



ECHO

KENNETH JAMES ALLEN

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Published by Everington Publishing House, 2024

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ECHO

First edition. OCTOBER 2024.

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Written by Kenneth James Allen.

For those who wonder about the path not taken.

“There’s nowhere you can be that isn’t exactly where you’re supposed to be.”

John Lennon

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

Reinhold Niebuhr, The Serenity Prayer

“The fates lead him who will; those who won’t, they drag.”

Seneca (Roman Philosopher)

Chapter 1

Wednesday 7:53pm

Death. We spend our lives trying to avoid it. Others can't get out of its way.

There was no way out for Eli.

Detective Thompson rapped sharply on the door. "Eli? What's the status on Madsen? He's gone silent on us."

Inside, Eli sat on the frigid kitchen tiles, a knot of emotion tightening in his throat. Tears threatened to spill as he grappled with the reality of his actions. The burden of the fallen officer weighed heavily on him.

His hands, still clenched around the gun, felt the increased heft of his deed. He shakily rose, leaning against the wall, his breaths coming in rapid succession. His voice, barely audible even to himself, trembled. "He's... I think he's dead." He threw his head back, mustered some breath, and shouted, "I think he's dead." *I think I'm dead.*

Sergeant Klein, clad in tactical gear with a semi-automatic weapon at the ready, shifted the gun to a more aggressive stance. "Scrap the negotiator. We're breaching."

With a swift hand signal, he directed his team. They adjusted their positions, ready for action, as Thompson stepped back, joining Detective Hayes at a safer distance.

An officer, battering ram in hand, positioned himself at the door. He caught Klein's confirming nod and swung the ram with full force at the door lock. The door burst open for the second time that night, crashing against the interior wall with a resounding thud.

Klein and his team, weapons drawn and at the ready, stormed into the apartment. Their movements were swift and calculated, eyes scanning for any sign of threat.

When Eli heard the door bust open, he stood up abruptly, his heart racing. This was it, the decisive moment. He took a deep breath, trying to compose himself. He wiped away his tears and straightened his posture. If he was going to face them, he was going to do it as someone with strength.

As he rounded the corner, his eyes widened with fear and his hand trembled as he raised the gun. He clenched his eyes shut and thought of his friends; sitting in the pub hacking the account, finding them murdered. As the thoughts rocketed through his mind, a burst of gunfire flung him backward onto the floor of the living room.

Eli's ears rang with a deafening intensity as he stared upwards at the ceiling, his fingers trembling as he brought them up to his blood-soaked face. The pain had struck him with the force of a rocket, but it soon ebbed away, replaced by a warmth that spread over his hands before a chilling coldness crept up his entire body. As he coughed violently, spurts of blood sprayed out before splattering over his face in a macabre display.

It was easier this way. He had to do nothing more than hold the gun and point it at someone. He didn't even need to pull the trigger. Weariness consumed him as he sensed his life force ebbing away from his body, draining him of all vitality.

It was a crushing realization—this was the end, the culmination of his entire twenty-eight years, now collapsing in on him like a condemned building. As he reflected on his life, he realized it was all for naught, nothing but a meaningless existence that now counted for nothing. He was numb, hollowed out by the events that had stripped away everything that had once held significance for him, whether it

was a distant memory from long ago or a recent tragedy that had befallen him just a few days prior.

Eli's breathing became increasingly labored, and his vision blurred as a cold numbness spread over his body. The encroaching darkness enveloped him, drawing him inexorably toward its embrace. In his final moments, his gaze settled on a figure standing over him, the only illumination emanating from the entryway casting a sinister shadow over his face.

"Damn it, Eli!" Thompson said. "Why did you do it? Why?"

In the background, someone's voice cut through the tension, calling for an EMT. But Eli, lost in his turmoil, knew the truth—it was too late. There was no reversing what had been done, no escaping the dark abyss that was now engulfing him.

Press rewind.

As the night settled in over the city, Eli's world went dark.

Press rewind.

And Eli was dead.

...

Stop.

...

Rewind.

Chapter 2

Wednesday 7:33pm

Twenty minutes before Eli's death, a man reclined leisurely on the balcony of an opulent hillside residence. He savored the early evening ambiance, watching as the sun gently dissolved into the horizon. As the city skyline burned with the setting sun, it awoke with lights flickering to life, dotting the landscape with twinkling illumination.

Grigory, joining the serene moment, approached and gracefully offered a glass to the man. He then settled beside him, their glasses meeting in a soft clink. Together, they leisurely sipped the rich, amber liquid, immersed in the tranquil beauty of the transitioning day.

"God damn," the man said. "I could get used to this."

"With the amount of money coming your way, you can," Grigory replied.

"I can't believe it got so damn complicated. It should have been very straightforward. Buy the guns and move on."

"Life is rarely straightforward."

"But you wanted to fuck around with Hyun-woo."

"He deserved it."

"Now, I've got no aversion to that."

"Naturally."

"But the kid? Fucking hell, Grigory. What the hell were you thinking?"

"He also deserved it."

"You almost lost control of this one. You put everything in jeopardy."

“For the record,” Grigory started. “Nothing was ever in jeopardy, and nothing ever is. It was fully within my control the entire time.”

A phone vibrated, and the man retrieved it from his pocket.

“News?” Grigory asked.

He needed the call. “Someone needs a new job.” He turned off the device. “Speaking of which, I need this destroyed.” He held it aloft.

A huge man strode from the shadows, collected it, and disappeared once more.

“Dima will take care of it,” Grigory said.

The man huffed. “God damn theatrics. This whole thing could have been easier. *Should* have been easier.”

“Nobody puts in any effort anymore. It’s all just ‘*bang, bang*’, you’re dead. If you’re going to do it, at least do it right. Show some passion, make an effort.” Grigory stared out over the city, the skyscrapers bathed in dusk. “Besides, I lost my brother because of what Eli did. Eye for an eye.”

“I was sorry to hear such a thing happened, but we knew there would be sacrifices along the way. No one ever comes out the other end of something like this unscathed.”

Grigory, with a thoughtful nod, took a sip of his drink. “Indeed.”

The conversation shifted. “Let’s discuss my compensation.”

“Of course,” Grigory replied, setting his glass on the nearby table with deliberate care.

Suddenly, the man coughed, initially with restraint, but then it escalated. As he set his glass beside Grigory’s, the coughing intensified.

Grigory leaned forward. “Are you all okay?”

Chapter 3

Wednesday night

An hour earlier, Eli slumped against the kitchen wall, cradling the police officer's gun in his trembling hands. His gaze fixed on its intricate lines as he thumbed the grip, lost in thought. Beyond the gun, he saw his outstretched legs, and his eyes flickered to a lone shoelace that dangled from his sneaker, undone. He stared at it blankly, tracing its path mentally as it weaved through the eyelets and crisscrossed to the bottom before rising on the other side.

The pool of blood that was spreading at his side caught his attention, and he followed its trail to its source: the pair of black boots and blue pants that lay motionless before him. Blinking back a solitary tear, he realized he was now completely numb. The adrenalin that had been coursing through his veins when the gun went off had given way to an all-consuming emptiness that left him devoid of feeling. His fingers, legs, and heart were all numb.

He struggled to come to grips with how he had ended up in his current predicament. At first, he could convince himself that just a few days ago, he had been an ordinary guy. But the truth was that he was responsible for the disaster that had befallen him. He had been the one to steal the money and open the doorway for his friends, and they had paid the ultimate price for his actions. Now, he was headed down the same path, and it was his fault.

He longed for an opportunity to go back in time and undo what he had done. He wondered how things would have turned out if he had made a different choice. Could he have altered the course of events, or was he fated to end up where he was now? Was he a mere

victim of circumstance, or was he being guided by the hand of fate itself? These were questions he could not answer, and they only deepened his despair.

He had heard the harrowing stories of people who narrowly escaped a terrorist attack at a Nairobi shopping center. Over fifty innocent souls had lost their lives in the brutal assault. Those who had fled moments before were spared. Some might call it fate, others might call it luck. Still, others would attribute their survival to the hand of God, whatever that might mean to them.

Now, he felt like he was in a similar situation. It was his destiny, and there was nothing he could do to change it. He was guilty, and he knew he couldn't talk his way out of it. No excuse, no matter how well-crafted, could stand up against the evidence: a dead police officer lying on his kitchen floor. He was damned, and he knew it. The weight of his situation was crushing, and he felt as though he was suffocating beneath it.

The gun felt like a lead weight in Eli's trembling hands. He couldn't shake the thought that placing it in his mouth and pulling the trigger might be the only way out of this nightmare. It would be a coward's way out, but at least it would be an escape. Slowly, he brought the gun to his mouth, his hands shaking so badly that he could barely hold it steady. But when it came time to pull the trigger, he faltered. His hands dropped to his lap as tears streamed down his face. He tried again, but once more his resolve crumbled, and he could not go through with it.

Suddenly, a loud banging on the door shattered the heavy silence. A deep voice, muffled by the door, echoed through the kitchen where Eli sat frozen with fear.

The authoritative voice of a police officer cut through the air, demanding that Eli surrender his weapons and lie down on the ground. But Eli remained frozen, unable to move or respond. He felt as if the world had suddenly stopped turning as if he were living in a dream.

He couldn't bring himself to obey the officer's command, to face the consequences of his actions.

A second round of banging echoed through the door. This time, a voice called out to Eli, a familiar voice.

"Eli, it's Detective Thompson. It doesn't have to be this way. There are armed officers here who will come in. If you are holding a weapon, they will shoot you."

But Eli couldn't focus on the words. He felt trapped and hopeless, as if there were no way out of this situation. He pressed his head back against the wall and rocked back and forth as if trying to find comfort in the motion.

"Eli!" Thompson roared. "Can we talk about this?"

No reply.

"Enough." The voice came from Sergeant Klein, a towering figure dressed in all black with an assault rifle slung over his shoulder. He was leaning against the wall next to the door, the rest of his team lined up along the corridor. "It's time."

Thompson turned to Klein, who was impatiently tapping his foot. "I need more time," he said firmly.

"He's already fired at Officer Gilham, whose fate remains uncertain. It was by the grace of God that he cornered the suspect. Now, we find ourselves in the middle of a hostage situation."

"What's the status of the negotiator?"

Klein sighed. "Five minutes."

"Then I have five minutes."

Klein turned to his men and gave them the *'get ready'* hand gesture.

Thompson pounded on the door again. "Are you there, Eli? I need you to answer me."

"I'm here," Eli whispered, the words struggling to escape his lips. He threw his head back. "I'm here!" he shouted.

“That’s good, Eli. Listen, I want to come in and talk, completely unarmed, okay? But first I need to know about Officer Madsen. Is he okay?”

Inside the kitchen, Eli sat with a vacant expression, his gaze fixed on the gun in his hands, then shifting to the body beside him. Blood spread across the floor in a grim pool.

It was unmistakably clear.

Officer Madsen was far from okay.

Chapter 4

Wednesday evening

“Isn’t surveillance duty just thrilling?” Officer Gillham quipped. “Need anything while I’m out?”

“Get me the same as yours,” Officer Madsen responded, his eyes fixed on the building’s entrance. They strategically stationed themselves across the street, a few doors down from Eli’s residence.

“You sure you’ll manage alone for a bit?”

Madsen glanced at him. “I’ll be fine.”

Gillham stepped out of the car, gently closing the door. He pulled up his hoodie, and with head bowed, strolled down the street in search of something to eat. As he turned the corner and vanished from sight, Madsen’s attention returned to the building’s front door. That’s when his phone rang. He answered it, eyes still trained on the entrance.

“Madsen here.”

“Are you still with Eli?” Hayes’s voice came through.

“Just dropped him off. Settling into the stakeout now.”

“We need you to go back and arrest him.”

“What about keeping watch here?”

“Skip it. Arresting him is the priority.”

“Understood,” Madsen acknowledged. “I’ll update you when we’re en route to the station.”

After ending the call, Madsen checked his 9mm pistol—a round chambered, safety engaged—and then holstered it discreetly. He exited the car, zipped up his dark jacket, and made his way determinedly toward Eli’s apartment.

Eli paced restlessly in his apartment, phone pressed to his ear, each ring heightening his frustration. The unanswered calls had already driven him to a boiling point, his anger manifesting in kicks and punches against the walls. He moved relentlessly from the kitchen to the front door and back, cursing under his breath each time the call abruptly ended.

Finally, on his fourth attempt, the call connected.

“Jesus Christ, Grigory. What the fuck is going on?”

“And hello to you, Eli.”

“I’ve just spent the day at the police station.”

“I told you it was going to take a while.”

“They have the gun,” Eli said bluntly. “The have the phone you gave me.”

“And?”

“Are they going to find my fingerprints? Why the fuck would you leave them there?”

Grigory laughed.

“Is this some kind of fucking game to you?”

Grigory stopped laughing. “Yes.”

“Fuck you, Grigory. I paid you.”

“No, you paid me *my* money.”

Eli’s breath hitched, a whirlwind of thoughts swirling chaotically in his mind, each one colliding with the next in a tumultuous storm of uncertainty and apprehension.

“They’ll be coming for you, Eli,” Grigory sneered. “Good luck.”

The call ended. Eli looked at his phone for a moment, Grigory’s words churning in his head. *My money. They’ll be coming.* Rage tore through his body. Eli’s grip on the phone intensified, his teeth clenched in mounting frustration. He redialed the number with determination.

“This call cannot be connected,” the automated voice stated, unyielding.

Undeterred, he tried once more, only to be met with the same infuriating message. In a moment of rage, Eli inhaled sharply and hurled the phone against the wall. It shattered on impact, scattering fragments of plastic across the room.

The realization hit him hard—they were on to him. As if on cue, a knock resonated through the apartment. Eli’s heart hammered against his ribcage, and he whipped his head towards the sound.

“Eli, it’s Officer Madsen. I think I left something in there. I was wondering if you could let me in.”

Eli tiptoed into the kitchen.

Madsen banged on the door again and waited. Nothing. The officer withdrew his service pistol, stepped back, and launched a foot into the door, sending it careening into the room, bits of wood flying into the air, the door slamming against the wall. The gun swept across the room, tracing a path from corner to corner before rounding down the hallway. Gliding past the space, he hugged the wall, making his way stealthily toward the kitchen. With every step, his ears strained for the slightest sound, gun poised and ready to fire.

Reaching the corner, he caught his breath, then smoothly swept his weapon through the kitchen and behind the wall, finding nothing. With careful stealth, he advanced, his boots barely making a sound on the tiled floor, his focus locked on the second opening that led to the hallway. Upon reaching the breakfast bar, he steadied himself before once again sweeping his weapon into the open space, yet still found nothing.

Just as he turned, an object smashed into his face, the sound of metal on soft tissue, causing him to stumble backward. Eli tossed the kettle aside as Madsen, with tears in his eyes and blood streaming from his nose, fired.

The bullet whizzed past Eli as he tackled the officer, crashing into him, and smashing against the fridge. The gun clattered on the floor as Madsen groaned. And they both fell to the tiles. The two men struggled to get to their feet and gain the upper hand in the fight.

Madsen scrambled to his feet first, trampling over Eli like a doormat. Eli desperately reached out for any limb he could grab to prevent the officer from reaching the gun, knowing that it would seal his fate. His hand landed on Madsen's ankle, and he pulled with all his might to bring him down.

Adrenaline and desperation surged through Eli as he grappled with Madsen. With a grunt, Madsen fell forward onto his stomach, his fingers just shy of the gun grip. He kicked out in frustration, but it was too late. Eli climbed onto Madsen's back, straddling him with his knees dug firmly into the officer's shoulders, pinning him down and restricting his movements.

Madsen turned his head as he spoke. "Don't do anything stupid, Eli."

Eli struggled to think clearly as his mind became a jumble. He found himself, yet again, in a situation that he felt he couldn't control and had very few options.

"Did Grigory send you? Is that it? He wanted you to finish the job?"

"No, Eli. Detective—"

As the cop started wiggling, he ignored the words, firmly grabbed the sides of the head below him, pulled back, and slammed it down into the tiles.

The first smack resulted in a groan from Madsen as he tried to gain some control of the situation. He wiggled forward, desperately reaching for his gun. Eli felt a twinge of guilt. He had never imagined himself capable of violence, but circumstances had forced his hand.

Eli mechanically repeated the process, his actions punctuated by the sound of a loud smack followed by a groan, mumbled words, and

frantic flailing of his arms. Despite the discomfort and pain, he persisted, leaning forward with each attempt, lost in a daze of memories from his past. He gripped tightly and pushed and pulled with all his might each time he felt movement underneath him, gritting his teeth and clenching his eyes shut. The cycle continued until finally, the groans and flailing arms ceased, and the hard smacks gave way to wet squelches.

He recoiled and leaned back, the officer's head dropping with a dull thud. It tumbled into a puddle of blood and bone fragments, rolling to the side with a sickening squelch. Eli's eyes slowly fluttered open, and he held his hands up in front of his face, observing the playful strands of hair that clung to his fingers and glimmered in the dim light that filtered through the entryway. With a trembling hand, he rose to his feet and stumbled backward, distancing himself from the lifeless body. Blood trickled from the mangled remnants of the officer's face, staining the tiled floor with streaks of crimson. For the second time in as many days, Eli had done the unthinkable, and he knew he was in deep trouble, trapped in a hole that just got a lot deeper. He had nowhere to go and no one to turn to.

The sound of a second knock echoed through the room, drawing Eli's attention. His head turned slowly towards the door.

"Eli? This is Officer Gillham. I need to find my partner, Officer Madsen."

In response, Eli silently retrieved the weapon. With a measured, deliberate pace, he moved towards the door, his every step heavy with intent.

Chapter 5

Wednesday late afternoon

Earlier, Eli unlocked the door to his apartment and pushed his way inside. Quickly following, and barging through behind him, was officer Madsen, an officer tasked with transporting him back home after the conversation at the police station. Although he wouldn't call it a conversation because it felt like an interrogation, perhaps dancing delicately on the line of needing a lawyer and not.

That is where he spent most of the day, most of which was in a police interview room by himself, with his thoughts, waiting, just waiting, for Grigory to come to the party and get him released. Sure, Grigory said it could take some time, but each passing minute, which turned into a passing hour, was debilitating. He had paid for the privilege of Grigory's services, and he couldn't tell if he was happy about it or not.

On the ride home in the back of an uncover police sedan, he couldn't help but ponder if his life would ever return to normal. He was tired of being surrounded by loss—it wasn't just death that was taking its toll on him. It was the sudden, cruel removal of people he cared for from his life, a feeling that crushed every vessel in his heart with each passing soul.

Madsen, wearing jeans, a dark t-shirt, and jacket, strode to the center of the entryway, stood tall, and planted his hands firmly on his hips, as if he were surveying his kingdom. Despite his diminutive stature, he made up for it with unwavering confidence. He scanned the room, starting from the dimly lit lounge to the wall immediately

in front of him, and finally narrowing down his gaze to the pitch-black hallway that seemed to swallow everything in its path.

Eli's hair fell over his forehead as he leaned against the wall, observing the officer's scrutinizing gaze. He wanted to tell Madsen to fuck off, but the words came out differently.

"Thanks, officer, you can go now."

Instead, Madsen, whose lingering gaze rested on the laptop on the desk, took off down the corridor, scrutinizing every corner and cupboard in the apartment.

"Oh, no, please, help yourself," Eli mumbled as he walked into the kitchen. He poured himself a glass of lukewarm tap water, not bothering to filter out the floaty bits. Leaning against the counter, he stared at the fridge, dreading the thought of opening it. And it wasn't the many beer bottles that resided within. It was the other thing that *was* in there, the thing that had injected haunting memories into his brain. He didn't want to deal with it, not now, not ever.

Lost in thoughts, Eli barely registered Officer Madsen's entrance into the kitchen. With a sigh, he pushed himself up from the counter and turned to face him.

"Look, everything seems okay here. If you need anything, best you call the station."

If I need anything?! How about you leave me alone so I can make a phone call? What about a new identity and a police escort out of town? He needed to escape, however, he knew his past would always follow him, regardless of where he went.

"Thanks for your concern, Officer," he said, forcing a smile. "I will call if I need anything."

Detective Thompson, his posture weary, leaned against a table. His hands, rough and calloused from years of demanding work, came together in a rub. He took a reluctant sip of his now cold coffee, the

bitter taste prompting a grimace. He smoothed over his bristling, bushy mustache and rubbed his tired eyes. Checking his watch, he noted Eli would soon be back at his apartment.

Reaching for a bottle of pills, Thompson tapped a few into his palm. He stared at them with a mix of resentment and necessity, cursing them silently as if they were the source of his pain rather than its remedy. Swallowing the pills, he winced at their bitterness, rubbing his stomach in faint hope for quick relief. Another sip of the stale coffee followed, accompanied by a resigned sigh. These pills, he realized, would be his companions for life.

His eyes scanned the evidence laid out before him, sprawled across the whiteboards. Photographs of Tyler and Dylan juxtaposed with those of Hyun-woo and his brother—two pairs bound by a grim similarity. Then there was the old factory, a phone, a gun, Eli's watch, and, most unsettling, a decapitated head. Each piece seemed to deepen the mystery rather than solve it, the puzzle growing more elusive the longer he looked.

Suddenly, the doors swung open. In strode Hayes, his wavy brown hair falling casually over his forehead, eyes alight with the zeal of police work. Clutching files to his chest, he wore a t-shirt emblazoned with the logo of some obscure band and jeans that Thompson knew irked him. Thompson was clueless about current music trends, just as Hayes was oblivious to the Beatles. In their generational divide, they found an odd balance.

Hayes held up the piece of paper in his hand. "I got the ballistics and fingerprint analysis back."

Thompson pushed himself off the table. "About damn time."

"You will not believe this."

"Oh god, what now?"

Hayes approached the board, pointing to the two murder scenes. "Same tape used in both crime scenes."

“I could pick up a roll from the local hardware store. What else do you have?”

“Same handgun used in both, found at the abandoned factory.”

“Fine,” Thompson retorted. “Same murder weapon suggests the same killer. But who’s that?”

Hayes causally pointed to a picture of Eli.

Thompson shook his head. “No way. No fucking way.”

“Prints are all over the gun and the phone from the factory.”

“I *still* don’t believe it. How the hell does someone like Eli execute something like this? And why kill his friends?”

“I don’t know,” Hayes replied. “But when we arrest him and get him in a room, we can ask him all those questions. But first, we need to get Eli back into custody.”

“Give Officers Madsen and Gillham a call to bring him in.”

Chapter 6

Wednesday midday

Thompson fell into his chair as Hayes perched on the edge of the desk.

“What about now?” Hayes asked. “You believe any of that bull-shit we just heard in there from Eli?”

Thompson took a deep breath, stretched out in his chair, and placed hands behind his head, clasped fingers. He shrugged. “It’s all circumstantial. We need something solid to tie him there, but at the moment, I’m just not buying it.”

Hayes folded his arms. “What do you want to do?”

“Nothing at the moment.”

“You want to release him? Seriously?”

“You think he’s capable of killing the head of a Korean crime family? His friends?”

“Who knows what people are capable of? Maybe he had help.”

“What circles do you think Eli runs in? Besides, it seems his entire world was his two friends, both of which are in the morgue right now. No, he doesn’t seem like a criminal mastermind.”

“For the record, I disagree.”

“Duly noted,” Thompson shot back. “And how long have you been here? How many crime scenes have you investigated? How many bad guys have you put away?”

Hayes pushed himself off the desk. “Yeah, yeah. So you keep telling me. Doesn’t change what I think about the situation.”

Knuckles rapped lightly on the door frame, drawing the attention of both detectives.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Roz announced, her police uniform lending an air of formality to her presence in the doorway. As a uniformed officer usually stationed at the front desk, her interruption suggested something out of the ordinary.

“An interruption might be just what we need,” Thompson replied, welcoming the diversion. “What’s up?”

“There are two special agents here to see you.”

Thompson and Hayes looked at each other.

“About what?” Hayes asked.

“They were very vague,” she replied.

“Perfect,” Thompson said, clapping his hands together. “I think Interview room three is free. Send them through.”

In the confines of the small interview room, a brief but formal exchange of handshakes and introductions took place. The agents, with professional air, presented their badges.

“I’m Agent Mitchell from the ATF,” one began, his voice carrying a note of authority, “and this is Agent Norcross from Special Investigations.”

Thompson appraised the two agents, noting the stark contrast between them. Mitchell appeared younger, with a more compact and rounded build, while Norcross, his tall and lean frame draped in a trench coat, bore the telltale signs of extensive field experience etched into his features.

“Special Investigations?” Thompson inquired, a hint of curiosity creasing his brow. “What exactly does that entail?”

“We primarily handle gang-related activities,” Norcross explained, his tone matter of fact. “Among other responsibilities.”

“I see,” Thompson responded, motioning towards the chairs. As they all took their seats, the detectives on one side and the agents on

the other, Thompson leaned forward slightly. "So, what brings you to our humble department?"

"You investigated a crime scene this morning," Norcross said.

Thompson eyed him suspiciously. "Yes. What about it?"

"Well, I'm sure you know the identity of the men there."

"Hyun-woo," Hayes said. "Koren crime family."

"Red Dragons, specifically."

"And how did you find out about that?" Thompson asked.

"Because he's a dangerous man, or at least, was a dangerous man. Wanted by a slew of organizations and was thought to be untouchable."

"Until last night, it seems."

"I'm also aware you have someone in custody."

Thompson threw his arms out. "And how the hell did you find out about that?"

"Our clearance grants us privy to all manner of information."

"But our interest is in more than Hyun-woo," Mitchell added.

"Like what?" Hayes asked.

"We were tracking a shipment of weapons bound for our shores when they fell off our radar. Given Hyun-woo was here and now dead, we believe he was involved."

"What do you want from us?" Thompson asked.

"Access to your suspect."

"Well, that isn't going to happen?"

"Look, detective," Norcross broke in. "We're not here to step on toes. But if he was there, he's got valuable information for us."

"I'm telling you know, this kid doesn't know what you want him to know. We can't even place him at the scene."

"Then why is he here?" Mitchell asked.

"We found one of his personal items at the scene," Hayes said.

Thompson snapped his gaze around, caught Hayes's eyes, and glared at him.

“Which is circumstantial,” Thompson added slowly.

“Prints? Ballistics?” Mitchell asked.

“Happening as we speak.”

“Okay, you don’t want to let us speak to your guy, and that’s fine, but we would appreciate if you could share whatever you have. He could be the link we need to the shipment and who has it.”

“What’s so important about these weapons?”

“Because the ammunition is deadlier than anything you’ve ever seen. This stuff will eat through a vest without thinking. If this stuff hits the streets, you’ll be spending a lot of time at funerals and press conferences.”

Thompson regarded the man for a moment, before turning to Hayes. “Grab the file.”

“Should I include the stuff we shared in the interview?”

Thompson sighed. “Might as well.”

As Hayes closed the door to obtain the file, Thompson said, “Listen, the person we have in custody might be caught up in something, but I don’t think he’s in any way responsible for the killing of a crime family boss.”

“Desperate people do desperate things,” Norcross said.

“You sound like my partner.”

“He must be a smart man.”

“Smart-ass, more than anything.”

The door swung open, and the men gathered around the table as Hayes unfurled the file, scattering an array of photos across its surface. The images, depicting the desolate factory, bodies captured from various angles, and the collected evidence, covered the table. Norcross and Mitchell methodically examined each photo, scrutinizing and then placing them back down.

“We’ll organize all this and set up in a situation room,” Thompson suggested, breaking the silence.

The agents continued their examination, seemingly unperturbed by Thompson's comment. Suddenly, a particular photo caught Mitchell's attention. He abruptly placed his hand on the table, picking up the image with a sense of urgency.

"Holy shit," he muttered under his breath.

"What's caught your eye?" Thompson inquired, leaning in.

"Where did this come from?" Mitchell asked, his tone sharpening.

"The severed head? Our suspect discovered it in his apartment," Thompson replied.

Mitchell exchanged a significant look with Norcross, then turned the photo towards the detectives. "Are you aware of this man's identity?"

"His file was sealed," Hayes responded, his expression one of curiosity.

Mitchell's voice took on a grave tone. "We've been tracking weapons intended for a Russian criminal syndicate led by someone named Grigory. This individual," he said, tapping the photo, "was one of our undercover agents, infiltrating the gang."

"Jesus Christ," Thompson breathed.

"So either our suspect knows Grigory," Hayes started.

"Or Grigory knows him," Norcross finished.

"What did your suspect have to say about it?" Mitchell asked.

"His story is he was sleeping, and someone broke in and planted it," Thompson said.

"Nothing else?"

"Nothing and doesn't seem the type to keep body parts in his home."

Silence fell over the table.

"What do you want to do?" Thompson asked.

"Let him go," Norcross drawled.

All eyes turned to him.

“If he’s connected to Grigory, they’ll make contact, one way or another.”

“You mean tap his phone?” Hayes asked.

“No,” Norcross replied. “Might take too long. Send him home and assign some plain clothes to watch him. Then you can carry on with your investigation and hopefully, the kid leads to Grigory. It’s a win-win.”

Hayes looked over to his partner who reflected for a moment and then nodded.

“I’ll organize the release paperwork,” Hayes said and motioned to the door.

“Wait,” Norcross grunted. “Let him stew a bit longer. Make him desperate. Make him *need* to contact Grigory.”

“What if he’s completely innocent and doesn’t know who this Grigory person is?” Thompson asked.

Norcross shrugged and sat. “That would be unfortunate.”

The sharp ring of a phone interrupted the conversation. Mitchell swiftly retrieved it from his pocket, glancing at the screen before finally answering. The call was a one-sided affair, with Mitchell listening intently, offering no verbal responses. After a moment, he ended the call and slid the phone back into his jacket.

“I need to step out,” Mitchell announced. “There’s a pressing matter I have to discuss with my superior.”

Norcross, too, stood up, signaling his departure. “I’ve also got a pressing matter.” He reached into his pocket, pulled out a business card, and placed it deliberately on the table. “Instruct your plain-clothes officers to contact me immediately if there’s any activity or anything out of the ordinary. I’ll be ready to respond with backup at a moment’s notice.”

Thompson gave a solemn nod, the weight of the situation pressing down on him. It felt as though he was sinking deeper into an already daunting case.

Chapter 7

Wednesday mid-morning

Thompson and Hayes stood in front of a bank of monitors. On one of the screens, Eli was visibly restless, biting his thumb and rhythmically bouncing his left leg. His eyes roamed the room, swiftly moving from one corner to another, until they locked onto the camera. For a moment, he held an intense, unblinking stare at the lens, then slowly, he shifted his focus forward. Settling his hands on the table and planting his feet firmly on the ground, Eli exuded a sudden air of composure, as if a wave of tranquility had just swept over him.

Hayes turned to Thompson. “What are you thinking?”

Thompson grunted in reply. “Have we got anything new?”

“Just that several departments—and not just ours mind you—are breathing a sigh of relief knowing someone like Hyun-woo is no longer on this planet.”

“The head?”

“Sealed file.”

A flutter danced over Thompson’s eyelids. “What the hell is this?”

“Forensics and ballistics from the factory?”

“No,” Hayes sighed. “Not yet.”

“Then I’m withholding my opinion until I get the results.”

“The watch doesn’t sway you? The head? The tape securing the bodies to the chairs?”

Thompson shrugged. “Hey, I didn’t say there wasn’t plenty to talk about.”

Hayes returned his gaze to the glass. “He looks guilty.”

“He looks nervous.”

“Because he’s guilty,” Hayes stated.

“Keep it in your pants, hotshot, until we’ve got something solid.”

Hayes nodded solely. “Fine. But do you think we should arrest him?”

“And have him arrange a lawyer? Let’s just keep things casual for the moment.”

Hayes folded his arms. “You’re the boss.”

“Grab your folder,” Thompson instructed. “Let’s go have our chat.”

The opening door startled Eli, who was drifting off. As they sat down, Hayes went through the standard procedure for a recorded conversation, while Thompson made himself at ease and placed a folder on the table. Eli nodded along to Hayes’s spiel, as his eyes drifted towards the folder, wondering what it contained.

“Any questions?” Hayes asked.

“You didn’t record our previous conversation,” Eli said.

“That’s correct.”

“But you’re recording this one.”

“This is different, Eli,” Thompson said. “Very different.”

“A different conversation or a different set of circumstances?”

“Both,” Hayes interjected.

“The officer said you would tell me what you wanted when I came to the station. So, what’s going on? Have you found the people responsible for murdering my friends?”

“Maybe. We’ll get to that.”

“Is this about the head?” Eli blurted. “Because I called it in as soon as I found it.”

“We’ll get to that,” Thompson responded.

Eli instinctively looked at his wrist. “How long has it been?”

“Are you expecting someone?” Thompson asked.

“No, it’s just, you know,” Eli rambled as he rubbed his wrist.

“Lost your watch?” Hayes asked.

Eli nodded. “I guess.”

Hayes opened the folder, extracted the first sheet, and placed it down on the table. “Is this your watch?” he asked, pointing.

Eli looked over the two images on the sheet, showing both the front and back of the watch, displaying the engraving. He shrugged. “It looks like it. Why do you have it?”

“We found it.”

“When can I have it back?”

“When we’re through with it?”

“Where did you find it?”

Hayes flipped open the folder and pulled out another photograph, laying it on the table. “Recognize this place?” he asked.

Eli studied the photo of the dilapidated factory, its siding worn by time, set in a barren landscape with distant trees. He shrugged. “I don’t think so.”

“So, you’ve never been there?” Thompson pressed.

Eli met his gaze. “I don’t know what to tell you.”

“That is where we found your watch,” Thompson revealed.

Eli’s mind raced, recalling the previous night’s events, the focus on his sleeves. But why would Grigory involve him in this? He shrugged again. “What’s so important about that place?”

Thompson leaned in. “Because besides your watch, we found two dead bodies.”

Hayes slid another photo across the table. Eli’s eyes widened at the sight of the two deceased men, one with a chest wound, and the other with neck injuries. He shut his eyes and turned away.

“Eli, how do you think your watch ended up in a place like this?”

“I don’t know,” he replied sharply.

“Do you recognize the men in the picture?”

Eli, staring blankly at the wall, shook his head.

“Did you want to have a second look?” Hayes asked.

“No.”

Hayes gathered the photos back into the folder. “Someone had taped their mouths shut and tied them to chairs. Does that remind you of anything?”

Eli remained silent.

“Eli?” Thompson prodded.

Eli slowly faced them.

“It looked just like with Tyler and Dylan. Does the name Hyun-woo mean anything to you?”

Eli shook his head. “Never heard of him. Who is he?”

“Korean mafia,” Hayes said. “A pretty bad guy.”

“Well, my friends weren’t involved with anything like that.”

“But you would have to agree,” Thompson said. “The method is strikingly similar.”

“I don’t know anything about that,” Eli insisted.

Hayes presented two more photos. “We believe this firearm to be the murder weapon, and this device was found at the scene. Have you seen either of these before?”

Eli glanced over both images and emphatically shook his head. “No! Why the hell would I?”

“We can help you,” Thompson said, leaning forward on the table. “But you have to help us.”

“I don’t know what to tell you, detective.”

“Eli,” Hayes said, shifting in his seat. “Where were you between midnight and four this morning?”

Eli’s expression hardened. “Are you accusing me of something? Should I call my lawyer?”

“Of course, we can arrange that if you’d like,” Thompson said. “But it might take some time.”

“And might tell us you have something to hide,” Hayes added.

"Of course not," Eli said firmly. "I was at home, okay?"

"Can anyone vouch for that?"

Eli gritted his teeth and clenched his jaw. "No. But my phone's GPS will show that I was there."

"Well, that would show that your *phone* was home all night," Hayes fired back.

"Listen, Eli, are you in some kind of trouble?" Thompson asked.

"No."

Thompson leaned back in his chair and folded his arms, studying the suspect.

"Finding a human head in your apartment isn't something that happens to everyone," Hayes said.

"Do you know who he was?" Thompson asked.

"Never seen him before."

"I've got a photo if it will help jog your memory," Hayes suggested.

"I don't need a photo." And then, out of nowhere, it hit him like a bolt of lightning. How it didn't come to him sooner was beyond him, but there, in that moment, the memory of walking into that hotel room and seeing him there, leaning against the wall. But how the hell did his head end up in his apartment? He needed to contact Grigory. He needed answers.

"What is it, Eli?" Thompson asked.

"What?"

"The look on your face."

Eli shook his head. "Nothing, I'm just tired. How long has it been? When can I go?"

"When we're ready," Hayes said. "When did you find the head?"

"Just before the officers knocked on my door this morning."

"And it wasn't there the night before?" Thompson asked.

"No."

"How can you be so sure?"

“Because I had a few beers last night, and I think I would have noticed it.”

“What time did you go to bed?”

Eli shrugged. “About midnight.”

“So,” Hayes started, “you are saying someone broke into your apartment, while you were there, possibly sleeping, and left the head for you to find.”

Eli dropped his gaze to the table. “I guess so.”

The two detectives looked at each other, before Thompson said, “Alright, thank you, Eli, for answering our questions.”

Hayes called out the end of the recording.

“Can I go now?” Eli asked.

“Almost, Eli,” Thompson replied. “We just need to verify a few things.”

Chapter 8

Wednesday morning

Eli jolted awake wearing yesterday's clothes with bed sheets twisted around his body. He gasped for air as his senses slowly returned. It took him several minutes to orient himself and register his surroundings, finally inhaling deeply as he savored the fresh air.

He had been dreaming that he was tied to a chair, repeatedly pummeled with a sack full of coins. He spat out teeth as he looked up at his attackers, Dylan, and Tyler, each missing a hand. "An eye for an eye," they chanted as Tyler brandished a knife, preparing to slice off his bound hand. That's when he jolted awake, tangled in a mess of sweat-riddled covers. He spent several moments reassuring himself that it was just a nightmare.

The events of the previous night flooded Eli's mind, though they now seemed like a distant dream or a surreal movie. He gazed at his trembling hands, questioning whether he could truly commit such atrocities. Even if he was, did it make any difference? Did his actions bring him any semblance of closure over the loss of his friends? That they were gone forever seemed unfathomable. Perhaps that was why their memories continued to haunt him, an unrelenting reminder that they would never be forgotten. He believed that once the perpetrator had paid the ultimate price, life would slowly return to normal. Yet, he felt more disconnected than ever before, as if his path had reached a dead-end.

He collapsed onto his bed, wishing it would consume him, transporting him back in time to undo his actions. But he knew that was a futile fantasy, no matter how hard he wished for it. Shifting his gaze,

he observed the alarm clock, a reminder that in the real world, where everything was still normal, he would be at work right now. The place where he would alternate sipping coffee, attacking his keyboard, and stealing glances out the window.

He sat up in his bed and let out a deep sigh. Work used to be his refuge, his sanctuary from the chaos of the outside world. He excelled in that place, where clueless middle managers who knew little about his craft respected his expertise.

But now, it all seemed distant and unimportant, like a memory from another lifetime. He felt as disconnected from his work as he did from his friends, who were now nothing more than ghosts haunting his every thought. The weight of it all felt heavy on his chest, suffocating him with the reality that life as he knew it was forever gone.

His phone vibrated on the bedside table. He looked over at it and identified the caller. Graham, his boss. He sat and watched the device dance over the surface, contemplating picking it up, but he just didn't have the energy for human interaction. He watched it as the device stopped and sat still. Then the message icon popped up. Graham had left a voicemail.

After staring at it for another minute, he eagerly reached for it, knocking it onto the floor. Reaching down, he fumbled it multiple times, before sitting on the edge of the bed, phone mashed to his ear, head in his hands.

"Eli, this is Graham. We've decided about the situation. I'm sorry to say we have terminated your employment, effective immediately. I need you to come in and sign some paperwork and hand over your ID. Call me when you get this, and we can talk through it. I'm sorry, Eli."

He stared at his phone, still coming to terms with the message from his boss. How one minor indiscretion meant ending his employment was beyond him. He felt like his life was slowly falling

through his hands, crumbling before his eyes. He looked at his hands, but they felt numb, like they belonged to someone else.

He booted up his laptop and quickly logged into his bank account. The balance was more than he'd ever make in a lifetime, even after paying off Grigory for the hunt for his friends' killer. He could afford a ticket to anywhere, maybe a place with no extradition. But did he really want to vanish? If so, why hadn't he already done it?

His stomach growled, breaking his train of thought. First things first: food and coffee. Then he'd sort out his life. He planned to quit his job later, and then start anew, trying to leave the past week and the memories of his friends behind.

He stood up, sniffing his armpits—definitely time for a shower. Eat, caffeinate, shower, then plan. That was the order. He paused, wondering about his missing watch, usually on his desk or bedside table. He shrugged it off for later.

He grabbed the fridge handle and yanked it open, sending a blast of cold air and light over his face. The sight before him made him jolt, shriek, and he fell against the wall, his heart pounding in his chest. He stared at the grotesque sight, his mind trying to process what he was seeing. Was this real or just another horrific nightmare? He couldn't bring himself to take another step forward, frozen in shock and terror. Sitting on a shelf, placed on a plate front and center, sat a human head.

Eli slammed the fridge door shut and staggered backward to the pantry door. He slid down onto the floor. Eyes clenched shut, heart pounding, ears ringing. *When did this happen? While he was with Grigory or passed out?* Either way, someone had been in his apartment.

He exhaled sharply through tight lips, trying to calm his racing heart and organize his thoughts. The decision weighed heavily on him: should he call the police or reach out to Grigory? He realized he lacked any means to contact Grigory directly, but he knew exactly

where to begin his search. He would start at the private club with ridiculously overpriced coffee and then go to the hotel.

Sitting on the cold floor, phone clutched in his hand, it suddenly rang, displaying an unknown caller. Hesitantly, he answered, pressing the phone against his ear, engulfed in a tense silence.

“Eli?” Grigory asked.

“Yep.”

“I called to check up on you, after last night. Is everything okay?”

“Nope.”

“What is it?”

“I have a problem,” Eli said, eyeing the head. “A big problem.”

“Elaborate.”

“A head in my fridge.”

“Excuse me, Eli?”

“I have a human head in my fridge.”

“Who is it?”

“I don’t fucking know.”

“How did it get there?”

Eli held the phone to his mouth and enunciated each word. “I. Don’t. Fucking. Know.”

“It must be from Hyun-woo or one of his henchmen,” Grigory said. “I’m sure he meant to intimidate you, so you didn’t track him down. A warning of sorts. No good now, of course.”

“Well, I want it gone. Need you to take care of it.”

“Well, certainly, Eli. But I’m sure you can understand that we don’t go around picking up decapitated heads all day. This is going to cost you.”

Just then, a bang on the front door reverberated through the apartment. Eli held his breath.

“Eli?” Grigory asked.

“Someone’s here.”

“Who?”

“Wait.”

Another bang followed by words that echoed through the space, “Eli Cruz. It’s the police. Open up, please.”

“Shit,” Eli breathed into the phone. “It’s the police.”

“Quick, Eli. Transfer the money, and I can make it all go away.”

“How?”

“Haven’t you learned anything by now? I’ve got contacts all over this city, Eli.”

Another series of heavy knocks.

“Answer them before they barge in,” Grigory advised.

“Just a minute,” Eli shouted.

Grigory’s voice was firm. “Do it now. I’ll get you released from the station, and then I’ll get you out of the country.”

Eli’s fingers trembled as he navigated his phone, struggling to access his hidden bank account. The persistent pounding at his door created a chaotic symphony with Grigory’s urgent instructions.

“Hurry, Eli,” Grigory pressed.

“Eli, open this door now!” demanded a voice from outside his apartment.

Eli pressed the phone closer to his ear. “Done,” he confirmed.

“Good. Remember, go quietly with the police. Don’t say a word. I’ll handle everything, but it may take some time,” Grigory instructed.

Eli nodded, though Grigory couldn’t see it. The call ended just as another series of forceful knocks resounded. “I’m coming,” Eli called out, pushing himself up and striding towards the door.

He yanked it open, revealing two uniformed officers. “Eli Cruz, you need to come with us to the station for questioning,” one of them said.

“What’s this about?” Eli asked.

“Detectives Thompson and Hayes will explain it when you get there.”

Eli nodded. “Fine, but first, I need to show you something.”

Chapter 9

Wednesday sunrise

In the early light of dawn, two nondescript white vans came to an abrupt halt in front of an ordinary, twenty-two-foot shipping container. It was just one among countless others in the sprawling port, yet it drew the focused attention of the van's occupants.

The rear doors of the vans burst open with a resounding clang, and a squad of heavily armed officers swiftly disembarked. They positioned themselves strategically around the container, their weapons aimed at its door with intense vigilance, as if expecting an imminent and dangerous emergence.

Special Agent Mitchell stepped out of the lead van with a composed demeanor, his aviator sunglasses reflecting the morning scene. A self-assured smirk, one he had been wearing since they received clearance for the operation, played on his lips.

With twelve years in the Firearms division under his belt, Mitchell was no stranger to the complexities of dealing with illegal arms. His department tackled everything from the illicit manufacture and purchase to the transportation and destruction of firearms nationwide. Their intelligence came from a myriad of sources, ranging from informants and undercover agents to less conventional means.

The container they were targeting, initially reported lost at sea a week prior, had resurfaced under mysterious circumstances. Its unexpected appearance at its intended destination, hidden among countless others, was a puzzle. Just as the situation seemed to reach a dead-end, a breakthrough came in the form of an unexpected late-night

call, rousing Mitchell from a restless sleep. For him, this operation felt like striking gold.

“We found the container,” Norcross’s voice came through the line.

“What?” Mitchell said as he dropped his phone as he struggled to sit up in the dark and turn the lamp on. He fumbled for his phone in the sheets, Norcross’s voice seeping into the silence in the room.

“Wait,” Mitchell said, his heart clanging. “What did you say?”

“I said we found it.”

“Where? When? How?”

“Calm down, Mitchell. My contact at the port called me to tell me about some suspicious activity. They confirmed the container didn’t appear on any manifest. I’ve cross-checked. It’s the one.”

“When did it arrive?”

“Get down here.”

“How the hell was it missed?”

“Would you just get down here?”

“Shit,” Mitchell said, rolling out of bed and pulling on the closest pair of pants he could find. “Where are you now?”

“I’m on my way over there to meet my contact.”

“Make sure you hold him there because I want to talk with him.. and no one touches that container until the cavalry arrives, understood?”

“Hey, it’s your bust.”

Mitchell observed as an agent approached with bolt cutters, skillfully positioning them around the padlock. With a firm squeeze, the lock gave way, clattering to the ground. He signaled the armed officers to proceed, then confidently yanked the container door open, a triumphant grin on his face.

However, his satisfaction quickly evaporated. As the team’s “clear” calls reverberated, Mitchell stepped forward, only to stop

dead in his tracks. Lifting his sunglasses, he stared into the container's hollow interior, a wave of dismay washing over him.

Hands on hips, he watched the disheartened officers regroup towards the van. The meticulous planning, and the anticipation of a significant breakthrough, all came to nothing. Someone would have to answer for this blunder, and Mitchell was determined it wouldn't be at the expense of his reputation.

Seething, he pulled out his phone and quickly dialed. "Norcross, we need to talk. And bring that informant with you," he demanded. "I've got some words for them, goddammit."

Norcross sauntered over the bitumen towards Mitchell, his hands deep in his trench coat, as heavy forklifts traversed the scene behind him.

Mitchell held his hands out. "Where the hell's your guy?"

Norcross shrugged. "I don't know, but he isn't here."

Mitchell threw his hands in the air, kicked the ground, and swore. "Ah, fuck! How the fuck can this fucking happen?"

Norcross ran a hand over his mouth. "I don't know what to tell you."

"We're fucked, Norcross. Just completely fucked."

"What did you find in the container?"

Mitchell stepped up to him. "Not a god damn thing."

Norcross looked away, dropped his head to his hand, and rubbed his temples. "I might have a lead."

"Who? Where?"

"Come with me," Norcross instructed, as he spun and walked off.

"What is it," Mitchell yelled, jogging to catch up.

"Local authorities stumbled on some bodies this morning."

Chapter 10

Wednesday 5:12am

Thompson groggily nodded to the officer standing at the top of the stairs before making his way down the metal stairs. He took a sip of his coffee and absentmindedly ran his fingers along the handrail as he descended. He despised being roused from sleep at five in the morning to investigate a murder in the middle of nowhere. The sound of his footsteps clanging against the steel steps reverberated throughout the stairwell as he let out a burp and adjusted his glasses. At fifty-five and married, he felt entitled to let himself go a bit, even sporting a bushy mustache that he knew irritated his wife. He hiked up his pants with his free hand as he reached the bottom of the stairs and began crossing the expansive area before him.

Thompson made his way toward the crime scene, his gaze fixed on the group of people gathered there. Some appeared to be deep in conversation while others were hunched over, taking photos or collecting evidence. He followed the well-defined path outlined by the forensic team, scanning the area for any potential clues. As he approached, he couldn't help but notice the stark emptiness of the surrounding environment. The concrete walls towered above him, the occasional pipe and generator casting long shadows on the ground. Wires snaked their way along the walls, disappearing into the distance. Finally, Thompson reached the crime scene where Hayes was waiting. He looked like he had just rolled out of bed, with his unruly hair and scruffy attire. Thompson wondered if this was some kind of statement, or if the younger generation simply had different standards of professionalism.

Hayes looked at Thompson's coffee with a hint of annoyance. "Didn't feel like bringing one for the rest of us?" he asked.

Thompson took a sip from his cup and scowled. "You wake me at a decent hour, and I'll see what I can do," he retorted.

"Yeah well, I don't kill 'em or call 'em in, boss. Don't forget I was here a long time before you were."

Thompson ignored the smart remark. He had learned a long time ago that engaging in an attitude battle with Hayes was a futile exercise. Hayes was always going to speak his mind, no matter who he was speaking to. "What have we got?"

They both approached the sheet-covered bodies and crouched down, pulling back the sheets to reveal relaxed faces and bullet holes.

"Two bad guys, two bullet holes," Hayes said.

"Bad guys?"

"Korean mafia from all reports." He pointed to one of the men. "This is Hyun-woo. I've put in a request for more information."

"Mafia," Thompson sang, scratching his chin. "Jesus, this is quite the setup. What are you thinking? A hit?"

Hayes shrugged. "Maybe. We'll know more when the information about them comes through the channels."

Both men returned to their thoughts.

"What do you make of the tape?" Thompson asked.

"Looks pretty similar to what was on Tyler and Dylan."

"That's what I was thinking."

"You think they're connected?"

Thompson scratched his head. "I don't know," he said, shaking his head,

"Well, if you like that, you're going to love what's on the evidence table."

They covered up the bodies, and as medical examiner officers carefully cut the tape away from wrists and ankles, preserving it as ev-

idence, the two detectives walked over to a table where bagged items were on display.

Hayes handed Thompson a bagged revolver, which he examined with care.

“This the murder weapon?”

“I guess we’ll find out in good time,” Hayes replied. “The serial number is scrubbed.”

“Yeah, but this is a beautiful gun. It makes my service piece of crap look like a piece of crap. Can’t believe they ditched it.” Thompson asked.

Hayes picked up another bag and handed it over as Thompson put down the bag he was holding. It contained a phone.

“No registered owner,” Hayes said. “Prepaid, no photos or contacts, just a single message from another prepaid number with directions of how to get here. We found it over there.” Hayes pointed to another cone at the other end of the crime scene.

“So, who does it belong to? Either of the dead guys?”

Hayes shrugged. “We’ll see what the tech guys can find out.”

“And the originating device,” Thompson added. “Has anyone tried calling the number?”

“I’m not sure.”

Thompson started pressing buttons through the plastic evidence bag.

“Teams have run multiple sweeps through the area,” Hayes said. “You’re not going to find any—”

A muffled ringtone and a sharp vibration that echoed throughout the room abruptly interrupted Hayes, catching everyone’s attention. Thompson immediately rushed towards the bodies, who were being released from their chairs, and stood over Hyun-woo. One examiner leaned in to locate the source, intently listening for any clues. All eyes were fixed on the examiner as they carefully removed the tape around one ankle and lifted the leg, revealing the hidden phone.

The ringtone grew louder, signaling its discovery to the rest of the room.

“Well, that’s just nasty,” Hayes said.

Thompson said, “I suppose the coroner would have been found it, eventually.” He turned to Hayes. “This suddenly got very personal?”

Returning to the evidence table, Thompson asked Hayes, “How long until we get fingerprints and ballistics on all of this?”

Hayes responded, “They said it could take up to a week. However, with our VIP suspect, we may get some results sooner. As for footprints and tire tracks, it will take a couple of days, but I wouldn’t count on it. And forget about getting prints from everything else. This place is massive, it would be like finding a needle in a haystack.”

“Have you got any good news for me?”

“I don’t think you would believe me if I told you,” Hayes said.

“What is it?”

Hayes handed over the final bag.

“A watch,” Thompson said. “What about it?”

“Read the inscription on the back.”

Thompson turned it over and read it out. “Happy birthday, Eli. Love, Dad.” He placed it back on the table. “Jesus Christ. What the hell is that doing here?”

“Great question.”

Thompson shook his head, furrowing his brow, and rubbing his temples.

“What is it?” Hayes asked.

“This. All of this. This isn’t a crime scene; this is a goddamn constructed event.”

“Who the hell would do such a thing?”

“I don’t know,” Thompson huffed. He put his hands on his hips. “Someone is playing us.”

“You want to go chasing the gunman on the grassy knoll?”

Thompson pursed his lips. “Let’s have a chat with Eli and see what knows. Send a unit around to pick him up.”

Chapter 11

Wednesday 2:02am

Eli ran his fingers over the black revolver, feeling its weight in his hand. The exhaustion he had felt earlier was now a distant memory. The gun was heavy, and he had nothing recent to compare it to. As he held the steel barrel and molded grip, memories flooded back to him of standing on the range with his father.

His father would take Eli and his older brother to the range, coaxing him off the phone. As Eli stood on the line, aiming at the target, his father would encourage him. “Breathe,” he would say. “Breathe and squeeze.” Recoil jolted his frame with every shot. But the feeling of pride and accomplishment he felt when he turned to see his father and brother standing side by side, arms crossed and smiling in approval, made it all worth it.

But his father was gone now, and he stored those memories away for safe keeping. Despite growing up around guns, it had been years since Eli had held one. The closest he had come to a firearm in the past decade was through the first-person shooter games he played on his computer. His father had taught him to squeeze the trigger and avoid anticipating the shot. Suddenly, there was too much to think about, and Eli’s palms became slick with sweat.

As Eli nervously handled the gun, Grigory stood by, observing. “That’s my favorite Ruger,” he remarked, pointing out the features like a seasoned used-car salesman. “It’s the SP101 model. It can hold up to five .357 magnum cartridges, has a four-inch barrel, and is both reliable and comfortable to shoot. Trust me, you’ll enjoy the experience much more than you think you will.”

Eli's grip tightened on the gun as he covered the handle with his second hand. He raised the gun slowly, pointing it at Grigory, who didn't flinch or move. The other people around them remained still as well. Grigory spoke calmly and evenly, "Don't forget what they did to your friends, how they made them suffer. They probably cried out your name, Eli, wishing you were there to save them. They knew their end was near and were in terrible pain."

Grigory stepped forward and placed a hand on the barrel, slowly guiding it toward the first seated man. "Revenge is within your grasp, Eli. No one will ever know. This is what you wanted." Grigory's voice was barely above a whisper, but his words were like poison, infecting Eli's mind.

Eli's hand shook as he continued to squeeze the trigger, the weight of the gun becoming unbearable. Grigory's words echoed in his mind, urging him to take revenge for his friends. But as he looked at the bound man, Eli couldn't help but feel a sense of detachment. The man was nothing but a nameless, faceless object to him, devoid of any emotion or humanity.

Each second feeling like an eternity. Eli's aim faltered, and he struggled to keep the gun steady. He knew he had to pull the trigger soon before his resolve weakened any further. As his finger tightened on the trigger, he focused on the naked blur that was in front of him.

As Grigory checked his watch, Eli's anxiety grew with each passing moment, causing his eyes to widen and his breath to catch in his chest. Suddenly, a soft voice broke through his racing thoughts.

"Breathe," it whispered. "Breathe and squeeze."

Eli turned to see Grigory's arms crossed and his eyes rolling, as if impatient with the delay. Despite the pressure from Grigory, Eli tried to focus on the present moment and took a deep breath, feeling the cool air fill his lungs and calm his nerves.

Eli braced himself for the recoil. With trembling hands, he squeezed the trigger with all his might, but there was only silence.

Click.

Eli's arms dropped to his sides, and he opened his eyes in disbelief as he gasped for air. He looked back at the bound figure, who appeared to be unscathed. No bullet hole, no blood. "What the hell just happened?" he exclaimed.

Grigory sauntered over with his hands in his pockets. "What happened, Eli? Did you remember to check the gun was loaded, right?"

Eli held up the revolver and peered into the chambers from behind. It infuriated him for missing such an obvious step.

Grigory turned to address his men, almost comedically. "Hey, which one of you idiots is responsible for this? I told you to make sure the gun was ready to go." He stood face to face with Eli, and placed a hand on his face, his expression softening. "You did a decent job, Eli, an excellent test run. I'm proud of you."

"What the hell do you mean 'test run'? I'm not doing that shit again." He held the gun out to Grigory.

Grigory pulled the white cloth from his pocket and Eli laid the gun carefully on top. Using the cloth, Grigory pressed the latch, and the cylinder fell open. While looking at Eli, he loaded the weapon and prepared it for firing. He offered it back to Eli.

Eli stared at it. "Fuck off. You guys do it."

But Grigory was unyielding. He held out the gun to Eli with a stern expression. "That wasn't the deal, Eli," he said. "I am a man of principle. I do what I say, and I say what I do. You are here for a reason; I implore you to fulfill your duty."

He thrust the handgun at Eli, who instinctively wrapped his hand around it.

Grigory continued in a light, whimsical manner. "Now, enough of this conversation, let's execute this piece of shit."

Eli stood there, dazed, and drained from the previous trigger pull. Grigory's words about death and killing were like disturbing po-

etry that sent shivers down his spine. He felt bewildered and unsure of what to do next.

Grigory helped Eli into position. “Now, Eli, you’re going to need to point the gun at the guy.” Grigory helped to raise Eli’s arms.

The man’s head lifted slowly, his matted hair clinging to his face as he struggled against his restraints. He gnashed his teeth, cheeks buffeting against the tape, his groans muffled. Water streamed down his face, mixing with snot and tears, creating a sickening trail of fluids.

“Oh yes, he is a wild one,” said Grigory as he stepped aside. “There you go Eli, all served up on a platter, just like before.”

Eli turned to face Grigory to block the sight from his eyes. “Who is he?”

“What the hell does it matter?”

“I want to know.”

“No, you are procrastinating. We’ve been through this Eli. He is the one responsible.”

Eli spoke to his shoes and spoke in a low, methodical voice. “I want to know his name.”

“At your peril, Eli. I’ll tell you. Just don’t do something stupid and become attached to him, it’ll make it harder to pull the trigger, and it would seem this task is hard enough for you already.” Grigory threw a hand toward the intended victim. “This is Hyun-woo, a dealer of all things drugs and guns, you know, the usual.” He looked down at the soon-to-be-dead body. “And a total piece of shit.” He spoke as he marched in front of the proposed victim. “You see, Hyun-woo here is a murderer. Yes, he kills people. He’s killed lots of innocent people. He also had my brother killed.”

Hyun-woo thrashed against the restraints with renewed vigor, dragging the chair across the rough concrete with a loud scraping sound.

Eli swallowed, now questioning his decisions that put him in this situation, between two incredibly dangerous men. He held out the gun. “It sounds like you need to kill him more, for killing your brother and everything.”

Grigory held up his hands. “It’s okay, Eli, really. You see, I, in turn, killed *his* brother. He’s that guy over there,” he said as he pointed to one of the upturned chairs.

Another burst of energy from Hyun-woo and chair legs clattered over the surface.

“In the business, that’s what we call ‘*an eye for an eye*’. I’ve had my retribution. Now is the time for yours.”

Eli looked at the gun in his hands. Grigory placed a hand on his shoulder. “Look, I don’t know what happened between your friends and... our guest here. Maybe your friends didn’t pay their debts or something. All we know, and we know this for certain, Eli, is this guy here pulled the damn trigger himself, probably got a little Korean hard on doing it as well.” He clapped his hands together. “So, everything’s in place, the other two assholes are dead, this guy’s about to get it, let’s get down to business.”

He looked at Eli who stood frozen, his gaze fixed on the ground. “Eli?”

Eli whispered. “I... I can’t do it.”

Grigory rocked back and forth, running a tongue around his mouth, and clenching his fists. He cleared his throat, smiled, and strode to stand in front of Eli’s face. They locked eyes. “Alright, that’s enough,” he whispered firmly. “I’ve given you everything you wanted, and now you are going to do this. I know what’s good for you, Eli. This is it.”

Eli clenched his eyes shut and cast downwards his gaze. Shook his head.

Grigory looked at the ceiling and pursed his lips. Shrugged. “So be it. There are many ways to kill a man.”

Eli exhaled through tight lips. He had found a way out, and soon everything would be over. To him, it made no difference who would exact vengeance on the person responsible for his friends' deaths. All that mattered was that the deed would be done, sparing him from the burden and allowing him to sleep at night.

Grigory stood behind Eli and whispered in his ear. "And many ways to get a man to kill a man." He reached around to grab the revolver, placing his hand over Eli's. With his other hand, he drew a second weapon and pressed it against Eli's temple. The situation was tense, the air thick with danger. Eli's body tensed up in response to the pressure, and he could feel the cold steel of the gun against his skin. It was a bizarre and frightening position to be in, and he prayed for a way out.

Grigory whispered into Eli's ear. "Now, Eli, my friend, let's sort this shit out. Put your thumb on the hammer."

Eli's hesitation was met with a harsh shove from Grigory, causing the barrel of the gun to dig deeper into his skull. His skin burned hot and cold as he reluctantly moved his thumb to the required position. Grigory covered Eli's hand with his own and together, they cocked the revolver.

Grigory commented on his actions. "Now this, Eli, is what we call a single action shot. Cocking the weapon has reduced the amount of effort you need to pull the trigger. Trust me, you'll thank me after this."

As Eli looked down at the trigger, he realized it was almost sitting back against the handle. He knew it wouldn't take much to fire it, and the amount of kick it would give.

"Now, treat it like a lady and just give it a little squeeze," Grigory said.

Eli stared down the barrel of the gun, but Hyun-woo drew his attention. Despite being bound and naked, the man still exuded an air

of defiance, staring back at Eli with an unwavering stare. It was as if he had no fear of death or the situation.

“Do it, Eli,” Grigory whispered. “Do it.”

Eli’s thoughts turned to his friends once again, and his breathing became more intense. His eyes widened as he let out a deafening roar and pulled the trigger. The gun kicked back, the sharp report of the shot reverberating throughout the room, followed by the sound of the chair hitting the ground. Eli immediately squeezed his eyes shut and held his breath, unwilling to face the consequences of his actions. For a few moments, everyone in the room remained frozen in place, suspended in silence.

Grigory released his grip on Eli and stepped back. “Yes Eli, that’s what I’m talking about. I knew you had it in you.” He walked over to the upturned chair, inspected the body, and then motioned for Eli. “Oh, dear. Eli. You missed.”

Eli, still gasping for air, looked quizzically at him, and shuffled in their direction. He looked down at Hyun-woo, who was struggling to breathe behind the tape. The bullet had ripped through the neck, the flesh exploding away to reveal tendons and other neck anatomy. The man’s breathing was shallow and ragged, blood pouring from the wound. Eli hesitated for a moment, looking into the man’s eyes, which were now clouded with pain.

“Shit, Eli, you’re going to need to put him out of his misery. I mean, look at him, poor fucker.”

Eli’s hand shook as he wiped the tears that were welling. He raised the gun, turned his head, and eased back on the trigger. His hand shook, and in the end, he faltered, releasing the trigger, and dropping the gun on the ground.

Grigory looked at him. “Eli, do you know how expensive that gun is?”

Silence collapsed over the space, and all eyes fell on Hyun-woo.

Grigory shrugged, and looked up at Eli once more, who was breathing hard, eyes wide.

“It’s okay, Eli,” Grigory said. “The first one always goes like this. Believe me.”

Chapter 12

Wednesday 1:46am

Eli's footsteps crunched on loose gravel as he stepped out of the Uber and the car sped off into the night. The massive structure loomed before him, shrouded in darkness, devoid of any signs of life. Moonlight cast a ghostly glow over the area, the only source of light in this desolate setting. In the distance, the faint glimmer of freeway lights snaked through a forest of tall pines. Despite the eerie quiet, Eli was certain he was in the right place; the directions had been exact, and he knew his purpose here.

He stepped cautiously toward the building, each step on the dirt path echoing in the stillness. The building's immense size became more imposing as he drew closer. Approaching the entrance, he noticed the gigantic doors, each towering two stories high, slightly ajar. Taking a deep breath, Eli reached out, his hands pressing against the cold metal, and pushed the doors wider, announcing his arrival. His voice echoed in the cavernous darkness, then seemed to vanish, absorbed by the vast emptiness.

Suddenly, the cold metal of a gun barrel pressed against his forehead, halting him in his tracks.

"Woah," Eli croaked, instantly holding his hands up. "Grigory is expecting me."

Eli instinctively retreated a step, seeking space between himself and the figure who emerged from the shadows, gun in hand. Bathed in the moonlight, the man appeared young, about Eli's age. He extended his hand, holding a sealable plastic bag, which he deftly opened with a shake.

Eli scrutinized the man's face, searching his memory for any flicker of recognition. A vague image of a hotel room surfaced in his mind, but the details were blurred, the faces of those present lost in the fog of his distracted focus at the time.

"Who are you?"

"Petrov," the man replied, holding up the bag.

Eli looked at the open bag with confusion, feeling like a child who had been caught stealing money from his mother's purse. "What?" he asked, unsure of what the man expected of him.

The man rolled his eyes in exasperation. "The phone my boss gave you," he said in a deep, nondescript voice.

"Why?"

"Precautions."

"Against what?"

"Against me shooting you in the face!"

Eli retrieved the device Grigory gave him earlier that day and dropped it into the open plastic bag. The gunman pushed the gun back inside his jacket.

"Now, turn around and put your hands on your head."

"What for?"

"Precautions."

Eli didn't question the need for the thorough search, simply complying as the man, Petrov, meticulously patted him down, focusing intently on his sleeves. With adept finesse, Petrov unfastened Eli's watch and slipped it into his pocket. Then, without a word, he turned and strode into the vast building, beckoning Eli to follow.

Eli hastened after Petrov, leaving the moonlit exterior for the shadowy interior. His footsteps echoed in the vast emptiness, occasionally accompanied by the distant drip of water. As he ventured deeper, the sound of his steps became the only audible noise, until he paused, realizing he was alone in the darkness. Suddenly, overhead

lights flickered to life, momentarily blinding him. He blinked against the brightness, trying to orient himself.

Turning around, Eli found himself unexpectedly face-to-face with Grigory. The man's presence was commanding, his tall frame outlined against the glaring lights. His muscular build and sharp features were highlighted by the impeccably tailored suit that he wore. His gaze fixed on Eli, intense and penetrating, exuding an aura of authority and latent threat.

"Welcome," he said with a smile.

Eli took a second to catch his breath. "That's quite an entrance."

Grigory spoke as he turned and walked away, following the path of light. "No one bothers to try anymore. It's all come, sit down, here it is, see you later. That's not how I like to operate. My flare adds a certain panache to proceedings."

Eli knew this to be true. Every encounter seemed to embody this singular value. He watched as Grigory reached the wall, turned, and then disappeared around the corner.

A voice echoed out. "Are you coming, Eli?"

Eli started walking, following the same path.

"Today, Eli."

Eli's heart raced as he hesitated at the edge of the corridor, the black void before him seeming to stretch into infinity. To his left, a daunting staircase spiraled down into the depths, its end obscured by shadows. He glanced over his shoulder, half-expecting to see Grigory materialize from the gloom, but the corridor remained eerily deserted. Alone with his racing thoughts, Eli felt the grip of fear tightening around him.

Then, slicing through the oppressive silence, a voice echoed up from the darkness of the staircase. It was a clear, deliberate call, beckoning him downward. Eli's head whipped towards the sound, his eyes widening in alarm. The voice, familiar yet unsettling, seemed to draw him in, urging him to overcome his hesitation and descend into

the unknown. With a deep breath, Eli steeled himself and cautiously navigated the staircase, each step resonating in the silent expanse.

“Are you coming, Eli?”

Eli’s hand shook as he gripped the handrail tightly, his knuckles turning white. He unsteadily descended the first step, the sound of his footfall echoing around him in the darkness. He marveled at how Grigory had made the journey without a sound or a misstep.

It occurred to Eli that this might not be Grigory’s first time navigating the treacherous staircase. Or perhaps he truly was a magician. The thought sent a shiver down Eli’s spine, and he felt a cold sweat break out on his forehead.

He tried to peer into the abyss, but the darkness was impenetrable, and he couldn’t see where the stairway ended. If Grigory was trying to scare him, he was doing an excellent job.

Eli’s mind conjured up memories of every horror movie, game, and internet video clip he had ever seen. His pulse raced as he tried to push those thoughts from his mind and concentrate on the task at hand. He couldn’t afford to lose focus, not in this place of endless darkness and unknown peril.

His heart pounded in his ears, and his hands began to shake. He knew that he had to keep moving, to trust in Grigory, and face the unknown with courage and determination.

“You are trying my patience, Eli.” The words floated around him like an apparition.

Eli clanged down on another step. “It’s fucking dark, asshole,” he mumbled.

His footsteps echoed in the cavernous space, each step amplifying the sense of isolation and uncertainty. The soft moaning noise, barely perceptible at first, grew steadily louder, heightening his sense of unease. He paused, his heart pounding against his ribcage, as a wave of realization washed over him. The past few days had been a whirlwind of chaos and danger, leaving him disoriented and on edge.

For a fleeting moment, Eli considered the possibility of turning back, escaping this ominous place and the life that had led him here. He was acutely aware of his solitude at that moment; no one knew of his whereabouts, and few, if any, would care about his fate. The temptation to flee, to abandon everything and disappear, was a siren call in the back of his mind.

But then, the purpose of his mission resurfaced, anchoring him to the spot. He had a specific role to play, a task that required his unique involvement. If not him, then who? This thought galvanized him, infusing him with a newfound sense of determination. Taking a deep, steady breath, Eli resumed his descent, ready to confront whatever awaited him in the depths below.

As he continued down, a series of lights flickered to life, cutting through the darkness. There, standing in the newly illuminated space, was Grigory. He appeared relaxed, almost nonchalant, with his hands casually tucked into his pockets, exuding an air of confidence that bordered on arrogance. Despite the dire circumstances, Grigory's demeanor was one of a man in control, seemingly unbothered by the gravity of the situation. Eli's resolve hardened as he approached, prepared to face whatever Grigory had in store for him.

"Hurry the fuck up, Eli, I haven't got all night," he barked at him before disappearing back into the darkness.

Eli's descent down the stairs was rapid, his feet barely touching the steps as he hurried to confront the unfolding nightmare. "What the hell is up with all of this?" he shouted, his voice echoing off the concrete walls. But Grigory's response was nothing more than the sound of his Italian leather shoes against the floor, interspersed with the haunting moans that seemed to permeate the air.

As Eli rounded the corner of the staircase, a dim light in the distance caught his eye. He hastened towards it, driven by a mix of fear and determination. The source of the light soon became clear: an industrial lamp casting a harsh glow over a harrowing scene.

In the light's stark illumination, Eli saw a naked Asian man, bound to a chair, his head drooping, mouth sealed with tape. Blood dripped onto his lap, with matted hair obscuring his face. The sight was chilling, but what sat beside him was even more gruesome—a lifeless body with a gaping gunshot wound in the chest, the surrounding skin torn and bloodied.

Eli's stomach churned as he realized the extent of the brutality before him. This was no random act of violence; it was a calculated, merciless execution. He stood there, momentarily paralyzed, as the gravity of the situation sank in.

Then, in a disorienting flash, the scene morphed before his eyes. The bound bodies transformed into the familiar faces of his friends, each marred by bullet wounds and contorted in pain. He blinked again, and the basement's grim reality returned. This nightmarish oscillation between past and present tormented him, blurring the lines between memory and the present horror.

Amidst this chaos, a voice called out to him, faint at first but growing increasingly insistent, pressing down on him with overwhelming force. His mind raced, caught between the echoes of the past and the grim reality of the present, as he struggled to comprehend the full scope of the nightmare he had stumbled into.

"Eli!" Grigory shouted.

Eli averted his gaze, the stark reality before him proving too much to bear. Off to the side, he noticed a pair of Grigory's henchmen. They stood in stark contrast to the sharply dressed individual who had initially greeted him, preferring purely functional manner attire of black cargo pants and dark t-shirts. Devoid of any frills, it bore a silent testament to their grim work.

Their heavy breathing filled the air, a result of their recent exertions. Their knuckles, stained with fresh blood, caught Eli's attention involuntarily. This gruesome detail, coupled with the battered and

bruised face of the man bound to the chair, painted a clear picture of the violence they had just inflicted.

The scene was a brutal reminder of the dangerous world he had become entangled in, a world where cruelty and violence were tools of the trade. Eli felt a wave of revulsion mixed with a chilling realization of the depths of brutality that Grigory and his men were capable of.

“What is it, Eli?”

“It’s just...”

“Just what?”

“It’s like how I found my friends. The tape, the lack of...” The end of the sentence got caught in his throat.

Grigory walked up and placed a hand on Eli’s shoulder. “I know,” Grigory said. “I wanted you to remember not just your friends, but what they did to them.”

He clicked his fingers and received a small package from one of his men, his eyes gleaming as he dragged open the white cloth. Inside lay a chunky, black revolver, which seemed to absorb the industrial light. He held it with one hand and offered it to Eli, who stared at the weapon with a mix of fear and confusion.

“What the hell do you want me to do with that?” Eli finally asked, his eyes darting back and forth between the gun and the bound man.

Grigory looked at him blankly. “What do you mean? This is what you wanted. I recall our conversation quite clearly.”

“I wanted you to find the person responsible.”

“Yes,” Grigory responded. “We found the one responsible.”

Eli threw a finger at the bound men. “I wanted them dead.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt that’s what you wanted Eli, but you asked me to find out who was responsible.” He turned and presented the three men. “And I didn’t just get you one, I got you three.” He smiled

a Cheshire grin. “Hell, we even killed two of them for you, free of charge of course.”

Eli backed away and held up his hands. “What the fuck? No,” he said shaking his head. “I won’t do that. I’m a lot of things, Grigory, but I’m not a killer.”

Grigory stepped forward and towered over Eli. “And yet you want them dead. I’ve done what you asked for, Eli. These are the men responsible for killing your friends, don’t forget that.”

The memories of his murdered friends Tyler and Dylan flashed through Eli’s mind, and he felt sick to his stomach. He didn’t want to take someone else’s life, even if it was a stranger. But he also knew that he was in too deep, and he didn’t have any other options. He looked around. Dangerous people capable of deadly things.

“What are you gonna do, Eli?”

Eli took a deep breath.

Chapter 13

Tuesday midnight

Grigory looked at his watch as the second hand made a full rotation. “He’ll be here soon. Is everything ready?” Despite being in the late hours, his adrenalin had starved off any tiredness.

A voice came from over his shoulder. “Of course.”

“Petrov,” Grigory called out.

The young man quickly appeared at his side. “Boss?”

“I need you to do something for me when our special guest arrives, something very much in your wheelhouse.”

Petrov acknowledged Grigory’s command with a curt nod before disappearing into the shadows, his footsteps echoing faintly on the metal staircase.

Grigory’s attention then turned to the two Asian men bound before him. Both were naked, their bodies secured to chairs with strips of silver tape that muffled their cries. The tape across their mouths added a sinister silence to the scene. Each man bore the marks of recent brutality - bruises and cuts marring their faces. However, it was the man in the center, presumably Hyun-woo, who had endured the violence. His face, grotesquely swollen, displayed eyes barely visible beneath puffy lids. Blood seeped from multiple wounds and his ears, painting a severe picture of his ordeal.

Grigory observed his prisoner with a cold, calculating gaze, a cruel smirk playing on his lips. The sight of the man, so brutally subdued and helpless, seemed to amuse him, a chilling testament to his ruthless nature.

“I bet you never thought this was going to happen when you woke up this morning,” he said. “How about a couple more... for old times’ sake.” He called out over his shoulder. “Dima?”

The man known as Dima moved through the dimly lit space, his imposing figure casting a shadow over the scene. His thick forearms, etched with an array of tattoos, spoke of a life marked by violence and survival. His large head, set in a perpetual grimace, and his shirt, stretched tight over a muscular chest and biceps, were physical testaments to his strength and endurance.

Dima’s past was a brutal saga of resilience. His years in the Russian army and the notorious Gldani Prison in Georgia had forged him in the fires of hardship. He had weathered the ravages of tuberculosis epidemics, but it was the relentless physical and sexual abuse that left the deepest scars. In a place where countless prisoners succumbed to the guards’ merciless whims, Dima stood unyielding. Each harrowing experience only hardened him further. His eventual escape from the prison was as violent as his time there, marked by a trail of bodies he left in his wake.

Now, Dima’s raw power was on full display. He delivered a vicious blow to Hyun-woo’s face, the sound of the impact reverberating through the room. Hyun-woo’s head snapped back, a groan escaping his lips. The other two captives, gagged and bound, struggled futilely against their restraints, their muffled sounds filling the air. Dima, undeterred, grabbed Hyun-woo’s head and landed another brutal punch, this time shattering his nose. The chair teetered dangerously on two legs before settling back down, Hyun-woo’s head now hanging limply, blood streaming from his wounds as he drifted in and out of consciousness.

Just as Dima was gearing up for another savage blow, Grigory’s voice cut through the tension. “Thank you, Dima. That will do nicely.” Dima grunted, visibly annoyed at being interrupted but recognizing the authority in the command.

Grigory, with a casual flick of his wrist, signaled for a weapon. One of his men promptly placed a handgun into his waiting palm. Grigory approached the battered figures, smoothly opening the chamber of the gun to inspect the bullets, his demeanor calm and controlled amidst the chaos he had orchestrated.

“There’s nothing personal about this, my friend,” Grigory said. “It’s all business. And since you killed my brother, I figure I should—” He stopped mid-stride and turned to his men. “Oh for fuck’s sake guys. There is no point in making a big deal of this if he’s not conscious to hear it.”

Immediately, a sharp spray of water from a fire hose struck the restrained men with force, knocking them over. The wild stream ceased as quickly as it had begun, and a group of men hurried to set the chairs upright again, slapping the occupants in the process. Once the chairs were aligned neatly side by side, groans echoing around Grigory confirmed their awakening.

Grigory cleared his throat. “Now, where was I?” He tapped the gun against the side of his head as he thought. “Oh yes, that’s right.” He lowered the gun and pointed it at the man next to Hyun-woo. “This is nothing personal, it’s all... you know what? Fuck it, it is personal. When my brother died, I promised all the gods in the sky that yours would suffer the same fate, only I’d be the one to do it myself. Now, I’ll give you two options. One grunt for the head, and two for the balls. Horrible way to go mind you.”

Hyun-woo narrowed his gaze and, despite his facial trauma, stared hatred through his counterpart and tensed against his constraints.

Grigory locked eyes with Hyun-woo. “Oh, I’m sorry, times up. I guess you went for option three.” Grigory squeezed the trigger, unleashing a burst of flame from the barrel. The gunshot reverberated, propelling the target backward onto the ground. Approaching the fallen figure, Grigory stood over it, listening to the faint, ragged

gasps. He observed the result of his action: a gaping red cavity in the chest, from which blood splattered and seethed, reminiscent of lava spilling over in the aftermath of a volcanic eruption.

“Do you hear that?” Grigory whispered. “Your brother’s final breaths, his life slowly and painfully fading away, his last thoughts blaming you for his life, placing him here in this situation. You could have saved him Hyun-woo, but no, you wanted to make things difficult.”

The room fell into a heavy silence, punctuated only by the labored breathing of the man in the chair. His chest rose and fell in ragged gasps, each breath more strained than the last, until finally, there was a long, drawn-out exhale, signaling the end of his struggle.

Hyun-woo, bound, and gagged, responded with muffled groans of pain and fear. He strained against his restraints, his chair rocking violently on the concrete floor, the sound of its legs scraping against the rough surface echoing in the tense air.

Grigory approached him with a cold, calculated demeanor. “Your time will come,” he sneered.

Without warning, he swung the gun with brutal force, striking Hyun-woo on the side of his head. The impact was immediate and devastating; Hyun-woo’s head slumped forward, the blow rendering him unconscious once again.

Chapter 14

Tuesday night

In the dim light of the port, the small team of men worked with a sense of urgency, unloading heavy plastic crates from a shipping container into a waiting truck. The crew was a makeshift assembly of four strangers, each playing a crucial role: two loading the truck, one maneuvering the forklift, and another coordinating the operation from the container.

The port authorities were conspicuously absent, thanks in part to the container's secluded location amidst a labyrinth of empty containers, but also due to a substantial bribe that ensured their non-interference. Under the glow of temporary, generator-powered lights, the men exchanged wary glances, a natural response when dealing with potentially illicit cargo. None of them knew the exact contents of the crates, but the mere association with a certain notorious name implied danger and illegality. The lucrative pay and the dire consequences of refusal had sealed their participation.

Despite their unfamiliarity with each other, they operated with remarkable efficiency, swiftly transferring the crates. Overseeing the operation was Hank, who sat in the truck's cabin, his eyes flicking between the side mirrors and the glove compartment. Eventually, he retrieved a gun from the compartment, a precautionary measure.

As the team secured the final crate in the truck and locked the shipping container, Hank descended from the cab. He called the men together, the forklift's engine dying down as its operator joined the group. Shutting off the generators plunged the area into near darkness, save for the moon's faint glow.

The men, rugged and tense from the night's work, gathered in the truck's shadow. Hank, sensing the rising tension, reached into his jacket. The men tensed further, anticipating trouble. But instead of a weapon, Hank produced a large envelope, which he handed to one of the crew members. The gesture, an ultimate step in their clandestine operation, signaled the completion of their task and the distribution of their payment.

"Five large each now, five more when you guys unload it."

The man accepted as the others lit up cigarettes, the glow a marker in the gloom.

"Cigarette?" they offered.

"Pass," Hank replied. "I've got my own."

Hank's actions were swift and decisive. He reached into his puffer vest and gripped the handle of his gun. In a matter of seconds, he fired four precise shots into the darkness, each finding its target. The echoes of the gunfire slowly dissipated, replaced by the chilling sound of gurgling breaths from his victims.

As Hank approached the edge of the trailer, he noticed the envelope of cash lying on the ground. Just as he bent to retrieve it, a hand emerged from the shadows, gripping his wrist with desperate strength. Darkness obfuscated the identity of the person, but their labored wheezing was unmistakable. Hank had executed his part of the plan, albeit reluctantly. Like the men who had unloaded the crates, he acted out of necessity, knowing the peril of defiance.

A final choke, a wet cough, and a prolonged wheeze marked the end of the struggle, and the hand fell away lifelessly. Hank quickly snatched the envelope, stuffing it into his jacket. He then closed the rear doors of the truck, sealing the grim scene inside.

This was the plan, and Hank had adhered to it meticulously. He returned to the cab of the truck, finding solace in the familiar surroundings and the control it offered. He reached for his phone and

made a brief call. "Job's done," he reported tersely before ending the call.

Starting the engine, the truck rumbled to life, its powerful engine breaking the silence of the night.

As the truck moved away from the scene, another vehicle, a four-wheel drive, approached the same container. It came to a halt, its engine idling briefly before shutting off. The doors opened quickly, and two figures emerged, their boots hitting the concrete with purpose. They moved swiftly through the gloom, opening the tailgate to reveal a body bag, showing the continuation of a dark operation.

Chapter 15

Tuesday dusk

Grigory, accompanied by two of his most trusted guards, stood in front of the old factory door. He absentmindedly adjusted his shirt collar, inadvertently revealing the tattoo of a Russian Orthodox cross on his neck, a mark of his deep-rooted faith and heritage.

They lingered at the threshold, a sentry security guard having already frisked them, and then vanished into the surrounding darkness. They adhered to the unspoken rules of their trade, leaving their firearms in their vehicles. Weapons were unnecessary for the meeting, which was steeped in hidden agendas and unspoken understandings.

As Grigory stepped through the doors for the second time, memories of his previous visit, a venture that had ended in disappointment and loss haunted him. At that time, he had left with a burdened heart and his family's legacy diminished. But this time was different. With a three-day deadline to secure the funds and seal the deal, failure was not an option.

The doors parted, powered by a distant motor, just wide enough to admit them. Grigory glanced at his men, a hint of approval in his eyes. "I like this setup," he mused, stepping into the enveloping darkness, his men following closely.

Inside, they stood momentarily blinded, their eyes straining to adjust to the darkness. The motor whirred again, and the doors closed behind them, plunging them into near-total darkness, save for the diminishing sliver of moonlight.

Suddenly, a flame flickered to life in the gloom, briefly illuminating a cigar before it extinguished. Then, with a sudden burst, the overhead fluorescent lights blazed on, revealing the scene before them.

It was a *déjà vu* moment for Grigory. Hyun-woo, the Korean crime boss, sat regally in a high-backed leather chair behind a solid mahogany desk. He dressed impeccably in an expensive suit, a smug smile playing on his lips, and a lit cigar held casually between his fingers.

Flanking Hyun-woo were four of his men, two on each side, standing rigidly with their hands clasped in front. Wearing gray suits and plain shirts, they exuded a quiet but unmistakable air of menace. Grigory knew all too well that this visible show of force was just the tip of the iceberg; undoubtedly, a small army lurked in the shadows and patrolled the perimeter unseen.

“So, you want to finalize the deal,” Hyun-woo said. “I can’t tell you how much of an inconvenience all of this has been for me.”

Grigory shrugged. “I’m sure you can appreciate it’s been inconvenient for everyone involved.” He thought briefly about his brother, the wound still fresh within him.

“Of course, I am a businessman after all. Therefore the price has increased by ten percent.”

Grigory’s jaw tightened, holding back the instinctive retort that threatened to escalate the tension. He recognized the inflated price as a strategic move in this high-stakes negotiation. It was a tactic he would have employed under similar circumstances. Despite his frustration, he maintained his composure, his gaze burning into Hyun-woo, who sat smugly before him.

Hyun-woo, reveling in his position of power, lounged back in his chair with a self-satisfied grin. His hands were leisurely folded over his stomach, and his demeanor oozed confidence. He relished dictating the terms and watching Grigory react to his demands.

Masking his irritation with a veneer of civility, Grigory forced a smile. "Of course. I must acknowledge your inconvenience." He bowed slightly, his gesture dripping with mock respect.

In response, Hyun-woo casually raised a hand and snapped his fingers, the sound sharply reverberating through the room. This signal brought forth one of his men, who respectfully placed a tablet on the desk. Hyun-woo gestured towards it, inviting Grigory to proceed.

"Of course," Grigory said, receiving his own tablet from one of his men.

His fingers moved rapidly across the screen, holding it close to shield its contents. He hummed a tune, seemingly indifferent, yet his occasional glances at Hyun-woo betrayed a keen awareness of the situation. Hyun-woo watched with a mix of curiosity and irritation, evidently unamused by Grigory's theatrics.

Guards on both sides remained acutely alert, their eyes darting between the players, ever watchful for any hint of a threat to their respective employers. Though unarmed, their expertise in various combat techniques and their unwavering loyalty, ready to sacrifice themselves if necessary, made them formidable protectors.

Hyun-woo's words cut through the air, a stark reminder of past events. "I trust there will be no issues like last time, Grigory. You should know, you were fortunate then."

The remark hit a nerve. Grigory's grip on the tablet tightened, his knuckles whitening. Memories of his brother's death flashed in his mind, fueling a surge of anger. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and exhaled slowly, regaining his composure. With a final series of gestures, he completed the transaction.

"The funds are now in escrow," Grigory declared confidently.

One of Hyun-woo's men quickly verified the transfer on a phone and then handed it to Hyun-woo. After a brief confirmation, Hyun-woo nodded and returned the phone, a satisfied smile on his face.

Hyun-woo casually bit off the end of his cigar, then reached into his jacket pocket and slid a business card across the desk. Grigory approached to retrieve it, but as he did, one of Hyun-woo's men leaned in to whisper something to his boss.

As Grigory's fingers touched the card, Hyun-woo's hand slammed down on top of it, their eyes locked in a fierce, unspoken confrontation. The tension between the two mob bosses was palpable, each man's gaze conveying a mix of defiance and calculation.

"What have you done?" Hyun-woo spat.

"What on earth are you talking about?" Grigory clapped back.

"Do you think you can play me? Pay me off with my own money?"

Grigory smirked and narrowed his gaze. "I was wondering how long it was going to take you to figure that out."

"You will die for this," Hyun-woo breathed. "Just like your brother."

The two men sneered at each other.

"*Geudeul-eul jug-yeo beolyeo!*" Hyun-woo roared.

The scene erupted into a maelstrom of violence as the four Korean guards revealed their hidden weapons. But before they could fully react, two of them abruptly taken down, their bodies collapsing amidst a gruesome spray of blood. This sudden, lethal strike from the shadows caught the remaining guards off guard, their momentary shock proving fatal.

From the periphery, unseen assailants, swift and silent, emerged, swiftly incapacitating the last two Korean guards. They moved with a precision and brutality that spoke of extensive training and experience.

Hyun-woo, still gripping the business card, watched in disbelief as two figures stepped out from the shadows, guns trained unerringly on him. His face, a mask of confusion, slowly twisted into anger as the reality of his situation dawned on him.

Grigory, with a cold, calculated tone, shattered any hope Hyun-woo might have harbored of turning the tables. “No point calling for backup,” he said, his voice laced with finality. “They’re all gone. Every last one.”

Hyun-woo’s expression, initially unreadable, morphed into one of pure fury. But Grigory was unfazed. He snatched the business card away, a triumphant glint in his eye. “Ex-Spetsnaz,” he declared, gesturing to his men. “Highly trained, extremely lethal, and very motivated by money.”

Hyun-woo’s threat, laced with venom, broke through the tension. “You will regret this, Grigory. I swear it.”

But Grigory was already lost in his actions, lighting the business card with a flick of his lighter. He watched, almost hypnotized, as the flame consumed the paper, the edges curling and blackening. Finally, he let the charred remains flutter to the ground, extinguishing the last ember with a casual stamp of his shoe. The message was clear: he was not intimidated, and he was in control.

“Well I don’t see how that’s going to happen, you little fuck.”

Chapter 16

Tuesday morning

Eli sat near the coffee shop window, the hood of his jacket pushed back, and he leisurely savored his coffee with one hand while absent-mindedly flipping the business card in his other. Recent events had left him feeling adrift, and in Tyler and Dylan, he found a sense of belonging that surpassed his blood ties.

Setting his cup and the card side by side on the table, he gazed at them, his head resting in his hands. The mid-morning sun streamed through the window, warming his face but failing to shed light on the turmoil within him. Dialing the number on the card felt almost instinctual, though he couldn't quite determine what he would convey to Grigory. Their previous encounter remained a confounding memory. He had acted out of fear for his life but somehow had lived to recount the tale. All in all, Grigory was an enigmatic figure capable of assisting him in dangerous endeavors.

Suddenly, a knock on the window jolted him from his dark contemplations. He turned to find Grigory standing on the sidewalk, impeccably dressed as usual. His deep blue Gucci suit contrasted starkly with the city's muted surroundings, and his matching patterned tie and pocket square added a touch of understated elegance. Pedestrians flowed around him like water over rocks.

Grigory lowered his sunglasses down his nose, peered inside, and surveyed the café. After a moment of wrinkling his nose in apparent distaste, he withdrew, pushed his glasses back up, and nodded his head down the street before striding away.

Eli hastily finished his coffee, winced slightly, snatched the business card from the table, and hurriedly followed Grigory.

Once more, Eli found himself surrounded by opulence as a waiter wheeled a trolley over. The waiter expertly poured two cups of coffee and presented them to both Eli and Grigory. Eli observed as the waiter gracefully positioned the coffee pot, nodded to Grigory, and quietly departed to attend to other patrons.

“What was wrong with the other place?”

“Because, Eli, when people call me, they rarely want to talk about the weather or local sports teams. It’s because they want something from me.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Or I want something from them.” Grigory picked up his cup, took a long breath, and let the aroma fill his lungs. “And because the place you were at looked like a shit hole, and this is premium.”

“Just so you know that coffee back there cost me seven dollars.” Eli took a sip and looked uneasy as he clasped his hands.

Grigory put his cup on the table and sat back. “This coffee costs a yard per cup.”

In the silence that followed, Eli could feel Grigory’s eyes look over him.

“What is it, Eli?”

“What do you mean?” Eli still didn’t know what or how to ask.

“That look on your face, the scowl, the crease in your forehead. Something is troubling you. Maybe you’re in trouble, maybe your friends are, but something is up.”

“You got that from a look on my face?”

“That, and like I said, there is a reason people call me to meet. Usually, they seek assistance in resolving their issues.” Grigory put the cup down and leaned in. “So, what can I fix for you?”

Fix. Eli couldn't fathom how anything could ever be set right, but he harbored a solid plan to bridge the chasm. He parted his lips, but the words remained trapped within him. Vivid memories of his friends inundated his thoughts.

"Eli," Grigory exhaled with exasperation. "This meeting has already set me back fifty thousand dollars, so, for heaven's sake, get it out."

Eli fixed his gaze intently on his coffee cup, drew in a deep breath, and spoke in a hushed, almost trembling voice, as if the words were entangled in his throat. "My friends... they're... gone. Someone killed them."

"Oh my. I'm sorry to hear that, Eli. Did the police catch the killer?"

Eli shook his head. "Not yet, but I'm hoping for something else, and I was hoping you could help."

Grigory picked up his cup again and regarded Eli as he sipped. "I'm listening."

Eli leaned forward. "I want you to find them and make them pay."

Grigory pursed his lips. "I can certainly make this happen, Eli, but it's going to cost you."

Eli thought about the extraordinary amount of money he had stored in the hidden account. The thought of taking it all and leaving town, never to return, and having his friends haunt his dreams forever, was something he could never do.

"How much?" Eli asked, sipping his cup.

"You transfer the amount you think your friends are worth, and then we'll go find the person responsible."

Eli retrieved his laptop, connected to a nearby secure network, and accessed his account. The funds remained untouched, but the internal struggle over how much to transfer weighed on him, though perhaps it shouldn't have.

“Where should I send it?” he inquired.

Grigory retrieved a business card from his jacket pocket and slid it across the table. Eli briefly scrutinized the characters of the international bank account number before deciding to transfer two-thirds of the total amount from his hidden account. The money had always belonged to his friends, and if they couldn’t benefit from it anymore, he would put it to use seeking revenge.

Grigory checked his device’s screen and returned it to his jacket pocket. “Consider it done,” he assured.

As Grigory rose and fastened his jacket, Eli sought clarification. “Is that all?”

“Indeed,” Grigory replied. “This is nothing more than a straightforward business deal. Emotions have no place in business.”

Eli, however, couldn’t help but ask, “Will you inform me once it’s completed?”

Grigory produced a phone from his pocket and placed it on the table. “Hold on to this,” he instructed. “It’s untraceable. You’ll be the first to know.” With that, he donned his sunglasses and left.

Grigory continued walking down the street away from Eli, retrieving his phone from his pocket and pressing it to his ear. Dima answered without delay.

“Set up the meeting with Hyun-woo,” Grigory instructed. “And ensure our special associates are prepared.”

He ended the call and dialed another number.

“We’re back on course,” Grigory affirmed.

“Excellent. How much longer?” came the query.

“Soon.”

“Do you think he’ll agree to it?”

“He won’t have a choice.”

“Very well... but spare us the dramatics.”

Grigory couldn't help but smirk. "I can't make any promises."

Chapter 17

Monday midnight

Over the past twenty-four hours, Oskar endured extended periods confined in the trunks of the cars as used to transport him from one secret location to the next. This imposed solitude provided him with ample time for introspection, contemplating the dark path he had become a part of and the grim scenes he had witnessed.

During his mission, he had allowed two young men to perish, and yet, in the end, it seemed to have little bearing on his perilous situation. It seemed Grigory was fully aware of his true identity, and he suspected that after that revelation, they wouldn't extend the courtesy of survival to him, even though research suggested that the longer a hostage remained alive, the greater their chances of survival.

During his most recent journey within the dim, cramped confines of a car trunk, thoughts of his family consumed him. He had sacrificed his life for his career, and all he yearned for now was to abandon it all and return to them. His resolve had crumbled.

The diminishing whine of the engine followed by a slight jolt alerted Oskar that their destination was imminent, and the seemingly endless wait would soon conclude. Eventually, the vehicle eventually came to a halt, accompanied by the muffled thuds of the passenger and driver's doors shutting. The distinct sound of boots crunching on gravel as they traversed concrete reached Oskar's ears.

The trunk swung open, allowing artificial light to pierce through the fabric covering his head. Invisible hands grabbed him, offering support as he adjusted to his surroundings. With his hands bound behind him, he leaned against them, straining to discern any clues

through his limited vision or detect any unusual sounds that might hint at their whereabouts.

Imposing figures flanking Oskar propelled him forward, the destination a mystery to him. He could have been marching towards a precipice for all he knew, and the outcome might well be the same.

The two escorts suddenly halted, their firm grips preventing further progress. A rapid succession of kicks to the back of his legs forced Oskar to his knees. Then, they unceremoniously tore the hood from his head. Oskar squinted, gradually acclimating to the light, unsure of whether it was day or night.

What he could discern was the room's darkness, pierced only by slivers of light seeping through louver windows positioned along the tops of the walls. He kneeled in the vast expanse—a former supermarket, now emptied except for the meticulously arranged tableau before him, resembling a staged performance.

Grigory occupied a large, dark leather wingback armchair, his legs casually crossed. He extended his hand to a decanter filled with amber liquid on a nearby table, accompanied by a lamp, and poured himself a measured portion into a crystal glass.

Oskar emitted a muffled moan through the tape that sealed his mouth, but Grigory merely raised a finger. He continued to lift the glass leisurely, reclining into the chair, studying his captive as he savored his drink. Grigory's expression revealed nothing of his thoughts.

Finally, Grigory waved his hand, prompting a figure to descend and ruthlessly rip off the tape, causing Oskar to wince from the stinging pain in his lips. He recoiled slightly, emitting a soft groan in response.

“How long have you known?” Oskar breathed.

“From the beginning,” Grigory responded.

“How?”

Grigory sipped his drink. “Now, Oskar, I can’t reveal all my secrets.”

“Well, shit. I was hoping for a thirty-minute monologue.”

Grigory’s smile widened. “The motivations behind people’s actions have always fascinated me. So, tell me, why are you here?”

“I have to.”

“Nonsense. No one *must* do anything.”

“It’s my duty,” Oskar replied.

“You must have understood the gravity of this situation, how perilous it is. The consequences for you are catastrophic.”

“I was aware of the risks.”

“And yet, you willingly embraced this role.”

“It’s the right thing to do.”

Grigory leaned forward, his gaze unrelenting. “And now, with your mission a complete failure, finding yourself bound and kneeling before me, do you still believe it’s the right thing?”

Oskar averted his gaze, pondering his potential responses. He weighed the words he wanted to utter against those he suspected Grigory wished to hear. Which choice might spare his life? But then again, was there anything that could save him now?

“I think your silence speaks volumes,” Grigory said.

“Where’s the shipment?” Oskar asked.

“Still,” Grigory said, taking another sip. “Even here, like this, you want to know.”

“Yes.”

Grigory shrugged. “It would make no difference to you.”

“I wish I had stopped you from killing those two men the other night. I wish I had tried to kill you. At least my death would not have been in vain.”

“Oskar, when are you going to realize, you can’t beat me? I’m destined to win, always, at all costs, whatever the sacrifice. I’m willing to do whatever it takes and push aside all who stand in my way.”

Grigory snapped his fingers and a large hunting knife appeared at Oskar's neck.

"Wait!" Oskar cried out.

His only thoughts were his wife and his daughter.

"What is it, Oskar?"

"My family. I want to make sure they are going to be safe."

Grigory leaned forward, placing the glass on the table beside him. "Your wife Maddy, daughter Bianca, son Jake, dog Hugo, the cat that sleeps on your daughter's bed, the goldfish your son does not feed enough on some days and overfeeds on other days. All of them, we've been watching all of them, just in case we needed to pull that little thread." Oskar's head dropped, and Grigory leaned back in his chair, regained his glass, and folded his legs once more. "But I will inform my men to cease surveillance. Don't worry, Oskar, your family will be safe from me, you have my word."

Oskar nodded.

"And I'm sure the government will see that your wife gets your pension. Killed in the line of duty. You'll go up on their wall, a cult hero."

As silence ensued, so too did the blade press closer into his neck, until it pierced the skin, and a trickle of blood ran down his neck.

My wife, my children, my family.

Oskar took deep breaths, each one buffeting his cheeks.

No, this can't happen. There must be a way out.

"Take a deep breath, Oskar," Grigory advised.

My family, I love you.

Oskar did, clenched his eyes shut, and strained his neck.

Please, God, make this be over.

The man dragged the knife across Oskar's delicate skin, causing a torrent of blood to spurt forth. Oskar gurgled and gasped for air, struggling to maintain his composure. Eventually, he could no longer support his weight, and he slumped forward, collapsing onto the

ground face-first. His cheek pressed against the grimy surface, and his life's essence stained the floor. Through blurred vision, he discerned a pair of luxurious leather shoes entering his field of view.

“Goodbye, Oskar.”

Chapter 18

Monday night

Eli's serene slumber shattered abruptly as a dark, imposing silhouette loomed above him. Panic coursed through him, and he instinctively attempted to react. But, before he could even raise his head, a gloved hand slammed down on his face, forcing him deep into the pillow. The sudden, brutal impact robbed him of breath, leaving him gasping for air in the pitch-black room. In that heart-pounding moment, he strained to discern the identity of his assailant.

A surge of terror surged through him as he felt the icy barrel of a revolver pressed firmly against his temple, the deafening click of the hammer locking into place reverberating ominously in the hushed surroundings. Eli froze, his breath held, paralyzed by dread, his fate delicate, uncertain of what would unfold next.

As the figure's face gradually came into view, a peculiar calm washed over Eli, almost as if he had resigned himself to his destiny.

"Tyler?" Eli gasped, his voice trembling with disbelief. "What are you doing?"

"We took their money," Tyler declared coldly. "And now it's your turn to make amends."

He pulled the trigger.

Eli jolted awake, a violent kick sending a sharp pang up his leg and into his groin. Gasping for breath, he quickly oriented himself to his surroundings. He was in his room. Shifting to the edge of his bed, he glanced at the clock. As the red glow of his alarm clock's display

pierced the morning haze, he let out a sigh. It was too early to rise and too late to salvage any meaningful rest. He couldn't help but wonder how many more nights he would endure these haunting nightmares of his deceased friends.

With a weary sigh, he rose from the bed and navigated the dim hallway by memory, making his way to the kitchen table where his laptop awaited. The money had been sitting in the holding account for far too long, and he knew he needed to do something about it. By now, he should have distributed it to his account and those of his friends. Yet, at this moment, he couldn't see the purpose in such a mundane act.

Seated at the table, he powered up his laptop, the screen's luminance momentarily blinding him before he adjusted to the glow. Each keystroke reverberated in the stillness as he worked through the routing sequence. The money would pass through various locations: initially through the Middle East, including Pakistan, Turkey, and India, followed by a few random stops to throw off any pursuers, such as the Cayman Islands, South Korea, and Lichtenstein. Twelve locations in total, funneling the funds through different banks, institutions, and credit unions.

However, just as he was about to press the last button, doubt seeped in. He hesitated, questioning whether he truly wanted to follow through with the plan. If he were a believer in premonitions and fortune tellers, he might have pressed the button and sent the money to its rightful account. Yet, he couldn't help but wonder if the situation was truly that straightforward.

What if it was the same individuals who had taken his friends' lives? Would they relent, especially if Tyler or Dylan had mentioned his name? Would they ever mention his name? And would he do the same in their shoes? It was difficult to predict anyone's actions in such dire circumstances. Words spoken in the safety of one's home

took on a different significance when facing a gun held to one's head, sending a shiver down his spine.

His gaze dropped to the business card resting on the table beside him. In the subdued glow, he could just make out the text on the pristine white card. As his finger hovered over the button on the laptop, he picked up the card with his other hand, gripping it between his forefinger and thumb at opposite corners. He blew softly, and it spun briefly.

Perhaps there was an alternative course of action.

Eli modified the destination of the fifty-eight million dollars, redirecting it to his account. He reasoned that there was no point in returning it or transferring it to the accounts of those who were no longer among the living. Perhaps he could put it to use.

He glanced at the card again and reached for his phone.

Sometimes, the best defense was a strategic offense.

Chapter 19

Monday evening

Eli sat in the stark police interview room, his gaze fixed on a point far beyond the door before him. In his hands, he cradled a Styrofoam cup of long-cold instant coffee. He slouched over the table, his posture far from his thoughts as he replayed the events of the last few hours in his mind. At times, he had to remind himself to breathe, pulling himself back from the brink of introspection, where he risked slipping into the deepest recesses of his thoughts. This was the last place he ever expected to find his friends, and now they were gone.

His thoughts wandered back to that Saturday night when he had hacked into the bank and allowed Dylan to transfer a significant sum of money into their secret holding accounts. He had considered it reckless and even voiced his reservations. Yet, in the heat of the moment, fueled by alcohol and the allure of drugs to come, he had agreed with his friends' actions. If he could turn back time, he would choose differently.

Though he couldn't say for certain, he suspected that someone had traced the stolen money back to them. How they had done that remained a baffling mystery, but he couldn't bring himself to focus on that puzzle. The gruesome images of his deceased friends tormented him, evoking both nausea and fury. He clenched his fists, tapping them rhythmically on the table, the urge to grab a chair and hurl it against the wall to release his pent-up rage coursing through him.

The door clicked open, and Detectives Thompson and Hayes entered the compact room. They approached the small round table, the

scraping of their chairs across the floor breaking the silence as they took their seats.

“Thank you for speaking with us, Eli,” Detective Thompson began. “We understand this is an incredibly challenging time, and we appreciate your willingness to cooperate with us to fully comprehend what happened.”

Despite the words floating in the room, Eli remained impassive and unresponsive. Their words seemed to have negligible impact on his demeanor, his expression remaining unchanged as he listened to the surrounding voices.

“Eli?” Thompson provoked.

Hayes eyed his partner. “You sure about this?”

Thompson persisted, undeterred by the lack of immediate response. “Eli? We understand that this is an incredibly challenging time for you.”

As Thompson called his name again, Eli’s mind wandered to the injuries and wounds his friends had suffered, vividly imagining the excruciating pain they had endured at the hands of those seeking retribution. He visualized every broken finger, each severed digit, and the deadly gunshot. His gaze delved deep into the faceless figure holding the gun, squeezing the trigger, and sending bullets piercing through Tyler’s and Dylan’s chests.

Hayes leaned forward and waved his hand in front of Eli’s face, attempting to regain his attention. He exchanged a glance with Thompson as he continued to click repeatedly. When he redirected his gaze to Eli, he was met with the resolute, dark, clear eyes of a man who had regained his composure, steadfastly staring back at Hayes.

Thompson cleared his throat. “I said—”

“I heard what you said,” Eli roared, his gaze affixed on Hayes. “Don’t click your fingers in front of my face, I’m not a dog.” He turned to face Thompson. “And you wouldn’t have a fucking clue what I’m going through. Have you ever lost your entire family in

the blink of an eye, that when you think about what they went through it tears you right down the damn middle?” He swiped his hand across the table and smashed the cup into the wall. Cold coffee ran down the wall like wet paint. He sat back, crossed his arms, and looked away.

As the room fell silent, he sat back in his chair, his arms crossed tightly across his chest. He refused to meet anyone’s gaze, instead staring off into the distance, lost in thought, his emotions boiling just beneath the surface. For now, all he could do was wait and hope that the storm inside him would pass.

They sat in silence until Thompson suggested they postpone the interview.

“No,” Eli said as he held up his hand. “I’m sorry; my head’s just spinning at the moment.” He looked over at the wall. “Shit, I didn’t mean that either.”

“It’s okay, Eli,” Thompson said in a fatherly tone, “trauma impacts everyone differently. Some grieve, some fight, some disbelieve. Some people will tell you to talk about it, others will tell you to hold it in. Eventually, Eli, you are just going to have to find the thing that works for you.”

Hayes said, “We can arrange for a counselor to contact you if you like. There’s also a bunch of information on hotlines that we can get for you afterward as well.”

“It’s... fine. If it’s the same for you, I’d rather just get on with the questions.”

“You spoke of Tyler and Dylan like they were family,” Thompson began. “How long have you known them?”

“We met at university and have been tight ever since. They were there for me, they both were, and I owe them everything, more so than my biological family.”

“Some sort of family falling out?” Hayes pushed.

Eli narrowed his gaze. “It doesn’t matter; my life story won’t help you find out what happened.”

“You’d be surprised what can help us,” Thompson countered. “So what did Tyler and Dylan do, you know, for a living?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, a couple of young kids in a nice apartment in a good part of the city.”

Eli thought. *Drugs. Gambling. Pilfering money out of other people’s accounts.*

“They didn’t *need* to do anything. Their parents died when they were on their way out of high school and left them with a hefty inheritance. They invested in a few technology companies and lived off the earnings.” He smiled. “Great waste of potential if you ask me, both of them were talented.”

“In what?” Hayes asked.

Eli chose his words carefully. “They each had their areas of expertise.”

“Well, I was just wondering,” Hayes continued, “because we found some pills in the living room. Was drugs part of his expertise?”

Eli held up his hands. “Alright, they weren’t angels, I can say that. But they were good guys, they wouldn’t hurt a fly. Couldn’t hurt a fly. I mean, shit, did you see Dylan?”

Thompson ignored the comment and said, “Your friends may have been great, but it seems they got caught up with some pretty bad people.”

“Well I spoke with both of them a couple of days ago and everything was fine, they sure as hell didn’t mention anybody that was out to get them.” He looked away and thought of the last time they were all together, drinking, popping a few pills, laughing. It all seemed like a lifetime ago. He wondered if he would one day wake up and forget what they looked like.

“Maybe they supplied drugs to the wrong person?” Thompson offered.

“Perhaps they couldn’t afford the repayments,” Hayes added.

Eli knew what the detectives were trying to do. He snapped his head around. “They didn’t deal drugs. My friends were a lot of things, but stupid isn’t one of them.”

Hayes smiled. “What about the person who they bought drugs from? Can you tell us about them?”

Eli rubbed his head. “I wouldn’t have a clue. I never got involved with that.”

“You were never present when your best friends purchased drugs?”

Eli shrugged. “I have a job.” He knew he had to cooperate, he needed to know what they knew.

“Is there anything else you think that could help?” Hayes asked.

Eli shrugged.

“We appreciate you talking with us Eli,” Thompson said. “And helping us with our inquiries. We trust you’ll be available when we need to talk again.”

Eli continued to rub his hands. “I’ve got nowhere else to go.”

Hayes said, “You understand we took your fingerprints to separate yourself from other prints we find at the crime scene.”

Crime scene. It sounded so cold. “My friends’ home.”

“Sorry?”

“Tyler and Dylan’s home. Not a crime scene.”

Hayes nodded. “Of course.”

“We’ll keep you up to date with our investigation,” Thompson said as they stood. “We’ll make sure an officer gets you home safely.”

The sound of the closing door reverberated through the interview room, plunging Eli back into the disquieting embrace of silence and solitude. His thoughts wandered, dragging him unwillingly back to the somber depths he had been trying so hard to avoid. He at-

tempted to shove those haunting thoughts aside, compelling himself to concentrate on the task at hand. Yet, like an insistent weight, they stubbornly clung to the recesses of his mind, unrelenting and burdensome.

The room felt desolate and constricting, as though its very walls were closing in on him. A yearning for the solace of his own home overcame him, a place where he could temporarily elude the relentless memories and the tormenting pain that plagued him.

However, deep down, Eli understood he couldn't evade the truth indefinitely. To find any semblance of peace, he had to summon the courage to confront his inner demons head-on, no matter how daunting the prospect might be.

Hayes and Thompson stood in silence just outside the interview room, observing as a uniformed police officer escorted Eli down the hallway and around the corner. Eli's steps appeared to waver, as if he lacked the strength to continue.

"What do you make of it?" Hayes leaned back against the wall and crossed his arms, eyeing his partner.

Thompson, his gaze still fixed on the corner where Eli had disappeared, remained lost in thought. "Definitely not involved. Terrified, but not involved."

Hayes studied his partner intently, then leaned in closer. "What's on your mind?" he inquired.

Thompson bit the inside of his cheek, contemplating deeply. "I'm just wondering why."

"Why what?"

"Why murder Tyler and Dylon? And in that manner? The torture. It feels extremely personal. Not something a drug dealer does."

"Yeah, and what about the caliber? When's the last time you saw some gangbanger with nothing other than a nine-millimeter?"

They stood in silence, pondering every aspect of the case. Eventually, Thompson spoke.

“I’ve seen bodies lying in alleyways or in dumpsters with bullet wounds. This was meant to make a scene, to make a point.”

“To who?” Hayes asked.

Thompson shrugged. “I don’t know, but the sooner we find them, the safer they’ll be.”

“Where do you want to start?”

“The kids had drugs, so let’s find the dealer.” Thompson’s hand flew to his chest as if a sudden pain had struck him. He took a deep breath and leaned heavily against the wall, his face contorted in discomfort.

“Jesus. Are you okay?” Hayes asked, his voice laced with concern.

Thompson nodded, pulling a small capsule from his pocket. He tipped out a couple of pills and popped them into his mouth, swallowing hard.

“Heartburn again?” Hayes offered.

Thompson rolled his neck and stood upright. “If you don’t find this dealer, I’ll give you some heartburn.”

Hayes held up his hands in mock defense. “Alright, calm down, big guy, I’m onto it.”

The deafening sound of shouting reverberated down the dimly lit corridor, causing the two detectives to swiftly pivot towards the commotion. A chaotic scene met their eyes as two burly officers struggled to restrain a man who was thrashing about and bellowing unintelligible obscenities.

“I guess the full moon is well and truly out,” Hayes said.

“So it seems,” Thompson said. “I just hope it passes before the entire city goes crazy.”

Chapter 20

Monday 2:30pm

Eli slouched in the sterile white leather chair, the silence in the conference room growing more pronounced in the company of the drug-and-alcohol tester. His lone figure occupied the boardroom table, surrounded by empty chairs and framed by two windows. He stared out into the world beyond, yearning for the freedom that felt like a fading memory from within the room's confining walls.

He should have heeded Grigory's advice, called in sick, and opted for a day spent with Tyler and Dylan. His mind, however, had been preoccupied and unfocused. Operating on autopilot, he fell into his desk chair, ignoring his colleagues.

In a matter of minutes, a person in a professional pant suit had directed him to accompany them to a private room for an impromptu drug and alcohol test. The outcome swiftly yielded a positive result, leaving him to wait as she contacted his superior.

Graham, his superior, soon arrived at the room, where the tester had briefly interviewed him before entering. After a brief exchange, she handed Graham a signed copy of the test results and departed. Graham perused the document before directing his gaze through the window at Eli. He adjusted his tie with an air of solemnity, then entered the room quietly, taking his place at the head of the table.

"Listen," Eli started. "It's just a layover from the weekend, that's all."

Graham held up his hand. "It doesn't matter, Eli," he said firmly, his tone clipped. "You know how seriously we take this. Coming in late was one thing, but this? Many people are up in arms about it, es-

pecially since we're in the middle of a major tender. And considering you played a key role in the project, it's all the more concerning. People are asking questions."

The manager's words hung heavily in the air, as Eli's heart sank even further. He knew acutely that he had disappointed not only himself but also his entire team and the company as a whole. With his head bowed, he couldn't bring himself to meet his manager's eyes.

Then he snapped his head up. "Wait. Played? Past tense. You're pulling me?"

"I'm telling you to go home and wait for my call. Some other conversations need to take place. But hey, who knows, you could be back in the chair tomorrow, after a successful test that is." He smiled weakly.

"Look, it's been a hell of a morning, I just need some time. I'm sorry, I just shouldn't have come to work this morning."

"Your damn right you shouldn't have come in. Now I'm going to need to go into my boss's office and explain why we should keep you around." He chewed his lip. "Go home, Eli."

"This is ridiculous."

"No, this is serious. It's going on your permanent record. There's nothing I can do about that. It's out of my hands now. HR will decide."

Eli chewed his lip, but then stood and walked out of the meeting room. He collected his satchel from his station. On the way to the lift well, he walked back past the conference room where he locked eyes with his boss. He was talking on his phone. Then Graham spun in the chair to face the window.

Eli clutched his satchel tightly as he briskly made his way towards his friend's apartment, the weight of the five grand inside seeming to bear down on him. Despite knowing that no one else could know

about the money, he couldn't shake the feeling that every passerby was scrutinizing his bag. His paranoia had reached such heights that when an elderly woman took a seat beside him on the train, he panicked and scrambled over her to put distance between them. Eventually, he found himself in the end carriage, clutching his bag tightly, realizing the irrationality of his actions in hindsight.

Eli's heart sank as he listened once more to Tyler's voicemail message, the familiar voice on the other end only deepening his sense of unease. He ended the call without leaving a message and forcefully pushed through the doors of Tyler's apartment complex. He had lost count of how many times he had tried to call both Tyler and Dylan, only to be met by their voicemail message. It was uncharacteristic of them to be so out of reach, and they hadn't reached out to him either.

Climbing the stairs to Tyler's front door, frustration boiled over, and Eli shouted out in exasperation, "God damn it, Tyler, you better be dead or dying or something." The words reverberated down the empty hallway, bouncing off the sterile white walls. Eli's mind raced with grim possibilities about what might have befallen his friend.

Upon reaching the front door, he called out again, "Tyler? Dylan?" He pounded on the door, which creaked open slowly. "Tyler? Dylan?" he repeated, this time in a hushed tone. He cautiously stepped into the dimly lit apartment. Slivers of afternoon sunlight filtered through the drawn curtains, casting elongated shadows across the room. Nothing seemed amiss, but Eli couldn't ignore the unusual detail of the unlocked door.

With trembling hands, he retrieved his phone from his pocket and dialed Tyler's number. His heart pounded as Tyler's unmistakable ringtone echoed from somewhere within the apartment. Eli took hesitant steps forward, his ears ringing with the growing volume of the ringing phone.

As he turned the corner, he abruptly halted in his tracks, confronted by a ghastly tableau. His heart raced as he grappled to com-

prehend the horrifying sight. He attempted to cry out, but his voice caught in his throat, leaving him gasping for air. His phone slipped from his trembling hand and crashed to the floor, playing Tyler's voicemail message upon impact.

There, before him, lay Tyler and Dylan, their hands bound and bullet holes in their chests. Their right hands were grotesquely twisted and battered, bloodstained, and bruised, with broken bones protruding from the skin at unnatural angles. Eli's gaze fixed on the fingers scattered on the floor amidst dried blood.

All he could do was stare in disbelief. His mind struggled to process the grotesque scene, unwilling to accept the horrifying reality unfolding before him. It felt like a nightmare, a dreadful dream from which he couldn't awaken. He stood frozen, unable to move, unable to breathe. The wounds, the blood, the shattered bones—nausea and dizziness overwhelmed him. He teetered on the verge of unconsciousness, but he couldn't tear his eyes away from the grisly tableau.

Eli couldn't recall anything that happened after making the call to emergency service.

Chapter 21

Monday 11:30am

Eli thought he was going to vomit as he tried to push the ever-growing presence of the gun pointed at his head out of his mind. His fingers moved frantically over the keyboard as he desperately sought a way past the bank's formidable security measures. Screen after screen flashed before his eyes, lines of code scrolling endlessly across the monitor. Despite his best efforts, each attempt was met with a daunting wall of rejection, and frustration mounted within him. Beads of sweat dripped down his forehead, and his eyes stung from the intensity of his focus.

Amidst the tension, Grigory's voice rang out, calling out time markers that added to the pressure. "Fifty seconds. Forty seconds." The countdown only amplified the urgency of the situation.

"I can't..." Eli's voice trailed off. Time was running out, and the situation was becoming increasingly dire. Yet he kept going, his fingers moving with renewed purpose as he searched for a way through the bank's impenetrable defenses.

"Come on Eli. Thirty seconds."

Eli's heart skipped a beat as he saw the lights on the screen turn green. He wiped the bead of sweat from his forehead, feeling a sudden surge of hope. "I'm in the first layer," he said. It was a minor victory, but it was a victory, nonetheless. He had breached the first line of defense, and he knew he had to keep going if he was going to succeed.

"Bullshit!" Fed cried out. "Not even Zero could get past the first layer."

“Yes, Eli, twenty-five to go,” Grigory said. “Watch and learn something, Fed.”

As he penetrated each defensive layer, he felt the pressure building. The presence of the gun swelled with each passing moment, the proverbial elephant. But he couldn't let that divert his attention. He had to focus.

“Twenty.”

“I'm close,” Eli cried. But he knew close would not be close enough. Not for Grigory, not in this little game.

“Ten.”

The sound of the gun's hammer clicking into place echoed in Eli's ears, and he felt a surge of fear wash over him as he could almost taste the cold metal of the gun in his mouth.

“I'm almost there.”

“Eight.”

“Wait,” Eli commanded, his eyes darting across the screen as he effortlessly switched between programs, creating, and then swiftly destroying pop-up windows. Each line of code he entered was a potential lifeline, a means of finding the chink in the armor that could save him from certain death. Despite the mounting pressure, Eli persevered, his fingers flying across the keyboard as he desperately searched for a solution to his dire predicament.

“Five,” the ominous countdown continued.

The gun pushed Eli's head towards his shoulder, but he refused to be deterred from his task. With unwavering focus, he continued to concentrate on breaking through the secondary layer, his eyes fixed on the screen as he typed furiously, determined to outmaneuver the threat looming over him.

“Four.”

His heartbeat pounded in his chest, the rhythmic thumping echoing in his ears like a relentless drumbeat.

“Three,” the ominous countdown persisted.

With a last burst of concentration, Eli's fingers flew over the keyboard, hitting the last button. He let out an audible sigh of relief, a mixture of tension and elation coursing through his veins.

"Done!" Eli exclaimed, pushing himself back from the desk and drawing in deep breaths. Grigory, with a hint of satisfaction, turned the laptop around to reveal a list of accounts, the fruits of Eli's labor displayed triumphantly on the screen.

As the realization of what he had accomplished washed over the room, Fed staggered towards the desk, his disbelief clear in his words. "Holy shit."

Grigory, his mood shifting, offered a smile to Eli. "I knew you could do it, Eli." But then his expression darkened as he turned his attention to Fed. "Fed, you have three seconds to leave the room."

Fed's bewilderment was palpable as he glanced at the imposing figure holding a firearm, then back to Grigory's stern face, and finally to the barrel pointed at his chest.

"But—" Fed stammered.

"Two."

Fed sprinted towards the door behind him.

"One."

As Fed reached for the handle, a boom echoed through the room, hitting him in the back of the head. A small spray of blood and brain matter splattered onto the carpet as his lifeless body crumpled to the ground.

Eli's eyes widened in shock as he looked down at the body of Fed, now lifeless on the ground. The realization of how close he had come to sharing the same fate hit him like a ton of bricks. He couldn't help but imagine himself in Fed's place, his brain matter splattered across the plush carpet. Grigory, meanwhile, seemed unfazed by the whole ordeal. He simply walked over to Eli and clapped him on the shoulder.

“You did good, kid,” he said with a grin. “Real good.” He bent down to peruse the screen.

“Why?”

Grigory looked up from the screen. “Why what?”

“Why did you have to kill him?”

“Well, in fairness, I like to think that *you* killed him. After all, it was you or him, and you *did* only give him three seconds. If you had finished quicker, poor Fed would have had more time to escape.”

Deep in his mind, Eli knew Grigory would never have let the poor soul out of the room. “You didn’t even finish the countdown!”

Grigory held his hands up in mock defense as he approached Eli. He sat the gun on the desk. “Alright, you got me, but the fact is, his usefulness had expired.”

“Is that all he was? A commodity? An asset with a shelf life?”

Grigory cocked his head. “Everything and everyone has a shelf life, Eli. The more one does to remain relevant, the longer one stays alive. It will serve you well to remember that.” Grigory extracted a card from his top pocket and placed it on the desk. “Open this account.”

Within a minute, Eli had opened the account, displaying the details on the screen.

“Hyun-woo. Are they a friend of yours?”

“The very best,” Grigory responded.

“The question is what are you going to do now?”

Grigory furrowed his brow. “What do you mean?”

“Well, getting in was the easy part. Getting the money out with no one noticing? That’s where the real skill is.”

Grigory put a finger on his lips and tapped. “You are absolutely right, Eli.” He pursed his lips. “Which means...” He picked up the gun and placed the barrel between Eli’s eyes. “You better get working.” He pulled out another card and flicked it over. “Put it in there.”

“How much of it?”

A devilish smirk crept across Grigory's face. "All of it."

A shiver ran up Eli's spine that sparked in the back of his neck. His friends said the same thing a few nights ago, and they had walked away quasi-multimillionaires. The money was still tied up in hidden holding accounts, and being the keeper of the keys meant he would release it in inconsequential waves to his friends, for their own good, to keep them out of trouble.

"I guess this Hyun-woo person must have really pissed you off."

"You have no idea. Now transfer it."

Eli utilized his own accounts he had set up years ago to route money around the globe. Money never stayed in one place too long, and eventually, it landed in Grigory's nominated account. It wasn't the cleanest bunch of transfers he had ever done—and he considered destroying his device because of it—but it sufficed to complete the task at hand.

As the last of Grigory's people left the room, Eli slumped down onto the leather sofa, his head heavy in his hands, trying to erase the images that had burned into his mind. They removed Fed's body, but the carpet remained stained. He couldn't help but wonder if this was a regular occurrence in the shady hotel.

Grigory lowered a glass in front of his face. "Here, drink this."

Eli refused the offer.

"Eli, its seventy-year-old scotch. Do you expect me to pour it back into the decanter?"

Eli slowly took the drink and stared into the brown liquid as Grigory settled in next to him.

"You've done well, Eli. I want to show my appreciation." Grigory lay down a neatly bound stack of notes on the glass coffee table and slid it over in front of Eli.

Eli looked down. "What do you expect me to do with that?"

Grigory sat back and crossed his legs. “It’s five thousand dollars in cash. I really don’t give a shit what you do with it. Buy a suit or give it to a homeless guy, it makes no difference to me.”

Eli carefully placed the heavy glass on the table. “I’m sorry, I just don’t know what the hell just happened. I don’t know what I’m doing here, and I don’t know who the hell you are. I was just minding my own business walking to work and the next thing I know I have a gun against my head and am hacking into a bank.”

Grigory placed a hand on Eli’s shoulder. “I can see how this is a lot for you to take in. You did me a massive favor. Hyun-woo is a piece of shit that deserves everything that’s coming to him. As for me, I can be your best friend. Don’t let the guns fool you, they are just for show. I’m really a nice guy.”

Eli scoffed as he thought about Grigory holding a gun against his head. “A nice guy that was going to shoot me?”

Grigory paused for a moment before speaking, “I wasn’t planning on shooting you, Eli. Everything worked out exactly the way it should have. This is just the way things are in my world.”

Grigory lifted his glass and gestured towards Eli, “Welcome to the realities of life.” He then took a long swig, savoring the taste of his drink.

Eli’s attention flickered back and forth between the money and the glass on the table as a business card appeared before him.

“If you ever need anything, Eli, anything at all, just call me. I can be your closest ally, someone who gets things done. And as you can imagine, we handle everything discreetly.”

“What exactly can you do? I thought you were in the import/export business.”

“That wasn’t a lie, Eli. I am in that business. I also have a network of loyal people who will do whatever I ask them to.”

Power and authority laced the man's words, and Eli couldn't help but feel a twinge of curiosity about what favors he could call upon if he accepted the offer.

Eli picked up the card. It was clean and simple, showing only a name and mobile number. The back was empty. "Not much of a business card."

"Well, in my world we don't advertise too much."

Eli placed it back on the tabletop and slid it over. "Thanks, but... I've got enough friends."

Grigory slid the card back. "Don't hurt my feelings, Eli. Take the card. You never know when you need more friends."

Eli picked up the business card, his hand trembling slightly as he held it, his mind racing with thoughts of how he could explain his recent activities to the police. He knew that the truth was too bizarre and far-fetched for anyone to believe, and the last thing he needed was to draw more suspicion to himself.

Taking a deep breath, he reminded himself of the staggering amount of money he had gained in thirty minutes, a sum that dwarfed his typical two-week earnings. He slipped the business card into his pocket, feeling a sense of unease mingling with his intrigue.

Grigory gestured around the room, a silent understanding passing between them. "I'm assuming that I don't need to mention that this series of events should stay between us."

Eli raised a glass to his lips and downed its contents in one gulp, the fiery liquid burning its way down his throat. He knew he needed to clear his head and plan his next move, but for the moment, all he could do was try to push the events of the past few hours out of his mind and hope they wouldn't come back to haunt him.

Grigory leaned in closer to Eli, his eyes narrowing. "If you've got friends, Eli, then go be with them. Spend your newfound cash on whatever you want—strippers, drugs, computers, I don't care."

With those words, Grigory stood and straightened his suit jacket, casting a last glance at Eli before turning on his heel. “I’ll be back in five minutes, and I expect you won’t be here when I return. Don’t make me regret the investment I’ve made in you.”

Eli sat with his thoughts as he watched Grigory’s departure, a mixture of relief and uncertainty churning in his gut.

Chapter 22

Monday 11:17am

The man stationed at the front entrance of Hotel Sylvester tipped his cap courteously and swung open the door for Grigory. Without pausing or breaking his stride, Grigory offered a nod of acknowledgment and confidently stepped into the hotel, crossing the expansive lobby. Despite his imposing presence, few among the bustling hotel staff and guests spared him more than a passing glance.

Behind the check-in counter, attendants were busy assisting arriving guests, while the concierge, with a map in hand, was attentively explaining directions with his pen. The lobby hummed with activity, each person immersed in their tasks.

Finally, they reached a bank of elevators adorned with silver doors reflecting their surroundings, framed by opulent gold moldings. Potted plants added a touch of greenery to the corners of the elegant space. Grigory extended his hand to press the ascending button, a round, classic fixture that complemented the hotel's timeless ambiance, reminiscent of a bygone era.

"This is an interesting place," Eli remarked.

"Oh, it most absolutely is," Grigory responded, staring at Eli's reflection.

"And what exactly are we doing here?"

Grigory turned to face him. "We are here to do some work."

"What work?"

Grigory held a finger to his lips, and the elevator doors parted. They stepped inside and Grigory hit the button for the top floor. When the doors closed, Eli asked his question again.

“What work?”

“Have you ever heard of the Bank of China?”

The words lay on top of him like a heavy blanket. “Of course. Besides dealing in bitcoin, their bank is the place for money to be safe. Their security is second to none.”

“Have you ever tried hacking their systems before?”

Eli contemplated the digital back door he had created just a few nights ago. While it wouldn't offer the same ease of entry as the front door, it could certainly simplify the entire process. “Maybe,” he mused quietly.

The elevator doors opened once more, and Grigory continued down the corridor. Natural light flooded the hallway through large windows, each pane framed by intricate wood carvings. Between the windows, an array of plants and pieces of artwork adorned the walls, showcasing a diverse range of artistic styles—countryside landscapes, portraits of people and animals, and even modern architectural designs.

Their journey led them to a set of grand double doors. With a final glance back at Eli, Grigory pushed the doors open and confidently entered the room beyond. A diverse crowd adorned the walls, some dressed in suits, others in snug-fitting shirts that accentuated their physique, all sporting sturdy boots. They erupted in cheers for someone seated at a desk, furiously typing away on a laptop keyboard.

The occupant had discarded their suit jacket, leaving it draped over the back of the chair, their sleeves rolled up past their elbows. Their gaze remained fixed on the screen, their focus unbroken as if they hadn't taken a breath in the past twenty minutes. Eli recognized that look; he had seen it before.

As the doors closed behind them, Eli hung back, allowing Grigory to stride purposefully toward the desk. With a sharp clap of his hands, Grigory silenced the boisterous revelry in the room.

“Well, Fed?” Grigory inquired, his voice carrying a subtle note of expectation.

The man at the desk looked up sheepishly from the keyboard, his fingers momentarily stilling their rapid dance across the keys. He shook his head, a hint of frustration and resignation in his expression. “Sorry, boss,” he admitted, his tone contrite.

Grigory acknowledged the effort with a nod but then decided it was time for a change. He turned away from the man and addressed the assembled crowd with a flourish. “Appreciate your efforts, Fed, but it’s time to make way for a true hacker.” Grigory’s sweeping gesture drew all eyes to Eli as he introduced him to the room. The crowd responded with applause, showing their approval and anticipation.

Eli, somewhat taken aback by the unexpected welcome, approached Grigory. He couldn’t help but inquire, “What is all this?”

“You’re going to show everyone here, especially Fed, how it’s done.”

“Show how what’s done?”

“You’re going to hack into the Great Bank of China.”

Fed closed the lid of his device, stood, claimed the device and his jacket, and skulked over to the corner of the room. Someone approached Eli and relieved him of his backpack, but before he could protest, Grigory clicked his fingers in front of his face.

“Concentrate, Eli. This is especially important.”

“Who are these people?”

“My workers.”

Eli looked around. He felt very out of place and his heart rocketed. “Without accessing the backbone of their system, it’s going to take me quite a while.”

“But you’ve done it before... Maybe,” Grigory finished with a shrug, ending with a replay of Eli’s earlier answer.

“Fine,” Eli relented. “I’ve done it before, but I was on the bank’s Wi-Fi, which made the task infinitely easier.”

“Relax, Eli. There is a branch within proximity.” He waved a hand over the desk. “Please.”

Eli watched a man place his laptop on the desk and open the screen. Under the watchful eyes of the room, Eli rounded the desk and sat. It was an unnerving feeling as he fired up his device.

“How long?” Grigory asked.

“How long what?”

“How long is it going to take you to gain access?”

“Given the exploits I’ve created, on an unfamiliar wireless network, I’d say about twenty minutes, if I’m lucky.”

Grigory smiled and looked at his watch. “You have sixty seconds.”

Eli shook his head. “What? It can’t be done.”

Grigory opened his jacket and retrieved a black Ruger.

“What the hell is that?” Eli asked, staring at the weapon.

“Oh, this,” Grigory said, holding up the gun. “This is my motivation technique. It’s amazing what people can accomplish with a little...”

“Threat?” Eli finished.

“Inspiration,” Grigory corrected.

Eli’s breaths became shallow and rapid as he struggled to keep his composure. His heart pounded against his ribcage with each passing moment, and he felt as though his entire body was on the verge of collapse. The weight of the situation was beginning to take its toll on him, and he knew that he had to stay calm if he was going to make it out of this alive.

Grigory looked at his watch. “Sixty seconds, Eli. Starting... now.”

Eli couldn’t break his trance from the gun.

Grigory clicked his fingers. “Fifty-nine, Eli. Come on.”

Chapter 23

Monday 9:06am

“And what do you do exactly?”

Eli’s voice was oddly out of place in the midst of the older men in their expensive suits. They sat around him at their respective tables, drinking coffee and eating egg-white omelets, their hushed conversations creating a white noise that seemed to amplify Eli’s voice.

The phone buzzed loudly on the table and Grigory edged forward to read the notification. He swirled his tongue inside his mouth, sat back, and crossed his legs, a smile on his face. “I’m in the import/export business.”

“And what do you import and export?” Eli picked up his saucer and took a sip. His shaking hands made for a wobbly trip until he could rest the edge of the cup on his lips and sip. The warmth helped to calm his nerves, not just because of the recent lifesaving event, but also because of where he was sitting. He felt underdressed in a room full of powerful-looking people adorning business suits discussing enterprising tactics and strategy in hushed voices. He viewed them from the corner of his eyes as he quietly sipped the expensive coffee, which was brought to the table on a tray, and poured before his eyes by an older man who could have been a butler of a nineteenth-century Lord, into a cup that was probably older than his grandmother. All of that was very different from the five-dollar takeaway he would usually buy from the café under his building. That tasted like crap. This was heaven, despite the surroundings, to which he owed the gentleman opposite.

Grigory mirrored Eli's movements, but his were fluid and his hands steady as a rock. He didn't lean one way or the other and remained perfectly still, legs crossed. "I import and export whatever my clients want... but that's not important. You were saying you work for Ostium Solutions."

"Yeah, for a couple of years," Eli replied, his tone laced with a tinge of bitterness. He thought about his rapid rise on the corporate ladder only to be stunted because of his talent. Apparently, they needed doers, not leaders. Managers were a dime-a-dozen, and finding someone with his level of skill was difficult, especially if you wanted someone to do it legally.

"And what exactly do they do?"

"IT solutions."

"And you, specifically?"

"I identify gaps in company IT infrastructure and digital security, exploit it, then create a solution that fills the gaps."

Grigory listened with interest, his piercing eyes scrutinizing every aspect of Eli's being, undistracted by any element of the environment. "So, you're a hacker?" he asked. "And you do this legally?"

"Yeah, I legally hack systems," he said with a smile. He loved telling people that. It was kind of like saying you were a cop and could legally carry a gun and run red lights.

"Private companies?"

"All companies."

"Well, I'm sure you've seen many things in your time."

Eli nodded, his mind filled with thoughts of top-secret projects involving missile guidance and satellite navigation systems. The defense contracts were a goldmine for their firm. "We deal with defense, intelligence agencies, financial sectors, the usual big players."

"Really?" Grigory stroked his chin, his interest piqued. "Are such systems vulnerable to hacking?"

Eli felt a tinge of discomfort. “In theory, yes. Anything connected can be compromised. The only way to ensure absolute security is to disconnect entirely. Get off the grid.”

Grigory raised an eyebrow. “But that would render such systems ineffective, wouldn’t it?”

“It’s a delicate balance,” Eli admitted. “You have to weigh the benefits of connectivity against the risks.”

“Interesting,” Grigory mused. “And outside of work, what occupies your time?”

“Nothing of interest,” Eli responded casually.

Grigory’s gaze seemed to probe deeper. “I would have thought someone of your caliber might exploit their skills for personal gain.”

Eli’s gaze shifted, a silent alarm sounding in his mind. This was dangerous territory, especially with someone he barely knew.

Grigory, noting the change in posture, commented, “It’s okay, Eli. I get it.” He leaned forward. “I mean, it’s not really something to talk about in a place like this, is it? I’m just saying that I know a lot of people who would pay a lot of money for your talents.”

Who? Like foreign governments? Terrorists? The room suddenly felt colder. Eli smiled uneasily. He never liked talking about these kinds of things, especially in public places, regardless of the other seemingly seedy conversations taking place around him. He knew, more so than others, that people were always listening. He shot some sideways glances as he took another sip.

Eli cleared his throat. “Well, I’m always looking for opportunities to improve myself.”

“Very good, Eli.” Grigory downed the remainder of coffee in his cup, placed it back in the saucer, and stood up whilst buttoning his jacket. “Drink up, Eli; we’ve got somewhere to be.”

Eli downed the last of his coffee and quickly got up to leave with Grigory. As they stepped out of the cafe, Grigory smoothly put on a pair of expensive sunglasses.

“Did we need to fix up the bill?” Eli asked.

Grigory called out over his shoulder. “They’ll add it to my tab.”

Chapter 24

Monday 8:48am

Eli stood at the pedestrian crossing, his foot tapping a restless rhythm on the pavement. He glanced at his phone again, the screen lighting up with the same lack of new messages. The weekend had been a whirlwind—from the unexpected windfall he and his friends had diverted into their secret accounts to the missed call from his mother. Guilt gnawed at him, not just for the financial escapade but also for ignoring his mother’s attempt at reconciliation. Maybe she was extending an olive branch, or perhaps it was just another false hope. He pondered calling her back as the pedestrian signal turned green, accompanied by a sharp beep.

Merging with the flow of the crowd, a sea of suits brandishing briefcases and the aroma of morning coffee swept Eli along. The city’s pulse seemed to echo his restlessness, a constant reminder of the mundane cycle of his daily life.

His thoughts drifted to Tyler and Dylan. He had messaged them earlier, curious about their latest antics, but the silence from their end was unusual. They were probably recovering from their weekend adventures, he mused.

To escape his spiraling thoughts, Eli cranked up the volume on his music player, letting the rhythm envelop him. Yet, the music did little to distract him from the monotony of his surroundings. He loathed this part of his commute—the long walk from the train station to their new, overly extravagant office building of his work.

As he walked, a woman ahead of him captured his attention, her confident stride, and sway of her hips, distracted him from his

brooding thoughts. He quickened his pace, following her until she veered off towards an underground parking lot.

Just then, his phone vibrated. Expecting a message from Tyler, his brother's name on the screen disappointed him, causing him to stop at the edge of a driveway. Sighing, he wondered what family drama awaited him this time. Danny was mum's favorite, always was, and always will be. But his father was different, and the pain of disappointing him was something he pushed to the side. He sent the call to voicemail, deciding to deal with it later, perhaps after a drink or two.

As he was about to recommence his journey, the roar of an engine mixed with squealing tires emitted from the bowels of an underground parking garage. A van veered around the corner and recklessly rocketed up the ramp toward them. A distracted stranger, with a phone against their ear, stepped into the van's path.

Without thinking, Eli lunged forward, pushing the man out of harm's way. They both hit the ground hard, narrowly avoiding the van which sped off down the road, consumed by other road traffic.

Amid the flurry of onlookers rushing to their aid, Eli stood unsteady, sensing the color drain from his face. The stranger he had rescued also found his balance and, with a firm grip on Eli's shoulders, conveyed his profound gratitude.

"You've just saved my life. I can't believe what's just happened, but you're a hero. I owe you my life. Thank you."

The crowd echoed the sentiment before dispersing back into their daily routines. Eli stood there, dazed and trembling, processing the surreal turn of events. In just a few seconds, his mundane morning had transformed into something entirely unexpected.

"It was nothing, really," Eli said. "Just instinct."

The man turned Eli back towards where he had come from and placed an arm around his shoulder. "Please, let me buy you a coffee. It's the least I can do."

Eli turned. "Look, I appreciate it, but I've really got to get to work."

"Come on, I'm sure your boss will understand. You're a hero. Let me repay you."

"But—"

"Less talking, more walking," the man said as he threw his arm around Eli's shoulder and took off, urging Eli to follow him.

Eli stumbled at first, trying to keep up with the man's brisk pace, but he quickly found his footing and matched his stride.

"My name is Grigory. What's yours?"

"Eli."

"Wonderful, Eli. Let's add some breakfast to your coffee."

"I don't want to interrupt your workday," Eli said.

"Nonsense," the man replied. "Work isn't important. What is important, is you."

Chapter 25

Sunday sunset

Agony, a primal element of the human condition, was about to be demonstrated in its rawest form. Dima stood over Dylan and Tyler, who were bound naked to wooden dining chairs, their wrists, and ankles secured with silver tape. Their heads hung low, mouths sealed with wide strips of silver tape, and bruises marring their faces—the remnants of Dima’s forceful methods to render them unconscious. Now, ironically, he needed to bring them back to awareness, a task he approached with a dark sense of amusement: pain as both a means to silence and to awaken.

He delivered a sharp slap to Tyler, the force jolting his head to the side and eliciting a muffled groan through the tape. Dylan required more effort—several additional strikes before he showed signs of consciousness. Gradually, they stirred, their heads bobbing weakly as they struggled against the fog of unconsciousness. Slowly, their eyes fluttered open.

The room had darkened, resembling the dimming light of sunset, illuminated only by a few switched-on lamps. The room bore the chaotic marks of a search—furniture piled against the walls, books yanked from shelves, a desk in the corner cluttered with scattered papers and miscellaneous items.

As consciousness fully took hold, the gravity of their predicament dawned on them. They struggled against their restraints, their moans growing more frantic, especially as Dima, an imposing figure, paced before them.

“Soon,” he murmured with a chilling, toothy grin.

At that moment, Grigory entered the apartment, flanked by his entourage which included Petrov, Oskar, and a group of menacing men. Their large frames made the doorway seem almost too small.

Grigory surveyed the scene with a critical eye. “These are the ones?” he asked, his gaze fixed on the bound figures. “These two are responsible for my missing money?” The air in the room grew heavy with tension, the stakes of the situation palpably high.

“They said they found the money,” Dima said. “We’ll make them tell us where they got it.”

Grigory observed the scene with a calculated gaze, his arms folded across his chest. “Have you found any tech here that we can send to Zero?” he inquired, his voice carrying an undertone of urgency.

Dima gestured towards the desk where two laptops lay in disarray. One of Grigory’s men promptly collected them, positioning himself near the door, the laptops now under his watch.

Oskar, impatient and visibly confused, made his way to the front. “Grigory, what’s going on? I thought we were here to discuss logistics for the shipment,” he said, his tone laced with frustration.

Grigory offered a sly smile in response. “This situation is a necessary step towards resolving our shipment issues,” he explained, his eyes briefly flicking to the bound men.

Oskar glanced skeptically at Dylan and Tyler, their predicament seemingly unrelated to their original agenda. “If you’d fill me in on the details, I could get a head start on the shipment while you sort this out,” he suggested, eager to move things along.

With a reassuring slap on Oskar’s shoulder, Grigory replied, “Patience, Oskar. Everything will unfold in time.”

“Well, what am I doing here, then?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t want you to miss this.”

With a snap of his fingers, Grigory commanded the attention of the room. As if on cue, a chair appeared behind him. He eased himself into it with a deliberate slowness, crossing one leg over the other

at the knees. He stretched his arms out wide before letting them fall gracefully to rest upon his legs, assuming a posture of relaxed authority.

“Now,” Grigory began, his voice calm yet laced with an undercurrent of threat, “I’m going to ask you some questions. You’re going to answer them. I trust I don’t need to elaborate on the consequences of dishonesty.”

Dylan and Tyler, still bound and visibly distressed, continued to struggle against their zip ties. Grigory’s expression flickered with irritation, and he gave Dima a pointed look. In response, Dima stepped forward and delivered a sharp backhand to each of the captives, eliciting muffled whimpers from behind their taped mouths.

After the brief display of force, both men nodded in understanding, their movements now more subdued.

Meanwhile, Oskar, sensing the tension and perhaps seeking an escape from the unfolding drama, subtly moved towards the door. The imposing presence of a large man blocking the exit abruptly halted him. After a brief, uneasy glance upward, Oskar retreated to a shadowed corner near the desk, staying out of the way but close to the action.

Grigory, maintaining his composed demeanor, addressed the captives again. “Staying calm is in your best interest,” he advised. “Do you understand?”

Their nods, accompanied by pained moans, indicated their reluctant compliance.

The tension in the room escalated as Dima methodically began his interrogation. He started by peeling back the tape from Tyler’s mouth. The moment his lips were free, Tyler let out a scream, but it was swiftly silenced as Dima resealed the tape and delivered a punishing punch to his face. The force of the blow knocked Tyler’s chair over. Dima quickly righted the chair, leaving Tyler dazed, blood trickling from his nose.

Without hesitation, Dima then turned his attention to Tyler's hand, gripping a finger and wrenching it to a grotesque angle. The sound of a loud crack filled the room, followed by Tyler's muffled cries of agony, his body writhing to escape the pain.

Dylan, witnessing this brutal act, struggled to suppress his nausea, gasping for air and whimpering in despair. His head shook frantically, a silent plea for mercy.

Dima, amused by Dylan's terror, leaned in close, blowing away the sweat-soaked hair from Dylan's forehead. His laughter was cold and devoid of empathy. "I've always wondered what's worse," he mused, "having your own fingers broken or watching someone else endure it, knowing you're next."

Dylan's trembling intensified, his fear palpable.

Dima's words were chilling. "Tonight, you two are a package. What happens to one, happens to the other."

With cruel precision, Dima then seized Dylan's pinky finger, pulling it violently. Dylan's reaction was immediate and visceral. He threw his head back, his body convulsing in a desperate attempt to escape the unbearable pain. His world became a blur of colors, his breathing erratic and uncontrollable. The sound of his agony echoed in his ears, a haunting reminder of their dire situation.

"Jesus Christ," Oskar called out. "Is this necessary?"

"Yes," Grigory responded. "This is how I deal with people who have wronged me." He held up a finger. "One hundred percent success rate. It really is the only way."

He returned his attention to his prisoners and took in the sight of the mangled fingers. "I guess that's going to make it pretty fucking hard to work a keyboard isn't it?" He leaned in and spoke, letting the words flow without a hint of emotion. "In Islamic culture, they remove the hands of people as punishment for theft, not for fun or to torture, but as a sign for others."

Two of Grigory's men stepped forward, each flattening a prisoner's hand, and held it steady as they withdrew a knife and held it against a finger.

"Now, I'm not some Islamic fundamentalist, I am a businessman. So I'm going to give you an opportunity to save your precious digits. Nod if you understand."

Tyler and Dylon both nodded energetically.

"Excellent. We will start with some very simple questions that simply require a yes or no response. Nod if you understand."

They repeated their movements.

"Good. Question one. Did you hack into the Great Bank of China last night?"

Tyler's nod was quick, his eyes darting to Dylan, who, even in his peripheral vision, was shaking his head in denial.

Grigory's jaw tightened, a clear sign of his growing impatience. With a subtle nod from him, the grim sequence of events unfolded.

The knife, wielded with merciless precision, sliced through Dylan's skin, grating against bone. Dylan's body convulsed in response to the excruciating pain, his muffled screams filling the room as the man continued his brutal task. Finally, with a sickening finality, Dylan's little finger was severed, falling to the floor. His body, overwhelmed by the trauma, began to shut down, redirecting its resources to preserve vital functions. Blood trailed down the chair and pooled on the floor, his eyelids fluttering weakly, his head lolling to the side.

The pain that followed was relentless, escalating from a sharp discomfort to an unbearable agony, cruelly snapped Dylan back to the horrific reality of his situation: bound, mutilated, in agonizing pain, and with dwindling hope for survival. The sensation was like countless knives dragging across his hand and up his arm, forcing him to clench his jaw and shut his eyes tightly, trying to silently endure the torment.

Glancing at Tyler, Dylan saw his friend had suffered a similar fate. The sight was nauseating, even through his haze of pain and shock.

Grigory, seemingly unphased, sighed. "Okay, let's try this again. Did you hack into the Great Bank of China last night?"

Both Tyler and Dylan, their heads heavy with pain and despair, nodded.

"See? That wasn't so hard, was it? Now, if you want to keep what's left of your fingers, you'll answer faster. Next question. Did you find an account with a substantial amount of money?"

Again, they nodded.

"Was it fifty-eight million dollars?"

They nodded once more.

"And did you transfer that money out?"

The same nodding response.

"And will I find evidence of this transfer, including the destination of the money, on your devices?"

This time, they both shook their heads vigorously. Grigory scrutinized them, his gaze shifting between the two.

"Oskar," he called out. Oskar, previously lurking in the shadows, stepped forward. "Take Sasha's knife." The man next to Dylan, identified as Sasha, extended his knife towards Oskar.

"This really isn't my thing, boss."

"I don't care if it's your thing or not. Hold it to his neck," Grigory instructed, pointing to Dylan.

Oskar slowly accepted the weapon and carefully took up the position behind the restrained man.

"Now," Grigory continued, "we are going to delve into more elaborate questions that require a more detailed answer, however, the same rules apply. If you scream, if I think you're trying to play me, if I think you're lying, you will die. Nod if you believe me."

They both nodded, Dylan only slightly, obviously concerned about the sharp metal across his Adam's apple. Dima pulled the tape from their mouths, and silence ensued.

"Good," Grigory sneered. "Now, why won't I find any evidence on your devices?"

Neither man spoke.

"Oskar," Grigory said.

"Wait," Tyler said. He took a breath. "You won't find anything on our tech because he didn't use our laptops. He used his own."

"And this person moved my money into some other account?"

They nodded.

"Can either of you get it back?"

The two friends remained steadfast.

Grigory rubbed his temples. "Who's the *he*? Who did this?"

Once more, they stayed completely still.

"Gentlemen, do I need to remind you what's at stake?"

Eyes widened.

Grigory sighed. "Oskar."

Oskar tightened his grip on Dylan.

"Wait!" Tyler shouted. "I'll tell you."

"Don't!" Dylan said.

"I have to."

"No, you don't."

"Eli wouldn't rat us out!"

Grigory stood. "So, Eli." He checked his watch. "Tell me about him."

Dylan's eyes closed slowly, a mix of pain and resignation washing over him. The agony of his injuries and the cold, threatening press of the knife against his neck had overwhelmed him, stripping away his ability to guard his words.

Under the unbearable pressure, both he and Tyler divulged everything—every detail about Eli, including where he lived and

worked. Once the torrent of information ceased, Dylan's head dropped, weighed down by a crushing blend of exhaustion and shame. He had betrayed his friend to save himself, yet somewhere deep down, he clung to the hope that Eli would understand and, perhaps in time, even forgive him.

Dima turned to Grigory, seeking direction. "What's the next move, boss?"

Grigory, his demeanor calm and calculated, opened his jacket to retrieve his gun. He then signaled to one of his men, gesturing towards the couch. The man understood immediately and fetched a pillow.

"Boss," Oskar said. "Let me deal with them. You don't want to get blood on that nice suit of yours."

Grigory smiled. "I've never asked my men to do something I wouldn't do myself. Besides, this is personal, beyond personal."

"I think this is out of control."

"Dear, Oskar. The one thing you need to know about me is that I'm always in control."

He snapped his fingers, and in a flash, Sasha reclaimed his knife and pushed a bag over Oskar's head, pinning an arm behind his back.

"What the hell is going on, Grigory?" Oskar yelled.

"Get him out of here," Grigory ordered.

In response to the order, Sasha forcibly escorted Oskar out of the apartment. Grigory, now holding the pillow, positioned his gun against it, directing the muzzle straight at Dylan. His eyes held a dangerous glint.

"Now," Grigory began, his voice eerily calm, "this won't hurt a bit."

Chapter 26

Sunday afternoon

Oskar's entrance into the bar forced a subtle shift in the atmosphere. The muffled sound of Grigory's voice grew clearer with each step, guiding Oskar through the dimly lit interior. As he rounded a corner, Oskar found Grigory concluding a conversation with a younger man. Both men looked up, their attention momentarily diverted by Oskar's arrival.

Grigory placed a hand on the young man's shoulder. "Thank you, Petrov," he said, a gesture of dismissal that sent Petrov blending back into the shadows against the wall.

With Petrov gone, Grigory made his way to a table set in the center of the room. The surrounding furniture had been rearranged, stacked haphazardly against each other and along the booths that lined the walls, creating an open space around the table.

Oskar, taking in the scene, commented with a hint of surprise, "I didn't realize you were interested in bars."

"This isn't just a bar," Grigory responded, as he looked around. "Well, at least it won't be for long. The renovations have ceased momentarily as we work through some operational challenges."

"I see," Oskar replied, cupping his hands in front of himself. "So, what can I do for you, boss?"

Grigory leaned back, the chair squeaking, the look on his face portraying deep contemplation, likely considering his next move. Then his expression changed, morphing into a cold, emotionless stare that he often wore. It was impossible to discern whether a hand-

shake or bullet was coming one's way, or possibly both. Oskar swallowed hard, bracing himself for what was to come.

"It was Pierre who recommended you to us in the first place, wasn't it?"

Oskar shifted uneasily on his feet and tried to figure out whether or not it was a rhetorical question. It was indeed Pierre who had recommended him, the same Pierre that was involved in a myriad of underworld activity and had been sent down for life, but not before making a sweet little deal. He nodded.

"Yeah, I thought so. I heard some news on the grapevine and wanted your thoughts on it." Grigory pulled out his matte black Ruger, placed it gently on the tabletop in front of him, and spun it.

Oskar watched it hypnotically and shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, it turns out Pierre was a snitch."

Oskar swallowed.

"Yeah," Grigory continued. "He had been flapping his gums all over the place."

Grigory slammed his hand down on the gun, the sudden action catching Oskar off guard, causing him to freeze in fear as in one swift motion, Grigory picked up the weapon, cocked it, and aimed it directly at Oskar.

Taking a half step back, Oskar realized he could not negotiate or reason with Grigory, who seemed determined to carry out his deadly intentions. Oskar knew that at this range, even a slight movement could trigger Grigory's violent response, and the consequences would be dire.

Grigory continued, his look darker. "So much so that he was getting out of jail soon, seven months of a thirty-year sentence."

"Was?"

Grigory smirked. "I believe his tongue nor protrudes out the side of his neck."

Oskar faked a smile. “Well, he’s a fucking rat. I heard nothing about it when I was with him.”

Grigory pulled back on the trigger.

Click.

Oskar’s body tensed at the sound of the hammer dropping, his heart pounding in his chest. He flinched involuntarily, his muscles tightening as his breath caught in his throat. For a split second, he thought his life was about to end.

The room fell silent, and Oskar’s mind raced with fear and uncertainty. He didn’t know what to expect next or how he could escape from this dangerous situation. He felt trapped, helpless, and completely at Grigory’s mercy.

Grigory placed the gun back down, leaned forward, and propped his chin up on his hands. “Which is why there are no bullets in this gun.” He chuckled like it was an innocent comment, a prank, a gesture of goodwill between friends.

Oskar failed to see the humorous side of it. He slowly let out his breath, a barely audible hiss.

“I have something important for you to be part of.”

“I heard some rumors about a shipment. Is this about the shipment?”

“Yes,” Grigory said. “I suppose it is.”

“Just tell me what I need to do.”

“We are going to see some people, and I want you to tag along.”

Oskar’s heart rate increased a little at this. It is exactly what he had been waiting for, to be trusted, to be included in the deal he was there to understand.

“When are we going?” he asked.

“Immediately,” Grigory replied. “I think you’re going to enjoy this.”

Chapter 27

Sunday midday

Tyler and Dylan, seeking refuge from the scorching sun, positioned themselves in the narrow alleyway behind their building. It was the familiar rendezvous point for their meetings with Berke, if that was indeed his real name. It was something they accepted and never considered further.

They leaned against the wall of their building next to each other and attempted to merge with the thin strip of shadow cast by the building. Their eyes were alert, scanning the street for the familiar sight of their long-haired supplier's car, from which they expected the usual handoff—a bag casually tossed out the window. If luck was on their side, Berke might even linger for a joint before disappearing into the city. Regardless, Tyler and Dylan had plans to spend the ensuing hours lounging on their sofa, indulging in the 'medicinal' benefits of their purchase.

The silence of the alley was typical, but Dylan, ever restless in quiet moments, broke it with his habitual, aimless chatter. "So, what's the plan with your share of the money?" he asked casually.

Tyler looked at his friend and smiled. "I'm doing it right now."

Dylan scoffed. "No, I mean long term."

"I going to walk into the casino and put it all on black and see what happens."

"Shit, really?"

Tyler looked at him. "No."

"Well, I wish Eli would just transfer our share."

"It'll happen, just be patient."

“I’d rather buy an island and party with a bunch of bikini-clad babes.”

“Yeah, that wouldn’t raise any eyebrows. The delay is for security purposes.”

“Yeah, well I think it’s for *‘pissing me off’* purposes.”

“Dylan, do you have a shitload of money stashed away in a secret bank account only you can access?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Then shut up.”

The wait in the alleyway stretched on, punctuated by the occasional car that slowed down, raising Dylan and Tyler’s hopes, only to dash them as none were Berke. Each false alarm added to their growing impatience. Dylan, glancing at his watch, let out a disappointed sigh.

“So, what do you think Eli’s up to?” he asked, attempting to fill the void of silence with some form of conversation.

Tyler was just about to respond, perhaps with a witty retort, a black car with tinted windows abruptly captured their attention. The vehicle aggressively pulled into the alley and halted sharply in front of them. The large engine idled with a deep rumble, drawing both Dylan and Tyler closer, their eyes reflecting a mix of admiration and curiosity. “Damn, Berke,” Dylan remarked, impressed. “You’ve really outdone yourself this time.”

Their history with Berke had been filled with surprises, including the time he arrived in a stolen ambulance, a memory that now brought a mix of amusement and disbelief. They had watched the news later that night, learning about the stolen ambulance found just blocks away, and couldn’t help but cheer at the audacity of it all.

The duo snapped back to reality as the front passenger door swung open. Out of the passenger side, a lean young man got out. One first appearance, the two friends might have thought they might have been friends, given their similar appearance however the rest of

their interaction would prove to be false. He walked to the front of the car and stood, arms folded, just staring.

“Who the hell are you?” Dylan asked.

The driver’s side then opened, revealing a figure that contrasted starkly with the first. A bald man with a snarl permanently etched on his face stepped out, his every movement seeming to emanate a palpable sense of threat. Each of his steps sent a subtle tremor through the alley, compelling Dylan, and Tyler to instinctively step back. The man’s presence was imposing, and as he reached the front of the car, he removed his jacket.

“Who the hell are you two?” Tyler asked tentatively.

“Yeah,” Dylan added. “Where’s Berke?”

The wrestler gently laid his jacket on the hood of the car without saying a word. His biceps were impossibly huge, and the shirt, which seemed two sizes too small, clung to them for dear life. He flexed his muscles.

“I am Dima, and my associate here is Petrov.” The deep voice, heavy with an Eastern Bloc accent, resonated distinctly. “Which one of you two is Tyler?”

Both stood paralyzed with fear, their stress responses kicking in.

Tyler attempted to shift the tone and ease the tension, his mind occupied with thoughts of Eli’s ability to handle demanding situations. He racked his brain, recalling every instance where Eli had successfully defused confrontations. It was all about attitude, Tyler thought. With a deep breath, he mustered his confidence.

“You haven’t answered our questions.”

The man’s finger pointed at Tyler’s face, its mere presence threatening to shatter their bones. “So, it’s you,” he growled, eyeing Tyler with suspicion. In an instant, the hulking figure had Tyler pinned against the wall, his massive biceps flexing as he exerted his strength.

Tyler tried to remember all the times Eli had saved them. Playing dumb. That was it. Not attitude. Shit! He needed to think fast.

“What the hell are you doing?” he feigned innocence, hoping to catch the man off guard.

“Yeah, what the fuck!” Dylan said as he rushed from the side to protect his friend. Over the years, Eli had always been the one to come to Tyler’s aid, to talk their way out of trouble after Tyler chatted up the wrong girl or made some smart-ass comments to some burly gym junkies, but now it was up to Dylan.

As Dylan approached, a fist flew from beyond his periphery vision and rocketed into his face. There was a loud crack as Dylan dropped like a stone, moaning, and grabbing his face. Petrov stood over him. “Stay out of it,” he warned.

“What do you want,” Tyler pleaded, his voice shaky.

Dima moved in even closer, invading Tyler’s personal space. Tyler couldn’t help but lock eyes with the intimidating figure. The stare was so intense that Tyler felt as if he was under Dima’s control. Tyler tried to ignore the potent scent of herring and vodka that wafted through Dima’s curled lips and into his nostrils.

He tried to break the stare, but Dima’s grip on his collar tightened. “Where’s Berke?” he asked, hoping to redirect the conversation.

Dima smirked. “You won’t be seeing or hearing from him ever again. This is our territory now.”

Tyler’s heart sank, thoughts of what they had done to him, what they might do to them, flooded his mind. *Play dumb. Yeah, that’s what Eli would do. Wait, no, not playing dumb. Shit, what was it? Personable, make a connection, and get on their good side. Yes, that was it.* Tyler took a deep breath and tried to sound calm and friendly.

“Look, sir, we don’t want any trouble. I never liked Berke anyway, too weedy, and did too many drugs if you ask me. M-m-my account’s up to date, isn’t it? And if you need anything extra, just name it, and I’ll take care of it.”

Dima snarled, grabbed Tyler by the shoulders, and forcefully slammed him against the wall, causing his head to collide with the surface and leaving a bloody mark. “Money must be of no issue to you,” he taunted. A large hand around his neck.

“I can pay you,” Tyler wheezed. “Name your price. Whatever your boss is paying you, we’ll double it.”

Dima released his grip. “Get the other one up here,” he ordered.

Petrov picked up Dylan and pushed him against the wall next to his friend, pulled out a gun, and pointed it at him.

Dima sniffed them. “So much money, huh? I can smell it on you. It’s overpowering your fear and your bullshit. Where did you get all that money?”

“I... I...” Tyler’s stuttered.

With arms like sturdy tree trunks, Dima pinned Tyler to the wall once more as he pulled out a gun from his waistband and lowered it to Tyler’s groin.

Tyler tried to back away, to climb up the wall away from the gun, away from the monster that was pinning him against the wall. He turned to Dylan. “Answer the question, unless you want your friend here to be a... *devushka*.”

“We found it,” Dylan blurted out.

Dima nodded, and Petrov stepped forward, pushing the barrel of his gun against Dylan’s lips. “Open your mouth,” Petrov instructed. He parted his quivering lips, and Petrov pushed the barrel inside.

Dima turned his head back to Tyler. “Where did you find it?”

Tyler couldn’t form the words in his mind, let alone articulate them with his mouth.

“You better talk fast, before me and my comrade pull our triggers.”

“In a bank account,” Tyler blurted out.

Dylan looked over, his eyes pleading.

“Oh,” Dima breathed. “Is that right?” He looked between them. “so which of you two can transfer that money, and which can I kill right now, huh?”

Silence, apart from the whimpering breaths from both victims held at gun point, the traffic blending into the background like a distant hum. Dima smiled. “Very well.” He looked over to Petrov. “Go get the boss. I’m sure he’ll want to talk with them. I’ll stay with our new friends.”

“What are you going to do?” Petrov asked.

“I think it’s time we took our little conversation to a more private setting, where we can be a little more persuasive.”

Both Tyler and Dylan swallowed hard.

Reality sunk in.

They were in some serious shit.

Chapter 28

Sunday morning

Dima stood at the center of the dimly lit warehouse, surrounded by a team of loyal workers. From boots on the ground to experts: firearms experts, munitions experts, drug experts. Every person present, from the dealers to the workers, had a role to play in their operation. Dima looked each one of them in the eye as he spoke, making sure they understood the gravity of the situation. His boss was on the warpath, and it was up to Dima to ensure that everyone in the room was aware of the stakes.

He spoke with a gravity that left no room for humor or distractions. His tone was serious, his snarl unwavering, and his finger pointed with purpose. He was rallying his team, and they knew it. Each member nodded in agreement; their restlessness was born not of nerves but of a shared desire to track down those responsible. It was as if they were prize fighters, each psyching themselves up before entering the ring. The anticipation hung thick in the air, and they were ready to spring into action.

“He’s pissed, he wants a fucking head on a platter. Not only is the deal and our future in jeopardy, but he has lost his brother... *your* brother.”

The circle tightened as the crew put their arms around each other like a sports team getting ready to take the court or field. Dima, their captain, stood in the center, relaying the coach’s orders and getting everyone’s head in the game.

“Talk to everyone. Every network, every person, every piece of shit you know. Someone must have heard something, know some-

thing, or done something. Check those that are selling, check those that are buying. Look for anything out of the ordinary. And to sweeten the deal, there is twenty-five thousand dollars to the person who helps us find these assholes.”

Dima had reduced the reward money, skimming half for himself, convinced it wouldn't harm anyone. He knew that for the people in his crew, money wasn't the only motivator. They relished inflicting pain, especially on those who crossed their company. The money was merely a bonus, a cherry on top.

Dima kept spinning, maintaining eye contact, and speaking to every person. He eventually locked eyes with Petrov, the newest dealer in their group. Petrov was in the circle, arm in arm with his fellow members, getting jostled around. Dima placed his hands on Petrov's shoulders and declared, “We will not be made fools of.”

As Dima made his final remark, the entire group erupted in cheers. It was exactly the effect Dima had hoped to achieve. He remained in the warehouse, watching as the last of his men departed for their respective businesses, ready to start their search for information.

As he looked around the empty room, his gaze fell on Petrov, who was standing in a corner, engrossed in his phone. Dima approached the new dealer and stood over him, asking, “Is everything alright?” His tone was somewhere between concern and a command to get going and find some leads.

“I have received a strange message,” he said.

“Strange, how?”

“They want a big order.”

“How big?”

Petrov handed the phone over. “They want everything.”

Dima grunted. “And willing to pay double. Who owned this?”

“Berke.”

“Ah, yes. One of the men in the water barrel.” Dima inspected the message once more, finally resting his eyes on the sender. “Tyler,” he enunciated.

He handed the phone back. “Reply as Berke and set the meeting up for midday. You can come with me when I visit them.”

“And present for the beating,” Petrov added, overly keen to negotiate the terms.

Yes, there were things more motivational than money.

Chapter 29

Sunday sunrise

The rising sun cast a golden glow over the city, and Grigory's gray-lensed sunglasses reflected the brilliant light. He leaned against his balcony railing, a steaming cup of espresso in his hand as he gazed out over the sprawling metropolis he was about to take over... provided he could find his money and secure the deal with Hyun-woo. And if he couldn't? That was another problem entirely.

The caffeine coursed through Grigory's veins, but it did little to alleviate the frustration and hatred that consumed him. He had spent the entire night trying to make sense of what had happened, re-playing the events of the previous night repeatedly in his mind. But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't find an explanation for how things had gone so wrong.

He took another sip of his espresso, hoping the bitter taste would help to ground him. Losing his brother had torn him apart, but he knew he couldn't let that slow him down. He had to find the people who had taken his money and screwed up the deal and make them pay.

There was a narrow window of opportunity, and Grigory knew he had to act quickly before it closed. He would have his revenge on Hyun-woo and anyone else who had crossed him. The thought of it fueled his anger and determination, and he set his jaw, ready to do whatever it took to get what he needed.

Grigory's computer expert, Zero, had spent the entire night at gunpoint trying to unravel the mystery behind the missing money. As the one who had set up the account and laundered the funds,

Zero was the prime suspect. However, he had proven his worth by showing up to face Grigory's wrath. If he had fled with the money, Grigory would have hunted him down and broken every bone in his body, and then the real pain would have begun.

Unfortunately, the perpetrator was skilled enough to cover their tracks, and Zero could only follow a trail that led to nowhere. The end of the trail was in cyberspace, lost in the vast expanse of the cloud, and there seemed to be no way to retrieve the stolen money. And so time ticked on, down to Hyun-woo's deadline. But when he found the perpetrator, he would make them pay dearly.

Grigory downed the last of his espresso, the bitterness of the drink mixing with the bitterness of his thoughts. The desire for revenge burned within him, but he knew he couldn't act on it yet. There were bigger things at play, and he couldn't risk losing everything he had worked for.

He stood up straight, his gaze fixed on the city below. The sun had risen higher in the sky, casting a warm glow over everything. But Grigory felt no warmth. He felt cold and calculating, his mind already working out his next move.

Dima stepped up behind him, a perpetual solemn look behind his sunglasses.

"I know you never cared overly for my brother," Grigory said.

Dima grunted in reply.

"I understand. He was family, after all."

"What do you want me to do, boss?" Dima asked.

Grigory leaned forward, his eyes burning with fury. He needed answers, and he needed them fast. Zero was doing all he could on the digital front, but Grigory needed someone to turn over every stone in the real world. He turned to Dima, his voice low and intense.

"I want you to create tremors," he said, his voice growing more urgent with each word. "I want you to look in every bush, under every rock. Shake down every supplier, dealer, user, crook, pimp,

hacker, slacker, mother fucker... everyone! I want to know who took my money and where it's gone. I want the money back and I want them to pay in blood."

Dima nodded, his expression grim. "Consider it done, boss. I'll see to it myself." He stopped at the door. "What do you want us to do when we find them?"

Grigory's voice was low and steady, belying the fury that simmered beneath the surface. "Dima, when we finally track down those responsible, I want you to be ready to have a little fun. We'll make sure they regret crossing us."

Tyler sluggishly pulled himself out of his bedroom to find Dylan standing naked in the lounge staring out the window eating a bowl of cereal. So many thoughts ran through his mind, chief of which was if they had any cereal left. Unfortunately for him, it wasn't the first time he had seen Dylan in the buff, and not by his choice.

Tyler groaned, rubbing his bleary eyes as he stumbled towards the kitchen. "For the love of god, Dylan, what the fuck are you doing?" he muttered.

The voice rang out from the lounge. "I'm doing it for our neighbors over the street."

"The widow, Mrs. Wesley?"

"Ha! She wishes. No! Above her! The Swedish twins."

Tyler picked up his phone that was charging on the kitchen counter and moved into the lounge. His shirt and boxers made him feel quite overdressed considering his naked company. He kept his gaze on the screen. "First of all, they're from the UK, and second, they're guys."

Dylan spun behind the wall and covered his manhood with his bowl. "What the fuck? Are you serious? I've been standing there all morning."

“Dylan, you stand there every morning, hoping that someone will see your junk. I’m beginning to think you’re a little bit of a deviant.”

Dylan spoke to himself. “Christ, they’ve been staring at it. Shit! Wait, are you sure they’re guys?”

Tyler shrugged. “You’re not the only ones who walk around naked, Dylan.”

Dylan threw his head against the wall. “Shit! I shouldn’t have done that other thing then.”

“What thing?”

“Well, I’m not going to tell you now!”

Tyler snorted. “Relax, you little deviant. I’m just fucking with you.”

Dylan looked at him in disbelief. “What? What? You son-of-a-bitch.” He trudged off the kitchen. “Just for that, I’m not putting on any pants today.”

There was a rummaging sound from the kitchen before Dylan, still naked, returned drinking a beer. “What are you doing today?”

“Well, I figure I’d make our weekly order. You know what, because of our recent windfall, I say we go big.”

“That’s exactly what Eli said we shouldn’t do.”

Tyler rolled his eyes. “One little splurge. We should be celebrating. Besides, all we’re doing is skimming a bit off the surface.”

“Fine. How big do you want to go?”

Tyler tapped his chin. “Let’s get it all.”

“All?”

“Hey, we took it all last night, let’s buy everything Berke has.”

“That could be a lot of shit.”

“Come on, it’s a onetime thing. Berke will get a kick out of it.”

“Berke will never give his entire assignment in one sale.”

“Fine, we’ll pay double then to sweeten the pot. No way he’s turning that down.”

Dylan sighed. Leaned back in the chair and placed an ankle on his other knee. “Fuck, it. Let’s do it.”

Tyler looked away. “But before we do, you actually need to get dressed.”

Chapter 30

Saturday midnight

Eli watched with a mix of amusement and concern as Dylan flamboyantly ordered the most expensive liquor at the bar. Their pact to use their newfound wealth cautiously seemed to teeter on the edge of Dylan's impulsive tendencies. Eli couldn't help but feel a twinge of anxiety about how this reckless display might attract unwanted attention.

The atmosphere in the bar was electric, a sensory overload of pulsating music, swirling lights, and the collective buzz of a crowd lost in the moment. Dylan's stash, a potent mix of substances, was doing its work, distorting reality into a kaleidoscope of sounds and visuals. It was as if the very fabric of their surroundings was bending and warping, creating a surreal landscape that was both exhilarating and disorienting.

Eli, usually more reserved, was swept up in the evening's festivities. The initial hesitation gave way to a heady rush of freedom and abandonment. The night was a blur of laughter, dancing, and the kind of deep conversations that only seemed profound when under the influence.

As the night wore on, the effects of the alcohol and drugs peaked, creating a bubble of timelessness where the outside world ceased to exist. It was a moment of pure escapism, a temporary reprieve from the reality of their actions and the potential consequences that loomed on the horizon.

Eli recognized that everything, whether positive or negative, ultimately ends. As dawn approached, it marked the end of their night

of excess and the return to a world where their actions would have consequences. The initial euphoria would give way to the reality that their newfound wealth came with responsibilities that could unravel their lives if not managed carefully.

Eli knew that the challenge was yet to come. Managing their sudden wealth and staying under the radar would require more discipline and caution than his friends seemed capable of at the moment.

Grigory's fingers gently caressed the crystal tumbler, holding the Macallan twenty-five-year-old scotch with a reverence that contrasted with the turmoil inside him. Each sip of the rich, amber liquid was an attempt to calm the storm raging in his chest, where his heart pounded like a relentless drum. He had just issued a command to his men to unravel the mystery of the missing money, a task that weighed heavily on him.

In the ensuing silence, Grigory's thoughts drifted involuntarily to the haunting memory of his brother Alexei's final moments. The image of Alexei's eyes, wide with fear and confusion, and the sound of his desperate call for help, echoed in Grigory's mind, a relentless reminder of the brutal reality of their world.

There was a part of Grigory, a cold, calculating part, that understood Hyun-woo's actions. It was the same part that had guided his own ruthless decisions in the past. This rationality, however, did little to quell the inferno of rage that burned within him. His emotions were a tangled web, a mix of grief, anger, and a thirst for vengeance that threatened to consume him.

Grigory was not sure where to direct his fury. Should it be towards Hyun-woo, the orchestrator of his brother's demise? The unknown adversary who had stolen his money? Or perhaps the next unfortunate soul who crossed his path? This internal conflict was a

battle between his instinct for revenge and the strategic thinking that had always guided his actions.

The vibration of his phone hastily shattered his reverie. He picked up the call. “What?” he said firmly.

“What do you mean, what?” the voice bit back. “I hadn’t heard from you, so I thought I would call.”

“I said I would call you when I was ready.”

“Well, we’re talking now. Is it done?”

“No, it’s not done.”

“What do you mean, what happened?”

“Someone fucked us and cleaned out the account.”

A long-expelled breath. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me. Do you know how long this took to piece together? The sacrifices I’ve made... am making?”

“Don’t tell me about sacrifice. I lost my brother tonight.”

“This puts us all in a very awkward position.”

Like most things, if you wanted a big reward, you needed a substantial risk, you needed to put your balls on the line, you needed to bite off more than you could chew, and then chew like crazy to make them happen. Grigory was in the business of making things happen.

“I’ll fix it,” Grigory said. “I’ve got three days.”

“Get it done sooner. We can’t have Firearms finding the stash before we take ownership of it. Which reminds me. What do you want to do about your rodent problem?”

“He’s the least of my problems and last of my priorities. But don’t worry, I’ll deal with him appropriately.”

Another sigh. “For the love of god, Grigory, no fancy shit. Just shoot the fucker in the head and be done with it. No showmanship. This isn’t a competition, no one’s watching.”

Grigory stared at the wall. “It’s an art form and one that I’m good at.”

Hyun-woo made a quick call, but it wasn't the conversation he wanted to have. The exchange was in Korean and hurried, but it didn't matter since he was alone in the back of his car. There was no driver present, making the vehicle soundproof.

"There was a problem with the transaction, it is going to be delayed."

"That is extremely unacceptable to our current situation. Everything is at risk."

Hyun-woo couldn't help but dwell on the life he had taken earlier. He knew nothing motivates like death, but deep down, he regretted the act. He also knew that he couldn't use killing as a bargaining tool forever. He needed to find other ways to exert pressure. Nevertheless, he knew Grigory understood the lengths he will go to finalize the arrangement, and one he would have done himself if the roles were reversed.

"I understand the urgency of the situation, but I am confident that we will reach a resolution shortly."

"Do we need to abort, to save face, to bide our time?"

"No," Hyun-woo pressed. "We should continue with the preparations. We must be ready to execute the plan. This is only a temporary delay. I will contact you as soon as the money is in hand."

"But—"

Hyun-woo ended the call. It was something he shouldn't have done, but he had to take extreme measures, and they were necessary to protect himself and his operation. He removed the battery and swallowed the SIM card, knowing that his communication was secure, even if it meant sacrificing the convenience of a functioning phone.

Chapter 31

Saturday night

Grigory sat in the center of the room, a good distance away from a sturdy oak table where his counterpart sat. Despite his Italian three-piece suit, he wiggled uncomfortably on the small metal chair. It seemed deliberately uncomfortable as if Hyun-woo had bent it out of shape or shortened one leg to make it wobble with every slight movement. Nevertheless, Grigory maintained his composure, not giving his host any sign of weakness.

Looming over them, the disused factory presented a confronting sight with its sheer size and cavernous ambiance, especially considering the business at hand. Walls faded into the distance, barely visible and shrouded in a blackness that appeared to engulf everything. Sparse overhead bulbs, dangling from metal chains, cast a feeble glow on the concrete floor. Gauging the structure's height was impossible; the roof disappeared into the darkness above. Standing there, it was as if they were in the belly of a beast, poised for it to awaken.

Grigory sat in the middle of the room flanked by his two most trusted men. In this line of work, trust was the key to survival. His brother, Alexei, stood by his side, dressed in a tailored suit. The second man, Dima, dressed in cargo pants and a black jacket, was a towering figure. Standing easily over six feet tall with a muscular build that made him look like a monster, Dima was Grigory's muscle.

They had all surrendered their weapons upon entering the deserted factory, but Grigory was not worried. It was standard practice in their line of work, and he would have been more suspicious if Hyun-woo had allowed them to keep their guns. This was the un-

spoken code of conducting business in the criminal world. When you were the guest, you played by the host's rules. It didn't matter that Hyun-woo was not in his home country; he was the seller, and Grigory was the buyer. And in this deal, Grigory needed Hyun-woo's product more than anything else.

Hyun-woo sat across from the table from Grigory, his large frame comfortably nestled in a plush leather chair, puffing smoke rings from his cigar. He fixed his unwavering gaze on Grigory, while his henchmen, stationed on either side of the imposing desk, stood like statues. Grigory could sense that there were even more men lurking in the shadows, a reminder of Hyun-woo's overwhelming power.

Grigory's chiseled features and impeccable fashion sense could easily land him on the cover of GQ, making him appear more like a male model than a drug empire leader. In contrast, Hyun-woo's long dark hair swept across his forehead and tucked behind his ear, complementing his sculpted facial hair. Both men were at the pinnacle of their careers, having started from humble beginnings and clawed their way to the top of their respective organizations. Despite their mutual disdain, they held a grudging respect for one another, a quality that carried weight in their cutthroat industry.

The negotiation had been a blend of intensity and theatrics, considering they had settled on the price days in advance. They concurred on the terms of the agreement, each aiming to bolster their reputation within their respective teams, while simultaneously projecting strength in the face of a formidable counterpart.

The manufactured tension in the air was palpable as they locked eyes and finally, Hyun-woo broke the silence by placing his cigar in the ashtray and extending his hand.

Grigory slowly rose from his chair, taking deliberate steps towards the table. He felt the weight of the moment, the significance of sealing a deal with a man he didn't trust. He knew he couldn't let Hyun-woo see any hesitation or weakness. As he approached the

table, he couldn't help but notice the smug expression on Hyun-woo's face.

Grigory took his time, giving Hyun-woo a taste of his own medicine. He wanted to clarify that the other man's show of power did not intimidate him. With a calculated pause, Grigory finally reached out and grasped Hyun-woo's hand.

After the handshake ceremony, Grigory returned to his people, where Alexei handed over the tablet he had been holding. His younger brother had been with him every step of the way and was the one person he trusted most. Second to that was his enforcer, Dima.

Grigory typed furiously on the screen while his trusted confidants and formidable muscle locked eyes across the room.

Suddenly, Grigory's smile vanished as his eyes widened, and he swallowed hard. He blinked, shook his head, and continued to tap away at the screen. His complexion grew paler, and a knot of anxiety twisted in his stomach. Frantically, he exited the website and attempted to access it once more, desperately hoping it was nothing more than a glitch or a simple mistake. However, the numbers remained unaltered, and within a minute, the same disheartened expression crept back onto his face.

Hyun-woo leaned forward on his chair. "Is there a problem?"

Grigory returned the device to Alexei, his features contorting with a puzzled expression. As Alexei inspected the screen, his gaze shot back to Grigory's clenched jaw. The glitch before him seemed utterly impossible. He had meticulously verified it just moments ago, right before they had entered the factory and handed over their weapons. Now, confronted with a balance of zero, a shiver raced up his spine.

He pivoted to face Hyun-woo. "What have you done?"

"Where's my money?" he exclaimed.

"What games are you playing, Hyun-woo?"

Hyun-woo slammed a hand down on the table, sending a shock-wave around the room. “You are the one playing games, Grigory. I ask again, where is my money?”

Grigory looked over his men before returning to his equivalent. “There’s a glitch with the system. I need some time. It’s probably all this concrete and steel and shit.”

Hyun-woo pouted, then sucked back on his cigar. “I don’t have a problem with my device.”

“Even so, I must ask to reconvene till next week.”

Hyun-woo’s eyes narrowed. “Next week? That was not the agreement! This is not how business is done!”

He gave a subtle nod, and from the shadows, a man materialized, deftly drawing a gun from his jacket. With a quick motion, he seized Alexei by the shoulder and delivered a sharp kick to the back of his legs, forcing him to collapse onto his knees.

“You dare to waste my time and dishonor our agreement?” Hyun-woo growled, his eyes narrowing.

Dima instantly edged forward.

“Stop!” Grigory yelled. And everyone did. He looked at his brother, at the silenced barrel pressed firmly against the back of his head.

“Brother,” Alexei breathed.

Grigory turned to his counterpart. “I’ll make this right.”

“I have every faith you will, Grigory. I have every faith. Because if you falter, I’ll unleash absolute chaos upon you and your entire organization. And just so there’s no doubt about my resolve, here’s something for you to ponder.”

Hyun-woo signaled, and the man pulled the trigger, causing a spray of blood to erupt from the back of Alexei’s head. Grigory could only watch in helpless horror as his brother’s eyes lost their luster, and he crumpled forward, hitting the cement with a resounding thud.

“Three days,” Hyon-Woo instructed. “Now get the fuck out of here and get my money.”

Chapter 32

Saturday 10:04pm

Eli's fingers moved swiftly and expertly over the keyboard, like a seasoned pianist playing a complex composition. Instead of music, the sound of tapping keys filled the air filled his senses, despite the loud music playing through the overhead speakers. He was in his element, completely immersed in his digital environment. The glow from the laptop screen illuminated his soft features, and his deep brown eyes remained fixed on the code.

Across from him, Tyler played on his phone. His mouth moved, but Eli couldn't hear anything he was saying. Eli instinctively looked up to see Dylan carry three pints of beer as he navigated his way through the throng of semi-drunk patrons. He returned to the booth, the glasses hitting the table with a wet thud.

The bar was their favorite spot not only because of the abundance of unsecured wireless networks but also because of the generous treatment they received from Max, the manager. They looked after Max, and in return, he treated them like royalty. He always settled their tab and profited handsomely under the table.

Eli continued to switch between typing and sipping beer, his gaze becoming wider and wider with each key stroke.

"Hey, how long have you two been dedicated to our little project?"

His question prompted a brief interruption in his friends' conversation. They both turned their gaze toward him.

"About a month," Tyler replied.

"Why?" Dylan asked. "Are we giving up on it?"

Eli grinned mischievously, his finger hovering over the enter key.

The chirping of a phone abruptly broke the spell, its vibration causing it to dance on the table. Eli didn't know why he had placed it there. In that fleeting instant, his entire universe was compressed into the confines of that booth. He reluctantly glanced down at the luminous screen, and his once-joyful demeanor instantly dimmed upon beholding the caller ID. His hand stretched toward the intruding gadget, then hesitated in mid-air, retreating.

A voice pierced through the airwaves. "Well, Eli?" Tyler asked. "Are we officially killing it?"

Eli stared at the phone. Life was full of choices and the consequences of those choices. Life was full of decisions and at the moment he tried to figure out where on the ladder this one stood. He moved his hand over again to pick up the phone, but at the last second, he retracted his hand. He didn't know why he was so indecisive, or what made him pull back from the phone, but he did. It stopped ringing and once again slipped back into its dormant state.

A voice busted through the airwaves. "Well, what is it, Eli?" Tyler asked before taking a large gulp of alcohol.

Eli looked at his friends and then back to the phone. "Nothing."

As he thought about the caller, it had been a long time since they spoke, too long a time to be answering it. There had been a lot of water under the bridge but would any of it really be enough? Perhaps for him. Maybe they were reaching out, looking to bury the hatchet. Regardless, if they really wanted to talk, they would leave a message.

He shook his head again, his eyes fixed on the screen in front of him. With a quick press of a key on the keyboard, he scanned the code before him, checking for any errors or inconsistencies. His attention was so focused that he hardly noticed the bustling bar around him, and he made a quick sweep of the establishment, scanning the patrons to ensure his privacy.

"Relax, Eli," Tyler said.

“Yeah,” added Dylan, “We own this place.”

Eli’s smile widened as he slowly turned the laptop around to show the screen to his cohorts. The screen displayed the bank’s insignia with a sleek menu bar at the top, exuding an air of sophistication and security.

Despite the raucous atmosphere of the bar, Dylan and Tyler were stunned into silence as they gazed at the laptop screen. The ‘Vault Project’ had been a success, and after a month of planning and less than a thousand dollars spent on necessary software and hardware, the fruits of their labor were finally within reach. Off-the-shelf hacker protection protected most servers, that one could crack within a matter of hours, but this was different. The security software on this site was custom made with unique encryption methods, unlike anything the trio had seen before, and created by a skilled hacker. Eli and his friends had made it their mission to break through the locks, and they had succeeded by developing a virtual pair of bolt cutters that could penetrate even the most advanced security systems.

The pair hesitantly extended their hands towards the screen, their fingers gingerly touching the glass surface as if they were afraid it might vanish like a mirage. Eli’s words broke the silence. “Yes, it’s real.”

Tyler’s eyes narrowed as he leaned forward, his gaze locked onto Eli’s. “You think you’re better than us?” he asked.

Eli met his gaze unwaveringly, inching closer to the table, then nonchalantly shrugged.

Tyler moved his glass to the side and moved closer still, until he was bending at the waist with his stomach on the table, his look severe. And in a moment it all fell away and replaced with a gracious smile. “You god damned right you are.” He retracted himself to his seat, picked up his drink, and pointed it at Eli. “You are a fucking genius.”

Dylan grabbed the laptop and clicked away furiously. He then sat back and ran his hands through his hair and whispered, “Oh shit, guys. Check this out.”

“What?” Tyler groaned.

Dylan rotated the laptop so that it rested against the short edge of the table, facing toward the wall.

“Holy shit,” Eli said.

Dylan said, “How does one person accumulate so much wealth?”

“Because that is a company,” Tyler said. “Probably a shell company, and probably from doing nefarious shit.”

“And let’s be clear,” Eli started. “You have wealth already, stashed away, from doing nefarious shit.”

“Yeah,” Dylan said, “but not as much as this. This would set us up for life.” He reached out across the table and grabbed Eli on the shoulder. “Which means you can quit that shitty job of yours.”

“It’s not a shitty job,” Eli said, his eyes glued to the screen in fear of it disappearing from view. “Besides, there is a reason I have that job. Maybe *you* should consider getting a job.”

“Then I wouldn’t be able to do this.” Tyler pulled out a bag of pills.

Eli couldn’t help but feel that his friends were wasting their potential by spending their lives getting drunk and taking illegal substances. However, who was he to offer any career advice? After all, they each used their talents in diverse ways, much like Eli himself.

“Just don’t let Max see them,” Dylan said. “You know how pissed he gets when you fling that shit around his bar.”

“Max loves me, besides, he can’t say anything about them if they are in our stomachs!” He slid a pill across the table to each of his friends. Tyler and Dylan wasted no time in washing theirs down with a quick gulp, but Eli left his untouched on the table.

Dylan faced Eli. “So, how much do you want to transfer? One million? Two million?”

“Hang on,” Eli interrupted. “Whoever this belongs to might have acquired it through illegal means, and we are taking it from them through illegal means.”

“Yeah,” Dylan said. “What’s your point?”

“Isn’t it a little contradictory?”

“No,” Tyler said, dismissing the notion.

“It’s ironic,” Dylan offered.

“No,” Eli said.

“Listen,” Tyler said. “Why don’t we just take it all?” An enormous smile spread across his unshaven face.

Eli butted into Tyler’s fantasy. “All of it? Are you serious?”

“Yeah,” he breathed.

“Fifty-eight million. That’s going to be difficult to hide, difficult to distribute, and difficult to explain if anyone finds it. Not to mention, someone is going to come looking for it.”

“It’ll be fine,” Dylan said. “We’ll bump it around the globe a couple of times and dump it into our usual holding accounts. We keep it there for a week and see what happens.”

Eli shook his head. “See what happens...” he repeated.

“Oh, come on. Think about it, with all of this, look beyond quitting your job. You can quit your life! Become someone else! *Some-where* else! *Anywhere* else!”

“Cars, mansions, private jets,” Tyler continued. “We’ll spread a little cheer around. Shit, Max can renovate this dump or retire.”

“It’s sitting right there,” Dylan said. “Just waiting for us to take it.”

Eli couldn’t breathe. The possibilities were enticing, but also bizarrely unrealistic. He grabbed the laptop and started typing.

“What are you doing?” Tyler called out.

“Checking the activity on the account?”

“Well?”

“Several large transactions, the last being three weeks ago. This is a holding account.”

“Yeah, holding for us,” Tyler mocked.

“No one sits on money like this. It must have a purpose.”

Dylan assumed control of the laptop and began typing. It was loud and clunky, although still fluid. “No one will ever know it was us,” Dylan continued.

“Really? Like the way you hacked into the school to change our marks and we spent an hour getting grilled by Ms. Evans?” Eli asked.

Dylan continued to tap away. “Never got expelled though.”

“Or the time you hacked that hotel to get us the free penthouse suite for the weekend and we spent the night in the security guard’s office? What was his name? Fitzgibbon?”

“Never got charged though,” added Tyler.

Eli sighed. “And now you want me to believe you when you say they’ll never be able to trace it?”

“Well, I certainly hope not,” Dylan said as he clicked a button. “Because it’s already done.”

Eli closed his eyes. The whole thing made him squirm, even though he was the one who bypassed all the digital security that led them to that place.

Dylan sat back with a pleased look on his face, picked up his pint, and caught up to his friends, finishing his pint in spectacular fashion.

Eli’s unease grew as he studied the laptop screen. On the left side, the drained account showed a balance of zero, while on the right side were various accounts they had used, including their personal and several untraceable stash accounts, all totaling the amount they had taken.

Eli never liked the term ‘stolen’; he preferred to think of it as re-distributing wealth, just like Robin Hood and his merry men had done. However, unlike Robin Hood, they were keeping the money

for themselves. Even when split between them, the amount in Eli's stash account was staggering. "Guys, I just don't feel good about having all this money in just a few accounts," he said, his worry in his voice. "Fuck it, I don't like this at all. It's too much... too big, too soon."

"Relax," Tyler said, "If it makes you feel any better, tomorrow you can anonymously distribute your share to any number of charities."

Eli contemplated his thoughts for a moment. It had never been solely about money; it had always been about gaining access to places and information they shouldn't have. Yet, a bit of skimming here and a few discreet transfers there had brought them to their current situation. He reclined in his chair, savoring the last sips of his pint, attempting to set aside any lingering feelings of guilt that haunted his mind.

"Who do you think it belonged to?" Dylan asked.

"Probably some smug tech CEO or investment banker or something," Tyler responded. "Probably pocket change for them."

"Even still, they're gonna be pissed."

"Damn right, they are."

Eli held the pill up between his thumb and forefinger like he was inspecting a diamond.

"Don't worry about it," Tyler said as if reading his mind. "You've got all weekend to recover before your all-important job that you go to five days a week."

Fuck it. What could possibly go wrong?

Chapter 33

Rewind

Saturday... Friday... Thursday... Wednesday... Tuesday...

Last Monday

Play

The Humbra, a colossal container ship, sliced through the Atlantic's tranquil darkness. Towering stacks of containers, reaching six to seven layers high, laden its decks. The ship was nearing a region notorious for the convergence of air currents, heralding unpredictable and often fierce weather. A storm flickered on the distant horizon, its presence noted by the ship's weather radar, but it was still a safe distance away, leaving ample time for the duty officer to alert the captain. Lost in contemplation, the officer gazed into the night, the deck illuminated before him when suddenly, the marine radar experienced a brief glitch.

Skimming over the ocean's surface, an inflatable craft surged forward, its engine straining against the relentless throttle. The mission's success hinged on precise timing, and the four-person crew, known for their efficiency, braced against the strong headwinds. Each member, clad in black and gripping a fully automatic rifle, was a silhouette against the night. Park Jiu, the team leader, commanded the craft from the front, his face obscured by a balaclava and goggles against the harsh wind. Ahead, the imposing shape of the Humbra loomed, cutting through the ocean's gentle swells.

As they neared the ship, the engine silenced. A crew member launched a grappling hook onto the deck, a rope ladder tight against the hull, securing their entry point. Swiftly, they ascended the rope ladder, with Park following close behind. Once aboard the ship, Park checked his watch—timing was critical. He signaled his team, and the three of them dispersed silently across the deck, each with their orders.

Inside the bridge, the door creaked open, letting in a faint howl of wind. The duty officer, engrossed in the control panel, didn't turn to acknowledge the unexpected visitor.

"I wasn't expecting you for another few hours," he remarked, his voice tinged with an Eastern European accent.

His words met with silence, followed by a swift movement and a needle piercing his neck. He slumped, unconscious, as Park quickly grabbed the duty officer's head and gently lowered it back onto the chair. Park then stood by the window, turned off the deck lights, and peered out, his watch illuminated briefly in the darkness. The radar's glitching was part of the plan.

In perfect synchronization with their timing, a double-rotor Chinook helicopter materialized from the clouds, its lights dimmed, blades thumping rhythmically. It hovered silently above the container stacks, completely concealed from the ship's glitching radar equipment. From this hovering behemoth, steel hooks descended, each carrying an operative. As they landed atop the containers, each operative skillfully secured their hooks to the corners of their target.

With a signal, one of them activated a device, which magnetically fastened itself to the container. A button press, a momentary flash of light, and then darkness, frying any electronic tracking equipment attached.

Another signal and the helicopter smoothly hoisted the container, with each operative gripping their designated anchored rope. The massive machine gradually pivoted away from the ship, its powerful

engines increasing with intensity, until it vanished into the obscurity of the night sky, operatives in tow.

Back on the ship, Park silently left the bridge and regrouped with his team at the entry point. After two descended the rope ladder, Park disengaged the hooks, throwing them clear. Once collected, Park then climbed over the railing, and with no further negotiation, propelled himself forward into the void. As wind buffeted against him, he placed his arms over his chest and plummeted feet first into the wash below. He was under for a few seconds as the inflatable craft came alongside, the team members pulled him aboard, whisking them away into the night.

On the bridge, the duty officer stirred, rubbing his neck. It had only been a few minutes—a mere power nap. He quickly surveyed the bridge, ensuring solitude, then returned to his instruments. It was almost time to wake the captain and report the approaching storm. A proper rest was needed, he thought, as he stifled a yawn and settled back into his duties.

Chapter 34

“What the fuck do you mean it’s missing?” Mitchell roared.

The words reverberated throughout the office, eventually reaching the analyst seated across the desk from the special agent in charge. It was a thankless task for the analyst, but someone had to deliver the message. Someone had made a colossal mistake, and the consequences were about to come crashing down on him as the special agent rose from his seat, ready to unleash his fury.

“I’m not sure how else to explain it, Sir.”

As the analyst nervously awaited the special agent’s response, Mitchell silently counted down from ten, clenching his jaw with each number. He struggled to contain the rage that threatened to spill forth, wanting to avoid tearing into the poor soul seated in front of him. Finally, when he reached zero, he leaned back in his leather chair and ran his hands through his thinning hair. It used to be thick and lush, but now only a few strands remained, floating in the slightest breeze.

Despite being in his forties, Mitchell looked and felt his age every bit, especially lately. The stress, the sleepless nights, the endless meetings, and the constant questioning by superiors had all taken their toll. What he couldn’t tolerate, however, was incompetence, especially from those under his leadership. Such mistakes reflected poorly on him and his ability to lead.

Mitchell grappled with the harsh truth: the cargo his department had diligently tracked for days had mysteriously vanished, and he bore the ultimate responsibility. He had not only funded and closely monitored it but despite his efforts, it had still vanished without a trace.

Frustration and anger boiled inside him as he confronted the nervous analyst seated across from him. “How is it even possible for a container full of munitions, on a ship in the middle of the Atlantic, to just vanish without a trace?” he barked, his eyes narrowing as he fixed his gaze on the hapless man.

The analyst was at a loss for words. The intelligence on the shipment had been solid, supported by photos and videos of its movement, which he had reviewed. Now, he stood before his boss with a look of bewilderment, desperately trying to come up with a satisfactory answer.

After a few tense moments, the only words that came to mind were, “We’re doing everything we can to track down the shipment.” While it was true, and he would have been remiss not to try, he knew it was far from the response his boss was hoping for.

He braced himself for the inevitable backlash as he awaited his boss’s next move.

Mitchell rose to his feet and leaned forward, placing his knuckles on the desk as he locked eyes with the analyst. His words were slow and deliberate, each one carrying a weight that was impossible to ignore. “You need to find that shipment, and you need to find it fast,” he growled through gritted teeth.

The analyst’s heart sank at the tone of his boss’s voice. He had seen Mitchell stressed, worried, concerned, and angry before, but this was something else entirely. The weight of the situation was heavy, and he knew the stakes were high. Despite working under the special agent for years, the analyst still felt a shiver run down his spine at the thought of Mitchell’s wrath.

Even though Mitchell was only five and a half feet tall, the analyst knew that his bark was just as fearsome as his bite.

An intensity filled Mitchell’s voice that made the analyst’s blood run cold. “Do you even comprehend the chaos that would erupt if that shipment ends up on the streets?” he asked, his eyes blazing with

anger. “People will die. Innocent people. And that’s on us. So, you need to get out there and find out who took my shipment before it’s too late.”

The analyst had never really considered the bigger picture before. His focus had been on the task at hand—tracking the equipment. The consequences of failing that task had never truly crossed his mind. But now, as he stood there in front of his boss, he couldn’t ignore the gravity of the situation.

He knew that if the munitions made it into the hands of street criminals, it would be a disaster of epic proportions. The news reports of the aftermath would force him to confront the reality that he had played a part in it. It wasn’t just his failure, but that of his boss, and his boss’s boss as well. They were all responsible, and they all had to do everything in their power to prevent that shipment from falling into the wrong hands.

Mitchell watched as the analyst retreated out of his office, disappearing into a frenzy of frantic activity. The entire floor was buzzing with nervous energy, as people scurried back and forth in a frenzied attempt to salvage what they could from the situation. Mitchell clenched his fists, feeling the tension rising within him like a coiled spring.

He waited until he heard the door shut, then let out a deep breath and rubbed his eyes. He pushed aside the file he had been working on, his mind now fully consumed with the task at hand.

As he stood there, Mitchell’s mind raced with possibilities and potential next steps. He knew that time was of the essence, and with every moment that passed without a breakthrough, the predicament became increasingly dire.

He knew he couldn’t rely solely on his team to find the missing shipment. As the head of the operation, it was his responsibility to take charge and lead the way. He considered reaching out to his net-

work of informants and contacts, hoping that someone had heard something or seen something that could provide a clue.

But then again, he also knew the risks involved in going rogue. If he stepped too far outside the bounds of the official investigation, he could risk compromising the operation entirely. He needed to strike a delicate balance between acting and following protocol.

Finally, after much deliberation, he picked up the phone and dialed Norcross's number. As the phone rang, he felt a knot forming in his stomach. He knew that this call could be a turning point in the investigation, for better or for worse.

The plan had been straightforward: buy illegal firearms from sketchy neighbors, then use them to catch a major criminal figure. It had seemed like a feasible scheme, with only a few moving parts. But now the operation was in jeopardy.

Special Agent Norcross had presented the idea to him, complete with a memorandum signed by both department heads. Mitchell had acted quickly, placing an informant on the inside of the criminal organization, and arranging a weapons purchase that was just on the edge of legality. But now everything was falling apart, and Mitchell had to act fast.

He stood up from his desk, gazing at the piles of papers and folders with a sense of unease. There was too much work to do and not enough time to do it. Mitchell knew he couldn't rely on anyone else to fix this mess.

"We need to talk, now," he said when Norcross answered the call.

Chapter 35

Dima mercilessly held the struggling man's head down into the barrel of water, the splashing, and thrashing only serving to further amuse the group of onlookers gathered around them. It wasn't clear where the barrel—particularly one used for shipping industrial waste—had come from or who filled it with water, but such details were inconsequential at that moment. The only thing that mattered was extracting the information they needed from their captives.

As the man continued to fight for air, a young man named Petrov watched on. It was he who had the task of monitoring the dealer and had ultimately led Dima and his associates to him. Petrov had played his part perfectly, keeping the dealer on the phone until they arrived to apprehend him. It was clear he was hoping for some kind of reward for his efforts—as a young man living on the streets, he didn't have many prospects. He had already spent time in boys' homes, served a brief stint in prison, and even briefly joined a church—some would say a cult—before his nineteenth birthday.

Dima savored the feeling of power as he slowly lifted the man's head, relishing in the sight of him coughing and gasping for air. The strands of long, dark hair that covered his face only added to the sense of domination. With a menacing snarl, Dima pressed his face close to the man's and demanded, "What is the fucking password?"

The man whispered a word in between gasps for air. "If... you... kill... me... you'll... never..."

Dima cut him off, not wanting to hear any more of his weak protests. Without hesitation, he shoved the man's head back under the water, his powerful hands gripping tightly. The man's struggles for life only fueled Dima's rage, and he held him there, determined to get the information he needed.

Petrov had always felt like an outsider, struggling to find a place where he could truly belong and connect with others who shared his interests and values. It wasn't until a chance encounter with Grigory that his life took an unexpected turn. Attempting to pickpocket Grigory, Petrov found himself pinned against a wall with a knife at his throat. His extremely short haircut made him look even younger than he was, and some doubted that he was even of legal age. But despite his youthfulness, Petrov refused to cower in fear. Instead, he responded to Grigory's threats with a defiant "fuck you," determined to go down fighting if necessary.

Despite Petrov's initial fear, Grigory surprised everyone by ordering Dima to take care of him.

The intimidating grimace on his boss's face as he submerged the man fascinated Petrov. Dima looked like he was in pain, just as much as the man he was holding underwater yet was sure the big man was reveling in the task. Dima yanked the man up once more.

"The code!" Dima roared, but he still refused to share the information.

"I can't," Berke coughed. "My clients."

Repeatedly, Dima brought the man up from the water, allowing him a gasp of air, but never enough to fill his lungs. Petrov couldn't help but ponder the difficult balance between self-preservation and loyalty to one's people. Where did that line lie, he wondered, and how much could it shift from one side to the other before it was irreparably broken?

After an arduous struggle to protect his clients' secrets, the man finally succumbed and disclosed the four-digit code, uttering the numbers amid coughs and splutters of liquid.

"You better be right," Dima snarled. "I don't like being lied to."

Once Petrov entered and verified the code on the phone, Dima expressed his gratitude to the man. Then, without hesitation, he

shoved Berke's entire body headfirst into the barrel. Water splashed and surged over the barrel's edges as the man thrashed wildly.

Two men pushed a lid on top and sealed it, leaving Berke trapped and helpless, upside down, and with no room to find the air pocket at the top. The banging against the barrel only lasted a minute before silence resumed. No one uttered a word, no one dared to question the fate of the man who had just been drowned. For them, it was just another successful takeover, one by force, and the man's disappearance was just another necessary sacrifice.

Two men carefully maneuvered the barrel, now distinctly marked, rolling it skillfully along its edge, aligning it with the other similarly marked barrels. In this world, domination equates to survival. While the weak compete, it is the strong who assert their dominance.

Dima carefully scanned through the contents of the unlocked device, going through messages, contacts, schedules, and other essential information. When claiming territory, having information was crucial. Dima and his crew needed to know who needed to be paid off, who the regulars were, and who the troublesome ones were. Though they would likely treat them all differently regardless of what they knew, having the information gave them a strategic advantage.

Dima scanned the assembly of people gathered within the dimly lit, abandoned warehouse. When his eyes locked onto Petrov, he beckoned him over with a subtle hand gesture. As Petrov approached, Dima placed a firm hand on his shoulder and handed him the phone, a silent proclamation to all those present that Petrov had now earned the status of a dealer.

For Petrov, it felt akin to a promotion in the world of organized crime. A surge of pride and accomplishment enveloped him, a testament to the hard work and unwavering dedication that had led to this elevation in his role.

For the very first time in his life, Petrov experienced a sense of belonging and camaraderie. He had found his family, a group of dangerous individuals who accepted and respected him for who he was.

Chapter 36

“What the fuck do you mean it’s missing?” Norcross growled as he leaned back and put his hands behind his head.

“That’s exactly what *I* said,” Mitchell replied.

“Tell me you’re joking,” he snarled, his gravelly voice a testament to years of smoking and heavy drinking. In the twilight of his career, he had abandoned the vices that had once consumed him, replacing them with stress and coffee.

The older man appeared fifteen years Mitchell’s senior, with a shock of white hair, slicked back neatly, sunken features on his elongated face, and pronounced bags under his eyes. His attire comprised a dark navy suit, and a crisply pressed white shirt, perpetually adorned with a beige trench coat that enveloped him, giving him the appearance of a character straight out of a sixties spy movie.

“Do I look like I’m joking?”

“Explain it to me again,” Norcross instructed. “You purchased, illegally mind you, over three million dollars’ worth of captured weapons from the Russian government, and then lost them in the middle of the goddamn ocean?”

“It was partially legal,” Mitchell responded.

He had been involved in some shady dealings and had crossed a few lines to get the job done. How he came to purchase the weapons in the first place was something he had tried to push to the back of his mind, but now it was staring at him in the face. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat, feeling the weight of his actions bearing down on him.

“That was the plan,” Mitchell said. “Your plan.”

“Hey, I didn’t tell you to lose it,” Norcross barked. “What’s the work name of your guy on the inside again?”

“Oskar.”

“Tell me Oskar has got the merchandise. At least then we’ll know where it is and start preparing. Tell me he knows something.”

Mitchell stood up and shook his head. “He doesn’t have that information. He’s just not trusted enough, not in the inner circle, anyhow.” He paused. “Yet.”

“Yeah, well, make sure he understands that time is of the essence now.” Norcross stared at him with deep-set dark eyes. But he knew already what needed to happen. He had been thinking about it from day one, and from a long time before that. “The game has changed. And if Grigory already has the merchandise, then we’re already screwed.”

Mitchell massaged his temples. “Who thought the cargo could disappear in the middle of the fucking ocean? Perhaps if we had a bigger budget and more resources...”

“No point thinking about that now,” Norcross huffed.

“Well, who else might be involved in this?”

“Nothing on my radar.”

“Oh, come on, Mr. Special Investigations. This is your area of expertise. Surely someone’s been talking about this. The Moretti’s?” He clicked his fingers. “The Giordano Syndicate?”

“If they’re involved in this, they’ve done so quietly. And if someone else *is* involved, it won’t take them long for their presence to be known. We’ll find out about it soon enough.”

Mitchell stood, walked to the bank of windows on one side of the room, leaned against the frame, and stared down at the tiny people in the city going about their lives. “I can’t believe this has happened. How the hell are we going to get our asses out of this one?”

“We need to wait and gather reliable intel that can actually help us. We can’t afford to act impulsively and waste our efforts on dead-end leads,” Norcross said, placing a reassuring hand on Mitchell’s

shoulder. However, the look in Norcross's eyes told a different story, one of concern and urgency.

Mitchell shook his head. "It's too late then." He turned. "You know as well as I do, when those things hit the street, they're not coming back, and we're all in for a world of hurt. We've faced waves like this before, but not an epidemic on this scale."

It was a fact. In the last ten years, the availability of guns on the streets had rapidly declined. Programs and schemes delivering actual results. So when they intercepted a conversation via a phone tap mentioning a requirement for a large shipment of weapons and ammunition, followed by a knock on his door from Norcross, it set the wheels in motion, and the rest became history.

The city below was a hive of activity, cars stopped at intersections as people crossed, then would start again. There was nothing strange about it, nothing abnormal. What they didn't know was the under-swelling that was being created, by people whose normal lives comprised inflicting fear and anguish.

"Then we move as fast as we can, on anything we can get." Norcross paused as if contemplating the next thing he would say. "Maybe get the local guys to help us out." He couldn't believe he was saying it, he knew how much the local authorities hated the federal boys tip-toeing on their turf. They would be lucky to get a 'hello' or a 'thank you'.

Mitchell scoffed. "Sure, who knows, maybe we'll get lucky." When they had control of the situation, Grigory was the primary target, but now this had happened the target had shifted. The focus now was to claim the weaponry, before it went anywhere, before it got out. Once it hit the street, the body count would rise. "The last thing we need is for a bunch of innocent people to die because some dimwit can't track a five-ton shipping container from one country to another." He clenched his jaw as he commented. The 'dimwit' was on

his team after all. “We need to get the word out to the Customs and Ports officers to keep an eye out for this thing.”

“Leave this one to me. Any sign of increased activity and the shipment will go underground quicker than you can say *‘we fucked up’*. I’ve got someone who owes me a favor. And he’ll pay up.”

“You can trust them?”

Norcross gave a slanted smile, so slight that if you weren’t looking at it, you would have missed it. “Mitchell, I don’t trust anyone.”

Chapter 37

Fast Forward

Last Monday... Tuesday... Wednesday... Thursday... Friday...

Saturday night

Play

As Eli's fingers danced across the keyboard, his unwavering gaze remained riveted on Dylan, who sauntered back from the bar, carrying three frothy pints of beer. Navigating through the raucous sea of patrons, Dylan deftly maneuvered, expertly evading flailing limbs and the occasional stumbling bar-goer. The venue itself possessed a narrow layout, with the bar nestled upfront near the entrance, while seating options extended towards the dimly lit rear—a realm where tables gradually gave way to cozy booths cloaked in shadowy seclusion. Over the bar, a pool of radiant illumination cascaded down upon the sturdy mahogany counter, where gleaming silver taps beckoned forth golden ales, a promise of refreshing indulgence.

Yet it was within the embrace of one of these enigmatic booths that Eli, Dylan, and Tyler had now found their sanctuary. The soft glow emanating from Eli's screen lent his visage an ethereal quality, as he remained absorbed in the rhythmic cadence of his fingertips on the keys.

A resonant thud of three glasses meeting the table splattered a smattering of frothy liquid across its surface. In response, Tyler and Dylan erupted into contagious laughter, as if the mere act of placing the drinks down was the most uproarious spectacle in the world. With Tyler slipping in beside Dylan, the clinking of glasses heralded the commencement of a spirited beer-savoring ritual, their laugh-

ter receding just long enough to permit the sweet nectar to cascade down their throats.

Eli couldn't resist being captivated by the bond shared between them. Tyler and Dylan, as different as night and day in countless respects, remained irrevocably intertwined—more than friends, they were like family.

As the evening unfolded, the pair regaled each other with narratives of inconsequential conquests, outlandish anecdotes, and even more far-fetched conspiracy theories. All the while, the pulsating music served as a backdrop to their animated discourse, and Eli meticulously observed their every gesture while his nimble fingers continued their mesmerizing dance across the keyboard. Tyler, with his lustrous shoulder-length hair, occasionally flicked it away from his eyes, while Dylan tenderly stroked his goatee. They embodied intelligence and simplicity in equal measure, a paradox that rendered them endlessly intriguing. Perhaps it was this enigma that had drawn them together in their youth as if the hand of fate itself had orchestrated their union.

Eli's smile widened as he noticed the change on the screen. Pausing his typing, he focused his gaze on the screen and asked, "How long have you two been working on 'the vault' project?" They used the phrase as a code word, but it was so obvious that they didn't expect anyone to decipher it. Not that it really mattered.

The question caused a momentary pause in his friend's conversation as they looked across the table at Eli, their eyes filled with a mixture of hope and anxiety.

"About a month," Tyler said.

"Why?" Dylan asked. "Are we giving up on it?"

He smirked slyly, his finger poised above the enter key.

Eli's phone started making chirping noises, its vibrating motion causing it to move on the table. His previously bright expression

quickly faded as he glanced at the caller ID, and his hand extended towards the unwelcome device, only to hesitate and withdraw.

A voice pierced through the airwaves. “Well, Eli?” Tyler asked. “Are we officially killing ‘the vault’ project?”

Eli stared at the phone, then slowly reached for it. Life was full of decisions, some of them good, some of them bad. And sometimes you didn’t know the impact of choices before it was too late. At the last second, Eli picked up the phone and squeaked out a greeting. He quickly covered his other ear, attempting to block out the surrounding noise.

After a few seconds, Eli shouted, “What? Can you repeat that?”

He slipped out of the booth, maneuvering through the throngs of people, and headed straight for the restroom.

Tyler and Dylan watched Eli bob and weave around the drunk clientele and disappear down a narrow corridor. Their gaze returned to each other.

Dylan asked, “Where the fuck is he going?”

Tyler shrugged his shoulders. “So, what’s your take on lizard people?”

Inside the bathroom, Eli ran his hands through his hair in frustration. “Where? Are you serious?” He didn’t even wait for a response. “How the hell did it happen?” His head was spinning. Under normal circumstances, given who was calling, he wouldn’t have even bothered to answer the phone, but in his somewhat inebriated state, he had given in to weakness and picked up.

He paced back and forth in the cramped bathroom, his heart-beat pounding in his ears as he tried to focus on the voice on the other end of the line. Strangers entered, used the urinal, and left, sometimes even using the sink as they departed, but Eli paid them no attention.

He retreated to the sink at the far end of the wall and turned to face the mirror. He eyed himself as he spoke. “Yeah, I’ll be right

there,” and then, “of course.” He smashed it against his ear. “Oh, is Danny there?” He pulled his eyelids down as he listened to the response and stared at his bloodshot pupils. “Oh, okay, good, good, great. See you soon.”

Eli pocketed his phone, turned on the tap, and splashed cold water over his face. He rubbed his eyes vigorously as if the tiny veins would magically disappear. *Tonight of all nights.*

As Eli re-entered the main area of the pub, Dylan and Tyler were still deep in conversation, with empty pint glasses scattered before them. Eli rubbed his face with his sleeves, trying to regain his composure.

Tyler said, “So, what have you got to show us?”

Much to the annoyance of his drinking companions, Eli abruptly snapped the lid of his laptop shut. The device found its refuge within the confines of his weathered leather satchel, which he effortlessly flung over his shoulder. He grabbed his jacket.

“Hey,” Dylan started, “where the hell are you going?”

“Something’s come up. I gotta go.”

“But it’s your round.”

Distracted, Eli said, “I’ll get you next time. Perhaps you two honeymooners can get two straws and finish mine. Tell Max sorry and that we’ll double his payout next time.”

A thousand conversations ran through his head and none of them contained his friends, the bar, or the company they were hacking. Eli turned from the table. “I’ll catch up with you guys later.”

Dylan sighed as Eli departed. “What the hell are we supposed to do now?”

Tyler’s hand extended tentatively toward the untouched pint poised upon the table, only to have Dylan’s swift hand intervene, smacking it away in a fleeting moment of rivalry. Undeterred, Tyler seized the glass in haste and took a bracing swig, a daring act of reclamation.

“Fine,” Tyler said. “I’ll just keep these to myself then.” He dug a hand in a pocket, looked around suspiciously, then withdrew a small clear bag of pills.

“Don’t let Max catch you,” Dylan said. “You know he’ll kick your ass if he catches you with those again. Plus, no more cheap drinks.”

“He can’t catch me with them if they’re in my stomach,” Tyler said with a wink.

It was undeniable logic that not even the most astute lawyer could talk around.

Dylan’s open hand shot out with sudden urgency.

Chapter 38

They had struck the deal.

Offers and counteroffers were a performance to show their respective men that they were the ones with the power. They eventually ended up where they had begun, at the exact point that was agreed upon days earlier in Grigory's Maserati. The sound of their agreement echoed through the empty factory, bouncing off the walls and filling the silent void. Hyun-woo placed his cigar in the ashtray and extended his hand.

Sitting in a room of massive proportions, its vastness remained unseen. Overhead, the only light source created an oasis of illumination amidst a sea of darkness. The factory's outer walls lay hidden in the deep shadows. Even with the sense of numerous men lurking nearby, Grigory felt a sense of safety, flanked by his two most trusted allies: his brother Alexei and his enforcer, Dima.

Grigory stood from the uncomfortable metal chair and approached the desk, his mind calculating the steps to execute the next steps in the plan flawlessly. Hyun-woo, on the other hand, seemed content to bask in the satisfaction of the successful deal, his cigar smoke drifting lazily into the air.

The counterparts firmly clasped hands, solemnly sealing the deal, thus presenting the agreement to all those present.

Grigory then rejoined his associates, while Alexei handed over the sleek black tablet he had been holding.

Silence settled in as Grigory deftly tapped on the tablet's touch screen for a few minutes, a contented grin on his face. Alexei and Dima observed their disciplined counterparts, positioned on either side of Hyun-woo's desk, their weapons clutched close to their bodies.

Suddenly, Grigory's smile vanished, his eyes widened, and he swallowed hard. However, just as quickly as it disappeared, his smile returned. With a satisfying press on the screen, he looked up and showed the screen to Hyun-woo.

"The agreed amount is in escrow."

Hyun-woo gave a subtle nod, and he reclined in his chair, savoring his cigar's rich smoke.

Grigory, a formidable figure in his impeccable Italian three-piece suit, stood with poise, his hands clasped before him. His eyes scanned the room, and he released a deep sigh. "Well?" he inquired, his voice a low, unyielding murmur, concealing the turmoil beneath.

Hyun-woo remained reticent, studying his adversary intently. He rotated the cigar in his mouth before removing it and gesturing toward Grigory. "Now, that's quite the suit. Who is your tailor?"

Grigory approached his counterpart, his polished leather shoes resonating loudly on the concrete floor. He pressed his hands firmly onto the ivory leather tabletop, speaking deliberately, intent on conveying his message without provocation. "I'm not interested in your sartorial desires. No games. I've transferred the funds. Just disclose the whereabouts of the merchandise, and we'll be on our way."

Hyun-woo's smile vanished, and his eyes flickered as if a magician had deceived him, somehow replacing the coin in his fist with a stone. He reached into his jacket pocket, withdrew a business card, and placed it on his desk.

"I hear you've been acquiring properties throughout the city," Hyun-woo remarked.

"If by properties you mean drug territory, and by acquiring you mean seizing, then yes, I'm expanding into new domains," Grigory replied, his tone laced with indifference. "Not that it concerns you."

Hyun-woo rested his hand on the card. "Consider yourself fortunate I'm not concerned." He took a final drag from his cigar, blowing smoke rings into the air, then slid the card across the desk.

Grigory picked up the card and examined its contents, which comprised three succinct lines of information. With a calculated air, he retrieved a lighter from his pocket, igniting one corner of the card. As it smoldered, he held it over a crystal ashtray, watching it twist and curl into a charred heap.

He pulled out his phone and sent a message. Within a minute, Hyun-woo's phone buzzed, and he leaned forward to inspect it. He leaned back, a smile on his face, a thick cigar in his fingers. "This concludes our business."

"Indeed it is," Grigory affirmed, a hint of satisfaction in his tone.

As Hyun-woo rose from his seat, overhead lights flickered to life, casting a harsh, revealing glow upon the factory. It unveiled an army of men armed with semi-automatic machine guns, poised for action.

"Now, get the fuck out of my factory," he snarled.

Chapter 39

Eli settled the taxi fare and stood before the hospital, his gaze locked onto the sliding glass doors. An innate sense of duty toward his family had propelled his journey, even though they had been absent from his life for the past five years. It felt peculiar to label them as “family” after such a prolonged absence, yet he couldn’t ignore his mother’s plea for assistance when she called to inform him of his father’s mild heart attack.

Despite the painful history and lingering wounds, Eli didn’t hesitate to jump into a taxi and rush to his father’s side. He didn’t do it for his mother or his brother, but solely for his father. It was his father who had stood by him, making difficult decisions that had supported him rather than harmed him. Now, it was Eli’s turn to return that support.

Navigating a labyrinth of sterile white hallways, retracing his steps, and seeking guidance from the hospital staff, Eli finally reached his father’s room. The journey felt like a security protocol, a series of incremental upgrades meant to patch vulnerabilities in the code but never as effective as starting anew.

Glancing through the partially open wooden door, he observed his mother keeping vigil beside her husband, while his brother, Danny, stood solemnly at the foot of the bed. “Angel” was not the word for Danny, who had never played that role in Eli’s childhood. Danny’s imposing presence loomed over them, arms crossed, fixated on their father as though his sheer willpower could dispel the ailment and breathe life back into the frail body. Eli knew who had inherited the brains and brawn DNA from their parents.

Taking a deep breath, Eli summoned his resolve before stepping into the room. The weight of their gazes bore down on him—his

brother's gaze laden with disdain, his mother's brimming with hope, and his father's radiating joy. The sight of them all together, seemingly untouched by the passage of time, tugged Eli's heartstrings. As he surveyed the room, he inwardly chastised himself for not bringing anything. Yet, it seemed his father required no more clichéd, overpriced gifts from the hospital gift shop.

They exchanged no words as Eli's mother enveloped him in a warm embrace, and he received a strong handshake from his brother that lasted just a little too long. Eli positioned himself by the bedside as his father summoned every ounce of strength to raise his arm off the bed. Eli gently clasped it, holding it close for a moment before setting it down with care. For an ephemeral instant, it felt as though everything could return to the way it once was, as though all had forgiven past grievances.

Then Danny's firm hand landed on Eli's shoulder, jolting him back to reality. "Eli, dad's exhausted. Can we talk outside while he rests?"

Eli exchanged a meaningful look with his father, offering a solemn nod. As they departed the room, he followed Danny, and the incessant beeping of the monitors slowly receded into the background.

Once the door closed silently behind them, Danny's countenance transformed. His previously gentle expression vanished, replaced by an unyielding, stony visage. His lips tightened with simmering anger, and his eyes gleamed with hatred. He advanced toward Eli like a lioness closing in on its prey, each step slow and deliberate.

Eli retreated, inching backward until he inadvertently struck the wall behind him; there was no escape. For the first time in his life, he sensed that there would be no smooth-talking his way out of this impending confrontation.

Danny towered over Eli, glaring down at him as he spoke through gritted teeth. "What the hell are you doing here?"

“Geez, calm down, Danny,” Eli said. He realized his mistake as soon as the words left his lips. His brother had always had the better of him, just looking at him would bring his emotions to the forefront and do the talking before his brain engaged.

“Don’t tell me to calm down,” Danny said, looming over him and thrusting a finger into his chest. “Nobody wants to see you, nobody wants you here.”

“Mum called me.”

“She only did that because dad asked her to. I’m here to help them, just like when we were kids, and you were off somewhere jerking off with those loser friends of yours.”

Eli looked over his brother’s closely cropped hair and grunted. “I thought you might have grown it out when you got kicked out of the service.”

Dang. Couldn’t help himself.

Danny balled a hand into a fist and cocked it back.

Eli quickly raised his hands.

“Wait,” he blurted. “I’m sorry, okay. I know I’ve been a screw-up, I know I should have done more. I was young. I guess I didn’t have your sense of family.”

Danny’s clenched fist hesitated in mid-air, and then Eli witnessed the tension slowly ebbing away. Eli wasn’t entirely sure how much his brother genuinely believed the words, but it appeared he infused enough conviction into his tone to disarm him.

Danny cast a furtive glance over his shoulder, ensuring that the door to their father’s room was sealed. “For some reason, Dad still harbors some sense of connection to you. I remember when we all went down the shooting range to blow off a few rounds, but it was so obvious why you were there. Always out for yourself, always wanting something in return. You didn’t give a shit, Eli. Not really, and everyone realized but him.”

“I’m sorry,” Eli repeated.

Danny came in close. “Dad had a heart attack because they were arguing about you. I blame you for this. For all of this.”

Eli’s gaze dropped to the floor, the weight of the news hitting him harder than any physical blow his brother could have delivered—more profound than any punch or kick. What cut the deepest was that he had expected retaliation from Danny for his impromptu visit. During the brief journey from the bar to the hospital, he had mentally braced himself, but the words had shattered his emotional defenses.

He was aware of his transgressions; it was the very reason he had left in the first place. He had hoped that, after all this time, the past could be buried and forgotten. Yet, it seemed not only was that not the case, but his brother also intended to make up for lost time.

Eli fought back the tears, determined not to show his brother any vulnerability. An empty sensation churned in his stomach, while an odd tingling crawled up his chest and settled in his neck. The sensation itched across his face, akin to pins and needles infiltrating his features.

While his brother had been honing his physical prowess, Eli had delved into the world of cryptography. As his brother made state teams and joined the military, Eli was busy earning his college degree. Throughout it all, his father had never berated him or urged him to step out of his darkened room and embrace the outdoors. Instead, he encouraged Eli to discover his passion and explore it further, often quoting Albert Einstein: ‘Once you stop learning, you start dying.’

Eli’s eyes glazed over as he looked up at Danny, and his voice was slightly hoarse. “Alright then, I’ll just say my goodbyes and leave. You’ll never have to see me again.”

Danny pinned him against the wall once more with his big hand. “No. No more. You can go now. I’ll let them know.” He dropped his hand down. “Everyone will be better off without you, Eli. Dad needs

no more aggravation. He needs rest and recovery, not some bullshit reunion.”

Eli parted his lips, but silence hung heavily in the air. There was no point, no words, or actions that could overpower his brother and grant him entry to the room. This was how the relationship would conclude, not just with Danny, but with all of them.

He turned on his heel and slowly made his way back down the hallway, each step laden with a profound heaviness. His gaze remained fixed on his hands as he walked, yearning to feel the warmth of his father’s touch once again. Yet, the more he tried to summon that feeling, the more his hands seemed to grow numb and lifeless. A solitary tear trickled down his cheek as the elevator doors slid open.

He stepped into the lift.

And out of his family’s life forever.

Chapter 40

Sunday morning

With a click and a roar, the motor came to life, lifting the massive metal door. As the door rolled up on itself at its high point, the morning light pierced the dusty interior, casting long shadows of the truck and the concrete pylons within. When the door reached its apex, the rumbling truck eased forward into the void. As the vehicle settled into its designated spot and powered down, the door began its descent, gradually snuffing out the last remaining light.

The vast interior plunged back into darkness, but only for a moment. Suddenly, a bank of bright lights overhead flickered on, illuminating the workers who had been hiding in the shadows. They swarmed towards the truck, dressed in dark clothing, their movements akin to ants converging on a dead animal. The sound of several forklifts filled the air as they joined the workers in unloading the cargo. Slowly but steadily, Dima made his way towards the truck, his figure silhouetted against the glare of the overhead lights.

Hank seemed unfazed by the bustling activity around him as he opened the cab door and descended the rig, his landing heavy. He quickly zipped up his jacket, doing his best to conceal the pistol securely wedged in the front of his jeans, before surveying his surroundings. The walls of the building were sturdy, with rows of closed louver windows running around all four sides. High overhead, large industrial fans slowly spun, attempting to stir up the stale air that permeated the structure.

On the opposite side of the city from the port, the deserted building offered little traffic to contend with during his journey. The

only discomfort came from the constant prodding of the gun barrel nestled against his leg with each shift of the gears. Despite this, he reassured himself the safety was engaged.

As Hank turned the corner of his truck, he found a robustly built man, a crowbar protruding conspicuously from the man's belt, engrossed in manipulating the locks on the trailer's doors. Despite Hank's usual unflinching composure, his heart raced with an unfamiliar wave of anxiety. With an attempt to conceal his unease, he coolly inquired, "You Dima?"

Without a word, the man swung open the doors of the trailer and secured them to the truck. "Da," he replied in confirmation before checking the contents of the trailer. Satisfied, he made his way over to the driver. "Did you follow the instructions?"

Hank nodded.

"All the instructions?"

Nodded again.

"Let us see."

Dima then climbed up the side of the truck and gestured for the driver to follow.

"If it's the same to you I'd rather just get paid and head out after your crew has unloaded it."

Dima ignored the comment and coaxed him up. "Come, come," he repeated.

The driver took a deep breath and hoisted himself up the side of the trailer. They worked their way between the crates, containers, and boxes as a caravan of forklifts arrived at the rear of the truck.

Deep inside the trailer, in an area mapped out by the cargo, was a space. Bloodied limbs intertwined with each other, laying in a pool of combined blood. They lay where they had fallen, moving little in the journey from the port,

Dima stood over the pile. "Somewhat of a beautiful thing," he murmured. "It doesn't matter how many times you experience it,

whether it's your home, a country you were invading, or a prison, the sight of death always invigorates me." He breathed in deep, like a chef smelling their latest concoction.

Hank stood motionless behind the giant. Quiet, because there was Quiet because. The awareness of the murder weapon tucked into his pants became almost overwhelming. He yanked it out and held it out for the big man.

"You did good. What do you think their ghosts would say if they were here right now?" Dima asked in an almost catatonic state of pleasure.

"I don't know," Hank replied. "But can I get paid now? I'd rather be somewhere else."

Dima slowly turned, his bulk made it feel like the walls were closing. He eyed the weapon in the outstretched hand and slowly reached for something concealed under his jacket.

As the pair locked eyes, Hank could feel his heart bang in his chest, and his fingers ever so slowly curled around the handle of the weapon. He was hesitant to point the weapon at the imposing figure, especially with several of Dima's associates nearby. A sudden, misconstrued move could escalate into a violent showdown. In the confined space between them, the margin for error was perilously slim.

Dima's gaze remained unwavering as he extracted a bulky envelope from his pocket and extended it toward the driver. Startled, Hank initially recoiled but quickly regained his composure, taking a steady breath.

"This is what was agreed," Dima said.

Hank relaxed his stance and reached for the envelope from Dima with his other hand, nodding in acknowledgment. But as he attempted to take the package, Dima refused to let go.

"There's a lesson you should know," Dima said.

Hank's smile vanished as two bullets hit the side of his head in a deafening double-tap. In a matter of seconds, his life ended, engulfed

by the darkness. The impact threw his body sideways, while Dima stood frozen, holding onto the package.

Chapter 41

Dima stood over the fresh cadaver.

“It’s not the man you’re facing that you need to worry about.”

Leaning down, he retrieved the pistol and straightened up. Following *his* instructions, it was another loose end tied up. He turned to the assassin who emerged from the shadows.

“Take care of this mess and get everything ready for distribution,” he ordered. “The boss wants the product on the streets within hours.”

The man nodded and made his way to the rear of the truck, releasing a sharp whistle that cut through the air. A utilitarian vehicle, its interior lined with plastic, reversed skillfully to the truck’s cargo door. Two stout men emerged, their faces stoic, and efficiently hoisted Hank’s lifeless body onto the tray. He hung momentarily in the air before landing on the tray with a sickening thud. More bodies followed as more containers were unloaded.

The men swiftly covered the grim cargo with layers of plastic and a somber black tarp. They then drove off, headed for a secluded location, a massive excavation site hidden from prying eyes. Here, the unfortunate passenger would find his last resting place, encased in unforgiving cement, ensuring no one would ever discover it.

In a world where even the police appeared indifferent to the fate of a lone driver, lost amid a sea of more pressing concerns, the truth would remain forever buried, much like Hank himself. The machinery of justice had its priorities, with plenty of innocent people to protect and serve.

Jumping down from the trailer, Dima weaved his way through the frenzied activity of forklifts and workers until he reached one of the open crates. The crew had unpacked the contents, revealing rows

of polymer containers that looked more like oversized suitcases than anything else. A man hovered nearby, moving between the crates like a sales assistant waiting for customers.

“Open it,” Dima commanded. With a hiss, the plastic case snapped open to reveal a series of semi-automatic machine guns, neatly stacked and gleaming in the dim light of the warehouse. Dima selected one and lifted it to his shoulder, peering through the sights at a worker strolling along the far end of the warehouse. He spoke as if giving a sales pitch: “The AK-12 Assault Rifle. Cheap, reliable, and so easy to fire a monkey could use it.” He returned the gun to its place in the case before moving on to the next open crate.

This time, he withdrew a sleek pistol and clasped it, pointing it at a worker in the distance who was taking a smoke break in the far corner of the warehouse. “The AF-1, the Russian Military’s new best friend,” he declared, a note of pride in his voice. He carefully placed the pistol back in the crate before turning to address his comrades.

“Comrades,” he said, his tone grave, “the Cold War may be long gone, but a new war is beginning.”

The atmosphere in the warehouse was tense, but it was nothing new. It was a way of life for them, and they knew the expectations. Dima’s words were just a reminder of what they already knew—that they were in the middle of something big, something that required courage and commitment.

As he approached the final case, Dima’s movements became more deliberate, more reverent. This was the most important case, the one that held the key to their success. He ran his fingers over the titanium surface, feeling the cool metal beneath his skin.

With a sense of ceremony, he undid the catches and lifted the lid, revealing the gleaming gold bullets inside. Each one was a work of art, with intricate etchings that spoke of their deadly purpose. Dima’s eyes widened as he took in the sight before him.

“This is going to cause some serious damage,” he mumbled, his voice filled with a mix of excitement and apprehension. He knew that with these bullets, they could take on anyone, and win. But he also knew that the stakes were high, and the consequences of failure were dire.

He carefully picked up one bullet and inspected it, marveling at its design. It was a thing of beauty, and yet it was also a harbinger of death. He knew that once these bullets were in play, there was no going back.

Dima scanned the dimly lit warehouse and caught sight of two workers chatting and smoking in the corner, believing they were out of sight. He called out to them, causing them to stamp out their cigarettes quickly and approach him, their gazes fixed on the ground. As they reached Dima, they lifted their heads slowly, attempting to conceal their guilt and fear of repercussions for their negligence. They remained silent, their jaws clenched, waiting for their next move, whether it be an order or punishment, or perhaps both.

Dima’s gaze intensified as he glanced at the two men, deciding who was the weaker man. “What are your names?”

“I am Ivan,” one of them said. “And this is Nikki.”

“Ivan and Nikki,” Dima said, pointing between them. “Nikki and Ivan.”

Ivan licked his lips. “What can we do, boss?”

“Why did you ask like that?”

The two men looked at each other until Nikki shrugged. “What do you mean, boss?”

“You asked if there was anything you could do, and as you can see, there is plenty of work to be done.”

“Well,” Ivan said. “It’s just that—”

“I want to run an experiment. I want to test the theory that our product is so easy to use that even a bunch of *Govnosos* like you can do it.”

Without hesitation, Ivan swiftly grabbed a pistol from the crate and hit the release button to inspect the empty magazine. Dima quickly picked up one of the new bullets and threw it at him. In the blink of an eye, Ivan skillfully pushed the bullet into the magazine, slammed it into the handle with a sharp crack, and pulled back on the slide, forcing the solitary bullet into the chamber. With the gun now ready to be fired, he presented it back to Dima with a confident nod.

Dima's eyes flicked over to Nikki, who had been observing the exchange. "My, that was impressive," he said, turning back to Ivan. "You have a steady hand and quick reflexes. You may just have a future here." While keeping eye contact with Ivan, he nodded to Nikki. "Kill him."

Ivan blinked as if he didn't understand the instructions. "What?"

Dima immediately reached for the gun, turning it upwards and facing it towards Ivan. Pulled the trigger. Brains exploded from the top of his head like an erupting volcano., the body collapsed, leaving Dima holding the gun, the slide locked back.

"We do not have the luxury of hesitation," Dima boomed. "Kill or be killed." He quickly pulled the weapon he retrieved from the dead truck driver, held it at arm's length, and without looking, fired.

Nicki stumbled backward, hands looking to plug the hole in his stomach, blood covering his hands. He fell to his knees and looked up as Dima stepped over to him. The big man grabbed him by the hair. "Open your mouth," Dima said sinisterly.

Nicki slowly parted his lips and Dima pushed the barrel inside.

"If I catch anyone else slacking off, they'll find themselves with a bullet in their brain. *Vy ponimayete, mne trakhnut ostroumiye?*"

He pulled the trigger, and Nicki crumpled amid a shower of his blood.

"Get back to work!" Dima roared.

Workers immediately came forward to collect the bodies, carrying them over to the utility that was yet to leave. It didn't matter how many bodies were in the back, there was always room for one more.

Dima observed as the men frantically moved from one station to the next. Sometimes it takes a sense of urgency to bring out their best. Death was the great motivator.

He called out for Petrov, his voice booming in the warehouse, who was by his side in a matter of seconds.

"You still have the phone I gave you?" Dima asked.

Petrov yanked it out of his pocket and held it out in the palm of his hand. Dima collected it, replacing it with the sleek black firearm.

"Congratulations," Dima said. "You've been promoted."

"That was fast."

"Ivan is dead," Dima replied.

"What about the drug runs?"

Dima cupped the side of the boy's head and laughed. "I appreciate the enthusiasm of youth. I will establish dominance and then hand it over to someone else. You just focus on the weapons."

They nodded at each other.

Chapter 42

Eli's eyelids fluttered open, wincing at the assault of the mid-morning sun beaming through the window. A parched throat and a merciless throbbing in his skull tormented him. He attempted to moisten his tongue with saliva, only to taste a bitter mix of liquor and bile. Cautiously, he sat upright, his surroundings a hazy blur, while he pieced together the events of the previous night.

He ran a hand over his face and caught glimpses of being cornered by his brother, relentlessly attacked with biting words, before he retreated to his apartment, swallowed a pill, and washed it down with a beer. The rest of the night was a blank slate, lost in the abyss of his mind.

The morning sun brought with it a painful realization—Eli was now alone, without any family of his own. His brother's hurtful words felt like a distant dream, but he knew they were all too real. He closed his eyes tightly, hoping to escape the memories, but they remained stubbornly present. He considered his options for the future, but his mind was clouded, and his thoughts were unclear. Eventually, he let out an enormous yawn, scratched his chest, and clumsily rolled off the couch onto the floor. Using the couch as support, he slowly and unsteadily pulled himself up to his feet.

He patted his pockets, finally retrieving his phone from his pants. As he stood swaying in the dusty midday sun, he scrolled through his contacts, searching for Tyler's number. His finger hovered over the call button, but the thought of making the trek across town made him hesitate.

Eventually, he gave up and threw his phone down on the couch, then bounced off the walls on his way to the kitchen to grab another beer. He resigned himself to being alone, like a lone pawn surround-

ed by enemy pieces on a chessboard. He knew he couldn't escape his troubles, so he might as well enjoy himself while he could.

As he opened the fridge, he faced a conundrum: there was only one beer left. He placed it on the kitchen counter and noticed a little clear baggy with a single pill that had somehow blended into the surface. He did not know how many pills he had already taken, but he assumed they were pretty mild considering his current state.

Then he had a better idea. There was a place he knew well, closer and in the opposite direction. It was sure to be deserted at this hour, but that only added to the appeal. He was sure Max could help him out.

Hyun-woo made an international call with a burner phone. With the deal struck and the money transferred, the phone call was going to set his plan in motion. Hyun-woo refused to exist at the bottom of the totem pole any longer. This opportunity presented his chance to rise to the top and spearhead a revolution. The world stood on the brink of change, and he intended to lead the charge.

While waiting for the call to be answered, he smiled, reflecting on his last interaction with Grigory. Upon receiving a response on the phone, they conversed in Korean. "The deal is satisfactory. It's time."

Hyun-woo hung up, removed the SIM card, and handed the phone to his assistant who walked off to melt the device. Hyun-woo swallowed the small piece of plastic, knowing that it would pass through his system and be undetectable by the time anyone tried to trace it.

He smiled, feeling liberated from his past. As he stepped out of his car and basked in the sunshine, he knew that the future was bright and full of possibilities.

Grigory placed his hands firmly on the table, splaying his fingers wide, and drew in a deep breath as he scrutinized the man standing before him. The deliberate absence of a chair in the room was a calculated move by Grigory, designed to grant him a psychological edge. He took pride in maintaining his composure and level-headedness in high-pressure situations, even when others were losing their heads—sometimes literally.

The man's demeanor was evident to everyone. His uneasiness was clear in the way he shifted his stance, a bead of sweat glistening on his brow, and a slight twitch in his eye. Grigory's piercing gaze locked onto the man, his scrutiny unrelenting, until finally, he allowed a small smile to creep onto his face.

"I apologize for the interruption, Oskar, but business is business. I'm sure you understand."

Oskar swallowed hard and smirked nervously. "Of course, boss. We are of the same mindset, cut from the same cloth."

The attempt to establish a common connection between the two had been a considerable stretch. Grigory reclined in his chair and cast a sidelong glance at his brother, Alexei, who stood in the shadows, leaning against the wall.

"Oh, there is no cloth that could possibly cover us both," Grigory said.

The silence worked its way through the myriad of tables and chairs, through the plush leather booths, and around the large, rustic chandelier that hung overhead.

"So," Oskar began, looking around. "I didn't realize you were into bars."

"My interests are wide and varied," Grigory replied. "However, for the record, this isn't just a bar."

“Oh?” Oskar said as he took in the sports memorabilia and newspaper clippings attached to the walls and the beer pumps behind the bar. “What is it?”

“This is a whiskey bar, Oskar. A place for influential people to have influential conversations and get fucked up on overpriced imported liquor. Not some hangout for teenagers.”

“I think you might need to redecorate.”

“Changes are coming,” Grigory stated.

“I see. So, what is this meeting about?”

Grigory looked him over again. “Pierre recommended you to us.”

“That’s right.”

“The snitch.”

Oskar bowed his head. “I know nothing about that.”

“For his trouble, his tongue now protrudes through his neck.”

Oskar clenched his jaw. “He deserved it, boss.”

“Are you two cut from the same cloth?”

Oskar held up his hands. “Hey, I’m here to serve you. I’m loyal to you.”

“In my line of work, people get labeled as guilty by association, it’s because they are. Trust is my cornerstone; I need to look into a man’s eyes and discern the truth in their words.”

Oskar’s eyes darted around the room, taking in every shadow and corner. Beads of sweat glistened on his forehead as he nervously rubbed his clammy hands together, leaving them red and sore. Despite his anxiety, he forced a smile on his face, though it was as fake as a groom who was really in love with the bridesmaid.

Grigory slammed his hands on the table, his broad smile belying his intense demeanor. “Relax, Oskar,” he said, trying to reassure his nervous companion. “I trust you.”

Oskar opened his arms and silently sighed. “I’m all yours, boss. Just tell me what you need, and it will get done.”

“Wonderful,” Grigory said. “I’m sure you’ve heard about a shipment we are expecting.”

“Sure, boss. I’ve heard the rumors. What is it exactly?”

“Something that is going to propel us to the top, Oskar.”

“Sure, but what is it?”

“All in good time.”

“When’s it coming in?”

“We’ll let you know. I just want you to be ready when I need you.”

“Of course.”

Silence once again enveloped the room, punctuated only by the intense gaze of Grigory, which seemed to emanate an intense aura of such dread that it could make your ears bleed.

“Oskar?” Grigory said softly.

“Yes, boss?”

“What the fuck are you still doing here?”

Oskar backed away. “Yeah, right. Thanks, boss.”

Just as he was making his way to the door, it suddenly burst open, and a disheveled man stumbled into the room. He made his way over to the bar and collapsed onto it, squinting through bleary eyes at the selection of top-shelf liquors arranged behind it.

Oskar’s gaze flickered between the newly arrived guest and Grigory. “You want me to deal with this one?” he asked tentatively.

Grigory, however, rose from his seat and buttoned up his jacket.

The patron smacked his hand on the bar. “Max!” he shouted.

“That’s okay, Oskar,” he said, his voice laced with annoyance. “Sometimes you just have to take care of things yourself. You can go now.”

Chapter 43

Eli called out as he leaned unsteadily against the bar, his eyes fixed on the frosted glass of the front entrance through which he had just stumbled. The feeble afternoon light attempted to filter through the translucent surface but only highlighted the dust particles swirling around him.

It was his favorite haunt, although he couldn't recall the last time he had set foot in the place during daylight hours. The bar looked and felt different in the harsh light of day. This was where he and his friends would conduct their business, but they wouldn't even be there at that time. He liked how, the farther he went from the entrance, the more the darkness swallowed the light, shrouding the back in a perpetual shadow, regardless of how many lights they switched on.

Eli's plan was simple: order two pints, retreat to the farthest and darkest corner, and pass the time reading the framed writings until his friends arrived, as they always did. They would banter, raise a glass or two, and make him feel better about life, helping him forget about his estranged family. The plan was flawless, and in his hazy state, it was perfect. The only thing he needed was some damn service.

Eli drummed his fingers on the bar to an imaginary beat, feeling as though he had been waiting for ages. The front door opened and then closed, but it didn't draw his attention from the bar.

"Max!" he called again. "Come on. It's Eli. Where are you?!"

Just as he was about to call out again, he heard a voice behind him.

"Max isn't here anymore," Alexei said.

"What are you talking about?" Eli mumbled.

"This establishment is under new management," Grigory added.

“New what?” Eli said as he turned, eyeballing the well-dressed person before him. Then to the person standing next to him. For a moment, Eli thought he was seeing double.

“My name is Grigory, the new owner.”

“Since when?”

“Since this morning. And we don’t officially open for another week.”

“But the door was open.”

Grigory smiled. “Even still. I would appreciate it if you left.”

Eli summoned his best negotiation skills, the ones that had gotten him and his friends out of trouble on numerous occasions. He steadied himself against the bar, placing his elbows on the counter. Cleared his throat.

“Listen, pal. You seem like a real dick in that fancy suit. Why don’t you just fuck off and let me enjoy a drink in peace?”

At first, Grigory smiled as he shared a glance with the person beside him. The sudden movement caught Eli off guard, his face slamming against the smooth surface of the bar, and a blunt object pressed against the other side of his head. The pain jolted him out of his morning stupor, and he felt it intensify.

Grigory tightened his grip on the gun, pressing it harder against Eli’s skull.

“Hey,” Eli shouted. “Listen, I don’t mean to be a dick. I’m having a rough time at the moment, okay? My dad’s in hospital and my brother doesn’t want me to see him, and it’s all fucked up. You know what it’s like, right?”

Grigory leaned down, pushing the gun harder against Eli’s skull. “What makes you think I care about you or your family?”

It wasn’t the response he was looking for, which meant he was pulling the wrong levers.

“Listen, maybe we can help each other out.”

“What do you think, Alexei? Should we hear him out or put a bullet in his brain?”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Eli stumbled.

“I suppose we could hear the young man out,” Alexei said. “I mean, we were young once.”

There was a momentary pause, then, “Very well. I’m listening.”

“It’s hard to talk when you mash my face against the bar like this.”

All at once the pressure subsided, and Eli stood up straight, stretching his neck and grimacing. Grigory pushed the weapon back into his coat pocket.

“I had an agreement with Max.”

“What type of agreement?”

“For a small fee, Max would let myself and my friends conduct business here sometimes.”

“How much?”

“A grand.”

“Over what period?”

“A month.”

Grigory laughed.

“Or I could just find somewhere else to do it.”

Grigory looked around. “I have a feeling that if that was the case, you would have done it by now.”

“Fine,” Eli conceded.

“Which means the location is important. So, I’m wondering if it’s the clientele or something the area has to offer.” He eyeballed Eli closely. “So, what’s the little venture you’ve got working for yourself?”

Eli quickly shifted his gaze between the two men. Considering his interactions with them so far, he felt mildly comfortable sharing some of the higher-level overview points.

“We seek out open systems and exploit that weakness.”

Alexei snapped his fingers. “So, the bank next door?”

Eli shrugged. “Initially. Then we just used it as a backbone to other systems, and eventually, other banks, societies, hedge funds. It’s simple stuff, really.”

“So, a little digital snatch-and-grab operation.”

“No,” Eli said evenly, “not a snatch-and-grab operation. A bit more nuanced than that.”

Grigory looked him up and down. “Fine, continue going about business. But it’s three grand a month. Give me your wallet.”

“My wallet? I don’t carry cash around on me.”

Alexei stepped forward and began patting down Eli, searching for the wallet. Upon locating it, he promptly handed it back to his brother. As Grigory examined the contents, Alexei straightened Eli’s clothes and gave him a reassuring pat on the shoulder.

“I don’t want the cash,” Grigory said. He sifted through the wallet until he found what he was after, then held up Eli’s driver’s license, reading out the address. “So, Eli, now I know where you live. If you decide to renege on our agreement, or breath a word about our deal to anyone, or cause me any grief in *any* way, I’ll find you, break each of your fingers one by one, and only then will I put a bullet through your head. Is that perfectly clear?”

Eli slowly nodded, feeling like he was slowly lowering himself into shark-infested waters without a cage.

Grigory replaced the license in the wallet and handed it back.

“Now, fuck off out of my bar before I reconsider.”

Chapter 44

Dylan leaned against the cool brick wall of their apartment complex and watched the sparse traffic flow by. He glanced at his phone, waiting for a reply from Berke about their drug delivery.

“I wonder what Eli’s up to right now,” he mused aloud to no one in particular. He was eager to get their hands on more pills after they had polished off the last batch at the pub the night before. The back alley they were hiding in was dark, save for the dim light spilling out from behind the industrial-sized rubbish containers. They couldn’t help but get excited at the sound of every passing vehicle.

As they waited for their order, Tyler couldn’t help but regret their lack of foresight. “We really should’ve stocked up on pills,” he said, his voice tinged with frustration. They had only realized the empty plastic sealable bag on the kitchen table after they had woken up from their drug-induced stupor. But it was no use crying over spilled milk. Tyler texted Berke, their go-to drug delivery person, for another score. After all, they couldn’t go without their fix for too long.

The more Dylan and Tyler thought about it, the more they blamed Eli for their reckless and haphazard combination of banned substances and alcohol. Had he been there, he would have insisted they take it easy, or at least moderate their consumption, and save some for later. But no, they had polished off everything in the pub and were now forced to restock.

They stood in the grimy back alley of their building, surrounded by industrial-sized garbage containers and the stench of rotting waste, waiting for Berke to deliver their drugs. The convenience of the service was unparalleled. All it took was a simple text message to Berke and he would deliver their order straight to their door. It was

like having their very own drug delivery service. And the best part? Berke was so efficient that he often didn't even bother to stop his car. He would simply toss a small plastic bag out of the window and Tyler would toss the payment back. It was fast, discreet, and incredibly effective.

The guilt of their overindulgence mixed with the excitement of the impending high, created a strange cocktail of emotions within them.

"He seemed freaked out when he left the bar last night," Dylan said, scratching his head. "What do you think's up?"

Tyler shrugged.

Dylan chewed the inside of his cheek. "Do you think we should call him and see if he's alright?"

The variety of vehicles Berke used only added to their curiosity. It wasn't always the same car, leading them to speculate whether Berke was in the habit of stealing vehicles for his rapid deliveries. Once, Berke even arrived on a mountain bike, later found abandoned at the end of the street. Berke's elusiveness was part of his mystique, assuming 'Berke' was even his real name.

Tyler stared at the wall opposite. "He knows where we are and how to reach us. If he hasn't called us, yet it's because he doesn't want to." There was silence.

Tyler and Dylan admired Berke for his entrepreneurial spirit in the door-to-door drug delivery business. They often discussed how they could have come up with the idea themselves. However, they were grateful for Berke's service and avoided the sketchy areas. They didn't want to get mixed up with the drug addicts, who wandered around in a haze, desperate for their next fix. It was much safer and more convenient to order from Berke and have the goods delivered right to their door.

Tyler finished his thought. “Besides, we’ll see him at the bar later. I wouldn’t worry about it.” He nervously bit his lip, his eyes darting around the alley.

Suddenly, a large, black car with heavily tinted windows turned sharply into the alley, its engine emitting a deep, menacing growl. It advanced slowly, reminiscent of a panther methodically stalking its prey. The car halted abruptly, mere feet away, its engine cutting to a sinister silence. The door swung open with a forceful kick, and from within emerged a monster—towering, broad, and built like a fortress. His biceps looked like they would make it difficult for him to brush his teeth.

Tyler and Dylan instinctively retreated, their steps cautious and measured. Tyler’s heart pounded against his ribcage, a rapid drum-beat of anxiety. Summoning his courage, he stammered, “Who the hell are you?”

The giant of a man held up his phone, his response laced with a thick Eastern European accent that cut through the tense air. “I’m the new delivery boy.”

The duo studied the phone in the giant’s hand, their curiosity piqued. Dylan, with a hint of apprehension in his voice, asked, “What happened to Berke?”

The towering figure introduced himself, “My name is Dima,” his attempt at a friendly tone still carried an undercurrent of severity.

Dylan persisted, “Yes, but where’s Berke?”

“Is he alright?” Tyler chimed in.

Dima, standing tall and imposing, took a step forward. His massive frame cast a shadow over Tyler and Dylan.

“He’s fine,” he assured them. “Now, what did you want? I’m very busy.”

Tyler nervously reached into his pocket and pulled out two crisp one-hundred-dollar bills. He held them out to Dima. “The usual. Two bags for two notes.”

“Price is now three notes,” Dima said, holding up his fingers.

“What? Since when?”

“Since now.”

“Listen,” Tyler said. “We had an agreement with Berke.”

“And now you have an agreement with me. Three notes.”

Tyler sighed, dug around, and extracted a crumpled-up third note. Dima snatched the bills from Tyler’s hand and stuffed them in to his pocket. Without a word, he retrieved a small bag of pills from his other pocket and tossed it to Dylan.

Dylan furrowed his brow in frustration as he stared at the measly number of pills in his hand.

“Where’s the rest of it?” he demanded.

Dima smirked, clearly enjoying their discomfort. “New dealer, new prices,” he replied, his voice dripping with smugness.

Tyler quickly intervened, holding up his hands in protest. “Wait, wait. That’s bullshit. We’re not paying more for less.”

Dima faced Tyler, retrieved another bag, and tossed it at his face. “Here. Now you owe me. I’ll be back tomorrow to collect. By the way, my interest charges are twenty-five percent daily.” He glared at their stunned faces. “What? You want to call the *politsiya*? You want to cry to your mommy?”

“Fuck you.” The words slipped out of Tyler’s mouth without him even thinking. He had used them as a defense mechanism many times before, and it had gotten him into trouble more than once. Eli was always the one to talk them out of sticky situations like this, to bring some calm to the situation. But this time, Eli was nowhere to be found, and the tension between them was palpable. Tyler could feel the hostility hanging in the air like a thick fog, suffocating and overwhelming.

Dima’s response was swift and blunt. He grabbed Tyler by the throat and pushed him up against the opposing cement wall and in

the same motion pushed the barrel of a pistol against his quivering lips.

Dima's grip on Tyler's throat tightened, cutting off his air supply, as he pressed the cold metal of the gun against his lips. Tyler's eyes bulged in fear, locked on the hammer.

Dylan's mind raced, trying to think of a way to help his friend, but he couldn't move, frozen by the overwhelming fear and powerlessness he felt at that moment. Memories of being bullied in the schoolyard flooded back, making him feel small and helpless once again.

Dima moved in close and whispered to Tyler, his breath wafting over him like a thick fog that seemed to dull his senses and cloud his judgment, much like a handful of pills and a six-pack. "Open your mouth," he said, pressing the barrel of the gun harder against Tyler's lips.

Tyler's eyes darted back and forth, looking for any sign of escape. His heart was pounding in his chest, and his mind was racing with thoughts about how to get out of their situation. The chilling touch of the gun against his lips intensified as the pressure of Dima's hand on his throat increased.

Dima moved his face closer until their noses touched. He spoke slowly and deliberately. "Open... your... fucking... mouth."

Tyler whimpered and slowly parted his lips. Dima worked the barrel into his mouth as Tyler choked. "Back in *Rossiya*, we have names for people like you. We call them *cyka*, it means bitch. You are now my *cyka*. I will be back, and I will collect. Believe me when I say that I always collect, one way or another."

Dylan finally found the courage to act and grabbed hold of Dima's forearm, trying to pry him away from Tyler. But even with both hands, Dylan's efforts were feeble against the brute strength of Dima. "Let him go! He can't breathe!" he pleaded, his voice shaking with fear and desperation. But Dima ignored him, continuing to hold

Tyler against the wall with the gun in his mouth, unmoved by Dylan's attempts to intervene.

Dima looked down at the struggling wimp and smirked at the pointless attempt. In a flash of movement, Dima swung his arm around to clip Dylan with the back of his fist and return before Tyler took a deep breath.

Dylan instantly felt his face, the pain rocketing across his skull as he staggered to the opposite wall, bent over in agony.

“Do you understand what I am saying, *cyka?*”

Tyler nodded vigorously, as much as a gun in the mouth would allow.

Keeping him pinned to the wall, Dima extracted the weapon and wiped the spit on Tyler's shirt. He gave him one last stare before finally letting him go and Tyler fell to the ground clutching at his throat. He threw a look at Dylan who was still half bent over feeling the side of his head.

Dima made his way back to his car, but before he could get in, he paused and pulled out his phone. “I'll meet you here tomorrow for the payment.” He held it up and spoke in a deep voice. “Don't forget, I know where you live. Your previous dealer made some excellent records.” With a menacing smile, he disappeared behind the tinted windows of his car.

The engine roared to life, causing the pair to recoil and press themselves against their respective walls. They tried to blend into the material, hoping to become invisible. The car lurched towards them, and for a moment, it seemed like it would hit them. But at the last second, it reversed, leaving the two shaken and trembling.

As the car sped off, the screeching of the tires echoed in the quiet street. The two watched in silence, knowing that Dima's threat was not an empty one. They were now trapped in a dangerous game, with no way out.

Chapter 45

Detective Thompson adjusted his safety glasses and rolled his neck, steadying his aim at the target. He rolled his neck, releasing the tension that had built up over the day. The target before him, a silhouette with concentric circles on its head and chest, was a mute witness to his dedication. Though not mandated, Thompson practiced his shooting regularly. Nearing fifty, he was acutely aware of the necessity to keep his skills sharp, to avoid the dire consequences of missed shots in a real confrontation.

With a practiced eye, Thompson fired six deliberate shots. He breathed in rhythmically, inhaling before each pull and exhaling as he squeezed the trigger. The bullets punctured the paper target, each finding its home in the bullet trap beyond. His focus was ensuring each shot was precise, and if not, to recalibrate and persist until his accuracy met his stringent standards. He wasn't chasing perfection for his own sake; it was a matter of valuing his life and the lives of others too highly to leave anything to chance.

Thompson deftly operated the range's sophisticated equipment, smoothly bringing his target back for inspection. Encased in the cocoon of his earmuffs, the world around him reduced to a symphony of subdued noises—the muffled, rhythmic thuds of distant gunfire and the gentle, almost musical whistle of his breath filtering through his mustache.

He scrutinized the results. Five of his shots had found their mark within the circles, albeit near the edges. The sixth shot, however, veered off, striking the silhouette's neck. Thompson rubbed his own empathetically, acknowledging the potential severity of such a misstep. He mentally noted it as a lesson, replaced the target with a fresh one, and sent it gliding to the end of the range.

“Six more shots. This time, you’ve got it,” he murmured to himself. He steadied his stance, reloaded his revolver with a sense of purpose, and took a deep, centering breath. He was ready for another round. Each shot would be a careful orchestration of breath and movement, a dance of precision akin to the rhythmic purr of a well-tuned V8 engine.

Detective Hayes hit the thirteen-mile mark on the treadmill, a testament to his commitment to fitness despite his aversion to running. The gym, usually a mundane backdrop for his exercise routine, was momentarily enlivened by a young woman in leggings and a tight top, her figure drawing his attention away from the monotony of his workout.

Under normal circumstances, he would have run past the opulent hillside mansions to a scenic lookout point, but the lure of venturing beyond the air-conditioned cocoon of the local gym was too strong.

His career ambitions had taken him up the coast, lured by the prospect of a promotion. The new position promised a steady stream of criminal cases, enticed by the promise of evenly paced crime, the opportunity to apprehend a few bad guys and view some dead bodies on the way.

Despite being significantly younger than his partner, Hayes was confident in his physical prowess and was rapidly honing his investigative skills. He saw himself on the cusp of another promotion, particularly as his partner neared retirement.

As the treadmill signaled the end of his run, he decelerated to a walk, feeling the satisfying weight of exertion in his sweat-soaked shirt. The next day marked the beginning of another workweek, presenting further opportunities to demonstrate his skills and edge closer to the senior role he coveted.

Pressing the stop button, he took a deep, fulfilling breath, mentally preparing for the challenges of the days ahead.

Oskar paced his small house, slowly watching the shadows change on the floor. Now and then he would glance at a chair at the small to the dining table and then steal his gaze away from it. He surreptitiously glanced from one corner to the next.

The small, two-bedroomed house was sparsely furnished, holding only the bare necessities. An old sofa with ripped upholstery sat forlornly in the lounge, while a small dining table that could fit four chairs occupied the corner of the room. Oskar only had three chairs. The bedroom had a mattress on the floor and a pillow that offered little comfort. The television, fridge, and kitchen appliances were all from the nineties. When he first saw it, he wasn't sure what look the agency was going for, but if he had to guess, it was *'I don't give a shit'*.

He needed to advise his handler of the latest developments, but there was a feeling he just couldn't shake. He walked over to the lamp, peered inside, unscrewed the lightbulb and inspected it. Then to a picture frame, and gently levered it off the wall, pushing his face against the wall and shining his phone torch in the gap.

Satisfied, he drew the curtains and walked to the dining table. He silently turned over a chair and removed the device that was stuck there with black tape. He dialed the number and waited. Someone answered the call almost immediately.

"Joe's Pizza," came the voice. "What's your order?"

"Large Hawaiian with extra pineapple."

"What's the message."

"I want a call back, immediately," he said, then hung up and recommenced pacing the room, gently tapping the phone to his head as he replayed the conversation he had with Grigory earlier that day. Things were close. Soon, it would all be over. Not just the operation,

but the ever-present paranoia that went with it. They would arrest Grigory, and he could finally shed his Oskar persona and return to his normal life with his wife and daughter. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

The phone rang, and he answered it.

“Did you order the large Hawaiian?” Mitchell asked.

“I think Grigory is bringing me into his trusted circle,” Oskar said.

“Have you found out anything about the shipment?”

“Apparently it’s happening soon.”

A relieved sigh came from the receiver. “Good. This is great. Splendid work.”

“I’m not so sure.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“I want out.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Something doesn’t feel right.”

“We’re so close,” Mitchell said. “So close. Don’t go to water on me now.”

“It’s not that.”

“Well, what is it then? You said yourself he trusts you now.”

“I don’t know. Just a feeling.”

“Well pull your shit together. You’re doing great. Keep it up. Soon you’ll be free from all this. Stick to the routine, and we’ll yank you out as soon as we have confirmation of the container.”

“But what if—”

The call ended. Oskar bit his bottom lip as he squeezed the old phone in his grasp.

“Soon,” he continued to repeat to himself.

Chapter 46

Sunday evening

Tyler savored the last drop of his beer, feeling a sense of calm washing over him as he watched the sun set. The city seemed to transform before his eyes, as the brilliant orb descended between the larger buildings, casting long shadows that grew longer with each passing moment. The bustling traffic ebbed, transforming the once-yellow sky into a kaleidoscope of orange and pinkish hues.

Lost in his thoughts, he absentmindedly traced his bruised neck, wincing at the residual pain. The events of the day played over and over in his mind, and he couldn't help but imagine what he could have done differently. If only he were bigger, stronger, braver... or better yet, armed. He knew that the police wouldn't expend much effort on finding the killer of a drug dealer. As he contemplated his options, the sound of inane nattering broke through his reverie, and he realized that his beer was empty.

"Tyler, what the hell are we going to do?" Dylan's words were punctuated by the clinking of the beer bottle in one hand as he pressed an ice pack against his swollen eye. He paced back and forth in the hallway. Tyler sat slumped on the couch, feeling numb and overwhelmed.

Dylan's pacing was making him dizzy, and he had to look away. He turned his attention to the TV, but the noise and images felt distant and disconnected from reality.

After seventeen steps, like clockwork, Dylan would pause, check the towel for ice, grab another beer, or launch into another tirade about their predicament. It had been this way since Tyler regained

some semblance of consciousness after their encounter with Dima - the monster who had barged into their lives and refused to leave. But Tyler was determined to find a way out.

“I wish Eli was here,” Dylan started. “He would’ve gotten us out of this shit. Christ, he can talk his way out of anything.”

Tyler returned his gaze to the window. “Forget it. The way he jumped out of here, he’s got other things on his mind. Besides, I know exactly what we’re going to do.”

Dylan sat down and promptly stood up again. “Oh good, as long as it’s not some stupid plan everything should be ok,” he said sarcastically.

“This is one of the most stupid plans on the face of the planet,” Dylan mumbled to himself.

The duo strode down the dimly lit alley with determined effrontery. Their steps were heavy, their postures imposing, and their hands tucked deep into their jacket pockets. In the bustling city, this body language helped them ward off the pushy backpackers who tried to guilt-trip them into donating money to various causes for a modest hourly rate. For a mere five bucks a month, these salespeople promised to save an endangered species or overthrow a tyrannical government—all they needed was a name and credit card number. But out here in the outermost reaches of the city, their tough façade carried a different meaning: cross us at your peril. Yet, it was an empty threat, and they both knew it.

As the sun vanished from the sky, the temperature plummeted, and a frigid wind whipped through the path, making Dylan shiver. He studied Tyler, still puzzled why he had followed him to that desolate place. If it weren’t for his unwavering loyalty, he would have been home by now, sipping on a cold beer and half-drunk. He shifted his

gaze to the colossal decrepit supermarket on the left, visible beyond a towering six-foot chain-link fence.

“I don’t remember feeling so small the last time we were here.”

Tyler, having been in a zombie-like trance, finally noticed Dylan’s unease. “It’s been a while since we had to drag ourselves down here,” he remarked, casting a sidelong glance at the derelict building to his right. “Although it’s surprising to see it still standing. I thought they would have bulldozed it years ago.”

In reality, the sketchy drug den *should* have been demolished a long time ago. It wasn’t like nobody knew about it; everybody did, especially the police. They used to raid the old place once a week, making arrests but only of users. As soon as they released the users, they returned to the scene of their arrest, and the cycle continued. The supermarket had become a micro-economy, thriving in its own way. The name was fitting.

Eventually, the police raids dwindled and faded from memory. The old supermarket was out of sight and out of mind. As long as the occupants kept to themselves and didn’t cause any issues, the police didn’t bother wasting their time only to release the perpetrators the next day. The promises of redevelopment failed to materialize, with developers unable to secure necessary investments for the economically disadvantaged neighborhood. The building was in a state of limbo, much like the lives of those who continued to frequent it.

“What if that guy was right?” Dylan asked. “What if Berke isn’t here anymore, or worse?” he muttered, his anxiety rising.

The questions washed over them, causing them to come to an abrupt stop. The last words hung heavily in the air, giving way to a deafening silence. Up ahead, a person bundled up in a coat stumbled out of a doorway, spotted the duo, turned, and scurried up the opposite end of the alley. They stood motionless, watching as the figure turned the corner and disappeared. Suddenly, a shadow caught their attention, emerging from where the person had left the building. It

appeared to be watching them for a moment before slipping back into the structure, blending into the shadows.

Dylan and Tyler exchanged uneasy glances, both feeling a sense of foreboding. The sudden appearance and disappearance of the figure made their nerves tense, and they felt as if they were being watched.

“See,” Tyler said, “he’s still here dealing his same stuff. That Dima asshole is full of shit.”

Dylan thought about it. “But what about the phone?”

Tyler shrugged. “Geez you ask a lot of fucking questions.”

As they arrived at the entrance, they stood shoulder to shoulder, peering into the void. The darkness within seemed to swallow any trace of light that existed in the alley. A soft murmur drifted towards them from the depths of the building, a chilling concoction of eerie and melancholy sounds. Tyler had always found that the noise had the opposite effect of the drugs he came here for, dragging down his high. That’s why he had vowed to never return after spending a night here.

The two looked at each other with a sense of hesitation before taking a deep breath and stepping inside. The narrow entryway gave way to a cavernous space that was oddly lit up by the soft glow of natural moonlight that filtered through the broken windows several stories above the floor. Despite the removal of fittings and machinery, the general layout remained intact, allowing users to indulge in their vices, sometimes all in the same night.

The ghostly glow combined with the noises that emanated from the walls made for a surreal and supernatural sight. It disgusted Tyler, who much preferred the comfort and warmth of his own home, free from diseases. That’s why he was more than willing to pay double the price for the premium treatment he received from Berke. He put his hands to his mouth and called out playfully, “Hello, Berke, where are

you?” The sound echoed into the void before being swallowed up by the emptiness, leaving them in a deafening silence.

A lighter clicking on caused them to spin around instantly. Attached to a cigarette, its flame briefly illuminated a dark face. As he extinguished the flame, the man took a drag and exhaled, surrounding himself with smoke, his gaze fixed on the two unsuspecting intruders in his domain.

“Who the fuck wants to know?”

Chapter 47

The voice that replied had a distinct accent, but neither Tyler nor Dylan could place it. Geography had never been their strong suit in school, or much of anything else. They had preferred to excel in useless classes like Computer Science, where they could at least have some fun with computers and gadgets.

Tyler and Dylan exchanged glances, momentarily startled, as a mysterious figure emerged from the shadows. Bathed in moonlight, his silver necklace, watch, and earrings gleamed spectacularly. To their surprise, the figure was about their age, sporting a tattoo that extended from his neck up behind his head, its full design obscured.

“We used to get our stuff from Berke,” he demanded, “So where is he?”

Petrov took a casual drag, his demeanor unflappable. “My name’s Petrov,” he declared, gesturing to himself with a sense of ownership. “This here is my territory. You’re here because I allow it. So, what the fuck do you want?”

Unbelievable arrogance. Petrov might have shared Tyler’s age, height, and build, but Tyler’s anger surged, fueling him with extra intensity. He pointed his finger. “Listen here, you little shit.”

Petrov’s action of lifting his jacket to reveal the butt of a gun instantly cut the tirade. This was a stark contrast to their previous dealings with Berke, who had never resorted to weapons or vulgarity. Berke had been a gentleman, albeit one who dealt drugs.

Dylan, trying to steer the conversation back, asked, “Where did Berke go?”

“How the fuck should I know?” Petrov snapped, his gaze sharp.

“We’re looking for something,” Tyler interjected.

Petrov, seeming to understand, fished out a small bag of pills from his jacket pocket. “A few happy pills then? The best in the country.”

The offer tempted Tyler momentarily but remembered the important reason for their visit. “No, we’re looking for something a little... different.”

“In the protection department,” Dylan added, trying to clarify.

Petrov’s folded his arms. “I’m not some fucking vending machine. You two want to fuck, go somewhere else.”

“No, no!” Dylan held up his hands. “You got it all wrong, it’s not like that.”

Tyler wasn’t smiling. “We need a gun, okay? Can you do something? Can you help us out?”

“Oh, I see,” Petrov smiled. “It just so happens I *can* help you two *kiski* out.” He paused. “But before I do, I want to see some cash because I’m not wasting my time.”

Tyler tossed a roll of notes to Petrov, who inspected it thoroughly before pocketing it. Petrov then disappeared into an adjoining room, returning moments later with a small package. He unwrapped it, revealing a gun, which he handed to Tyler.

Tyler examined the weapon, feeling its weight and power. “What is it?”

“Like you give a shit,” Petrov replied dismissively. “You point it, you pull the trigger. That’s all you need to know. Hell, you point it at someone, and they’ll do whatever you want them to do, alright? Fucking scary.”

As Tyler reached for the trigger, Petrov warned him that it was a loaded firearm. Tyler heeded the warning, admiring the weapon’s polished metal.

“Awesome. We’ll take it,” Tyler said decisively.

“Damn right, you’ll take it. Just so we’re clear, there are no returns and no warranty, this isn’t a fucking gun-mart.”

Dylan watched anxiously, missing their friend Eli's calming influence. He knew Eli could have tempered Tyler's impulsive nature, a skill Dylan sorely lacked.

Petrov, leaning against a wall and lighting another cigarette, watched them with a mix of amusement and curiosity. "So, what do two guys like you want with a gun? Planning a robbery or something?"

"We got into trouble with someone," Dylan admitted.

"I see," Petrov said. "I wish you well. Don't accidentally shoot your dick off."

Tyler continued to caress the weapon. "I'll shoot Dima's dick off," he blurted out. And as soon as he had, he wished he hadn't. He looked up, tightening his hand around the gun. As Petrov made a move to grab it, Tyler stepped back, keeping the gun out of reach.

Petrov drew his weapon, and Tyler raised his in response. Dylan took a step back and held out his hands. "Just everybody calm down."

"I can't let you leave here with that weapon," Petrov stated firmly.

"Well I'm not leaving without it," Tyler countered, his hand shaking.

"Be careful, little boy. Those words could cost you your life."

"I'm not scared of you," Tyler said, his hand shaking, his aim lowering slightly.

"You feel the weight of the weapon," Petrov said. "How long can you keep it up for?"

"Guys," Dylan interrupted. "This is a no-win situation. Tyler, how about you put it down and we get the fuck out of here before something bad happens?"

"No!" Tyler shouted. "I'm sick of people like him."

At that moment, the sudden sound of shuffling feet caught their attention as a person stumbled through the doorway. Startled by the sight of two men with weapons raised at each other, the figure quickly turned and disappeared into the darkness outside. Despite the in-

terruption, Tyler and Petrov remained locked in their standoff, their defiant gazes unwavering.

Dylan stood frozen, his heart pounding like a drumbeat in his chest, as he watched the two men in front of him. Their voices rose in fierce competition, each word a powerful shot aimed at the other. It was like watching two tennis champions battling it out in the final of a grand slam, their grunts, and groans echoing through the arena as they exchanged blows. But instead of rackets, they held deadly weapons, their eyes locked in a deadly stare-down. Dylan prayed for it to end soon before someone got hurt.

BOOM!

Without warning, a gunshot punctuated the argument. Tyler's body violently thrust backward, his fingers desperately trying to cling onto the gun before losing grip and letting it clatter to the ground. The gunshot ricocheted off the walls and dissolved into the gloom.

Dylan froze in shock, trying to comprehend the sudden turn of events. As he looked down at his friend's lifeless body lying motionless on the ground, despair gripped him.

A deep, crimson stain was spreading across Tyler's chest, and the sight of the gaping wound left Dylan feeling sick to his stomach.

"You see what you assholes have made me do?"

Petrov aimed the gun at Dylan.

And then, another shot rang out.

Chapter 48

Monday morning

Detective Hayes surveyed the expansive room, standing in the center as he gazed up at the broken glass windows that allowed the morning sunlight to stream in. Slowly, he spun in place, taking in every detail of the scene before him. As he did, his partner Thompson lifted the police tape and entered through the narrow doorway. Concern etched across his face, Thompson questioned, “Detective, are you okay?”

“Oh yes,” Hayes said. “It’s quite hypnotic. You should try it. You know they’ve been talking about tearing this place down for years.”

“Perhaps you should try doing some work and figuring out what happened here,” Thompson said coldly.

Hayes stopped and flopped his arms to the side. “Yes *Dad*, I’ll be sure to do that while I’m waiting for you to drag your sorry ass out of bed and arrive at a crime scene.” He smirked, which wasn’t returned. “Anyway, it would be my pleasure to fill you in.”

Hayes lifted the sheet, revealing two lifeless bodies, and narrated as he did so. “We have two males, in their late twenties, with gunshot wounds to the chest and head, respectively. They had a few priors when they were younger, nothing serious though.”

Thompson surveyed the faces of the deceased and then lowered his gaze to the gruesome wounds. “Good God. What type of round could have caused this kind of damage?”

“We will have to wait for the ballistics for that. Looks brutal, though.”

“Was it their first foray into drugs?”

“Found nothing on their person. We’ll know more when we check out their residence.”

“Which is where exactly?”

“Upper, other side of the city.”

Thompson cocked his head. “Oh, I see. Bored rich yuppies looking for a fix?”

“Perhaps. Either way, it didn’t end well for them.”

Thompson puffed his cheeks and blew out a lungful of oxygen. “What a mess.” His voice trailed off as he noticed two sharply dressed individuals conversing in the corner. He stood up, his gaze fixed on them. “Who the hell are they?” he asked, a note of suspicion creeping into his voice.

Hayes spun around on his haunches. Suddenly, the two men stopped talking and turned their heads in unison to stare directly at the detectives. Hayes quickly spun back around and stood up.

“Okay. Now I know how you get, and I don’t want you to get mad.”

The only thing Thompson hated more than cold coffee was other departments stepping in on his turf or worse still, taking the glory for his work. “Just tell me who they are.”

“Listen, two guys came in here earlier flashing their badges, and they’re pretty insistent on helping with the case. I did my best to keep them at bay, but they seem to have a lot of interest in what’s going on here.” As he spoke, Hayes noticed the two men approaching, prompting him to pivot and face them. “This is Special Agents Mitchell and Norcross,” he said, introducing them.

As they approached, both Agents flipped open their badges to show their identification. Thompson couldn’t help but notice how different they were from each other, both in appearance and demeanor. The one on the left, who appeared to be leading the conversation, was shorter and a little rounder than his partner. Wisps of

light brown hair playfully danced on his head as he spoke in a slightly nasal voice.

“I’m a Special Agent from Firearms,” Mitchell said, gesturing towards his badge. “And this is my colleague, Special Agent Norcross from the Special Investigations branch.”

“Special Investigations?” Thompson said, his brow furrowing. “What’s that?”

“Gangs, mostly,” Norcross said. “And other things.”

“I see.” Thompson placed his hands on his hips. “And... why are you here in my crime scene?”

Mitchell glanced up at Norcross, who stood stoically in the light breeze. The square frames of his sunglasses complemented his angular features flawlessly. Removing his aviator sunglasses, Mitchell’s expression turned grave as he spoke. “Excuse me, but would you mind if we continued this conversation in a more private setting, away from the others?”

Thompson indulged them and led them further into the open space, away from the other officers and reporters. Thompson stood with his back against the wall and folded his arms. “Please, continue.”

Mitchell said, “Look, we’re not trying to step on anyone’s toes here.”

“Oh really,” Thompson retorted.

Hayes jumped in. “Like I said guys, he takes a little getting used to.”

Mitchell stepped forward. “I’m assuming you’ve just seen the mess on that kid over there. What did that was a new generation of ammunition. It’s extremely destructive, cuts through body armor, and has made its way onto our shores. It makes hollow points and RIP bullets look like toys.”

Thompson mulled it over, taking in the agent’s intensity. “So what do you want and what do I get?” He said it loosely, he knew

everything came at a price, and even the good guys bartered their services with each other.

Mitchell rubbed his mouth. “We just want to be kept in the loop, that’s all.”

“And what do I get?”

“I’m happy to share.”

“Bullshit,” Thompson barked. “Why do I get the feeling you guys want everything but aren’t overly keen on sharing any information in return? You know you need to participate in your own rescue, right?”

Mitchell glanced up at Norcross, who had maintained a stoic demeanor throughout the entire conversation. Without a word, Norcross turned his back to the two detectives and engaged in a hushed conversation with Mitchell. After a moment, he strode away, phone pressed against his ear, leaving the detectives to speculate about the nature of their exchange.

Mitchell sighed. “This is highly confidential information that I’m sharing in good faith, got it?”

The detectives nodded in unison.

Mitchell took a breath. “We were tracking a shipment of weapons and ammunition on a container ship in the North Atlantic Ocean.”

“And?”

Mitchell chewed the inside of his cheek, as if considering the response to the question. “The rest of that story isn’t your concern. What should concern you is all of this, and fast. We need to get all this off the streets and the perpetrators behind bars as quickly as possible with as little bloodshed as possible. If we don’t, you’ll be spending your mornings at crime scenes, your afternoons at press conferences, and your weekends at funerals.”

The last remark hung in the air and sunk into each of them differently.

“I need your help,” Mitchell repeated, extending his hand to seal the deal. “You keep me across things, and I’ll take care of the rest.”

Thompson knew he had little choice; his superiors would eventually insist on sharing all information with the requesting departments. However, he could still control how quickly he volunteered the information.

With a resigned nod, Thompson shook Mitchell’s hand, the deal now struck between them.

Chapter 49

Hyun-woo grinned as his luxury vehicle pulled up to his desolate factory, the tinted windows completely blocking out the sun. With the transaction complete, and the call home to others in the organization, he could carry on with his ideas, to other lucrative projects he had conjured up.

Reclining in the plush back seat, he exuded an air of relaxed authority, his arms nonchalantly draped over the seat's top. Opposite him, his two armed bodyguards sat with stoic expressions, their eyes vigilantly scanning the desolate surroundings for any hint of danger.

As Hyun-woo picked up his tablet, the sound of gunfire shattered the air. Bullets, with deadly precision, pierced the car's interior, striking down his guards in a swift, merciless assault. Blood slowly trickled down their foreheads as their bodies slumped lifelessly in their seats. A single bullet to the side of the head executed the driver, causing him to slump against the steering wheel.

Hyun-woo's initial shock quickly gave way to a pounding heart as panic set in. In a coordinated move, both rear doors of the vehicle swung open simultaneously. Before he could even process what was happening, two people unceremoniously dragged the lifeless bodies of his guards and driver out of the car.

In their place, Grigory took a seat opposite his counterpart, blood covered the seats on either side of him. Alexei slid in next to Hyun-woo, casually picking up the tablet that had fallen in the chaos. Outside, men stood by the open doors, their guns trained and ready.

Hyun-woo's voice cut through the silence like a knife. "What is the meaning of this?"

Grigory smiled. "Because I am me."

“What on earth does that mean? You are going to start a war that you cannot possibly win.”

“I beg to differ,” Grigory said playfully.

Hyun-woo laughed. “I know all about you, Grigory. No family back home, no connections here. No one will come to save you, no one will come seeking revenge. You are nothing, Grigory. Nothing. You are a speck of dust. No legacy, no reputation. The only reason I agreed to work with you is so I could take your money.”

In a flash, Alexei pulled out a knife and held it to Hyun-woo’s throat. “Be careful how you talk to my brother.”

The defiance in Hyun-woo’s eyes intensified.

“It’s okay, Alexei,” Grigory said with a smile. His brother slowly retracted. “I don’t need family for protection.”

Hyun-woo searched Grigory’s features. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“I am the future, Hyun-woo. And this, what you did for me is nothing but a steppingstone. You are nothing but a means to an end.”

“I’m bored with this conversation,” Hyun-woo spat. “What do you want, Grigory?”

“A man of business, as always,” Grigory said, clapping his hands. “I want my money back, with interest.”

Hyun-woo burst out laughing, easing his hand into his coat. Sudden movement at the doors and Alexei had his knife out once more.

“Relax,” he laughed as he pulled out a cigar and guillotine cutter. He was still laughing as he cut the cap off the cigar. “I always thought you were unhinged, but, well, damn, you almost had me.” He patted his jacket down. “Want your money back! With interest!”

Grigory flicked open a lighter and Hyun-woo leaned forward on his seat, rotating the foot of his cigar near the heat. Satisfied, he lit the end, puffed a few times, and leaned back once more, staring across the interior.

Grigory didn't flinch and remained unmoved. Eventually, the laughter from Hyun-woo died down.

"Come on, Grigory, what's going on?"

Grigory pulled out a sleek handgun and held it on his lap. "I'll make you an offer. Give me the money and I'll let you leave here with both of your balls intact."

"I was wrong," Hyun-woo said between puffs. "You have completely lost your mind."

"On the contrary, I'm seeing things clearly for the first time."

Hyun-woo tapped the ash into the footwell. "I'm not giving you any money."

"I'm not leaving without it."

"Was this your intention, Grigory? To betray me after we struck a deal."

Grigory smirked. "Oh, yes."

Hyun-woo's features hardened. "You knew about the arms shipment. Why not just steal it yourself? Why get us to do it? Why the theatrics?"

"For starters, theatrics is under rated. There just isn't enough of it these days. It's all shaking hands to your face and then hitting you with a baseball bat as soon as you turn around. Where's the craftsmanship? Where's the *gamesmanship*? Where's the ruse?" He sighed. "The truth is you had the resources to make it happen. And I'm sure by now you've called back home and told them of your newfound wealth, and they will relinquish their hold on you."

"You are unstable," Hyun-woo seethed.

Grigory held up his thumb and forefinger. "Just a bit. So, I say again, transfer the money."

"You have no intention of letting me live, do you?"

Grigory took a breath. "No."

Hyun-woo blew several smoke rings into the air and leaned back. "Then fuck you." Quickly, he reached inside his jacket.

Two shots rang out.

Hyun-woo, with his face a mangled, bloody mess, slumped in his seat, a gun clutched in his fist. Alexei fell sideways through the open door, clutching his chest, caught by one of the armed guards. Blood erupted from his lips as he clutched his chest, his breathing labored. Grigory fell to the footwell and reached out, even though he knew there was nothing he could do for his brother. He watched the breaths becoming more and more shallow until there was nothing and Alexei's body became still.

Gregory kneeled there for some time, willing for his brother to open his eyes, even though he knew it was an impossibility. As time dragged on, Grigory's breathing grew more frantic, his hands tightening into fists.

Then he pointed his gun at Hyun-woo's lifeless face and pulled the trigger. Bloody flesh tore away, and teeth and bone shattered into fragments. Grigory continued to pull the trigger, heedless of the empty chamber's clicks. *Click. Click. Click.*

Finally, he straddled the lifeless body and delivered brutal blows with the gun's base onto the disfigured face, each strike splattering him with a gruesome spray of blood.

Content with the macabre scene he had created, he extracted a handkerchief and wiped his face, smearing blood across it. He pushed it back into his pocket, rolled his neck, and took a deep breath. Then he picked up Hyun-woo's tablet and exited the vehicle, where Dima was standing.

"I'm sorry, boss."

"See to it Alexei gets a proper burial."

Dima nodded. "What about the other bodies?"

Grigory looked over the desolated factory. "Hang onto Hyun-woo. Dispose of everything else." He handed over the tablet. "Give this to Zero. See what he can do with it."

Dima nodded again. "What if he can't?"

Grigory pursed his lips as he looked over his chief enforcer. “I know someone.” He gave the address. “Is there any update on Petrov?”

“Still in police custody. Stupid *uchastkovy* asking their stupid questions.”

Grigory clenched his jaw. “When they release him—and they will release him—pay him a visit.”

“He wouldn’t say anything. I’m sure of it.”

“Still, let him know I don’t tolerate people losing their allocation to the police evidence locker.”

Dima looked down.

“I know how you feel about him, but failure is not an option. Make an example of him.”

“But—”

“Are we going to have a problem?”

Dima snapped around, coldness settling in his eyes. “Of course not.”

“Very well. Oh, and I think it’s time to get rid of our little *samozvanets*. We’ll do it tonight.”

Chapter 50

Eli sat at his cluttered desk, his large takeaway coffee in hand as he gazed absently out the window. The bitter liquid had become a crutch for him, a means of staying alert and focused amidst the chaos of his racing thoughts. Each sip provided a moment of clarity, but it was fleeting. Memories of the recent encounter with his brother played out in his mind, forming a single, haunting narrative, the sting of the verbal attack lingering long after the event. Memories consumed him, derailing his productivity and leaving him mired in a haze of introspection.

He absentmindedly picked up his mobile phone, noting the flashing message symbol on the screen. It was a voicemail from his brother, most likely a relentless stream of insults and accusations that he had become all too familiar with. He had ignored the call when it had come in earlier, not wanting to subject himself to the emotional turmoil it would bring. He made a mental note to listen to the message later, fortified by a few beers, and then delete it from his phone and his memory forever.

A sudden, sharp pain shot through his head, settling heavily in his chest. He closed his eyes tightly, the ringing in his ears drowning out all other sounds. After a few moments, the ring subsided, replaced by a voice speaking behind him.

“Eli!”

Startled, Eli spun around to face his manager, who stood with his arms folded across his crisp white shirt, wearing a concerned expression.

Quickly composing himself, Eli responded with a falsely cheerful tone, “Good morning, boss. How can I assist you?”

“Jesus, what happened to your face?”

Initially, Eli wasn't sure what his boss was talking about, and then he remembered the cut on his face that magically appeared sometime on Sunday. He didn't know how to respond, so he lied.

"I banged it on one of my kitchen cupboards this morning. It's stupid, I should move the glasses to a lower shelf and rip those bloody things out. Once I almost lost an eye..." He trailed off. The art of good lying is in the detail, and it seemed to do the trick as his boss nodded and carried on with his original thoughts.

"You're up."

"For a promotion?" Eli asked hesitantly. His boss spoke like Eli knew what he was talking about, which means he probably told him, which means he probably wasn't paying attention. Sometimes he wondered why they kept him around and then he remembered few people could do what he did as effortlessly as he did it.

"Nice one, funny man. But I tell you what, if you help me land G2 Research, I'll give you your own shit kicker to boss around."

Eli laughed uneasily. "Seriously though, what am I up for?"

His manager pointed a thumb at the meeting room door down the hall. "Drug and alcohol testing."

A thousand thoughts rushed through his mind in an instant, recounting every bit of alcohol and illicit substance between Friday night to now. He sipped his coffee.

"Oh, have you got that preliminary on G2 yet?"

Eli didn't respond, he was deep in his mind, reliving moments.

"Eli?!"

Eli shook his head as the words had a delayed effect. "Ah yes, no, a little. It's a work in progress. I'll have something for by COB."

"Did you say I'll have something by three?"

"Come on, have I ever let you down before?"

"No, and neither has the homeless guy out the front of the building, who, by the way, will have your job if you don't get me the report by three."

Eli nodded. “You’ll have it. Hey, didn’t I do testing last week? I’d rather just finish up this report for you.”

As his manager turned to leave, he spoke over his shoulder, his voice tinged with reassurance. “It’s just a routine test, Eli. Nothing to worry about. It’ll only take five minutes. I don’t make the rules, I just enforce them.”

Eli twisted back to his computer screen and found himself staring through the pixels and into the layers of electronics and wiring that powered it.

“Famous last words,” he muttered to himself.

They had confined Eli to his manager’s office, the minutes stretching out into what felt like an endless wait for his boss to make an appearance. Eli was taken aback when Graham finally arrived. The room was filled with an uncomfortable silence, and his boss’s face bore an expression that conveyed either concern or regret—Eli couldn’t discern which.

For five agonizing minutes, Eli grappled with feelings of guilt and shame, unable to meet his boss’s gaze. Finally, breaking the silence, his boss delivered the dreaded message Eli had been expecting.

“You need to go home, Eli.”

“I’m sorry, it was just an after effect, you know I’d never intentionally—”

Graham raised his hand and turned his head away. “Eli, it’s irrelevant,” he said firmly, his tone curt. “You know how seriously we take this. A lot of people are outraged about it, especially since we’re in the middle of a major tender. And given that you played a crucial part in the project, it’s even more troubling.”

Graham’s words hung in the air like a heavy cloud, causing Eli’s heart to sink even further. He knew painfully that he had let down not only himself but also his team and the entire company. His head

drooped, and he couldn't muster the strength to meet his manager's gaze.

Then he snapped his head up. "Wait. Played? Past tense. You're pulling me?"

"I'm advising you to go home and expect my call. Other conversations need to take place. But hey, who knows, after a successful test, you could be back in the chair tomorrow." He smiled weakly.

Eli stood.

"Just one more thing. This will go on your permanent record. There's nothing I can do about that. It's out of my hands now."

Eli left his workplace with a heavy heart, consumed by guilt and remorse. He knew he had brought the mess upon himself and no amount of talking could get him out of it. He trudged home, hoping he could get a hold of his friends on the journey. Alas, both Dylan's and Tyler's phone frustratingly rang out. He knew he would see them later that night, as they did most nights.

He entered his building, jiggling the keys in the lock, and then stomped up the stairs. His place wasn't as nice as his friends', but he was okay with that. It was one of the few sacrifices he made. Unlike his friends who seemed to flit their cash around, he was busy squirreling it away.

He stood at his door, pushed his key in the lock, but then leaned forward and rested his head on the door. Maybe he should just quit, take his savings, and disappear. When he was ready, he would send for his friends, and they would leave the city. He wondered how much convincing it would take, not that they had any ties to the city. He was sure it wouldn't take long, assuming they could get their party favors.

As he righted himself, he turned the key, just as a piece of tape smacked across his mouth, and a hood pulled down over his head, sending the world into darkness.

Chapter 51

As someone yanked the hood from Eli, his eyes initially struggled to adjust to the sudden influx of light. He sat opposite a man, dressed in a finely tailored suit, reclined in an armchair with an air of casual authority. His legs were crossed at the knees, a lit cigar held confidently between his fingers. Around them stood several stern-faced men, their demeanor, and stance radiating seriousness and alertness. To Eli's right, an individual was engrossed in work, their fingers dancing rapidly over the keyboard of a laptop, seated in a leather chair.

Eli's gaze fixed on the face of the man sitting opposite him. He wracked his brain, trying to piece together the fragments of his memory, to make sense of what happened.

"You look like you don't remember me," the man observed, a hint of amusement in his voice.

Then, in a flash of recognition, it all came together for Eli. He snapped his fingers, the name emerging from the depths of his memory. "Grigory. From the bar."

Grigory responded with a slow, deliberate clap, his expression one of mild approval. "Very good. Now, do you remember our conversation?"

Eli's mind raced, trying to recall the details of that encounter. "Have I done something wrong? Is it the money? I can transfer it to you now."

Grigory's smile took on a sardonic edge. "While I would appreciate that, I was actually referring to a different incident. Do you recall the time when you found yourself with your head pressed against the bar, my gun cold against your temple?"

Eli's hand moved instinctively to the side of his head as if he could still feel the ghostly pressure and the chilling touch of the gun.

A shiver ran down his spine at the memory. “Yes, I remember,” he replied.

“Did you enjoy that?”

“No,” Eli sighed. “Not really.”

“Do you think it could have gotten a lot worse?”

“Yes,” Eli admitted.

“So you know I’m a serious guy, right?”

Eli looked around. “Yes.”

“Excellent,” Grigory said as he clapped his hands. “We have an understanding.”

“Where am I?” Eli inquired, his eyes scanning the unfamiliar surroundings.

Grigory leaned forward, a hint of amusement in his demeanor. “Ah, welcome to Hotel Sylvester,” he announced with a flourish.

Eli nodded, though confusion was evident in his tone. “Never heard of it.”

Grigory’s smile widened slightly. “It’s more of an establishment for the discerning gentleman, not typically frequented by young troublemakers.”

“I’m not a troublemaker,” Eli countered, his voice firm.

Grigory’s expression turned contemplative. “And yet, you have a certain skill set that I find myself in need of.”

Leaning back, Grigory shifted his attention to the person at the desk. “Zero,” he called out, “how are things progressing?”

From behind the laptop, a voice responded with measured confidence. “I’m close.”

Grigory’s eyes narrowed slightly. “How close?”

“Soon,” came the succinct reply.

“Ten,” Grigory called out.

Zero paused in his typing, lifting his head to reveal enormous eyes magnified behind thick lenses. There was a moment of silence as he met Grigory’s gaze.

“Nine,” Grigory stated simply.

Then, almost as quickly as he had looked up, Zero’s attention returned to the laptop. The light in the room glinted off his glasses, casting fleeting reflections as his fingers resumed their dance across the keyboard.

“Eight,” he continued, his voice steady and rhythmic.

Turning his gaze towards Eli, Grigory’s expression softened slightly. “Are you good, Eli?” he asked. Before Eli could reply, he shouted, “Seven.”

“Good?” Eli questioned.

“Six,” Grigory yelled. Then to Eli, “At hacking.” Then into the room, “Five.”

“Oh, that,” Eli responded. “Pretty good.”

“Four,” Grigory bellowed. “Pretty good?” he said to Eli. “I’m afraid that just won’t do.” He threw his head back. “Three.”

With a swift and fluid motion, Grigory produced a gun from within his coat and aimed it at Eli. “Two,” he said.

“Wait,” Eli said. “I’ve hacked the Great Bank of China.”

“One,” Grigory whispered.

Grigory swung his weapon around and fired. The gunshot rang out, a sharp, deafening sound in the enclosed space. The impact was immediate and brutal; Zero’s head snapped back violently from the force, before slumping forward, his lifeless body collapsing onto the keyboard.

“Fuck!” Eli yelled, pushing himself further into his seat. “What the fuck did you do?”

“Eli, I’m an uncomplicated individual,” Grigory said, waving the gun around. “You have a set of skills and I have a problem.”

Eli’s gaze involuntarily darted towards the desk, a morbid curiosity compelling him to look. But what he saw was too much to bear, and he quickly recoiled, a wave of nausea and horror washing over him. The gruesome scene before him was overwhelming, and sud-

denly, the air felt thick and stifling. To find relief, Eli leaned back, his hands trembling as he tugged at his shirt, pulling it away from his neck.

“Breathe,” Grigory said. “I get it. I still remember my first dead body. It stays with you.” He stood and stepped towards Eli. “But play your cards right, do what you do, and not only will you not see another dead body, but you won’t be one either.”

Eli swallowed. “What do you want me to do?” he asked, still regaining his breath.

In the background, people approached the desk and moved the body away, pulling the body away. Eli didn’t know if this was a common occurrence at the hotel. Did they have a service to pick up the body? He suddenly wondered how many people had been murdered in the chair he currently sat in.

“No, Eli. Not want, need. What I need you to do. Come.”

Grigory rounded the desk and squared the chair, inviting Eli to sit. Eli looked at the chair, and then to Grigory, before dropping his gaze to the chair once more, his focus firmly affixed to the blood stain where Zero’s head had been. Grigory tapped it, urging him to sit. Eli lowered himself, edging forward as much as he could.

“What do you need me to do?”

“Hack into the Great Bank of China and... how should we put it?”

“Steal some money?”

Grigory clicked his fingers. “Liberate. Liberate some money.”

Eli looked at the bloodstained laptop on the desk, a sleek black tablet tethered to it, obviously the target of Zero’s hacking capabilities.

“I can’t work with this. I need my stuff.”

Someone suddenly appeared, placed Eli’s laptop on the surface, and opened the lid.

“What do you say, Eli,” Grigory said. “Ten seconds?”

“It’s easier doing this stuff from the bar when I can jump on the bank’s network.”

“If you have a look, there is a branch within range.”

“Sure, I get that. But why not do this from the bar?”

Grigory pulled out his gun and sat it on the desk. “Sixty.”

Eli looked at the gun. “Sixty what?”

“Fifty-nine.”

Chapter 52

Clarity under pressure. As his fingers worked the keyboard, and various screens popped up and then disappeared, in the back of his mind, he wondered why the threat of death, of losing one's life, allowed him to break through the bank's firewall, latch onto their network, and slink through antivirus software to exploit vulnerabilities.

"Twenty," Grigory said.

"This isn't easy, you know," Eli stated. "I may have created a back door, but I need a security key that changes every five minutes."

"That's nice," Grigory said. "Fifteen."

Eli continued to tap away, until he pressed the enter key, and leaned back away from the keyboard. "I'm in."

Grigory smiled and inspected the screen as he hid the gun under his jacket once more. "Yes, you are. Magnificent work, Eli. There may be hope for you yet."

"Now what?"

Grigory placed a business card on the desk. Apart from some handwritten characters over the patterned stock, it held nothing else. "From this account," he started, "to this account." He placed another card on the desk.

Without giving it another thought, Eli typed in the account number and clicked through the screens. When he saw the amount on the screen, he coughed.

"Shit." He composed himself. "How much do you want me to transfer?"

Grigory's eyes lit up. "All of it."

"That's going to raise some flags."

"Deal with it."

“Sure, maybe in the short term. But that much coming off the balance sheet, they’re going to know.”

Grigory smiled. “By the time that happens, it won’t matter.”

Eli slowly typed in the receiving account. “Last chance. They’ll come looking.”

“Do it,” Grigory instructed.

Eli pressed the button to secure the transaction and then proceeded to tidy up any breadcrumbs. He backed out the way he entered, disconnecting from the networks in sequence. When he had disconnected, he ran a program that wiped over the system, dissolving the digital fingerprints he might have picked up on his journey, and then slowly closed the lid.

Grigory lit up a cigar. “You did good, kid. You’ll come in handy.”

Eli backed away from the desk and picked up his device. “I appreciate the offer, but I’ve got my hands free with my job at the moment.”

“Quit. You don’t need it.”

“I can’t just quit.”

“What? Of course, you can. It’s simple. You call up your boss, tell him to stick his job up his ass.”

“But-”

“Take control, Eli.”

“I’ve got plans,” Eli said. “The job is a means to the end.”

Grigory blew smoke into the air. “You misunderstand me. I’m not offering you a job. I’m telling you, you have a job with me. Unless you want the same fate as Zero.”

Eli didn’t.

Grigory reached inside his coat and pulled out a wad of bills held together with a money clip. He flicked through the bills, yanked them out, folded them over, and pushed them into the top pocket of Eli’s coat. “Buy yourself some better clothes.”

Eli found himself at a loss for words, unsure of how to react to the situation. In a swift, almost magical gesture, Grigory snapped his fingers and presented an old-fashioned candy bar phone, extending it towards Eli. Without hesitation, Eli accepted the phone.

“There is one phone number on that phone. When I need you, you’ll receive a call, and you will come running. If you run into any troubles in the meantime, you can call my enforcer, Dima.”

Eli looked around at the people standing around the room, watching the charade. He pointed at one. “Is that him?”

“No,” Grigory responded.

Eli pointed at another one. “Is *that* him?”

Grigory closed his eyes. “No. Dima isn’t here right now. But trust me, you’ll know him when you see him.”

It was noon when Eli left the hotel, his satchel over his shoulder containing his laptop and burner phone. Each staff member on duty stopped what they were doing and watched as he strode across the opulent foyer. He had never felt more on display, as their gaze followed him as he exited through the large revolving door and stepped out onto the street.

He marched along one foot in front of the other, with no set direction in mind, all the thoughts running through his mind. He had gotten involved with some seemingly dangerous people and somehow found himself in the position of working for them. And it seemed the only way out was with a bullet. He could just go to the police, and the thought did cross his mind, but if he did, he might end up incriminating not only himself but his friends as well.

He had lost track of time when he stopped, realizing he was standing in front of Tyler and Dyon’s apartment building. Subconsciously, he had wound up there. Perhaps deep down he knew they could offer the guidance he so desperately needed.

He arrived at the building and entered the access code on the panel, pushing his way through the foyer's entrance. Pausing at the foot of the stairwell, he leaned on the handrail for support, carefully ascending one step at a time. Eli winced, his temples throbbing as another sharp pang shot through his head. The cumulative weight of the events of the past few days was exacting a toll on his well-being.

Shaking himself out of his thoughts, Eli trudged up the stairs, his steps heavy and deliberate. He stomped his feet loudly, hoping to rouse his friends from their slumber. It was time they got their act together—he needed their help to piece his life back together.

As he reached the landing, however, he noticed the door to Tyler and Dylan's apartment was slightly ajar, which was unusual. Because there were only a few times they opened it. Just as he was about to push the door open, he froze. Murmurs emanated from inside, and they didn't belong to his friends.

He pulled out the business card Grigory had given him. Was it too soon to call? Was it even worth his time? Was he even in trouble? He thought better of it and pushed it back inside his coat.

Suddenly, the door swung open. Without thinking, Eli jabbed a fist into the face. The cap fell off the back of his head as the man groaned, holding a hand up to his face, followed by a string of expletives.

Eli didn't want to stick around and find out who they were, as he turned his head back to the stairwell, but before he could move, two Taser prongs shot out from behind the commotion and struck him square in the chest. In a split second, electricity coursed through him, causing his muscles to contract and immediately collapse on the floor. The surging power seemed to last for an eternity, and Eli wondered if the tightness would ever end.

When the electric shock finally subsided, Eli gasped for air and tried to orient himself. He felt a hand grab his arm and roll him onto

his stomach, and then the cold metal of handcuffs clamped around his wrists. He winced as the restraints dug into his skin.

Chapter 53

Eli sat in the sterile interview room; his gaze locked on the door ahead. He tried to ignore the video camera perched on the table beside him and focused on his breathing, attempting to still the nervous jitter in his leg.

The arresting officers had remained tight-lipped during the ride to the station, not mentioning anything about Tyler or Dylan or why they had been in their apartment. However, there was one thing that troubled him even more than the arrest: the whereabouts of his friends. Eli doubted the police had discovered the money they had transferred over the years or tracked them down so quickly.

As he sat in the small, enclosed space with his handcuffs removed, Eli imagined different scenarios that could have led to their current situation. He was certain that Tyler and Dylan were being questioned in separate rooms, being pressured to turn on each other. However, he knew they would never betray each other, nor him.

Soon, Tyler would secure lawyers for them all, and they would be out of the station in no time. Whatever the police were looking for, they wouldn't find it that day, and the detectives would eventually inform him of such.

“So, my learned colleague, what did you find out about the victims?” Thompson asked as he took a long sip from the instant coffee. It was viscous and resembled an oil spill. The way he worded the questions was harsh and impersonal although this was the nature of the job. Being connected to the victims, or the accused could cloud judgment and make the facts twist to suit a story.

Hayes checked his notes. “Nothing much. No tax returns in four years.”

“So they were skipping taxes?”

“Not exactly. From what I can tell they weren’t employed.”

“Well, something was paying their rent. You don’t live uptown with no job. The rents are astronomical.”

Hayes said as he scratched his head. “Their bank accounts are modest. No regular transactions, no big transactions. The apartment is owned by some company. We can track it through if you think it’s going to make a difference.”

Thompson chewed his lip. “What about the drug paraphernalia?”

Hayes crossed his arms and shrugged his shoulders. “If those guys were dealers, I’m not seeing it.”

“Right. And this guy just appears at the door and assaults Jenkins.”

“I don’t he’s going to press charges, under the circumstances.”

“Well,” Thompson said. “That’s very kind of him. Tell him I’ll buy him a beer.”

Midway through another restless leg shake, the door swung open without warning, and in walked two plain-clothed detectives. The older one took his seat on one side of the table, while the younger one, carrying a stack of files, sat next to him. Eli couldn’t help but feel uneasy as they both eyed him. The younger detective placed the files on the table, clearly aware of the time ticking away.

Eli’s mind raced, trying to anticipate what questions the detectives would ask him, and how he should answer them. He couldn’t afford to slip up or say something incriminating. He took a deep breath and tried to focus on the present, tuning in to what the detectives were saying.

“Eli, my name is Detective Thompson,” the older man said pointing to himself, “and this is Detective Hayes.” Eli ignored Thompson’s plaid suit, loosened tie, and darkened sweat stains around the neck to concentrate on Norcross’s jacket. It had various pockets and zippers and seemed strangely hypnotic given the circumstances. In the opening seconds, Eli knew Thompson was in charge, given his age and attire. He also assumed Norcross was a pain in his partner’s ass.

Thompson continued. “I just wanted to start by saying that given the circumstances we find ourselves in, Officer Jenkins won’t be pressing any charges.”

Eli’s suspicion of the detectives’ motives only grew stronger upon hearing the comment, and he braced himself for the inevitable ‘good cop, bad cop’ routine. He couldn’t help but rub his chest, the memory of the painful encounter at his friends’ apartment still fresh in his mind.

Eli rubbed his temples. “Just... What is this about?”

Thompson bit his lip and slowly nodded. He placed two photos in front of him. They were mug shots, taken when they were a little younger, but not by much. “Do you know these two individuals?”

Here it comes. Eli braced himself as he waited for the detectives to begin their questioning. He couldn’t help but wonder what angle they would take—drugs, hacking, or something else entirely. Despite not being a religious person, he hoped to God that any sensitive files on his laptop remained well-concealed.

“Yes,” Eli drawled. “Tyler and Dylan. What about them?”

Hayes asked, “So, what was your relationship with them?”

Eli jumped up as if hit by an electric shock. “I’m not answering questions without my lawyer present.”

Hayes and Thompson looked at each other. Thompson smiled appreciatively. “You’re not under arrest, Eli, we just wanted to ask you some questions that could help with our investigation.”

“What, so you can pin something on them? Listen, these mug shots aren’t them, not really. They’re better than that, much better.”

Once again, the two detectives exchanged glances before Thompson nodded and Hayes slowly opened a folder and retrieved a large glossy photo, laid it on the table, and slid it over.

At first glance, Eli didn’t quite know what he was looking at. It was from a crime scene, that part was obvious. What he didn’t understand was why he was being shown the image. He could see two bodies lying side by side, their bodies ripped open with massive amounts of blood that had erupted out of both of them.

Thompson leaned in to talk as Eli cocked his head and looked at the faces.

“Eli,” he began. “Tyler and Dylan were found early this morning...”

Thompson’s voice trailed off into nothingness as Eli’s eyes widened, and the faces registered in his brain. His heart skipped a beat, and he involuntarily backed away from the table, causing his chair to topple over. He remained breathless as the image seared a hole in his retina.

“No,” he whispered, his voice barely audible.

Chapter 54

Monday evening

Oskar cautiously entered the safe house, his eyes scanning the space for any signs of intrusion. He had followed the prescribed protocol, taking several loops of the city, and changing routes frequently to throw off any potential followers. Eventually, he arrived in the lower socio-economic suburb, where the dilapidated houses lined the streets, the footpaths cracked, and graffiti was a permanent fixture on fences.

Locking the front door behind him, Oskar placed his keys down on the kitchen counter. He performed all the usual checks around the house, ensuring that no one had intruded upon his sanctuary. Satisfied, he approached the dining table. It was time to check in, but he had little to report. He was still waiting for any signal from Grigory, Dima, or anyone about the shipment. In fact, it felt like everyone was keeping him at arm's length. It didn't bode well for the operation or him personally. Perhaps his instincts were right.

He knew he could just get in his car and drive. Damn the airport. He'd eat up the miles and be home in a couple of days. At best, he would receive a reprimand, and at worst, he would lose his position entirely in the department. But it didn't matter, not if he could see his wife and daughter again.

He turned up a chair to retrieve the concealed mobile phone but froze when he realized it wasn't there. The tape holding it there hung loosely. He slowly and gently placed the chair down, careful not to make any noise, and held his breath as he listened intently for any sound.

Someone had been there, despite the precautions, even though he checked every morning and every evening. Panic gripped him as he thought of his family. He couldn't move, but he had to. Oskar raced to the next chair and tipped it over, breaking the silence with the clatter of wood on the tiles. His firearm was missing, the second chair replicating the first, with the tape clinging loosely underneath.

Doubt and confusion crept into Oskar's mind. Had he moved them? Had the agency? Was this part of the plan? He instantly felt alone and powerless, but he needed to get out, away, far away. He needed to feel safe.

As he turned towards the kitchen counter to grab his keys, Oskar ran into a solid object, sending a jolt of pain through his body. He stumbled backward, trying to regain his balance, but his eyesight blurred, and his limbs went numb. Falling to the floor, Oskar knew it was too late to fight back.

Dima stepped out from the shadows, lightly running fingers over his knuckles. "Looking for something?" he asked.

"No," Oskar said, his heart rate rocketing. "I was just..."

"Just what?" Dima said. He extracted a phone and firearm from his pocket and held them out. "The boss wants a chat. You want to do this the easy way or the hard way?"

"But—" Oskar protested.

Without hesitation, Dima struck Oskar's head with the butt of the gun, causing him to crumple to the floor.

"The hard way," Dima grumbled.

Eli sat motionless as time marched on. He clutched an old Styrofoam cup in his hands, its contents long since gone cold. The images before him were overwhelming, and he struggled to make sense of them. The more he pondered, the more it felt like a dream, and he half-expected to wake up on his couch clutching an empty beer bottle.

He reached out to touch the photos and shuffled them around. To his left was the original image of his two friends, lying in pools of blood. Next came pictures of a smashed laptop, followed by bags of pills and an abandoned building. There were also photos of drug paraphernalia from their university days, now mixed in with more recent items.

On the opposite side of the table sat Thompson and Hayes, their mouths moving in conversation. Eli had lost track of time, lost in thought and oblivious to their voices.

Hayes clicked his fingers in front of Eli's face. "Hey, you still in there?"

Eli shook his head. His eyeballs pulsated with pain. "What happened to them?"

"We're investigating," Thompson began. "We hope you can help us put the pieces together." He pointed to the photo of an old building. "Do you recognize this place, or if Tyler and Dylan went here often?"

Eli struggled to remember the last time they had gone to the supermarket. Something urgent must have driven them there. What was so critical? And why hadn't they contacted him? His mind raced with unanswered questions. Then it hit him—the missed call. Dylan had tried to reach out.

Confusion and worry clouded Eli's thoughts, making it hard to concentrate on any specific concern. One thing was clear: he deeply regretted not preventing their visit to that dreadful place.

He exhaled, a mix of resignation and sorrow. Whether it was their first or hundredth visit didn't matter anymore. The harsh reality was they had gone, and it had cost them dearly.

"Tell us about your friends," Thompson asked.

Eli shrugged.

"They live in a pretty nice apartment. What did they do?"

“Fucking around, mostly.” He tilted back in his chair and folded his arms, casting his gaze downwards at the table. “They inherited some cash from their parents or parent’s parents. Something like that.”

“Did the mucking around ever involve drugs,” Hayes asked.

Eli snapped his head up and burned a hole through the detective. “None of us are perfect. They were young with money and time on their hands.”

“When’s the last time you spoke to them?” Thompson asked.

Eli threw his head back and exhaled to the ceiling. “It would have been Saturday night.”

“Did they mention about going here?”

Eli shook his head.

“Have they been there before?”

Eli shrugged.

The two detectives shared a glance as Hayes retrieved another photo and placed it on the desk in front of Eli.

“Have you ever seen this person before?”

Eli studied the two images closely. In the first one, a dark face with piercing eyes seemed to sneer back at him. The man held up a plate displaying his name and prisoner number. In the second photo, the man’s profile was on display.

Eli’s heart raced. “Is this the guy?” he asked, his voice barely above a whisper. The thought of finally coming face-to-face with his friends’ killer made his heart bang in his chest.

“He’s part of our investigation,” Thompson said.

Eli lifted the photo to find any other details but there was nothing else in the folder. “Well, who is he? What’s his name?”

“His name is Alexander Petrov. He was picked up near the scene of the crime,” Hayes said. “Have your friends ever mentioned that name before.”

“Where is he now?”

“That’s no concern of yours, Eli. Does the name sound familiar? Did Tyler or Dylan ever mention his name?”

Eli shrugged, folded his arms, and staring at the image, leaned back in his chair.

Chapter 55

Monday night

Special Agent Mitchell slumped on the barstool, watching the ice cubes slowly dissolve into the amber liquid. It was a poignant reminder of his situation—his career was slowly slipping through his hands, and the only thing that would save it was a tip about the whereabouts of the missing shipment.

Norcross strolled in, grabbed a beer, and plopped onto the stool next to him. The bar was empty except for a handful of locals loitering around the periphery. They paid no heed to the newcomers, and less to the suits invading their territory.

“You needed to talk?” Norcross grumbled. It was late, and he had things to do and places to be.

“Yep, figured we’d just do it here. Hope you don’t mind.”

Norcross just drank his beer in reply.

“We lost contact with our agent,” Mitchell said. “He failed to check in tonight.”

“What happened?”

Mitchell sipped his drink and winced as the cheap scotch went down hard. “Not sure. I sent in a backup team to check it out. No signs of a struggle.”

“How do you know he’s missing?”

“Something is wrong, Agent Norcross, because he broke protocol. He never breaks protocol. Besides, we found his car parked around the back.”

“Maybe he was on a date.”

“He’s a faithfully married man.”

Norcross shrugged his shoulders. "It's tough to put up a facade every day, pretending to be a stranger, and then being all alone every night."

"I know him. He's not that type."

"Well, maybe he went home. Maybe he broke."

He shook his head. "We've checked in the wife. She hasn't seen or heard from him." He sipped his drink. "I don't like this."

"What was the last thing he said?"

"That he was getting closer to being trusted."

"I'm sure it's nothing."

"What if it's something?"

"Did he get a lead on the shipment?"

"Not yet." Another sip. "Shit, what if they found him out?"

Norcross took a drink. "If Grigory knows who he is, I doubt you'll ever see him alive again."

Mitchell took a long drink, taking in the remaining contents of the glass. Winced as he swallowed. "Fuck."

"What do you want to do?" Norcross asked.

"Short of sending in the cavalry, I haven't got a clue."

"Don't be so hasty. You know the dangers with that."

"Hey," Mitchell said, sitting upright. "Both our asses are on the line here."

Norcross leaned in. "So we wait. Give it a couple of days and see if Oskar surfaces."

Mitchell picked up his drink and sunk it all. Waiting and hoping was rarely a successful strategy, but he had nothing else.

Oskar slowly regained consciousness, his body numb and his mouth dry. As he struggled to orient himself, he opened his eyes to complete darkness and stale air. It wasn't until he tried to move that he realized they had tied him to a chair, and placed something over his mouth.

Panic set in as he attempted to call out, but only muffled sounds escaped his lips. He fought against his restraints, causing the chair to clatter loudly against the ground.

Suddenly, the scraping of metal on metal pierced the silence, and a large door creaked open, letting in a sliver of moonlight. A group of darkly clad men entered, their identities shrouded in mystery. Oskar knew what they wanted, and what his fate was, but tried to push those thoughts aside. However, the image of having his tongue ripped out consumed his mind. The men surrounded him, but the silence was deafening, broken only by his shallow breathing.

A bulb exploded into light, casting a dull glow over the room. Oskar squinted, trying to make out the faces of his captors, but the shadows they cast made it impossible. The swinging of the bulb was disorienting, and Oskar felt dizzy watching it sway back and forth. Finally, it came to a stop, and a face dropped into view.

“Welcome,” Grigory said.

Oskar’s moans were muffled as his eyes darting around the dimly lit room.

“You’ve been a bad boy, Oskar. And like all things that misbehave, you need to be punished.”

Oskar struggled against the tape that sealed his mouth shut, his muffled attempts at speaking yielding only incomprehensible noises. With a sharp tug, Grigory ripped off the tape, causing a searing pain across Oskar’s lips. He winced, his eyes watering with the sudden sting.

“I have done nothing, what’s going on?” Oskar gasped out, his voice shaky with fear.

“Shhh, please, Oskar, there is no need for the charade to further insult my intelligence. I know who you are—who you *really* are—and who you work for.”

“But... but...”

“Shh,” Grigory said accommodatingly. “There is no need to explain, there is no need to negotiate. There is no way out of this. I would prefer you just own up to things instead of fighting the truth we both know.”

Oskar looked on frighteningly as Grigory clasped his fingers and extended his grip, cracking his knuckles in the process. The noise struck Oskar like a bullet. “I can talk,” he breathed. “I can help you.”

Grigory let out a deep sigh and reached for the tape, slapping it back over Oskar’s mouth with a sense of finality. “Now, now, Oskar,” he said in a mock-sympathetic tone. “I’m afraid you’ve brought this upon yourself. But don’t worry, I’ve been waiting for an opportunity like this for a long time.”

As Grigory spoke, Oskar’s eyes widened with fear, his mind racing with the possibilities of what was to come. Before he could react, black-clad figures emerged from the shadows, their muscular arms restraining him tightly against the chair.

Grigory took hold of Oskar’s right hand, gripping his middle finger with a vice-like grip. Oskar winced in pain, his eyes flickering with a desperate plea for mercy.

“In certain cultures, those who betray their leaders are subjected to all manner of violence and torture,” Grigory continued, his tone heavy with menace. “Consider yourself lucky that we’re only going to make an example out of you.”

Oskar’s heart sank as Grigory’s words sank in. He knew he was in for a world of hurt, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. As he braced himself for the inevitable, a sense of profound regret washed over him.

As Oskar’s tears continued to fall, Grigory reached for his left hand and twisted his fingers back one by one. The sound of cracking bones filled the room, accompanied by Oskar’s muffled screams of agony. Grigory enjoyed himself, his eyes widening with each sicken-

ing snap. The black-clad arms holding Oskar in place tightened their grip, making it impossible for him to escape the excruciating pain.

As Grigory moved on to Oskar's next finger, a sense of hopelessness washed over him. He knew there was no way out of this situation, no way to stop the pain. He closed his eyes, trying to escape into his mind, but the sound of his bones breaking kept pulling him back.

Grigory finally finished with Oskar's hand and stepped back, admiring his handiwork. Oskar's hand was now twisted and mangled, his fingers pointing in all directions. Grigory chuckled to himself.

"Well, that was fun. But we're just getting started, my dear Oskar."

Eli slumped on his couch; beer in hand, as his eyes fixed on his phone. It was late, and his finger hovered over the call button, hesitating to retrieve the voicemail left by his brother earlier that morning. Memories of his recent mistreatment at his brother's hands resurfaced, making him question if he really wanted to hear what he had to say. But now, in his darkest hour, with his closest friends gone forever, he yearned for companionship. He hoped that his brother's call was an apology, a chance to bridge the gap between them. He smiled at the thought, but quickly realized the foolishness of his wishful thinking. He knew it wasn't that simple, and that their relationship was far more complex than that.

Still, he pressed the button and listened to the message.

"Eli, it's Dad. I borrowed Danny's phone."

Eli immediately hung up, held the phone out, and looked at the screen. It was quite a shock to hear his voice after all that time. With a trembling finger, he played the voice message again.

"Eli, it's Dad. I borrowed Danny's phone. I saw you at the hospital earlier and I really wanted to talk to you. I love you, son. Miss

you. I'm not angry at anything that happened. You are an amazing person, and—”

The line suddenly went quiet, followed by a clatter, the message ending abruptly with a series of beeps and a flatline.

He stared at the phone, a single tear rolling down his cheek, before hurling it across the room and collapsing onto the couch and crying.

Chapter 56

Tuesday sunrise

Eli stared blankly out into the darkness beyond his windows, waiting for the sun to rise. He wasn't sure how little sleep he had that night, but he knew it wasn't much. Too much was rattling around his head to get any peace. Every time he closed his eyes, he thought about his father, his brother, his friends, his job, Grigory. As he flipped the phone over in the palm of his hand, he thought about everything he had lost in the last few days.

Take control. Grigory's words kept filling his head. *Call if you need to.* He looked down at the phone and opened the contacts. Finger hovered over the single number. Then he backed out and went back to peering out the window to the street below. Someone in a heavy puffer jacket walking a mangy dog. A taxi, its availability light glowing, searching for a fair. A woman in spandex, joggling along the footpath.

He thought about his friends, and even though the detectives didn't share the photos from the crime scene, Eli imagined what they could look like. He clenched his jaw and didn't know whether to punch the wall or collapse and cry.

He contemplated reaching out to Grigory, considering his offer to handle such problems. However, that approach seemed too detached for his current mood. His thoughts turned to Petrov, the man the police had detained. The idea of confronting Petrov personally, of looking him in the eye and forcing a confession, grew increasingly appealing. The more he dwelled on it, the stronger his desire to exact retribution became.

Grigory would still have a role, but not the one initially envisioned. He was confident that Grigory could offer protection, perhaps even a place to hide if needed, at least until he fulfilled his thirst for vengeance. The more he mulled over it, the more detailed and clear his plan became in his mind.

This was it. The beginning of the end.

He had lost everything and now he had nothing left to lose.

The convoy of vehicles sped through the port entry and along the passageway. They pulled up short, taking up positions near the container. From the corner of a tower of shipping containers, Mitchell surveyed the target location. There didn't appear to be any vehicles or people within the vicinity, so given that, Mitchell gave the signal. A squad clad in black, armed with semi-automatic weapons, emerged from their cover, their weapons aimed.

When in place, Mitchell stepped forward. "Open this damn container up," he yelled.

He stood with a stoic expression, donning his agency-issued windbreaker and aviator sunglasses, his hair dancing in the gentle breeze as though attempting to flee the scene before him. The missing container had magically surfaced, and he could feel his fingers curl around the tendrils of his career once more.

The previous night, as he finished his drink with Norcross, he thought everything was lost. No undercover agent, no lead on the shipment, and no chance of arresting Grigory. But when a phone call roused him in the early hours of the morning, everything had changed.

Norcross's voice came through the line, saying, "We located the container."

"What?" Mitchell said, as he dropped his phone as he struggled to sit up in the dark and turn the lamp on. He searched clumsily for

his phone among the tangled sheets, while Norcross's voice filled the room's silence.

"Wait," Mitchell said, his heart clanging. "What did you say?"

"I said we found it."

"Where? When? How?"

"Calm down, Mitchell. I received a call from my connection at the port who informed me of some concerning behavior. They verified the container was not listed on any manifest. I've cross-checked. It's the one."

"When did it arrive?"

"Get down here."

"How the hell was it missed?"

"Would you just get down here?"

"Shit," Mitchell muttered, hastily getting out of bed, and throwing on the nearest pair of pants within his reach. "Where are you now?"

"I'm currently heading there to meet my contact."

"Make sure you hold him there because I want to talk with him.. and no one touches that container until the cavalry arrives, understood?"

"Hey, it's your bust."

An agent abruptly entered with scene brandishing bolt cutters, positioning himself near the entrance while other officers aimed their weapons expectantly at the door. The agent quickly snapped the lock and pulled the heavy door open, allowing a flood of morning light to illuminate the dark container. The stench of death hit Mitchell before he even saw the gruesome image before him. He had anticipated the sight of a few poisoned rodents, but the ghastly reality was far worse. The visceral image left him reeling as he struggled to take it all in.

Seated alone in the center of the container was the undercover agent Oskar, bound to a chair. The plastic bag suffocating him re-

vealed his distorted face and lifeless eyes staring blankly at the ceiling. His mangled fingers twisted at impossible angles. The brutality of the scene was overwhelming, and Mitchell knew it was personal. A typical hit would have ended with a bullet to the head, but this was something far more sinister. The message was clear—not only were the weapons lost, but a valuable agent had been sacrificed.

The team meticulously searched every nook and cranny of the container, ensuring it was safe for entry. After their inspection, Mitchell reluctantly entered the enclosed space. The mission had been compromised once again, and they were left with another dead-end. The team's focus was now solely on Grigory, and they were determined to bring him to justice.

Exiting the container, he placed a call, attempting to soothe his nerves with deep breaths and a contemplative gaze at the world beyond. With each subsequent ring, his frustration mounted, and he didn't hesitate to voice his thoughts when it was finally picked up.

“Where the fuck are you?”

“I'm trying to find my guy,” Norcross replied.

“Well, we need to have a fucking conversation.”

Sitting in the back of a taxi, Eli surveyed the entrance to the police station where he had received the devastating news of his friends' deaths. He knew that Petrov, the suspect in their murders, was being held inside. Eli was aware of the justice system's flaws and the possibility of Petrov being released due to circumstantial evidence and an effective lawyer. The more skilled the lawyer, the guiltier the accused appeared, regardless of the evidence against them.

Eli's deceased friends consumed his thoughts, and he strongly felt the urge to avenge their deaths. Violence was not his nature, but at that moment, he felt the anger coursing through his veins.

“Listen,” said the driver. “The meter’s running. I’m going to need some kind of upfront payment if you want me to sit here all day.”

Eli extracted the money Grigory gave him the previous day and handed it over. “Here. I’m hiring you for the day.”

The driver counted the bills. “You got it, boss,” he said as he reached forward and turned off the meter.

Without warning, the station doors slid open, and Petrov emerged, followed by an older man in a suit carrying a briefcase, likely his lawyer. The lawyer held the back door open of a black Audi and Petrov disappeared inside. With a glance back at the station, the lawyer sat in the driver’s seat and pulled the door shut.

“Follow that Audi,” Eli instructed the taxi driver.

“You got it, boss,” the driver said as he fired up the engine.

The black car pulled out into traffic and the taxi pulled off the curb. Eli felt as though he was in autopilot mode, with every action being driven by his desire for justice for his friends. The cloud of anger and confusion hung over him as he trailed the car into the unknown.

Norcross sauntered over the bitumen towards Mitchell, his hands deep in his trench coat, as heavy forklifts traversed the scene behind him.

Mitchell held his hands out. “Where the hell’s your guy?”

Norcross shrugged. “Fucked if I know. But he isn’t here. Maybe someone flipped him. He could be in a shallow grave for all I know.”

Mitchell threw his hands into the air, aggressively kicked the ground, and swore. “How the fuck can this fucking happen?”

Norcross ran a hand over his mouth. “I don’t know what to tell you.”

“We’re fucked, Norcross. Just completely fucked.”

“What did you find in the container?”

Mitchell stepped up to him. “In the container? Nothing, apart from Oskar, with a plastic bag over his head.”

Norcross averted his gaze, lowered his head to his hand, and massaged his temples. “Jesus Christ.”

“Tell me, Norcross, when you are actually going to do something that helps with this investigation?”

“If I recall, Special Agent Mitchell,” Norcross said. “It was your team who lost the shipment of firearms in the first place.”

Chapter 57

The Audi carrying Petrov cruised around the city's bustling Central Business District for a solid twenty minutes before making its way to an older, less frequented part of town. Eventually, the car rolled to a stop at an intersection beside a run-down warehouse, signaling the end of their journey. On Eli's instruction, the taxi continued and took the next corner. The car screeched to a halt, and he jumped out, racing back to the corner.

From the corner of a dilapidated building, he spied Petrov exit the vehicle and enter a door cut into the side of the warehouse. The deafening roar of the Mercedes' engine shattered the silence. The car peeled off down the street, leaving Eli behind to watch as the tail-lights shrank in the distance. Once the car had vanished around another corner, he continued his solitary trek.

Eli huddled himself against the chilly breeze by pulling up the collar of his jacket and burying his hands deep in his pockets. The old part of the city seemed abandoned, with little to no traffic or pedestrian activity on the streets. Boarded-up windows and the absence of business signs on the buildings, deepened his sense of isolation. This was his purgatory, and there was no escape.

Eli dashed over the road and raced to the corner of the warehouse and scanned the area, looking left and right, up and down the street. The desolate surroundings remained barren. His gaze then settled on the narrow alleyway behind the warehouse, and he inched towards the entrance.

The neglected warehouse matched the bleak skyline of the area. Just then, Eli saw a leg step off the pavement and disappear into a doorway. He was about to pursue the person when a low rumble

shook the walls, blending with a mechanical noise to create a dissonant industrial symphony.

A colossal door on the other side of the building rolled up and flooded the alleyway with bleak sunlight. A semi-trailer emerged, accompanied by two four-wheel drives that raced off in the opposite direction. Eli waited for the noise to die down and cursed himself for losing Petrov, maybe forever.

Standing before the wooden door, Eli hesitated before slowly reaching for the handle. He wondered if this would be his ultimate destination and if he was ready to confront his fate. One step closer to his destiny, he pushed the door open and stepped inside.

Eli moved stealthily on his haunches toward the source of the raised voices. Crouching behind an empty crate, he peered intently at Petrov, who had his arms raised in defense while being berated by a hulking figure. The roughness of the monster's thick Russian accent reverberated through the air.

“What the hell did you think you were doing?”

Petrov scrambled backward, as though attempting to pacify and evade a wild animal simultaneously. “Dima, please understand. He pointed the gun at me, I had no choice,” he pleaded, desperation lacking his words.

“The gun *you* gave him, you imbecile,” Dima boomed, striding toward Petrov, and looming over him like a giant.

Petrov retreated backward, edging toward the concealed Eli, who turned his head away from the scene but listened intently to the rest of the conversation, his heart racing with trepidation. The menacing tones of the man called Dima sent shivers down Eli's spine, and he cowered just a little more.

In his retreat, Petrov bumped into the crate, causing it to wobble. Eli quickly placed his hands on the wooden surface, willing it to stay put and conceal him.

Startled, Petrov looked up and stuttered, “I.. I..” before falling silent under Dima’s withering glare.

“Because of you, we’ve lost an entire shipment, and the police are on our tail. You’re a fucking idiot,” Dima spat out, yanking the gun from his belt, and gripping it by the barrel. He swung it down with a sharp, violent motion, hitting Petrov hard on the side of his head. Petrov’s attempt to block the blow was futile against Dima’s brute strength and the unyielding polymer frame, which collided with his face.

Petrov let out a sharp yelp as he crumpled onto all fours, his head spinning as he tried to make sense of his surroundings.

Dima placed the gun down on a stack of empty crates and flexed his fingers, cracking his knuckles. “You do not know how much this hurts me,” he said. “I can’t afford to lose another dealer, but you must understand that failure is not an option for us.”

Reaching down, Dima grabbed Petrov by the collar and hoisted him up, holding him steady as he drew back his fist and swung his elbow around with brutal force. The impact threw Petrov to the side, landing face down and sprawling on the hard concrete floor.

“Now, pull yourself together. Your new allocation arrives tonight, and if I must come down here again, next time I won’t be so accommodating to your failure,” Dima barked. “And don’t think for a second that what I’ve just done to you is the worst that can happen. Next time, you’ll face consequences beyond your imagination.”

Turning his back on Petrov, Dima was already steeling himself for the unpleasant meeting with his boss, Grigory. As he reached out to grab the gun, his hand closed on air. He looked down, bewildered, to see the top of the crate was empty. His gaze then flicked over to Petrov, who was lying on the ground, blood dripping from his mouth. A figure stood over him, holding Dima’s gun and aiming it at Petrov’s head.

Eli's eyes widened with shock, and he felt his breath catch in his throat as he faced the helpless figure in front of him. His mind raced as he contemplated his next move, the weight of his decision bearing down on him like a heavy burden. Suddenly, vivid memories of the crime scene photos he had seen interrupted his thoughts—the blood, the wounds, the haunting eyes of the victims. His vision blurred as he imagined the bullet hurtling through the air, tearing through flesh and bone with deadly precision.

Meanwhile, Petrov struggled to regain his bearings after the blow had sent him reeling. He reached up to wipe away the blood streaming from his nose, feeling the weight of his actions settle heavily on his conscience. Despite his dizziness, he got to his feet and tried to steady himself. As he stumbled forward, he caught sight of a pair of joggers and hesitated.

Petrov's voice shattered the silence, loud and angry. "Who the fuck are you?" he demanded.

Eli's grip tightened on the gun as he held it steadily, his eyes trained on Petrov's every move. The two men faced off against each other, neither willing to back down.

"Yes," a voice boomed behind him, "Who the fuck are you?"

Eli moved around Petrov, his sightline never leaving either of the two men. He needed to stay focused and alert if he wanted to come out of this situation unscathed. As he circled around, his heart pounding in his chest, the gun wavering in his hand.

"Do I know you," the big man said.

Eli raised the gun. "Shut up!" he roared.

He then lowered his aim to his intended target. In a low, steady voice, Eli spoke, attempting to keep his emotions in check. "Say you're sorry," he said firmly, locking eyes with the dealer.

"Fuck you," Petrov spat.

Eli edged close. Stabbed the gun towards him. "Say it."

Petrov's eyes widened in confusion. "What are you talking about?" he protested, his voice rising with each word.

"You know what you did!" Eli shouted. "Say you're fucking sorry."

Petrov glanced over his shoulder at Dima, who stood behind him, his expression unreadable. Eli's request hung heavily in the silence between them.

Eli repeated his request, his voice low and steady. "Say it," he said, his gaze never leaving Petrov's face.

Petrov shifted nervously, his eyes darting from Eli to Dima and back again.

"Look man, I don't know..." he began, his voice trailing off as he searched for the right words.

Eli took a step forward, his hand shaking as he pointed the gun at Petrov's chest. He repeated his demand, his voice quivering with anger and fear.

Petrov backed away again, his hands held up in a gesture of surrender. "Fine man, fuck, I'm sorry," he said, his voice tinged with bitterness. "You fucking happy now?"

Eli's finger tightened on the trigger as he looked into Petrov's eyes. He could feel the rage boiling inside of him, and he knew he was about to do something that he could never take back.

He nodded slowly, his eyes welling up with tears. "Yes," he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

Without another word, he pulled the trigger. The gunshot echoed around the warehouse as the impact threw Petrov to the ground, his body twitching. Eli stood there for a moment, his chest heaving with emotion.

Petrov writhed in agony, clutching his shoulder as he screamed, moaned, and swore. Eli could barely hear him over the echo of the gunshot that still rang in his mind.

Approaching the dealer, Eli stood over him and placed his foot gently on the man's chest. He aimed his gun at the dealer's face and applied more pressure with his foot, causing the man's eyes to bulge in terror. "This is for my friends," Eli said, pulling the trigger again and again until the dealer lay still.

The moment the first bullet pierced Petrov's skull and penetrated his frontal lobe, he was already dead. The following two shots were gratuitous, a display of callous disregard for human life. Eli stood there, his emotions frozen, watching the life drain from Petrov's eyes. He had become a monster, the kind he had only seen in movies or heard about in news reports. A cold, heartless being, armed with a deadly weapon. And there was no turning back from this dark path he had taken.

"It looks like Petrov got under your skin," Dima observed.

Eli spun around; his eye twitching as he aimed his weapon at the towering figure's chest.

"What are you planning to do, little man? Kill me too?" Dima taunted.

"No," Eli ground out through gritted teeth. "You're going to help me."

Dima grunted, "Help you do what, exactly?"

Chapter 58

Dima sat in the driver's seat of his Jeep and gripped the steering wheel, his knuckles turning white as he wrung them back and forth. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

A gun appeared from over Dima's right shoulder, the barrel placed firmly against his head. Eli appeared over the opposite side of the seat and whispered into Dima's ear. "Just drive the fucking car, asshole."

Dima smiled. "So where would you like to go?"

"Take me to the one in charge."

"In charge?"

"We all answer to someone. I want the one at the top."

"And what do you want to do with them?"

Eli bared his teeth. "I'm going to put this gun in their mouth and pull the trigger."

"Do you know what you are doing?" Dima asked. "He is a dangerous man."

"I know dangerous people too," Eli barked in reply. He was sure that his hacking skills were an asset to Grigory and would therefore buy him protection.

"You think your people can protect you? Walk away, little man."

Eli pushed the barrel hard into Dima's skull. "Maybe I should just blow your brains out and take my chances on my own. I already killed your dealer friend over there, so I won't hesitate to do it again."

Dima paused as he stared out of the windscreen at the open entry way that yawned out into the lonely street.

Eli pulled out a car key and dropped it into Dima's lap. Dima looked down at the key, the gun following his move, and smiled. "As

you wish.” He grabbed the keys and started the engine. The motor roared to life before settling back into a low, rumbling harmony.

Eli regressed into the back seat. “Just don’t forget I’m back here, and any bullshit and I pull the trigger.”

Dima leered and nodded as he put on his seat belt.

“Just keep your finger off the trigger, little man. You are holding a dangerous weapon.”

Dima fired up the engine.

“Just drive.”

Put the car in drive.

“What did the boss do to you?”

“My friends are dead.”

“You killed Petrov. What more do you want?”

“He’s going to pay. They are all going to pay.”

“You realize once you get to the boss you’ll never get out alive.”

“Yeah? Well, I’ve got a loaded gun, and nothing left to lose, so fuck him and fuck you.”

“As you wish.” Dima drove through the old warehouse and eased out into the street.

Several blocks later, the black car careened recklessly down the winding road, its tires screeching against the pavement as it navigated each corner with dangerous speed. It appeared to be on a desperate mission as if searching for something. Finally, it sighted its destination: a solid steel pole jutting out of a cement traffic island.

Onlookers, if present, would have been horrified to witness the vehicle making no effort to avoid the impending crash. It was as if the driver had a death wish, intentionally hurtling towards the pole with reckless abandon. It was an act of madness, a display of suicidal tendencies that would ultimately lead to a fatal outcome.

The collision was so violent that the car appeared to liquefy upon contact with the steel pole. As the front grill crumpled inward, the hood collapsed under the force of the impact. Despite this, the car maintained its forward motion until the engine block met the pole, causing the rear of the vehicle to lift like a bucking bronco. The roof wrapped around the pole in a tight embrace before gravity took hold and pulled it back to the ground. Rear wheels bounced forcefully, causing the axle to snap with a loud crack.

As the cacophony of twisted metal finally subsided, a silence ensued, save for the hissing of steam escaping from the mangled hood. Slowly, the driver's side door creaked open and fell to the ground, scraping loudly against the pavement. A large boot emerged from the wreckage, landing heavily on the ground. Dima struggled to free himself from the airbag, using the door frame as leverage to pull himself out of the wreck. He leaned heavily against the mangled car, shaking his head repeatedly to dispel the confusion and reorient himself to the present.

He raised his hand and gingerly touched his nose, wincing at the tenderness he felt. It might have been broken, but he had experienced worse before. He ran his fingers underneath his nose and inspected the slickness of the blood staining his fingertips. It was a necessary sacrifice.

With a slight shuffle, he made his way over to the rear door of the car and flung it open. Eli tumbled out, his head colliding with the footplate as he let out a pained groan.

Summoning his remaining strength, Dima reached down and grabbed Eli by the collar, lifting him off the ground until their eyes locked at the same level.

Eli spoke in a slow, groggy voice. "What just happened?" His eyes rolled back in his head and his body went limp.

Dima shook him roughly. "Wake up, you little shit!" But Eli's arms and head hung limply like a rag doll. With a grunt of frustra-

tion, Dima slammed his head down onto Eli's nose, crushing it under the force of the blow. He released Eli's body, and it crumpled to the ground, the impact of his head hitting the pavement hard.

Dima quickly yanked his phone out and dialed.

"I need a tow truck," he said. "Don't ask questions, just send it. And tell the boss I have a special guest with me, someone who wants a personal introduction."

Chapter 59

Wednesday

Detective Thompson trudged up the external concrete staircase of Petrov's unit block, his feet heavy, and his breathing labored. They had sent a unit to pick up Petrov for further questioning the previous night, but he had vanished. And so there he was, in the early hours of the morning, climbing the stairs of a dilapidated building in a less-than-desirable neighborhood.

As he neared the top, he stopped to catch his breath, gripping the handrail for support. Suddenly, the sound of light footsteps bounding up the stairs behind him startled him. Turning, he saw the young Norcross skipping past him, taking the stairs two at a time and leaping onto the top level with effortless grace.

"Come on, Thompson," Hayes called out over his shoulder. "You aren't retired yet."

Thompson grumbled as he took the last two steps. "I'll give you retirement."

Hayes looked him up and down. "I don't think you'll be giving me anything. You look like shit by the way."

"Fuck you by the way."

Hayes smiled. "Always so damn cheerful in the morning."

Thompson pushed past Norcross and marched up to the front door, slamming his fist down repeatedly to get someone's attention. But there was no answer. Hayes joined him, standing to the side and peering in through a dirty window.

“Anything?” He glanced at his partner, who had his face pressed against the glass, hands cupped over his eyes to block out the early morning sunlight.

“Nah, can’t see shit. Doesn’t look like he even came home.”

Thompson slammed his fist down on the door again. “Petrov, open the door, this is the police.”

Hayes pulled away from the window. “I’m bored. I hate it when they’re not home.”

Thompson and Hayes stood in front of the closed garage door and stared at it.

“I think we should open it,” said Hayes.

“Without a warrant or probable cause?”

“Well, he’s probably in there, hiding out, or passed out.”

Thompson put his hands on his hips. “Yeah, I don’t think anyone’s buying that one.”

“He could be dead in there for all we know. I think it would be an injustice if we didn’t check it out.” He threw his arm out and clipped Thompson on the shoulder. “Shh, did you hear that?”

“I heard nothing.”

Hayes walked up to the door. “Yeah, I think I heard something. It could be him.”

“Well, he can’t be dead *and* making noise.”

Hayes kneeled and grabbed the handle. “Sure, maybe he’s fighting for his life or something. Geez, stop making this so damn complicated.”

Thompson stepped forward and retrieved his weapon from his holster. “Sorry, I forgot the law was so complicated.” He stood by as Hayes heaved on the door and it slid up. They stood staring at the emptiness. Save for a dozen cardboard boxes, the garage was empty.

“Yep, still bored,” Hayes announced.

Just then Thompson’s mobile buzzed.

“Here we go again,” Thompson said, as his car slowly approached the alleyway and waited for the officer to lift the crime scene tape.

They drove under and continued down the narrow drive. Concrete buildings dwarfed them on either side, their presence blocking out the sun in what could have been a perpetual shadow. Up ahead an ambulance and police cars with flashing lights sat waiting for their drivers. Several officers milled around waiting for someone to give them an order, others were talking with residents and passersby who couldn't stay away from the excitement.

As they pulled to a stop, they noticed the two agents standing in the shadows engaged in animated conversation.

Thompson looked over to his partner. “Those two again,” he huffed.

“We seem to see a lot more of them,” Hayes replied. “I'm trying to figure out if we're going steady or still playing the field.”

“I don't trust them. I've got no doubt they'll clean out your wallet while you're sleeping and leave before morning.”

“Sounds like my ex.”

The pair pushed their way out of their car and walked over to the agents.

“You two going to make a habit of showing up to all our crime scenes?” Thompson asked.

“I will when it involves someone who could have helped me with my investigation.”

“How did you even find out about this?” Hayes asked.

“Don't you worry about that,” Mitchell fired back. “We have ways of finding shit out.”

“Listen,” Thompson started. “Petrov was a nobody. He had nothing.”

Mitchell waved for the two detectives to follow as he walked inside the structure. Dispersed officers collected samples and took

photos. The group came to a halt near some crates, concealing a body beneath a sheet. Mitchell stooped down and pulled it back.

“He still sound like a nobody to you?” he asked.

Thompson looked over the headless corpse, at the blood that had dried on the cement. “Jesus Christ,” he breathed. “How the hell did anyone identify him?”

“I’ve got a file on Petrov the size of an Encyclopedia,” Norcross grunted. “Not a nobody.”

“I could’ve gotten something from him,” Mitchell said. “He could have been our in. This could have been the beginning of the end of this mess.”

“He had links,” Norcross grumbled. “To the Russian mafia.”

“Now’s the time,” Hayes said. “Now’s the time you share your shit.”

Mitchell turned. “You think we’re going to share anything? After this?”

“That’s your decision,” Thompson said. “But despite all that, we’re on the same side here.”

Mitchell backed off and stepped inside the old building, running a hand through his hair.

Norcross ground his teeth as if summarizing the main points in his head. “We’ve been picking up a lot of activity between two mafia powerhouses, the Koreans, and the Russians. They’re working together on something, unfortunately, we haven’t been able to figure out what that something is.”

“Something big, I’m assuming, given the nature of their product,” Thompson said, referring to the destructive nature of the ammunition.

“We had a guy on the inside,” Mitchell said, “but the trail on the merchandise has gone cold.”

“*Had* a guy on the inside?” Hayes pondered. “What happened?”

Thompson stared at them and ran a tongue over his teeth as if contemplating what to say next. “We found his body in a shipping container suspected of holding illegal weaponry. Trust me, what they did to him... it made my skin crawl.”

Mitchell’s phone beeped, and he backed away to check it.

“Listen, we might have someone to talk to,” Thompson offered.

“Someone?” Norcross grunted. “And who might that be?”

“A friend of the two who we found here yesterday.”

“I see. We’d love to have any information you have on him.”

Thompson nodded as Mitchell once more joined the group. “I was just saying to your partner here, that we—”

“Before that,” Mitchell said, cutting him off. “I’ve got something for you if you’re interested.”

Thompson turned to Hayes, who raised his chin slightly. “For us?” Thompson said. “We’re interested. What have you got?”

“A lead on Grigory, the head of the Russians out here.”

“What do you need from us?”

Mitchell pursed his lips. “I can’t risk putting in the paperwork to get a team together if this turns out to be bullshit.”

“What are you thinking?” Hayes asked.

Mitchell nodded to the cruiser the detectives arrived in. “You guys got some vests in there?”

Chapter 60

Eli opened his eyes slowly, wincing as the bright light burned his retinas. A streak of pain shot through his head, settling across his face. He felt puffy and numb, his entire body aching all over. As he went to rub his head, he realized his wrists were tied to the armrests of a chair.

Confusion and fear flooded his mind as he struggled to remember how he had ended up there. Memories of the past hour eluded him, and even the current day remained a mystery. He tugged at the restraints, but they held tight. Several echoing footsteps intensified around him, and he strained to see through slitted eyes who was approaching.

Finally, a man appeared before him. Dressed in a navy suit, he stood with his arms on his hips, spreading his jacket to unveil a waistcoat and a gun handle protruding from his pants. His green eyes sparkled in the light, commanding attention.

“You’re awake,” he said.

Eli searched the room. “What the fuck’s going on?”

Grigory smiled. “My esteemed colleague tells me you wanted to see me so you could...” he righted himself, folded his arms, head down, finger tapping lips, as if deep in thought. Then the words seemed to hit him. “Ah, yes, that’s right. Put a gun in my mouth and pull the trigger.”

“I... I...,” Eli stumbled.

“I just don’t understand why.”

Eli’s hopeless position enhanced the level of fear that had gripped him. He pulled at his constraints. “I... I don’t remember.”

Grigory placed a hand on Eli’s shoulder and looked over his face. “You don’t remember?”

The intensity of the stranger's stare unnerved him, and the hand on his shoulder felt like an iron grip. He swallowed hard, trying to moisten his dry throat. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said, his voice raspy and weak.

Grigory's eyes narrowed. "You trying to play me?"

Eli looked up into the man's eyes. "I've never seen you before in my life."

Hayes smoothly stopped the car behind Mitchell and Norcross at the desolate factory. After exchanging a brief, meaningful look with Thompson, Hayes stepped out of the vehicle. Earlier, they had paused further up the road for a thorough reconnaissance of the area using high-powered binoculars. Now, they efficiently geared up beside the trunk, strapping on bullet-proof vests and arming themselves.

"Is this definitely the place?" Thompson asked.

Mitchell responded with a firm nod, confirming their location.

Hayes turned to Norcross, his expression serious. "You sure you're up for this?"

Norcross's eyes narrowed, a mix of determination and annoyance. "I can handle myself, don't worry."

Hayes couldn't resist a jab. "Just checking, considering your retirement is around the corner."

Norcross shot back, his voice tinged with both humor and pride. "Kid, I was in the trenches for this country before your mother spread her legs."

Thompson chimed in with a smirk. "Well, I guess that settles it. Let's head in."

With that, the four of them moved stealthily across the gravel, their footsteps muted. They reached the factory entrance, slipping inside.

Grigory's eyes narrowed as he examined Eli's battered face. Dark circles around his eyes, bruising around his nose where Dima head butted him. Without warning, Grigory stepped forward and yanked a fistful of Eli's hair, causing him to cry out in pain. Tears streamed down Eli's face as he tried to steady himself against the agony that pulsed through his skull.

Grigory's grip tightened as he forced Eli's head to the side, inspecting the source of the dried blood that trailed down the side of his face. As he examined the wound, his face twisted in disgust.

Grigory's eyes glinted with amusement as he observed Eli's pain-ridden expression. "Interesting," he repeated, a hint of a smirk on his lips. "So many questions."

With a swift motion, Grigory released his grip on Eli's hair, relishing in the power he had over the captive man. He clicked his fingers and one of his henchmen handed him a chair, which he positioned opposite Eli. Grigory lowered himself onto the chair slowly, with an air of superiority, as if he were a king taking his rightful throne. His eyes never left Eli's face as he leaned back, crossing one leg over the other.

He elegantly retrieved a cigar from his pocket, inspecting it with admiration before handing it to his assistant. The man swiftly sliced off the cap of the cigar using a cigar cutter, making a clean cut to ensure a smooth draw. Grigory raised the cigar to his lips, allowing the assistant to light the foot with a flame, taking a few puffs to ensure the cigar was evenly lit. Throughout the process, his gaze remained fixed on Eli.

As the smoke curled towards the ceiling, Grigory's smile grew wider. "It's funny how the world works, don't you think?"

Eli tugged at his constraints once more. "What do you mean?"

"Well, this isn't the first time we've met."

Eli shook his head. "I don't know."

"It would seem fate continues to draw us together. Do you believe in fate?"

Eli shrugged. Exhaled. "I don't know."

"It's curious to think that if even the smallest decision had been made differently, we may have never met."

"I promise not to tell anyone about this."

Grigory continued, ignoring the request. "But dwelling on such things would drive even the most rational person insane."

"Please," Eli breathed. "Please let me go."

Grigory smiled. "No."

"But... But I don't know anything. I don't know who you are. What the hell would I tell anyone?"

"You killed a member of my family and threatened me. You must pay retributions."

"Killed? Me? Never." Eli leaned forward, as far as his bounds would allow. "I could never do that. That isn't me."

Grigory shrugged. "And yet you did." He sat back and regarded his prisoner. "You know, some people might call that even. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and all that."

Eli fell back, shoulders dropped. "What do you want from me? What do I need to do?"

"This is quite the conundrum, given your talent and all. Excuse me," Grigory said as he stood. He walked over to Dima, who leaned into Grigory as they engaged in a whispered conversation.

Eventually, they stepped apart, and Dima withdrew a glinting knife from his pocket. With each step Dima took towards the chair, the light reflected off the blade, casting an eerie gleam in the room.

"Wait," Eli said, his heart racing. "I won't say anything, I promise."

Dima's face twisted into a maniacal grin as he shifted the blade around, admiring its deadly sharpness in the dim light. "Please," Eli

whispered, his voice trembling with fear. He squeezed his eyes shut, bracing for the worst.

“Wait!” Eli shouted. “Computers! Something to do with computers.”

Suddenly, Dima swung the knife, and Eli flinched, waiting to feel the blade slice through his skin.

With their senses heightened, the detectives and agents fanned out, moving with silent steps through the murky interior of the building. The darkness was suffocating, broken only by the faint light filtering in from a nearby window. Despite the trepidation that gripped them, they pressed forward, their eyes peeled for any clues that might lead them to their target.

Thompson’s hand tightened around his weapon, the cold metal offering some solace in the musty interior of the abandoned factory. As he scanned the darkness, his thoughts drifted to Eli and the tragedy that had befallen his friends.

But then, the chaos had escalated, thanks to Mitchell and Norcross’s involvement. What had started as a simple drug deal had spiraled into a deadly partnership between rival Korean and Russian crime families. The missing firearms and deadly ammunition added an element of danger that felt surreal, like something out of a movie.

As he continued to navigate through the factory’s labyrinthine corridors and dormant machines, unease beckoned Thompson. The situation was far from the usual, threatening to tip over into the realm of the absurd. He knew they needed to remain focused and vigilant if they hoped to bring an end to the madness that was blanketing the city.

After scouring the building’s interior, the team regrouped in the farthest corner of the building’s footprint. The detectives and agents exchanged nods, signaling they cleared their respective paths. Then,

with a shared sense of purpose, they turned their attention to the metal steps that led to the unknown depths of the structure.

Without hesitation, the quartet made their way towards the staircase. The metallic clang of their footsteps echoed eerily through the stillness of the air. As they descended, the darkness grew more suffocating, wrapping around them like a thick cloak.

Eli slowly opened his eyes.

Grigory stood in front of him, an arm outstretched, holding back Dima. The big man backed off, a sneer on his face.

“So, you remember something.”

“I don’t know. Maybe things will come back slowly.”

Grigory considered the comment. “It would be a shame to lose your skills, and I do have an opening for someone like you.”

“What happened to the last guy?”

“I killed him,” Grigory said matter-of-factly.

“I promise,” Eli whimpered, “never to tell anything to anyone. I promise. I’ll do whatever you ask. If you haven’t killed me yet, it must mean the skills and knowledge I have are better than good. When they come back, it’s yours.”

“Let me be explicitly clear about something. And I want you to truly understand this. Men have died for less.”

Eli swallowed.

A flash from the corner of his eye, and the sound of metal digging into wood filled his rang out. Then, a split second later, a searching pain rocketed up his arm, and he bellowed. Blood erupted from where his little finger had been. He kicked against his restraints as he yelled and swore.

Grigory shushed him as he patted his head and ran a hand down the side of his face. Eli looked up, his eyebrows attempting to meet on his forehead, his eyes crying out for sympathy.

“This is the price of admission. Now I own you. When I ask for something, you will give it to me, without hesitation. If you try to run, I will find out. If you talk to the police, I’ll know. Don’t even think about trying to outsmart me, you will not win. Do you understand?”

Eli whimpered.

“Nod if you understand.”

Eli nodded.

Satisfied, Grigory stepped back and Eli dropped his head.

“Eli?”

“What?” Eli responded.

Grigory sighed. “Well, that’s a shame.”

Eli snapped his gaze up but before he could say anything, a plastic bag thrust over his head. He gasped desperately for air as it constricted around his neck. The stifling grip of the plastic clung to his face as he arched his back.

Grigory looked on. “How long do you think, Dima? Seventy seconds?”

Dima stepped forward. “I give him eighty.”

Grigory smiled. “You’re on.”

Eli’s struggles grew more frenzied. His chest heaved with the desperate need for air, and his body weakened with each passing moment. Human nature forced him to continue, and he fought against his restraints with all his might.

His mind raced with thoughts of escape; his thoughts muddled by the lack of oxygen. He clenched and unclenched his fists, trying to find some way to break free. He thrashed his head from side to side, searching for any glimmer of hope in the suffocating darkness, but all he could feel was the relentless pain of suffocation.

The quartet descended the staircase, the darkness so thick it seemed to swallow them whole. But in the distance, they spotted a faint light, a floating orb in the void. They drew their devices and activated the torch function, illuminating their path as they fanned out and converged on the source of the light, weapons at the ready.

As they drew nearer, they spotted a figure bound to a chair, his back turned towards them. With caution, the team advanced, their flashlight beams cutting through the darkness like blades. Circling the motionless figure at a safe distance, they kept their guns trained on the potential threat.

Eli's lungs burned as his vision faded and his consciousness slipped away, he regretted not being able to keep up the charade, accidentally slipping and falling into Gregory's obvious trap and answering his name. Despite losing a finger, he had been so close to freedom, although he wondered how free he would have actually been. He would have found a way. Would have...

Pain slowly subsided as his body went limp, and he felt himself slipping away into the void of death.

Thompson's eyes widened in horror as he took in the scene before him. The man's face was unrecognizable, his features twisted and mangled beyond all recognition. And the dark stains on his clothing only added to the sense of dread that hung heavy in the air.

"What the hell happened here?" Thompson muttered, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Well, from what I can make out, this is, or should I say was, Hyun-woo," Norcross grumbled. "Head of the Koreans over here."

"Where's Grigory?"

“He ain’t fucking here,” Mitchell spat.

“Well, this shit is personal,” Hayes said, looking over the bullet wound to the face. “You think the Russians are responsible?”

“Possibly.”

“Possibly?” Thompson said. He turned to Mitchell. “What does this mean for your missing firearms?”

Mitchell replaced his weapon in its holster. “Fucked if I know. Contrary to intelligence, it seems like the Russians are keeping the weapons for themselves, and whatever the Koreans had. It seems they’ve got unfinished business.”

“But, the Russians still have the weapons,” Hayes said. “That’s a good thing, yes?”

“No, none of this is good,” Mitchell said. “Who knows what they are planning to do with them.”

“We know nothing,” Norcross jumped in. “I think it’s best not to jump to conclusions until we can dig up some facts to back up our assumptions. For all we know, the Russians are on their way out of the country as we speak.”

“Where do we go from here?” Thompson asked.

“You mentioned you had a lead on someone who might offer some information,” Norcross said. “Give us the details and we’ll have a little chat about things.”

“No,” Thompson fired back. “We’ll pick him up and have a conversation first. Then we’ll invite you in.”

“At least tell me who you’ve got hidden away.”

“In good time. If we find anything, we’ll read you in.”

“Jesus,” Norcross exhaled. “This is going to be Petrov all over again.” He turned to Mitchell. “You okay with this?”

Mitchell dropped his shoulders. “The boss has called me in for a meeting, which means I might have to go pack up my desk.”

“It’s not over yet,” Thompson replied.

Mitchell nodded glumly. "Call me when you get him in an interview room. And make sure he has a lawyer."

Thompson nodded.

"Fine. You guys tend to your errands. I'll get a team to sweep through all of this shit," Norcross said. "But I bet they won't find jack shit.."

Chapter 61

Hayes rapped his knuckles against Eli's door, calling out loudly to announce their presence. Silence greeted him, and he exchanged a worried glance with Thompson.

"What are you thinking?" Hayes questioned his partner.

Thompson tried the handle, but the door was locked.

"You really think Eli has anything to offer?" Hayes asked.

"I guess we won't know until we have a little chat with him."

"Come on. Russian and Korean family heads. Illegal guns and ammo. We've spoken with him. Does that sound like the kind of shit he's into?"

"Someone connected with the Russians murdered his friends." Thompson pounded on the door again.

"Why are we really here? Is it because you think he's got something to share, or because you think he could be in trouble?"

Thompson turned to face him and grumbled something unintelligible.

Hayes shrugged. "I don't think he's home."

"Wait!" Thompson breathed. "Do you hear that?" He watched Hayes listening intently, then motioned for him to step back. With a sharp intake of breath, Thompson threw his shoulder into the door. It swung open with a loud crack, sending wood splinters flying into the room.

"What the hell was that?" Hayes asked.

"What? I thought I heard something and thought Eli might be in trouble."

They cautiously stepped into the room, jackets parted and hands on the butts of their weapons, ready for anything. The room was

dimly lit, fading light fighting to break through the closed curtains, and it took a moment for their eyes to adjust to the darkness.

The detectives split up and combed through the house, their eyes scanning every corner and their hands searching every surface. As they moved from room to room, it became apparent that there was no sign of a struggle or forced entry. Apart from some empty beer bottles on the coffee table, everything looked like it should be where it was.

Hayes emerged from the bedroom, shaking his head. "He's probably gone to get some food or something. You want to illegally wait inside his apartment, or come back later?"

"I don't like this shit," Thompson said, scanning the room. He walked off into the kitchen.

"Yeah, but you don't like anything," Hayes retorted and followed him into the kitchen. "What do you want to tell Mitchell?"

The silence fell to a faint hum of the refrigerator, the door slightly ajar, light spilling onto the floor.

"Jesus, you smell something?" Hayes asked.

Thompson didn't respond, just edged closer to the fridge door. Slipped a finger in the gap and slowly pulled it open. The room got brighter as the door opened. Thompson stepped back as the two detectives stood next to each other, staring at the severed head sitting on the shelf.

"Holy Mary mother of God," Hayes whispered. "Petrov. The fucking kid got revenge and chopped the head off the guy who murdered his friends."

"Jesus, Hayes, we don't know that."

"Eli is a fucking psycho."

"We won't know anything until forensics gets here. In the meantime, we need to find Eli. Call it in."

As Hayes stepped away to place a crucial phone call, Thompson gently nudged the refrigerator door shut. His mind was awash with

thoughts about Eli's predicament. He pondered over the series of events that could have entangled Eli in such a situation. The uncertainty of it all weighed heavily on him, but his resolve was clear. He needed to locate Eli before anyone else did.

Chapter 62

Norcross leaned against the doorframe, surveying the room with a discerning eye. In the center of the space, an individual was firmly secured to a chair. Lifeless eyes bulged from their sockets, the plastic restraints pressed tightly against their face, evidence of their desperate struggle for even a hint of oxygen within the claustrophobic confines. Some areas of the plastic had fogged, and for a fleeting moment, Norcross attempted to envision the sheer terror they must have endured, their lungs aflame as they gasped for air just beyond the thin, unforgiving layer of plastic.

He clapped his hands, sending booms around the room, garnering attention.

Grigory turned. "Ah, welcome, Mr. Norcross." He strode over and extended his hand. "I trust you enjoyed the show at the old factory?"

Norcross shook it. "It was quite the show. It'll keep everyone busy for weeks." He pointed to the suffocated body. "Who's that?"

Grigory waved it away. "No one of note."

"Is anyone going to come looking for him?"

"Only if they look in his refrigerator," Grigory said with a wink.

Norcross turned. "I don't want to know. Just make sure he is never found."

"Of course," Grigory said. He gestured to the door. "Come, let's celebrate."

Mitchell slumped in his chair, his mind racing with the weight of his failures. He knew his superiors would storm in any moment for an explanation, but he had nothing to give them. No leads, no

prospects, no hope. The death of his undercover agent and the empty container left him with nothing to go on. He had tried calling his partner, Special Agent Harrison Norcross, eleven times, but there was no answer. His voicemails ranged from anger to despair, and finally to fear.

Mitchell felt utterly alone. The only thing he had left was the arrest warrant he had initiated after Oskar's death. He knew he shouldn't be handling the case, but he was determined to get Grigory. However, with the lack of any physical evidence from the murders, the chances of getting the warrant signed seemed to slip away with each passing moment.

Bloody Norcross. This whole thing started when he swaggered into his office and suggested the operation. At the time he saw nothing but a promotion and pay raise. Now he doubted he would get any of those things, in fact, he would be incredibly lucky indeed just to keep his job.

His phone erupted in a loud ring as it vibrated across the desk. Swiftly, he snatched it up and answered. "Norcross? Where the hell have you been?"

The booming volume from the other end forced Mitchell to hold the phone away from his ear for a moment, allowing the deluge of words to subside. Then, he cautiously brought it back to his ear and replied in a hushed tone.

"Yes, Sir, I'll be right up."

He rose from his chair, his movements slow and deliberate. Mitchell straightened his tie, rolled down and buttoned his sleeves, and smoothed down his disheveled hair. He retrieved his jacket from the back of his chair and shrugged it on, taking a deep breath before stepping out of his office with a heavy heart. As he locked the door, he couldn't help but take one last look around. It was a surreal moment, knowing that the next time he entered the room it could be to pack up his belongings. He hoped it wouldn't be in handcuffs.

He shut the door to his office, and at the same time, on his career.

Norcross lounged on the balcony, perched high in the hills, and taking in the breathtaking sunset behind the city skyline. In the distance, golden light danced across the towering skyscrapers, casting a warm glow that stretched across the horizon.

Grigory approached and handed a glass over.

“Macallan, neat,” he announced.

Norcross accepted it with a grunt and took a sip. “Oh yes. I’m going to get used to that.”

His phone vibrated in his pocket. He put the drink down, he pulled it out to inspect the screen. Smirked. He pressed a button to silence it, then powered it down.

“Anything interesting?” Grigory asked.

“It was Mitchell. I dare say his career is over.”

“Collateral damage.”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“Like my brother.”

It was unfortunate to hear about what happened, but we understood sacrifices would be inevitable during our journey. It’s impossible to go through something like this with no damage.

Grigory took a sip of his drink. “Quite.”

Norcross held his phone in the air. “I need this destroyed.”

Dima reached over and took the phone, disappearing inside.

Norcross took another sip. Exhaled.

“What are you going to do now?” Grigory asked.

Norcross huffed. “Disappear.”

“You don’t want to join us for one last *fuck you*?”

Norcross smirked. “After three decades chasing people like you, I’m tired. I just want my money and then disappear to the other side of the world.”

“Very well,” Grigory said. “I guess you want your payment.”

Norcross nodded. “Yes, I would. I don’t think my pension will be enough to get me by.”

Grigory pulled out his phone and tapped away on the screen.

“So,” Norcross said. “You’ve got the guns and money. What are you planning to do?”

Grigory smirked as he swiped and tapped. “This is going to be brilliant. We are going to—”

“Wait,” Norcross said, holding up a hand. “I don’t want to know. I’m sure I’ll read something online about it all.”

Suddenly, Norcross coughed, his face contorted with effort, and he carefully set the drink aside. Grigory, glancing up from his phone, observed as Norcross reached up, loosened his tie, unbuttoned the top button of his shirt, and squirmed uncomfortably in his chair.

“You all right?” Grigory asked.

Norcross wheezed. “What... did... you...” He felt around his neck as thick white bubbles emerged from his lips. Grigory watched as the fight left the older man, eventually slumping in his chair, his arms flopping to his side.

Now he had everything, and it was all his.

Grigory smirked.

If you play with snakes, you’re gonna get bit.

Please review this book!



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Acknowledgements

Echo is the kind of book I wrote, sat on for a while as I completed other projects, dusted it off, rewrote it, sent it off to my editor, then rewrote it again. Maybe this is how things should be done. I originally finished this book in 2015 but am glad I let it marinate.

This book is complex, with a number of moving parts, flowing backward in time to a convergence point before moving forward. It's a more streamlined and less intertwined "sliding doors" story, but one I was adamant to tell. I always wanted it to be this way, to tell two different stories that lived side by side. Interestingly, the title underwent the greatest transformation, starting as *The Account*, then *Retrospection*, then *Locus*, before landing on *Echo*.

In my stories, I often challenge my characters to answer the big question of 'what if?', but rarely do I get to write what happens with both of those paths. Writing the first half of the story in reverse and aligning the two halves to somewhat mirror each other was challenging, yet I hope satisfying for you.

For those who are interested, there is a deleted chapter that outlines Eli's fate, regardless of the decisions he makes. Trust me, he never makes it out of the book alive, with Grigory remaining victorious.

A big thank you to my editor, Jerrica, for taking on the challenge of editing this story. As always, you were able to see the things I couldn't and set me down the right path. I can't thank you enough for coming on this journey with me. Jerrica, I think you had it right: it is a mind-bending ride.

Thanks to Maryne for helping me with my media and social engagement. Your support allows me to focus on creating more twisted stories.

Finally, to Rachel, my wonderful partner and president of my fan club! The support and care you offer me is unrivaled. I couldn't ask for a better person to be by my side in this little crazy adventure.

For those wondering about what's next, I'm excited to share that I've been jotting down ideas for a few more Caddius Finch Files amidst my contracts with various independent traditional publishers. Although it has been an outlier until now, this fun little subversion is about to get a breath of fresh air. Keep an ear and eye out for its return!

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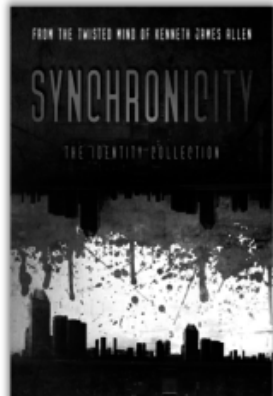
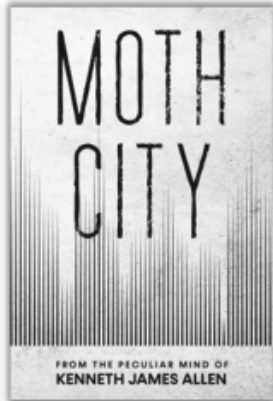
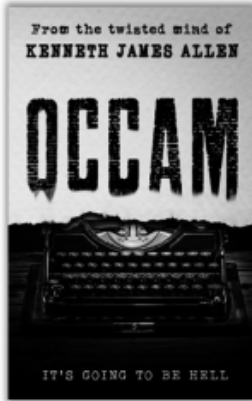
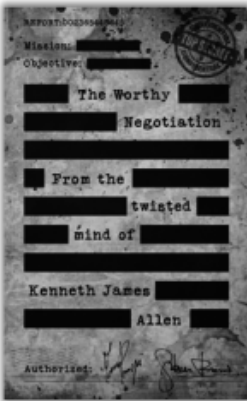
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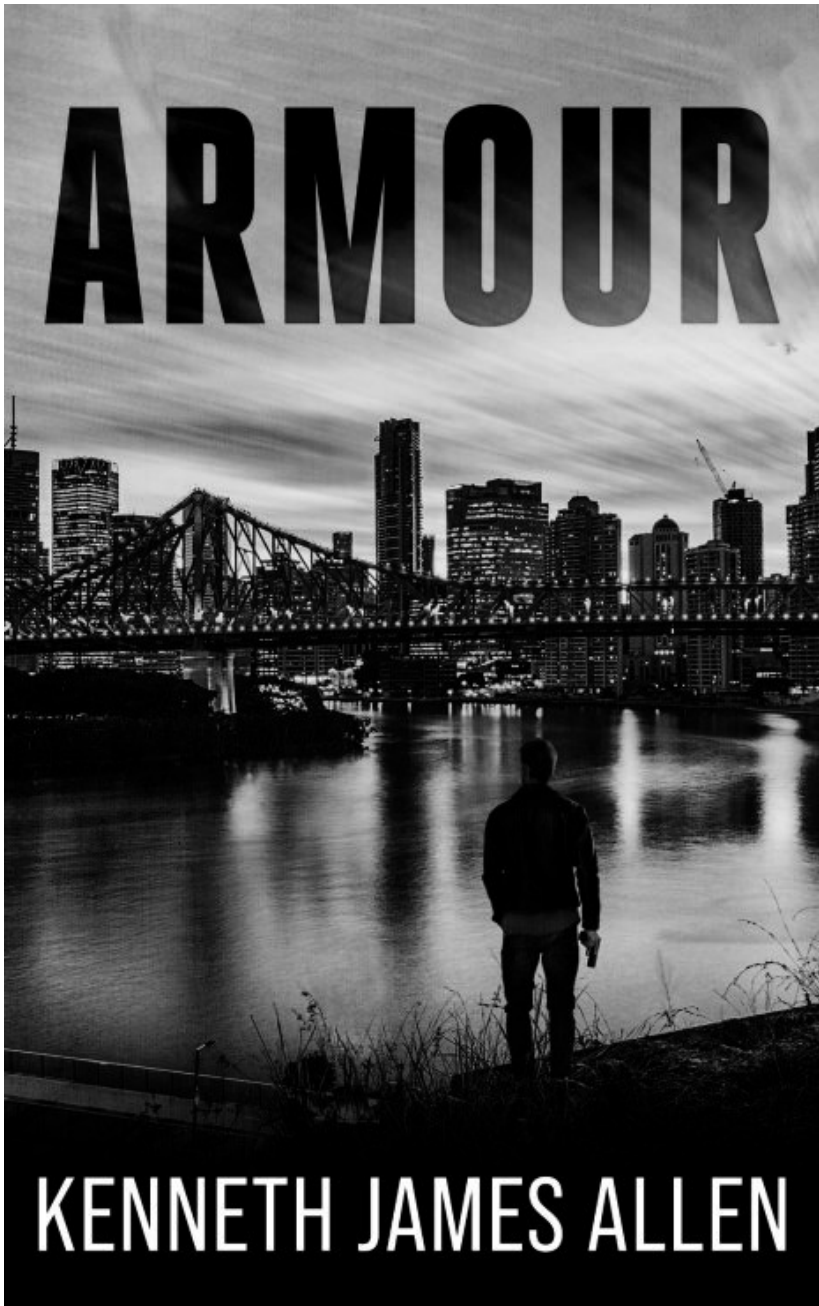


I started writing in 2008, and after years of professional rejection, I started my self-publishing journey in 2020. I enjoy any story that keeps me guessing, hate contradiction, and fear spiders and hypodermic needles. Writing is my meditation. When I'm not writing in Brisbane, I'm facilitating workshops, MCing conferences, and keynote speaking all over Australia—both face to face and virtually.

Find out more at my website <https://kennethjamesallen.com/>



Special Extract



To be released in 2025

CHAPTER 1

Kesh Devere struggled to open his eyes. His mouth was dry, and his shoulder and knee hurt like hell. In fact, he hurt all over. He clenched his eyes shut and tried to remember what had happened the previous day, the events that led to him being where he was. The best he could conjure were blurry, disconnected images, and they raced through his mind in a jumble.

Fighting against the pain, he opened his eyes. Blackness enveloped him. Everything felt close, and the air tasted stale. He groaned and tried to move his lethargic limbs. A flash of pain shot through the numbness and into his consciousness, yet he continued to search for meaning in the haze. Was he lying in his bed, or perhaps on the couch, having passed out from drinking too much? Time and space meant nothing to him.

He tried again to move his arms, but only fought against restraints. All he could manage was to clench his fist. As feeling returned to his extremities, he noted someone arranged his limbs away from his body at right angles, akin to da Vinci's Vitruvian Man. Chills filled his sweat-laden body. His heart felt like it would break through his rib cage. He called out. The sound reverberated around him like his head was in a fishbowl. He arched his back as he screamed, using every ounce of energy to fight the invisible barrier that held him down.

It was a futile effort.

A sting dug into his outstretched arm, the pain registering in his brain a little too late. He tried to recoil to no effect. The drug crawled up his arm under the skin. Coldness climbed to his shoulder and finally to the side of his face. When the liquid hit his brain, he arched his back, widened his eyes, and roared into the abyss.

Suddenly, a bright light exploded above him and burnt his retinas. He groaned again and squeezed his eyes shut, wanting nothing more than to cover his face with his hands, to turn away, to sink back into the darkness. Ever so slightly, millimetre by millimetre, he opened them until he became accustomed to the light.

After a few minutes of false starts and fluttering eyelids, he could see. A few centimetres in front of his face appeared to be a visor of some sort bordered by black. He looked around as far as his peripheral vision would allow but saw nothing but white. Mustered the energy to call out but received nothing in reply.

Then a voice whispered in his ear. A woman's voice. Familiar to some degree, yet he couldn't place it. "Kesh..." Smooth, directed, deliberate.

It came around again. "Kesh..." Was he dreaming? The sound encased him, floated around him like smoke.

"Who... who are you? Where am I? Help me!"

"Shh." It was like white noise filling his senses. Then he was moving. Up, down, turning and twisting on every axis. He could see nothing but white. No point of reference. The machine slowed to a standstill as a blob came into view. Shades of color on a blank canvas. He blinked a few times for the image to focus.

"Beth?" But it couldn't be. She was... It just couldn't be.

"It's okay, Kesh."

Her image solidified, yet still manifested the same qualities as a watercolor.

"Don't just stand there; get me the fuck out of here." He fought against the restraints once more. Pain and numbness collided into a jumble that only heightened the reverberation of his racing heartbeat.

"It's okay," she said again. "You'll be out soon enough."

He hoped so, because he knew his life was on the line.

