

ONE

“I killed a man,” I say to my new therapist.

I’ve barely settled onto the couch . . . which isn’t a couch at all, but a chaise lounge that looked inviting and proved horribly uncomfortable. Like therapy itself.

I’ve caught her off guard with that opening line, but I’ve been through this before with other therapists. Five, to be exact. Each time, the gap between “hello” and “I’m a murderer” decreases. By this point, she should be glad I’m still bothering with a greeting. Therapists do charge by the hour.

“You . . . ,” she says, “killed a man?”

The apprehensive look. I know it well—that moment when they’re certain they’ve misheard. Or that I mean it in a metaphorical way. *I broke a man’s heart*. Which is technically true. A bullet does break a heart. Irrevocably, it seems.

When I only nod, she asks, “When did this happen?”

“Twelve years ago.”

Expression number two. Relief. At least I haven’t *just* killed a man. That would be so much more troublesome.

Then comes the third look, as she searches my face with dawning realization.

“You must have been young,” she says. “A teenager?”

“Eighteen.”

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“Ah.” She settles back in her chair, the relief stronger now, mingling with satisfaction that she’s solved the puzzle. “An accident of some kind?”

She’s blunt. Others have led me in circles around the conclusion they’ve drawn. *You didn’t really murder a man. It was a car accident or other youthful mishap, and now you torture yourself with guilt.*

“No, I did it on purpose. That is, pulling the trigger was intentional. I didn’t go there planning to kill him. Manslaughter, not homicide. A good lawyer could argue for imperfect self-defense and get the sentence down to about twelve years.”

She pulls back. “You’ve researched this. The crime. The sentence.”

“It’s my job.”

“Because you feel guilty.”

“No, it’s my *job*. I’m a cop.”

Her mouth forms an O of surprise, and her fingernails tap my file folder as she makes mental excuses for not reading it more thoroughly. Then her mouth opens again. The barest flicker of a smile follows.

“You’re a police officer,” she says. “You shot someone in the line—No, you were too young. A cadet?”

“Yes, but it wasn’t a training accident.” I settle on the chaise. “How about I just tell you the story?”

An obvious solution, but therapists never suggest it. Some, like this one, actually hesitate when I offer. She fears I’m guilty and doesn’t want me to be. Give her a few more clues, and she’ll find a way to absolve me.

Except I don’t want absolution. I just want to tell my story. Because this is what I do. I play Russian roulette with Fate, knowing someday a therapist will break confidentiality and turn me in. It’s like when I was a child, weighed down by guilt over some wrongdoing but fearing the punishment too much to confess outright. I’d drop clues, reasoning that if I was meant to be caught, those hints would chamber the round. Magical, childish thinking, but it’s what I do.

“Can I begin?” I ask.

She nods with some reluctance and settles in.

“I’d gone to a bar that night with my boyfriend,” I say. “It was sup-

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posed to be a date, but he spent the evening doing business in the back corner. That's what he called it. Doing business. Which sounds like he was dealing coke in some dive bar. We were actually in the university pub, him selling vitamin R and bennies to kids who wanted to make it through exam week. . . .”

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TWO

Blaine and I sat at a back table, side by side, waiting for customers. His fingers stroked the inside of my thigh. “Almost done. And then . . .” He grinned over at me. “Pizza? Your place?”

“Only if we get enough for Diana.”

He made a face. “It’s Friday night, Casey. Shouldn’t your roommate have a date or something?”

“Mmm, no. Sorry.”

Actually, she was out with college friends. I just wasn’t telling Blaine that. We hadn’t had sex yet. I’d held him off by saying I was a virgin. That was a lie. I was just picky.

Blaine was my walk on the wild side. I was a police recruit playing bad girl. Which was as lame as his attempt to play drug lord. On a scale of bad boys, Blaine ranked about a two. Oh, sure, he claimed he was connected—his grandfather being some Montreal mobster whose name I couldn’t even find with an Internet search. More likely the old guy played bookie at his seniors’ home. Blaine’s father certainly wasn’t mobbed up—he was a pharmacist, which was how Blaine stole his stuff. Blaine himself was pre-med. He didn’t even sample his merchandise. That night, he nursed one beer for two hours. Me? I drank Coke. *Diet* Coke. Yep, we were hard-core.

A last customer sidled over, a kid barely old enough to be in university. Blaine sold him the last of his stash. Then he gulped his beer,

put his arm around my shoulders, and led me from the pub. I could roll my eyes at his swagger, but I found it oddly charming. While I might not have been ready to jump into bed with Blaine, I did like him. He was a messed-up rich kid; I could relate to that.

“Any chance of getting Diana out of your apartment?” he asked.

“Even if there is, the answer is no.”

He only shrugged, with a smile that was half “I’ll change your mind soon” and half genuine acceptance. Another reason why I wasn’t ready to write him off as a failed dating experiment—he never pushed too hard, accepted my refusals with good-natured equanimity.

We started walking. I wasn’t familiar with the campus area. I was attending the provincial police college outside the city and spending weekends with Diana, a high school friend who went to the local community college. Neither of us was from here. So when Blaine insisted that a dark alley was a shortcut to the pizza place, I didn’t question it . . . mostly because I was fine with what he had planned—a make-out pit stop designed to change my mind about getting Diana out of our apartment.

We were going at it hard and heavy when I heard the click of a gun. I gasped and pushed Blaine back. He looked up and jumped away, leaving me with a 9 mm pointed at my cheek.

“I only have fifty bucks,” Blaine lied—the rest was stuffed in his sock. “She has some jewelry. Take that and the fifty—”

“Do we look like muggers, Saratori?”

As the gun lowered, I saw the guy holding it. Early twenties. Dark blond hair. Leather jacket. No obvious gang markings, but that’s what this looked like: four young guys, one with a gun, three with knives.

I couldn’t fight them—I didn’t have a weapon, and martial arts doesn’t work well against four armed attackers. Instead, I committed their faces to memory and noted distinguishing features for the police report.

“Does the old man know you’re dealing?” the lead guy asked.

“I don’t know what—” Blaine began.

“What I’m talking about? That you’re Leo Saratori’s grandkid? Or that you were dealing on our turf?”

Blaine bleated denials. One of the guys pinned him against the wall,

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while another patted him down. They took a small plastic bag with a few leftover pills from one sock and a wad of cash from the other.

“Okay,” Blaine said. “So we’re done now?”

“You think we want your money?” The leader bore down on him. “You’re dealing on our turf, college boy. Considering who you are, I’m going to take this as a declaration of war.”

“N-No. My grandfather doesn’t—”

A clatter from the far end of the alley. Just a cat, leaping from a garbage bin, but it was enough to startle the guy with the gun. I lunged, caught him by the wrist and twisted, hearing the gun thump to the ground as I said, “Grab it!” and—

Blaine wasn’t there to grab it. He was tearing down the alley. One of the other thugs was already scooping up the gun, and I was wrenching their leader’s arm into a hold, but I knew it wouldn’t do any good. The guy with the gun jabbed the barrel against my forehead and roared, “Stop!”

I didn’t even have time to do that before the other two slammed me into the wall. The leader took back his gun and advanced on me.

“Seems we know who’s got the balls in your relationship,” he said. “The pretty little China doll. Your boyfriend’s gone, sweetie. Left you to take his punishment.” He looked me up and down. “A little too college-girl for my tastes, but I’m flexible.”

I thought he was joking. Or bluffing. I knew my statistics. I faced more danger of sexual assault from an acquaintance or a boyfriend.

“Look,” I said. “Whatever beef you have with Blaine, it has nothing to do with me. I’ve got twenty dollars in my wallet, and my necklace is gold. You can take—”

“We’ll take whatever we want, sweetie.”

I tugged my bag off my shoulder. “Okay, here’s my purse. There’s a cell phone—”

He stepped closer. “We’ll take *whatever* we want.”

His voice had hardened, but I still didn’t think, *I’m in danger*. I knew how muggings worked. *Just stay calm and hand over my belongings*.

I held out my purse. He grabbed it by the strap and tossed it aside. Then he grabbed *me*, one hand going to my throat, the other to my

breast, shoving me against the wall. There was a split second of shock as I hit the bricks hard. Then . . .

I don't know what happened then. To this day, I cannot remember the thoughts that went through my brain. I don't think there were any. I felt his hands on my throat and on my breast, and I reacted.

My knee connected with his groin. I twisted toward the guy standing beside us. My fingers wrapped around his wrist. I grabbed his switchblade as it fell. I twisted again, my arm swinging down, and I stabbed the leader in the upper thigh as he was still falling back, moaning from the knee to his groin.

Afterward, I would piece it together and understand how it happened. How a response that seemed almost surreal was, in fact, very predictable. When the leader grabbed me with both hands, I knew he was no longer armed. So I reacted, if not with forethought, at least with foreknowledge.

Yet it was the lack of forethought that was my undoing. I had stabbed the leader . . . and there were three other guys right there. One hit me in the gut. Another plowed his fist into my jaw. A third wrenched my arm so hard I screamed as my shoulder dislocated. He got the knife away from me easily after that. Someone kicked me in the back of the knees, and I went down. As soon as I did, boots slammed me from all sides, punctuated by grunts and curses of rage. I heard the leader say, "You think you're a tough little bitch? I'll show you tough." And then the beating began in earnest.

I awoke in a hospital four days later as my mother and the doctor discussed the possibility of pulling the plug. I'd like to believe that somewhere in that dark world of my battered brain, I heard them and came back, like a prizefighter rising as the ref counts down. But it was probably just coincidence.

I'd been found in that alley, left for dead, and rushed to the hospital, where I underwent emergency surgery to stop the internal bleeding. I had a dislocated shoulder. Five fractured ribs. Over a hundred

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stitches for various lacerations. A severe concussion and an intracranial hematoma. Compound fracture of the left radius. Severe fracture of the right tibia and fibula with permanent nerve damage. Also, possible rape.

I have recited that list to enough therapists that it has lost all emotional impact. Even the last part.

Possible rape. It sounds ludicrous. Either I was or I wasn't, right? Yet if it happened, I was unconscious. When I was found, my jeans were still on—or had been put *back* on. They did a rape kit, but it vanished before it could be processed.

Today, having spent two years as a detective in a big-city Special Victims Unit, I know you can make an educated guess without the kit. But I think when it disappeared, someone decided an answer wasn't necessary. If my attackers were found, they'd be charged with aggravated assault and attempted murder. Good enough. For them, at least.

As for my injuries, physically, I made a full recovery. It took eighteen months. I had to drop out of police college and give up the job waiting for me. As the victim of a serious crime, I was deemed no longer fit to serve and protect. I didn't accept that. I got a bachelor's degree in criminology, a black belt in aikido, and a flyweight championship in boxing. I aced the psych tests and, five years after the attack, I was hired and on the fast track to detective.

My parents had not been pleased. That was nothing new. When I'd first declared I wanted to be a police detective, their reaction had been pure horror. "You're better than that," they said. Smarter, they meant. Not geniuses, like them. While they considered my IQ of 135 perfectly adequate, it might require extra effort to become a cardiologist like my dad or chief of pediatric surgery like my mom or a neuroscientist like my sister. Still, they expected that I'd try. I wanted none of it. Never had.

After I had to leave police college, they'd been certain I'd give up this nonsense and devote myself to a meaningful career, preferably with a string of letters after my name. We argued. A lot. They died in a small plane crash four years ago, and we'd never truly mended that fence.

But back to the hospital. I spent six weeks there, learning to walk

again, talk again, be Casey Duncan again. Except I never really was. Not the Casey Duncan I'd been. There are two halves of my life: before and after.

Four days in a coma. Six weeks in the hospital. Blaine never came to see me. Never even sent a card. I'd have ripped it to shreds, but at least it would have acknowledged what happened. He knew, of course. Diana had made sure of that, contacting him while I was in emergency. He hadn't asked how bad I was. Just mumbled something and hung up.

When I'd seen him run away in the alley, my outrage had been tempered by the certainty that he would get help. Even as the blows had started to fall, I'd clung to that. He must have called the police. He must have.

The last thing that passed through my mind before I lost consciousness was that I just had to hold on a little longer. Help was on the way. Only it wasn't. A homeless guy cutting through the alley stumbled across me, hours later. A stranger—a *drunk* stranger—had run to get help for me. My boyfriend had just run.

Blaine did need to speak to the police after I woke up and had told them what happened. But in Blaine's version, *he'd* created the distraction. I'd been escaping with him, and we'd parted at the street. The muggers must have caught up and dragged me back into that alley. If Blaine had known, he'd have done something. To suggest otherwise, well . . . I'd suffered head trauma, hadn't I? Temporary brain damage? Loss of memory? Clearly, I'd misremembered.

I didn't call him when I got out of the hospital. That conversation had to happen in person. It took a week for me to get around to it, because there was something I needed to do first. Buy a gun.

Blaine's routine hadn't changed. He still went jogging before dawn. Or that was what he'd say if he was trying to impress a girl: *I run in the park every morning at five*. It wasn't completely untrue. He did go out before dawn. He did run in the park. Except he only did it on Fridays, and just to the place where he stashed his drugs. Then he'd

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run back to campus, where he could usually find a few buyers—kids who'd been out too late partying, heading back to the dorms before dawn, in need of a little something to get them through Friday classes.

I knew the perfect place for a confrontation. By the bridge along the riverbank, where he'd pass on his way home. The spot was always empty at that time of day, and the noise of rushing water would cover our discussion.

Cover a gunshot, too?

No, the gun was only a prop. To let him know this was going to be a serious conversation.

I stood by the foot of the bridge. He came by right on schedule. Walking. He only jogged where people could see him.

I waited until I could hear the buzz and crash from his music. Then I stepped out into his path.

"Casey?" He blinked and tugged at the earbuds, letting them fall, dangling, as he stared at me. "You look . . ."

"Like I got the shit beat out of me?"

"It's not that bad."

"True. The bruises have healed. There are only ten stitches on my face. Oh, and this spot, where they had to shave my head to cut into my skull and relieve the bleeding." I turned to show him. "Plus a few teeth that will need to be replaced after my jaw's fully healed. My nose isn't straight, but they tell me plastic surgery will fix that. They also say I might walk without the limp if I work really, really hard at it."

He listened, nodding, an overly concerned expression on his face, as if I were an elderly aunt detailing my medical woes.

When I finished, he said, "You'll heal, then. That's good."

"Good?" I stepped toward him. "I almost *died*, Blaine. I had to drop out of police college. I'm told I'll never be a cop. That I'll never move fast enough. I might never *think* fast enough."

Another long pause. Then, "I'm sorry this happened to you, Casey. I gave you a chance to run."

"No, I let *you* run. You did, and you never even called for help."

"That's not how I remember it." He pulled himself up straight, ducking my gaze.

"No?" I said. "Does this refresh your memory?"

I took the gun from my pocket.

I'd envisioned this encounter so many ways. All those nights, lying in a hospital bed, fantasizing about it, I'd realized I didn't want him to break down and beg forgiveness too quickly. I wanted to have to pull the gun. I wanted to see his expression. I wanted him to feel what I'd felt in that alley.

Now I pointed the gun at him, and he blinked. That was it. A blink. Then his lips twitched, as if he was going to laugh. I think if he had, I'd have pulled that trigger. But he rubbed his mouth instead and said, "You're not going to shoot me with your training weapon, Casey. You're smarter than that."

"Did I mention I had to drop out? This *isn't* my training weapon. Now, I want you to think hard, Blaine. Think back to that night, and tell me again that you let me run."

"Oh, I get it." He eased back. "You want me to confess on some hidden tape so you can—"

I yanked off my jacket. It wasn't easy. My left arm was still in a cast, and my shoulder blazed with the simple act of tugging off clothing. But I got it off, and I threw it at him.

"Check for a recorder. Pat me down if you want. I'm not taping this. It's for me. I want to hear you tell the truth, and I want to hear you apologize."

"Well, then you're going to have to pull that trigger, because I don't have anything to apologize for. We ran, and you must have doubled back."

"For what?" I roared. "What in *fuck* would I double back for?"

"Then they must have caught you. You were too slow—"

"I did not run! You know I didn't. I grabbed him, and you were supposed to pick up the gun he dropped, but you ran. Like a fucking coward, you ran, and you didn't look back, and I nearly died, and you never even called the goddamned hospital to see if I was okay."

"You *are* okay. Look at you. Up and about, waving a gun in my face. Well, actually, I'm not sure I'd call that okay. I think you need help. I always did. You're messed up, Casey. I bet a shrink would say you have a death wish."

I went still. "What?"

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He shifted forward, as if he'd just remembered the missing answer in a final exam. "You have a death wish, Casey. What normal girl wants to be a cop? Does that martial arts shit? We get mugged in an alley, and I'm trying to play it cool, and what do you do? Grab the guy. Hell, thank God I *did* run, or I'd have had the shit beat out of me, too."

I hit him. Hauled off and whaled the gun at the side of his head. He staggered back. I hit him again. Blood gushed. His hands went to the spot, eyes widening.

"Fuck! You fucking crazy bitch!"

"We were not *mugged*," I said, advancing on him as he backed up, still holding his head. "You were selling dope on some other guy's turf. Apparently, you knew that. You just didn't give a shit. I grabbed that guy to save your ass, and you ran. You left me there to die!"

"I didn't think they'd—"

"You left me there."

"I just thought—"

"Thought what? They'd only rape me? A distraction while you escaped?"

He didn't answer, but I saw it in his face, that sudden flush right before his eyes went hard.

"It was your own fault if they did rape you," Blaine said. "You couldn't leave well enough alone. Now give me that—"

He lunged for the gun. I shot him. No thought entered my head as I pulled the trigger. It was like being back in that alley.

I saw Blaine coming at me. I was already pointing the gun at his chest. So I pulled the trigger.

The end.

THREE

“And he died?” the therapist says.

I swing my legs over the side of the couch and sit up. Her expression is rapt, as if she’s overhearing a drunken confession in a bar.

“And he died?” she prompts again.

“I called 911 on his burner phone. By the time I got through, he was gone.” *No, not gone. Dead. Use the proper terminology, Casey. Don’t sugarcoat it.*

“What did you tell the operator?”

“Dispatcher,” I say, correcting her automatically. “I said I heard a shot, and I raced over to see two men fleeing the scene. One had a gun. I gave descriptions roughly matching two of the guys who beat me. I said I was going to follow them to get a closer look. She told me not to, of course, but I was already hanging up.”

“You’d thought it through.”

Her tone should be at least vaguely accusatory. Instead, it’s almost admiring. She’s been abused in some way. Bullied. Harassed. Maybe even assaulted. She’s fantasized about doing exactly what I did to whoever hurt her.

I can’t even take credit for “thinking it through.” A situation presented itself, and I reacted. One therapist explained it as an extreme response to the primal fight-or-flight instinct. Mine apparently lacks the flight portion.

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“What did you do with the gun?” she asks.

“I wiped it down and threw it in the river. It was never found.”

“Have you ever pulled the file? As a cop?”

She doesn’t even bother to say “police officer” now. All formality gone.

“No, that could flag an alert,” I say. “It didn’t happen here anyway.”

“Was the boy’s family really connected? Like capital *F* family?”

She says it as if this is an episode of *The Sopranos*.

“I guess so,” I say, which is a lie. I know so. The Saratoris aren’t major players, but Blaine’s grandfather Leo is definitely part of the Montreal organized crime scene.

“Don’t you worry they’ll find out and come for revenge?”

Every day of my life, I think, but all I grant her is a shrug.

“Biggest therapist fail ever.” I down a shot of tequila two days later, my first chance to have a drink after work with Diana. “I might as well have confided in that chick over there.” I point at a vacant-eyed girl in the corner. Hooker. Crack addict. If she’s old enough to be in a bar, I’ll turn in my badge.

“Remind me again why you put yourself through that,” Diana says.

“Oh, right. You’re a sadist.”

“Masochist,” I say. “Also, possibly, a sadist, but in this situation, it’s masochism.”

She rolls her eyes and shifts on her stool. She’s already sitting on the edge, as if placing her ass—even fully clothed—on the surface might result in lethal contamination. At least she’s stopped cleaning her glass with an antiseptic wipe before drinking from it.

Another shift has her sliding off the stool, and she does a little stutter-jump to get back on, tugging down her miniskirt as she does. One of the guys across the bar is checking her out. Or he’s checking out her hair, blond with bright pink tips. He squints, as if suspecting he’s had too much to drink. They don’t see a lot of pink hair in here.

“So how was work?” I ask. Diana is in accounting. Her exact title seems to change by the month, as she flits about, not climbing the cor-

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porate ladder, but jumping from rung to rung, testing them all for size.

“We’re not going to talk about your therapy session?”

“We just did.”

I down my second shot of tequila. The bartender glances over and jerks his thumb at the soda fountain. It’s not a hint. Kurt knows I have a two-shot limit. I nod, and he starts filling a glass.

“So work . . . ?” I prod Diana.

Her lips purse, and that tells me that’s not a good question. Not today. I just hope it doesn’t mean she’s been demoted again. Lately, Diana’s career hops seem to all be downward . . . and not by choice.

“Is work . . . okay?” I venture.

“Work is work.” She gulps her drink, and there’s an uncharacteristic note of bitterness in her voice.

I try to assess her mood. We haven’t always been best friends. In high school, it’d been on and off, the ebb and flow that marked many teen friendships. It was the attack that brought us closer. She’d stood by me when all my old friends shied away, no one knowing what to say. After I shot Blaine, she’d found me frantically changing out of my blood-splattered clothing, and I’d told her everything, and that cemented our friendship. Forged in fire, as they say. Fire and secrets.

“Let’s talk about something else,” I say. “Did you bump into that guy at the coffee shop? The musician, right?”

She shrugs and runs a hot-pink fingernail around the rim of her martini glass . . . which is actually a regular whiskey glass, but it’s currently holding a lemon-drop martini. I know she has something to say. Something about therapy, I presume, but I pretend not to notice, as Kurt brings my Diet Coke.

“You staying till closing?” he asks me.

“Maybe.”

A smile lights his eyes. When I stay until closing, I usually end up in the apartment over the bar. His apartment.

“You should,” he says. “Looks like you could use a break.”

I’m sure he’s about to make some smutty suggestion about ways to relieve my stress. Then his gaze slides to Diana, and instead he heads off to wait on another customer. He thinks he’s being discreet, but

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Diana knows about us, and she's just as horrified as he suspects she'd be. Diana does not approve of casual sex, especially not with an ex-con bartender who works at the docks by day. She has no idea what she's missing.

Normally, she'd make a smart comment as Kurt walked away. But tonight she's lost in the mysteries of her lemon drop.

"You okay?" I ask.

"It's . . . Graham."

"Fuck," I mutter, and sit back on my stool.

Graham Berry is Diana's ex-husband. Respected lawyer. Community pillar. Also one of the most goddamn brilliant psychos I've ever met. He knows exactly how to stalk and torment her while keeping his ass out of prison. Restraining orders? Sure, we can get them. But any cop who's spent time in SVU knows they're as useful as cardboard armor in a gunfight.

She downs her martini and signals Kurt for a refill. Diana rarely has more than one, and when he comes over to deliver it, he gives me an *Is everything okay?* look.

"Rough day," I say.

When he says, "Maybe tomorrow will be better," I know he isn't talking about Diana.

"It will be," I say.

"Graham's in town," she blurts out when Kurt leaves. "He claims he's here on business."

"And he wants to see you, because he loves you and he's changed."

I look her in the eyes as I say this, steeling myself for the guilty flash that says she's considering meeting with him. Like many abusive relationships, theirs is a complicated one. He'd beat the shit out of her, and then he'd be so very sorry, and she'd go back to him, and the cycle would start again.

It's been two years since she left him and convinced me to move to a new city with her. I'd resisted, not because I was reluctant to help but, honestly, because I expected I'd relocate my life for Diana and then find myself alone in that new city when she went back to Graham. But I'd decided to give her one last chance . . . and she'd finally decided he'd had enough chances. She's been free and clear of him ever

since, and now I don't detect any guilt in her eyes, any sign that she wants to see him.

"Okay, step one," I say. "You'll stay at my place tonight and work from there tomorrow. Call in sick."

I brace for her to suggest she stay longer. When her lease came due, she hinted—strongly—about moving into my place instead. She'd gotten very little in the divorce, having signed a prenup, and had long since run through it. The demotions haven't helped her ever-worsening financial situation. I'd pointed out that my single-bedroom place wasn't big enough, but still I feel like a selfish bitch. I help by footing the bills when we go out and "loaning" her bill money that I never expect to see again.

She doesn't suggest a longer-term stay, though, and I feel like a bitch for *that*, for even thinking it at a time like this, as if she'd manufacture a story about Graham to move in with me.

"With any luck," I continue, "it'll take him a while to track your home or work address, and if he really is on business, he won't be here long . . ." I catch her expression. "He's already found you."

"He—he stopped by the office. The usual crap. He just wants to have coffee, talk, work things out."

"And then?" I say, because I know there is an *and then*. In public, Graham plays the besotted ex-husband. But as soon as no one is around . . .

"He waylaid me in the parking garage."

I reach for her wrist, and she flinches. I push up the sleeve to see a bracelet of bruises.

"Goddamn it, Di!"

She gives me a whipped-puppy look.

"Graham showed up at your office, and you didn't call me? You walked into the goddamn parking garage—"

"Don't, Casey. I feel stupid enough."

Her eyes fill with tears, and that's when I really feel like a bitch. Blame the victim. I hate it so much. But Diana never seems to learn, and I'm terrified that one day I'll get a call that she's in the morgue because she gave Graham another chance and I wasn't there to stop her.

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“He’s going to do it one of these days,” she says, wrapping her hands around her glass. “You know he is.”

I don’t want to follow this line of thought, because when I do, I think of Blaine and how easy it was to kill him. I fear that one day I’ll decide there’s only one way to protect Diana. No, really I’m afraid she’ll ask me to do it. I don’t know what I’d say if she did. I owe her for keeping my secret about Blaine. But I don’t owe her enough to repeat the mistake with someone else. Not even Graham.

“I’ve been researching how to disappear,” she says.

“What?” I look up sharply.

“We could disappear. You and me.”

I don’t ask why she includes me. When she’d asked me to relocate and I’d resisted, she’d pointed out the ugly truth—that I’d had no reason to stay. That hasn’t changed. I have a furnished apartment I’ve never added a picture to. I have a lover whose last name I’ve never asked. I have a sister I speak to three times a year. I have one friend, who is sitting in front of me. I do have a job I love. But that’s all I care about. My job and Diana. The job is replaceable. Diana is not.

“Let’s just focus on keeping you safe for now,” I say. “Graham will give up and go home, and then we can discuss how to handle this long-term.”

I put money on the table and catch Kurt’s eye as he deals with a drunk. He mouths, “This weekend?” meaning he can see something’s up and tomorrow probably isn’t going to be better. I nod, try for a smile, and then turn to Diana and say, “Drink up, and let’s go.”

FOUR

I'm at work the next day, trying not to worry about Diana. Of course, I do. I've felt responsible for her since we met. She'd just moved to my district, and I spotted her in the cafeteria with her tray, looking like a rabbit about to dine among wolves. I'd waved her over to join me and my friends, and I've been there for her ever since.

I keep thinking about Graham being in town. About the other times he's tracked her down and what he did. Got her fired. Trashed her apartment. Beat the shit out of her. And the last time, tried to run her down with his car.

"Detective Duncan?"

I look up from my desk. It's Ricci, a new detective from Special Victims.

"Are you, uh, busy?" he asks.

I resist the urge to glance at the piles of paperwork on my desk and say instead, "What's up?"

"Got a, uh, victim in hospital and she's . . . She won't talk to me. My partner's off with the flu, and she said I could ask you."

What he means is that he has a rape survivor refusing to speak to a male detective. Our division is small enough that the lines aren't drawn in permanent ink.

When I hesitate, my partner, Timmons, leans over. "Boy's giving

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you the chance to escape paperwork for a few hours, and you're arguing? Go. I've got this."

Ricci fills me in on the ride. The young woman kicked out her addict boyfriend a week ago. He came back for his things . . . and took what *didn't* belong to him, raping and strangling her. Or that's the story given by her roommate, who spotted the ex fleeing the scene. The victim herself insists it was a random home invasion.

As I listen to the story, I try not to think of Diana. I still send her a text, reminding her that she's supposed to order takeout for lunch and not leave my apartment.

I know the rules, Casey, she replies, and I mentally hear her add, *I'm not a child*. As an apology, I tap back a note that I'll grab her a chai latte on my way home.

We arrive at the hospital and take the stairs to the room, which is being guarded by an officer I don't recognize. He whispers to Ricci, "You aren't supposed to take anyone else in there. Doctor's orders."

"Constable Wiley, this is Detective Duncan," Ricci says.

I shake his hand. He stares a little too long and then covers it with a laugh that's a little too loud as he says, "Guess the force doesn't have height restrictions anymore, huh?"

"They haven't in years," Ricci says. "That would be discrimination against gender and race."

He slides me a look, as if expecting a pat on the head. He's referring to the fact that I'm also half Asian—my mother was Chinese and Filipino.

"Is Ms. Lang . . . ?" I wave toward the room.

"Uh, right," Ricci says, and grabs the door for me. As we walk through, he whispers, "Thank you for doing this. I really appreciate it. Maybe we can grab a drink after shift?"

I really hope you're not hitting on me in the hospital room of a rape survivor, I think, but only murmur something noncommittal. Then I tug back the curtain around the bed and—

It looks like Diana.

It isn't, of course, but that's the first thing I think. I see a blond woman wearing pink barrettes that, for a moment, look like pink-tipped hair. Her face is purple and yellow and swollen. A ring of bruises circles her throat. She wears a cast on one arm, has one leg raised, not unlike me twelve years ago.

I imagine Diana here, in a hospital bed, like me and like this girl, beaten and left for dead, and I realize I can't keep ignoring Graham. I owe it to Diana to make sure she never ends up like this.

Then I push that aside, and I see this girl. Only this girl. Our eyes meet, and there are traces of defiance in hers, but only traces, and she clings to that, as if refusing to turn in her ex is her choice. As if he doesn't have her so terrified she can't see any other option.

I move to her bedside, lean over, and whisper, "Let's make sure he never does this again," and she starts to cry.

I bang on Graham's hotel room door.

"Casey," Graham says as he opens it, grinning like I've brought his favorite takeout. "I was hoping you'd find me. Come on in."

As I enter, I put my back to him. That's my way of saying he doesn't scare me. Only once I sit on the couch do I face him. Graham Berry. Forty years old. Looks like he should be the spokesmodel for some high-end law firm, all white teeth and perfect hair and chiseled jaw. I can still hear Diana's excited whisper. "Oh my God, Case. You have to meet him. He's gorgeous, and he's brilliant, and he's charming, and he asked me out. Can you believe it?"

I wanted to, because Diana deserved some good in her life, having gone through a string of abusive losers since high school. Except she was right—it was hard to believe a guy as outwardly perfect as Graham Berry was madly in love with Diana. That's cruel, isn't it? But there's a dating hierarchy, and though you can move up or down a notch or two, when you're attracting the attention of someone a half dozen rungs up? You need to ask yourself why.

In Diana's case, the answer was that Graham saw the same thing

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her loser exes had—her deep vulnerability and eagerness to please. Like my parents, Diana’s set a higher standard of expectation than she could reach. Unlike mine, hers vented their displeasure in more than words, and she’d spent her childhood convinced she deserved every beating she got. That made her the perfect target for Graham’s particular brand of sadism.

“You look good, Case,” he says, those white teeth glimmering.

“Knock it off. We both know I’m not your type.”

“Mmm, not so sure about that.” He walks over and sits on the coffee table, right in front of me, so close our knees brush. “How about a deal? You give me a night, and I’ll go home happy. I’ll let you bring the handcuffs. We can arm-wrestle for who wears them.”

“If I ever got you in handcuffs, Graham, I don’t think you’d like where it ended up. I want you to leave Diana alone.”

“Oh, I know, but Diana doesn’t really *want* me to leave her alone. It’s a game we play. You’ve never understood that.”

“If you hurt her—”

“I never hurt her. Not against her will, anyway. You’ve got me all wrong, Casey. You always have. I love Diana, and if our relationship is a little unconventional, well, that isn’t a crime.”

He smiles. I know exactly what that smile means—that if I’m wired and trying to entrap him, I’ll catch nothing. He’s so damned careful.

“I want you out of town,” I say.

“Mmm, you make a very sexy sheriff, Casey. Shall we set a time, then? High noon or pistols at twenty paces?”

“It’s well past noon. Let’s say six. Or . . .” I open my bag, take out a file folder, and drop it beside him on the coffee table.

He opens it. And he stops smiling.

“Britnee Spencer. Sister of a boy you coached in basketball two years ago. You went over to give him some private lessons and ended up giving *her* some, too. In a whole different kind of sport.”

“Who told you—?”

“I’m a detective, remember? She was fifteen. That makes it stat rape, and I have what I need to see charges pressed. The evidence is in there. Keep it. I have copies.”

“This is bullshit,” he says. “She told me she was eighteen.”

“You can explain that to the police. Six o’clock, Graham. Better pack fast.”

As I drive, I grip the steering wheel to stop my hands from shaking. I haven’t threatened Graham with that file before because it’s 50 percent bullshit. When Diana left Graham, one of the reasons was that she suspected he’d fooled around with Britnee. I’d contacted Britnee . . . who’d told me to go to hell. If I did take the case to the police, she’d deny everything.

When my phone rings, I look down to see *Private Caller*, and I’m sure it’s Graham calling my bluff. I steel myself and hit Answer on my Bluetooth.

“Detective Duncan? It’s Stefan.” A pause. “Stefan Ricci?” His voice rises, as if he’s uncertain of his own name.

“Yes?”

“I want to talk more about the, uh, victim interview. You brought her right around, and I . . .” A strained chuckle. “I have no idea how to do that. I mentioned drinks earlier, and I didn’t get a chance to ask again, so I’m asking now. I just finished my shift. Can I take you out? To talk about, uh, your interview techniques.”

I stifle a sigh. *You seem like a sweet kid, Ricci. Really you do. And I’d be more than happy to discuss interview techniques with you. But that’s not what you’re asking, is it?*

“I need to meet a friend for dinner,” I say, which is technically true.

“Oh, okay. Maybe after? Or—”

“How about coffee tomorrow? At the Grounds.”

It’s the shop right beside the station, which means this will be business only, and his voice drops as he says, “Uh, I guess so?”

“Totally up to you. If you want to, just pop by my desk.”

I sign off and turn on CBC, hoping to distract myself. It’s midway through a story about one woman’s hike across Alaska, and as I listen, I imagine myself doing that, and I’m swept away by a feeling that is so

normal for others and so rare for me—that little thing called day-dreaming.

I pull into the station's underground lot and park my Honda. It's the first car I bought, almost a decade ago, and it was well used when I got it. The guys in the department prod me to buy something newer, safer, with air bags and ABS brakes. It's not like I can't afford it. My parents left me with a seven-figure bank account. But the car runs. When it doesn't, I'll replace it.

I've gone about five steps when I realize someone's watching me from the shadows. I don't see him. Don't even hear him. I just know he's there.

I stop midstride and take a long, slow survey of my surroundings. On the return sweep, I spot an arm poking from behind a van. Then, slowly, the arm withdraws, the figure vanishing entirely.

I walk toward the van until I can see him through the window. The image is blurry, but I can tell it's a guy. Late twenties. Short, curly dark hair. Looks Italian. Also looks familiar.

"Ricci?" I say.

He drops from sight as if ducking.

"Hey!" I say. "If that's you, Ricci, this really isn't the way to get my—"

I hear a scuffle and realize, three seconds too late, that he didn't just duck—he bolted. I jog after him, but when I get to the exit, there's no sign of anyone. I shake my head and continue up to the station.

FIVE

At seven, I call Graham's hotel, and I'm told he checked out early. That's a good sign, but I still don't dare spend the night with Kurt. I really need a break, though, and Diana's going stir-crazy enough in my apartment that she agrees to a drink at Kurt's bar.

Kurt doesn't seem happy to see me. The looks he keeps shooting me suggest he has something to say, and I realize what's coming. The point of having a regular hook-up is the "regular" part. I've been too busy to hold up my end, and as nice a guy as he is, he's decided it's time to move on.

"Just a sec," I say to Diana, who's on her second lemon drop. "I'm going to talk to Kurt."

She drains her glass and wordlessly hands it to me. I take it to Kurt.

"Everything okay?" I whisper as I slide onto a bar stool.

He shrugs and makes the lemon drop. Then he says, "If I'd known you were coming by, I'd have told you not to."

I force myself to say, "Okay," as casually as I can. "So would you like me to stop coming by, then?"

"Huh?" He searches my face, frowning, and then says, "You think that's a kiss-off? Hell, no." He leans forward, his forearms on the bar, his face coming down to mine. "I'd like to think I'd do that with a little more class."

"Sorry." I made a face. "Rough week. I'm braced for the worst."

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“Well, this isn’t it.” His fingers hook mine, a discreet bit of physical contact. “When I said I’d have told you not to come by, it’s because I got a couple calls earlier. A guy phoned the bar and asked for me by a name I don’t use anymore.”

From the old days, he meant. Kurt had grown up in the kind of neighborhood where making a name for yourself almost certainly entailed jail time. He’d dropped out of high school and worked as an enforcer for a local “businessman.” After his second stint in prison, he cleaned up his act before a third strike could steal his last chance.

“Someone trying to pull you back in?” I ask.

“Dunno. Can’t imagine why. I’ve been out too long, but maybe someone got my name, figured I might be tired of the straight life, looking to make some fast money. I said I don’t know anyone who goes by that name anymore. Hour later, I get the same call to my cell. I delivered the same message. That’s why I was going to suggest you stay away for a few days. Give me time to sort this. I don’t want you getting involved.”

“I’m a cop. I can handle it.”

“Right. You’re a cop . . . which is why we’ve been keeping this on the down-low.” He casts a meaningful glance over at a table of detectives in the corner. “You don’t need the bullshit of dating an ex-con. I get that.”

“Umm, no,” I say. “If I’m discreet, it’s because I’m *always* discreet. I save my energy for *private* displays of affection.”

His grin sparks then. “Which I totally appreciate.”

“Glad to hear it. However, if you want, I could make an exception right now.”

I reach and wrap my hand in his shirt. He grins but shakes his head and jerks his chin toward the back hall. I lead him into the single-occupancy ladies’ room and show him how much I’ve missed him. It doesn’t go beyond kissing, though. A quickie in the bathroom isn’t our style. Given that he might not want me coming by for a while, though, I consider making an exception. When I tell him this, he chuckles.

“If you’re okay dealing with my shit, you can come by any time you like.”

He leans into me. I'm sitting on the counter, my legs around him, and he presses closer, murmuring, "No pressure, but . . . what are my chances for tomorrow?"

"About fifty-fifty. Diana—"

He cuts me off with a kiss, a deep one that makes me temporarily forget what we were talking about.

"Your friend's having trouble," he says. "She comes first. But if you *can* get away tomorrow, I promise I'll take your mind off that . . . and everything else that's bugging you. I'd like your phone number, though. Again, not pushing, but I should have it in case there's a problem."

I'm about to ask if he lost my number . . . and then realize I never gave it. We've been seeing each other for six months, and I never got around to that. Shit. I pull out my phone. "Give me yours."

"Um, pretty sure I did already. Twice."

The first night I came by, with some guys from work, Kurt left his number on my napkin. I hadn't kept it. I returned a week later, though, and he gave it to me again after I spent the night. At the time, I still hadn't been prepared to save it, and then . . . well . . .

When I'm slow to answer, he shakes his head and rattles it off. I text him my cell number, work number, and home address. His phone buzzes in his back pocket. When he reads the message, he grins like I've handed him the keys to my apartment, my car, and my safe-deposit box.

I see that grin, and I feel a prickle of guilt. I tell myself we keep things casual by mutual agreement. We both have busy, complicated lives. If he doesn't get annoyed when I don't make contact for a week, that only proves he feels the same way I do.

Or that he's a sweetheart of a guy who's taking what he can get. What I can give.

"About Diana," I say as I slide off the counter. "It's an ex who hasn't accepted that he's an ex. He's been quiet for months, but he made contact again yesterday. That's why I had to take off last night. She told me while we were here."

"This guy have a name?" Kurt doesn't actually flex his biceps—he'd never be so trite—but he shifts, muscles bunching, telling me exactly what he has in mind.

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“Tempting . . .,” I murmur.

“Just give me a name. He doesn’t understand it’s over? I can drive home the message.”

“I bet you could. And after dealing with this asshole for years, I’d almost pay to watch.”

“Oh, you wouldn’t have to pay.” A devilish grin. “Not in cash, anyway.”

“You have no idea how much I’d like that. The problem is that it would only piss him off, and he’d take it out on her. I’m working on another resolution.”

“All right. But if you need muscle for the job, you now have my number. Day or night, I’ll be there.”

I’m back at the table. I expect Diana to comment, but she barely seems to have noticed I left. When I deposit her third lemon drop, she reaches for it as if it’s been there all along. After a sip, she says, “Graham called this afternoon. He said he had to fly back early and wouldn’t be able to do dinner. Not that I’d agreed to dinner . . .”

She stares across the room, her eyes unfocused.

“That’s good, right?” I say tentatively. “That he left?”

She blinks hard before forcing a humorless laugh. “Yes, sorry. Did that sound like regret? Absolutely not. I was just thinking . . .” She turns to me. “Is it ever going to end, Casey? He only has to call, and I’m in lockdown again. Do you know what I did today? Checked my life insurance. I wanted to be sure it was paid up so you wouldn’t be on the hook if anything happened. Can you believe I even thought that? Me? Miss Happy-Go-Lucky?” Her fingers tighten on the glass. “Not so happy these days. Definitely not so lucky.”

“How about a vacation?” I ask. “God knows I’ve got a shitload of time banked.”

She nods, absently, and I struggle to think of “fun” things to do, but it’s like asking a pastry chef to fix a broken carburetor. My idea of a holiday is the guy behind the bar.

“I keep thinking about this place,” she blurts out. “And don’t laugh,

okay? Because I know it sounds crazy, and maybe it just proves how desperate I am. But in my therapy group, there's this woman I have coffee with, and we talk about our escape plans, what we'd do if things got too bad. She has a place she'd go."

"A cabin or something?"

"No, a town. For people who need to disappear. A place where no one can find them."

"Like an underground railway for abuse victims?"

"For anyone in trouble. It's an entire town of people who've disappeared."

I shake my head. "I'm sorry, Di, but that sounds like a classic urban legend. Think about it. An invisible town? In today's world, you're never really off the grid. How would a place like that work? The economy, the security"

"I'm not saying I believe in it. The point is that it proves how far I've fallen, Case. I can't stop thinking about it. Obsessing over it. Telling myself maybe, just maybe, it could be real."

"It isn't," I say. "Now, if you want to talk real strategies and escape plans, we can do that. But no fantasy bullshit. It's a real problem; it needs a real solution."

SIX

Everything goes fine the next day. Ricci stops by and takes me up on that offer of coffee, and he's all business. I don't mention the parking garage. If it was him, he must have just been trying to work up the nerve to ask for a drink again and changed his mind.

As for Graham, all is silent. I insist on Diana spending another night at my place, but I don't see the need to stay with her.

When I walk into the bar that night, Kurt's washing glasses. He squints against the dim lighting to be sure it's me. Then he smiles, puts down the glass, and has a shot of tequila poured before I reach the bar.

He doesn't say anything. I down the shot and let him pour another. Someone hails him from across the room, and he slings the dish towel over his shoulder and walks off, leaving me to take my second shot, slower now, as the burn takes hold.

We barely exchange a dozen words over the next hour. Usually, if I'm here without Diana, we talk. How's work? How's life? Did you see the forecast calls for rain all week? Yep, deep conversation. That's no reflection on Kurt. He's joked that we only have one thing in common: I arrest people, and he's been arrested.

Tonight he can tell I'm not in the mood for chatter, and he takes no offense at that, letting me sip my tequila in silence.

The bar should close at two. Kurt shuts it down at one. The only remaining patrons are too drunk to check their watches. I doubt any of them even own one. He scoots them out the door with a cardboard cup of coffee and a good night. He doesn't bother telling them not to drive. There's little danger of them owning vehicles, either.

By the time he comes back, I have the tables cleared and I'm washing glasses. He nods his thanks and finishes cashing out. He's supposed to make the deposit tonight. He'll get it later. No one's going to break into his apartment for a few hundred bucks. Not when the last guy who jumped him spent a week recuperating in hospital.

He's done first and takes the dishrag from me to finish up. I wait. He tosses the rag in the sink, and I follow him into the back, where stairs lead up to his apartment.

It's a tiny place, half the size of mine. Kurt has two jobs and an ex-girlfriend with a five-year-old son. His son. His responsibility. Not that he plays any role in his child's life. He's just the ATM. His ex has decided her new husband is "Daddy." Kurt still insists on paying child support, even if it means working two shitty jobs. He's also saving money. Saving it for what? *No fucking idea*, he said when I asked. I guess we have that in common, too.

He's locking the door as I walk into the living room. I hear him follow me, but he doesn't say a word, just stands behind me as I stare out the window.

"Casey?"

I turn. He doesn't move. He's trying to gauge my mood, whether I've changed my mind about staying. I unbutton my shirt, and he smiles, staying where he is, watching. I left my bra off when I changed to come over, and as my shirt falls open, he sucks in breath. I start toward him.

"You are fucking gorgeous, you know that?" he says.

"Considering what I'm here for, I do believe you're obligated to say that."

"Nope. You're gorgeous, Detective Duncan. Also? Shit at taking compliments."

I laugh, and he crosses the floor to scoop me up in a kiss.

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We're in his bed, entwined in the sheets—or what remains of them, most pushed onto the floor.

He leans over to kiss me. “Any chance you're staying the night?”

“Planning to.”

“Good.” He squeezes my hip as he slides from bed. “I need to make that bank deposit. You know the drill.” As an ex-con, he doesn't dare keep it in his apartment overnight. “But I'll be quick. You want me to stop at the diner?”

I smile up at him, and he says, “Dumb question. Burger and rings and a Diet Coke. Though I don't quite get the point of the diet pop.”

“Balance.”

He laughs, kisses me again, and heads for the other room, where we left our clothes. I watch him go. It's a helluva view. Broad, tattooed shoulders. Muscled arms. Great ass. He notices and turns, his gaze moving slowly over me.

“You keep looking at me like that,” he says, “I'm not going to make it to the bank.”

I pull my knees up in invitation. He starts toward me. I shut my legs and tug the sheet over them.

“Tease,” he growls.

“Drop off the money. Bring me onion rings. I'll show my sincere appreciation.”

“*Sincere* appreciation? I like the sound of that.”

He dresses and then leaves. When the door closes, I'm on my phone, zipping through work-related messages before I check in on Diana. I go to hit Speed Dial. Then my gaze shoots to the door.

Phone. Kurt.

Shit, I never asked if he'd had any more weird calls. And now he's taken off on a 2:30 A.M. bank run.

I'm still doing up my shirt as I fly down the stairs. I know I'm overreacting. But it's my way of admitting he's important to me, that I'm not going to get distracted with my own problems when he has his own.

I'm on the street now. Even in the daytime, it's not one of the city's safest neighborhoods. At this hour, it's unnaturally quiet, as if a pred-

ator lurks around every corner, waiting for some foolish prey to break the silence. It's a wet September night, rainwater still dripping from eaves, that plinking the only sound I hear until I catch the slow thump of Kurt's footsteps. Unhurried, deliberate footsteps, ones that tell the world he's here and doesn't give a shit if they know it.

I tear around the corner. He glances over his shoulder, still unhurried, even the pound of footfalls not enough to concern him. He's twenty feet away, under a flickering streetlight, and he frowns as he sees me.

"Everything okay?" he calls, his voice echoing in the darkness.

I slow to a walk. "I just decided I want a milk shake instead of the burger and Coke."

"You did keep my number, right?"

"I needed the exercise."

He chuckles. "I planned to give you that after I got back."

I laugh. He's waiting under the light, and I'm walking over, the gap closing. Ten feet, nine . . .

Movement flickers in the shadows. I don't wait to see what it is. I charge, yelling, "Kurt!"

He turns, it seems in slow motion. A gun rises. I shout. I hit Kurt in the side, and a gun fires, and he goes down, and I don't know which comes first—the shot or the fall. Then he's hitting the ground, and I'm twisting, and there's a guy there. The same one I saw in the parking garage. Not Ricci. A dark-haired stranger. Holding a gun on us.

"Present from Mr. Saratori," he says.

He lifts the gun. I don't think. I don't need to. I'm already in motion, grabbing his wrist and wrenching, the gun clattering onto the pavement. A hiss of surprise. The thug turns, his fist swinging. Then the gun appears, seeming to rise from the sidewalk on its own.

No, not on its own. Kurt's pointing the gun at the thug. His face is ashen. There's blood on his shirt. The guy twists, pulling me into the line of fire. And I'm thinking I'm dead. Kurt will pull the trigger before he sees I'm in the way. Except Kurt isn't me. He doesn't react like me. He just points the gun, and the guy breaks free and runs. Kurt shoots, but it's deliberately wide. A warning. *Keep running, asshole.*

I reach for the gun to go after the thug. Then I see Kurt. See his

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white face. See the blood on his shirt. The hole ripped through it, blood gushing. He slaps a hand to the hole, as if that will stop the blood.

He hands me the gun. “Get out of here.”

His voice is weak, his eyelids flickering. He’s going into shock. I push him gently down onto the sidewalk.

“You need to go—” he begins.

“He’s gone.”

“You can still—”

“No.”

I grab my phone.

“Don’t.” He wobbles to his feet. “Whatever this is, you don’t want to get involved.”

“This isn’t about you. That was for me.”

He hesitates, but then shakes his head. “I don’t care. I don’t want you getting in trouble. I know a guy. Comes by the bar. A doctor. He lost his license, but—”

“Hell, no,” I say. “I’m getting you proper medical—”

He teeters, his eyes starting to roll up. I break his fall as he topples. Then I dial 911.

SEVEN

I'm at the hospital, beside Kurt's bed. I paid to upgrade him to a private room, and he's sleeping now. He's been in and out of consciousness since the ambulance came, first from shock and blood loss, now from painkillers and exhaustion.

Leo Saratori has found me. My game of Russian roulette with therapists is over. The bullet has slid into the chamber.

Four days ago, I confessed to a new therapist; today, Saratori catches up with me. That's no coincidence. That therapist looked up the details and found my story. She told someone. Maybe she found a way to contact Saratori. Maybe she just called the police and someone figured they could get a windfall from Saratori if they told him first.

However it happened, I made a mistake. *Many* mistakes.

I'd mentioned Kurt to the therapist—no name, just that I was seeing a bartender. Saratori's thug had been stalking me and followed me to the bar. He got his boss to run Kurt's name and learned of his gang affiliations. Then he called to make sure he was talking to the right guy.

I've misjudged Leo Saratori. He knows that perfect revenge is not dumping my body in the river—it's making me live, knowing I'm responsible for my lover's death.

But Kurt is alive. Thank God, Kurt is alive.

The doctor has assured us Kurt will be fine. The bullet went

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through, did some muscle damage, missed everything critical. Forty-eight-hours-in-a-hospital serious, not permanent-injury-or-death serious.

While Kurt is sleeping, I make some calls. First to Diana to tell her to take a cab to work in the morning. She doesn't pick up. Not surprising, given it's 4 A.M. Then I phone my work and Kurt's to say we won't be in today. I'm hanging up from the last when his eyelids move. After a few flutters of indecision, his eyes open.

"Hey," he says.

"Hey."

He clears his throat. I hand him water, and he sips it, then says, "Those are some damn fine drugs. You'll need to refresh my memory: did I piss someone off or did you?"

"Me. All me. I saw the same guy tailing me the day before last, but I mistook him for another detective. It was a stupid, careless mistake." Nearly a fatal one.

He takes my hand and tugs me over, shifting on the bed to make room for me. When I resist, he says, "If I have to tackle you, I'll be stuck in this bed even longer."

I sit. He keeps hold of my hand and my gaze.

"I'm okay," he says.

"No, you're not. You were shot, and that's my fault."

"Bullshit. It's the fault of the asshole who shot me."

"That's not—"

His hand goes to my mouth. "Stop. Shit happens. Doesn't matter what side of the law you're on."

"It's not related to my job. It's from . . . before that."

"Something to do with all this?" His fingers touch a pucker on my forearm. Where bone once jutted through my skin.

He's seen the scars. The damage is impossible to cover without hiding under the sheets, and I don't hide. The first time we slept together, he didn't seem to notice the marks until afterward. He just touched one of the knife scars and said, "You okay?" and that was an invitation to explain, but when I only said I was fine, he dropped it.

I nod. "I got myself into some trouble back in college."

He tilts his head, and I know he's thinking my marks aren't like his

own physical reminders of a youth lived hard and wild: the scars, the tats, the old needle tracks. Mine suggest a single incident. A single attack.

“You paid someone back?” he says. “For doing that to you?”

I try not to look surprised that he’s hit so close to the bull’s-eye. “Something like that.”

“And it was the kind of person who remembers, the kind who won’t let you walk away and consider the score even.”

“Something like that.”

“I’m not looking for an answer, Casey. Not unless you’ve got one to give. I’m just figuring stuff out. Someone is on your ass. Someone dangerous enough to hire thugs. We’re gonna need to do some serious thinking on how to fix this.”

“I’ll handle it.”

“*We’ll* handle it. I’m not in any shape to go after anyone right now, but I will be soon. If that’s not enough, I know guys. Guys who owe me. We’ll fix this. Until then, I know you don’t like carrying your service weapon, but you need to. At all times.”

He continues on, planning, working out how to keep me safe, and I can only stare at him. This man just took a bullet for me. He’s lying in a hospital bed because I brought my crap to his doorstep. And all he’s thinking about is how he can help me fix this. What he can do for me.

“You’re really something else,” I say as he finishes.

“A good something or a bad something?”

I lean over, my lips brushing his. “An amazing something.”

“Nah, I’m just building up credits.”

“No, you’re amazing,” I say. “Also? Shit at taking compliments.”

He laughs, puts his hand on the back of my head, and pulls me down into a kiss.

As I walk up to my apartment, I’m thinking about the last few hours. A night of hell. A night of surprises, too, chief among them the shock of realizing I can still feel. And what I’m feeling right now? Pain and regret.

—-1
—0
—+1

As soon as Kurt's back on his feet, I need to cut him loose. Even the thought makes me gasp for breath. It hurts. Physically hurts. I want to be selfish and jump at his offer to help and tell myself it'll all be fine and I can have this, I can have him.

Tough shit, Duncan. You dug your grave twelve years ago, and if you give a damn about Kurt, you're not going to let him fall into that grave with you.

This is what I'm thinking when I unlock my apartment door. It's not until it swings open that I realize Diana hasn't secured the interior deadbolt. I swear under my breath. I hate treating her like a child, but sometimes . . .

The security panel flashes green. Unarmed.

I dash in to see a lamp toppled to the floor, the shade three feet away, the bulb smashed across the carpet.

There's blood on the floor.

Blood on the floor.

Oh, God. Oh, *fuckin*g God. First Kurt. Now Diana.

I never called to warn her. No, worse—I called, and when she didn't answer, I thought, *Huh, guess she's sleeping*.

The blood turns to drips in the hallway. Those drops lead into the bathroom, and there's Diana lying on the floor, bloody water everywhere, a red-streaked towel clutched in her hand. I drop beside her, my fingers going to the side of her neck.

She's breathing.

I carefully turn her onto her back. The blood is from her nose. Broken. Again. Her lip is split; more blood there. A black eye. Torn and bloodied blouse. I quickly check for holes—bullet or blade. She moans when I touch her chest, and I rip open her shirt to see bruises rising on her torso. She's breathing fine, though. No broken ribs. No lung damage.

I take out my phone to call 911. Her eye opens. One eye, the other swollen shut. One bloodshot eye that looks up at me as she whispers, "No."