

STATE OF MIND

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For Betsy and Michelle,
who held my hand throughout
this entire project and fed me
chocolate when I got discouraged.

And to Andrew,
for being patient and
for believing in me.

Trust is given freely once.

Power is for the popular. Gifts are for the principled.

CHAPTER 1

THE bomb detonated while Grier was still two blocks away.

The shockwave propelled him backward into a brick wall, and his skull cracked against the masonry. Whipping his arms up to cover his face, he hissed as a wave of heated air rushed past, leaving a thick cloud of dust and debris in its wake.

As the rumbling faded and the screaming began, Grier pounded his fist against the wall. “No!” Ten minutes, even five, would’ve made the difference. Just that small amount and he could’ve reached the bomb to disarm it. Instead he was huddled in an alley several blocks away while the blaze licked the sky, coloring the lingering dust clouds red and orange. “God damn you!” He slid down the bricks, hands pressed to his eyes. “I won’t forgive you for this,” he whispered.

People stumbled onto the sidewalk, stepping over broken glass and choking on the smell of death, too shocked to do anything but stare or weep. Soon mournful sirens joined the chorus.

One sound stood out. Grier lifted his head, squinting through the polluted air. A child stood at the alley’s entrance. A girl. She was weeping, clutching her small arms to her chest while she turned in a circle. “Mommy! Mommy!”

Grier swiped a hand over his mouth, then pushed to his feet. His sudden appearance frightened her. She cried harder, biting down on one filthy, tear-stained fist. Grier stole into her mind, calming her fears. “It’s all right. Come here,” he said, adding a subliminal suggestion to the order.

The girl came. He hefted her into his arms and stepped back into the shadows. “Don’t be afraid,” he crooned, smoothing her hair. Pliant,

she spooned against him, tiny hands clamped around the lapels of his coat. Still, she trembled. “Mommy?”

“We’ll find her,” he said, again reaching into her thoughts, convincing her it was true.

He had no idea if it was. Was her mother a victim? Had Grier’s failure killed her as well?

A voice sounded in his head. *Report*. The girl rubbed her face against his shirt, oblivious, but Grier snarled. He held her closer. *Report*, the voice demanded again. A split second later, Grier’s heightened senses crackled, and he flattened himself against the building. Four men passed the alley, their steps unhurried and purposeful, identical double-breasted trench coats swishing against their suit slacks. As they walked by, Grier brushed over their minds with a feather’s touch. He recoiled. All four were agents, searching for him.

The girl keened. “Shhh,” Grier whispered, rocking her as he watched the last man in line pause at the alley’s entrance. Grier tensed, but a moment later, the man moved on. Grier released the breath he’d been holding. The chaos was too thick, the emotions in the crowd too high. They couldn’t sense him.

Report, the voice demanded again. His Monitor was losing patience, but Grier’s threshold for deception had been destroyed as thoroughly as the bombed conference center. He set his jaw and severed the mental connection, warding his mind against further intrusion. Somewhere not too far away, his Monitor, his so-called safety net, was writhing in agony from the terminated bond.

Grier didn’t relish causing the man pain. The bond that a Gifted and his Monitor formed for their missions was intimate. They shared more than just thoughts. But the taste of betrayal was too sharp, and the air was thick with the smell of blood. The child in his arms might now be an orphan.

He pushed his hair off his face, grimacing when his hand came away caked with dust. He did the same for the girl, exposing her lax features. “Christine,” he said, reaching into her mind and plucking the name from her head. “We’re going to find your mother now.”

Dazed, eyes locked on some distant point, she nodded. Ignoring his burning lungs and churning stomach, Grier pushed off the wall and, after a thorough sweep of the street, mingled with the confused and terrified crowd.

He'd gone no more than a dozen steps when he heard the child's name.

"Christine! Christine!"

Across the street, a woman ran back and forth, hobbling on one high-heeled shoe. Her ripped blouse hung off her shoulder, exposing the white, lacy bra beneath. Tears carved jagged tracks on her soot-stained cheeks. "Christine!" she called again.

Christine lifted her head from his shoulder. "Mommy?"

Grier pushed through the crowd. The woman looked up when he stopped in front of her. "I have her," he said, steadying her when she began to sob. "I have Christine." He let the woman scoop the child out of his arms, then coaxed her to sit on the curb.

"Jacqueline," he said to the woman, touching her mind.

The woman's face relaxed under the force of his mental suggestion. Obediently, she answered, "Yes."

"Stay here. Someone will help you." He slipped his coat off and draped it over her shoulders, tucking it around Christine's small body. "You're both going to be fine."

"Okay," Jacqueline said. She hugged Christine to her chest.

After one last look, Grier walked away. Each step added to his rage and bitterness. So many lives destroyed. It should have never happened. This was the final straw. Whatever corruption was eating its way through the ranks, he needed to escape before it devoured him as well.

The Organization could go on without him. He refused to lease his talents and soul to terrorists. Escaping would be the most difficult mission he'd ever attempted, but he had motivation in abundance. There'd be no retirement party. No engraved gold watch. They'd hunt him like an animal. But he'd never expected to live past thirty-five, his

job being what it was, so that milestone, passed three years ago, was something to be proud of.

A very small, twisted something, in wake of this failure.

His defection would likely end in his death. But he would use every resource, every *gift*, at his disposal to ensure that he lived through today. Then he would focus on tomorrow. And if surviving one day at a time guaranteed his freedom, then so be it.

ALEC DEVLIN swung his car into the last available parking space on the street and turned off the engine. For a minute, he didn't move, just listened to the quiet nighttime sounds of the neighborhood. His was a city address, but the area was wealthy and secluded enough to ensure some privacy and security. People kept to themselves, which was perfect for Alec. They didn't ask questions—another perk. And because of all that, he'd been able to keep this apartment for over a year now, an unprecedented amount of time for someone like him.

The name on the mailbox read Jeremy Long. Alec bypassed it without looking inside. Even his junk mail came infrequently enough that emptying it once a month was sufficient. He was exhausted and sore and looking forward to some peace and rest. This mission had taxed him. His vision blurred as he fumbled with his keys, and he tried not to notice how his hand shook as he slid the key home.

Before crossing the threshold, he extended his senses, scanning the flat for anything unusual or out of place. The gesture was perfunctory; the stale smell was enough to convince him no one had been inside since he'd left two weeks ago. Still, he couldn't afford to let his guard down—ever—so he completed the sweep, searching for any sign of life in the four connected rooms.

He sensed nothing. Alec sighed and ran a hand through his messy hair. Turning back to the door, he engaged the lock, which was state of the art, even for the rich part of town, and strode for the bathroom, not bothering with the lights. Keen night vision helped him navigate the apartment without so much as a stubbed toe. He stripped with economical movements, then reached across the large porcelain tub to open the faucets. A glance in the mirror revealed sunken, pale cheeks,

dull blue eyes, and rumpled chestnut brown hair. Not a healthy looking reflection. Alec grimaced. More like a prisoner of war.

Gushing water slicked his hair flat as Alec stepped under the spray. He tipped his head back, letting it saturate his scalp before dipping forward and allowing the heat to soothe the bunched muscles in his shoulders. The rushing water lulled him into a light meditation. Soon, even the low-watt bulb became an annoyance, so he used his mind to extinguish it.

The mission had been long. Very long. Two agonizing weeks with a novice Monitor. Several times, Alec had been tempted to demand his removal. Carrying another person in his head for so long drained his strength.

Alec didn't begrudge the constant monitoring. After all, how many people had the pleasure of saying they loved their job? And how many could truly say they made the world a better place? In his ten years with the Organization, Alec had traveled to every corner of the globe. He used his gifts and other abilities without fear of retribution or ridicule.

He was luckier than most. So he let the monitoring slide.

The cooling water roused him from his meditation, and he twisted the taps closed. Striding naked into the bedroom, he donned a pair of lightweight sweat pants, but as he pulled a T-shirt over his head, his cell phone rang. Bad sign. Already pining for the sleep he'd lose, he flipped it open, remaining quiet until he was prompted.

"Mr. Long?" a voice asked.

"Speaking," Alec answered, cursing his hoarse voice.

"The safe house at Wallaby and Fifth. One hour." Alec pressed his lips together as he listened to the static-peppered connection fall silent. Fantastic. One fucking hour.

He slammed the phone shut and threw it onto the dresser. In his bare feet, he padded into the main room where he'd left his duffel and exchanged the sweat pants for a pair of jeans. They weren't clean, but they'd have to do. He buttoned them as he walked the few steps to the kitchen and helped himself to two potent painkillers. Stifling the migraine before it had a chance to develop was the wisest course.

He was in no shape for immediate reassignment. In a rare fit of insubordination, he decided that if they insisted on another Monitor right away, he'd refuse. The last guy they'd put in his head had rattled around like a ping-pong ball until Alec had gone nearly insane.

He needed a break. For once, the Organization was going to have to take no for an answer.

The safe house wasn't close by, but taking the car he'd brought home from his last assignment might compromise security. And getting a cab within the hour wasn't something he wanted to bank on this time of the night. He jogged the two miles across town. The night was cool and the run invigorated him. It had rained earlier and everything shimmered in the glow of the streetlights. The reflective puddles brought old memories to the surface.

Alec's pace faltered. Reminiscing about his childhood never ended well. He tried damming the flow of memories, but they washed forward, seeping through his defenses like the rivulets rushing through the storm drains at his feet.

A car raced by, showering his ankles with a curtain of dirty water, and unbidden, a memory swallowed him.

"Come on, Dixon. Don't be scared. That's it. See? There's nothing to be afraid of. The water won't hurt you."

At eight going on nine, Alec knew his family didn't love him. His grandparents doted on his cousin, Dixon, but Alec was a burden, one thrust on them late in life from a daughter they'd forgotten long ago. Dixon was their pride and joy, the golden child of their golden child. Alec quelled a surge of jealousy as he watched his grandfather coax his cousin into the murky water.

"But I can't see the bottom of it, Pap! How do I know what's in there?" Dixon resisted when his grandfather tried to ease him off the dock and into the water.

"There's nothing in the water that's going to hurt you. Trust me." As Alec watched, Dixon scrambled to his feet, out of his grandfather's reach, and up onto the shore. "Dixon!" his grandfather yelled as the skinny boy ran for the lake house. "Get back here! I won't let anything happen to you! I promise!"

He cursed as Dixon disappeared through the door. Alec opened his mouth, then shut it again. His grandfather paid him no mind, just muttered to himself and floated in the water next to the dock.

Alec gathered the tatters of his innate bravery. "I'd like to learn, Pap."

For a moment he thought his plea had gone unheard. Then his grandfather stopped floating and stood up. The water, Alec noticed, was deep enough to lap at his beefy shoulders. "Would you, now?"

Alec nodded.

"Well, then. Come on over here, and I'll teach you. Just because Dixon won't take advantage of the opportunity doesn't mean you should be left out." He slapped the water with his hand and jerked his head, urging Alec onto the dock. Alec couldn't believe his luck.

Grinning, he scampered from the grass onto the weathered wood and rushed to where his grandfather was standing. He sat on the edge of the dock and lowered his feet into the lake. The cool water felt wonderful between his toes. When he glanced up, his grandfather was staring at him. "Are you ready, Alec?"

Alec nodded and grinned even wider. His grandfather stared for another moment before reaching up and gripping Alec under the arms. Alec reached out and placed his hands on his grandfather's shoulders, bracing himself. "Don't worry. There's nothing to be scared of," his grandfather said.

Alec nodded, swallowing a nervous lump in his throat.

His grandfather's eyes narrowed. "I said don't be scared. Trust me, Alec."

Alec relaxed his grip. Then, with no warning, his grandfather ripped him from the dock, hoisted him into the air, and threw him far out into the water.

Panic didn't register until the water closed over his head. He held his breath, but his arms and legs felt leaden and unresponsive. When he bobbed to the surface a moment later, he saw his grandfather watching from a few feet away. Alec screamed and reached for him. The last thing he heard before slipping beneath the surface was laughter.

Alec clenched his teeth and forced the memory away. Fatigue was getting the better of him, tearing down his walls. He quickened his steps. The faster he got the meeting over with, the sooner he could sleep.

There was little activity on the street; the safe house sat nestled in the middle of a residential district. As soon as he turned the corner, he sensed the others. Five people were watching him: two on the street and three from surrounding buildings. The extra surveillance was troubling, but he was too well trained to be nervous.

The house at Wallaby and Fifth was an unassuming brownstone, exactly like a dozen others on the street, though its residents were anything but pedestrian. There was no bell or knocker. Alec was expected, as always, to let himself in. A subtle mental shove disengaged the lock, and he stepped into the elegant foyer.

ETHAN HUNTER, head of the Organization and mentor to the young man standing in the entryway, smiled. To an outsider, Alec would have appeared relaxed, bored even, but Ethan knew better. He could feel the coiled tension radiating from him.

“Greetings,” he called from the balcony, and Alec tilted his face up and smiled.

“I could feel you Ethan, although it was a very faint vibration. You’re getting very good at that.”

Ethan nodded as he moved around the landing and descended the stairs. “I have you to thank for such a nifty trick. I’ve worked many years to discover a viable way to conceal my presence from the Gifted. I would have never considered your approach. How did you ever discover it?”

Alec’s smile faded. “Necessity.”

Ethan frowned and tugged on his beard as he approached. “I didn’t mean to dredge up old memories.”

“It’s all right. The past is just haunting me tonight.”

“I’m sorry.”

Alec inclined his head, acknowledging the apology, and followed Ethan into a small parlor to the right of the foyer. Matching armchairs sat side by side in front of a marble mantle. As they settled themselves in front of the fire, Alec sighed.

“How are you feeling?” Ethan asked, not immune to Alec’s fatigue.

“Tired,” Alec replied with a terse smile. “I was looking forward to some unmonitored rest.”

Ethan nodded, and with a subtle gesture toward the sideboard, levitated two coffee cups to the small table between their chairs. Alec rested his chin in one hand, using the fingers to massage his temple. “Show-off,” he mumbled.

“Your gifts surpass mine in many areas. Far more important areas, I might add. Don’t be too impressed with my parlor tricks.” The two men shared a companionable laugh and for several minutes did nothing but enjoy the coffee in silence.

Surreptitiously, Ethan watched Alec. It was difficult to believe that the confident young man sitting next to him was the same shy, repressed boy he’d recruited at the age of sixteen. He stifled a sigh. He shared Alec’s exhaustion. Unlike his young friend, he wouldn’t be finding relief in slumber. His weariness ran deeper. “Trust is given freely once,” he whispered.

“And then it must be earned,” Alec finished for him.

Ethan dredged up a wan smile.

“I still remember that, you know,” Alec said. “The first time we met.” His eyes lost their focus. “I thought you were lying to me. You said you’d earn my trust.”

Ethan’s stomach turned over. “And have I?” he ventured.

“You have. But it took a while.”

“As all things of good quality do.” Another silence fell between them.

After a few minutes, Ethan spoke. “I understand there were some problems with the Monitors during this assignment.”

Alec snorted into his coffee and crossed one leg over the other. "You might say that."

"I apologize. We will work to prevent any such unpleasantness in the future."

Frowning, Alec set his cup down, then bent forward to cradle his head in his hands. Ethan set a soothing hand on his back. "Headache?"

"I've taken something," Alec's muffled voice answered. He straightened, dislodging the hand, and Ethan drew back without a word, knowing Alec could be uncomfortable with any act of kindness or comfort, even from a friend.

Alec's shoulders were stiff. The boy had something on his mind, and it was best he aired it before Ethan dropped even more unpleasantness into his lap. He waited, sipping his coffee, knowing Alec would speak up when he was ready.

He didn't have to wait long.

"Why the Monitors at all, Ethan? I'm hardly one of your borderline Gifteds. I have perfect control over my abilities. Why do you continue to insist I use one?"

Ah, the Monitors.

Not every Gifted was suited for Alec's job. Many had little more than an increased awareness. But some had the ability to form a bond with another person, allowing them to maintain contact over large distances. Dubbed "Monitors" in the Organization's early days, they were every agent's lifeline. And the eyes and ears of the Directorate.

Ethan frowned. Valid as Alec's point was, he lacked an understanding of the Organization's scope. No agent operated without a Monitor, even the most gifted of them all, and very few operatives could boast Alec's power or abilities. Only one really even came close.

Which brought him full circle to the matter, or rather *person*, at hand. But first, Alec's question deserved an answer.

It would have to be a dishonest one.

"No agent operates without a Monitor. This is for your own safety, nothing else. How would we reach you if you were in danger, needed help, and couldn't contact us through the usual channels?"

“Most of the rest of the world makes do,” Alec said through clenched teeth.

“You aren’t like the rest. You are special.” Ethan punctuated his last words by poking his thigh with a long, gnarled finger.

Alec shook his head, but didn’t answer. Ethan nodded. Subject closed.

Complaining wasn’t one of Alec’s faults. He was a model agent and an amenable Gifted. Most were difficult to work with, forever second-guessing their orders and too arrogant for their own good. Sometimes even dangerous.

“Alec, I’m afraid we have a situation.”

Alec pressed the heels of his palms against his eyes. “And that would be?”

“One of our operatives has disappeared. A Gifted. His name is Grier Crist.”

Alec sagged in his seat. He squinted at Ethan while rubbing circles on his temples again. “Can’t you track him through his Monitor?” he asked with a wry smile. Ethan ignored his sarcasm.

“No. He broke the connection with his Monitor before he disappeared.”

Alec shot up in his seat. “No. The termination must have been forced.”

“I’m afraid there was no coercion whatsoever. He did it knowing the consequences.” Ethan stroked his beard while he stared into the fire. “It was a most horrible death for his Monitor. I feel responsible,” he finished in a low voice.

Alec rose to his mentor’s defense. “It wasn’t your fault.” He leaned forward and placed his hand on Ethan’s knee. “Please don’t blame yourself.”

Surprise flickered through Ethan. Alec was not one for casual touch of any kind. Clearly, he didn’t like the thought of Ethan assuming responsibility for what had happened. Burying his guilt for taking advantage of the boy’s genuine concern, Ethan said, “I’m afraid I must accept some level of culpability for this situation. The clues were right

in front of me. I just failed to notice them for what they were, blinded as I was by my affection for this particular man.”

“Do you believe he’s turned rogue?” Alec asked. “That he’ll somehow expose us?”

“Yes, that is exactly my concern, and the primary concern of the Directorate.”

Alec blanched and fell silent.

Ethan shared his disquiet. The world at large was not the problem. The public these days showed no more interest in another purported secret government agency than they did in anything else. Rather, it was the world’s governments, and the pressure they could bring to bear on the Directorate, that worried him. Should knowledge of the Organization become public, Alec would be snatched up like a lab rat, as would all Gifteds.

And that wasn’t the only worry. If Grier deduced what was really going on....

Ethan grew sick at the thought. He couldn’t allow the Organization to fall. Not now. Not with so much at stake.

“I won’t let that happen,” Alec stated, echoing Ethan’s sentiment if not his reasoning. “What do we know about Crist?”

“Nothing. Only his last location.”

“It’ll be enough.”

CHAPTER 2

GRIER chose to hide in Manhattan. What better city to indulge his love of fine living, and it would be easy to blend in. His Sutton Place residence consisted of four interconnected rooms, but dripped opulence and came with the kind of original architectural detail that buyers craved. Grier couldn't care less about stone gargoyles and marble columns. Security was stringent, discreet, and round the clock. He'd deemed it expensive, but affordable. His time with the Organization had paid well, and his assets were secure in several different Swiss accounts.

He had no illusions that he'd be safe forever. The Organization would track him down. But it had been two weeks without a trace of pursuit, and a cold trail meant a smaller chance of discovery.

Nightmares haunted his sleep—screams and smoke and sirens—and often Grier woke with a shouted denial on his lips, drenched in sweat and sick to his stomach. He'd followed the story in the days after the bombing, morbidly fascinated with how high the number of dead climbed. He could've stopped it, but he hadn't been fast enough. That haunted him most of all.

His living room window faced Central Park. Morning coffee in hand, he caught his reflection in the glass. The absence of a Monitor had spurred a miraculous recuperation. In the space of two weeks, his stamina and acuity had skyrocketed, despite the disturbed sleep. He wondered if Ethan knew the long-term side effects of constant monitoring.

The old fool most likely did.

Grier's skin, sallow to the point of being yellow, had regained the healthy glow he'd enjoyed in his early twenties. His eyes glinted a

sharper green, his hair a richer black. Restless energy had replaced the draining fatigue that had plagued him for years.

A vague hope had taken seed: that he'd find the peace he'd spent years chasing. The hurdles were many, including a persistent idea that he didn't deserve *any* measure of serenity, not after letting so many die.

But he was going to try.

He slipped into his shoes and donned a light overcoat, one that complemented his tailored trousers and linen shirt. His had never been the boyish good looks of some, but more rakish. His cheek bones were high and prominent, his nose angular. He kept his black hair shaggy, so that it fell just over his deep-set eyes. It was a countenance that had served him well over the years, and one to which he'd grown accustomed.

He locked the apartment behind him and rode the elevator to the lobby. Greeting the doorman with a slight nod, he slipped out into the sunshine. As was his habit, he extended his senses, searching for agents or other Gifteds that may be close. He detected nothing, and with a self-satisfied smile, turned up the street toward the deli.

A figure darted by, bumping his shoulder and nearly jarring him off his feet. Grier twisted and caught himself as he stumbled.

When he straightened, the scathing comment he'd prepared died on his lips. The man who'd bumped him turned as well. He was tall, a couple inches shy of Grier's six foot three, with chestnut hair, deep blue eyes, and wide shoulders that tapered to a trim waist. A pair of blue jeans hugged his narrow hips.

When Grier realized that his eyes had strayed to the bulge beneath the faded denim, he jerked his gaze back to the man's face, assessing.

Shrewd, his instincts told him. And dangerous, they added a minute later, even as the man flashed a friendly grin. Grier frowned at the conflicting signals. Then the man winked, and heat pooled low in Grier's stomach. The other man's eyes widened. His smile deepened.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

Grier cursed his body for reacting to the husky voice.

"Fine," he answered, voice clipped. He chastised his inattention. At this rate, the Organization would have him in less than a week.

“Sorry about that,” the young man said, smile still in place, eyes dancing.

“It’s no trouble,” Grier replied.

They stood in the middle of the sidewalk, eyes locked, for several seconds. When the fire in Grier’s stomach began to sink into his cock, he brought himself up short. Unnerved by his visceral reaction, he offered a mumbled, “Good day,” before walking away.

TREPIDATION creeping up his spine, Alec watched Grier stalk off. He was the only Gifted able to mask his presence from others like him, and his talent was a closely guarded secret. He’d felt Grier’s subtle probe of the crowd when he’d exited the building, and he’d passed over Alec without pausing.

What he hadn’t expected from Grier was gracious politeness, and he certainly hadn’t been prepared for the flash of interest in his eyes. Grier’s appearance had thrown him, and Alec didn’t appreciate being caught off guard. Ethan’s grainy snapshot had been of a jaundiced and battered man, one who looked closer to fifty than thirty-eight.

While Grier’s skin was still pale, it was milky rather than yellow, with healthy spots of pink smudged across the cheekbones. His hair had been shiny and well groomed, his eyes a clear green. And although Alec had been unable to touch Grier’s mind, lest he give himself away as a Gifted, he sensed his contentment. All in all, Grier struck Alec as a good man, and he always trusted his instincts, ability-enhanced or not.

Plus, there had been the unexpected attraction. Alec was angry at himself for letting his guard slip, but there was no denying what had happened. He’d seen Grier’s eyes drift over his body, linger on his cock, and while attention like that normally left Alec cold, today it had done the complete opposite. In fact, if Grier hadn’t walked away when he had, there would have been no hiding Alec’s inappropriate reaction.

He started down the street, walking in the opposite direction as Grier, still breathless with an arousal that was as powerful as it was rare. His T-shirt brushed over his nipples, and his pants stretched tight

over his erection with every step. Ignoring the damn thing was doing no good at all. Where was his control?

Alec knew he was considered handsome. And it wasn't unusual for him to take advantage of that if the mission demanded it. But his personal life was another matter. Attraction—sexual or otherwise—was a liability. He didn't need or want romantic attachments, and the Organization frowned on them.

But this man, Grier, had been attracted to him. And Alec's interest had been just as intense. The question was: how could Alec use that to his advantage?

Conflicted, he detoured to lean against an empty storefront and squeezed his eyes shut. It made sense to report Grier's position and go home. Leave the rest to Ethan. Yet he hesitated. Grier wasn't what Alec had expected, an incongruity that boosted his curiosity.

He slipped into a small shop across from Grier's apartment building. His Monitor's presence buzzed in his head, but Alec tuned her out. He wasn't ready to make a move. He'd wait for Grier to return to his apartment, then he'd choose a course of action. Smiling at the shopkeeper, Alec began to flip through the mountains of T-shirts and key chains.

RESISTING the urge to glance over his shoulder took all the willpower Grier possessed, which embarrassed him. He pinched his lips together and plowed ahead, away from the man with the sparkling blue eyes. He pondered as he walked, for once tuning out the thoughts of the people around him to instead focus on his own.

Sexual desire was an infrequent physiological response for agents—yet another side effect of the numbing exhaustion of hosting a Monitor. Eventually the body forgot how to be aroused. But not forever, because the electric feeling that had blossomed in his stomach and sizzled through his groin had been clear enough. His mouth was dry, and there was a pleasant tingle across the top of his thighs. He replayed the incident in his head, and his reaction was no less intense, mere memory or not. His imagination went to work, stripping the sweater and jeans from the man's fit body. It had been so long since

he'd touched another person. Hell, it'd been ages since he'd *wanted* to. Now he couldn't stop thinking about it.

His cock began to fill. Sheer will kept him from becoming fully erect, but even so, he shuffled the last fifty feet to the deli .

He pushed through the swinging door and greeted the woman behind the counter. Her face lit up when she saw him. "Hi, Mr. Swann, how are you today?"

Grier returned the smile. "Fine, Carrie. Thank you. I'll take the usual." Carrie bustled away to fix his meal, while Grier took delight in the normality of the situation. He ran his palm along the counter, past the stack of paper menus, smiling when he realized it had been days since he'd consulted one.

Is this what an ordinary life felt like? Twenty years with the Organization had tainted him. He'd helped many people, and for the most part, had made the world a safer place—until recently.

His hand clenched on the edge of the counter, and a frown replaced his smile. These past months had produced one suspicious, questionable mission after another. If only he'd removed himself sooner, before the summit.

He was still deep in thought when Carrie returned with his boxed sandwich and salad. Her friendly expression dimmed when she looked at him, and Grier winced. "Thank you, Carrie," he said, forcing a smile.

"You're welcome, Mr. Swann," she replied. "You look a bit sad. Nothing's wrong, I hope?" As Grier shook his head, he reached out and brushed against her mind, alleviating her worry for him.

"I feel fine, but thank you for asking."

Her brilliant smile returned, and he left without another word. On the walk home, hating himself for his weakness, Grier searched for the blue-eyed man.

ALEC watched Grier greet his doorman and disappear into the lobby. He thrust his hands into the pockets of his jeans and leaned against the storefront. For over an hour, he studied the building, considering his

options, telling himself over and over again that their sexually charged meeting earlier would have no bearing on his plan. The decision, when he made it, felt right. He wouldn't terminate the assignment. Not yet.

Report, the voice sounded in his head for the third time that hour.

Alec chewed his bottom lip and stared at the building as he replied: *No contact yet*.

ALEC woke to a pounding headache that grew tenfold when he struggled to sit up. He swallowed the nausea and eased backward until his head was again cushioned on the pillow. Blindly, he grabbed for the bottle of pills on the nightstand and swallowed two, trying not to vomit at the bitter taste.

He cracked one eye at the digital clock by the bed and cursed. Late as hell, but he wasn't going anywhere feeling like this. He closed his eyes and waited for the painkillers to kick in. Light meditation helped the pain, but it was a struggle to reach even the shallowest state of relaxation. A small moan escaped when his cell phone began to ring, and he waited, hands plastered to the sides of his head, until it fell silent.

Tense, he waited for the inevitable. If he'd been able to cross the room without emptying the contents of his stomach, he would've answered the phone. Not that it mattered. He'd worked with this Monitor before and knew how she operated. The next call would come straight to him.

Report, Nora demanded.

"Fuck off," Alec groaned and risked rolling over to bury his head under the pillow.

Report.

"I said I'd report when I made contact, damn it, now leave me alone," he yelled, swiping at the involuntary tears of pain that leaked from his eyes. Nora took the hint, but the connection became an angry buzz in his head.

Alec threw the covers back and stumbled to the bathroom. His accommodations were neither elegant nor seedy—a standard room in a mid-priced hotel, where the chances of being noticed were slim to none.

He didn't bother with the harsh florescent lights, just whipped his hand across the spigot, blasting frigid water into the sink. Taking large handfuls, he splashed his face several times. For a long moment he stayed curled over the counter, letting the water drip from his face and hair. When he risked a glance in the mirror, his sunken, bloodshot eyes and hollow cheeks drew a scowl. He'd have no chance of holding Grier's interest looking like this.

"Fuck it all," he whispered as he turned toward the shower. Shucking his underwear, he climbed in. What on earth had possessed him not to turn the dogs loose on Grier yesterday? Whatever the reason for his poor judgment, Alec vowed not to let it happen again today.

GRIER frowned into his coffee. Choosing to eat in one of the tucked-away booths instead of going home had been a bad decision. He conducted sweep after sweep of the crowd, but couldn't detect any overt danger. Why was he so uneasy?

He drew his coat around himself and hunched over his meal. The noise was deafening, making it difficult to block the stray emotions of those seated close. When a particularly vulgar thought from the man across the aisle slithered its way into his brain, Grier gave a frustrated sigh and gathered up the remnants of his meal. He would eat at home.

"Are you finished? I was just wondering if I could join you."

Grier froze, knowing before he even looked who was standing over him. A quick glance confirmed his suspicions. "I was just leaving," he mumbled to the blue-eyed man.

"Oh, okay," the man said, but he didn't move away from the table. Ignoring the flutter in his chest, Grier took a closer look at him, noticing things he'd missed yesterday.

The man's eyes were the cobalt blue that Grier remembered, but today they looked lifeless, the creases below smudged black.

Pronounced fatigue or high levels of stress, Grier guessed. Or both. He looked like a strung-out drug addict. Or a Gifted after a long assignment. Anxious, Grier reached out with his mind, searching for the telltale signature that all Gifteds carried. He breathed an inaudible sigh of relief when he found nothing. Curiously, he couldn't penetrate the man's head. That did happen occasionally.

The young man hovered. "I don't want to impose," he said. "But there aren't any empty tables, and I thought—" He paused and licked his lips before flashing a lazy smile. "I was just looking for a bit of conversation."

That's not all you're looking for, Grier thought, but kept silent. A thrill raced through him, for once not tempered by caution. Making a split-second decision, he gestured to the empty chair, and with a grin, the blue-eyed man dropped into it. "Thanks."

Grier nodded but didn't speak. The man smiled at him through lowered lashes. "I'm Jeremy," he said, offering his hand. Grier grasped it.

"Stephen," he reciprocated with a nod of greeting. Jeremy leaned back in his chair.

"Nice to meet you," he said. He held Grier's stare for another moment before turning to flag Carrie down.

"Yes, beautiful," Carrie teased as she bustled over, "what can I get for you?"

"Whatever Stephen is having," Jeremy said. "It looks delicious." Carrie's eyes crinkled at the corners when she smirked.

"Maybe he'll let you taste his."

Grier groaned. Just what he needed—a busybody matchmaker. "I'm afraid not. He'll have to risk it."

"I'll risk it," Jeremy said with a wink.

"Coming right up, handsome."

Jeremy shook his head, watching as she slipped behind the counter to prepare his lunch. "She looks out for you," he said, taking a sip of the coffee she'd left behind.

Unnerved by his inability to read his companion, Grier was cautious with his answers. “Apparently she’s taken it upon herself to do so. I didn’t encourage it,” he added.

Jeremy tapped his fingers on the table. “No, I expect you didn’t. You don’t look the type to enjoy being fussed over.”

Grier tipped his head in agreement. Baffled by the mysterious Jeremy, he let the conversation die. Since when did gorgeous young things cruise washed-out, middle-aged men in corner delicatessens? The silence turned awkward, and Jeremy bit the inside of his cheek. “Okay, Stephen. I can tell you’re not comfortable with this.” He drained his cup and stood. “It was nice to meet you.” The smile returned as he fished out a couple of bills for the coffee. “Don’t let Carrie get too cocky,” he teased as he turned away.

Grier shot out of his chair and grabbed Jeremy’s arm. Jeremy turned in surprise, eyes wide, and Grier couldn’t blame him. He knew he was acting strangely. But he also knew something else. He wasn’t going to let the Organization dictate his happiness any longer. Damn caution to hell; it was time to start living again. “I’m sorry,” he said to Jeremy. “I’m afraid I’m a little slow off the mark. My job... never mind.” Grier loosened his grip and let his hand slide down over Jeremy’s fingers. “Please, I’d like you to stay.”

A strange look flashed in Jeremy’s eyes. “I’d like that.”

HIS act worked like a charm, though Alec felt a twinge of guilt when Grier asked him to stay. Time to remind himself what was at stake. Grier had breached protocol, sacrificed his Monitor’s life, and could be working to expose the Organization.

Still, the shadowed, lonely look in his eyes haunted Alec, and—not for the first time—he questioned the validity of his intelligence regarding Grier Crist. He itched to probe Grier’s mind, to discover once and for all what secrets he was hiding, but that would be foolhardy and dangerous. Grier would recognize him for what he was, a Gifted, and would either flee or try to kill him. Maybe both. Alec would have to

rely on his training and instincts, both of which were well developed, but not as impeccable or useful as his gifts.

He wasn't entirely comfortable playing the part of interested paramour, especially since he *was* interested. Being attracted to a murderer and a possible traitor didn't fall under the umbrella of acting like a professional. But if it got him into Grier's apartment, he'd endure.

He looked like hell. Grier had taken notice of his haggard appearance and had tried to read him. He was suspicious; no surprise there. Accepting Alec's advances, though... that hadn't been smart. All in all, Grier's erratic behavior was damn confusing.

"You started to say something about your work?" Alec asked as he settled back into his seat.

Grier shrugged one shoulder. "Yes. My employer got himself mixed up in some shady business deals. I was caught in the crossfire and left soon afterward."

Alec adopted an empathetic expression, but was more confused than ever. Grier's tone and body language didn't ring of any falsehood. He couldn't detect the slightest hint that Grier was lying.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Alec said. Grier's hands clenched into fists on his lap.

"Thank you. We were close, and I was sorry to see him so corrupted."

Carrie arrived with his food, and Alec used the distraction to mask his dismay. Was Grier referring to Ethan? There was no way to know for sure. Time to turn the conversation to more mundane things.

"I'm new to the area," Alec said. "Perhaps you can offer some recommendations for restaurants... besides this quality establishment," he added when Carrie scowled and smacked him with her notepad. Grier laughed as she stalked away, mumbling about the fickle tastes of youngsters. Alec joined in, his amusement genuine. "What shall I do to soothe her ruffled feathers?" he asked with a chuckle.

Grier shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine." He blew across the top of the steaming coffee. "I've just met her myself."

"You're new around here too?"

Grier went stiff. "I am."

Not squirming under Grier's sharp eyes took all of Alec's formidable acting abilities. "It's nice to meet someone like me." He let the conversation lull once more. This time, it was anything but awkward.

"I live a few blocks away," Grier said in a low voice. "Perhaps we could continue our conversation there."

Straightforward. Respectful, even. Though Grier's tone left little question as to the nature of the invitation. Alec swallowed heavily when his heart rate picked up.

"I'd like that," he answered in the same quiet voice. Grier's eyes flashed with heat, and Alec caught his breath. Unnerved, he offered his hand. Grier took it, his touch more a caress than a shake, and Alec's mouth went dry. "I just need to take care of something first. Can I meet you there?"

Grier hesitated but rattled off his address. Alec squeezed his fingers, then rose and slipped out of the deli, heading in the opposite direction from Grier's building. After two blocks, he ducked into a convenience store, made his way to the back, and leaned against one of the refrigerators that lined the wall. It wasn't the best hiding place, but it would do.

The chilled glass felt wonderful so he turned and rested his forehead on it, pretending, when the owner came slinking back to investigate, that he was having trouble choosing a drink. His head was throbbing again, and his cock was doing a nice job of keeping up. The headache didn't help. In fact it seemed to amplify the yearning. His arousal took on a painful edge. Groaning, he rubbed his temples. A few minutes to gather himself, that was all he needed.

The owner leaned around the end of the aisle. "Either buy something or get out," he yelled. "This ain't a hotel."

"You have atrocious manners," Alec mumbled. He turned his head, sliding his cheek along the condensation-coated glass. "Fuck off." Adding a hint of mental suggestion to his words did the trick. The owner blinked once and nodded.

“Right,” he said as he turned away, scratching at the stained T-shirt stretched over his belly. “I’ll just fuck off.”

If only everything were so easy. In a fit of frustration, Alec struck the glass with his fist. The cans inside rattled. Where was his objectivity? His professional detachment? The evidence didn’t lie: Grier was dangerous. So why the hell did Alec want to trust him?

And why, he wondered, turning his other cheek against the glass, was he having such a physical reaction to the man. He couldn’t remember the last time that had happened. Intimacy—sex—had never ruled him before. No accounting for the tingle of anticipation in his chest then. He punched the glass again.

Report.

Bristling, Alec answered—*Have made contact, stand by*—then waited. There was no chance that would satisfy Nora.

What is your position and the position of the target?

Alec pursed his lips. For some reason, he took exception to Grier being called “the target.” *Will update in two hours*, he sent. Nora’s response was immediate and angry.

Report your position and stand down.

“To hell with that,” Alec murmured. *I’ll report in two hours*. He punctuated his words with a forceful mental shove, hoping Nora took the hint. He’d hate to have to resort to other measures. He didn’t enjoy causing his Monitors any pain, but he couldn’t risk being interrupted while with Grier. Braced for Nora’s backlash, he was amazed when the link stayed quiet.

Alec pushed off the bank of coolers and ran his fingers through his hair. As he reached the front of the store, he caught his reflection in the window and shook his head. What *did* Grier see in him? Alec paused and did his best to tame his wild mass of hair. Good thing the disheveled look was in. Though there was still the matter of his tired eyes and too-thin frame. Shrugging, he left the store and headed north.

If Grier found him attractive despite his faults, who was he to argue?

“AN UPDATE, Ms. Picket?”

Nora jumped, upsetting the glass she'd been holding, and icy water spilled over her notes and into her lap. Ethan snatched some tissues from a nearby desk and handed them over. Nora grunted a thanks as she mopped up the worst of the mess.

“I didn't mean to startle you.”

“That's all right. It's my fault. I was preoccupied with Alec.” Nora tossed the damp tissues into the trashcan and gestured for Ethan to sit. He glanced around, then pulled a chair from the suite's kitchen area and joined her. Their hotel wasn't anything special, but it beat trying to monitor Alec from the back of a van. Ethan watched Nora pluck at her damp jeans and straighten her glasses. She wouldn't meet his eyes.

“Bad news, I take it? Alec hasn't found him?” Nora's pause put Ethan on guard. “Ms. Picket?”

“There has been contact.” Nora stretched the words out, pulling at the thick braid of hair hanging over her shoulder.

“But?” Ethan prompted, miffed at having to pry the information from her.

“He refused to report his position, sir.”

Ethan frowned and sat back in his chair. Not one to rush to judgment, he pondered before he spoke. Nora was an experienced Monitor, familiar with the protocol of such a situation. She would've pushed Alec for details. The fact that Alec had refused was worrisome.

“I can try to re-establish contact,” Nora offered. Ethan sensed her hesitation.

“Did he hurt you?”

“No, sir,” Nora insisted. “Not really. Just a small sting. The situation is evolving quickly, and he needed privacy.”

The situation. Leave it to Nora to euphemize the current disaster. She was far too professional to ask why Alec was tracking Grier Crist, one of the Organization's best assets.

“Should I inform the Directorate?”

Ethan refocused on Nora. “Why would you do that, Ms. Picket?”

Nora faltered. “I just thought....”

“Am I not a member of the Directorate?”

“Yes, sir. You are,” Nora confirmed in a shaky voice, drawing into herself. She reminded Ethan of a church mouse.

“Do I not, in fact, *head* the Directorate and the Organization?”

“You do, sir. I—”

Ethan cut her off with a gesture. “I understand your concern. Rest assured, the situation is well in hand.”

“Yes sir.”

She fell silent, for which Ethan was thankful. He had little tolerance for curiosity or insubordination at the moment, and removing Nora would make an unstable situation more volatile.

They were all walking a thin enough tightrope as it was.

CHAPTER 3

GRIER had paved his way; the doorman didn't give Alec a second glance. *John Shipton*, his small, tasteful nametag said. Alec paused just inside the wide glass doors and waited until he had John's attention.

"I'm sorry," Alec said. "But I'm supposed to meet Mr. Swann—"

"Yes, he's expecting you." John clasped his hands behind his back, his vague smile just twisted enough to indicate he knew the precise reason for Alec's visit.

"I'm afraid I've forgotten the apartment number," Alec admitted in a rush. Then, while John chuckled, Alec reached into his mind and planted a suggestion. He needed to drop his guard for a moment to do so and prayed Grier was too preoccupied to notice the sudden presence of a Gifted so close by. He planted the thought and retreated, raising his mental shields once more. John blinked and stared at Alec for a moment before his eyes cleared.

"No problem, young man. It's apartment 1508."

Alec smiled his thanks and headed toward the elevator. It was two-thirty. If all went as planned, he had fifteen minutes before John called. He'd better make the most of it.

It always paid to plan for a hasty retreat, so once on the fifteenth floor, Alec made a circuit of the halls, memorizing the location of the fire exits. Aware of how much time was passing, he returned to Grier's apartment and knocked twice. Footsteps approached, but the door never opened. Alec frowned. Grier was standing right on the other side, he didn't need his gifts to know that. Had he changed his mind?

Alec's window of opportunity was slipping away. He lifted his hand to knock again when the door swung open.

Show time. Alec grinned, and Grier offered a small smile in return. "Come in."

"Thanks." He brushed against Grier as he passed into the room. "Very nice." Which was an understatement. Sunlight poured in through the giant picture window. Beyond, Central Park spread out in a patchwork of green and blue. The furniture was dark, a rich cherry. Alec ran his hand over the curved sofa back, admiring how its patterned brocade felt silk-soft under his fingers. A trio of bold, minimalist prints lined the far wall—the slashes of red and black complementing the chocolate brown upholstery. "I'm impressed."

"Thank you," Grier answered. "Would you like a drink?"

"Yeah. That'd be great." Alec waited for Grier to move into the kitchen before circling the large room. "You have impeccable taste," Alec remarked as he skimmed the titles nestled in the bookcase.

"I can't take the credit," came a voice from over Alec's shoulder. Only his extensive training stopped Alec from jumping out of his skin. Grier had been busy in the kitchen five seconds ago.

"You used a designer?" Alec asked, doing his best to cover his surprise. Grier's sly smile indicated he'd failed.

"I rented it already furnished. The style appealed to me, and I wasn't sure how long I would be here, hence my reluctance to purchase furniture of my own."

Alec took the proffered glass of scotch. "I imagine this is very close to how you would've done it yourself."

"And why would you think that?" Grier watched Alec as he took a small sip of his drink.

Alec shrugged. "Just a feeling." He cocked his head to the side. "It suits you."

Grier watched Alec for another moment, a hint of the burn Alec had seen earlier flaring in his eyes. "Shall we sit?"

Alec wet his lips and Grier followed the furtive movement with his eyes. "Sure," Alec said, a little breathless. He took a seat on the long couch, cursing himself the whole time. His shortness of breath hadn't been feigned. Eight minutes to go. He could hold Grier off that

long—he just wasn't sure he wanted to. Alec wrapped both hands around his tumbler as Grier joined him.

"That's eighteen-year-old scotch. I hope you're able to appreciate it," Grier said, and Alec bit back a snort of laughter.

"Well, that was subtle. I'm twenty-six, in answer to your question, and I always appreciate a good single malt."

Grier made a wry face. "Not as bad as I thought. I still feel like a dirty old man."

"You don't look a day over thirty-five," Alec said. A phenomenon he was still puzzling over.

Grier raised an eyebrow. "Thirty-eight."

Another truth. As far as he could tell, Grier hadn't yet lied to him. "You age well."

Grier downed the last of his scotch. "There's no need to pay me compliments." *Since that's not what you're here for*, he left unsaid.

"I'll try to restrain myself."

Grier's eyes bored into him. Scrutiny normally made Alec twitchy, even if he hid it well, but Grier's attentions were producing an altogether different reaction. Unfamiliar, but undeniable. He didn't protest when Grier shifted closer.

JOHN whistled as he waved at the occasional passer-by, greeting those he knew and even those he didn't. He studied people—not an unusual hobby considering his job—but fifteen years in his position had made him a connoisseur. Figuring them out wasn't all that hard. Take Mr. Swann, for instance. Quiet and respectful, well bred, and wealthy. John could always smell money. Mr. Swann reeked of it.

As for Mr. Swann's guest... the handsome, bedraggled young man hadn't been selling magazine subscriptions. No matter. John had perfected discretion the same time his special sense of smell had kicked in. And the boy had seemed a nice enough sort. He expected Mr. Swann to have as good a taste in men as he had in every other aspect of his life. Class with a capital C, that was Mr. Swann.

The giant clock on the building across the street caught his eye. Two-forty. John's eyes went unfocused, and he blinked. Abandoning his post, he pushed through the tall glass doors and strode across the marble floor to the security station nestled behind the elevators. Once inside, he located the fire warning system for unit 1508 and triggered the silent alarm. Closing and locking the door behind him, he returned to his accustomed place just outside the building. As soon as he stepped outside, a welcoming smile replaced his blank stare.

John whistled and waved.

Two minutes later, the phone on his desk, located just inside the doors, began to ring.

"YOU mentioned you were new in town, Jeremy. Was it family that brought you here?"

Two minutes left until John's call. Grier had drawn closer, his intentions clear. Which was why, when he sat back and asked about "Jeremy's" family, Alec was taken aback. He recovered, but not fast enough for Grier's shrewd eyes. "Have I touched on too personal a subject?"

You have no idea, Alec thought. "No, it's fine. My parents died when I was very young. My grandparents raised me. But we were never close. I have no family to speak of."

"I'm sorry," Grier said. He placed his hand on Alec's knee. "Have we talked enough?"

One minute left. "Yeah," Alec whispered.

Grier pressed close and curled one hand around Alec's neck. "So long," he whispered. "I'd forgotten."

Alec had forgotten too. His sexual experiences were few and far in the past, but he didn't remember anything like this. What harm to give in just once? Just for a moment. He turned his face toward Grier, who didn't hesitate, but leaned forward.

His lips skimmed over Alec's skin, tongue gliding to one edge of Alec's mouth and back before diving between his lips. Alec moaned,

melting against Grier's chest when he gathered him close. Grier's tongue swirled around his own before retreating, only to return, more forceful than before.

Alec panted, dizzy and unable to catch his breath. Waves of pleasure arrowed through his body, sinking to his toes before rushing back to settle between his legs. One of Grier's fingers brushed his nipple, and Alec gasped, sucking the breath from Grier's mouth. Grier stole it right back.

"Stephen...." The name escaped before Alec could stop it. He didn't register the movement, but suddenly he was on his back, pressed into the cushions, Grier leaning over him, one thigh pressed between Alec's own. Groaning, Alec arched into the delicious pressure, rubbing his cock against Grier's leg wantonly.

Grier grunted, grounding his thigh against Alec's prick with enough force to make Alec whimper. "That's right," Grier hissed. With his free hand, he ripped at the button of his trousers.

The telephone rang. Grier stopped, his hands trembling on his zipper. The second the loud trilling registered, Alec drew back. Addled with lust, he realized only belatedly who the call was from.

John.

Grier studied the phone, and Alec took the opportunity to slither out from under him. He scooted across the couch. "Well that killed the mood."

"I never get calls," Grier said, voice pensive.

"Whoever it is has horrible timing," Alec grumbled. "Tell them to call back." Gathering his tattered self-control around him, he reclined against the cushion and spread his legs. His cock pressed painfully against his jeans; his arousal couldn't be more obvious. Fortunately, Grier had lost interest in his seduction.

"I never get calls," Grier repeated before reaching over the back of the sofa and plucking the receiver from its cradle. "Yes?"

Alec watched and waited, not even pretending to be uninterested in the conversation. He could make out bits and pieces, John's voice rising and falling as he tried to placate his tenant. "I can assure you, John," Grier said, "there's nothing on fire up here."

“Speak for yourself,” Alec cut in.

Grier shot him a look. “Yes, fine. Fine. I’ll be right down. No, I’ll come down.” He punched the off button with more force than necessary. “I have to go downstairs. There’s a maintenance issue.”

Alec pouted. “Can I take a rain check?”

“No.” Grier stood, adjusting himself with a grimace. “Stay. I’ll be back shortly.” Rather than hurrying out, though, he hovered over Alec, a small frown on his lips. “Make yourself comfortable,” he murmured, then slipped out the door, shutting it behind him.

Alec waited one minute before he rose from the couch. The desk in the living room was a showpiece; it held nothing but stationery. He moved on. Grier’s bedroom was at the end of the hall, the door closed but unlocked. Slipping inside, Alec zeroed in on the laptop computer humming on the dresser. Knowing his time was limited, he swiped his finger over the mouse pad, unsurprised when a password prompt appeared. Letting his shielding slide, he rested his fingers on the keyboard, and a few moments later saw the keystrokes in his mind.

He’d managed to type four numbers before Grier’s fist slammed into his side, knocking him into the dresser. The laptop crashed to the floor. Alec rolled and rose agilely to his feet, taking in the situation as he nursed his bruised ribs. Grier was back, anger pouring off of him in great waves. He rounded on Alec, snarling, and began stalking him across the room.

“Stupid, arrogant boy!” he seethed. “Did you think you could fool me with that absurd ruse? I was playing this game before you knew what your cock was for.”

Not the best time to remind Grier just how he’d been deceived. Alec feinted left, but before he could launch himself across the bed, a blinding pain sliced through his head. He swore. Pushing it aside, he struck out in a similar fashion.

A howl of agony was his reward. Alec opened his mind, revealing himself as a Gifted, and struck out again. Grier was expecting it this time, though, and Alec’s attack failed. Their mental battle was a deadlock. Time for a more roundabout strategy.

Alec reached out with his mind, squeezed, and the light fixture above Grier shattered. Grier ducked his face against the falling glass,

and Alec jumped, tackling him onto the bed. The momentum carried them to the floor where they struggled fiercely.

Grier rolled them as soon as they landed and wrapped his hands around Alec's neck. Alec had a split second to be impressed by Grier's strength and combat skills before his airway was cut off. Fighting back panic, he fit his own arms between Grier's and pushed. The viselike grip around his throat loosened. With a Herculean effort, Alec broke Grier's hold and threw him off. Coughing and wheezing, he scrambled backward, but Grier was already up and advancing again.

Alec gathered his strength and pushed outward with his mind. Grier flew back against the wall, smacking it with a loud crack, and moaning, sank to the floor.

Alec stumbled to his feet, keeping an eye on the dazed agent. How could he have been so wrong about Grier? The bastard would have choked him to death without a second thought. Alec had sensed it. The man was a killer.

He stumbled a few feet closer, weaving as much from the physical fight as from the mental. He opened his link with Nora, knowing it was past time to report his location.

Alec?

Here.

Report.

Grier opened his eyes. They were dazed and unfocused. "Do yourself a favor, Crist," Alec spat. "Stay down."

Alec?

Before he could answer, something hard and heavy collided with the back of his head. Everything went black.

AS THE other man dropped to the floor, Grier struggled to his feet. His ears rang. He tasted copper and realized he'd bitten his tongue when he hit the wall. Spitting the blood onto the carpet, he clutched the doorframe until his dizziness passed. Maybe Ethan had a point about Monitors, and there was an excellent reason for having one's libido

repressed. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been almost killed for thinking with his dick.

He stumbled across the room, kicking away the glass ashtray he'd sent flying at the boy's head. There was an impressive pool of blood accumulating on the carpet beneath.

Lying on the floor dazed, knowing "Jeremy" was a Gifted and most likely bonded with a Monitor, Grier had wielded the opportunistic weapon with more force than necessary. Now that the immediate danger had passed, he cursed his panic. He refused to saddle his conscience with another death. Besides, he had some questions for Jeremy, in particular, how the hell he'd hidden his presence from Grier.

Time was short; the Organization might already be en route. Grier hoisted Jeremy up by his armpits and flipped him over. Hastily, he assessed the damage, noting the cut was shallow, just very bloody. He held his hand over the jagged tear in the skin, focused his power, and prompted the cut to close. It was an ugly job, temporary at best. Healing wasn't his dominant gift. But it would have to do.

Next, he gathered what he dared not leave behind: the computer and his stash of forged identity papers. The majority of his assets were safe in Swiss accounts. The money tied up in the apartment was lost, but he was leaving on his own two feet, not in a body bag. More than an even trade.

He didn't give the pool of blood soaking into the carpet a passing thought. Let Ethan deal with it; he specialized in cover-ups and deception, after all. No one in New York would know what happened to Stephen Swann. And no one would miss Blue-Eyes either; Jeremy's story had been an utter fabrication. He was a Gifted, an agent for the Organization.

Grier packed his duffel with his computer and other necessities. Then, grimacing at the still-tacky blood, he threw the kid over his shoulder in a fireman's carry and fled the apartment. He encountered two people on the way to his car, one in the hall and one in the elevator. It was simple enough to cloud their minds so that neither saw him carrying a bloodied man, obviously hurt, maybe dead, over his shoulder. One even wished him a pleasant afternoon as she exited the elevator at the lobby.

Once at his vehicle, Grier dumped Jeremy in the trunk, then probed his mind, planting a suggestion that he remain asleep. Sooner or later, he'd wake, but by then Grier would be ready and waiting.

He swung into the front seat and drove up and out of the garage, joining the afternoon traffic snarl.

“SIR! Sir!”

Nora's frantic call pulled Ethan from his nap. Alarmed, he rushed to her side. “What's happened?”

“He was there, for a moment. He was hurt, I think. Then nothing.” Nora's voice fell to a whisper on the last word, and Ethan's apprehension thickened.

“But you can still sense him?”

“Barely.”

“Barely is better than not at all, Nora,” Ethan reminded her.

There was little comfort in his statement, he knew. Grim, he clasped the young Monitor on the shoulder. Nora flinched at the sudden touch, then relaxed with a shaky sigh. Her reaction gave Ethan pause. Events had been spiraling out of control for many months now, and the number of people he trusted grew smaller every day. It was a dirty game, a dirty business, and he'd made harsh choices. Not just with Alec. With Grier as well.

He'd ignore her jumpiness. For now. “Alert me if there's the slightest change.”

Nora nodded, averting her eyes, and Ethan frowned. He left her to her job and made his way back to the bedroom. Meditation would help him focus; he'd need all his faculties when whatever was going on with Alec and Grier came to a head.

The bed was hard and the light from the hall too bright. Altering the firmness of the mattress was beyond his control, but the lights were another matter. Ethan made a curt gesture with his hand and the door swung shut. Total darkness descended. He closed his eyes, recalling the first time he'd spoken with Alec. Not the first time he'd seen him. Not

by a long shot. But the first time he'd approached him about his gifts, his future, and the Organization.

The boy looked pitiful eating alone while a dozen other teenagers frolicked a few tables away. At sixteen, Alec was pale and lanky. An underachiever. A troublemaker. Ethan knew him inside and out. His family ostracized him. His grandfather called him a freak. Alec believed the entire world was against him, but nothing could be further from the truth.

"You want to sit here?" Alec sneered at him. "Are you crazy?"

"Yes," Ethan answered. "I'm not crazy, but I would like to speak with you, if I may."

Alec glanced around the small pizzeria before frowning at Ethan. "I guess," he mumbled.

When Ethan slid into the booth across from him, Alec dropped his eyes. "What do you want?"

"To talk, Alec."

Alec's head shot up. "How do you know my name?"

Ethan smiled. "I've been watching you," he admitted. He didn't mention for how long. If all went as he hoped, that fact would come to light soon enough.

"Why?"

"Because you're special."

Alec glared at Ethan through a messy fringe of brown hair. "I'm not special," he whispered.

Ethan leaned forward. "You are." And with that, he opened his mind and enveloped Alec in a blanket of comfort and companionship. Alec gasped.

"You can do it too?"

Ethan nodded. "You're not alone, Alec," he said, "and you are very, very special."

"I don't understand."

“There are many like you. Extraordinary people with extraordinary gifts, just like yours. Would you like me to tell you about them?”

Alec bit his bottom lip and stayed silent. When he gathered the courage to look Ethan in the eye, the older man smiled. He reached across the table and covered Alec’s hand with his own. “You have nothing to fear from me. I promise—I will never lie to you.”

Alec yanked his hand away. “We’ll see.”

“We will.” Ethan removed a card from his pocket and slid it across the table. With the exception of his phone number, it was blank. “Trust is given freely once. And must be earned ever after.”

Alec cocked his head at the cryptic words. “What?”

“I know you’ve been hurt. I don’t expect you to trust me. Not right away. I am prepared to earn your loyalty. And your friendship,” Ethan added. His smile broadened. “I’m a patient man.”

Ten years later, he had Alec’s trust and his friendship. But for how long? Ethan scrubbed his hands over his face. If Alec ever discovered the depth of his deception, he’d lose the boy for good.

He’d wanted to save the Organization. Now he wondered if his actions would be the death of it. If they could, in fact, mean the death of them all.

CHAPTER 4

IT TOOK Grier just over an hour to cross New Jersey. He followed the interstate until the highway became a small two-lane country road. It ended in a sleepy community, a pretentious little town where the wealthy of Manhattan spent their weekends, complete with cobbled streets and a Starbucks on every corner. Storefronts mimicking those of Colonial times were framed by gas lamp-lined sidewalks. A lake stretched the length of the valley below, its shores dotted with colorful boathouses.

Grier was too furious to appreciate any of it. He'd almost been caught, and by an agent whose experience couldn't possibly match his own. Even more infuriating, despite everything, he was still fascinated with Jeremy, or whatever his real name was. The boy had been able to hide his gifts, and Grier wanted that power for himself.

His survival depended on it.

The lakefront cottage looked as it had in the pictures from the real estate agent. Grier had rented it sight unseen the day he'd arrived in New York, anticipating the need for a hasty escape at some point. Musty with the smell of the lake, its stark plaster walls and crisscrossing oak ceiling beams lent it an abandoned feel. A half-dozen sturdy pieces of furniture left behind by the previous tenant dotted the living room. Grier made a hasty tour of the house, raised the heat against the late spring chill, and deposited his bag on one of the two chairs in the dining area.

When Jeremy woke, Grier would tell him the truth—that would be a novel experience for the lad. If that failed, he'd try to sway him in other ways. He prayed Jeremy wasn't one of the Organization's puppets, so loyal to Ethan that he wouldn't accept reason. Grier didn't want to kill him.

More exhausted by the second, he fumbled in his pocket for his cell phone. Time to call in some favors. Loathe as he was to involve anyone else, he doubted Nicolas would mind; he took a perverse amount of pleasure in screwing the Organization whenever the opportunity arose. As Grier dialed, he gave another mental nudge to his prisoner, but there was no response.

A long pause preceded any ringing—a positive sign. Nicolas was where Grier needed him, which at the moment would be anywhere outside the United States.

“Speak to me,” an aristocratic voice answered. Grier rolled his eyes.

“It’s official, Nicolas. You’ve forgotten every drop of etiquette your mother ever managed to teach you.”

“Grier!” A flurry of static burst over the line. Grier heard the rise and fall of voices, then a door being opened and closed. The voices faded, and the dull roar of the ocean replaced them. At least Nicolas was trying to give himself some privacy. Propriety wasn’t his forte.

“Grier!”

“You’ve said that.”

“Well, I’m saying it again, you idiot!”

“Nicolas, I don’t think the people next door to *me* heard you. Why not yell my name a little louder.”

Personal experience had taught Grier some hard truths over the years. Most important, and relevant to this situation, was that everything came with a price. Nicolas would want something in return for his help. His demands, though, were never unfair. And Grier trusted him.

“All right, I’ll play along,” Nicolas said, chuckling. “How are you, Gertrude?”

“I’ve had a hell of a day, Edna.”

“I prefer Anastasia.”

“I’m sure you do,” Grier replied.

More laughter crackled through the earpiece. “Remember that time—”

“I need a favor.” It was prudent to cut to the chase with Nicolas. He was as distractible as a child, and Grier couldn’t afford that at the moment. “Are you listening?”

“I’m all ears, Gertrude.”

“I need to leave the country.”

“What country are you in?”

“Don’t play coy with me. You know exactly where I am.”

EIGHTEEN hundred miles away, Nicolas braced himself against the balcony wall and squinted at the calm, blue waters of the Caribbean. Uncanny how his thoughts had been on Grier just five minutes ago. Scowling, he smoothed back his shoulder-length blond hair and flicked a speck of lint from his shirt.

Nicolas believed in three basic covenants: the easy way was always best; despite what most people thought, the best laid plans could be brought to fruition; and lastly, there *was* such a thing as coincidence. Take now, for example. “I was just thinking about you,” Nicolas admitted.

“I’m sure you were.”

“Not like that. Although you know I’m always open to such things.” He glanced over his shoulder. Inside the house, his guests partied on, oblivious to his absence. With practiced ease, he stepped out of sight between two large potted palms. “Still there?”

“It would seem so. Although I’m growing grayer by the second. Did you perhaps not hear the part of our conversation where I said I needed help? I meant *now*.”

“You’re such a prick, Grier,” Nicolas replied with genuine affection. “Listen—I know you’re in the States. Everyone knows you’re in the States, but they don’t know where. The Organization has tracked you that far, but I’ve heard nothing new since Saturday.”

“They found me.”

“Already?”

“Yes. And don’t press for details. You won’t be getting them right now. I need passage out of the country—for two people.”

Something banged against the glass door, and Nicolas peeked around the palm. Two women stood at the window, looking left and right, searching. Smirking, he drew back. He’d chosen a lime-colored silk shirt and white linen slacks that morning and blended into his hiding place beautifully. He’d almost worn black, but at the last moment something had made him choose the green—karma did adore him. “Two people?”

“I believe that’s what I said.” There was a slight pause. “Where are you?”

“St. Barts.”

“Your father?”

Nicolas flicked a frond out of his face. “He’s in Europe. You can speak freely.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure about that. Roman can sense trouble halfway around the globe.”

Nicolas took a deep breath. Coincidence or not, he planned to take advantage of the situation. He needed to pick Grier’s brain. Something was happening, and Nicolas’s father was in the middle of it. Furthermore, the Organization was involved. That was sure to interest Grier.

“I’ll get you out. But I’m bringing you here.”

“Are you mad?” Grier hissed.

“I need to talk to you.”

“I have my own problems at the moment.”

“That’s my price,” Nicolas insisted. “Safe passage for you and your tagalong. You can go anywhere you like after you stop here. And stop being such a bastard. You’ll want to hear this, trust me.”

Silence, but for static, followed his statement. Nicolas waited.

“Why is this meeting necessary?” Grier asked, all emotion absent from his voice. He sounded exhausted.

“Let’s just say your problems and my problems are related.” Nicolas paused. He needed a hook, and the truth fit the bill. “It seems my father, representing the collective Gifted *not* under Ethan’s thumb, has extended an olive branch to the Organization.”

Grier snorted. “Impossible.”

“Believe me, my friend. The massacre at the peace summit was only the beginning. My father’s in Europe, as I said. You’ll be safe here for a few hours. Then I’ll arrange for you to go anywhere you like. Do we have a deal?”

Static crackled through the line for several seconds. “We do,” Grier answered, sounding more tired than ever.

GRIER ended the call and melted back into his chair.

He was out of options. If agreeing to a play date placated Nicolas, Grier would go. Not that he believed for one second that Roman was cozying up to Ethan. Many years ago, when Nicolas had manifested as a Gifted, Ethan had tried to recruit him—to Roman’s extreme annoyance. Nicolas’s father despised the Organization. There was a history there, one Grier wasn’t privy to.

Shaking off his unease, he stood. Time to deal with the mysterious Jeremy.

He checked that the young agent was still unconscious before opening the trunk and hoisting him over his shoulder. The front door was ten steps away. Too far for Grier’s taste. Just because he couldn’t see the neighbors didn’t mean they couldn’t see him. He carried Jeremy’s limp body inside, then cast out with his mind, searching for a spike in curiosity or fear from anyone nearby. Nothing. Grier grunted in satisfaction.

He propped Jeremy up in one of the wooden chairs and secured his hands and feet. A stopgap, nothing more, but if Jeremy didn’t cooperate, the bonds would slow the boy enough that Grier could overpower him—for good this time.

After he’d fastened the plastic handcuffs, he retrieved a syringe from his bag. Barozene—it was one tool he always had on hand. Some

Gifteds, including Ethan, called him crazy. He called them short-sighted. Over the years, he'd employed the drug many times, though never quite like today.

He injected Jeremy, then retreated across the room. Now or never. He awakened the other man with a sharp mental prod.

DISQUIET plagued Alec as he woke. Groggy, he tried to stretch, but his limbs wouldn't cooperate. He jerked his arms, hissing when sharp cuffs cut into his wrists. The back of his head throbbed, and his shirt collar was tacky and clinging to his neck. He could smell blood.

"Welcome back."

Alec stopped struggling. As familiar as the voice sounded, he couldn't place it. Woozy and disoriented, he peeled his eyes open. The blurry figure across the room sharpened into a wary-looking Grier Crist.

"You hit me," Alec deduced.

Grier's arched eyebrow challenged the inanity of the accusation, but he didn't speak. Alec rolled his head, assessing the damage. The blurred vision could be blamed on the head injury, but the bitter taste on his tongue was something else altogether. Barozene.

"And drugged me."

Grier lowered himself into a chair. He crossed one leg over the other. "I called you bad names too."

Alec squinted at him. "Did you insult my mother?"

"Not that I recall."

"I'll let you live." Nausea swelled in Alec's gut. He swallowed it back with a low groan.

"How do you feel?"

"Dandy." Alec tested the cuffs at his ankles, even though the movement made the nausea worse. Bound, with his gifts impaired by the drug, he had few options. Barozene was the Organization's Achilles' heel—the one chemical that could suppress a Gifted's talents.

Every agent trained with it, and Alec knew how long an average dose would affect him.

He'd never imagined having it used against him by one of his own.

Grier seemed content to watch him suffer. Alec tuned out his smug smile. Years of training kept him calm and focused. He closed his eyes and reached for Nora. Barozene made the simple task as difficult as slogging through quicksand, but a few seconds later, he found her. It was a joyless victory. He was too drugged to communicate, and the strain kicked his headache up another several notches. An involuntary moan slipped past his lips. His roiling stomach threatened to rebel.

"Here," Grier said.

Alec opened his eyes. Grier was close, holding a tall glass of water in front of Alec's face. He considered refusing, but the promise of cool liquid pouring down his throat was impossible to resist. He opened his mouth, Grier tilted the glass to his lips, and he drank his fill. He half-expected Grier to pull back at the last second, rescind the offer, but he kept the glass to Alec's lips until he was finished.

"That was a stupid thing to do," Grier said as he backed away and set the glass on the table.

"Which part?"

"All of it. I believe I may have overestimated you. Well, your intelligence at least." Alec ground his teeth at the tone. It was easy enough to be condescending when your enemy was bound and drugged. Arrogant prick.

A wry smile proved Grier had heard his thoughts. "I was speaking of your attempt to contact your Monitor. Was the pain worth being able to fondle your security blanket for a few precious seconds?"

Alec remained silent. Grier circled behind his chair. "What's your real name?"

Alec ignored the question.

Grier leaned over his shoulder. His breath tickled Alec's ear. "I could rip it from your head, you know. But believe it or not, I don't wish to add to your already considerable headache. Now, what is your name?"

Alec considered. Grier was right, of course. He could take the information any time he wanted. It was a tiny thing—his name—but capitulating wasn't something Alec enjoyed. "Devlin."

Grier made a small sound of satisfaction. "First name?"

"Alec."

The questions ended. Grier hovered for a moment, then retreated across the room. His chair, Alec noted, was a full twenty feet away, on the other side of the archway that separated the living and dining rooms. Both areas were devoid of knick-knacks. The glass of water was the only potential weapon in sight.

Grier hadn't taken any chances.

Tired of the games and the pounding headache, Alec let his eyes fall closed. The sickness was beating down any attempt to ignore it, and he feared he'd soon lose what little he had in his stomach. His skin grew clammy. Pain slashed through him like a wild animal, clawing through his head, down his neck, then into his fingers and toes. Sweat dripped between his shoulder blades.

He heard a chair scrape. Footsteps approached. Maybe Grier was coming to put him out of his misery. He'd almost welcome it at this point.

"When were your last meds?" Grier asked, in front of him once more.

Alec fought to remember. "This morning."

"Do you have them with you?"

Did he? The pain had shattered his ability to think. "I—"

Grier's hands came to rest on the sides of his head, and Alec gasped.

"Relax. I'm not going to hurt you." Impaired by the Barozene, Alec couldn't sense the focused burst of energy Grier must have sent, but the throbbing pain retreated a half-dozen levels. Alec whimpered in relief.

"Simpleton," Grier mumbled as he backed away.

"Thank you," Alec said, confused by the kindness.

“You’re welcome. Feeling better?”

“Yes. Some.” Though if Grier was hoping to win Alec to his side with acts of mercy, he was wasting his time.

Grier took his seat. “It’s temporary. As long as you’re hosting a Monitor, the pain will come back.”

Alec shrugged. Old news.

“Why not break the connection?”

“I would never do that!” Alec shook himself, caught off guard by a man who would heal him in one second and suggest murder in the next.

Grier cocked his head. “Why ever not? She can’t help you right now. You have no idea where you are. Wouldn’t you benefit from a clearer head? Think better without the pain?”

“Not at the expense of her life!”

Grier’s eyes widened. “Alec,” he said, “it’s true that an impromptu severing of your bond can be excruciating for your Monitor. But it isn’t fatal.” He let the words sink in. “Who told you that it was?”

Alec shook his head. Grier could be lying. He *had* to be lying. The Monitor bond was intricate; it took hours to form and hours to unravel properly. Having it ripped free without warning was certain death for any Monitor. The brain couldn’t handle the stress. It shut down. Permanently. That was a fact—one of the first drilled into an agent’s head.

“I don’t believe you,” Alec said. Grier’s expression softened with sympathy, and a cold ball of dread formed in Alec’s gut.

“Just how many other misconceptions are you harboring, I wonder?” Grier asked.

Alec sucked in a breath, cursing the anger that burned through him. How was this man able to push all his buttons? His cocksure disposition, probably. Ethan had said he was arrogant.

How to sway him?

The stray thought had come from Grier. Alec kept his face blank, hiding his glee. The Barozene must be wearing off. If he could distract

Grier from that fact, he had a chance. Alec pasted on a smile. “You’re trying to get me to question myself. I won’t do it.”

Grier sat back in his chair. “Very well. Cling to your lies.” He tapped his fingers on his knee. “What is your current assignment?”

Alec clenched his jaw shut.

“The Organization’s still growing them headstrong, I see. Let me guess: Locate and report my whereabouts.”

Alec remained silent.

“Don’t bother denying it. I know I’m right. You’re a field agent, not an assassin.” Grier leaned forward in his chair. “You lack the killer instinct.”

“They weren’t going to kill you—”

“Please,” Grier interrupted, “don’t insult my intelligence. I gather your contacting me wasn’t a designated part of your mission.”

Alec dropped his eyes.

Body language, Alec. You’re giving yourself away.

Alec’s head shot up, and Grier’s eyes widened when he realized Alec had heard his thought. “Fighting through the drug already?” He pushed a hand through his hair, the first sign of frustration Alec had seen.

“It wasn’t a stipulation of the assignment to make contact with you,” Alec replied, ignoring Grier’s previous question.

“I didn’t think so.” Grier mumbled. “Then why did you?”

“I make my own rules.”

“This is no time for jokes.”

Alec jerked at the cuffs, but they held. “My mind is my own!”

“Is it?” Grier’s face grew pensive. “We’ll see.” He tilted his head back, taking a deep breath, and for the first time Alec noticed a jagged scar bisecting his throat. “Would you like to know why I’ve been disavowed?” he asked, implying the obvious reason wasn’t the real reason at all. Exactly what Alec’s instincts had told him at the very beginning. Intrigued in spite of his current predicament, Alec nodded.

“Very well,” Grier said. “Is it possible for you to listen without interrupting?”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Your record in that regard doesn’t inspire a lot of faith.”

What could Alec say to that? Nothing. Except, “I won’t interrupt.”

It should have been a clear signal to begin, but Grier didn’t. Silent, he frowned at his folded hands. Alec counted off the seconds, content to let the drug work through his system while Grier gathered his thoughts.

“The summit two weeks ago,” Grier said, pushing the words out with a visible effort.

At the mention of the massacre, a directionless tide of anger rose in Alec. Nearly a hundred people had been killed. “Terrorists,” he spat. “We were too late to prevent it.”

Grier rubbed the back of his neck, but he didn’t shy away from Alec’s stare. “I’m responsible.”

Truth, Alec’s instincts told him. His stomach turned over in disgust. And also disappointment—part of him had wanted Grier redeemed.

Grier read him easily. “Condemning me already? You’ve yet to hear my side of the story.”

“But—”

“I tried to stop it.”

Alec flinched at the tortured tone.

“Believe me, Alec.” His hands were locked around each other, the knuckles white. “I’ve always worked under the same precepts you have, and for many more years. I’ve never killed another person.”

Alec had. More than once. “Then you’ve been lucky.” Or maybe just very good at what he did. Better than most. Better than Alec.

“I have been,” Grier agreed. If he’d picked up on Alec’s self-pity, he gave no sign. He unfolded his hands and laid them, palms down, on his knees. “My assignment was to infiltrate a splinter group that was rumored to have targeted the summit. I achieved this. My show of

loyalty was to help assassinate the key leaders in attendance. It was, as you can imagine, a complicated plan. Security was impenetrable.”

Not for a Gifted, it wouldn’t have been. That went without saying, so Alec kept quiet.

“The Organization’s goal... my goal... was to demobilize the terrorist group and corral the ringleaders.”

“When they were all more or less together. On the night of the attack.”

Grier nodded. He didn’t chastise Alec for speaking. “That night.” Grier paused and swallowed. “My instructions were to clear a path through security for those planting the bomb. I did so. I’d planned to return and disarm it once the arrests were underway.” Grier fumbled for the empty water glass.

“Get some more,” Alec suggested, but Grier shook his head and replaced the glass on the table.

“I was tricked.”

“Tricked?”

“Detained.” He spat the word out as if it were poisonous.

“By our people,” Alec inferred, incredulous.

Grier stared him down, willing Alec to deny it. “They held me there despite my protests. When I tried to leave against their wishes, I was restrained. I managed to escape, but not in time.”

“Jesus.” Floundering—because damn it to hell, Grier’s words rang with conviction—Alec grasped at straws. “Just how much of this do you expect me to swallow?”

“All of it.” His tone had a finality to it. These were the facts, as Grier knew them. Alec could take or leave them. His call.

Nora’s voice gained strength with each passing moment. The drug had run its course. Alec examined the plastic cuffs, then focused his mind. They snapped at once, and needles of pain stabbed through his calves. His arms fared the same. Alec rolled his shoulders and stretched his legs out in front of him.

Grier’s only reaction was to sigh.

Alec gave him a verbal nudge. "If all this is true, then who's responsible?"

"I don't think you want to know."

"How do you know what I want?"

Grier paused. "It was Ethan," he said, voice gritty.

Alec blinked. "Who?"

"You heard me."

Surprise pushed Alec to his feet, and he had to grab for the chair back when his legs threatened to give. "That's ridiculous."

Grier's gaze never wavered. "It's the truth."

"I don't believe it. He would never...."

"He would never what?" Grier rose and paced the room. "Twist the truth? Bend the rules? Compromise his ethics? Well, I can promise you, he's done all of that and more."

"I would have sensed any duplicity." Alec was certain.

Grier stopped short and swiveled to face him. "Would you have?" he asked. "Open your mind, Alec. You'll see the truth."

"My mind is open," Alec said "As much as you've let it be with your drugs. I won't turn my back on a man who's been like a fath—" He cut himself off too late.

He expected Grier to latch on to his slip. Embarrass him. Expose his bias. Grier did none of those things.

The setting sun had thrown the house into shadow. Grier retreated into the dining nook—far enough into the gloom that Alec had trouble judging his expression—and stared out the window at the choppy water. "My father liked to gamble," he said.

Alec blinked at the non sequitur.

"I'm sure I don't have to tell you where I spent most of my Saturdays, once he knew what I could do." Grier's hand clenched, and for a moment, Alec worried for the window, but all Grier did was place his fist against the pane. "Ethan took me away from all of that."

So they shared a dysfunctional childhood. Many Gifteds had similar stories. Families that didn't understand. Parents that took

advantage. It wasn't enough. Alec hobbled across the floor, closing the distance between them. "You're laying the blame on his shoulders a little too easily for my tastes."

"Easily!" Grier spun on him. "He's manipulated us from the beginning. Kept us tired and clouded. I suppose he tells you there are no ill effects from constant monitoring."

Alec lifted his chin. "He's always been upfront about the side effects."

"I'm sure." Grier leaned back against the window and crossed his arms in front of him. "Do you remember what it feels like to wake up rested, Alec? No? How about going more than a day without your happy pills?"

"Fuck you."

"What *about* sex, since you've brought it up? When was the last time you had it? For Christ's sake, when was the last time you wanted to?"

No way in hell was he answering that question. Before he could deflect, Nora's voice sounded in his head. *Alec?*

Alec faltered when the brief contact fanned the flames of his headache. Taking a shaky breath, he pressed his fingers to his temples.

"Ask her," Grier said.

"Ask her what?"

"You know what. Ask her about breaking your connection. See what she says."

"I know what she'll say," Alec said through the reawakened pain. "She knows the consequences."

Grier hissed and turned back to the window. "Blind, ignorant fool," he mumbled.

Blind and ignorant. Two things Alec swore he'd never be again. Grier's intimate knowledge of his emotional triggers was sinister. A test, then. *Nora*, he answered.

Thank God. Nora's relieved voice sliced through his head like a jackhammer. Alec winced. *Report.*

I'm in trouble, Alec replied.

How can I help?

Tell me the truth. He eyed Grier, but the man never moved. Spine ramrod straight, he kept his back turned and his eyes on the lake. Nora's answer was long in coming, and Alec's flicker of doubt grew.

Okay, Nora said, wary.

He's going to kill me if I don't break our connection, Alec lied. *But I won't do it if it means your death.* A pregnant silence ensued. *Nora?*

Don't break the connection, Alec. You'll be alone.

"You won't be alone."

Startled, Alec realized Grier was watching him again. *I'll be dead, so it won't matter,* Alec said, continuing the ruse.

There must be another way.

No, Alec said. *There's no other way. Now—the truth. Will you die if I break our bond?*

She didn't answer, and Alec felt his perfect little world begin to crumble. *Nora?*

No, Alec. It'll hurt like hell, but it won't kill me.

Alec's breath left him in a rush. He reached out, steadying himself on the window sill.

Alec?

"Break it," Grier said.

Alec tilted his head back against the glass. His heart was racing—with anger, he realized. "Why didn't I ever see it? Why didn't I ever sense it?"

Grier put his hand on Alec's shoulder. "You didn't want to. You never questioned what Ethan told you, so nothing rang false."

But it was all false. All questionable. His entire adult life could be a sham. "I don't want to believe it," he whispered.

Grier's fingers pressed into his skin. "Please, Alec. You say Ethan can't be responsible for these things. Perhaps you're right."

Alec grabbed at the words. “You don’t really know what’s going on, do you?”

Grier shook his head. “You need the truth? I’ll do what I can to help you uncover it.”

For a price, Alec was sure. “You want something from me in return.”

“We both want something,” Grier admitted. “You might even say those somethings will determine the course of the rest of our lives—as short as they may be. Whatever’s happening, it’s bigger than you and me. It goes deeper than a sabotaged peace summit. It involves the Organization.” He paused. “It’s time for you to decide. Are you going to crawl back to Ethan for another round of corruption and lies? Or are you ready for the truth?”

The truth. Alec knew it could go far beyond a painful breach of trust. Every assignment was now suspect. Every life he’d taken was in question. Had any been innocent? The odds were high. Too high to accept.

Alec? Alec?

“I’ll do it,” Alec said. “And God help him if I don’t like what I find.” Even through his haze of anger, he felt Grier’s reaction: a combination of acceptance and relief. And on the periphery, concern over Alec’s rage.

“However you find you’ve been wronged, remember your training, Alec.”

That was rich. “What part?”

“The part that taught you responsibility.”

Another of Ethan’s axioms: gifts were for the principled. Good thing irony was always up for grabs. Still, he wouldn’t break his connection without warning Nora. Despite her part in the deception, despite her lies, he didn’t hate her. *I’m severing our bond*, he sent. He felt her flinch.

If it keeps you safe, then do it.

With no additional warnings or explanations, Alec reached into his mind, found the source of their connection, and cut it. Just before

Nora's presence faded, a tendril of the backlash snuck through, stealing his breath with its intensity. If Nora felt even a fraction of that pain, it would be a fitting punishment.

Grier waited until Alec collected himself. His hand crept out, palm up, and Alec took it, sealing their partnership.

"It begins," Grier said.

CHAPTER 5

NORA braced herself for the pain, but the intensity of it still caught her off guard. With a strangled yelp, she withered to the floor, pulling a stack of papers with her. Waves of agony racked her body. Time passed, she had no idea how much, then a pair of arms encircled and steadied her as she rode out the last of the bone-grinding tremors.

A questing presence in her mind filled the void left by Alec's withdrawal. "Easy now. The worst is over."

Nora doubted that. She peeked through her tear-damp hair. Ethan looked calm. Too calm. His soothing mental touch betrayed nothing, but she wasn't fooled.

"Better?" Ethan asked. He pulled back from Nora's mind, ensuring his departure was slow and controlled.

Nora nodded. Her throat felt dry, her eyes scratchy. She'd survived, but the experience wasn't one she'd forget.

Ethan fixed her with a grim look. "Is he dead, then?"

She tried to hide her shock, but Ethan was too perceptive. His eyes narrowed to slits, and his lip peeled back in a silent snarl. He hauled her off the floor and into a chair. Shocked by his strength, she had little time to prepare before his barrage of questions began.

"He's not dead? Where is he? What happened? Why did he break the connection?"

Nora fumbled with her glasses. "He's not dead. I don't know where he is. He didn't say." Her voice caught on a sob. "May I please have a drink?"

For a minute she thought Ethan would refuse. Then, without a word, he snatched an empty glass from her table and carried it into the kitchen. Wary, Nora watched him go. Her allegiance was to the

Organization, but her connection to Alec was strong. They'd been paired many times. He trusted her, at least he had. She still believed in him.

When Ethan returned with a glass of water, Nora drank it down in three gulps. "Thank you," she whispered. Ethan nodded, but didn't speak. His jaw was tight, his eyes twin shards of ice. He was waiting for answers.

Nora swallowed twice before she could speak. "I don't know much else. He said his life was in danger. He, um...." She glanced at Ethan. The man hadn't even blinked. "He didn't try to give me his location. I'm guessing... I'm guessing he didn't know it."

Ethan stroked his beard as he digested the information. "You say you believe he was unconscious for a time. It's likely he was unaware of his exact whereabouts." He refocused on her. "Is that all?"

Nora took a deep breath. "That's all, sir," she lied.

Ethan stared at her. Nora stared back, keeping her expression open and her mind closed. She wasn't suicidal. Ethan could crush her with a thought. Still, an uninvited probe of another Gifted would be an unforgivable breach of etiquette. It was their creed, their unspoken law. She'd never known Ethan to betray it.

Of course, she'd never known a situation like this one. Hopefully it wasn't a day for firsts.

Her answers had been truthful, just not complete. Because at the very last, before she and Alec had been separated, she'd sensed no fear. No danger. Instead there'd been confusion, betrayal, and a hot rush of anger, tinged with bitterness and aimed at Ethan.

Nora would keep those facts to herself. She had no desire to see Alec added to the list of the hunted.

An eternity later, Ethan rose. He looked down at Nora, face devoid of expression. "He's been compromised. That much is obvious, despite the alarming lack of information. Alert the rest of the team."

WHILE Nora made phone calls, Ethan excused himself to the small bedroom and shut the door.

Damn Grier to hell and back. He'd take every opportunity to poison Alec's mind with his self-righteous propaganda when neither knew what was at stake. Ethan's hands balled into fists. Twice now, he'd opened his heart to other people. Twice now he'd been betrayed. He'd come to terms with losing Grier, but Alec....

Ethan knew the one thing that would drive him away. "Trust is given freely once," he mumbled. He stumbled to the bed and sank onto the edge. His cell phone sat on the bedside table, waiting. It would be nothing to reach out. Grasp it. Seal both Alec and Grier's fate.

He couldn't.

Perhaps he should've confided in them both. Grier would've understood the nature of their enemy. But would he have approved of Ethan's unconventional solution? Probably not. And there was the crux of the matter. He'd hoped it wouldn't happen, but he'd expected to lose Grier.

He hadn't prepared himself to lose Alec.

He scooped the phone off the table and dialed, blinking when the numbers swam in front of his eyes. He pressed send and stared out the window into the vibrant city beyond. "Forgive me, Alec," he whispered.

Three thousand miles away, the phone was answered, and Ethan gave his report.

"WHERE are we going?"

The sullen tone made Grier's lips twitch. "I've made arrangements to leave the country."

Alec didn't comment, but did take increased notice of the passing road signs. "Is that who you were talking to earlier?"

Grier considered ignoring him. "Yes," he relented, "if you mean the phone call before we left the house. I needed to know where to meet the plane."

Alec shrugged. He was uncommunicative, still reeling from Ethan's betrayal. It was, Grier knew, the first of many unpleasant realizations Alec would experience. He hoped the boy wouldn't pout this much after each such discovery.

The road stretched out before them. They'd wound down out of the mountains of eastern Pennsylvania to an endless vista of rolling hills. Besides the occasional passing car or stray cow, there was little to break the monotony of farmland and pasture. Grier's lids drooped. Monitor or no, he'd taxed himself to the limit of his capabilities. The warm car, the buzz of the engine, and the plush seat worked in tandem to put him to sleep.

He fought it for an hour before Alec roused from his sulk enough to notice. "Why don't you rest? Let me drive."

Grier answered with a snort.

"You have to sleep sometime." Alec turned away, picking at a splotch of dried blood on his jeans. "You've got nothing to fear from me. We've struck a bargain."

"So you say."

"I have some honor."

The implied *more than you ever will* made Grier gnash his teeth. He didn't take the bait. "You have honor," he said with a roll of his tired eyes. The car drifted to the shoulder and he jerked it back onto the road. "You really are wet behind the ears."

"And you're exhausted. Let me drive." The cool, unaffected tone belied Grier's accusation; Alec hadn't reacted to the insult. "I've given you my word. What more do you want, Grier?"

Now they were getting somewhere. Grier pulled onto the shoulder, tossing gravel and dust into a cloud around the car and startling a groundhog back under a pasture fence. The road was empty; there wasn't another car or person in sight. "What I want is simple. In fact, you've probably already guessed it. But as it's a rather important point—critical, you might say—it bears repeating. Let's consider it a show of solidarity. How do you hide your presence from me? Does it work on everyone? Who else has this talent?"

“Slow down.” Alec rolled down the window and captured a deep breath of air. Grier did the same, willing his sleepy senses to sharpen. “Let’s cut to the chase, since I *do* know what you want,” Alec said. “How I hid myself from you... it’s something that I can teach you.”

Grier’s nostrils flared. A spark of hope, the one that had died when he realized his New York sanctuary was compromised, took on new life.

“Pleased?”

“Obviously,” Grier drawled. It was the proverbial gold at the end of the rainbow. Hiding would still be his way of life, but at least he could do so with a measure of peace. He glanced over to find Alec staring at him, face blank.

“Who can do it?” Alec repeated, eyes locked on Grier’s. “Just me, at the moment. Well....” He paused. “And Ethan, but he hasn’t perfected it.”

Grier slammed a fist against the steering wheel. He knew it’d been too good to be true. Still, Ethan was just one person; he couldn’t be everywhere at once. “How kind of you to share,” he said under his breath.

“*He* asked nicely.”

Well of course he would have. Ethan was all about propriety—if he was serving afternoon tea. When it came to truth and honesty, however, the old man took a pass. Grier allowed himself a moment of self-indulgent wallowing, then shoved it aside. Whatever friendship, whatever *respect*, he believed had existed between Ethan and himself was dead. “This... ability... works on everyone?” he asked, eyes focused on the road before them.

Alec nodded. “I’ve never come across another Gifted who could sense me if I was hiding myself. I could walk through a crowd of them and not a single one would be the wiser.”

Far more valuable than gold then. “Will you teach me?” He phrased it as a question, in deference to Alec’s quirky desire for mutual politeness. In the end, though, he knew Alec would acquiesce. Solving the mystery of Ethan’s lies was too rich a boon. Check and mate. For better or worse, they were now a team.

“Yes,” Alec said, confirming his suspicions. “I will.”

Grier threw his door open. “Need a potty break? Please say no.”

“I’m good.” Alec unfastened his seatbelt. They passed each other in front of the car and slipped into their new seats with perfect synchronicity.

Grier waited until they were pulling back onto the road before speaking. “No country music. No hip-hop, and don’t even think about tuning in to any talk radio.”

Alec floored the accelerator, and Grier fell back against the seat with a grunt. “Anything else?”

“Yes. Don’t sing.”

“May I hum, master?”

Grier turned away before Alec saw his lips twitch. He sank into the seat and rested his forehead against the window. First he’d sleep, then he’d beat back his growing affection for Alec’s dry wit.

“Where are we headed?”

“Go west, young man.” Grier cracked an eye open. “Wake me up in two hours.”

“Yes, sir.”

Grier watched through lowered lids while Alec blew out a frustrated breath, then pushed a hand through his hair. “Ass,” he heard Alec whisper.

Grier closed his eyes. Despite his best efforts, a smile crept across his face. “You know what, Devlin?” Alec didn’t answer, and Grier risked another glance. Alec had his hands at ten and two on the steering wheel—didn’t that just figure—and was concentrating on the road like he was navigating through a tornado. A tic twitched in his jaw. Grier’s smile widened into a grin. “I’ve worked out part of your problem.”

“Just part?”

“Give me time. I expect the full scope of your neurosis has yet to manifest.”

Alec swung to glare at him, and perhaps that dark, brooding “fuck off” look worked on most, but all it did to Grier was kick his libido into gear. Again. “Watch the road,” he said, voice husky. Having Alec obey

did nothing to dampen Grier's lust. Heat coiled through his balls. With a quiet sigh, he curled his fingers over his thickening cock.

"You were saying?" Alec asked, his tone strained.

What the hell *had* he been saying? The sharp rays of the setting sun poured in through his window, and the drowsiness was setting back in. He felt drunk with it, or maybe that was Alec's presence. "I was saying I'd figured out part of your problem."

"And?"

"You're too damn honest." Grier closed his eyes. He hadn't the energy to argue, and as soon as the words were out of his mouth, he knew Alec would want to debate them. He waited, growing groggier by the minute, until Alec spoke. Score one for predictability.

"Too honest. I'll work on that," Alec said. Disappointed, but too far gone to examine why, Grier slipped into a deep slumber.

DESPITE Grier's warnings, as soon as he was sleeping, Alec found a country music station and twisted the volume low. It was the act of a rebellious teen, but he didn't care. He suspected Grier was so sound asleep anyway that he'd snore through a war. The road began to twist and turn up another mountain range, but traffic stayed light. Alec had plenty of opportunity to study his companion.

Even in sleep, Grier's body was tense; his fingers clutched the seatbelt and his jaw shifted back and forth. His face was all sharp angles, the features hawklike. A shadow of dark hair covered his cheeks and chin. Thoughtful, Alec reached for his own face, scratching at the stubble as he drove. His eyes wandered to Grier more than was prudent.

Two hours and twenty minutes later, he swung into a rest stop, found a secluded parking space, and killed the engine. His head throbbed. Tilting it back against the head rest, he listened to the ticking engine and the distant sound of other travelers as they moved through the lot.

"Where are we?" Grier asked thickly.

“Somewhere in western Pennsylvania,” Alec said, keeping his eyes closed. Beside him, Grier shifted and opened his door, and the muted ruckus grew sharper. They sat together in silence for a time, listening. Alec tuned out the horns and engines and concentrated on the voices. Despite the late hour, the lot was full. He opened his senses, surprised to find the energy level so high. This time of night, most travelers were weary. He sure as hell was. Beside him, he felt Grier doing the same, searching for other Gifteds.

Grier frowned. “You were there a minute ago, but now I can’t sense you.”

Alec smiled at the begrudging tone. “I think we’re alone. You’re the only one I can feel in the immediate area.”

“I concur.” Again with the grudging respect. Alec held his tongue, not wanting to shatter their fragile peace. Grier swung his legs out of the car. “I’ll be back.”

“I’ll be along in a minute.” Stretching his legs would feel good, but first he needed to fight off his escalating headache. Where had Grier stashed his painkillers?

“Behind my seat, side pocket of the duffel bag.” Grier smirked when Alec blinked in surprise. “I don’t need to read you to know you’re suffering. You do drama like a teenage girl.”

The bag was easy to reach. Alec hooked it with his right hand and gave Grier the finger with his left. “Didn’t you need to take a piss?” The pills were right where they were supposed to be. Alec resisted the urge to claw the cap off.

“There’s a bottle of water back there too.” Grier walked off, and Alec swallowed two capsules dry before fumbling behind the seat for the water. Time was short, but he indulged in a light meditation, turning his mind inward while he focused on easing the tension in his neck and other muscles.

It was natural, as his body shut down, that his mind opened, and he didn’t fight it. He reached for Grier, keeping his touch light, but vigilant. He expected a rebuke, but none came. Pleased, Alec tightened their connection. The thoughts of those around him dulled to a buzz. He felt the drug start to zing through his blood, dampening the last of the pain, and—now that Alec knew what to look for—a good bit of his

emotion. Eyes still closed, he frowned, for once resentful of the side effect.

The sooner you wean yourself, the sooner you'll feel human again, Grasshopper, came Grier's voice.

"Christ, you're annoying," Alec replied out loud. He sat up with a groan, pocketed the keys, and stepped out of the car. His body protested, and Alec compensated by running through a short series of stretches. At the edge of his awareness, Grier's presence prickled with edginess. Alec snorted and started across the parking lot. Did the bastard have any other state of mind besides grim and irascible?

He crossed under the harsh fluorescents of the gas station and started along the sidewalk to the restaurant, his stomach grumbling from the pervading odor of grease and smoke. Some carbs would do him good. And with the day he'd had, he deserved them.

A group of teenagers swarmed by, running toward the entrance, pushing each other as they raced to be the first inside. Alec stepped out of their way, and in that minute, when his head was full of their adolescent ramblings, he sensed the presence of another Gifted.

He slammed his mind shut and stepped off the pavement into the shadows by the building's entrance. Hiding himself dulled his own senses to a certain degree, and knowing he'd just left Grier on his own with no warning kicked his concern up another notch. The chance that this person was a threat was slim, but it didn't pay to take chances. Alec watched and waited. The sudden burst of adrenaline punched his headache back to full force. No surprise there, and he could use the advantage. The pain helped him shake off the last of his lethargy.

He saw her before she saw him. Alec hissed and slunk back against the brick, willing her not to turn her head. Of all the agents on the prowl that night, it had to be Kay, one of the few Gifteds who knew him on sight. Her presence was no coincidence.

It'd been months since he'd seen her, but little about her appearance had changed. Little ever did. She swaggered by the nest of teens, and didn't even pause when every boy in the group swiveled to watch her pass. Her silk tank, pale pink, was tucked into the tightest pair of leather pants the boys had probably ever seen outside of Playboy, and her mass of blond hair framed a sculptured face and sky-

blue eyes. Kay had never believed in fading into the background, even on assignment.

She pushed through the doors and disappeared inside. Alec waited a few seconds, then followed.

The noise was a physical thing, as stifling as the mass of bodies. His senses were tuned low, so he heard very little mental chatter. Entering a closed space with so many people meant muting his awareness, drowning out the thoughts of others so he could think. Grier would've done the same. Which meant he didn't know Kay was following.

With fast food restaurants along the perimeter and seating in the middle, the building resembled a sports arena. A convenience store occupied one end of the dome and a bank of restrooms the other. Alec had been mere seconds behind, but already Kay was lost in the crowd.

"Fuck!" He risked stepping into the open and was rewarded with a flash of blonde hair near the alcove that housed the bathrooms. Alec followed.

His heart slammed against his chest as he worked his way through the press of people. By the time he'd reached the wide hall that led to the toilets and vending machines, he'd traded panic for calm. His shoes made no sound on the tile and his body was loose and ready to fight. In increments, he opened his mind, casting out for Grier. All that bounced back was distress and anger. Then, in a condensed burst, pain.

Alec broke into a run, bypassing both restrooms for the door marked "Employees Only" at the end of the corridor.

He skidded to a halt by the door, cursing at the electronic keypad. A simple lock he could've tumbled in a heartbeat, but not this. Another flash of pain pushed the air from his lungs. Tinged with fear—the first Alec had felt—it faded after a few seconds.

Alec slapped his palm over the pad, but before he could focus, the door swung outward, pushed by a man with a rolling bucket and mop. "Hey," he said to Alec. "This area's off-limits, buddy."

"Move," Alec snarled.

The man gasped with the force of the suggestion and jumped aside, tripping over his bucket and crashing to the floor. Alec barreled through. To hell with caution.

The door opened on a string of connected kitchens for the food court restaurants. In the first, two men in matching blue visors chopped vegetables while their coworkers chatted in low voices over a sizzling deep fryer. They all stared when he rushed in. So much for slipping by unnoticed. Alec ignored their curious looks and plowed ahead to the next room. There, a half a dozen girls in red- and white-striped shirts worked side by side, prepping pizzas. Stacks of flat cardboard boxes littered the floor, and an oven along the back wall threw garlic-scented heat into the room. Alec drew up short, panting. One of the girls gave a low cry and dropped her ladle. Another watched him with wide eyes while she groped for the phone.

“Don’t,” Alec said. “Keep working. Everything’s fine.”

Her hand stalled midair as the order penetrated her mind. “Okay.” She went back to kneading her dough. The others followed suit, spreading sauce and shredded cheese onto the pizza shells, their jerky, uncoordinated movements indicative of forced suggestion.

Alec spun in a circle. No sign of Grier or Kay.

“Fuck it.” He opened himself, exposing his presence to any Gifted that might be close. In return the world sharpened, like a camera brought into sudden focus. He sensed the girls’ trepidation and heard their unspoken questions, but couldn’t locate Grier. Enough wasted time. He chose the closest one and probed her mind.

She’d seen them. Five minutes ago. Grier first, then Kay. Alec jogged across the kitchen, through a short hall, and into the next area. There was no need to question any of the three people here. They were all sprawled on the floor, still as death. He knelt by the first, a teenage boy with the nametag *Kurt* pinned to his green polo, and checked his pulse. Just unconscious. Alec blew out a relieved breath.

His connection with Grier buzzed and crackled. He was close, very close. More pain came, localized at his right shoulder. Alec winced, but drew the sensation in instead of deflecting it, searching for the source.

There. He spun round to a door in the back, near the exit. A white laminate sign mounted on it said *Dry Storage*. Next to that was a handwritten post-it note that read *order more napkins*.

Alec pushed the handle, edged the door open, and slipped inside. His silent entrance hadn't gone unnoticed. Grier lay on his side, facing the door. He was holding his right arm, and his lip was curled back in a grimace of pain. He looked straight at Alec, but not a flicker of emotion crossed his face.

Kay stood over him, brandishing a stun pen. "Where is he? Tell me!"

That answered one question. They hadn't felt his approach because they were both closed off, each protecting themselves from the other. It accounted for Kay's choice of weapon. Her mental attacks, which were formidable, had proved ineffective against Grier's shields.

"Tell me!" she shouted again.

Grier shook his head.

"If you've hurt him, I swear to God—"

"Kay," Alec said. She spun at the sound of his voice. He took another step into the room, keeping one eye on the stunner as he slid closer. "I'm right here. I'm fine."

"Alec." The warmth in her voice didn't last long. Her eyes narrowed. "You don't look like a prisoner to me."

"You're a clever one," Grier said with a grunt.

Kay ignored him. Not a good sign. "And why is that? What's going on?" In the kitchen, someone screamed. A volley of shouts followed. Kay backed up several steps, pressing herself against the wall. Her attention shifted between Alec and Grier. "I was led to believe you were a hostage."

"By whom?" Alec questioned.

"Who do you think?"

Ethan, of course. Alec shook his head. "You were misled."

"Oh, for Christ's sake, enough of the games," Grier snarled. He reached out with his good hand and hauled himself to his feet, using the metal rack as leverage. Kay watched, stunner tracking his movements.

Grier jerked his chin in Alec's direction. "As you can see, he's fine. So now what are you going to do?"

Alec bounced on the balls of his feet, ready to jump at Kay if she made a move in Grier's direction. The shouts from the kitchen grew more frantic, and Alec nudged the door closed with his foot. It was thick and heavy, and the storeroom was down a short hall from the kitchen, but their hiding place wouldn't remain safe for long.

"What am I going to do?" Kay took a deep breath and lowered the stun pen. "What can I do? I don't want any of us dead. Even you, Crist, and especially not Alec or myself. I'm going to ask you to trust me." She ignored Grier's snort. "You can. Alec does." She shot Alec a tense smile. He didn't return it.

"No way in hell." Grier stumbled when his fingers slipped off the shelf, but he kept his feet. Alec saw him flexing his fingers, testing the returning strength.

Kay extended an imploring hand. "Let me bring you in. The fact that you haven't hurt Alec will count for a lot. Come with me. Explain your actions." The stunner dropped further toward the floor. "*He* still believes in you."

There was no need to ask whom she meant. Even through Grier's shields, Alec felt his spike of emotion.

"Does he?" Grier spat. "Please let him know that the sentiment isn't returned."

Kay's smile faltered. "You've been given another chance, Crist. Don't fucking blow it. Let me bring you in."

"Not a chance."

Alec read Kay's intentions a split second before she acted—too late to warn Grier. She struck with the speed of a cobra, *pulled*, and dozens of boxes and cans flew from the shelves above and rained down on top of them. Grier rolled against the wall, shielding his head, and most of the projectiles bounced onto his shoulders and away. Alec's precognition saved his life. He leapt to the side just as the shelf behind him broke away from the wall and crashed to the floor where he'd been standing a moment before.

Kay's rush of triumph hit with the strength of a bullet, stealing his breath. So much for wanting him alive and well.

A box of cocktail napkins had burst open, spreading like a fan over a puddle of ketchup. Alec took a running leap over the mess and landed next to Kay. She whipped around, stun pen aimed at his chest, but Alec was still off balance, sliding on the spilled ketchup. He twisted and went down hard on one knee. Kay stabbed at him again, but he deflected her arm with a vicious uppercut. The weapon flew across the room and under the collapsed shelf. Alec shifted his weight, ready to kick Kay's feet out from under her, but Grier was already there. He struck from behind with a bottle of olive oil, and Kay's eyes rolled back in her head. She dropped like a brick. Alec caught her and lowered her to the floor. He checked her pulse and pupils before glowering at Grier. "You hit her too hard."

Grier dropped the oil. It landed with a splat next to Kay's shoulder. "I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that." He nudged her with his toe, but she didn't move. "You know each other, I take it."

"Never seen her before in my life."

"There's a time and place for jokes, Alec." Grier inched the door to the storeroom open and glanced outside. "Should I be relieved or scared that nobody came to investigate that racket?"

"Relieved, for now." Alec smoothed Kay's hair off her forehead before standing. "I'm a glass half full kind of guy."

"I knew there was something *else* I didn't like about you."

"Besides my affection for country music?"

Grier ignored the remark and gestured at Kay. "You've worked with her before."

It rankled to admit, but, "Yes. More than once."

"So you share a connection." This seemed to worry Grier more than anything else. "She can hurt you with it."

"She won't."

Grier answered with an arched eyebrow. "Do we bother with restraints?"

Alec shook his head. "They won't hold her." Kay's golden hair was matted and red. Ketchup accounted for most of it, but blood was trickling from a small cut on the back of her head. She twitched, then stirred. Alec tensed. "She has a Monitor, I'm sure. We need to go."

"She'll follow as soon as she's able."

Alec stood, facing off with Grier over Kay's prone form. "I'm not going to kill her."

"Now you grow a conscience. Fine, let's go." Grier snatched a small paper bag off the floor and shoved it at Alec. "Here."

"What's this?"

"Your dinner." Grier moved to the door, and Alec followed. "Don't say I never gave you anything."

They slunk down the short hall into the kitchen. A dozen people, including two security guards were gathered around the unconscious workers. "Hey!" one shouted. "You! Stop right there." Every head in the crowd swiveled in their direction. One, a girl from the next kitchen over, gasped and pointed. "That's them!"

Grier spoke to Alec from the corner of his mouth. "We don't have time for this."

"I know." Alec's eyes darted about the room, casting about for options. "Can you open the gas on those burners from here?"

Grier followed his gaze to the row of stovetops. "Are you trying to kill us or save us?"

"Can you?" Alec growled. "Or not?"

Grier nodded, and Alec swung his focus back to the security guards, trusting Grier to follow through. One started across the kitchen toward them, brandishing his billy club. He was looking Alec right in the eye. Perfect. At the junction of the two cooking islands, Alec stabbed a suggestion into his mind. The guard grunted and stumbled, then turned and cranked the gas burners to high. Flames whooshed to the ceiling. Several people in the crowd screamed. A moment later, as Alec had hoped, a fire alarm pierced the air, and the sprinklers came to life, showering the room with water.

Glorious chaos. Grier even deigned to laugh as they fled through the kitchens and back into the hallway near the restrooms. Even there the sprinklers were spitting water, and Alec thrust the bag of food under his jacket, protecting it from the deluge.

Navigating the crowd wasn't easy, but hundreds of people fleeing in a blind panic provided the perfect cover. Kay's Monitor was likely close, maybe even in the building, but that wasn't the worst of it. Reinforcements were on the way—Alec had little doubt about that—and those were the real danger. They'd come in numbers, and they'd come prepared. A solid head start was Alec and Grier's best hope.

They were in a dead run halfway across the parking lot when Alec felt Kay fight her way to consciousness. Before he could cloak his presence, pain exploded through his head. Kay clawed into his mind, screaming in frustration, and her rage drove him to his knees, turned his stomach inside out, and made him retch onto the pavement.

"Alec!"

Dimly, Alec felt Grier heft him up and over his shoulder, a move that drove an agonized cry from his lungs. Kay struck again, too fast for him to defend himself, and his body convulsed, mouth contorting in a rictus of pain.

"Push her out! Hide yourself!" Grier demanded.

He couldn't. Fighting was beyond him. Breathing took all his strength. They reached the car and Grier tossed him into the passenger seat, where Alec curled into a ball. He managed one gasping breath before Kay struck again. It felt like a thousand hot needles sinking into his forehead. The bitch *was* using their connection to hurt him. At least Grier wasn't rubbing his face in it. Yet.

Grier swung into the driver's seat, slammed the car into gear, and they roared out of the parking lot and toward the onramp. "Any better?"

It was. Her attacks became less productive with distance. He ached everywhere, and his mouth felt swollen and dry, like it was stuffed with cotton. Rather than croak an answer, he nodded.

Grier hunched over the steering wheel. "I'm not going to say it."

"You bastard," Alec said with a husky laugh. "You're thinking it. That's enough."

“What made you believe she wouldn’t exploit your connection?” Grier grumbled something to himself before adding, “Too trusting. I’m adding that to your list of faults.”

“Noted,” Alec conceded. “And also, fuck you.”

Grier swung the car around a luggage-laden station wagon and roared up the shoulder, scraping the guard rail for a few seconds before shooting back onto the asphalt. The on-ramp ahead of them was clear, and he floored the accelerator. The engine protested with a high whine, but the car surged ahead, picking up speed. “Stay down,” he hissed at Alec when he stretched up to the window. “You don’t need to give her a target.”

“She doesn’t need to see me for that.” But he stayed crouched low, cursing Kay, Ethan, and the whole fucking Organization.

“Might as well add me to that list,” Grier said, and Alec heaved an exhausted laugh.

“Am I broadcasting?”

“No.” Grier frowned, pensive. “But I heard you loud and clear.”

“Fantastic,” was all Alec could say to that. Now he had some sort of twisted bond with Grier. A weakness that, after Kay’s betrayal, made him uncomfortable and ambivalent.

Whatever hope, however small, that might have existed for him to reconcile with the Directorate was gone. He’d assaulted another agent, disobeyed a direct order to surrender himself, and—this was the worst—helped Grier escape. “I’m fucked.”

“Agreed, but let’s be fair, shall we?” Grier glanced at him, his face reflecting the pale glow of the dash lights. “You were pretty much fucked before now.”

It was the truth. Alec still hated him for saying it.

A sharp stab of pain knifed through his temple, followed by a wave of Kay’s seething rage, and he doubled over, a groan escaping before he could choke it back. He laid his cheek on his knee and gritted his teeth against the urge to vomit. Grier’s hand lighted on the back of his neck, blessedly cool. “Breathe through it.”

“Fuck, it hurts.”

“You have a foul mouth.” Fingers curled into the hair at the nape of his neck. “Now shut up and listen. Listen to my voice.”

It wouldn’t be a hardship. Anything beat Kay’s screeching anger. The indirect light of the passing headlights burned through his eyelids, going bright, then dark, then bright again, matching the ebb and flow of pain in his head.

“Are you listening, Alec?”

“Yeah,” Alec rasped.

“She can’t keep this up forever, and soon we’ll be far enough away that she won’t be able to reach you.”

Reminding Grier that Kay was already on their tail—and that she drove like a maniac—didn’t seem worth the effort. Grier’s fingers petted his neck, and Alec concentrated on that and how it siphoned away some of his agony.

“I’m going to say this now before my good sense convinces me it’s unnecessary.” Grier’s fingers stilled. “Thank you.”

Despite everything, Alec smiled. He bet that had hurt.

“Also, your actions were reckless and put innocent people in danger. As you’re suffering from a head injury I’ll forgive the sloppiness.”

Alec sighed when the fingers resumed their hypnotic stroking. “Thanks. I think.” Kay’s voice grew dimmer, and Alec turned his head so he could look at Grier. “You didn’t give me much of a choice on how to play it. How did she corner you like that?”

A muscle twitched in Grier’s jaw. “I was distracted.”

“Just so we’re clear—did you just admit to making a mistake?”

Grier swerved around another car. “I felt you shut yourself off.”

“Sorry about that. Couldn’t warn you.” Lifting onto his elbows didn’t cause the pain to come crashing back, so Alec risked sitting up against the seat. Grier’s hand stayed with him, massaging.

“I understand. It was fair warning on its own. After that, I did what I could to lead her away from the crowds.” He winced and rolled his shoulder. “She’s a vindictive bitch, isn’t she?”

As understatement went, it took the prize. “You could say that.”

“She was worried for you.”

“Until she realized—” Alec cut the last part off. Until she’d realized that his loyalties had shifted, he’d almost said. Verbalizing it made it more real. He wasn’t quite ready for that.

“Yes. Until then,” Grier agreed. He pulled his hand away from Alec’s neck and nudged the crumpled paper bag. “Eat, if you can.”

The intensity of Kay’s attack had slackened. All that remained was a furious, far-off echo of her rage. Alec inhaled, taking in the odor of fried chicken, and waited for his stomach’s verdict. It grumbled. “I think I can,” he said, surprised. He unfurled the grease-stained bag and fished out a drumstick. “We should get off the highway.”

“You’re a brilliant strategist.” Grier threw him a napkin. “Wipe your face.”

“Christ, you’re fussy.” Alec swiped it across his lips. “How far until the next exit?” He extracted another piece of chicken and waved it under Grier’s nose. “Come on. Don’t be a snob. You haven’t eaten either.”

Grier’s expression made it clear Alec might as well have been offering raw human flesh. “No. Thank you.”

Alec shrugged and dug into it himself. “Your loss.”

“I’ll cope. And we won’t be taking the next exit. She’ll expect that. Besides, the one we want is only a few miles farther along. We’re less than an hour from our destination.”

Alec tossed the chicken bone back into the bag. There was a third piece near the bottom, but his head was starting to pound and his palms were damp. Another migraine, big surprise. Best not to risk stuffing himself if there was a chance of losing it all later. The adrenaline had burned off whatever good the first two pills had done, and it was still too early for more. Alec kept strict control of his habit. He’d just have to suffer. “Mind if I try to rest?”

“I suggest you do.” Grier’s tone had lost its gruff edge. “Your mind’s taken a beating today. I’m surprised you’re still standing.”

“Well, I’m not,” Alec mumbled. “Standing.” Another tractor trailer came into view, and Grier moved into the left lane to pass it.

They flew by too fast for Alec to read the name painted onto the side, which meant the truck was crawling or Grier was speeding. “You’ll get pulled over.”

“You’d prefer your harpy friend catches us?”

Good point. “Okay.” Alec closed his eyes. “I defer to your superior judgment.”

“About fucking time.”

Alec fell asleep with a smile on his face.

CHAPTER 6

Crawford County airport was little more than a pub with a runway attached. There were aviation offices, with wide oak doors and engraved nameplates, but they were locked, and Grier noted a layer of dust on the fancy brass handles. He walked past without even bothering to knock. Around the other side of the terminal, a bar, complete with Pac-Man and a listing pool table, promised “the coldest, most refreshing draft beer in town.”

There was a man huddled over his alcohol who looked promising. Tie askew, he was mumbling at the television, nursing a half-empty glass of piss-colored beer. The bartender was nowhere in sight. Grier stepped up and cleared his throat. “I need access to the tarmac, if you please. My plane is waiting.”

“Oh yeah?” The man glanced over his shoulder. He took another long draw from his glass, depositing a foam mustache across his upper lip, and spun around on his bar stool. “That’s your plane out there?”

“Yes.” He’d glimpsed it through the fence. Nicolas’s Lear was unmistakable. Flamboyant, but state of the art. Grier has used it more than once.

“It’s missing a proper flight plan.”

“That’s because I don’t want you to know where I’m going.”

“You—” The man lumbered off his stool. He reeked of cheap beer. “You need to file a flight plan. That part’s not optional, *sir*.” He poked at Grier’s chest with one chubby finger.

It was the poking that snapped Grier’s temper. Lightning quick, he grabbed the man’s hand and squeezed. He reached into his mind and did the same. The man’s eyes bulged. “Your interest in my private affairs is flattering,” Grier said, voice low and calm, “but I won’t be

filing a flight plan. In fact, as soon as that plane has cleared the runway, you'll forget it was ever here."

The man's eyes lost focus. "That's right," he wheezed, pliant in Grier's grip. "I will."

"And I'll add, if I may, that you are a disgusting pig."

"Yes!" Bobbing his head made the man's double chin wiggle. "I am."

As a rule, such petty games were beneath him, but the day had been long. Grier could practically taste Nicolas's expensive scotch, and all he wanted was to be airborne so he could drink himself into the oblivion of sleep. At his current state of exhaustion, it wouldn't take much. And what trouble could Alec get into while 35,000 feet above the earth? The trip should be peaceful.

He released the man's hand. "Your agreement pleases me. Shall we?"

"Let me just get the keys." The man knocked over a barstool in his rush to do Grier's bidding. He charged out the door like a bull, huffing for air after three steps. Grier's lip twisted; calling the man a pig had been more accurate than he'd realized. He was righting the stool when the bartender pushed through the swinging doors that connected the main area to the kitchen. He frowned at the abandoned beer. "Where'd Stu go?"

"He'll be along." Grier nudged at the bartender's mind, then rolled his eyes. "Go back to your internet porn."

The bartender blinked but obeyed without a word. The door swung shut behind him, and Grier took advantage of the unexpected solitude. He sent a tentative thought in Alec's direction, and—to his surprise—received one in return. Nothing so complicated or cumbersome as words. Just a gentle return push: all clear. A refreshing turn of events, but bound not to last considering the way his luck had failed him so far that day. He thought again of Nicolas's well-stocked bar, and his mouth watered.

Stu returned, a large ring of keys in hand. If he knew what even a quarter of them were for, Grier would be shocked. "Excellent. Let's be on our way." He shooed Stu out the door. The nearest gate just happened to be the one closest to Nicolas's Learjet. Grier's eyes

narrowed when he saw Alec waiting for them. The night breeze was cool, and the whelp was propped up against the fence, shivering. Grier's bags were at his feet.

"I told you to wait in the car." A thorough once-over told him everything Alec's stubborn silence didn't. The man's lips were pressed into a thin line, and he was clutching his arms close to his chest. Grier frowned. "Take a pill."

Alec started to shake his head, then winced. "No."

Obstinate idiot. Grier approved of the effort, but the last thing he wanted was Alec writhing in pain for the whole trip. No one would get any sleep. "We'll talk about it onboard." He accepted Alec's silence as tacit agreement.

Stu began sifting through the keys, mumbling to himself as he held one after another up to the light. Alec rubbed his temple while he watched. "Problem with the locals?"

"Not at all," Grier replied.

Stu stopped fussing with the keys and extended his hand to Alec. "Hello! My name is Stu. I'm a pig."

Alec shot Grier a dirty look. Grier shrugged, smile playing at his lips while Alec shook the man's hand, then squeezed his arm. "You're not a pig." He reinforced his words by removing Grier's original subliminal suggestion and then *thanked* him for his help.

Didn't it figure that Grier had gone fifteen years without a partner, only to be saddled at this juncture with a goddamn boy scout. "Don't confuse the nice man, Alec."

Alec gave Stu's arm a final pat. "Was that necessary?"

"He was curious about our destination." And rude, not to mention repulsive. Grier had the facts on his side.

"I am," Stu piped up, dropping the keys again. "Curious. It's my job." Grier's temper began to simmer, a fact not lost on Alec. Stepping forward, he put himself between the two. The sudden move sent him stumbling, but he caught a handful of fencing before he toppled. Only the strictest measure of self-control stopped Grier from reaching to steady him.

“Of course you are,” Alec said. “And your job’s important.” He took the heavy ring of keys and slipped them into Stu’s pocket. Then he placed his hand over the gate latch. A moment later, the lock disengaged.

Grier’s eyes narrowed, but impressed won out over angry. “Neat trick. Could you have mentioned it before?”

Alec shrugged. “I’ve been able to tumble locks since I was five. Anyway, you still needed to deal with the flight plan issue.”

Wobbling, he turned, and this time Grier didn’t fight the urge. He elbowed Stu out of the way and slipped an arm around Alec’s waist. “Through being a hero?” he snarled in his ear.

Alec shivered, but didn’t answer.

“Have a safe trip!” Stu called as they slipped through the gate and started across the tarmac. “Where are you going again?”

“Now that’s a man who takes his job seriously,” Alec said with a raspy chuckle.

Behind them, the Learjet’s engine roared to life. Their little drama was being observed. Alec turned back to answer, placing his chest to chest with Grier. He had to yell to be heard over the noise. “Disney World. It’s my first time.”

Stu shifted from one foot to the other. The keys jingled in his pocket. “Really?”

“It’s his dream to ride the teacups,” Grier said.

“Oh! I love the teacup ride.” Stu waved.

Grier spun back to the plane, dragging Alec with him. “I’ll refrain from making all the obvious jokes.”

“Not on my account, I hope. I can’t get enough of your clever repartee.”

If the barb had been delivered with dry humor instead of repressed pain, Grier might have enjoyed the exchange. But Alec was mentally and physically compromised, and it was simple enough to call the pull in Grier’s gut concern rather than the far more dangerous alternative.

The pilot met them at the base of the steps. Unlike any pilot Grier had ever seen, he wore ripped denim shorts and a tropical print button-down. The words *Elvis Lives* were tattooed across his left bicep. Black, curly hair protruded from beneath his Chicago Cubs ball cap. He greeted Grier and Alec with a curt nod. “Gertrude and Tagalong?”

The whine of the engine swallowed Grier’s bark of laughter. “That’s us.”

“You Gertrude?”

Grier nodded.

The pilot gave Alec a thorough once-over. “You pass.” To Alec’s raised eyebrow, he said, “Orders from the boss. If you were too pretty, I was supposed to leave you behind.”

Alec’s scowl was priceless. Grier drew him closer. “That sounds like Nicolas. Good thing you look like you’ve come through a war,” he said into Alec’s ear as the pilot turned and climbed back into the plane.

“I’m sure your friend thought you were bringing a woman.”

“I’m sure you couldn’t be more wrong.”

Grier helped Alec navigate the narrow steps that led into the plane, then signaled to the lush bench tucked into one side of the aircraft. Two facing seats, a table between them, took up the other. Alec grabbed the bulkhead as he surveyed the posh layout. “I’ll take one of the seats.”

“You’ll take the couch. Stop acting like a child.”

“I’m capable of making my own decisions.”

“You’re incapable of standing on your own at the moment. Are you trying to be a liability? If you’ve changed your mind and want me dead, just say so.”

Alec stiffened. Grier took advantage, swinging him past the wet bar, into the narrow aisle, and onto the long bench. Alec went with all the cooperation of a rabid dog. The snarl he leveled at Grier when he let him go added to the imagery. Grier collapsed into one of the empty seats, then pointed lazily at him. “Play dead.”

With a hiss of pain, Alec flipped onto his side and glared. “Enjoying yourself?”

“I’m getting there.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to fetch?”

“I thought about asking you to roll over.” Grier fastened his seatbelt as the plane began to taxi. “But I doubt you’re up to it.” That shut him up. So sexual innuendo silenced Alec as effectively as a gag. He’d be sure to take advantage of that, and often.

A curt warning from the pilot—“One for the money. Two for the show. Three to get ready. Now go, cat, go!”—and the plane surged ahead, engines roaring. When the lurch in Grier’s stomach let him know they’d cleared the runway, he took his first deep breath in hours. The plane went into a steep climb, then arced south.

South. Safety, or at least the illusion of it. In truth, the plane was carrying them straight to the lion’s den. Even if Roman was in Europe, meeting with Nicolas was a risk. Grier had given cursory thought to what his friend had hinted at over the phone, but if even a fraction of it were true, the Organization would have its eyes on Nicolas Petrov.

As the aircraft leveled off, Alec made a small sound. He’d turned and was pressed face first against the back of the cushioned bench. Not asleep. No one could rest while that tense. His spine was bowed, his shoulders hunched. His one visible hand was clenched on a belt buckle. Grier slipped from his seat and knelt on the floor next to him, frowning when Alec flinched from his gentle touch. “What can I do?”

Alec’s laugh was stifled against the soft leather. “Erase this whole damn day?”

“Why stop there? As long as we’re being escapist”—His lips twitched when Alec gave another pained laugh—“let’s redo the entire month. Four weeks ago, I was in Rio. I was between assignments, Monitor-free, and my biggest concern was what seafood to sample for dinner.”

“Sounds nice,” Alec wheezed.

“It was.” Even if it hadn’t been as carefree as he let on. He’d been well aware that something was afoot with Ethan. One hint to his old friend of his suspicions had landed him a two-week vacation in Brazil. Who was it that said that every man could be bought? They’d been right.

As before, Grier cupped the back of Alec's neck in his palm and massaged the area. He kept up a steady monologue while stealing deep into Alec's mind, dilating constricted blood vessels and numbing pain synapses. The muscles began to relax under his deft fingers, and Alec sighed. "I feel like a puppy with you petting me all the time. *Don't* say it."

"I've no idea what you mean."

"You make me crazy," Alec whispered.

Grier bit back his glib response. "How are you feeling?"

"Better."

"Do you want me to keep going?"

"No. I'd hate that."

The attempt at humor earned him a reward; Grier pressed into the muscles, working his fingers in tight circles until the knots had loosened and an appreciative groan rang from Alec's throat. The sound stabbed through Grier. It was exactly the sort of noise he imagined Alec would make when he came. What would Alec look like, he mused, twisting on Grier's fingers while Grier sucked him deep down his throat?

His body approved of the idea, if the heaviness in his pants was anything to go by. Grier jerked his hand back.

Alec made a wordless sound of protest. He rolled onto his back, assessing Grier with half-lidded eyes. "What's wrong?" Then, without waiting for Grier to answer, he said, "I can sense what you're feeling."

Grier stood and stepped back into his seat. "Congratulations."

"You didn't seem to mind before." Alec propped himself up on his elbows. His face had lost its blotchy flush, and his eyes were clearer. "Why does it matter all of a sudden?"

Because the sentiment wasn't returned. However genuine Alec's attentions had seemed, they'd been an act. A ruse to infiltrate Grier's apartment. Pursuing what wasn't on offer wasn't Grier's style. "Get some rest."

Alec settled back onto the cushion. "What are you going to do?"

"Drink. Think. Sleep."

“A three-pronged strategy. I’m impressed.”

“You should be. This isn’t MacGyver. Surviving is going to take actual intelligence and planning.”

Alec yawned and threw an arm over his eyes. “Don’t knock MacGyver. You haven’t seen what I can do with a roll of duct tape.”

Grier snapped his eyes shut. “Lights to low,” he barked, and the cabin dimmed, leaving only a pale halo of light from the cockpit.

Alec whistled. “Fancy. Is there a voice command to extract that pole from your ass?”

“Why? Did you need it for something?”

Blessed silence followed. Grier enjoyed his victory for a moment before going to raid Nicolas’s liquor stash. By the time he’d poured himself three fingers of scotch and rounded up two ice cubes, Alec was asleep, mouth parted and cheek cupped against his palm.

The intercom hissed, and the pilot’s deep voice flowed over him like molasses. “Welcome to Love Me Tender Airways. Your approximate flying time to paradise will be four hours and fifty minutes. Make yourself at home, relax, and enjoy the flight. Let’s rock, everybody. Let’s rock.”

Grier tilted his seat back and held the glass against his lips, reveling in the sharp odor of the liquor. Nicolas loved to surround himself with eccentric people; they tempered his mercurial nature. Being Roman Petrov’s son would twist even a saint, and Grier had never begrudged Nicolas his bouts of ego. The boy was also prone to acts of selflessness, though predicting when those would occur was useless.

For a man just out of his early twenties, he’d seen much. Too much, Grier often thought. Their first meeting had proved that.

Paseo de la Reforma shimmered in the unforgiving Mexican sun, its sidewalks crammed with people hoping to catch a glimpse of the parade. Under the portico of The Four Seasons, Grier smoked and watched. Snatches of conversations, some in Spanish, others in English, drifted to his ears, but none interested him. He crushed the

hand-rolled cigarette under his shoe and slipped through the door before the bellhop could open it for him.

The lobby bustled, but with none of the brash reality of Reforma. Money smoothed such things. Expensive perfume and leather scented the air instead of sweat and local tobacco. Grier bypassed reception and rode the lift to the eighth floor. The bodyguard stationed outside the Presidential Suite took one look at him as he stepped off the elevator and reached beneath his suit jacket.

“Stop.” Grier put his hand on the bodyguard’s shoulder. “Time for your break. I’m here to relieve you.”

“Oh.” The bodyguard took one step, then turned, eyes clearing. “Wait—”

“I said, time for your break.” Grier wasn’t surprised the man was able to shake the mental suggestion. Petrov could afford the best, and often employed borderline Gifteds. “Take an hour,” Grier said, putting more force behind his words the second time. “You deserve it.”

“Damn right I do.” The man buttoned his suit coat and headed for the elevator. “Petrov’s a first-class prick.”

“So I hear,” Grier said to the bodyguard’s retreating back. He knocked on the door, and a moment later Nicolas Petrov himself opened it. Barefooted, dressed in a loose linen shirt and black pants, he smiled at Grier.

“Ah, there you are.” He swung the door wide. “Please come in.”

Grier did, then shoved Nicolas hard against the wall. The boy’s gasp was a little too enthusiastic for his taste. “Why are you following me?”

“It’s complicated.” To Grier’s snarl, Nicolas amended, “but explainable. Not, however”—he pushed Grier away—“before breakfast.” He sauntered further into the suite and gestured at the elaborate spread of food. “Shall we?”

Grier eyed the table set for two. “Expecting someone?”

“You, of course. Champagne?” Nicolas extracted a bottle from a silver bucket. “Only the best for you, Grier Crist.”

Wary, Grier sat, then nodded. Nicolas popped the cork and poured two glasses. "To us," he said, lifting his in a toast.

Grier didn't drink. "Are you even legal?"

"This is Mexico," Nicolas said with a roll of his eyes. "They spike the baby bottles with Sangria. And I won't answer that question on principle. You know how old I am."

Twenty-one. Grier knew quite a lot about Nicolas and the effort to finagle him away from his father. He'd been one of Ethan's few failures, and a spectacular one at that. Grier sipped his champagne. "Changed your mind about the Organization?"

"No. Just you." Nicolas's tongue darted out to lick the edge of his glass.

Grier cut into his Eggs Benedict while he mulled the odd turn of events. "Does your father use you like this often?"

"He doesn't use me at all. That's the difference between you and me."

Another stab at Ethan. What had the old man done to him? As Grier watched, Nicolas poured himself a second glass of champagne. He'd yet to pick up his fork. "What do you want?" Grier asked.

Nicolas shrugged. "Same as you. World peace."

They both chuckled.

"I thought the big money was in war and strife," Grier said. He accepted the strawberries, ignoring Nicolas's blatant caress as the bowl changed hands.

"For those who don't know how to make an honest living, maybe." Grier chuckled again, but Nicolas offered a stilted, bitter smile. "No, all right, I'll be honest. Since you're the first cultured company I've had in a week." Nicolas swished a plump strawberry through the cream. "I've heard much about you. I wanted to see your... skills... firsthand."

Grier chased the fruit with champagne. "And?"

"And," Nicolas frowned, "I'd planned to be spectacularly unimpressed, drown my disappointment in some dark, doe-eyed local, and return to civilization more cynical than ever."

“But?”

“But I’m not unimpressed.” Nicolas pushed his champagne aside, and Grier paused, eggs halfway to his mouth. Nicolas’s struggle fascinated him. Before today, he’d been a name on paper. A spoiled brat, a highly Gifted one, but spoiled nonetheless. The son of a megalomaniac. Now he’d come to life, shattering preconceptions left and right.

“I watched you yesterday,” Nicolas said. “You let a murderer escape.”

Grier hid his surprise. “I did.”

“In order to spare a child.”

He had. His target was the most despicable of all human filth. One who hid behind the innocent. Grier dabbed his mouth with the corner of his napkin. “He’s gained a day’s reprieve, that’s all.”

“He’s on your agenda for this morning?”

“This afternoon.”

Nicolas’s eyes glittered. “May I come along?”

Grier burst out laughing. “Your father would have my balls.”

“Don’t be a coward.”

“It’s self-preservation.” Grier pushed away from the table. “The last thing I want is Roman Petrov’s eye on me.”

“You believe it isn’t already?”

“Hardly.”

Nicolas snorted into his champagne. “I’ll perpetuate your fantasy then.” He stood and stretched, letting Grier admire the slender liteness of his body. “Well, enjoy yourself. Why not stop by afterward? Have dinner. Share the details.”

“Why?”

“He’s not a nice man,” Nicolas said. And he’s hurt me, his silence added. It’s personal.

Grier’s missions weren’t personal. They were for a greater good. He didn’t believe in petty revenge, or so he’d always told himself. But

seeing a baby snatched from his mother's arms and hauled into harm's way.... "He's not a nice man," Grier agreed.

Nicolas gave a wolfish grin. "How refreshing that we see eye to eye. I'll expect you later, then? I can be discreet, you know, and my father is far"—he stepped close—"far away."

He could've been in the next room, and it wouldn't have mattered just then. Anticipation was already tightening in Grier's chest. He indulged in one touch; he tucked a strand of loose hair behind Nicolas's ear. "I look forward to it."

CHAPTER 7

ALEC and Grier exited the jet into cloying tropical heat. Blinded by the rising sun, Alec squinted to keep from stumbling down the stairs. Sunglasses would've helped, but the past twenty-four hours had seen him cross half a continent, and he'd barely had the chance to brush his teeth, let alone shop for appropriate island attire.

Dressed in jeans and one of Grier's long-sleeved shirts, an ensemble better suited to spring in New York, he was sweating before he reached the bottom of the steps. Grier looked unaffected by the heat. Alec shot him an annoyed look, satisfied when he spied a trickle of perspiration run down the man's neck.

The plane taxied off toward a distant hangar, and Alec glanced around the tarmac. He sensed no imminent danger, but took his cues from Grier's tense posture.

"Where the hell are you, Nicolas?" Grier muttered. As the words left his lips, a sleek limousine appeared out of the haze. It was approaching at a fair clip, but Grier didn't seem concerned. Wary, Alec eyed it as he picked at his sticky shirt.

The car slid to a halt ten feet away, kicking up enough dust to make Alec cough. The driver, a tall, pale man, face etched with wrinkles, got out to open one of the back doors, and a wave of arctic air rolled out. Unprompted, Grier ducked his head and entered the car. Alec didn't. The immediate danger was behind them. No more following blindly until he had some answers.

A second later, Grier's head reappeared. "What are you waiting for? Get in."

Alec shook his head and crossed his arms over his chest. A cultured voice drifted out of the cool haven. "What the fuck is wrong with you, Grier? You're letting all the hot air in."

Grier shot Alec an unreadable look. “You’re upsetting Nicolas.”

Alec shrugged. “Too bad.”

“Grier?” Nicolas called. “What sort of uncultured trash have you picked up now? I refuse—do you hear me—refuse to discuss this in a *car* at the *airport*. I want my cool house. I want a drink. And preferably, a fuck. But if you’re not up to that, I understand. You’ve had a shitty couple of days, after all.”

Alec wasn’t pleased to see Grier fighting a smile. He stepped out of the car, took hold of Alec’s arm, and led them a few feet away. “Alec, I’m asking you to trust me on this. Not on everything. Just on this. I believe Nicolas will keep us safe.”

“On what evidence are you basing that?”

Grier’s lips tightened. “He’s my friend.”

“Good for you.”

“Good for *you*. You wanted the inside track on what’s happening with Ethan. This is where we start.”

“Here?” Alec made sure his voice was pitched high enough to carry into the limo. “With that pompous ass?”

“What the *fuck* is going on out there?” Nicolas yelled.

The driver, who looked to be wilting by the second in his black suit and hat, cleared his throat. Alec took two steps back, out of earshot. Eyes narrowed, Grier followed. “Do you realize what’s at stake here?” Alec asked.

“My life, for one.”

“And the lives of many others.” The driver cleared his throat again, and Alec leaned close. “I need you invested in more than just *you*. If what you’ve told me is even half true, I need you committed to unraveling this mess.”

Grier shook his head. “No. It’s too late for that. I said I’d help you uncover the truth. That doesn’t include fighting your righteous battles. Keep your high and mighty ideals to yourself. I’m finished with the lot of them.”

Alec shook his head, searching Grier’s face. “Even Ethan?”

“Him most of all.”

For the first time since they’d met, Alec sensed untruth behind Grier’s words. Oddly, Grier didn’t appear to recognize it. “I thought we had a bargain.”

“We do. This is me upholding my end.” Grier pointed at the limo. “Get in the car.”

It wasn’t a matter of trust that made Alec obey, but honor. He’d made a promise, and he planned to follow through. Even if Grier reneged. The chauffeur looked relieved when Alec stepped up to the door. He tipped his hat as Alec slid inside. Grier followed.

After the harsh glare of the Caribbean sun, the interior was cool and dark. Alec took the seat behind the driver, across from Grier’s friend. Grier nodded at him as he settled onto the cool leather next to Nicolas. It was subtle, almost invisible, but Alec recognized it for what it was: a thank you.

The driver slammed the door, cutting out the last of the sunlight, and Alec peered across the car, wanting a look at the famous Nicolas Petrov. His blond hair was tied back into a short ponytail at the nape of his neck. Light brown eyes bored into Alec, measuring. Alec melted back into his seat. He wasn’t intimidated.

“Champagne?” Nicolas offered, turning to Grier, his gaze an alarming combination of adoring and predatory.

“No, thank you.”

Nicolas tsked his disappointment. “Shame. I hate to drink alone.”

“Why not ask Alec?”

“I think not.” Nicolas’s voice dripped disdain. “I imagine the bottle costs more than his entire wardrobe.”

Alec rolled his eyes. Elitist bastard.

Nicolas sneered at him. “Ill-bred philistine. If my considerable wealth intimidates you, you’re more than welcome to ride with the driver.”

Startled, Alec made a subtle probe of Nicolas’s mind, and got an angry sting for his trouble. He glared at Grier. “He’s Gifted.”

"I'm well aware." Grier stared out his window, fingers drumming on his knee. "Empathic."

Nicolas gave a dramatic sigh. "Grier, you steal all my fun."

"With the Organization?"

Nicolas gasped. "Bite your tongue, G.I. Joe. I'd never go slumming with Ethan. And by the way," he said, leaning forward, "stay the hell out of my head."

"Gladly." Alec considered the offer of the front seat.

"Suit yourself," Nicolas said. "I'd welcome a bit of privacy, anyway."

So much for propriety; now the bastard was reading *him*. Before Alec could snap a reciprocal warning, his eyes were drawn to Nicolas's hands, one of which was nestled between Grier's crossed legs. Something reared up in him. He quelled it in a heartbeat, but Nicolas's widened eyes signaled he'd grasped the stray emotion. Alec scowled. He hated empaths.

Nicolas's eyes flashed. "Well, well, well," he whispered.

"What am I missing?" Grier asked as he took in the silent battle of wills.

"Nothing." Alec turned to the window.

"You're a pretty thing," Nicolas continued as if Alec hadn't spoken. "Though you look a bit underfed and over-monitored."

"Fuck off," Alec muttered.

"Don't you agree, Grier?"

"Let it go."

Nicolas smug smile grated across Alec's nerves. "If you insist."

"I do."

Nicolas fell silent, not that Alec believed the warning would muzzle the other man for long. Across the car, he heard the rustle of fabric, the clink of a glass, and the low rumble of Grier's voice. Nicolas's answering laugh was low and intimate.

Alec set his jaw. He kept his eyes trained on the passing scenery until the car turned onto a wide, paved drive, stopped at a set of high gates, then rolled forward again when they swung open at a signal from the driver. He risked a glance at Grier, but Nicolas had done a fair job of crawling into his lap, not a spectacle Alec had any interest in, so he turned back to the window.

And if the sight of Grier's hands curled intimately around Nicolas's back ignited a spark of jealousy-tipped lust in his chest, it was just something he'd have to live with.

The drive wound through a grove of tall, shady palms and down a hill, then burst into the sunshine at the bottom, in front of a sprawling villa. The driver opened the door a moment later. Alec made sure he was the first out.

He supposed Nicolas's villa was tasteful—if four floors of bright peach stucco and a half a dozen bougainvillea-draped balconies could be considered so. Fifty-foot palms swayed all around the structure and dotted the maze of gardens and courtyards that surrounded the two wings.

Alec turned from his perusal to find Nicolas studying him. "What do you think, Alec?"

"Cheery."

"I aim to please."

"So I gathered," Alec said under his breath.

"Stop sulking." Nicolas accepted a leather satchel from his driver, then swept past Alec and up the wide steps. "There's plenty of Grier to go around."

"I'm not—" But Nicolas had already disappeared inside. Just as well.

The limo pulled away and circled behind the house, leaving Alec and Grier alone on the crushed stone drive. Grier's scrutiny was a physical thing, pressing into Alec's back. "What are we doing here?" Alec asked.

Grier stepped up beside him. Hands thrust deep into his pockets, he followed Alec's gaze to the wide front doors of the villa. "Aren't you the least bit curious?"

Alec arched a brow. "About?"

Grier took his elbow and led him around the side of the house, down a winding path shaded by coconut palms. Alec shook him off as soon as he could. "About Nicolas," Grier said. "And the pilot. And the driver."

Alec kicked at a stray pebble. "They were both Gifted."

"You sensed it."

"Yes. Neither was very strong."

Grier shrugged. He slowed his pace to match Alec's. "We all have different strengths. There's no rhyme or reason to how our gifts develop."

True enough. "So Nicolas seeks out and employs Gifteds."

"Yes. So does his father." Grier caught Alec's arm when he tried to brush past. "Believe it or not, there *are* those who live and thrive outside the Organization's nurturing umbrella."

"Careful. You sound almost bitter."

"Just almost?" A wry smile flickered across Grier's face.

"What are you trying to say?"

"That there is more to us than the Organization and those who oppose it."

"I know that." Alec yanked on his arm, but this time Grier held tight. "But I'd rather use my gifts for something useful. I've got no desire to be an errand boy for some rich, spoiled brat."

Grier sighed. He released Alec so unexpectedly that he stumbled on the loose gravel. "You see the world in black and white, Alec."

Alec squared his shoulders. "That's not true."

"Isn't it?" Grier shook his head. "Never mind. We're here because Nicolas has information for us. I can't believe things are as he says, but if they are...." His eyes pinned Alec in place. "You'll have

answers to some of your questions very soon.” He motioned Alec to follow as he started up a smaller path, this one hidden by overgrown foliage. Alec imagined he navigated around Nicolas’s bedroom with the same ease. The thought kept him rooted in place until the crunch of Grier’s footsteps faded.

Through the trees came the gentle smack of waves on sand. The air was thick with the smell of salt and hibiscus. Ignoring Grier’s command, Alec followed the sounds of the ocean, staying on the original trail until it emptied him onto the beach.

Paradise. Nicolas’s villa sat on a perfect arc of sand. A half-mile out to sea, waves broke over a coral reef. Inside the lagoon, the water spilled away from shore in a rainbow of blues, light aqua near the beach, cobalt in the center, and pale blue around the reef. The surface rippled like beveled glass, calm. And probably teeming with sharks.

Something he’d do well to remember.

“Alec?”

He turned at the unfamiliar voice. The woman who’d appeared at the head of the path beckoned him closer. Exotic features enhanced her dark mocha skin and waist-length, curly hair, which she wore tied back with a swath of purple silk.

That was all she was wearing.

Alec smirked. Poor Nicolas. Predictability was such a tragic fault. “Yes?”

“I’ve been sent to fetch you for lunch.” She offered her hand.

“Thank you.” Alec ignored her wagging fingers. “This way?” She nodded and they ducked back into the shade of the trees. “And what is his majesty serving today?”

The woman giggled. “What would please you?” She slithered closer, pressing her breasts against his arm. Alec peeled her off.

“A cheeseburger and fries?” They crossed a tiled veranda to an open-air dining room. Giant fans turned overhead, and three sets of tall wooden doors were open to the house beyond, spilling cool air over the table. Nicolas and Grier were already seated, Nicolas at the head and Grier to his right. The remaining seats—fourteen of them—were

unoccupied. Alec eyed the ornate covered platters. "But I bet we're having fish eggs or something, right?"

Undaunted, the woman wrapped herself around him again. "Perhaps I could offer something more to your liking."

"No thanks." Getting free was like detaching a leech. He set her away and pulled out the chair next to Grier. "Fish eggs are fine."

She pouted until Nicolas sent her away with a wave. "She doesn't please you?"

"Not interested," Alec answered.

"Why?"

"Not my type."

"No?" At Nicolas's subtle gesture, a man appeared and began serving food. Impeccably dressed, he flashed a coy smile as he poured wine into Alec's glass. He was as fair as the beach escort had been dark, hair a pale yellow and eyes a light green. A smattering of freckles covered his nose and cheeks. He didn't look a day over sixteen.

Nicolas sipped his mimosa. "What's your type?"

Alec ignored the servant's flirtations and choose ice water over the wine. "The kind you don't have to pay for."

"I haven't the faintest idea what you mean."

"I'm sure. Are you done throwing your concubines at me?"

"Would it be possible," Grier cut in, "to skip ahead to the part where we eat?"

A muscle twitched in Nicolas's jaw, but he managed a smile. For Grier's benefit, Alec was sure. "Of course. My apologies. You've had a difficult day."

Alec snorted.

"Thank you." Grier slipped his napkin into his lap, and the conversation ended.

“SO HERE we are.” Nicolas snapped his fingers, and a different group of women bore away the dishes and uneaten food. All beautiful, these attendants were at least partially clothed in floral-print wraps. After a final check—and a wave from Nicolas—the last one skittered by on bare feet and slid the mahogany doors closed behind her. “There,” Nicolas said. “Privacy.”

Alec eyed the dense foliage beyond the short stucco wall. “Because nobody could be hiding out there listening.”

Before Nicolas could sputter a denial, Grier nodded. “He’s right. This isn’t a secure location to discuss the matters at hand.”

“There’s always my bedroom,” Nicolas purred.

White-hot anger made Alec’s stomach clench. “We’re interested in what you’re storing in your other brain,” Alec said. “The smaller one that you keep in your head.”

“Boys.” Grier laid a hand on Nicolas’s arm when he would’ve risen to confront Alec. “This antagonism is getting tiresome. Isn’t there something you can bond over? A favorite toy, perhaps?”

Alec blanched, and Nicolas—the bastard—saw it right away. “You’re so smart, Grier. It’s why I love you.” He twirled the dregs of his mimosa around the bottom of his glass. “There is one thing Alec and I share an affection for.”

The barb hit its mark. Discomfited, Alec rose from the table and paced to the opposite end of the room. He kept his back to Nicolas and Grier. “If you insist we whore ourselves out for your alleged crucial information—” He threw a dismissive glance over his shoulder. “I suppose I’ve endured worse.”

“Why you—Let me go, Grier!”

Alec turned to watch Grier wrestle Nicolas to his side. He stood and hauled the younger man out of his chair. Nicolas glared at Alec.

Grier’s voice put a chill in the air. “This ends now.” He strode forward, Nicolas’s arm gripped in his hand, and gestured Alec ahead of him onto the beach path. “Let’s take a walk.”

NOBODY spoke during the short trip to the lagoon. Once on the sand, Grier gestured Alec ahead. He went without a fuss, meandering to the shoreline, where he stood watching the water lap at his feet.

Nicolas's lip curled. "How on earth did you get paired with him?"

"It's a long story. Not," Grier said, squelching the evil twinkle in Nicolas's eye, "one you'd be interested in."

"I don't know about that." Nicolas tugged on his captured arm, and with one last warning look, Grier let him go. While Nicolas brushed at his wrinkled clothing and mumbled about brutish behavior, Grier watched Alec.

His hands were out of sight, working at something, but when his shirt billowed open on a light breeze, Grier figured out what. Alec shrugged the heavy material off his shoulders, and, after hesitating for a moment, tossed it behind him onto the dry sand.

Grier swallowed.

Nicolas gave an appreciative hum while he brushed at his trousers. "Perhaps I was too quick to judge our dear Alec."

"Leave him be," Grier snapped, then tempered his tone. "We're not here for your pleasure."

Nicolas took a break from his grooming. He glanced first to Alec, then back to Grier. "Oh, not you too."

Rather than acknowledge the cryptic remark, Grier stepped into the sun. The heat descended on him like a heavy blanket. As though he sensed Grier's presence, Alec glanced over his shoulder. Their eyes met and held.

Behind him, Nicolas sighed.

"Are you going to help me?" Grier asked.

"Yes. All right, yes." The sullen tone had disappeared. "You've just sucked all the entertainment value from the day anyway." He stuck a loafer-encased toe into the sun. "But it's far too hot to discuss it out here. You fetch Juliet, and I'll ready my office." He forestalled Grier's automatic protest. "It's safe. I promise."

He turned up the path, disappearing behind a mass of giant fronds. Steeling himself for another fight, Grier crossed the sand. By the time he reached the shoreline, he wanted to shed his own shirt, the humidity was so thick. Continuing their business in the house, spying eyes or not, was gaining appeal.

“Alec.”

“Yeah?”

Caught off-guard by the quiet tone, Grier paused. Alec’s shoulders were straight, his head high. Still, through the remnants of their mental connection, Grier could sense tendrils of uncertainty and self-doubt—the last two emotions he expected. They made him uneasy. And, if he were honest, protective. Laughable, since Alec had demonstrated more than once over the past two days that he was anything but helpless.

Grier shook off his ruminations. “Nicolas’s called a truce. He’s ready to talk if you’re ready to listen.”

He expected skepticism, but Alec nodded. “Lead the way.”

NICOLAS glanced up as Grier and Alec entered his study. “Close the door, Grier.”

Grier ran his fingers over the curved handle. “Where’s the lock?”

“I’ve got it.” The panel under his desk controlled everything from the door locks to the level of tint on his windows. He gestured for them to sit, and Alec dropped into a black wicker chaise, a picture of nonchalance. Grier opted for a straight-backed chair facing the desk. Nicolas leaned back, steepling his fingers under his chin. “Let’s get down to business, shall we?”

Alec arched an eyebrow but kept his mouth shut. Grier nodded. “What do you know?”

“That pertains to your situation? Possibly nothing. Possibly everything. Who knows what the truth is anymore?” He directed this last at Alec, stripping his usual sarcasm from the words.

Alec rubbed his forehead and frowned.

“Tell me about your father and Ethan,” Grier said. “You intimated they’d formed a partnership of sorts.”

Nicolas gave a short, disbelieving laugh. “Yes, who could’ve seen that coming, I ask you.”

“Desperate times call for desperate measures,” Alec cut in.

“And loose lips sink ships. Thank you, Alec, for exceeding our quota of idioms for the afternoon,” Nicolas said, without rancor.

“It’s the truth,” Grier said, but Nicolas waved him off.

“I do hope you’re not referring to my father. Desperate is one thing that man is not.”

“You’re implying that Ethan initiated things.” Alec scooted to the edge of the chair and sat with his elbows on his knees. “That’s not outside the realm of possibility. He tends to think outside the box. If he considered such a merger beneficial, he may well have pursued it.”

“But for what purpose?” Grier asked. “And why now?”

“I’ve heard....” Nicolas slid his fingers over his lips, weighing his next words. “That there’s a new faction of Gifteds gaining power.”

Silence from Grier and Alec implied the information was new to them.

“Like a gang?” Alec ventured.

“Nothing so innocuous, I’m afraid. These people put even my father on edge. They’re determined to upset the balance of things. Rumor has it that a few have managed to insinuate themselves near the top of the world’s most powerful governments.”

Alec slouched backward. “Oh, please. We’re speaking of elected officials here. No Gifted can influence an entire election.”

“One wouldn’t need to be at the heart of things to do damage,” Grier reminded him. “A Gifted secretary, even a janitor, if given opportunity, could change the world.”

Said so plainly, it was unnerving. Alec must’ve felt the same. With a muffled curse, he rose from his chair and paced the room. Grier

watched him; Nicolas studied them both. "Their activities have become bolder of late," he added.

"This is all coming from your father?"

Nicolas nodded, and the lines around Grier's eyes grew deeper.

"It would be so easy," Alec said as he stalked the length of the room. "They'd have to do little more than sow mistrust."

"A danger in even the best of political climates," Nicolas said.

"Why, though?"

Nicolas blinked. "Money?" His tone carried a hearty dose of condescension. "Just a guess."

"A good one, I'd wager," Grier muttered. "Could this be just smoke and mirrors? Are we sure this faction exists?"

"My father believes it does. Ethan knows it does." Nicolas played his fingers over the top of his desk before adding, "So do you." That caught their attention. "The peace summit bombing," he said.

Grier's eyes flashed. "Those terrorists—?"

"Were an offshoot of the main group," Nicolas finished, then choked when a tidal wave of anger crashed over him. He rose to his feet, but Alec got there first, crouching next to Grier's chair while he spoke in a low, soothing tone. Jealousy wasn't an emotion Nicolas allowed himself. He pushed it away, swallowing something that tasted like loss.

"That doesn't make any sense," Alec said. "Ethan put Grier undercover to *destroy* that group."

"Not his best work, I hear." Nicolas weathered Grier's furious look. "You were set up to fail, my friend."

"I'd figured that part for myself." Grier sat back, rubbing at his eyes. "Where does your father fit into all this?"

"He's been gathering his people for months. And now, I'm told, he's approached the Organization about a partnership."

"A partnership?"

“Common enemy and all.” Nicolas stood and made his way to the wet bar near the window. He’d darkened the glass to a deep charcoal gray to keep out the midday sun. Reflective on the outside, bulletproof, and impervious to long-distance listening equipment, it was state of the art and unbelievably decadent. He’d installed it last year, believing it another shiny toy, nothing more.

But it had come in handy today, and didn’t that threaten to plunge him into a foul mood. He thrust his hand into the ice well, then hissed when his finger caught on a razor-sharp shard. “Damn it.” He held it over the sink while he fumbled for a napkin.

“Here. Let me.”

Nicolas startled at Alec’s voice, but what shocked was his gentle touch. He wrapped a bar towel around the tip of Nicolas’s bleeding finger, then scooped some ice into a crystal tumbler and—after a sideways glance—filled it with sparkling water.

Nicolas took a long, thoughtful sip before speaking. “Thank you.”

“Are you all right?” Grier came up behind him, allowing Alec to escape.

“Fine. Where were we?”

“Common enemy.”

“Ah.” He returned to his seat, still cradling his finger close to his stomach and eyeing Alec. “Well, it’s self-explanatory, isn’t it? United front and all that rubbish. Ethan has allowed my father’s people to join some of their current operations. In return, Roman shares intelligence with the Directorate about the activities of this new group as it comes to him.”

Alec spoke up. “You’re talking in circles. Whose side are you accusing Ethan of helping? Do you expect me to believe that Roman Petrov, your father—one of the most self-serving men on the planet, if Grier’s opinion is anything to go by—is concerned about the level of suffering in the world?”

Nicolas laughed. “He is a bastard, isn’t he?”

Grier snorted as he raided the bar, plopping ice cubes one by one into his glass.

“Say what you will about my father, Alec, but his interests are diversified and profitable in *peace* time. He has no desire to see the world at war. Ethan, on the other hand... his fingers have been in every international incident for the past twenty years. No one understands the workings of the world’s governments better than he. Who knows what motivates him?”

“I do,” Grier answered. “The Organization. It’s his child. His prodigal. He wouldn’t take kindly to having it threatened. By anybody.”

Nicolas rocked back in his chair. “Even by the most powerful people in the world?”

“What are you suggesting?”

“That the bombing was a warning?” Nicolas spread his hands in front of him. “A statement.”

“By whom? And *to* whom?” Grier returned to his seat. He’d chosen something a bit stronger than water, Nicolas saw. “And why would Roman align himself with Ethan if he believes the man a traitor?”

“I didn’t say I had all the answers, Grier.”

“Who’s leading this mysterious group?” Alec asked.

“I don’t know.”

Silence followed his statement. Hunched over, eyes on the floor, Alec radiated an agitation so thick it made Nicolas’s skin crawl. Grier twirled melting ice cubes round the bottom of his glass. “What else can you tell us?”

“Not much. I’m included in very little, you know.”

“By your own choice.”

“Yes.” He was the proverbial black sheep, with no interest in his father’s plans for grandeur and power. The methods turned his stomach, something Roman accepted, though not with any measure of grace. The kindest thing he ever said about his son was that he knew his own mind. His criticisms were more cutting, but as Nicolas had little more than a thimbleful of love for the man, the barbs flew wide.

“I don’t trust your father,” Grier said.

“I know.” Few did, and with good reason.

“Be careful.”

“Always,” Nicolas replied with an untroubled smile. His personal safety wasn’t something he’d worried over in the past. How things did change.

Grier and Alec shared a glance—Nicolas beat down another wave of jealousy—then Grier snatched a slip of paper from the desk. He jotted something down and handed it to Nicolas. “Call if you discover anything else that might help us.”

“Us?”

A muscle twitched in Grier’s jaw. “Alec.”

Nicolas accepted the paper. “A new cell phone?”

“No. And I’ll be disposing of the old one soon. That number’s for a message service. Just leave your name. I’ll be in touch.”

“A message service,” Nicolas said with a sneer. “How very 1980. Very well, but I’d like the same courtesy, if you don’t mind.” Involved or no, it paid to be well informed. He slipped the phone number into his pocket. “And now, as I promised, transportation. Where would you like to go?”

Grier thought for a moment. “Some place where Ethan and Roman can’t find us.”

“The South Pole?”

“Richmond, Virginia,” Alec said. Then, to Grier, “I have a friend in that area. She can help us.”

“No. There’ll be an agent on every person you know, down to your paperboy, hoping they’ll be the lucky one to find us when we surface.”

“Nobody in the Organization knows these people. I’ve made sure. Grier,” he said, when the other man started to shake his head, “they have a place we can hide. You’ve done what you said you would, but I still have my portion of the bargain to fulfill.”

Nicolas hummed and meandered to the bar. “Ooh. That sounds promising. Take pictures, Grier.” He laughed at Alec’s blush, but fell silent when his gaze caught the bloody towel wrapped around his finger.

“Grier,” Alec said. “Trust me.”

Nicolas went still, his hand hovering over the decanter of brandy. From the corner of his eye, he saw Grier nod. Jaw tight, he poured a double shot. “Richmond, it is.”

CHAPTER 8

NORA pressed against the car door, making herself as small as possible. Beside her, Ethan rolled a quarter back and forth between his knuckles. She watched from the corner of her eye, but didn't stare outright. The trick was meant to mesmerize her. She knew his ways.

The cab hit a bump, and the quarter fell, then stopped in mid-air before floating back into Ethan's palm. He closed his fist around it. Nora glanced at his face and then snapped her eyes back to the window. Before her fidgeting gave her away, she removed her glasses and rubbed them with a corner of her shirt. Expression pinched, like he had a bad taste in his mouth, Ethan began rolling the coin again. "Nora?"

She rubbed harder. "Yes, sir?"

"Nora?" A warning this time—albeit a gentle one. She turned to meet his eyes.

"Sir?"

"I want—"

His cell phone rang, and Nora melted with relief.

Ethan's clipped, "Yes?" made her glad she wasn't the one who'd disturbed him. His eyes narrowed as he listened. "Richmond? You're positive?" He cradled the phone between his cheek and shoulder and extracted a tiny gold pen from his pocket. At his snap, Nora produced a pad of paper. She didn't look at what he scribbled across it. "When do they land? Yes, I have it. Is Petrov with them?"

Nora perked up. She knew the name. But did Ethan mean the father or the son?

"Thank you." Ethan snapped the phone closed. Nora's curiosity was piqued, but she sure as hell wasn't going to ask. "Nora," he said again, his tone the same, as if they'd never been interrupted. And yet, his face had changed. He looked bleaker than before.

“Yes, sir?”

“How did Alec strike you, the last time you were bonded?”

“Sir?” Nora squeaked. “I’m not sure I understand.”

“Did he seem troubled?”

“He seemed... tired,” Nora answered.

“When he broke your connection, was he angry?”

Her hesitation damned her, yet Ethan showed no anger. He sighed and once again the quarter began to roll. Back and forth. Back and forth. Nora ripped her eyes away when she felt them drooping.

Ethan sighed. “What are you up to, Alec?”

ON GUARD for additional hostility, Alec was surprised when Nicolas excused himself to make their arrangements without a single snide word. Left to his own devices, he paced the room, stopping to browse the titles in a small bookshelf. “Hey, these are all in Russian.”

Grier roused from his thoughts. “Yes.”

“Huh.” Alec frowned at the bookcase.

“Are you surprised Nicolas reads Russian?”

“I’m surprised he reads,” Alec muttered, sliding his finger over the spines. “Doesn’t he have someone do it for him?”

Grier joined him and plucked a leather-bound book from the shelf. “I suppose he might,” he said, examining the title. “That bothers you?”

It did, but why? That’s what Grier was asking.

Maybe because of Nicolas’s wandering hands? With a scowl, Alec squelched the thought. He dropped into Nicolas’s chair and perused the items that littered his desk. He opened his mouth, then snapped it shut when he tasted another sharp insult on the tip of his tongue.

A knowing smile crept over Grier's face. He replaced the first book and chose another. "Who are these people you spoke of? The ones in Richmond."

"I'll tell you their names later. I'm sorry, but I've kept the Organization's eye off of them for ten years. I'm not going to risk that now."

Sighing, Grier snapped his book shut. "You still don't trust Nicolas."

Fuck, no, Alec tried to say, but what emerged was, "I'm starting to." He rolled his eyes. His subconscious was starting to scare him. "The people in Richmond are old friends. Well, one is. From my childhood."

"You're still a child."

The criticism held little sting. Grier was staring out the window at the water, pensive once more. Turning the tables, Alec asked, "How long have you known Nicolas?"

"Eight years. Longer, if you count how long I knew *of* him."

"He gets around?"

Grier shot him a look. "You could say that. Ethan wanted him very badly."

"Really?" It was hard to picture. Maybe because he didn't want to. Or perhaps because the idea of Nicolas being anyone's play toy was ridiculous. Alec had known the man three hours and already accepted that. "He usually gets what he wants."

"Who are we talking about again?"

Alec laughed. "I'm beginning to see your point. Ethan and Nicolas—it wouldn't have been a good fit in the long run."

"Oh, I don't know." Grier had grown pensive again. "Life under his father's thumb is no picnic."

The annoyance returned, niggling. He was inclined to agree. Grier's portrait of Roman hadn't been flattering, and knowing he and Ethan were working together left Alec uneasy.

Nicolas returned in a subdued mood, closing the door behind him before he spoke. "It's done. You leave in three hours."

“Thank you.” Grier stood, and Alec followed his lead. “I’d like to get some sleep, if you have no objections.”

“None. Alec?” Nicolas tilted his head at Alec’s blank look. “Would you care to rest?”

Alec shook his head. “Too keyed up. What else do you have to do around here?”

“Ah.” A spark of playfulness returned. “I’m sure we can come up with something. Grier, you’re capable of finding a bed on your own, aren’t you?” Nicolas threw the door open and ushered Alec out. “I think I have just the thing. Do you box, Alec?”

Grier tagged along behind, frowning. “Perhaps—”

“Get some sleep,” Alec said. “I’ll be fine.” Already the tension was spiraling higher, spurred by the promised challenge. He’d welcome the chance to work out some aggression. Working it out on Nicolas would be a bonus.

Nicolas shoved Grier into the nearest guest room. “Nighty-night,” he said with a curt wave. “Don’t worry about Alec. I promise not to hurt him. *Too* much.” He closed the door in Grier’s face. “Come on. Let’s see if any of my toys make you happy.”

Alec studied Nicolas as they walked. He moved with a fluid grace that Alec lacked, but then Alec also had two inches and a good twenty pounds on him. He bet Nicolas relied on all that fancy footwork too, something Alec had never mastered.

They descended two flights past various utility rooms to a set of double doors. Nicolas pushed them open and marched inside. Whatever Alec had been expecting, this unadorned room wasn’t it. “What, no naked attendants?”

Nicolas flicked on the overhead lights. “I can arrange for some if they motivate you.” He smiled sweetly. “Perhaps Grier would indulge us.”

Alec swallowed noisily. That was the last thing he needed to be thinking about. “Nah.” He took a deep breath of musty air, inspecting the floor mats and punching bags. Along the far wall, a bank of open cabinets held towels, tape, and other odds and ends. A bench ran the

length, with pairs of boxing gloves lined up neatly above it. Grinning, Alec rubbed his hands together.

“You never answered my question,” Nicolas said as they moved toward the bench. “Do you box?”

“I dabble.” A pair of jet black gloves caught Alec’s eye, and he scooped them up, testing the weight. He guessed at least sixteen ounces. Perfect. “You?”

“Never before in my life.” Nicolas pulled a pair of shorts off the shelf and began stripping down. He threw Alec some wraps. “And take your hands off my gloves.”

Being right about something had never been so painful, Alec decided. Twenty minutes later, he stood in a semi-crouch, trying to catch his breath while Nicolas danced around him, feet a blur. Nicolas’s, “Had enough?” pulled a snarl from his throat. He straightened his stance and began to stalk him across the floor.

Nicolas blocked his next jab and cross—slippery bastard—but couldn’t dodge Alec’s hook. He went down hard. Alec leaned over him. “Had enough?”

Nicolas sighed. Through the headgear it sounded like a snake hissing. “I think... yes.”

“Thank fucking God.” Alec left him on the floor and stumbled to the bench. He peeled the tape loose with his teeth and pried the gloves off, then sagged against the wall, grinning so wide his jaw hurt. His head ached, but the adrenaline rush was keeping it in check. So was the sight of Nicolas limping his way, looking disheveled and not one bit the uptight aristocrat. Alec grabbed a thick white towel off the top of the pile and lobbed it at him.

Nicolas caught it out of the air before it smacked him in the face. “Thanks.”

“God, I needed that.” The endorphins sharpened his awareness to near painful levels. He felt it all. The trickle of perspiration between his shoulder blades. The pull of overused muscles. The cold air gushing out of the air conditioner vent above his head. Nicolas’s presence beside him, and the dual thump of their hearts.

“You’re a brute.” Nicolas wiped the sweat from his face and neck.

“Yeah. You’re not bad either.”

Nicolas groaned into the towel. “That wasn’t a compliment.”

“Sure it wasn’t.”

They both looked up when the doors opened. Grier’s sigh carried all the way across the room. “Is there blood?”

“Nope.” Alec looked Nicolas up and down. “I was gentle.”

“Caveman ego is not charming. Grier, tell him.”

Grier watched from the door, saying nothing.

“I wasn’t trying to be charming.”

“Sadly, I knew that.” Nicolas winced as he stood. “I need a shower. If you’ll excuse me.” Grier let him go, but a look passed between them, something intimate. Alec felt too sated to care.

Grier nudged the abandoned gloves out of the way and sat. He crossed his legs and stared down his nose at Alec. “Did it occur to you that your little grudge match might have exacerbated your headaches?”

“Nope. I feel great.” He turned his grin on Grier, dipping his gaze to take in the other man’s rumpled appearance. “Get any sleep?”

“None, of course.”

Alec smirked at the tone and continued his perusal, letting his eyes linger where they wanted. He thumped a fist on the abandoned gloves. “Wanna get sweaty?”

Grier’s inhaled sharply, nostrils flaring. He sifted a hand through Alec’s damp hair. “Is that an invitation?”

High on endorphins, Alec laughed. “Didn’t it fucking sound like one?”

Grier didn’t answer. His fingers twisted and tangled in the hair at Alec’s nape.

Alec leaned into the caress. You know,” he said, “once Nicolas takes a few punches, he isn’t so bad.”

Grier blinked. "That's the sort of statement that makes psychoanalysts come in their pants, you realize."

Alec rubbed the towel through his hair. "What's a little transference between friends?"

"Friends?"

"He's quick on his feet, though. I was right about that. It's hard to get under his defenses."

Grier stood and offered his hand, which Alec took. "Let's hope his luck holds."

THE Learjet that had brought them to the island waited on the runway. Their pilot sat on the steps, smoking a thick cigar, sporting the same cap and shorts as that morning, though the shirt was now electric blue with red Mustang convertibles. He saluted Alec as he climbed out of the car.

"Thank you," Grier said when Nicolas stepped out.

"Not as entertaining as usual, but I forgive you." He nodded at Alec. "Good luck."

"Thanks."

Grier took Nicolas's arm and led him around the other side of the car. Alec slung both of their duffels over his shoulder and walked away before Grier's quiet words carried to his ears. Privacy had been at a premium. It was the least he could do.

The pilot motioned for Alec to hand him the bags, and he tossed them up before glancing over his shoulder. Grier was walking toward him. Behind, Nicolas stood at the open door to his limo, watching. Alec raised a hand, and Nicolas returned the gesture before disappearing inside the car.

"Ready, kittens?" the pilot asked as Grier reached the steps.

This time, Alec chose one of the seats, Grier took the one opposite, and five minutes later the plane lifted into the air, the pilot's voice ringing through the speaker: "I gave a letter to the postman. He put it in his sack. Bright and early next mornin'. He brought my letter

back.” He smacked his gum. It sounded like a firecracker over the intercom. “*Goin’ to Richmond.*”

They leveled off high above the clouds. “Feel free to prow! about the cabin,” the pilot droned. “Should be smooth sailing.” The opening chords of *Crying in the Chapel* drifted out of the speakers.

Alec shook his head when Grier offered him a drink. The tension he’d shed was already creeping back. He flashed to the house by the lake, and the desperation in Grier’s voice. Then to Nicolas, and the cat-and-mouse game he played with his father. To Nora, and her insistence he do what was required to stay safe.

“What are you thinking about?” Grier asked, watching from across the table.

“Nora,” Alec said. “My Monitor for this assignment,” he clarified.

Grier nodded. “Nora Picket?”

“You know her?”

“I do. She’s one of the best.”

Maybe, but still.... “She lied to me.” *And then I hurt her.*

He hadn’t been asking for comfort. Again, Grier surprised him.

“Nora has the poor luck of being very good at her job. I suspect you can commiserate.” His voice grew thoughtful. “I imagine there are many like her, caught up in something they wish they weren’t.”

RICHMOND looked small from the air, a cluster of lights that fanned out to the east like a glass of spilled milk. Alec watched the city grow as they descended, already anticipating the visit despite the circumstances. His headache had faded without his usual potent cocktail of drugs. He couldn’t remember the last time that had happened.

“Nicolas arranged a car for us,” Grier said, strapping on his seatbelt. “Where in Richmond do your friends live?”

“They don’t,” Alec said, buckling up. “They live in Annapolis. I didn’t want to pick an airport any closer.”

Grier accepted this in silence. “Let’s hope they’re amenable to helping us.”

“That won’t be a problem.” Because they had a few minutes to spare, and Alec felt it was time, he gave Grier the details he’d been holding back. “Their names are Amelia and Henri Baptiste. I’ve known Amelia the longest. We went to school together. Henri, her husband, I’ve known for about six years. He’s a doctor.”

“How have you managed to keep your association with them a secret?”

“With great care.”

The pilot taxied to a hangar on the outskirts of the commercial terminal. At the door, he handed them their duffels, then fled back into the cockpit.

“Not very talkative,” Alec remarked as they walked away.

“No.” Grier pointed to the bulky shadow at the end of the hangar. “That’s our transportation.”

The walk from the plane to the car wasn’t even a hundred yards, and the area looked deserted, but Alec’s senses prickled. His step faltered. “Grier.”

Grier glanced over his shoulder, and Alec held out his hand. Stop.

“What is it?” Grier asked, turning.

“There’s something—” He knew before he finished the sentence. Sensed Kay’s presence in the building beyond. Saw the red dot centered on Grier’s chest. Grier followed his gaze down.

“Run, Alec,” he said, and Alec did.

But not away.

He threw himself forward, tackling Grier even as he felt Kay pull the trigger. He took the bullet in his right side, just above his hip, and it burrowed into his flesh like someone had stabbed him with a burning spear. For a moment, his body went numb and the sound was sucked from the night. Then he landed on top of Grier, and the world snapped back into focus. He stifled his cry of pain in Grier’s shoulder.

Grier rolled them, pulling another scream from Alec when his weight fell on the bullet wound, and they crashed against the side of the hangar. “Don’t move,” Grier snarled.

Alec sucked in a pained breath. “No problem.”

Rising to his haunches like a wolf, Grier went still while he scanned the area, then loped into the dark, his soft-soled shoes making almost no sound on the asphalt. Cursing his helplessness, Alec watched him go. At least it was an even match. Kay could no more hide from Grier than he from her. Kay had a gun, but her element of surprise was gone.

Grier’s voice cut into his head. *Hide*. Then, *she’s coming*.

He tried. But every time he pressed a hand to the wound to stem the bleeding, the spike of pain took his breath away. Shock set in, dulling his reactions. He couldn’t center.

Alec! Hide yourself.

“I’m trying, you son of a bitch.”

He closed his eyes. Cool metal at his back. Breathe. Pebbles under his cheek. Breathe. Concentrate. Focus.

The screen came down. The blood seeping out of his side darkened from crimson to maroon. The sounds he’d heard clearly moments before—the slap of running feet, the bang of a door—disappeared. The sharp smell of gasoline faded, and the night grew even darker. He’d done it. Grier had left him deep in the shadow of the hangar wall. Short of Kay stepping on him, he was safe. Now it was a waiting game.

By the time Grier appeared out of the dark and dropped to his knees beside him, anxiety was giving the pain a run for its money. “Are you all right?”

Grier helped him struggle into a sitting position. “Fine. You?”

“Never better. Where is she?”

“She ran. Cowardly bitch. Can you stand?”

“Yeah.” But Grier supported more of his weight than he did. He gritted his teeth, ignoring the fresh warmth spreading across his hip. “The car?”

“Compromised.” They’d reached the edge of the building.

“Shit,” was all he got out before Grier was moving again, dragging Alec across the open expanse of tarmac. Every drop of strength went into staying upright while they sprinted through the bright light.

In the shadow of the next hangar, they found a lot full of cars. “Here,” Grier said, thumping Alec against the passenger door of the closest. “Perfect.”

Alec squinted. “A Kia? No way. I’ve got standards.”

His protests fell on deaf ears. Grier pushed him in. “You’ll have to suffer. The doors are unlocked. We’re taking this one.” Grumbling, Alec fumbled in the console, found nothing, then flipped open the driver’s seat visor. The keys dropped into Grier’s lap as he swung into his seat. Grier scooped them up, shaking his head. “Under the visor,” he said as he sped out of the lot. “Such sophisticated anti-theft measures.”

“Maybe they want it stolen. Did you ever think about that? It’s a *Kia*.” Grier took a speed bump at fifty miles per hour, and Alec yelped. “Okay, no more jokes, I promise.” He fumbled to put pressure where blood was bubbling out of the bullet hole. “Just please don’t do that again,” he wheezed.

Grier killed the headlights, buried the speedometer needle, and shot up the narrow access road to the highway. Bypassing the entry ramp, he drove several blocks into the city before pulling into an alley. “How bad is it?”

“Hurts like a bastard.”

Grier rummaged in the backseat, emerging with a wrinkled towel. Folded over twice, it made a passable bandage. “Hold that.”

“Okay.” It took Alec three tries, but he managed to wedge it under his elbow. His stomach protested the exertion. “Don’t feel so good.”

Grier pulled back onto the road. “You need a hospital.”

“No.”

“Alec—”

“Henri’s a doctor. Just stick with the original plan. Take 301 north to Route 50, then east into Annapolis.”

“What’s the address?”

The information took forever to come to mind. Alec recited it twice, gave crude directions, and Grier nodded. “I’ll find it.”

“Yeah. Okay.” His fingers felt icy, and a bone-deep cold set his teeth chattering. Unconsciousness pulled like a riptide. Voices rang in his head. Kay’s. Nicolas’s. Grier’s.

“Hang on,” Grier’s voice was saying. “Hang on.”

CHAPTER 9

AMERICAN suburbia: a combination of prosperity and debt, little league and little affairs, and young people living old dreams. Grier hated it. He couldn't deny, however, its suitability as a hiding place. How fortunate that Alec's friend and her husband wallowed here.

His concern for Alec grew with each passing mile. He lay slumped against the door, arm curled over the bandage Grier had pressed against the wound. Shallow, wheezing gasps came far too infrequently for Grier's taste. An hour ago, Alec had given up the ruse that the injury was superficial and opted for petulant silence. To preserve some of the boy's dignity, Grier let him pretend.

He swung his eyes back to the road, slowing the car as he turned onto the Baptistes's street for the third time. Cruising the block would rouse suspicion sooner or later. He'd already made two passes by the house, and though another was prudent, he couldn't risk it. Alec was getting worse.

Grier slowed the car and pulled to the curb in front of the Baptistes's home, a sprawling cookie-cutter colonial with a white picket fence. A generous covered porch was trimmed out in white railings and gingerbread molding. He glanced around at the few close neighbors, taking in their similar snow-white dwellings, and shook his head.

He put the car in park and killed the lights. Regardless of what Alec thought of these people, Grier didn't trust them. He needed to be cautious, and dragging a gunshot victim onto the porch to bleed all over that pristine white wood wouldn't make the best first impression. He leaned across the seat and cupped Alec's cheek in his hand. "Alec." Alec's eyelids fluttered. He groaned but gave no sign he knew where he was. Grier's jaw clenched at the lines of pain etched into his face.

“Alec,” he said again, louder this time. Alec opened his eyes and blinked.

“Are we there?” he croaked. He shifted to look out the window, but Grier held him still.

“Yes,” he said. “I’ll be right back.”

“I should go. Talk to Amelia.”

“No.” Grier stroked his thumb over Alec’s cheek. “Stay here. Moving will aggravate the injury, and you can’t stand to lose more blood.”

“But—”

“Don’t move.”

Alec’s eyes slid shut at the rebuke. “Yes, Mother.”

Grier climbed out and started up the front walk. A motion lamp clicked on, bathing the porch in yellow light, and he paused before cursing and climbing the last two steps to the front door. He cast his senses out, but besides the orange cat slinking through the rose bushes, he found nothing. He wasn’t being watched, proving his agitation wasn’t due to any threat, but rather to the man bleeding to death inside their stolen car.

No one answered the doorbell, and Grier frowned. He heard snatches of thoughts and conversation from within; the house wasn’t empty. He rang again, twice, and a moment later heavy footsteps approached. Grier braced himself as a tall, red-haired man yanked the door open. His eyes raked Grier head to toe. “May I help you?” he asked, voice brusque.

“I hope so,” Grier answered. “I’m looking for Amelia Baptiste.”

Henri Baptiste was as Alec described: imposing, with a thick head of ginger hair and a beard to match. He wore a cabled cardigan over a dress shirt and tan Dockers. At Grier’s words, he stepped over the threshold and set his hands on his hips. “May I ask why?”

Grier sighed. Seeking help here had been a mistake. He’d thought about healing Alec on his own, but his skills were inadequate to the task. He couldn’t remove a bullet with his mind, no matter how much he wanted to. “I’m here on behalf of a friend. A Mr. Alec Devlin.”

Baptiste drew back, inhaling sharply. Grier tensed. “And would that be Alec’s blood all over you, sir?” Baptiste asked.

Grier glanced down at his shirt, noticing the dark red blotches that covered a fair portion of its front. He raised his eyes until they met Baptiste’s. “It is,” he admitted.

“Henri? Who is it?” A woman bustled forward and ducked under Baptiste’s arm. The top of her head barely brushed the middle of his chest. She slid her reading glasses up over her forehead as she squinted at Grier. Cut into a fashionable bob, her black hair accentuated her milky skin and dainty features. “Who are you?”

Baptiste stepped in front of her, but she shouldered in front again, and he settled for a restraining hand on her arm. “This man is here about Alec, or so he says.”

Grier let his silence answer for him.

Amelia focused on his stained shirt. “Where is he? Where is Alec?”

Grier looked over his shoulder to the car idling at the curb. He wasn’t shocked when Amelia gasped and tried to rush past. She was too fast for her husband, but Grier caught her by the hand. “Wait.”

She rounded on him like an angry cat, eyes blazing. “Is he dead?”

“No.” Grier glanced up and down the street. “But I doubt you want your neighbors to see him in his current condition.”

“That’s our driveway, there.” Baptiste pointed and stepped forward to take Amelia. She struggled, but this time he held tight. “Pull back by the garage. There’s a door there that leads to my home office.” His instructions were matter-of-fact, but his voice was cold. Grier didn’t take it personally.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet.” Baptiste steered Amelia inside. “I’ll meet you in back.”

Grier ran down the sidewalk to the car and slipped behind the wheel. Alec was unconscious again. Fresh blood had leaked over his hand where he held the makeshift bandage. Grier jerked the car into gear and coasted up the curved driveway. An addition with its own covered porch and private entrance extended behind the main house,

and he parked beside it. Baptiste was at the passenger door before he'd shut off the engine, opening it and catching Alec's limp body when it slid forward. Behind him, Amelia cried out. "Get the door, Amy," he ordered.

He hoisted Alec into his arms and carried him up the steps and inside. Grier lingered, eyes scanning the darkness, but high hedges hid the yard from neighbor's prying eyes. So far, so good.

He locked the car and trudged up the steps into the office. Amelia was drawing the blinds when he came in. Alec and Baptiste were nowhere in sight, though Grier heard the faint echo of movement in the room beyond. He helped Amelia until all four windows were covered, then stood in the center of the room and let her glare at him. He couldn't say the slap, when it came, was unexpected. "I suppose you think you don't deserve that," she spat, backing away, small chest heaving.

Grier touched his stinging cheek. "I do."

She deflated, then turned and buried her face in her hands. "Why?" she asked, voice muffled. "Why does he do this?"

An excellent question with many answers, but Grier wouldn't speak for Alec. She spun back. "Are you reading my mind right now?"

"No."

"Prove it."

He couldn't. All he had was a code of ethics he followed to the letter and a measure of honor. Neither of those things would impress her. Grier sank onto a padded seat, exhausted. "I can't." And he didn't care. His concern was for Alec, not what this woman thought of him.

Again the anger seemed to leave her, but even Grier, who wasn't empathic in the least, sensed her lingering distress. She was trembling, in mild shock. He reached for her hand. "Please. Would you check with your husband for me? I'd like to know if Alec is all right."

She frowned at their joined fingers, then nodded. "I don't know your name."

"It's Grier."

“I’m Amelia.” She sniffed, gave his hand a loose shake, then let go.

Grier smiled. “I know.”

With that fragile peace between them, she turned, tapped a quiet knock on the exam room door, and slipped inside. Grier heard her ask a muffled question. Baptiste’s rumbling baritone answered, and a moment later, the door opened, and Baptiste joined him in the waiting room. He chose a chair close by and settled into it with a sigh. Red spatters dotted his cardigan and pants.

Grier tore his gaze away from the blood. “How is he?”

“Stable. For now. I’m a bit worried about infection, but the wound is straightforward and there was little serious damage. Some torn muscle, blood loss.” He folded his hands in his lap. “What can you tell me about what happened?”

Grier hesitated. “What do you need to know?”

“Any additional information would be useful.”

There was just enough truth in the statement that Grier couldn’t outright call Baptiste a liar. He answered with his own half-truths. “The less I tell you, the better.”

Baptiste snorted. “For who?”

“For all of us.”

“Grier, is it?” Baptiste abandoned his pose of disinterest and leaned forward. “Amelia told me your name.”

Grier shrugged.

“I’ve learned over the years not to question Alec. He’s a good friend. An extraordinary friend, but I know just slightly more about him than I do about you. Do you find that strange?”

“I find it unsurprising.”

“I thought you might.” Baptiste glanced to the closed door of the exam room. “I don’t ask unnecessary questions, and I won’t start now. For his safety, I need to know as much as you can tell me about how he was shot.”

Saying he stepped in front of a bullet meant for Grier would be imprudent, nor was it important clinically, but the information was on

the tip of his tongue, along with the sharp taste of guilt. Grier swallowed it back. "It was a rifle."

"I figured that for myself. Approximate range?"

Grier replayed the scene in his head. "A hundred yards maybe."

"How long ago?"

"Three hours." Grier began to relax.

"I'll refrain from asking why you didn't go to the ER, although I'd like to know what your plans had been if you hadn't been able to come to us."

Not a medically relevant question. Grier ignored it and volleyed with, "We were on our way here, as it happens."

To this, Baptiste laughed. "I don't believe it. Alec treats Amelia with kid gloves. He never comes unless it's safe. Never. That much I *do* know about him." He pinned Grier with a narrowed gaze.

"I'll have to let Alec tell the rest. He has some questions for you. And a favor."

Baptiste blew out a breath. "Things must be dire."

Not for Grier, but he wasn't the one with a hole in his side. More guilt washed up his throat, and Baptiste's next words didn't help.

"He has a contusion. Here." Baptiste pressed a finger to a spot on the back of his head. "Can you explain that?"

Grier stifled the urge to laugh. "Glass ashtray. That was a couple of days ago." He noticed Baptiste didn't blink at the remark.

"Did he receive treatment for that?"

I stuffed him in a trunk. Grier winced. "Rudimentary."

"It looks bad enough to have caused a concussion. Has he been nauseous, suffering headaches?"

Yes, as a matter of fact, but Grier had assumed they were symptoms of mental trauma, not physical. Fuck. No wonder Alec had been popping his pills like candy. Grier swiped a hand over his face, forgetting he hadn't answered Baptiste until the man spoke again.

"Are *you* injured?"

Grier took measure of Baptiste's tone before answering. "No."

"Relax. I'm not going to poison you. You weren't the one who pulled the trigger." He paused. "Were you?"

"No." He'd considered it though, not all that long ago. Something else he wouldn't mention. The thought of hurting Alec now felt foreign. "May I see him?"

Baptiste stroked his beard, then nodded. He motioned to the door.

The room was dim and smelled of disinfectant. Real wood cabinets instead of laminate erased some of the impersonal feel of the space. The tools of Baptiste's trade were well hidden in frosted glass jars and behind cupboard doors, and the walls were painted a light sage green. Grier avoided the trail of blood droplets spread across the wood floor and stepped close to Alec's bed.

Amelia sat at his side, his big hand clasped her in tiny one. Her eyes were shiny with tears, but she wasn't crying. She ignored Grier, and he took the hint. Without a word, he hooked the rolling stool with his foot, pulled it alongside the bed, then sat. Alec's chest rose and fell with steady, unlabored breaths, his face lax with whatever pain medication Baptiste had pumped into him. His filthy clothes were gone, but trails of dried blood still decorated his chest and stomach.

Grier fetched a washcloth from beside the sink, wet it, then began to wipe the blood from his skin, but Amelia stayed his hand. "Let me." She pried the cloth away. "Please."

He gave in, but kept a close watch as she worked, humming approval at her thoroughness. "You've done this before. Do you have children?"

She made a sound low in her throat, then shook her head. She didn't elaborate, and Grier didn't ask her to. "I've been helping Henri with his patients for years." She paused, cloth hovering over a smudge of dried blood. "I've never had to do this for Alec though."

Was that censure in her tone? He refused to probe her thoughts, not after being accused of doing so earlier. He'd thought her anger had been for him alone. Now he wondered. "He cares for you. Your safety has always been his paramount concern."

“More paramount than his own, I happen to know. There’ve been a few times—” She went to rinse the cloth. “Never mind. The more he visits, the greater chance someone will find a connection between us. That’s what he says.”

“He’s telling the truth.”

Amelia nodded. “He never did want me in his world.”

“It was for your own protection.”

She sniffed and started to reply when Alec stirred. His head rolled toward Grier’s side of the bed, and his eyes fluttered open. Grier leaned in. “Alec?”

Alec gave a lopsided smile. “Wow. I feel great.”

Grier ignored Amelia’s soft trill of laughter. “You’re full of painkillers.”

“So.” Alec lifted a shaky hand, and Grier took it, curling their fingers together. Alec’s hand was cold, and Grier set to rubbing some warmth into it. “So,” Alec started again, “I should keep my mouth shut before I say something I’ll regret?”

“Yes.”

“Hey, you know what—?”

“Take your own excellent advice,” Grier said. “Don’t speak.”

Alec’s grin got wider. “Okay, but... thanks.”

“For letting you get shot?”

“For getting me here. I was starting to feel like shit.”

Grier bit his tongue until his eyes watered. He set Alec’s hand aside and pushed back. The stool rolled away. “You were starting to *look* like shit. Go to sleep.” He pushed the suggestion, just a little.

Alec sighed. “Okay.” When his breathing had evened out, Grier indulged in his own examination, stealing into Alec’s mind to check his condition. Baptiste had called him stable, and Grier found nothing to contradict that. He withdrew, relieved.

Across the table, Amelia stared at him with new eyes. “Forgive me. I didn’t realize.”

Knowing it was a mistake, Grier asked, “Didn’t realize what?”

"I thought you were just another one of those people. I didn't realize you were friends."

Friends. Maybe. And that's all they'd ever be, in all likelihood. But the situation *had* forced a bond between them, both literal and figurative. Denying it made little sense at this point. Grier's face twisted into a scowl. Next thing, Alec would assume Grier was an active member in his little crusade. "We're acquaintances," Grier snapped.

Amelia clucked her tongue and resumed sponging Alec clean. "Alec doesn't let people get close."

He'd known that, on some level. Just not the reason behind it.

"That's why I know you're more than acquaintances. He touched you."

Grier rolled his eyes. "He's higher than a kite."

"God, you are so like him," Amelia said under her breath. She made one final swipe across Alec's neck, then set the cloth aside. She patted him dry with a soft towel, and Grier pulled the sheet up over his chest. Together, they stood over his bed, watching him breathe until Amelia shook herself. "Are you hungry? I've got the remnants of our dinner, if you're interested."

"Coffee," Grier said, "would be much appreciated."

"Mmm." Amelia washed her hands. "And food, I think. You look like you could use it. He'll be fine," she said, when Grier didn't follow her to the door. "Sleeping like a baby. Come on." She led him down a long hallway that emptied into the main part of the house. Baptiste was already in the kitchen, setting another place at the table. Grier took in the intimate, candlelit setting, and understood why his first knock had gone unanswered.

"I apologize for ruining your meal."

Baptiste grunted and took a casserole dish from Amelia. "It wouldn't be the first time. I saw a patient on our wedding night, if I recall." He hovered over the table, frowning at the flickering candles. "Don't apologize for bringing Alec." He looked ready to say more, perhaps a roundabout insult directed at Grier, but Amelia shushed him.

"Let's eat. Before it goes cold again. Grier, sit here."

The remnants of the Baptistes's dinner would have made Nicolas's mouth water. Rack of lamb, cooked to perfection, and wild rice with shallots. To his embarrassment, Grier's stomach grumbled when Amelia sat his plate in front of him.

Baptiste pointed with a fork. "This is our anniversary dinner. Consider yourself lucky. Amelia doesn't work this kind of magic every day. She's a busy woman."

"Thank you," seemed the appropriate response to Baptiste's veiled annoyance. The man was king of his domain, and Grier had no desire to fight him for the title. He obliged Amelia and ate when prompted. She offered him wine, a Riesling that smelled crisp and fruity, but Grier declined. He'd hoped the delayed meal would result in more eating and less conversation, but Baptiste managed to shovel food into his mouth and still fire off enough questions that Grier's food was cool before his plate was half empty.

"How long have you known Alec?" Baptiste asked around a mouthful of rice.

Grier chewed while deciding his answer. "Not long, despite what your wife believes."

"What kind of trouble is he in?"

"You'll need to discuss that with him. I'm sorry."

"Does this have to do with that conglomerate he works for?"

Grier's answers grew repetitive and awkward. Baptiste had said he knew little about Alec, and he hadn't been lying. As soon as the other man took a sip of wine, Grier launched a defensive strike. "You're right. You don't know him at all. How does this friendship between you survive?"

Amelia went still, but Baptiste, to his credit, shrugged. He refilled his glass. "He was Amelia's friend when she needed one. He protected her. Over the years, he's become a sort of... guardian angel, if you will." He drank his wine. "Let's just say we owe him."

CONSCIOUSNESS came long before Alec opened his eyes. A hazy memory of Henri leaning over him and Amelia's low-pitched voice in his ear blunted the urge to panic. He remembered Grier forcing him into sleep, the bastard. Still, he was safe. His head buzzed and his body tingled with warmth, but no pain. Even his headache had disappeared. Alec reveled in the comfortable haze. A crooked smile spread over his face.

"Someone's having good dreams."

Alec's grin grew. "Just dreaming about you, sweetheart," he said with a slight slur. "It always makes me smile."

Amelia followed her short burst of laughter with a peck to Alec's forehead. "Flatterer. How are you feeling?"

"Um." He risked peeling his eyes open. The room swam into focus. "Pretty good right now. Like I'm made of jello. What magic elixir did Henri give me?"

"The magic elixir of morphine," Amelia replied in his ear. She added another chaste kiss, a lingering press of lips at his temple. "Enjoy it while you can."

"Oh, I plan to."

"Because he says that when it wears off all you get is Tylenol."

"Sadist," Alec grunted. He wiggled his fingers, testing, then curled his hands into fists. "I suppose he has a point. I can't exactly defend myself against the evil hordes right now."

"You couldn't defend yourself against a small cat right now," Grier's voice came from the doorway.

"You want to test that theory?" Alec asked with a hoarse laugh. "Because the sight of you holding a fluffy kitten would be worth getting my eyes scratched out." He blinked to clear his swimming vision as Grier came into view. Damp hair curled over the collar of his fresh shirt. The fine lines around his eyes that Alec now knew signaled fatigue were smoothed, and his eyes were clear. He leaned over Alec, one hand on either side of his head. When the questing probe came, Alec opened himself to it.

Opened all the way.

Grier sucked in a breath as Alec drew him in, thickening their existing connection and bridging the final distance between them. Too trusting, Grier had called him, and Alec hadn't denied it. He asked for nothing in return, no window into Grier's thoughts, just offered more of what he'd already given, this time without words.

I trust you.

"Reckless," Grier muttered, still hovering, closer now. "Do you ever look before you jump?" A water droplet fell from his hair and splashed onto Alec's neck. Grier tracked it as it rolled down his throat and into the hollow of his collarbone.

Close enough to see Grier's eyes dilate and his breathing turn shallow, Alec used their link to broadcast the spike in his own heartbeat. Grier drew back, wetting his lips as he did, and heat, not from the morphine this time, prickled across Alec's skin. "I always look," he said in a whisper, too low for Amelia to hear. Maybe it was the drugs, but none of his usual apprehension plagued him. He wanted Grier closer, and instead he was moving away. "Come here—"

How many times in the past few days had he thought about the way Grier had kissed him? A hundred? A thousand? That seemed an impossible amount, considering everything, but Alec thought it was pretty damn accurate. Fuck, he wanted it again, and not just the kiss. He wanted to be back on that fancy leather couch, pressed flat by Grier's hard, demanding body.

Grier continued to hover, close but not close enough, and with a low, frustrated sound, Alec lifted his head to erase the distance between them.

Amelia cleared her throat. Alec ripped his gaze from Grier to find her studying him with suspicious disapproval. Her pinched expression meant a lecture was on the way. He cut her off just as she took a breath to speak. "Amy, is Henri home?"

She bit her lip, glancing between them. "Yes."

"I need to talk to both of you."

"I'm not sure you're—"

"It can't wait." He grasped her hand and squeezed. "Please."

Her pinched expression returned. "It'll be a few minutes. He's making calls." Alec nodded, and she backed away, still watching both of them.

When the door closed behind her, Grier crossed his arms. "Think she'll be back to ask about my intentions?"

Some clumsy maneuvering gave Alec the leverage he needed to sit up. "I think—whoa." The room spun. He felt himself tilting forward off the table. "Grier."

Two hands steadied him. "What are you doing?" Grier hissed.

"I want to be up and dressed when Henri and Amelia come back."

"Why?"

Alec opened his eyes. Grier stood next to the table between his splayed legs, holding him by the shoulders. Alec picked at the thin sheet pooled in his lap. "I don't want them looking at me like I'm an invalid. Now are you going to help or let me stumble around naked until I find some clothes."

"Is that rhetorical? Because option two has merit." Grier didn't wait for an answer, but kept one hand on Alec's arm and reached for the pile of clothing on the chair behind him. He shook out a shirt and slacks and laid them on top of the mussed sheet. "You're depleting my wardrobe."

"What do you want me to say?"

"How about, 'I promise to stop bleeding on your expensive clothing, Grier'."

Alec held up a finger. "Think about how dull our life would be if I did."

"I like dull. One lives longer, or so I'm told." Grier helped him shrug into the shirt, but Alec's fingers felt thick and clumsy, and after a minute Grier swatted them away and buttoned it himself. "Oh yes, you're the picture of good health."

"It's the damn drugs," Alec complained. He managed the underwear for himself, though Grier held his arm when he slipped off the table and onto his feet for the first time in twenty-four hours. "I feel drunk." He shrugged Grier's hand away. "Don't say it."

“What?”

“That I’m acting drunk.”

“Fine.” Grier handed him the pants. “You *look* drunk.”

The slacks were too long, and pulling them too far over his hips was out of the question. The wound still throbbed. Alec cinched the belt tight below the bandage. It was better than nothing. “Did you get a hold of Nicolas?”

Grier shook his head. “I didn’t want to take a chance of having the call traced here.”

“He needs to know his security’s been compromised.” Alec turned up his shirt cuffs. “He could be in danger.”

“He can take care of himself.”

Grier’s pensive frown gave Alec pause. “Thank you, then, for not taking the risk. We’ll call as soon as we’re clear. The thing is—” Alec frowned at the socks, then shoved them into his pocket and slipped his bare feet into the loafers. “We can’t stay here much longer. One nosy neighbor is all it takes. Kay’s smart. It might take her a while, but she’ll track us down.”

“And then we’d have more of your friends shooting at us.”

Alec eased himself back onto the table, cringing when the skin around the bullet wound pulled taut. “Funny.”

“I try.”

“I won’t put Amy and Henri in any more danger.”

“No one knows you’re here,” Henri said, coming in, Amelia at his heels. “We made sure.” He looked Alec up and down. “Did I say you could get dressed?”

Grier’s smile bordered on fond. “You don’t know him very well, do you?”

“I’m not going to take that chance,” Alec said, ignoring them both. “We’ll leave tonight.”

“No!” Amelia slashed her hand through the air in furious rejection. “You can’t. Not in your condition.”

"I'm fine." Alec caught her hand, trapping it between his own. "Trust me."

"Where will you go?" Henri asked.

"That," Alec glanced at Grier, "is what I wanted to talk to you about. We need someplace quiet. I need to recover, one. But I also need some seclusion in order to... help Grier with some things. The fewer people who see us, the better. In fact, if we could go without seeing anyone, that would be ideal."

Henri stroked his beard. "You mean the beach house."

Alec nodded. "You still have it, then?"

"Yes."

"The beach house?" Amelia asked. "It's not—"

"It's perfect," Henri said. "Alec's right. Secluded. No neighbors. Most people don't even know it's there. Plus it's in your mother's name, Amy, and the trust still maintains the property."

Alec rubbed Amelia's hands between his palms. "It's not ideal. But if we're found there, someone will have to dig deep to find you two, and I doubt they'd even try. The house is empty. It'll be assumed we took advantage of that." He met Grier's eyes. "It's quiet, no people. That'll be key for your training. A couple of weeks and we'll be gone, I promise, Henri."

"It's *too* secluded," Amy said. "If your condition worsens, if there are complications, infection, relapse...."

"I won't be alone."

"Alec." She pressed a hand to her mouth and shook her head. "You're asking too much. You have to give me more."

"I can't. You know I can't."

She broke free with a vicious tug. Alec lunged for her, too late, and tipped off the table, but Henri caught him before he fell. Amelia ran from the room.

"I'll talk to her." Henri patted Alec's shoulder. "We'll get you supplied and on the road tonight."

Henri had never been an easy man to read, and Alec wasn't going to try now. "I'm sorry," he said, at a loss. Henri nodded, not meeting

his eyes. The ache in Alec's chest expanded. Staying away all these years meant nothing if his actions put them in harm's way now. Henri turned after Amelia, and Alec let him go.

In the ensuing silence, Grier sighed. He drummed his fingers on the counter, a thoughtful tap tap tap. "We can find another place. Not connected with your friends."

Alec swallowed his regret. "No. This is our best shot. I need to heal. You need to learn."

"Will it take two weeks?"

"Well," Alec said as he slid from the table, holding his side. "It took me years to master. I taught Ethan in about six months, but I didn't see him every day, and I didn't know the best way to explain things back then."

"You do now?"

"I'll do better this time around. Can you learn it in two weeks? I don't know for sure, but I hope so. If anybody can, it's you."

Grier didn't react to the compliment. "And at the end of two weeks?"

"You go get yourself a new life." He slid around the table to the door, but Grier was faster. He caught Alec's arm.

"And you?"

"I'm going after Ethan."

"You're insane!"

Alec set his jaw. "I need to know."

"You already know. Didn't you hear a word Nicolas said?"

Alec nodded.

Grier gave him a shake. "Ethan's a part of this. He's *orchestrating* it."

"I can't believe that."

Grier hissed in disgust and stalked to the door. "Sentimental idiot. You don't *want* to believe it."

Alec waited until he'd thrown the door open. "Neither do you," he said to Grier's retreating back.

GRIER took the first turn he came to and slammed through a metal door into the Baptiste's garage. An empty paint can took the brunt of his frustration and went sailing against the wall with a vicious kick. Damn Alec to hell. If he wanted to die, let him. The thought prompted another wave of rage, and Grier slammed his fist into the nearest wall, where it sank into the soft wallboard. He pulled free and snarled at the hole.

Amelia's soft tsk of censure startled him more than he cared to admit. He rounded to where she knelt on the opposite side of the room, sorting through boxes. "My apologies," he said, voice gruff.

Amelia pushed one box to the side and slid another between her legs. Again, Grier was struck by how small she was. "Alec's batting a thousand today, isn't he?" she asked with a wry smile. "Did you get a shot at him?"

"I—no." It was a tempting thought though.

"Shame," Amelia said with a sigh. "Someone needs to hit him. Hard."

"That wouldn't accomplish anything."

"It'd make *me* feel better." They shared a smile.

Grier picked his way across the garage, sliding in front of a black Land Rover to where Amelia sat in a circle of boxes. "What are you doing?"

"Supplies. You'll have to stop for any fresh food you want, but I have everything else you need." She ran her hand over a clear plastic bag filled with blankets. "Alec said the less public exposure, the better. This should save you several stops."

"Thank you." Grier found an empty spot and sat. The icy concrete cooled his anger. "How did you two meet?"

Amelia motioned for another box, and Grier slid it forward. “Isn’t that my line?” she asked. “Oh, stop with that look.” One by one, she filled the bottom of the box with cans. “I’m not blind, Grier.”

“It’s not what you think.”

“Isn’t it?” Boxes of rice, instant potatoes, and pasta got stacked on top of the canned vegetables. “You don’t want to know what I think. Although...” She paused to check the expiration date on a box. “If you did, you could just... look, couldn’t you?”

Why lie? She already knew. “Yes.”

“Hmmm.” She folded the flaps closed and rested her elbows on the cardboard. Chin in hand, she said, “To answer your question, we met when I was in the fifth grade and Alec was in the fourth. He was just a little larger than I was, if you can believe that. His bitch of a grandmother never fed him much.” She stood, brushing grime off her jeans. “Grab those?” She picked up a smaller box, slung it over her hip, and popped the hatch on the Land Rover. “That one’s pretty heavy. Let’s put it on the bottom.”

Grier shook his head. “We’re not taking your car.”

Amelia tilted her head back to laugh. “Oh yes, you are. Don’t argue with me. I’ve already had it out with my husband today, and I’m angry enough that if Alec weren’t hurt, I’d knee him in the balls right now. Don’t you piss me off, too.” She pulled herself up to her full four feet eleven inches and glared.

Grier cleared his throat. “Where did you say you wanted this?”

“Left side, on top of that one. You’re not stupid. I like that.”

“And you’re capable of standing up for yourself.”

“Don’t let my height fool you.”

Grier handed her another box. “It doesn’t, but your husband mentioned something about Alec protecting you.”

She stilled then shrugged. “Yes. From my father. He was a sadistic bastard, almost as bad as Alec’s grandfather. They were a pair of worthless souls, both dead now.” She swiped a hand under her eye. “He—I—”

“Never mind,” Grier said, infusing his voice with suggestion. Presumptuous, but he was the one who’d brought the pain to the surface. He eased into her mind and turned her thoughts to other things, repelling her memories as he withdrew, but a few caught him, inky black with pain and fear. He heard a man’s voice, saw a pair of filthy hands, heard Amelia crying.

He drew back so fast he stumbled. Amelia cocked her head. “What was I saying?”

“You were telling me about Alec’s family,” Grier said, swallowing the bad taste in his mouth.

“I was?” The thought bothered her, he saw. Then she shrugged. “There’s not much to say. He never knew his father, and his mother died when he was still a baby. Drug overdose. His grandparents raised him.”

Most of this Grier knew, from their first conversation in his apartment. “His grandfather abused him?”

Amelia stuffed the bags of linens into the back of the Land Rover, then pulled the hatch closed. “Yes.” She motioned for Grier to follow her out of the garage. “His favorite game,” she said as they walked, “was to trick Alec, be nice to him, right before he hurt him. There’s only so much a little boy’s heart can take, you know.”

He did. Some of the mystery that was Alec Devlin began to fall into place.

“By the time I met him, he’d learned his lesson. He’d stopped giving the old bastard chances to hurt him.”

The damage would’ve been done by then. Fourth grade. Nine, maybe ten years old. Grier took a deep breath when he found his teeth grinding together. “What power does a child have?” he asked under his breath.

“Not a lot, as a general rule.” She turned to face him before they crossed the threshold into the kitchen. “But this is Alec we’re talking about.” They shared a conspiratorial grin. “He got my father good too,” she whispered, then pushed the door open.

Alec was hunched over the table with Baptiste, speaking in low tones. Both glanced up, then went back to their discussion. They had a

map spread out on the table in front of them, its accordion folds turning up at the edges.

“And then one day,” Amelia said, still in a whisper, her eyes on Alec’s back. “A man came. He talked to Alec, and Alec”—she gave a hiccupping laugh— “he *smiled*. The man took him away, and nothing’s been the same since. If we’re lucky, we see him every six months or so. Once he didn’t come for two years.” Her voice broke on the last word. Grier placed a gentle hand on her shoulder, wondering for the first time just how deep Amelia Baptiste’s feelings ran for her friend. “I thought he was dead,” she said. “I truly thought he was dead.”

Grier, unsure whether she was referring to then or now, stayed silent.

CHAPTER 10

THE desire to party or fuck his troubles away disappeared with his two guests. Grier would've called it petulant. Nicolas deemed it cautious.

Grier hadn't explained how the Organization had tracked him down, but it didn't take a genius to deduce Alec was behind it. The man was hiding something amongst all those churning emotions. So was Grier. And he'd been scared, which was enough to give Nicolas nightmares. The time had come to chose sides, but who were the players and what were their agendas? Where did his father stand?

Burying one's head in the sand was all well and good, but he had no desire to be shot in the ass.

He cast his book aside and considered what he knew. He was missing something vital; the knowledge felt close, like he could brush it with his fingertips. He tilted his head back against the cushion and closed his eyes.

His cell phone vibrated in his pocket. Nicolas inspected the caller ID before answering. "I thought you said you were getting rid of this phone."

"I haven't had the chance yet." Grier's voice was clipped, all business. "We ran into a problem."

"Oh?" Concern tickled Nicolas's chest. "Of what sort?"

"The sort that comes from a gun."

Nicolas's stomach flipped over. "Are you all right?"

"Fine."

Which meant, "Alec?"

"Not so fine, but alive."

Embarrassed to find himself relieved, Nicolas countered with, "Haven't you taught him how to duck?"

“Careful, Nicolas.” Amusement leaked into Grier’s voice. “You sound almost worried.”

So what if he did? Alec wasn’t a bad person. A bit idealistic, rough around the edges, uptight, repressed.... “How bad is he?”

“It was touch and go for a while. But I didn’t call so you could advertise how much you like him.”

“Which would be not at all.”

“They were waiting for us,” Grier said.

Nicolas went cold. “Explain,” he forced out between clenched teeth.

“In Richmond. The Organization was waiting.”

“Fuck!” Nicolas shot off the sofa. A black, marble statuette was the nearest object of opportunity, and it shattered when he hurled it against the wall. He hunched over the table, one hand fisted on the surface while the other clutched the phone. “I’m sorry.”

“You couldn’t have known.”

“I should have.” The knowledge sparked another burst of anger. He had a spy in his house. God knew for how long or to whom they reported. Ethan? His father? The last made his stomach flip. “I’ll deal with it.” *Today. Right now.*

“Be careful, Nicolas.”

“You always say that. Afraid I can’t take care of myself?”

Silence answered him. Then Grier said, “I know you can.” Strains of a muffled conversation drifted over the line. “And Alec says thanks for your concern. It’s touching.” The connection went dead.

Nicolas stood with the phone to his ear until he’d wrestled his rage to a manageable level. He’d promised them protection. Now his word meant nothing. He had a house full of servants, most Gifted. An hour ago he’d believed in them all. Now he trusted no one. He cursed and stalked to his office. He’d start there and work backwards until he figured it out. And God help the man or woman who’d betrayed him.

An hour later, he dropped into his chair and brooded. Nothing. Not a trace—that his senses could pick up, at least. The next logical step would be to prowl the house, flushing out the traitor with good

old-fashioned surliness and suspicion. He spun his chair to the window as another surge of worry over Grier—and yes, damn it, Alec—distracted him.

He felt his father before he saw him. Roman's emotional aura preceded him everywhere, a mass of condescension and disdain. Unsettled by the unannounced visit, Nicolas slipped a hand into his pocket and curled it around the scrap of paper with Grier's phone number.

The door to his office opened. A cool rush of air brushed his face, blowing a strand of blond hair over his chin. He plucked it away. "Father," he said, throwing the honorific over his shoulder, preempting Roman's greeting with his own.

"Son," Roman countered. "I hope I'm not intruding." He edged around the room, just out of sight, pausing at the bar, then at the window to admire the view. It was a game he played, an unnerving one, but Nicolas was a master of it himself. He refused to crane his neck to follow Roman's progress.

"No, of course not. You're always welcome. Though I admit it's unexpected. I thought you were in Italy."

"I was. That business is concluded." Roman swaggered into sight. He was darker than Nicolas—who'd inherited his pale hair and complexion from his mother—and broader across the shoulders. His height was an intimidating 6'4", but he'd never needed it to control a situation. That he did with his eyes. Dark brown, almost black, they could pierce a person's soul. Austere as always, he settled into a chair—the same one Alec had chosen the day before yesterday—and crossed his legs. Long fingers picked at his suit jacket buttons one by one, revealing more of the starched, white shirt beneath. "I felt like a bit of sun."

"You're on holiday then?"

"Unfortunately, my schedule won't allow it. I have several issues to attend to. And in four days' time, a meeting with my new *allies*." The way he spit the word left little question as to how Roman felt about his fledgling partnership with Ethan.

Nicolas slid his fingers back and forth over Grier's note. "New allies?"

Roman chose to pour himself a drink rather than answer. "I'd like you to attend."

"We agreed long ago on this."

Roman's hand paused, then resumed pouring. "I realize that. I'm asking as a special favor." He raised the glass to his lips. "Please. Suspend your boycott of my affairs for one night?"

Manipulative bastard. "What sort of meeting?"

"A meeting of the minds." Roman cackled at his own joke.

Nicolas managed a tight smile. "Where?"

"Majorca. You haven't been there in years, have you?" Roman topped off his drink before returning to his seat.

Nicolas wasn't sure what bothered him more: his father's patronizing smile, or that he knew the last time Nicolas had been in Spain. "It's full of tourists this time of year," he hedged.

Roman's smile evaporated. "I won't have you left behind on this. It's too important, and you've spent far too much of your life doing nothing but dodging one difficult task after another. It's time to grow up. I'll expect you to be there." He stood. "I've forwarded the details to your assistant."

"As you wish."

He didn't realize he'd mauled Grier's scrap of paper into several pieces until Roman paused at the door. "I understand you've had guests recently."

"Several," Nicolas answered.

"Yes, but I was speaking of two in particular."

Well, Nicolas thought, anger once more threatening to boil over, *no question as to who the spy reports to*. He met his father's eyes but kept silent.

Roman sniffed. "I don't begrudge you your teenage crush, Nicolas, but tread carefully."

"Father?"

"Don't confuse your loyalties," Roman said as he left. The door closed with a soft click.

THEY left later that night, under cover of darkness. Amelia's goodbye was teary and emotional, and even Alec was relieved to drive away when the time came.

"We shouldn't have taken their car," Grier said. "If we're found, their involvement will be impossible to hide."

Alec tilted the seat back and shifted onto his left hip. "There's no arguing with her. Just drive."

"Which direction?"

Alec pulled out the handheld GPS that Baptiste had given him. "Wherever the magic eight ball leads us." He punched in the address to the beach house.

"Does the magic eight ball say anything about when I'll get my life back?"

Alec grinned. He shook the GPS unit, then squinted at the screen. It beeped. "It says: after you save the world."

"Poor deluded eight ball."

Alec laughed. "Go over the Bay Bridge and across the peninsula to the Eastern Shore. If I remember right, it should take about three hours. The way you drive, four."

Grier tapped the brakes, and Alec hit the dash with a thump. "Hey."

"Buckle up. And also, shut up."

For as tense as Grier felt, the trip was dull. Alec didn't complain, but Grier knew his wound was tender. His headaches hadn't returned, and an hour into the journey, he fell into a peaceful sleep, curled on his side with the seatbelt tucked under his arm. Grier peeled the GPS from his fingers.

Two hours and fifteen minutes later, he pulled onto a private lane that led off into scrub-covered dunes. Sand covered the pavement in most places. The offer of the Land Rover made more sense now. A quarter of a mile later, he made a sharp right between two dunes and almost plowed into the house.

His sudden lurching stop woke Alec. He rubbed his eyes like a five-year-old and squinted through the windshield. "Ah, here it is. Just like I remember it." He untangled himself from his seatbelt. "I hope you're not expecting anything too fancy."

Grier eyed the house. "Would running water be too much to hope for?"

"Snob."

Alec climbed the steps and squinted through the frosted glass of the front door. "Looks pretty much like I remember."

"I was afraid of that."

Alec beckoned him up onto the deck. "Come on. This isn't its best side."

"I'm praying you're serious." He followed Alec up the stairs.

The Baptiste's beach house was a simple Cape Cod, raised on stilts and surrounded on all four sides by expansive wood decks. Beachside, the house was as impressive as Alec promised, with large picture windows running the length of the structure. Best of all, it was nestled between rows of dunes, hidden from its neighbors. At one corner, a boardwalk led off toward the beach. He heard the roar of the ocean and the morning cry of seagulls on the breeze. The air tasted salty. The horizon grew brighter by the second, pale pink tinged with purple.

Alec fit a key into the back door. "Come on," he called over his shoulder.

Grier had expected shag carpeting and wood paneling. Instead, pale cherry flooring ran uninterrupted throughout. The living room was painted a bright white, throwing the shaker furniture into sharp relief. The kitchen lined one wall, all stainless steel and granite. A massive work island connected the two areas.

Grier gave a low whistle. "I take back every bad thing I said about Baptiste."

"You didn't say anything bad about him," Alec replied with a frown.

"Everything I thought, then."

Alec scratched the back of his head. “Want to unload now or later?”

“Says the man who just had a two-hour nap.” Two identical bedrooms branched off the hallway, each with queen-sized beds. “I don’t relish waking up without coffee. Let’s get it over with.”

In the end, Grier carried the supplies and Alec found a place for them inside. By the time Grier had dropped the last box on the floor and locked the door behind him, Alec was pale and hugging his side. “I think I’m done.” He hobbled into the bathroom. Grier wedged a foot inside before he could slam the door.

“Take off your clothes. Is there any fresh blood?”

“You just want to see me naked,” Alec peeled off his shirt, then popped the buttons on his jeans and slid them low on his hips.

“I’ve seen you naked. Or have you forgotten?”

Alec winced when Grier probed the wound. “Oh yeah. What’d you think, by the way?”

“The room was cold, so I won’t hold it against you.”

Alec’s bark of laughter ended with him curled over in a groan. Grier grabbed him by the nape of the neck and steered him into the nearest bed. “Idiot,” he said as he turned to leave.

“Grier, wait.” Alec pushed up onto his elbows. “Do you want to start that training?”

“Right now?” Grier hovered in the doorway. “Aren’t you tired?”

“I’m not the one doing all the work. My part’s easy.”

Grier hesitated. Eagerness battled with exhaustion, then Alec’s voice drifted out of the dark, coaxing. “Come on. We’ll start slow. It’ll give you an idea of how it works.”

“All right.”

Alec scooted to the side in invitation—one Grier couldn’t resist. He lowered himself onto the edge of the mattress and reached for the lamp, but Alec grabbed his arm. “No.”

“Why not?”

Several seconds passed before Alec blurted, "Darkness might help you the first few times."

Interesting. And telling. "If you insist."

Alec sighed and released his arm. "Okay, first—"

"Tell me about how you learned to do this," Grier said.

Alec swallowed. "Why?"

That should've been obvious, yet Alec's curiosity was genuine. Was he so blind to what was inside him? "If you'd rather not...."

"No, it's okay. I, uh, taught myself. When I was a kid." With a wince, he crossed his arms behind his head. "It's not a gift. Not in the strictest sense of the word. At least, I'm assuming that's the case, since it's a skill that can be taught. It's more...." He paused, then said, "A state of mind."

Grier stared, trying to discern Alec's features in the dark. "Can you be more specific?"

"I—" Alec shifted, agitated. "You have to want to be invisible." His voice dropped at the end, the final syllables of *invisible* no more than a breath of sound.

"Why?" Grier slid his hand across the blanket and set it on Alec's hip.

Alec shrugged. His hand crept over Grier's. "That's the way I do it. So that's how I'm going to teach you." He turned Grier's hand in his, running the pad of his thumb over Grier's palm.

Topic closed for the evening, but not forever. Grier let it go. He knew the reason, anyway, if what Amelia had let slip about Alec's childhood held a kernel of truth. "Invisible. That shouldn't be too hard."

"There are levels," Alec continued. "Like... curtains. The first level is like a sheer. It hides your gifts, that's all. Don't think it'll be easy to master just because it's the first step. It's the hardest to learn, but once you have it?" He snapped his fingers. "Piece of cake."

"Hmmm." Grier's cock twitched with every stroke of Alec's finger. When the contact became more distracting than pleasurable, he

pulled away and reclined near the foot of the bed. “What are the other levels?”

Alec’s teeth flashed in the dark. “The next is for when you want to fade into the background. People still see you. I mean, you register, but they don’t *notice* you. Do you know what I mean?”

Grier digested the words. “I believe so.”

“It’s dead useful. Especially in more intimate places, like hotel lobbies or restaurants. No one gives me a second glance. Even if I sit there for hours.”

Disbelief began to replace excitement. “And the next?”

“Is the ultimate. I can become, for all intents and purposes, invisible. Not literally, of course.” He reached for Grier again, touching him just above the knee. “I can’t keep it up for very long. It’s good for split-second evasion. Little else. And it’s draining. Very draining.”

Getting his mind around the *concept* was draining. Grier shook his head. “I can’t believe that. I’m sorry, Alec, but it’s too far-fetched. This isn’t magic. It’s science.”

“Is that so?”

Grier tensed at the amused tone. “Yes. Gifts stem from our brain. It’s physiological, plain and simple. How else do you explain how a drug can impair them? What you’re suggesting....”

“It’s not so different,” Alec insisted. “And no one knows how our Gifts work, so who are you to put a limit on what’s possible?”

Nobody, in the grand scheme of things. Still, it stretched Grier’s ability to accept. “That’s enough for tonight,” he said, mind spinning.

“Already?” Alec’s blunt fingernails scratched across his jeans, edging higher on Grier’s thigh. “Are you that tired?”

Grier sat up, swinging his leg out from under Alec’s hand, ignoring his soft sound of disappointment. “No. And that’s why I’m leaving.” Dodging Alec’s clumsy grab, he stood and backed across the room to the door, thankful that the darkness hid his raging erection.

“Afraid I’ll bite?”

“No.” And, Christ, that visual wasn’t helping things. Grier clutched the doorframe. His mouth went dry at Alec’s raspy chuckle.

“Afraid you will?”

“Yes.” It was the truth. Tasting Alec, tasting him everywhere, had become the cornerstone of his dreams. Or maybe nightmares, he thought with a grimace. “Yes,” he repeated, making no effort to strip the lust from his voice. It wasn’t as though Alec didn’t know.

His reward was a sharp intake of breath. But as he spun to leave, Alec laughed again. “How long are you going to make me wait?”

Grier stepped into the hall and slammed the door. Standing with his forehead against the wood, he listened to the muffled noises from the other side. Bedsprings creaked. Cotton sheets swished against one another. How long? *Until I’m sure you mean it.*

Running away, then asking for more was weak, but he couldn’t help himself. Palm flat against the door, Grier reached out with his mind, and Alec drew him in.

The pillowcase felt silky against his cheek, and the ceiling fan blew a steady breeze of cool air over his throat and across his chest. His wound throbbed in time with his heart, just a dull ache now. His stomach felt heavy, the rest of his body weightless. Under the blankets, he was too hot. Clammy. Hard.

He kicked the blanket down and wrapped a hand around his cock, teasing himself with light strokes up and down the shaft. With his other hand, he tugged on his balls, adding short bursts of sensation to the cresting wave.

Grier’s legs started to shake.

Alec’s voice drifted through the door, laced with too many things to identify. “Good night, Grier.”

“The sooner I’m rid of you, the better,” Grier grumbled, short of breath.

Keep telling yourself that. The last came through his thoughts, a gentle caress. Grier tamped down the connection as best he could and stalked away.

LEARNING Alec's magic trick became his primary focus. Alec obliged by pushing him day and night, insisting his failures were guiding him in the right direction.

"It's a process of elimination," Alec said. "We'll keep trying until we find what triggers a successful attempt."

"Must it be so dark?" Grier asked.

Alec eyed him from where he'd propped himself against the headboard. After the first day, he'd shunned the constant bed rest, but still tired easily. "Need a nightlight?"

"I need an explanation. I'm afraid next you'll want a circle of beeswax candles and a Ouija Board."

"That's advanced stuff. I never Ouija until the second week."

"And I delayed dinner for this." Grier turned to go, but Alec motioned him back.

"Okay," he conceded. "No more jokes. Promise." He circled his finger in the air. "Close your eyes."

"Alec." Grier's warning elicited another sly smile.

"Grier," Alec mimicked in the same tone. He sat forward, holding a hand over his bandage. "Close your eyes."

Grier sighed, but obeyed. "No need to tell the rest. I know it. Click my heels together and say, 'There's no place like home'."

The room rang with Alec's laughter. "If only we could," he said, tone so wistful that Grier swallowed his sharp retort. "Could I get you to lie down next to me?"

Grier opened one eye and squinted at him.

"I'll be good." Alec patted the bed. "We're going to try something different tonight," he said once Grier was prone next to him. He propped his head on his hand. "Relax."

"I am."

"No, Grier. *Relax*. Do you meditate?"

"Of course."

Alec smirked at the testy response. Before Grier could stop him, he reached out and ran a finger over his forehead. "Meditate until you

feel clear-headed. You're too tense, and each time you try this and fail, it gets worse."

"How silly of me. It's not as though it's a matter of life and death."

His sarcasm bounced harmlessly away, judging by Alec's sleepy smile. "And you call me the drama queen." The finger returned, tracing lines Grier hadn't realized were there. "Clear your mind. Then we'll start fresh."

Grier mumbled his agreement. "What are you going to do?"

"Watch you." The one finger became two. They slid over his temple and across the line of his cheek.

Achieving a deep state of relaxation took Grier very little time. "Thought you didn't touch people," he said, slurring the words.

Alec's voice sounded far away when he answered. "Thought I didn't either."

Grier lined his troubling thoughts into a row and banished them one by one. Some proved more difficult than others, but by the time he reached the last—his inability to learn what Alec was trying to teach him—he felt refreshed. At some point, Alec's fingers had fallen away. His breath puffed against Grier's shoulder, long and even, and his body, close but not touching, radiated comforting warmth. Rather than wake him, Grier tried to puzzle out his failure.

Why wasn't it working when his need was so intense? "You have to want for no one to see you," Alec had said. "Like you've never wanted anything more."

That was the crux of it. There was one person he didn't want to be invisible to.

I just need it for a few moments, he told himself. *Not forever.*

The last barrier slipped away. This time when he began the exercise—when he tried to picture himself as invisible—the image came without a fight. Grier reached for it with the care a child might reach for a butterfly, afraid it would slip through his fingers. His surroundings, always sharply focused because of his Gifts, blurred, like

he was looking through a fine mesh screen. So this was how most people saw the world.

The cadence of Alec's breathing changed. The finger returned, tracing his lips this time. "You did it," Alec said, voice thick with sleep, "I can't sense you."

Grier grinned.

He had it.

CHAPTER 11

HANDCRAFTED stone walls and cypress trees lined the road to Valldemossa. Such a serene setting was sure to put Ethan on edge. He no doubt expected an ambush of some sort. Roman exited the limousine when it rolled to a stop outside the restaurant and breathed in the fragrant air. He dismissed his driver with a wave. “Remember, Nicolas,” he said as he smoothed a hand down his coat. “Vigilance.”

“Do you expect Ethan to let his shields slip in front of you?” Nicolas mumbled. He tapped a cigarette free from a silver case.

“Yes.”

The answer, he saw, gave Nicolas pause. “My invitation makes sense now.”

“Just now? Why am I not surprised?”

They entered the restaurant side-by-side. The maître d’ himself took their coats and led them across the room through a high archway into a smaller, more intimate space. Here, tall carved screens and groupings of potted plants gave the illusion of privacy. Dim lights threw shadows onto textured stucco walls.

Ethan rose to greet them, the surprise on his face masked in a heartbeat. The old man hadn’t expected to see Nicolas, and he well knew the depth of the boy’s Gifts. His worry was justified. Few could withstand Nicolas’s empathic probes.

As they reached the table, Ethan turned and helped a woman to her feet. She was stunning, dressed in a strapless, floor-length black gown. Hair the color of spun gold was twisted into a chignon and fastened with a pearl-encrusted comb. It matched the strand ringing her throat. Icy blue eyes studied them both. They lingered on Roman.

“Ethan, you dog,” Roman said, grinning like a wolf. “What is she, half your age?”

“That might be a bit generous,” Nicolas threw in.

Ethan puffed up like a papa bear. “May I introduce Kay Parks, my associate.”

“My pleasure, gentlemen.” Kay held out one manicured hand.

Roman brushed a kiss across her knuckles. “The pleasure’s all mine.”

Nicolas cleared his throat. “I’m sure it is.” He slid Kay’s chair out, and, with a final look at Roman, she slipped back into her seat. Roman smiled his approval when Nicolas was the first to extend his hand to Ethan.

Ethan held it in his own for several heartbeats. “Nicolas. It’s been a long time.”

“It has. How are you?”

“Well, thank you.”

Fondness softened Ethan’s features. Even after all these years, the fool held out hope that Nicolas would defect to his side. Bristling, Roman focused his attention on Kay. “Wine, my dear?”

“No, thank you,” she demurred. “I believe in keeping a clear head.”

“You shouldn’t give Roman such an opening, Kay,” Ethan said as he took his seat. “He enjoys his chauvinism act a bit too much.”

The choked off sound that escaped Nicolas’s throat made Roman’s grip tighten on his wine. He tipped his glass at Ethan. *Your point, old man.*

Niceties concluded, the conversation lagged while the waiter poured fresh water and topped off their wine. Roman waited until he’d settled the bottle back into the bucket and disappeared. “As much as I appreciate the venue, we should attend to business.” He lowered his head, schooling his features to the appropriate level of anxiety. “There have been some disturbing developments.”

Ethan’s jaw clenched. “I didn’t suspect I was at the top of your social calendar. What’s happened?”

“I fear another attack is imminent.”

“You have proof?”

“Only my intuition and the chatter my people are privy to. But the information comes from all corners of the globe, and from independent sources.”

Kay pressed her fingers to her lips. “Do you have any details?”

“Few.” Roman flashed Kay a confident smile. “But I won’t allow another bloodbath. Whatever our previous disagreements, we must work together.” Kay’s face flushed a soft pink.

Too easy. This was the enemy he’d spent so many years fearing? It was almost disappointing. He darted a glance at Nicolas to find the boy watching him, eyes narrowed in speculation. He relished his next words, anticipating the pain they would bring. “There’s more. Your missing agents. They’ve joined the splinter group.”

Ethan went statue-still, as if one move would shatter him. He bled denial from every pore. Nicolas’s reaction was similar but not as desperate, and it held a touch of amusement. Kay, however, nodded. Lips pressed into a bloodless line, she glared at Ethan. “I told you.”

Nicolas took a slow, deep breath, and Roman knew he was picking up every nuance, every emotion, swirling through the air between them.

“No.” Ethan thumped his fist on the table. “I won’t believe it.”

Roman shrugged. “That’s your prerogative.”

“No, it isn’t!” Kay rounded on Ethan. “How much evidence do you need? Would Alec pointing a gun at you be convincing enough? He’s not the man you thought he was. Accept it.”

“I will not.” His words, whisper soft, carried enough power to rattle their silverware and spin the water in their goblets into tiny whirlpools. Kay, used to such displays, Roman imagined, fell quiet, but her resentment was palpable. Disgraceful. Had Ethan’s people no control?

“Suit yourself,” Kay said. “But the next time we cross paths, he won’t get the benefit of my doubt. And I won’t miss my next shot at Crist either.”

Nicolas's reaction was a tightened grip on his napkin. Roman shot him a warning look. Murdering Ethan's new favorite pet would certainly strain relations. His temper tantrum would have to wait.

Nicolas swallowed once, twice, then made a show of straightening his place setting. "Moving on?"

Roman lifted his glass in a toast of agreement. "I believe it's time for a public show of our alliance. Hear me out," he implored when Ethan shook his head. "This group believes themselves to have two enemies. More importantly, two enemies who, well, let's not mince words, are enemies themselves. We must send a message." Roman shifted his attention to Kay. "Together, we are stronger than they are. Do you not agree this could be a powerful deterrent to any further terrorism?"

"It would give them pause," Kay said.

"And what have we to lose?" Roman asked. "I'll admit, I did not want to accept this partnership, but accept it I have." He leaned forward. "Let's make the most of our resources."

Ethan stroked his beard. His eyes bore into Roman. "What do you propose?"

"We bring our players together. Who knows how much serendipity we may create? How many of our people are already... friends?"

Ethan's eyes darted to Nicolas. "True."

"We cannot continue to circle each other in the dark and still hope to emerge the victors." This last he directed at Kay, adding subdued desperation to his voice.

"He's right." Kay laid a hand over Ethan's. A lock of hair slipped from her comb and swept her chest. It made her look, Roman thought, very young. Young enough to crave leadership for herself? The night was bearing unexpected fruit.

In the stillness that followed, Nicolas picked up his wine and held it to his lips. "I agree." He took a sip then set it down with a decisive plunk. "My father is right. We must work together."

Oh, well played, Son. Roman sensed victory close at hand. A den of lions wouldn't keep Ethan from his chance to take the elusive Nicolas under his wing. Sure enough....

"Very well." Ethan turned his palm in Kay's and squeezed her fingers. "But I name the time and place."

Roman spread his hands in supplication. "I have no arguments." He raised his glass. "To a fresh start." Kay beamed as she clinked her glass against his. Her blush had spread across the top of her breasts, and Roman made sure she noticed him take it in.

The first course arrived, and, as though their cooperation were already an art, all talk of business ceased until the dessert plates were cleared. Roman was watching Kay when she went still and her eyes lost focus. So the child was hosting a Monitor. Forty years in the business and Ethan still played things too safe.

"I'm sorry," she said a moment later. "I'm afraid I have to leave."

Roman and Nicolas rose when she did. Ethan nodded.

Never one to let an opportunity pass, Roman took a gentle hold of her arm. "Allow me to escort you. Do you require a taxi?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Nicolas, play nice with our new friend," Roman purred as he led Kay away. A glance over his shoulder confirmed that Ethan had already pounced on the boy. Stroke of genius, bringing him. And here, on his arm, the opportunity for another. "Kay," he said, as he helped her slip into her wrap. "Please be careful. You and I know the truth. Alec is dangerous. Crist even more so." He squeezed her shoulders in a loose embrace. "Keep yourself safe."

She shook his hand. "I will," she said, adding after a short pause, "You do the same."

"Until we meet again." He helped her into the car and shut the door.

ETHAN had wooed Nicolas Petrov for two years, to no avail. Roman's lies corrupted the Organization's reputation beyond repair, and Nicolas

never gave him a chance. Ethan still grieved for the boy; his empathic skills were unparalleled, and to have had his confidence and loyalty in this situation....

Useless fantasies. He watched Nicolas walk ahead of them on the path, unbothered by the veiled tension sparking between Roman and himself. Unbothered, but not unaware. And listening. Always listening.

Roman walked beside him, hands behind his back. At ease, but for thirty years of history between them. Still not so trusting, but who could blame him? The bench-lined path curved around a fountain, and even at this time of the evening it was busy, filled with people pouring out of the restaurant to enjoy the mild weather. "So strange," Ethan murmured.

"Strange?" Roman echoed.

Even after all these months, the sound of Roman's distinct voice at his elbow was startling. "To be here with you." Ethan motioned at the fountain. "At this place, celebrating a truce."

"Let's not go overboard," Roman said, and Ethan chuckled. That was the Roman Petrov he knew.

"Perhaps it's presumptuous. But I'd hoped, once the current crisis passes...." Ethan stopped and waited for Roman to turn. He did, gaze wary. "I'd hoped we could continue what is so obviously a beneficial arrangement for us both."

Roman tilted his head. "Let's see this through. When the time comes, I'd be willing to listen."

A tinge of distaste penetrated the wall Roman kept around his mind. At odds with his words, it derailed Ethan's reply. He pressed his mouth shut and nodded. A few steps later, he said, "Your son."

Roman's eyes rose from the ground to drill into Nicolas's back. "Yes?"

"Seems nothing like you."

"I imagine you're complimenting one of us," Roman said with a tight smile. "I just don't know who."

Ethan, too, watched Nicolas, but didn't comment. The boy's hands were slung into the pockets of his suit trousers. His jacket was unbuttoned, his tie loose. His attention shifted with lightning speed,

from a child splashing in the fountain, to a couple kissing on a bench, to a baby crying in his mother's arms. "Unable to focus," Roman had described him months ago when Ethan had asked after his welfare. "And still happy to have turned you down."

Perhaps, but Roman saw what he wanted to—one of the major downfalls of always getting what one desired. Ethan, however, knew the truth: Nicolas didn't miss a trick.

"It pains me to say, but Nicolas is," Roman sighed, frowning at the ground, "a spoiled, privileged weakling whose primary concern is his next fuck."

As Ethan was still watching the spoiled weakling in question, he saw Nicolas's shoulders tense and his step falter. The boy was too far ahead to have heard the words, but not so far as to have missed the emotion behind them. A thrill raced through him at Roman's mis-step. It wasn't much, perhaps, but an advantage it was. "Forgive me if I disagree."

"You're free to do as you like." The words masked a touch of impatience. A tactical retreat was in order. Ethan turned and held out his hand.

"I'll leave you now."

Never one to appreciate the moral high road, Roman nodded, but kept his arm at his side. The man hadn't an ounce of honor, Ethan decided. He dropped his hand, tipping his head in a curt farewell. "I'll be in contact about the arrangements."

He turned back up the path, leaving Roman and Nicolas to themselves.

NICOLAS watched Ethan walk out of sight, his gait uneven, not as sure as it had been at the beginning of the night. Smirking, he chose a bench, lit a cigarette, and waited for his father. Roman took his time meandering up the path.

“Couldn’t help baiting the old man, could you?” Nicolas asked, smoke leaking through his lips as he spoke. “Your new best friend.” Said out loud, it sounded ridiculous. He choked on a laugh.

“What did you learn?” Roman took the seat beside him.

“Ethan is scared. Your accusation terrified him. He’s losing control.”

“And Ms. Parks?”

“Frustrated. Resentful. Her faith in Ethan is fading. And,” Nicolas said as he blew a ring of smoke into the air, “you captivate her.”

“Excellent,” Roman said, drawing the word out. He studied the people walking past, his semblance transmitting enough pretension that even those who noticed the scrutiny hurried by without challenging him. “Remember what I’ve taught you about weakness? Ethan’s about to discover just how crippling it can be.”

Nicolas rolled the cigarette between his fingers. “You don’t sound very sympathetic.”

This made Roman laugh out loud, a bitter, boisterous sound that startled those nearby. He met their eyes one by one until each scurried away. On the bench across the path, a nosy young woman looked longer than she should’ve. Nicolas felt her confusion as his father ripped into her thoughts. He gritted his teeth, averted his gaze, but movement in the corner of his eye drew his attention back. The girl dropped her book into her shoulder bag, walked across the path, and slid onto the bench beside Roman. When she put her hand on his knee, Roman sighed.

Nicolas’s stomach roiled. “Must you?” he bit out.

“Weakness,” Roman continued, “is what brings everyone down. Sooner or later.” He kissed the girl’s temple. She smiled at him with blank eyes. “A lesson you’d do well to remember.”

“Meaning?”

Again his father ignored him. “Ethan is obsessed with Alec Devlin.”

“Your point?”

“Only this.” Roman took the girl’s hand and placed it in his lap. “It’s what Ethan didn’t say tonight that revealed the most. Especially as it’s common knowledge that his young protégé is in hiding with your best friend.” He sneered as the last two words left his mouth.

Nicolas shrugged. He pinched the butt between his fingers, then flicked it to the ground.

Roman’s nostrils flared as he took a deep breath. “Ethan’s world is crumbling. His lies are coming back to haunt him. The Organization is faltering, the Directorate scared.”

“Good times,” Nicolas replied. His urge to fidget was overpowering. Rather than light a second cigarette, he clasped his hands in his lap. “At least in the past you would’ve thought so.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Roman grinned. At his side, the girl fumbled at his trousers, openly fondling him now. “I rather like it.”

“I’m sure,” Nicolas muttered. “Yet it lends little stability to your situation.”

“Doesn’t it?”

There was so much unsaid in those two words. Disquiet niggled at Nicolas. “You want the Organization weakened?” he guessed.

“Oh, Nicolas.” Roman dislodged the girl’s hand. She didn’t make a sound, but sat staring into the distance. “There’s so much you don’t know. The question is, can I trust you?”

The questioning of his loyalty, while sudden, didn’t startle Nicolas. He’d been expecting it just marginally longer than he’d been preparing his answer. Years. A lifetime. He couldn’t help lamenting the loss of his freedom, though. Perhaps that was what his father was counting on.

“You ask this now?” he answered, following the script of their little game.

“You are *my* weakness, Nicolas. I haven’t asked because there are answers I have no desire to hear.”

Pensive, Nicolas tapped his fingers on the bench, pretending to mull his father’s ridiculous words. He doubted Roman would miss him

any more than he would one of his thousand pairs of shoes. He kept his voice light. "I often say I trust no one. A lie, of course."

Roman tilted his head in acknowledgment. No man was an island. No successful one, at least. He'd preached as much to Nicolas since childhood.

"It may be trite, but blood is thicker than water." Despite his father's substantial shields, Nicolas felt the pride that emanated from Roman. "But why *now*? Why are you asking me to choose sides when you've been content to let me play the neutral party for so long?"

"Fair question. If I answer, may I ask one of my own?"

Absolutely not, Nicolas ached to say. Roman had been conciliatory so far, but that wouldn't last. And lying to the man was suicide. He pursed his lips, but nodded.

Roman turned to the girl and whispered in her ear. Brow furrowed, she rose and went back to her bench, where she pulled out a cell phone and began punching numbers. Nicolas watched with interest. "What did you tell her to do?"

Roman's smile didn't reach his eyes. "Never you mind. Now, my answer." He looped an arm over the back of the bench and slid close. Nicolas forced himself to stay relaxed. "There's a battle coming. I hope to keep it bloodless, but Fate often takes these decisions from us, doesn't she?"

Nicolas watched and waited.

"In the end, there will be no Organization. No agents. No Monitors." He leaned close. "Only me. And you, I hope." His eyelids drooped, heavy with promised pleasure. "I've grown tired of Ethan's interference these past few years."

The truth hit Nicolas like a physical blow to the stomach, pushing the air from his lungs. The puzzle piece he'd been missing clicked into place. He couldn't keep the surprise off his face. "There is no rebel faction of Gifteds."

Roman licked his lips. "My turn?"

"Yes," Nicolas said, despising the fine tremor in his voice.

"When push comes to shove, will your loyalty be with me or with Grier?" He tilted his head. "Do you *care* for him?"

“That’s two questions.”

Roman’s mouth split into a wide, toothy grin. His eyes rolled back like a crocodile and he chuckled. “So it is. Well, then. Pick which one you want to answer.”

Clever bastard. To buy time, Nicolas turned his eyes back to the girl. Silent tears poured down her cheeks. The phone was still pressed to her ear.

“I’ll answer both,” Nicolas said, turning to meet his father’s startled gaze. “I suppose I care for him. He’s magnificent in bed.”

Roman’s eyes flashed. Nicolas braced himself, but continued. “And that’s about all he’s good for, to be frank. My emotional connection stems from his cocksucking skills. I’m man enough to admit it.”

He stood, brushing loose cigarette ash from his suit. “I don’t appreciate having to choose sides, Father. But if it’s necessary, then I stand with you. I always have.

Roman’s rage ebbed, leaving Nicolas limp with relief. Roman stroked his chin with a leather-gloved hand. “Thank you, Son. That’s all I needed to know.”

Which could mean a host of things. The most dangerous of which was, *You can’t fool me*. For his sake, Nicolas prayed it meant something else altogether.

CHAPTER 12

ALEC trudged up the steps from the beach to the boardwalk. The weathered planks followed the curve of the dune over the hill and down the other side. Scrub brush thrived above the tide line, growing in scattered clumps. Alec squinted, but all he could see was the very top of the beach house roof. At the shoreline, even that wasn't visible. Amelia and Henri had given them the perfect hiding place.

Each day his stamina improved, and Grier had used what gifts he possessed to speed Alec's recovery further. His efforts had made a significant difference. The flesh around the wound was already pink with new scar tissue, and Alec's strength was returning by the hour. It fed his restlessness; his short morning walk had turned into a three-mile run. Not the wisest decision he'd ever made. His side was tender, and his body, accustomed to days of lethargy, ached. But, damn, he felt good. Wincing at the pull in his hamstrings, he fell into a series of stretches.

Lost in his thoughts, he missed Grier's approach. "What are you doing?" Grier glared his disapproval.

"Stretching."

"Why?"

"Critical after exercise." The bastard didn't crack a smile. "Relax. I just took a short run."

The chastisement he expected never came. Grier's eyes ran the length of his body, then away. He stared out toward the ocean, frowning. "How do you feel?"

"Great. Ready for breakfast." Alec started up the boardwalk toward the house. The twinge in his hip grew to a sting, but he ignored it. Grier fell in beside him, his agitation so plain that Alec stifled a laugh. "What's up?"

“What do you mean?”

They reached the rear deck and Alec went straight for the outdoor shower. He sank onto the bench, stifling a groan. Taking the weight off his legs was more of a relief than it should’ve been. No more sitting around. There’d be running every day until he was back in shape. Toeing off his sneakers and socks, he asked, “Something on your mind?”

Grier folded his arms over his chest. “You’ve fulfilled your end of the bargain.”

“Yeah?” Alec took in the defensive stance, then pulled his shirt off and ducked under the showerhead. Icy water drenched his face and hair. He stepped out of the spray and shook off the loose droplets. “Got a towel?” He swiped a hand over his face, rubbing the moisture out of his eyes.

“No.”

“Huh.” With that, Alec made for the house.

Grier caught up as he was stepping through the sliding door. His fingers clamped around Alec’s arm. Not an easy feat as Alec was still slick with water and perspiration. “Did you hear me?” he asked.

“Loud and clear. You’re leaving.” With exaggerated patience, Alec unpeeled Grier’s fingers. “Good luck.”

So this was it. Grier had what he wanted, and he was leaving. Alec refused to classify the twist in his gut as hurt. Disappointment, maybe. But he couldn’t help the spark of resentment that flared in his heart. Not because Grier was implicitly refusing to help Alec flush out Ethan. More because he was refusing *Alec*.

He’d thought Grier wanted him. He’d been sure of it.

Evidently, he’d been wrong.

He ducked into his bedroom for another T-shirt, then into the kitchen for coffee. Grinding the beans, filling the pot, and flipping the switch took a few minutes. Alec used the mindless task to cool his temper, darting glances across the room as he worked. Grier had been aloof for days, avoiding him. And now this? He couldn’t even say goodbye like a normal person?

Impassive, Grier stood in the middle of the living room, eyes glued to the pile of sand Alec had tracked in. Frigid bastard.

Still pumped from his run, spoiling for a fight, Alec slid up behind him. "Need help packing?"

Grier scuffed his toe through the sand. "Alec—"

"Are you one of those people who always leaves something behind when they go?" One more step brought them within inches of each other. Fascinated, Alec watched goose bumps erupt over Grier's neck. "No way, right? Too organized. Bet you put your name on all your stuff when you were a kid." Motivated by Grier's sharp breath, he swayed closer. He'd told himself he wasn't going to push. Or beg. But, damn it, he was tired of being ignored. "Bet you never lose anything," he whispered, then pressed his mouth to the side of Grier's neck, breathing in deeply.

Grier spun, wrenching Alec's arm and shoving him against the back of the sofa. The momentum would've carried him over, but Grier caught a handful of his T-shirt, suspending him off balance.

"Enough," Grier said. He gave Alec a shake. "Do you understand?"

"No." He tried to yank away, and one of the seams in his shirt gave with an audible rip. The tendons in Grier's arms bulged, but otherwise he didn't react. Alec growled low in his throat, days of resentment surging to the surface. "I *don't* understand. Did you forget how to fuck?"

"Did you remember you liked to?" Grier fired back.

"Isn't that obvious?"

"No! Nothing is obvious." Grier released him, and Alec tipped backward onto the cushions. "Except that you don't seem to care that your plan is going to get you killed. You're walking into a trap." He leaned forward, bracing himself on either side of Alec's legs. "Damn it! This isn't my battle."

For several seconds, their harsh panting filled the room. Then Alec threw an arm over his eyes and laughed. "Jesus, is that what you're afraid of?" He tucked in his legs and rolled off the couch, pointing at Grier once he was back on his feet. "I *know* where you

stand, okay? You want to go? Then fucking go. That's your choice, and I respect it. But I'm making a different one." His tone softened. "You don't have to like it. Honestly, I don't give a shit whether you do or not." A couple of deep breaths calmed him further. "Are we clear?"

Grier's tortured voice barely carried to Alec's ears. "You're going to die."

Alec gave a grim smile. "You don't have much faith in me, do you? But anyway," he said, interrupting Grier's reply, "if that's what you think, then shouldn't you be willing to grant a dying man his last wish?"

"That's not the slightest bit funny," Grier said. His hands curled into tight fists.

"Okay, I'm sorry." Alec edged around the couch. "Listen." He swallowed. "I got my information. You got your training. We're even."

"You got shot."

Alec threw him a lopsided smile. "Oh, that's right. Totally forgot." He advanced, ignoring how Grier raised a hand in warning. Like that was going to stop him at this point. "I guess we're not even." He grabbed Grier's hand out of the air and twisted, forcing it down. His turn. "You're leaving. I get it. I understand." He lifted his hands to Grier's neck, curling them around his throat while he stroked his thumbs across his mouth. He recalled the last time they'd been so close, in Grier's apartment. What he'd wished for then, he craved now: the heat; the lust that made him forget everything except wanting Grier's hands and mouth on his body.

"Have we talked enough?" Alec whispered.

Grier's breath caught. He'd made the connection. His hands pushed into Alec's hair, clamping him in place, and he reached out with his mind. No intentions. No declarations. No words. Just a wave of emotion and desire that gave Alec a hint of what was to come. Still, the kiss was brutal enough to snap his head back and take the strength out of his knees. Boneless, he invited Grier to feast on his mouth and threw the doors to his mind wide open. A matching wave of lust rushed out.

When their minds connected, Grier's body jolted. He pushed Alec away with a strangled shout. One hand flew to press against the

erection tenting his pants. With the other, he pointed toward the bedrooms. “Finally,” Alec breathed. Grier advanced, and Alec shuffled backward toward the hallway. “Which—”

Grier captured him for another rough kiss, then propelled him through the nearest door and tipped him onto the mattress. Alec grinned. “Your room, then?” he asked, but his next words devolved into a moan when Grier, now shirtless, fell across him. He brushed their mouths together, nipping at Alec’s lower lip, before dipping to lick his neck.

A touch of anger colored his touch; he attacked with sharp teeth, his fingers ringing Alec’s wrists with enough pressure to bruise. Alec met his desperation, arching into the bites and writhing just to feel Grier’s grip turn punishing.

He protested when Grier released him, until those hands scratched down his arms and over his chest to thumb his nipples. “Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Alec babbled in a hoarse whisper when Grier’s tongue followed a similar path and sunk into the hollow of his sternum. His mouth was dry, his shorts damp. Frantic, he rutted against Grier’s stomach.

For the first time in a week, the cell phone rang.

“No,” Alec whimpered.

Grier dropped his head to Alec’s chest. When the phone buzzed again, he lifted himself off to grab it. A check of the caller ID set him cursing. “Grier?” Alec asked.

“It’s the service.”

“Of course it is. Fuck!” Alec smoothed a hand over the front of his shorts, pressing the nylon flat against his erection.

With uncharacteristic discomposure, Grier fumbled for a pen, dropped it, then tried to write with the wrong end. “You have a message for me?” he barked.

Alec couldn’t make out the answer.

“Yes,” Grier snapped, scribbling down a number. “I have it. Thank you.” He flipped the phone shut.

“Nicolas?”

“Who else?” Grier pressed the speaker button, then dialed. Nicolas picked up on the first ring. His voice exploded through the phone with a mass of crackling static.

“About fucking time.”

“Calm down.” Grier jerked his pants higher on his hips. “I was busy.”

“Don’t even *think* about finishing that sentence.” Nicolas spat a litany of curses. “I don’t want the details of your disgustingly vanilla sex play. Wait, yes I do. Just not right now.”

Alec stretched to run his bare toes up Grier’s leg.

“If,” Nicolas continued, “for no other reason than to hear how Alec begs for it like a ten-dollar whore.”

“Hey, I thought you liked me now,” Alec said.

“Did I call you a five-dollar whore? No, I did not.”

Grier set the phone on the nightstand and crawled across the mattress, sliding his fingers inside Alec’s shorts. Alec arched into the touch with a low groan. “What do you want, Nicolas?” Grier asked.

More static, then, “I’ve some news for you.”

“Not good, I take it.”

“I see fraternizing with Alec hasn’t damaged your IQ. Yet.”

“Get to the point, please.”

“You’re not going to like it.”

“Nicolas,” Grier warned.

“Do you remember that group we spoke of the last time we met?”

Grier pinched the bridge of his nose. “Are you being cryptic on purpose?”

“I’ll take that as a yes. Guess what? It doesn’t exist.”

That got Alec’s attention. “That’s good, isn’t it?”

“I suppose that depends. I had dinner with Ethan a few nights ago. Oh, and someone who insinuated she’d taken a shot at you recently, Grier. Ring a bell?”

“Blonde lady?”

“Blonde, anyway. Afterward, I had an enlightening talk with my father. There were the usual protestations of his superiority, etcetera.” Nicolas sighed. “Would you like the short version?”

“Any version would be appreciated,” Grier said, toying with Alec’s navel.

“The splinter faction of Gifteds is my father’s invention. Created to discredit Ethan and undermine the Organization.”

Grier froze. His eyes locked on Alec’s. “Go on.”

“He’s bent on destroying Ethan. Well, those weren’t his exact words, but read it how you like. He hinted at some sort of amnesty for any agent willing to see things his way.”

“There won’t be many,” Alec said, shaking his head.

Nicolas snorted. “You weren’t at the same dinner table I was. But if you’re the poster child for Ethan’s pack of puppets, then you could be right. It’ll be a slaughter of idealistic fools.”

“What will be a slaughter?” Alec asked.

Bypassing the question, Nicolas said, “Things haven’t been going well for Ethan lately. His two favorite boys have run off, have you heard? And his operations are being thwarted left and right by this splinter group. He’s quite desperate.”

“Roman’s manipulation is unbelievable,” Grier muttered. “Only the strictest level of planning and skill would’ve fooled Ethan.”

Nicolas hummed his agreement. “It is impressive, isn’t it? If it weren’t so damn evil, I’d congratulate the bastard. Not that Ethan isn’t culpable. He’s made some dirty deals since this began and long before that as well. I’m sorry, Alec, but he’s not the paragon of virtue you believe him to be.”

“Somehow I doubt you’re sorry,” Alec said.

“I am. In a way, it feels like—” Nicolas fell silent for a long time. “The point is, he’s still a bastard in my book, but not the demon recent events have made him out to be.” He paused. “There’s more.”

Grier met Alec’s worried gaze, but didn’t speak.

“My father has tricked the Organization into arranging a... I don’t even know what to call it. An all-hands meeting? Ethan, the

Directorate, and all their toy soldiers on one side of the table. His people on the other.”

Alec sat up. “What for?”

“Oh, Alec, please tell me you’re not that naïve.”

“You’re underestimating Ethan’s powers, as well as the Directorate’s,” Alec said. “Not to mention the Organization’s Gifteds. They won’t be so easy to kill.”

“I wish I shared your optimism. My father’s leaving very little to chance. The numbers won’t be as even as you’d like to think. And even Ethan can’t defend himself against so many enemies at once.”

Grim, Alec asked, “When?”

“Three days from now. Friday. We’re still waiting on the details.”

“Will you be there?” Grier asked.

A caustic chuckle drifted through the static. “Oh yes.”

“Whose side are you on?” Alec ignored Grier’s sharp look.

Nicolas laughed. “Mine, of course. But,” he said, sobering, “I won’t bear witness to a massacre.”

Alec saw the ghost of a smile pass over Grier’s face.

“So there you have it,” Nicolas said. “It does promise to be exciting. Think about joining the party, why don’t you.” The last traces of amusement faded from his voice. “I can’t say I wouldn’t be happy to have you two at my back.”

Grier answered before Alec did. “We’ll be in touch.”

There was no promise in Grier’s words, no hint of agreement. Nicolas heard it too. “Take care of yourself, Grier,” he said, and Alec heard the farewell clearly.

“You too.” Grier disconnected the call.

Alec’s head spun. “You’d leave him.”

“Nicolas isn’t helpless. I believe he can take care of himself.” Grier tossed the phone onto the table.

Alec watched it skid across the surface and thunk onto the floor. “I used to believe a lot of things.”

The phone call had banked their desperation. Grier stood and stalked out of the room, and Alec fell back onto the pillow, processing the new information. He nibbled his lip as he plotted. The logistics of infiltrating the meeting would be complicated. He could only put so much faith in Nicolas; he'd have his own problems.

Alec opened his mouth when Grier returned, a question on his lips, but the bottle of oil in Grier's hand chased it away. "Good thinking," he said, and Grier's eyes narrowed at his casual tone.

"Hardly ideal, but it'll do."

"I'm sure—"

Grier shed his pants and underwear in one movement.

"—it will," Alec said.

"Changed your mind?"

In answer, Alec shimmied his shorts down over his hips, and Grier took over from there, sliding them off in one smooth movement before crawling back up Alec's body to mouth his reawakened cock. "Jesus," Alec whispered. He bucked up, as much to feel Grier's weight on his legs as to push down his throat. Grier didn't protest, even when Alec's control broke and he clamped his hands onto Grier's head and fucked up into his mouth.

It couldn't last, but he sure as hell wasn't going to let it end like this. Alec fought for enough control—just a bit more, one more thrust, one more scrape of Grier's teeth against the crown of his cock—then scrambled away, a whimper on his lips when he felt himself tipping toward climax. "Stop."

As if the explosions going off in his own body weren't enough to drive him crazy, he could sense Grier's as well. Days and weeks of denial had culminated in this one moment, and he knew Grier was using every trick he knew not to pin Alec to the bed and rut against him until they both came.

The sensory overload built, whiplashing between them until Alec wanted to scream with frustration. "Stop," he said again, meaning something different this time.

"No stopping." Grier lifted up onto his knees, then curled one arm around each of Alec's thighs and yanked, spreading them wide as he

dragged Alec toward him. He grabbed the bottle and splashed oil over Alec's balls and into the cleft of his ass. Pushing Alec's knees to his stomach, he curled over him. His teeth tugged ungently at the tender skin of Alec's throat as his cock nudged against Alec's hole. "Hard? Fast? How do you want it?"

"Fuck," Alec wheezed. "Don't know. I'm not—Just do it."

Grier stilled. He lifted his head and studied Alec's expression. Alec withdrew from the mental probe too late, and Grier saw what he was trying to hide.

"Don't overanalyze." Alec squirmed beneath him. "I want you. Come on."

It took Grier another several heartbeats to move. He spilled more oil onto Alec's thighs, watching him carefully while he spread it over his aching cock. Alec bucked into the touch, then away when it threatened to send him over the edge. Lost in a haze of lust, he didn't react at first when Grier lowered his legs to the bed and straddled him. "Wait, what—"

"Shut up."

Grier planted one palm on Alec's chest. He reached back with the other, guiding Alec inside him. Sinking into Grier's body would have sent Alec into immediate orgasm, but Grier helpfully shared some of the discomfort, just a bit. Enough for Alec to stave off his climax.

It had been awhile, but he remembered enough to keep still until told otherwise. Grier's sharp eyes stayed on his, but Alec had too much to look at to return the favor. The cock jutting out over his stomach, for one. Curling up toward Grier's stomach, the shaft was as perfect as Grier, long and slim. The crown was swollen, purple with blood, and wet. The urge to touch was too difficult to resist, and Alec captured it in both hands. Grier jerked, and with a graveled moan, sank the last few inches onto Alec's prick.

"Jesus Christ," Alec gasped. He squeezed Grier's cock in his hands, jacking him slowly, but Grier batted Alec's hand away after a few exploratory strokes.

"Not yet," he barked.

Alec let go and concentrated on not coming.

Screwing his eyes shut helped, but when Grier began to spew lewd comments and rock backward, he gave up and grabbed Grier's waist. He snapped his hips upward, driving deep. "Fucking *hell*," he rasped, unable to rip his eyes from Grier's toned body riding him. Grier's mouth fell open with every thrust, and when he threw his weight forward, setting both hands on Alec's chest, taking complete control, Alec knew the end was close. He had just enough pride left to wrap both hands round Grier's neglected cock and take up the same punishing tempo.

His battered dignity got a boost when Grier's breath whooshed out of him. "Alec," he panted, then threw his head back and came, grunting with each powerful spasm. With a final shudder, he dropped forward and Alec grabbed his hips, bucking up twice more before losing himself in his own climax.

The physical release was still pounding through him when the mental one hit. Alec's mouth dropped open in a soundless scream as the ecstasy of Grier's orgasm barreled into his mind, joining with his own. He arched off the bed and a few more pulses of semen pulsed out of his cock and into Grier's ass. Overwhelmed, he could only babble. "Oh God, oh God, oh God."

Grier chuckled into his shoulder while Alec rode it out. The pleasure ebbed in waves, rocking him into a comfortable, sated daze.

Grier rolled away, but he returned before Alec could work up enough energy to verbalize the *where the hell are you going* that was stuck in his throat. A warm, wet cloth skimmed away most of the mess. Feeling boneless and sleepy, Alec protested the cursory nature of the task. "Forget that," he muttered, seizing the cloth. It hit the floor with a splat. "Come here."

Grier stretched out beside him, silent. Waiting.

Alec took a deep breath. "I'm going," he said. He whispered it, hoping to temper Grier's anger, at least for now, because he didn't need enmity or repudiation. What he craved was more visceral: Grier's blunt fingernails marking his skin; his strong, angular body holding Alec down; his hot, wet mouth on Alec's cock. Two weeks ago, that need had been a thousand miles away. Frivolous. Today it was crucial, begot from a thousand shattered misconceptions.

He wrapped Grier in a tight embrace and whispered again, “I have to.”

For all of Grier’s quietude, he wasn’t relaxed. Taut as a bowstring, he laid in Alec’s arms.

“And thanks,” Alec said, nudging his nose against Grier’s throat. “For this. I—” He stopped, frustrated. The words that wanted to come weren’t right, so like Grier, he fell back on silence.

Above them, the ceiling fan turned, throwing a light breeze, and Alec pulled at the sheet he’d tossed to the side, slipping it up over their legs to their shoulders. Grier shivered, still mute. *What are you going to do?* Alec wanted to ask. *Where are you going to go?* Self-serving questions, and unreasonable, to be honest. No matter how things shook out with the Organization, Grier wanted a clean break. A new life. It was a fair thing to ask for.

But that was tomorrow.

Alec slid a hand down Grier’s back, dipping his fingers into the crease of his ass, and finally Grier moved, pushing back against the probe. Alec withdrew. “Nope. Want something different.” He coaxed one of Grier’s hands lower over his own back, then lower, and a strangled moan rang from Grier’s throat, vibrating against Alec’s shoulder. His fingers clenched into Alec’s flesh. “Please,” Alec murmured.

“Why?”

The muffled question threw him. He retreated far enough to look Grier in the eye. “I want it. Afraid I’ll break?”

“No. What I meant was, why are you going?”

Alec swallowed his angry retort. “I’ve already said.”

“You declared your intention to go. You didn’t say why.”

You know why. But he bit back the words, considering.

He wanted to destroy Roman. To help Nicolas. To find out once and for all what kind of man Ethan was. The last point wouldn’t decide the fate of the world, but it would determine Alec’s future. Years were at stake, almost half of his life. He needed to know, for certain, what he’d been fighting for.

“For completely selfish reasons,” he admitted. “For me.”

Grier didn't acknowledge the cryptic answer. Instead, he rolled Alec onto his back and reclined beside him. They'd shared little gentleness before then, and continuing in that same vein, Grier penetrated Alec with two fingers, using the residual oil slicking his thighs to ease the way. The intrusion stung. Alec hissed, then groaned when Grier scooted lower to lick his flagging cock. Fitting his lips over the head, he began a lazy sucking that matched the movement of his fingers in Alec's ass.

Hypersensitive from his first orgasm, Alec jumped at every brush of Grier's lips against his skin. Grier's tongue swept up and down Alec's shaft, circling the head with each pass. Every so often he grazed the glans with his teeth, humming in approval when Alec cried out.

Caught up in how Grier's mouth fit over his dick, Alec almost forgot the fingers working him open until Grier pushed deeper, pressing his knuckles past the tight ring. Wasting no time, he nudged Alec's prostate.

“Ah!” Alec's hips jerked up off the mattress. “Grier!”

Grier hooked his fingers, brushing the bundle of nerves again, and Alec choked on his next moan. Fine. If that's how Grier wanted to play, then Alec had no complaints. He opened his mind and pushed his renewed lust down their link. Grier jolted. He groaned over Alec's cock. His fingers flexed and curled.

Emboldened, Alec sent more images: Grier hovering over him, eyes screwed shut and face tight with need, bending Alec in half and fucking him with a relentless, punishing rhythm. Imagining it did nothing to slake the need. Alec rocked his hips, forcing Grier's throat open while urging his fingers deeper. The pleasure built, erasing the discomfort, and Alec feasted on it before feeding it through their connection. “Please,” he begged. “Fuck me.”

“Alec!” Grier lifted his mouth from Alec's cock. His voice, thick and raspy, held a warning.

“Fuck me,” Alec panted. “Like that. Just like I showed you.”

With a growl, Grier crawled back up Alec's body and snatched a handful of his hair. He thumped Alec's head back onto the pillow. Alec grunted in surprise, but the fog dissipated for a moment. He blinked his

vision clear to find Grier inches away, eyes glittering. His chest heaved against Alec's. His fingers dug into Alec's scalp. "Stop that," he ordered, voice shaking. "Stop it now."

"Don't you want to feel what you're doing to me?"

Grier's hand trembled in his hair. "I want you to shut up. Pull back from the bond, or I'm going to come the second I get inside of you."

"*God.*" Grier out of control and at Alec's mercy. A heady thought.

"I won't last five seconds. That's not what you want, is it, Alec?"

Not really. At least not today. Alec lifted his head far enough off the pillow to nudge his nose against Grier's cheek. "No."

"No." Grier crossed an arm over Alec's chest, pinning him to the mattress. "What about this? Is this what you want?" he asked with a hiss, twisting and pumping his fingers for a moment before going still. Alec thrashed against his hand. Grier let him rut on his fingers but didn't give in. "Answer me."

Frustrated, Alec slammed his fists against the mattress. "No." He bucked against the restraint.

Grier held him easily. He spoke through gritted teeth. "Then pull back. Or it's all you're going to get."

Alec obeyed. Grier's strong mental presence faded, leaving him bereft.

"That's better." Grier eased away and reached behind him for the bottle of oil he'd set on the bedside table. He splashed some into his palm, then moved between Alec's legs. Not caring how eager it made him look, Alec spread himself wide, hooking a hand behind each knee and lifting them to his chest.

Grier's smooth movements stuttered to a stop, and his hand tipped, spilling oil onto the sheets. Alec grinned. "Easy there."

Scowling, Grier let some of the liquid drip over Alec's balls, then massaged it into his hole. Some he used to wet his own cock, and the last he smeared over Alec's erection. Despite the light, fleeting touch,

Alec sucked in a breath. He smacked Grier's hand away. "What are you waiting for?"

"For you to shut your mouth for five seconds."

"Why didn't you just say so?"

With a roll of his eyes, Grier gave Alec's thighs an extra push, lifting his ass completely off the mattress. He walked forward on his knees until the tip of his cock pressed at Alec's hole. Alec held his breath and forced himself to relax, but when nothing happened, his eyes flew to Grier's face.

Grier met his gaze. He held his cock steady with one hand while the other massaged the skin of Alec's upper thigh. Alec opened his mouth, and Grier flashed him a dark look. "Don't. Speak."

Alec collapsed back to the pillow. *Then fuck me*, he answered, prying their bond open a crack. Grier's jaw tightened, and Alec, unable to resist the challenge, allowed a tendril of his earlier thoughts to seep through. *Fuck me*, he chanted in his head. *Fuck me*.

A low, guttural cry left Grier's lips, his hips shot forward, and the head of his cock sank past the ring of muscle. Alec forced himself to relax and breathe through the pain, but he knew some had leaked through their bond.

Grier froze in place, quivering. Chin to his chest and eyes closed, he whispered an apology. "Alec, I'm sorry. I couldn't—"

"It's okay." With one deep breath, Alec released the rest of his tension, welcoming Grier farther inside him. Groaning, Grier gave the extra needed push, and suddenly Alec felt so full it was hard to breath.

Please, he prayed, *don't ever let this end*.

Grier curled over him, just as Alec had imagined, pinning him in place in every way it mattered. Their mouths met accidentally, a happy coincidence Grier took advantage of. The kiss cut off Alec's already-limited air supply, but he couldn't make himself care. Not with Grier's tongue stroking the inside of his mouth and his hips picking up the perfect rhythm.

Just as the need to breathe became desperate, Grier tore his mouth away and buried it in Alec's neck. His thrusts turned long and deep. "Alec," he said, voice breaking. "Alec."

Alec cast his mind wide open. *This is how you make me feel*, he whispered into Grier's head, letting the sensation of being fucked overflow their bond. A tangled mass of need and affection reverberated back, and for a moment, they were close enough for Alec to know the sensation of fucking and being fucked all at once.

Alec gave in to the inevitable. A wordless cry tore from his throat as his climax hit. His dick pulsed, shooting onto his stomach. Grier followed a few seconds later, still clinging to their bond, drawing another few strings of semen from Alec's cock as he emptied himself into Alec's willing body.

Alec was still trembling, pulse thumping in his ears and sparks of pleasure fizzling down his thighs, when Grier next spoke. He untangled Alec's legs from his waist and lowered them to the bed. Alec sprawled in a boneless heap, arms thrown over his face.

"If you insist on doing this," Grier said, still shaky from his own release. "Then I'm coming with you."

Alec scrubbed his hands over his cheeks, trying to jumpstart his brain. "Why?"

For a long time, Grier didn't speak. When he did, it was with resignation. "For selfish reasons."

CHAPTER 13

WHEN Nora was a child, her grandparents took her rafting on the Rogue River. As much as she loved their house, high in the hills above the gorge, surrounded by trees and gurgling streams, she'd hated the raft. Even at that age, she'd seen it was nothing more than a piece of fabric filled with air, its path ruled by the chaotic rush of the water. It was survival by pure chance, and she was far too practical a child to accept that kind of risk.

This trip, along the same river, was no different.

From the backseat of the rental car, she admired the forest's dark beauty, even if the rolling turns made her feel sick. Being bonded to Kay didn't help; the woman's mind was a confused mess, and even though Nora would never intrude where she wasn't invited, she recognized that Kay was keeping many of her thoughts hidden. She wasn't even sure why Kay had taken a Monitor for this meeting, except that Ethan had insisted on it.

Besides herself, Kay, and Ethan, she'd sensed at least four other Gifteds as they'd passed through the airport. Lord knew how many others were descending on this secluded patch of wilderness. Such a gathering was unprecedented, especially as not all were Organization. Some—many—pledged a loose loyalty to Petrov, while others, Ethan had hinted, answered only to themselves.

War did have a way of uniting the ranks.

She eased open the connection with Kay before squeezing it shut again. Her stomach rolled. There were disadvantages to being a good Monitor. You got to work with the best, but sometimes the best were too arrogant for their own good.

But not all. In the past, Nora had been paired with Alec several times, Grier twice, but Kay more than everyone else put together. Kay

made it no secret how she felt about the bond. It was distracting. Unnecessary. She was too good for it. That kind of condescension got old.

“What precautions have you taken to keep our people safe?” Kay asked. Nora held her tongue. The question wasn’t directed at her.

“I chose this location with great care.” Ethan didn’t look up from his small notebook. “The lodge doesn’t open until May. This time of year, it’s deserted.”

“Surely it has a caretaker.”

Ethan’s mouth twitched. “He’s been taken care of.”

Kay swerved to avoid a squirrel in the road, and Nora’s stomach flipped. “It’s too secluded. I don’t like it.”

“Seclusion ensures the safety of any innocent bystanders. The lodge is accessible from two roads,” Ethan said. “We’ll approach from the south. Roman and his people from the north. We’ll even enter the building from different directions. You studied the layout I gave you?”

“Yes.”

Ethan looked over his shoulder at Nora. She nodded. The property was immense, and it was unlikely, if everyone followed the rules, that the two sides would encounter each other before they were ready. It was a tidy plan.

“You’ll be perfectly safe,” Ethan said as they drove into a quaint, one-stoplight town. “This is Grant Hollow, the last we’ll see of civilization for a while.

“How cute,” Kay said, smacking her gum.

Nora rolled her eyes.

“I just feel like we—” Kay began, but Nora missed the rest. At that moment, the car rolled past a café and something flashed in the corner of her eye. No, it couldn’t be. She craned her neck, then whipped it back around when Ethan glanced over his shoulder. Nora produced a watery smile, and he resumed his conversation with Kay.

Nora wrung her hands in her lap. Alec. She’d seen Alec. There was no doubt. Standing just inside the door to the café. What did it mean? Had he defected to the enemy’s side?

“Everything all right, Nora?”

She jumped. “Yes, sir. Just a bit nervous.”

Kay mumbled something, but Ethan gave her a reassuring smile. “Caution is an admirable trait. Keep your eyes open.”

Nora returned the smile. She planned to.

Thirty minutes later, the road made one last sickening turn and broke through the trees at the top of the mountain. Nora caught her breath. Grant Lodge was everything her research had promised. It straddled a cliff above the gorge, its stone façade a gorgeous backdrop for the thick forest. A portion of the lodge hung out high above the river with a wall of glass that promised a commanding view.

If Nora understood the blueprints, that was the restaurant, where the meeting would take place.

Kay parked at the end of the south wing, and they climbed out. “Follow me.” Ethan led them inside, down an endless carpeted hallway and through an archway into the main reception area. Gloomy, lit by the diffused light of the late-day sun, it looked as long as a football field. A dozen groupings of couches and chairs were scattered throughout, covered with white sheets. In the dark, they looked like great, hulking ghosts.

“Love the ambiance,” Kay muttered.

Nora sensed nothing, but Kay spoke under her breath as they approached the restaurant. “We’re being watched.”

“I’m aware,” Ethan replied.

Roman met them just inside the doors, greeting Ethan with a nod. He graced Kay with a kiss on the back of her hand. “I’ve just arrived myself. My compliments, Ethan, on the venue.” He gestured behind him to the glass wall. “Stunning.”

“Thank you.”

In the center of the room, Nora noted, was a conference table, perhaps twenty feet long. Those who had already arrived were standing on one side or the other, casting suspicious looks across the table.

“May I have a word with you before we start?” Roman gestured to a corner, and Ethan acquiesced with a nod.

“Nora,” Kay said as Ethan and Roman moved off. “I need your help.”

Nora clutched her bag and answered through their bond. *What is it?*

“Not here,” Kay said.

Nora hung back as Kay stepped through the doors and back into the vast lobby. What could she want that she couldn’t communicate through their bond? Wary, Nora followed at a distance while Kay walked further into the gloom and descended a set of wide steps, trailing a hand over the banister. “Hurry,” she called over her shoulder. “We’ll be missed soon.”

Nora reached the bottom of the steps and squinted into the darkness. “Here,” Kay said, off to her right. A flashlight clicked on, and Kay gestured her closer. “This room has emergency lights, like the restaurant. Come on.” Throat dry, Nora followed her into what looked like a small conference room.

“Thank you.” Kay closed the door and stood against it.

“What did you need?”

Kay sighed, dropping her head back against the door. “I’ve come to a decision. I’m sorry, but I can’t afford to be distracted by you during this meeting.”

Nora cocked her head. “I promise I’ll keep the bond quiet.”

“That’s not it.” Kay’s eyes narrowed. “And you know it.” She stalked forward. “I need a clear head. You know how the Monitor bond impairs me.”

Nora gathered her courage and didn’t flinch. “To a very small degree,” she breathed. “But if you should need help, and have no way to communicate that—”

“*Everyone* is going to be right there.” Her clipped laugh made Nora’s skin crawl. “Ethan will be less than two feet away.” She curled her red-tipped fingernails around Nora’s arm.

Nora shook her head. “I insist you don’t. Protocol—”

“Nora.” Kay’s eyes glittered. “I’ve already decided. It’s not up for debate. As for the protocol,” she shook her head, “I have a feeling it won’t be an issue much longer.”

“Oh?”

“That’s in the future, of course,” Kay said. “But at the moment, there’s Ethan to consider, and he wouldn’t approve.”

“No, he wouldn’t.” Nora pressed her lips together. “And neither do I.” Kay could be insensitive and unreasonable, but Nora’s job was to protect her. She took that responsibility to heart.

“I’m afraid your opinion doesn’t count.” Nora swallowed at Kay’s snide tone. “If your gifts were a bit more developed.... But they’re not, so you’re not much use, are you?” She dropped her hand and took two steps back. “Prepare yourself.”

“Wait!” Panic clogged Nora’s throat. She still remembered the pain of Alec’s terminated bond. “Please. If you insist on this, I—I have no say, but—”

“That’s right. You have no say. I’m sorry, Nora. I really am.”

A quick probe of her thoughts convinced Nora that was the truth. “Kay,” she pleaded. “Don’t do this.”

She felt Kay waver, reconsider, but the relief was short-lived. Kay’s eyes hardened with resolve. “You almost had me, dear. I didn’t know your gift of suggestion was so strong.”

“There are many things you don’t know.” Before she could continue, pain tore through her head. Every muscle in her body tensed in agony. She crumpled to the thick carpet, throat locked around a scream.

An eternity later, the cramps eased, and she was able to cry, tears soaking the dusty floor under her cheek. Trembling and short of breath, she jumped when a hand touched her. It smoothed the hair off her brow. “Should’ve killed that bitch when I had the chance,” a voice said. Then, “I’ll have to remedy that error at the earliest opportunity.”

ALEC ducked back inside the café, then made his way along the bar, past the bathrooms, and out the back door. Grier was waiting. “What’s wrong?”

“Could’ve sworn I saw Nora.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised.” He paused, taking in Alec’s pensive look. “Did she see you?”

“Maybe.” Alec shrugged. “It’s too late to do anything about it, one way or the other.”

Grier cursed. “All it would take is one word in Ethan’s ear that we’re here, and things will get a thousand times more difficult.”

“I know.” He peeked around the dumpster. “Are you sure this guy is going to show?”

“Nicolas said he would.”

Alec tugged him out of sight against the wall. Smoothing his fingers over Grier’s stomach, he said, “You’re doing great. I can’t sense you at all.”

Grier captured his wandering hands. “As you said, it’s not difficult to maintain.”

“Even while distracted?” Alec slid a thigh between his legs.

“Stay focused.” But he twisted a hand in Alec’s hair and pulled him in for a kiss. Alec groaned, and Grier answered it, yanking Alec’s head back and forcing his mouth wide with his tongue.

“Gertrude?”

They broke apart at the unfamiliar voice. A man stood behind them. Shorter than Alec by several inches and bald, he frowned as he gave them both a thorough once-over.

“Yes?” Grier answered, voice gruff.

The man’s eyes were wide behind his wire-rimmed glasses. His flannel jacket and hiking boots swam on his slender frame. “When you’re finished—”

“We’re finished.” Grier shoved a grinning Alec aside.

“If you say so. Looks to me like things were just getting interesting.” He made a curt gesture—*follow me*—then strode off. Any

warning about keeping out of sight proved unnecessary. The man stayed off the streets, leading them through a series of connected back lots before stopping at a battered Civic. He climbed inside without a word, and after a short hesitation, they followed, Grier in the front, Alec behind him.

"Sorry about the car. The boss said I needed something *inconspicuous*." The man's lips twisted around the last word.

"At least you're not driving a minivan," Alec said.

"There is a God after all," the man grumbled. After a check of his mirrors, he pulled onto the road, ending the conversation for a good fifteen minutes until he swung off the pavement and onto a rutted, dirt lane. Uneven, it wound through a copse of trees and into a field. At the far side of the clearing was a brick utility building. "End of the line, boys." He pointed. "That's the property line there. Main lodge is south through the trees, about a mile. The trail's pretty flat, but gets steep near the end."

Alec nodded. "Thanks for your help."

"I'm just the delivery boy. From the way it sounds, you've got the shit job today." With a parting wave, he drove away, the Civic bouncing over ruts and kicking up thick clouds of dust.

Grier circled the utility shed, checked his compass, then motioned Alec closer. "Okay, what's your plan?"

"Simple." Alec slipped the small pack off his back, crouching on the ground while he dug inside. He had a feeling Grier wasn't going to approve, but, "Kill Roman."

Grier waited. Alec smiled up at him while he pulled a pair of tight leather gloves over his hands. "That's it?" Grier blurted.

Alec shrugged. "I believe in keeping it simple."

"Except that's not simple, it's suicide."

"Oh," Alec added, "and save as many people as I can."

"Like who?"

"Nora? Ethan? Kay?" he added with a quirk of his eyebrow.

"Kay!" Grier roared. "She shot you." He poked at Alec's arm with every word.

“Yeah, but she was aiming for *you*.”

Grier dropped his own pack to the ground, muttering something that sounded a bit like, “Fucking crazy.”

Alec flexed his hands, testing the fit of the gloves. “Wish you’d stayed in Maryland?”

“That’s the least of what I wish right now.” Grier pulled out a folded canvas bag and slipped it inside his jacket. “Barozene,” he said to Alec’s questioning glance. “Not quite as dramatic as ‘Kill Roman’, but it will have to do.”

Alec laughed as he swung his pack over his shoulder. “So I’m a brute, as Nicolas likes to say, and you have all the finesse. Sounds about right.” His smile died. “Do you think...?”

“He’s not stupid.” Grier stood. He cupped Alec’s cheek in his hand for a moment. “Nicolas knows you’re not coming for the hors d’oeuvres.”

“The man’s his father. He must feel something.”

“Oh, he feels something.” Grier started off through the woods. “We don’t choose our parents. Believe me, Alec, he’ll bear you no ill will.”

They jogged the first part of the trail, slowing when it began to weave up a steep hill. At the top, the trees ended at a cluster of giant boulders. Alec gave a low whistle when he saw the lodge. “Jesus, it’s huge. Looks like it’s hanging right over the edge.”

“Part of it is.”

Alec craned his neck. “How far to the bottom?”

“A long way.” Grier flashed a grin over his shoulder. “Fancy a swim?”

“Maybe later.”

Grier fished a pair of compact binoculars from his pack. “Roman’s people are everywhere.”

“Armed?”

“That would be going against the agreement. So, yes, of course they are. There.” Grier pointed to a spot below the northern entrance.

“There’s the one Nicolas said to look for.” Grier shouldered his pack, and Alec did the same. “Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

In the end, it was too easy, something that made Alec more tense than not. They circled the area, approaching the building from where it hung out over the gorge. There they found the guard loyal to Nicolas. Adrenaline jolted into Alec’s system when the man pulled his gun. “Gertrude?”

Grier leveled a quelling look at Alec when he choked on a laugh. “Yes,” he answered, and two minutes later, they were creeping through the lobby on their way to the restaurant. Grier motioned Alec behind one of the tall reception counters, then back into an empty office.

“How the hell does Nicolas know who’s loyal to him from one day to the next?” Alec asked.

“You’re mixing father and son. Nicolas doesn’t usually have trouble keeping his people once he’s acquired them. I’m sure the recent security breach was a blow to his ego.” Shaking his head, Grier said, “It’s a game they play. Ever since Nicolas was old enough to understand the rules.”

“Roman allows it?”

“He encourages it.”

“For the first time, I’m happy to be an orphan.”

I’VE arranged some security, Roman had said when he pulled Ethan aside. *Don’t be alarmed.*

But he *was* alarmed, even if he refused to let Roman see it. The agreement had been no weapons. No show of force or coercion. They’d yet to begin, and already Roman was changing the rules. It didn’t bode well.

Ethan ran his tongue over his teeth. The air tasted thick.

One Gifted in a room put a low buzz in his head, like a honey bee. Several made enough ambient noise to confuse him, if he allowed it. This many—he looked around, counting at least twenty on his side, an

equal number on Roman's—charged the air. The deep drone made the hair at the back of his neck stand on end. His ability to manipulate objects wasn't unique, but rare enough that he thought he might be the sole person in the room who could *see* the air vibrate with power.

He cursed the distraction, even though he'd prepared for it. Time to find Kay. He greeted each of his people in turn on his way to the door. They'd arrived individually and in pairs. His elite. They represented the whole of the Organization.

Standing on the other side of the table was a group of men and women Ethan had never seen before. Roman's contingent. The best of his people. While Ethan's group chatted in low voices, these stood without speaking, eyes playing over their counterparts.

Notably, Nicolas was missing.

Roman called to him. "Leaving, Ethan? It's time to begin."

Ethan nodded. "I believe we're all here. Let me fetch Kay." He touched the curved handle.

"And the Directorate?"

Ethan turned.

Roman had risen from his chair. His eyes glittered like ice. "I was led to believe they would be attending."

Ethan's shoulders shook with silent laughter. He gestured to the group. "Right in front of you." At his nod, half a dozen people—four men and two women—stepped forward and took a seat on Ethan's side of the table.

Roman's lip curled back in a sneer. "These children?"

"Did you believe the Directorate a complement of stuffy old men?" Ethan shook his head. "No, Roman. The only stuffy old man is me. And," he added with a twinkle in his eyes, "you. Now if you'll excuse me." He stepped out into the hall.

Immediately, the air thinned, rushing into his grateful lungs.

"Ethan?"

He turned to see Kay approaching, her blonde hair a bright glimmer in the dark. "Kay. Where have you been?"

“Taking care of Nora. I’m afraid she isn’t well. It’s nothing serious,” she said when Ethan made to push past. “Just overwhelmed, I think.” Her smile didn’t reach her eyes.

He’d been fighting feelings of unease since they’d arrived. First Roman’s small betrayal, and now Nora was ill. The tickling disquiet grew. “If you’re sure she’s all right,” he said, choosing his words with care. “We’re about to begin.”

She hooked her hand around his elbow. “My apologies. By all means, let’s begin.”

THROUGH a small slit in the door, Alec watched Ethan lead Kay back inside. “They’re starting. Does that mean the Directorate is here? I didn’t see them arrive.”

Grier’s hand trailed over his back. “Yet another misconception. *I* was once a member of the Directorate, Alec. They’re not a faceless league of manipulators hiding in a tower somewhere. They’re your peers.”

“What?”

“Ethan created the Directorate to balance his doctrine. The members change, but they are always there, tempering his vision. He is, after all, one man. The Organization’s primary directive has always been to serve. Power is for the popular.”

“Gifts are for the principled,” Alec finished for him.

“If I didn’t believe in the system, I would’ve walked away long before now.”

“If that’s true, then how could the Directorate let this happen? Wasn’t there anyone who saw the deception for what it was?”

Grier leaned around Alec, scanning the lobby. “They’re young. Blinded by Ethan’s presence. Intelligent and highly gifted, but easily influenced. That Ethan never took advantage of that before now is a miracle.” He turned his face into Alec’s hair for a moment, then sighed. “It’s a sham. Not a one has the balls to challenge him. Which is, no doubt, why Ethan never considered *you* for a seat.”

Alec couldn't help but smile. "But you're a member."

"Was. In my youth."

Alec snorted. "Not much of a check and balance."

"No." He slid an arm around Alec's waist. "Someone's coming."

Alec drew further inside the room, leaving nothing but the narrowest crack in the door. Two people came into view, climbing the stairs Kay had ascended a few minutes ago. Even in the dim light, they were unmistakable.

Alec was out the door before Grier could catch him, sliding across the polished wood to meet them at the top of the steps. He looped an arm around Nora's waist, taking most of her weight from Nicolas. "What the hell happened? And where have you been? We've been waiting for fifteen minutes."

Nicolas glared at Alec. "Keeping an eye on your girlfriend."

"She's not my girlfriend."

"I'm his Monitor," Nora rasped.

"Not you," Nicolas said. "The blonde."

"She's not my girlfriend either," Alec pointed out.

"Alec!" Grier hissed, appearing at their side. "The guards! Get out of sight!" Together, they helped Nora race across the open space and into the reception office. There, Grier took over, guiding her to a plush seat.

"Thank you, Grier," she whispered, shaking. "Alec. I was right. I did see you in town."

Alec pushed in front of Nicolas to sit by her side. "What happened?"

When Nora's eyes filled with tears, Nicolas answered. "I don't know. I saw Kay slip away, and I followed. She took—" He waved a hand in Nora's direction.

"Nora," Nora said, gracing Nicolas with a tender smile.

"She took Nora downstairs, but came back alone about five minutes later."

Nora sniffed. "I'm finished with that witch."

“Are you bonded with Kay right now?” Grier cut in.

“No. Not anymore.” Nora gulped. “She broke our connection. Said she needed to be clearheaded.”

Nicolas’s sharp bark of laughter made them all jump. “She’s taken with my father. Two guesses as to why she didn’t want a Monitor privy to her thoughts.”

“Are you all right?” Grier squeezed her hand.

“Fine. It hurt, but,” she said, her eyes sliding to Alec, “I kind of knew what was coming.”

“Fuck, Nora,” Alec said, “I’m sorry about that.”

“I deserved it. No, I did,” she insisted when Alec shook his head. “You shouldn’t have been told such horrible lies. But Ethan thought...”

“Yeah.” Alec shot to his feet and paced.

“We’re running out of time.” Nicolas straightened his clothing. “I need to join my father.”

“No,” Alec and Grier said in unison. “That makes no sense,” Grier continued. “All it does is put one more person in harm’s way. We need to lure Roman out.”

Nicolas shook his head. “That’s not going to stop things at this point. What you need is someone inside who can minimize the damage when all hell breaks loose. Which it will. Soon.”

“What?” Nora sat up straighter. “I don’t understand.”

“It’s a trap,” Alec told her. “Roman means to destroy the Organization. And anybody else who gets in his way.”

“All the more reason,” Grier snarled at Nicolas, “for you to stay the hell away.”

“He’s right,” Alec said. “The last thing we need is another liability.”

Nicolas moved so fast, Alec never saw the punch coming. Nora squeaked in fright when he crashed into the wall and slid to the floor. Shocked into silence, nobody moved. Gingerly, Alec shifted his jaw back and forth, pressing his fingers along his chin. “Okay, I deserved that.”

“Damn right you did,” Nicolas spit out, glaring at him. The standoff lasted another moment before Nicolas extended his hand. Alec took it, and Nicolas pulled him up.

“Okay,” Alec said, swaying. “I’ve got a great idea. Let’s send Nicolas in.”

Nora clamped a hand over her mouth, trying to stifle a burst of nervous laughter.

“To do what?” Grier asked.

“Well,” Alec said as he lifted his eyes to the ceiling for a moment, “we still have the Barozene. Nicolas, you’ll be sitting next to your old man, right? Think you might get a shot at him?”

“I’ll make sure I do.” Nicolas took the capped syringe from Grier. “Where do I stick it?”

Alec arched an eyebrow. “With an opening like that, you expect me to give you a serious answer?”

Some of the tension lifted. Grier laughed as Alec and Nicolas grinned at each other. But Nora’s next words sobered them. “I’m going too.”

“No.” Grier slashed his hand through the air. “Absolutely not.”

Nora pursed her lips. “Why not?”

“Will you punch me if I said you’d be a liability?”

Nora pushed her glasses higher on her nose. “Roman Petrov isn’t the only threat.” She held her hand out for a syringe. “I’ll be seated close to Kay, maybe even next to her. If her loyalty’s in question, then she’s a threat. Give me a chance to neutralize the bitch.”

Alec barked a laugh, but Grier’s struggle was plain. He didn’t hand over the drug.

“Nora, are you sure?” Alec crouched next to her. “After what you’ve just been through?”

“I’m sure.”

A commotion on the other side of the door drew Grier’s attention, and everyone fell silent. He slipped out to investigate, returning a

minute later, somber. “More of Roman’s watchdogs. These are armed. They’ve spread out across the lobby.”

“Covering the exits,” Nicolas confirmed. “My father doesn’t plan to let anyone go without a fight. Grier, we can’t wait any longer.”

Cursing under his breath, Grier snatched back the syringe he’d handed to Nicolas and unzipped his bag. “Give me a moment. I can concentrate the dose so that even a few drops will do the trick.”

Nicolas craned his neck as Grier started refilling the syringes. “You’re useful to have around, aren’t you?”

“I can make microwave popcorn too,” Grier said, focused on his task.

“Truly a man of many talents.”

“Enough games.” Alec took one of the syringes and handed it to Nora. “Here’s the plan.”

CHAPTER 14

WITH Nicolas's steadying hand on her elbow, Nora was able to look the guard in the eye and not flinch. The slight weight of the syringe in her pocket was a constant reminder of her mission—one she'd have to bury deep if she didn't want Kay or Ethan to see it.

"What are you waiting for?" Nicolas snapped at the guard. "Open the door. I'm late enough."

"Yes sir, Mr. Petrov."

When the guard turned away, Nicolas winked at her. More nervous giggles bubbled up her throat. She swallowed them back. The door swung open to the room beyond and in a flash, the terror returned.

Nicolas squeezed her arm. "You're doing fine," he said from the corner of his mouth as he guided her inside. "Father," he said, louder. "My apologies."

Ethan left his seat, shaking off Kay's hand as he rushed forward. "Nora," he said, taking her from Nicolas. "Kay said you weren't well."

"I was feeling ill, and then got lost trying to find my way back. Mr. Petrov was kind enough to help me." She turned to flash a thankful smile at Nicolas, but he'd already retreated to his father's side. The father and son shared a look she couldn't decipher.

"This place is a maze. Come and sit." Ethan pulled out a chair next to Kay. So far, so good. Nora ducked her head, ignoring Kay's piercing gaze, but dared to raise her eyes to Roman. "I'm very sorry for interrupting."

Roman inclined his head. "How fortunate that my son was in the right place at the right time."

“Yes.” She forced a smile onto her face, hoping it didn’t look as much like a grimace as it felt. Free of Kay’s bond, she could feel the tension and distrust radiating from every corner of the room.

Roman continued to stare, and Nora dropped her eyes, fingering the weapon in her pocket.

SENDING Nora into danger hadn’t been Alec’s first choice. He watched Nicolas lead her inside before turning to Grier. “Okay, time to kill the lights. Which way?”

Side by side, they crept through the reception area, at times passing within feet of Roman’s men. Complacent, the guards were scanning for the Gifted, not for anyone else. Alec and Grier evaded them easily.

Grier ducked into an alcove at the far end of the lobby, and Alec followed. Coat racks lined the walls, and hangers littered the floor. “How much farther?” Alec whispered.

“Not much. The electrical main is two flights down. The stairs are across this hall.” Grier looked around the doorframe, then ducked back. “Two guards,” he whispered.

Alec shrugged. “Even odds.”

Grier shook his head, guided Alec to the archway, and pointed. On the balcony overhead, another two guards stood watch. “We can’t take these two without those noticing,” Grier breathed in his ear. “And any noise will carry. We need to neutralize all four at once.”

Alec mouthed a curse. They could, of course. But not without alerting every other guard in the building, and Roman as well. Using their Gifts would be like lighting a signal fire. “We’re running out of time.”

“We can circle outside the building and look for another way in.” Grier eased out of the alcove, but Alec caught the collar of his shirt and shook his head. No time.

He lunged forward, catching Grier off-guard with a quick, rough kiss. “Be careful,” he said against his lips. Grier’s eyes widened with understanding, but too late. Alec sprinted into the open.

He opened his mind, revealing himself, and Grier’s fury speared into his head like a hot poker. A moment later, running feet approached from two directions. Alec couldn’t help grinning when all four guards appeared out of the gloom, guns trained on him. He lifted his hands when prompted. In his peripheral vision, he saw a low shadow dash across the floor and down the open stairwell. Mission accomplished.

“Hey,” he said to the nearest guard, “isn’t there a party around here or something?”

“How do you know about that?” the man barked.

“Saw it written on the wall of the john.”

Without moving an inch, the man struck, and Alec crumpled to the floor as pain exploded through his head. “Bring him,” he heard the leader say. “You two get back to your post.”

The pain ended, but Alec stayed down, curled into a fetal position while he gasped for breath. He grunted when the first guard nudged him with his foot. “Get up. Time to party.”

“I thought you’d never ask,” Alec wheezed, struggling to his feet. “If that’s what a bad joke gets me, what happens if I really piss you off?”

“I have a feeling you might find out. Let’s go.” The man shoved him forward. Alec went docilely. At the door, they paused, and Alec heard muffled voices from the other side. When the guard knocked, they went silent.

“Enter,” someone called. That had to be Roman. Alec had heard the same aristocratic tone in Nicolas’s voice.

The guard opened the door and pushed Alec through. He stumbled a few steps before righting himself, and murmurs erupted around the table. The guard steered him across the room to stand in front of Roman.

“Alec.” Ethan pushed himself up, setting two shaky hands on the table. Whatever he’d planned to say next, he reconsidered. The ensuing

silence gave Alec a chance to reconnoiter. Nora was sitting next to Kay. Good. He made sure his gaze didn't linger on Nicolas, but was relieved to see him seated beside Roman. Perfect.

"Alec," Roman drawled, breaking the tense silence.

Alec saluted him. "Sorry I'm late."

"I don't believe you were invited."

"Now that hurts my feelings."

"And why is that?" Roman stood, placing a hand on Nicolas's shoulder when he tried to rise as well. Nicolas's face was a white mask, fixed on Alec. "You've joined the enemy," Roman said. "You have no business here."

"No!" Ethan shouted. "I don't believe it. Alec?"

Alec ran his eyes over the Directorate, dismayed to find them wide-eyed and inert. He couldn't stall forever. Damn it, where was Grier?

"Alec," Ethan repeated. "Tell him he's wrong. I know you, son. I know you."

In spite of all the lies between them, *that* was true. Ethan knew him. He hoped the reverse still held. "You've been tricked," he said to Ethan. "Petrov means to kill you."

A collective gasp went up from Ethan's side of the table, yet Roman's people were still. Alec knew the moment when Ethan realized the truth.

Still, Roman played his game. "You come here daring to spread these lies." He pounded his fist on the table, shouting at Ethan. "Remove him. Before I do."

Ethan didn't move, and Alec shook his head. "It's over."

"How wrong you are," Roman hissed under his breath. He focused his gaze across the table.

Before Alec could process the energy that surged past him, Kay shot from her seat. Bright splotches of red colored her cheeks. Even halfway across the room, her anger rocked Alec back on his heels. She lunged under her jacket, and suddenly there was a gun in her hand. "Traitor!" she cried as she fired.

As her finger squeezed the trigger, Nicolas hit Alec from behind, driving him into the floor. Alec's head slammed into the wood, and the bullet thudded into the wall above his head, spitting plaster down on both of them. His vision went white from the blow, and came back double, but he still saw what happened next.

Nora leaped from her seat, pulling the syringe from her pocket as she did, and jabbed it into Kay's neck. Kay gasped and twisted, but Nora followed, depressing the plunger and emptying the drug into her bloodstream.

Alec felt like cheering.

Kay yanked out the syringe and threw it across the room. "You bitch!" she screamed, swiveling to point the gun at Nora.

"No!" Ethan yelled, echoing Alec's shouted warning. He stepped in front of a cowering Nora, hands out. "No, Kay!"

Kay pulled the trigger. Ethan spun backward, then crumpled to the ground. Nora released a splitting scream, and the room erupted into chaos.

Feeling sick, Alec glanced over his shoulder. Nicolas was still on the ground, but he wasn't watching the drama unfold across the room. His eyes were on Roman, who was standing over them, murderous gaze glued to an identical syringe clutched in Nicolas's hand, and the liquid swirling inside of it.

"Shit," Alec said.

The lights went out.

Alec kicked and his boot met something soft and yielding. He heard the snap of a bone and a grunt of pain. He spun into a crouch, intent on launching himself toward Roman, but Nicolas caught him. "Alec, no." He threw his weight forward, holding Alec down. "I didn't get a chance to inject him."

Behind them, a door smashed open, letting in a touch of grayish light. Alec squinted, then pounded his fist against the floor when a figure limped through. "He's getting away."

The shouts grew more frantic. Chairs toppled. A glass pitcher shattered on the floor. Alec cringed. At least Kay seemed to be the only one with a gun.

Even as the thought passed his mind, the doors to the lobby where thrown open and one of Roman's guards panned a bright spotlight over the space. He lowered the light and hefted a machine gun against his shoulder. Before Alec could shout a warning, there was a deafening spatter of gunfire. The picture window shattered, raining glass into the gorge below. Wind charged in. The shredded blinds drifted to the floor, and the last of the day's sunshine lit up the room, tinting everything pink.

"Jesus." Alec ducked against the flying glass, then shouted, "What the fuck are you doing? Stop shooting!"

Miraculously, his order was obeyed. He craned his neck, desperate for a glimpse of Ethan or Nora, but he couldn't see through the throng of panicked people. Few were fighting; most were converging on the lobby doors, trying to escape.

Nicolas grabbed the syringe off the floor and scuttled toward the rear door after his father. Cursing under his breath, Alec followed.

GRIER had wanted to kill Alec when he ran off. Reckless little bastard! Fuming, he'd waited, and a few seconds later, the men at the top of the stairs abandoned their post. Alec had lifted the curtain on his gifts, exposing himself.

As much as Grier wanted to throttle him, the diversion worked. He slipped out of his hiding place and bent low to dash across the floor and onto the steps. He crept down a half a flight before turning to peer at Alec through the banister. Four guards surrounded him. Alec had fallen to the floor, clutching his head.

Rage ballooned in Grier's chest. His legs twitched, desperate to carry him back. Instead, he slithered down the rest of the steps before rising to take the next flight at a run, then pushed through the double metal doors into the maintenance area of the lodge. Once inside, he pulled a small flashlight from his pocket.

Two deep breaths calmed him enough to recall Nicolas's instructions. Second right, third left, down a short flight of metal steps, and there it was. The electrical main. The lock had been cut, the chain puddled on the ground next to it. That made sense. Ethan's people had been there earlier, reconnecting power to the restaurant. A secondary breaker was also active: the emergency lighting. Grier stuck the flashlight between his teeth, reached for the main breaker, and flipped it down with a loud snap.

The bulb above his head went out, and the low whirring of the back-up generator died. The ensuing silence seemed to have physical weight. Grier didn't move. The only sounds were his harsh breathing and thumping heart.

Far away, so faint it was nothing more than a breath of sound, someone screamed. Grier took off toward the restaurant at a run.

The trip back felt endless. He topped the stairs to the lobby still running, the small beam of his flashlight a beacon if anybody wanted a shot at him, but there was no gunfire, no shouts for him to stop.

The sun had set. The barest hint of light shone through the windows, but it was enough for Grier to see someone throw open the restaurant doors, swing a gun up to his shoulder, and fire off a dozen rounds. More screams erupted from the room.

He heard Alec shout, and the relief almost buckled his knees.

He didn't slow as he came up behind the shooter. Bending low, he tackled him at the knees, driving the weapon up and away. The man went down with a grunt, and Grier finished the job with a vicious blow to the side of his face.

"Alec!" he shouted as he gained his feet.

No one answered. People rushed past on both sides, jostling him backward, their expressions a mix of fear, anger, and confusion. He fought his way back into the room, and in the pale light saw Ethan sprawled on the floor, blood seeping from his stomach and Nora huddled over him. Ethan's eyes crackled with rage. "You," he said. He pointed with one shaking finger, but not at Grier.

Grier followed his gaze.

A few feet away, Kay stood, arms outstretched. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," she cried. "Please."

Blood bubbled out of Ethan's mouth. Sobbing, Nora tried to wipe it away with the edge of her shirt, but more came behind it, dripping across his cheek and onto her leg.

Grier's heart clenched. He fell to his knees by Nora's side.

Trembling, Kay dropped the gun. It clattered on the floor. "Please."

Ethan's stare never wavered. He sucked in a wet breath. His pupils dilated, then shrunk to pinpricks. No words passed his lips, but Kay's head snapped back. Her fingers locked apart, and her mouth opened in a silent scream. Graceless as a string puppet, she turned and began a clumsy run for the shattered window.

"Ethan, no," Nora whispered, but Grier said nothing. It was too late.

Kay never slowed, even when the sleeve of her blouse caught on a shard of glass, ripping a jagged hole in the fabric. She jumped, arms and legs still pumping when gravity caught and carried her down and out of sight.

"Grier."

Tearing his eyes away from the scrap of material caught on the glass, Grier looked at Ethan. The old man gave him a sad smile. "A fitting end."

"She—"

"I wasn't speaking about Kay." Ethan fumbled for Grier's hand. The clasp of his fingers was familiar, the grip of a man who'd once saved him. "Don't I always say, no mistake should go unpunished?"

"No," Grier replied, hoarse. "You always say we should learn from our mistakes."

Ethan struggled for another breath. One corner of his mouth, still wet with blood, turned upward. "So I do." His fingers went tight around Grier's. "Then you, my son, must learn from mine."

"I don't want—"

“Watch out for Alec. Watch out for all of them. Please.” Ethan shut his eyes.

“No!” Grier covered the bullet wound with his hand, calling up as much power as he could to repair the damage. Within seconds, he realized the futility. Ethan’s body had shut down. His heart struggled on, even when his lungs ceased to fill. Jaw clenched, Grier watched as the artery in his neck stuttered, then finally went still.

Only then did he acknowledge the watchers.

A circle of people stood around them. The Directorate, he assumed. Most of the rest had fled. There was no more reason to hide. Grier dropped his shields, flinching at how his improved vision sharpened the details of Ethan’s slack face and the coppery smell of blood. Grief crushed down on him, not all of it from the men and women clustered around the body.

“The end of an era,” Nora said. She laid a hand on Ethan’s forehead.

Caught in a storm of conflicting emotions, Grier stood, swiping a blood-covered hand over his shirt. “Go,” he choked, addressing the Directorate. “It’s not safe here.” He bowed his head, sensing when they moved off. “You, too, Nora.”

“But....”

“I’ll take care of him. Go.”

Despite the order, Nora stayed on the floor, legs tucked beneath her and Ethan’s head on her lap. Her glasses were crooked. A thin spray of blood covered one lens. “So it’s over?”

Grier extended his senses past the empty room, searching. Alec’s return touch held relief and affection. And a sense of urgency. “No,” Grier said. “Not yet.”

ALEC let Nicolas take the lead. Two levels down, they found a set of security doors torn from their hinges. Alec’s step faltered at the snapped metal. “Did he do that?”

“I’m afraid so.” Nicolas leapt over the obstacle without slowing.

Beyond was a sweeping veranda, carved into the side of the cliff. When the resort was open, Alec imagined it was filled with umbrella-shaded tables and lounge chairs, but at the moment it held nothing but a few dead branches. It stretched from one end of the lodge to the other. A short wall of stones separated it from the forest beyond. Every few feet, faded, red-lettered signs warned of the danger.

Do not cross.

Nicolas vaulted over it, and Alec followed. They slid down a steep incline onto the next terrace of earth and rock. Nicolas paused, and Alec bent over his knees to catch his breath. "How the hell is he moving so fast? I broke his fucking leg."

Nicolas's face twisted into a frown. "He knows he has no chance of outrunning us. He's setting a trap."

"Scary. Let's go."

Sunset had faded to full dusk. The sound of the river filled Alec's ears, echoing up and down the gorge until he couldn't tell from which direction it came. His only clue was the sloping terrain. One slip was all it would take. He reached for Nicolas's arm. "Careful."

"I'm trying," Nicolas said, voice strained. He said something else, but it was lost in the roar of the water. They slid down another steep bank, clutching at exposed roots. The trees had thinned, and a cool mist bathed Alec's skin. The river.

His feet hit the next terrace to find Nicolas huddled on the ground, clutching his leg. Alec crouched over him. "Did you hurt yourself?"

"No." Nicolas wiped a bead of sweat off his brow. "My father's sharing his pain."

"He's trying to slow you down." Alec pulled at his fingers. "Give me the syringe."

The details of Nicolas's expression were lost in the falling darkness. "Are you going to use it?"

Which wasn't what he meant, Alec knew. "If I get the chance."

Nicolas pressed it into his palm. "Be careful."

"Don't worry."

“Alec.” Nicolas grabbed him before he could move. “He’ll try to trick you, and he’s very good.”

Alec curled his fingers around the syringe. “Stay put.” He moved off, extending his senses in a wide arc. He absorbed the lay of the terrain, felt Roman’s presence ahead of him—though not too far ahead. Pain was slowing his progress, dulling his ability to fight. Alec dug into his mind, memorizing his route, then followed.

Roman had pushed through a thicket. There. At the next drop, he’d turned left, following the trail to an opening in the brush. Alec followed, mapping Roman’s every move in his head. Maybe the bastard would fall before Alec ever reached him.

Gaining confidence, Alec sped his pace. He was closing in. In his mind, he saw Roman take the next drop onto a large, flat boulder, then pick up a trail heading north, away from the gorge.

“Oh, no, you don’t.” No way was the bastard going to get away from him. Alec jumped down the incline, but where he expected his feet to hit rock, there was nothing. Gasping in surprise, he twisted, hooking a tree root with his arm. The syringe flew from his fingers and fell, disappearing into the mist below. Stopping his fall had almost pulled his shoulder from its socket. “What the fuck?” he wheezed, eyes tearing from the pain.

There was no rock, no wide terrace of trees. No trail heading north. The image in his head blurred, then faded. Nicolas’s warning had been warranted. Even hurt and weakening, Roman’s powers were formidable. The suggestion he’d embedded in Alec’s head had been seamless, the illusion perfect.

Grunting, Alec hoisted himself a few feet higher.

“End of the line, Alec.”

Alec jerked his head in the direction of the voice. Roman was so close, Alec could have touched him. He, too, had wedged himself against a tree root. With one arm, he clung to the side of the cliff. His other hand held a gun, aimed at Alec.

“Yeah, that suits me just fine. I’ve wanted off this crazy ride since it started.” He gathered himself and struck, but Roman rebuffed the

mental attack, swatting at it like he would a fly. Alec couldn't help but be impressed.

"Is that the best you have, boy?" Roman sneered. "Pathetic." He cocked the gun.

"Well, actually," Alec said, "no." With a deep breath, he reached for the power he hadn't sought in years, his ultimate camouflage, and made himself invisible. He had no idea if the illusion would fool someone as gifted as Roman, but it was his only shot. The night turned darker, sounds grew muffled. He prayed the ruse worked.

Roman's shocked shout was all the confirmation he needed.

Vertigo took hold as the strain of maintaining the illusion worsened. His hand slid from the tree root, and before his strength left him altogether, he let go and lunged toward the gun. It went off when his fingers closed around it, the report deafening, but the bullet went wide, ricocheting off the cliff face. Alec ripped it from Roman's hand and tossed it away.

Roman let loose another strangled cry and began to slip, and Alec kicked at his stomach, helping him along. With his own strength flagging, he revealed himself, grinning manically when Roman's eyes bulged.

"How did you—?"

Alec kicked again, and Roman's fingers lost their grip. "Bye-bye," Alec growled as Roman dropped over the edge.

Roman's lips peeled back in a snarl. Just as he went over, he grabbed Alec's foot, yanking him off balance. Gasping, Alec threw himself backward, scrabbling for a handhold, but his fingers found nothing but dirt and smooth rock. He shot toward the abyss.

Then jerked to a halt when a hand clamped onto his.

He tore his eyes away from where his legs hung out over the drop and tipped his head back, smiling into Grier's worried face. "Nice catch."

"Hang on."

"I'll try." But he was so weak that even saying the words was a struggle. In the end, it was Grier who did most of the work, manhandling them both up the cliff face until he reached flat ground.

Panting, he collapsed on a bed of matted pine needles. Alec curled against his side.

“See? Everything went perfectly,” Alec said a few minutes later. “And you were all worried.”

Grier’s hand tightened on his hair. “Shut up. Before I throw you over myself.”

Heavy footfalls approached. Nicolas dropped to the ground next to them, setting his arms on his bent knees. “Just so you both know, I’ve satisfied my quota of heroics for the next century.”

Alec pushed himself upright. “Your father—”

“He’s dead, Alec. Please don’t apologize. It would be an empty sentiment. For both of us.” Like an animal that had caught a scent, he lifted his head, nostrils flaring, then swiveled to look up the hill.

“What are they feeling?” Grier asked him, staring at the dozens of shadowy figures watching from above.

Nicolas inhaled again, but shook his head. “Everything.”

One by one, the figures turned and moved off into the night. A few minutes later, they were once more alone.

Grier helped Alec and Nicolas to their feet. “Now,” he said, brushing dirt from his pants, “it’s over.”

CHAPTER 15

TWO weeks after Grier watched Nicolas's bodyguards hustle him into his limo and down the mountain, and thirteen days after Alec decided they should return to the beach house, Grier woke to his cell phone vibrating on the bedside table. He caught it on the second ring, answering before he was fully awake. "I'm getting tired of this, Nicolas," he said. No need to check the caller ID. Only two people had his number, and one was in bed next to him.

"No, you're not. You love the sound of my voice in the morning."

"It's the middle of the night here. As you well know." Grier rolled onto his back and stretched. "Just like it was when you called yesterday."

"Don't be a baby. Want to know what I'm having for breakfast?"

"Are you really that lonely?" Grier propped the phone between his ear and the pillow.

"Crepes," Nicolas said. "Tell me crepes aren't the most decadent thing in the world."

"They suit you," Grier agreed. "Goodbye."

"So you're retired now," Nicolas said before Grier could punch the end button. Silverware clattered in the background.

His eyes felt gritty. Grier scrubbed at them, noticing how his hands still smelled like Alec. "I'm not having this conversation right now."

"Why? Are the two of you busy?"

Grier stretched an arm to the opposite side of the bed. His fingers touched nothing but bare sheets.

"Grier?"

“What do you want?” He sat up, squinting around the dark bedroom. No Alec.

“I had another call.” Chewing filled the line.

“Congratulations.”

“I’m not your message service.” Nicolas’s voice faded, then returned stronger. “This is getting tiresome.”

The pop of a champagne bottle in his ear made Grier jump. Giving up on sleep, he wrestled into a pair of jeans and padded into the living room. “Tell them you don’t know where I am,” he said, scanning the room.

“That would be a lie.”

“Which goes against your moral code all of a sudden?”

“Grier, all these people are looking for is information. Some guidance.”

“No, they want someone to tell them what to do. Not interested.”

The kitchen was empty. Frowning, Grier wandered back into the bedroom. Nicolas’s voice turned sharp, leaving laziness behind. “You’re talking like this war ended on top of that mountain.”

“Didn’t it?”

Nicolas snorted. “You think I wouldn’t like to say yes?”

The grudging tone gave Grier pause. “So your father’s goons are making trouble.”

“They’re trying. I can only do so much. They want nothing to do with me, and I can’t say I don’t return the sentiment. Your people have a chance of keeping them in line, but they’re too disorganized at the moment.”

Back to that. “They’re not my people.”

“Deny all you like.”

“Goodbye, Nicolas.” He’d started to snap the phone closed when Nicolas’s frustrated reply came through.

“Shall I give them Alec’s number, then?”

Grier froze. Silent, he put the phone back to his ear.

“That got you,” Nicolas said. “You can’t wrap him in cotton and keep him locked in that beach house forever. He’s going to get restless.”

Grier kept his gaze averted from the empty bed.

“Your apathy isn’t helping anything. If you have no intention of getting involved, at least make that public knowledge.” He took a sip of something, his champagne, Grier assumed, then smacked his lips. “They’re waiting for you.”

Grier set his hand on Alec’s pillow. He hadn’t been gone long. The case still felt warm. “Enjoy the crepes,” Grier said. He hung up.

Back in the living room, he noticed what he hadn’t before: a low whistle of wind, like the breathy sound of a flute. There was a two inch gap in the sliding door. Grier pushed it open and stepped out onto the deck.

The breeze held a touch of spring chill, not enough to warrant a jacket, but Grier swiped his shirt from the bench by the shower—where he’d left it earlier when Alec had stripped it from him—then followed the boardwalk to the beach.

The moon reflecting off the water bathed the sand in pale yellow light. He saw Alec right away. Seated just above the tide line, he was tossing shells into the waves. Grier watched for a long time, Nicolas’s words playing in his head in an endless loop. After several minutes, Alec turned and waved him forward.

“How long were you going to stand there?” he asked when Grier sat down next to him. Alec’s knees were bent. His fingers dug in the sand between his legs, looking for shell fragments.

Grier had no idea. Most likely, if Alec hadn’t beckoned him forward, he would’ve gone back to bed and brooded, as he had the last three nights he’d awakened to find Alec gone. “Nicolas called.”

Alec gave a low laugh. “Again?”

Grier found a stick and began twisting it through the wet sand. “He says that he’s tired of being my message service.”

“I bet. So he got another call.”

Grier opened his mouth to answer before he realized it wasn’t a question.

“Anything else? No report on today’s breakfast?”

“Crepes.”

“Of course.” Alec wiped his hands on his jeans and scooted closer. His thigh pressed against Grier’s. He fell silent, something that made Grier more nervous than not.

Soon the silence grew too thick to tolerate. “Alec—”

“You’re not going to return this message, either, are you?”

“I don’t know,” Grier answered. His fingers crept into Alec’s hair, taming where the wind had blown it wild. “There’s appeal to letting them find their own feet. Elect new leadership.”

“They’ve done that.”

“Someone who gives a shit would make more sense.”

No laugh from Alec. He stared at the ocean.

“Ethan asked... before he died...” Grier stabbed his stick into the sand. “He wanted me to take care of them.”

“You can’t be held hostage by a dying man’s request.”

Grier shot him a look. “Do you believe that?”

“Isn’t that what you want to hear?”

“I’d rather hear your honest opinion.” His hand sank through Alec’s hair to his neck. Alec arched into the touch. He turned to look Grier in the eye.

“You don’t owe him anything, Grier, but we could use your help.”

Grier’s gut twisted. “We?”

“Don’t look so surprised. Because I know you’re not. Disappointed, maybe.”

An accurate summation. He pushed it aside and let his fingers wander. Alec’s skin was sandy. The ridges of his spine felt cool under Grier’s fingers.

Alec shivered, but his voice held steady. “I’ll be leaving soon. Roman may have been our biggest threat, but he wasn’t the only one.”

“Now who’s living a dead man’s dream?”

“Same rules as before,” Alec said, ignoring the cutting remark. “No hard feelings if you choose to chase the things you want instead of coming along.”

The things he wanted were mutually exclusive. “I’ll need to think about it,” Grier murmured. He curled a hand around Alec’s hip, and Alec leaned into him, his surge of contentment a sure sign he’d picked up on the lie.

“Okay. How long do you want?”

Grier kissed him. “One more day.”

“One more day,” Alec agreed.

Whatever mess Ethan and Roman had left behind, Grier wasn’t so naïve as to think it could be unraveled quickly. There would be more fighting. There might even be more death.

Maybe, Alec agreed through their link. But the one thing I won’t allow is more of the deception that led to that bloodbath on the mountain. Grier mentally scolded him for his idealism, but it was a promise he knew Alec meant to keep. So be it.

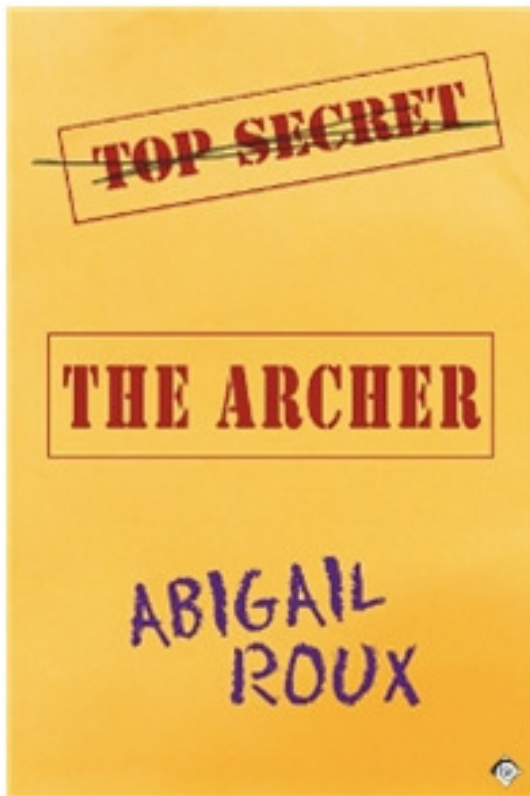
He pulled Alec closer.

One more day of invisibility. Then they’d deal with what had to be done.

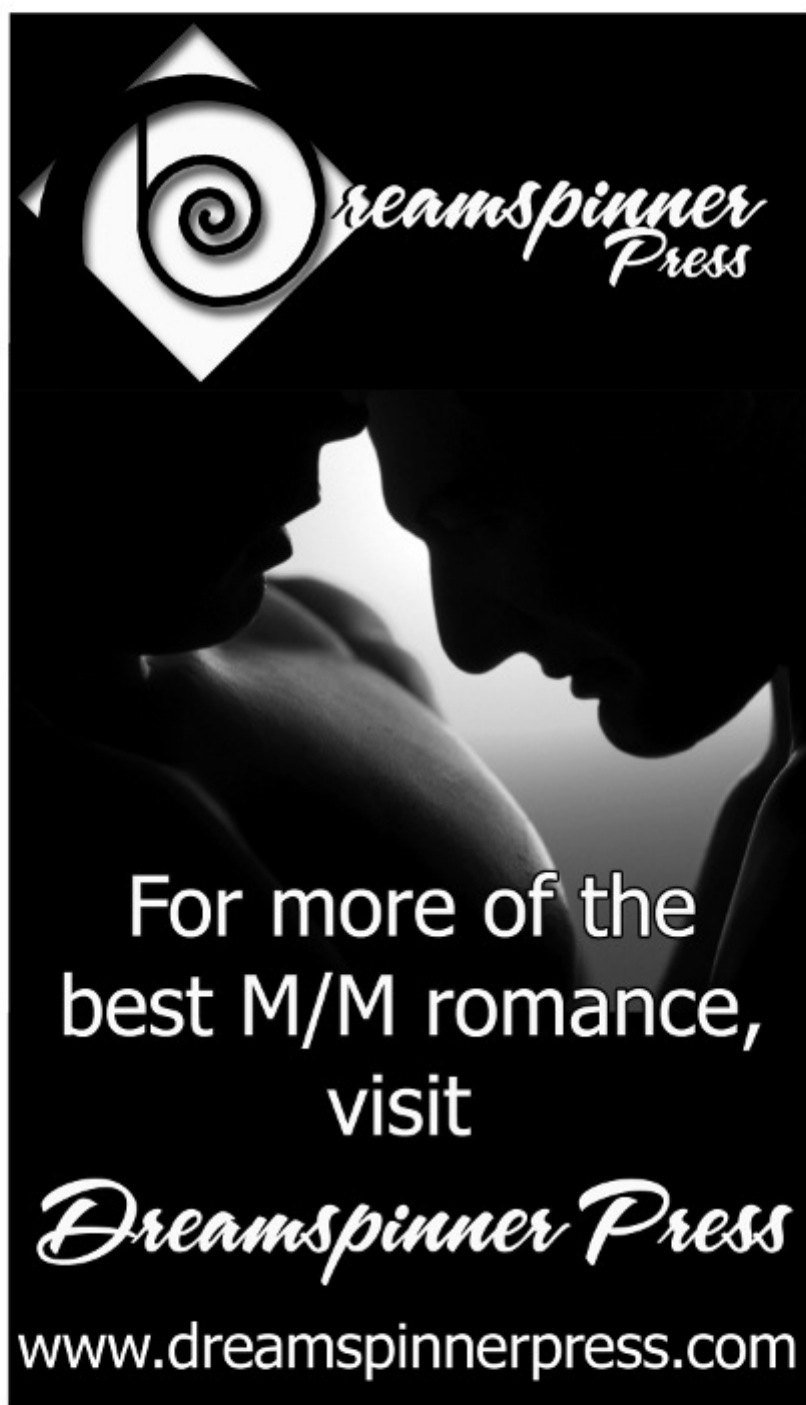
LIBBY DREW glimpsed her true calling when her first story, a Winnie-the-Pooh/Shakespeare crossover, won the grand prize in her elementary school's fiction contest. Her parents explained that writers were quirky, poor, and often talked to themselves in supermarket checkout lines. They implored her to be practical, a request she took to heart for twenty years, earning two degrees, a white-collar job, and an ulcer, before realizing that practical was absolutely no fun.

Today she lives with her husband and four children in a very old, impractical house and writes stories about redemption, the paranormal, and love at first sight, all of which do exist. She happens to know from experience.

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