One more piece of the puzzle fell into place.

She was still busy scanning the shelves, looking for the box, by the time he finished giving Kathy her instructions. "You're not going to find it." He snapped his phone shut and shoving it back into his pocket. "The coins aren't here."

"Well, obviously," Remy retorted. Her torpor had vanished with her discovery, and she was taut again with barely pent energy, like a thoroughbred waiting at the gate of a big race. While there was no denying what Nathan's physical attraction to Remy was, when she was like this, Isaac thought he saw what other interests his best friend might have. She was like a living flame in a slight breeze, flickering first in this direction and then the next, attracting everybody to come close and then dancing out of their reach. Nathan would find the contradiction irresistible.

If nothing else, the fact she was the physical antithesis of Susanna had to be a good thing. Nathan had fallen for that sugar and spice act far too easily. Remy could never be mistaken as less than worldly. "I think I know what he was doing this morning," Isaac explained. "Which means the coins are safe. Right now, our priority has to be finding him. Agreed?"

She looked like she wanted to argue some more, but to her credit, Remy nodded. "What do we do first?"

"We're going to talk to my connection to Tian." Already he was heading for the door. They couldn't afford to waste any more time; Nathan's life was in the balance. "Which means, keep your mouth shut, your eyes open, and if you do anything to fuck this up, I will not hesitate to lock you up and get you out of my way until he's back, understand?"

In the doorway, he glanced over his shoulder. None of the fight had faded from her eyes, but she gave him another nod anyway.

That was all he needed.

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Nathan did not expect to wake up in bedroom-a rather posh bedroom, at that. He thought at first they had taken him back to a hotel, and the soft whisper of waves just feet from his window added credence to the assumption. But as his head cleared, Nathan realized he was in somebody's home, tied to somebody's bed.

His arms were stretched over his head, secure to the bedpost with handcuffs. His feet were bound together with thick ropes. A cool breeze floated through the room, caressing his overheated skin, and he thought the situation would almost be pleasant if he wasn't most certainly going to die.

Nathan curled his fingers, gasping at the sting from the burn still raw on his skin.

Remy.

Did they get her, too? Did they know where to find her? Had she been the target? Nobody Nathan knew had such nice digs. Tian didn't own any beachfront property. He looked around the room, searching for any clue, or anything useful for an escape. But the walls were bare, the door shut and locked, and the cuffs unyielding.

The low murmur of voices outside the room joined with that of the surf, too indistinct for him to decipher who or how many were speaking. Nathan turned his head in time to see the doorknob move, and in the crack that was created when it was opened, saw a more than familiar shape.

Tian. Maybe the house was a recent acquisition.

The woman who entered, closing the door behind her, was an unknown, though. Tall and willowy, she had white-blond hair cut into a severe short cut. Rather than make her appear masculine, it accentuated the sharp angles of her face, lending her an austere beauty that would have been striking under other circumstances. Right now, Nathan was only interested in finding out who she was.

And why she was smiling at him.

"Mr. Pierce." Her voice was lower than he imagined, her accent from the East. She came to a stop at the side of the bed and gazed down at him, glancing at his various bindings. "How are we feeling?"

"We're feeling great," Nathan said, his smile matching his bright tone. "And you are?"

"An ally. If you allow me to be." Grabbing the straight-backed chair from the nearby desk, she pulled it up to the side of the bed. "I'm Kirsten Henryk."

Nathan didn't betray his feelings when she introduced herself. Despite his rather unfortunate situation, he couldn't help but behave as though he was the one in control. She wanted to get information from him, but not before he got
what she wanted from her. He squashed the instant reaction of rage, forcing himself to forget about the pain and terror-the pain and terror he had just experienced himself-that this woman had caused Remy.

"An ally?" He wiggled his wrists, the chains jingling against the bedposts. "It seems I'm in need of one of those. What can you do for me?"

Her gaze never left his face. "Get you out of here, of course. And get that idiot Tian off your back for good. In fact-" she leaned forward. "I can fix it so you can catch him, Mr. Pierce. Tian's garbage that should have been cleaned up ages ago. It would be better all around if we got him off the streets, don't you think?"

"Oh, yes. I quite agree with you. The problem is that we're all quite clear on what I need from you, but I'm not certain what you want from me."

The ice-blue of her eyes seemed to grow even paler as she regarded him, and for the first time since entering the room, her smile began to fade. "A trade," came her quiet response. "I give you your freedom and your criminal. You give me what's mine."

"That seems fair enough," Nathan agreed, keeping the relief out of his voice. A trade meant she did not have Remy. More importantly, it meant she didn't know where to find Remy. At this point, Nathan prayed Isaac had her, and was keeping her somewhere safe, out of Kirsten's reach. And of course, she wouldn't be able to get her evil claws on the coin. "What's yours?"

"A family heirloom. It was stolen from my father's home. A silver coin he'd been entrusted to care for, taken by somebody whose only concern was to sell it."

Her mouth hardened, her smile now gone. "She's not the woman you think she is, Mr. Pierce. Remy Capra has killed more people than you did while you were still on the force, including cops. All she cares about is herself, and she will do anything she needs to, to get what she wants. She's not like you or me. She has no regard for what's right and what's wrong."

"What if we calculate the number of people I've killed since I left the force? Would our numbers be closer then?"

His glib response gave him his first real reaction from her. Kirsten's nostrils flared, the muscles in her strong jaw twitching. In her lap, her long fingers curled into a fist.

"You're out of your league, Mr. Pierce." She didn't raise her voice, but the menace in it was unmistakable. "And if you have any desire to walk out of this house with your heart still inside your chest, you'll agree to my deal. I am the only hope you have to get out of here alive. You don't want to piss me off."

"Yes, your reputation precedes you. I heard you're worse than Godzilla and Hitler combined. Unfortunately, I don't know where Remy is, and I don't have your coin, so I can't help you."

"Technically, you scratched Isaac. He didn't even have to go to the hospital," Nathan pointed out. "And there is something to be said for the home-field advantage, Ms. Henryk." He moved his hands, trying to ease the throbbing in his palm. "I'm not from the future or anything, Ms. Henryk." He pressed the muzzle to the middle of his forehead. "The only reason Tian didn't kill you as soon as his boys brought you in was because of me. I don't know why you're protecting that bitch, but don't think it's going to do any good. I got your partner without breaking a sweat. I'll get her, too."

"He probably took that knife in his back personally," Nathan murmured, watching the nose of the gun as it traveled up his arm, cold and hard. "I don't know why. I didn't take the grenade-"

Before Nathan finished his sentence, she jammed the barrel of the gun into his burned hand. He managed to keep the scream from ripping through his throat, but just barely. White-hot slivers of agony flew up his arm and seemed to lodge in his shoulder and chest. He couldn't breathe for several seconds, and he didn't miss the look of surprise, or pleasure, on Kirsten's face.
"Personally," he finally wheezed as sweat rolled down his neck. "Interesting."
Without moving the gun, she edged closer to the head of the bed, reaching forward with her other hand to uncurl his fingers and pull them straight. She began to trace over the burn, not the one her gun mostly covered on his palm but the fainter markings on the calloused pads of his fingers. Her touch was cool and light, and while he could see what she was doing if he dared to crane his neck, there was no way he was giving the bitch the satisfaction.
"It would appear you've been lying to me, Mr. Pierce."
Bloody fucking hell.
"Yes," Nathan said around the fresh lump in his throat, "you caught me. I'll have to ask your pardon."
"Does it hurt?"
Her hand disappeared from his, and she stepped back in order to see his face, at the same time pressing the gun more firmly against the burn.
The shock had been the worst part, and now the agony settled over him like thick blanket. It took a few moments to adjust, but he had survived worse pain. And one thing trumped the raw throbbing-anger. This bitch had nearly killed both Remy and Isaac, and he'd be twice damned before he let her break him. He clung to that anger now.
"It's a bit unpleasant, yes. But pain is subjective."
Her eyes were like ice as they regarded him, seconds stretching into a minute and then two before she spoke or moved. "Yes, Mr. Pierce. And I'm sure Cesar will take great pleasure in demonstrating that principle for you."
Nathan didn't reply, returning her stare until she backed away from the bed and moved to the door. He held his breath as he watched her leave, releasing it in a pained moan when she shut the door.
"What am I going to do? What the fuck am I going to do?"
He hoped by now Remy would have contacted Isaac. He knew Isaac would immediately start looking for him, and given the recent trouble with Tian, he'd start checking his informants. But he hoped Isaac had the good sense to get Remy out of Kirsten's reach. The woman was powerless without Remy, and frustrated. That combination could lead to weakness.

Several minutes dragged by. He sensed Cesar in the hallway, his sly mouth twisted in an impatient grin. He'd want to make a big entrance, want to put Nathan on edge. He didn't know as much about Cesar as he did Tian, but he knew enough. Cesar had done his first stint in juvie at age eleven-three months for stealing a car. The sentences and the offenses had only snowballed after that. Eight months here for breaking and entering, fifteen months there for attempted rape, a full two years for assaulting a police officer.

He had disappeared for several years after his eighteenth birthday, only to turn up again in Los Angeles as Tian's right-hand man. Though his record as an adult was more or less clean-he had gotten smart in the intervening years-Nathan knew what he was capable of. He wouldn't be surprised if Cesar tortured animals in his spare time.
And he knew for a fact Cesar didn't give a fuck about Remy, Kirsten Henryk, or the damned Silver Maiden. He was there for his own purposes, and Kirsten only thought they aligned with hers. It didn't matter what Cesar had planned, Nathan wasn't going to tell him anything.
Finally, Cesar slipped into the room, his smile identical to the one Nathan had imagined. He was carrying a clothes basket brimming with all sorts of items. Nathan thought he saw some clothes hangers, a few boxes of soap, lemon juice, and a long, black cord, among other things.
"Nathan. I have been dying to see you," Cesar greeted.
"I'm surprised you're already back on your feet. I thought it would take more than a few days to heal from a wound like that."
"I have a strong constitution," Cesar said, taking the items out of his basket and placing them on top of the dresser. Nathan watched for a moment before asking, "Did you come in here to clean? I'd help, but..."
Cesar looked over his shoulder, his eyes flat. "They wouldn't let me leave to get my supplies. So I had to make do. It is amazing how many common household items will work in a pinch. The average American leads a very dangerous life."
"Indeed," Nathan murmured, his skin crawling.
Cesar pulled a pair of wire snippers from his back pocket and cut one of the hangers. He pulled the wire straight, holding the very sharp edge up to the light. "Ready?"
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

More than once, Isaac repeated his instructions in the car. "Mouth shut, eyes open." He said it so many times, Remy was ready to stuff his phone down his throat by the time he pulled the car to a stop in the crowded parking lot.

Her brows shot up as she stared at the glass-fronted building. A bookstore.

When Isaac tapped on her window, Remy jumped. She hadn't even heard him get out of the car.

"We don't have all day." He stepped back, allowing her room to open her door. His eyes were hidden behind his shades, but his mouth was still drawn into a tight line as he lifted a warning finger. "And don't-"

"Fuck this up. Got it." She slammed the door, ignoring his scowl. "Any other words of wisdom you want to impart?"

For a moment, Isaac looked like he was going to snap at her again. She had no idea why she was goading him as much as she was—well, that was a little bit of a lie; she pushed because he'd pushed first—but she knew sooner or later, she was going to have to stop. Isaac meant the world to Nathan, and if Remy wanted a chance for them to have any kind of future together, she was going to have to learn how to play nice.

Of course, they had to get Nathan back first. They would. Failure was not an option.

The store loomed large and empty around them as she followed Isaac through the faux wood trimmed doors. Lights bright and many scored the warehouse ceiling, while row after row of shelved books stretched to the back of the store.

The scent of brewing coffee made her stomach rumble.

Isaac glanced back over his shoulder. "Didn't you have breakfast?"

Remy shook her head. "That's what the groceries were for. Nathan's kitchen is pathetic."

Though he continued navigating through the wide aisles, she caught a glimpse of a smile on his face. It was the first one she had seen all morning. "Why do you think I'm always bringing over food?" he commented. There was a pause. "Tell you what. We'll grab Miles and go sit in the café for our meeting. If you've got food in your mouth, odds are better you won't talk."

"Gee, thanks," she muttered. It was a good sign, though. Isaac wouldn't make the offer if he hated her, would he?

They rounded the corner, slipping between two laden rows of shelves. Out of the corner of her eye, Remy saw the section's label. *Humor.* She hoped that wasn't Isaac's idea, because she didn't think it was funny at all.

He came to a stop in front of her, stuffing his hands deep into his pants pockets. "Good book?"

Remy shook her head. "That's what the groceries were for. Nathan's kitchen is pathetic."

He shook her hand with a nod. She had expected a man of his size to have sweaty palms, but they were warm and dry, the strength in his fingers unsurprising. This close, she could see the fading pockmarks from adolescent acne, the broken capillaries in his wide nose. He couldn't even be thirty, but between the receding hairline and the haunting sadness behind his eyes, she would bet he was often mistaken for at least ten years older.

"Miles Morgan." He lumbered to his feet, his knees audibly cracking from the awkward movements. Marking his page with his finger, he closed the book and held it loosely at his side, never once taking his gaze away from her. "You're the one who knifed Cesar."

Isaac was stepping forward before Miles had finished speaking, grabbing Remy's elbow and hauling her back and out of the way. She winced at how tightly he was holding her. "She's not a threat to you. You've got my word on that."

"Miles shrugged. "You think I care if someone wants to stick it to that son of a bitch? He's half the reason I'm even talking to you, McGuire. Anyone who wants Cesar dead is my friend, not my enemy."

She liked him. When it came to people, Remy followed her gut, and something deep inside told her Miles Morgan was a man to be trusted. "You want to get a coffee? Because I'm starving, and Ike here promised we could do this over food."

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"It's Isaac," he hissed.

"I could do a donut." Miles's gaze darted dispassionately over the pair. "Sure. I could do a donut."

None of them spoke until after they were seated at a small table tucked in the corner of the café. Isaac had been forced to let her go when it came time to pay, and Remy made sure she took the seat next to Miles when they sat down. He might be Isaac's informant, but Nathan was as much her priority as he was his friend's. She would be damned if she got left out of the questioning, especially since the guy didn't seem to hate her. It made a nice change.
She was getting a little tired of being on everybody's shit list.
"Nathan's missing," Isaac said without preamble.
"Yeah." Miles blew across his steaming cup. "Tell me something I don't know."
"Tian grab him?"
"Would I have let you make this meeting so quickly if he hadn't?"
Isaac swore under his breath, leaning back in his chair. It gave Remy the opening she wanted to break into the conversation.
"I know this is none of my business, but there's no way in hell you're part of Tian's gang. You're not part of any gang, not as soft as you are. And this is Nate's life we're talking about here, so I'm not about to fuck this up by being stupid. Wanna tell me why I should believe a word you say?"
The two men exchanged a look, ending in Isaac's casual shrug. "It's your life, Miles. I wouldn't have brought her along if I didn't trust her."
The vote of approval took Remy by surprise, but she didn't have time to push him on it. Already, Miles was nodding, breaking apart his bear claw and shoving morsels into his mouth.
"I'm Tian's money man. Tian and I ... we grew up together. He was always watching my back, one way or another. Difference was, I was good in school, and he wasn't. When I moved back after college, he asked if I wanted a job, and I said yes. Didn't blink. There's nothing I wouldn't have done for Tian. He saved my ass more than once."
"And yet you've gone from president of his fan club to a sell-out in three seconds flat."
"No." The force of the simple word had crumbs spewing out of his mouth, falling to the swell of his stomach. Miles ignored them in favor of leaning forward, closer to Remy. His eyes bore into hers, but she didn't back down. "This isn't about Tian. This is about that psycho Cesar, filling his head with delusions of grandeur that are going to get him killed. I'm only doing what I have to keep my friend from ending up in the morgue even faster than he already will, and if that means he spends a few years behind bars cooling his heels, so be it. Just as long as Cesar is out of the picture."
It was honest. Even better, it matched with what Nathan had told her about Cesar, how worried he had been about his presence at Rojo. She yielded on the matter with a nod and a bite of her banana muffin.
"I need to know where he's keeping Nathan," Isaac said.
Miles shook his head. "No, that's too much. Too dangerous. Especially since she's going to be next." At their startled looks, he rolled his eyes. "Don't tell me you're surprised. She stabbed Cesar in the back. He's out for blood and he's going to get it, one way or another."
"Would they consider a trade?" The offer was on the table before she could stop it, but as soon as she said it out loud, Remy knew it was their best chance. "Me for Nate."
Miles looked doubtful, but Isaac looked like someone had dropped a pound of sour balls into his coffee. "No, no way. No trade."
"Why not?" Remy demanded.
His eyes were blazing when they met hers. "Because I said so. Because Nathan would kill me if I let anything happen to you. And because it's a fucking stupid idea, that's why not."
"It is kind of stupid," Miles interjected.
She only half-heard. She was too busy bristling with fresh anger. "If you think I'm going to sit back on my ass and do nothing to help Nate, you don't know the first thing about me. He means too much to me to lose him now, especially because his so-called best friend is too boneheaded to use what assets he's got to get the job done. Like me."
Miles's head swiveled back to Isaac. "She's got a point. Anybody who can take a slice out of Cesar is an asset."
"Shut up," Isaac growled. Reaching across the table, he grabbed Remy's wrist and yanked her forward. Though it hardly stopped Miles from hearing what he said, it created an air of intimacy between them that made it impossible for her to ignore his next words. "Tell me why I should let you in any deeper than you already are."
"You have to." Her voice was low, intense. "You need me. You won't find anybody else who'll fight for Nate as hard as me, because nobody else cares about him as much as I do. Well, except you, but I figure that's a given." She paused, debating the wisdom of the words poised on her tongue, but decided to hell with it. "I'm not Susanna. I am not going to hurt Nate. I promise you."
Mentioning Susanna rattled Isaac enough to let her go, dark eyes narrowing in further assessment. She wondered how much the two men talked about the woman from their past. Not much, if this reaction was anything to go by.
"Are we done here?" Miles asked, interrupting the tension between Remy and Isaac. She looked over to see him brushing the crumbs from his T-shirt. "I'm not going to tell you where they're keeping him, McGuire. I can't. All I can tell you is last time I heard, there wasn't any intention to kill him yet. So you probably have a little bit of time to find him on your own."
"We'd have more time if you could tell me where he is," Isaac shot back.
"Probably," came the amiable response. "But I'm not." The chair squeaked across the floor as he pushed it back and rose to his feet. He nodded to Remy. "A pleasure to meet you, Ms. Capra. Feel free to take another stab at Cesar next time you see him."

He was gone within moments.
"Now what do we do?" She hadn't expected to reach a dead end with Isaac's informant, and from the look on his face, he hadn't either. But she had no clue what step they were going to take next.
"We'll figure it out." He repeated it as if doing so would make it more likely to happen. "We'll figure it out."

Nathan didn't know when Tian arrived. Each impossible long minute blended in his mind. Time felt as hot and thick as the blood rolling down his chest, and eventually, it became just as meaningless. Had Tian been there since the beginning? Had he seen everything? Heard everything? Or did he only just arrive, lured by the scent and sounds of suffering?

Cesar's smile never left his face. It hung above Nathan with mocking good cheer. Tian wasn't smiling, though. His eyes were black discs, wide and empty. The two men stood on either side of the bed, regarding him, but neither touching him. When Nathan felt the world began to blur, he'd curl his burned hand, and the familiar pain would cut through the red fog and bring him back.

"Well, Nathan Pierce. I never thought I'd see the day," Tian said.
"Who's helping you?"
Tian's eyes narrowed. "Is that all you have to say? You don't want some water? You're not going to beg for mercy?"
"Who's helping you?"
"Nobody but me," Cesar said, moving to the foot of the bed.

Nathan sent him a dismissive glance before turning his attention back to Tian. "You're not smart enough, and we both know it. Your boys aren't, either. Who's helping you?"

Anger flashed in Tian's black eyes, but only for a moment before he subdued it. "I don't think you're in the position to be asking questions."

"You're not going to defend yourself?" Nathan rasped. It took what little energy he had left to speak. It took even more energy to enunciate through his swollen and bleeding lips. He welcomed the bitter taste of copper flowing over his tongue with each word, preferring it to the lingering flavor of laundry detergent.

Tian's hand shot forward, his fingers wrapping around Nathan's neck. "I don't have to answer to you. Or explain myself."

"But somebody is helping you," Nathan said, his words small.
"Yeah, somebody is. Your worst nightmare."

He released Nathan with disgust, stepping back again. Nathan took several deep breaths, though the air burned on its way down his throat. "What's my worst nightmare's name?"

"Why do you care? You're going to be dead before you have a chance to meet him."
"I'm hurt. I really am. Don't you know I care about you, Tian? I care about your friends, your goals, your future. I guess that's why I've spent so much time looking into your life." Nathan's lips twisted into a grotesque smile.

"You don't know shit about me," Tian countered, his eyes narrowing.

"Let's just finish him." Cesar pulled a gun from his waistband. "One shot in the head, and it won't matter what this motherfucker knows or thinks he knows."

Nathan didn't look away from Tian, though he was intrigued by Cesar's reaction. He had made his intentions known several times, and chief among those, was keeping Nathan alive long enough to see Remy's end. And now Cesar was ready to kill him right there? Looks like somebody hit a nerve.

"No," Tian said, holding his hand out. "You heard what Kirsten said. He's hers until she gets what she wants."

"Man, fuck that cunt. What's she going to do about it?"

"She might not be able to do anything, but Gabriel will."

"Gabriel?" Nathan interjected. "Is he your new friend, Tian? What's his last name?"

"Shut the fuck up," Cesar snapped. "I'm tired of hearing your voice. Do I need to gag you?"

"No gagging either," Tian said, taking the gun from Cesar. "What if he feels like talking?"

"This fuck always feels like talking," Cesar muttered.

"Gabriel de los Rios? Is that your new friend's name? You're right to be scared, Tian. I'd listen to him, Cesar."

"You're already a dead man, Pierce. Just because this Henryk bitch wants to keep you alive doesn't mean you're safe forever," Cesar said, dragging the tip of his bloody hanger up Nathan's chest after retrieving it from the dresser.

"Well, so are you. You don't need me to tell you that you two are just the grunts, right? You must know."

Tian brought his elbow down on Nathan's stomach, knocking the wind out of his body. Nathan closed his eyes,
struggling to keep control. He didn't know where his breaking point was, didn't know how far they could push him before he'd snap, but he thought they might be getting close. He felt like he was shattering, his skin pulling apart from the endless shallow cuts that Cesar had carved into his flesh.

"He'll kill you," Nathan said, when he could speak again. "When you're of no more use to him, he'll kill you. And he'll take everything you've worked the last decade to create. Was that the deal you made to get me? I'm flattered."

"You don't know what you're talking about," Cesar said, reaching for the lighter he had discarded earlier. He ran the flame over the hanger, his eyes glowing.

"Cesar," Tian said sharply, holding out his hand. "It's my turn."

"What do you mean, it's your turn? I've barely started."

They both looked down then, studying Cesar's work. A part of Nathan wished he could see it himself. But even if he had the mobility, his eyes were too swollen and thick for him to see much of anything.

"Don't worry, I'll leave some for you."

Nathan knew Cesar wanted to argue more, but left without further protest. Tian followed him to the door, locking it behind him, before tossing the hanger aside.

"What do you know about him?"


Tian growled with frustration, but he ducked inside the dark bathroom, returning with a glass of water. He held it to Nathan's lips, allowing him to take several loud gulps before pulling it away. "Now what the fuck do you know?"

Nathan felt the cold water flow through him, landing hard in his sore stomach. It almost replenished some of his strength—enough to keep him talking, at any rate.

If Tian wanted to know about Gabriel, he'd tell him the man's entire life story.

"Gabriel has been in and out of LA for about a decade now. He comes into town, finds the newest up-and-comers, and makes them a little stronger, a little more powerful. But it comes with a price, right? He's not altruistic. He's not helping you because he wants to be your friend. He wants to rule Los Angeles and he's so subtle, so slow, most people haven't noticed at all."

"But you have?" Tian asked coldly.

"It's my job to notice. And he noticed you, didn't he? You didn't contact him first."

Tian folded his arms. His silence was enough of an admission.

"He wasn't going to get involved before Kirsten Henryk found him, was he?"

Tian remained silent.

"Do you know what she wants? Do you know why I'm still alive? They didn't tell you, did they? Because you don't matter. He wants your territory, he wants your men, and he wants your death added to his reputation."

"Man, fuck you."

"I didn't make a deal with the devil. But I'm surprised you did. Thought you were smarter than that, Tian."

Tian stared at him with unreadable eyes for several long seconds, and Nathan could almost hear the wheels turning in his head. Tian had made it as far and as long as he had because of his strong sense of self-preservation. He didn't put anybody or anything ahead of himself, and Nathan appreciated that. No ties meant there was nothing to grab except the man himself.

"How do I know you're telling the truth?"

"I've met Gabriel before." Tian opened his mouth, his eyes flashing. Nathan only smiled. "Did he tell you he never heard of me? The man's heard of me. More than once. But Tian, why would he lie to you?"

"I should kill you now," Tian raised the gun. "I think it'll be doing all of us a favor."

Nathan lifted his hand, flashing his burned fingers. "You kill me before I hand over the coin, and you are a dead man. Do you want to survive this little deal you've made, Tian? Regardless of what happens later, it's got to be better than a shallow grave. You played right into his hands. You owe him, and he'll collect."

Tian shook his head. "You have more reason to fuck with me than Gabriel does."

"No, that's not true. I never wanted to fuck with you, Tian, I just wanted to put you in jail. Gabriel wants to take everything you ever cared about and kill you," Nathan pointed out.

Tian's lips thinned. "I think that's what he intends for you, Nathan. A single bullet right between Remy Capra's eyes. Well," he smiled now, "eventually. But I'll let you see her one more time before it's all over."

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This was not the way Kirsten had envisioned things working out. Pierce should have given Remy up without much of a fight. The one thing she'd learned about the bounty hunter was that he had a tenacious sense of self-preservation. Given the choice between him and Capra, the choice should have been simple. It was inconceivable that Remy could have gotten to him so badly in such a short period of time.

Yet, Cesar and Tian had been with him for far too long. And as soon as Cesar came storming out of the room, his
thunderous glower told her things with Pierce were not going as he had anticipated.
It was time to start reconsidering her plan. She needed the Silver Maiden, and if Pierce was going to drag his feet—if he ever gave them the information they wanted at all—she had little choice but to find new means to get it herself. Gabriel would be little help. He had far too much trust in Tian and too little knowledge of how Remy Capra worked. Kirsten had to find a new ally.
A crash came from the kitchen, followed by Cesar's shouted curses.
Or an old enemy.
Picking up the portable phone, Kirsten carried it out to the front of the house, slipping the door shut behind her. Information connected her to the number she wanted, and she listened to the wordless Muzak as she waited for the receptionist to finish putting her through. In the distance, the sounds of the ocean relaxed her, in spite of the anxiety of failure twisting through her gut.
He answered on the first ring, his deep voice brusque, the soft hum of car engines in the background.
"It's good to know my shot didn't wound you too badly. How are you feeling, Officer McGuire?"
His sharp intake of breath made her smile. "Ms. Henryk." His voice was tight. "Somehow, I don't think you're interested in how I'm doing."
"You're right. I'm not." When she heard a door open and close inside, Kirsten hesitated, glancing over her shoulder to see if she was going to be interrupted. Nobody came out.
"Am I going to find out what this is about then?"
She smiled. "Whether Nathan Pierce lives or dies, of course. Or is your ex-partner's life not worth as much as one silver coin?"
CHAPTER NINETEEN

Kirsten gave McGuire two hours. Her original ultimatum had been one, but he had scoffed and said, "Obviously, you know as much about LA traffic as you do ethics. I need more time than that." His comment almost angered her enough to call off the deal, but she held her tongue. Tian was proving less than useless. Regardless of how she felt about McGuire, this was going to be her best bet at getting the Silver Maiden back.

Finding another opportunity to slip outside and make the call, however, was proving troublesome. Cesar hovered in the background no matter where she turned, complaining about the lack of proper food in the house and how violence always made him hungry. She dispatched him to a nearby Mexican restaurant with enough cash to satisfy whatever craving he had. Gabriel was in his bedroom, taking a midday nap, while Tian didn't seem to know what room he wanted to settle in.

She decided to risk it when he went to the bathroom.

"McGuire."

The California sun was hot on her cheeks, but the warm flush spreading through Kirsten's body was caused more from relief than anything else. She hated being so dependent on this rogue cop, but if he was answering his phone so quickly, it meant he had been anticipating her call. A man ready to talk. That had to be a good sign.

"Do you have the coin?"

"I got it. Let me speak to Nathan."

"That wasn't part of the deal."

His explosive curse pierced her ear, and Kirsten held the phone away until he lowered the volume of his voice.

"...Unless you want me to turn you in for kidnapping, you'll put him on the fucking phone!"

She waited a few seconds before speaking, keeping her voice low and even. "We both know you can't turn me in if you can't find me, Mr. McGuire. And if you continue to treat me like an amateur, I'll find another way to acquire the coin and your friend will die. So go on. Be a jackass and kill your friend. It'll be funny."

Silence came through the line. Threatening Nathan Pierce's life was the best way to get to this man.

"How do I know he's even still alive?" McGuire demanded, his voice lower.

"Because I'm giving you my word. Cop to cop."

"You shot me. That doesn't inspire me to trust you, Ms. Henryk."

"Yes, but now we're both in a position where each has something the other person wants. I have your friend, you have the coin." She paused. "And Remy Capra."

"What!" He was back to being loud again. Kirsten thought her initial impressions of him being a reasonable man were a tad optimistic. With the right stimulus, he could be very easily provoked to fury. "You didn't say a word about Remy being part of this deal."

"I didn't think I had to. You've known from the start I was looking for her."

She didn't hear his response. The door behind her opened, startling her into whirling and facing Tian's frowning face. Before he could say a word, her finger hit the button to disconnect the call.

"Who were you talking to?"

"One of my contacts," she answered without hesitation. Her eyes were cool as they met his. "I was checking in to see if he had any new information on the girl."

Tian narrowed his eyes. "You found a friend in the LAPD? I thought you said you were new to town."

Though her features remained placid, inwardly Kirsten seethed. Damn it. He'd overheard too much.

"It doesn't take living somewhere for years to find a sympathetic ear. And just because you think you've got the situation under control doesn't mean I have to sit back and wait for things to happen."

"It takes years to find a sympathetic ear in LA," Tian countered. "You were talking to that McGuire prick, weren't you?"

"I was talking to my contact." She was not going to have this argument with him. With her shoulders squared, Kirsten stepped forward to go back into the house, only to have Tian's hand shoot out and grab her arm, forcing her to a halt. Her pale eyes flickered to his white-knuckled fingers, ignoring the pain his grip was causing. "Let me go or lose that hand."

"You come waltzing in here like Queen Cunt, expecting everybody to lick the shit off the bottom of your shoe. I don't know how you got Gabriel to help you, and I don't give a fuck." Tian tightened his hold. "But you're cutting deals behind his back and putting me and mine in danger, and I do give a fuck about that."

She tasted blood in her mouth from biting her cheek. Only the fact that he was closer to his gun than she was to hers kept her from shooting him then and there.

"I'm doing what I have to, to get the job done."

"You want to find out if Gabriel has problems with cutting deals with Officer fucking McGuire? You think he might
appreciate the fact you're revealing the location of his safe house? Fine. Let's go ask him," Tian said, dragging her into the kitchen.

"Damn it!" Slamming down the phone, Isaac glared at the tech in the corner. "Please tell me you got that."
The computer tech squinted at the screen in front of him, his fat fingers flying across the keyboard. The electronic taps and beeps of his computer filled the room, stretching the passing seconds into a full minute, but his narrowed eyes never left the screen, the beads of sweat popping out on his shiny pate. His discomfort was obvious, but Isaac didn't care. Because this wasn't an active case, he had had to pull a lot of strings to get the trace done, not to mention doing it over the phone since he had had to drive to Nathan's bank and retrieve the coin first. He'd been designated a signatory and had his own key to the safe deposit box since Nathan had first rented it.
If the trace didn't work, Isaac didn't know what he was going to do next. He didn't know why Kirsten had hung up on him, and he had no idea how Remy would react if something happened to Nathan. He glanced over to where the girl in question was fidgeting against the far wall, waiting for the tech's response as impatiently as he was. Correction. He knew how she was going to react. Violently. At anybody who happened to be standing too close.
Isaac was about to march forward and slam the fucking computer over the tech's bald head when the man's face lit up with excitement.
"Got it!"
The printer beside him sprang to electronic life, humming for a moment before its rollers began to spew out a sheet of paper. Isaac darted forward to snatch it off the tray, beating Remy there by only a split second, and almost sighed in relief when he noted the address.
"That's only thirty minutes away," he said, turning on his heel and heading for the door. "This'll be over within the hour."
He was startled to a halt when she darted in front of him. "You're not leaving me here." She was vibrating from all her pent-up energy, hands on her hips as her doe eyes crackled with expectation. "I'm going with you."
"No, you're not." Grabbing her by the biceps, Isaac dragged her out of the conference room he'd conscripted for the phone trace and down the hall, into a tiny interrogation room at the far end. The door slammed shut behind him, but he only saw the furious woman standing in front of him.
"I know you care about Nathan." He didn't have time to stand around and debate this with her. One of them had to be rational. "But guess what? He's got his head turned around because of you, too. And if something happens to you getting him away from Tian, it's going to kill him. So stop trying to turn this into a one-woman crusade and start being as smart as Nathan claims you are. You can't go with me."
"You can't stop me."
"I can." He held up his key ring, jangling his keys in front of her face. "All I have to say is you're a hostile witness, and I can lock you up in here to cool down until you're ready to talk. Nobody would question it, and nobody would come to your rescue."
"I'll scream."
"You'll be wasting your breath."
She didn't back down. "Why are you doing this? Just because you don't like me-

"I like you just fine!" Frustrated, Isaac rubbed the back of his neck, feeling the knots starting to return already. "Look, I know we got off on the wrong foot, but hell, between your crazy story and everything that happened with Susanna, can you blame me? You don't have a monopoly on caring about him, Remy. He and I might not be blood-related, but he's the only family I have I'd die for." He took a deep breath. "But it doesn't matter anyway. This has nothing to do with that. You heard Miles. Cesar is out for blood and you're next on the menu. I take you in and-

"-And you get the distraction you need to get to Nate," she finished. Renewed vigor wiped away her earlier anger, and she stepped forward, jabbing her finger into his chest. He wished she would stop doing that. "Think about it. Kirsten wants me dead, Cesar wants a piece of me, and the only person left with a hard-on for Nate is Tian. Taking me gives you better odds on getting him out without getting hurt because you've eliminated two of the three people watching him. Now who's the one being dumb here?"
Isaac pursed his lips together at her argument. He hated having logic he'd been overlooking thrown back in his face, though usually, it was Nathan who was doing the tossing. Because Remy had a point. A good one. When it came to bait to clear the waters around Nathan, she was the best Isaac could get.
His silence prompted her to continue.
"You know I'm not some novice who doesn't know her way around a sticky situation. All I need is a blade to protect myself with. Or give me a gun. I'm a good sh-

"No. No gun. You're a civilian, and if anything goes wrong, it's going to be my ass for taking you in to a hostile situation in the first place."
As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Isaac realized his mistake. He hadn't denied giving her a weapon at all, just the liability of a firearm. They both knew that meant he was going to let her go.

"Fuck," he swore under his breath. With a scowl, he grabbed her arm again and hauled her back out of the room, ignoring the satisfied smile on her face. He didn't say a word until they were out in the parking lot, at which point he released his bruising grip.

"There is only one way this is going to go down." His heels were hard on the concrete as he stormed over to his car. Remy had to do double-time at his side in order to keep up. "And this time, you're going to do exactly as I say."

"As long as it's not that stupid mouth shut, eyes open plan you seem to love so much," she retorted.

He glared at her over the roof of the car. "If you say so."

Isaac barely caught her smirk before her head ducked to get in. "If you say so."

With another muttered curse, he yanked open his door and slid behind the wheel. For as much as he was beginning to understand Nathan's attraction for the girl-outside of the obvious-and for as much as he was even beginning to like her, it was going to take a while to get used to her brash attitude. She needed to learn there were ways things got done in LA, buttons you just didn't push. There was a system, damn it, and he didn't think it was asking too much to have her follow it.

It wasn't until he was pulling out of the lot that Isaac realized his frustrated thoughts on Remy Capra almost mirrored those written on his last performance assessment.

* * * *

Tian would have been happy to drag her all the way into Gabriel's bedroom, but that wasn't necessary. They found him in the hallway, standing outside Nathan's room with a quizzical look on his face. When Gabriel saw the two of them, he beckoned them over with a distracted wave of his hand.

"Why is it so quiet in there? Did Cesar kill him already?"

Tian shook his head. "I told Cesar to take a break for now. Nathan wasn't talking and I thought we didn't want to kill him yet." He pushed Kirsten forward. "Not that our plans seem to matter much around here."

"What is he talking about?" Gabriel asked Kirsten, his hand resting on the doorknob.

She shot Tian a hateful scowl, her lips pinched so thin as to be almost nonexistent. For a moment, he thought he was going to have to put his gun to her head to get her to speak, but then she turned away, staring down Gabriel as if she owned the fucking place.

"I called one of my contacts to see if they'd had any luck finding the girl. Your friend Tian here seems to think having a contingency plan is a bad idea."

"She called Nathan's partner," Tian explained. "And that cocksucker is smart enough to do a trace. Or don't they have phone traces where you come from?"

"We weren't on the phone long enough for him to do a trace."

"Is that what you're going to say when he starts knocking on the goddamned door?" Tian wanted to shoot the bitch. Didn't she understand they weren't fucking around with the goddamned Keystone Kops? He knew damned well he had only lasted this long because he had a healthy respect for Pierce and his former partner. Tried never to give them an opening or invite trouble and now this stupid whore ... ?

"Is there a problem? I thought we weren't going to try to contact McGuire until it was necessary?"

Kirsten answered first. "Why don't you ask Tian? He's the one who can't get Pierce to talk."

Tian shrugged nonchalantly, though his stomach began to knot. "Cesar's been working on him. He's not going to be easy, but everybody has a breaking point. Cesar will find it."

"You're a fool. The only way Pierce is going to talk is if Cesar shove his hand up his ass and does it for him. And if he's dead, you can forget using him to manipulate McGuire. Because McGuire will be on you so fast, you won't even have time to pull your dick out to take a piss. So let's think about this again, okay? Is this about getting Pierce? Or is this about getting the Silver Maiden?"

"Why the fuck would I give a fuck about the Silver Maiden? Whatever the fuck that is. You can shove it up your twat."

Her fist came out of nowhere, slamming into his nose with more force than he would have expected from a girl. He heard something crunch, and then felt the warm gush of blood flowing over his lip, but before he had a chance to react, Gabriel was stepping between them.

Tian wiped the blood from his nose with an angry wave of his hand. The pain was terrible, but it didn't touch the anger washing over him. Red dots clouded his vision, and he knew he could take her out. His piece felt heavy at the small of his back. One motion, one shot, and then none of them would have to worry about some piece of shit coin.

He reached behind him, his fingers brushing against the butt of the gun when a single shot shattered his eardrum. Tian ducked, cupping his ringing ear and looked around to see what Gabriel had been firing at.

"I saw you reaching for your gun, Tian. It was a bad move."
From behind Gabriel, he saw the bitch smirk. "I told you he only had his own interests in mind."
Tian ignored her, his eyes drawn back to Cesar's bent body. He was clutching his stomach, and he was looking right at Tian as blood poured over his hands and onto the beige carpet, turning it a nasty shade of brown. He hurried over to Cesar's side, unable to breathe, barely able to think.
"It's going to be..." Tian tried to say, but Cesar was opening and closing his mouth desperately. He fell to his knees, still gasping for air. "It'll be okay."
Another shot echoed off the walls and Cesar collapsed to the ground, a single red dot above his right ear.
"Don't try that again, Tian. We have a job to do."
CHAPTER TWENTY

Nathan tensed, his heart seizing as the sudden, deafening gunshots echoed through the small house. Overhearing the conversation outside his room had been one thing; witnessing gunfire was something else entirely. Sweat rolled down his face and neck, each drop stinging as it mingled with the dried blood in the open cuts. He didn't know who caught the bullets, but he was apprehensive—those two rapid shots were going to change everything. One moment had shifted the game, and Nathan didn't know where the players stood now. Or even, which players were left standing.

But Isaac was coming. Tian had been right about one thing, and it would be a shame if he paid for his warning with his life. Nathan had no doubt Isaac would be there within the hour, which meant he only needed to keep himself alive for another sixty minutes. Manipulating Tian had bought him some time, but probably not enough. Nathan strained his ears, waiting for the unmistakable sound of Cesar's approach. But for long minutes, there was only silence, as though all four of them were bleeding in the hallway, shot down by an unknown assailant. He counted each second as it passed, certain each one would bring him closer to freedom—if he played his cards right. If he could keep Cesar, or Tian, or whoever had survived, at bay.

After ten quiet minutes, a door slammed hard enough to shake the walls, and two unfamiliar voices shouted for Gabriel. There was a gruff exchange, but Nathan couldn't make out the words. He imagined they were lackeys, called to clean up the dead body. After all, Gabriel wouldn't want to deal with the mess himself.

But who is it? There were two shots. Did Gabriel take out both Tian and Cesar? Or did Kirsten pull the trigger? Nathan did not have to wait long for that mystery to be solved. Tian came into the room, his young face pulled into a mask of fury and pain. Nathan had never seen the other man look so determined, and yet, so confused. It disoriented Nathan. Did the situation call for kid gloves, or for something a bit stronger?

"Hey, Tian, I thought you shuffled off this mortal coil."

Tian moved to the dresser where Cesar had left most of his supplies. He picked up an X-Acto knife and fingered the blade thoughtfully before replacing it. Nathan didn't dare let his gaze slip from Tian's face; he was waiting for the moment some sort of spark would return to Tian's eyes.

"It was Cesar, then?"

Tian focused on a gallon of bleach, his fingers working the cap. He didn't even seem aware Nathan was in the room.

"Did Gabriel do it?" Nathan waited a beat before pressing. "You still have blood on your face. Telling her to shove the Silver Maiden up her twat probably wasn't the best idea."

Tian turned his back to him, his shoulders hunched. There were several dark maroon stains on his baggy white shirt, and a single drop of blood on his neck, almost the size of a dime. Nathan wouldn't shed any tears for Cesar, but seeing the remnants of his life splattered on Tian's back made something twist inside his gut.

When Tian turned around, he had something small and silver in his hand. "It's the key to your cuffs."

"Why?" Nathan asked, his mouth dry.

"In case he thinks you get to go. In case he thinks you were just a bargaining chip."

"Didn't that little scene teach you anything? You cross him, and he's going to kill you. You look at him sideways, and he's going to kill you. The only thing keeping your ass alive is that, for the moment, you're useful to him."

"Might as well take you down with me," Tian said, his lips stretching over his teeth in a grotesque smile. "They won't get their precious coin, but I'll get the satisfaction of seeing you bleed."

"That's worth dying for? I'm flattered. If our roles were reversed, I wouldn't die for you."

"You would," Tian countered. "You almost have, more than once."

"No. I told you. You were just a job. Just another punk kid, waiting for the law to catch up."

Tian moved to the side of the bed, pulling a small gun from his pocket. It didn't look like much, but it would still get the job done. Nathan had lost track of time. He knew Isaac was coming. Knew it. But would he be there in seconds? Minutes? Hours after it was too late? Gabriel had made a tactical error. Tian had been under his thumb as long as Tian had something to gain. Now there was nothing holding him back.

"I kill you, and maybe that bitch will never get the Silver Maiden."

"So, then, you're going to get yourself murdered out of spite?" Nathan shook his head. "How did somebody as dumb as you elude me for so long?"

The room darkened for a moment, as though a cloud was passing over the sun. Tian's hand was steady. Nathan heard the telephone, its harsh ring drilling through the walls.

"Must be smarter than you think, seeing as how I'm not the one chained to a bed."

"Well," Nathan murmured, "you were right about one thing. Kirsten contacting Isaac was a very bad idea."

Tian's features twisted into a snarl, but before he let loose the natural retort, Isaac slammed the butt of his gun into his temple, making him crumple unconscious to the ground. Behind Isaac, the sheer curtains billowed in the ocean.
breeze coming through the open patio doors, the same doors Nathan had seen his best friend slip through unnoticed just seconds before.

Isaac stepped over Tian's body, his critical gaze sweeping over Nathan. "Anything broken? Or do you need me to carry you out of here like a big baby?"

Nathan managed a small smile despite his bruised lips. "He was still at the cutting and chemical stage. Nothing broken."

"Good." Crouching, he rolled Tian onto his back and did a quick search of his pockets, pulling out the key he'd brandished in front of Nathan. Isaac unlocked the cuffs, then crossed to the closed door and pressed his ear to the wood. "How many are out there?" he asked in a barely audible whisper.

Nathan sat up, rolling his shoulders and neck. Dull pain radiated from every muscle, but he was still mobile. "Four, at least. Cesar is dead." He pushed himself to his feet, surprised by the way the room wouldn't stop spinning. Swallowing hard, he gripped the head of the bed.

Isaac was back at his side in a shot, guiding a strong arm around his back. "Are you able to walk? The car's parked out of sight down the road. If we can avoid a shoot-out, all the better."

"We might have a bit of time. They don't seem concerned with me." He straightened again, privately thankful Isaac still had his arm around his back. "They want Remy's head, though. Where is she? She's not safe in Los Angeles. We need to get her to ... what?"

Isaac couldn't meet his eyes as he lead Nathan toward the patio doors. "We ... kind of figured Remy was their focus."

"Yes, detective, that's very astute of you. Where is she?" Nathan demanded as they stepped onto the patio.

"By this point?" Isaac pretended to gauge the time by glancing up into the brilliant midday sun. "I'd say in the front yard."

"It's not nice to lie to torture victims, Isaac." Nathan paused, giving the other man a chance to laugh it off, but Isaac's face remained serious. "Fuck. What were you thinking? Did you bring my gun? If there is a shoot-out, I don't want to be unarmed. Also, what the fuck were you thinking?"

"I was thinking I needed to get you out of here, that's what." He tried to move them along, but Nathan dragged his weight, drawing a frustrated sigh from Isaac. "Look, I tried to keep her away, but in case you haven't noticed, that girlfriend of yours doesn't take no for an answer. And when she came up with the idea to use her as bait—"

"Bait." Nathan noticed Isaac was only carrying one weapon. "Bait? You're using Remy as bait?"

He shoved a fresh clip into the gun, stalking past Isaac again. He didn't know where he was drawing the extra strength. Could have been the pure, unadulterated fear at the thought of Remy in Kirsten's clutches. It could have been the blinding rage. It could have just been the adrenalin rush, but he was ready to find her with guns blazing.

He would have, if Isaac hadn't put a hand on his arm.

"Go off half-cocked like this, and you will get her killed. She's armed, she's aware of the danger, and most importantly, she's doing this for the exact same reason I am. To save your life."

"No. No, you don't bring her into the viper's nest to save my life, Isaac. As soon as you knew Gabriel was involved—"

"Gabriel?" The sudden alarm in Isaac's voice was accompanied by a tightening of his grip. "This is Gabriel's house?"

"You didn't check before you rode in here with the cavalry?"

"There wasn't time!"

Nathan lowered his voice and pulled Isaac closer. "Look, I don't know how Kirsten knows Gabriel, or knew to go to Gabriel for help, but he's her ally. Tian was just the muscle. Tensions were running a bit high today, and I think Gabriel was the one who took out Cesar."

"Fuck," Isaac muttered. He rubbed at the back of his head, his mind clearly working. "We accounted for the three, but even if Cesar is dead, Remy's not going to know who the hell Gabriel is." A sudden frightening thought made his eyes widen, shooting to Nathan's. "Damn it, that means she's going to improvise, doesn't it?"

"Yes, and we'll have to improvise, too. I have no idea why Gabriel is involved or what he wants out of the situation, and that makes him very much a wildcard." That troubled Nathan most of all. He knew Gabriel was a pragmatic man, prone to kill after cool calculation rather than out of passion. Which meant, he might not take out Remy if he had nothing to gain by shooting her. "What was your plan and how can we fix it?"

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Remy waited until she saw Isaac disappear around the building before dialing the number he had given her. It was a simple plan. Divide and conquer. It couldn't fail.

Except if she fucked up. Which she wasn't going to do. Nathan's life hung in the balance.
Her palm was sweaty where it gripped Isaac's cell phone, her eyes steady on the blank windows of the front of the house. The line only rang once before a man answered. God, she hoped it was enough for Isaac to get the signal.
"Kirsten Henryk, please."
He paused, not expecting it. "Can I tell her who's calling?"
Creeping closer to the house, Remy peeked into the broad window near the front door and spied Kirsten's willowy form sitting on a white leather couch. A dark-skinned man stood a few feet away, gazing at Kirsten with a frown, but it wasn't Tian or Cesar. She didn't know who the hell it was.
"Tell her it's an old friend."
The man put his hand over the receiver and spoke to Kirsten. The pair exchanged heated words for several seconds before Remy watched him pass the phone over.
"Hello, Remy."
She wasn't surprised Kirsten had identified her. The bitch was the best for a reason and really, Remy hadn't been subtle. "Long time, no see. Miss me?"
Kirsten rose to her feet, forcing Remy to shrink away from the edge of the window in order not to be seen. "How did you get this number?"
This is where the lies start rolling. "Stole it from Nate's cop buddy before stealing his car. Apparently, technology isn't quite as backward as we thought it was. He had a trace on you in seconds."
She shrank back against the wall, hiding in the bushes as she saw Kirsten appear in the window, staring out at the empty front yard. "So where's his rescue brigade?" Kirsten asked. Disdain dripped from her voice. "If he knows where I am, then why isn't he here this second arresting me for kidnapping?"
"Oh, he's coming. Let's just say, I was a little more motivated to get here first."
"What do you want?"
"You know what I want, just like I know what it is you're after. Let's just leave the boys out of this, yeah? This is between you, me, and that stupid coin of your old man's."
She heard a male's voice muffled in the background, and wondered what he was saying. Several seconds passed before Kirsten spoke again.
"Do you have it?"
"The coin?" Remy's hand slipped into her pocket, tracing the smooth edges of the Silver Maiden with her fingertips. It was the one part of the plan Isaac hadn't been thrilled with, but she knew it was the only true bargaining chip they had. "Yeah, I've got it. I'm willing to make the trade if you make sure Nate walks out of this alive."
Sounds from the garage behind her made her whirl, edging away from the house to see what was causing them. It had to be Cesar or Tian; Kirsten was already accounted for. But the strange man ... Isaac hadn't known about him. Were there others they didn't know about?
That question was answered by a branch snapping behind her. Through the phone, she heard Kirsten talking, but Remy was more concerned with the approaching threat, ducking out of the way just in time to avoid a meaty fist.
She twisted to reach for one of the knives strapped to her calf, but a heavy boot connected with her wrist, causing her to cry out in unexpected pain.
Remy rolled out of the way. From the corner of her eye, she saw the hulking man who had attacked her, blood staining the front of his snug T-shirt. No messing around with this one. She dropped Isaac's cell phone in favor of going for blades with both hands, but the second her fingers curled around the grips, a shadow fell across her face.
"Go ahead," the second goon snarled, his gun aimed right at her eyes. "Give me an excuse to blow your pretty face off."
Slowly, Remy let her hands fall lax to the grass, her gaze not wavering from the men surrounding her. The first man grabbed the wrist he'd kicked and yanked her to her feet, grabbing the gun she had tucked into the back of her pants.
"Won't be needing this," he said with a smirk.
The gun did as she and Isaac had hoped. Thinking she was now unarmed, the goon didn't check for other weapons. Thank god he hadn't checked it, though. The only gun Isaac would give her was an empty one.
Kirsten and the other man stepped out of the house. Kirsten had a self-satisfied smirk on her face that made Remy long to punch it off, but the man didn't seem very satisfied or dangerous. In fact, he was smiling.
"You must be Remy," he greeted. "Welcome to my home. It was brave of you to come alone. You are alone, right?"
"Ask Kirsten how much I love cops," she retorted. The hulk who was holding clipped her across the temple, making her head ring as she turned and glared at him. "Lay off! That was a fucking answer!"
"It's my understanding you're a great lover of cops." The man shrugged. "Or ex-cops, I suppose. Would you like to see him?"
"You mean Kirsten wasn't blowing smoke out her ass saying he was still alive? That's what his old partner said, you know. That she was going to trade Nate for the coin. Or was that a private deal she was making?"
It was hard not to grin when she saw the ice queen stiffen. Ignoring Remy, Kirsten turned to the man at her side. "I
told you what I was doing, Gabriel. I would have told McGuire anything to get him to bring the Silver Maiden here."
"Don't forget me." This time, Remy did smile. "I was part of the deal, too, remember?"
Gabriel sighed, the pleasant smile melting from his face. "Tian was correct about everything, then? I suppose I owe
him an apology." He shot an unreadable look at Kirsten before turning back to the man holding Remy. "Kill her and
bring me the coin."
Her blood chilled as the hulk reached to pull his gun from his holster. Reacting on instinct, Remy yanked at his grip
enough to reach into her pocket and pull out the small piece of silver. "Guess that's my cue to get out of here then."
She held the coin in plain view before curling her fingers around it. "Say sayonara to your Silver Maiden, asshole."
Fear flickered over Gabriel's face. He held up his hand. "Sal. Back off." He took a step towards Remy, but there
wasn't anything menacing about his approach. "What makes you think the coin will work again?"
"Because it's not a one-way ticket." She opened her hand again and began running it between her fingers, the
sunlight catching the silver and sending glints across the grass. "It's all about deepest wishes, right? That's why she
made it in the first place. To trade for her freedom. And the power of the coin gave it to her in the end, just like it got
me away from her..." She jerked her chin toward Kirsten, who visibly stiffened. "...And just like it'll get me away
from here. Because the last thing I want to do right now is die." "What do you want right now?" Gabriel asked, positioning himself between her and Kirsten.
She weighed her words before responding. "To not have to run from that bitch any more."
"Okay," Gabriel turned, his gun appearing out of nowhere. Remy jumped as he pulled the trigger, expecting to feel
the red hot pain of the bullet, but blood was flowing down Kirsten's face. She stood as still as a statue, the hole like a
third eye above her nose, for just one second before falling face-forward onto the driveway. "Now give me the coin."
Remy couldn't move. He shot her. Holy fuck, he actually shot her.

She had only been hoping to make her answer

sound as plausible as possible without triggering some effect of the coin she didn't know about. She had never
expected that he'd kill Kirsten.

Her eyes fixed on his calm features. Whoever the hell this Gabriel was, she understood now he was the truly
dangerous one here. She was going to have to be a lot more careful how she dealt with him.

"How do I know you're not going to just kill me, too, then?" she asked, as evenly as she could. That was when she
saw the familiar form appear around the far corner of the house. Both relief and fear flooded her veins.

"I want that coin more than I want to see you dead," Gabriel asked, his head slightly turning to his right. "Did you kill him?"
Isaac glanced at Nathan before responding. "As tempting as it was, no. Surprisingly, he passes out like a girl when
you hit him on the head."

"Fine. Remy, give me the coin, and I'll let you and your friends go. I'll even throw in Tian. He's still got that
bounty." When she didn't respond, he tilted his head. "Unless you plan to use the coin again. How much running
have you got left to do?"

Her eyes flew to Nathan's. She didn't want to run any more. Her home was here, with him, for as long as he would
let her stick around. The slight softening of his mouth along with the almost imperceptible nod of his head were all
Remy needed to know he wanted that, too.

"Fine. I'll give you the coin." Two men on either side of Remy tensed, drawing their guns.

"Pierce. McGuire," Gabriel greeted cordially, neither his gaze nor his gun moving from her head. "Take another step
and my boys here will turn you into Swiss cheese."
Both Nathan and Isaac stopped, but neither lowered their weapons. They had approached Gabriel from opposite
sides of the house, and now they stood several feet behind him on either side. Even from that distance, Remy saw
the danger in Nathan's eyes.

"Sounds like a lose-lose situation then," she said, her voice nonchalant even to her ears. It was hard to keep from
staring at Nathan. Though his grim determination was etched in his taut muscles, there were livid burns and cuts all
along his bare chest. She had no idea how he was even standing upright. "Anything happens to them and I'm outta
here. It would be a fucking shame to get so close to the Silver Maiden and then have it disappear right in front of
your eyes. Especially after twenty years."
"What of Tian?" Gabriel asked, his head slightly turning to his right. "Did you kill him?"

Isaac glanced at Nathan before responding. "As tempting as it was, no. Surprisingly, he passes out like a girl when
you hit him on the head."

"Fine. Remy, give me the coin, and I'll let you and your friends go. I'll even throw in Tian. He's still got that
bounty."
When she didn't respond, he tilted his head. "Unless you plan to use the coin again. How much running
have you got left to do?"

Her eyes flew to Nathan's. She didn't want to run any more. Her home was here, with him, for as long as he would
let her stick around. The slight softening of his mouth along with the almost imperceptible nod of his head were all
Remy needed to know he wanted that, too.

She flipped the coin through the air, watching it twist and turn in the sunlight to land in the soft grass at Gabriel's
feet. "Deal."

Gabriel smiled. "Good girl. Sal, go get the car." He bent, picking up the coin. It flickered in the sun, reflecting light
into his brown eyes.
Sal hurried to the garage, but nobody else moved, locked in their tenuous tableaux. Remy's eyes shifted from Gabriel to Nathan. His face was still set in a hard mask, but the hand holding his gun was trembling, and fresh blood stained his chest.

The hum of the garage door opening filled the air, followed by a silver Lexus backing onto the drive. With one last look at Remy, Gabriel lowered his gun and headed for the car, the man at her other side close on his heels. She didn't exhale until the Lexus had disappeared down the street.

"Remy," Nathan said, lowering his arm. The gun hung from his fingers for a moment before slipping to the ground. He stepped back, putting his hand out to catch himself, but came up with nothing but air. Both Remy and Isaac rushed forward, reaching him before he lost his balance completely. Isaac caught him by the shoulder, and her arm fit snugly around his waist.

"We've got to get him to a hospital. Can you two save the kissy-face reunion until we know for sure he's not going to need something silly like a blood transfusion or something?"

She saw Nathan's lips twitch in amusement. While she would have loved to have the kissy-face reunion Isaac described, the delicate fluttering of Nathan's muscles beneath her palm told Remy just how barely he was holding himself together. "Well, it's not like I'm going anywhere."

Together, they began the trek back to Isaac's waiting car.
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Nathan had wondered what it would be like to boast one hundred stitches, but it was more of a drunken musing than an actual desire to experience one hundred stitches. A blanket covered his chest, and he had no wish to inspect the result of the good doctor's handiwork. For now, he couldn't feel it either. He wasn't sure what they had shot him up with, but he liked it. It had a nice numbing effect without clouding his brain too much.

He picked listlessly at the bandage wrapped around his hand. Where was everybody? Why had he woken with only an old nurse with tired eyes for company? He couldn't help but think of the last time he opened his eyes in a hospital bed, disoriented, confused, and shocked to be alive. He remembered begging the nurses to tell him about Isaac, his voice a toneless whisper, his throat burning...

This is different. Remy and Isaac are fine. You saw that. Gabriel didn't shoot her.

When the door opened, Nathan's gaze went to it without hesitation, relief flooding through him at the familiar shape of Isaac's shoulders filling the frame. Dark shadows hollowed his friend's face, and his clothes were rumpled, as if he'd been sitting in them for a long period of time. The smile, however, was warm and genuine.

"Up for some company?"

"Depends. Can you get me out of here? It's a lovely room, but I was hoping for something with more of a view." He beckoned Isaac over to the bed. "Where's Remy? Is she okay?"

"She's good. She's in the waiting room. The docs were a little overprotective until they got you all stitched up, though that could've been the fact that they didn't make you a priority." Shutting the door behind him, Isaac grabbed one of the metal-edged chairs and carried it over, flipping it to straddle it when he sat down. "You didn't beat my record, by the way. That knifing on my calf still stands at thirty-two stitches."

"The knifing on your calf? You don't mean the time you slipped and fell on a knife do you? Because I don't think that counts towards the record." Nathan pushed the blanket down, exposing his chest. "One hundred beats thirty-two any day. You owe me a drink."

"Hey. First of all, it doesn't count, adding up all your little cuts to try and beat my one big one. And secondly, a guy was holding that knife when I fell on it. Just because he was already dead doesn't mean it doesn't count." He shrugged, his smile self-effacing. "But, because I'm such an accommodating guy, I'll buy you that drink anyway. I'll even buy one for Remy if you ask nicely enough."

"Well, I might threaten..." he teased. His gaze ducked for a moment, his mood sobering. "Look. I'm not going to pretend to understand how this time travel stuff worked to get her here. And I'm not sure I'm crazy about you forgetting all about the brain-not-dick philosophy when she's around. But the fact of the matter is... I don't think I've ever seen anybody go to bat for you so strong or so hell-bent before. Anybody who wasn't me, I mean. That means something."

Nathan chuckled, and soon the light sound turned into a full laugh. It hurt his chest and shoulders, but the image of Isaac trying to work with Remy was just too much. But it wasn't that as funny as it was-fueling the laughter. The tension and fear that had been lodged in his chest shattered, and he needed the momentary release.

"Let me guess," he said, once he caught his breath, "You tried the old keep your mouth shut plan with her, didn't you?"

"Well, I might threaten..." he teased. His gaze ducked for a moment, his mood sobering. "Look. I'm not going to pretend to understand how this time travel stuff worked to get her here. And I'm not sure I'm crazy about you forgetting all about the brain-not-dick philosophy when she's around. But the fact of the matter is... I don't think I've ever seen anybody go to bat for you so strong or so hell-bent before. Anybody who wasn't me, I mean. That means something."

Isaac sat up in mock-hurt. "It's a good plan. And when I'm not partnered with a hothead know-it-all who wouldn't know a plan if it bit her on her cute little ass, it actually works."

"Yeah, but she did a good job of not getting us all killed." Nathan looked down at his bandaged hand, the back of his neck tingling as he thought about how close he had been to losing her. "I love her, you know."

Silence stretched between them, long enough to draw Nathan's gaze back up to his friend's. The amusement was gone from his inscrutable eyes, replaced by a somber regard usually reserved for drunken soliloquies in the wee hours of the morning.

"I suppose saying you only just met her would be kind of pointless."

"I think it would be, yes. When Cesar wasn't trying to flay me alive, I had a great deal of quiet time for thoughtful reflection." Isaac's eyebrows knitted together in confusion. "I was terrified and all I wanted to do was see her again," Nathan clarified. "But I would have died before telling them where to find her. Had I known you were going to bring her to them, I might have tried a different tactic."

"You can stop acting like I had a choice in the matter any time now."

"You didn't have to use her for bait, is all I'm saying."

"And again, I'm going with her idea, not mine." His gaze flickered over the injuries marring Nathan's chest before climbing up to the faded scar at the base of his throat. "She told me she wasn't Susanna. I think that's when I knew I
could trust her. Because there's no way you would've told her that story if you didn't."

"And I was stone-cold sober when I told her, too." He looked up, catching Isaac's eyes. "I think Susanna has taken enough of my ... or our lives. Can't live like this forever, Isaac."

"Well, you can't." Isaac rose from the chair, pushing it back to the wall, and shot him a grin. "Some of us don't need a woman to define who we are."

"Well, who needs a woman when you've got goldfish?"

"And they're damn fine goldfish, too." He jerked a thumb at the door. "You want me to send her in here? The docs say you have to stay in overnight for observation, but I pulled some strings and if you want her to stay, too, that's okay."

"I'd appreciate it. And Isaac? Thanks for coming for me."

The smile he was leaving with was just as warm as the one he'd arrived wearing. "Like there was ever any question I wouldn't." "Of course not." Nathan smiled. "I still owe you that twenty dollars."

Isaac snorted. "If you ever get your tab down to twenty dollars, I will take you out for the best dinner this town has to offer." He opened the door. "Now cover yourself back up before I send Remy in. The last thing she needs to see is the Frankenstein monster there on display."

"It's not that bad," Nathan muttered, before obediently pulling the blanket up to his shoulders.

Isaac snorted again before closing the door behind him. Nathan stared at the empty space he left for several long seconds. It had been easy enough to state his feelings for Remy aloud to Isaac. Now he just needed to figure out how he would tell the girl herself.

* * * *

Remy nearly knocked over an orderly as she raced for Nathan's room. It felt like she had been waiting for days to see him, pacing the too-white waiting area until she knew how many steps it took to get from wall to wall, when the nurses went on their breaks, which doctors did their jobs instead of passing off care to subordinates. When Isaac got to go in first, she wanted to shout in frustration. He wasn't the only one who cared, damn it. She deserved to see him, too.

So when he came back out and announced Nathan had to stay overnight, Remy deflated. She wasn't even sure what that meant for her. Would it be okay to spend the night back at his apartment? The thought was frightening. It wouldn't feel right without Nathan there.

The second Isaac told her she could stay, too, she threw her arms around him. The next, she was running down the corridor.

She burst through the door without knocking, but then skidded to a halt when she saw how pale he was next to the white sheets. Over a hundred stitches, Isaac had said. Be careful. She had to be cautious in how she approached. The last thing Remy wanted was to make his condition worse.

"Hey," she softly breathed.

Nathan grimaced. "Do I look that bad?"

Guilt flooded through her. "Of course not," Remy asserted. She closed the distance to the bed, hovering at the side as her fingers skimmed along the mattress edge. "But Isaac told me what they had to do for you. The stitches and the transfusion and everything. You don't need me jumping all over you, making it hurt more."

"You won't hurt me," Nathan said, taking her hand and pulling her closer. "They have me on some good drugs."

His touch was warm and dry, but the heat arced between them as he laced their fingers together. Carefully, Remy sat on the edge of the bed, drinking in the invitation of his eyes, wondering yet again how it was she'd come so close to losing him.

"Isaac said I could spend the night." Her gaze swept over the narrow mattress. "This isn't going to be nearly as comfortable as your place, though."

"No. But at least you're here." He slid his fingers up her arm and cupped the back of her neck, pulling her forward to brush his lips against hers. She couldn't hold back her sigh of satisfaction. She so desperately wanted to deepen the kiss, but Isaac's words of warning echoed in her ears, forcing Remy to keep the caress superficial even when everything inside her screamed for more. When she pulled away, though, he didn't move his hand, stroking her nape as she gazed down at him.

"You scared the hell out of me."

"I scared the hell out of you?" Nathan shook his head. "Do you realize you stared down one of the most dangerous men in California?"

"Who? Gabriel?"

"Yeah. Gabriel de los Rios. He's been working in and out of Los Angeles for several years now. He's ... ruthless. So, you know, don't ever do that again."
He was so serious about his warning, she couldn't help but smile. "Or what?" Remy taunted. Leaning down, she skinned along his jaw until her mouth hovered at his ear. "Are you going to spank me?"
"Yes. At the very least. My god, Remy, you almost..."
"But I didn't." Her tongue darted out, and the salt of his skin made her mouth prickle for more. "I'm still here."
"I know," Nathan sighed. He tilted his head, a subtle invitation for her to continue. "But why would you do that? Why would you agree to be bait? You should have... you shouldn't have..."
Remy closed her eyes as she licked a trail back to his mouth. "You haven't figured it out by now?" She kissed him again, this time tracing the seam of his lips with the tip of her tongue. "I'd do anything for you."
Nathan moaned beneath her lips before returning the kiss, but this time he wouldn't let the caress remain superficial. He kissed her hungrily, almost at a complete disregard for his own comfort.
"You know what the worst part was?" he asked once they broke apart.
She opened her eyes to see his intent on hers. A thousand possibilities tumbled through her head, each one a repeat of what had terrified her in his absence. "What?"
"The coin. When I thought you were going to use that goddamned coin." Nathan shook his head. "It was a brilliant move, don't get me wrong. But knowing I could lose you forever, and it would be for the best..."
"It was never going to happen. But there was no way Gabriel would've known that."
"You had an excellent poker face." Nathan paused, looking at her thoughtfully. "We should set up a card game with Isaac. He'd never know to call your bluff."
She chuckled. There was something thrilling in his presumption about her place in his life, including her in future plans with Isaac. It made Remy even that much surer about what she had chosen.
"You're not mad I gave it up?"
"Gave up the coin?" Nathan shook his head. "I don't care. Obviously, it's a powerful artifact now in the hands of a very dangerous man, and maybe I should care, but I just don't."
"Good. Me neither."
She kissed him again, taking his earlier lead and deepening it with the first hungry press of her lips. The hand at her neck tightened, fingers lost in her heavy hair, and Remy slid hers down his shoulder, along his arm, down to his hand. When he winced, she jerked away.
"What is it?" Her eyes jumped over his covered body. "What did I hurt?"
Nathan held up his bandaged hand. "It's a good thing I'm not left-handed. I burned myself when I took the coin to the bank."
"On what?"
"I burned myself on the coin. I have no idea how it happened. It just got hot while I was holding it." Nathan smiled ruefully. "Which, of course, is how Kirsten knew I had the coin somewhere in my possession. That was great."
Gingerly, Remy sat back, picking up his injured hand and holding it in both of hers. "I don't remember it getting hot." Fear lanced through her, and her eyes leapt to his. "It wasn't doing something crazy like... sending you to DC or something like that, was it?"
"No, I never left the bank. I wasn't even thinking about anything specific at the time. Maybe it didn't want to be locked away. I don't know. And why would I wish to be sent somewhere else?"
It was genuine confusion in his eyes, as if she'd made the most insane suggestion in the world. Remy was about to backtrack and try to get away from the awkward moment when she remembered what he had said earlier.
"Why would my leaving have been for the best?" His bewilderment didn't dissipate, so she elaborated. "The worst part. About using the coin? You said losing me forever would be for the best."
"Well, it was the best of the two options. I'd rather lose you forever, watch you slip into another time, than see you get shot. The Silver Maiden is meant to take you to safety, if we understand it correctly, and I could live with that. But I couldn't... I couldn't see you..." He caressed the side of her face, his fingers light against her cheek. "I love you."
She stared at him, stunned. Everything in her ground to a halt, all except for the sudden racing of her heart. "What?"
Nathan offered a self-conscious, half-smile. "I'd rather you not die because I love you."
"That's... what I thought you said."
I love you. When was the last time someone had said those words to her? Had anybody ever said them to her and meant them? Because she had no doubt Nathan did. It was in the blue fire of his eyes, in the possessive stroke of his fingers. It had been in the grim determination when he had threatened Gabriel. She saw it now in the nervous smile curving his mouth.
As many times as she had made her own confessions, frightened of his response, there had always been his concurrence, his I know that made it easier to believe she wasn't crazy for feeling like she did. Now here he was making his own confession. It was terrifying to consider, but there was no way Remy was going to deny it. This was
her permission to unlock the stronghold she'd placed her own emotions in. Her hand was trembling when she reached up to touch his face. "Do you know why my threat wasn't going to work?" She didn't wait for a response. "Because I lied to him. I would've died without blinking if it meant you would be safe. Because I love you, too."

Nathan's smile changed from hesitant to glowing. "Do I need to remind you we only just met?"
The sudden exhalation of breath came out as the laugh she intended. "You're the one who said it first. So if Isaac or anybody gives us shit about this being too fast, I'll make sure he knows that." Her face softened, and her thumb brushed over his mouth. "Not that it matters. Not really. Being with you has always felt like being home."
Nathan's fingers were all over her face, his eyes searching hers. "It hasn't even been a week," he murmured.

Something seemed to occur to him, and he frowned. "Though speaking of home, I wish I had something more to offer you."

Remy smiled. "Do I get you?"
Nathan traced the outline of her lips. "Yes."
"Then that's all that matters to me."

She leaned down and captured his mouth again, allowing the tide of emotions swelling inside her to rise and crash into the simple kiss. Not even a week. It was inconceivable. Then again, so was the idea of her being here in the first place, so maybe not so insane after all. It wasn't about time. It was about what was right.

"I love you," she said again when they parted. "You should probably get used to hearing it."
"No," Nathan shook his head. "I don't think I'll ever get used to hearing that." He pulled her closer, but winced as she brushed against his chest.
"I wish we weren't having this conversation in a hospital room."

"Docs say you can go home tomorrow if you make it through the night okay." Remy carefully stretched alongside him, heedful of his injuries. "We can always have a repeat of this conversation then."

Nathan caressed her arm, his knuckles brushing against the side of her breast. "We might need to. The drugs are making me a little fuzzy."

Snaking her hand beneath the blanket, she found the line of his half-hard cock and stroked it with a single finger.
"Doesn't feel so fuzzy to me."
"Don't do that," Nathan moaned, but the protest sounded weak, and he didn't attempt to push her hand away.
"You say that a lot." He was hardening beneath her touch, and she let her finger drift to the sensitive head of his cock and trace around the ridge. "I can be gentle, you know. Scout's honor."
"I believe you," Nathan sighed, reaching beneath the blanket to grip her wrist. The material shifted as he pulled her hand away, exposing the top of his chest. "But I don't think I can be, and then I'll pop a few stitches, and they won't let me leave."

She had only been teasing, but the visible proof of his injuries, the small irregular slashes dotting his chest, kept Remy from pushing. Her heart was pounding as she propped herself up, pulling free from his grip to skim her fingertips over the worst of the injuries.
"You're going to have more scars, and all because of me."
"No, Remy. It's not your fault. Hell, you probably saved my life. Cesar and Tian had orders not to kill me until I turned you over. Do you think they would have hesitated otherwise?" Nathan looked down, watching her trace the marks. "It was my fault. I shouldn't have let them grab me."

She lifted her eyes to his, serious as the memories of that morning washed over her. "Will you promise me one thing?"
"Okay, but just one thing."

Her lips twitched but she refused to give in to his good humor yet. "Don't lie to me again. You could've told me what you were doing with the coin. I know you were doing it to protect me, but if I'd been with you instead of at the grocery store-"

Nathan held up his hand. "If you had been with me, then maybe Cesar would have ignored me in favor of carving you. Gabriel didn't just send one or two people. They cornered me with at least four cars, and they were all full of armed thugs. He kissed her forehead. "If you had been with me, we could still be trapped in that house, or worse."

Remy didn't believe she couldn't have made a difference, but she decided to let it go for now. The important thing was that he was safe, she was free, and the future was theirs.

Nothing else mattered.
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Remy's eyes widened as the waitress set a massive platter of ribs in front of her, and another platter with all the sides she ordered. Nathan smiled as the shock on her face turned to hunger. The greedy hunger was mirrored on Isaac's face as a second waitress brought his food. They dug in without hesitation, their fingers and mouths soon covered in sticky red sauce.

Nathan picked at his own food, taking the time to butter his roll and cut into his steaming baked potato. Isaac tossed a bone to the side of his plate without thought and dug in for the next one. Nathan liked the Barn well enough, but he never understood the gusto Isaac exhibited every time they ate there. He always behaved as though it was his last chance to eat ribs ... or anything at all, for that matter. Remy looked to have the same fear.

"You have to try this," she said around a mouthful of spiced apples. She scooped a spoon into the dish, then slipped it past his lips and the hot cinnamon liqueur coated his tongue. "The only thing that would make this better is if I was eating it off you."

Isaac grimaced. "Whoa, whoa, back it up." He waved a bone in Remy's direction, the sauce still clinging to his fingertip. "Remember the conversation in the car about appropriate subjects to talk about over dinner? Any reminder Nathan is getting some while I am not is at the top of that list."

Nathan swallowed the apple before smirking. "I'll ask the waitress to bring us another order to go." He cut into his steak and chewed it thoroughly while Isaac looked at him with exasperation. "What?"

He shook his head before tossing the bone aside and tearing another from the slab in front of him. "I take you to the best rib place in a hundred mile radius, and you order a steak." Abruptly, Isaac picked up a knife and jabbed at Nathan's meal. "It's not even bloody! Who orders a ribeye that isn't rare?"

Nathan hit his hand away. "After thirty-five years, I thought I was capable of choosing my own food. But I guess not. Would you like to order for me next time?"

"If you're going to order like an idiot, yes."

Nathan cut another measured piece and chewed it with exaggerated care. "You know what makes this steak so delicious? The fact you're paying." He sipped from his beer and turned to Remy. "Are you enjoying your dinner?"

He almost jumped when she felt her small foot in his lap, though from the zest with which she was attacking her food, he was sure Isaac had no clue what she was doing under the table. "Food this good makes a girl hungry for even more."

"Hey!" Isaac said with a good-natured smile. "The list, remember?"

Remy's eyes were large and innocent as she turned them to Isaac, but her toes were most definitely not, curling over Nathan's growing erection. "What? Did I say it was Nathan I'd be jumping?"

"Watch it," Nathan warned, his voice light. "I'm the jealous sort."

He tried to catch Remy's eye, but she was pointedly not looking at him. If she didn't stop, he might have to carry her out of the restaurant over his shoulder. The past week had been excruciating, and not just because of his healing stitches. The fear of opening his cuts had been a serious one and had put a serious damper on their activities.

Isaac rolled his eyes. "Oh, please. Like she even knows the rest of the world exists when you're in the room. It's almost enough to make a guy lose his appetite." He licked spare sauce from his finger. "Almost."

"Let's make a toast." She stood up and found his cock and Nathan looked up from his plate to see Remy holding up her bottle of beer. "To Nate's clean bill of health. May I spend the rest of the night figuring out just how healthy he is."

"Cheers!" Isaac tapped his bottle against hers, his smile matching hers. She slid her foot along his inner thigh, a wicked gleam in her eye. Isaac rolled his eyes and shoved another rib in his mouth. "I'd like to make a toast, too. To Isaac's long-suffering patience."

"I'm just glad you're around to try my patience. They tapped the lips of their bottles together. "Even if you do order like an idiot."

Nathan motioned at the waitress as she passed. "Can we get a couple of to-go containers? Thanks."

"You're leaving already?"

"I'm eager to see how healthy I am," Nathan explained. "Unless Remy wants to stay for dessert?"

She shook her head, an emphatic no.

Ten minutes later, they left Isaac to finish his apple cobbler. Nathan carried the boxes in one hand, the other pressed against Remy's back. Her warm skin and the brush of her hair against his knuckles was almost more than he could stand. His apartment was only eight miles away, but it might as well have been on the other side of the city. By the time they reached the Mustang, he knew Remy sensed the tension in his body.

As he unlocked her door, she slithered between him and the car, running her fingers along his waistband. "He's going to make us pay for ditching him, you know."

"Yes, I'm sure I'll have to hear about it until the day I die." He pinned her against the car with his body, tilting his
head to kiss her full lips. "It's worth it, though."

With the last of his stitches removed earlier that day, it was a welcome relief to feel Remy slipping her arms around his shoulders, clinging to him almost precariously as her mouth opened to his. "This has been the longest week in recorded history," she murmured. "Not getting to touch you whenever I want, however I want, has been awful."

"The universe has got to keep balance somehow." Nathan lowered his head to kiss her again, but the heat from the boxes burned his arm, distracting him. Grimacing, he reached behind her and pulled open the door, eager to get on the road. "The week hasn't been so awful. The other night was nice."

She slid into her seat, but not before he caught the satisfied smile on her face. "There's that word again," Remy teased as she took the food from his arms. Her fingers stroked his. "But yeah, it was."

Nathan hated breaking physical contact with her-no matter how slight-but since the burn on his palm was still healing, he needed both hands to drive. He was able to focus until they reached the Ten and she slid across the seat, closing the distance between them. She pressed her chest against his arm, her head resting on his shoulder. Her fingers danced across his chest, light enough she didn't aggravate his sensitive skin.

"It's hard for me to drive while you're doing that."

Her hand drifted downward, outlining his erection through his pants. "What about when I do this instead?"

Nathan figured they were about five miles from home. Only five minutes away from the apartment, if the traffic and lights went their way. He would just have to push her away for a few minutes-

He didn't even try to push her away. Instead, he bit his tongue and kept his eyes glued to the road as she smoothed her palm over his cock.

"Have you missed me?" Her breath was hot against his neck, and he shivered when her tongue snaked out to run along his jaw. "I've missed you. Missed how hard you pound into me, how tight you hold me against you." She turned her hand near the base of his cock so that her fingernails dug into his inner thigh. "Will you do that for me tonight? I'll even ... beg for it if you want."

"Remy..." Nathan knew if she kept that up, he'd be begging her. It was on the tip of his tongue to plead with her right then, but he didn't know what he wanted. Did he need her to stop? Continue? The large sign over the freeway promised his exit was only another mile and a half away. "I did promise to make you beg, didn't I?"

"You did." She was nibbling on his neck now, tiny bites leading straight to his ear. "Will you wait until I'm on my knees? I can't beg you with my mouth full, you know. Or maybe that's what you want." When she dragged her palm back up his cock this time, Remy let her nails scrape against his covered balls. "Maybe you want me sucking instead of fucking. God, do you know how much I love the way you taste?"

Nathan moaned in frustration as the traffic seemed to close around him. Jerking the car over to the right lane, he took the next exit without thought, knowing he needed to get off the freeway. He couldn't sustain speeds of over seventy-five miles and imagine Remy on her knees in front of him at the same time.

"Both," he managed. "I'm greedy."

Her low chuckle went straight to his cock. "That's my Nate," she murmured. "Always wanting more."

"It's not my fault you're irresistible," Nathan countered. He turned down his block with a sigh of relief. The torment was going to end, one way or the other. "We're not going to make it upstairs. I thought I'd give you fair warning now."

She must have exhausted all her words. Remy's response was a fresh attack along his neck, teeth and tongue and warm breath rasping along every inch of exposed skin she could reach. As she began to pull at his cock, his knuckles turned bone-white around the steering wheel, his concentration slipping with every roll of the tires. He had to get the car parked. It was his mantra until he finally came to a stop.

As soon as he turned off the engine, he was moving to capture her mouth. Her hands were everywhere, threading through his hair, along the sides of his face, down his shoulders. He moved his fingers up her thigh, dipping beneath the black skirt to find the edge of her briefs. Her mouth was hot and demanding against his, the kiss almost punishing. They both pressed for more as their hands moved in quick, graceless gestures.

Nathan lowered her to the seat once her briefs were discarded, unmindful of the possible witnesses that could stroll through the parking lot. He only had one thought, and she seemed to share his single need, her body arching as he positioned himself between her thighs. Bracing himself with one hand on the back of the seat, Nathan kissed her, catching her moan of satisfaction as he pushed the head of his cock into her waiting body.

Her heels pressed into his ass, pushing his trousers down further around his hips as he thrust almost violently into her searing heat. One arm bent over her head to brace herself against the car door, while the other raked nails over his back, scratching even through the thin cotton of his shirt. Nathan growled in the back of his throat at the unexpected sting.

"Fuck, I love this," Remy panted. Her skin was already growing slick from the force of his strokes, and her eyes were wide, riveted on him, when he pulled away from her swollen mouth. "Love you."
She told him all the time, as though the words tasted novel and sweet in her mouth. She told him before they fell asleep at night, told him when he stepped out of the shower, mentioned it over lunch, and in passing whenever the mood struck her. But it didn't matter how many times he heard it. It always sent a warm thrill through his body, always took him a little bit by surprise. And if he ever doubted her, ever let the past's demons sneak into his mind, all he had to do was look in her eyes. She couldn't hide the truth in her brown depths, couldn't fake the emotions, the adoration, he saw there.

And it was just as thrilling to return the words. Just as thrilling to know she was as hungry to hear them as he was delighted to say them. "Love you, too." His lips fell on her face, her flushed skin hot against his mouth. "Love everything about you."

He wouldn't have thought it possible, but Remy ignited beneath him, her lush body meeting him thrust for thrust, his name and more filling her every breath. It didn't surprise him when she came, when the cries tore from the slim column of her throat, when her tight passage quivered and clenched around his cock. It only surprised him he hadn't come first.

A shudder wracked Nathan's body as he found the release he needed. He continued rocking his hips slowly after first wave of pleasure made his muscles convulse, trying to milk the moment for as long as possible. She buried her fingers in his hair, forcing his mouth to hers once more, her tongue moving languidly between his lips. Nathan finally stopped, but didn't pull away from her. "What happened to begging?"

"That comes later. When I have the patience."

He felt her smile rather than saw it. "I get the feeling it's going to be a long time before that ever happens."

"Maybe a few days. A month, tops." He licked her neck. "Let me get you upstairs so we can start working on it."

It took all her willpower not to jump him again before they reached his apartment. The doctors had been suitably severe about Nathan taking it easy until the last of his stitches were removed, and now that he'd been cleared of the worst of his injuries, all Remy wanted was to feel her against him. Without worry, without heed, with only their skin separating them. While the past week had been restful, long hours spent lying next to each other and talking, she was ready for time not so low-key. She wanted more than her fingertips as her only exploration. By his reaction in the car, so did Nathan.

She nestled into his side as he unlocked the door, her hand flat on his stomach, her nose buried against his chest. The fresh smell of him always made her mouth prickle, and Remy had to tamp down the urge not to rip his shirt from him then and there. Inside, she reminded herself. Just a few more feet.

Nathan slammed the door behind them with surprising force. He flashed a sheepish smile as the walls shook, then took her by the shoulders and kissed her again. He kissed her as though it had been days since their last contact, not mere minutes. As though her thighs weren't still slick from their coupling. Nathan began walking without breaking the kiss, pushing her backwards to the hall. Somehow, he managed to keep his feet from tangling with hers as he guided her to the bedroom.

Remy kept her back to the door as he fumbled around her to open it. Nothing was going to disturb the seal of their mouths, it would seem, not the hindrance of a knob he couldn't find or their slight stumble over the threshold when he did. She reached past him and flicked the switch, flooding the bedroom in light.

Nathan broke the kiss, gasped for air, and lowered his head again, but he paused as his eyes flickered over her shoulder. He remained frozen for a moment before straightening, his gaze moving from the bed, to her, and back to the bed. "It's... new?"

She couldn't hold back her smile of delight. It had taken a bit of finagling, and promises from Isaac to keep Nathan out all day so it could be delivered, and she had had to dip into the money they had put into the bank from the sale of her coins, but in the end, Remy was more than pleased with the result. Gone was Nathan's old full-size bed, with its saggy spring in the middle and the aged headboard. In its place was a king-sized four-poster, with the softest of comforters she had been able to find.

"Do you like it?" She went over to the bed, climbing on to jump up and down near its foot. "And look! No squeaking!"

"No squeaking," Nathan repeated under his breath, gliding his fingers along the comforter. He circled it once, tracing the edge as he walked. She couldn't read his face, and she couldn't tell if he was about to smile or about to yell at her for presuming she had the right to make major purchases and replace his furniture. Nathan moved to stand in front of her, wrapping his hands around her waist. "But what did you need with such a big bed?"

Dropping to her knees, Remy rested her arms on his shoulders. "We were always so crowded on your bed. This gives us room to move around, so if you get hot in the middle of the night, you can just kick me over to the other side. And it wasn't that much more expensive than the queen, so I thought..."

Her voice trailed off. She was no longer certain this had been the best idea. All she had wanted was to get Nathan
something special, but she hadn't wanted it to be frivolous. This had seemed like the perfect compromise. "Isaac said you would like it," she finished lamely.

"Well..." Nathan pushed her lightly, forcing her to lie back on the bed. "Isaac was right." He bounced, testing the springs. "Wow, this is a nice mattress." Relief suffused through her as she watched his curiosity manifest with more experimental bounces. "We can always exchange the headboard if you don't like it." She stretched to reach the smooth pedestal, curling her hand around it to stroke the soft wood. "I liked the way this one felt. It felt English to me."

Nathan chuckled, his eyes dancing. "The bed felt English to you?" He took her hand, moving it against his chest and to the outline of his semi-erect cock. "What about this?"

"Isaac said you would like it," she finished lamely. "Well..." Nathan pushed her lightly, forcing her to lie back on the bed. He crawled onto the mattress, bracing himself on his hands and knees above her, and looking surprised at the way the bed moved beneath him. "Isaac was right."

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Her fears about the gift fled in the face of the much more pleasant reality of his ready body. "I dunno," she said in mock seriousness. She slid down between his legs, working at the button and zipper of his pants until his cock sprang free. "I think this requires further testing."

Remy didn't give him time to argue, leaning up to run the flat of her tongue along the underside of his shaft. Nathan groaned, his hand leaving hers to tangle in her hair, and his cock jumped in her grip, stiffening further with her attention. She didn't disappoint him. Angling it away from his body, she directed the length to her wet mouth, sucking the sensitive head past her lips.

Nathan indicated his pleasure with a long sigh as he shifted his weight forward, letting the length of his shaft slide between her lips and along her tongue. His breath was ragged, as though her mouth had been an unexpected, but not unwelcome, shock to his system. Her name fell from his lips as he began rocking his hips.

He tasted of his come and her juices and smelled of heaven, every soft stroke into her mouth probing a little further. Remy's hand slipped down the back of his pants to cup his ass, guiding him even more firmly, and she pushed past the fabric in front to fondle the heavy sac of his balls, almost chuckling as his groans turned into growls. There was the one spot, velvety smooth, right behind the sac, that always garnered one of the strongest responses from him, and she deliberately let her fingers stretch in order to find it.

Nathan buckled as she found the bit of skin she was looking for, his chest hitching above her as she began to massage his sensitive skin with the pad of her finger. He was always so responsive when she caressed him, his muscles always jerking and dancing beneath her touch. Now was no exception, and as she guided him forward, she could feel the tension in his body shift, hear the difference in his breathing.

"Remy, I'm going to..."

If she hadn't had her mouth full, she would have smiled and told him that was the whole point. Instead, she tightened her grip on his muscular ass and pulled him closer, swallowing so her throat opened and the head of his cock slipped inside.

Nathan cried out as the first of his come splashed down her throat, and Remy pulled away just enough to catch the rest on her waiting tongue. She swallowed convulsively, unwilling to lose even a single, salty drop, and savored the quivering of his muscles as his body trembled above her. This was one of her favorite parts. It never ceased to amaze her how he reacted to her touch.

He pulled away from her, collapsing on his side with a soft sigh. Nathan watched her with half-closed eyes, but he didn't move or speak for a moment. Finally, he propped himself up on his elbow and offered a wicked grin. "Undress for me."

She made a show of turning to face him again, the black fabric hanging loose around her body. As she lifted a hand and leisurely pulled a strap off her shoulder, exposing the lacy cup of her bra, she asked, "Why do you ask me to wear this dress so often if you just want to get me out of it?"

Nathan smiled. "Because you look stunning in that dress. But you look better out of it."

"Not yet," she agreed.
Sliding her hands down her hips, she pushed the dress off the rest of the way, letting it fall to a black pool at her feet before stepping out of it. Nathan's eyes followed her hands back up as they returned to her bra, this time playing with the clasp between her breasts. "What's in it for me once I've done as you said?" Remy asked. "You'll make me very happy. Isn't that enough?" Nathan teased, shrugging his shirt off and exposing his nearly healed chest. He looked down with a wry smile. "Unfortunately, even with the stitches gone, I'm still rather ... unattractive."

"Impossible." Ignoring the rest of his directive, she stepped back to the bed, crawling up to stretch out next to him. Pushing him onto his back, Remy began trailing her tongue around his scars, winding from one side of his chest to the other, circling a nipple and then up to his neck. His hands came to her waist, guiding her atop him, and she more than gladly complied, throwing her leg over until she straddled his waist. "I love these scars." Carefully, she licked across a tender spot on his shoulder. "I love this one..." Her mouth descended to another near the hollow of his throat. "...and this one..." She felt her breath reflect off his heated skin and warm her cheeks as she shifted to a mark on the opposite side. "...and this one."

When she pushed up, she knew she was glowing, but damn it, this was their first real night together, post-confessions about their feelings, post-worries about his health. Everything he did testified that he felt the same way, from the casual brushes across her cheek when her hair would fall across it, to the possessive touch of his hand whenever it seemed she was stepping beyond arms reach. He said it, too, made the same admissions he'd made in the hospital, over and over as if it still took him by surprise. The last thing she would ever do was deny what he meant to her.

Nathan smiled at her, mollified for now. "That's good, because I love you and you're stuck with me. Deformities and all."

Remy squirmed against his hips. "But they're such nice deformities," she purred. She bent to kiss him, her hair tumbling over her shoulder, when a muffled ring came from his pants. Both of them stiffened as her eyes flew to his. "You're not going to answer that, are you?"

Nathan sighed. "It's Isaac." Remy looked at him, unimpressed with his rationale. "Despite everything, he's not just ringing now to be a prick. It's important." He smiled apologetically and brought the phone up to his ear. She rolled off, stretching back along his side as he answered the call. Though the glance he shot her was sympathetic, he greeted with Isaac with his usual politeness, prompting her to call out, "You have lousy timing, Ike!"

"He says he knows." Nathan's smile changed, his face growing serious. "When did this happen? Well, why didn't they call sooner?" He swung his legs off the side of the bed, reaching for a pen and paper. "Blah blah blah, Isaac. What's his name?" He scribbled his notes. "Probably ... no ... yes, I'm aware of that." Reaching for the shirt he discarded, he smirked into the phone, "Yes, mother. I'll be sure to call. Yeah. Bye."

The fact that he was slipping his shirt back on even before he'd disconnected the call meant Remy didn't have to ask, but that didn't stop her from doing it anyway. "A job?"

"Yes. Fairly straightforward. It'll just take a few hours to find the guy and haul him back. Isaac gave me express instructions not to let you help." Nathan smiled. "So wear something more sensible than the black dress, yeah?"

She had been prepared to argue with him about letting her go, so the simple declaration about what to wear left her speechless. Only for a moment, though. In the next, she was vaulting toward him, arms around his shoulders, mouth hard and hungry on his, before scrambling away to get her clothes. "Don't discount the power of the dress," she said, grabbing a pair of jeans. "Flash a bit of leg, show some cleavage, most guys turn into idiots."

"Just most?" Nathan asked, slipping his shoulder holster on. "Or are you being modest?"

She grinned. "I'd say modest, but then you broke that theory, didn't you?"

Nathan spared her one more smile before shifting, and she could see he was all business. "You're my back-up. That means you leave the work to me and just make sure nobody shoots at my ass. Right?"

"Nobody gets your ass but me. Got it." She was dressed in record time, ready even before he'd finished preparing his weapons. As Remy followed him out of the bedroom, she asked, "So when do I get my own gun?"

THE END

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