
Shadow of the Templar:
With A Bullet

by
M. Chandler

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The **Shadow of the Templar** novels:

The Morning Star

Double Down

With A Bullet

High Fidelity

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for Lyn
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◆ Prologue: Sandra

[tuesday]

She'd washed off her makeup at eleven when it became obvious she wouldn't be going home tonight. It was two in the morning now. She wasn't even tired. She felt like she was stretched tight enough to snap, but the thrum gave her the energy she needed to deal with this thing. This *thing*.

Nate was in the saferoom, taking another stab at breaking into Rich's old files. That was good. That was a good thing. At least Nate was here, safe. And she knew where Johnny was. Mike, though . . . Mike had left before any of this went down. He had a date, a *hot* date as he'd made certain to tell them all several times—*on a Monday*? Sandra had thought at the time—and the asshole had either left his cell at home or turned it off. Sandra had taken a great deal of personal pleasure in siccing the local police on Mike's license plates. All cars, be on the lookout for. Maybe he'd take a swing at a cop and end the night in jail. Jail would work just fine as far as Sandra was concerned.

Her mouth tasted like dogfood and burnt coffee. Her skin felt greasy. Rubbing her hands over her face Sandra took a long breath and was vaguely pleased to note it was more or less steady. Ever since Johnny had called half an hour ago she'd been sort of afraid she was going to cry.

She tugged at the drawers. Locked. She didn't know why he bothered, when he headed up *this* team. For form's sake, maybe. She stood up and went to the doorway. "Nate?"

Nate jumped. She couldn't blame him. "Sandy?" he said, a bit squeaky.

"Sorry." Sandra blew out a long breath and pushed her hair behind her ear, getting a hold of her irrational temper. "I need your crowbar."

"Oh. Sure. Hang on . . ." Nate hit a few keys on Rich's biggest computer and pressed 'enter', looking none too hopeful. The computer did exactly nothing. He stared morosely at the screen.

"Crowbar," Sandra reminded him, as gently as she could.

"Right."

The desk drawers popped open one after the other, yielding to the crowbar with almost ridiculous ease. Sandra found herself wishing that one would be stubborn. Beating the crap out of Simon's desk with the crowbar would feel really good, right about now. Instead of indulging that particular wish she put the crowbar aside and started riffling through the files, not really looking for anything in particular, just trying to get a sense of what was what.

The number was scribbled on the back of an envelope and shoved haphazardly into the top drawer, like it didn't matter. 'Archer' was slashed across it in Simon's angular handwriting. The number itself, oddly, was in the New York City area code, and in a different hand, small and precise and prone to crossing its sevens. Sandra smoothed out the crumpled envelope and considered it. It was so battered that she suspected the envelope had been crushed and smoothed back out several times.

She should call him.

Simon would be furious if she did.

Therefore, she should definitely call him.

Besides, she had this gut feeling that Jeremy ought to know about this. She hated that gut feeling. Jeremy didn't have any sort of rights to Simon, in Sandra's humble opinion. He'd worked with the team, sure, got along with them pretty well, but he wasn't really one of them—hell, he was a *felon*. Wrong person, in the wrong place, at the wrong time. A little voice that sounded oddly like Mike's deadpanned *in the wrong pants?* in the back of her mind, and Sandra discovered that she'd crumpled the envelope in her fist.

I don't know that, she reminded herself, flattening the envelope back out on the desk—not for the first time, apparently. *It's ridiculous. Simon's not . . . Jeremy's a criminal, anyway. Simon wouldn't . . .* She stared angrily at the number for a moment longer, then made up her mind and grabbed for the desk phone, only to drop it half a second later.

Instead, she dug out her own personal cell phone. Before she dialed the number, though, she checked the little black book she'd found in one of the previously locked lower drawers. Everybody else's numbers were in it, including a couple of numbers she was damned sure Simon shouldn't have; the 'Archer' number wasn't listed anywhere in it. Only on that battered envelope. Somehow that only made her gut feeling stronger. God, she hated that.

Flicking open her cell phone she started to stab out the number, then hit Cancel before the third digit; instead she programmed the number into memory and called it from there. Despite the hour, the phone only rang once before it was picked up. "Answering service," a cheerful anonymous female voice said.

Sandra almost laughed, despite everything. That was Jeremy, all right. Way too damn clever. "Ah. Yes. I'm trying to get in touch with Jeremy Archer?" Out in the other room, Nate abruptly stopped typing at the sound of Jeremy's name. It made Sandra wish the office still had a door. She knew the door was still around

here somewhere. Or at least the halves of it. Maybe down the hall in the men's bathroom . . . ?

The voice interrupted her musings. "Yes, ma'am, I can take that message for you."

"Fine. Thank you. My name is Sandra Leone—uh, he may know me better as Springheel." Sandra eyed the desk phone again, but in the end she ended up giving the voice her cell phone number.

The voice on the other end of the line didn't falter at the code name. "Yes, ma'am. And the message?"

"I . . . it's urgent that I speak to him as soon as possible." Sandra leaned on the last few words.

"Yes, ma'am. I'll pass that message along as soon as I can."

"Thank you," Sandra said distractedly, and broke the connection. She stared at her phone for a moment, then stabbed at the buttons. **Shadow**, read the name above the number when she was done. She flipped the phone closed on Jeremy's code name and put it on the desk, and then put her head in her hands and waited.

Less than five minutes later it rang, and she and Nate both jumped. She thought Nate actually yelped a little. The number was a string of digits in all the wrong configurations: international call. She flicked the phone open. "Sandra," she snapped, belatedly realizing how edgy she sounded.

The pleasant Englishy voice on the other end of the line didn't seem to care. "Ms. Leone," he said, rendered tinny with distance, like a James Bond movie playing in the next room. "This *is* a pleasant surprise. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

And now that she actually had him on the line, she had no idea what to say, so she stalled instead. "Jeremy. I'm sorry, I just realized what time it was." She realized that she didn't exactly sound sorry. She sounded sort of flat, actually. Oh, well. "I hope I didn't wake you."

"Time . . . ? Oh! Oh, no. It's four in the afternoon here, Ms. Leone. I assure you I was not asleep." The good humor was leaking out of his voice fast, though. He was quick, she'd give him that much. "What can I do for you?"

"Four? Where are you?" Still stalling. It was like a reflex. She sounded like her mother, she suddenly realized, all pleasant chit-chat and no substance. The realization made her feel vaguely sick.

"Tokyo. Ms. Leone—"

"Tokyo! God, what are you stealing there, some kind of . . . gold-plated Hello Kitty statue . . . ?" Sandra trailed off there. When she started again, her voice was harder. "I'm sorry. That was stupid. I didn't call to chat, did I."

"I suspected as much." No good humor left at all now. "Please. What is it?"

Sandra closed her eyes and fell silent for a moment. On the other end of the line, Jeremy was also silent. Sandra could hear the babble of many voices

somewhere far behind him. She opened her eyes and splayed one hand out on the desk, staring down at her fingers. “Simon’s been shot.”

The long pause that followed this abrupt announcement told her more than she needed to know. Damn that gut feeling anyway.

◆ 1: Jeremy

“Shot,” ‘James St. John’ finally said, putting his free hand over his ear in order to hear better. Behind him he could hear the low murmur of thousands of people—gem importers, jewellers, wholesalers—echoing off the cavernous roof of the exposition hall. He stared at the wall. He thought his voice sounded calm enough.

“They say he’s going to pull through,” Sandra said in his ear, rushing the words a little now that she’d finally got to them. “Johnny’s with him at the hospital, he called an hour ago, Simon’s out of surgery, the damage isn’t as bad as it looked—”

“I see,” Jeremy breathed, shutting his eyes and momentarily putting ‘James’ away.

Sandra talked right over him. “—the bullet went under his ribs at an angle and lodged by his spine, nicked a lung but didn’t puncture it. Mostly blood loss and muscle damage.” And then she stopped babbling so abruptly that Jeremy could almost hear her teeth click shut, halfway around the world. There was a pause. “Anyway. I just thought you should know.” Her voice was abrupt and not entirely friendly. One of Jeremy’s eyebrows lifted just a bit.

He waited, just a moment. Nothing else seemed to be forthcoming. “Thank you,” he finally said, and “I appreciate your letting me know, Ms. Leone.”

“You’re welcome.” She still sounded abrupt. “Good-bye, Jeremy.”

“Mm. Good morning, Ms. Leone.”

The phone clicked in his ear.

“Sinjun-san?”

All the tension melted out of Jeremy’s shoulders as if by magic. By the time he turned to face his interpreter, ‘James’ was smiling absently. “Ah, I’m terribly sorry, but you know how it is,” he said, his voice lazy, sliding the phone back into his jacket pocket. His interpreter shrugged and nodded, indicating that he did, indeed, know how it was. “Are they ready for me?”

“Yes. They will sign.”

“Excellent!” ‘James’ sauntered off back into the exposition, his interpreter trotting in his wake. Despite the documents waiting for him in one of the convention centre’s plush office suites, he took his time, idly examining the displays as he passed, reaching out to run one loving finger over a strand of black pearls worth a tidy fortune. Deep within ‘James’ Jeremy felt more like running. “I’m quite glad we could come to an agreement today. It seems my presence is required elsewhere.”

“Hah? You are leaving so soon?”

“Unfortunately so. Business,” ‘James’ said, with only the slightest faltering of his lazy smile, “waits for no one.”

[wednesday]

Twenty-seven hours later, at five in the morning local time, Jeremy Archer (having peeled off and discarded the affably useless ‘James St. John’ like so much dirty laundry, leaving him in Japan along with ‘James St. John’s systematically destroyed mobile phone and, unfortunately, a lovely pair of matched pink pearls whose existence would have been a little too awkward to explain) leaned against the white wall of a Washington, DC hospital and considered his options.

The grey-suited man seated outside the door to Simon’s hospital room could only be an FBI agent on guard duty. Everything about him screamed it, from his clothes to his posture to his haircut to the fact that he was so bloody alert at this ungodly hour of the morning. Granted, at the moment his only visible weapon was a clipboard, but Jeremy was positive that there was also a gun in residence somewhere. Jeremy was not in the least enthused about walking up to the man, having his name put down in the records, and being summarily denied entrance; however, he was even less enthused about being shot at. Therefore, the careful consideration of his options.

He had just come to the conclusion that the safest way to attempt Simon’s hospital room was, unfortunately, to rappel down from the roof (and was, accordingly, unobtrusively checking the wire wound up inside his belt) when he heard the man say, “Keep an eye on the door for me, would you, honey? If I don’t get a cigarette and a bite to eat, I’m going to go crazy. I swear I’ll only be ten minutes.”

“Mr. Cleary! I have at least twenty other patients to mind,” a female voice responded, cold as Arctic ice. “I don’t have time to be doing your job.”

“Bah, it’ll be fine,” Agent Cleary said dismissively. “If something was going to happen to him, it would have happened already. Just keep an eye on the door when you’re here, all right? S’all I ask.” Around the corner, Jeremy rolled his eyes, but silently blessed his luck.

“All right,” the nurse said reluctantly. “But I won’t take responsibility for what might happen, do you hear me?” she added, but by that time Jeremy had already slipped away. He made a beeline for one particular room he’d noticed on

his way in, currently occupied by a burly middle-aged man wearing two casts, a neck brace, and a particularly grumpy expression, awake despite the hour.

"I beg your pardon," he said, pausing in the doorway and rapping his knuckles on the open door. "I don't suppose you might have a pen I might borrow?"

"Nah," the man said, barely glancing his way, just staring at the nearly-silent television and scratching his chest near the edge of one cast. His voice was a sandpappy smoker's rumble, Jeremy was pleased to note. "Nurse's station's probably got one."

"Ah. Well. You see, that's the thing." Jeremy made a show of glancing over his shoulder in the direction of the nurse's station, then lowered his voice conspiratorially. "My ex-wife, God bless her evil soul, has made some sort of arrangement with the hospital that I'm not to be allowed in to see my son, so . . ." He let his voice trail off here, and noted with some satisfaction that the man was looking at him now, instead of at the television.

"Yeah?" the man said, with marginally more sympathy. "That's rough."

"She's a stone *bitch*," Jeremy said, letting his very real jet lag leak into his voice. "I've flown all the way in from London and she won't so much as let me see my boy."

"Yeah, thought you sounded English." The man didn't exactly sound friendly yet, but he was at least interested.

"Terribly," Jeremy said, bracing his hand on the door-frame and leaning his forehead against it. In his mind, he was counting: *one minute and two, one minute and three*. "I can't even ask how he's *doing*, damn her anyway. I'd thought to at least write him a note, let him know I came, but I don't even know how I'd get it to him." He closed his eyes and waited.

The man harrumphed a little and finally said, "... what's your boy's name?"

Got you, Jeremy thought. "Simon," he said aloud, not opening his eyes, amused despite himself by the act of taking Simon's name in vain. "And before you say it, it's a perfectly good English name and he does *not* get beaten up on the playground for it." All technically true, at least at this point in time, Jeremy supposed.

The man snorted out a laugh and muted the television. "Hey, did I say anything? I didn't say a damned thing."

"... I'm sorry, I'm being terribly rude." Jeremy opened his eyes and straightened up, taking two steps into the room and holding out his hand. "I'm James. James St. John," he said, summarily importing 'James' from Japan and shrugging back into him. *One minute and forty-six. One minute and forty-seven*.

The man eyed his hand for a moment and then grinned and shook it, engulfing Jeremy's hand in his own meaty paw. "Luther Bycross. Pleasure to talk to anyone who isn't a damned nurse, son."

"I can imagine." Jeremy let his eyes roam around the room, noting the complete absence of flowers, cards, or anything else of a sympathetic nature. His

choice was looking better by the moment. "I'm not usually the type to be flinging my dirty laundry about with such abandon, but I'm quite tired."

"Nah, it's okay. This ex of yours, she sounds kinda like mine, one of them cast-iron twats, you know?" Luther paused and scuffed at his thinning hair. "And I'm sorry about your boy. What happened?"

"... I don't even know." *Two minutes and twenty-three, two minutes and twenty-four.* "My ever-so-lovely ex left a message with my service telling me that Simon was in the hospital and she'd be sending me the bill—"

"Christ!"

"—and that was essentially it."

"What a bitch."

"Yes, but she was pretty once."

"Ain't they all, son. Ain't they all."

"Bitches? Or pretty?"

"Eh, whatever." Luther laughed his snorting coughing laugh.

Jeremy couldn't help but laugh ruefully in return. "Ah, well," he said, rummaging about in his jacket pointedly. "I'll go find some place in this benighted hospital where I can have a bit of a smoke, and then I suppose I'll try to find some way to sneak past the nurse on duty. There's only one of them on at this point, perhaps I'll get lucky."

Luther's eyes immediately jumped to Jeremy's rummaging hand and stayed there, and Jeremy had to work very hard to repress his triumph. "Ah, Christ, you lucky bastard. Ten years my wife nags me to give up the coffin nails and I can't listen, so now I've been stuck in here for a week without my cigs and I'm gonna climb the walls, you know?"

"I know, believe me," Jeremy said fervently. "I, ah—" he hesitated, almost entirely for effect "—look here, they're English and a bit froofy, but I promise you that there's *some* tobacco in them," he said all in a rush, pulling out his cigarette case and shaking out three cigarettes. A quick toss of his pockets turned up half a book of hotel matches and he pressed them into the thoroughly startled Luther's uncasted hand along with the three cigarettes. "I don't know how exactly you'll be able to smoke them without attracting attention, but you seem clever enough, I'm sure you'll find a way."

"You, son, are a goddamn lifesaver," Luther said, yanking open the drawer of his night-stand and hiding cigarettes and matches under a battered magazine. "My momma never told me angels came in the English variety."

Jeremy waved that away. *Four minutes and twenty-nine, four minutes and thirty.* "It's nothing, believe me. I'd want someone to do the same for me if I were in hospital."

Luther slammed the drawer shut again and settled back against his pillow, looking a great deal happier. His eyes drooped about half-closed. "And now, son, I don't mean to turn you out all abrupt-like, but I think it's time for another pain

pill.” One eye dropped closed in a swift wink. “So you might wanna go some place where the nurses aren’t likely to spot you, because in thirty seconds I’m gonna push this buzzer here—” One fat finger stabbed at the red button on the side of his bed. “—and that nurse at the duty desk is gonna come down here and give me my pill, and if she spots you, well, hell, son, I wouldn’t wanna be responsible for that.”

Got you in five, Jeremy silently exulted, although outwardly he gaped for a moment before taking a quick step backwards. “I believe I owe you *flowers*, sir.”

“Hell, you don’t owe me a damned thing. I’m not doing anything for you.” Luther Bycross closed his eyes. “I sure hope she’s that pretty little thing. A nurse is a pretty little thing, I like to chat for a minute or so before I’ll let her go on her way.”

“In that case, I sincerely hope she’s beautiful, and I hope you feel better, sir.”

“Oh, I’m gonna.” Luther grinned. “I’m sure gonna.”

Jeremy spun on his heel and left the room.

Twenty-seven seconds later, hidden in a linen storage closet behind an ajar door, Jeremy heard Luther’s buzzer go off at the desk. The nurse passed by his hiding place a few moments later, quiet on her crepe-soled shoes, bearing a tiny paper cup in her hand; Jeremy counted five more seconds just to be safe and then stepped silently out, nonchalantly striding down the hall in the opposite direction.

No one hailed him. The chair by Simon’s door was still empty. Jeremy didn’t so much as break stride and two seconds later he was in, grinning wolfishly as the door clicked shut. “God bless you and keep you, Luther Bycross,” Jeremy breathed, stepping away from the door and turning around.

Simon’s room was dark, although the darkness was studded by red and green lights from the various flickering devices he was hooked up to. One of them was beeping. Jeremy wasn’t quite sure which one, but it was beeping steadily and quietly, so he figured that was more or less normal. Simon himself was a pale blur in the darkness, and since he hadn’t yet demanded to know who was there or insulted Jeremy’s height, nationality, sexual preferences, or fashion sense, it seemed likely that he was asleep.

Jeremy slid into the shadows and away from the little window set in the door, moving slowly to avoid bumping into things until his eyes got used to the dark. Finally he stood by Simon’s bedside, almost completely invisible, just a face and a pair of hands in the darkness. Simon, by contrast, was pale, faded, and all in white, one hand resting on his stomach, the other curled loosely by his hip. He was definitely asleep, his face turned away from both Jeremy and the door. For a long moment, Jeremy couldn’t do much but stare down at Simon, helpless and off his guard and *wrong*.

“Your Agent Cleary is something of an imbecile,” Jeremy finally informed him. Simon, sleeping and probably drugged, didn’t so much as twitch. “And

your hair is a fright,” Jeremy added for good measure, reaching out to brush a stray black tendril away from Simon’s forehead before retreating to the chair in the corner, out of sight of the door.

♦ 2: Simon

The sky outside was just beginning to turn from black to gray when Simon dragged himself back to consciousness, his eyes still unfocused from his last dose of painkillers. He groped over his head until his hand hit the switch for the bedside light, promptly catching the head of the bed in a circle of soft yellow light and blinding himself. Wincing, he shaded his eyes with his hand until they adjusted.

For a moment longer he just lay there, eyes half-squinted against the light, listening to the machinery noises. Someone walked by outside, and the FBI agent seated by his door shifted in his chair and coughed, and somewhere an elevator dinged softly.

Simon's water glass stood just at the edge of the circle of light, half-full. Rolling clumsily up onto his unwounded side Simon made a grab for it, hissing as it pulled the wound in his other side tight; his fingertips just barely grazed the condensation on the side of the glass before he fell back to the bed. "Goddamnit," he told the bedside light. His voice sounded rusty and unused.

A hand slid silently into the light and picked up the water glass, followed a moment later by the rest of Jeremy. Unsmiling, silent like a ghost, he sauntered fully into the ring of dim yellow light and held out the glass to Simon. Simon blinked at him, having some trouble focusing on all that black, then smiled a little. "Hey."

Instead of answering, Jeremy glanced at the door and put a finger on his lips. *Shh*. Simon also glanced at the door, drew his own (correct) conclusions, and rolled his eyes. "I'll have him fired," he muttered, carefully closing both drug-clumsy hands around the glass and taking it from Jeremy. His voice was thick and dazed. "I'll have him *shot*." Belatedly he realized what he'd just said, and he winced, and Jeremy winced with him.

"Charming as ever," Jeremy breathed as Simon drained his glass in two massive swallows. "And I'll have you know that you take me to the most *interesting* places."

“Yeah, well, *Cosmo* says that’s . . . how you keep the spice in a relationship.” Simon wiped the back of his hand over his mouth and maneuvered the glass back onto his tray table, then more or less collapsed back onto the bed and closed his eyes.

“You read *Cosmopolitan*?” Jeremy quirked an eyebrow at Simon, finding a few inches of unoccupied bed by his hip to perch on. “And you call *me* a fag.”

Simon was barely paying attention, patting gingerly at his bandaged side. “Yeah, well—ow—Sandy leaves those things lying around everywhere, I get curious.” Pressing his hand to his ribs he tried to sit up a bit, and promptly hissed and said “*Fuck*.”

“Now? Here?” Jeremy glanced around the room. “You’re a madman.”

Simon let his hand drop back to the bed and took a careful breath, longer than it was deep. “You’re right. Bed’s a little small.”

Jeremy leaned in over Simon, his hand pressing to the bed by Simon’s other hip as he studied Simon’s face. “Well, if you can joke, I suspect you’ll be all right.” His eyes wandered down to where the battered white hospital gown met Simon’s throat. “I should have known you were too much of a prick to die.”

“Oh, hey, thanks,” Simon said acidly, staring over Jeremy’s head at the ceiling. He fumbled for the button on his IV with both hands, finally managing to push it; a moment later there was a deep glugging sound and the pain on his face began to recede into a dim and foggy painkiller haze.

“Any time.” And finally Jeremy smiled, just the slightest bit. The hand he wasn’t leaning up drifted up to brush Simon’s hair out of his eyes and Jeremy leaned in the rest of the way, giving Simon a long, slow, lazy kiss that Simon did not precisely resist, although he made a fuzzy little cranky noise against Jeremy’s lips. “I suspect you should get some more sleep,” Jeremy murmured once the kiss broke, touching the tip of his nose to Simon’s.

“Yeah.” Simon’s eyes kept drifting shut and cracking open again. “Sleep’s the breakfast of champions. . . .knew you’d show up.”

Jeremy’s laugh was a soft breath on Simon’s cheek. He didn’t sit up. “Did you? Have you put another tracer on me? I *hate* having to get rid of perfectly good jackets after seeing you, Simon . . .”

“Nah,” Simon said, drifting off. “Just . . . kind of wanted you to.”

By the time Jeremy digested this, his eyebrow lifting, Simon was already asleep underneath him.

♦ 3: Sandra

It was almost seven in the evening by the time Sandra was able to break away from work the next day. She was exhausted. She was beyond frazzled. “I don’t know how Simon does it,” she snapped at Mike, stomping out to her car. “I work with *crazy people*. You are all *batshit*. Another few days of this and I’ll go get myself shot too just to get some peace and quiet, I swear.”

“Shouldn’t say things like that,” Mike said, ducking to check under her car as she checked the back seat. “If all you want is a couple of days off, it’s probably safer to use a knife, get yourself somewhere in the meat of the shoulder, you know?”

“Shut up, Mike.”

Mike shrugged, unrepentant. “I can help, just say the word, I got a Swiss army knife around here somewhere—”

“You wave a knife at me and I’ll break your arm in four places, *cholo*.”

“Fine, be that way. Least I know what to do next time *I* need a couple of days off.”

Sandra snorted and unlocked the car. Mike was quiet until she got the car started and had it trundling down the rows to where Mike had parked. “You going to the hospital?” he finally asked, slightly more subdued now.

“Yeah,” Sandra said, eyes darting back and forth, looking for . . . well, she didn’t know what, precisely. Anything suspicious. “It’s on the way home.”

“Yeah,” Mike echoed. “Tell Simon I said he’s a goddamned faker and to stop malingerin’.”

“Will do.” Sandra pulled up beside Mike’s car. “Ta da. It’s like valet parking in reverse. Go check your car. I want to get out of here before Upstairs thinks of sixteen more things I have to go do.”

Mike hesitated, then reached over and squeezed Sandra’s shoulder. “Hey. New boss. Don’t sweat it, ’kay? You’re doing fine.”

Sandra smiled sweetly and drove the heel of her hand into his side. Mike made a most satisfying ‘oof!’ sound and hunched over, hugging his ribs. His eyes were wide and startled. “Shit, Sandy, that’s what I get for trying to be nice?”

“That’s what you get for thinking I needed some kind of fucking pep talk from you. Go check your goddamn car.”

Mike blinked at her in confusion, then reached out and grabbed her shoulder, somewhat gently. “Hey.” Automatically Sandra struck for his ribs again; this time Mike caught her hand. “Dammit, Sandy, will you chill?” he demanded, giving her a little shake.

Sandra halfheartedly fought against his grip on her hand for a moment before giving up. “Shit. Sorry, Mike. I’m just—”

“Going psychotic from stress, yeah, I gathered. Not that I don’t think it’s really hot when you get all violent and shit, but I’m kind of a fragile fucking flower, you know?” Mike let go of her hand, then squeezed her shoulder again and let go. “Get some sleep or something. Turn off your phone. Fuck the Man. I’ll see you tomorrow, boss.” And he ducked out of the car before she could snap at him about calling her ‘boss’.

Sighing, Sandra crossed her arms on the steering wheel and rested her chin on them, watching Mike check under his car and in the backseat. Finding nothing, he turned around and gave her a thumbs-up. She flipped him off. He grinned and grabbed his crotch in her general direction, and Sandy snorted and smacked her brights on, half-blinding him.

“Crazy hol!” Mike bellowed, starting his own car and pulling out.

Sandra’s rising cry of “*Asshole!*” followed him all the way out of the lot. After that, she felt a little better.

She drove to the hospital more or less on autopilot. She talked to Simon’s doctors more or less on autopilot. Finally she was able to take the elevator up to Simon’s floor, where a sturdy no-nonsense field agent with the unlikely and unfortunate name of Jasmine ‘Call me *Jazz*’ duPlessis was sitting stolidly outside Simon’s door, clipboard resting across her knees.

“Hey, Secret Agent Jazz,” Sandra said, blowing out an exhausted breath and running one hand through her hair. “What’s the word?”

“Not a damn thing, Secret Agent Sandy,” Jazz said, knocking her knuckles against the clipboard. “Cleary and Jackson both report completely dead shifts and I’ve got nothing more interesting than that. No one’s interested in looking at our boy, seems like.”

“Hey, beats the alternative, right?” Sandra glanced at the door. “He awake?”

“Hell, no.” Jazz stretched her arms up above her head and yawned as an afterthought. “Looked in on him when I came on duty and he was out like a light, and far as I can tell he still is. He’s not bitching or throwing shit, anyway.”

Sandra’s smile went from real to pasted on just like that. Jazz was a good person and a dependable field agent, but she didn’t have the right to be talking about Simon like that. As far as Sandra was concerned, that right belonged entirely to her, and maybe, grudgingly, to the others on the team. If they were

lucky and she felt like sharing. “Good enough,” she finally said, cracking the door open and pitching her voice low. “I’ll just peek in on him.”

Jazz flapped her hand. “Go on, then, girl. Nurse was by not half an hour ago. I get the feeling it’d take a mid-sized explosion to wake him just about now.”

“Probably,” Sandra said absently, letting herself into the room and closing the door with something like relief. After the hectic mess of the day, the dimly-lit hospital room was the first bit of peace she’d had all day, beeping machines or no, and she took a moment to just lean her head against the cool wood of the door and catch her breath. When you had to go to the hospital to get some peace and quiet . . . she didn’t let herself finish that thought, instead stepping away from the door.

Simon looked exactly the same as he had when she’d left yesterday, which seemed like a good sign. Or a bad sign. Sandra wasn’t really sure. The doctors were neutral on the subject. They said he was stable, recovering, but all she knew was that he wasn’t really Simon like this. Just seeing him asleep was strange enough. He was sleeping so deeply that he barely seemed to be breathing, and Sandra watched his chest for a moment just to make sure he was. “Hey, boss,” she finally said under her breath, and reached out to touch his shoulder.

Someone cleared his throat. Sandra’s hand flew to her hip in one smooth practiced motion and her gun was trained on the bathroom door almost before the sound was over. “. . . my apologies,” Jeremy said, blinking mildly, his hands already up, open, and empty.

“*God*—” Jeremy’s finger flew to his lips, shushing her. “—dammit, Archer,” Sandra finished in a furious whisper, not taking the gun off him. Adrenalin stiffened her spine like a wire, but her hands were rock-steady. “You scared the everliving shit out of me!”

“I’m very sorry,” Jeremy didn’t put his hands down, either. “I’d actually meant to be gone by now.”

“Who let you in? Who am I going to have to kill?”

“Ah. Technically, I let *myself* in.”

“Oh, you bastard,” Sandra breathed.

“It didn’t seem likely that my name made it onto the short list of allowed guests.”

“. . . you have a point. Why are you even here?”

Jeremy nodded towards Simon. “You called and told me he’d been shot,” he said, as if that explained everything. “May I put my hands down?”

“No.” But most of the adrenalin ebbed out of Sandra at the simplicity of that goddamned answer. Still angry, she snapped, “So you, what, came to make sure I wasn’t lying to you?”

Jeremy’s face was bland and patient. “I came because you called and told me he’d been shot.”

“That still isn’t an answer.”

“No, I suppose it’s not.”

They stood that way for a moment longer, Sandra with her gun pointed at Jeremy, Jeremy with his hands nonchalantly in the air. Sandra found herself eyeing his right wrist and the band of his watch. Jeremy was polite enough not to mention it. Between them, Simon slept on, unaware of the drama.

“I don’t suppose you’d be willing to help me get back out,” Jeremy finally said, his fingers twitching slightly.

“Right now I’m leaning more towards either shooting you or yelling for help,” Sandra snapped, and was surprised to find it was almost true. She’d almost welcome a little mayhem right now.

Jeremy didn’t answer right away. But he slid his feet slightly farther apart and his shoulders lifted slightly, tensing, and his hands both rolled into loose fists. Sandra’s fingers tightened on the grip of her gun. “I’m sorry, Ms. Leone,” Jeremy said for the second time, and his voice was very soft and soothing. “I only wanted to see to Simon and make certain he was all right, and I’ve done so. All I want now is to leave in peace, and I’ll stay away from now on if you insist.”

Jeremy paused. Sandra’s chin lifted slightly, but she didn’t say anything. “All I want now is to leave in peace,” Jeremy repeated, stressing the words slightly. “You don’t have to help me. You don’t have to do anything. I’ll take care of it myself, and all you have to do is pretend I’m not here. However, if you *insist* on doing this the hard way—” The fingers of his right hand twitched slightly.

“Oh, shut up, Archer,” Sandra said tiredly, reholstering her gun with an abrupt movement. “Give me five minutes and then I’ll help you get out, all right?”

Jeremy’s shoulders relaxed and his hands dropped to his sides. “I’m in your debt,” he said, and he knew enough not to smile. “I believe I owe you dinner, at least.”

“At least,” Sandra echoed. “Go hide in the bathroom again.”

“... I thought you wanted five minutes?”

“I do.” Sandra smiled tightly. “I just want to say hello to Simon first, and I want to pretend you’re not here.”

“Ah.” Jeremy half-bowed, stepping back into the darkness of the bathroom and vanishing like a spectre. His disembodied voice floated out to Sandra. “I can understand that.”

Five minutes later Sandra let herself back out, closing the door behind herself and leaning on it for a moment. “All clear, Jazz,” she said, offhandedly. “If you want to go use the facilities or grab a snack, I’ll watch the door until you get back.”

Jazz sighed, a long and heavy procedure, and stood up, handing over the clipboard. “You’re an angel, Secret Agent Sandy. I’ll be back in five.”

“Take your time,” Sandra called after Jazz’s retreating back. She waited until Jazz had rounded the corner, counted to ten, then rapped her knuckles against the door once.

There was a pause, then Jeremy’s face flashed once, briefly, against the tiny window in the door. A second later he was out, and the door was closed, and he was already on the way down the hallway in the opposite direction—it had been so fast and smooth that Sandra barely saw it, and she’d been watching for it. There wasn’t so much as a peep from the nurses’ station.

He’d touched her shoulder as he went past, though, and murmured something that sounded like “Lobby?”

Somewhat to her surprise, Sandra was considering meeting him there.

She found him in the little florist shop just off the lobby, just now putting away his wallet. The florist handed him a receipt. “Flowers? Simon’s going to kill you for that,” Sandra said, with a bit of relish.

“Ah. He would, wouldn’t he?” Jeremy said with a little faraway smile, crumpling the receipt and dropping it neatly into the trashcan by the exit. “Fortunately, they aren’t for him.”

“What?” Sandra was taken aback. Just then the florist’s runner came out bearing a rather pretty little arrangement of yellow and orange flowers, heading towards the entrance of the shop where they stood, and Sandra had just enough time to think *if he bought those for me I’m going to kill him myself* before he slid between them with an apology and set off towards the elevator. Sandra turned to watch him go, curious. “So if they’re not for Simon—” *and they’re not for me* “—who are they for?”

“Do you know,” Jeremy said, that little smile suddenly maddening, “I don’t think I want to tell you?”

Sandra jerked back, stung. “Don’t want to *tell* me?” she repeated stupidly. She was too tired for this. “Why not?”

Instead of answering, Jeremy glanced over his shoulder, then gestured lazily in the direction of the lobby. “Shall we walk, Ms. Leone?”

“Don’t want to tell me,” Sandra muttered, allowing herself to be shepherded out into the lobby proper only because the sweetish reek of the florist’s shop was starting to annoy her.

“Allow me to make you an offer, Ms. Leone,” Jeremy said as soon as they were clear. “At this moment I believe we’re both a bit too out of sorts to have a proper conversation—the sort where people don’t pull weapons on each other—and I believe that a decent meal would go a long way towards remedying that. Would you allow me to buy you dinner?”

Sandra laughed a little, bitterly. “You really do think you’re smooth, don’t you, Archer?”

“Well, yes,” Jeremy said. “Indeed, I’ve been told I’m positively frictionless.”

“Went to charm school, did you?” But the more Sandra thought about it, the lower her resistance to the idea became. She was hungry—hell, she was starving—and letting Jeremy buy her dinner sounded much better than driving home and eating some leftover takeout before crashing into bed. “Fine,” she said abruptly, reaching up to push her hair behind her ear again. “Buy me dinner, Archer. But I’m warning you, I don’t put out on the first date. I’m just not that kind of girl.”

“Ah, well, isn’t that just my luck,” Jeremy murmured, his smile getting just a touch wider. It rasped on Sandra’s drawn nerves like sandpaper.

Sandra rolled her eyes. “Nobody here’s buying your straight act, Archer,” she snapped, mostly to try and wipe that annoying smile off his face. It worked, although he looked a lot less startled than she thought he ought to. “And I’m not in the mood in any case. We clear?”

“As crystal,” Jeremy said gravely, touching her elbow to shepherd her towards the revolving door.

After a grumpy but desultory argument over who got to drive, Sandra finally allowed herself to be persuaded into the passenger seat of Jeremy’s slick little sports car. The car smelled like leather and, more faintly, of cigarette smoke and something strange and spicy. Sandra burrowed into the curved leather hammock of the passenger seat and shut her eyes—for just a moment, she told herself, to rest them—resting her cheek against the shoulder strap of her seatbelt. She dozed off almost before they left the parking garage.

Beside her, Jeremy was mercifully silent. Rush hour had come and gone and it was fully dark out, and despite everything—or perhaps because of it—Sandra’s doze threatened to deepen into full, real, deep sleep. It *was* something she hadn’t been getting enough of lately. Hovering on the verge of sleep she attended vaguely to the journey going on around her, dimly conscious of the occasional lane shift or turn. The ride was smooth, though, and the seat was ridiculously comfortable, and eventually she gave in and slid into unconsciousness with a sigh.

At one point she dreamed that Jeremy was speaking to her, but that she couldn’t understand what he was saying.

She didn’t wake until the car slowed and the wheels bumped up against the slant of a rising driveway. Struggling upright Sandra scrubbed at her eyes with her fists, blinked twice, and then said, “Oh, *hell* no.”

“Hm?” Jeremy said, his eyes on the curving drive ahead of them. The steering wheel slid through his hands with a little whispering sound.

“Do you have any idea how tired I am?” Sandra said, her dull anger flaring again. “I’m barely up to eating in the first place, let alone dealing with fingerbowls—this place has a *dress code*, Archer! Jesus Christ!” Grabbing hold of her temper with both hands, Sandra pinched the bridge of her nose until the

impending headache receded. Her skin felt greasy under her fingers and it made her grimace. “Look,” she said tightly. “I know you probably meant well and wanted to buy me a really nice apology dinner, but there is no way in hell that I am up to eating in a place this fancy, even if I *were* properly dressed for it. Let’s go someplace else.”

“Ms. Leone,” Jeremy said.

“And stop that,” Sandra said, letting her hands drop into her lap. “For God’s sake, I’ve worn your blood like a pair of elbow-length gloves, I’d think you could at least call me Sandra.”

“Fair enough,” Jeremy said. He had the courtesy to wince at that, Sandra was vaguely pleased to note. The long and rising drive eventually opened out onto a semi-circular drive populated almost entirely by red-vested valets. “Sandra, then. I’m asking you to simply trust me on this.”

“Why does it always come down to that with you?” Sandra asked peevishly, unbuckling her seatbelt and lurching out of the car as the valet opened her door. Her legs threatened to buckle under her for a moment, but she gritted her teeth until it passed.

Jeremy passed the valet something that crackled faintly. Sandra didn’t see what it was, but she could guess. “Do you know, I’m not sure,” he said, stepping back. His little car disappeared smartly around the bend and Jeremy watched it go before turning to Sandra. “Shall we?” he said. “I’d offer you my arm, but I’m rather afraid I’d lose it.”

“The man can be taught,” Sandra muttered.

“This way, then,” Jeremy said, and he bowed over his extended hand, which was almost, but not quite, as annoying as actually trying to take her arm. Sandra shot a glare in his general direction and stalked towards the doors.

◆ 4: Sandra

The double doors opened onto a lobby that was nothing short of opulent. It made Sandra tired just to look at it. The crystal chandelier in the ceiling did little but make her eyes throb, violins were playing from somewhere, and the noise of people dining clattered in through the far archway. A woman in a cocktail dress swept past Sandra, barely even sparing her a glance, like her jeans and battered suede blazer made her invisible in this place.

Yeah. This was going to be excruciating. Sandra gritted her teeth and headed for the host's stand, preparing to endure dinner.

"Jeremy!"

The fat and sweaty little man in the immaculate black suit intercepted them before they got halfway across the lobby, beaming. Jeremy smiled and held out both hands, and the man grabbed him in an enthusiastic hug, nearly lifting Jeremy's feet off the floor in the process. Sandra blinked, slowly, too tired to believe what her eyes were telling her.

The little man laughed and noisily kissed Jeremy's cheek before letting him go, still beaming. "So good to see you again!" he cried. "I was so pleased to get your call, of course I'll do everything in my power to help—"

"You certainly haven't changed, Claude," Jeremy said, tugging his jacket back into place. "I do hope everything's in order. I'm *exhausted*, and if I have to put up with the dining room this evening, I suspect that it may kill me."

The smile vanished off Claude's face on the instant, replaced by an expression of almost comical concern. "Of course, of course, right this way, I've seen to everything myself," he said, and then he swung to Sandra, who flinched despite herself. "Please, right this way, ma'am, lovely to meet you—" and he swept them both off down a narrow and unobtrusive wood-paneled hallway half-hidden behind the coat check station.

Sandra, a bit dazed by the sudden explosion of attention, followed Jeremy without really wondering about where they were going. This sort of fuss was just what she hadn't wanted—Claude stopped and pulled open a door about halfway

down the hall, gesturing them grandly in. "Go on, go on," he said. "Sit and rest, I'll be back on the instant!"

Jeremy peered into the room and then clapped Claude gravely on the shoulder. "It's just what I needed," he said. "You're a miracle worker, as always."

"I try," Claude said smugly, and he zipped off on down the hallway, moving pretty smartly for a fat man.

Curious, Sandra plodded the last two steps to the open doorway and looked in. The little room was paneled in some kind of dark wood and, in direct contrast to everything else she'd seen so far, simply furnished and outfitted; the upholstered armchairs were wide and sturdy, their padded seats curved from age and use, and the little round table was almost completely bare, without even a tablecloth to get tangled about her knees when she sat down.

Jeremy collapsed bonelessly into one of the armchairs, shutting his eyes. "Oh, God," he said. "I shall be hard-pressed not to fall asleep right here."

"Yeah," Sandra echoed, getting herself moving again only with an effort. Really, only the promise of the chair made her move at all. She sank into it with a bit of a groan herself and crossed her arms on the bare table, dropping her head into them. "I thought this place was fancier than this."

"Well, yes, it is," Jeremy said. "Out there, at any rate."

Sandra considered this, lifting her head out of her crossed arms. "You know, I should be more curious about this," she said, "but I'm too tired."

Jeremy started to say something in answer to that, but just then Claude darted back into the room, two menus under his arm and two glasses of water on a tray in his hand. "I know that you'll be having club soda," he told Jeremy, "but for the lady?"

"Diet Coke," Sandra said. To hell with what the fat man thought of that.

"Diet Coke," Claude said, without hesitation, setting her water down in front of her. "Will you be needing menus?"

Jeremy waved the menu away. "Tell me, what did *you* have for dinner tonight?"

"The stewed chicken in white sauce," Claude said, beaming. "Potatoes and onions. Good, solid, hearty farmer's fare. None of those ridiculous frills."

"Sounds excellent," Jeremy said wearily. "I'll have that."

"... me too," Sandra said. "Weird. I thought this place was all about the frills."

Claude sniffed, the amiable expression falling off his face on the instant. "Frills sell," he said disdainfully. "No one in this country eats real food—they're all *frightened* of it. If I want to make money, I have to sell frills and ambiance to a bunch of idiots with lead palates. Why I ever came to America in the first place—"

"—be a love, Claude," Jeremy said, interrupting what looked to Sandra to be a lengthy and well-rehearsed rant. "Not tonight."

Claude slapped his forehead. "Of course! Of course, I'm an idiot. I shall go get your drinks, and would either of you care for some aspirin? I have a bottle in my desk, and frankly, you both look as if you could use some."

"Christ, yes," Sandra said, nearly moaning it. "Four, please. Also, I love you."

"She's never even told *me* that," Jeremy said. "Who knew you could buy her love with drugs? Two for me as well. Bless you, Claude."

"Bah, anything for friends of the house," Claude said, and swept out of the room, closing the door behind him with a click.

Sandra shoveled her hair out of her face and closed her eyes. It was so quiet that she could hear Jeremy breathing, and under that, dimly, the clatter of the kitchen. "All right, fine," she finally said.

"Hm?"

"I admit it, this isn't so bad."

"Mm," Jeremy said. "I apologize for not explaining myself before we arrived, but I decided that you probably needed your sleep."

"Yeah," Sandra said, opening her eyes. "Yeah, okay. Truce?"

"Truce," Jeremy said, although he sounded a bit amused.

Sandra stared at him. "What's so funny?"

"To tell you the truth, Ms. Leone, I wasn't aware we were at war."

"*Sandra*," Sandra said, exasperated. "And since I don't feel like putting this nicely: I don't *not* like you, Archer, but I don't particularly like you, either. These last two days have put me at the end of my rope, and just about the last thing I needed was for you to surprise me inside Simon's fucking *hospital room*, Jesus Christ. I'm too tired to be angry with you right now, but you know what? I really should be. So you'll take my truce and you'll like it."

"Mm," Jeremy said. "I take your point, and I apologize. And, if I may . . . ?"

"What?"

"If I'm to call you 'Sandra', the least you can do is return the favor."

Sandra considered this for a moment. She was tired, and she was kind of angry, but she also couldn't let a perfect straight line go when she saw one. "What, you want me to call you 'Sandra'? That's going to get kind of confusing."

Jeremy blinked, once, and then clapped a hand over his eyes and started laughing. "Oh, God, I *am* tired, aren't I?"

"But, anyway, fine," Sandra said. Her own urge to laugh was a vague pang that passed quickly. "Jeremy, then."

"I do appreciate it," Jeremy said, letting his hand drop. There was a knock on the closed door, and Jeremy glanced toward it and called "Come!"

The door swung open and Claude backed into the room, a tray held in front of his chest. "Club soda with lime for the gentleman," he said, putting a glass down in front of Jeremy, "and a Diet Coke for the lady," he said, putting Sandra's drink down in front of her. "And the house bread and garlic sauce, and, lest I

forget, six aspirins.” Sandra immediately scrambled four of the aspirin out of the little silver dish in the middle of the table; Claude beamed indulgently at her, holding his empty tray flat against his belly. “Your dinner will be about another fifteen minutes, and I’ll leave you to recuperate until then.”

“You’re an angel, Claude,” Jeremy said, picking the last two aspirin out of the dish. “I may never leave.”

“Such promises he makes,” Claude said, bowing himself cheerfully out of the room and closing the door behind him.

By the time Sandra finished off her drink and wolfed down a piece of bread, she was already feeling better. Her sluggish brain picked itself up, dusted itself off, and started limping along again. “So who is he?” she asked, filching a second piece of bread from the basket and nodding at the closed door.

“Claude?” Jeremy asked, not opening his eyes. He was sprawled out in his chair with his head tilted back, looking just about as exhausted as Sandra felt. “He’s the owner. I believe this is his private dining room we’re sitting in.”

“And you know him . . . how?”

Jeremy laughed a little. “He’s an old, old friend of my mentor’s. The rest of his story is both complicated and not mine to tell, I’m afraid.”

For a moment, Sandra considered pushing the matter out of sheer curiosity. In the end, she decided against it; as interesting as it might be, it wasn’t anything she needed to know right now. Instead she finished off her second piece of bread and settled in with her water. “Considering we have a truce,” she began, carefully.

“Mm?” Jeremy said.

“Who were the flowers for?”

Jeremy held up a hand to forestall her. “After dinner, please,” he said, sounding apologetic about it. “I promise you that I will field any questions you may have after I’ve eaten something. As it is I’m barely functional.”

“I guess that’s fair,” Sandra said. “Irritating, but fair. I mean, what else are we supposed to talk about? The weather? Football? Whatever you were stealing in Tokyo?”

“You could tell me about who shot Simon,” Jeremy said, and Sandra choked on her water. Jeremy had lifted his head and opened his eyes and he was watching her intently, his hands steeped in front of his chest. “Judging by the guard on Simon’s door and your own reaction to my presence, either you haven’t caught the shooter yet or you suspect he has accomplices still at large,” Jeremy went on, politely ignoring the coughing from the other side of the table. “Also, since Simon was gutshot, that leads me to believe that he wasn’t wearing a vest of any sort, so he must have been surprised . . .”

“Oh, barely functional, my ass,” Sandra said, snuffling to clear the water from her nose. “If you’re going to plead exhaustion to dodge my questions and then hit me up with your own, well, two can play at that game. After dinner. And there’s only so much I can tell you in any case, so don’t get your hopes up.”

“Ah, well.” Jeremy looked away. Sandra suspected it was to hide a smile. “I thought it was worth a try.”

“You know,” Sandra said irritably, “I always felt kind of sorry for Simon for having to be the one who actually dealt with you, but now I’m starting to think he deserves some kind of *medal*. How did he get this far without beating the crap out of you?”

“Who said he hasn’t?” Jeremy said, raising an eyebrow.

Sandra shook her head and took a third piece of bread from the basket, just because it was there. “Simon wouldn’t do that,” she said around a mouthful. To hell with what Archer thought about her table manners, too.

“Mm,” said Jeremy. “Well, I suppose you do know him better than I do.”

Sandra automatically started to agree with that sentiment before its noncommittal nature really registered, forcing her to stop and think about what Jeremy was and wasn’t saying. She knew better, didn’t she? She’d sat in the saferoom and listened to Jeremy weasel around his own basic amorality by picking his words carefully, hadn’t she? And he was certainly picking his words very carefully at the moment, wasn’t he? And she had a strong suspicion that she knew why he was doing so, didn’t she? Sandra hesitated, and put her half-eaten bread down on the little dish that the aspirin had come in. “Well, that’s the thing,” she said slowly. She glanced up at Jeremy, taking in his face out of the corner of her eye, and then looked back down at her hands, picking absently at the remains of her manicure. “Do I?”

Jeremy was silent.

“I’ve been on Simon’s team for a little over four years now,” Sandra said, scraping a flake of pink polish from one of her thumbnails. She didn’t know why she bothered painting her nails any more. She always destroyed her manicure the first time she needed something to do with her hands. “You can’t do a job like ours for four years and not get to know your teammates really well, okay? It just . . . you can’t keep your distance. There’s no way to save a guy’s life one second and go back to minding your own business the next.” Huffing out a sour breath Sandra shook her head. “So yeah, I guess I do know Simon pretty well—but I thought I knew *Rich* pretty well, too, and look how that turned out. Shows you what I really know.”

Jeremy was still silent. Sandra peeled a thin thread of nailpolish off the side of one of her nails and let it drop, listening to Jeremy breathing and, distantly, someone in the kitchen laughing. “God, I shouldn’t be talking about this,” she said, all in a rush.

“Ms. Leone—”

“Sandra.”

Jeremy closed his eyes, briefly. “Sandra.”

“See, the thing about Simon is that he doesn’t tell us things unless he thinks we need to know them,” Sandra said. Somewhere deep inside she was horrified

that she was saying these things out loud at all, especially to *Jeremy*, but she couldn't stop. Damn the man for listening anyway. "And that makes me wonder. How well *do* I know him? Really?"

Jeremy was quiet again. Sandra's eyes were fixed on her hands, but she could sense him watching her—her peripheral vision told her as much. "So let's start there," she said. "Just tell me yes or no. Don't explain. *Has* Simon ever beaten the crap out of you?"

"Yes," Jeremy said.

Sandra closed her own eyes. "Was he seriously trying to hurt you?"

"Yes," Jeremy said again.

Blindly, Sandra laced her fingers together. "Why—no, don't answer that. Um. Was it directly related to your, uh, your criminal activities?"

"No," Jeremy said.

"Was it personal?" Sandra opened her eyes and looked up, trying to brace herself, probably failing.

Jeremy hesitated. "It's complicated," he finally said.

"So let's say yes and no."

"That's fair."

"So Simon once beat the shit out of you for reasons that weren't related to his job, at least not entirely," Sandra concluded.

"Not entirely," Jeremy echoed.

"So those reasons were at least partially personal."

"Partially."

Sandra stopped and forced herself to take a deep breath. "And you're telling me the truth."

"Yes."

"Then I think that tells me everything I need to know," Sandra said. Her gut felt hollow. Suddenly she didn't have any appetite left for the bread, but she took a sip of her water, stalling for time. Across from her Jeremy was silent and watchful, his expression grave. Sandra put her glass down. "Aren't you going to ask me what I've concluded?"

"I don't think that's necessary," Jeremy said. "After all, if I ask you, then I'll be put in a position where I'll feel obligated to confirm or deny your theory."

Sandra twitched out half a smile despite herself. "Yeah. Yeah, I don't really want you to do that either. I guess I don't really want to know. Not for sure."

"Shall we leave it at that, then?" Jeremy was still watching her, although he was wearing just the faintest hint of a smile now. "Since to go any further would compromise Simon's privacy?"

"Yeah," Sandra said. "I follow you. I'm done."

"In that case," Jeremy said, "may I ask you a question? Just one."

Sandra looked away, bracing herself. "Just one," she said tightly.

The pause that followed was long, but it wasn't long enough. "Do you have a personal reason for asking?" Jeremy finally asked.

Suddenly the blood was beating hard in Sandra's ears, the roar of it deafening. "Yes," she finally said through gritted teeth. God *damn* him anyway.

"And you seem like the sort of person who wouldn't take things personally without a damned good reason," Jeremy said, musing.

"Hey," said Sandra. "You said 'just one'."

"My apologies," Jeremy said. "That wasn't a question. I'm simply . . . explaining my reasoning."

"Yes, well, I think we understand each other now," Sandra said. "Is there a bathroom around here I could use, do you know?"

Jeremy was silent for a moment. "Out the door and to the right," he finally said. Sandra couldn't decide if what she was hearing in his voice was kindness or pity, and she didn't want to know which it was. In her current state, either one ran the risk of making her either break down or break his nose. "It's the last door on the left before the hallway bends towards the kitchen."

"Thanks," Sandra said tightly. She heaved herself out of her chair and strode quickly to the door, getting a wall between herself and Jeremy as fast as possible.

By the time she came back, her face washed clean of makeup and her hair pulled back in a rubber band, there were two covered plates sitting on the little table along with silverware and fresh drinks. Of Claude there was no sign, but Jeremy was just where she had left him, neatly tucked into his chair with his legs crossed and his hands folded in his lap. "You didn't have to wait for me," Sandra said briskly, tucking herself back into her chair.

"Bah, I hardly had to wait at all," Jeremy said. "Our dinner arrived less than a minute ago. And to be honest, if you had been even thirty seconds later, my manners probably would have been overcome by my appetite."

"Well, then, let's eat already," Sandra said, and whipped the metal cover off her plate, getting a faceful of steam. "... oh, God."

Jeremy leaned across the table and took the cover from her, stacking it with his own and moving it to a tray set up behind his chair. "I agree," he said. "To hell with conversation. Dinner now."

"For once, I'd have to agree with you, as much as that hurts," Sandra said, poking at her chicken with her fork. The stewed chicken nearly fell apart at the first press, and Sandra speared a bit, ate it, and moaned around the tines of her fork.

"I trust it was all right?" Claude said archly, stacking up their empty plates on the tray.

"Wonderful," Jeremy said, with real feeling. "It's a good thing Ms. Leone was here to remind me of my manners or I might have licked my plate clean."

“Now that’s a mental image I didn’t need, Archer,” Sandra said. She was full, stuffed to bursting, logy with food, and for the first time in what seemed like forever she was starting to feel on top of things again. “But, yes, it was delicious, thank you.”

“Good, good!” Beaming, Claude finished clearing the table and flicked a napkin over it, cleaning up the crumbs. “More to drink? Oh, and there’s dessert coming, and don’t you dare try and tell me no.”

“Oh, I learned the futility of *that* long ago,” Jeremy said. “Coffee, please. If we’re to get ourselves to our respective homes in one piece, we’ll need it.”

“I’ll bring a pot,” Claude promised. Sweeping up the tray, he spun out the open door and nudged it closed behind him.

Jeremy folded his hands over his stomach and smiled at Sandra. “Well! I feel worlds better for having eaten. You?”

“I think I may live to see another day,” Sandra said. “So, does this count as ‘after dinner’, or do I have to wait until after dessert, too?”

“Oh, I think I’m up to the task by now,” Jeremy paused, considering. “Do you want to start, or shall I?”

Sandra glanced at the closed door. “I’ll start,” she said. “We can talk about Simon when we’re less likely to be interrupted. So, Archer. Flowers?”

“They were for a patient named Luther Bycross,” Jeremy said, without further ado. “I’m afraid I used the man rather shamelessly as part of my bid to get into Simon’s hospital room unnoticed, and I told him that I owed him flowers in return.”

Sandra nodded. “Don’t think I’m not going to drag the rest of that story out of you, but first . . . when was this? When did you sneak into Simon’s room?”

Jeremy hesitated. “A little after five in the morning,” he finally said, reluctantly.

“Cleary,” Sandra said, rolling her eyes. “Fucking *Cleary*. Why am I not surprised? Where was he?”

“He said he was popping out for a bite to eat and a smoke,” Jeremy said. “I don’t know exactly where he went.”

Sandra shook her head. “I’ll kill him,” she said with relish. “Pull his guts out through his navel.”

Jeremy smiled a bit. “Simon said he’d have him shot. It’s so nice when people agree.”

“Wait,” Sandra said, startled. “Wait. Simon spoke to you? Simon was *conscious*?”

“Yes, for about . . . forty seconds. Out of approximately fourteen hours that I spent hiding in his room,” Jeremy spread his hands. “Not precisely an efficient use of my time, although I confess myself content.”

Sandra leaned forward, intent. “Damn. Archer. Please. Did he say anything—*anything*—about the guy who shot him?”

“Ah.” Jeremy looked startled and then abashed. “I hate to admit it, but I don’t think he said anything that would be of any use to you. He was barely awake for long enough to process that I was there.”

Sandra shut her eyes. Her headache was a thing of the past, but she rubbed her temples anyway, just because it felt good to do so. “Damn it,” she said. “See, we’re about ninety percent sure we know who the shooter was, but Simon’s the only one who saw his face, and he hasn’t been conscious for long enough to confirm or deny it—”

Jeremy touched her arm and Sandra broke off there, her eyes flying open. Jeremy was looking towards the door, holding up his other hand like he was a cop halting traffic. Sandra glanced towards the door just as someone knocked on it. “Come!” Jeremy called, letting both hands drop again.

The door opened and Claude backed through, a tray balanced on one hand. “Coffee,” he said briskly, spinning the tray down onto the stand behind Jeremy’s chair. “And dessert, as promised.” Dishes clinked down on the table in front of them: dessert plates, reasonably plain coffee cups, a heavy-looking silver coffeepot . . . Sandra picked up the fork resting on the edge of her plate and poked gingerly at the thick and bubbly-looking slice of bread that was floating in a pool of some creamy stuff. “Orange-ginger tea cake,” Claude said, just as if she’d asked, “in vanilla cream.”

“I’ll regret this in the morning,” Sandra said, cutting off a corner with her fork and poking it into her mouth. It was astonishing, spicier than it was sweet, and she shut her eyes in order to enjoy it better.

“Let me just give you this now,” she heard Jeremy say. Something crackled like folding paper. “Once we’ve finished here I’m afraid I’ll need to be on my way.”

“Of course,” Claude murmured. “But you must come back.”

“If I’m able,” said Jeremy. Sandra opened her eyes and cut off another corner of her cake, paying more attention to it than to either of them. The door closed behind Claude. She barely spared it a thought.

Jeremy filled both coffee cups, hers and then his own. Sandra ate steadily through her cake. Jeremy took a bite of his, closed his own eyes in momentary appreciation, and then turned his attention to his coffee. For the moment, all was quiet.

Finally Sandra looked up. “If you’re not going to eat that,” she said, “then tell me the story of how you got into Simon’s hospital room.”

“From the beginning?” Jeremy asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Don’t leave anything out,” said Sandra, picking up her own cup. “I could use a good laugh.”

There were only two valets left on duty by the time they left the restaurant. This time, watching closely, Sandra saw the folded bill tucked behind the valet

tag that Jeremy handed over, and the valet's sudden turn of speed made perfect sense. The other valet made a perfunctory effort to open the car door for her when it came, but Jeremy beat him to it, opening the door and gesturing Sandra in with a wave of his hand and a twitch of his eyebrow, as if he found his own manners to be too ironic for words.

She didn't so much get into the car as she did roll in, curling protectively about her belly like she was pregnant with food. Jeremy shut the door behind her and slid around to the other side of the car, settling into the driver's seat and nudging the car towards the exit. Sandra waited until he was guiding the car back down the long and winding drive to say, "I suppose I forgive you."

"I'm glad," said Jeremy. "For what?"

"For everything," Sandra said, and shrugged. "Well, for everything that I know you've done, anyway. Don't get me wrong, I'm still not your biggest fan, but for the moment, we're good. We coo', as Mike would say."

"Well, then, I *am* glad," said Jeremy. He paused, then added, "About Simon..."

"I suppose nowhere else is likely to be this private," Sandra said, glancing out the car window. "Right. Let me get my thoughts in order."

Jeremy was silent, waiting patiently, his eyes on the road. They came to the end of the curving drive and turned out onto the road proper, the car accelerating so smoothly that Sandra barely felt it. It was like floating, almost. "We were in the parking lot," she said abruptly, staring hard out the window and trying not to picture the scene again. She was helpless not to, though, and suddenly her meal was a stone in her belly. "The goddamned *parking lot*. He walked me out to my car because we were leaving at the same time—everybody else was already gone for the day—and then he headed over to his own car." Sandra stopped and pressed a knuckle against her lips, her arms folded protectively over her chest. Jeremy said nothing, and after a moment she went on. "I almost missed the sound of the shot. It was just a dinky-shit .22, Christ, it sounded more like someone slapped him than shot him."

Jeremy flicked on the turn signal and heeled quietly over onto another, larger road, and Sandra was quiet until it was done. "I knew the sound, though," she said. "You learn it. So I spun around and Simon was falling to his knees—" Sandra made a small, helpless, frustrated gesture, feeling sick all over again "—and there was this other guy, running away. He must have been hiding behind Simon's truck, there wasn't anywhere else... Anyway, I drew and yelled for him to stop, which he didn't, of course, and Simon was kind of... groping aimlessly around behind himself, trying to get his own gun out, and then he fell over onto his side—" She stopped abruptly.

After a long, silent, sick ten seconds, Jeremy quietly prompted, "What did you do?"

“I want you to understand that I couldn’t just shoot the fleeing man and have done,” Sandra said. “God knows I wanted to, but it doesn’t *work* that way.”

“No, I understand that.” Jeremy’s smile twitched on and off. “I’m passing familiar with the intricacies of the law, you understand. As a safety measure.”

“I fired a warning shot into the air, just in case,” Sandra said, ignoring Jeremy’s tangent. “And I yelled again. But there wasn’t anyone else *there*, so instead of giving chase I started yelling for backup and stayed with Simon. Did what I could.” She sounded snappish to her own ears, but she didn’t bother apologizing. She could still picture the blood on her hands and Simon’s wide, shocked eyes and how they’d started to go all unfocused and dreamy, but even if she’d wanted to put these things into words, she couldn’t.

“A .22,” Jeremy said after a moment. “Someone wasn’t very serious about killing him, were they?”

“Of course not,” Sandra said. She shook her head to clear it. “Not this fuck. No, that’s not his *style*.” She sneered the last word hard.

Jeremy nodded. “So you do know who did this.”

Sandra sighed out a long and frustrated breath. “Like I said, ninety percent sure. Crazy fuck got out of prison like two weeks ago, broke parole immediately—we didn’t expect *this*, though. Didn’t expect him to be *this* crazy.”

“Who is it?” Jeremy asked.

Sandra almost told him that she couldn’t tell him that. Almost. Jeremy wasn’t a part of this (lucky, lucky bastard) and there was absolutely no need for him to know . . . but he was paying a cool and absolute sort of attention to her, and when it came right down to it, there was no need for him *not* to know, either. “Farraday,” she said tightly. She dropped her hands into her lap and caught a double handful of the hem of her sweater, pulling at it. “His name’s Cole Farraday. He

◆ 5: *Sandra*

calls himself a colonel,” Simon said with mild distaste, dropping the sheet of paper he’d been holding onto the folder in front of him.

Sandra, sitting on his left, crossed her arms on the table and said nothing. She could feel Mike fidgeting beside her, like he always did; he couldn’t sit still for a second. It was enough to drive her crazy. Mike was plucking at the clip of his pen, running his thumbnail up under it and then letting it snap back against the barrel with a little clicking sound. Sandra wanted nothing so much as to tell him to stop, but this last year had taught her a lot, including the futility of simply telling Mike to do anything. So she ignored him the best she could, her eyes firmly on Simon’s face. He’d missed a spot while shaving this morning, just behind the point of his jaw.

A little flicker of white caught at the corner of her vision and distracted her from the distraction: Rich, reaching up to fuss with his glasses. “Is he?”

“A colonel? No.” Simon leaned back in his chair and linked his hands behind his head. “He was, in fact, invalidated out of the Army at the grand rank of corporal.”

“Hell of a promotion,” Johnny said.

“And only in his tiny little rathole mind,” Simon said, shrugging one shoulder. “When they drum you out of the Army for having a ‘personality disorder’, they don’t go and promote you a good ten ranks in the process. I mean, unless something’s changed since my ROTC days.”

“Hoo,” Mike said cheerfully, “you were ROTC, boss?” He pronounced it rot-zee, rhyming it with Nazi; Sandra could remember doing that herself, back in her college days. “Never woulda guessed!”

“Learn something new every day, Honda,” Simon said dryly. “Well, most people do. Don’t know about you.”

They could go on like this for hours. Sandra knew that very well. So she shifted in her chair, leaning forward and raising her shoulders slightly; the little movement was enough to attract Mike’s attention (but what wasn’t?) and it made Simon glance towards her as well. “So,” she said, “what’s our problem with this

so-called Colonel Farraday? Does the Army want us to go tell him to knock it off with this 'colonel' shit or what?"

"Tell you the truth, I think they wouldn't mind that." Simon sat back up and started riffling through the dossier in front of him, one hand flicking rapidly back and forth. "But our problem with the colonel is a bit less trivial."

"So fill us in," Sandra said, glancing at Simon's hands before looking back at his face.

"Right," Simon said. "So what we've got here, kids, is one of those smart-type crazy fuckers—"

"—worst kind," Johnny put in.

"You said it," Simon said. "Anyway, near as we can tell he joined the Army straight up at age eighteen and spent two or three years being no problem to anybody. Took a few college classes, got promoted along, wasn't unusual in any way. If he was a discipline problem, well, the Army's not saying. Who knows? Maybe he was a nice, normal kid once, with a bunch of buddies and a girlfriend and a, a golden retriever puppy."

"So what happened?" Sandra asked.

"In point of fact, the Gulf War happened," Simon said. "He got shipped over pretty early on and snapped under the pressure, or something."

"Gulf War syndrome?" Nate asked. Sandra, startled, glanced down the table at him. He was playing with his pen.

"Nah, he wasn't sick. He went crazy." Simon finally found the paper he'd been looking for and slid it out. "Or maybe he pretended to go crazy in order to get shipped home. Army doesn't know. Hell, half the Army psych guys who interviewed him thought he was faking it. Developed a bunch of tics, started talking some crazy talk. 'Espousing a new and disturbingly amoral view of life', as one of the shrinks put it."

Johnny half-opened one eye. "It work?"

"Eventually," Simon said. "Got slapped with a 'personality disorder' label, got discharged, and got sent home. And then, boys and girl, he stepped off the plane, picked up his suitcase, and disappeared. Poof." Simon snapped his fingers. "Like that."

"Why do I get the feeling that's not the end of the story?" Sandra asked.

" 'Cause otherwise it's none of our business?" Mike said cheerfully from behind her, and Sandra twitched and swiveled to look at him. "I mean, shit, all we got so far is that he's possibly crazy, and I'm all possibly crazy too and they don't send the FBI after me."

"I'm aware of that," Sandra said after a pause. "You know, just in case you were wondering."

"Nah, I wasn't wondering," Mike said, looking mildly hurt. "Shit, I was just funnin' with you."

Simon cleared his throat. Sandra, beginning to feel a bit like a tennis ball being lobbed back and forth, swiveled back around to face him. "Anyway," Simon said. "Remember that 'amoral view of life' bullshit I told you about earlier? Basically, if you boil it all down, our friend the colonel believes or pretends to believe that the government shouldn't get to dictate how we conduct our private lives—"

"Um," said Nate. "Is that a problem? Because, I mean, I kind of believe that too..."

"Well, yeah, same here, we're all good libertarians here, but the colonel takes that to mean that he can smuggle unstamped cigarettes and peddle a lot of drugs and hijack trucks and abscond with willing sixteen-year-old girls," Simon said, waving his bit of paper at Nate. "He likes to send the papers these typewritten screeds about how the age of consent is an artificial construct meant to prevent little girls from 'fully expressing their natural womanhood' or some shit, I don't know, or how getting involved with drug cartels is evil and wrong but growing weed in your own backyard and selling it to the neighbors ought to be legal because it's a matter of choice..."

"Shit, I kind of can't disagree with that part," Mike said. "Course, don't quote me on that. I like my job like it is. You know. Existing."

"So yeah," Simon said, ignoring Mike entirely, "basically you've got your flat-out balls-standard cult of personality growing up around this guy—apparently he's one of those charismatic panty-melter types, which just goes to show you there's no accounting for chicks, I mean taste—and he's rocketing around up North setting up hidey-holes and driving RVs full of illicit goods back and forth across the Canadian border and making a complete pain in the ass out of himself."

"Great," said Mike. "I wanted to spend my time taking out whacko cult leaders, I'd have joined the ATF."

"Yeah, 'cause they're awesome at it," Simon said without any apparent sarcasm. "Anyway, he's definitely one wanted little motherfucker, so our only goal here is to find him, arrest him, and feed him into the maw of the military-industrial complex, so to speak. I'm guessing that finding him's going to be the hard part. Man loves him some kitted-out RVs."

At the other end of the table, Rich cleared his throat. "Speeding tickets," he proclaimed. "Parking fines. Registrations. Gas station fillups. Border checks."

"Knew I could count on you, Two," Simon said genially. "Also, under no circumstances are you to try and find out if this guy's got a sealed juvie record. And if I find out that you've been poking around in his Army records pre-crackup, I will be just exactly as upset as my position of power requires me to be with you. Get me?"

"Got you, Templar," Rich said, nodding furiously. Sandra shifted in her chair (once again drawing Mike's attention momentarily) and frowned down at her hands. Rich and Simon had always occupied a particular wavelength that she

was not on; she wasn't particularly upset by the illegal orders so carefully not communicated along that wavelength, but being excluded from it, that bothered her a bit.

On the other hand, she couldn't deny that the results Rich produced were usually invaluable. He earned the special treatment that he got. And if she were being honest with herself she would admit that Rich required Simon's careful handling, because he was an ill-tempered little asshole with almost no sense of humor. "Cult of personality," she said out loud, derailing her own train of thought. "Does that mean he's running a militia?"

"Aw, fuck," Mike moaned.

"Sources don't believe so, although I encourage you guys not to rule it out," Simon said slowly. "He likes women. Blonde women. He doesn't like competition for his women. He's a crazy fucker and there's no denying it, and he's got some nasty crimes on his record, but he seems to like to surround himself with adoring ladies instead of with men with guns."

"Well, shit, who doesn't?" Mike said, then stopped and took a theatrical look around the room. "Aw, shit. Quick, Sandy, tell me you adore me!"

"I abhor you, Mike," Sandra said. At the end of the table, Nate made a sound that was remarkably like a giggle. Sandra glanced at him and smiled; he went a little pink. "So," she said, getting back down to business. "Have we got any information on his lady friends?"

"Funny you should ask that," Simon said, turning his own lazy smile on Sandra. She wanted to go a little pink herself. "See, I've got this list of names here that need running down..."

Sandra rolled her eyes and snapped the paper out of Simon's hand. "Me and my big mouth," she said.

"Love ya, Sandy," Simon said, and slapped his hand on the table. "Right. Here's how it's going to fall out. Specs Two, do whatever it takes to pinpoint the colonel's location, and don't tell me how you did it later. Specs, I can tell you right now that we're going to need tracking devices and assorted chase-scene music, so get into your closet and make sure all our electronic doodads are in order. Springheel, you've got the list, I want you to put together dossiers on his lady friends, past and present, and then start calling 'em; I figure you're a chick, so maybe if he left 'em disgruntled they'll talk to you. Honda, go make sure the van's in fighting trim first, and then I want you to call the Army and see if you can't weasel anything else out of 'em. Texas, you did your time on the force—"

"—still holdin' that against me," Johnny said mournfully, shaking his head.

"—here's a copy of his arrest record. Call around, make some friends, flesh it out. Once you've got that, give it to Specs Two, he'll, uh, triangulate or some shit. Something really technical, anyway." Simon paused, glanced around the table looking for questions, then nodded. "Let's get to it, kids."

“He figures I’m a chick,” Sandra said, scraping her chair back and standing up. “Gosh.”

“Yeah, his powers of observation are awesome to behold or some shit,” Mike said, beaming. “Regular Sherlock Holmes, that guy.”

Simon unfolded from his own chair and had himself a good, long stretch. “Hey, less talk, more action,” he said. “Always been my motto. Besides, the sooner we find this guy

◆ 6: Jeremy

the sooner I can stop looking over my shoulder every second,” Sandra said, rubbing her upper arms absently. The suede of her blazer made faint whispering sounds under her hands.

Jeremy spared her a quick glance before turning back to the road. It was astonishingly dark out here; another two minutes and they’d be on a well-lit freeway, another fifteen minutes would see them into DC proper, but right here, right now, the only lights were those of the suburban houses to either side, set far back from the road. The car’s headlights stretched out in yellowish-white ovals in front of them. Almost absently he turned the information that he’d been given over in his mind, even as he slid the car gently around a curve in the road. “I’m guessing he turned out to be more than he appeared,” he finally said, trying the words on for size.

“No,” Sandra said. “It’s not that. He turned out to be exactly what the briefing materials said he was: a smart, charismatic, amoral psychopath.”

Jeremy nodded. If Sandra saw, she gave no indication. “So you underestimated him,” Jeremy said.

“No,” Sandra said again. She stopped rubbing her arms and folded them tightly across her chest. “Well, possibly a little. But that’s not what happened.”

She fell silent and Jeremy fell silent with her, turning his attention back to the road. Dimly, in the distance, he could see headlights flickering back and forth: the freeway. The silence stretched between them for a moment before Sandra heaved out a sigh and tightened her arms across her chest. “We overestimated *ourselves*, is what happened.”

“Mm,” said Jeremy, and fell silent again. Surreptitiously he let the car’s speed ease back from a comfortable 50 to a lazy 40, lengthening their stay on this dark and lonely stretch of road.

“Christ, we were so cocky back then,” Sandra said, breaking the silence, staring out her window at nothing. “I look back and I’m *amazed*. I mean, we’re good as a team, okay, we *are* good, we’re *really* good, but back then everyone in the department thought we were the golden children and *so did we*, okay?”

Suddenly she sounded defensive, almost angry, nearly spitting out the words. “Just like a month before we pulled off this massive, insane coup on a routine stakeout and suddenly it was like we could do no wrong! No one gave Simon orders any more after that, do you understand what I’m saying? Upstairs would just hand him an assignment and give him free rein, and people in our division just don’t *get* that kind of responsibility!” The last word was still echoing in the enclosed space of the car when Sandra closed her mouth with a snap and squeezed her eyes shut.

Jeremy said nothing, trusting his instincts. Instead he made a soft sound of acknowledgement and fell still, concentrating what was left of his energy on guiding the car up and onto the freeway. A massive SUV lumbered by to their left and dopplered away; Jeremy kept to the right lane and fell back, leaving them isolated in a small pocket of space between one clump of DC-bound cars and the next.

“It took us months to regain that kind of trust after Farraday,” Sandra said abruptly. She had hold of herself again, and she sounded calm enough. “But we got it back. We *are* good. We’re damned good.”

“Believe me, I’m aware of that,” Jeremy said.

Sandra smiled a little, although there didn’t look to be much humour in it. “Guess you would be.”

Jeremy flicked on his turn signal and swept into the left lane, passing a massive tanker truck. Sandra’s confession seemed to be over and so he sped back up to the speed limit; despite the temporary lift of the caffeine he was exhausted, having piled his illicit stay in Simon’s hospital room on top of his jet lag. He could be at his hotel and in bed in half an hour, and he planned to be.

“Do me a favour,” Sandra said.

Jeremy glanced at her reflection in the windshield. “What’s that?”

“Just take me home,” Sandra said, rubbing a hand over her face. “I’m too tired to deal with anything else tonight.”

“If you’re certain.”

“I’ll hop a bus down to the hospital tomorrow before work and pick up my car, check in on Simon at the same time.” Sandra snorted out another of those little not-a-laughs and glanced out her window. “Besides, maybe Farraday’s at the hospital laying for me at my car and this way I can give the bastard a little grief.”

“As you like, then,” Jeremy said.

Sandra looked at him. “Do you remember how to get to my place?”

“I think I can find it.”

“Good.” Sandra leaned her head back against the headrest and shut her eyes. “Christ, but I’m tired.”

“If you’d like to nod off, go ahead,” Jeremy said. “You’ve a good fifteen minutes.”

“Yeah,” said Sandra. She covered her yawn with one hand. “Yeah, maybe I will. Anything else you want to know first?”

Jeremy considered. Four hours ago his mind had been alive with questions; now he could think of only one. “What does this Farraday look like?”

“Anorexic Billy Idol,” Sandra said immediately. “He’s tall and wiry-thin, you know, with the big hands and feet? And he’s got really short spiky hair that he bleaches white and a bony face with these deep-set baggy eyes. Kind of ugly and raw-looking, really. Oh, and he tics.”

“Ticks?” Tired as Jeremy was, his mind simply refused to comprehend this. “What, like Captain Hook’s crocodile?”

“*Tics*,” Sandra said with bruised patience. “Like he has Tourette’s, only without the cussing. He can’t stand still. Every few seconds he’ll jerk his shoulder back or twitch his chin to the side or spasm all his fingers out.”

Jeremy considered this and then shivered slightly. “That’s rather creepy.”

“Very,” Sandra said. “Like he’s constantly being poked by invisible people.”

“Oh, yes, this Colonel Farraday of yours sounds *very* charismatic.” Jeremy essayed a small smile, attempting to lighten the mood that was filling the car like concrete. “I have no idea how women resist him.”

“What can I say? Us women see a guy convulsing and all of a sudden we can’t keep our hands out of his pants—” Sandra huffed, irritated. “I guess stupid women and little romantic teenaged girls think he’s vulnerable, or something. Never saw the attraction, myself.”

“I guess he was too smart—or too stupid—to try anything with you,” Jeremy said diplomatically. After a moment Sandra reached over and punched his shoulder lightly, which made him smile.

The last ten minutes of the drive passed in a comfortable silence, Sandra nodding off in the passenger seat, Jeremy occasionally biting the inside of his cheek to keep himself alert. His memory proved good enough to find Sandra’s apartment building after only one wrong turn; disdaining the parking garage Jeremy pulled up in front of the building, flicking on his hazards. “We’re here,” he said softly, touching Sandra’s shoulder.

Her eyes flicked open. “Oh good,” Sandra said, and yawned. “I think I’ve got just enough energy to make it upstairs and into my bed. Maybe if I get real lucky I’ll be able to spare an erg to get my shoes off.”

“I’ll walk you in,” Jeremy said, shaking his head once and shutting off the engine. He was out of the car before Sandra could protest, the cool October air reviving him slightly; Sandra looked decidedly grumpy when he pulled her door open, but she’d sat there and waited for him to do it, which Jeremy believed was a good sign. “Shall we?” he asked, offering her his hand.

“I can see myself in,” Sandra said grumpily, but all the same she took his hand and stood up, dropping it almost immediately. “I *am* armed, Archer, maybe

you remember? If Farraday's laying for me in there, we'll find out how he looks with an extra hole in his face."

"I'll see you to the elevators, at least," Jeremy said, keeping his voice bland and his expression neutral. It was a trick that had always worked on Simon, and apparently it also worked on Sandra. She rolled her eyes but gave in, heading for the doors with Jeremy in her wake.

The building lobby was empty except for the security guard on duty. A glance confirmed that he was neither dead nor a bleached-blond fellow with bags under his eyes, and he waved back when Sandra waved to him. Jeremy relaxed slightly. "Are you certain you wouldn't like me to come up with you?" he asked as they reached the bank of elevators.

"I'm good," Sandra said, lifting her sweater away from her hip and freeing her holster. "I know I'm just a chick and all, but I *have* been trained in the art of hurting people real damn bad."

"Believe me, *that* I know," Jeremy said, reaching up to ostentatiously rub one shoulder. "And I'm certain I'd never dare call you 'just a chick'. In fact, I wouldn't call you 'just' anything."

Sandra rolled her eyes. "You think you are *so* damn smooth," she said, but she was smiling ever so slightly while she said it.

"Yes, well, I've found that a certain amount of polish is invaluable in my profession—" One of the four elevator doors dinged cheerily, and they both tensed until the doors slid open to reveal it empty. Jeremy put a hand to his chest and bowed over it. "Good night, Ms. Leone."

"*Sandra*," Sandra said, punching him in the shoulder again before stepping into the elevator. The doors rumbled most of the way closed before she stuck her hand between them and stopped them. "Archer."

Jeremy didn't bother protesting the 'Archer'. "Hm?"

Sandra studied him closely, a slight frown on her face. "Are you planning on sticking around town for a while?"

Jeremy hesitated. "I'd thought so," he said carefully. "Just to keep an eye on . . . things."

The frown didn't waver, but after a moment, Sandra nodded. "In that case, I'll call you later this week. Something I want you to do for me, maybe."

Jeremy smiled, suddenly finding it a little easier to breathe. *Got you, too*. "Consider me entirely at your disposal," he said. "... Sandra."

◆ 7: Mike

[thursday]

“Man,” Mike wailed, slapping on the turn signal and heeling over into the left lane at almost exactly the same time, “I get why we’re doing this in person and all, but why’s it gotta be me that does it?”

Johnny, slumped in the passenger seat with his eyes half-shut, grunted in answer. Mike blew past the slow-moving luxury car and cut back into the right lane, sharply enough to make horns blare behind him. Gleefully he shot the car behind him the finger and then accelerated on out of there, exchanging one traffic jam for another. “And that’s another thing,” he said, slotting in behind an eighteen-wheeler and shifting about impatiently in his seat. “Why the fuck’s lawyer lady gotta be in Fredericksburg, anyway? Why the fuck am I on 95? Why the fuck am I on 95 at ten in the morning? What did I do to deserve this shit?”

Johnny grunted again, this time opening one eye long enough to glance in Mike’s direction. “It’s not about you,” he pointed out.

Mike deflated, patting one hand absently against the steering wheel in the same oddly syncopated rhythm that had been stuck in his head all morning. Six pats into the musical phrase he stopped long enough to smack the turn signal again, easing into a space in the right lane just barely bigger than his own car. This time there wasn’t so much as a self-conscious high-pitched beep from the horns of the cars behind him, which only deflated him further. “I *know* that,” he muttered. “Shit, I’m just complaining ’cause it makes me feel better.”

“Yeah,” Johnny said, and shut his eyes again.

“You know, you could do some bitching too, if you wanted,” Mike pointed out. “Just to keep me entertained and all.”

“Nah,” said Johnny. “Looking forward to this.”

“*Whaaat?*” Mike gaped at Johnny, although he kept his eyes half on the road while he did it. “What the hell are you looking forward to? This is gonna suck!”

Johnny shrugged. “She’s gonna tear a strip off you,” he said, and now he was almost grinning around his ever-present toothpick. Mike could see it in his reflection in the windshield. “I like a good fight.”

Mike hunched his shoulders and glared at the car in front of them. “Aw, gee, thanks, Texas.”

“Sure,” said Johnny.

“I don’t like her any more’n she likes me,” Mike pointed out. “Maybe I’ll tear a strip off *her*, huh?”

Johnny flicked his chewed-up toothpick out of his mouth and stuck it into the car’s ashtray. “Nah,” he said when he was done. “You’re gonna go in there blustering and she’s gonna tear you down. Like she does.”

“Aw, man, thanks for the vote of confidence!” Mike scowled and leaned forward, digging around under his seat. “Fuck this. I’m gonna use the bubble light.”

“Yep,” said Johnny.

“Yep what?” Mike said suspiciously, rooting a blue bubble light out from under his seat and rolling his window halfway down.

The roar of the wind and the other cars nearly stole Johnny’s next sentence, but Mike still heard it. “Usin’ the bubble light,” Johnny said, pulling another toothpick out of his shirt pocket. “You’re wired. She’s gonna eat you for lunch.”

“Awww, *man*,” Mike groaned, sticking the bubble light onto the roof of his car and hitting the switch. Cars in front of him dropped out of his way with alacrity and Mike goosed the car up to a comfortable eighty, but not even the sheer sense of power could entirely shake his sulky mood.

Johnny tilted his head back, taking in the building. “Eh,” he said dismissively.

“Yeah, well, it’s a dinky-shit little law firm, remember?” Mike asked, aiming a lazy kick at Johnny’s ankle to get him moving. “C’mon, let’s get this over with already.”

Johnny expressionlessly shifted his weight onto his other foot and kicked him back. Mike yowled. “Ow, goddammit, Texas, why you gotta wear the *pointy* boots?” he asked plaintively, grabbing his offended ankle in both hands and hopping around in a circle, nearly falling over. “That’s cheating!”

“’Cause they’re shitkickin’ boots,” Johnny said, once again nearly grinning around his toothpick. “C’mon.” And with no further ado he turned around and ambled up the sidewalk towards the building’s entrance. Mike scowled and followed him, pointedly limping the first few steps, not that Johnny appeared to notice.

The glass doors led into an anonymous and gray little lobby, with a faded red carpet leading to a bank of four elevators at one end. A black sign above the elevator call buttons listed the building’s tenants: doctors and lawyers and insurance firms, mostly. Mike scanned the list. Fourth floor, Adams, Mackenzie, Procomo, Attorneys At Law. Also Dennis Wallerson, DDS and Four-Ex Title Services, Inc. “There we go,” he said, and punched the call button. “. . . shit, I ought to make you do the talking, Texas. She doesn’t have anything against *you*.”

“Springheel told you to do it,” Johnny pointed out. “I heard.”

“Why me? I guess ‘cause I’m all smooth or some shit.” Mike preened a little, scanning the bank of elevators.

“Maybe,” said Johnny. “Or maybe Sandy wants to annoy the lawyer lady.”

Mike flailed his arms a little, nearly hitting Johnny, who swayed lazily back out of the way. “Man, why does everybody gotta go around tearin’ me down all the time?” he asked.

The elevator to their left dinged and slid open. “‘Cause you need it,” Johnny said, edging past Mike and into the elevator.

“Pff,” said Mike, following him.

For just a moment Diana Fontaine’s pretty snubnosed face remained blankly inquiring, displaying no sign of recognition whatsoever. Mike could tell the exact minute she placed the two of them: when her eyes narrowed and her mouth twisted up into a little grimace of distaste. She’d chewed off all her lipstick at some point that morning, Mike couldn’t help but notice. He’d always sort of liked that worn-down look, even on chicks he didn’t like. “Oh, this is just what I needed,” she said, clapping one hand tiredly over her eyes. Her nailpolish was chipped, too. “This is *just* what I needed today.”

Mike flung his arms open wide and beamed her the biggest smile he could find. “Baby!” he announced, loudly enough to make her coworkers peek out of offices all around. The noise level in the office dropped audibly, like the building was holding its breath, all the better to hear what was going on. “Did you miss me?”

“Ma’am,” Johnny added with vaguely polite distaste.

“Ooh, I’m sorry,” Mike caroled. “D’you want me to shut the door? Guess it wouldn’t do to make everybody else listen to our happy reunion!”

“No,” Diana snapped, letting her hand fall away from her eyes. Her little smile was cold. “You’re a dangerously unstable man, Mr. Takemura. Some day you’ll use your fists on the wrong person and end up in jail, but until that happy day, the least I can do is make sure that I have *witnesses*. Leave the door open.”

“Yeah, you haven’t changed any,” Mike said, letting his arms drop. “So! Three guesses why we’re here, Princess Di!”

“My name is *Diana*,” Diana said. “*You* may call me Ms. Fontaine. If you must.”

“Hooooo,” Mike half-sang, drawing it out. He glanced over at Johnny and grinned. “*Miz Fontaine.*”

Johnny shrugged and turned to look out the open office door, keeping a vague sort of watch. Mike turned back to Diana. “Aw, c’mon, Miz Fontaine, aren’t you gonna guess why we’re here?”

“I haven’t heard from him,” Diana said coolly. She looked away from him, gazing at her computer monitor and hitting a few keys.

“Ahh, she *does* know!” Mike loped over and dropped into one of the two visitor’s chairs with a thud, propping his feet up on her desk. Diana rolled her eyes but didn’t bother protesting. “How’d you know, Miz Fontaine?”

“His parole officer called me when he missed their first scheduled meeting,” Diana said. Her smile was tight and cold and rimmed with the faintest traces of brown lipstick. Mike was privately of the opinion that that was kinda hot, in a cold kinda way. “As I am still technically his attorney of record.”

“Ooh, only technically?” Mike said, craning around to try and get a look at her computer screen. Diana immediately slapped her hand against the side of the monitor and turned it away, glaring at him frostily. “That mean you’re planning to ditch him as a client? Gosh, if you did, I could almost maybe not hate you!”

“No,” Diana said. “I’m not. Everyone in this country is entitled to fair representation, and that, sadly, includes you, Mr. Takemura. Tell me, why haven’t you been fired yet?”

That cut through the remains of his mocking good humor like a knife through butter, and Mike swung his legs down with a crash and leaned forward, bracing his palms on the edge of her desk. “‘Cause I’m *good* at what I do,” he said, plain and simple. “And it’s gonna take more than some lawyered-up ice princess filing a trumped-up brutality complaint with the Bureau to get me fired.”

“It was not ‘trumped-up,’” Diana snapped, her voice thin. “I have *photographs* of the bruises left by your assault, Mr. Takemura. Would you like to see them? They’re right here.” One hand darted below her desk and yanked an unseen filing cabinet open with a rumble and a bang. Diana stopped and waited.

“Nah,” Mike said, easing up a little. No sense getting thrown out just yet. “I remember. And only *you* could sit there and tell me he didn’t deserve what he got, lady. That and more.”

“On the contrary,” Diana slammed the filing cabinet shut again. “I managed to convince a jury of twelve upstanding citizens differently, Mr. Takemura. I’ll thank you not to forget that.”

“Yeah,” Mike said. “Yeah, Miz Fontaine. I’m not ever going to forget that. Trust me, I’m gonna remember that until my dyin’ fuckin’ day.”

One of Diana’s eyebrows arched upwards, perfectly. She’d done it to that jury back then, Mike remembered. Every time he’d testified to anything. He’d hated it then and he hated it now, and it burned in his gut like fire. “Is that a threat, Mr. Takemura?” Diana Fontaine asked, folding her hands neatly on the desk in front of her.

Over by the door, Johnny shifted and cleared his throat. Mike immediately sat back. “Nah,” he said, just barely managing to sound offhand about it. “Just statin’ a fact, Miz Fontaine.”

“Oh,” Diana Fontaine managed to pack enough disdain into that one syllable to make it detonate like a chunk of ice thrown off a freeway overpass. “A fact.

I see.” She paused, cocked her head to the side, and flashed him that cold little smile again. “Is there anything else, Mr. Takemura?”

Fuck, Mike thought in dismay. *How would Simon handle this shit?* “Have you heard from Cole Farraday since he was released on parole, Miz Fontaine?” he asked, trying to sound as neutral as possible.

“I already told you, I haven’t.”

“Yeah,” said Mike, summoning Simon with all his strength. “But I thought I’d give you one last chance to stop lying to me.”

Diana’s eyebrow twitched upwards again before she looked away, fiddling with the papers on her desk. “I’m not lying to you, Mr. Takemura,” she said evenly. “If Colonel Farraday—”

“Colonel Farraday,” Mike said, and snorted.

“If Colonel Farraday *should* get in touch with me, which seems unlikely at this point, you have my word that I will encourage him to turn himself in to the local authorities,” Diana Fontaine said, still shuffling her papers. “I could not, in good conscience, encourage him to turn himself in to *you*. I have absolutely no desire to see my client’s battered body turn up floating in the Atlantic.”

Mike turned around in his chair, looking back at Johnny. “Daaaaamn,” he said, stinging at the burn. “Was that slander? Or libel? Or whatever it is?”

“If you’d care to consult a lawyer on that matter, Mr. Takemura, I can give you the name of any number of attorneys who’d be glad to laugh in your face and charge you two hundred dollars for the consultation,” Diana said. “Now, if there’s nothing else?”

“Yeah, there’s something else.” Mike stood up, slowly, unfolding to his full height before planting both of his hands on Diana’s desk and looming towards her. Despite her self-possession Diana leaned back in her chair to get away from him, just a hint of nervousness sparking in her eyes. “Someone shot Simon in the gut two days ago,” Mike said softly. “I’m not gonna say that I know for sure it was your client, ’cause Simon’s still unconscious in the hospital, but you know what, I’m pretty sure, and I’m not gonna lie, that doesn’t make me too happy.”

The faint spark of nervousness in Diana Fontaine’s eyes bloomed and grew. “Step away from my desk immediately,” she said, her imperious voice uneven. “I *will* call security.”

“If I find out it *was* your client who shot him, Miz Fontaine, you better hope that your precious ‘local authorities’ catch up to him before I do,” Mike went on, not moving an inch. “And you know what? That’s a threat. In case you were wonderin’ or some shit.”

He was expecting her to be angry. Instead her face softened into uncertainty, the nervous glint in her eyes now full-fledged fear, and for a moment she stared up at him like she was about to dissolve into tears—then her face hardened again and she tore her eyes away from his, picking up the papers in front of her and tapping them briskly on the desk. “So noted,” she said. “I’ll be certain to inform

the authorities of your threat should my client turn up dead. We're done here, Mr. Takemura. Get out of my office before I call security."

Mike loomed for just a moment longer, then nodded. "Yeah, guess we're done for now." He straightened up and turned on his heel, beckoning to Johnny. "C'mon, Texas. You heard the lawyer."

"Ma'am," Johnny said again, and ambled out of Diana's office. Mike followed him, not looking back, and slammed the door behind himself hard enough to make the glass window in it tremble.

"She's lying," Johnny said, once they were a good forty feet down the hall.

"Shit, I know that, Texas," Mike said in exasperation, throwing up his hands. He was walking so fast he was nearly running headlong down the hallway. "She can't lie worth shit, and you'd think a lawyer would be good at that, I dunno. Trouble is, what am I gonna do to make her own up? Beat the shit out of her?"

"Never works like you'd think," said Johnny. "Hang on. Bathroom." Without another word he cut a sharp left and banged into one of the law firm's restrooms, leaving the door to flap on its hinges behind him.

Mike heaved out a sigh and flopped against the wall opposite the men's room, stuffing his hands in his pockets and taking an incurious look up and down the long, dull hallway. For the moment he was the only person in it, although he could hear the beehive-like sounds of a whole passel of lawyers working and talking and typing to either side of him. He stared down at the industrial gray carpeting and kicked at it absently.

A door to his left slammed open. Mike glanced that way, once, and then did a doubletake as Diana Fontaine stepped out of her office, her short blonde hair momentarily a halo in the sunlight above her white silk blouse. It was pretty enough that he momentarily forgot how mad he was at her. Momentarily.

She glanced at him, once, then strode down the hallway toward him, her eyes resolutely elsewhere. Just to be contrary, he watched her approach. She swept past him and kept going, and Mike turned to watch her go, appreciating the view, if nothing else—without looking back at him she tossed a small folded piece of paper over her shoulder. It fluttered to the ground not five feet from him, and then she rounded a corner and was gone.

Mike, slack-jawed, took a moment to process this before stepping over and picking up the note. It had been folded in quarters. He unfolded it with a flick of his thumb. 539-555-9182, it said, the numbers so hastily scrawled onto the tiny scrap of paper that they leaned to the right like they might fall over. *any day—after 9pm—before 11pm.*

The last line had been damn near carved into the paper, like she'd been bearing down on the pen as hard as she could. *PLEASE HELP ME.*

♦ 8: Johnny

Johnny washed his hands, not really thinking about anything. Ran them both through the short brush of his crewcut, leaving the short hair in front standing up in little wet spikes. The cool water felt good on his scalp. He'd half-expected to have to pull Mike off the lady, especially towards the end. He was glad it hadn't come to that.

Smacking his still-damp hands against his thighs, Johnny glanced at himself in the mirror. Yep. Still an ugly fuck. Just checking. His hands strayed up, checking both his gun and his cellphone, making minor readjustments to their respective clips until they rode at his belt just right again. Johnny nodded to himself, plucked at his shirt until the collar lay flat against the back of his neck, and left the bathroom.

"Okay," he said, banging the door open. Mike, leaning against the wall, jerked his head up like he was startled or something, yanking his hands out of his pockets. It didn't make sense. Johnny digested this. Filed it away.

"Shit, Texas," Mike said, his voice a little uneven and charged with manic energy. "Thought you'd drowned in there or something."

"Yeah?" Johnny asked. "Why didn't you come check on me?"

"Gross," said Mike, falling in behind him. "I don't wanna see your dick, man."

Johnny patted his shirt pocket, then fished out another toothpick, wishing, as he always did, that it was a cigarette instead. *Goddamn* but he missed smoking sometimes. Especially after days like today. "Why's that?" he asked, poking the toothpick into his mouth and biting down on it, hard. The slight mint bite wasn't a menthol, but it'd do him. "Don't wanna confirm that I'm hung better'n you?"

Behind him, Mike was silent for an interesting moment, then he whooped out a laugh. "Aw, shit, Texas, as if!" he cried, making lawyers poke their heads out again. Like prairie dogs. "Goddamn thing's probably as ugly and wrinkled as the rest of you!"

"Maybe," Johnny acknowledged. "Why you so interested? You want some?"

Mike made a gagging sound and caught up with him, nearly bounding along by his side. Johnny grinned around his toothpick and lengthened his stride to match.

After five or so manic minutes in the car, Mike's usually neverending stream of babble slowly tapered off to nothing. He just drove, slouched down in the driver's seat with one elbow jutting out of the window, scowling at the traffic in front of them. Johnny noted this, thought about it for a while, and then said, "What?"

"What?" Mike echoed, blinking like he'd just woken up. Johnny waited, patiently. Sure enough, after a moment Mike made a frustrated little gesture. "Nothing. Not sure. Still chasin' my thoughts. I don't want to talk about it just yet, in case I jinx it, you know?"

Johnny grunted—yeah, he knew—and then settled down to consider the morning, turning Mike's conversation with the lady over in his mind. It'd gone just about as well as he thought anyone could expect, in his opinion, although probably he should have stepped in before the end. Still, now they knew that Farraday had been in touch with his lawyer, who for some reason or other didn't want to admit it. Interesting.

"Hey," Mike said, nudging Johnny out of his thoughts. Johnny looked over at him. Mike hesitated, tapping his fingers against the steering wheel, and then said, "... don't tell Springheel, okay?"

Johnny was quiet for a long moment, not really liking that. It didn't bode well. Finally, he settled on grunting again, figuring that Mike was welcome to take it however he wanted.

"While I was waiting for you," Mike said, fishing around in his shirt pocket, "Princess Di came out of her office and went parading past me, right? So right as she goes past she throws this over her shoulder. Check it out." He pulled a scrap of paper from his pocket and passed it over.

Johnny unfolded it. Read it. Ran his thumb over the sharply indented letters of the last line. Turned the note over to study the indentations from that side. *Very* interesting. "Huh," he said. "You gonna call?"

"I don't know," Mike said, making a little frustrated gesture. "I mean, on the one hand, I am just curious as fuck now. But ... shit, what if she's just jerking me around here? What if I call and she turns around and nails me for harassment or some shit?"

Johnny ran his thumb over the paper again and thought about it. "Oughta tell Springheel," he finally said. "Get some boss clearance on it."

Mike wrinkled his nose and held out a hand for the scrap of paper. Johnny passed it over and watched as Mike stuffed it back into his shirt pocket. "I dunno," Mike said. "I mean, Princess Di hates my guts, man, it's gotta be a trap, right?"

Johnny shrugged. "Maybe." He was definitely not liking this trend now.

“Damn right it’s a trap,” Mike said, hunching his shoulders. “Bitch hates me *personal*.”

“Still oughta tell Springheel,” Johnny said. He’d chewed all the mint out of his toothpick, and he gave it one last ruminative gnawing before putting it in the ashtray. His mouth tasted vaguely of plywood now. It wasn’t unpleasant.

“Yeah . . .”

“She’s boss while Simon’s out.”

“Yeah, but . . .” Absently Mike slid the car into the left lane, in his distraction handling the car with unconscious grace. “Maybe she’s got enough shit to deal with right now, huh? I think I’m gonna think on it for a little before I tell her.”

And Johnny liked that least of all, so he waited a good five seconds before shrugging and settling back into his seat. “Your funeral.”

“Yeah,” Mike said absently.

Johnny could tell Mike wasn’t listening any more, so he shut his eyes against the noonday sun and fished out another toothpick. “We gonna eat?” he asked, biting into the wood, tasting mint, wanting a cigarette so goddamn bad.

“ . . . shit, yeah, I’m starving,” Mike said, perking right up. “You wanna hit a drivethrough or wait until we get back into town?”

Johnny made a face. “Back into town.”

And it wasn’t until after they’d had their lunch and gotten back into the car that Mike abruptly said, “Hey, Texas?”

Johnny grunted inquiringly, getting his seatbelt on. He suspected that he knew what was coming.

Mike proved him right not a moment later. “You think Princess Di might really be in danger or some shit?” Mike looked torn. “I mean, she’s his lawyer *and* she likes him all personal, you know, why’s he gonna hurt her?”

“ . . . you crazy?” Johnny squinted at Mike. “You work law and still gotta ask me that?”

“Yeah, I *know* how it is,” Mike said, slapping one hand against the steering wheel. “Not him, though. He’s not just some drunk asshole punchin’ up on his babymama, Texas! Likes himself too much control for that kind of domestic abuse shit.”

Johnny considered that, eventually conceding that Mike had a point. “Yeah,” he finally said. “Guy’s a real squirrel, though.”

“Yeah,” Mike said. He nearly moaned it. “Yeah, he is. Shit. Shit! What if I don’t call and he messes her up or something? I’d totally feel like shit for, uh, a minute? Maybe?”

Johnny shrugged. He didn’t have a ready answer for that.

“Goddammit, why’s Simon got to be all malingering?” Mike said, jutting out his lower jaw petulantly and tapping his fingers on the steering wheel. “Shit, he’d be all over this.”

“Oughta tell Springheel,” Johnny reiterated. “She’d be all over it too.”

“Yeah,” Mike said. He sounded uncertain, though. “Guess I oughta.” His hand strayed to his shirt pocket, the paper inside crackling faintly as he touched it. For just a moment he was quiet, plucking at the fabric of his shirt; then, with a snort, he let his hands drop to the steering wheel. “Fuck it,” he said dismissively, and started the car.

♦ 9: Nate

Nate sat in front of his computer, staring dully at the monitor and tapping the right arrow key. Onscreen, photographic images flickered by; he barely paid attention, save to listlessly mark any that showed the white or silver bulk of recreational vehicles. It was dull, boring, repetitive work, and wouldn't get much more interesting even after he'd finished marking the images and started comparing them.

Almost against his will his eyes stole left, surreptitiously studying the three hooded computers that sat powered off and useless in Rich's old lair. Not for the first time Nate felt a flare of useless anger directed at his old friend, his *ex*-friend, his—God, what a poor turn of phrase—his former 'partner in crime'. All the old case files from their first encounter with Farraday were somewhere on those three computers (assuming they had not been among the erased files). All the old border-crossing photos, just like these, only those had already been searched, winnowed, cross-indexed, and filed according to Rich's anal-retentive schematics. Everything that Rich had done three years ago Nate was having to painstakingly redo, from scratch, because Rich's old files (or what was left of them) were locked soundly behind a barricade of Rich's own paranoid build. And it was a barricade that Nate was no closer to breaching, even now, almost seven months later.

Nate's cheeks flushed red with anger, and just as quickly flushed red with embarrassment. He didn't *like* being angry at people. It made him uncomfortable. Flicking his eyes away from Rich's lair he settled back down with the photos, marking another white bulk with a tap of the space bar.

"How's it going?" Sandra said behind him, and Nate yelped and jerked in his chair. Sandra yelped a little herself, startled by his startlement. "... sorry."

Nate, still pink, glanced over his shoulder at Sandra. "It's going," he said, scooting his chair back into place. "I should be done with these by the end of the day, and I can move on to traffic tickets tomorrow."

Sandra nodded. "Sounds good." She patted him on the shoulder, two quick, light, hesitant pats, and moved away, heading back into Simon's office.

Nate watched her go for a second or two before turning back to his monitor. Sandra's question had distracted him from his momentary anger at Rich, which was good in one way and bad in another. It was good, because being angry at Rich would get him nowhere and accomplish him nothing, and it would only make the job of redoing all of Rich's old work over again even harder if he was doing it and burning with resentment at the same time.

It was *bad* because now that he didn't have that anger to distract him, he'd gone back to being terrified.

One of Nate's hands stole up to knot in the collar of his heavy white turtleneck sweater. Somehow he'd managed to completely block out the knowledge of Farraday's impending parole hearings, and even hearing that Farraday had won parole hadn't really scared him. Hearing that Farraday had *jumped* parole, though, that had given him a nasty little shock, and then he'd somehow dealt with it and moved on and spent two weeks not giving it a thought. And then someone had shot Simon in the building's own parking lot and left Nate paralyzed with terror.

It was ridiculous, really, he tried to tell himself. Farraday was just one little tinpot dictatorial psychopath, and in his four years with the Bureau Nate had dealt with so much worse—someone had tried to blow him up with a *satellite* once, for God's sake. Farraday didn't even compare with that. For one thing, satellites were somehow . . . classier. Cooler. More like an action movie than a slasher film.

Of course, the guy trying to blow him up with a satellite had been pretty impartial about it. And as much as Nate tried to tell himself that Farraday had also been impartial—had simply seized an opportunity as he saw it, without caring who that opportunity was—he'd never really believed it.

Sandra's voice drifted out of Simon's office, muted enough by the distance that it didn't make him jump this time. "Hey, Nate?"

"Yeah," Nate said, not bothering to look around. Pictures flicked by onscreen.

"Do me a favor?"

"What's that?"

"Before you leave tonight, go down to the firing range and put in one of your five hours for the month. Okay?"

He could hear the concern in Sandra's voice and it made him duck his head a little. "I'd been planning to," he said, truthfully. "I did an hour yesterday, too."

Behind him, Sandra was quiet, absorbing this. Nate knew how pitiful it was, really. Usually Simon had to chaff, poke, or outright nag him into doing his required five hours of target practice a month; now here he was, doing it without being prompted, sheerly out of fear. It wasn't that he didn't like the firing range, technically. He was somewhat awed by his constantly armed state, and shooting paper targets was absorbing enough, once he managed to make himself go down and get started. It was just that there were always better or more pressing things

to do than put in an hour of target practice, and it wasn't like he was often in the line of fire . . . it wasn't like he'd ever actually shot anyone.

Yeah. It wasn't like he'd ever actually shot anyone.

His eyes drifted to Rich's lair again. Used to be that he and Rich would go down there together and get it over with, an hour at a time. Rich was a way better shot than he was—always had been—and it had been humbling, if impressive, to watch his friend scowl at the paper target and then irritably pump fourteen bullets into the two inmost circles on the human outline, emptying his clip. Of course, this was a memory that had been pretty well tarnished by Rich trying to shoot *Simon*, but it was still part of his memory, and he still sort of liked that memory, even if it made him a little angry now.

All his good nostalgia was tainted by anger these days, and that, ironically enough, made him angrier at Rich. Rich had been so *selfish*, and ultimately, that's why Nate was here, looking at these photographs instead of using Rich's old, excellent algorithms: because Rich had been selfish, and now he was dead.

"Okay," Sandra finally said. Her voice had left 'concerned' and gone somewhere into 'outright pity'. It made Nate flush red with shame. He supposed he sort of deserved that pity, but it didn't do much to make him feel better. He hunched forward over the keys and waited until he was sure she was done talking to him.

He'd gone through and marked a few hundred more photographs before he heard the thudding of approaching feet from out in the hallway and Mike's whooping hyena-like laugh, and it knocked him out of his bout of self-pity if only out of self-preservation. He sat up and briskly rubbed his cheeks to make sure the flush was gone, then went back to his photos with a new determination.

The saferoom door boomed open. "Man," Mike proclaimed to the world at large, "if that lawyer lady ain't a *world-class* bitch."

"Any luck?" Nate asked, genuinely curious. He'd never met the lady in question, but he'd heard Mike talk about her. Well, possibly 'rant about her' would be more precise.

"Well, depends what you mean by 'luck', Specs," Mike said, wandering over to the conference table and dropping into a chair. Sandra poked her head out of Simon's office to listen. "On the one hand, she said that she hasn't heard from him since he broke parole."

"On the other hand," Johnny put in, "she's lyin'."

"Is she," Sandra said. It wasn't a question. Her voice was kind of . . . purring. It made Nate uncomfortable in weird ways.

"She sure is," Mike said. "Lyin' like a fuckin' rug. Man, you would think a lawyer would be better at that shit, you know?"

"Mm-hmm," said Sandra. "Still, she's not that much of a lawyer." She bit her thumbnail for a second, considering. "Maybe we ought to ask the Fredericksburg police to drive by her house a little more often, huh?"

“Yeah,” Mike said comfortably. “That sounds like a peachy-keen idea to me, boss lady.”

Sandra nodded. “I’ll give Upstairs a call here in a minute, bring him up to date on things. Anything else I need to know?”

Mike considered the question for a moment or two. “I’m hung like a horse?” he finally volunteered, beaming, and Nate’s cheeks went a little red. Johnny, who’d been watching Mike, looked away with a snort.

“Like a My Little Pony, maybe,” Sandra said dismissively, making Mike hoot. “Right. Keep it down, I’m calling Upstairs.” She vanished back into the depths of Simon’s office. Nate turned back to his computer.

“Border-crossing photos?” Johnny asked.

“Yeah,” Nate said with a little laugh. “Boring. Makes me wish I’d spent a little more time trying to tunnel into Rich’s old files.”

“Yeah,” Johnny said, turning around to eye Rich’s lair speculatively. “Sucks.”

“Totally,” Nate said. “Gotta be done, though.”

Johnny considered Rich’s computers for a minute, then looked back at Nate. “Gonna hit the range before I go home tonight,” he said. “Wanna come with?”

Nate ducked his head. “I was gonna,” he said. “I went yesterday, too.”

Johnny was silent, studying Nate through his slitted eyes. His offer didn’t have quite the same quality of pity that Sandra’s request had, but it still made Nate feel kind of small and ashamed, how they all felt the need to look after him all the time. Like he was the team’s pet or something, and for real, not just as part of the old ‘mascot’ joke.

Johnny turned on one heel and slapped his knuckles lightly against the back of Mike’s head. “You wanna come with, too?”

“Shit, wild horses couldn’t keep me away,” Mike proclaimed, punching blindly back over his shoulder and managing to hit Johnny’s hip a glancing blow. “I am gonna mentally put Princess Di’s face on every single damned target, swear to God.”

“Yeah,” Johnny said. “Me, I’m going squirrel-huntin’.” That made Mike laugh, for no reason that Nate could discern. “Whenever you’re done with that,” Johnny told Nate, ambling down to take his own seat. “No hurry.”

“Another hour or two,” Nate said absently, going back to the photos. Flick. Flick. Flick.

From inside Simon’s office, Sandra said, “*What?*” Her voice was sharp and incredulous, and it made Nate glance over his shoulder. “No, sir,” Sandra said, now actually breathless with shock. Mike sat up. “Sir, that’s not—that’s really not a—” and then Sandra fell abruptly silent, although Nate could still hear her breathing, fast and hard and angry, from all the way across the room. “Sir, I don’t recommend—”

Nate turned around in his chair, cocking an arm over the back of it, all the better to hear what was going on. “No, sir,” Sandra said, her voice heavy with

bitter resignation. “No, sir. No,” and Nate belatedly realized that all three of them were staring at the empty doorway to Simon’s office like hypnotized chickens.

◆ 10: Sandra

Between one thing and another, it was just not shaping up to be her day. Week. Whatever.

Thwarted yet again, Sandra sat back in Simon's chair and scowled at his computer, as if that would help matters at all. She wasn't exactly surprised that it required a password to access it; what *surprised* her was that Simon hadn't ignored Rich's near-constant infuriated rants on the matter and written his password down somewhere. (Simon's rather casual observance of computer security measures usually ended precisely where his own convenience began. No surprise there, Sandra thought. Simon's observance of *most* laws, rules, and social conventions tended to be on the casual side, interpreted for his convenience.)

It was always possible that he kept said password on a slip of paper in his *wallet*, in which case Sandra was out of luck until she got to the hospital this evening. Sandra sighed, kicked Simon's chair around, and started yanking the broken drawers open again, just in case she'd missed something. She was in the middle of squeezing files to the backs of their drawers when she heard Mike yowl in exaggerated pain out in the hall, announcing that the boys were done down at the firing range. Letting the files expand back into their natural spaces Sandra sat up and fetched her phone off its belt clip, checking the display on the cover. After seven already. It was funny how the days that actually *were* the longest always vanished before she noticed.

The door in the main room slammed open and the three of them blew in on a wave of noise, like they always did. Sandra stifled something that was half a smile and half a sigh and raised her voice. "Hey, Specs?"

"Oop, 'scuse me," she heard Nate say. He sounded almost cheerful, out of breath but happy; the sound made Sandra smile for real, although it didn't last long. Nate being *cheerful* again was a welcome return to normality. A moment later he popped up in the empty doorway, blinking at her owlishly. "What's up?"

Sandra reached out and tapped the password screen with one finger, her nail ticking crisply against the glass. "Can you do anything about this?"

Nate trotted in and leaned across Simon's desk, then sucked in a little breath. "Ooh," he said dubiously. Most of that near-cheer was gone, just like that, and Sandra felt the momentary urge to kick herself. "I doubt it," Nate finally admitted, rounding the desk (trailing a wave of sharp cordite stink in his wake) to look over Sandra's shoulder. "Not without the password. Rich set up all our security precautions..." He trailed off there. He didn't say it—this time—but Sandra could still supply the next part: *and Rich was a lot better at that stuff than I am.*

Sandra sighed and let Simon's computer shut itself down. "Never mind," she said. "Simon wakes up, I'll beat it out of him."

"Are you sure he didn't write it down somewhere?" Nate asked. "I mean, this is Simon we're talking about..."

Sandra bit down on her instinctive sarcastic response. "Yeah, that was my first thought, too. But if he did, I can't find it. And I've looked. Believe me."

"Oh." Nate shrank back and stood up, automatically backing off a couple of feet.

"Don't worry about it," Sandra said. "I can get the password from Simon later. It's not of critical importance."

Nate bit his lower lip, but he nodded. "Okay."

Sandra kicked the bent desk drawers shut, one after another. "How'd the shooting go?"

"I'm still terrible," Nate said with a little uncertain smile.

"He's lying," Mike yelled from the other room. "He's *mediocre*."

The little pause that followed this announcement ended abruptly with a thud and a yelp of pain. "He's decent," Johnny said tersely.

"Ow, yeah, decent, that's what I meant, Texas, dammit."

Sandra glanced out the open door, then rolled her eyes at Nate. He apparently hadn't been expecting it, because he ducked his head and stifled a little laugh behind one hand. "Got the border-crossing crap done?" Sandra asked.

"Yeah," Nate said. "I want to at least dump the traffic ticket stuff into a single database before I go home. It shouldn't take more than half an hour or so..."

"Sounds good." Sandra linked her fingers and stretched her arms up above her head, making her sweater ride up and her knuckles all crack. It felt good. It also made Nate go a little pink and look away, really fast. "Make sure someone walks you out, okay? If the rest of us are gone, call security."

Nate nodded, still staring blindly out the doorway. "I'll just, uh, go get started," he said, and scooted out of Simon's office just about as fast as he could go.

Barely ten minutes later, Sandra's cell phone rang. Sandra, who'd been checking the underside of Simon's keyboard on the off-chance that his password was written there, dropped the keyboard with a plasticky crash and grabbed her phone off its clip, flicking it open. "Sandra," she said tersely.

“Ms. Leone? This is Dr. Vacek, down at the hospital?”

All of a sudden the rest of the team might as well have been a hundred miles away. Sandra had ears for nothing but the phone. “Yes, doctor,” she said, suddenly a touch breathless. “What can I do for you?” *Simon’s dead!* some small and traitorous part of her mind wailed, and Sandra gritted her teeth against the irrational idea and how momentarily plausible it seemed.

“I, ah, I just wanted to let you know that Mr. Drake has regained consciousness.”

Sandra clutched at the edge of Simon’s desk, suddenly lightheaded with relief, that little voice banished into the void. In her ear the doctor was still speaking, her voice diffident. “And he’s . . .” Dr. Vacek paused. Sandra, who could easily supply the rest of that sentence, found herself wryly amused when the doctor settled for the diplomatic “. . . asking for you.”

“I’ll just bet he is,” Sandra said, shoving Simon’s chair back and leaping to her feet. “Tell him I’m on my way and to quit his bitching because no one cares.” Dr. Vacek was surprised into a faint snort of laughter at that, and Sandra couldn’t help but laugh a little herself, rounding the corner of Simon’s desk at a trot. “Tell him fifteen minutes. And don’t let him near anything he could theoretically throw, all right?”

Dr. Vacek said something else, but Sandra barely heard it, already slapping her phone shut. She burst into the main room only to discover it silent and tense with anticipation, all three of her teammates staring at her and waiting for the official word. “Simon’s awake,” she announced.

The tension burst like a popped balloon. Mike flung both hands into the air and bellowed a heartfelt war cry, and Nate slumped over the back of his chair like his spine had just dissolved, laughing a breathless and embarrassed laugh; the corner of Johnny’s mouth crooked up in half a grin, which was almost as demonstrative, for Johnny. Sandra pushed past Mike and swept up her purse, whipping it around herself and onto her shoulder. “I’m going to the hospital,” she said, shoving back past Mike and heading for the door, her heels beating a sharp tattoo on the bare floor. “Finish up what you’re doing and go home, and remember, no one is to go into the parking lot alone.”

“Wait!” Mike cried, slapping his own laptop shut and shoving his chair back. “Dammit, Sandy, wait up, I’ll walk you out!”

“Catch up,” Sandra said, throwing the words back over her shoulder, and she slammed out of the saferoom door before he could formulate a response.

She hit the hospital not ten minutes later, her stride so long and ferocious she was almost running. Weaving determinedly around the human obstacles littering her path, Sandra found the elevator and hit the ‘Up’ button with the heel of her hand, tapping her foot in her impatience. The elevator took forever to arrive, and she had to wait for a man in a wheelchair and his nurse to vacate it once it *did*

come, but fifteen seconds later she was riding to the sixth floor, her hand knotted tightly around the strap of her purse.

Dr. Vacek was waiting for her at the nurse's station. Sandra checked her stride only reluctantly. "How is he?"

"As well as can be expected," Dr. Vacek said guardedly, tapping her clipboard against the palm of her other hand. "He's weak but coherent, and can probably answer your questions now. Please keep it short, and try not to excite him unduly, all right?"

Sandra abruptly found herself very glad that Mike wasn't here, because she could hear his reaction to *that* request very clearly in her mind. "I'll try," she said instead. "I'm sure he's managed to excite himself a little anyway."

Dr. Vacek smiled slightly. "He *is* a bit . . . agitated."

"That's one word for it," Sandra said, rolling her eyes. "I'm afraid that he's just going to be like that until he manages to bully someone into letting him check himself out of the hospital. Simon doesn't take well to being sidelined."

Dr. Vacek's smile thinned and set. "We shall see," she said. "If he gets out of the hospital by Monday, he's lucky. He was in good physical shape before the shooting, so he's recovering well, but don't let him get his hopes up."

"Ha. As if I could prevent Simon from doing anything," Sandra said sourly. "Can I go see him now?"

"Go ahead," said the doctor, yielding. "Good luck."

"I'll need it," Sandra said over her shoulder, already moving away.

"*There* you are," Simon said, pretty much the instant the door swung shut behind Sandra. He sounded weak and peevish, but he was awake and indignant and, once again, Simon. More or less. "Took you long enough. Christ, I thought you'd gotten run over by a train or something."

Sandra stopped in the doorway and put her hands on her hips, surveying the human wreckage in the bed. Frankly, he looked terrible. The top half of the bed had been raised enough to prop him up, or he would certainly have been flat on his back bitching at the ceiling; he was a ghastly cheesy white in color, and his lips were cracked and pale, and his hair lay oddly flat and dull against his skull. There were still tubes stuck in his nose, and probably elsewhere, and an IV in his arm. All in all, he was the most beautiful thing Sandra had seen in days. "Good to see you *too*, boss," she said, relieved to discover that her voice was behaving itself.

"Fuck a whole bunch of pleasantries," Simon said, and coughed weakly, and went taut all over for a second before relaxing again. "Jesus, that hurts. Anyway. Get over here."

"Yeah, you're feeling better," Sandra said cheerfully, the lunatic urge to burst out laughing for sheer joy welling up in her throat. She swallowed it back and found the chair, dragging it over to Simon's bedside. "For the record, boss, if

I find out you've been harassing the doctors, I'm gonna come yank out your catheter."

"Stop reminding me about the tube up my dick, crazy bitch." Simon flapped his hand weakly at the half-empty glass of water on the tray next to the bed. "And give me that, will you?"

Sandra obligingly refilled the glass from the pitcher and handed it over, nudging the straw around until it pointed at Simon. "We don't have long," she said. "So I—"

Simon promptly interrupted her, resting the glass of water on his chest. "First thing I want to know: is everyone else okay?"

Sandra stopped, and realigned her mental processes, and started over. "Everyone's fine," she said. "We put a whole bunch of extra precautions into place, and Upstairs put a different team on the North thing so we'd be free to deal with this instead. Boss, before we get into that . . ."

"What?" Simon said irritably, taking another sip of his water. "Jesus, they took North away from us? We were this close!"

"I've been running on the assumption that it was Farraday who shot you, but I don't *know* that," Sandra said, ignoring that last part for now. "You're the only one who saw the guy's face. Was it Farraday?"

Simon was quiet for a moment, curling his lip at his water glass. "Yeah," he finally said. "Guy had his face covered and a watch cap on, but it was him. I'd recognize those fucking eyes anywhere, and there was a little bit of bleached hair all—" He coughed again and tensed up until the little coughing fit was over. "Wouldn't want to testify to it in a court of law," he said when he was done, breathless and drawn, "but . . . yeah."

Sandra heaved out a deep breath. "Okay," she said. "That means that everything we've done in the last three days hasn't been for nothing. Always good."

"Tell me what you've done," Simon commanded.

"I've been chasing down all the old aliases that Farraday and his harem used to use, putting out BOLOs, keeping an eye on incident reports, coordinating. Boss crap. Nate's trying to reconstruct all the stuff that Rich did during the first Farraday case," Sandra said. "He's still working on that. I sent Mike and Johnny down to brace Diana Fontaine, just in case—"

"Bitch," Simon muttered, fumbling the half-empty glass back onto the tray.

Sandra stumbled momentarily before she realized Simon wasn't referring to her. "—and they say that she claims not to have heard from Farraday, but that she's lying."

"*Bitch*," Simon repeated, this time with an undertone of venomous glee. "Send the Fredericksburg police around to keep an eye on her place."

"Already done," Sandra said.

Simon's acknowledging nod came just a beat too slowly. "Good," he said. "Tell me what else." Sandra hesitated, remembering Dr. Vacek's admonition not to let Simon get too excited. Simon caught on to her hesitation and poked her weakly in the shoulder. "Tell me what else," he repeated, making himself cough and tense again.

"... you have to promise not to get worked up," Sandra said, already knowing that it was going to do no good, but wanting to observe the formalities. "The doctor told me not to let you get too excited."

"I won't get worked up," Simon said irritably.

"You swear?" Sandra said, and put a hand on his shoulder, just in case.

"I swear!" Simon said, getting a little worked up already.

Sandra sighed and came out with it: "Upstairs is assigning us a replacement for Rich."

"*What?*" Despite the healing bullet wound in his chest and Sandra's restraining hand on his shoulder, Simon managed to bolt up off the bed a few inches; he went from nearly white to completely white and flopped back, gasping. "Ow, fuck," Simon said, wheezing and patting his chest with trembling fingers. "He can't... he can't *do* that!"

"Apparently he disagrees with you," Sandra said heavily. "Said a lot of things about how you've been putting this off for nearly six months now, and how we can't afford to be two team members down, especially now, so he's just going to pick the best-looking applicant out of that pile of applications you've been ignoring and assign him to us for you."

Simon stared at her in mute, baffled fury, one clawed hand trembling in midair. Finally, with a wave of his arms that was probably supposed to be grand and instead came out weak and floppy, Simon said, "*Fuck.*"

"Yeah," Sandra said in agreement, squeezing Simon's shoulder. "I don't like it either. For one thing, this is a bad time."

"And for another, that's *my* job," Simon said. "It's *my* team. Part of our original agreement was that I got to pick my own team members—Christ! Tell him fine, we'll accept this guy as an interim measure, but once I'm back on my feet I'm replacing him with someone more appropriate. Get me?" Once upon a time it would have been an impassioned speech; now it was thick and choked and it dropped to a painful whisper at the end.

"Hey, you don't have to convince *me*, I tried to talk him out of it," said Sandra. "I'll tell him, for all the good it'll do." She pinched her lips together and surveyed Simon. "You look like shit," she judged. "I think that's everything I needed to know. You should do some more drugs and get some sleep."

"It can wait another five minutes," Simon mumbled, gingerly patting his chest again. His eyes were half-shut, his eyelids rolling open and shut at random. "I drug myself to sleep when I'm this pissed off and I'll have nightmares."

“Guess so,” Sandra said. She stopped there and just looked at him for a moment.

Simon eventually noticed, rolling his head towards her. “What?” he muttered, trying to sound snappish.

Gingerly Sandra extended an arm across Simon’s shoulders, gripping his upper arm and giving him a half-assed hug. Shutting her eyes resulted in mild vertigo and she let her head fall forward onto Simon’s shoulder, which was disturbingly clammy and damp under the faded hospital gown. “I’m so fucking glad you’re still alive, boss,” she said, trying and failing to keep the tremble out of her voice.

Eventually Simon worked his free arm around her and awkwardly patted her back, returning the half-hug. “Yeah,” he said. He sounded exhausted. “Me too. I think.”

Sandra left her head down for a moment longer. The temptation to just *stay* that way was enormous . . . “Oh!” she said, her head flying back up. “Your password! I needed your password!”

“Pass—” Realization dawned. “In my wallet,” Simon croaked, flapping a hand at the little closet. “Behind my driver’s license. Steal my money and I cut you.”

“How’d I know you wrote it down somewhere?” Sandra said, disentangling herself and strenuously resisting the urge to kiss Simon’s forehead. “Rich would try to kill you all over again. I’ll get it. You get some sleep.”

“Yeah.” Simon ran one shaking hand up along the line of his IV to the button. “Christ.”

Sandra strode out of the hospital with her hand on the butt of her gun, just in case, feeling better than she had in days and just daring Farraday to show his ugly face. Farraday prudently declined to do so, and she made it to her car without incident.

Throwing herself behind the wheel Sandra hit the button to lock all the doors and backed her car out of the space, putting it in drive before fishing her cellphone out from under her sweater. She dialed one-handed, one eye on the glowing screen of her phone.

“Answering service,” a pleasant female voice said in her ear.

“Yeah, this is Sandra Leone, I’m calling for Jeremy Archer,” Sandra said, negotiating the last turn and guiding her car into the line at the exit. “Please tell him to call me as soon as possible.”

“Yes, ma’am. At the same number?”

“What? Yes, that’s fine.” The car ahead of her pulled up at the little guard-house, and Sandra groped for her purse. “Thank you,” she said distractedly, folding her phone closed.

She'd barely gotten out onto the road before the phone rang again. Sandra plucked it out of her lap and thumbed it open. "Sandra."

"Sandra," Jeremy said, noncommittally pleasant and English as ever. "You rang?"

"Simon's awake," Sandra said with no preamble. "Weak and pissed off at the universe, but he seems to be recovering."

There was a brief, taut pause and then Jeremy sighed out a relieved breath in her ear. "That's good to hear," he said, his voice warming. "Have you any idea when he'll be discharged?"

"Doctor was hinting Monday, but knowing Simon, I think he'll finagle it by Saturday, the idiot," Sandra said.

"That soon?" Jeremy said, startled.

"It's Simon." Sandra slowed and made a right, edging into traffic. "Have you *ever* known Simon to take no for an answer?"

After a moment, Jeremy laughed. "Ah, yes. I take your point. Thank you for letting me know—"

"I need you to do something for me," Sandra said, cutting him off.

Another pause, even more loaded than the last. "Anything," said Jeremy.

◆ 11: Mike

Mike let the restroom door swing shut as soon as he caught sight of Sandra approaching. She walked within five feet of his hiding place, assuming you could call a men's room a hiding place; personally, Mike thought it was kind of cheating, but he'd never been above taking the easy way out. Besides, you never knew when you might need to go all of a sudden, right?

He slouched against the wall until he could no longer hear the sharp click of her heels echoing down the hallway. One of the hospital elevators dinged in the distance. Mike stared at the wall and counted off twenty seconds, one-Mississippi, two-Mississippi, all the while picturing the elevator doors opening and closing. The guy in scrubs finished up at the urinal and went to wash his hands, glancing suspiciously at Mike every now and then. Mike beamed at him and waggled his fingers. The guy coughed and studiously ignored him after that.

Just to be safe (and just to be an ass to Mr. Scrubs) Mike counted off an extra ten seconds, then swung out of the restroom and headed up the hall. No need to ask which room had Simon in it: it had to be the room with Jazz sitting in a chair in front of it. That was kind of a dead giveaway, in Mike's expert opinion.

"Hey, Jazz," Mike said, rolling to a halt. "How's tricks?"

"Hey, Mike!" Jazz beamed at him, her round face splitting into a smile. "You just missed Sandy. I mean *just* missed her. You could probably catch her in the lobby, you wanted to."

"Nah, I'm not here for her," Mike said, hooking a thumb at Simon's door. "Doc says he gets only one visitor at a time." At least, he hoped so, since he had no actual intention of talking to Simon's doctors, but he thought it sounded plausible.

Apparently Jazz thought so too, because she waved at the door. "Go on, then, although if he's had his meds he's liable to be out cold."

"Hey, I'll take that risk," Mike said. He gave Jazz an absent high-five and let himself into the semi-darkness of Simon's room.

He was still standing in front of the closed door, blinking to let his eyes get used to the dimness, when Simon croaked, "Well, dammit, Sandy, make up your

mind, either stay or go.” Mike jerked and made a little noise. A vague white shape in the darkness shifted, the hospital bed creaking, and Simon sounded much more alert—and suspicious—when he said “. . . Sandy?”

Belatedly Mike realized how he was, you know, lurking all ominous-like, and decided he should probably identify himself before Simon started yelling for Jazz or trying to shoot him or something. “Uh. No, boss, it’s just me.”

“Mike,” Simon said, flopping back down. He sounded exasperated, and exhausted, and kind of let down by the lack of action. “My man. Ordinarily I’d be glad as hell to see you, but—whatever you want, make it quick.”

“Right.” Mike gingerly picked his way across to the chair, which he could just now barely see. “Uh. S’good to see you awake, boss. . .”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Simon, reaching out to thump Mike’s shoulder weakly. “Enough with the small talk, I’m on some serious drugs here and liable to . . . conk at any minute. What’s up?”

Mike touched the breast pocket of his shirt, making the scrap of paper inside crinkle. “Uh, long story short, boss, went to see Diana Fontaine this morning—”

“Bitch,” said Simon.

“Bitch,” Mike agreed, and continued with his story.

“—and I don’t know what I should *do*,” Mike finished, lacing his fingers together and squeezing until his fingertips throbbed.

On the bed, Simon was silent, save for the low rasp of his breathing. Mike was just starting to wonder if Simon hadn’t drifted off into a happy drug-time coma when Simon said, “Christ, Mike.” His voice was fuzzy.

“I *know*!” Mike said. “The bitch asks *me* for help—”

“Not that,” Simon said, interrupting. “Well, yes, that, that also deserves a ‘Christ, Mike’, but. . .” Simon stopped, wheezed in a breath, and went on. “Christ, Mike, why the fuck didn’t you tell Sandy?”

“Oh.” Mike unlaced his fingers and laced them together again. “I don’t know. I guess ‘cause she’s got enough to handle already?”

“So you’re just going to . . . to withhold what could possibly be, oh, I don’t know, the first real break she’s gotten on this case? Is that it?” Simon reached up and rubbed his face with a little sandpapery sound. “She’s my second-in-command for a *reason*!”

“Yeah, but—”

“Fuck your ‘but’,” Simon said, probably mostly out of habit.

Mike sniggered despite himself. “Quit gettin’ me all hot and bothered when you can’t do anything about it.”

Simon was silent.

“. . . boss?” Mike said.

“Uh. Sorry.” Simon’s voice was weaker now, starting to slur. “Just reminded me of this weird dream I had a couple of nights ago. Fucking drugs. Getting hard to think. Uh. Where was I?”

“Chewing me out,” Mike said.

“Oh. Right. She can *handle* it, Mike.” Simon paused, breathed, rallied. “And I don’t like you making these . . . these little executive decisions about what you are and aren’t going to . . . to tell the person you’re reporting to. For . . . for obvious reasons.”

“Yeah,” Mike said, abashed. “I, uh, I’ll tell her tomorrow.”

“Do that,” Simon said. It came out more like *do dat*. Rallying was apparently over. “S’ an order. Christ. So tired. Fuck off.”

Mike obediently kicked his chair back and stood up. “Right, boss. Sorry, boss.”

“S’ okay,” Simon slurred. It came out sounding more like *so gay*, and Mike couldn’t help but snicker. Simon didn’t ask what was so funny or anything, just lay there quietly, and after a moment made a thick snoring sound. Mike picked his way to the door, vaguely unsettled.

He drove himself home, deep in thought. It was shaping up to be a nice night and he drove with the windows cranked down, one hand on the wheel, one elbow cocked out over the door. Once home Mike pattered around opening the place up—he figured it’d take a better class of criminal than Farraday to get in through a third-story window without attracting some kind of attention—stripped down to his shorts and t-shirt, and nuked himself a frozen dinner, had it with a beer. It tasted like salty cardboard, but he wasn’t motivated to make anything better tonight.

It was close to nine when he finished eating and cleaning up after himself, not that he was paying any kind of attention to the time. The cool fall breeze occasionally rose, making the miniblinds shiver slightly, and Mike flicked off the lights and sprawled out in his favorite place on the floor, propping his feet up on the couch. Staring at the weird rosette patterns in the plaster on the ceiling always made him think better.

Instead he found himself not really thinking about anything. He scratched his belly absently, his t-shirt rucking up on his wrist. Images flickered through his mind and didn’t stick: Sandy, and how mad she was going to be at him tomorrow, and Simon all pale and weird and barely there in the hospital, and Sandy again just because, and Diana Fontaine’s face when she passed him in the hallway, all set and tense . . . Mike sighed and shoved a hand through his hair and rolled to his feet, going off in search of his phone.

“Fuckin’ terrible idea,” he told himself, flopping back down onto the carpet, phone in one hand, scrap of paper in the other. He glanced up at the clock on the DVD player, which told him it was 9:20. Good enough. He dialed the number

on the paper by the light of his phone's screen, and put his phone to his ear, and waited.

It barely rang once before someone grabbed it, the receiver clattering against something several times before someone—someone female—breathlessly said, “Hello?”

“You better not make me regret this,” Mike said, not bothering to be formal or anything.

From the other end of the phone, silence. Then whoever it was—Mike thought it *could* be Diana Fontaine, but he wouldn't swear to it—said, “Thank you for calling.”

“Hey, what can I say, I'm a sucker for a sob story.” Mike shut his eyes. “Or maybe I'm just curious. Hell, I got no clue which.”

“I need your help,” the woman said without any further ado. “I'm sorry about this morning but you don't understand, he's *crazy* . . .”

Mike barked out a startled laugh. “Wait, wait, shit, *I* don't understand he's crazy? Fuck, lady, I think *you're* the one that got that memo kind of late!”

She was silent for a moment. “Crazier, then,” she said, cool and precise, and for all that she was being most un-Diana-like in conceding his point, Mike was suddenly convinced that it *was* her. It was that goddamn cold lawyer voice that sold him on it. “He's not the same man he was when he went into prison, Mr. Takemura.”

“Yeah,” Mike said with some relish. “For one thing, I bet his asshole's hanging a little looser.”

“*Stop it*,” she said, her voice edgy. “Just . . . for God's sake, be serious. I'm asking for your help.”

“Sure,” said Mike. The breeze picked up and ruffled his hair, and he stared at the ceiling and listened to the sound of traffic down below. “See, though, you haven't said why I should *give* it to you.”

“What? But . . . it's your *job*, isn't it?” She honestly sounded taken aback. “And you . . . you want to catch the Colonel, don't you?”

“Well, shit, sure, I'd like that. Frankly, it gets me all kinds of hard just thinkin' about it. Buuuut . . .” Mike left it hanging there while he scratched his nose and got all comfy. “See, you're jerking me around. Right now, you are jerking me around, and it's not like I can't tell, 'cause I am a *master* of jerking people around.”

“What . . . what do you mean?” Faintly.

“You sound like you're reading from a goddamn script is what I mean,” Mike said. “Shit, everything you've said up until now sounds like you copied it down from some mystery novel somewhere.”

She was silent.

“See, I don't like you,” Mike told the silence, not rubbing it in, just getting it out there. “And I don't have reason one to trust you. Hell, I almost didn't call you

at all because I thought this was some kind of sneaky lawyer-type trap of yours, see? And shit, as far as I'm concerned you've already got one strike against you, so before I can actually find it in my noble fuckin' heart to do anything for you, you're going to have to make me believe you. So."

"...so," she echoed, whispering it. Mike figured he kinda liked that.

"Where are you?" Mike asked. "Right now. What's this number you gave me?"

"It..." She stopped and swallowed. When she started again, her voice was stronger. "It's a pay phone. Outside a gas station a couple of miles from my house. I... it's one of those pay phones that's mounted low, so that you can use it from your car. I'm sitting in my car."

"Okay," Mike said. "You realize I can check that shit easy as anything."

"I realize that," she said. "Are you going to?"

"Depends." Mike switched his phone to the other ear. "What's your name?"

"What? You know my name."

Mike bit back a laugh. "No, come on, I'm totally serious," he said. "What's your name?"

"...Diana Fontaine." She swallowed again. "He calls me Dia." She pronounced it *Dee-a*. Mike shut his eyes. "I used to think it was pretty," Diana Fontaine said, and made a queer strangled sobbing sound in Mike's ear.

"Aw, fuck, here come the waterworks," Mike said, mostly but not entirely unconcerned. "That shit doesn't work on me, you know."

"It's not a trih-hick," Diana sobbed, her voice thick. "Fuh-huck you."

Mike couldn't help but grin, just a little. "Aw, man, did the ice princess actually just lose her temper?"

Another sob. "Suh-sorry."

Mike didn't say anything, just listened to her snuffle and wheeze on the other end of the line. After a fairly short time she got herself back under control. "I'm sorry," she said again, sounding more collected.

"Hey, no skin off my dick," Mike said.

"You're a vulgar man, Mr. Takemura." She sounded like she was trying to sound disdainful, but as far as Mike could tell, it wasn't working for her right now.

"Fuck yeah I am, and would you quit calling me that? Mr. Takemura's my, uh, my dad. If we're going to be friends you might as well call me 'Mike'."

"Friends," Diana said with a ladylike little sniff. "That doesn't seem likely."

"Yeah, it doesn't. Hey, mind if I call you 'Dia'? It is kind of pretty."

She choked a little. "Yes I do mind!" she exclaimed, all one infuriated exclamation. "You have no right..." She broke off, abruptly.

"Sounds like you're of two minds about this whole 'help me' thing," Mike concluded into the silence. "Still got feelings for the squirrel, huh?"

"...yes," she admitted. "It's hard to... to forget what he used to be like..."

“Yeah, it is,” Mike said. “Trust me.”

“... but he’s *crazy* now,” she said, looping doggedly back to that. “I’m sitting at a pay phone because I’m afraid he’s... bugged my house, or something, and that just sounds *stupid* and *paranoid* and I hate it! I hate sounding like a, a bad movie! I hate having to ask you for help! I *hate* that he’s forced me into this!” She broke off again, this time breathing hard, and gritted out, “... sorry.”

“Naw, naw, don’t be sorry,” Mike told her. “See, that there? Is the kind of honesty I was looking for. I really don’t give a fuck what you think of me, long as you don’t lie to me. Okay?”

“I *hate* you,” Diana Fontaine said crisply. Mike burst out laughing. “No,” she said, raising her voice to be heard over him, “I really do, I hate you, I don’t know why I thought this was a good idea—”

“It’s not that!” Mike said, when he could. “Shit, lady, I tell you not to lie to me and right away you’re all ‘I hate you’, and that’s sure as hell honest!”

“I’m so glad you’re amused,” she said, as coolly as she could. Mike rubbed a hand over his face and made himself stop snickering. “... I really am afraid he’s bugged my phones,” Diana went on. “I don’t know how to check, but I know he’s had access to my home phone and cell phone, and it’s not hard to... to imagine that he got into my office somehow.”

“It’s possible,” Mike said, as diplomatically as he could. “He never was that kind of squirrel before, but there’s no ruling it out, I guess.”

“I know how it sounds,” Diana said despairingly. “It sounds like paranoia to me, and I’m the one who keeps thinking it. He just... he likes to tell me that he always knows what I’m thinking... it’s really *believable*...”

“Yeah, well, there’s that thing where he’s psychotic, remember?”

“I suppose. So... will you help me?”

Mike closed his eyes again and broke for a different part of the field. “If I hadn’t called tonight, how many nights would you have spent parked by that phone?”

“... what?”

“Hey, none of that, you heard me.”

“I... I want to say that I’d have waited as many nights as it took, but... I suppose I’d have given up on you after about... four or five.”

Mike grunted. “Well, shit, I guess that’s fair.”

“Will you *help* me,” Diana said, not making it a question this time.

“Guess it depends on what you want me to do,” said Mike. “I mean, shit, if you’re lookin’ for a white knight? Wrong on both counts.”

She was quiet for a moment. “I don’t know,” she finally said. “He drops by my house sometimes, but I never know when, or how long he’s going to stay, or anything...”

“Do you know where he goes when he isn’t there?” Mike asked.

“No.”

"And I bet you don't want me to come and camp out in your house until he comes by, either."

"Oh God no," Diana said. Mike could sort of picture the shudder.

"And you probably don't want me to call Witness Protection, not that they'd do much for you. Oh no, a mean nasty man whose only crime is breaking parole on a charge of smuggling a whole lot of cigarettes without tax stamps on them, oh no."

"I have a *life*!" she cried, startling him. "I'm not going to let him scare me away from my *life*!"

"But you're scared," Mike said.

She swallowed. "... yes."

"Okay, so ... now I know that. Tell you what. I'll give you my cell number, how's that? And if you think of something I *can* do for you, call me."

"All right," Diana Fontaine said, hopeless and beaten. "I just ... I don't want him to know that I had anything to do with it. I don't want him to *know*. He scares me."

"And you know what, he should, too." Mike gave her his cell number and listened to the faint scratch as she wrote it down. "Tell you what, I'll run your story by Sandy tomorrow, see if she has any ideas on what we can do for you—"

"*No!*" Diana cried, sounding honestly terrified. "Oh, God, you can't!"

Mike frowned and rolled up onto one elbow. "Why not?"

"I refuse to participate in an official investigation!" Her voice was spiraling into panic. "I refuse! I won't! I'm still his attorney of record—attorney-client privilege prevents—if you try and use this phone call against me I'll deny everything and—and file a harassment charge against you!"

"Jesus fucking Christ, lady," Mike said, now thoroughly taken aback. "I'm with the fucking FBI, that's about as official as you get! Maybe you should have thought of that before you started throwing notes, huh?"

"*I know that!*" It was almost a scream, and then she went quiet, gasping. "I know that," she said again. "I just thought ... I guess I thought that you were ..."

"You thought I was a loose fuckin' cannon," Mike said. The silence from the other end of the line proved it nicely, he thought. "You thought that just since I lost my temper that one time that I'd be willing to bend other rules just for you."

"... I suppose that's it." Very soft now, breaking. "I just ... I'm just so *scared*. Mike."

"Oh, don't even give me that shit," Mike said, just as disgusted with himself as he was with her. "You can't flirt me into this, *Diana*."

"Oh, God, what am I doing?" Diana said, very softly, and swallowed another sob. "This wuh-was a bad idea ..."

Mike rolled his eyes and flopped back out on the carpet. "Okay, look," he said briskly. "I am going to tell Sandy, okay? No buts. But I swear to you we're

not all flashing lights and sirens and shit. Seriously, we will keep your stuff on the down low.”

“Please don’t,” Diana said. Mike was confused until she added, “Please don’t tell her. Not yet. Just . . . give me . . . forty-eight hours. Okay? Please?”

“Why?”

“To give me time to . . . to decide what I want you to do,” Diana said. “I’ll call you. I will. If you haven’t heard from me by Saturday night, you can tell whoever you want.”

Mike snorted. “I hate to bust your bubble, lady, but we work Saturdays, so you’re not getting a free day and a half by hitting up the weekend.”

“I’m not working an angle!” For a moment she sounded outraged, which was better than sounding hopeless. “For God’s sake, *help* me!”

“You know what, fuck this,” Mike said, sitting up and crossing his legs. “You figure out what you want from me, you call me, but you can’t just jerk me around like this and expect me to hop! You think I’m some kind of crazy fistfightin’ baby-rapist, yo, I get that. Well, I and mine are also the fuckin’ *professionals*, and I’ll thank you to give me and mine a little fuckin’ credit for knowin’ how to do our damned jobs.”

“Nobody said you weren’t,” Diana said dully.

“You asked me for help and now you’re gonna have to trust me,” Mike said. “Argument over. Call me tomorrow night and I’ll tell you what’s going down.”

“I don’t know if I—”

“Don’t give me that shit. You said you were planning to sit in front of that phone for four or five days, well, looks like you already got the time budgeted.”

“All right.” *Now* she sounded truly beaten, enough to make Mike feel a pang of guilt. “I’ll call.”

“Awesome. I just love it when two people get on the same wavelength or whatever it is the new age twits say. G’night, Miz Fontaine.”

“Goodbye,” Diana Fontaine said, and the phone rattled in Mike’s ear briefly before it cut off.

Mike stared at his dead phone for a long moment and then slowly folded it away. “Well, shit,” he said to no one in particular.

◆ 12: Nate

[friday]

He could feel it when he walked in the door that morning: so much tension had vanished from the room's atmosphere overnight that he found it easier to breathe than he had in days. Even the little constant knot of terror that clutched at the back of his neck loosened, just a bit.

"Yo, Nate-man!" Mike sang from his spot at the table. His laptop was open and running but he didn't appear to be paying any attention to it. "How's tricks?"

"Good," Nate said, a little startled to realize that he meant it. "Tricks are good."

Mike's expression altered on the instant, into a sort of cagy eagerness. "You like tricks, huh?"

Nate drew back half a step. He was still trying to figure out how to extricate himself from this sudden (but not unusual) conversational pitfall when Johnny sighed and slithered down in his chair, kicking Mike under the table. Mike yelped. "Too early for that shit," Johnny said, sliding back up.

"Aw, man, Texas, why you wanna go and bust my balls, huh?" Mike asked plaintively, resting his chin on the table so that he could reach down and rub his injured leg.

"Didn't bust your balls," Johnny said. "Busted your shin. *Could* bust your balls, you want me to."

"That's okay!" Mike cried, kicking his chair back about a foot (with a screech) to remove himself from range. "Really! I don't need any kind of demonstration!"

Sandra appeared from Simon's office, carrying a handful of papers. "Sometimes I think you do," she said absently, crossing to the door. "Hey, Specs."

"Hey, Sandy," Nate said. "We meeting now?"

"Pretty much now," said Sandra, opening the saferoom door and leaning out to stuff her handful of paper into the outbox. Nate accordingly didn't turn on his own computer, but made his way over to the table and sat down in his usual spot. Mike scooted back into place.

The saferoom door swung ponderously closed again. Sandra caught it at the last moment and eased it shut with a puff of displaced air and a click, then headed for the table herself. "Right," she said, taking Simon's chair. "First things first: you all know that Simon woke up last night. He seems pretty lucid and his doctor says that by now it's just a question of recovery, so barring some kind of freak accident, I'd say he's out of the woods. Doctor hinted that Simon could get released as early as Monday—"

"—so he's going to bitch his way out of the hospital by tomorrow," Mike finished for her, brightly.

"Probably," Sandra acknowledged. "Arrangements for his care are being made as we speak. Upstairs has decreed that he's not to come back on the clock for another week or so and is restricted to base for two weeks after that, so I'm afraid we've got a bit of a battle on our hands." She paused and rubbed her eyes with one hand. "I'm sure we'll see him Monday, no matter what. I want you guys to act normal, but nobody argues with me when I start telling him to go home, okay? You don't have to back me up. Just stay out of it."

"Okay," Nate said.

"Good," Sandra said, just as if Nate had answered for all three of them. "Next." She stopped, took a quick breath, shut her eyes, and said, "Simon did, in fact, positively ID the shooter as Farraday." The little knot in the back of Nate's neck immediately tensed back up, and he hunched down in his chair, uncomfortably aware of people's eyes flicking towards him. "Not that there was really any doubt about it," Sandra went on, "but now it's official."

Mike heaved out a long breath and slumped down in his chair. "Sheeee-it," he said. "Don't know if that makes me happy or not."

"Yeah," said Nate. He bent his head to the side and rubbed the back of his neck. "At least we haven't been wasting our time," he added, weakly.

"Yeah, that's something," Mike said. "Still, kinda wish it'd been, uh, anyone else at all, you know?"

"I know," Nate said, trying to smile and failing.

"Yeah," Johnny said. "House calls?"

"Sounds like the logical next step," Sandra said. "I want you two to handle that."

"Already on it," Mike said, patting his open laptop. It beeped at him and he yanked his hand back with an involuntary grimace. "I've been looking up current numbers and shit for all his old girlfriends. Should have 'em all in another half an hour or so."

"Good," Sandra said, after a glance in Mike's direction that looked pretty startled. "Great. If there are any within an hour's drive, go see them in person. After all, we know he's in the area, so those are the people he's mostly likely to have dropped in on."

"Will do," said Mike.

"Think there's one in Annapolis," Johnny said. "Used to be, anyway."

"Ohhh, yeah, definitely, couldn't forget her." Mike leaned forward, poking at the keys. "Hadn't gotten to the W's yet... yeah, there she is, Amanda Winston."

Sandra winced. "That's the one—"

"—yeah," Johnny said.

"Good," Sandra decreed. "If she's still there, go see her."

"Yes'm!" Mike said.

Sandra turned to Nate. "Nate, you were going to get the traffic tickets done today?"

Nate nodded. "I should have those winnowed by lunch, and then I'll spend the afternoon starting the gas station receipts. That's going to take, um, approximately forever."

"Yeah. Well, it's got to be done." Sandra glanced at Rich's lair and made an exasperated face. Funny how everyone seemed to be doing that these days. "Okay, next thing: I suspect that this new computer jockey that Upstairs is foisting off on us will be arriving on Monday." Mike made a little 'tch' sound under his breath and looked away, folding his arms across his chest. Sandra glanced at him, then shrugged. "I don't like it either," she said. "Neither does Simon. I can't say how things are going to shake out for sure, but Simon told me to tell Upstairs that we'd accept him solely as an interim measure."

"So he's not sticking around?" Mike said, looking back at Sandra. Nate could hear that same cagy eagerness in his voice. Despite everything, Nate couldn't help but feel a brief stab of pity for the incoming interloper.

"Probably not," Sandra said. "Officially, you know, I have to tell you to behave yourselves and make him welcome."

"Course we will," Johnny said.

"Oh yeah," Mike agreed, twisting out a thoroughly evil little grin. "He is gonna feel *aaaaall* kinds of welcome." Nate resisted the urge to scoot his chair away.

Sandra ignored that. "I'm going to assign him to work on Rich's computers full-time," she said briskly. Nate twitched, startled. "It'll keep him the hell out of our hair while we chase down Farraday, and if by some miracle he *does* manage to bust through Rich's security wall, well, it can only help us. Nate, is that going to be a problem for you?"

"I... don't like it," Nate said carefully, "but I don't have time to work on it any more right now, so he might as well."

Sandra went quiet and looked at him for a moment, then shook her head. "I'm sorry. Believe me, if I had a better idea, I'd take it."

"No, really, it's okay." Nate pushed up his glasses. They immediately began to slip back down. "I mostly just wanted to be the one to break it for, um, personal reasons. Pride. You know."

“Awww, man, that’s cute,” Mike said, snickering. “Specs wants to flex his geek dick!”

Nate could feel himself starting to go red. “I-I don’t!” he squeaked. “It’s not like *that*!”

“Nah,” Johnny said. Nate looked at him in mute and flushed gratitude, which vanished abruptly when Johnny flicked his chewed-up toothpick out of his mouth and added, “Wants to measure his geek dick against Specs Two’s.”

Nate immediately found himself extremely interested in his clasped hands, sweat breaking out around his hairline. “S-sort of?” he said, unintentionally making a question out of it. “I mean, he . . . he was really *good* . . .” Mike was already hooting, though, and Nate stumbled to an embarrassed halt and ducked his head.

“Guys,” Sandra said chidingly, although she also sounded pretty amused, for which Nate couldn’t totally blame her. “Anyway, we all know Rich was some kind of vicious biting computer savant—I hear IT basically gave up on breaking the encryption on their copies—so I’m betting that his computers will keep the new guy baffled and busy until Simon has the chance to get rid of him for good. You’ll probably still have your chance to, uh, be the one to break the code.”

“It’s okay,” Nate said, his voice barely louder than a whisper.

Sandra gave him one last sharp look, then nodded. “Anything else I ought to know?” she asked, looking around. No one said anything. “Okay,” Sandra said. “Let’s get to work, then. I’ll be in Simon’s office doing the liaising if you need me. Got his password.” She paused. “He had it written down and stuck in his wallet.”

It startled Nate into a laugh, and he reddened again as everyone looked at him. “I knew he had to have it written down *somewhere*,” he said in explanation.

“That’s Simon for you. Let’s do this,” Sandra said, and pushed Simon’s chair back with a screech.

◆ 13: Johnny

Sandra disappeared into Simon's office. Mike went back to his laptop, hunching forward over the keys the way he did, scowling at the screen. Nate pushed his chair back and went over to his desk, turning on his own computer. Within minutes he was staring at a screen full of text, oblivious to the world.

Johnny sat where he was for a minute longer, chewing on his toothpick, considering the far wall, and sorting through all the thoughts that were backed up waiting to be thought. The sound of typing came from all around him. Johnny frowned a little and unfolded his arms, leaning forward to scrub his hands against his thighs.

"I'll split this list up soon as I'm done," Mike said, not taking his eyes off the screen. "Spend the morning doing calls and go see Winston after lunch?"

Johnny grunted in acknowledgment and stood up, shaking the vague stiffness out of his arms. Something was missing—the coffeemaker wasn't on, that was it. Johnny filched the pot out of the machine and left the room, carrying it down to the first floor kitchen to fill it.

The community coffeemaker (much larger than the petite 'Mrs. Simon Drake (♥)' and the center of the floor's social life, such as it was) was making ominous little rumbling and burbling noises when Johnny backed in. Ignoring both it and whoever it was that was bent over rummaging around in the fridge, Johnny went to the sink and rinsed out the glass pot, watching the water swirl around inside and not really thinking about much.

The fridge closed. Trent Doherty—a.k.a. Sandra's favorite guy ever, Team Hall's tech guy, Bobcat—blinked. "Hey, Texas," he said uneasily. "What's up?"

"Not much," Johnny said, dumping out the rinse water and refilling the pot.

Bobcat glanced at the door, then looked back at Texas, running his tongue along his lower lip. Nervous habit of his. "Any word on Templar's condition?"

Johnny swiped his hand over the outside of the pot, collecting stray droplets. Flicked the water off his palm into the sink. "Recuperating," he said. "Probably be out of the hospital by Monday."

Bobcat shut his eyes, briefly. "Good to hear," he said, and although he still didn't sound too comfortable he did sound relieved. "So, uh, have a good one," he added, heading for the door. "Tell everybody I said hello."

Johnny grunted, not turning around to watch him go. The door shut behind Bobcat, and *then* Johnny glanced over his shoulder at the door. Poor guy. Transparent as window glass. Johnny snorted out a laugh and filched a donut hole out of the box that someone had abandoned on the counter, popping it into his mouth before he picked up the pot and carried it back to the saferoom.

Nothing had changed when he opened the door. Everybody was still staring at one computer or another. Nobody was talking. Johnny carried the pot back to the machine, poured the water into the top, and dug the can of coffee out from underneath. "Bobcat says hi," he said, dumping a scoop of coffee into a filter.

Mike snorted. "Bobcat says hi to Sandy, you mean." From inside Simon's office, Sandra made a little gagging sound.

Johnny shrugged one shoulder, shut the coffeemaker up, and started it. "Just passing it on," he said. "Asked about Templar, too."

"He has manners now?" Nate said. "Amazing!"

"Nah," said Johnny. "Just afraid for his own skin."

"Probably!" Mike said. "Man, everybody's been treating us like lepers since Simon got his ass shot. What, are gunshot wounds contagious now? Did I miss some kinda memo?"

"They just don't know what to say to us," Sandra said, raising her voice to be heard out in the main room. "People around here aren't really good with sympathy, you know?"

Nate nodded. "I never know what to say either," he said, pushing his glasses back up again. "I mean, everything I think of always sounds so . . . lame. Like I'm not taking it seriously enough."

"Hey, Texas, I'm just about done over here," Mike said, changing the subject. "Fire up your laptop so's I can send you your half of the list."

Johnny grunted and abandoned the coffeemaker in favor of his battered laptop bag.

"Yes'm, thank you for your time," Johnny said for the twenty-fourth time, hitting the call cancel button.

Every phone call was shaping up to be the same. Well, no, not the same, but the important part was always the same. No, the person on the other end of the line said. They hadn't seen or heard from Cole Farraday since he went to prison three years ago.

Most of the time the person on the other end of the line was female, since Farraday had always liked his women. And about half the time when they said no, he hadn't been in touch, they said it with a certain amount of relief. Johnny could understand that. Farraday had that kind of weird hypnotic charm that palled

pretty fast when he wasn't around to reinforce it all the time, and a lot of his former girlfriends sounded pretty embarrassed about having been fooled by him back in the day. They probably weren't any smarter now, but they thought they were, and sometimes that amounted to the same thing.

Some of the others sounded upset about not having heard from him, which Johnny marked down to how some people just never learned their lesson. Some of them sounded downright afraid, and those Johnny hastened to assure that they were doing everything they could. And a couple of them got mad, one at Farraday and one at Johnny, which was at least interesting, if not helpful.

Johnny gave them all his number, though. Probably half of them didn't even write it down, but he had to try.

Still, the picture was clear: wherever Farraday was and whatever he was doing, he'd made a pretty clean break with his past. Johnny couldn't be sure, of course, but he was reasonably certain that none of Farraday's ladies had been lying to him. At least, not as plainly as Diana Fontaine had. And that told him something else, too. Farraday was sticking close, and he was occupied with something that he thought was more important than reestablishing ties.

Johnny put his phone back in its belt clip and pulled out his gun instead, examining it thoughtfully. Farraday was sticking close, after all, and Annapolis was even closer than Fredericksburg.

He ejected the magazine, checked it, slotted it back in, and went ahead and racked the slide to load the first round into the chamber. Usually he didn't carry with a round in the chamber, but . . . Mike glanced up, took this in, nodded, and went back to his phone call. Johnny nodded, too, mostly to himself, and slid his pistol back into its holster after double-checking the safety.

"Trouble?" Nate asked, his voice a little raspy with nerves.

"Maybe," Johnny said, glancing back over his shoulder. "Doubt it, but . . ." He shook his head slightly, indicating his current case of the heebie-jeebies.

"Yeah," Mike said, folding up his phone and putting it away, pulling out his own gun and sighting along the barrel. "Nobody's heard nothin'. Farraday's lying low."

"'Cept for the lawyer lady," Johnny said, watching Mike. "And she's close by."

"And Winston's place is *awfully* equally convenient to the city, isn't it," Mike concluded, putting his gun away. "You done, Texas?"

"Yeah," said Johnny. "You want, we can run grab lunch, head on out."

Mike shut his laptop. "Hey, Spring?" he called. "Texas and I are thinkin' about lunch!"

"Go ahead," Sandra called back. "Going out to Annapolis right after?"

"That's the plan!" Mike said.

There was a pause. Sandra appeared in the doorway, one hand resting on the door's frame right by where a hinge used to be. "Be careful," she said.

“Careful as a nun at a death-metal concert,” Mike said cheerfully. “But first, lunch. You two wanna come with?”

“Cafeteria for me today,” Sandra said. “Too much to do to waste time leaving the building.”

Nate shook his head. “I want to finish this up before I eat,” he said, reaching up to tap his monitor. “I’ll probably just hit the cafeteria too.”

“Suit yourselves,” Mike said, stretching his arms up over his head before bounding to his feet. “C’mon, Texas. Let’s go feed the beast.”

“That a metaphor for something?” Johnny asked, pushing his chair back and standing up.

It was cool in the shade but warm in the sun, just before noon. Johnny thought about stopping by his truck and grabbing his sunglasses and decided not to all in the same mental breath, swinging into Mike’s car and settling in instead. Mike started the car and pulled out of his spot, heading for the gate. “Wanna meatball sammich,” he said contentedly, making it more of a suggestion than a question.

“Sure,” said Johnny, getting comfortable, chewing on a toothpick, biding his time.

They talked about nothing much on the way to lunch, about nothing at all while actually stuffing their food into their mouths, and about nothing much on the way back to the car. Johnny waited until Mike had the car comfortably stretched out on US 50 to flick the remains of his latest toothpick out of his mouth and say, “Didn’t tell Sandy about the note, huh.”

Mike ducked his head like Johnny had just beaned him with something, confirming it. “Nah,” he said, laughing a little, trying to sound unconcerned. “I wanna run some things down first, give it to her all as a nice little package, you know?”

Johnny grunted and settled back, thinking this over while he replaced the toothpick. “Kinda things?”

“Oh, you know—” Mike flapped one hand in mid-air “—get Nate to check out where that number actually goes to, see if Farraday’s in Annapolis, that kind of thing.”

“Gonna call first, too?”

Mike was abruptly silent, squinting out at the traffic.

“Shit,” Johnny said, not really surprised, “you called already.”

“... maybe,” Mike admitted.

“Maybe,” Johnny echoed. He snorted. “Maybe...”

“Well, shit, Texas, she made it seem kinda *pressing*, what with that ‘please help me’ shit.”

“Guess it wasn’t a lawyer-type trap after all, then,” Johnny said.

Mike shrugged a little. “Guess it could still be some kinda really complicated one. Anyway, she *sounds* on the level.”

“Yeah?”

“Actually, she sounds pretty fuckin’ terrified,” Mike said. “Told me Farraday was, get this, crazy.”

Johnny snorted. “Shit, finally figured out what the rest of us already knew, huh.”

“Guess so.” Mike was quiet for a moment, shifting lanes, and then just blurted it out all of a sudden. Like he did. “The big problem is that she’s still his attorney of record,” he said. “And she’s too scared of him to ditch him as a client and tip him off, so she can’t officially get involved in the investigation because he’s her *client* . . .”

“That’s bullshit,” Johnny opined. “Since when have we done things all official?”

“That’s what *I* said!” Mike thumped on the steering wheel in frustration. “Shit, though, Texas, you oughta hear her, she’s freakin’.”

“Bet she is,” Johnny said.

“She wanted me to give her a day or two to think about what to do,” Mike said, chewing on his lower lip. “I told her I wasn’t gonna.”

“Then you did.”

Mike scowled. “I still got time.”

Johnny paused and thought about it. “Problem is, you’re makin’ this my business,” he finally said, carefully. “I don’t wanna be a part of keeping secrets from Sandy.”

“I *know*,” Mike said, hunching his shoulders further. “I just . . . well, shit, Texas, you shoulda heard her. If we push her too hard, she’s just gonna clam up, maybe file a harassment complaint on me anyway.”

“Tell Sandy that part,” Johnny said. “She’s not gonna fuck this up.”

“Yeah, I know,” Mike said, subsiding. “But fuck, I wish Simon was around, I trust his instincts on stuff like this, you know?”

Johnny didn’t much care for that, but he figured that he’d said his piece, so he shut up, all the better to let Mike think about what he’d said. Shelving the problem Johnny turned his attention to other, more pressing concerns, tugging absently on his lower lip as he thought.

They rode the rest of the way into Annapolis in a comfortable near-silence broken only by the tapping of Mike’s fingers on the steering wheel. Amanda Winston still lived in the same comfortable but anonymous little townhouse she’d always lived in. The complex was located near nothing interesting at all, which in Johnny’s opinion was pretty damned hard to do in Annapolis.

Mike parked the car a fair distance away, just to be safe. They both sat back in their seats, studying the face of the Winston place in the distance. “How you wanna play this?” Mike said.

“Cell up and I’ll go ’round back, keep an eye on the back way,” Johnny said. “You go up front and knock.”

“Right,” said Mike. “You wanna call me? I’m running low on minutes.”

“Shit, bet you are, wonder why,” Johnny said, fishing for his phone. Mike made a rude noise and did the same.

Johnny hit the shortcut for Mike’s cell number—**honda**, it was labeled, because his phone wanted him to jump through hoops to make capital letters and Johnny didn’t give that much of a shit—and made Mike’s phone hum in his hand. Mike flicked it open, establishing the connection. “Sweet,” Mike said. “Let’s do this.”

Johnny nodded and stepped out of the car, right hand resting on the butt of his holstered gun, left hand holding the cell phone loosely against his ear. He could hear Mike breathing twice, which was interesting, and then he shut the car door and could only hear him once.

He loped around the end of the row of townhouses and slowed to a walk. None of them had actual backyards, just little plots of grass leading up to concrete patios and sliding glass doors on one side and down to the sidewalk on the other; on the other side of the sidewalk there was a patch of scrubby pine trees. Johnny slid into these, twigs cracking under the soles of his shoes. “Fuckin’ townhomes,” he said.

“I hear you,” Mike said. “You in position?”

“Good as I’m gonna get,” Johnny said. He shifted, making sure he could see the back of Amanda Winston’s townhouse and its glass door. “Go on.”

“Going,” Mike said, the car door opening and shutting again in Johnny’s ear. Johnny checked his gun, making sure it was riding loose in its holster, and listened to the thump of Mike’s footsteps and the soft blowing of his breath. Mike jogged up the front steps (Johnny could hear the sudden thump-thump-thump) and said, “Here goes.”

Johnny squinted against the sun and listened, his eyes alert for any shifting going on behind those windows. He heard Mike knock, and whistle out a tuneless phrase, and mutter “C’mon,” and then there was the click of a lock and the squeak of hinges. “Yes?” a woman said, her voice neutral but cautious.

“Miz Winston,” Mike said, suddenly all polite. He could pull that on you, if he wanted to, and if he didn’t like you very much. “My name’s Mike Takemura, I don’t know if you remember me—”

“I remember you,” Johnny heard Amanda Winston say unhappily, as clearly as if she were the one holding Mike’s phone. “What’s he done this time?”

◆ 14: Mike

“Suppose you’d best come on in,” Amanda eventually said, shuffling back a step and holding the door open. She didn’t sound happy to see him, but Mike figured that was just about par for the course. None of Farraday’s ladies liked him all that much, it seemed.

“Thanks,” Mike said, and did so. It was like stepping into a time warp: as far as he could tell, nothing had changed in the past three years and some-odd months, neither the townhouse nor Amanda. *Deja screw*, Mike thought, the idea rising unbidden into the back of his mind. *The weird feeling that somehow, somewhere, this woman has fucked you over once before.*

Amanda shut the door and relocked it, putting on the chain by rote. “He’s not here,” she said dully. “I suppose you might as well go ahead and check for yourself, though. You will anyway.”

“Hey, I appreciate it!” Mike promptly opened the little hall closet, poking his head in. Amanda waited behind him, eyes drooping half-shut, arms crossed loosely over her chest, not so much patient as resigned to the hassle. Ignoring her was easy *and* fun. Keeping one hand prudently close to his shoulder holster Mike wandered through the little first floor of the townhouse with Amanda trailing in his wake, poking his head into the various rooms. On his belt his open cellphone rode uneasily in its clip, broadcasting to Johnny.

“You can check upstairs too,” Amanda said once Mike reached the tiny dining room attached to the kitchen. “But he’s not up there.”

“Yeah, I kinda figured, but I gotta be thorough, right?” A random prickish impulse made Mike check both the fridge and the miniscule pantry before he went back into the dining room and the sliding glass door there. He caught the cord of the vertical blinds and tugged them open.

Amanda showed a reaction for the first time, dropping her arms and blinking. “What are you doing?” she asked.

“Letting my partner in,” Mike said, poking at the glass door until it rumbled open. He reached down and unsnapped his phone, bringing it to his ear. “C’mon in, Texas,” he said, and then snapped the phone shut, disconnecting the call.

Ten yards away Johnny stepped out of a little stand of ugly trees and crossed what passed for Amanda Winston's backyard at a lope, stopping on her back porch to open the storage closet there and check it before joining them inside. "Wanna go check upstairs for me, Texas?" Mike asked, closing the sliding door behind Johnny. "I gotta talk to the lady."

"Right," Johnny said. He nodded to Amanda, stepping past her, heading for the front room. "Ma'am."

Amanda Winston turned to watch him go, her arms crossed protectively over her chest. Once Johnny's thumping footsteps had retreated up the stairs, Mike turned to her and said, "Wanna sit in here, or in the front room? Either's fine."

"Front room, I guess," she said listlessly, picking her way back out into the main room. The couch in here was an ugly green tweedy affair, shaped like a capital L; it hadn't been comfortable three years ago and it hadn't gotten any better with age. Amanda plopped down at one end of the L and tucked her bare feet up under herself, picking a throw pillow up off the couch and hugging it to her chest.

Mike sat down at the other end, gingerly wedging his knees into the smallish space between the couch and the coffee table it bent around. "So!" he said brightly, only half-listening to the muffled thump of Johnny's footsteps from above. "Guess you kinda figured out why we're here, huh?"

"The colonel," Amanda Winston said, not looking at him. "I guess he must be out and you want to know if he's gotten in touch with me. Well, he hasn't."

"Not at all? Not even back when he was still in prison?" Mike leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees.

"No," Amanda said. After a brief hesitation, she added, "Well, I went out to the jail to see him once, right after."

"Yeah?" said Mike, who'd known that already.

Amanda nodded and pursed her lips. "He seemed okay but he told me I shouldn't ought to come back. Said he didn't want to be seen like that, all locked up."

"Ever go back after that? You know, anyway?"

Amanda glanced at him, her brow furrowed in disbelief. "He told me not to," she said, patiently, like Mike was some kind of idiot.

"And he hasn't come to see you or called you or *anything* since he got released?" Mike shook his head. "That's a damn shame."

"Don't know why you care," Amanda said, looking back down.

Mike shrugged. "Well, I mostly don't, but it kinda burns me that he's got no manners. He could at least come say hi to the lady who saved his neck."

"I guess," Amanda said listlessly.

Mike waited a beat, then gave up. "So I'm gonna leave my card, okay?" he said, digging out his wallet. "If he *does* get in touch with you, even once, even a little, I want you to call me and let me know." He held out the card to Amanda,

who didn't even look up, let alone acknowledge the card; after a moment Mike stifled a sigh and tucked it under an empty glass on the coffee table, face up.

Johnny came thumping down the stairs, stopping near the bottom. "He's not up there," he reported, leaning against the banister.

"Yeah, I kinda figured, Texas, given the total lack of anything like a *ruckus*," Mike said.

Johnny grinned and didn't say anything else. It was quiet for a few moments before Amanda Winston hugged the pillow more tightly and asked, "... when did he get out?"

"Couple of weeks ago," Mike said. "Be three weeks come, uh, Tuesday."

"Oh." It was scarcely audible. Amanda's head tilted forward until the bits of blond hair that had come loose from her half-assed bun nearly hid her eyes. "I didn't know that."

"Yeah, well, like I said, he could be a little more *mannerly*," Mike said. He went quiet again, to see if she'd ask anything else.

One of her hands strayed up to touch the little knot of hair on the back of her head. "Did you want anything else?" she asked, almost in a whisper.

Mike paused, watching her. "How's Carole?" he finally asked, leaning forward.

"... she's fine." Amanda Winston folded in on herself, resting her chin on the throw pillow, drawing her knees up in front of her. "She's a freshman in college now." She paused before defiantly adding, "University of Colorado."

"Good," said Mike, meaning it. "That's good. When's she come home next?"

"Christmas." Nearly silent now.

"Well, then, I guess that gives us our deadline, huh?" Mike pushed himself to his feet and extricated himself from the coffee table. "You hear from him, or even think of anything I oughta know, you call me, huh?"

Amanda nodded, her eyes squeezed shut.

Mike glanced at Johnny. Johnny's face was a mask. After a moment, he shrugged. Mike shrugged back, then turned to face Amanda, who hadn't moved. "Hey," he said, trying to sound reassuring. "We'll get him before Carole comes home. Promise. Okay?"

Amanda mouthed something silently into the depths of the pillow.

Mike glanced at Johnny again, then back at Amanda. "What?" he said.

"I said I don't care," she snapped, jerking her head up and squeezing the pillow until Mike expected it to burst a seam. "I don't give a fuck if you catch him or not. Fuck him." The last came out in a vengeful, hurt rasp.

Mike twitched back against the banister despite himself. "Ohhh-kay," he said once he'd recovered. "We'll just show ourselves out, huh?"

Amanda's head dipped in a vague nod, and stayed down, completing her transformation into a miserable little ball of humanity wedged into one corner of the couch. Mike thought he might have seen something glittering at the corners

of her eyes, but he wouldn't want to swear to it. Johnny reached over the banister and wordlessly clapped Mike on the shoulder, then jerked his head at the front door; Mike nodded and headed that way, glancing back over his shoulder only once. Amanda hadn't moved.

The door shut behind them. Johnny shook his head.

"Yeah," Mike said, bounding down the front steps and heading towards his car. "That was *real* smooth." He unlocked the car doors and got in, fiddling absently with the steering wheel until Johnny had made himself comfortable. "Anything?" he asked, putting the car in reverse and backing out.

"*Nada*," Johnny said. "Not a sign of him. Think she's on the level."

Mike put the car in gear and headed towards the exit. "Yeah, I'm with you there. You know what else? I think she's pissed that she hasn't heard from him. I think I just broke her little heart."

Johnny shook his head slowly and shut his eyes against the afternoon sun. "Christ, I don't get women," he said, patting his breast pocket absently.

◆ 15: Nate

By the time Nate glanced at the clock on the taskbar, his eyes smarting from the glare of his monitor, it was nearly two in the afternoon. It was quiet. Everything was quiet. Sandra was in Simon's office again, typing away; she must have gone to lunch at some point, but Nate hadn't noticed.

Or maybe she hadn't. Maybe, like Nate, she'd gotten so engrossed in what she was doing that she'd forgotten to eat. Nate pushed back his chair and arthritically unfolded, shaking out cramped muscles and stretching his half-collapsed spine. "Sandy?" he called, once he was confident in his ability to move again.

"Yes?" Sandra called back.

"Did you . . . did you go to lunch?" Despite the fact that no one could possibly be looking at him, Nate went a little red. "If you did, I kind of missed it . . ."

There was a pause before Sandra appeared in the empty doorway, shaking her head. "An hour ago," she said. "I asked you if you wanted to come with me and you said 'Mm' so I figured that meant no."

"Oh," Nate said, ducking his head a little. "Yeah, I guess I was kind of . . . distracted."

"I guess," Sandra said, smiling despite herself. "Go eat something, Specs. You aren't going to do me a damned bit of good if you keel over from starvation."

For a moment, Nate couldn't answer, his throat suddenly closing. It had sounded so much like something Simon would say—Nate shook his head briskly, dismissing it, and swallowed the lump in his throat. "Yeah, I'm . . . I'll go have lunch now."

"Do that," Sandra said, stepping back into Simon's office. "Bring me a can of Diet Coke when you come back?"

Nate nodded, even though Sandra was no longer there to see. "Okay," he said. Leaning over the back of his chair he put his computer to sleep, then absently patted himself down to make sure he had everything, wallet, keys, ID card, gun—his fingers paused on the textured metal grip, as they always did, and then moved on. His book lay open and face-down on the computer desk beside

his monitor. He considered bringing it to lunch with him but decided not to. If he started reading in the cafeteria he'd end up wasting an extra half an hour.

Without bothering to say goodbye (what if she was doing something that required a lot of concentration?) Nate let himself out of the saferoom and headed up the hall towards the center of the complex and the cafeteria. The hallways were empty and quiet, although he could hear the low buzz of conversation and typing through most of the doors he passed. It was nice. Relaxing. Nate had always liked being alone but not *really* being alone, just like this.

The cafeteria was equally quiet, one hour before closing, two hours after the lunch rush. There were a few people dotted here and there at the tables, mostly alone—mostly Nerd Squad, to Nate's expert eye. Nerd Squaddies always forgot to eat until late and then ate alone, quickly, wanting to get back to their machines. Nate (a card-carrying Nerd Squaddie himself, and proud of it, unlike Rich, who'd never been much for geek solidarity—or any sort of solidarity, really, Nate had to admit) waved absently at the one or two people he vaguely recognized before grabbing a tray, a ham sandwich, a banana, and a root beer, in that order.

Automatically he found himself a spot at an empty table, carefully picking one far away from anyone else in order to avoid psychic trespass; he caught himself doing it a moment later and amused himself by working out the trigonometry of the decision-making process in his head while he ate. By the time he was done with the sandwich he had a working theorem and he put it to the test, attempting to predict where the next person to enter the lunchroom would sit.

Unfortunately, the next person to enter the cafeteria went to sit with someone who was already there. Nate laughed at himself, cut his banana into slices, and ate them, having been trained by his teammates long ago to never, ever, ever put a whole and uncut banana in his mouth. Or anywhere near his mouth. Or, really, to pick one up at all . . . but he liked bananas, so he compromised. Easy as that.

He finished off his root beer in front of the trash can and threw the cup in after the rest of his lunch debris, abandoning his tray on top. Just as he was leaving, someone sat in the very spot that he'd picked out. Nate nearly giggled his way out of the cafeteria, only sobering once he was back out in the halls, lest he be betrayed by echoes. A quick stop by the vending machines and then he went back to the saferoom, a cold and wet can of Diet Coke caught gingerly in his fingertips.

By the time he got back Mike and Johnny were back, lounging noisily around the conference table. Sandra was standing in the doorway to Simon's office again. "Hey," Nate said, shutting the door behind himself. "How'd it go?"

"She hates me, and she hates him, and she hates the world, and she hasn't heard a word," Mike said. "And this lady, I believe."

Nate frowned. "So it's just his lawyer he's been in contact with, then." He tossed the can to Sandra, who caught it one-handed and popped it open with a quick and absent smile of thanks.

“Guess he made some new friends,” Johnny said.

Sandra frowned and tucked a stray lock of hair behind one ear. “What about her daughter?”

“Freshman in college at the University of Colorado,” Mike said triumphantly.

“Oh, good.” Sandra wilted against the door frame. “One less thing to worry about, unless he’s really fucking crazy.”

“Called the campus cops on the way back, just in case,” Johnny said. “Let ‘em know to keep a quiet eye out, for all the good it’ll do.”

Mike nodded at Johnny, then glanced back at Sandra. “Hey, Sandy, think we ought to warn the kid, or let it be?”

“Hm.” Sandra paused to consider this, scuffing the toe of her sneaker against the tiles. “No,” she finally said. “For one thing, I don’t think he’s squirrely enough to go all the way to Colorado, even if he *does* know where she is. And for another, if it was voluntary on her part . . .” She trailed off there.

“Yeah, that’s what I was thinking,” Mike said cheerfully. He swung his feet up onto the table and settled in. “But I figured I’d check, since you’re the boss lady and all.”

“Thanks ever so,” Sandra said, taking a sip of her Coke. “Anything else?”

The silence that followed this perfectly natural question was kind of weird, even to Nate’s ears. Mike and Johnny were kind of frowning at each other, and Sandra looked expectant and then suspicious. “What?” she finally said.

Mike rubbed a hand over his face. “I . . . don’t want to talk about it yet,” he said slowly. “I gotta finish putting the pieces together, you know? Could be nothing anyway. Just a hunch I’ve got.”

“About what?” Sandra asked, coming a step or two out of Simon’s office like a turtle poking its head out of its shell.

“Lawyer lady,” Mike said. Across the table from him Johnny made a neutral little noise that could have meant just about anything. Mike scowled at him. “It’s on the tip of my goddamn tongue, you know? But I just don’t *got* it yet.”

Sandra nodded after a moment, slowly. “Would talking it out help?”

Mike heaved out a breath. “I don’t think so,” he said, all in a rush. “Think I just gotta stew.”

“ . . . stew, then,” Sandra said after a moment. “Try to stew quick.”

“Will do!” Mike said. “I am totally the express crockpot of, uh, crackpot theories. What you want me to do now?”

Sandra thought about it. “Go down to the lab and look menacing until they cough up the ballistics report on Simon’s bullet?”

Mike whooped and bounded out of his chair. “Music to my fuckin’ ears!” he cried, ostentatiously cracking his knuckles. “Aw, Spring, you’re totally my kind of goddess!”

“When you get it, see if you can’t chase down the gun, figure out where he got it,” Sandra said, raising her voice to be heard over Mike. “Texas, call the

Fredericksburg PD and see what they have to say about Diana Fontaine's house, and if you want to remind them to keep an eye out in general, be my guest."

"Right," said Johnny, fishing out his phone. Mike raced out of the room, the door slamming behind him (someone on Team Hall pounded on the wall briefly, which they all ignored) and Nate went back to his computer, waking it up and getting back to the thousands and thousands of gas station receipts. He tuned out Johnny's voice, behind him, and Sandra's footsteps, and soon enough he'd tuned out everything.

The next time he blinked his way back to normal consciousness, it was nearly four. Mike and Johnny were both busy on their laptops, Mike with his phone pressed to his ear, and Sandra was nowhere to be seen. Nate looked around. "Where'd Sandy go?" he asked, frowning.

"Upstairs," Johnny said.

"Oh." Nate turned back to his computer and spent a good thirty seconds just watching the search function run. The 'percentage complete' bar was barely a sliver of the way gone and hardly inched upwards at all while Nate watched; finally, half out of boredom and half out of a nagging sense of inevitability, his attention strayed to the three darkened and shrouded computers in Rich's lair. Shaking his head he got up and went over there, thumbing on the middle of the three computers (Mama Bear, he'd called it once, and you could have iced your drink with the glare that Rich shot at him) with his jaw set and his hopes low.

The soft sound of the computer turning on caught everybody's attention, but no one said a word. Mike and Johnny just watched him, unsmiling and wary, while Nate pulled open all the various drawers and finally, finally unhooded the monitor and turned it on.

The screen looked no different than it ever had. A dialogue box with a single text-entry box and no labeling text at all; of course Rich wouldn't have labeled his own security system. Who else would ever need to use it? Nate didn't even know if a password went here, or an ID, or some kind of system command, and in the past seven months, he'd tried them all.

Eyeing the dialogue box and its steadily blinking cursor warily, Nate dipped one hand into the topmost drawer and patted blindly around. His fingers strayed over neatly wrapped cables, a handful of blank CDs in their slimline jewel cases, all kinds of pens and pencils, and a single, ancient, and certain-to-be-inedible granola bar in its wrapper. Nothing new here. He'd searched all these drawers a hundred times.

Mike and Johnny were still watching him, taut with some kind of expectation that Nate knew he wasn't going to satisfy. He sighed and reached for the keyboard. **RichStory**, he typed. The dialogue box filled with asterisks. Nate hit enter. The asterisks vanished into the ether, the cursor once again blinking on the left-hand side of the dialogue box.

RichardStory. Nothing.

Richard‘SpecsTwo’Story. Nothing.

After about five minutes of fruitlessly retracing his steps yet again, Nate silently turned the computer back off. The undercurrent of tension faded. No one said anything. Nate sat still, staring at the blind eye of the powered-down monitor, and thought; thought about Rich, and about himself, and about the trespasser who’d be coming in on Monday to take what was left of Rich away from him. It made him obscurely angry, despite Sandra being one hundred percent right in assigning the new guy to Rich’s computers.

The casters on Rich’s chair squealed faintly as Nate abruptly shoved it back and stood up. He put a hand on the back of the chair, rolling it idly back and forth, watching it move and thinking about the new guy who’d be sitting here on Monday. He glanced over his shoulder at the door. He made his decision. He felt a little better. “Hey, Texas?”

“Yo,” Johnny said, turning halfway around in his chair.

“Got a minute to do me a favor?”

“Sure.” Johnny reached behind himself and closed his laptop.

“Here in a minute I’m going to need you to go keep a lookout for Sandy,” Nate said, heading for his equipment closet. Hot glue. He’d need the hot glue gun. And a screwdriver, probably a big one. Maybe a bandsaw. “I’m going to leave the new guy a present, and she shouldn’t catch me at it while she’s still acting chief.”

By the time he unlocked the closet and waded in, all three of them were grinning in anticipation.

◆ 16: Sandra

Sandra could hear Simon's aggravated, staccato voice clearly through the closed door, interspersed with odd little periods of silence that must have been someone else speaking at a lower volume. Jazz was half-turned around in her chair, eyeing the door, half a grin on her face. "Girl," she said, "I think he must be gettin' better."

"You know, Secret Agent Jazz, I think you might be right," Sandra said, craning forward to see if she could make out the words through the little window. No such luck. She glanced at Jazz. "Who's in there?"

"That doctor lady of his," Jazz said, checking her clipboard through sheer force of habit. "Vacek."

Sandra rolled her eyes. "Hoo boy," she said. "Pardon me—" and without further ado she pushed the door open and went in. The doctor, standing at the foot of Simon's bed with her own clipboard clasped (protectively) over her stomach, glanced at her. She looked harassed. Sandra was not at all surprised.

Simon jabbed a commanding finger at her. "Sandy, tell this woman that I'm going home tomorrow morning," he said, his finger cutting a swift arc through the air until it accused the doctor instead.

"I don't know that I have the right to tell the good doctor her business," Sandra said evenly, shutting the door firmly behind herself, probably to Jazz's dismay. "Although I suppose you *do* look better." It wasn't a lie, she realized, studying Simon. He was still ungodly pale (and sort of sticky-looking) and his jaw was tight with what she suspected was pain, but he was sitting up without the aid of a bunch of pillows and someone had at least brushed his hair. Yesterday, he had looked terrible. Now he just looked awful. A definite improvement. *I'd hit that*, a voice that sounded an awful lot like Mike's said in the back of Sandra's mind. She nearly laughed, but bit it back just in time.

"See?" Simon said triumphantly, looking back at Dr. Vacek. "I'm going home *tomorrow*."

"Mr. Drake—" with a sigh Dr. Vacek lifted her clipboard and flipped through Simon's chart "—while I'll admit that you *are* recovering nicely—"

“No buts,” Simon said, cutting her off with a chop of his hand (and wincing afterwards, his arm coming down to clamp against his wounded side). “You and I both know that if a gunshot victim survives the first forty-eight hours, chances are damned good that they’ll survive the rest. I’ve been here for *four days*. I’m going home.”

“And by ‘home’ he means ‘back to work’,” Sandra put in. Simon glared at her. She tried to look innocent.

Now Dr. Vacek looked horrified. “Absolutely not,” she said firmly. “If that’s your intention, Mr. Drake, I’m even less inclined to let you check yourself out.”

“Besides, Upstairs said you weren’t allowed back on site for another week,” Sandra added, “and you weren’t to go back in the field for another two weeks after that.”

“Well, fuck him and the seniority he rode in on,” Simon said. “I am checking out *tomorrow*. I am going back into work on *Monday*. And nothing either of you can say will stop me.”

“What if she said ‘interns, check this crazy man into the psych ward on a 72-hour observation period’?” Sandra asked. She was really starting to enjoy herself. “Heck, boss, you sure look like you’re suffering from chest pains right now, that’s a mandatory overnight stay at least . . .”

“I’d ask her if her malpractice insurance was paid up,” Simon shot back, jerking his arm away from his chest and wincing again. “Goddammit, Sandy, whose side are you on?”

“Yours,” Sandra said, “although you don’t seem to realize it.”

Simon flopped back onto his pillow and wheezed in a couple of rapid, panting breaths. “You’re fired,” he said. “Terminated with extreme prejudice. Hand over your gun and your ID badge immediately.”

“If you think I’m giving you a gun right now, you’re even crazier than I thought,” Sandra said. Dr. Vacek was looking helplessly back and forth like a spectator at a tennis match. Sandra glanced at her and winked even as she added, “You’d check yourself out of the hospital at gunpoint and I am not going to be responsible for that, boss.”

“Crap.” Simon pointed a declamatory finger at the ceiling, since that’s what he was looking at. “Not only are you fired, but you’re not invited to my birthday party any more.”

“I’m heartbroken,” Sandra said. “And here I already bought you a G.I. Joe.” She was smiling now. She just couldn’t help it.

“ . . . six or twelve inches?” Simon asked suspiciously.

“That’s kind of a personal question, isn’t it?”

Simon snorted out an unwilling laugh. “*Tomorrow*,” he said, going right back to that.

Dr. Vacek blinked, startled at suddenly being reinvolvement in the conversation. “No sooner than Monday morning,” she said, folding her arms over her clipboard again.

“Tomorrow,” Simon repeated with strained patience.

Sandra looked at the doctor. “Trust me, you want to get him the hell out of here. The longer you balk him, the more likely he is to throw something at you.”

“I *told* Texas I was sorry about that,” Simon said, grabbing the railings of his bed and painfully hauling himself upright again. He went paper-white, almost a bit green, but clenched his jaw and persevered until he was hunched more or less upright again, wheezing. “Tomorrow, and I promise I’ll . . . go right home and spend the rest of the weekend in bed. Just like I was here, only without the . . . beeping and the uncomfortable bed and the constant threat of septicemia or, or green Jell-O in little cubes.”

Dr. Vacek considered him, her eyes narrowed. “I’ll tell you what,” she finally said. “When I come on duty tomorrow at four PM, I’ll re-evaluate you then. I don’t want you to get your hopes up, Mr. Drake, but frankly, I’m already tired of dealing with you.”

“Excellent,” Simon said. “We’ve got a deal.”

“I’ll come get you at five,” Sandra promised.

“If I release him,” Dr. Vacek added, sharply, at the exact same moment that Simon said, “I can drive myself.” Dr. Vacek’s head snapped back towards him. “You most certainly can *not*,” she said in scandalized exasperation.

Sandra laughed, absurdly delighted with it all. “Oh, you’ll release him,” she said. “If he’s still in this hospital by this time tomorrow it’ll only be because one of his doctors snapped and assaulted him.”

“I don’t know why she’s talking like that,” Simon told the doctor. “I am a perfectly reasonable human being.”

“Ha!” Sandra said.

The door closed—maybe a little too firmly—behind the retreating Dr. Vacek. Simon blew out an aggravated breath and absently rubbed his chest. “Finally,” he said, and collapsed back onto his pillow like someone had cut all his strings, breathing hard. He waved one hand vaguely at the chair. “You. Come. Sit. Tell me about what happened today.”

Obligingly Sandra took the chair, dropping her purse to the floor beside herself, and filled him in. Simon stared at the ceiling and fingered his chest gingerly, plucking at the ugly hospital gown like it annoyed him, listening. Once Sandra was done, Simon was quiet for a long five seconds or so before he said, “That’s it?”

“That’s it,” Sandra said, frowning. “We’re still kind of shorthanded, you know—”

“Nah, it’s not that,” Simon said, waving an unsteady hand at her. “Never mind. Just felt like there was something you weren’t telling me, is all.”

Sandra shook her head. “I promise, that’s everything that I know of.”

“Huh,” Simon said, and let it drop. “Well, at least Carole Winston is out of the picture.”

“We hope.”

“We hope,” Simon echoed. “Although frankly, if Farraday wants to go to Colorado for a while, I’m not gonna argue so much.”

“There’s that,” Sandra said, and paused. “How are you feeling, boss? Really?”

“Hurt like a bitch *and* I itch like crazy,” Simon promptly said. “I need a shower so bad, you have no idea—”

“I think maybe I’ve got an inkling,” Sandra couldn’t help but put in, fanning one hand ostentatiously in front of her nose.

“—but what I really, really need is to get all these goddamned tubes out of my various orifices so that I can, oh, I don’t know, *stand up*. I hate this convalescing shit, Sandy. I really, really hate it.”

“Yeah, I know.” Sandra patted his free hand. “Tomorrow, boss. I’ll come get you at five and take you home. I hear there are showers there, and one hundred percent fewer orifice tubes.”

“Thank Christ,” Simon said, shutting his eyes. He pointed blindly at the miniscule closet; his hand shook a little, but Sandra pretended not to notice. “Get my keys,” Simon said, letting his hand drop again. “Pick me up in the Jeep. Get Nate to look it over first to make sure Farraday didn’t wire it up or anything, but pick me up in my Jeep. It needs to go home anyway.”

“Will do, Templar.”

“And I’m coming in on Monday,” Simon added, in his flattest, most non-sense tone, only lightly blurred with exhaustion.

“For an hour or two,” Sandra said firmly.

Simon’s face contorted into a grimace. “Half a day,” he said stubbornly. “I’ll come in after lunch.”

“And I’ll send you home the minute you start looking like shit,” Sandra said. “Don’t think I won’t call security on your pasty wounded ass.”

“Christ, Spring. I *can* have you fired, you know.”

Sandra smiled. “No, you can’t. Not right now, anyway. I’m in charge until Upstairs clears you to return to duty, Templar, and that means I’m in charge of you, too.”

“Conspiring against me, all of you,” Simon said, his voice blurring further. He trailed a hand up along the tube of his IV, looking for the button. “Right. Drugs and sleep time now. Come back tomorrow. Rescue me from this hell or I’ll hunt you down and, and wreak my revenge.” The little machine attached to his IV bag glugged once.

"I'll ride to your rescue like a white knight on his charger, boss. That's a horse, in case you don't speak romance novel."

"Yeah," Simon said. The little pain lines on his face started to ease, slowly. "Charger. Reminds me. Plug in my cell phone. In the closet."

Sandra smiled and stood up, patting Simon's shoulder. "G'night, Templar. Sleep well."

"Yeah," Simon said fuzzily. "Sleep. Breakfast of champions."

Sandra picked her way around the foot of Simon's bed and claimed his keys and his cell phone from the closet, dropping both into her purse. By the time she closed the closet again Simon was motionless, not quite snoring, as limp as a rag doll. Sandra tiptoed to the door, turning out the lights on the way.

She had her hand on the doorknob when Simon's dreamy and disembodied voice said, "That was . . . was a dream . . . right?"

Having no idea what Simon was talking about (but suspecting it was drug-related), Sandra said, "Yeah, boss. Just a dream. Go back to sleep."

"'kay," Simon said. Sandra waited in the dark for a while longer, but he said nothing else, and eventually she let herself back out.

◆ 17: Mike

The first thing he did when he got home was put the white grocery bag down on the counter. The second thing he did was check the clock on the DVD player. 7:17. Plenty of time.

Whistling, he unpacked everything and laid it out. He had a piece of raw pork and a lot of aggression to work off—fortunately he also had a heavy maple mallet and neighbors who were usually too stoned or too loud to bother complaining about his tendency to get a little too enthusiastic about things. He pulled out the cutting board and the wooden mallet, slapped the pork down with a wet little sound, and proceeded to beat the everliving shit out of it. The kitchen rang with the sound, leaving him half-deaf and laughing. Bottled-up aggression, Mike had found, made for excellent *tonkatsu*, eventually.

He kept one eye on the clock, even when he didn't want to. The little red numbers marched inexorably on as Mike dawdled over the dinner preparations, trying to draw things out so that he wouldn't get stuck waiting for too long. Waiting for a phone call, shit, what was he, some kind of chick now?

By the time he actually finished making his dinner, the clock read 8:32, and Mike suddenly realized that he'd wasted a little too much time. Grabbing a beer out of the fridge Mike bolted his dinner (with a twinge of regret—first time he'd bothered to cook all week, for this?), then threw all the dishes in the sink and slammed the palm of his hand against the faucet handle.

He finished the dishes with barely two minutes to spare and ran for the bedroom, pulling his shirt off over his head as he went. His clothes hit the hamper—or near it, good enough—and Mike dropped onto the floor of the living room just as the clock hit nine, in his shorts and breathing hard. He hoped she gave him enough time to catch his breath, at least, because this shit was *undignified*.

Fifteen minutes later, he was flopped out on his back with his cell phone resting on his stomach, staring at the ceiling, bored out of his mind. “Fuck it,” Mike said, kicking out his legs and sitting up. He dialed the number of the

payphone and let it ring. Seven, eight, nine times—no one answered. Eventually he gave up and slapped his phone shut again. Bitch was late, that's all. Hooking the clip of his phone to the waistband of his boxers Mike stood up, shook himself like a wet dog, and went to open the windows and clear the scent of fried pork out of his apartment.

The clock on the DVD player read 9:58. Mike was considering turning his phone off and going the hell to bed. He was also kind of considering putting his clothes back on, driving out to Fredericksburg, and maybe throwing down with someone. Shit. Had Farraday done something to the lady lawyer? Not that Mike would put it past him—far as Mike was concerned Farraday was a rabid dog with a bad bleach job, no two ways about it—but the timing of it would mean that it was maybe partly his *fault*, and fuck but he hated personal responsibility—

From out of nowhere his phone started blasting the first few bars of *The Imperial March* at him, and he jerked so hard that he nearly fell right off the couch. Mike yanked the clip of his phone holster off his shorts, snapping himself a good one with the rebounding elastic, and flipped it open. “Damn, woman, I’d just about given up on you!”

Silence. No, not silence, but a gulping, breathing hush, like a woman trying not to cry and failing. Mike sat up, one lone alarm going off in the back of his mind. “Hey. You okay?” he demanded to know. “Hey!”

“I’m sorry!” Diana Fontaine finally blurted, still breathing hard—whether in exhilaration or terror Mike had no idea. Her words spilled out over one another in her hurry to get them out. “He turned up at the back door just as I was about to leave, I had to wait until he left again, I didn’t want to hurry him out, he’d know something was up, he’s so *perceptive* . . .”

“Paranoid, you mean,” Mike said, flopping back out on the couch and shutting his eyes. “You okay?”

“I’m fine,” she said, getting herself under control again, her words slowing back to normal. “I’m fine. I’m sorry I was late, Mike.”

And now she sounded just like herself, all prissy and composed, and it made Mike grin a little and take a poke at her. “Ooh, are we on a first-name basis now? ’cause I don’t know about you, but I’m maybe not ready for that kind of commitment—”

“Mr. Takemura,” she amended, her voice cooling to the point where it congealed.

Mike snickered. “Aw, well, guess it couldn’t last,” he said. “So! What’d the squirrel want from you today? He tell you anything I can use?”

Diana was quiet for a moment. “Off the record?” she finally asked.

“Record? We doan need no steenkin’ record,” Mike said. “Yeah, sure. Off the record.”

“He’s . . . not really telling me much about what he’s doing,” Diana said. “Mostly he just wanted to . . . to reassure me, I suppose, tell me that everything’s all right, he’s all right, it’ll all be over soon—”

“—wait,” said Mike, sitting up and letting his feet drop to the floor. “It’ll all be over soon? He said that?”

Diana swallowed. “Yes,” she said. “I-I don’t know what he meant by that, precisely. He sounded like he was trying to console me, not to make some kind of . . . of promise . . .”

“Shit,” Mike said. He rubbed his eyes. “Either way, that sounds kinda ominous, you know?”

“I know.” She fell silent. In the background Mike could hear the faint sound of traffic. “I’ve decided what I’m going to do,” she said after a moment.

“Yeah? What’s that?” Mike slithered down off the couch, sprawling out in his usual spot on the carpet.

Diana paused. When she spoke again, her voice was firmer. “First you have to promise me something.”

Mike snorted. “Yeah, I kinda figured that was coming. What?”

“I want protection,” she declared. “In exchange for my help.”

“Protection, huh. What kind of protection did you have in mind?”

She only faltered for a second. “If I call you . . . if I call you, I want you to come rescue me. No matter when I call or where I call you from. If I’m going to help you I want to know that I’ll have someone to extricate me and somewhere to hide.”

Mike pulled his phone away from his ear and raised both eyebrows at it. “Well, sure, I can do that, but I’m an hour away, remember? Might be easier for me just to tell your local police who you are and what you need—”

“No!” She cut him off immediately. “I *can’t* do this officially, remember? If he . . .” She faltered again. “If he actually starts trying to hurt me, I promise I’ll go right to the police, but if I just feel threatened . . .”

“Yeah.” Mike shut his eyes and rubbed the back of his neck, thinking about it. “Okay,” he finally said. “If you think you need extricating, you call me, and I’ll come running. On one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“If I have to come rescue your pretty little ass from this squirrel, that’s pretty much it for the unofficial, okay? There’s no more keepin’ it on the down low if he’s gone that kind of threatening.”

“That . . .” Diana swallowed. “That’s fair.”

“Okay,” Mike said. “Okay. So . . . what are you going to do?”

She hiccupped out a brittle little laugh. “What I’ve been doing,” she said. “I’ll keep talking to him. Sooner or later he’ll tell me something you can use. I’m sure of it. He’s always liked to . . . to brag.”

“Promise me you’re not going to get all cute and shit,” Mike said sharply. “You try and pump him, he’s going to smell a rat. If you can’t act natural he is going to mess you the fuck up, lady.”

“I’ll be careful.” She hesitated again. “I think I can do it. I’ve known him for a long time.”

Mike opened his eyes, staring up at the plaster rosettes on the ceiling. “Fuck, I hope you know him as well as you think you do, then.”

Diana Fontaine made a noise into the phone that could have been a laugh, or a snuffle, or just a little cough. “So do I,” she said.

◆ 18: Sandra

[saturday]

“I do not need babysitting,” Simon informed Sandra, hobbling across the parking lot towards the stairs to his apartment. Checking him out of the hospital had taken the better part of an hour, despite everything, and the sun was already setting behind them. “I appreciate the ride and all, since they were being such assholes about letting me drive myself home, but I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself. So piss off.”

“Nope.” Sandra neatly slipped her arm through Simon’s two steps from the stairs. “Hate to break it to you, Templar, but someone shot you in the chest.”

“I know that. I was there, remember?” Simon tugged grumpily at Sandra’s grip on his arm.

“So that earns you a whole *raft* of special privileges, a chauffeur and a maid and an escort and everything. Feel special, you big whiner.”

“Don’t want ’em. Let go.”

“That would be a no, chief.”

“I’m not going to fall down the fucking stairs!” Simon grabbed for the railing with his free hand. His knuckles promptly went white. Sandra rolled her eyes and nudged Simon with her shoulder until he gave up and leaned on her, and together they made their way up the stairs to Simon’s apartment.

“No, all right, I agree, you are probably not going to fall down the stairs, fucking or otherwise. Maybe I just wanted an excuse to get close. Here we are!” Sandra knocked on the door to Simon’s apartment.

“What the hell are you knocking for? It’s my place, I’ve got the keys right here . . .”

The door opened. Simon stopped with his mouth open and his hand halfway in his jeans pocket.

“Well! Aren’t we looking chipper!” Jeremy smiled faintly and stood back, gesturing them both in. “You’d never know he was in the hospital an hour ago, except for the lovely plastic bracelet and the deathly pallor.”

“Yes, you would,” Sandra told him, maneuvering the now thoroughly cranky Simon into his apartment. “He’s never this bitchy unless he’s been sidelined. Oh, and he hasn’t had his precious morning coffee in about a week.”

Jeremy winced politely. “Ah, it all becomes so clear.”

“You broke into my apartment!” Simon broke in, outraged. “Goddammit, Archer, you broke into my apartment—”

“Again,” Jeremy finished for him, still entirely serene. “Yes, Simon, I broke into your flat. Your locks are—oh, how do you Americans put it—crap. Ms. Leone asked me to come make sure the place was habitable before she brought you home, which it mostly certainly was not, given that you are *such* a bachelor.” By this point Simon had been reduced to infuriated glaring. “And I believe she asked me to do it because I have no morals whatsoever and a better set of lockpicks than anyone else she knows.”

“That’s about right,” Sandra said. “I guess I could have had Mike come kick your door down instead. You know Mike loves a little mayhem.”

“All right, all right, so instead of waiting five seconds for me to get out my keys you encouraged a known and wanted criminal to come break into my apartment, Sandy. That’s really sweet and all. Now fuck off, both of you.”

“Still a no, chief.”

“Afraid not, Simon.”

“I hate you both. You’re out of my will.”

“You have money?” Sandra asked.

“If he had money,” Jeremy said, “I think he’d probably dress better.”

Simon let go of Sandra’s arm long enough to flip them both off.

“So how bad was it?” Sandra was in the process of guiding Simon to the couch, more or less against his will, given how his sneakers dug into the carpet.

“Not so bad.” Jeremy closed and locked the front door, then brushed invisible lint off his shirt with both hands. “Some dishes which needed to be done, a bit of nigh-sentient garbage . . . oh, and he has a tendency to miss his laundry hamper. Hardly anything out of the ordinary.”

“I’m right here, you know.” Simon shook off Sandra’s hands before she could make him sit down. “You could stop talking around me like I’m some kind of houseplant.”

Ignoring him, Jeremy continued, “I’m hardly the housework sort, but I think that I’m up to carting a few bags of garbage down to the tip. And he has a dishwasher, which I’m led to believe actually washes dishes for you? So clever, you Americans.”

“Still right here! Not dead!” Simon waved a hand. “Really!”

“He has a dishwasher?” Sandra asked Jeremy. “In a place this small? I’m impressed. My place barely has a sink.”

“Perhaps you should have abandoned him in the hospital and moved in. Possession *is* nine-tenths of the law, I’m led to believe.” Jeremy’s smile was brilliant.

“All right, that’s it.” Simon shot them both a glare and stomped off towards the back hallway, a bit wobbly. “I am going to go have a real shower for the first time in a week, and if you two are still here when I get out, I’ll shoot you both.”

“He’s so sweet,” Sandra said to Jeremy.

“I’m utterly charmed,” said Jeremy. “So, what am I in for?”

“He’ll be a complete bitch, refuse any help even when he needs it, complain about everything, and possibly throw things at you. He nearly gave Johnny a concussion the time he broke his leg and couldn’t get around. Threw a coffee mug at Johnny’s head. Fortunately, it was empty.” Sandra smiled a bit. “Simon doesn’t waste coffee.”

“Lovely.”

“Oh, yeah, we all love him for his winning personality. Did I mention that he can’t have caffeine for another week?”

Jeremy eyed Sandra. “So what you’re saying, Ms. Leone, is that you hate me?”

“Maybe.”

“Archer!” Simon reappeared in the doorway, his face apoplectic with rage. “The beer cans in the guest room—?”

“Threw them out with the rest of the garbage,” said Jeremy.

“You *threw out my beer can collection?*”

“You collected empty beer cans? Whatever for?” said Jeremy.

“You still had a *beer can collection?*” said Sandra.

“Is this some sort of strange American thing I should be aware of?” Jeremy asked Sandra.

“It’s an American *college boy* thing,” Sandra said, eyeing Simon narrowly. “He’s thirty. That’s not even cute any more. That’s just sad.”

“I’m *twenty-nine*. And if you two don’t stop mocking my beer cans,” Simon said, “I am going to have a relapse just to spite you.”

“How, exactly, do you relapse into a gunshot wound?” asked Jeremy.

“Because I will shoot myself rather than listen to any more of this abuse.”

“Ah.”

“Those beer cans have been with me longer than either of you bastards. And, quite frankly, I like them better than either of you, too. You see, number one, *beer* loves me and doesn’t treat me like a fucking invalid. And number two . . . uh . . . shut your stupid face.”

“Ms. Leone is right. That *is* just sad.”

“Fuck you,” Simon said, pointing at Jeremy, “and fuck you,” he said, pointing at Sandra, “and I am going to take that shower now, assuming Archer here hasn’t thrown out the soap, too—”

“I did get rid of that pathetic little sliver of soap and put in a new bar. I do hope that’s acceptable to you.”

Simon stopped dead and glared daggers at Jeremy. “It better be some of the normal soap from under the sink. If it’s some froofy kind of English faggot soap . . .”

Jeremy glanced at Sandra. “You *do* hate me.”

“I plead the fifth.”

◆ 19: Simon

“Where’s Sandra?” Simon asked, stalking barefoot and bare-chested back out into the living room forty-five minutes later, more or less clean and rebanded.

“She went home,” Jeremy said, not bothering to look up from his magazine. He was lounging on the couch like he owned it. “It seems someone threatened to shoot her if she was still here when he got out of the shower, and for some reason she took that personally. Women. Can’t fathom them.”

Simon just snorted and shrugged gingerly into the shirt he was carrying, hissing out a strangled little noise. “I notice *you* didn’t have the sense to take it personally. I meant for you to.”

“I realize it’s hard for you to remember this from day to day, Simon, but I’m not a woman.” Jeremy laid his open magazine down on his chest and eyed Simon peacefully. “Well! You look better. There’s some kind of monstrous overgrown sandwich in the kitchen that Sandra said you’d like, if you’re hungry.”

Simon paused, smoothed his damp hair down over his forehead, and scratched the unbandaged part of his chest. “. . . okay, I forgive her. But not you.”

Jeremy picked up his magazine again. “And here I went down to the garbage tip and fetched all your silly cans back.”

“Still not with the forgiving you.” Simon gingerly poked the bottommost button of the shirt through its hole, made that little strangled sound again, and gave up on the buttons.

Jeremy eyed him over the top of the magazine. “That’s quite the fashion statement, Simon. Taking the unbuttoned shirt to new lows?”

“You—” Simon stabbed a finger in Jeremy’s direction “—are getting on my very last nerve. I do not need a nursemaid, especially not a snotty English one. I don’t know what Sandra was thinking. I don’t know *if* Sandra was thinking. Get out of my apartment.”

Jeremy sighed, closed his magazine, and stood up, but instead of going to the front door and letting himself back out, he crossed to where Simon was looming and deftly did up the next button for him. “No.”

"Out." Simon glowered at Jeremy, although he didn't move to protest the buttoning.

"No."

"...how about if I lower myself to say 'please'?"

"Not even if you lowered yourself and said 'mind if I unzip this?'" Jeremy favored Simon with an arch little smile and did up the next two buttons. "Not that you *could*, I suppose, in this state."

"Don't think I can't have you deported. ...and stop *lingering*."

"I'm not lingering." Jeremy buttoned one last button and lightly patted an unbandaged bit of Simon's chest. "There. Quite fetching. Go eat some of that sandwich before it annexes the kitchen and starts squalling about sovereignty."

"One last chance." Instead of swatting Jeremy's hand away from his chest, Simon swayed backwards slightly. "Out."

"Hm. Let me think, what makes this time different from all the other times... ah, that's right. Nothing. No."

"Fine." Simon scowled and shouldered past Jeremy, heading for the kitchen. "At least come keep me company while I eat, then."

Jeremy raised an eyebrow at Simon's retreating back and followed him. "That seems like an abrupt change of heart."

"Like hell. It's just because if I leave you alone in there, you'll steal something."

"Oh, yes, I don't know how I ever lived without a fake tweed couch."

"So shooting you. After I eat."

The sandwich had the entire middle shelf of Simon's fridge all to itself, looking like a zeppelin wrapped in white paper. Simon fetched it out and dumped it on the kitchen table in passing, stopping in front of the coffee maker and arthritically grabbing for the can in the cabinet overhead.

"Far be it from me to meddle in your little love affair, but I've been led to believe you're not allowed coffee yet," Jeremy said from the doorway.

"I'm not going to drink it," Simon said, although it pained him to say so. "I just want to smell it in the air. Can't eat otherwise."

"Addict." Jeremy sauntered over, dropping into the chair opposite the sandwich.

"Ha. I prefer to think of it as a fulfilling relationship."

"Call it what you will, but it's been my experience that genuinely fulfilling relationships involve more than oral gratification."

"As if *you* would know anything about genuinely fulfilling relationships." Leaving the coffee to perk, Simon gingerly lowered himself into the chair opposite Jeremy and picked at the paper wrapped around his sandwich.

Jeremy shrugged. "That *is* debatable. However, I do know a thing or two about oral gratification." As if to prove it, Jeremy fetched out his cigarettes and lit one.

Simon stopped, gave Jeremy a singularly disgusted look, and then picked up half his sandwich in both hands and took a huge bite. Jeremy simply looked pleased with himself and dragged over the bowl-cum-ashtray that was always lurking on the corner of Simon's kitchen table these days.

Silence fell. Simon kept his eyes on the rapidly-vanishing sandwich, and Jeremy watched Simon eat and burned his cigarette, occasionally remembering to take a mouthful of the smoke. When that was gone, Jeremy said, "Well, as long as it's there . . ." and went to pour himself some coffee.

Simon waited until Jeremy was seated and bringing the mug to his lips to say, "Why, yes, you *may* have some of my coffee, thank you for asking."

Jeremy eyed him over the rim of the mug, took a sip, and lowered it just enough to say, "Your generosity was never in doubt, Simon."

Simon grunted and picked up the other half of his sandwich. This time, though, his eyes stayed firmly on Jeremy, or, rather, on the cup of coffee that hung steaming from Jeremy's hands. For a while Jeremy pretended he didn't notice. Finally, with the cup half empty and the last bite of Simon's sandwich disappearing, Jeremy said, "You do realize that if you choose to have a cup or four of coffee, I'm not going to stop you. It's your funeral."

Torn, Simon eyed Jeremy's coffee mug while he wadded up the discarded white paper. Finally he mustered a scowl from somewhere and went to throw the paper away. "Some nurse you are."

"I'm hardly your nurse, Simon. I'm simply going to keep you company until you're all tucked into bed and sleeping, and then I plan to break back *out* of your charming flat and go back to my hotel and have a decent dinner and perhaps a mouthful or two of good Scotch, and then I plan to sleep the sleep of the completely morally absolved." Jeremy paused and took another long sip of his coffee, watching Simon gingerly manipulate the cabinet door under the sink. "Of course, I'll come back tomorrow. Letting you abuse me for doing absolutely nothing wrong is such an excellent penance for my sins."

"Ha. As if penance for your sins would be that painless. Getting *your* soul into a state of grace would require martyrdom."

"What can I say? It's a start."

"A start." Simon nudged the cabinet door closed with his toes, then crossed to where Jeremy was sitting, grabbed his face in both hands, and kissed him deeply. Jeremy put the coffee mug down, and quickly. After a long and breathless moment Simon pulled away, licking his lips. "Oh, God."

"Mmn. Welcome home, Simon."

"Oh, God, you taste like *coffee*."

"... your priorities continue to alarm me."

"Shut up. Have some more. I'm jonesing here."

◆ 20: Jeremy

[sunday]

Jeremy's phone blared from the bedside table, startling him awake and nearly vibrating itself straight off onto the carpet in the process. Before it could ring again (or fall off the table) Jeremy shot an arm out from under the covers and grabbed it, dragging it under the blankets with him. He didn't bother opening his eyes. Instead he cleared his throat, flipped his phone open, and said, "Good morning, Simon."

"Goddamn it, Archer," Simon said, dispensing with the pleasantries, as had always been his habit. "Where the hell did you put my keys?"

Jeremy didn't answer right away. Instead he pushed the covers down and stretched luxuriously, making something of a point of yawning in Simon's ear; at the apex of his stretch his fingers groped along the bedside table, plucking a small metal key-ring from the little pile of things there. "I don't know where your keys are, Simon," Jeremy said once that was done, cracking his eyes open and smiling lazily up at the keys, dangling from his forefinger and catching the morning sunlight. "However, I'd be happy to come help you look, if you'd like."

"Don't bother, I'll find 'em—" Simon hung up.

Jeremy kicked the covers the rest of the way off and sat up, running a hand through his hair. A quick glance at the clock confirmed that it wasn't quite eight in the morning. In his opinion, an absolutely inhumane time of morning to be awake without a damned good reason. Letting Simon's keys drop to the bed in front of him, Jeremy brought up his call history and tapped redial.

"What?" Simon snapped.

"You weren't planning to try and go somewhere on your own, were you?" Jeremy asked pleasantly.

"Maybe. What's it to you, anyway?"

"Well, ordinarily it'd be nothing, except that Ms. Leone very specifically tasked me with keeping an eye on you and making certain that you spent as much of today as possible in bed—"

“Yeah, well, she can go straight to hell and so can you,” Simon said, interrupting what Jeremy thought had been a very promising line of conversation. “I’m sick of rotting in bed.”

Jeremy sighed. “If it’s rotting in bed you’re sick of, give me half an hour and I’ll come fetch you for breakfast.”

“Don’t want it,” Simon promptly said.

“Tell me, do you always regress to five years old when you’re ill?” Jeremy asked, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I’ll be there in half an hour, Simon.”

“Go to hell,” Simon said, and hung up on him again. Jeremy rolled his eyes and slid out of bed, padding towards the bath.

True to his word it was barely eight-thirty by the time Jeremy arrived at Simon’s apartment. Humming under his breath, Jeremy knocked.

After ten seconds in which no one answered the door, Jeremy was no longer humming. He was, however, smiling a bit. He knocked again, just to be certain, but after another ten seconds passed with no answer he simply let himself in with Simon’s keys.

Simon, flushed and grumpy, was lying in wait just behind the front door. “You *did* steal my keys!” he said, snatching them out of Jeremy’s hand. The effort made him wheeze a little. “Christ, I should have known. Leave it to the fucking thief.”

“Good morning to you too, Simon.” Jeremy shut the door behind himself and locked it, ignoring the pissed-off Simon as best he could. “And how are you this morning?”

“I’m fine.”

“By which you mean . . .”

“That I’m fine,” Simon repeated irritably.

“Mm,” said Jeremy, studying Simon with a critical eye. “Well, I suppose you look all right, although I’d feel a bit better if I thought you could stand up straight.”

“I’m standing up straight!” Simon said, straightening up and promptly wincing. After a moment, with an effort, he rolled his shoulders back. “There. See?”

“Much better,” Jeremy said, internally starting to count the seconds. By the time he’d counted seven Simon’s shoulders had rolled forward again, and by the time he hit eleven Simon had returned to his slouch, curling forward protectively over his chest. Simon made a little noise and looked away, gritting his teeth. “So!” Jeremy said brightly, not bothering to point out what was surely crystal-clear to both of them. “Shall we go somewhere and have a bit of breakfast?”

“Yeah, okay,” Simon said. “I’ll drive if you pay.”

“Actually, I thought I’d drive *and* pay, if it’s all the same to you,” Jeremy said.

Simon's hand closed hard around his keys. "I'll drive," he insisted, and then frowned and glanced down, letting his hand roll open. "...oh, God fucking *damn* it, Archer."

Jeremy smiled and held up the key to the Jeep. "Is this what you're looking for?"

Simon made a half-hearted lunge for it, but this time Jeremy twitched his hand back, the key vanishing into his fist. Simon pulled up short and hissed, one hand rising about halfway to his chest before he made it stop (with an effort of will that was visible) and drop to his side again. "Bastard," he said, suddenly breathless.

"Yes, quite," Jeremy said. "Come on, then. Breakfast?"

Simon closed his eyes. "Breakfast," he agreed. "Anything to get out. And there's nothing to eat in the apartment, so I need to hit the grocery store afterwards."

"Or you can give me a list and I can go in your place while you rest," Jeremy said, still cheerful.

"Or you can get the fuck off my back," Simon said, his eyes snapping open. "I don't need *baby-sitting*."

"Actually, I'm of the opinion that you do," said Jeremy. "Honestly, Simon, it's like telling a five-year-old not to put a fork in the outlet: the moment my back is turned you're attempting to do exactly what you shouldn't, quite possibly just because someone told you not to."

Simon so dearly wanted to be infuriated by that—Jeremy could see it quite clearly—but it was equally clear that he didn't quite have the energy for actual fury. Simon's shoulders slumped further and he growled in exasperation, grabbing for the doorknob. "Fine," he said. "Whatever. Just buy me some fucking breakfast, Archer."

"My pleasure," Jeremy said, following him out the door.

Unsurprisingly for a Sunday morning, the little place that Simon grudgingly directed him to was packed to the gills with the elderly and the churchgoing, all enjoying a bit of breakfast before they went off to be preached at. Jeremy sighed and exercised his discretion appropriately; it required a quiet word with a manager, a subtle playing up of Simon's injury (which would doubtless have aggravated Simon immensely, had he known), and a discreet twenty-dollar bill, but five minutes after they arrived they were seated at a booth near the back. Jeremy internally decreed this a success before turning his attention to the horrifically cheery laminated menu in his hands.

"Coffee," Simon absently told the waitress, refolding his menu.

Jeremy glanced up sharply from his own. "No coffee."

Simon gritted his teeth. "...decaf," he finally said, in much the same tone of voice he might have used to say *carcinogenic*.

"And a regular coffee for me, please," Jeremy said pleasantly, picking up Simon's discarded menu and adding it to a little stack with his own. Simon scowled at him furiously enough to raise blisters; the waitress glanced from Simon to Jeremy and back, uneasily, and then nodded and moved off.

"...it's just not the *same*," Simon said, clutching his coffee mug and staring with real greed at Jeremy's.

Jeremy shut his eyes and drank some of his own coffee, feeling a bit like he was a performer in some kind of fetishistic peep show. "Well, you can certainly have real coffee if you insist, but I think Ms. Leone might be slightly put out with me if you died."

"I know! Christ." Simon took another sip, wrinkling his nose. "At least it's... sort of like coffee. Kind of like how blow-up dolls are like real women."

"I'm sure I wouldn't know," Jeremy said equably.

By the time they had finished eating, Simon was visibly paler, his forehead damp with sweat. Jeremy prudently followed a step or two behind Simon as they made their way out to where the Jeep was parked, just in case he stumbled; he did not, although negotiating with the handle of the passenger side door took a bit longer than it should have. "Groceries," Simon said once they were both in the Jeep, fumbling with his seat-belt.

"Home," Jeremy said in contradiction, starting the engine. "You look like you're just about all in. If you *insist* on fetching your own groceries, we can go this afternoon, after you've had a bit of a lie-down."

Simon's head hit the headrest with a thump. "I suppose there's no point in arguing with you," he told the roof of the Jeep, ungraciously.

"None at all."

"Fine," Simon said irritably. "You can make me go home, but you can't make me lie down."

Jeremy smiled, just a little. "Do you know, I rather think I could?"

"...fine, but I bet you can't make me *stay* in bed."

Despite the can of worms which it would undoubtedly open, Jeremy found it absolutely impossible to let that one pass him by un-remarked. "Oh, I rather think I could," he said, reaching over and laying a hand high up on Simon's thigh.

Simon picked his head up (with an effort) and stared at Jeremy. After a moment, he groaned under his breath. "...are you *trying* to kill me?"

"Bah, I seem to recall that you said that you were fine," Jeremy pointed out. Prudently he moved that hand back to the steering wheel, edging the Jeep towards the parking lot's exit. "If so, I don't see where the problem lies."

"Bastard." Simon let his head fall back again. "Thought you were supposed to be my nurse and here you're trying to take advantage of my helpless state—what is this, bad seventies porn? Bom chicka wow?"

“Oh, I don’t know, I rather think I’m a better actor than that,” Jeremy said. After a moment, Simon snorted out a tired little laugh.

He was quiet for most of the rest of the drive back to his apartment, tapping his fingers on his leg; it was only when Jeremy was turning into the parking lot that Simon said, speculatively, “I’m definitely not up for anything athletic, buuuut . . .”

Jeremy almost laughed. “I won’t say I haven’t had a few ideas about how to handle your, erm, *handicap*,” he said, pulling the Jeep into its appointed spot and stopping the car, pocketing the key before Simon could grab it. “But perhaps today would be pushing it.”

“Bullshit,” Simon said. He slid slowly out of the Jeep and steadied himself with a hand pressed to its side before heading, slowly, towards home. “Couple of hours’ nap and I’ll bet you I could handle you just fine.”

“I’ll keep an open mind,” Jeremy promised, hooking Simon’s arm over his shoulders two steps before the stairs and ignoring the long-suffering glare that this act of preservation earned him.

Simon headed slowly towards the small hallway that led to his bedroom, his fingers trailing along the back of the couch like he might need to lean on it at any second. Jeremy watched him go, blindly doing up the locks on the front door by feel. “Do you need any help with your shirt?” he asked, mostly just to watch the reaction.

Simon paused in the doorway. “*No*,” he said grumpily.

“Mm.” Jeremy picked up the chain and slotted it home. Simon vanished into the bedroom. “How about your pants?” Jeremy called after him.

“*No!*” Simon yelled.

Jeremy ducked his head to hide a little smile, even though no one was around to see it. Shrugging out of his jacket he tossed it across the back of the couch and followed Simon into the bedroom, pausing to lean against the doorjamb. “You’re certain.”

“Yes, nurse, I’m certain,” Simon said, gingerly kicking his way out of his jeans and letting them fall on top of his sneakers. He plucked at his t-shirt, scowling, then stopped and slowly lowered himself into the unmade bed just as he was. He was hissing air like a teakettle and had to stop no fewer than three times to suck in a breath and let his body catch up, but every time he gritted his teeth and kept going. Bandages crackled under his t-shirt.

Jeremy prudently watched this production from the doorway, suspecting that his help would be both unwelcome and unnecessary. “D’you need a hand down?” he asked anyway, just in case.

Simon paused, half in the bed and half out of it, and shot Jeremy a look. “*No*,” he said.

“Fair enough,” Jeremy said, and watched the rest of the slow process. Once Simon was once again safely prone, he asked, “Anything else?” This nursemaid business was starting to amuse him, and he didn’t bother hiding it. “Glass of water? Aspirin? Need me to tuck you in? Anything at all?”

Simon rolled his eyes at the ceiling and pulled the covers over himself. “Yes,” he said. “Come here.”

Raising an eyebrow, Jeremy pushed himself off the door-frame and crossed to Simon’s side of the bed, perching by his hip. “Yes?”

Simon promptly grabbed his wrist. “Stay,” he said. “Christ, if I have to stay in *bed* all day you can at least keep me company. I want my obituary to say something more interesting than ‘died of boredom’.”

“Oh, well, keeping you company in bed, now how can I say no to an offer like that?” Jeremy said, toeing off his shoes.

“Yeah, I’m irresistible,” Simon said. He still sounded a bit grumpy, and a bit tired, but some small measure of essential Simon-ness was coming back to him now, Jeremy was happy to note.

Jeremy tugged lightly against Simon’s grip on his wrist. “Since I suspect that climbing over you is a poor idea at the moment, and not for the usual reason, if I’m to get into bed with you I’m afraid you’ll have to let me go.”

“Christ, you’re so demanding,” Simon said, and let go.

Standing up, Jeremy emptied his pockets onto the bedside table and then flicked his belt loose, dropping it on top of his shoes. “I may doze off for a while myself,” he said, rounding the foot of the bed and sliding in, moving slowly so as not to jostle Simon too much. “Someone saw fit to wake me at a perfectly ungodly hour of the morning with a phone call, you see.”

Simon snorted. “You know what time I went to bed last night? Seven PM. *Seven*. Like I was six years old and needed lots of sleep because tomorrow was a big day. You’re lucky I didn’t call you at five when I first woke up.”

“Mm.” Jeremy settled in on top of the covers that Simon was under, wedging the pillow under his head. “Somehow, I think that might actually have been better. Phone calls that come at five in the morning promise some sort of excitement that phone calls at eight entirely lack.”

“Oh, well, sorry I’m not exciting enough for you any more,” Simon said, tucking both hands behind his head and staring at the ceiling.

“Besides, if you’d called me at five I’d have felt perfectly entitled to tell you to piss off before going back to sleep,” Jeremy added. “I may have promised to look after you, but I have my limits.”

“I can’t believe she called *you*,” Simon said, picking up that train of thought. “I mean, what is the train of thought that runs through a woman’s mind that somehow links *fancy-ass English art thief*—” one of Simon’s hands pulled out from behind his head and gestured at Jeremy “—with *in-home nursing care*—” it flopped over to gesture vaguely in the direction of the bedroom window “—when

you have absolutely nothing to do with anything in the first place?” Simon tucked that hand back behind his head.

“Well, it wasn’t quite that simple,” said Jeremy. Guided by a vague impulse he reached up and put his hand on Simon’s jutting elbow. “She only called to tell me that you’d been shot, and the rest sort of fell into place a bit at a time.”

“Yeah?” Simon twitched his elbow up out of Jeremy’s hand. “How’s that?”

“Well, I was seized by a largely irrational desire to come to the States and make certain you were going to be all right, and so she caught me lurking in your hospital room—”

“—you know, I thought I dreamed that?” Simon said. He let his arm fall back down into Jeremy’s waiting hand. “I was so out of it I thought you were some kind of, of drug hallucination. Christ.”

“Oh, I’m flattered,” said Jeremy, curling his fingers loosely about Simon’s bicep. “I trust I was a good trip.”

“Eh, I’ve had worse.” Simon shut his eyes. “Anyway, she caught you in my hospital room, go on.”

“Ah. Well. At any rate. She wasn’t precisely thrilled to see me, but once I convinced her to put her gun away, we fell to talking—”

“Wait,” Simon said, rolling his head to one side and staring at Jeremy. “She drew on you?”

Jeremy twitched out half a smile. “I’m afraid so.”

“She pointed a gun at you.”

“Most emphatically.”

“And I *missed it*?”

“Well, technically you were there.”

“Christ!” Simon’s head thunked back into the nest of his hands. “I would have paid cash money to see that. Double if there’d been pistol-whipping involved. I have fantasies about that kind of thing sometimes.”

“In that case, perhaps I’m not so sorry that you missed it.”

“You’re just no goddamn fun, Archer.”

The conversation meandered on in that vein for another ten minutes or so, only coming to a halt when Simon squeezed his eyes shut and made an odd breathless sound. Jeremy levered himself up onto one elbow. “Are you all right?”

“Fine,” Simon wheezed, pressing his stiffened fingers against the skin of his chest. “Aches a little, is all.”

Jeremy looked around the room, frowning. “Did they give you any sort of pain pills?”

“Yeah.” Simon continued to prod gingerly at his chest, working in a large circle around what Jeremy could only assume was the actual bullet hole. “But I had one when I got up.”

“At five.”

“Yeah.”

“Simon, it’s after ten.”

“Huh.” Simon let his hand drop and started painfully rolling upright. “Guess I better go have another one.”

Jeremy sighed and put his hand on Simon’s shoulder. “Stay,” he said. “I’ll fetch them for you. In the bath?”

“I can get it,” Simon said grumpily, but after that token protest he thumped back down and heaved in a breath. Jeremy patted his shoulder absently and slithered back out of bed, heading for the bathroom.

The prescription bottles stood in a little row by the sink, next to a glass from the kitchen. Jeremy, curious, consulted the various labels, made a few calculations, rolled his eyes, and started palming open the childproof caps. Three pills in one hand and a full glass of water in the other, he went back to the bedroom. “I’m assuming you took all three pills when you woke up?”

“Huh?” Simon’s eyes drifted open. “Yeah.”

“Well, then, you’re late for these two as well, so you may as well take them while you’re at it,” Jeremy said, putting both the pills and the water glass on the night-stand. “Do you need help sitting up?”

“No,” Simon said, a flash of irritation clearing the exhaustion from his face. “I do not need your help sitting up, or in fact at all. Piss off.”

“You really are a terrible patient, you realise,” Jeremy said, already on his way back out the door. “I’ll be right back.” He went out into the main room and hung up his jacket, keeping half an ear on the little sounds coming from the bedroom; once he heard the pained noises stop and Simon’s body hit the mattress again he whisked back in and claimed the glass, refilling it and bringing it back. “There,” he said, putting the glass down at Simon’s elbow and going to reclaim his spot on the bed.

“You know what?” Simon said, rubbing a hand over his face to clear off the light sweat. “This sucks.”

“Really? I can’t imagine why.”

“*That*.” Simon reached out and blindly grabbed a handful of Jeremy’s shirt, although he didn’t bother pulling Jeremy closer or anything. “That’s why.”

Jeremy glanced down at the hand fisted in his collar. “Because you can grab me all you like but you can’t do anything with me once you’ve caught me? Oh, yes, that rather bothers me too—”

“No!” Simon gave him a very half-hearted shaking. “What *bugs* me is having to listen to you be all snide about my situation when I’m like this and can’t give you the beating you totally deserve. You think I can’t tell when you’re laughing at me?”

Jeremy considered this, then carefully eeled over until he was leaning over the prone Simon. “Terribly sorry,” he said. “Do you think you can thump me now, or should I lean in?”

Simon glared up at him, then popped his open palm smartly against Jeremy's ear. It made a booming sound like a bass drum being broken over his head. Jeremy, who hadn't been expecting anything quite so effective and certainly nothing so loud, yelped and recoiled, only to be brought up short by Simon's grip on his collar. "There," Simon said. "Playground justice prevails again!" Jeremy could only dimly hear him over the roar of his offended eardrum, but he was reasonably sure that Simon sounded quite pleased with himself.

"...ouch," Jeremy said, cupping his own hand over his throbbing ear and wincing. "Well, I trust you're satisfied now?"

"Yeah, I think so." Simon let go of Jeremy's collar.

"Well, that's *wonderful* news," Jeremy said thinly, scooting himself back out of easy punching range and rubbing at his ear until the throb in his eardrum subsided and he could hear out of both ears again. "I'd be angry, but I've known for ages now that doing you extraordinary favours only ends in pain, so it isn't as if this is some sort of surprise."

Simon shrugged and tucked his hands behind his head again. "See, the thing is, I don't *want* your favours, Archer."

"I'm aware of that," Jeremy said, also aware that despite his earlier statement to the contrary, he was starting to feel a bit angry. "Indeed, I was *warned* that you were a terrible, uncooperative, ungrateful prick of an invalid, but since I seem to be the only friend in the world that you have aside from your team-mates, who are rather busy, I'm afraid that it falls to me—"

"Okay, let's get this straight: you? Are not my friend," Simon said, cutting in in a hurry, just as Jeremy had known he would. "You're just this guy—"

Jeremy slammed one hand into the mattress by Simon's side and propelled himself up and over, looming over Simon. The motion of the bed made Simon grimace; Jeremy ignored it. "*Yes I bloody well am*," he said, nearly hissing it, his nose not half an inch from Simon's. "I know it kills you to admit it, *Simon*, but whatever else I may or may not *be* to you, I am your friend, and it is out of said friendship that I am allowing you to abuse me in this fashion! Because you *need* my help, whether or not you're willing to admit it, and the more you depend on me, the less strain you will put on yourself and the faster you will *heal*, you Christing fuck, and the faster you heal, the sooner I can get out of your life again, which I'm certain will make us both just ecstatic. Are we clear?"

This little speech didn't precisely leave Simon gaping with awe, but he looked sullen and a little guilty, and Jeremy supposed that was the best he was going to get. They stared at each other, Jeremy's momentary flare of anger dissipating. "Yeah, okay, whatever," Simon finally muttered, glancing away. "Can you maybe scoot back some? You're denting the mattress."

Jeremy sighed and rolled away, flopping out on his back on the other side of the bed. "Yes, of course," he said, rubbing his temples.

Simon was silent for a while. "... I remember your little friend Lindsey said that too," he finally said.

Jeremy left his hand tented over his eyes. "Said what?"

"‘Christing fuck’," Simon said. "That something the two of you pick up from your mentor-guy?"

"Actually, I picked it up from Bran when we were still living together at Ethan's," Jeremy said, smiling just a bit at the memory. "Only he says ‘yeh Christin’ fahk’, as you might recall."

"Yeah, I remember." Simon pulled a hand out from behind his head and lightly knuckled Jeremy's shoulder. "Your ear okay?"

"I believe so." Jeremy pulled his hand away from his eyes and blinked at the ceiling.

Simon hesitated, then cleared his throat. "Uh."

"Mm?"

"So, uh, I'm not really sorry about that, and I'm not really *grateful* for your butting in or, or anything, but I'm kind of aware that I ought to be ..."

"Mm," Jeremy said noncommittally.

Simon glanced at him, looking almost sheepish, for Simon. "Think that's enough to get me out of the doghouse?"

Jeremy considered this. "Well, since it's you, I suppose it's the best I'm likely to get. Fair enough. Your non-apology is accepted, and I'll attempt to treat your delicate condition less lightly in the future."

"Awesome," Simon said. "So where were we, anyway?"

"I'm damned if I remember *now*," Jeremy said. "Pain does that to one. Actually, since I've both the opportunity and the opening, I'd rather like to ask you something."

Simon grunted. "Ask away."

Jeremy rolled onto his side and propped himself up on one elbow again. "Ms. Leone told me a bit about this fellow who shot you," he began.

Simon rolled his eyes. "Farraday," he said, sheer loathing plain in his voice. "What about him?"

"Well. Frankly, I was curious about why he's got this enormous grudge against you. Ms. Leone told me why you were looking for him originally, but she really didn't go into much detail ..." Jeremy trailed off there expectantly.

Simon thought for a moment, scrubbing his palm against his face with a scratchy little sound. "What all'd she tell you?"

"Mostly just what he'd done to catch the FBI's attention and that you were supposed to find him and arrest him," Jeremy said.

"Huh. Okay," Simon said. Tucking his hands behind his head again, Simon stared at the ceiling and chewed on his lower lip. "Well, anyway, we started trying to track him down, right, and so on about the third day I asked Specs Two if he had

◆ 21: *Simon*

anything for me, or should I fuck off?" Simon asked cheerfully, banging into the saferoom with a new can of coffee stuck under his arm. Not that the old can was in any danger of being empty yet, but Simon believed in taking no chances where coffee was concerned, and hey, the stuff had been on sale.

Rich grunted vaguely, eyes glued to the screen of his largest computer. The hair all along the right side of his head was mussed, slowly wilting back into place; apparently there'd been some hard thinking going on while Simon had been at lunch.

Simon rolled his eyes fondly and grabbed the can of coffee in both hands, swinging it up over the conference table and letting it go in midair. The can fell about three feet and bounced off the table with an ear-shattering boom that left it deeply dented all along one side; Rich yelped in shock and nearly catapulted over backwards. Mike, who'd been watching all this with an expectant grin, whooped out a hyena laugh and melted right out of his chair.

"Funny," Rich said, recovering back to his usual irritability. "Yeah. That was really funny."

"Damn, I sure thought so!" Mike cried from under the table. Simon glanced away, not bothering to hide his grin.

Rich rolled his eyes and scooted his chair back into its usual position. "Hate you all," he muttered, slamming the heel of his hand against the bridge of his glasses and shoving them back into place. "Anyway, Templar, come take a look at this."

"Oh, hey, have you got something for me?" Simon said, jogging over. Mike scrambled out from under the table again and joined him behind Rich's chair, elbowing Simon in passing. Simon elbowed him back.

Rich hunched his shoulders slightly and attempted to draw away from the sudden commotion. "I think so," he said. "Anyway, see this here?" He tapped the screen, calling Simon's attention to what appeared to be a spreadsheet not unlike every other spreadsheet Rich had ever generated.

"I see it!" Simon said. "Boy, I can sure see it. It's right there. So what the hell is it?"

Rich snorted. "This is a record of a Winnebago crossing into New York State from Canada about two months ago. Little podunk border-crossing station; Winnebago had Georgia plates."

"Okay," Simon said. "Is that him?"

"Maybe," Rich said, grabbing the mouse and bringing up a different (yet equally incomprehensible) spreadsheet from behind the first one. "Now, see here, about two weeks later, we've got a Winnebago with the same Georgia plates involved in a pretty nasty collision in eastern Pennsylvania, aaaaaand the insurance company appears to have totaled the Winnebago out thanks to a snapped axle."

"Okay," Simon said again. "So . . ."

" . . . so if that Winnebago was totaled, how exactly did it manage to cross the border again a week later?" Rich brought up a third spreadsheet. Or possibly the first one again. Simon wasn't sure. "See, here are those Georgia plates again, in Maine . . ."

Simon blinked. "That's him. That's gotta be him. Christ. So what—"

"—and then an Airstream with those same Georgia plates came back across the border in Vermont two days after that," Rich said with an air of triumph. "We know it was an Airstream that time because it got stopped and searched, but the border-crossing guys didn't find anything."

"On account of probably having their thumbs up their asses," Simon said, fired up. "You're the man, Specs Two. Now, knowing that, how do we find him?"

"I don't know," Rich said, at the exact same moment that Mike said, "Insurance company." Both Simon and Rich turned to stare at him. Mike blinked. "Insurance company," he repeated. "They totaled out the Winnebago, right? So where'd they send the check? Made out to who?"

Simon gaped at Mike for a moment, then abruptly grabbed him in a headlock and ruffled his hair. "Christ, Honda, you're not getting smart on me, are you?"

"Hell no," said Mike, elbowing Simon again as he struggled away. "Smart's for losers. Uh. No offense, Specs Two."

Simon whipped back around. "What insurance company?" he asked Rich.

"I don't know," Rich said. "I don't have access to that data here, I just have a notation that it was totaled out."

"We'll find it," Simon said. "Specs Two, get me a comprehensive list of automobile insurance providers for Georgia, order it largest to smallest, split it three ways." Rich dove for his other computer and woke it up; Simon rounded on Mike. "Honda! Go to the cafeteria and light a fire under the others! We've got calls to make!"

* * *

It took almost three hours of calling, cajoling, and threatening before Sandra abruptly sat up straight and put the palm of her hand over the mouthpiece of her cell. "Walkins Property and Casualty," she said, her voice thrumming with controlled excitement. "Got the plates on record as belonging to a Mrs. C. Dallas." She rolled her eyes. "Chandra, apparently."

"Thanks, but I think I've just found what I was looking for elsewhere," Mike said into his own phone before snapping it shut.

The rest of the room fell silent. Sandra made little 'uh-huh' noises into her phone and scribbled notes on a piece of paper; when Simon leaned over her shoulder to try and read it for himself, she slapped his chest with the back of her hand. He snickered and fell back again, turning to pace across the room and back.

"The check was sent to a post office box in some town named Waycross, Georgia," Sandra announced pretty much the moment she snapped her phone shut. "The funny thing is, the check was deposited in a bank in... Allentown, Pennsylvania."

After a taut moment Mike threw up his hands and let loose with a war whoop that made someone from Team Hall bang on the wall and yell something that none of them understood. Mike ducked his head, abashed but grinning. "That's gotta be it!" he cried.

"Yeah," Simon said, thinking fast. "Springheel. Call information, get the number of the post office in Waycross. Find out if the mail gets picked up by someone or if it gets forwarded to somewhere." Sandra spun back around and picked up her phone. Simon bit his thumbnail absently and kept pacing. "Honda, call the Allentown bank; we're probably going to have to sic some kind of court order on them to get them to cough up, but you can probably at least get them to confirm that there is a bank account there that they can't tell us anything about." Mike, still grinning, grabbed his own phone and the piece of paper that Sandra had been scribbling on. Simon threw up his hands. "Christ, okay, we need legal clearance to seize his mail. The rest of you do whatever the hell it is you do, I'm going to go call Upstairs and get him to let the lawyers off their leashes."

"Right, Templar!" the rest of his team said, more or less in unison, but Simon didn't really hear it, already loping towards his office.

By the middle of the next day events were damned near falling over each other in their hurry to resolve. The post office box in Waycross, Georgia (along with post office boxes in Jefferson, Ohio, Fairfax, Virginia, and Nashua, New Hampshire, incidentally) had its forwarding address set to a post office box in Allentown, Pennsylvania, less than five miles from the place where one Mrs. Chandra Dallas had had her checking account—for all of about two months. There was, however, no record of anyone named Chandra Dallas living in either Georgia or Pennsylvania, save for those few traces that they'd already dug up.

The Allentown post office box was paid up, not forwarding its mail anywhere, and (at the time that Johnny actually called them) the box was empty. Like it was being checked regularly.

"It's one of those little fly-by-night mailbox storefronts, too," Rich said, exultant. "They wouldn't give a shit if he was the Boston Strangler, as long as he paid on time."

"So now what?" Johnny asked. He was cleaning his nails with his blunt little silver pocketknife, which was a sure sign that he was about as riled up as he ever got.

Simon thumped his knuckles into the palm of his hand. "Road trip," he said. "We're going to Allentown, folks. Quick, nobody call Billy Joel."

"Billy who?" Mike asked, probably just to be an ass, but he was already packing his stuff up.

Eighteen hours later they were in Allentown, all checked into a motel on the east side of town and raring to go. Simon sent Sandra to badger the paperwork out of the poor properly-subpoena'd bank and Mike to go check out the little mailbox store.

"Box's there, Templar," Mike said, once he got back. "Little stack of letters in it and everything, I could see 'em through the window."

"Right," Simon said. "Right." The motel room smelled like ancient smoke and cheap cleaning products, but he didn't care. After thirty seconds of frantic pacing he stopped and slapped his hand on the listing wooden dresser. "Listen up, folks. Here's how we're going to handle this..."

In the end, it went down as smooth as silk. A pretty woman with long blond hair—'Chandra', ostensibly—came in two days later and opened the box with a key, retrieving the little stack of letters. Nate, currently 'working' behind the counter (in his little blue uniform apron, which Mike had teased him about endlessly) saw her do it; before she even got the mailbox closed again he'd hit the alarm on his belt.

Outside, things swung into motion. Sandra hit the door at the same time as the blond woman and managed to engineer a collision; in the midst of the confusion Sandra tossed one of their tiny radio trackers underhand into the blond woman's purse. By the time the woman left Mike and Johnny were waiting for her, Mike ducked down low behind the wheel of an idling car with Johnny slumped down in the passenger seat next to him. Radio transmitters sometimes failed. Chances were good that they wouldn't.

The rest of them bunched up in Simon's motel room and waited, watching the little blip on Nate's laptop until it faded, too keyed up to even generate commotion. Mike and Johnny came back two hours later, fired with success, Mike so high

on adrenalin that he hit the door running and had to be subdued via judicious punching. Johnny ambled in after him, just as Johnny as he ever was.

“Right on the border!” Mike cried. “Right on the fucking border, they can run like half a mile and be in New Jersey, out of the jurisdiction of damned near everybody who’s not in hot pursuit—”

“—except us,” Simon said. Success had him pumped to the point where he couldn’t stop flexing his fingers. “What’s it like? Where are we going?”

“Oh, man, Templar, you are not going to believe this,” Mike said, still bombing around the room and nearly tripping over people’s legs. “It’s a fucking abandoned apartment complex. Swear to God, a block of dead apartments like two miles from the nearest podunk town, I have no idea who’d build that shit there, I’m guessing it’s some kind of tax writeoff thing—” he stopped and whooped in a breath and kept going “—gimme some paper and I’ll sketch the place out for you, it’s more secure than it looks, they can see for like a mile in all directions—”

Simon snapped his fingers at Rich, who rolled his eyes and produced a legal pad. Nate scrabbled around by the side of his computer and dug up a pen; Simon snatched them both and spun on his heel, presenting them to Mike. Mike grabbed them from him and dropped to his knees with a thud, putting the legal pad down on the floor and rapidly sketching out a rough map. “Place looks deserted from the front,” he said, blocking in a line of parking spots. “I couldn’t stop long enough to see where she put the car, but I bet she pulled it around back or something.” Mike added an arrow to one side and labeled it NEW JERSEY, then after some consideration added an exclamation point. NEW JERSEY! “Guess it might just be a place to garage a couple of vehicles, but I dunno, Templar, it feels like the real deal to me.”

“Yeah,” Simon said. “Me too.” He dropped to one knee opposite Mike and studied the rough map. “Okay, folks, here’s the deal: we’re going in—or at least by—tonight. Don’t get too excited, just in case, but hell, if we find him, we’ll take him down. Okay? Okay. Everybody shut the hell up and go back to your rooms, get some sleep if you can; we leave here

♦ 22: Jeremy

at . . . midnight,” Simon said, blinking lazily at the ceiling, his hands folded on his chest. His voice had become slower and slower the further into his story he got; now, just at what Jeremy judged to be the exciting part, he was fading in and out, pausing for seconds at a time.

He stopped, his eyes drifting shut, and didn’t continue. Jeremy waited for almost a minute before softly prompting, “And?”

No answer. After a moment Simon snored out a thick sound, one hand slipping off his chest to thump laxly to the mattress between them. Jeremy glanced down at it, then smiled. “Honestly, Simon, your sense of timing is awful,” he murmured, wedging his pillow up under his head and closing his own eyes.

Simon was silent, save for the occasional snore. Jeremy reached out and laid his own hand lightly across Simon’s, his fingers resting across Simon’s palm; when even that failed to wake him, Jeremy mentally shrugged and let it go.

He drifted off to sleep with his hand in Simon’s, absently attending to the slow rumble of Simon’s breathing, just in case it should change.

He woke up two hours later, thanks to Simon poking him in the forehead and repeating his name over and over. “Archer. Archer. *Archer.*”

“Mm,” Jeremy said, blinking a few times and automatically reaching up to smooth his hair back. “Yes, *yes*, Simon, I’m awake, thank you. What time is it?”

“Little after one,” Simon said. He paused, considering, and then poked Jeremy’s forehead again.

Jeremy reached up and caught his finger. “Enjoying yourself?”

“Yeah, actually, I kind of am,” Simon said, promptly poking him in the stomach with his other hand. “I mean, I know I’m totally acting like a five-year-old here, but like you keep telling me, I am one right now. Plus I’m on pain medication and can’t be held responsible for anything I do. It’s the *law*. And I ought to know.”

“Actually, I said that you were behaving *like* a five-year-old,” Jeremy pointed out, grabbing Simon’s other hand. “The difference between a metaphor and a simile and all that.”

“Christ, what is this, English class?” Simon shook his hands free and, mercifully, stopped poking Jeremy. “Anyway. I feel better. Let’s go get some goddamned food before I realise how disgustingly *domestic* going to the grocery store with you is going to be.”

◆ 23: Dave

[monday]

He stopped in front of the door and automatically reached up to adjust his tie, hooking his fingers around the knot and resettling it yet again. For some reason, he couldn't take his eyes off the nameplate by the door. The Special Ops wing looked just like the wing he'd transferred from—plain white hallways, doors every twenty feet or so, inboxes mounted by each one—but instead of having the division name on it, the little white card in the bracket above the inbox here just said **107 Templar**. Someone had written **w00t!** beneath it, in pencil.

Dave frowned uncertainly. Now that he was actually here, in front of the door, he was nervous. Well, all right, he'd been nervous ever since he'd gotten his official transfer notice, but that had been more of an excited nervous. He'd been promoted to Field Division—to the *Special Ops* branch—to *Team Templar*! Dave had never felt so much like a rock star in his life as he had on Thursday when the news got out. (Of course, even the most jealous of his former coworkers had made a point of telling him that he was insane, but Dave had been diffidently angling for Special Ops ever since he joined the FBI and he thought he could probably handle it.)

No, this was more of a butterflies-in-the-stomach nervous. A stage-fright nervous. A *rock star* stage-fright nervous. Six months of doing his best to accept that the position was going to go to someone else before the blue sheet showed up on his desk. Of course he was bound to be a little nervous—

Abruptly he realized that he'd been standing here gawking at the door like an idiot for close to a minute. He glanced up and down the hall in embarrassment, hoping that no one had seen him; it wasn't quite eight in the morning, though, and the hallway was still empty enough to echo. Dave shook his head, tightened his grip on the handle of his briefcase, and knocked on the door. "Come in!" someone yelled from the other side.

Abruptly he shuffled his briefcase into his other hand and opened the door. Or tried to. It was surprisingly heavy, and he ended up having to put his shoulder against it to push it open far enough to stick his head into the room. "Hello?"

The room was empty save for the guy with his nose to his monitor just a few feet away from where Dave was standing. “Come on in,” he said, not looking up.

Dave edged the door open farther and shuffled himself in. Unthinkingly he let go of the doorknob and the heavy door swung itself shut with a muffled boom that made him jerk a little; the guy at the computer didn’t so much as look up. “Hang on a sec,” he said, and did something, and then something else, and then turned away from his computer to blink nearsightedly at Dave. “Can I help you?”

“I hope so,” said Dave, switching his briefcase back to his other hand. “I’m, uh, David Brassoff? I was supposed to start today?”

There was a pause, during which the guy at the computer studied him like he was some fascinating new species of insect. “Sandy’s in there,” he finally said, jerking a thumb at the empty doorway behind him. “She’ll get you—what’s the word?—oriented.” And before Dave could say anything else he twitched out an absent smile and went back to his computer.

“Thanks,” Dave told the back of the guy’s head. Edging around the corner of the empty desk in the front of the room he headed for the indicated door, stealing little glances around as he went. The place didn’t *look* particularly crazy.

The door (had it been there, which, as Dave discovered, it was not) led into a small and plain office much like most every other petty chief’s office Dave had ever been in. Dave stopped in the doorway. A pretty woman of about his age sat at the desk, flipping through a stack of papers, sorting them into piles; she didn’t look up. After a painful minute, Dave cleared his throat.

“Have a seat,” she said, still not looking up. “I’ll be right with you.”

Dave sat down, put his briefcase between his feet, and waited. He tried not to fidget and failed. After another minute or so she finished sorting the stack of papers; without any further ado she picked up the largest pile and dropped it into the trash, then looked up. “Nate!”

A chair screeched out in the main room and the guy from earlier appeared in the doorway. “Sandy?”

She held out a much thinner pile of papers. “Here, take these, sign somebody’s name to them, stick ’em in the outbox.”

Dave blinked. The guy named Nate took the papers and flipped through them. “Okay. I’ll sign ’em ‘Napoleon Dynamite’, how’s that?” Dave blinked again.

‘Sandy’ looked offended. “God, no, Nate.” And just as Dave was about to relax, she added, “What is it with nerds and that horrible movie? Pick something else.”

“‘Leonidas, King of Sparta’?”

She nodded. “Works for me. Just do it, I have to get the new guy here set up.”

“Okay!” ‘Nate’ departed. Dave was left only mildly at sea.

That taken care of, she switched her gaze, level and assessing, to him. Abruptly he felt very small. “I’m Sandra,” she finally said. “Sandra Leone.

‘Sandy’ is fine. So is ‘Springheel’, that’s my code name. Anything else and I’ll break your face.”

“Okay,” Dave said, because how else did you respond to that?

Sandra waited for a moment, then nodded and went on. “And I’m assuming you’re, uh, David Brassoff, the transfer.” Dave nodded, but before he could say anything else, she went right on. “Mr. Brassoff, before I go on, let me ask you something.”

“Okay,” Dave said again.

“Do you know what happened to the man you’re supposed to replace?”

“Some of it,” Dave said uncomfortably. “I know that he was, uh, shot and killed, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Sandra’s gaze was level. “Anything else?”

“There was . . .” Dave trailed off, frowned, made a helpless little gesture, and started over. “There was something weird about it. I don’t know what it was, I’m not, uh, in the loop there, but there wasn’t as much commotion over the shooting as there usually is, and all the files relating to the event have been labeled as, uh, classified information. That’s not unheard of, but it’s . . . unusual . . .” He trailed off, noticing for the first time how closely she was watching him.

“Yes, well,” she said briskly, dismissing the subject. “At least you have some idea of what you’re getting into, then. Mr. Brassoff, I’m going to be honest with you.”

Dave blinked. “Okay,” he said. He was saying that a lot.

“It’d probably be easiest on you if you thought of this as a temporary assignment.” Oblivious to Dave’s stomach dropping into his shoes she looked down at the bit of yellow paper on the desk. Dave could see his name typed neatly at the top. “We’re an extremely close-knit and hand-picked team, Mr. Brassoff—”

“Dave’s fine,” Dave said weakly.

“—what?”

“Dave’s fine,” he repeated.

Sandra waved that away with a little huff of irritation. “My *point*, Mr. Brassoff, is that Upstairs can’t just assign us a new team member at random and expect him to fit in. But he did. And by doing that, he’s put both us and you in a bad position.”

“Oh,” said Dave.

“For the time being, though, you’re on. Simon’s currently on medical leave—he’s recovering from a gunshot wound—”

“I know,” said Dave, his voice getting very small.

Sandra talked right over him, barely glancing up. “—so until he comes back at full capacity and can see about replacing you, we’ll give you a chance. I suppose you never know.”

“Thank you,” said Dave. His stomach hurt a little. How was he supposed to go back to Internet Crime after this?

“So!” Sandra said. Now she looked up, folding her hands together on top of the yellow sheet with his name on it. “Quick rundown of the basic ground rules. This team gets into some very hairy situations, sometimes without warning, so we require every member of this team to put in at least five hours per month down at the firing range and to carry their weapon at all times while on duty. That goes for acting members as well, Mr. Brassoff. I assume you carry?”

“Uh,” said Dave. “Yes’m.” His hand crept under his suit jacket and touched the shoulder holster there.

“Good. Moving on. If you take the last cup of coffee in the pot, you make more. The only person who is exempt from this rule is Simon. If Simon takes the last cup of coffee in the pot, whoever gets publicly caught noticing first makes more. Whoever gets here first in the morning makes the coffee and brings in the paper in the inbox. Put it on the desk here. Clear so far?”

“Yes’m,” Dave said again, his mind a whirl of coffee and paper.

Sandra smiled for a bare second. It didn’t look particularly friendly. “We’ll go over the rest if you survive, Mr. Brassoff. Now, then, as to what I’m going to have you doing . . .”

Ten minutes later she abandoned him, numbed and despairing, to the blank gazes of three computers. “I’ll introduce you to the other team members once we’re all here,” she said briskly. “Good luck. You’ll need it.” And just like that she was gone, her hair flickering out behind her like a pennant as she strode back into the doorless office.

Dave stole a covert glance left. The guy at the other, separate computer—Nate, apparently, which Dave supposed made him ‘Specs’—didn’t appear to be paying him much attention. By this point Dave was so embarrassed that he he could only be grateful for that. He put his briefcase down at the end of the smaller desk and let out as stealthy a sigh as he could get away with, struggling to snap himself out of his temporary paralysis.

So it was going to be like that. Two weeks, three at the outside, and if he hadn’t made an impression by that point he was going to be dumped back down into the desk brigade—well, fine. He shouldn’t have expected it to be that easy anyway. Dave nodded to himself. He’d just have to make the most of this chance he’d been given, that’s all, and try not to psych himself out.

This Story guy was supposed to have been some kind of freakish prodigy with computers? Dave had run across self-proclaimed computer geniuses every day of the week when he was back in Internet Crime, and he’d still managed to help prosecute a bunch of them. He could do this. Sure. First thing he needed to do was go down and talk to the guys in IT, see what they had to say about this guy and his computers, pick up a few things . . . after that it was just a matter of time, leverage, and psychology. And, if all else failed, brute force. He could do this. He *could*.

By the time he'd finished thinking all of that, he almost believed it. Straightening his shoulders and firming his jaw Dave grabbed the back of the chair and spun it around—

—the entire top half came slewing loose under his hand and crashed to the ground. Dave yelped and jumped back just barely in time to save his toes; the guy behind him made a little choking sound that sounded unpleasantly like an abortive laugh. Dave stared blankly down at the half-a-chair laying on the ground at his feet, his newly-won and shaky confidence draining away again.

Sandra stuck her head back out of the office. “What the hell was that?” she demanded to know.

“He broke Rich’s chair,” Nate said from behind Dave, his voice a little uneven.

“Uh, sorry . . .” Dave dug up a sickly grin from somewhere and picked up the top half of the chair, hefting it awkwardly. “I’ll, uh, I’ll take this out to the dumpster,” he said. He could barely hear himself for the roaring in his ears. “I’ll . . . come back for the other half.”

They both watched him silently as he floundered across the room, thighs bumping painfully into the half-a-chair at every step. The door was heavy (in his flustered state he’d completely managed to forget that) and he wound up having to inch it open a little bit at a time while balancing the half-chair against his hip; he scooted out as soon as he could and got the lever handle jammed into his stomach for his troubles. As soon as he managed to break free the door boomed to behind him, making him jump again.

Out in the mercifully still-empty hall, Dave stood and gasped at the closed door, absently cradling the seat against his chest like an awkwardly oversized puppy. Sweat broke out on his forehead. Could this be going any worse?

Abruptly he brought the chair up, banging himself sharply in the forehead with the padded seat back. It hurt a bit, but at least this time he’d meant for it to. “*Focus*,” he told himself severely. He squared his shoulders and hefted the half-a-chair, heading down the hallway towards the exit door; halfway there he noticed that there was now oily chair goo smeared across his shirt and tie, which didn’t surprise him at all.

♦ 24: Nate

Somehow he managed not to laugh until the door slammed itself shut. Even then it was just a little snorting sound, quickly choked back. Nate clapped a hand over his mouth and squeezed his eyes shut, going red and sweaty with the effort of not laughing.

After a minute the new guy's footsteps started up, heading away down the hall, and Nate managed to rein himself in for at least three more seconds before losing it; then he dropped his head onto his crossed arms and laughed until he wheezed.

"You did that, didn't you," Sandra said behind him. It was half accusing and half amused.

"Uh huh," Nate said, still pink-faced and wobbly. He brought up the timer function on his computer. "Oh, man, that was awesome, it's a pity the other guys missed it—"

"Shame on you," said Sandra, trying to sound severe. The laughing kind of ruined the effect, in Nate's opinion. "I hereby officially disapprove of this juvenile stunt. Consider yourself verbally reprimanded."

"Okay," Nate said, hitting the mouse to start the timer and bounding out of his chair. He had the new guy's briefcase tucked between his knees a second later, fumbling avidly with the locks. Like most people who actually used the locks on their briefcases, the new guy had set the numbers to 000 as a neutral starter setting; by using both thumbs on both locks Nate was able to test two sets of combinations at once, his head whipping back and forth.

After a pause Sandra came over to stand behind him and watch the process. She stayed quiet. Nate spun the wheels and tested the catches at a frantic speed, keeping half an ear out for the sound of returning footsteps. He wasn't even really looking at the wheels any more, just sinking into that rhythm, click-click, test, click-click, test...

The right-hand lock popped open at 655, jerking him out of the rhythm. "Ha! What a n00b," Nate crowed. "Time?"

Sandra leaned back and checked his computer. "Two minutes, seven seconds."

“Oh yeah, I’m the *man*.” Nate set the left-hand lock to 655 and pushed the catch release. It didn’t open. “Huh.”

“Hm?”

“He’s got a different combination on this side.” Abandoning the right-hand lock entirely, Nate redoubled his efforts on the left, only to jerk his head up at the sound of approaching footsteps. With a little yelp he slapped the right-hand lock shut and thumbed the dials back to 000, dropping the briefcase back where it had come from and nearly leaping back into his computer chair. A quick slap of his palm against the mouse and a secondary window hid the timer from view, and Nate still had time to take two long, deep, calming breaths before the door creaked slowly and apologetically open.

The new guy shuffled back in, head down, shoulders hunched, like he was hoping no one would pay any attention to him. Expressionlessly Sandra leaned in and plucked a pen off Nate’s desk and carried it back into Simon’s office with her, leaving the two of them alone; Nate focused his attention on his monitor and tried desperately to still the whooping hysteria that lurked just underneath his feigned calm.

Everything went quiet. The new guy glanced back and forth, then abruptly strode over, bent down, grabbed the bottom half of the ex-chair, and tried to pick it up. Nate heard him grunt and hunched his shoulders, nearly losing it.

The new guy straightened up, frowning. He kicked one of the casters lightly, then a little harder, then hunkered down and ran a hand over the wheel, trying to wedge his finger underneath. Nate couldn’t resist. “Problem?” he asked, hooking an arm over the back of his chair to watch the show.

“Uh.” The new guy straightened up and turned around, blinking. He was tall and kind of scrawny-looking, his regulation-cut red hair was starting to draggle across his damp forehead and rumple up along its neat part, and his pale eyes were wide and wild; in Nate’s opinion he looked like nothing so much as a semi-hysterical cartoon rooster. Nate nearly choked.

“No,” the new guy said, turning around again to look at the bottom half of the chair, the half of the chair that Nate had spent a good ten minutes painstakingly hot-gluing to the floor. “No problem.” And without any warning at all he hauled off and booted one of the chair’s legs as hard as he could, both rooster arms flying up to counterbalance the pistoning rooster kick. The hot glue gave, immediately and entirely, and the remnants of Rich’s chair hurtled backwards to slam into the wall, chipping and scuffing the industrial off-white paint before rebounding and nearly hitting the guy in the shins.

He swooped down and picked it up. “See? No problem,” he said, turning to face Nate; his eyes were even wider than before but his expression was oddly, crazily focused, and he hugged the chair’s base to his chest like someone had given him a present. “I’ll be right back,” the new guy promised, and he strode across the room and banged out of the saferoom door with something that was

either authority or insanity.

Nate stared after him, his need to laugh momentarily overpowered by awe. “He already broke,” Nate told no one in particular, listening to the rapid retreating footsteps. “I broke him. He hasn’t even been here half an hour and I already broke him.”

“That’s some kind of record,” Sandy said from the doorway to Simon’s office. “Mike’s gonna be pissed that you didn’t leave him any.”

“Guess I better do something to make it up to him, then!” And Nate flung himself out of his chair again, grabbing for the briefcase.

♦ 25: Mike

Mike pulled into the parking lot at ten to nine, purposely letting his car get lost in the sea of other not-quite-late arrivals. Let Farraday try and shoot him *now*—actually, the idea of Farraday getting chased down and ventilated by an actual army of irate FBI agents was an idea that was too fucking funny to waste, so Mike absently savored it while he maneuvered his car over to his usual parking area.

There was a spot left. There was always a spot or two left. Nobody liked parking over behind this wing of the building, for some reason. Something about collateral damage. Whatever. Johnny's beater was already parked back here, listing slightly to the left and lowering property values in the area just by existing; Mike pulled in next to it and kicked his door open with glee, putting yet another ding in what remained of the red paint on Johnny's passenger-side door.

His good mood thus ensured, Mike climbed out to have himself a nice stretch. He was halfway through it when he noticed that Johnny was still sitting in his truck, watching him expressionlessly and chewing on a toothpick. Mike choked back a laugh and wagged his fingers. "Whoops, sorry, Texas, didn't see you there!"

"Damn, Honda. My truck steal your girlfriend or something?" Johnny asked, hitching open his own door and sliding out.

"Nah," said Mike. "I just figure, you know, some day that thing's gonna be more dent than truck and then maybe something *quantum* will happen, you know?"

"You even know what that means?"

"Sorta?"

Johnny grunted and dismissed it, ambling around the back of his truck to join Mike. "New guy's supposed to come today."

"Shit, I forgot." Mike's good mood fizzled for a moment before rebounding, twice as large. He rubbed his hands together in anticipation. "Oh, man. This? This is gonna be *fuuuun*."

"Not for him," Johnny said, not quite grinning.

Nate was sitting cross-legged on the low concrete wall just outside the door. Waiting for them, as it turned out; the moment he spotted Mike and Johnny he hopped up, bouncing slightly on the balls of his feet as he waited impatiently for them to join him. “Oh, man, you guys,” Nate cried once they got close enough to hear. “I gotta tell you . . . !”

“Ooh, ooh, new guy?” Mike said, jogging the last ten feet to join Nate under the overhang. Johnny followed at his own, more leisurely pace, and they moved out of the way of the door to huddle up in a corner. Their fellow agents were filtering into the building in ones and twos, the card swipe beeping merrily, and not a single one failed to give the conspiracy a wide berth and a wary glance.

“He *already broke*,” Nate said in triumph, pushing up his glasses. “Swear to God it took half an hour.”

“Whaaaaat?” Mike wailed. “He broke already and I *missed it*?”

Johnny glanced at Mike and then looked back at Nate. “Spill.”

“Oh, man,” Nate said again, nearly laughing. “The chair got him, wait ‘til you hear—”

“*Awesome*,” Mike breathed once Nate was done explaining. “Hauled off and kicked it loose? In the middle of all those computers? Dude snapped.”

Nate nodded furiously. “For serious! And then he went back to normal once he calmed down some. Bet he thinks it’s over—bet we can break him again!”

Johnny snorted out a laugh. “And?”

Nate beamed at Johnny and gave him a thumbs-up. “Figured out the combination to his briefcase while he was dealing with the chair.”

“My *man*!” Mike cried, slapping Nate on the back so hard that his glasses almost fell off. “Anything unusual inside?”

Nate shoved his glasses back up. “No—”

“Not yet,” Johnny said, overriding Nate. Nate stuttered out a breathless laugh and nodded frantically.

“Yeeeeeah,” Mike said, his eyes going to slits. “Think I’m going *shopping* at lunch.”

Nate, still unable to breathe properly thanks to his giggling fit, poked Mike with a slip of paper. “Here,” he wheezed. “Combination.”

Mike took it and slid it into his breast pocket, glancing around surreptitiously. “You are the *man*, Specs. I’ll tell you if I change it. How’s Sandy taking it?”

“Officially disapproving,” Nate said, “but willing to look the other way. I think we’re probably good so long as no one loses an eye.”

Mike beamed. “Fuckin’ sweet. I needed this, you know? Some kind of . . . distraction.”

“Yeah,” said Johnny. “Poor dumb sonofabitch.”

Still snickering under his breath, Mike booted open the heavy saferoom door and bombed in. Sandra poked her head out of Simon's office and scowled at him, but Mike's attention was divided, and he dismissed the scowling with an absent beam and a wave.

The guy sitting at Rich's largest computer looked up and blinked mildly. And he was wearing a *suit*—"Hoo, check it out, it's a new guy," Mike told the room at large. Nate, behind him, stuttered into another nearly-hysterical laugh; Johnny, bringing up the rear, snickered and let the saferoom door slam shut. The four of them all looked expectantly at the wall they shared with Team Hall. After a moment, the new guy's eyes helplessly followed, but Team Hall was apparently disinclined to object to the ruckus at a moment, which left the new guy looking even more confused.

"So, new guy," Mike said, crossing his arms over his chest, "you got a name?"

"Uh. Yes," the guy said, blinking again. His eyes were so pale a blue that his pupils looked like tiny black dots floating in a sea of white; in Mike's opinion it made the guy look kind of crazy to begin with. "David Brassoff. Dave's fine."

"David-Brassoff-Dave's-Fine," Mike repeated thoughtfully. "That's some name." The new guy opened his mouth and shut it again, apparently thinking better of trying to correct him, which was a pity.

"Knock it off," Sandra said severely, punching Mike's shoulder. Mike yelped. Sandra ignored him. Dammit, she always did that. "Okay," she said, clapping her hands together like she thought she was Simon or something. "We're all here. Meeting now."

"Right," Nate said, sliding around Mike and heading for the big table. Johnny followed him. A moment later, so did Mike.

David-Brassoff-Dave's-Fine fumbled his way out of his own chair—stolen from the big table, Mike noticed, although by some stroke of luck he'd picked the one that Rich used to sit in—and picked it up, carrying it awkwardly over to join them. "Is here okay?" he asked, putting the chair back where it had come from.

"Yeah, that's fine," Nate said. David-Brassoff-Dave's-Fine nodded and sat down, only then realizing that by taking Rich's old seat at the table he'd put himself across from Mike. Mike squinted at him for a couple of moments and then bared his teeth in an enormous face-eating grin. The new guy blinked several times, but to his credit, didn't squirm too bad.

Sandra took Simon's spot at the head of the table. "Right," she said. "First things first. As you've all undoubtedly heard, this is Dave Brassoff, Rich's temporary replacement. Mr. Brassoff, let me just go around the table quickly." She flicked a hand at Mike, who beamed at her and then transferred that same loopy look to David-Brassoff-Dave's-Fine, who was still not squirming. "That's Mike. For the record, not that you'll need to know this, his codename is Honda."

"I'm the crazy one!" Mike volunteered.

David-Brassoff-Dave's-Fine made a little tiny sound that might, if magnified, have proven to be a laugh. "I've heard that," he murmured, showing what Mike thought was a creditable spark of courage lost in an abominable lack of a self-preservation instinct.

"He's *heard* that!" Mike cried, pouncing on it. "Holy crap, I'm famous in the desk brigade!"

"Infamous, probably," Nate said.

"Whatever." Mike ratcheted his grin up a couple of notches, past the point of all sense. "What have you heard? Tell me," he told the new guy. "I wanna know."

"Uh. Well—"

"*Later*," Sandra broke in. She pointed down the table at Nate. "You've sort of already met Nate, but let me make that official. His codename is Specs, and he's the one who knew Rich best, so you may want to see what help he can give you."

"I'll see what I can do," Nate said, smiling at David-Brassoff-Dave's-Fine, who smiled back in something like relief. "I hope I can help."

Mike, confronted with this evidence of Nate's complete and total two-facedness, hooted. Sandra shot him a glare just chock-full of imprecation and waved a hand at Johnny. "And that's Texas. Johnny."

"Yo," said Johnny, just barely cracking an eye open.

"Hey," said David-Brassoff-Dave's-Fine, raising his hand in an uncertain little wave.

"There's every chance that Simon will come by after lunch," Sandra said, dismissing both David-Brassoff-Dave's-Fine and the half-assed introductions briskly. "Remember: don't let him get too excited, and when I start telling him to go home, the rest of you *stay out of it*."

"Awesome," Mike said with some relief. "Man, it'll be good to have him back, even if he *is* some kind of helpless invalid."

Johnny grunted a little. Mike decided to take it for agreement.

"Okay," Sandra said. "So, on to business. Specs, you're still working on the gas receipts stuff?"

Nate heaved a sigh. "Yeah," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. "I should be done with it by the end of the day—it's just that there's so *much* of it and I don't have Rich's old sorting algorithms to work with."

"That's fine," Sandra said. "Honda, ballistics?"

"Got the report out of the lab, *finally*," Mike said, tossing his pen into the air and snatching it again as it fell. "I chased the bullet trail around a little on Friday, but didn't get anywhere, so I'm gonna keep chasing it today."

Sandra nodded. "Texas, I want you to get on the phone with the Pennsylvania state police and get them to go check out where that old hideout of his used to be. We all know he's not going to be there but I just want to be *sure*."

"Sure," Johnny said, nodding. Nate got very interested in his linked fingers all of a sudden; even Mike couldn't miss that. He reached over and swatted Nate's

shoulder in awkward solidarity, which made Nate's glasses slide precipitously to the end of his nose again. Nate smiled weakly and shoved them back up. Mike sat back, caught David-Brassoff-Dave's-Fine watching them curiously, and mouthed *What?!* at him. The guy flushed a little and looked away. Mike scowled a bit, although his heart suddenly wasn't in it.

"At least we know he's not at the place in New York, that's something. As for me, I'm still checking on all the known aliases that Farraday and his girls used to use," Sandra said, and then paused abruptly and pinched the bridge of her nose, sighing. "And getting nowhere."

"Yeah," Mike said, hunching his shoulders and feeling just a bit guilty. "It's like the guy went to ground."

"Yeah," Sandra said. "Maybe I ought to send you two back out to brace Diana Fontaine again. She's our only goddamn lead so far—"

"—and that's based on a fucking hunch," Mike hastened to add, looking down at his hands to avoid the look that Johnny shot him. To make his conscience pipe down, he added, "Although I've still got *something* percolating, shit, I just can't nail it, it's driving me fucking crazy."

"Well, I wish you'd nail it," Sandra said, huffing out another breath. "If you don't have it by the time Simon shows up, maybe you ought to run it by him, see if he can pin it down for you."

Mike nodded fervently. "Daaamn, but it'll be good to dump all my problems on the boss' shoulders again," he said. "This thinking for myself shit is for the birds."

"You said it, not me," Sandra said, shoving her chair back and standing up. "Let's get to work."

Nate and David-Brassoff-Dave's-Fine both stood up as well. "Uh," said David-Brassoff-Dave's-Fine. "I'm going to go down to IT and get them to tell me about the computers—"

"You don't have to tell me where you're going," Sandra interrupted him gently, but the new guy still hunched his shoulders like she'd snapped at him. He was a loooong drink of water; hunching up like that made him look like a folding ruler collapsing. Ignoring his reaction, Sandra went on. "If I want a status report, I'll ask for it. Otherwise I expect you to manage your own time. The only exception is if you're going somewhere that could possibly turn out to be dangerous—" her smile flickered; it looked pretty cold "—and I'm at least eighty percent sure that IT hasn't killed anyone yet."

David-Brassoff-Dave's-Fine blinked and nodded, his shoulders dropping. "Okay," he said tentatively, and then he straightened up all the way and said it again. "Okay." One hand crept up and straightened the knot of his stained and bedraggled tie—a fucking tie, it made Mike want to grab it and yank real hard—and then he left, only briefly fighting with the door.

The door closed behind him with barely a click, and his footsteps echoed away up the hall towards the main building. Mike looked at Johnny, then at Nate, then at Sandra, then whooped in glee and dove for David-Brassoff-Dave's-Fine's abandoned briefcase.

◆ 26: Sandra

Leaving the boys clustered around the hapless briefcase—and that’s what they were acting like right now, Sandra thought, *boys*—Sandra went back into Simon’s office, shaking her head. Not that she’d expected any better from Mike, of course. Nate, well, Nate had his immature moments (although when *Nate* did it, it was cute) and she had to admit that the chair thing had been funny. But now even Johnny was getting into it, and that, frankly, surprised her a bit. Although in retrospect she couldn’t say why.

Sandra sat down in Simon’s chair and sighed a little, waking up his computer and wincing at the pile of incident reports that had piled up during the meeting. She was glad that, as acting team leader, she was officially required to disapprove of this trial by fire; it saved her being dragged into the endless rounds of pranks. She didn’t like having this new guy foisted off on them either, but she was too busy (and too mature, thank you) to waste time with that nonsense.

On the other hand, she had to admit that if the new guy couldn’t survive *this*, there was no way that he’d survive being an actual member of the team. If he wanted to stay on, he could earn it. Picking up the yellow transfer sheet, she neatly ‘filed’ it in the trash can. “Sink or swim, Mr. Brassoﬀ,” she muttered under her breath, kicking the chair around and getting back to work.

Out in the main room, a calculating, pregnant silence fell. Sandra glanced up suspiciously, her fingers falling still on the keys. “*No physical harm*,” she yelled, just in case.

There was an immediate (and vaguely guilty) explosion of laughter, confirming her sick little hunch. “Awww, man, Sandy, you’re no fun!” Mike cried. “Not even, like, a finger? He’s got plenty of extras!”

“I am *sufficient* fun,” Sandra said frostily. “I just draw the line at *casualties*. Notice that I said nothing about mental, emotional, or collateral damage.”

Silence fell again, a good deal more awed this time. “Daaaaaamn,” Mike finally said, his voice fading slightly. “Lady is *cold*.”

“Sufficient unto the day is the fun thereof!” Nate said. “No, here, not yet, wait until after lunch—”

Sandra tuned them out and got back to work. Sometimes it was the only way to stay sane. Well, close to.

Amazingly, for once, she managed to get almost fifteen minutes of actual work done before her cellphone rang. Still staring at Simon's computer screen she groped around in her purse until she found her phone, flipping it open absently. "Sandra," she said.

"Goddammit, Sandy!" Simon's voice blasted out of the speaker, crackling with volume. "Where's my ID?"

Startled, Sandra jerked the phone away from her ear. Simon, unaware, just ranted right on. "Archer here says that *you* took it, not that I believe him, him being a fucking thief and all, but I've been shaking him down for five minutes now and he's not changing his goddamned *story*—"

"—he's not lying to you," Sandra said, raising her voice a little in order to make herself heard. "I have your ID."

The spluttering sound from the other end of the line made her bite her cheek to keep from laughing. Quickly, before Simon could regroup, Sandra plunged on. "However, if you'll just ask him, he'll tell you that I've provided him with his old guest ID—"

"—what the hell good does that do *me*—"

"—which I have had Security upgrade to level 5 access privileges—"

"—you gave *level 5 access* to Archer? You're fired—"

"—so that as long as you are properly escorted, you'll be able to go almost anywhere," Sandra finished, more or less shouting Simon down. Out in the other room the others were quiet; they were listening as hard as they could. She could just tell. Sandra modulated her voice. "I don't need to remind you that you're on medical leave and ought to be resting, boss. And I *know* you. If I'd left you with your ID you'd be trying to drive yourself over here every day and push yourself until you fell over dead at your desk, which I would, personally, find unsanitary. Well, guess what, I'm not having it."

The huffy silence from the other end of the line had that particular 'too infuriated to speak' quality to it. Sandra closed her eyes and waited for the storm to break.

"Jesus Christ!" Simon finally said, exploding. Sandra could just picture him pacing back and forth, flailing his free hand around. Simon's voice dropped to an accusatory growl. "You are all *conspiring against me*. All of you."

"Actually, we're conspiring *for* you, not that you care," Sandra said. "I'd bet you anything you care to name that you found out your ID was missing because you were trying to sneak out before your 'nurse' showed up."

Simon swore bitterly in her ear and slammed the phone down with a painfully loud bang (the only reason he kept a landline, in Sandra's opinion, was to be able to slam the phone down when he was pissed). Sandra jerked the phone away

from her ear a moment too late, wincing. She shook her head. "Love you too, boss," she told the screen of her phone, folding it away with a snap and waiting.

Her hunch paid off in under five minutes, her phone ringing again, an unfamiliar number displayed onscreen. She flicked it back open. "Sandra."

"Ms. Leone," Jeremy said, amused. "I don't know what, precisely, you told Simon there at the end, but I thought I ought to warn you that he's making horrible threats towards your person."

Sandra closed her eyes. "I'm used to it," she told him. "He's not as mad as he's pretending to be. Where is he now?"

"Stalked off in high dudgeon to get into the bath," Jeremy said. "Otherwise I'd never have dared to call you, I'm sure."

"Yeah, he may not be as mad as he's pretending to be, but that doesn't make him harmless," Sandra said. "Just don't let him get his hands on your guest ID. If he does, I hereby authorize you to take it away from him by any means necessary that doesn't actually put him back in the hospital."

Jeremy laughed. "I see," he said. "I'll have to start carrying the gas shooter again."

"... he would *kill* you," Sandra said, after a startled moment in which she found herself wondering if Jeremy meant it or not. He didn't sound serious, but she wasn't sure.

"Ms. Leone, I assure you that he would have to catch me first." He still didn't sound serious. That was the problem with him, Sandra thought: he almost never did. "In any case, you needn't worry. I have both my guest ID and the key to his car safely stowed away, and while I'm thinking about it—" something jingled faintly in the background "—now I have the rest of his keys, too."

"I do like the conniving-bastard way you think," Sandra said, opening her eyes and sitting up. "Try to keep him at home until after lunch, if you can."

"Shouldn't be a problem, I predict," Jeremy said affably. "After the enormous dicky fit he just threw, I should think he'll be worn out again by the time he finishes up in the bath. Poor fellow. Can't even get angry properly."

"Yeah, I feel so sorry for him, you have no idea." Sandra reached over and tapped one of the keys on Simon's computer, waking it back up. "Anyway, I've got things to do. Call me if he gives you more trouble than you can handle."

"Seems unlikely," Jeremy said, with the utmost good cheer, before hanging up.

An hour or so later, frustrated beyond belief with the lack of answers that her work was turning up, Sandra shut down Simon's computer and stalked back out into the main room. The new guy was still absent, as was Johnny; Nate was communing with the spirit of his computer or something and didn't so much as look up, and Mike was doing the same. With Nate, it was normal; with Mike, it

was really weird, and Sandra crossed her arms and stared at him until he noticed and looked up. “What’s up?” she asked.

“I think I got something,” Mike said slowly, touching the screen of his laptop. “I’m not just one thousand percent sure—”

“Let’s hear it,” Sandra said.

Mike nodded, still all weirdly serious, and looked back at his computer. “Ballistics records don’t exactly match anything in the NIBIN,” he said. “Course, that doesn’t mean that his gun’s clean, just means that it hasn’t been all properly reported and shit.”

“Right,” Sandra said, crossing to sit next to him.

Mike obligingly scooted back a couple of inches and shoved his computer over. “So anyway, I started looking at thefts and burglaries where a .22 was reported as stolen, right? So I work my way out in a spiral and I’m doing Virginia and look what turns up.” He tapped the monitor again.

Sandra leaned in, shoving her hair back behind her ears. “Theft report, a whole bunch of petty cash, vending machine food, and a .22, stolen from—” Her voice clicked off like someone had just flipped her switch.

“—Adams, Mackenzie, Procomo, Attorneys At Law,” Mike finished for her. “Two weeks ago.”

Sandra blinked rapidly. “That’s the firm Diana Fontaine works for, isn’t it.” It wasn’t a question. She knew the answer.

Mike clicked his tongue in irritation. “Sure as hell is. Goddamn that bitch anyway.”

“Yeah,” Sandra said, pressing one knuckle against her lips as she thought. “Call the reporting officer and get the details. Anything they’ve got, but mostly we need to know where that gun was being stored. If it wasn’t some place pretty goddamned obvious, then—”

“Then Miz Fontaine told him where to find it,” Mike finished for her, his lips skinning back from his teeth in a grimace. “Son of a *bitch*.”

Sandra glanced at him. “What are you so pissed about? I thought you’d be thrilled to have a chance to nail her to the wall.”

“Just pisses me off that she’s fucking with us like this, you know? ‘Less he did it just to scare her or some shit, in which case I’m still pissed, but less fucked with.” Mike flicked to the top of the report and squinted at it. “. . . shit, what the hell does that say?”

Sandra turned the computer towards herself and squinted at the ARRESTED BY box. “Christ, there’s a reason they’re supposed to type these,” she said in exasperation. “I guess we’re lucky it’s online at all. I think that’s an ‘M’ . . .”

Johnny ambled back in, coffee pot full of water in one hand. Mike waved at him over Sandra’s head. “Yo, Texas, come see if you can decipher this guy’s handwriting, will you? We need to know who the arresting officer is!”

Johnny grunted in acknowledgment and put the pot back down on top of the coffeemaker. Sandra pushed the laptop around to face him; Johnny leaned over the end of the table, squinted at the laptop, and said, "Naughton, Ralph M."

"Whaaaaat?" Mike grabbed the laptop and spun it back around, gaping at it. "Where'd you get that? How'd you *do* that?"

"No, no, I see it," Sandra said, hauling the laptop back around to face her again. "He puts an extra line into his 'N's for some reason and squinches all the round letters shut—"

"Plus it's typed at the top," Johnny added, heading back towards the coffeemaker.

Sandra and Mike both stared after him, then nearly knocked their heads together in their lunge to confirm this assertion. Sure enough, the general search terms were all displayed in neat (if small) type above the scanned-in copy of the arrest report; Mike slapped his forehead and slithered down in his chair, moaning out a pained little sound at the ceiling. "Fuuuuuuck, I've been workin' too hard!"

"Take a break," Sandra suggested, shoving her chair back and standing up. "Get a drink or something. When you're done, call Officer Naughton."

"Will do, demiboss," Mike said breathlessly, hauling himself back upright. "Want I should call Miz Fontaine afterwards and ask her what the hell's up with that?"

Sandra shook her head. "No," she said. "Save it up. If we ask her about it now she'll just deny it or claim he did it to intimidate her, and then she'll know we know. Let's hold it in reserve in case we need to ask her some hard questions later. More hard questions we've got, the better."

"Right!" Mike slapped his laptop closed and stood up, rising up onto his toes and stretching his arms lazily up above his head. His fingertips just barely brushed the ceiling. "I'm gonna run down to the machines and grab a drink. Anyone want anything?"

"I'm good," Johnny said, putting the now-empty pot back into the coffeemaker and jabbing the on switch. 'Mrs. Simon Drake (♥)' beeped cheerfully. Johnny patted her with vague affection and headed back to the table.

"Get me a Diet," Sandra said. Too much coffee had left her mouth feeling foul.

"Man, that shit'll kill you, Sandy," Mike said, just like he did every time. Sandra rolled her eyes; Mike grinned at her, unrepentant. "Nate-man? You want anything?" Nate didn't respond. Mike raised his voice. "Yo! Nate!"

"Eh?" Nate blinked rapidly, coming out of his monitor coma. "What?"

"I'm going down to the machines," Mike said patiently. "You want anything?"

"Um. Snickers bar." Nate pushed his glasses up. "And a Coke."

Mike made a gagging sound, ruffled Nate's hair, and loped off, the saferoom door slamming behind him.

♦ 27: Johnny

The good thing about waiting for a phone call was that it gave Johnny all kinds of time to think. Of course, that was also kind of the problem with waiting for a phone call, but Johnny didn't see how he had much choice but to wait. Wasn't like he could help Nate any or hold Mike's phone for him.

Leaning back in his chair he emptied his pockets onto the conference table, making a little pile of his things. Wallet, keys, spare clip plus one extra loose bullet—Johnny was privately of the opinion that anyone who carried, anywhere, ought to carry a last-resort round over and above everything else—cell phone, little bottle of toothpicks—he was packing cinnamon today, on the theory that switching things up kept life interesting—pocketknife, lighter . . .

Johnny paused, picked up his battered lighter, and flicked it open. He hadn't smoked in close to three years but he still carried his old Zippo, mostly because he never knew when he was going to be called upon to set something on fire. Least, that was his excuse. Considering, he flicked the wheel and got a flame. Still considering, he thumbed the lid shut. Then he added the lighter to the pile of things in front of him and patted his pockets, confirming that they were empty.

Across from him Mike was frowning at nothing, phone glued to his ear. Johnny switched to considering him for a moment. Man was digging himself a regular trench over there, and seeing as how he was going to fall into it sooner or later and maybe drag Johnny in after himself, Johnny thought that Mike should probably stop making it deeper. But no, on the subject of the lawyer lady Mike's mouth was still shut, despite everything. Maybe having Simon back would help. Johnny hoped so. He didn't precisely want to tattle, but Mike was putting him in a situation where the alternative was rapidly getting deadlier.

"Uh huh," Mike said. "Right. Gotcha. Thanks for your time. Call me if you think of anything else." He pulled the phone away from his ear and stabbed the END button. "*Fuck.*"

Sandra poked her head out of Simon's office again. "What?"

".22 was stored in the same drawer as the stolen petty cash box," Mike said, his face all screwed up with frustration. "Petty cash custodian is their sole in-

house accountant, with a big ol' name-plate on his door, right by the goddamned entrance. Which was forced, by the way, as was a fire exit."

"Can't tie it to Diana Fontaine directly, then," Sandra said, pushing her hand through her hair. "Still, it's a hell of a coincidence."

"Yeah, but that's all it is." Mike hefted his cell phone like he was thinking about spiking it off the table. "We bring that up and she's gonna skin us alive, being a lawyer-type lady and all."

"That's some accountant," Johnny said, picking his things up off the table and putting them back into his pockets again, one by one.

"Huh?" Distracted, Mike blinked at him, automatically reaching down to put his phone away.

"Guy's heeled," Johnny said, to clarify. "Try and rob petty cash, catch a bullet?"

It took Mike a second, which wasn't really like him, but eventually his face split into a grin. "Aw, man. Have Ledger, Will Travel! Guy is *serious* about his custodial duties!"

"Guess you get a lot of desperate criminal types in a criminal-law office, too," Johnny said. "Go figure."

"Was the gun registered to the accountant?" Sandra broke in impatiently to ask.

"Yeah," Mike said. His grin faded again. "All legal and everything, damn the luck."

"Do we know the make and model of the piece?"

"Yeah?"

Sandra heaved out a breath. "That's a little something, then. Go online, get some pictures of it. We'll show Simon. Maybe he'll remember the gun. What the hell, worth a try."

"Every little bit helps, I guess," Mike said dubiously, flipping open his laptop again. "Still, I'd just been shot in the gut, I guess I'd have better things to scream about."

"Texas?" Sandra said, ignoring Mike and turning to him. "What's the word with you?"

"Called the state police and got 'em rolling," Johnny said. "Said they'd call me back in an hour or so."

"So . . ."

"Any minute now." Johnny considered this, eyed the clock at the front of the room, shrugged, and dug out a toothpick. "Supposedly."

"Right," Sandra said. "I'll leave it up to you, then." She looked over at Nate, then glanced at Rich's old lair, still empty. "I'm going to get back to things," she said abruptly, and took two steps backwards before spinning on one heel and vanishing into Simon's office. Johnny watched her go, considering.

In the end, it took them another twenty minutes to get back to Johnny, his phone ringing while he was down at the water fountain. Johnny straightened up, swiped the back of his wrist over his mouth, and pulled his phone out of its holster. "Pilgrim."

"Hey, this is Officer Case, Pennsylvania State Police, gettin' back to you about your request?" The guy on the other end of the line sounded like a hardass in the making, in Johnny's professional opinion, but at least seemed to be one without any particular axe to grind right at the moment. "Anyway, me and my partner swung by like you asked, and I gotta tell you, there is *nothin'* here. You sure you got the right location?"

"Yep," Johnny said, momentarily shutting his eyes. "Ought to be a foundation, at least. Place was bulldozed under by court order after the fire."

"Ah—" Officer Case hesitated, blowing hard into the phone "—yeah, yeah, I can see the concrete. No sign of anybody here that I can see, though. Far as I can tell no one's even been dumping."

"Figures." Johnny leaned back, cracking his spine with a sound like gunfire. "Appreciate you taking the time to swing by. Takes a load off my mind."

"Hell, no skin off my dick," Officer Case told him, relaxing a fair bit now that business time was over. "Anything beats coopin' for speeders on 78. You know they linked those radar guns we use to cancer of the testicles?"

Johnny made what he figured was an appropriate sound of dismay. "Heard that," he said, heading back towards the saferoom. He'd also heard that it was a big crock of shit, but he figured it wouldn't be diplomatic to bring that up. "Job's not dangerous enough as it is, I guess."

"Shit, guess not. I always knew they were after my balls." Officer Case had swung around to sounding almost friendly, like he wouldn't be averse to shooting the shit some more. "Anyway, we're gonna head on out, 'less you need something else."

"Nah." Johnny stopped outside the saferoom door and leaned against the wall, poking his fingers into his shirt pocket in search of a fresh toothpick. "You take care. Keep your balls safe."

"You too," said Officer Case, hanging up with a clatter. Johnny, expressionless, folded his phone away and rooted around in his pocket until his groping fingertips found the last toothpick, trying to hide in the very bottom, lost in the seams.

Mike was gone when Johnny came back in, gone off to who knows where. Johnny automatically checked on Nate—lost to the world, as usual, half a Snickers bar abandoned by his keyboard—and then headed over to lean in the doorway to Simon's office. "State police called back."

Sandra looked up. "Anything?" She didn't sound too hopeful.

"Nah. Place is deserted. No dumping, even."

“That close to New Jersey? *That’s* unusual.” Sandra sighed out a short and irritated little breath and looked back at Simon’s computer. “Damn it, something’s gotta break soon. We’re just running around in circles.”

“Hope so,” Johnny said. He straightened up and glanced over his shoulder. “Got anything else for me?”

Sandra shook her head, automatically shoving her hair back behind her ears afterwards. “Not this close to lunch. Take off early, if you want. Simon’s coming in this afternoon; maybe he’ll put us onto something.”

“Right.” Johnny hesitated. It was on the tip of his tongue to say something about Mike, since the man was out and all, but in the end, he didn’t. Wait and see what happened when Simon came back, first.

♦ 28: Simon

Simon pushed impatiently past Jeremy pretty much the instant Jeremy swiped his guest ID through the card reader, grabbing the door's handle and immediately regretting it. In general he was fine as long as he wasn't moving his arms too much or breathing too deeply, but the minute he made pretty much any muscle try to work in concert with any other muscle, he got scorched by an arc of pain that punched in just under and to the left of his sternum and radiated outwards from there in the general direction of whichever muscles he was trying to move.

It was infuriating. *A goddamn dinky-shit*.²² he raged silently for about the four hundredth time, hissing in air through his teeth in little sips as he clumsily manipulated the door open. *I took a 9mm shell in the shoulder once and I get laid this low by a fucking*.^{22?} *Christ!* Jeremy was waiting patiently behind him. Simon was torn. He wished Jeremy would hurry up and open the door for him because he hated having to stand here and struggle with it like an invalid; he also wished Jeremy would hurry up and try to open the door for him so that Simon could rip his head off for it. It was one of the few pleasures currently available to him, after all.

Finally the door swung past Simon's ear and Jeremy's hand flashed out, curling about the outer edge and pulling it the rest of the way open. "Took you long enough," Simon muttered, without any real force to it. It was petty and he didn't care.

"Terribly sorry," Jeremy said from behind him, not meaning it. Simon snorted and hauled his carcass into the building, relaxing significantly once he was breathing the canned office air. It wasn't until the outer door swung shut behind them that Simon realized that the next door he was going to have to fight with was the saferoom door. The heavy saferoom door. In view of his entire team. And Jeremy. Oh, yes. Today was going to be wonderful.

Resigning himself to the inevitable, Simon headed off down the hallway, sort of vaguely hoping that Jeremy would (or would not) have the gall to move ahead and open the door for him. "I'm just going to pop in here for a moment," Jeremy said instead, peeling off and heading towards the men's room. "I'm sure you

know where you're going, so go ahead. I'll be along in five or so." And the bathroom door whuffed shut behind him before Simon could say a word.

Simon paused and eyed the bathroom door narrowly. He had the sinking, sneaking suspicion that Jeremy's sudden disappearance had some kind of ulterior motive, but he wasn't sure what it was. It was either something really low-down and dirty or something really well-mannered, the kind of manners that are so fine as to be completely invisible. Simon *hated* that. Jeremy would do something offhand and casual and it would take him three months to realize that it had really been Jeremy being all *Jeremy* and avoiding some kind of nonexistent crisis of bad manners by taking steps to prevent it half an hour in advance. Maybe it was a British thing. Simon didn't know.

Fighting down the random and counterproductive urge to wait right where he was until Jeremy reappeared, Simon headed off down the hallway again at a brisk and unsatisfying hobble. A proper stride required a certain amount of arm movement, goddammit. Walking around with your arms held stiffly by your sides looked stupid and felt worse. It made him look like he was stalking around angrily. ... all right, so being crippled like this *made* him angry, so what?

At least the door problem got solved for him, and by the person that was, frankly, going to be the easiest to deal with. Johnny was lounging outside the saferoom, chewing on a toothpick and staring at the screen of his cellphone. As soon as Simon's stumping footsteps registered he looked up, the lines on his face rearranging themselves into what passed for a smile, for Johnny. "Yo," he said, pushing himself up off the wall.

"Hey, Texas," Simon said, bracing himself. "We going to shake hands or are you going to insist on treating me like a fucking invalid too?"

"Might as well shake," Johnny said. "Sure as hell ain't gonna hug you. Might kill you."

Simon snorted. "Oh, fuck you," he said, sticking out his hand. Johnny's face wrinkled up a bit further and he slapped his hand into Simon's. It barely hurt at all. "Who all's inside?" Simon asked, jerking his head at the door.

"Everyone but the new guy," Johnny said, dropping his hand.

Simon paused. "New guy," he finally said.

"Yep," said Johnny. "Kind of a squirrely fellow, you want my opinion."

"Good squirrely or bad squirrely?"

Johnny gave this some consideration. "Squirrely with potential," he finally said.

"Potential," Simon said, and snorted.

"Eh." Johnny looked down at his feet, then away over Simon's shoulder, then back at him. "Just sayin'."

Simon watched him scan the area and a couple of things belatedly fell into place. "You're out here standing watch, aren't you?"

Johnny's face remained largely unreadable. "Maybe."

“Are they doing something I don’t want to know about—” Simon halted and shut his mouth. “Wait,” he said. “It doesn’t matter, does it? I’m on medical suspension.”

The toothpick slowly rolled to the other side of Johnny’s mouth.

“So I’m not the boss right now,” Simon said, struggling with this amazingly liberating idea. “I don’t have to take responsibility for anything they do to him.”

The toothpick rolled back, then quirked up as Johnny busted out with an actual grin. “Go on in, then.”

“Yeah,” Simon said. “Yeah, I think I will. You wanna get the fucking door already?”

For a heartbeat of time just after Simon rolled in (just a hiccup, really) you could hear a pin drop inside the saferoom. Before Simon could even begin to formulate a grouchy response to the staring, however, Mike yelped out an ecstatic “*Boss!*” and flung himself out from behind the table, crossing the room in long loopy strides with his arms thrown wide. “Boss! Boss! Boss—”

Simon warded him off with a hastily raised forearm, which hurt, but not as much as the potential alternative. “You touch me and so help me God I will scream and bleed and *kill you*.”

Mike screeched to a guilty stop a couple of feet away, letting his hands fall to his sides again. Then, because he was Mike, he reached out and ruffled Simon’s hair with exaggerated care. Simon snorted and arthritically smacked his hand away. “You look like crap, boss,” Mike said happily, falling back a step.

“Yeah, well, I feel like crap, isn’t that a hilarious coincidence?” Simon said. His chest was throbbing dully now but he was determined not to show it. “Nate, you can stop trying to hide whatever that is behind your back. I’m still on medical leave and am not technically required to give a shit.”

Nate, sitting on the floor by Rich’s lair, hiccupped out a laugh and sheepishly scooted an open briefcase out from behind himself. It looked like a perfectly ordinary briefcase, as far as Simon could tell (not that he saw very many in the course of a day), but a couple of brown paper bags sitting by Nate’s foot suggested that it would not look ordinary for long. “Hey, Templar,” he said, embarrassed.

“Hey yourself,” Simon said. “Uh. You doing okay?”

The little embarrassed smile vanished and Nate ducked his head, scowling. It was such a weird expression to see on Nate’s face that Simon automatically bent to double-check it, which really, really hurt. “I’m fine,” Nate said petulantly. “I’m okay. Really. Why does the guy who got shot have to go and ask me if *I’m* all right?”

“I think Nate’s tired of us all trying to babysit him at once, not that I can blame him,” Sandra said, appearing from out of Simon’s office. Simon gritted his

teeth and pushed himself back upright. "Hey, Templar. Honda's right. You look like hell."

"I had no idea you guys paid so much attention to my pretty face," Simon said. He was vaguely irritated, but considering how he'd thought this might go, only vaguely. He didn't even mind too much when Sandra came over and smoothed his hair back down for him, although he swatted at her, too. "So!" he said brightly, nudging Sandra away. "I hear we've got a new guy!"

"David-Brassoff-Dave's-Fine," Mike said, twirling his finger by his temple. "Total headcase. There's gonna be a newspaper article about him some day where his neighbors talk about how quiet he always was."

"Man, you should have seen him dealing with the chair," Nate added, glancing towards Rich's empty lair and away.

"The chair? Where's Rich's chair?" Simon asked, then thought better of it. "... never mind. I don't want to know. And if you're going to do something to that briefcase, you better hurry."

"Oh! Right!" Nate grabbed one of the big paper bags and upended it on the floor, producing a pile of random items, half of which Simon didn't recognize. The Dustbuster was pretty easy, though. Simon decided that he did not want to know, and decided that he *really* did not want to know when Nate plucked a large canister out of the pile and crumpled the open end of the empty bag closed around its nozzle. The paper bag ballooned out to full size with a loud WHOMP when Nate pushed the nozzle down. There was a hiss and sizzle like bacon cooking. Simon so, so did not want to know.

Outside the door he could just barely hear the dim buzz of conversation, and Simon braced himself for the inevitable. The door swung open and Jeremy let himself in and for the second time that day the saferoom went all quiet. "*Archer?*" Mike finally said, breaking the silence. "What the fuck?"

"I suppose you could say that I'm playing chauffeur for the time being," Jeremy said pleasantly.

"Yeah, okay, I knew someone was looking out for Templar, but..." Mike trailed off there, boggled, and flailed his arms around for a second. "I just don't get why it's *you*," he finally said.

"Boy," Simon hastened to add, "neither do I."

Jeremy smiled. "I suppose you could say that I made the mistake of asking Ms. Leone if there was anything I could do to help, since I was, er, in between jobs at the time."

"That's what you get," Sandra put in.

"It's not *quite* that simple, though. You see, I don't quite feel as if I've earned my entire fee for the last time, given that I didn't have much to do with the actual arrest," Jeremy said.

"Yeah, don't know what we paid you for," Simon muttered under his breath, turning away.

Jeremy's eyes flicked towards him, then away. "So, actually, I've been looking for a way to earn the remainder ever since," he concluded. "Or, at least, to make myself feel as if I'd earned it. Because I wasn't going to give the money *back*. I consider that to be poor business practice."

Mike snorted. "Shit, you're babysitting Templar when he's wounded? You'll fuckin' well earn it, all right."

"Duly noted," Jeremy said, heaving out a sigh.

Paper crackled behind Simon, distracting him from the grumpy comment he'd been about to make; Nate had stuffed the open end of one of the bags into the open end of the other and was transferring the contents. Simon really, really, really did not want to know. Jeremy, on the other hand, leaned back, all the better to see what Nate was doing, and Nate pinkened a little at the sudden attention. "Leaving the new guy a present," he said sheepishly, waving the bag.

"The new guy?" Jeremy asked.

Nate hesitated, then became very involved with what he was doing, namely, crumpling the top of the paper bag closed around the mouth of the Dustbuster. "Some guy they sent to replace Rich."

Jeremy winced and looked away. "Ah," he said.

"Yeah," Nate said, and turned on the Dustbuster, sucking a large part of the air out of the bag with a loud crackle. He frowned at it, laid it in the open briefcase, and frowned at it again. "Hey, Honda, come push on this, will you? I need to get more of the air out."

"Sure thing!" Mike said, loping over and dropping to his knees. Together they managed to compress the paper bag to Nate's satisfaction, and Nate picked up a large clip of some kind from the pile and fastened the bag shut.

"What are you doing?" Jeremy asked.

Sandra immediately threw up both hands and retreated towards Simon's office, hands still up like she was at gunpoint. "I don't want to know," she announced to the room at large. "I just don't."

"Yeah, me neither," Simon said, watching Sandra go with a twinge. Wasn't that his line? "Course, there's nothing I could do to stop it if I *did* know."

"That means you get to stay!" Mike said happily.

Nate laughed and started peeling the paper bag away in long brown strips, revealing a shrunken mass of black stuff beneath it. Small oblong shapes were clearly outlined by the black stuff, compressed to within an inch of their lives. When the entire paper bag had been reduced to a pile of shreds by Nate's foot, Nate carefully laid the black mass in the briefcase. It just barely fit. "Combination's changed, right?" he asked Mike, pushing his glasses up.

"Yep!" Mike poked him with a scrap of paper. "Here's the new one."

"Thanks," Nate said absently, putting the scrap of paper in his shirt pocket. He eased the briefcase's lid shut. Well, after a while he was forcing it shut, and eventually he couldn't push it any farther. "Honda, sit on this, will you?"

Mike's grin was instantaneous. "Aw, man, I'll sit on anything you ask me to, Specs," he warbled, dropping his ass onto the briefcase even as Nate went a vibrant pink. Jeremy's mouth twitched, but he didn't say anything.

Coughing a little, Nate clicked the locks shut, and Mike rolled off. The briefcase groaned but held its ground, a long tongue of the black stuff jutting out over its handle. "Nice briefcase," Nate said, patting it. "Very well-made."

"All right, I can't stand it any longer, I have to ask: what is that . . . blackish stuff?" Jeremy hunkered down beside them.

"Don't tell him," Simon immediately said. "He'll just use it in commission of a felony and then you'll feel bad."

Jeremy turned on his heel and looked up at Simon, his expression about halfway between 'amused' and 'reproachful'. Nate, not really noticing, just turned around and started sorting through the pile. "I don't think it really has a name, anyway. Mostly just a chemical designation. I got it off the bomb squad—"

"—oh, Christ, is this one of Tesseract's toys?" Simon broke in. "Because if it is, I am just going to go stand out in the hall with Johnny, where it's safe. Safer."

"Uh," said Nate.

"On second thought, I don't want to know," Simon said, and took a couple of steps back, just to be prudent.

"Anyway, it's a liquid detonator, basically," Nate said, fishing a lighter out of the pile of things on the floor. Simon took another giant step backwards. Nate didn't notice. "But see, what's so neat about it is that it's not really explosive on its own. It just burns away instantaneously. You can't even use it to set paper on fire, because it burns away *that fast*."

"Interesting," Jeremy said under his breath, picking up the canister and studying it.

"And it's kind of like strong rubber assuming it doesn't touch fire, so it can be sprayed out in strings across doorways, stuff like that. It also means that it can be used to make a makeshift bag—" Nate fired up the lighter and touched it to the end of the black stuff. There was a dazzling flash and the briefcase jumped about an inch in the air, thumping back to the ground a second later. "—which can be put inside something else and then burnt away, doing no damage and leaving almost no trace," Nate concluded triumphantly, patting the quivering briefcase. It groaned. Mike whistled in awe. Nate blinked. "Wow. That's total torque waiting to happen."

"Keeping in mind that I don't really want to know," Simon said, "what's in there?" He came back over; it seemed safe enough, now.

Nate looked up at him, shoving his glasses up again. "Um. How about 'you'll see' as an answer? Is that okay?"

Simon considered that. "I can accept it," he proclaimed.

Nate carefully thumbed both combination locks back to 000, then stood the briefcase upright at the end of one of Rich's desks. The pile of paper scraps went

into the other bag, followed by the pile of assorted items. "I need that back," he told Jeremy, holding out a hand.

Jeremy curled the hand holding the canister back against his chest. "Are you certain?"

"Now look what you did, Specs," Simon said, nudging Jeremy's hip with his toe and utterly failing to set him off-balance. "You set off the thief."

"No, seriously, give it back," Nate said. "If I don't give it back to Robin by the end of the day he won't help me get my HWL shoulders."

Jeremy's face went totally blank. Mike immediately leaned in and clapped a hand to Jeremy's shoulder. "Believe me," he said, "if you value your sanity, *don't ask*." Jeremy glanced at Mike, then handed over the can without another word.

Nate bunged the canister into the bag with everything else and hopped to his feet, stashing the bag in his equipment closet and shutting the door. "Okay, I have *got* to get back to work," he said, slapping the dust off his pants legs. "Unless . . . are we meeting?" He raised his voice and looked right past Simon. "Sandra, are we meeting?"

"Not yet," Sandra called back. Simon blinked. Definitely his line. "I'm still trying to relight these fires. Someone go fetch Johnny back in now that whatever didn't just happen is over."

"On it," Mike said, hopping up.

"Okay!" Nate edged past Jeremy and plunked down in front of his computer, waking it up. "I'm redoing all the search parameter stuff that Rich did last time," he told Simon. "It'd sure be nice if I had his old algorithms to work with."

Simon glanced over at Rich's dark and silent lair and went a bit quiet. Nate hunched his shoulders. "Yeah," Simon eventually said. "It would be, wouldn't it."

♦ 29: Jeremy

Jeremy slipped away, leaving Simon and Nate to their little impromptu conference. It was none of his business in any case, to be certain, but he didn't quite feel like wandering the halls of a major FBI hub without a clear destination in mind, so he thought he'd hang about until someone tossed him out of the room.

He went over and fished about in the cabinet underneath the coffee-maker, wondering as he did if what he was looking for was still here. And it was: his fingers closed on a fat handle a moment later and Jeremy drew out a black coffee mug, still reasonably glossy and new, and—he sniffed at it critically—not particularly in need of a wash. Wonderful. Jeremy stood back up and got himself some coffee.

It was terrible coffee. It always was. Jeremy wasn't all that fond of the stuff in the first place (although he did have to admit to liking both the side effects and the various reactions it eked out of Simon) and the coffee that got brewed in here tended to sit around on the burner slowly scalding until someone drank the last of it and made more. Which wasn't ever *too* long, in his experience, given how hot Simon generally was for his coffee, but it was doing an already-crippled beverage no favours whatsoever.

He turned around, face-first into a look from Simon that was mostly glare but partially, underneath, like that of a kicked puppy. Very carefully keeping his face neutral, Jeremy raised the mug in a silent toast and went to sit down with it.

Mike and Johnny joined him at the conference table a moment later. Jeremy shut his eyes, sipped his coffee, and waited for it. As it happened, he didn't have to wait long: "How'd you find out, anyway?" Mike asked, most of his attention ostensibly focused on his computer.

"Mm?" Jeremy opened his eyes. He knew very well what he was being asked, but he played dumb anyway. "Find out about what?"

"Templar," Mike said, nodding towards Simon's back. "I mean, I'm pretty sure they kept the shooting quiet and all..."

"Ahh," Jeremy said, nodding as if a light had just dawned. The little not-a-lie came so easily: "I've got into the habit of, er, checking in on occasion, to see if

there are any little jobs on offer.” Entirely true. Not a thing about that statement was a lie. It also didn’t have a damned thing to do with how he’d found out, of course, but Mike’s face cleared and he nodded, drawing the preferred conclusion. Jeremy smiled self-deprecatingly and added, “Of course, this isn’t entirely what I’d had in mind, but my timing *does* seem to be impeccable.”

“I’ll bet,” Johnny said. “He thrown anything at you yet?”

“Not recently,” Jeremy said innocently.

“No,” Simon said in exasperation, thumping heavily into his chair at the head of the table. He caught his breath audibly, sighing it out a moment later. Jeremy winced. “I have not thrown anything at anyone,” Simon went on, when he could. “Despite everyone and their mother telling everyone else and *their* mother that I’m about to. Christ, Texas, I *said* I was sorry about that.”

“Yeah, I know,” Johnny said, his eyes drifting shut. “Doesn’t mean I gotta let it go, though.”

The safe-room door clicked open. Somehow, in some way, it managed to be an apologetic click. Jeremy glanced over his shoulder as the door squeaked quietly open and someone he didn’t know edged in, gingerly balancing a large CPU on his hip and a bulging canvas bag slung over one shoulder. The room went quiet for a moment, then Nate looked over his shoulder. “New guy’s back, Sandy,” he called.

“Thanks,” Sandra said from Simon’s office. “We’ll meet here in a sec. No one get too involved with anything.”

The room went quiet again. Jeremy glanced at Simon, who had magically acquired a piece of paper from somewhere and was concentrating on it with remarkable single-mindedness, ignoring the man who was currently trying to edge his way all the way across the room without calling any attention to himself. Of course, this normally would have ended up calling a lot of attention to him, but everyone seemed to be studiously ignoring him: Johnny was apparently asleep in his chair, Mike was staring at his laptop, Nate was still at his computer, and Sandra was hiding in Simon’s office. And Simon, of course, had his bit of paper.

Jeremy had never seen it get quite this quiet in here before. It was an ominous quiet. He felt a brief stab of enormous pity for the target of all this silence—not enough pity to do anything about it, of course. It wasn’t his place, now, was it? Instead he directed his little smile down at his mug, waiting.

The quiet stretched out until the air felt thin. Simon flipped over his piece of paper. It was the loudest sound in the room. Eventually the poor fellow managed to sidle his way into the little fortress of computers in the corner of the room and started trying to put his burden down quietly, which was, unfortunately, currently nearly impossible. The CPU hit the larger desk with a metallic thud and the bag slithered down to lean against the wall. For a moment the stranger stood helplessly inside the computer nook, arms akimbo like he didn’t know where to

put them, then he picked up the chair from the middle and awkwardly toted it over to the table.

Of course, there was no place to put it now. With Jeremy sitting in the 'guest spot' and Johnny having moved down accordingly, that side of the table was full. Hugging the chair against his chest the new fellow looked around, frowned, then obviously made some sort of decision and wrestled the chair around to the foot of the table, edging Nate's chair aside, putting his own down, and sitting down.

It was definitely odd to see him there, in the spot that Jeremy had always thought of as Rich's. (For one thing, the new fellow must have been almost a foot taller.) And if it felt odd to *Jeremy*, well, it had to be quite jarring to the rest of them. Experiencing a resurgence of that wave of pity, Jeremy glanced in the new fellow's direction and smiled; the new fellow looked startled and then confused, but he returned the smile uncertainly, whispering out a 'hi' that was no louder than a breath and still managed to sound entirely too loud.

Jeremy looked back down at his mug. Oh, dear. The man was doomed.

"Meeting," Sandra said briskly, appearing in the doorway and shattering the silence. All around Jeremy the room came back to life, shifting and muttering and coughing; Nate pushed back from his computer and joined the rest of them, forcing the other fellow to shift his chair over a bit more. Sandra dropped into her usual spot opposite Jeremy and put a small pile of papers on the table.

Jeremy cleared his throat. "Should I go?"

"Stay if you want," Sandra said. "Nothing top-secret about this. Plus as long as you're helping Simon out there's always a chance you're going to run into this asshole yourself, and you might as well know what you're up against."

"Fair enough," Jeremy said, settling back in his chair. The new fellow, he noticed, was staring at him curiously, his brows beetled in either thought or concentration. Ah, well, he didn't know who Jeremy was or why he was allowed to stay, that was to be expected. And Jeremy knew quite well that he didn't look at all like an FBI agent, since unlike most FBI agents of his own personal acquaintance, he actually knew how to dress himself.

Sandra nodded. "First things first," she said, gesturing absently down at the far end of the table. "That's David Brassoﬀ, he'll be working with us for a while, at least until we get this Farraday crap dealt with."

"Dave's fine," David Brassoﬀ said weakly, raising a hand in a nervous little wave.

"David-Brassoﬀ-Dave's-Fine," Mike said under his breath, and sniggered. Jeremy managed not to wince.

"Mr. Brassoﬀ, this is Simon," Sandra said, flicking her fingers in Simon's direction. "Templar, our team leader, when he's not on medical leave."

For a long moment, Simon didn't respond, just kept staring down at his bit of paper. Instinctively Jeremy stopped breathing, a *don't-notice-me* reflex so old as to be entirely automatic. Finally, slowly, Simon looked up, his expression

completely, severely neutral. His stare caught Dave and froze him solid, leaving the poor fellow blinking rapidly at the other end of the table, terrified into stone and not quite realising why; after a long, long moment Simon nodded once, brusquely, and looked back down at his paper. Dave wilted and let out a breath. After a moment, so did Jeremy.

“And *that*,” Sandra said, nodding at Jeremy, “is Jeremy Archer, who free-lances for us on occasion—”

“—wait,” Dave said, blinking again. “Wait. Jeremy *Archer*?”

“Yes?” Jeremy said, forcing an innocence into his voice that he really was not feeling. Oh, dear.

“I thought he looked familiar!” Dave said, all his hesitant mannerisms charring away in the sudden fire of his certainty. Good trick, thought Jeremy; bad timing. “Jeremy Archer! Profile number, uh, um, AJ-45, I think! Art Theft’s had his file open since 1996!” His eyes were as wide as saucers and he was pointing one shaking finger at Jeremy. “Thefts reported from, um, something like fifty countries, totalling over ninety-one million dollars!”

“A hundred and seven, actually,” Jeremy said pleasantly, folding his hands around his mug.

Dave recoiled slightly, the pointing finger drifting down to indicate the table instead. “What?”

“A hundred and seven,” Jeremy repeated. “Your files must be out of date.” A couple of faint snickers drifted across the table. “Actually,” Jeremy went on, now enjoying himself quite a lot, “I’m afraid that number’s a bit misleading. While the official Interpol total is a hundred and seven million dollars’ worth of stolen goods, any number of those items have been either officially overvalued or undervalued for various reasons, mostly having to do with insurance, tax fraud, and matters of national pride—” Mike hooted and buried his face in his crossed arms “—and really, if you add in the numerous items that haven’t been properly reported for one reason or another or haven’t been officially linked to me, the total is much closer to a hundred and *forty*-seven million, although again that’s a misleading number—” Sandra was smiling tightly down at her papers “—but as a rough estimate, it’s acceptable,” Jeremy said, finishing with a flourish and a perfectly innocent smile.

“My *point* is that he’s a known felon with a huge number of outstanding warrants!” Dave said, his voice spiralling up in pitch. “He’s been number one on Art Theft’s most-wanted list since before I worked there!”

Mike’s head popped up like a manic jack-in-the-box. “*He was in Art Theft!*” Mike howled, laughing like a jackal until he collapsed back down into his folded arms.

“I *started* there,” Dave said defensively, now trying to speak over the waves of stifled laughter. Jeremy maintained his perfectly innocent smile only with an effort. “I didn’t stay there long! But that’s not my point: *why is he here?*”

At the head of the table Simon jerked his head up and slammed his open palm to the table with a sound like thunder. The laughter cut off instantly, leaving only its swiftly-dying echoes behind. “*Mr. Archer and the FBI have reached an agreement,*” Simon snapped, the edge in his voice sharp enough to behead yourself on. “His file has been suspended until such time as he’s caught breaking the law within the borders of the United States again, and his presence here is *officially sanctioned.*” He didn’t actually add *and he’s more welcome here than you are*, but Jeremy would have been willing to bet that everyone at the table heard it anyway. Really, he was charmed, even if he was also not breathing again. Simon paused, lasering the poor fellow with his stare again, and then said, “Any other questions?”

Dave shrank in on himself until he was a small huddle in a bad suit at the far end of the table. Really, for such a tall fellow, he made quite a compact package. “Uh, no, sir,” he said, his voice equally small.

“Good,” Simon said, and looked back down at his paper, dismissing Dave utterly. After a moment, Jeremy dared to breathe again.

◆ 30: Sandra

Sandra was the first to recover, although she was still pretty shaken. “Well, now that that’s been dealt with,” she said briskly, glad that her voice seemed to be steady, “let’s get on with this meeting, shall we?”

Across from her Johnny shook his head slightly like he was waking up from a bad dream, and Mike glanced from Dave to Simon and back, whistling out a low sliding sound under his breath. Sandra ignored it all as best she could. “First, I think we need to bring Templar up to date on what we’ve been doing. I’ve tried to keep him updated in general terms, but I think he’s up to hearing the details by now.”

“That’d sure be nice,” Simon said without looking up. “I stay out of the loop for one minute longer and I’m gonna snap and kill someone.”

“I believe we’re aware,” Jeremy said under his breath.

Eyes still focused entirely on his paper, Simon pointed an accusing finger at Jeremy. “You shut up,” Simon said. “You’re still not funny.”

Without another word, Jeremy touched a hand to his chest and bowed over it. Simon’s eyes slid right—Sandra could just barely see it—and then returned, inevitably, to the piece of paper in front of him. Sandra wasn’t even sure what that *was*, but he certainly seemed interested in it. Clearing her throat, Sandra jumped once more into the breach. “I’ll start,” she said. “Most of what I’ve been doing is Simon’s usual purview: keeping every law enforcement officer within a hundred miles of here informed and on the lookout, and sorting through the incident reports in case someone missed him. Since Nate’s busy reconstructing all of Rich’s old data-collation methods, I’ve also been hitting up the records databases and chasing names around . . .”

It took the better part of an hour, but once Johnny finished outlining the gist of his call to the Pennsylvania state police, they were done. Sandra glanced at Simon and saw, to her general alarm, that he had dropped his face into his hands. “Simon?” she said, reaching out to touch his arm. “Are you all right?”

“Mike,” Simon said, which was absolutely no sort of answer at all. Confused, Sandra glanced at Mike; Mike had hunched up his shoulders and was looking guilty, which only left her more confused. “Goddammit, Mike,” Simon said, rubbing his hands down his face with a little scratchy sound. “What did I *say*?”

Instinctively, Sandra went very still. Whatever was coming, she wasn’t going to like it, and she wasn’t going to like it because this was the first she was hearing of it. Because she couldn’t watch both Simon and Mike at the same time, she instead settled on watching a point halfway in between, a few square inches of table near Jeremy’s interlaced fingers—*I wonder if he gets those manicured?* she thought absently, and then banished the stray thought.

“Uh,” said Mike. “Yeah, I know.”

“What do you know?” Sandra asked, her voice quiet and very, very calm.

Although she didn’t look at him (didn’t exactly trust herself to look at him, right now) she was exquisitely aware of Mike folding in on himself beside her. “Crap,” he said, equally quiet.

“Mike,” Sandra said. Forcing herself to speak over the roaring static that was threatening to paralyze her was very hard, but still, she made herself do it. “What do you *know*?”

On the other side of her, Simon cleared his throat. “Okay, folks,” he said. “Listen up. Here’s how we’re going to handle this.” Sandra shut her mouth with a little click of teeth and automatically deferred to Simon, although the beginnings of honest anger were starting to burn through the paralyzing static. Simon glanced at her, then looked down at Mike. “Mike, start over. Tell us everything from the beginning. Don’t leave anything out. The rest of you? I don’t want to hear a word. Not a word. As long as we’re in this meeting, we are going to handle this information calmly and reasonably, like professionals, do you hear me?” Simon fell silent, looking around the table. After a moment, Sandra nodded and folded her hands very tightly together, and one by one the others followed suit (save for Dave and Jeremy, who had both gone completely still).

Sandra looked down at her hands. Her knuckles were white with tension. Beside her, Mike shifted, rubbing a hand down his face and then folding his arms protectively over his chest. “Uh. Okay. So. Last Thursday when Texas and I went out to Fredericksburg to see Diana Fontaine, I was hanging out in the hallway afterwards . . .”

He finished, eventually. Sandra had started folding and refolding her hands about halfway through Mike’s deadpan recitation; her fingers made little dry slithery sounds as they slid against each other, but no one seemed bothered by it. In fact, most of them seemed to be politely looking elsewhere.

“Is that it?” Simon said, a thousand miles away on her right.

Mike cleared his throat uncomfortably. “Yeah, that’s all, so far.”

"Okay," Simon said, putting both hands flat on the table. Sandra waited for him to say it again, because he always did, and he did not let her down: "Okay," he said again. "Sandy? You okay? Still with us?"

"I'm good," she heard herself say. As far as she could tell she said it with no conscious input whatsoever. "I'm angry, but I'm good."

"That's fine," Simon said. "I can work with that. Hell, I'd worry about you if you *weren't* angry. But for the time being I need you to put that aside for me, okay?"

"I'm *good*," Sandra said, flaring momentarily at Simon because she could not currently afford to start getting angry with Mike. "I don't need a pep talk. Let's just get on with this."

Simon nodded and sat back, absently reaching up to rub his side and wincing a little. "Okay, then."

"Sorry, Sandy," Mike said, his voice very small.

"Shut up," Sandra said crisply. "We'll talk later."

"Okay," Simon said, leaning forward again and effortlessly taking the conversation back. "So now we all know that we have one very definite lead. Thing is, I don't know how much we can trust her. Personally, I'm voting for 'about as far as Nate can throw her', but you know me, I don't trust anybody who's not one of you guys. Uh, some of one of you guys." Jeremy laughed under his breath.

"I dunno, boss," Mike said. "I mean, yeah, I totally hear you, but you haven't heard her, she sounds pretty fucking well on the level—"

"I haven't *heard* her because you didn't tell Sandy, so Sandy didn't know to have your conversations recorded," Simon said, gently enough. "Here's the thing, and you guys tell me if my logic is missing a step: whether she's telling the truth or just fucking with us ultimately doesn't matter, because either way she's still currently in contact with him. If it's the truth, she's genuinely scared of him, right here, right now. If she's fucking with us, he put her up to it; she wouldn't just decide to do this on her own." He paused. "Does that ring true to you guys?"

Everyone was quiet for a moment, thinking this through. "Yeah," Nate finally said. "The progression seems logical."

"And hey, I count on you for all my logic needs, Specs," Simon said. "Anyone have anything to add?"

"Sounds about right," said Johnny. "She's kind of a bitch, but not that kind."

Simon nodded. "So we have a lead of some kind. Next thing we have to do is follow up on it . . ." He trailed off there and grimaced, reaching up to rub his side again. Sandra reached out to touch his arm again; Simon shook her hand off with a scowl. "I don't have long and I still have to go see Upstairs," he said rapidly. "Sandy's still in charge, and believe me, I mean that, but here's what I'm recommending: Nate, find some way to make recordings off Mike's phone. I know it's a cell, but do what you can. If we have to we can diddle up the payphones she's been using, but that's the kind of thing I don't need to know

about.” Nate nodded. Simon went on. “Someone needs to get back in touch with Amanda Winston, and by ‘in touch’ I mean in person. He may have contacted her since we did or he may not, but either way, she needs to know that he is still at large and that we have a definite lead on him being in contact with another woman. I suspect that’ll goose her but good in our direction, particularly if he hasn’t contacted her at all.”

He paused, glancing around. No one said anything. Even though Sandra knew she ought to do something to take back control, right at the moment she didn’t trust herself enough to do so. “Right,” Simon said, nodding. “You guys get to work, and for God’s sake keep a tight eye on Diana Fontaine. Sandy, I want you to go down to the machines and get yourself a drink *before* you tear into Mike, and that is not an order but it is a very firm request. Mike, you stay here and you prepare to take it like a man. Archer, give me my pills.” Jeremy promptly stuck a hand into his jacket and came out with a small orange bottle, which he handed to Simon. Simon closed his fist around it. “Okay. I’m going to go take these goddamned things and then I’m going to limp upstairs and check in and probably get scolded for it. I’ll be back in fifteen, twenty minutes. Archer, you stay here.”

“Gladly,” Jeremy said, settling back in his chair.

Simon nodded. Tucking the pill bottle into his jeans pocket he put both hands flat on the table and slowly, painfully eased himself up out of his chair, for a long moment hunched over like he’d just been punched in the gut; Sandra reached for him and stopped herself just in time, although her hands hovered impotently nearby until Simon had managed to get himself upright again. “Come on,” he told Sandra, wheezing a bit. “I need a drink myself. Walk me down.”

Faced with that bald request, Sandra couldn’t help but comply. She stood up as well and edged around Simon, preceding him to the door and opening it for him; the door shut behind them with a soft *whoomph* of displaced air, like the room had been holding its breath and had just let it out.

◆ 31: Nate

Once he was reasonably sure that Sandra wasn't actually about to kick the door down and throttle Mike, Nate slumped down in his chair. "Oh, boy," he said under his breath.

"You said it," Johnny said.

Nate glanced towards Mike. Mike was sitting just where he'd been left, staring off at nothing, his mouth ever so slightly ajar. Nate winced and looked away again, embarrassed for him despite everything; sure, what he'd done had been pretty stupid, but he was really going to pay for it now—"Aw, *fuck!*" Mike wailed, dropping his head to the conference table with a thump and folding his arms protectively over it. "You guys, I'm toast, I'm dead meat, she's going to pound me into some kind of gruesome unidentifiable paste—"

"Is that vengeance or breakfast?" Jeremy asked, raising both eyebrows.

Mike's self-pity train derailed with a snort of laughter. His head popped up a moment later and he heaved out a huge sigh. "Man, I'm so doomed. Doomity doom doom doomed."

"What just happened?" Dave said faintly. Nate, startled, looked over at him for the first time since the meeting began; he looked like he was frozen in place.

"Bad stuff," Mike said, scruffing his hair back into place. "Look, no offense, David-Brassoff-Dave's-Fine, but it's not really any of your business, 'kay?"

"Yeah," Dave said, exhaling. "I get it. So, uh, I think that I probably don't want to be here when she gets back, so, uh . . . later." He shoved his chair back and stood up, inching awkwardly around Johnny (who didn't bother to actually move) and heading for the door. Nate watched him go, really wishing that he'd thought of that first, kind of vaguely impressed that Dave had had the nerve to articulate the idea at all.

The door closed behind Dave with a notable lack of slamming. Nate, deciding that the better part of valor was having something else to look at while Sandra was taking Mike apart, made for his computer. Even the aggravation of redoing all of Rich's old work beat having to be an embarrassed witness to a fight.

"Do you want me to go as well?" Jeremy asked, behind him.

"No, no, you stay," Mike said fervently. "If there's someone here who's not *us* I think she'll go easier on me, maybe. So you stay riiiiight there, okay? And try and look conspicuous."

"Mm," said Jeremy. "That's not really my forte, you realize."

Nate laughed a little, bringing up the next massive set of spreadsheets and getting the whole merge going. After that, there was really nothing to do but wait, so he turned halfway around and cocked his elbow over the back of his chair. "Man, did you *see* the look Templar gave the new guy?"

"Fucking *brutal*," Mike said happily, somehow managing to put his own impending doom out of his mind for the moment. Nate would have loved to know how that was done. Worrying was pretty much his hobby and his second job.

"Harsh," Johnny said, in what sounded like general approval. "Good to have him back."

"Oh, damn, you said it," Mike said. "I feel more, what's the word, *motivated* already. I feel *led*. This is awesome."

Johnny eyed Mike askance and chewed on his toothpick. "Man, Sandy hears you say that, you're losin' a limb."

"I'm going to lose one anyway," Mike pointed out.

"Another one," Johnny amended. "A bigger one."

"... ohGodnotmydick," Mike wailed, hunching over and folding both arms over his crotch. "I don't want to lose my dick! It's what I *think* with!"

Nate coughed out an embarrassed laugh and then found it extremely prudent to turn back around at this juncture and stare at his monitor until his ears stopped roaring quite so badly. Behind him Jeremy said something, he didn't quite hear what, and then Mike whooped out a laugh, and it was only sheer bad luck that the blood stopped pounding in his ears at about the same time as Jeremy said, "In any case, would you mind answering a question for me?"

"Go for it," Johnny said. "Better be a short one, though. Sandy's gonna come back any second."

"Point taken," said Jeremy, and then perversely stopped talking altogether. "I've been getting the story of this Farraday in disconnected bits and pieces, you understand, and it's made me quite curious," he finally said. "Simon's told me a bit, but he's much too busy recuperating to tell me the whole thing."

Nate's fingers stilled on the keys. "Uh huh," Johnny said, his voice extremely neutral. "What all you got?"

"The last bit I heard was the lot of you setting out for this abandoned apartment complex that he'd holed up in," said Jeremy, and Nate's hands closed into fists so fast that his short nails scraped along the keyboard with a loud plasticky clatter. He felt more than saw the others glance in his direction, but suddenly he didn't dare turn around. "... ah," Jeremy said, after a strained moment. "This is a bad question."

"Kinda, yeah," Johnny said. "Next part's not mine to tell in any case."

“And it’s none of my business, is it,” said Jeremy, letting the last word trail off like he expected someone to deny it.

“There’s that, too—”

“—I’ll tell you,” Nate said, his voice all abrupt and way too loud. “Okay? I’ll tell you. It’s okay. Just . . . can I . . .” He faltered, briefly, then plunged on. “. . . can I tell you later?”

For a moment the room was silent except for the little noises that meant they were all shifting around in their chairs. Three people were staring at the back of his head, and it made his skin feel tight and hot. “You don’t have to tell me at all,” Jeremy finally said. “But I’d be obliged for the information.”

“It’s okay,” Nate said again, his eyes very firmly on his monitor.

Johnny cleared his throat. “You sure?”

“No,” said Nate, “but I . . . I think he ought to know. Like Sandy said, as long as he’s helping Simon . . .”

“Course, long story short, Farraday’s a fuckin’ psycho and probably oughta be shot on sight,” Mike said, jumping back into the conversation. “Still, uh, there’s saying it and then there’s proving it, right?”

“*Later*,” Nate said, with such an unusual edge to his voice that even Mike shut up.

♦ 32: Sandra

Sandra saw Simon off to the second floor before she headed back, chivvying him into the elevator rather than letting him climb the stairs by himself. He took it with reasonably good grace, all things considered; well, reasonably good grace for Simon, which meant Sandra bore the brunt of a lot of pointed grumbling. They were already in front of the elevator banks, waiting, by the time Simon looked over and finally brought it up. “You cool?”

“I’m not going to kill him, if that’s what you mean,” Sandra said. So much for not having to talk about it.

“Yeah, mostly,” said Simon. His half-empty bottle of water dangled forgotten from his right hand, scissored between his first two fingers. “Go ream him out some. He deserves it. Just . . . once you’re done, you’re done, okay? Kick his ass and let it go. We can’t afford for you to carry a grudge here. Gotta work together and all that rah-rah bullshit.”

Sandra stared at him for a moment. “I know that,” she finally said. “Don’t you think I know that?”

“Yes, I ‘think you know that’,” Simon said, his brow furrowing. “I’m just trying to make sure—”

“Jesus Christ,” Sandra said, putting a hand over her eyes. “I am so sick and tired of people second-guessing my ability to *lead* this fucking team!” Her hand slashed away from her eyes to cut a furious swath through the air. “You know what, I know I’m not *you*, okay, boss, I know that, but first I find out that Mike’s been keeping stuff from me because he doesn’t think the chick can *handle* it—”

“—hey—”

“—no, don’t you ‘hey’ me, it’s true and you know it, even if he’s dressing it up as honest concern for me, okay?” One of the elevators dinged and rumbled open, a couple of business-casual women from some desk platoon accidentally stepping out into the eye of Sandra’s wrath. Sandra noticed them in much the same way that she might notice an ant on the sidewalk: something to avoid stomping on, if at all possible. “And now I’ve got you giving me one of those friendly little ‘reminders’ of yours, like now *I’m* Mike and you’re having to

remind me why telling reporters to eat my dick is generally a bad idea! Christ, can't anyone have any faith in me any more?"

She fell silent, breathing hard through her gritted teeth. The elevator doors started to rumble shut again; without looking Simon shot out an arm and pinned them open, then hissed in pain and hunched his shoulders. Sandra's anger immediately keeled over and died. "Okay," Simon said, wheezing a bit, "you done?"

"Yeah," Sandra said, looking away. "Yeah, I'm done. I'm sorry, I'm just—"

"—pissed off, yeah, I get it, it's cool," said Simon, edging over until he was standing with his back against one of the elevator doors. "And honestly, I figured you'd handle it right without needing to be told, but the boss reflex dies hard, you know?"

"Yeah, I guess so." Sandra glanced at him, then away again.

"For what it's worth, I do have faith in you, okay?" Simon transferred his bottle of water from one hand to the other, then reached out and put his free hand on her shoulder. It was a little cold, still. "I wouldn't have put you in this position if I didn't think you could handle it."

Sandra looked back at him, her expression going flat. "You put me in this position because everyone else on the team is either psychotic or Nate," she said. "That doesn't necessarily imply that you think I can handle it."

Simon looked at her for a moment, then finally said, "Sandy, if we have to have this conversation now, I should probably let the elevator go."

Startled, Sandra glanced into the open elevator. "Oh. Oh, right. You should probably go on up—"

"I *do* have faith in you," Simon said, squeezing her shoulder. "Period. End of story. Thirty-three. Not just 'more faith in you than I have in the others', and for the record, I have a lot of faith in them too, although maybe not quite the same kind. Okay?"

"Okay," Sandra said, closing her eyes and nodding.

"Awesome," Simon said. He let his hand drop. "Go tear Mike a new one. That's an order."

Sandra smiled, just the slightest bit. "Boss, you're not allowed to give me orders right now. I'm the boss."

"Like hell," Simon said. "Just because you're the boss doesn't mean I'm not the boss. Anything else?"

"Yeah," Sandra said. "Thirty-three?"

Simon stepped back into the elevator, letting the doors start to slide shut. "You tell anyone else I minored in journalism and you're fired," he said, and then the doors closed and the elevator hummed away.

It wasn't a long walk from the elevators in the main lobby to the Special Ops wing, but it was long enough. Sandra spent the first half of the walk remembering

just why she was so goddamned pissed, and the second half reining it back in. By the time she hit the saferoom again, Sandra was more or less in control of her anger, reshuffling her priorities in a way that Simon would probably not approve of. “Sandy—” Mike started to say, but she flicked out a hand and stopped him in his tracks with a brusque gesture, not looking in his direction.

“Archer,” she said.

Jeremy looked up from his coffee, blinking in mild surprise. “Yes?”

Sandra jerked her head towards Simon’s office. “Come on, I want to talk to you before Simon comes back.” Jeremy obligingly scooted his chair back and stood up; Sandra’s glance cut from Jeremy to Mike. “And you,” she said, “I’ll talk to you in a minute. You stay right there.”

“Okay,” Mike said hesitantly. He looked scared as hell. Sandra approved of that.

Without another word she led Jeremy into Simon’s office, wishing that there was still a door to shut. Oh, well. “How’s it going?” she asked without any preamble, perching on the front of Simon’s desk. “Can you handle it? Do you need help? Advice? Money? Weaponry?”

“It’s no problem,” Jeremy said, spreading his hands. “He’s been something of a right bastard, yes, but it’s nothing I can’t handle. Or, I suppose, nothing has happened *yet* that I can’t handle.”

“Nice save.” Sandra glanced towards the open door, then back at Jeremy. “He’s got a doctor’s appointment tomorrow morning, right?”

“At ten, yes,” said Jeremy, nodding. “I believe I remember where the hospital is.”

Sandra smiled, briefly. “I should hope so,” she said. “When do you have to leave?”

“Around nine-thirty, I suspect—”

Sandra held up a hand. “Not for the hospital. Sorry. I mean in general. How long can you stay with him?”

“Ah.” Jeremy’s head ticked thoughtfully to the side; he started absently fiddling with the cuffs of his jacket. “To be honest, I don’t *have* to leave at any particular time. I have a bankbox back in Japan that needs, er, emptying, but frankly, the longer I let its contents sit, the better. So . . .” He heaved out a breath and tilted his head to the other side. “I had thought that I would stay at least until the upcoming weekend. I can stay longer, if need be, but perhaps we ought to let Simon’s condition dictate that.”

“Sounds fair. I can set something else up if I have to, but the longer you can stay, the larger a load you’re taking off my mind.” Sandra paused, watching Jeremy fuss with his cuffs. “You haven’t actually *seen* Farraday lurking around, have you?”

Jeremy hesitated. “I don’t believe so,” he finally said. “At least, I haven’t seen anyone who resembles the description you gave me.”

Sandra could hear the unspoken ‘but’ as clear as day, so she spoke it. “But?”

“But I’d like to see a photograph of him, if you happen to have one handy,” Jeremy said. “At the moment I’m just looking out for twitching fellows with baggy eyes and bleached hair, and if he should dye his hair some other color I’m afraid I’d overlook him entirely.”

Sandra snapped her fingers. “Good point,” she said briskly. “Well, we can set you up there. We’ve got mug shots, candid shots, video footage, the works. I’ll get Johnny to walk you through.”

“I’d appreciate it.”

“And now, if you’ll excuse me . . .” Sandra hopped down off Simon’s desk.

“I suppose Mr. Takemura would prefer it if I said ‘no,’” Jeremy said, but he stepped back out of Sandra’s way.

“Texas,” Sandra said, powering back out into the main room with Jeremy in tow. “Take Archer here through the case photo archives, will you? I want him to be able to know Farraday if he sees him, just in case.”

“Right,” Johnny said, swinging his feet down off the conference table and reaching down for his laptop. “Video too?”

“Video too,” Sandra confirmed. “Show him what Farraday looks like, sounds like, and moves like. The more reference material he has, the better.” Johnny nodded. Sandra swung to Mike, who was hunched over in his corner like it would make him invisible. “All right, Mike,” she said. “Come on.”

“Huh?” Mike blinked rapidly.

Sandra made an impatient gesture. “Come on,” she said again. “Let’s go have us a talk, as Simon would put it.”

Mike slowly edged back his chair and stood up. “Where are we going?” he said nervously, glancing over at the doorway to the mat room.

“No, not in there, as satisfying as it would be. Outside,” Sandra said. “For privacy.”

It was a sure sign of how worried Mike was that he didn’t jump on that last line dick-first. Instead he just nodded, looking around the room like he was afraid this was the last time he was ever going to see it, and then dragged ass over to where Sandra was standing. Sandra waited until he got there, then spun on her heel and led the way out into the hall.

Mike trailed silently behind her all the way down the hall and out into the parking lot, literally dragging his feet, his sneakers making little squeaky scuffing sounds as he shuffled along. It was both annoying as hell and kind of retardedly charming—actually, that summed up Mike pretty well in general, Sandra thought. Once they got out under the covered entrance, she stopped. Mike stopped behind her, like the world’s squeakiest shadow. “Okay,” Sandra said. “Why don’t you start?”

“Huh?”

Sandra sighed and turned around, linking her hands together behind her head. “Do you want to say anything before I tear into you?” she said, rephrasing the question. “You know. Any last words?”

“Oh,” Mike said, looking down at his feet. “Uh, how about ‘oh shit’? Or I could be down with ‘aw crap, I’m really sorry’ . . .”

“Second one’s likely to get you farther,” Sandra pointed out tersely.

“Yeah, I . . .” Mike trailed off there and jammed his hands in his pockets, making his wallet chain jingle. “Crap, Sandy, I *am* sorry, okay?” he said plaintively, staring off somewhere to her left. “You were getting all stressed out with the boss crap and then I didn’t think it was going to turn out to *be* anything—”

“So you just sort of decided what you were and weren’t going to tell me?” Sandra broke in, jerking her hands out from behind her head so fast that she pulled some of her hair by accident. It didn’t do much to help her retain her temper. “Because I was so ‘stressed’?”

“I guess so,” Mike agreed, abashed. “I didn’t mean for it to happen like this! It just kind of snowballed, okay? And Miz Fontaine’s all up in my grill begging for time and waving her little lawyer dick in my face and I guess I got kind of confused—”

“Confused!” Sandra announced to the world in general, flinging both hands out in an exasperated gesture. “Okay, since you’re so *confused*, I’m going to spell it all out for you nice and clear. Listen up.” She jabbed Mike in the sternum with one stiffened forefinger, making him yelp a little and rock back half a step. “I. Am. The. Boss!” she announced, jabbing him again with each word. Mike hunched up his shoulders and took it, looking thoroughly miserable. “Until Simon is officially back on duty, it is me who is responsible for everything. I am the one who has to make every. Single. Goddamned. Decision. And I can’t make the decisions if you’re knowingly hiding things from me!”

“I’m sorry—”

“Stop being sorry!” Sandra nearly yelled it. “Stop being sorry, and *think*! Do you have any idea what could have happened? What could still happen? Any one of us could be the next one to get shot by this lunatic, and since thanks to you we’ve lost *five goddamned days* that we could have been working the Diana Fontaine angle, that would make it what?”

“ . . . really fucking terrible?”

“*Your fault!*” Now she *was* yelling; with an effort of will she wrenched her temper back under control. “All right! Not entirely. But if he does hurt someone else, you are going to be partially at fault for that, because it was you who delayed the investigation. There’s no getting around that. And you know what else?”

After a moment, Mike hesitantly asked, “ . . . what?”

“If he shoots someone else before we manage to subdue his ass, the official blame isn’t going to stick to you,” Sandra snapped. “It’s going to stick to me. So

thank you. Because you didn't think the chick could handle it, you've potentially damaged my credibility and my career, which happens to be of some personal importance to me even if it's currently a secondary concern!"

By this point Mike looked so lost and overwhelmed that Sandra almost felt sorry for him, somehow. He really *was* that clueless, she knew that. He didn't think things through very well. He never had. "I didn't think you couldn't handle it," he said weakly.

Sandra pounced on that with claws extended. "Yes, you did," she said. "You said as much yourself, how I was getting 'all stressed out with the boss crap'. I vent at you to blow off some steam and next thing I know, you've convinced yourself I actually can't handle this shit! You purposely withheld vital information from me because it might give the little lady the fucking vapors! Christ."

"That wasn't—"

"—yes, *it was!*"

"I was worried about you!" Mike cried, jerking his hands out of his pockets and flailing his arms wildly. "Not because you're a chick, although you totally are, but because you were so stressed out! Okay? I really fucked up, I get it, I'm sorry, but I didn't do it because I think you need sheltering or some shit!"

"Then why'd you do it?" Sandra snapped, her voice thin.

"Because I thought it was going to be nothing!" Mike's jaw snapped shut and he stuffed his hands back into his pockets. "I thought we'd find him sooner than this," he said weakly. "I thought for sure something else would turn up or he'd do something stupid or . . . I don't know. I guess I was hoping never to have to deal with Diana Fontaine again and then things completely exploded in all directions from there and it got harder and harder to tell you."

"Because I'd yell at you."

"Because you'd yell at me. Which, uh, I totally deserve, by the way, in case you don't think I get that." He tried smiling, weakly.

"Well, now, here I am, yelling at you. So I guess it was all for nothing, huh." Sandra crossed her arms over her chest. "You know what really fries my eggs about this?"

Mike eyed her warily, the little twitchy smile fading. "What?"

"You've been jumping through hoops for *Diana Fontaine*." Sandra nearly snarled the name. "When it came down to a choice between helping me out and helping *her* out, you chose her. Apparently I came in second to a woman who tried to put you in jail and nearly got you fired! If you still value her over me, Christ, I have to wonder what I did to you to deserve that!"

Mike's eyes went wide. It just made Sandra tired. He hadn't thought of it that way either. Of course not. "I'm sorry, Sandy," he eventually said, defeated and quiet. "I didn't mean to. I don't even *like* her, she just sounded so . . . I don't know. Lost and scared."

“Yeah, you ran to the aid of the weepy little girly-girl and left me to hold the line alone,” Sandra said, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Very chivalrous of you.” Abruptly she let her hand drop. “Okay. I’m done chewing you out. You ever do anything like this again and so help me God I’ll hurt you in ways you cannot begin to imagine. Okay?”

“Okay,” Mike said, taking a tentative step back.

“Go back on inside.” Sandra turned around, staring blindly out over the parking lot. “I’m going to stay out here for a while longer, finish cooling off. You talked to Naughton yet?”

“Nah, I was gonna call after the meeting.”

“Well, now it’s after the meeting,” Sandra sighed. “Go call him. I’ll be back in in a while.”

“Okay,” Mike said again. For a moment Sandra was sure he was going to apologize again, but then he didn’t; instead the card reader beeped and the door chunked open and he was gone. Sandra, hollowed out, heaved out a deep breath and rubbed her face with both hands.

♦ 33: Jeremy

The last image in the file was a still photograph: ‘Colonel’ Cole Farraday, bad suit, worse hair, and all, caught leaning against a courthouse wall and scowling. His entire right arm was a blur, flying off in some random space-alien direction. Farraday was paying even less attention to it than to the blonde woman he was with, just staring off into space with his head tilted to one side, his upper lip lifted just enough to bare a pixel-sized flash of tooth. “Diana Fontaine,” Johnny said, tapping the image of the woman. “One and only.”

“Mm,” said Jeremy, rubbing a knuckle absently over his lower lip. “And that’s just before he went into prison.”

“Yup,” Johnny said. He closed the image and shut the program down. “Three years ago.”

Jeremy nodded. “Well, I think I can say with some certainty that I haven’t seen him loitering about. Lucky, lucky me. Some of those videos are like to give me nightmares.” He shivered, mostly (but not entirely) for show. “The twitching is just as disturbing as I thought it would be.”

“I hear you,” Johnny said. “Creepy as shit, all this—” He flicked one hand up into the air, twitching his head to the side like a demented macaw. “Oughta see it in person.”

Jeremy held up a hand to ward him off, laughing a bit. “No, no, I really oughtn’t.”

“Heh. Yeah, you got a point there.” Johnny’s laptop spun down and he shut the top, then turned halfway around in his chair. “Got any questions?”

“Mm. I don’t believe so.”

Johnny nodded, then stood up and stretched, his spine crackling. His eyes, Jeremy noticed, flicked to the semi-oblivious Nate for half a second before flicking away again. “Gonna go hit the little agent’s room,” Johnny said, his voice neutral, casual, and pitched to carry.

“Mn,” said Nate absently. The rapid slideshow of images on his monitor made his glasses flash and flicker.

Johnny paused, his face creasing up slightly; he reached out to knuckle Jeremy's shoulder in a generally friendly fashion before stepping around him and heading for the door. He stopped just behind Nate. "Don't fall in," he said loudly, whacking Nate companionably on the back.

Nate jumped and yelped out a startled sound, his chair skittering an inch or so to the left. "What? What?"

"Said I'll be back in a little," Johnny said. The creases on his face were now definitely identifiable as a smile, only just. "You oughta stop starin' at that shit for a while. Gonna make you go blind."

"Oh," Nate said. He glanced over his shoulder, taking in the rest of the room. "Oh. Yeah. A break would be good, right?"

"Yep," said Johnny, heading for the door. Jeremy, his face very carefully neutral, turned back around and located his stone-cold coffee, putting his back to Nate. The safe-room door shut with a whoosh, and then they were alone.

For a little while, it was all quiet. "They mean well," Nate finally offered. Jeremy risked a single, quick glance back over his shoulder. Nate was staring so hard at his monitor that Jeremy thought he could very possibly hear the irises in Nate's eyes focusing.

"They do at that," Jeremy said, swirling his coffee around in its cup. It had developed a weird oily film on top; he wrinkled his nose at it and put it back down. "A more well-meaning if occasionally loony bunch of people I've never met."

Nate laughed. It was a slight and mostly humourless sound. "I bet if you opened that door right now Johnny would be standing out there keeping everyone else out."

Jeremy smiled. "I won't be taking that bet, I'm afraid."

"You're too smart for me," Nate said, his voice abruptly faltering a bit.

Likewise, Jeremy's smile flickered and vanished. "You don't have to do this, whatever it is," he said quietly. "It's only my curiosity that you'd be satisfying, and it'll survive without the information."

"Yeah, I know." Nate typed a couple of thoroughly desultory characters and then stopped again. "But it's really only my pride that I'll be hurting, and it wasn't ever that healthy to begin with."

Following his instincts, Jeremy restricted his answer to a neutral "Mm." Behind him Nate was still, very still; Jeremy could hear him breathing, but that was about it.

Finally Nate hit another key, just one, the little click like some sort of percussion. "I never set out to be in the FBI, you know?" he asked. Three more keys clicked, deliberately, one after the other. "I was in the private sector until a little over four years ago."

"Really?" said Jeremy, figuring that was safe. "I didn't know that."

“Yeah,” Nate said, with a breathless little laugh. “That’s a long story. And I guess it’s not really why we’re here, is it?” Click, click. “Except that it’s kind of important to know that I don’t really think like the law. I never got the hang of it. I have a gun and all but I’m kind of scared of it.”

Jeremy breathed out just the ghost of a laugh. “I can’t blame you for that.”

Click. “Remember that part,” Nate said. All of a sudden his voice was calm, almost detached. Jeremy shut his eyes and waited, not bothering to look around. This seemed like a story that was best heard just like this: back to back, eyes most firmly on something else or on nothing at all.

“I could barely sleep before we went in after Farraday,” Nate finally said. Click, click, click. “I’ve gotten better at that, but not much. Anyway, I was wide awake at midnight, but it took an hour of driving to get out there, and everybody was being all quiet, getting into game mode, right? So I was

◆ 34: *Nate*

starting to doze off, he realized, as he woke with a little jerk. Beside him Sandra glanced over, maybe smiling, maybe not; Nate blushed and pushed his glasses up, trying and failing to clear the residual fog of exhaustion from his brain. He glanced around. Mike was in the driver's seat, hunched forward over the wheel like a vulture and muttering to himself. Simon was in the passenger seat, slumped down so far that all Nate could see from back here was the top of his head and the pale smear of his face reflected in the windshield.

The rest of them were in the back, nearly lost in the dark. Nate could see the outline of Sandra's profile, and the unevenness in the darkness opposite him was Johnny, and if he looked very closely he could see something that might have been the shine of Rich's glasses. He wasn't sure until it moved, Rich leaning forward to murmur something to Simon, who nodded and waved a lazy hand at him.

Nate blinked again. The fog would lift as soon as they started doing something, he knew that. Right now, though, he could just drift off...

He woke with a snort when the van crunched to a quiet stop, and in the darkness his face went warm. And it was dark: the headlights were off and the moon was new, and once Mike shut off the engine even the parking and brake lights vanished. He couldn't see a thing. Apparently he wasn't the only one, since Sandra elbowed him lightly and then whispered an apology. "S'okay," Nate whispered, groping around in his shirt pocket.

"Okay, folks," Simon said softly from the front. "Honda, tell us where we are."

"About a quarter of a mile away from the complex, you follow this road in," Mike said, also quietly. "Can't get us much closer than that. They're in a niiiiiiice wide open flat space, hella visibility on all sides."

"Can we get light in here, or will they be able to see it?" Simon asked.

Nate heard more than saw Mike shrug. "Probably a little light won't hurt anybody."

"Right," said Simon. "Specs, got a light?"

"One sec," Nate said, fumbling the little plastic thing out of his pocket and cupping his other hand over it. The red LED lit up when he squeezed it, casting a tiny amount of hellish light on the circle of faces around him; even dimmed by his other hand it was enough to see by, if only barely. "Red's supposed to provide illumination without affecting your night vision," he explained. Little shards of reflected red light flickered off the walls of the van as Rich nodded in agreement.

"Good idea," Simon said briskly. "Okay, folks. Let's do this thing. I want to stress that there is a lot we don't know at the moment. We don't know who's there or where they are. We don't know if they have power, and that means we don't know if they have alarms. The man may not be a bona-fide colonel but he was in the Army, so we may be looking at tripwires, that sort of thing, too. We're going to go in quiet and slow. Real slow."

"Headsets?" Nate asked, reaching down to touch the latch of the box he was sitting on.

Simon tugged at his lower lip, considering. "No," he finally said. "Springheel and I will wear earpieces and carry handsets, but I want everybody else's ears free to listen. Specs Two, I want you in the van, monitoring the frequencies and keeping us in touch; if anything official gets too close, warn 'em off. If we start screaming for help, extract us the fuck on out."

"Got it," Rich said.

Simon glanced at Nate. "Specs, you're with the rest of us. For some reason I'm not enthused about setting off any alarms, go figure. Call it a character flaw. However, while I want any potential alarms gone and I would not be averse to some missing phone lines, if they have power, I want them to keep it. A cutoff would just warn them that something's wrong, and Farraday is a paranoid little bastard. Got it?"

Nate nodded. "Got it. It shouldn't be a problem, unless he's got some kind of weird homebrew system running."

"Good." Simon looked around, checking everybody's faces. "Texas and Specs are with me. Honda, you're with Springheel. Once Specs gives us the all-clear, we're going to take the most likely building from either end and move towards the middle. As misogynistic as it is, we're going to concentrate solely on the men, here. I'm not interested in arresting any of Farraday's ladies, at least not now. As to what to do with them... eh, use your discretion. No, actually, Honda, use Springheel's discretion, thanks. If it's an adult male, though, take it down, move it out. We'll find some place to stash them if we have to, but given what we know, Farraday's likely to be the only one."

Simon paused. Around him everyone else was silent, watching him; nervousness settled like a stone in Nate's belly. Or possibly it was excitement. He could never really tell the difference. "Okay," Simon finally said, clapping his hands

together once. "Okay. Keep it quiet for as long as you can. Specs, get your tools together, and then we're going."

"Right," Nate said. The red LED vanished, leaving them in darkness, and in that darkness Nate flicked open the trunk at his feet, his groping fingers locating the handle of his toolbag entirely by feel.

It went as smooth as silk, at first, even if it was also as slow as opera. The complex was three long, low buildings arranged in a squat U shape, completely dark inside and out; something shone faint and yellow from a window on the second floor of the middle building. A candle, probably. Maybe a lantern. Their eyes had adjusted to the near-total lack of light, and by starlight they crept in along cracking asphalt and ruptured concrete, eventually gathering in a huddle inside something that had probably started life as a carport.

"Huh," Simon breathed, peering carefully around the edge of the sheltering wall. "Think they don't have power?"

"Probably not," Nate whispered back. "I can find out for sure if you can find me a power outlet."

Simon edged back and nodded, bringing up his handset. "Specs Two," he muttered, "this is Templar. We are moving to the end of building three, repeat, building three." He paused, then nodded, reholstering the handset. "Springheel, Honda, wait until we're there, then join us." Without waiting for confirmation Simon slithered around the edge of the carport and vanished, crossing the empty ground in a fast, crouching sidle.

Nate swallowed and scrambled after him, Johnny close at his heels. By the time they joined Simon at the butt end of the third building Simon had already located an outlet, one of the big sturdy utility ones with metal covers over the holes, half-lost in a dying shrub. Nate poked his hand into his bag and groped gingerly around until his fingers closed on just the squarish plastic thing he was looking for. "Little light, maybe," he whispered, and cupped his hand over the three lights on the front just to be safe.

Sandra and Mike arrived just as Nate dropped to his knees and plugged the current detector into the outlet, already wincing back in expectation of the lights. He got none. Not quite able to believe his good luck, he peeled back one finger, then another—the lights were all dark. Nate unplugged the detector and put it away. "No power," he whispered. "I can check again on the other buildings, if you want, but I think they're just squatting. I can't hear a generator, either."

"Awesome," Mike breathed, his fingers flexing nervously in front of his chest. "Think they've got phones?"

"No phone lines," Johnny said, his voice just a bare rumble. "'Less they're underground."

"They're probably using cell phones anyway." Nate rocked back onto his heels. "I can go try and find the lines if you want, though."

Simon thought about it, thumping his knuckles against his forehead briefly. “No,” he finally said. “Longer we’re out here, the higher the chance someone twigs to us. I’m thinking building two. Anyone object?” No one did. They’d all seen that little flicker of candlelight. “Right,” said Simon. “Team Two, I want you to head to the north end of building two—” one finger stabbed out “—and radio in when you’re there. We’ll head to the south end.”

Five minutes later they were in place, waiting for Rich to confirm Team Two’s call-in. Nate crouched against the blank wall and breathed in long, shallow drafts through his open mouth, trying to make himself silent. He was pretty sure it was working. Of course, given the weird look that Johnny was giving him, maybe he looked a little odd, too.

Simon rolled to his knees by Nate’s side, putting a hand on his shoulder. “Once we’re in, we’re going to clear out an apartment and stash you,” he breathed directly into Nate’s ear. “Texas and I can move faster if it’s just the two of us.”

Nate swallowed and nodded. Simon patted his shoulder and rolled away, crossing the five feet between Nate and the edge of the building in a crouch, his hands occasionally dotting off the ground for balance. He peered around the edge, then hunched his shoulders and froze; Nate also froze, completely forgetting to breathe, which did make him very quiet.

After a painfully long, tense moment Simon rose to his feet, glancing back over his shoulder and gesturing to them both. Johnny immediately loped to Simon’s side, his drawn pistol pointing to the ground between his feet. Nate rose uncertainly and crept after him, his nervous tension now a knot in his gut. Simon jerked his head at the first apartment and broke for it in the same motion, Johnny right after him, Nate a startled step or two behind. Simon tried the doorknob. The door sprang open. Half a second later all three of them were through, piled up in the tiny, dark foyer, breathing hard.

“Texas, go check it out,” Simon breathed, easing the front door shut again. Johnny’s penlight flashed on, momentarily dazzling Nate, and Johnny vanished; doors opened and closed in his wake, cabinets opening and shutting with what seemed to Nate’s currently strained senses to be a ferocious racket.

A minute or so later Johnny reappeared, his penlight flicking off and vanishing. “Looks clear,” he reported.

Simon nodded. “Specs, you stay here,” he said. “Lock up after us real well and don’t let anyone in unless they do the knock—” his hand flashed out and tapped lightly against the wall, one-two, one, one-two, one “—and that includes if they identify themselves to you vocally. Get me?”

“Got you,” Nate said, nodding.

Simon’s grin flashed through the darkness. “Of course, if I scream for you, you come running, because that means we’re fucked.” Not really waiting for an answer Simon eased open the front door again and slipped through. Johnny

paused long enough to thump Nate's shoulder, then followed. The door clicked shut.

Nate fumbled at it, finding and turning both locks and engaging the chain. It was incredibly dark. It was beyond dark. His eyes couldn't adjust to the light because there was none. He could hear thumping in the apartment next to him—Simon and Johnny, certainly—but no one was yelling, not yet... Nate touched the wall and eased himself down, putting his toolkit down on the floor with a muffled clank.

The darkness was getting to him in its totality. He groped for his shirt pocket and the little LED flashlight. On the other side of the wall the thumping got quieter, Simon and Johnny moving on to the next apartment—the squeeze light flicked on inside his cupped hands, making them glow. A single hair-fine sliver of light squeezed out from between his fingers to draw a line on the floor. That ought to be dim enough not to show.

Moving slowly, following the red sliver, Nate eased himself into the empty main room and looked around. The windows were all shut, the blinds down. On the far wall a rank of vertical blinds half-hid a sliding glass door, and the kitchen was off to his right. Nate let the light play over the floor. The carpet looked as new as the day it had been installed, still all plush and unmarked.

Wincing every time the floor creaked under his boots, Nate crept into the bedroom. It was just as empty, just as new; there was no water in the toilet, and turning one of the taps produced nothing but a faint squeaking noise. Nate scowled down at the empty toilet. How could anyone stand to live here, even if it was free?

Nate carefully picked his way back out into the bedroom, double-checking the closets, just to be safe. Empty, both of them, except for a workman's hammer and a pile of tacks abandoned in one corner. Nate picked up the hammer, weighed it thoughtfully, and then put it back down. His was better.

From outside came a sudden babble of raised feminine voices, and Nate spun around so fast that he nearly lost the flashlight. The voices grew louder, moving past the door of the apartment Nate was in, heading not outwards in flight but inwards, towards the rest of the team—Nate bit his lip and retraced his steps into the main room, listening so hard to the yelling from outside that the soft rattle of the vertical blinds didn't register for a single, crucial second.

Something—someone—slammed into him from behind, sending him reeling forward. Nate shrieked out a thin, startled sound that turned into a whoof of displaced air as he smacked into the wall in front of him. He lost his grip on the little LED and it went flying, plunging the room into darkness even as that same someone slammed into him again and pinned him to the wall, one hand as scrawny and tough as beef jerky clamping down hard over his mouth, the other one grabbing his right wrist and jerking it up as high over his head as it would go. Nate's shoulder creaked in its socket. His instinctive scream of pain died

muffled against the palm of his attacker's hand.

The sliding door! he thought wildly, trying and failing to elbow his attacker with his free arm, trying to grab for his gun—he couldn't reach it, his assailant had him pinned too tight—glass door, vertical blinds, glass door! Nate thrashed, groping behind himself, trying to grab a handful of hair, anything, but his opponent seemed impervious, completely unaffected by anything...

"Suh-sorry," someone murmured into his ear, laughing a little, and then the hand over his mouth twisted up, thumb and forefinger clamping hard over his nose and cutting that off, too. He couldn't get air—Nate panicked, throwing himself frantically from side to side, beating with a single ineffective fist at his attacker's hip, trying to bite the man's hand, trying to stomp on his foot, while all the while his lungs burned and his head swam and his consciousness receded to a single, dim point—

He swam dizzily back to semi-consciousness some unknown amount of time later, sprawled on his back on that plush, unmarked carpet. His glasses were missing, his hands were pinned somehow, and for some reason, he was cold. Weakly, Nate pulled against whatever was holding his wrists together, but all that his efforts produced was that sinewy hand clamping down over his mouth again. Nate tried to scream; he produced a muffled, terrified hum.

"I'm sorry, but your friends have to go now," his attacker said, suddenly looming out of the dark to stare down at Nate. His eyes shone crazily from the center of two black circles of bruise; his hair was a pile of straw on his head; even as Nate fought to make his weak eyes focus on his attacker Farraday suddenly jerked his chin to the right and made a little involuntary "Huh!" sound. "I have to make them need to go now," he said again, as his head drifted back to true. "Hold still. I don't want to huh-hurt you more than I have to and it'll hurt less if you just hold still." And he smiled.

Uncomprehending, still dazed, Nate tried to jerk his hands free, trying and failing to turn his face away from the hand digging painfully into his cheeks—someone stuck a branding iron into his belly and started dragging it upwards and Nate screamed so hard into that muffling grip that he flayed his throat raw. His heels drummed helplessly on the carpet, making dull thudding sounds. Whatever held his wrists made a sticky sound but didn't give an inch, and neither did the hand over his mouth, and he couldn't even pass out as his world convulsed into a tiny ball of fire and tearing and pain—

He was, at best, semi-conscious when the knife point bounced off his lowest rib, tears sliding helplessly from the corners of his eyes to slide outwards and get lost in his hair. Farraday jerked his chin up and went "Huh!" again, pulling the knife free, and for a moment it was almost okay, it was just stinging and something wet sliding over his skin, heading down along his sides towards the floor—oh gravity, Nate somehow thought beneath his shock—and then the knife

slid in someplace else and dragged sideways and Nate's legs jerked up, slamming into Farraday's back. Farraday made a startled noise and nearly fell forward, jerking his knife hand up and turning the sideways slash into a huge, looping, curving thing that drew fire up over Nate's ribs and ended sunk deep into his chest. "Huh-hold still," Farraday chided him, grinning madly, and laid the blade almost gently against the side of Nate's throat, and then, finally, blessedly, Nate did pass out, spiraling down into unconsciousness in weeping relief.

It ended, eventually. Even as close to unconscious as he was Nate was vaguely aware of it ending, of Farraday's hand pulling away from his mouth, of the weight of the man vanishing, of the vertical blinds rattling. It hurt to breathe now, his throat burning like he had strep or something, the wounds in his chest gaping and closing every time he pulled in a breath. His breath went shallow, reflexively. Nate faded out again.

One-two, one. One-two, one.

Pause.

One-two, one. One-two, one.

Pause.

A huge crack of splintering wood, a boom, bobbing lights, someone yelling a name, hands on his bleeding chest oh God but that burned—

He woke up, briefly, with the world vibrating madly around him and a weight on his chest that made it hard to breathe. Nate squinted against the darkness and made a noise. Someone was holding his hand, squeezing it. Nate wasn't sure who it was.

"Hang in there, Specs," Simon said from somewhere above him, his voice furiously intense. Nate was vaguely glad that it wasn't him that Simon was so mad at. "Just hang in there—goddammit, Honda!"

"It won't go any faster!" Mike yelled back, his voice cracking with terror. "Honest to God!"

Simon looked back down at Nate, his expression melting from fury to fear all at once. The weight on Nate's chest resolved into Simon's hands, spread out and pressing down, applying pressure, desperately holding him together oh God there was blood halfway up Simon's forearms and on Simon's face and it was his—"Hold on," Simon said urgently, but the pain and the fire of it slammed into Nate all over again and he shrieked once, thinly, and passed out again

◆ 35: Nate

and woke up in the hospital all stitched back together,” Nate said, staring down at his hands, all splayed out on the keyboard doing nothing at all. “Simon blames himself for leaving me behind, Johnny blames himself for not noticing that the glass door was unlocked, I blame myself for not going over there and locking it—”

Behind him, Jeremy said nothing. Nate knew he was there. He could hear Jeremy breathing. “And what’s weird is that aside from one or two places, I wasn’t even hurt all that badly,” Nate said, after a minute, when it became obvious Jeremy wasn’t going to say anything. “He really was . . . trying not to do more damage than he had to. Like he said. I look like Frankenstein’s monster under here,” he said, tapping his chest, “but it’s just superficial scarring. Mostly.”

“I see,” Jeremy finally said.

Quickly, before he could chicken out, Nate turned halfway around in his chair. “Here, look,” he told Jeremy, tugging down the collar of his turtleneck sweater and exposing the fat worm of a scar that began to one side of his Adam’s apple and curved down from there to meet up with a second scar, even fatter. “See?”

After a pause, Jeremy turned around himself, moving slowly. His eyes flicked first to Nate’s face and then down to the exposed skin of his throat; although Jeremy worked very hard not to react outwardly, Nate very clearly saw the little flex of his jaw and the flutter of his eyelid that followed. “I see,” Jeremy said, reaching up to rub away the twitch.

“Yeah,” Nate said, letting his sweater fall back into place. “It’s just—he’s smart. He doesn’t panic. And he doesn’t . . . overdo? I guess? He doesn’t overreact. Like there’s always a lawyer in the back of his head watching the line between a Class B and a Class A felony and making sure he never quite steps over.”

“He likes to keep a little weasel room, in other words,” Jeremy said, thoughtfully. “That’s why he only shot Simon with a .22. Because it wasn’t too likely to kill him and compound the felony.”

“See? He always thinks like that.” Nate sighed. “And he uses what’s available,” he added, not without a bit of bitterness.

“Mm,” said Jeremy. They were both silent for a long moment before Jeremy pushed his chair back and stood up. “If you’ll pardon me, I think I could use something to drink.”

So that was it. It was over, and there wasn’t even going to be any awkward sympathy or anything. Nate closed his eyes in relief and turned back around. “Okay. I need to get back to work . . .”

“I’m sorry to have kept you,” Jeremy said, like this was all somehow completely normal. And then he left, the saferoom door closing quietly behind him. Outside there was a faint, dim buzz of conversation that quickly tapered off to nothing, and then Nate was left alone in the saferoom, staring at his monitor. He quivered for a moment. Then it passed.

By the time a thoroughly beaten and subdued Mike crept back in, Nate felt almost normal again. Or, at least, he’d gotten back to work, which was calming in its own dull and repetitive way. They traded wary and shell-shocked glances. “Hey,” Nate finally said, rustily.

“Hey,” said Mike, without any of his usual bounce. “Uh. I gotta make a call . . . work to do, you know?”

“Yeah, I know,” Nate said, nodding. Mike slunk off to his corner, pulling out his phone; Nate turned back to his computer and sank back into the comfortably dull database. Mike’s voice started up in the background and Nate just tuned it out.

Voices buzzed out in the hallway, and then the door opened again. Even with ninety-five percent of his attention currently absorbed by his computer Nate was still dimly aware of being watched, and he blinked and looked up. “Yo,” Johnny said.

“Hey,” Nate said, and awkwardly added, “. . . it’s cool.”

“Okay.” Apparently accepting that, Johnny wandered off again.

The next time Nate resurfaced, after ordering the database to purge itself of every receipt for less than thirty dollars’ worth of gas, they were all back, even Simon. His computer ground on, the progress bar not budging at all. All around him his teammates worked in relative silence, occasionally conferring quietly. Inside Rich’s lair the new guy was flat on his back on the floor, stuck halfway under the largest desk with his legs poking out, fussing about with the cables. His suit jacket lay folded neatly over the back of his borrowed conference chair, completely unmolested as far as Nate could tell.

It was *weird*. No one was kicking anyone else or laughing or even making suggestive comments; if it had been Rich on the floor under that desk (Nate couldn’t help but think) there would be suggestions flying fast and furious about

what else Rich might want to do as long as he was down there. But it wasn't Rich, it was the new guy, and no one was paying any attention to him at all—except that there was also an almost complete lack of ongoing shenanigans in the space around him. It wasn't just an absence of attention, it was negative attention. An attention vacuum.

Nate's computer continued to hum along, needing no input from Nate whatsoever. Watching the progress bar fail to move, Nate took a brief self-inventory. He felt . . . fine. Well, that wasn't true. He felt nothing. Numb. Empty. He could deal with that.

Idly he brought up his web browser and opened a certain locally-saved .html file that he'd made years ago: a completely blank black browser window with a fake prompt and cursor blinking in one corner. The window did nothing but make the glass surface of his monitor into a fairly decent (if dark) mirror, so that he could scan the room behind him without turning around and alerting people that he was watching. It was, Nate reluctantly remembered, a trick that Rich had taught him. Why that hadn't made him leery of Rich's capacity for underhandedness, he'd never know. Nate had just thought it was a great trick at the time.

Behind him Simon sat in his usual place, slumped over with his head in his hands, staring down at the table. Even as Nate watched Jeremy leaned over and murmured something—Nate could hear it, almost subliminally, even if he couldn't make out the words—and Simon scowled and made a little shooing motion at him. Jeremy sat back. Nate heard something that might have been a very faint laugh.

Mike was either absorbed in his work or hiding behind his laptop, frowning; Johnny was doing absolutely nothing that Nate could see (which didn't mean that he was actually doing nothing, knowing Johnny). Sandra, in Simon's office, was just barely visible in the makeshift mirror, and then only when she moved. Nate repressed a sigh and shut the browser window again, the stubborn progress bar popping back up like a particularly boring and slightly malevolent jack-in-the-box.

The new guy shuffled out from under Rich's desk and sat up. It was the loudest sound in the room and yet no one but Nate glanced in his direction at all. The new guy ducked his head anyway, rolling to his feet and making a halfhearted attempt to beat the white dust off his suit pants. He was a mess: dust all over his pants, blackish machine oil smeared across his shirt and tie, damp reddish hair straggling into his face. Maybe tomorrow he'd be smart enough not to wear a suit.

Bending over he powered on the new computer tower, then picked up his briefcase and set it on the desk, thumbing at the locks—Nate went very still. In fact, the entire room went still. The new guy glanced around uncertainly, like he could tell something was up but he couldn't tell what it was, and then went back

to his briefcase. A little quiver of anticipation settled in Nate's belly.

The sound of the locks failing to open was not loud at all, just a little metallic click as one part of the still-engaged lock hit another part. Now it was the new guy who went still, frowning in confusion. Carefully he turned one of the dials a digit away, then turned it back, then tried to open the lock again; unsurprisingly, it didn't work the second time, either. His frown deepened. Nate bit the inside of his cheek.

After a bit more fruitless clicking around, the new guy gave up and looked up. Quickly Nate looked back at his monitor, but not before he saw how wide the new guy's eyes had gone. Oh, boy. This was going to be good—"Excuse me," the new guy said, pointing, "but can I borrow that for a sec?"

Nate blinked, then looked where the new guy was pointing: at his crowbar, leaning comfortably against the back leg of Nate's desk. "...sure?" he said, unable to believe that something this great was really about to happen. Nate picked up his crowbar and held it out. "Try not to break it," he said, helpless to avoid smiling. "It's my best friend."

Behind him, Mike sniggered a little, but didn't actually say anything. The new guy reached out and took hold of the other end of the crowbar, the expression on his face now nearing 'completely unbalanced'. That absent little smile was kind of scary, really, especially in combination with those crazy hyper-focused eyes. "Good friend to have," the new guy said, studying the crowbar. The engraving glinted in the light and the new guy ran his thumb over it, his lips moving as he read the 'Speak Friend And Enter' inscription. "Oh," he said, "that kind of friend," and even as Nate gave him a startled point for recognizing the reference, the new guy turned around and rammed the straight end of the crowbar into the seam between the body and lid of his briefcase, wedging it open just a bit.

Already-stressed hinges groaned, just a little, but Nate only heard it because he was listening for it. Everyone else was dead silent, staring at whatever was in front of them and just waiting. The new guy patted the crowbar (making the hinges groan again) and mouthed something. Nate hadn't ever been much for lip-reading, but he could recognize 'Mellon' when he was watching for it—both of the new guy's hands closed into white-knuckled fists around the crowbar's curved end and drove it downwards with lunatic singlemindedness.

The locks—and the hinges—held against the stress for almost a second, the briefcase's leather side bowing outwards instead. It couldn't last. The strain must have been incredible. Both of the briefcase's locks abruptly gave, bursting open with twin sharp reports like balloons popping; the briefcase leaped an inch or so off the desk's surface, its lid slamming open with such vehemence that the hinges broke, and the new guy vanished in a quiet rainbow explosion.

Three hundred NERF balls didn't really take up that much space, if you compressed them enough. They really didn't like to *stay* compressed, though, and the resulting kinetic energy was awe-inspiring: the little foam balls exploded

out of the briefcase to ricochet off the ceiling and walls, momentarily filling every bit of space available before expanding, like the universe, outwards in all directions. Nate's teammates yelped and ducked as the little missiles pattered softly down around them like multicolored hail.

The new guy reappeared as the NERF balls dissipated outwards, his eyes as wide as saucers, both arms thrown up in front of him for protection. He still had the crowbar clutched in one hand, for all the good it had done him. The last few balls completed their lazy arcs and fell to the ground with tiny, soft sounds, rolling along the floor. One hit the toe of Sandra's sneaker just as she appeared from out of Simon's office to survey the carnage.

For a moment, the room was completely, tautly silent, although Mike's shoulders were starting to quiver. "You can get anything on eBay these days," Nate finally said, his voice shaking with the effort it took to control it; the tension burst and the room exploded in laughter.

♦ 36: Simon

“Oh, Christ, that hurt,” Simon said, laughing, coughing, and clutching at his chest all at once. As little as he liked to admit it, he was just about done in, but he was glad he hadn’t missed that. “All right, folks, c’mon, clean it up and get back to work.”

“Wasn’t me that made the mess,” Mike said, his eyes gleaming. “Looks to me like it was the new guy who made the mess, boss.”

“Yeah, well, think of it as showing the new guy some of our fabled teamwork,” Simon said, fighting to keep his voice even. *Christ*, his chest hurt. “Hop to, c’mon.”

Nate, still quivering with giggles, produced a garbage bag from somewhere and started tossing the balls in. It rapidly turned into an impromptu game of basketball, as Simon had known it would: Nate held out the garbage bag and Mike and Johnny started lobbing balls into it, Johnny with a matter-of-fact underhanded throw and Mike showing off his free-throw form. (Flawed, in Simon’s opinion, but he wasn’t in any condition to correct it just now.) Sandra roamed around the front of the room, kicking balls in Nate’s general direction. The new guy just stood there, clutching Nate’s crowbar and gaping. Simon made an impatient gesture at him. “You too, whatever your name is,” he said.

“Dave,” the new guy said, swallowing.

“Whatever,” said Simon, with a flash of irritation. The new guy blinked, hastily put the crowbar down, and started digging NERF balls out from under Rich’s computers. Mollified, Simon turned to pin Jeremy with an accusing stare. “Too good to help, Archer?” he said, perhaps a bit more thinly than he’d meant to.

Jeremy plucked a sodden and dripping NERF ball out of his coffee, inspected it, and then dropped it back in. “Oh, I suppose I could pitch in,” he said affably. “If you’re asking.”

“Or you could take Simon home,” Sandra put in from beneath the desk at the front of the room.

Simon twisted halfway around in his chair, a movement which he really started regretting about halfway through. “I’m fine,” he said, digging his fingers

into his side. His voice was starting to get a bit rough around the edges, although he wasn't quite croaking yet. "Besides, if I try to leave now I'll just step on a NERF ball, fall down, and die."

"Good point," Sandra said, reappearing with both hands full. "But you're not fine, boss. In fact, you look like all that's between you and a coffin is that pesky breathing stuff. Once we clear you a path to the door, I want you to go home."

"I'm *fine*," Simon insisted. The second word came out sounding more like 'fi-hine', as his breath caught in a pained croak halfway through. He winced.

Sandra dropped her load of balls into Nate's bag, accidentally (or possibly on purpose) deflecting one of Mike's arching free throws. Mike moaned in what sounded like real anguish. "That's an order, boss," she said cheerfully. "Remember how I threatened to call security on you? Now's when you get to find out if I was bluffing."

Simon hunched over in his chair, wanting to argue but feeling too much like crap to bother. "Fine," he said grumpily. "As soon as the debris gets cleared away, I'll go." And then he shut his eyes and waited.

It took another couple of minutes, during which the pain receded slightly, thanks to Simon very carefully not moving at all. Eventually the last few balls had been corralled and dumped into the bag, and the new guy picked up the crowbar and held it out to Nate. "Thanks," he said inanely.

"... sure?" Nate said, reaching out to take it. Some kind of innate Nate-ness made him add, "Although I don't know if you really ought to be *thanking* me..."

The new guy looked at the exploded remains of his briefcase, then back at Nate. He shrugged, weirdly calm about the whole thing. "It's open now, isn't it?"

"Yeah," said Nate, blinking. "Yeah, it's definitely open now. I noticed."

"Then thanks," the new guy concluded, logically, if not intelligently. Simon snorted under his breath.

Sandra looked around, dusting off her hands. "Is that it?" she asked.

"Think so," said Mike from under the table. "Least I don't see any more. Guess they may keep turning up for a while, though—holy crap, that was awesome."

"Great," Sandra said briskly. "Simon, go home. Archer, take Simon home."

Jeremy stood up. "I'm afraid there's a stray foam ball absorbing the remains of my coffee," he said pleasantly, very carefully not paying any attention to Simon at all as Simon puffed and struggled upright. Sandra hovered nearby, to Simon's general displeasure, but she was smart enough not to try to help.

"I'll get it," Nate said, mostly occupied with knotting the mouth of the bag shut. "Thanks."

Once Simon was more or less upright, hunched over the throbbing pain in his chest, he took a look around the room. "Anything else before I go, folks?"

There was a generalized chorus of ‘no’ sounds from everybody. The new guy cleared his throat. “Nice to meet you, sir,” he said, suddenly all faltering and hesitant again. The tone (and the ‘sir’) ground on Simon’s already-frayed nerves.

“Enjoy your first day?” he asked, swiveling slowly around to face the new guy, standing lost in the midst of Rich’s computers.

The new guy blinked rapidly. “Uh,” he said. “It was . . . interesting.”

“Interesting,” Simon said thoughtfully. “Well, I sure hope you actually did mean ‘interesting’ and weren’t just using it as a euphemism for ‘awful’ or anything. Because, see, here’s the deal: if you had trouble dealing with today, you’ll never survive what’s waiting for you.”

“Uh.” The new guy sure did blink a lot. “What’s waiting for me?” he finally asked, timidly.

“Yeah,” said Simon. “This shit? This shit was *mild*. Sandy hasn’t even punched you yet, not that I’ve seen. If you want to have a chance in hell of being a real member of this team, and I warn you that the odds are stacked against you, you’re going to have to put up with a, a hell of a lot worse on a daily basis.”

The new guy didn’t say anything for a moment. “Oh,” he finally said.

“Price of admission,” Simon said. “Pay up or leave.”

“I can . . .” The new guy—disheveled, sweaty, covered in dust and chair grease—straightened up. “I think I can handle it, sir,” he said, with what Simon could only think of as sadly misplaced confidence.

“Yeah?” Simon asked. A nasty pain- and irritation-fueled impulse made him add, “You know what happened to the guy you’re supposed to be replacing?”

Everybody else in the room got quiet again, all of a sudden. The new guy, clueless, only nodded. “Sort of,” he said. “I know that he was shot and killed, anyway.”

“Shot and killed,” Simon repeated. He was already starting to regret bringing this up, but he was too stubborn to stop now. “Yeah, you could say that.”

From somewhere, the new guy dug up enough of a brain cell to realize that keeping quiet was his best option. He stared apprehensively at Simon, waiting. Simon stared back, willing the new guy to falter and look away; the new guy didn’t, which was at least vaguely impressive. “I shot him,” Simon finally said. “Think you can handle that?”

The new guy twitched backwards, his eyes going wide. Simon waited a beat, then looked at Jeremy. “Come on, Archer. You heard the lady. Take me home.”

“Gladly,” Jeremy said gravely. He wasn’t smiling. Simon couldn’t blame him for that at all.

They were halfway down the hall and passing the water fountain when Jeremy reached into his jacket and produced a second little orange bottle, a single large tablet rattling around in the bottom. “Pain pill,” he said, holding it out. “You may as well have it before we leave.”

Simon paused, scowling, his eyes locked on the little bottle. He was torn. On the one hand, he was way too damned manly to let a little pain get the best of him and send him running for fuzzy oblivion; on the other hand, this wasn't a *little* pain they were talking about, here. "I can wait," he finally said.

"Are you certain?" Jeremy asked, still holding out the bottle. "I mean, it's your health, and I'll certainly respect your wishes in this matter, but there *are* speedbumps in the parking lot—" Simon winced—"and there's that construction going on on the motorway—" Simon winced again, one hand stealing up to flatten out over his chest—"and that one nasty bump upwards that leads into your block of flats—"

"Give me that," Simon said, snatching the bottle out of Jeremy's hand. Or trying to, anyway. He ended up flailing slowly and arthritically in Jeremy's direction until Jeremy took pity on him and pushed the bottle into his hand. Simon ground his teeth and forced off the childproof lid himself. "I just don't want to turn into one of those pussies who counts the minutes before his next painkiller, you know?"

"Given that I damned near have to sit on you to make you take one, I don't think you're in any danger of that," Jeremy said.

"Yeah, well, I'm tough, I can take it." Simon shook the pill out and used the empty bottle as an impromptu water glass, wiping the back of his hand over his lips when he was done.

"Take what? The pain, or the sitting?"

"Take your pick." Simon dropped the empty bottle into a nearby trash can. "Come on, take me home before this thing kicks in too hard."

"Mm," said Jeremy, falling into step beside Simon again. Suddenly he sounded ominously cheery. "Remember the good old days, when I only sat on you for recreational purposes?"

"Shut up," Simon said warningly, ducking his head. He automatically checked up and down the hallway—empty, thank God.

Jeremy, being Jeremy, did not shut up even the least little bit. "*Now* I not only have an actual reason to be hanging about your flat, but in addition you spend a large part of the day drugged into a happy and pliable stupor," he said, "and yet all I can manage to think about is whether or not it will adversely affect your recovery. Tch. I'm not certain I like this whole 'giving a damn about you' program."

"Yeah? Well, first of all, take it up with Farraday, and second of all, blow it out your ass, and third of all, would you shut the hell up?"

The speed bumps were just exactly as bad as Simon had been fearing—Jeremy went over them at approximately the speed of a procrastinating iceberg, and still Simon hissed breath between his teeth—but by the time they hit the construction zone and the uneven pavement Simon couldn't quite bring himself to care any

more. Once they reached Simon's complex and Jeremy parked the Jeep in its usual spot Simon was watching the world go by from a distant vantage point, his thoughts having been reduced to a cottony-soft blur.

"Do you need a hand?" Jeremy asked, taking off his seat belt.

Simon flapped a hand lazily in Jeremy's general direction. "Nah, I'm good," he said, fumbling with the seat belt until it came undone and then fumbling at the door until it opened. Simon slid out, expecting to stand up, like usual; his legs hadn't quite gotten the message, however, and folded up neatly underneath him. He caught himself on the door, blinked twice, and forced his knees to brace. "Huh," he said.

"Come on," said Jeremy, tugging Simon's arm over his shoulders. Simon let him, puzzling over the question of when, exactly, Jeremy had come around to the passenger side, since he'd apparently missed it entirely. Absently he patted Jeremy's shoulder, the leather of his jacket warm under Simon's hand.

Simon watched the parking lot and the stairs go by, leaning on Jeremy while Jeremy opened the door. It didn't seem to have much to do with him. Jeremy got him into the apartment and into the bedroom, lowering him to sit on the side of the bed; trying to do his part Simon picked numbly at the buttons of his shirt, clumsily toeing off his sneakers as an afterthought. "You know," he said, inching out of his shirt a bit at a time, "this is some pretty strong shit."

"I've noticed," Jeremy said, not quite laughing.

Simon rolled carefully onto his back and started fumbling with the zipper of his jeans, eventually managing to coerce it down. Wriggling out of his jeans exhausted the last of his strength. "'M gonna take a nap," he said, closing his eyes. "And then you're gonna buy me dinner."

"That was the plan," said Jeremy. "Sleep well."

"Thanks, Archer," Simon said, already mostly asleep.

◆ 37: Mike

Mike slung the paper bag onto the kitchen counter, snickering at the suggestive rubbery thump as it hit and bounced. Man, buying that thing had been embarrassing as hell, but it was going to be worth it, just to see the look on the new guy's face tomorrow. The plastic bag he put down with quite a bit more care, since it had food in it, and goddamn, but he was hungry.

Humming under his breath he slapped open the dishwasher and pulled out a clean plate and fork. Maybe after he ate he'd take a moment and actually empty the dishwasher, he told himself, knowing full well that he wasn't going to. He had to at least intend to, though. Far as he was concerned, virtuously intending to clean the kitchen was almost as good as actually doing it. Especially if he didn't actually clean anything and got to lounge around afterwards with the full knowledge that whatever he was doing, it was still better than drudging around in the kitchen.

Mike emptied the styrofoam box onto his plate, scraping the last bits of brown goo out with the fork. Even the dried-out nasty white rice that came with his mediocre Chinese takeout couldn't dampen his good mood too badly. He'd survived! Not only had he survived but Sandy hadn't even hit him once! And now everything was out and in the open and someone else's responsibility, and he didn't have to worry about it any more. Nate had promised to put together some kind of recording device for his phone tomorrow, Farraday was lying low and would probably get his ass caught soon in any case, *and* he was going to get to pick on the new guy for days. The rest of that stuff, well, he had to admit that Sandy had a point, or several points, a couple of which were really nice to look at, but he was pretty confident that things would work out okay in the end.

He grabbed a beer from the fridge—the last one, actually, he'd have to do something about that tomorrow—and ate leaning against the kitchen counter, just because he could. Why take the plate out of the kitchen if he was just going to have to bring it back in ten minutes? Mike swallowed the last bit of his chicken-bits-in-sweet-brown-stuff and glanced at the clock on the microwave. Seven minutes, actually. He balanced the plate on top of the others in the sink, ran water

over it for a few seconds, declared that good enough, and carried his beer out into the main room, opting to flip through the channels instead of emptying the dishwasher.

One of the movie channels was showing *Top Gun*. The twelve-year-old that Mike still essentially was made him stop there, his brain patriotically switching itself off.

The credits rolled. Mike blinked at his long-empty beer can like he'd forgotten why he was holding it and then checked the clock on the DVD player. Almost ten. Huh, well, maybe he'd go ahead and empty the damned dishwasher before he went to bed, since the sink *was* starting to get kind of full—

His phone blared from the kitchen counter, screaming *The Imperial March* at no one. Mike nearly jumped out of his skin, his stomach cramping with reflexive nerves, and ran for it. Had that asshole Farraday—it wasn't a number he recognized, thank God. "Shit, it's a bit late for socializing," he informed his phone, his voice a bit shaky. He could just let it go to voice mail . . . but even as he had the thought, he flipped his phone open. Just in case. "Yello?"

Someone gasped in his ear. Ordinarily he'd think that was an excellent start to a conversation, but right now it brought him fully upright like someone had goosed him. "Mike!" Diana Fontaine cried not a second later, confirming his worst fears. "Oh, God, you've got to help me—"

Mike grabbed his phone in both hands. "*Where are you?*" he demanded to know, steamrolling right over her panic.

Diana swallowed. "Ah, ah, at a Sunoco," she said. "On Route 1. I-I'm hiding in the ladies' room."

"Is he there? Are you in immediate danger? If so you need to call 911 *right now*—"

"No! No. I don't think so, anyway." She'd already started to calm down, although she was still breathing a little hard. "I'm sorry! Oh, God. I'm just so scared!"

Mike relaxed, a little. Not much. Just enough to regret passing up the entertaining reference to the ladies' room. "Okay. Deep breath. Then tell me what happened."

There was a brief pause, during which he could hear a little shifting rustling sound. "Oh, God," she said again. "I think I made him suspicious. I don't know. I was—" she paused and heaved in a suspiciously snuffly little breath "—I was trying to get him to tell me what was going on, I told him it was because as his lawyer I might need to know, to be prepared for anything, it *used* to work! He *used* to tell me these things!"

"What happened this time?" Mike took his shoulder rig off the counter and shrugged back into it.

She took another deep breath. “He went quiet and . . . looked at me. I don’t know how to describe it. It was like . . . a little light went on in the back of his head. And then he patted my hand and told me h-he had to go but not to worry about a thing because he had it all under control and *he never used to talk down to me!*”

Mike winced away from the phone. “Okay,” he said. “Did you drive there?”

“Yes!” She didn’t sound calm, but she wasn’t wailing any more, either. “I didn’t know where to go so I just . . . got away. I just took random turns—I don’t think I’ve ever been this far north on Route 1 before.”

“Okay,” Mike said again, rolling both shoulders to settle the harness. “Don’t worry. You did good. Where’s your car now?”

“Behind the convenience store.” She made a little sound, sort of like a laugh. “I tried to hide it behind the dumpster.”

“Good idea.” Mike loped into the front hallway and grabbed his jacket down off its hook. “Okay. Tell me how to get there.”

“It’s . . . just south of where Truslow branches off. You probably want to take 95 to Route 17, go . . . go east. It’ll hit Route 1, go north. The station’s on the right.”

Mike stomped into his shoes and grabbed for the doorknob. “Got it. Okay. You stay there, try to stay in sight of other people, call 911 if you even think you see him. I’ll be there as soon as I can. Half an hour, tops.”

“Can you . . . can you stay on the line with me?” Diana asked, falteringly. “I’m sorry, I’d just feel more comfortable . . .”

“Well, I tell you what,” Mike said, kicking the front door closed behind him and thudding down the stairs two and three at a time. “I can either stay on the line or I can bust ass with both hands and get there faster. Which one do you want?”

For a moment, Diana was silent, breathing into the phone. “Get here as soon as you can,” she finally said, her voice trembling but brisk. “I’ll survive.”

“Good girl. Hang in there. I am *en route*.” Mike closed his phone and stuck it back on his belt, slamming out of the building and into the night. It wasn’t until he was already in his car and groping for the bubble light under his seat that he paused. “. . . did I just call her a ‘good girl’?” he asked the air. “Good thing it wasn’t Sandy, shit, she’d kill my ass.”

His blood up, Mike used the bubble light and the accelerator shamelessly all the way down 95 and then eased up on both the moment he hit the exit ramp. Rolling his window down (and blasting himself with an October night moving by at high speed) Mike fetched in the bubble light and hucked it back under his seat, drifting to a smooth stop at the light. No sense advertising himself too much, since there was always a slim chance that Farraday was out looking for his lady and he didn’t really crave the lunatic’s attention right now.

Without the bubble light going, his car was pretty damned nondescript. Mike liked that ‘anonymous getaway car’ feel in his transportation, although he drew the line at actually driving a Ford Escort. Mid-sized was as low as he’d go, since he liked the feel of a little steel between himself and the rest of the world, none of whom could drive worth a fuck, in his opinion. Like this idiot in front of him, for example—Mike hit the horn and the car in front of him lurched out into the intersection before sheepishly accelerating through the green light that was almost five seconds old.

Mike snorted and turned left onto Route 17. A flick of his fingers angled his car into the left lane and Mike blew past the idiot, feeling a little better once that guy’s headlights were dwindling in his rearview mirror. Eventually they vanished; while Mike was never quite alone on this stretch of road, for a good minute or two there was no one behind him at all, which did wonders for his fledgling paranoia. (At least, there was no one behind him driving *with their headlights on*, a thought which also did wonders for his fledgling paranoia, giving it wings.)

By the time he hit Route 1 his nerves had dissipated. He was calm. Game face on. Farraday would have to be some kind of genius to find Diana Fontaine all the way out here, *and* have to be some kind of idiot to actually show his face. Of course, Farraday had always been some kind of idiot genius, but still, Mike figured that the actual risk here was pretty low. Or, at least, he hoped so.

The Sunoco loomed brilliant on his right, bright yellow and blue against the night sky. Mike hit the turn signal and bounced in. His tires hit rough pavement and he cursed under his breath. “Nice pothole,” he muttered, whipping his palm over the steering wheel and spinning his car into the nearest spot, which happened to be handicapped. Oh, well. Everyone thought he was psychotic, did that count?

He saw the bright aureole of Diana Fontaine’s blonde hair through the window even before he could shut off the engine, and he paused with his fingers still on the key. She was darting through the aisles of the convenience store towards him—Mike’s hand leaped from the key to the butt of his gun, his heart seeming to pause before leaping into a rapid, adrenalin-fueled rhythm—and then out the front door, accompanied only by the blare of the electronic door chime. No Farraday seemed to be in pursuit. Mike’s heart slowed again.

Diana Fontaine more or less hit the passenger-side door, bouncing off it and clawing at the handle at the same time. Mike hit the lock button just a second too late, precipitating one of those idiot dances where the passenger’s repeated attempts to get into the car keep foiling the driver’s attempts to unlock the goddamn door. It was only drawn out the further by Diana’s stubborn, panicky handle-rattling. “Whoa!” Mike finally yelled, startling her into letting go just long enough for Mike to get the thing unlocked.

Panting, Diana yanked the door open and fell into the car. “Go,” she said, slamming the door and fumbling for her seatbelt. “Turn right, go north, *go*.”

“Right,” Mike said, dropping the car into reverse and giving up the handicapped spot. His tires screeched a little, and he winced. Man. Rein it in. He throttled himself back, put the car in drive, and left—at a fast clip, but under control. “You okay?” he asked once they were on Route 1. He checked the rearview mirror. Then he checked it again.

“Yes,” Diana said, her voice brisk and businesslike. Contrary to the evidence of her voice she was huddled up in the passenger seat, her eyes shut, rubbing her arms nervously. “If you keep going this way you can pick up Truslow on the left and take it back to 95.”

“Okay.” Mike shifted over into the left lane. He was completely at a loss for what to say now that the crisis had passed: ‘hey, nice jeans’? ‘Got your Halloween costume yet’? ‘Nice night for being stalked by a crazy fucker’? Diana didn’t seem to be feeling very talkative either. For a while the only sounds were the rumble of the car’s engine and the little slithery sound of Diana’s fingers rasping up and down over the silky fabric of her sleeves.

Truslow rose up on the left, leading off into the dark, and Mike slapped on the turn signal and heeled over. Route 1 receded to a single bright point behind them and suddenly his headlights were the only lights in the world, curving through the darkness on a two-lane stretch of tarmac that tunneled through the trees. “Here’s how it’s going to go down,” Mike said, finally. “Unless you’ve got some strong objection I’m just going to take you back to my place for tonight, okay? I think we’d both majorly prefer if I was within screaming distance, and it’s cool, I have a couch and everything. Hell, I’m totally a gentleman, I’ll even be the one to sleep on it, ’less you wanna get all liberated on me.”

He paused. After a moment, Diana nodded and swallowed, completely failing to tell him how dangerously unstable he was this time. Emboldened, Mike went on. “Soon’s we get to my place I’ll call the state road crew and get them to go tow your car to the impound lot. It’ll be safe there and they won’t charge you for anything since it was my call, okay?”

“Fine,” Diana said, her voice still abrupt. She looked up and leaned forward, staring out the windows, looking from side to side. “What . . . whatever you say.”

“That’s right, whatever I say,” Mike said with a reasonable amount of cheer, settling down in his seat. Truslow was completely dark both behind them and in front of them. For the first time since his phone had rung Mike was starting to feel safe, or at least like he’d gotten away with something. “Tomorrow we’ll get you in with the rest of the team, make better arrangements for your safety—”

He saw the flash out of the corner of his eye, at almost the exact same moment that the back tire blew out with a jolt that threw him forward against his seatbelt. Suddenly the car was slewing out of control, the remaining three tires screaming on the tarmac, and Mike grabbed the steering wheel with both hands and hauled his suddenly-cranky fucker of a car into the skid, barely able to hear himself yelling “FUUUUCK!” over the noise. Beside him Diana was screaming, her

arms thrown protectively up over her head, and a second flash heralded the loud *spang!* sound of a bullet impacting metal somewhere behind them. “*Down!*” Mike yelled, even as the car spun into its second revolution and he lost track of where the flash had come from. “*Jesus fucking Christ he’s shooting at us get down!*”

With a roar like an avalanche the crippled car spun off the road and onto the graveled shoulder, finally crunching to a halt and rocking on its offended shocks. Nearly standing on the brake Mike grabbed the back of Diana’s neck and forced her down against the seatbelt, below the level of the windows, hunching over her protectively and desperately scanning the darkness. Where was he, where *was* the fucker—there was another flash off to his left, emanating from a dim black bulky shape silhouetted dimly against the stars, and one of the back windows blew out, scattering little cubes of safety glass over them both. Diana shrieked again.

Leaning over her Mike grabbed the door handle and shoved the passenger side door open. “*Out!*” he yelled, jamming a hand down between them and punching the first seatbelt release button he came across, which turned out to be hers. “*Get out, stay down behind the car, put your back to one of the tires!*” The seatbelt retracted with a whistling *whump* and Mike just flat-out pushed Diana Fontaine backwards out of the car. Her ass hit gravel—he heard it—and then she was scrambling on all fours for the front tire.

Mike undid his own seatbelt even as the front tire blew out. This time, listening for it, he heard the flat sharp crack of rifle fire underneath the sound of the tire exploding, and he wailed “*Fuuuuuck!*” again. Crunched flat against the front seat with the emergency brake jammed painfully into his chest, Mike slammed the car into park and grabbed for the lights, wrenching the switch to ‘off’. The car’s lights went out, all but the dome light. Mike yanked the keys out of the ignition purely by reflex and then kicked himself straight forward out of the car, nearly doing a bellyflop in the gravel. At the last second he threw his hands out and caught himself, grinding gravel deep into his palms, which stung like a motherfucker. Behind him the driver’s side window blew out and a puff of smoke and stuffing uncurled from the driver’s seat, just a second too late.

Palms stinging, heart racing, Mike kicked the passenger side door shut and rolled for the back tire. The idiotic dome light stayed on—fucking modern cars and their ‘helpful’ lights—and by its light he could see Diana, huddled up against the front tire just like he’d told her to and digging frantically through her purse. “*My cell,*” she panted, her voice all screamy and hoarse. “*It’s my cell, I called you on my cell, he must have bugged it after all, my cell—*” She ripped her phone out of her purse and flung it straight away from her with reflexive revulsion, the treacherous little thing flying over the low wire fence to vanish into the woods beyond. Mike heard it hit something and bounce away.

Another bang, another flash, another *spang!* The car rocked. Diana slapped

both hands over her mouth to muffle her scream. Mike cursed and grabbed for his belt, pulling his own cellphone off it. “Here,” he said, tossing it to Diana, who nearly fumbled it. “Bring up the menu, find the one marked ‘Texas’, call him and tell him where we are—” *spang!* “—and I’ll see if I can’t hold this fucker off until the cavalry arrives,” Mike finished in a growl, pulling his own gun from its holster. He didn’t dare pop up from behind the trunk just in case Farraday had some kind of scope—it wasn’t like he’d magically be able to see Farraday in any case—so he poked the muzzle of the gun up over the car’s side and blindly fired twice, aiming in the general direction of the low bulk of the building up on the hill.

The echoes of Mike’s shots faded and suddenly the night was ominously, eerily silent. Mike half-closed his eyes and strained to hear a sound, any sound, like possibly the sound of approaching crazy-fucker footsteps—all he could hear was Diana panting for breath. Not that this made him feel any better. Farraday was obviously just getting himself some better cover before he picked up the assault again.

Off to his right his cell phone was beeping cheerily, its little screen casting a harsh light on Diana’s face. The dome light finally went out—fucking *finally*—and suddenly the light of the cell phone was the only light for miles. Mike took one look at that and fired again, because if Farraday spotted that—! Three bullets down. Shit, did he have a spare clip, please God let him have a spare fucking clip . . . “In the *glove compartment*,” he groaned, bashing his forehead against the dusty metal side of his car.

“What?” Diana whimpered. “What’s in the glove compartment?”

“Never mind,” Mike said. “Just *call*. Tell Texas Farraday has a rifle.” As an afterthought he wriggled out of his jacket and threw it at her. “Put that over your head, hide the light of the phone.”

“What?” she said again, but before he could repeat himself she scrabbled his jacket up off the ground and threw it over her head, the phone’s light nearly vanishing. Good enough. Mike turned his attention back to the night.

♦ 38: Johnny

“—and so I told her that if she was going to do that she needed to get the entire department to chip in, not just those of us in her group—”

Johnny swung his stocking feet up onto the arm of the couch and settled in, making himself comfortable, closing his eyes so that he didn't have to stare up at the ceiling. Pretty boring ceiling. The lady on the other end of the line kept prattling on cheerily. “Uh huh,” Johnny said at what seemed like the proper time, rubbing his temples. Goddamn, wouldn't Honda laugh at him tomorrow: picked another crazy one, Texas. Shit. Buy her one goddamned dinner and she decides they're some kind of soulmates or some shit—Johnny cracked one eye open and checked his watch. After 10:30. She'd get ten more minutes, he decided, and then he was going the hell to bed. “Uh huh,” he said again.

“—anyway, when I got home it turned out my dog had pulled the trash can over and scattered the garbage all over the kitchen floor, so I had to deal with that—”

His phone beeped in his ear, momentarily drowning out the crazy lady's palaver. Low battery...? Johnny pulled the phone away from his ear and checked the screen. **Incoming Call: honda**, it said. Thank Christ, work. ...shit, work? At 10:30? Fucking *Farraday*—“My call waiting,” Johnny said, overriding her story about her goddamn dog or some shit. “It's work. Gotta go.” And without so much as waiting for her to stammer out her surprised goodbyes Johnny hit the CALL button and bought himself an earful of gaspy whimpering. “Yo,” he said. “Honda, I know that ain't you.”

“Texas?” some lady whispered. “Is this Texas?” And then there was gunfire on the other end of the line and Johnny sat right up, already grabbing for his boots.

“Yeah,” he said. “Where are you?”

“Mike told me to call,” she said in this terrified little whimper, apparently deaf to what he'd said. “Mike told me to call, the colonel's *shooting* at us, Mike says it's a rifle, he shot out the tires, we're trapped—”

“Where are you?” Johnny said again, leaning on it this time.

Another flat crack of gunfire scared a little scream out of her. “Truslow Road!” she said, nearly wailing it. In the background Mike was cursing, and suddenly she was babbling: “Ea-east of 95! In Virginia! About halfway along, there’s some kind of abandoned falling-down barn at the top of the hill, he’s *hiding* in it, Mike can’t get a clear shot!”

“I know where it is,” Johnny said, running for the front hall. Automatically he fished a toothpick out of his shirt pocket and poked it into his mouth as he went. “Saw the exit a while back. You hang in there, I’m on the way.”

“Please hurry!” she said, but Johnny was already folding his phone away and only barely heard it. He stuck his cell phone into his pocket and kicked open the coat closet, pushing aside his winter things with one hand and grabbing for the shotgun with the other. He stuck it under his arm and groped around until his fingers hit the box of shells—then, with the shotgun under one arm and the box clutched loosely in his free hand, Johnny hit the ground running.

He passed his landlady on the stairs, going up as he was heading down. She took one look at what was stuck under Johnny’s left arm and flattened herself back against the wall, her eyes wide and her mouth gaping like a fish’s. Johnny eased past her as politely as possible and resigned himself to maybe losing his lease in the next couple of days. “Evenin’,” he said, giving her a half-assed salute with the box of shells. “’scuse me.” And he thudded on down the stairs, aware of her eyes on his retreating back. Shit. That could have gone a little smoother, maybe.

The driver’s side door of his truck didn’t actually lock any more. Hadn’t for almost a year. Still, Johnny’s truck was an ugly and piebald old thing (with the rusting remnants of a gun rack on the back window, not that he actually kept any guns back there) and he hadn’t ever been too worried about some idiot trying to steal it. Johnny slung the shotgun in across the passenger seat and threw himself in after it, dropping the shells on the seat by the shotgun. Shifting his toothpick from one side of his mouth to the other, Johnny pulled the bubble light out from under the seat and stuck it to the roof, then broke his shotgun open across his lap and thumbed in as many shells as she’d take.

Good enough, he thought, and dropped the shotgun across his lap, just under where the lap belt of his seatbelt lay. He pulled his pistol out and racked the slide, loading a round into the chamber. Armed for bear—or squirrel—Johnny stuck the key into the ignition and brought the truck to life with a choking roar. The walls around him went a strobing blue as his bubble light kicked in, and Johnny threw the truck into gear and laid one hell of a patch as he peeled out of the parking lot. Mike would say that that was no goddamned way to treat a motor vehicle, but Johnny’d just have to admit that maybe he’d never gotten all the way over being sixteen and terminally stupid, and if you couldn’t burn a long strip of rubber off your tires when you had two loaded guns sitting pretty in your lap and a goddamned police light on your roof, when *could* you?

His tires bumped lightly over the curb and then he was out in the street, the back end of his pickup slewing a bit before it grabbed the road again. Johnny shifted the toothpick back and got the hell out of Dodge.

◆ 39: Mike

Five rounds. He had five rounds left, and then it was either sit here and wait to get shot or make a try for the clip in his glove compartment, which would set off the dome light, which would illuminate him like a fucking Christmas tree, which would get him shot, which would *majorly suck*.

Mike risked a glance right at where Diana was huddled against the front tire, still hiding inside his jacket, her arms up over her head. “Still with me?” he asked, trying to keep his voice down in direct defiance of the adrenalin burning along his nerves.

“Yes,” she said, her voice pitifully tiny. “He said he was on his way and then he hung up.”

“Needed both hands to carry more weapons, probably,” Mike said, forcing a little cheer and confidence into it for her sake. “Don’t worry. We’re totally fuckin’ saved, although I know it doesn’t so much look like it right now—”

From the other side of the road there was another flash and crack, and the passenger-side window exploded overhead, showering them both with glass again. They both flinched back, Mike with a hoarse yelp and Diana with a little scream that she pinched off pretty quick. Mike stuck the muzzle of his gun up again and returned fire—this time he could swear he’d heard the dull splintery thud of a bullet hitting wood. Great. He’d literally hit the broad side of a barn. Despite the fact that he was now down to four rounds, he laid his head against the car’s metal flank and tried hard not to start laughing. That shit was hysteria, and it wouldn’t help anybody.

He glanced up at the remains of the passenger-side window, the first glimmerings of an idea starting to come to him. “You know,” he said, his voice still quivering with all that misplaced funny, “I’m not sure my insurance is going to cover this shit.”

Diana turned ever so slightly towards him, her eyes wide and disbelieving under the collar of his jacket. Mike patted the car’s side. “Think maybe they’re going to total it out?”

After a long moment, Diana nodded, just a little. It made Mike happy to see it: at least she wasn't totally gone. "Well, goddamn, in that case, I'm gonna try something, and I need your help, okay? When I tell you, you reach up and pull the passenger-side door open, okay? Think you can do that?"

Diana Fontaine shrank into a terrified little huddle against the front tire, automatically shaking her head. She wasn't actually saying 'no' so much as she was refusing to do anything but curl up and hide—Mike sighed, his hysterical good humor fading just as fast as it had bubbled up, and decided that maybe now was the time to level with her. "Okay. Look," he said, turning the gun out and showing her its side. "I've got four rounds left in this clip. Four more shots, and then we're going to be a sitting duck dinner if we don't *do* something about it." Diana's eyes were now huge with terror. It made Mike feel pretty much entirely like shit, and so he hurried on. "But I've got a whole 'nother magazine in the glove compartment, and the only thing really standing between me and it is—"

Across the street the rifle cracked again, the bullet thudding into the car's side and making it rock on its shocks again. Quickly, before he could lose his nerve, Mike stuck his own gun up through the hole where the passenger-side window used to be and shot out that fucking dome light—it exploded in a shower of sparks and glass, and what was left of his windshield crazed with a spiderweb of cracks. "—the fucking dome light that's just been taken care of now *open the goddamned door and help me save your worthless lawyer's ass!*"

His voice cracked across her face like a slap. Shocked into motion she reflexively lunged for the handle, whimpering in terror but dragging the door open. Another shower of sparks came from the ruined dome light and the little light stuck in the passenger-side door came on but Mike was already half-inside the car, scrabbling for the glove compartment, which fell open with a thump and showered him with three years' worth of insurance cards and old maps and the *clip*, the clip, thank God!

He whipped back, fresh clip in hand. The tire was a welcome relief against his back, and he heaved out a grateful breath and shut his eyes for a fragment of a second. "Close it," he said, his voice cracking. "Shit, I forgot about the stupid little light in the door panel, close it again."

After a pause, there was a soft rubbery *thud* and the door arced shut. Diana Fontaine pulled her sneakered foot back into her little huddle. "Thanks," Mike said, shoving the full clip into his front pocket. "Hang in there. Cavalry always gets there just in time. Well. In the movies, anyway."

"That's not as reassuring as you think," Diana said in a tiny little voice, and Mike couldn't help it: he laughed, just a little bit.

Approximately a millennium passed. The rifle fire from the old barn across the way kept up, slow but steady—Mike didn't even want to think about how many holes there must be in the driver's side of his car by now—and Mike

conserved his bullets as best he could.

The three in his current magazine ran out, and he ejected it into the gravel and slapped in the new one, racking the slide. “C’mon, Texas,” he muttered under his breath, picking up the spent clip and sticking it in his pocket. “Any year now, Texas. That laconic shit is not funny at this point in time, Texas.”

“How . . . how many do you have left?” Diana asked.

Mike blew out a breath. “Seventeen,” he said. “Texas’ll get here before I fire off ten of ’em. Swear. He doesn’t and I’ll eat one.” The shocked little sound she made at that made him rapidly add, “Joke, just a joke, bad joke at that, sorry, I tend to run off at the mouth in high-stress situations, don’t mind me.”

“ . . . I keep expecting to hear sirens,” Diana said. “I keep thinking that someone has to hear all this godawful noise, or at least drive past and see the car . . .”

“Unfortunately, the sound doesn’t carry as well as you’d think,” Mike said. The rifle cracked from across the street and Mike blindly returned the shot. “C’mon, Texas,” he muttered again.

He was nine rounds down when he heard the gloriously familiar sound of Johnny’s engine off in the distance. No other pickup truck in the world sounded like that, Mike was sure. “Here he comes,” Mike said, shifting. “I’m gonna start shooting like fuck as soon as he comes ’round that curve, try and pin Farraday down so he doesn’t take out Johnny, too. It’s gonna get loud. Put your hands over your ears and hang on.”

Diana nodded, her mouth set in a thin, grim line. Her hands vanished under Mike’s jacket and she hunched forward, hands tight over her ears, eyes squeezed shut. Mike rose up on one knee, rested the muzzle of his gun on the lip of the trunk, and waited. “Hope you got a plan, Texas,” he said, the tone of his voice almost conversational. “Or maybe a rocket launcher, you know, I’d settle for that—”

Headlights exploded around the curve in the road as Johnny’s truck hove into view. The rifle cracked, once—at which of them Mike wasn’t sure—and then Mike stuck his head up above the edge of the trunk and just fucking well opened fire, stitching a crooked line of five bullets across the barn’s side. He risked a glance at Johnny’s truck just as Johnny spun the wheel and sent his truck careening off the road and onto the shoulder— “Oh, fuck, Texas, you crazy son of a bitch!” Mike cried.

The truck hit the roadside ditch, bouncing right back out like Johnny thought he was starring in his own personal off-road vehicle ad. Behind the ditch there was nothing but a rusty barbed-wire fence, the twin of the one behind Mike; the truck’s crumpled grill hit it at an angle, with a tortured screech that might have been fence or might have been truck, Mike couldn’t tell which. In the end it

didn't matter. Johnny's bastard of a truck was ugly but tough and the old barbed wire let go with three loud twanging noises like a guitar snapping in half.

For half a second the truck was still, settling ever so slightly backwards. Then Johnny downshifted, the roar of his engine going throaty and furious, and gave it everything it had. Gravel sprayed madly under the truck's spinning back tires for a second before they caught, catapulting the truck on a lunatic bouncing arc almost straight up the hillside towards the barn. His headlights strobed madly up and down, splashing across the landscape like some kind of demented lightshow—Mike put two more bullets into the barn, just in case, screaming "*Don't you go in after him alone, Texas, you goddamned crazy man!*"

The truck breasted the hill and balanced on its back tires like a rearing horse for just a moment before crashing back down. Dirt sprayed up against the night sky and the truck dug in for half a second before lunging forward again, its back half fishtailing, a cloud of dust billowing out in its wake as Johnny hauled it around in a vicious tight semicircle. The barn, caught in the rapidly shrinking circles of Johnny's headlights, was a half-rotted, ramshackle, ugly thing—and then Johnny crashed his truck into it hard enough to make the truck's back wheels jolt up off the ground and it abruptly got a whole lot uglier.

The echoing, hollow boom of the collision sounded like an explosion. A frantic cloud of either pigeons or bats came swarming out of the hole in the barn's roof. For a moment the night was full of the sound of shrieking, splintering wood as the barn shuddered and swayed drunkenly and developed a slight but definite cant to the left. Johnny's engine revved, his tires spinning furiously in the dirt, his front bumper grinding back and forth against the barn's wooden backside—Mike's jaw dropped—Johnny downshifted again and punched the accelerator and the barn screamed like a woman, old nails pulling free of old wood. It was leaning at a crazy drunken angle now, the whole thing, the wall that Johnny was pushing against now at so acute an angle that the truck's front tires bit in and started climbing it.

Barely a second later, with a deafening splintering crash like thunder, the barn fell right the fuck over, collapsing in on itself like a house of cards and belching out ancient dust and smoke in all directions. "*Timber, motherfucker!*" Mike screamed, jittering back and forth on his knees in insane glee.

Part of the billowing cloud of dust on the hilltop lit up hellishly bright and Johnny's truck burst out of it a second later, bouncing its way back down the hill towards the road. Mike shoved his gun back into its holster and crouch-ran along the side of the car to where Diana was huddled. "Get ready!" he yelled, and she blinked at him in confusion for a moment before shifting awkwardly to her feet, her purse clutched to her belly, Mike's jacket still over her head.

Casually, as an afterthought, Johnny took out another section of barbed-wire fence with another series of broken-guitar noises. His truck hit the blacktop and slewed, slightly, before righting itself; he screeched to a halt just past the bullet-

riddled ruin of Mike's own car and leaned over, unlocking the passenger-side door and kicking it open. "Come on!" Johnny bellowed.

"Go!" Mike yelled, pushing at Diana's shoulder as hard as he dared. She stumbled once and then scrambled for the truck, Mike right on her heels. Without even thinking about it he grabbed the waistband of her jeans and hoicked her right into the truck, shoving her up against Johnny's side. Mike threw himself in after, yelling "Go, go, go" and hauling the passenger-side door shut. Johnny's tires screeched on the road and then they were gone, hauling ass down Truslow, leaving Mike's car behind.

"Whooooo!" Mike screamed, so high on adrenalin that he couldn't sit still. "Holy shit, Texas, that was the most awesome fuckin' thing I've ever seen and I've seen some *awesome fuckin' things*! Holy shit!"

"Yeah, it'll do," Johnny said, but he was grinning like a maniac around a totally shredded toothpick, which was almost the same thing as screaming, for Johnny. Instinctively they high-fived each other—Diana shrank back, startled and still scared, but right at the moment Mike didn't care so much. "Pity he probably got out before it went," Johnny said.

"Yeah, probably, 'cause he's one canny motherfucker," Mike said, jittering along. "Still, that'll give him something to think about!"

"Shit, I'm gonna get sued by some fuckin' pissed-off farmer," Johnny said, and they both burst out laughing, Diana huddled on the seat between them staring straight ahead like they were both crazy, which Mike figured they probably currently were.

Side streets and buildings eventually started appearing along the sides of Truslow, right about the same time that the excitement started to wear off and Mike's scraped-up hands started to hurt in earnest. Johnny put the bubble light back on the top of his truck just to keep from having to answer awkward questions and handed Mike the shotgun. Diana sucked breath between her teeth and shrank away from it as it went past. "Hey, I got shotgun!" Mike cried. Johnny snorted out a laugh so hard that he coughed out his toothpick.

Finally, just as Truslow gave way to 95, Johnny glanced past her at Mike. "You tell Springheel what was up?"

The last of Mike's adrenalin high burned itself away on the instant, replaced by a sudden and extremely healthy fear of his own imminent death. "Aw, *fuck*!" he cried, banging the heel of one hand against his forehead (and immediately regretting it). "She's gonna kill me!"

Johnny considered this for a moment. "Naw, maybe not," he finally said. "You wanted to get to Miz Fontaine without delay, right?"

"Right..."

"So you were plannin' to call just as soon as you got away safe, right?"

“Right,” Mike said with a good deal more enthusiasm, seeing where this was going.

“And you’re just now gettin’ away safe, right?”

“Right!” said Mike. “So you should totally call her right now!”

Johnny sighed. “Shit, guess I do deserve to take one for the team,” he said, fishing out his own battered cell phone.

“I fuckin’ love you, Texas,” Mike said. Looking down at Diana Fontaine, Mike said, “I fuckin’ love him, you know.”

Diana nodded, her teeth chattering. Mike’s smile faded. “Aw, c’mon, here, it’s okay, it’s over,” he said, awkwardly shifting to put an arm over her shoulders. Diana made a small whimpering noise and burrowed up against his side, making him yelp a little in surprise. Johnny glanced their way then looked back at the road, his phone pressed to his ear.

“Right,” Johnny said. “Right. We’ll let you know.” Without saying goodbye he folded up his phone and stuck it in his breast pocket.

Mike looked up. Diana had either gone to sleep or passed out snuggled up close against him, and he really had no fucking idea what to do about it (other than put his arms around her and try real hard to enjoy it) so until he thought of something, he was letting her sleep. “Well?”

“It’s cool,” Johnny said. “She’s a little pissed at you but it’s normal-type pissed.”

“I can totally handle that,” Mike said. Diana made a little grumpy sound and hid her face against his chest. He winced and patted her shoulder, lowering his voice. “So where are we gonna take her? I was just gonna take her to my place but I guess maybe that’s not such a hot idea, since Farraday knows she called me and all . . .”

“Probably not,” Johnny said. “Probably shouldn’t take her to Sandy’s, either.”

Mike shuddered. “Man, that’s a cat-fight waiting to happen, there . . .” He paused, thinking about it, then added, “Actually, that’s kind of a good reason *to* take her there, now that I think about it.”

Johnny didn’t dignify that with an answer. “Hell if she’s coming to my place, and Templar’s got his own problems. So . . .”

“Nate,” they said in unison. Mike nodded. “Yeah, Nate,” he said. “Perfect. He’s got an actual house and guest room and everything, and his ma’s there to sorta . . . chaperone things.”

“Yeah, ’cause Specs is an uncontrollable womanizer,” Johnny said, pulling his phone back out. “I’ll call him.”

“Tell him I wanna stay too,” Mike said, glancing down at Diana. “I’ll sleep on the couch, it’s cool. Figure maybe an extra gun hand around the place wouldn’t go wrong, you know?” He sighed. “And my hands hurt like fuck. Hope he’s got some peroxide or something.”

Johnny paused, then nodded. "Right."

All the lights in Nate's house were on when they pulled up, and Nate himself was sitting out on the front porch, waiting for them. Johnny glanced at him and snorted out a little laugh. "Cute," he said.

Mike looked at Nate and laughed a little himself. Nate's hair was standing up in big fluffy sleep-induced spikes and he was wearing bedroom slippers with his jeans, but what really made the picture complete, in Mike's opinion, was the gun. Nate looked to be just awake enough to have realized that sitting out on his front porch unarmed was a bad idea, so he was sitting on the top step with his gun dangling from one hand, casual as anything, blind to the 'crazed killer in between rampages' look he was currently sporting.

Diana sat up, knuckling at her eyes, her hair all weirdly flat on one side. "Where are we?" she asked nervously.

"Specs' place," Mike said, resisting the urge to comment on her hairdo. "You'll be safe here until tomorrow, when we can find you something a little more permanent. Okay?"

"If you say so," said Diana. Her fingers crept up and fluffed out the flat spot in her hair.

"Yep, I do." Mike unlocked his door and opened it, sliding out. "'Sides, I'll be staying too, just to keep an eye on things. Safe as houses. Promise." He held out his hand to Diana, who took it after a moment of hesitation and slid out of the truck after him, wobbling a little before her legs steadied again.

At the top of the steps Nate rose, blinking, and shoved his gun back into its holster before he padded down the steps to meet them. "Whoa," he said once he got there. "What happened to Johnny's truck?"

Mike turned around, took one look at the truck, and had to clap a hand over his mouth to keep from laughing loud enough to wake the entire neighborhood. Johnny's front bumper was crumpled and bent, one long curl of rusty barbed wire caught in it like a stray hair and a bunch of wood splinters wedged in the grill; the headlight on the left was still lit but the glass cover had gotten knocked off, leaving the headlight a single bright point of light. Paint and rust alike had been scored off the hood, leaving long bright gouges of raw metal shining in the streetlights, and grass and mud were caked an inch deep on the tires and splattered in the wheel-wells. "Little matter of a head-on collision with a motherfuckin' *barn*," Mike said, dropping his hand. "I shit you not. Man, it was awesome, you totally should not have been there."

"With a what?" Nate said, frowning. "I'm really sleepy, could we not mess with my brain right now?"

Johnny came slowly around the front of his truck, inspecting the damage. Apparently satisfied, he patted the truck's hood. "Ugly bastard's tough," he said proudly.

“Yeah, yeah, we all know you are,” said Mike, steering the stumbling Diana around in front of him. “Nate, this is Diana, Diana, Nate, now let’s get our asses inside before someone calls the cops on us, huh?”

“Oh. Yeah,” Nate said, glancing around. “C’mon in. Mom’s putting sheets on the guest bed.”

“Man!” Mike said, gently pushing Diana up the walk and falling in step behind her. “Live-in maid service! You’re gettin’ the four-star treatment tonight, Di.”

“Please don’t call me that,” she said dimly. She was nearly staggering: probably exhausted, thought Mike, paying attention just in case he was going to have to lunge forward and catch her. “I hate that.”

“Kay-o.” Mike took her elbow just before she hit the steps, just in case. Johnny, taciturn as ever, brought up the rear.

◆ 40: Sandra

[tuesday]

“—called the state road patrol and got them to tow her car to the impound lot,” Mike said. He was crouched inside Rich’s old lair, doing something. Sandra couldn’t see exactly what it was, but given Nate’s red and scandalized face, she thought she could make a decent guess. “Told them where mine was, but mentioned that maybe they ought to wait until broad daylight to go get it, just to be on the safe side.”

Sandra, leaning against the conference table, gave in to her need to pinch the bridge of her nose and drive her headache back to bay. “So that’s it,” she said.

Mike paused, half-glancing over his shoulder. “I think so,” he said. “Princess Di was still asleep when the Nate-man and I took off this morning, so we left her there with Nate’s mom, who’s kinda sorta totally adopted her. And hey, nobody blew up my place yet, bonus. I packed a bag and got back out just fine.”

“I called the local precinct and got them to promise to keep an eye on my house,” Nate added, tearing his eyes away from whatever Mike was doing. “I don’t think it’ll be safe forever but it should be okay for a little while.”

“Okay,” Sandra said. “We’ll put our heads together this afternoon and try to figure out where to put her. I’d like to keep her kind of close by, just in case, but if she suddenly develops some kind of overwhelming urge to visit relatives in San Francisco I won’t kick too hard.”

“Heh, yeah,” said Mike. He straightened up and gently shepherded the wooden chair under the desk. Sandra saw only a momentary flash of pink. “Yo, Nate-man, catch,” Mike said, tossing a tube of superglue back over his shoulder; Nate fumbled it, of course, and had to lean over to pick it up off the floor.

Sandra nodded. “So I only have one question—” Inside Simon’s office, her cellphone rang. “—and I’ll get to it in a minute,” she finished, wheeling around and going for her purse. **Incoming Call: TEXAS**, the screen read. She flipped her phone open, trying to ignore the low-key butterflies that the call woke up in her stomach. These days any variation in the routine put her on edge. “Johnny?”

“Yeah,” said Johnny, talking loud over the background din. “Woke up to three flat tires. Had to call a tow, so I’m gonna be late.”

“Three—” Sandra closed her eyes. “Think Farraday had anything to do with it?”

“Nah. Well. Not direct. Picked up a bunch of nails and barbed wire—” he said something closer to *bobwire*, actually “—last night. Probably the mud’s all that held ’em together this long.”

“Okay. Want me to send someone to get you?”

Johnny snorted in her ear. “We got any cars to spare?”

“I guess we *are* running kind of low,” said Sandra. “I’ll think of something. Are you at home, still?”

“Yeah.” Someone spoke in the background and Johnny covered the mouthpiece of his phone and said something in answer before returning. “Anyway, they’re done winching. Gotta go. Send somebody if you want, or I’ll grab a cab.”

“I’ll send someone,” Sandra promised. “Take care.”

“Yeah,” said Johnny, and hung up without saying goodbye.

Sandra folded her phone back into her purse and went back out into the main room, taking up her post by the conference table once more. “That was Johnny,” she said, probably unnecessarily. “Seems that his truck had three flat tires this morning—”

Mike whooped, cutting her off there. “Aw, *man!*” he said, delighted. “I gotta pay him back for those, because it was totally, totally worth it.”

“Yeah, that’d probably be good,” Sandra said. Her headache was coming back. “At any rate. Take the van and go pick him up at his place, will you?” Quickly, before Mike could leave, she held up a hand. “*After* you answer something for me.”

“Whassat?” Mike said, filching the van keys off their hook.

“Last night,” Sandra said. “You gave Diana Fontaine your cell phone and told her to call Johnny.”

“Right.”

Sandra sighed. “Mike, why didn’t you just tell her to call 911?”

Mike’s grin curdled and went petulant. “Oh, yeah, Farraday’s holed up in perfect cover with a hunting rifle, I really want to give him a whole gang of clueless patrol cops to pick off—”

“—Farraday doesn’t kill people.”

“Farraday *didn’t* kill people,” Mike said testily. “Who the fuck knows what he’s capable of now?”

“While it’s possible you have a point,” said Sandra, now getting a little testy herself, “I think the fact that he only shot Simon with a .22 and then managed to hit nothing but your car last night is some pretty strong evidence that three years in prison didn’t change him that much.”

“Yeah, okay, maybe so,” Mike said. “Maybe not. My point is, I don’t fucking know. My other point is, neither do you.” Sandra blinked, taken aback. Mike flapped a scabbed-up hand at the air in front of him. “He put a fucking shell into the driver’s seat like not even a second after I left it, okay? Here’s the thing: you weren’t there. I was. He *was* trying to kill me, Sandy, least right at first, and he didn’t only ‘cause I’m awesome like that.”

“All right,” Sandra started to say after a startled pause, but Mike, now wound up, rode right over her: “And okay, maybe it was kind of a pride thing, you know? ‘Oh, hey, I’m a big bad FBI agent, wah wah come rescue my helpless ass, Mister Local Cop’, yeah, that’d have been loads of fun to live down afterwards, even if Farraday *didn’t* shoot a whole bunch of them.”

Sandra gaped at him. “A *pride* thing?” she said, flabbergasted.

“You know what? No.” Mike flung up his hands, stomping back towards Rich’s lair, then spinning on his heel and stalking back towards her, too exercised to hold still. “It’s not a pride thing. That’s just a fuckin’ excuse. You know why I got her to call Johnny? ‘Cause he was the first person I thought of, and I trust him, yo. I knew if anybody was going to get me and Miz Fontaine out of there, it was Texas. Swear to God I didn’t even think about 911 until you said it just now.”

Sandra held up both hands. “Okay. Okay, I’ll buy that, it makes sense, calm down—”

“Fuck calming down!” Mike said, aggrieved. He thumped his chest once, like punctuation. “Shit, Sandy, I fucked up, I get it, I’m really sorry about that, but could you not talk down to me like I’m some kind of retard now? I don’t fucking well appreciate it! Fact is I *did* my job last night, even if I needed Texas’ help to do it, and no one got hurt but my car—*my* car—and three of Texas’ tires, and fuck me, I think that’s maybe a job well done! And you know what? *Templar* would have said so!”

And before Sandra could even draw breath to answer those charges, Mike shouldered past her and banged out the door, keys in hand. The saferoom door slammed shut behind him with an echoing, hollow boom, and someone on Team Hall bellowed angrily a moment later, the actual words too muffled to make out. “Uh,” said Nate, his voice tiny.

“Yeah,” said Sandra, putting a hand over her eyes. “That could have gone better.”

The door clicked and swung slowly open, and Dave poked his head into the room. “Um,” he said. “Good morning.”

Sandra let her hand drop. “Morning, Mr. Brassoﬀ.”

Dave gave her a small and faltering smile, then edged into the room and carefully swung the door shut. At least he’d had the sense not to wear a suit today, although he looked kind of lost without it, like he wasn’t entirely comfortable with dressing himself yet. “Mike nearly ran me down in the hallway,” he said uncertainly.

“Yeah,” said Sandra. “There was a thing.”

Dave paused, glancing from Sandra to Nate and back, obviously waiting to see if someone would elaborate. It made Sandra feel even less like doing so, and she hadn’t really thought that was possible. “Um,” said Dave, once it was clear that neither of them was going to say anything else. “’scuse me.” He stepped between them, heading for Rich’s lair.

Nate immediately whipped around and got very interested in his computer. Sandra was at a loss to explain why until she heard Dave suck his breath in, and then she remembered how Mike had been fucking around in there this morning. She went over and peered over Dave’s shoulder, trying to see what he was staring down at, and found herself entirely unsurprised. Mike had kind of a one-track sense of humor. “My,” she said brightly, “that’s a *large* penis, isn’t it?”

Dave yelped and spun around, startled. Behind her Nate made a choking sound that was either embarrassment or amusement. Sandra was guessing both. Giving Dave a tight little smile she took one step to the side, putting a hand on the back of his chair and wagging it, making the ridiculously pink dildo glued to the seat wobble back and forth (almost realistically, she thought before she could stop herself). “Good thing you didn’t sit down on it,” she said. “We as a team are pretty darned sex-positive but there’s sex-positive and then there’s accidentally getting twelve inches of latex rubber stuck up your ass, you know? As in one does not necessarily preclude getting teased half to death about the other?”

“Silicone,” said Nate. “It’s probably silicone.”

“I do not even want to know how you know that,” Sandra said, not looking at him.

“Um. The internet?”

“I *said* I didn’t want to know. Buuuut, that would have been my first guess.” Sandra finally looked back at Dave, who was apparently too mortified even to blush: he was a pale and cheesy white, instead, like the shock of actually seeing a penis that wasn’t his own had made him go all faint. “But hey, count your blessings,” she said. “Not only did you not sit on it, Mike wasn’t even here to appreciate your reaction. If you’re quick you can get rid of it before he comes back.”

“Aah,” said Dave, glancing helplessly from her to his chair ornament and back. His fingers twitched at his sides.

Sandra rolled her eyes. Men. “Look,” she said. “Touching it will *not* make you gay, okay? Look, here—” and pushing around him she grabbed the thing around its middle. “Girthy,” she said appreciatively, just to see if Nate would actually faint (he didn’t, although he made an entertaining choking noise) and then she gave it a tentative pull, wiggling it back and forth. Either the twee little suction cup on the end or the half a tube of superglue held it fast, though, and she didn’t really get anywhere. “You might not want to watch this,” she said, sliding her feet a little farther apart.

“Watch what?” Dave said, horrified and fascinated, his eyes already as wide as saucers.

“Not what you’re thinking, you pervert,” said Sandra, now actually enjoying this. Beside her Dave started to babble out some kind of frantic, apologetic denial, but Sandra didn’t bother to listen; instead she shifted her grip slightly, bared her teeth, and wrenched the dildo free of the chair’s seat with a horrible rubbery ripping sound. Dave made a sound like a balloon squeaking and shut up. Sandra was pretty sure he wasn’t breathing, either, and she’d lay even odds that he’d spontaneously developed some kind of erectile dysfunction.

“Huh,” said Sandra, tossing the damaged dildo into the air and catching it again. “You know, contrary to rumor I’ve never *actually* emasculated anything with my bare hands before.” She held it up and studied the shredded remains of the suction cup and the long rip that spiraled up along the length of the thing, its outer skin now hanging loose like the aftermath of a particularly terrible industrial accident. “Surprisingly fulfilling,” she said, and dropped the dildo into the trash can by Rich’s smaller desk. “You’ll have to get the rest of the suction cup off yourself.” She turned and headed back into Simon’s office, feeling pretty good.

“I-I have no idea if that was hot or terrifying,” she heard Dave say, his voice awed and hushed.

“She heard that, you know,” said Nate. Dave made a little terrified noise and shut up, suddenly concentrating very hard on scraping the last of the suction cup and the superglue off the seat of his chair. Five minutes later he tiptoed out the door, gingerly carrying the trash can held away from his body, like the contents were volatile.

By the time Mike and Johnny got back Dave was once again seated in front of one of Rich’s computers, pretending very hard that nothing at all had happened. (He had switched out his own damaged and presumably penis-cootie-infested chair for Mike’s, a fairly canny move which both surprised Sandra and vaguely impressed her. If only he’d thought to do it before she’d yanked the dildo off.) Mike made a disappointed noise.

“Mike?” Sandra called. “Can I talk to you for a second?”

“Yeah,” Mike called back. “Hang on.” There was a bit of banging around and then Mike appeared in the doorway, van keys still dangling from his hand. He looked just like he always did, except that he was staring at a point vaguely to her left instead of at her face. Or at her breasts, which Sandra had to admit was more of a Mike thing to do. “’Sup?”

“I wanted to apologize for earlier,” Sandra said without any preamble. “I handled that badly. So: I’m sorry.”

Now he looked directly at her. His boggled look made her kind of want to smack him. Dammit, was it that unusual that she wanted to apologize for

something? “S’okay,” he finally said. “I know you’re kinda under a lot of pressure and all—”

“Don’t,” Sandra said. “Don’t make excuses for me. I fucked up, that’s all. Okay?”

“Uh, okay,” Mike said, ducking his head. “I probably shouldn’t have blown up like that, though.”

Sandra nodded. “No, probably not, but I get why, so it’s okay. Forgiveness all ’round? We coo’, as Simon would say?”

“Yeah, we coo’,” said Mike, looking vastly relieved. “Are we meeting?”

“Not yet.” Sandra prodded at Simon’s computer and woke it up. “We’ll meet this afternoon, keep Simon in the loop.”

“Okay. Anything else?”

“Not at the moment,” said Sandra. A devilish little impulse made her add, “Go sit down and get to work.”

“Yeah, I need to call the Virginia highway patrol—” Mike vanished from the doorway. A moment later, Sandra heard him pull out his chair and thump down in it, and she had to bite her lower lip to keep from laughing.

“Yo, Spring?”

Sandra (who’d been contemplating running down to the machines and feeding the large hungry gremlin in her stomach) looked up. Mike was back in the doorway. “What?”

Mike knocked his knuckles on the doorframe and blew out a breath. “I’m gonna take the van back out to Truslow and meet up with the highway patrol, okay? We’re gonna go in together and check out the remains of the barn, see what we can find.”

“Good idea,” said Sandra. “Take Texas with you, just in case.” She raised her voice. “Texas?”

“On it,” said Johnny. His chair screeched back.

Mike looked relieved. “Awesome, I was just about to ask if you minded.”

“Try and be back by one, if you can,” Sandra said. “And if there’s any trouble, call me pronto, okay?”

“Will do, semi-boss.” Mike tossed off an awkward jazz-hands-y salute.

Johnny appeared in the doorway next to him, as an afterthought grinding a knuckle into Mike’s side. Mike yelped. “Gotta go use the men’s,” Johnny said. “Pull the van around. Meet you at the side.”

“Right!” said Mike, smacking the top of Johnny’s head and zipping off. The saferoom door thumped closed behind him.

Instead of following, Johnny looked back at Sandra, running an absent hand back over the spikes of his crewcut. “About Miz Fontaine,” he said, keeping his voice quiet.

Sandra’s hackles all rose. “Yes?” she said.

Johnny looked over his shoulder, then back at her. "Something's not right there," he said. "Story doesn't add up right."

"How so?"

"Not sure." Johnny shrugged. "It's just . . . not right. Don't think Honda sees it, either. Think she's kinda got him fuddled up."

"Bitch," Sandra said, tapping her nails on Simon's desk. "How sure are you?"

Johnny hesitated. His eyes slid away from hers for a moment, then returned. "Not a hundred percent," he admitted. "Gut feeling, mostly. I'll think on it."

"Okay," Sandra said, the pit of her stomach squirming uncomfortably. Suddenly she wasn't hungry any more. "I guess we better get Diana Fontaine out of Nate's house pronto, then."

"Make me feel better," Johnny admitted, his face creasing up into a vague and worried grin.

◆ 41: Johnny

Mike's car was long gone by the time they got there, Johnny noted, hauled away by the road crew to wherever. Well, not entirely gone. Mike's tires had left deep dirty gouges in the gravel shoulder, and little cubes of safety glass sparkled like diamonds along a stretch of road almost twenty feet long. It wasn't the first thing an onlooker tended to notice, though. In fact, the two uniformed state policemen that were waiting for them had their backs entirely turned on the traces of Mike's car and were staring up at the hill opposite.

"Holy crap," Mike said reverently, pulling the van over the shoulder. He crossed his arms on the steering wheel and leaned forward to get a better view. Johnny chewed on his toothpick and silently allowed how he might be feeling pretty goddamned manly right about now, yep, thanks.

The dull greeny-brown of the hillside had been torn to shit, pretty much. Looked like a junior-sized tornado had hit it. Johnny's tires had ripped out huge chunks of sod everywhere they'd hit, leaving big patches of the hillside bald and raw; the barbed-wire fence was busted in two places, just like Johnny remembered, and what was left of the fence had been yanked towards the crash sites, fenceposts leaning drunkenly inwards. From here, the barn itself was just half a shattered roof peeking crookedly up above what was left of the tall grass.

Johnny glanced over and noted how the two state police had left off looking at the carnage and were now looking at the van. "C'mon," he said, elbowing Mike in the side. Mike reflexively knocked Johnny's arm away, not taking his eyes off the barn for a second. Johnny considered that for a moment, then smacked the back of Mike's head.

Mike's forehead came within a couple of inches of hitting the steering wheel. "Ow!" he said, finally looking away from the barn in order to give Johnny a wounded look. "What was that for?"

"You gonna sit in the van all day?" Johnny punched the door handle and slid out.

"Shit, man, don't be bitchslappin' me in front of the po-po," Mike said grumpily.

Johnny paused, one foot on the gravel shoulder, one still in the van. “‘Po-po’?” he asked, trying to figure out if he’d heard that right.

“Aw, you know. The po-lice,” Mike clarified, opening his own door. Johnny didn’t so much know, but he shrugged and let it go.

The state police (or whatever it was Mike wanted to call them) silently watched the two of them approach. The older one was leaning against the side of their patrol car, arms crossed over his chest; the younger one had straightened up, at least, but hadn’t bothered to take off his shades. Johnny steeled himself, noticing as he did that Mike’s usual swagger had toned itself down a notch. Good. Least they were both on the same wavelength here.

“Mornin’,” Johnny said, once they got within speaking distance. He flicked his ID folder out of his jeans pocket and held it up for a second before folding it away again, formalities all seen to.

After a stiff moment, the younger one nodded. “Hey,” he said, and then turned to look at the hillside again. “Christ, look at this mess.”

“Pretty sweet, isn’t it?” Mike said cheerfully. “I mean, that is one fucking dead barn up there. It has passed on. It is no more. It has ceased to *be*.”

The older trooper didn’t shift a muscle, but the younger one twitched like he sort of wanted to smile. Still, in the end, it was the older one who spoke, if reluctantly. “I’m Parker. That’s Haynes. Captain tells me you’ve got a crime scene you want an escort for.” Me, Johnny noticed. Not us. Me.

Johnny—who could see what was coming next so clearly that he could almost taste it—nevertheless decided he ought to be diplomatic and let Parker have his little fun. “Yep,” he said.

“Well, what a coincidence,” said Parker, right on cue, finally deigning to heave himself upright. “Looks to me like we’ve got a crime scene right here.”

“Yep,” Johnny said again. Dismissing Officer Parker for the moment, he looked down long enough to pop the safety strap off his holster. Mike stuck his hand into his jacket and did the same—now they had everybody’s attention. “Think our screwball’s long gone,” Johnny said, once that was done. “Still, can’t be sure. Figured we could use some backup on this, keep your captain in the loop in the bargain.”

Haynes nodded, slowly. Parker glanced at him, disgusted, then grunted. “So we’re goin’ up there.”

“Yep.” Johnny fell silent, waiting.

Eventually, Officer Parker got fed up enough to fill the silence. They always did. “So what are we supposed to be looking for?”

Johnny shrugged. “Casings, mostly. Blood, if there is any. Our squirrel’s backtrail would be nice, as would anything he dropped. You know the drill as well’s I do: bag’n’tag it now, figure out what it is later.”

“Guy fired off enough shells to *carpet* that fuckin’ barn with casings,” Mike said beside him. “He can’t have carried them all off.”

“And if he *is* still up there . . .” Johnny paused and dug himself out a toothpick. “Guy’s a psycho,” he said around the pick. “He’s up there, he’s gonna either hide or shoot.”

“Shit,” said Parker, glaring up at the roofline of the collapsed barn. “I get all the good assignments.”

Johnny gnawed on his toothpick reflectively, tasted wood. “Yeah? Think it’s because of your winning personality?”

Mike sniggered. Parker scowled at Johnny and hitched up his gunbelt, heading for one of the holes in the fence. “Let’s just get this over with,” he said.

“Couldn’t agree more,” Johnny said, heading for the other.

The hill felt a hell of a lot steeper when Johnny was on foot, which didn’t surprise him a bit. Even sticking closely to the shallow gouges that had been left by his tires he had to shift to all fours a couple of times, getting his hands dirty in the process. Mike and Officer Haynes climbed to either side of him, Mike occasionally pausing to mutter in awe at the sheer scope of the damage—yeah, Johnny was feeling pretty damned manly—and Officer Parker stuck stubbornly to the other side of the hill and managed to dump himself on his face once when a rock shifted under his foot, which didn’t precisely make him cheerier.

Still, soon enough Johnny had reached the crest of the hill, and he went the last ten feet at a careful pace, hand resting on the butt of his gun. Beyond the barn the hill opened up in a gentle, sweeping curve of land, dotted in the distance with grazing cows. The treeline stretched away to both sides, thickening on the left into a small, dark stand of trees that receded into the distance like a second fence.

The barn itself was a splintered pile of warped gray wood. If it had ever been painted, the paint had long since flaked away; long bloody rust stains wept away from the heads of the exposed nails. “Man,” Mike said, whistling in appreciation. “Farraday’s lucky the barn didn’t fall on him out of sheer fuckin’ exhaustion.”

Johnny grunted, taking a long stroll around the barn. The two state troopers poked desultorily at the ruin, then spread out and studied the area; despite Officer Parker’s almost visible animosity they both had their hands on their guns, as well, proving that some people could indeed be taught. There had been enormous double doors on the front side of the barn at one point. One of them was still there. Well. Sort of. “Bet he came and went that way,” Johnny said, pointing at the thickening treeline on the left.

“Yeah,” said Mike, squatting by the remains of the wall that had faced the road. “Shit, this wall’s more hole than wood. He had his pick of places to shoot from.”

“Wonder if he’s still in there,” Johnny said, kicking at a stray plank.

Mike yelped out a laugh, making both state troopers twitch and glance in his direction. “Shit, that’d be too easy, Texas! Farraday ain’t no Wicked Witch of the

East, you know what I'm sayin'?"

"Yeah. No call for his shoes, neither." Johnny eyed a chunk of the roof that had pulled halfway free in the collapse. "Let's try and move this bit."

"You think?" Mike jogged up beside him and gave the boards a critical once-over. "Yeah, I think we can flip it, if we try. You wanna go left or right with it?"

"Left," said Johnny. He straightened up and waved at the troopers, who headed in his direction, Haynes a little faster than Parker. "We're gonna flip this bit over," he said once they were close enough to hear him. "Back us up in case he comes boiling out."

Haynes barked out a laugh. "Shit," he said, shaking his head as he moved behind them. Parker, still lagging behind, snorted.

Johnny and Mike hunkered down and grabbed the edge of the roof, Johnny nearly perforating his palm with a stray nail. "Shit," he said, shifting his grip. "On three."

"Three," Mike said cheerfully, and they both braced their feet and heaved. The roof resisted for a few moments, still attached up near the top, but in the end the rotten wood gave and the roof panel splintered and flipped over with a boom that kicked up dust in all directions. Johnny fell back a step, raising an arm against the expanding cloud.

Once the dust cloud had died down (and Farraday had not come charging out) Mike grabbed an exposed strut and took a giant step into the remains of the barn, glancing back and forth. After a moment he squatted down. "Casings," he reported, pulling a bag and a pen out of the inside of his jacket. "Not seeing any blood, though."

"Yeah," Johnny said, ambling a few steps to the left and peering into the tiny tent-like cavity that was just barely being preserved by the roof beams. There wasn't anything in there that he could see, not even any abandoned equipment. And definitely no Farraday, which Johnny was inclined to be of two minds about. "Bet he took off the moment the truck hit the fence. Maybe before."

Behind Johnny, Officer Haynes said, "Huh." Johnny twisted around to look at him, shifting his toothpick. After a couple of seconds Haynes looked away, jerking his head at the mangled slope. "I thought your screwball did all that."

"Nah," said Johnny. "That was me."

Haynes blinked. After a long moment, he whistled, long and low. Mike hooted. "Shit," Mike said a moment later, stuffing the evidence bag back inside his jacket. "I forgot to bring a fuckin' flashlight. Any of you guys have one?"

"I can run grab one," Johnny offered.

"Shit, here," said Haynes, pulling a massive black flashlight from his belt. He waved it at Mike, then lobbed it in a gentle arc; the flashlight flew end-over-end over the remains of the barn wall. Parker snorted again. He might have had the twin to Haynes' flashlight stuck in his belt, but he hadn't made a move towards it.

Mike stuck up a hand and caught it, the heavy metal flashlight slapping into his palm with an audible thud. Mike hissed, tossed the flashlight into his other hand, and shook the sting out. "Goddamn," he said. "You sure are hung better than me in the flashlight department."

"Maybe a couple other departments, too," Haynes said, shrugging. "I hear a lotta things about the feeb's."

"Yeah?" said Mike, thumbing on the flashlight and investigating the little cave. "How about the bit where we're all in our suits 'n' ties come to steal your hard work and treat you like short-bus retards? You hear that one?"

Haynes grinned and looked away. "Every goddamn day."

"'Cause I ain't that kinda feeb, case you were wondering." Mike shucked out of his jacket and hung it on an exposed nail, rolling his shoulders to resettle his shoulder rig. "I'm the kind those guys fuckin' *hate*." Dropping into a crouch, Mike shuffled under the remains of the barn's roof; Johnny lost sight of all but the beam of the flashlight and Mike's white t-shirt pretty quickly. It made him a little uneasy, so he ambled a step or two closer. He could grab that same strut, swing in and give Mike a hand, but for some reason he didn't feel like putting any extra stress on the wood while Mike was under half a ton of it. His hand fell reflexively to his gun again, palm against the warm metal.

Turned out to be for nothing, though. After a couple of minutes Mike duck-walked back out again, backing out from under the roof. "Nothin'," he said. "More casings and a whole bunch of bird crap." He straightened up. His knees cracked. For half a second Johnny thought it was rotten wood splintering.

"Gettin' old," Johnny noted.

"Yeah, you wanna drop your pants, I'll show you old," Mike said happily, fetching his jacket again before grabbing the exposed strut and vaulting back out. The wood groaned precipitously under his weight, but the roof didn't fall the rest of the way in, just yet.

"Yeah?" Johnny said, relieved that this all seemed to be over, and with no unpleasant surprises. "Why you so eager to get me naked, anyway?"

Getting back down the hill proved to be even more interesting than getting up it had been. In the end Johnny gave up on any pretense of dignity he might have had and went the last thirty feet sliding on his butt like a kid, throwing up a cloud of dust in his wake. Mike, being Mike, just ran pell-mell down the hill, cannoned out through the hole in the fence, and reeled halfway across Truslow before his momentum ran back out; it was just dumb good luck that he didn't get smeared by a passing car, but then, Mike had always had a surplus of dumb good luck. The troopers picked their way back down with care, not so much wanting to get dirt (or more dirt) on their uniforms.

"Appreciate the help," Johnny said, once they were all safely back by the patrol car. "Either of you know who owns that barn?"

Officer Haynes shrugged. “No clue. Looked pretty abandoned to me.”

Johnny nodded. That was definitely what he was hoping, anyway. “Yeah. Well. Some irate farmer calls you, point him to me.”

“Will do,” said Haynes. Parker just snorted and threw himself in the patrol car, revving the engine impatiently; Haynes blinked, raised a hand in a hurried wave, and ran to get in before his partner could take off without him. The wheels spun, kicking up gravel in a dirty wave that broke over Johnny’s shins as the patrol car roared off. He figured he wouldn’t give Parker the satisfaction of seeing him jump back, even if flying gravel did kinda sting like fuck. Behind him, Mike yelped.

Johnny watched the patrol car recede in the distance, chewing thoughtfully on his toothpick. “Maaaaa,” Mike wailed. “Why the suits gotta ruin it for the rest of us, Texas?”

Johnny grunted. The germ of an idea had just struck him, and he had no real patience with Mike’s chatter right about now. “You got your phone on you?”

“Huh?” Mike’s hand automatically flew to his waist. “Yeah?”

Johnny nodded, checking up and down Truslow before jogging across the street. Gravel and safety glass crunched under his heels. “Your car was right about here, right?”

Mike loped after him. “Yeah, right about . . .” He came to a halt by a particularly generous scattering of glass. “Think this used to be my passenger-side window,” he announced, not without some pride, kicking at the little blue-green cubes.

“And Miz Fontaine was huddled up by the front tire, right?” said Johnny, easing past Mike and measuring off another three feet, stopping where one of the black-dirt gouges abruptly ended. “‘Bout here.”

“Yeah,” said Mike. “What’s up?”

Johnny looked off into the woods, just past a rusty barbed-wire fence exactly like the one he’d decimated. “Got an idea,” he said, shucking off his own jacket. “Wait here.”

“Aw, c’mon, Texas, ’sup,” Mike wailed after him, but Johnny was already navigating the ditch and didn’t bother answering. He gave the barbed-wire fence an experimental tug, just in case it was going to be rusty enough to give without a fight. It wasn’t. Johnny resigned himself to tearing up the lining and draped his jacket over the topmost strand of wire, grabbing the protective layer of leather in both hands and vaulting over the fence.

Mike leaped over the ditch and met him by the fence. Johnny looked back at him. “You said Miz Fontaine called you on her cell, right? So her number’s in your call history?”

“Right—” The light dawned and Mike scrabbled for his phone. “Hope it didn’t break when she slung it away,” he said, squinting at his phone as he navigated its menu system. There was a lot of beeping. “I heard it hit *something*.”

“Worth a try,” said Johnny, already pacing off into the trees. “Course, she mighta had it on vibrate, too.”

“Aw, yeah, Miz Fontaine’s a vibrator sorta gal—” Mike broke off there. They could both hear it, faint but clear, one of those obnoxious trilling ringtones. Johnny dashed into the trees, after it—right? left? Shit, where was it—the ringtone cut off in the middle of a trill. “Fuckin’ *voice mail!*” Mike shouted from behind Johnny. “Hang on, calling again!”

Johnny stopped where he was and turned in a circle, leaving his eyes slightly unfocused. She couldn’t have thrown it much farther than this—the phone trilled again. Johnny hesitated, then broke left, the sound getting louder and louder—something white winked at him from halfway under a pile of leaves and he angled towards it. “Again?” Mike yelled.

“Got it!” Johnny yelled back, then hunkered down and brushed the wet leaves away. The phone was in two pieces, its battery cover hanging free, and the screen was cracked and dark—but here it was. Johnny dug an evidence bag out of his back pocket, turned it inside out, and used it like a mitten to pick up the phone, loose battery cover, stray leaves, and all. Nodding to himself he turned the bag right-side out again, sealing the phone away.

“I’ll be damned,” Mike said happily as Johnny broke from the treeline and headed for the fence again. “That was good thinkin’, Texas, I wouldn’ta thought of that in a million years.”

“Yeah, I know,” Johnny said comfortably, sticking the bag in his teeth and hopping the fence again. He untangled his jacket from the barbed wire with as much patience as he could muster, but it still came loose with a couple of ripping sounds. Johnny sighed and put it back on. “Guess now we’ll find out if it really is bugged, huh?”

“Awwwww,” said Mike, smacking Johnny’s shoulder companionably. “You got Nate a *present*.”

Johnny snickered. “Ain’t a dozen roses, but it’ll do him.”

“Somebody ought to do him, anyway—you know what?” Mike said. “I’m thinkin’ lunch.”

Johnny looked left and right and then jogged back across to the van, the bag containing Diana Fontaine’s damaged cellphone dangling from his hand. “Yeah?” he said. “Me too.”

♦ 42: Simon

“Just don’t tell Sandy,” Simon said, for the third time.

Behind him, Jeremy sighed, running his keycard through the reader and making the door beep. “I have no intention of telling her,” he said, also for the third time. “You might try to trust me on this, Simon.”

Simon snorted and dropped it for long enough to wrestle with the door. It came open a bit more easily than it had yesterday, he was pleased to note. He got a little better every day; all this sleep had to be good for something. At this rate, he’d be almost back up to speed in a week, maybe two. Almost. “I can’t believe I told *you*,” he shot over his shoulder as an afterthought. “I don’t know what I was thinking.”

Jeremy reached forward over Simon’s shoulder and pulled the door the rest of the way open. Simon aimed a grumpy, desultory elbow in his general direction, which hurt, but also not quite as badly as it had yesterday. Progress, progress. “I believe you were thinking that you had to bitch to someone before you exploded,” said Jeremy. “And I happened to be closest, damn the luck.”

“Guess that’s about the size of it,” Simon said, easing himself into the building. “And, I mean, it’s not like it’s some life-threatening complication. It’s an *annoyance*. Sandy doesn’t need to hear about an, an annoyance.”

“Adhesions are slightly more than an annoyance, I’d say,” said Jeremy. He followed Simon in, the door closing behind him. “But, in any case, it’s between you and your physician. Your health is, ultimately, your own concern,” he said, finishing on a thoroughly hypocritical note.

Simon stopped right where he was. “Yeah? That’s why you guys aren’t letting me have coffee or drive my own truck or come back to work?”

“Oh, well, that’s entirely different,” said Jeremy. “That isn’t a question of your health. It’s a question of your welfare.”

“Christ, can you split those hairs any further?” Simon said, aggrieved. “I hear there’s particle physicists that can’t do it any neater.”

“Oh, I’m certain that I could,” Jeremy said cheerfully. Simon grunted in annoyance and stalked off down the hall, his arms stiffly by his sides. Jeremy

followed him, only darting ahead at the last moment to pull the heavy saferoom door open and bow Simon in; Simon flipped him off on general principles, which didn't put a dent in Jeremy's good cheer but did make Simon feel a little better.

He knew something was wrong—or at least *up*—pretty much immediately. Half a second of breathless silence was not generally part of his team's *modus operandi*. Suspicious, Simon stopped in the doorway (forcing Jeremy to ease past him) and said, "Okay. What?"

"We'll bring you up to speed here in a sec, Templar," Sandra said briskly. "How'd your doctor's appointment go?"

"None of your goddamned business," said Simon, "and you know exactly where you can stick that 'in a sec' stuff. I'm thinking now is good."

Sandra hesitated, then sighed and waved a hand at his chair. Simon dropped into it, which, unfortunately, still hurt like hell no matter how much he had or had not healed up since yesterday. Gritting his teeth, he waited for the flare of pain to subside again. "Tell me if I need to go," Jeremy murmured, but he went ahead and took his usual place next to Simon as if he were confident that Sandra wasn't going to be pitching him out.

And she didn't. After only a quick glance in Jeremy's direction, Sandra looked back at Simon. "Good news first, or bad news?"

"You know better than that," Simon said reprovingly. "Always give me the good news first. It's better to get me good and softened up." Jeremy might or might not have made a little amused sound at that; Simon was definitely, totally not paying attention.

"Farraday's still in the area," Sandra said without further preamble.

Simon blinked. "That's *good* news? Christ. If that's what passes for good news with you, maybe I need a pain pill before you hit me up with the bad."

"And none of us are dead," Sandra added.

"Well, okay, yes, that does count as good news," Simon said carefully, "but, uh, one, I knew that just by coming into a full room, and two, that's almost always true by default. Hell, I wake up every morning taking it for granted that we're all still alive. Also that my hair hasn't started falling out yet."

Sandra's eyes strayed up a few inches. Struck by a sudden attack of paranoia Simon ran one hand over his hair, prompting a couple of snickers from the far end of the table. Other than the muted laughter, though, everyone was oddly quiet, watching the two of them. Mike was jittering in his seat, which was normal, but without running off at the mouth, which wasn't. "I'm starting to see why you guys hate it so much when I try to keep you in suspense," Simon said, letting his hand drop.

"Good," said Sandra. "Mike? You want to tell him, or shall I?"

Mike shot bolt upright in his seat like someone had just jabbed him in the ass. "Ooh, you're gonna let me tell him? Fuckin' sweet!"

“So tell him,” said Sandra, gesturing grandly from Mike to Simon and back. “I don’t know that I could do the story justice, plus you’d be interrupting me all the time anyway.”

“That? That is *totally true*,” Mike said happily. “So! Okay okay okay—”

“—and so Nate’s got the phone now and he’s going to take it apart this afternoon,” Mike finished with a flourish, finally ceasing to bounce around in his seat now that the story was out.

Nate nodded, holding up the plastic bag. Wet black leaves stuck to the phone and the bag itself, steaming up the sides of the bag and leaving a thin puddle of condensation in the bottom. “If there’s a bug, it should still be in there. I mean, sure, the battery cover came off, but something like that isn’t going to just *fall out* without leaving some kind of trace of itself. Unless it’s CIA-issue or something, in which case we have way worse problems.”

“Good,” Simon said, slapping the table, so charged up that he didn’t even hurt any more. Finally, something to be doing. “Jesus Christ, you guys are awesome even without me. I might as well retire and take up fishing.”

“Ha!” said Sandra.

“Texas, some pissed-off farmer starts hassling you, send ’em to me. Uh. To Sandra,” Simon said, shaking his head. “The quarterly budget stretches to cover *Archer*—” Jeremy, invoked, shifted in his seat and glanced in Simon’s direction “—I think it can probably buy us one abandoned barn and a couple of bags of grass seed. Also, Christ, videotape that shit next time.”

“It was fuckin’ *awesome*,” Mike said reverently. “I mean, goddamn, I think I came in my shorts or something.”

“Don’t videotape that part,” Simon added. “So where’s Princess Di now? Still at Nate’s?”

“For the time being,” said Nate. “I called Mom at lunch. She said everything’s fine, the police have been by several times, Ms. Fontaine’s up and about and seems functional.”

“Okay. Okay, good.” Simon chewed on his thumbnail, thinking. “However, I’m thinking we need to get her out of there pronto.”

“Uh, yeah,” Nate said, ducking his head. “Yeah, I’d kinda . . . yeah.”

“I want to keep her close by, though,” Simon said. “Get her a hotel room or something. Uncle Sam can spring for it. I’m gonna be honest with you guys: if Farraday wants her that bad, I’m thinking she’s got ‘bait’ written all over her pretty little bleached-blond head.”

“If she didn’t set Mike up,” Johnny added.

“If she didn’t set Mike up,” Simon agreed. “Hell, maybe even if she did. I’m guessing the interior of her phone will give us an idea of where her loyalties really lie, though. Specs, I’m thinking I want you on that right now.”

“Soon as we’re done meeting,” said Nate. He glanced sideways at the new guy, who’d apparently learned a whole bunch of lessons yesterday and was being as unobtrusive as it was possible for a red-headed six-footer to be. “I’ll have to help you with Rich’s stuff later.”

“Um,” the new guy said, blinking. “That’s fine.”

“Okay.” Simon clapped his hands. An echo of pain twanged from his ribs, but it was nothing he couldn’t ignore. “Okay. Mike, I want you to find a place to put Princess Di, and then go put her there. Don’t let her go to stay with friends, no matter how much she wants to. I don’t want to put some poor civilian in the line of Farraday’s fire. Try to get something with middling security: if we do go the ‘bait’ route, I want Farraday to feel reasonably secure about walking in, but I want something that we can box up if necessary. Get me?”

“Got you,” said Mike, fidgeting with his pen.

“And for Christ’s sake be careful,” Simon said. “Maybe stay in Nate’s guest room for a couple days. In fact, do that. I’d feel better if you two had each other’s backs for a while. Nate? You okay with that?”

“Yeah, definitely,” Nate said in obvious relief.

Simon nodded. “In fact, all of you be careful. It doesn’t matter whether this attack of Farraday’s was aimed at Diana Fontaine or at Mike, it still proves that he’s out there and pissy. Any of you so much as get the heebie-jeebies, go stay with someone else on the team or rent a hotel room of your own. The budget will cover it.”

“We did put a few extra security measures in place,” Sandra said, pointedly.

Simon reined himself in with an effort, but Christ, it felt so good to be back in charge that he couldn’t quite stop trampling over her authority. “Which was good thinking on your part, Spring. I want you guys to keep doing all that. Don’t relax. I get the sinking feeling that things are going to speed up now.”

“Do you . . .” Nate’s voice tapered off. He looked down at his clasped hands. “Do you think I ought to get Mom out of the house for a while? I could send her to stay with one of my aunts . . .”

Simon thought about it. “I don’t know,” he finally said. “I think that’s your call. You know what Farraday’s like: he’s not going to attack some old lady just because he feels like it. He’s not the type to feel like it. He’d need a pretty good reason. Right now, I can’t think of what that’d be. Still, if you’d be more comfortable . . .”

Nate nodded. “I’ll think about it,” he said, his voice faltering.

“Do that,” Simon said. “But for now, get me some answers out of that phone. Spring? Anything to add?”

Sandra spread her hands, looking resigned. “I think you’ve covered it,” she said. “Only I think I want Johnny to go with Mike when they move Diana Fontaine. Just in case.”

“Good idea,” Simon said, snapping his fingers. “You’re the man, Spring. And I mean that.”

After a few more minutes, the meeting broke up. The room came back to life: Nate vanished into the supply closet and started banging around, the new guy slunk back into Rich’s lair, and Sandra went back into Simon’s office.

Simon blew out a breath and slumped back in his chair, prodding gingerly at his chest and hissing. A quick glance to the side caught Jeremy watching him do it. Simon shook his head. “I’m okay,” he said. “Swear.”

“Rather thought you were,” said Jeremy, flashing him one of those quick little smiles.

A smallish tidal wave of motion from his left jerked Simon’s attention back that way: Mike slid into Sandra’s chair, looking oddly hunted. “Boss?”

“Yeah,” said Simon, not bothering to sit back up.

Mike looked uncomfortable. “I’m totally not gonna argue against evidence or nothin’, but . . .” He hesitated, fiddling with his pen. “I just wanna get it on the record that my gut says that Ms. Fontaine may not be fuckin’ with us, ’kay?”

Simon considered this. “Guess you’d know best out of all of us,” he finally said.

“I mean, she’s still totally a bitch and all,” Mike said, trying out a little laugh, “but . . . boss, you weren’t there. She was fuckin’ *terrified*.”

“Yeah, well, getting shot at is scary, period.” Simon caught his breath and scooted himself back upright, hissing. “It’s on the record, okay? But all the same let’s wait and see what Nate’s got to say.”

“Yeah, okay,” said Mike, ducking his head.

Sandra reappeared. “You never said how your appointment went,” she said.

“Uh, yeah, that was kind of on purpose,” Simon said, gingerly propping one arm up on the back of his chair and looking past Mike at Sandra. “All you need to know is that I’m healing up fine. Getting better all the time. Anything else is between my doctor and me,” he finished, blatantly stealing Jeremy’s line and translating it into the American. Behind him, Jeremy made a little amused sound.

“Oh,” said Sandra. “Archer, what did the doctor say?”

“Hey!”

“I’m sure I don’t know in any case,” Jeremy said. “I spent the duration of his appointment sitting in a truly horrible waiting room hiding behind a magazine and hoping I didn’t contract anything vile. I’m perfectly willing to look after him but I needs must draw the line *somewhere*.”

Sandra was quiet for a moment, giving Jeremy the fish-eye over Simon’s shoulder. Finally she sighed and shrugged, conceding the point. “You swear you’re okay?” she asked Simon. “No complications?”

“Nothing you need to know about,” Simon said.

“Oh. So there *are* complications.”

“None of your business.”

“Asshole,” Sandra said fondly.

“You know it,” said Simon. “Look, there is a bullet hole in my chest, a certain amount of shit is going to go down between now and my eventual full recovery. I’m going to be just fine. Seriously. It’s under control.”

Sandra eyed him narrowly for a long moment before visibly giving up. “Fine, be that way. You’re still not coming back to work full-time until I say so.”

“And now I guess we both know where we stand,” Simon said. “Mexican standoff.”

“Hey, that shit is racist and I for one am totally offended and shit,” Mike said, wagging his pen accusingly at Simon’s face. “Anyway, it’s more like a Chinese fire-drill around here right now.”

◆ 43: Dave

After a bit of thought he'd decided to make the laptop his guinea pig. According to Nate this Rich person had copied everything off his laptop onto his larger computer every day or two, so even if Dave's experiments ended up erasing it completely nothing much would actually be lost. At least, that was the theory. It was kind of a nerve-wracking theory, really, but Dave was about eighty-five percent sure that Nate wasn't lying to him. Well. About this, anyway.

Ducking his head Dave finished plugging the laptop into one of his borrowed computers. There were five computers crammed in here now (which didn't leave all that much room for Dave, which was kind of the story of his life right now). In addition to the three that he was trying to break into, there was the one that was doing nothing but entering words, meaningful strings of numbers, system commands in half a dozen programming languages, and anything else that took Dave's fancy into the stubborn unlabeled text box on the smaller computer and then rebooting it every time it shut down (it tried to connect to the internet every time, probably to send an alert somewhere, which was currently about number three on Dave's list of Things To Track Down), and this one, which he intended to use like a defibrillator. There'd been one process running on this computer when it died, after all.

If it had been so important to this guy that the computer be erased, the process ought to take any chance it could get to reassert itself, which would leave Dave with a laptop that was slowly deleting its contents and overwriting them with some kind of noise. In theory, not good. In practice, Dave was betting that sooner or later, the overwrite process would start feeding on the guy's elaborate homebrew security systems. Once those were broken or gone, what remained of the laptop would be wide open.

Of course, if this guy was as good as they said, then the security systems would be the last thing to go before the OS itself. That was where the interrupts came into play. Dave had spent most of the morning (and a few of the small hours the night before) cobbling together a crude patch that *ought* to give the overwrite program a serious case of the hiccups. And every time the process hiccuped,

there was a slim chance that Dave's program could jab in and extract a burning chunk of code, or half a file, or a handful of text: anything that it retrieved could potentially be analyzed and turned against the security systems on the other two machines. Of course, it would probably kill the laptop in the process, but unlike the desktop machines, the laptop was an acceptable loss. In theory. This was the kind of theorizing that made Dave's stomach hurt.

Dave paused and took a swig of his half-cold coffee, barely tasting it. Behind him the smaller computer whirled, spun down, spun back up, and whirled again. And all around him, people were talking normally. They were ignoring him, true, but having them behave like he wasn't here beat having them sit there silently resenting his existence. By a long shot. He was almost happy, or at least distracted. He put his mug back down.

The spare laptop battery sat waiting in the canvas bag full of tricks that he'd talked out of IT. Flipping the laptop over Dave carefully slid the battery halfway into its socket and rested the outer edge on the lip of the battery case. He put his palm on the battery and the fingers of his other hand on the space bar of the borrowed computer's keyboard, closed his eyes, said a silent prayer, and pushed them both down.

The battery clicked home. The laptop made a momentary startled whirring sound before the other computer jabbed it with his interrupt-query one-two punch, interrupting the startup. Affronted, the laptop hitched. Dave flipped the laptop over and thumbed open the screen, hitting it with another interrupt-query even as he did—the laptop gave him not a single empty text-entry box but an unlabeled inching progress bar, leaving Dave limp with relief. Not too limp to send another interrupt-query, though. The laptop hitched and spat a few lines of nonsense at him before the progress bar reappeared. The borrowed computer dutifully noted down the nonsense. Fired with excitement—it was working!—Dave hit the space bar again.

Everything else faded into the background. He supposed he could have written a script to administer the interrupts for him, but he had no idea what to expect and wanted to be fully in control, just in case. Dave, eyes riveted to the monitor, hit the space bar. The laptop hoicked up both a few lines of nonsense and a few lines of something that looked like code. The borrowed computer swallowed them.

It was working, thank God. Dave's world narrowed to the monitor and the space bar and the little whirring grinding sounds. He shifted in his seat and got comfortable, only vaguely noticing that the mousepad was damp under his left wrist.

A few seconds later there was a soft *whoomph* and a flicker of orangish light, neither thing really attracting Dave's attention. The last interrupt-query had spat out half a page of lightly corrupted English text, text with familiar names in it, and Dave was so enthralled by this proof that his crude hammer and chisel was,

in fact, working that he had no time to spare for anything else. His left arm went a little warm. *Hey*, some tiny part of Dave's consciousness thought, *mousepad's on fire*, and without taking his eyes off the monitor Dave picked up his half-empty coffee mug and dumped it onto the flames.

A billowing cloud of coffee- and burnt-rubber-scented steam belched up from beside him. Absently Dave shuffled the keyboard out of the way of the spreading puddle and hit the space bar again, completely deaf to the sudden lack of talking going on around him. Someone whistled, long and low; the sound just barely penetrated his concentration. Dave held up a finger. "I can't stop this process right now," he said, jabbing the space bar again. "I'll be with you in a second."

There was a pause. "Sure," someone said. Dave let his hand drop and fell back into rapt communion with his machines, as an afterthought nudging the charred remains of the mousepad off into the trash.

◆ 44: Nate

After a moment Nate shook his head and tore his eyes away from Rich's lair, now that the spectacle was over. Smoke was still eddying furtively around on the ceiling, though, and the room stank like burning tires and scorched coffee. "Whoa," Nate breathed. "Hardcore."

"Not bad," Johnny allowed, leaning back in his chair and poking his lighter back into his jeans pocket. "Stinks like hell, though."

"Yeah, it—oh crap!" Nate bounded out of his chair, grabbing an empty folder off the table. "Mike, get the windows!"

"Huh?" Mike said, blinking.

"The *smoke detector*," Nate said urgently, wedging himself in behind the unresponsive Dave and whipping the folder back and forth over Dave's head, forcing the smoke back and away from the detector on the wall. Dave just hunched his shoulders slightly and went on poking the space bar. "If we set off the alarms again Upstairs said he was going to fine us, remember?"

"Oh, crap!" Mike vaulted from his chair and jumped onto the table, fumbling for the lock that held the nearest narrow casement window closed. After a moment of fighting with it it screeched free and Mike was able to punch the window open, letting in a swirl of damp October air to mitigate the smoke.

"Shit," Johnny said, sounding vaguely sheepish. "Forgot all about that."

"Um, you know what, I'm going to have to revise the ground rules here," Sandra said, standing in the doorway and watching the commotion. "No physical harm, and *no fire*."

Johnny ran a hand back over his hair. "Yeah. Uh. Sorry. No more fire. Out of lighter fluid anyway."

Snickering, Mike stopped fighting with the second window long enough to aim a lazy kick at Johnny's head. Johnny ducked under it and reflexively punched Mike's foot away; Mike, thrown off-balance, went reeling off the side of the table and crashed to the floor with a ground-shaking thud, knocking chairs everywhere. "*Fuck!*" he wailed, from somewhere.

“...you all right?” Johnny asked. Mike didn’t answer. Johnny’s face creased up in a frown and he levered himself about halfway out of his chair, peering over the far edge of the table. Mike’s hand immediately shot out from under the table and grabbed Johnny’s ankle; Johnny had just enough time to grunt in surprise before Mike jerked him under the table. Johnny vanished, his butt hitting his chair on the way down and sending it clattering back to bang against the far wall, next to Nate. The table jumped several inches to the left. Nate’s carefully laid-out tools went everywhere.

“Careful!” Nate yelled, dropping the folder on Dave’s head and throwing himself at the table. “The phone—!”

“Hey!” Sandra snapped, lunging for the table herself. Dropping into a crouch she reached under the table and made a blind grab, hauling a laughing Mike out by the back of his t-shirt a second later. “Now is the time when you chill!” she yelled in his face, shaking him a little for good measure.

“Okay, okay!” Mike said, still laughing, holding up both of his scabby hands to ward her off. “In my defense, he *totally* started it that time.”

“Yes, all right, that’s true, except for the part where you tried to kick him in the head,” Sandra said. She let go of his t-shirt and flexed her fingers. “Still, he may have started it, but you kept it going, and nearly knocked Diana Fontaine’s cell phone off the table to boot.”

The smile faded from Mike’s face pretty quickly. “Ooh, crap,” he said, abashed. “Sorry about that. Is it okay?”

“I think so,” Nate said, scrambling around picking up his fallen tools. Johnny was still under the table, but he seemed to be conscious and breathing, so Nate left him alone. “You just kind of made a mess.”

“Shit. Sorry. You need help?”

Nate stood up, his hands full. “It’s okay, I got it.”

“Fuck, my head,” Johnny said from under the table. Mike opened his mouth to respond to that and Sandra slapped him across the back of the head so fast he didn’t get a single word out. Mike shut his mouth and looked injured. Johnny pulled himself out, one hand cupped around the back of his head. “Think I hit it on my chair.”

“You okay?” Sandra asked.

“Think so.” Johnny pulled his hand away from the back of his head and looked at it, then shrugged. “Not bleedin’, anyway.”

They all went quiet. In the background, Dave’s space bar clicked monotonously on. “I’m glad Simon wasn’t here to see that,” Sandra finally said, sighing. “Although I guess it’d have made him feel right at home.”

“Huh,” said Nate, watching Dave, who was so far in the zone that the ruckus didn’t seem to have registered at all. It gave him an odd feeling in the pit of his stomach. After a moment he went back over and picked up the fallen folder,

fanning desultorily at the remains of the smoke as an excuse to peer over Dave's shoulder. "Huh," he said again, watching the code snippets flicker by.

"Huh?" said Dave, momentarily emerging. "I can't stop right now—"

"—it's okay," said Nate. "Keep going."

By the time Simon got back from HR with Jeremy in tow, Nate had the wet phone in pieces, all the different bits laid out in a neat grid on a large sheet of plastic. Simon took one look at the ongoing dissection and dropped into his seat without a word, waving Sandra to silence as she poked her head out of his office.

"It's okay," Nate said, gingerly peeling a wet leaf off the phone's back and then having to shake it off his gloved fingers. "I'm not concentrating all that hard."

"Oh, good," said Simon. "So what's the word?"

Nate blew out a breath. "Well, frankly, I'd be more comfortable if I had another phone of this model to compare it to. I've been comparing it to some hobbyist tech sheets I found on the net—" he waved a hand at his computer "—and that's good, but not perfect."

"We can spring for one if we have to," Simon said immediately, just like Nate had known he would. "Have you got any kind of preliminary assessment at all?"

Nate took a deep breath. "There's no bug in here," he said. All around him the room went still, and he hastened to add, "But see this?" Picking up the smallest tweezers from his little pile of tools, he pinched up that stupid little gold wire that had been bugging him for half an hour and looked back at Simon. "This wire leads from the earpiece to nowhere, and it leads to nowhere along the back of the case. Seems I was wrong. If there was some kind of listening device attached to this, then it could have fallen out when she threw the phone and it hit the tree or whatever. That's why I want another phone like this to compare it to—"

"—we'll get you one," said Simon. "What's the model number?"

"—because if the other phone doesn't have the wire, then Faraday put this wire here and her phone was bugged," Nate said, borne on his momentum and also not wanting to get to the next part.

"Specs," Simon said, his voice going all patient and coaxing. "What's the model number?"

Nate went a little red and nudged his glasses up with the back of his wrist. "That's the other problem," he said unwillingly.

"Oh, Christ, I hate other problems," Simon said, flopping back in his chair. "What's up?"

"This phone's at least three years old." Nate picked the phone's plastic back up and turned it over, running his thumb over the worn faceplate. The raised logo caught at the latex of his gloves. "I know that because that's when the manufacturer stopped making them. I can probably get one off eBay no problem, but it'll take days to get here and might have been tampered with itself."

“Crap,” said Simon. “Any chance that one of the stores in the area might have one stuck away in a back room somewhere?”

Nate blew out a breath. “Three years old? It’s not likely. Not impossible, I guess.”

Simon thought furiously for a moment, scowling off into midair over Nate’s shoulder. “Okay,” he finally said. “Here’s what I want us to do. Nate, go see if you can get one online. Tell the guy you’ll pay for overnight shipping, whatever, just get that started so that we definitely have one en route. In the meantime, I’ll start calling around and see if I can find a store in the metro area that still happens to have one. If we end up paying for two, well, they’re old cellphones, I think we can afford it.”

“I get to browse eBay from work?” Nate said. “I love my job!” He started stripping off his gloves, throwing up a cloud of powder around himself. “I’m going to leave this stuff all spread out to dry,” he said, rubbing his dusty fingers together absently. “Once it’s dry we can send it down to the lab and get it all fingerprinted—if we find Farraday’s prints on the phone’s guts, that’ll basically tell me the same thing.”

“Awesome, although unfortunately the asshole isn’t usually that stupid,” Simon said. He fumbled gingerly around at his belt, wincing a bit, and eventually pulled out his phone. “I’ll start making these calls and then delegate it to the Danger Twins once they get back. Spring, get me the yellow pages. Archer, you maybe want to be of some use and help?”

Jeremy blinked. “Excuse me?”

“Help?” Simon said patiently. “You know, give aid, render assistance, try not to be totally useless for once in your little English life?”

“Let me get this straight,” said Jeremy, clasping his hands on the table and raising an eyebrow at Simon. “You want me to ring up various mobile phone shops under your aegis, identify myself as an FBI agent—which, I might add, is a felony—and ask them to kindly search their storerooms for three-year-old phones?”

“Well, yeah. You got a problem with that?”

“On the contrary,” said Jeremy, producing his own phone like a magic trick, “I wouldn’t miss this opportunity for the world.”

As was generally the case, it only took a few moments of negotiating with eBay (and another five minutes of waiting impatiently for the search results to load) for Nate to find what he was looking for. Hundreds of what he was looking for. Of course, out of all those entries, all but three were scammers, knockoffs, overseas dealers, or people selling off their old, used, broken phones, which made it pretty easy to narrow his choices down.

“Found one,” he said over his shoulder. “It’s got a Buy It Now and it’s supposedly mint in box, but it’s one of those big-ass high-volume dealers—”

Simon glanced up and shot Nate a thumbs-up, then put a finger over his lips. Nate obligingly shut up and bought the phone.

The saferoom door boomed open. Nate jumped and twisted around in his chair just as Mike came bombing in. "Miz Fontaine's all safe and sound—" Mike started to say, then noticed Simon on the phone and strangled himself back to a low mumble. "—and I dropped Johnny off at the car place," he finished sheepishly.

Simon held up a hand like a traffic cop. "I see. Well, thank you anyway," he said into his phone. Mike caught the saferoom door and guiltily eased it closed behind him as Simon folded his phone away. "Mike! My man!" said Simon, turning about halfway around in his chair and jerking to an abrupt halt before he was quite done. "Oh, boy," he went on, now slightly breathless, "am I ever glad to see you."

"Aw, fuck," Mike immediately said. "What kind of awful shit do you want me to do now?"

"You get to call a bunch of cell phone places!" Simon said, still gruesomely cheerful. He tapped the phone book that was laying open halfway between himself and Jeremy. "We've done up to here. I want you to finish off the section."

"Do I have to stop?" Jeremy asked, putting his hand over the mouthpiece of his phone. "I'm rather enjoying myself."

Simon snorted. "Yeah, you can stop now," he said. "Sorry to ruin your fun and all that, but, you know, there's that thing where Mike is a real FBI agent and has the actual authority to make these requests, whereas you? You are just *racking* up the offenses over there."

"Ah, well, so much for that enjoyable abuse of borrowed power," said Jeremy equably. "I'll stop after this one."

Simon turned back to Mike. "We're looking for another one of those," he said, pointing over his shoulder to where Nate had left Diana Fontaine's cell phone in pieces. "Nobody's had 'em for three years, but there's a chance that there might be one lurking about in the back room of one of these places, so call 'em and ask. And don't touch that one or jostle the table or you're fired. Okay?"

"Will do," said Mike, jogging around past Simon and thumping down in his own chair. Jeremy pushed the phone book at him.

"If worst comes to worst we could probably flash our credentials and get one out of the manufacturer," Nate said tentatively. "If they haven't all been destroyed, that is."

"Yeah, maybe," said Simon, tapping his fingers on the table. "Thing is, we'd have to negotiate with half the damned company before we found somebody who actually knew where they were, they'd still have to ship it to us, and they'd send us the wrong thing out of, of sheer boneheadedness."

“And we’d probably have to get a court order to get the actual design specs out of them, even if they’re three years out of date,” Nate said gloomily. “I hate tech companies.”

“Can’t imagine why, Specs,” Simon said.

“Ah, well,” said Jeremy beside him, and it startled Nate for a moment before he realized that Jeremy was speaking into his phone. “Thank you for your time.” He hung up and made his phone vanish, sighing. “Do you know, only two people seemed even remotely suspicious of a man with my accent claiming to be with the FBI? And not a single one thought to actually challenge the assertion or ask for proof. Personally I find it disheartening, but I must admit that as a thief I find it very encouraging.”

“Yeah, well, don’t let it encourage you the wrong way,” Simon said. He sank back in his chair, putting a hand over his heart. “Oof.”

Jeremy studied him. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine,” Simon said, flapping an irritable hand in Jeremy’s direction. He didn’t quite look fine, but he looked okay. Okayish. “I’ll make it until five, in any case. Then we’ll go.” He looked over at Nate. “Think that thing’s dry yet?”

“Oh! Oh, yeah, probably,” said Nate, pushing himself out of his chair. “I’ll bag it back up and run it down to the lab, which will . . . probably not even glance at it until next week.”

“Tomorrow. Tell them tomorrow or I’m coming down there and bleeding on them.” Simon rubbed his chest absently. “And I am a pro bleeder. I bleed like a champ. I’ve had *practice*.”

“Okay,” Nate said, already distracted by his search for a clean evidence bag. There ought to have been hundreds in his supply closet; he knew there *were* hundreds of them in here, but they’d been buried under other things over the years and it was always a struggle to find one. Kind of like fishing in the box of cereal for your cheap plastic prize. Nate finally found a small box of them wedged uncomfortably behind one of Rich’s old dead printers and dug it out with a minimum of fuss, only dropping one piddly little box of case screwdrivers on his foot. Nate took three bags and fetched another pair of latex gloves while he was at it.

Pulling on the gloves he divided the dissected cell phone into three piles: one for the bits he wanted the lab to fingerprint, one for the assorted bits that weren’t likely to hold prints, and one for the actual memory chip, which could probably be salvaged and copied onto Diana’s new phone, whenever she got one. It could also be copied onto Nate’s hard drive, which he intended to do just as soon as he got a moment to steal Rich’s cable-tribble. Just in case.

With that thought clearly in mind he picked up the first bag, turned to go and nearly jumped out of his skin: Dave had emerged silently from his programmer’s trance at some point and was now staring wide-eyed at him. Nate had almost

forgotten he was there at all. “Did Mr. Story ever post to Usenet?” Dave asked, with no preamble.

“Yeah,” croaked Nate, blinking. He cleared his throat. “Yeah, all the time. There were a couple of messageboards he liked to go to, too. I told IT.”

Dave nodded. “Do you know the email addresses he usually used?”

“Maybe?” Nate scuffed at his hair with one hand, which turned out to be a really bad idea, since he was still wearing the gloves. He winced and started peeling those off. “I know a few of them. I think IT got court orders to have them all opened and forwarded, though.”

“That’s good,” said Dave, his pale eyes defocusing. “What happened to his home computers?”

“IT has them,” Nate said. He shifted from one foot to the other, a little unnerved by all this sudden attention. “They’d all already erased themselves by the time IT got there. He must have started the process remotely.”

“Okay,” said Dave, glancing around. “What happened to his old work computers when he replaced them?”

“He took them home, usually.” Nate sighed. “I guess he destroyed them there, or something. There are a couple of broken peripherals in the supply closet, printers and stuff—”

Dave’s eyes abruptly slammed back into focus. “He didn’t throw those away?”

Nate couldn’t help it. He laughed. “Rich? Oh, man, Rich never threw a machine away unless it had caught on fire or something. Sometimes not even then. We used to fix and rebuild stuff all the time.”

“Huh,” said Dave. “Okay. Thanks.” Those weird pale eyes flicked down and away, ending the half-interrogation and undoing Nate’s paralysis. Nate frowned, then shook his head and picked his way to the door, evidence bag in hand.

◆ 45: Johnny

Four new tires, a new headlight, and a quick wash later, Johnny's truck was officially pronounced hideous but borderline road-safe. Johnny ransomed it and headed back to work, kind of enjoying how the shiny new scratches on the hood added a whole new dimension of ugly to the truck. It wouldn't last. The rust would catch up to the exposed metal sooner or later. But for right now it felt kind of like being awarded a medal or something, and Johnny couldn't say he minded that at all.

Eleven bent and rusty nails rattled around in the ashtray, fresh from his old tires. Johnny was of a mind to leave them there, in case he needed a conversation piece. Wasn't like he used the ashtray for anything else these days.

He waved his ID at the parking gate and rolled in, then parked around back. For a moment he just sat there, hands on the steering wheel, scanning the parking lot—he found himself looking for Mike's car and snorted at himself—then finally let himself out and headed for the building, pretty sure that Farraday wasn't lurking around. Man would have to be crazy. Well, all right, Farraday *was* pretty fucking crazy, but Johnny felt like that was beside the point. As Mike would put it, Farraday was crazy, but he wasn't *crazy* crazy.

Farraday's sanity notwithstanding, Johnny made it into the building without any hassle. The saferoom door opened just as he reached for it, and he nearly collided with the new guy, who was on his way out; the new guy yelped and fell back, both arms twitching up to protect his face. Nervous fellow, except when he wasn't. "Pardon me!" he said, edging out and into the hallway, his eyes still wide. "I'll get out of your way, I'm sorry!" And off he went, striding so fast down the hall that he was almost running. It made him look like an infuriated stork. Johnny watched him go, bemused, then let himself in.

Most everybody else was there when he got back to the room, although Nate was off somewhere, which meant that Farraday hadn't broken cover in the last hour. That they knew about, anyway. Mike, on the phone, raised a hand and mouthed a soundless "Hey". Johnny nodded back and sat down.

Simon shifted stiffly in his chair, eventually getting himself turned around to face Johnny. “So,” he said, slowly, like he was savoring the words. “Three flat tires.”

“Nah, all four,” Johnny said. “Last one went flat when they hosed the mud off it. Plus a dead headlight and a bunch of scratches.”

“Daaaaamn,” said Simon.

“Got eleven nails in the ashtray,” Johnny said. “Think someone’s gonna want ’em back?”

“I don’t know. Do you think they’re gonna need those nails to put their barn back together?”

“Take more than that,” said Johnny. “Someone really did a number on that barn.”

“Yeah, so I hear.” Simon paused, then shook his head and snorted out a laugh. “Christ, Texas.”

Johnny grinned around his toothpick, feeling pretty good. “Worked, didn’t it?”

“Yeah, guess so,” Simon said, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. “I were you, I’d send Honda the bill.”

“What?” Mike said, blinking up at them. “What? Oh. Yeah, I’ll pay you back—yeah?” he said into his phone, startled back into his other conversation. “Oh. Oh. Okay. I appreciate your checking for me. Thanks anyway.” With a sigh Mike pulled his phone away from his ear and hung it up. “Man, boss, ain’t no one got one of these phones.”

“Yeah,” Simon said. “How many more places have you got left to call?”

“Two more.” Mike stretched his arms up above his head and groaned a little, then collapsed back into his chair like all his strings were cut. “But for serious, Texas, how much was it? I’ll write you a check.”

“Eh, make it three hundred, we’ll call it even,” said Johnny, shutting his eyes. “Havin’ that story to tell oughta cover the rest.”

“Shit, yeah. I’ll pay you back when the insurance company coughs up, how’s that?”

Johnny considered this. “Works. Assuming I don’t die of old age first.”

“Yeah, well, that’s always a possibility, what with you being ninety and all,” said Mike, punching another number into his phone. Johnny lazily kicked at him under the table; he missed, but he figured he’d made his point. Mike beamed at him and ostentatiously scooted his chair back a few inches. “Gimme a sec here.”

“So Diana Fontaine’s all settled in?” Simon asked Johnny. Mike’s voice dropped to a low background hum.

“Yeah.” Johnny cracked an eye open. “Nate’s mom got her up a couple of changes of clothes this morning, so she’s good. We’ve got her down at a Vantage, kinda midrange.” Meditatively he chewed on his toothpick, splintering it in his

teeth. "Box of a building, four ways in 'less he wants to break a window or hit the roof."

Simon nodded. "Good. That'll make it easy to keep Farraday out."

"Or box him in," Johnny said, flicking his used toothpick into the trashcan behind him.

"Or box him in," Simon agreed. He shuffled around in his chair and groaned under his breath. "Christ. Every police department in a hundred miles of here is looking for this asshole, we've chased down everybody he used to hang with, we've got people watching every border crossing between here and, and North Dakota, and nothing. Not a goddamned thing. Where the hell is he? If something doesn't break by Friday I swear I'm going to start waving Diana Fontaine around like a goddamned red flag."

"That what they call 'being proactive'?" Johnny asked.

"No, that's what they call 'being pretty fucking callous'," Simon said. "Still, if she set Mike up..." He trailed off there and shrugged. Johnny shrugged back.

"I'm still not convinced she did," Mike put in, his hand over the mouthpiece of his phone. He was frowning. "Still, shit, if her phone wasn't bugged, guess she had to have, right?"

"Right," said Simon. "From what you've told us, she's the one who steered you to Truslow. There could be any number of reasons for that, but one possibility is that she knew he was there and she drove you straight into him."

"Which would just be fuckin' cold," said Mike, shaking his head. He pulled his hand off the mouthpiece. "Yes? No? Well, thanks for checking." He hung up. "Still, either way, at least she's out of Nate's house."

"Christ, yeah," Simon said. "I mean, I get why you took her there and all, but the last goddamned thing I want is for Farraday to have a reason to hit up Nate again—" He broke off there and went all still, his eyes flicking right.

Whoops, Johnny thought. "He knows," he said, at the same moment that Jeremy said, "I've heard."

Simon jerked in his seat. "What?" His forehead wrinkled and one of his hands crept up and pressed against his chest. "Who told you? Christ, that's none of your business, that was a total dick move on somebody's part—"

"Actually, Nate told me himself," Jeremy said, folding his hands around his mug.

Simon went quiet, chewing on the inside of his cheek and eyeing Jeremy narrowly. Jeremy, expressionless, sat there and waited him out. The staring contest went on for a second or two too long, then Simon heaved out a breath and lost, shaking his head. "Okay, so you know. Long as Nate told you himself, guess I can't make too big a deal over it, right?"

"That's what I'd been hoping, yes," Jeremy said, his tight little smile coming and going so fast that Johnny almost missed it. On the other side of the table

Mike took a belated breath and turned back to the phone book, tapping in the last number.

Simon let his hand drop. "So how much did Nate tell you? He can't have told you the whole rest of the story. He wasn't there for most of it. Uh. Obviously."

"He, ah . . ." Jeremy paused. His expression went guarded again. "The last thing he mentioned was waking up in the hospital."

"So he stopped there?" Simon asked. "Didn't tell you about Amanda and Carole Winston or anything?" Jeremy shook his head. Simon heaved out a breath and relaxed. "Well, Christ, we can't just leave it there, with us looking like bumbling idiots and all. Now you *have* to hear the rest of the story or I don't know how I'll sleep at night, knowing that you think we're stupid."

Jeremy's smile flickered again. It looked more real this time. "Oh, I'd say that I had an opinion on your team's respective intelligences or lack thereof long before I'd had a chance to hear the story, Simon."

Simon's face snapped back into its sour-mouthed glare. From the other side of the table Mike fought down a snicker. "Yeah?" Johnny said, unable to let that one go past. "So which one of us is the stupid one, Archer?"

The look Jeremy gave him was nothing short of pained. "I am, if I even consider answering that."

"Anyway," Simon said. "Texas, you want to tell this part, since it was you that fielded the call and all?"

Johnny thought about protesting that—he wasn't much of a storyteller—but a glance in Simon's direction confirmed that Simon was sweating a bit and starting to slump in his chair. "Guess I can," Johnny said. "Jump in if I skip something."

Simon waved a hand and settled down further in his chair, like he was melting. "Will do."

Johnny paused and shut his eyes, getting his thoughts in order. Blindly he groped around in his shirt pocket, producing another toothpick; he gave it a meditative gnawing, flooding his mouth with the taste of mint. "Nate's all laid up in a hospital in Allentown, right."

"Fucking cut to shit," Mike put in from across the table. "—what? No, ma'am, I'm sorry, I wasn't talking to you—"

"But not really *hurt* all that bad," said Johnny. "Cut up, yeah, but pretty shallow. Flesh wounds." Jeremy nodded, watching him. Johnny shifted uncomfortably, but plunged on. "Anyway. We're all at the hospital, his doc tells us that he's mostly out of danger, and

◆ 46: *Johnny*

moved on, murmuring his exhausted condolences. Johnny watched him go; once he rounded a corner, Johnny kicked his bootheel against the shiny hospital flooring, listening to the dull boom of its echo with half an ear. "I'm staying."

"Hell you are," said Simon, rubbing a hand over his drawn face for about the fiftieth time that hour. He'd managed to wash up at some point but there were still little flecks of blood caught under his fingernails. Johnny didn't feel too much like pointing that out. "Go back to the motel with the others and get some sleep. I'll stay. It's my job."

"Yeah," said Johnny. "It's your job. I'm still staying."

Simon pulled his hand away from his face and gave Johnny a long, hard, suspicious stare, and Johnny lifted his chin and braced for impact. "You have something you want to say?" Simon finally said, anger bubbling so close to the surface of his calm that Johnny could almost taste it. "Go ahead and say it."

"Nah," Johnny said, shaking his head and breaking that eye contact before it could get any worse. "I don't. Nothing I could say you don't already know for yourself." He paused, waiting to see if Simon was going to blow up; Simon didn't, just continued to watch him. Johnny took a deep breath and planted both feet, prompting another wave of echoes up and down the empty hallway. "Not about fault right now. It's about responsibility. I'm staying."

Finally Simon nodded and looked away. He looked about fifty years older all of a sudden. "Suit yourself. Go tell Honda to take the others to the motel. Bring some coffee when you come back."

"Yeah," said Johnny, and turned to go, and paused. "It's not your fault," he said over his shoulder. "It's mine." He left before Simon could say anything else.

The rest of the night dragged by, and Johnny and Simon spent it on a padded bench outside the ICU. Simon kicked his feet out into the hallway and let his head thump back against the wall, staring blindly at the ceiling; Johnny laced his hands together in the space between his knees and stared down at them, running his thumbs idly over the hard knots of his knuckles.

They didn't talk about it, not for a while. They sat there and thought their own thoughts and watched the occasional person in scrubs go by, and it wasn't until nearly four in the morning that Simon shifted, scratched at the stubble on his cheek, and said, "It's not your fault, Texas."

"Yeah, it is," said Johnny. His voice sounded rough, like he hadn't used it in a year. "I'm the one forgot to make sure the sliding door was locked."

"I'm the one who left him there," Simon said. His hand dropped back into his lap. "If we'd kept him with us he'd have been fine."

Neither of them said what Johnny's mind had been shying away from all this time: that maybe, possibly there was a little blame left over for Nate, too. Johnny wasn't about to throw blame at Nate along with everything else; he figured that Nate had paid the check for everybody in any case. So he shook his head a little and said, "Well, mostly I figure it's Farraday's fault."

Simon snorted. "Yeah, you can say that again."

Johnny looked back down at his knuckles. "I'm gonna kill him," he said, trying on the thought for size. He wasn't sure he liked it, but he thought he liked saying it just fine. "I get a clear shot and a chance—"

"No, you're not," said Simon, interrupting him. The denial had the flat sound of an order about it. "I mean, if he doesn't give us a choice, yeah, we'll take him down, and I for one will not be too heartbroken about it. But we're not a goddamned vigilante squad, Texas. We're the law, and we're going to take this fucker down by the book."

"Yeah?" But Johnny's heart wasn't in it—hadn't ever really been. "You still be able to say that if Nate was dead?"

Simon was quiet for so long that Johnny almost thought he'd gone to sleep. "No," Simon finally said, sounding just as old as he looked.

"Some folks just need killing," Johnny offered.

"Some folks do," Simon agreed. "But we're not going to be the ones to do it."

Johnny thought about it. "Yeah," he said, eventually. "Guess I'm all emotional at the moment."

"I always thought your emotions were going to get the better of you some day, Texas," said Simon, and Johnny could not for the life of him tell if Simon was joking or not.

They moved Nate out of the ICU just as the sun was rising. He was pale and unconscious, but alive; three lines of blue plastic knots marched like ants from the loose neckline of his hospital gown to about halfway up his throat. His glasses were gone. Their loss made him look small and broken. Johnny hadn't even thought to look for them in the confusion; maybe after this was all over but the shouting, he and Mike could go back, see if they couldn't find Nate's glasses.

Two orderlies rolled Nate's giant plastic hospital bed down the hallway—it was like something out of a science fiction movie, and Johnny made a note of

that, intending to tell Nate later—and a nurse padded along beside it guiding the IV pole. Johnny and Simon, after quick stricken glances at the unconscious Nate, fell into step on the other side. Johnny kept his eyes on the floor.

They put Nate in a regular room and hooked him up to a bunch of machines. “I’m not going to try to make you leave,” the nurse said, her voice somewhere between kind and severe. “But what he needs now is rest. Keep it quiet.”

“Yeah,” said Simon. He was standing by the side of Nate’s bed with his hands on the rail; he hadn’t looked at her once. “Thanks. We’ll be good.”

The nurse nodded, glanced at Johnny, and left. Johnny turned on his heel, taking in the room: it wasn’t much to look at, but there was a visitor’s chair and a padded bench set just under the window. Outside the sky was just beginning to turn purple. Johnny dropped heavily onto the bench. Simon stayed where he was.

Mike showed up at seven with coffee, doughnuts, and news. One of the three had him jittering nervously in place, and he more or less dragged Simon and Johnny back out into the hallway. “Oh, fuck, Templar,” he said, a little too loudly. A nurse glared at him and he folded, hunching his shoulders and pitching his voice lower. “The state police called half an hour ago—Templar, Faraday burned the fucking apartment complex down!”

Simon jerked like he’d been slapped, his eyes going wide. “What? Burned it down?”

“All three buildings,” Mike confirmed, pushing a styrofoam cup of coffee into Johnny’s hands. “That’s no fucking accident. Least I guess it was him—who else woulda done it?”

“Jesus Christ,” said Simon.

Johnny swayed a little but caught himself. He was just about all in, and the glance that Simon shot him said that he wasn’t hiding it well. “Man’s a sore loser,” he said, shaking his head. The coffee was terrible. He drank it down anyway.

“No,” Simon said. His lips were a thin line. “There was something there he didn’t want us to find.”

“Little of both, maybe,” said Johnny. “Cover his tracks and flip us off all at once.”

“Yeah,” said Simon. “Yeah. Jesus, this fucker’s taunting us.” His hands flexed impotently at his sides.

Mike glanced past Simon at the door. “He wake up at all?” Mike asked in a hushed little voice, jerking his head towards the door like there was some doubt about who he was talking about.

Simon turned halfway around, following Mike’s glance. “Not yet,” he said heavily. It was his turn to sway on his feet and Simon grabbed his temples, tenting a hand over his eyes. “Christ.”

"C'mon, let's go back in, it'd totally suck if he woke up and no one was there," said Mike. His eyes flickered nervously to Simon and away and then he pushed past, letting himself into Nate's hospital room. Simon let his hand drop and followed, nearly sleepwalking; Johnny threw back the last of his coffee, flipped the empty cup into a nearby trashcan, and brought up the rear.

It hadn't changed much since they left. Nate still lay like a stitched-up rag doll in the sci-fi bed, arms by his sides, palms up like a benediction. Mike huddled at the foot of the bed like he was trying to make himself small, wincing. "Fuck," he whispered, his voice all thick. "Fucking awful."

"Yeah," Simon said, his voice so matter-of-fact that it was kind of awful itself. "It is that."

Mike glanced back and forth. "Where are his glasses?"

"Don't know," Johnny said. "He didn't have 'em. Guess Farraday took 'em."

In retrospect, it was exactly the wrong thing to say, although Johnny wouldn't know it for hours yet. Mike's eyes shot open wide and then narrowed again. "Like a fucking trophy?"

"Dunno," Johnny said again. "Maybe he just threw 'em somewhere . . ." He trailed off there. Mike's eyes had glazed over, and he'd turned to look at Nate again. He wasn't listening any more. Johnny shut up.

There was a knock on the door, feather-light, and then Sandra let herself in. "Hey," she said under her breath. Her eyes darted to Nate and away.

"Hey yourself," said Simon. "Rich here too?"

Sandra shook her head. "He's still back at the motel."

"Fucked up," Mike said in sepulchral awe. "That was a fuckin' scene—"

"Mike," Sandra said. There was an edge to her voice that made Mike shut up, and fast.

Simon straightened up, frowning. "What?" he said, alerted by Sandra's tone. "What happened to Rich?"

"He . . ." Sandra stopped and sighed. "He's taking it pretty hard. You know how it is, those two are pretty close."

Simon exhaled, long and loud, and let himself deflate, hunkering down until he could rest his forehead against the plastic side of Nate's bed. "Oh, Christ. I didn't even think about how Rich would take it." After a silent moment, he lifted his head and let it fall again. Thump.

After a worried glance in Simon's direction, Sandra shut her eyes. "I eventually made him take one of my Ambien," she said. "He was out like a light when we left."

"Yeah," said Simon. He lifted his head and let it fall against the side of the bed again. Thump. "Good idea. Jesus, poor Rich."

"Simon, stop that," Sandra said, her voice helpless and pleading. It didn't sound like her, and it made Johnny uncomfortable. "It's not helping anything—"

"Wh," Nate muttered, and just like that he had everybody's attention. Simon shot to his feet so fast that he stumbled forward against the side of Nate's bed and got a railing in his stomach for his troubles. "Whuh," Nate croaked, and his eyes flickered halfway open, unfocused and small.

"Hey, there you are," said Simon, managing to force some cheer into his voice. Of course, his voice also shook, but you couldn't have everything. "I was beginning to think you'd sleep all day, you lazyass."

Nate tried to smile and one hand groped up from the bed. Simon took Nate's hand in both of his; a little frown creased Nate's forehead and he twitched his hand out of Simon's grip and started patting blindly around. He swallowed and licked his lips. "Glasses?"

Simon closed his eyes like he was in pain. "Don't have 'em, I'm afraid," he said. "We, uh, didn't have time to look for them."

Nate let his hand drop. "Oh," he said, closing his eyes.

"You're gonna be fine," Simon said, reaching down to pick up that hand again. This time Nate let him have it. "The doctor says you aren't actually hurt all that bad."

"S'what..." Nate swallowed again. "... Farraday p... promised."

He couldn't have electrified the room more if he'd used actual current, which wasn't beyond him, normally. The four of them traded shocked glances, then Simon hunkered down by Nate's side again. "Nate, can you tell me what he said to you?"

Nate's forehead creased again, and he coughed twice, little raspy sounds. Sandra eased herself around behind Simon and picked up the glass on the tray table. "Have some water," she said softly, and she leaned past Simon's shoulder and guided the straw to Nate's lips.

Once he'd drunk his fill, Nate sighed and ran his tongue over his lips again. "He said... he hurt me because he needed to make you all leave."

"What?" Simon said, pretty much purely out of denial as far as Johnny could tell.

"He fi... figured that if I was hurt you'd have to... take me to a hospital," Nate explained. "So you'd leave." His entire face closed up in a wince. "He... he apologized. First."

Mike abruptly whipped around and punched the nearest wall, leaving a dent in the plaster. His upper lip lifted, baring his teeth. "Fuck," he growled under his breath, lightly thumping his knuckles against the broken place on the wall again.

"Jesus," Simon breathed, apparently in agreement. He absently patted Nate's hand and then put it back down on the bed with exaggerated care, like Nate was made of glass or something. "Get some more rest," Simon said. "Someone will stay with you while you sleep, okay?"

"Okay," Nate said. His voice was already distant. His face smoothed out as he drifted back off.

Simon rested his forehead against the side of Nate's bed again, closing his eyes. "I'm done in," he abruptly said, his voice rough, like it hurt to admit it. "I wanted to be here when he woke up, but I can't stay awake much longer."

"Yeah," said Johnny, figuring it was okay to say so now. "Me neither."

"We'll stay with him," Sandra said, her voice regaining that businesslike edge. Beside her Mike nodded, rubbing his bruised knuckles. "Actually, I'll stay with him. Mike, why don't you take them back to the motel? I don't think either of them are in any condition to drive."

"I'm coming back," Mike said stubbornly. "Once I drop them off, I'm totally coming back."

Sandra nodded, closing her eyes. "I'd hoped you would."

Mike opened his mouth, like he was either going to protest further or say something inappropriate, then closed it again and nodded. "Let's go," Simon said, shoving himself back to his feet with a grunt.

Mike let them off in front of their rooms. They stood there for long enough to watch Mike pull back into traffic, then Simon glanced in Johnny's direction, his face drawn and set. "I'm gonna go crash in Nate and Rich's room," he said with no preamble. "I don't want Rich to be alone when he wakes up."

Johnny nodded, relaxing fractionally. "Good idea."

Simon fumbled at his belt, pulling his cell phone off. "Here," he said, pushing it into Johnny's hands. "I don't want it to wake Rich. You get to play secretary and field my calls. Doesn't that sound fucking awesome?" By the end of this little speech his voice was strident, almost angry; then he wobbled on his feet again, squeezing his eyes shut. "Oh, Jesus," he said in a much weaker voice.

"Yeah, I can do that," Johnny said carefully, clipping Simon's cell phone onto his belt next to his own. "I'll come knock if it's important."

"Yeah," Simon echoed weakly. "Christ, sleep now, my heart's starting to beat funny."

Johnny lifted his hand to squeeze Simon's shoulder, then hesitated. Simon, catching the gesture out of the corner of his eye, moved to complete it, slapping his hand into Johnny's own. His other hand came up and for a moment he held Johnny's hand clapped in both of his, like a promise. "Get some sleep," he said, dropping Johnny's hand again.

Johnny nodded, letting his hand fall to his side. "Be a pleasure." Leaving Simon where he was Johnny dragged his ass to the room he'd been sharing with Mike, silently grateful for those heavy light-eating motel curtains. It took everything he had left to strip out of his boots and jeans before he fell face-first onto the bed, and he fell asleep so quickly that it was more like passing out.

For a miracle he got almost six hours of sleep, deep and dark as the grave, before Simon's phone shrilled from the floor beside the bed and jerked him awake.

Johnny fumbled it off his discarded belt and sat up, flicking it open. It threw its miniscule light against the wall. "Yeah," he said, his voice a gravel pit.

"This is the DC switchboard," a businesslike female voice informed him. "I have an outside call for Simon Drake; I am transferring it now. Please hold."

"Yeah," Johnny said again, blinking and scratching his chest, but the clicking on the line told him that the operator hadn't waited for his acknowledgment before starting the transfer. It clicked twice more and then Johnny could hear breathing on the line. "Hello?" he said.

"Finally," the woman on the other end said, her voice a grating mix of relief and petulance. "God, I've been shunted from place to place for an hour now, don't any of you assholes know what you're doing?"

Johnny shut his eyes and ran a hand down his face, nearly lacerating himself on two days' worth of stubble. "Ma'am, what's this about?"

"What's this—" She broke off there, outraged. "They didn't even tell you? God!"

"Afraid not." Johnny scratched his knee, vaguely aware of the long laddered scar under his fingertips, a souvenir of his patrol days. "Appreciate it if you'd bring me up to speed."

"It's about the Colonel!" she said. "God, what else—Colonel Farraday!"

Johnny's hand stilled. "Yes'm," he said. "I can help you with that."

"Fucking finally," the woman said, and it wasn't relief Johnny was hearing in her voice so much as it was relish: this was a woman who was hoping she got some people in trouble. "I called 911, and they shunted me to the local police, and they made me tell the story like fifty times and sent me around and around in their system and finally told me to call the FBI, and I did, and they sent me to another FBI number, and they connected me to you, and it's about time!"

Too tired for this shit, Johnny thought. "Ma'am," he said, "please, who are you, and what do you have for me?"

"God, I'm so sick of telling this story," she said petulantly. "Anyway. My name's Amanda."

Johnny cracked an eye open. Amanda? As in Amanda Winston? Goddamn. He swung his legs off the side of the bed and stood up. "Yes'm. What can I do for you?"

"I think my daughter's still with the Colonel," Amanda said, and Johnny's hand stilled in midair two inches from his jeans. "She hasn't come home yet, anyway."

"Your daughter," Johnny prompted, grabbing his jeans.

"Uh huh." For a woman whose daughter was missing, Amanda Winston didn't sound too worried. "Carole. She's sixteen."

"Sixteen," Johnny repeated, switching his phone to his other ear. It made him feel both sick and anticipatory: abducting a minor was a hell of a club to beat

Farraday with, once they caught him. “Ma’am, did the police say anything about putting out an AMBER Alert?”

Amanda’s voice went sullen. “I told them to,” she said. “They said that based on my story, she didn’t qualify.”

Johnny grunted. “Ma’am, what did you tell them?”

“I didn’t want to leave Carole at home alone,” Amanda said, suddenly trying to make out like she wasn’t at fault at all. “So I took her with me when I went to see him. The rat-bastard likes her, you know. Probably better than he likes me, fucking men. He’s always telling her how smart she is, you know, he feeds her all his bullshit ideas and she just eats that shit up . . .” Amanda Winston prattled on in his ear, spilling her litany of petty complaints, and Johnny listened to them with half an ear as he struggled back into his clothes. Something about the conversation was making him nauseous, and it hit him while he was doing up his belt: this wasn’t about her daughter’s welfare, not exactly. Amanda Winston was only turning Farraday in because she was jealous.

“So he’s not gonna hurt her,” Johnny said, when he could.

“Hurt her,” Amanda said, and she snorted in disbelief. “He’s not gonna do anything to her that she hasn’t been asking for all along.”

Johnny swallowed his nausea and stomped into his boots, one, then the other. “Ma’am, I need you to tell me everything you can think of that might be helpful, now. Do you know what he’s driving?”

“Maybe? I guess? I don’t know which one he took.”

“Can you list ’em for me?”

Sullen now that the spotlight had fallen off her, Amanda Winston heaved out a put-upon sigh. “I don’t know models or anything. He always has a couple of RVs, but they’re always different. And there was a light blue car, just a normal car, kind of square. Four doors and a trunk. Anyway, there were always cars around, he could have just taken someone else’s.”

Well, that was slightly more helpful than getting poked in the eye with a stick. “Yes’m,” Johnny said, letting it drop. “Do you happen to know where he might be going?”

“Yes,” she said, exasperated. Johnny froze. Just like that? It was going to be this easy after all? “That’s why I called. I want you to go out there and break up their little fucking party! And tell her to get her ass back home!”

Johnny squeezed his eyes shut. “In that case, ma’am, I’d really appreciate it if you told me where he is.”

Less than a minute after Amanda Winston hung up in a huff Johnny was pounding on the door to Rich’s room. It was Rich that jerked the door open, his face a cheesy white in color and his eyes still swollen. Simon was thrashing his way upright in the bed behind him, still tangled in the sheets but wide awake.

“What?” Rich said, a panicky undertone to his voice. “What happened? Is it Nate?”

“It’s Farraday,” Johnny said shortly, pushing into the room past Rich and shouldering the door closed. A pair of jeans that looked way too large for either Rich or Nate lay on the floor; Johnny swept them up and threw them at Simon, who caught them. “Amanda Winston called. Farraday’s got her daughter, she’s pissed, and she gave up his secondary hideout.”

“Fucking yes,” Simon snarled, bounding out of the bed and into his jeans in what was damned near the same motion. “Rich, put your shoes on and call a cab, you’re going to go sit with Nate. Johnny, call Sandra, tell her to throw Mike in the van and come get us pronto. Tell her that Rich is coming. Where are we going?”

“Massena, New York, or thereabouts,” said Johnny. Behind him Rich fumbled for the room phone and the yellow pages.

“Where? Fuck it, it doesn’t matter. It’s near a border, isn’t it?”

“Yep. Near the Canadian border.”

“That’s Farraday all over,” said Simon, jamming his feet into his sneakers. “There an AMBER alert?”

“No,” said Johnny. “You want there to be?”

“No,” Simon said. “He’s already holed up, bet you anything, and probably keeping an ear on the police band. If we put out an AMBER alert he’s going to know we’re on to him. Let’s go surprise our little friend, huh?”

“Plan,” said Johnny. He looked down long enough to pull his phone off his belt and got a good whiff of his pits in the bargain. He wrinkled his nose. “Shit, I stink.”

“Yeah? Me too. We can shower once Farraday’s on the correct side of the bars,” said Simon. “If Farraday is offended by our manly odor that’s just

◆ 47: Sandra

too fuckin' bad for him,' ” Johnny said, staring off at nothing.

“I said that?” said Simon, blinking.

“Yep.” Johnny snorted out a laugh and looked down at the table.

Sandra smiled a little, leaning in the doorway to Simon’s office and ignoring the beeping computer behind her. Hearing the story again, as awful as it was, still beat sifting through the massive piles of police reports—in frustration she’d finally expanded her request to include every report that so much as mentioned a thin Caucasian perp with bleached-blond hair, and it was astonishing how many criminals in the region fit that description. Too many. So for the time being she was letting them pile up on the computer behind her unread. She had a sinking feeling that Farraday wasn’t going to get caught that way in any case. It was too easy.

Johnny heaved out a breath and went on. “So Mike comes screeching up five minutes later and we pile in—”

Jeremy reached over and laid his fingers on Johnny’s wrist, and Johnny stopped, startled. “Someone’s coming,” said Jeremy.

Sandra glanced towards the door just as it opened and Dave blew in, with a bemused-looking Nate bobbing in his wake like a tugboat. Dave’s eyes were wide and his jaw was set—Sandra was already starting to recognize that as a bad sign. Or a good sign. A sign that, for good or ill, Dave had gone temporarily around the bend once again. Dave spent a lot of time around that bend, actually. He stopped in the middle of the room with his shoulders squared and his head lowered bullishly. “Did you steal my wallet?” he demanded of Jeremy.

There was a pause, broken only when Mike started snickering. Jeremy sighed, slid halfway around in his chair, and fixed Dave with a long-suffering stare. “Do you happen to have the world’s smallest Botticelli painting stored in it? Because otherwise, I assure you, I have less than no interest in the contents of your wallet.”

“Well, it’s gone,” said Dave, scowling. “I know I had it this morning. And I can’t think of any other *thieves* that I’ve been in *contact with*.”

Jeremy put a hand over his eyes. "I did not steal your wallet, Mr. Brassoff, and I'll gladly submit to a search if you deem it necessary—"

"—there will be no *searching*," Simon said, his voice an ominous rumble. "Christ, for all you know it fell out of your pocket somewhere between here and wherever the hell you went. Why don't you go look in Rich's lair before you go haring off accusing people of things?" Dave jerked upright, his Adam's apple bobbing; after a moment he twitched off a little nod and stalked off into his corner, dropping to his knees and sticking his head under one of the two desks.

"As a pickpocket I'm barely passable in any case," Jeremy added, letting his hand fall. "It's really not my specialty. Well, any more."

"Yeah, tell that to Mercy Kane," Simon said.

Jeremy smiled faintly. "Well, yes, but I nearly had to knock the poor woman over to make sure she was sufficiently distracted. That's hardly the mark of a *good* pickpocket."

"Eh," Simon said, shrugging. "It worked, didn't it? Congratulations! That means you're adequate."

"Ah, I've spent so long aspiring to have you someday deem me adequate," Jeremy murmured. Simon coughed.

"It's not there," Dave reported, pushing himself back to his feet. Sandra didn't find his scowl all that threatening, personally, but she thought it was slightly more interesting than his usual whipped-puppy look. "And I retraced my steps all the way from here to IT when I noticed it was missing, and checked with the Lost and Found already. Someone stole it. That's the only answer I can think of." He directed his scowl at the back of Jeremy's head.

Jeremy sighed and pushed his chair back, standing up. "All right," he said, stripping off his jacket and holding it out towards Simon. "Simon, if you would?"

"No, I don't think I would, actually," Simon said, pushing it back towards Jeremy. "Christ, how stupid would you have to be to steal his wallet? A lot stupider than I, personally, know you are, that's how stupid. And even if you did completely lose your mind over the opportunity to steal twenty bucks and a, a Mastercard, if you're inviting us to search you, then you stashed it somewhere already. There's no fucking *point* to searching you."

"Except for fun!" Mike said brightly. Sandra firmly ignored him. So did Simon.

"Mm. Well, you have a point," Jeremy said pleasantly, sliding back into his jacket. "Although I suppose it *would* satisfy Mr. Brassoff's curiosity."

"Fuck a bunch of Mr. Brassoff's curiosity," Simon said, almost cheerfully.

"Yeah," said Mike, leaning back in his chair and sticking his hand inside his jacket. "Especially since I'm the one what stole his wallet." Mike pulled a plain brown leather wallet out of his jacket, waggled it in the direction of the boggled Dave, and then threw it onto the middle of the table. "Yeah," he said, completely pleased with himself, "that's one thing you gotta learn about being a *real* FBI

agent, David-Brassoff-Dave's-Fine: if you keep jumping to the most obvious conclusions, it's gonna come back and bite you in the ass eventually."

Dave's jaw snapped shut with a little click and he lunged forward, snatching his wallet off the table and jamming it back into his back pocket. His face wasn't quite scarlet, but it was getting there. Sandra put a hand over her face and laughed a little. "As if you're one to talk, Mike."

Mike's self-satisfied grin faded. "Yeah, okay," he said sullenly. "C'mon, Sandy, you're totally peeing on my moment of triumph here."

"Mike's lecturing someone about jumping to conclusions," Sandra told Simon.

"I heard, I heard," said Simon. "I wasn't going to say anything. I didn't know where to start."

"Think next he's gonna give us a lesson in dealing with the press?" Johnny asked.

"Or maybe he could lead our next sexual-harassment seminar," Sandra said.

Mike brightened right up. "Oh, hey, yeah, sexual harassment is totally my forte or some shit! Right, sweetcheeks?" The little flicker of movement in Sandra's peripheral vision was all the warning she needed; quickly she shifted her weight onto her right foot and kicked out with her left, knocking Mike's groping hand away before it could land anywhere near her ass. Mike yowled, the kick spinning him halfway around in his chair to collide with the wall behind him. Sandra decided she wasn't sorry. "Ow ow ow *ow* ow," Mike said, sticking his bruised knuckles into his mouth and sucking on them.

"Judging by that little display, I'd say maybe it's not your forte after all," said Simon, shutting his eyes. "I'd say you need more practice, but I'm afraid you'd take it as a suggestion, and we really cannot afford to be another team member down due to Sandy beating you to a pulp right now." A perfectly normal thing for Simon to say, but by the end his voice was a little strained.

Sandra leaned over, checking Simon's face. He was pale and sweaty, with pink spots burning high on his cheeks. "I think it's time for you to think about heading home, boss," she said.

Simon flapped a hand at her. "Fifteen more minutes," he wheezed. "I want to hold out until five."

Leaning back into Simon's office Sandra checked the clock on his computer, noting also that the number of incident reports in her inbox was up over sixty again. "See, that'd be acceptable, except for the part where it's not quite four-thirty," she said.

Simon reluctantly cracked open an eye and checked his watch. "... shit."

"Go home," Sandra said gently. "You did better than you did yesterday."

Simon groused for a minute or two, which was no less than she was expecting, but eventually he pushed his chair back and started the laborious process of rolling out of it. "On one condition," he said tightly. "If anything goes down—*anything*—

I want you to call me, okay? Even if it's three in the morning. I'm tired of being out of the goddamned loop, especially now that things are starting to shake loose."

"I suppose that's fair," Sandra said cautiously, "but I don't want you to interpret being called with a status report as a license to go out and do something about it."

"Much as it pains me to say it—" Simon finished straightening up and hissed out a long breath, hunched protectively forward over his chest "—I won't. I'll leave the doing up to you guys. I just want to *know*, dammit."

Sandra nodded, although she didn't believe a word of it. "Then we have a deal."

Simon paused and eyed her warily. "You'll call."

"I'll call."

"No matter when."

"No matter when," said Sandra. "Assuming *I've* been called, anyway, *Mike*."

"I said I was sorry," Mike said, scowling at Sandra over his mouthful of bruised knuckles.

"Hey, now. You kids play nice," Simon said. He started for the door at a hobble; after two or three steps his stride smoothed back out. "C'mon, Archer," he said over his shoulder. "Take me home. I need drugs."

◆ 48: Mike

Switching the plastic bag to his other hand Mike rapped his knuckles against the door and waited. He didn't hear anything from the other side, but after a few seconds the pinpoint of light shining through the peephole cut off; he wagged his fingers at the peephole, beaming.

"Mike?" Diana Fontaine said from the other side of the door.

"Yep, it's me," Mike said, rocking back on his heels. He lifted the bag to shoulder height. "I brought dinner! It's like a date or something, except it's totally not, and also usually on dates you go to where the food is instead of having it come to you. Or so I hear, anyhow."

There was a pause, then the locks and chains on the other side of the door started to clatter as Diana undid them one by one. There was also a hefty rattle and thump that could only be a chair being removed from under the doorknob. Mike bit back a grin. Finally the door swung open a few inches and Diana Fontaine peered out, looking up and down the hallway before she stepped back far enough to let Mike push into the room. Almost as soon as he got past her she was doing up the locks again, her fingers fumbling nervously at the chain.

She looked pretty rough, Mike had to admit. Her aureole of blond hair was limp and shaggy and she wasn't wearing any makeup, making the bags under her eyes and the little lines at the corners that much more evident. Self-consciously she ran a hand through her hair, which didn't do it any favors. "I didn't get to go to the drugstore today," she said. "I suppose I could have gone, but I just felt so—" She broke off there, making a little helpless gesture.

"Paranoid?" Mike said, putting the bag down on the little table at the front of the room.

"I suppose," Diana said listlessly, letting her hand drop again. "At least there's soap and shampoo here. At least I'm *clean*."

Mike pushed the sides of the bag down and started unpacking it, rapidly setting two places without thinking about it too much. "Maybe you can go tomorrow," he said. "You want, I can pop over at my lunch hour and take you, if it'd make you feel safer."

"I'd appreciate it," said Diana, crossing her arms nervously over her chest and watching him unpack the plastic boxes. "I-I mean, I know you must be . . . busy."

"Hoo boy, am I," Mike said. "Running around like a chicken with my fucking dick cut off, swear to God. C'mon, sit down, let's eat this crap before it gets any less edible."

She hesitated in front of the door for a moment longer. Finally, with an effort, she made herself put one foot in front of the other, dragging herself towards Mike and the little table; pulling out one of the chairs she sank into it, sitting on the very edge with her spine ramrod straight like she was planning to flee at any second. Truth be told, it was kind of unnerving. "You know," Mike said, flipping the lid off one of the boxes, "I'm not gonna tell you to relax because you totally have a reason to be all freaked right now, but I don't think the chair's gonna bite you and neither am I."

Diana ducked her head and edged back into the chair, not exactly relaxing but at least letting her shoulders fall some. For a minute or so she was quiet, nibbling on her lower lip and watching Mike unpack and serve. "... what are we having?" she finally asked, sounding more polite than actually interested.

"Fried baby," Mike said cheerfully. "I mean, you're a lawyer, I'm dangerously unstable, I figure it's something we can both enjoy, right?"

"That's not funny, Mr. Takemura," Diana said, aiming for 'prim' and coming off more like 'unhappy'.

Mike snickered and dug the paddle into the rice. "Actually we've got cold soba and stir-fried veggies," he said. "With maybe a little fried Japanese baby in there, I don't know, I don't so much keep track of where my meat comes from, you know?"

Diana ducked her head, her product-less hair spilling over her eyes in two big seventies-ish wings. "Still not funny," she said, brushing her hair back out of her face with the back of her hand.

"Yeah, well, the jokes are only gonna get worse from here, so you might as well give up and try to enjoy 'em," Mike said. "Buuuut, just to put your mind at ease, it's pork. Really. Pork. The kind that comes from pigs. Adult pigs, even, not baby pigs."

"All right," Diana said, clasping her hands in her lap. "It . . . it sounds good."

"Guess what? It probably is good." Mike tossed the empty rice box back into the bag and turned his attention to the noodles. "I mean, I'm not one of those fancy-ass Japanese chefs who charge a thousand bucks for the perfect bowl of soup, but I get by okay."

"... you made this?" Diana asked, frowning a little.

Mike made an irritated little gesture with the chopsticks in his hand, hitting himself in the eyebrow with a flying droplet of sauce. "Man, why does no one ever believe that I can cook?" he said peevishly, scrubbing the back of his hand across his face. "For serious, that's all I ever get from anybody: 'you cook?' I

live alone, who else is gonna feed me, the Dinner Fairy?" He studied the little smear of sauce on the back of his hand, then sucked his knuckles clean and went back to serving.

"I, I'm sorry," Diana said, hunching her shoulders a little. "It . . . just didn't seem like something you'd do."

"'Cause I'm so tough and macho and all," Mike said, his good mood rebounding. "Yeah, that's totally true, I *am* the manliest individual what ever wielded a spatula, I can see how it might confuse and intimidate you."

"That's not precisely what I meant," said Diana, "but I suppose there's no changing your mind once it's made up."

"Nah, nah, no need to hide it, you totally want me now that you know I'm all sensitive yet manly and shit," Mike said cheerfully, dumping half the stir-fry on Diana's plate and scraping the rest onto his own. That done he threw himself into the other chair, dug two cans of beer out of the sack, and plunked them onto the table. "*Ita-fuckin'-dakimasu*."

" . . . what?" Diana said, blinking.

Mike pointed at her with his chopsticks. "Eat."

Diana picked up her own chopsticks and pressed the tips against the palm of her other hand, getting them settled in her fingers. "I, um." She picked up a miniscule bit of rice and ate it. "Are you, ah."

"Huh?" Mike popped a baby carrot into his mouth. "Am I what? Awesome? Charming? Well-hung? Yep, sure am."

"Are you *Japanese*," Diana said, cringing a little in white-girl embarrassment.

"Half," said Mike. "And yeah, it was my dad taught me how to cook and all, if that was going to be your next question."

Diana laughed a very little, gingerly selecting a bit of baby corn and nipping it off her chopsticks. "It was, actually. I just didn't know if asking would be . . . I don't know. Racist? Or something?"

Mike paused, prodding absently at the pile of soba on his plate. "Wait, wait, okay, now you're actually *worried* about offending me? Shit, if that's not some kinda progress I don't know what is."

Diana paused in her turn. "That *is* different, isn't it," she said. After a moment she rallied a little, squaring her shoulders. "I still think you're too . . . *wild* for the job you do," she said, and for a miracle her voice was almost firm. "I mean, I . . . I can't forget those *pictures*. But . . . well."

"You don't want to take potshots at my competence while you've got a mouthful of my home cookin', you mean?" Mike said.

All the firmness leaked out of Diana like she'd sprung a hole. "I suppose not," she said, becoming very interested in her food.

Mike shut his eyes and picked up his beer, popping it open. "Yeah, okay, suppose if all I had was Farraday's side of the story and those pictures, I'd think I was a crazy motherfucker myself. And hell, you wanna be honest, I did used to

be some kind of discipline problem, but shit, this much I swear to you: I never beat on anybody like that before Farraday, and I haven't done it since, neither."

Diana Fontaine nodded down at her plate. Mike figured it was more to shut him up than to actually agree with him.

"I'm serious," Mike insisted, dropping as much of the attitude as he could. "Look, come on, I know what kind of party line being Farraday's lady lawyer requires you to toe, but spare me the 'allegedly's: I went a little crazy because I had been pushed pretty fucking far."

"I suppose so," she said listlessly, poking at her food.

"No, shit, there's no 'suppose so' about this!" Mike said, dropping his chopsticks onto the side of his plate. "Farraday carved one of my best friends up like a fucking Thanksgiving turkey!"

"I know that!" Diana said, her voice going a little shrill. Almost as quickly as the shrillness had come, it vanished. "I know that," she repeated, hunching up over her plate.

Mike reined himself in with an effort, picking up his chopsticks. "Go on, eat," he said tiredly. "Stir-fry gets pretty gross when it gets cold."

"It's good right now, though," she said, in a voice so tiny it was almost a whisper. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Mike said, chugging off half his beer. After a moment Diana's chopsticks started to move again.

The rest of dinner passed in an uncomfortable near-silence, which meant that at least it ended quickly. Almost before he knew it Mike found himself packing up the dirty dishes to take back to Nate's place, Diana watching him out of the corner of her eye.

"You gonna be okay?" Mike finally asked.

Diana nodded. "I think so," she said. "He . . . he doesn't know where I am, and the door has a deadbolt and chain . . ."

"You need anything, you call me," Mike said. "It's an emergency, you call 911. Every police officer in ten states is just itching to find this guy. I promise that if you call for help this building'll be a box full of cops in under a minute. Okay?"

"Okay," Diana said. She shoved the floppy wings of her hair out of her eyes again, her mouth twisting in momentary irritation.

"And I'll call before I come get you tomorrow," Mike promised. "I won't just show up and scare you. Don't know exactly when it'll be, though, as things do get a little hectic, you know? All's I can say is some time between, uh, eleven and two."

"That's fine," said Diana, nodding.

Mike tied off the top of the bag and picked it up. "I'll see you then," he said, which sounded kind of inane. "Try and get some sleep, okay? I can probably beg a couple of Ambien out of Sandy if you think you need 'em."

Diana looked away. "I'll try," she said. She took a hesitant half a step in his direction, one hand reaching towards him—then she stopped and pulled that hand back, letting it hover in front of her chest. "Uh. Good night, Mike."

"Night," Mike said. As an afterthought he reached out and awkwardly squeezed her shoulder. Diana Fontaine reached up and curled her hand about his wrist for a moment, and then they twitched their hands apart like the contact had stung. "It's gonna be okay," Mike promised, for lack of anything better to say.

"I hope so," Diana said dully, following him towards the door.

A minute later Mike was out in the hall, staring at the uncommunicative wooden surface of the closed door, listening to her do up the locks behind him. "Yeah," he muttered under his breath. "Yeah, I'm *real* smooth." The doorknob rattled as Diana wedged the chair back under it; the little sound jarred Mike out of his morose reverie and he jogged off towards the elevators, the plastic bag shifting and clinking in his hand.

♦ 49: Simon

By the time Simon drifted out of his latest happy-drug-time coma, it was dark. The lights were already on in the parking lot outside, casting bars of orange and blue light over Simon's face and the far wall—what time was it? Carefully he let his head fall to the side, squinting at his alarm clock. After eight. Crap, no wonder he was so hungry. As if on cue, his stomach muttered.

The remnants of his last pain pill were still fizzing around in his system—he could feel the vaguely unpleasant bone-deep tingle in his limbs, sort of like a two-beer buzz—and right now, as long as he lay perfectly still and didn't move anything below his neck, he didn't even hurt. It made kind of a nice change. Simon yawned. Then he winced. Okay, now he hurt.

Still, now that he was awake again, his body was starting to make its demands known, some of which were directly in opposition to the idea of lying completely still for the rest of his life. Carefully, moving slowly so as to avoid making the ache any worse than he had to, Simon brought his hand up and wiped his eyes. His cheek made a little scratchy sound under the palm of his hand and Simon meditatively rubbed at his stubble for a moment, not thinking about too much.

He let his head fall to the other side, taking stock. The light in the main room was on, spilling into the hallway and adding a dim yellowish glow to everything in Simon's room to compete with the light from outside. Simon yawned (and winced) again, then held his hand up in the light and studied it. He'd lost a little weight in the hospital, which wasn't surprising, and it made his knuckles look knobby. Simon scowled at his hand and let it fall.

A shadowy black figure appeared noiselessly in the doorway, blocking out most of the light. Simon blinked a little, then gave the figure half of a sleepy smile. "Hey," he said, his voice still thick. "I didn't even call you yet."

"I heard you shifting about," Jeremy said, resting his upraised arm comfortably on the doorframe. He was backlit in the doorway, his face shrouded in darkness and impossible to read. "How are you feeling?"

"Right now? Pretty good, actually," said Simon. He cleared his throat and swallowed, pushing himself back towards full consciousness. "I mean,

I'm hungry and someone shot me in the chest, but all in all, I'm doing okay. Comparatively, anyway."

"Mm." Jeremy shifted. The leather of his jacket made a little slithery sound. "We can eat any time you like."

"See, that's the thing." Simon pushed his t-shirt up and scratched at his stomach. "I feel pretty good, but that's only because I'm not moving."

"Ah, I see." Jeremy was quiet for a moment. "I suppose I could bring you a tray," he finally said, sounding pretty dubious about the whole idea.

Simon coughed out a laugh, which hurt. "Oh, Christ, I ought to take you up on that just to enjoy the spectacle," he said. "You gonna make me fresh-squeezed orange juice, too?"

Jeremy made that little almost-a-laugh sound of his. "Well, Ms. Leone bought that bedtray and left it here, I suppose that we ought to at least make an attempt to pacify her by using it," he said. "Although I *will* admit that I probably make a singularly terrible maid. I don't even have a proper white apron, let alone one of those horrible frilly caps."

"Nah, I'll get up in a sec," Simon said, dismissing the mental image, as interesting as it was. "I just . . . wanna enjoy feeling okay for a moment."

"Mm. Shall I leave you to it, then?" Jeremy asked, not quite turning to go. There was just the faintest hint of amusement in his voice, now.

Nudged by the vaguest of impulses (and a hefty amount of bravado) Simon lifted his hand off his stomach and let it flop out across the mattress in Jeremy's general direction. "Or you could come here and enjoy it with me," he said, wiggling his fingers. "Seriously, I feel pretty good."

For a moment Jeremy was silent, considering him. "Ah," he finally said. "So, before I commit myself to any particular course of action, tell me, how well is 'pretty good'?"

Simon gave this question some honest consideration, then dismissed his actual conclusions and substituted a half-truth. "Well, I don't really feel *athletic* or anything, but I'm almost eighty-five percent sure I won't bleed to death as long as we're careful."

"I suppose I've faced worse odds," Jeremy said lazily, shifting. There, finally, was the little purring note that Simon had been listening for. Although he had barely moved, leaning in the doorway had somehow become *lounging* in the doorway; Jeremy's hand drifted up, over his hip, over his chest, and up to his hidden face, and Simon watched it go. "Aren't you going to ask me to be gentle with you?" Jeremy asked, running his hand back through his hair. "I've been wanting to have someone say that to me all my life."

"Well, I would, only there's the part where you're kind of a little guy, also British, also a giant faggot, and I may be crippled but I've still got my pride," Simon said. "Shut up and come take advantage of me before my pain pill wears off."

“You’re such a romantic,” Jeremy said, straightening up. His hand fell again and he slithered out of his t-shirt without a second thought, like a lizard shedding its skin. For just a moment his hair fell in his nearly-hidden eyes, then he flicked it back with a little jerk of his head and discarded his t-shirt on the floor. “Really, Simon, do try not to gush so. It’s embarrassing.”

“Yeah, yeah. You coming or what?”

“Oh, I’m sure I will, eventually,” said Jeremy, closing the bedroom door behind him and casting them both into orange-barred darkness.

◆ 50: Nate

[wednesday]

No matter how early Nate woke up, his mother always managed to wake up earlier. Every morning was orchestrated to the muted, clattering soundtrack of his mother briskly crossing chores off her list. Blearily he smashed his face into the pillow and listened to the noise from the kitchen with half an ear, dreading the moment when he would finally look up and notice the time.

Eventually he gave in and peeked out from the pillow, squinting at the fuzzy glowing red numbers. A little after seven, which meant he'd managed to sleep a little later than usual, but didn't really have enough time to catch a significant amount of extra sleep before his alarm went off at seven-thirty. "Ugh," Nate muttered into his pillow, squeezing his eyes shut and groping blindly for his glasses.

The usual morning routine veered sharply off-course with a buzz of voices from downstairs, his mother's voice reserved and polite, Mike's usual essential Mike-ness blunted with grogginess. Nate paused with his hand spread out on the wood of the nightstand and listened. After a moment the conversation died off and Mike thudded up the stairs, the bathroom door thumping shut behind him; Nate gladly reeled his arm back in and burrowed under the covers. Now he had a perfectly good excuse to spend another twenty minutes sleeping.

He was asleep again before Mike got the shower going, a little huddle of covers in the middle of the bed.

By the time Nate's alarm went off Mike was audibly downstairs again, being loudly cheerful at his mother. Nate swatted blindly at his alarm clock until the noise shut off and then fought his way out of the tangled sheets, eventually managing to get both feet on the floor. He groped for his glasses and found them. Someone was cooking downstairs—he could both hear it and smell it—but he wasn't really willing to lay bets on who. His mother wouldn't have let a houseguest fend for himself without a fight, but Mike had a way of blithely

sidestepping (and clotheslining, pistol-whipping, and hog-tying) conventional etiquette that Nate sort of envied.

Nate dragged himself into the bathroom, which was still damp and smelling of soap. It was odd, walking into a faceful of someone else's shower steam, but it seemed like a small enough price to pay for the security of having Mike around. Mike wasn't ever crazy when it counted—well, all right, except that one time, but that was something that Nate's mind flinched away from, even now.

Carefully avoiding the mirror Nate chucked his pajamas into the hamper and stepped into the shower, not quite certain about whether there'd be enough hot water for all three of them but resigned to having to find out.

Showered and clean, Nate scruffed his fingers through his damp hair and hurried into his clothes, glad that he'd laid them all out the night before. By the time he was dressed, he was starving, and the smell of breakfast from downstairs was making his stomach growl.

"—glad she's all right," Nate's mother was saying as Nate picked his way down the stairs. "Poor girl, she seemed so frightened."

"She's tougher than she seems," Mike proclaimed. "She's gonna be just fine. We'll make sure of it."

"Good," Nate's mother said, shortly. Nate half-smiled and half-wincing and picked his way into the breakfast nook.

"Yo, Nate-man," Mike caroled from his seat at the table, waving a forkful of eggs in Nate's general direction. If he was aware of Nate's mother's private doubts, he didn't let on. "How'd you sleep? Okay?"

Nate yawned, unable to stop himself. "Yeah," he said. "Anything happen?"

"Nah, not that I noticed. Kinda spooky quiet, really." Mike ate his eggs. "Man," he said around his mouthful, "I oughta buy a house over here. No traffic noises, no screaming neighbors, no sh—crappy music comin' through the walls . . . kinda like heaven, you know?"

"Guess so," Nate agreed. His mother appeared from the kitchen, put a plate in front of him, and unselfconsciously kissed the top of his head before vanishing again. Nate went a little pink. Mike grinned at him from across the table, but mercifully didn't say anything. Just yet, anyway. "Thanks, Mom," Nate said, picking up his fork.

"I offered to cook but she wouldn't let me," Mike said. "I mean, it's totally all for the best because this is *awesome*, but I guess I don't feel like I'm earnin' my keep, you know?"

"Don't worry about it," Nate mumbled around the tines of his fork. "You're kind of like my bodyguard, right? That's why Simon wanted you to stay here."

"Aww!" Mike beamed insincerely at him across the table. "Bodyguard! That's downright cute, Specs. Like you're some kinda celebrity or something. Next thing you know you'll have a whole entourage."

"I guess I'll need a bigger house," Nate said dubiously, looking around at the walls of the breakfast nook.

"No, seriously," Mike said, gently nudging Nate's mother's hands away from the sink, "you made breakfast, I can at least do the dishes, right?"

"Well, you can," Nate said, "but she'll only wash them again after we're gone just to make sure they're up to her standards."

His mother rolled her eyes. "He thinks I'm so picky."

"She is," Nate told Mike.

"Nathan, please don't embarrass me in front of our guest," his mother said sternly. Nate blushed and hid his face in his coffee mug. He was never going to hear the end of this from either of them, he just knew it.

"Huh," said Mike, picking up the dish brush. "Well, that's okay. I gotta at least make the effort, right?"

"Well, if you must," Nate's mother said, relinquishing the territory around the sink with cool grace. "Nathan, if you wouldn't mind stopping by the grocery store on your way home . . ."

"Sure, Mom," Nate said, already holding his hand out for the inevitable list.

His mother rummaged around in her purse, looking for it. "If I'd known we were going to have company I'd have laid in more supplies," she said, fretting. Her search produced a long sheet of pink paper, which she pressed into Nate's outstretched hand. "Between that poor woman and your friend, it's been quite an eventful week!"

"I can spring for those," Mike offered, nearly yelling it over the clatter of the dishes.

"Oh, don't worry about that," Nate's mother said. "It's rather nice to have people about again. When Nathan's father was still alive—"

"Mom," Nate said quickly.

His mother sighed. "Oh, all right, all right, I know it embarrasses you. Your old mother, running off at the mouth in front of your friends . . ."

"Mom," Nate said again.

"He never lets me have any fun," Nate's mother informed Mike, sweeping out of the kitchen like she was offended. Mike hunched his shoulders and tried to choke back his laugh, which ended up making him snort like a pig. Now just about scarlet Nate immediately bent all his concentration on the mug of coffee in his hands, tossing the last of it off before dropping it into the sink next to Mike's soapy hands. Mike equably picked up Nate's mug, scrubbed it clean with a few twists of his wrist, and rinsed it out. "Lemme just finish this up and we'll go," he said over the noise.

"Sure," Nate said, leaning against the counter by the sink and watching Mike finish up the dishes. "I'd never have figured you for the domestic type," he said.

“Hey, I can be all kinds of useful, the mood strikes me,” Mike said, slotting a plate into the dishwasher. “Hell, I even got some manners, not that I bother with ’em that often.”

“Huh,” said Nate. “So how’s Diana Fontaine? Really?”

“Scared shitless,” Mike said. He plucked a glass out of the sink and ran it under the water. “Shit, I never thought I’d feel sorry for her, you know? But it’s like—” he made a frustrated little gesture with the brush, inadvertently spraying Nate and the kitchen counters with droplets of soapy water “—shit, sorry. It’s like she’s this stone-cold bitch, which we totally knew, but it’s all a big front, like a cat puffing out its fur, right?”

“Right,” Nate said. He pulled off his glasses and scrubbed them dry on his sweater.

“And behind it she’s just this scared little girl,” Mike said. “Well, okay, not a little girl, the woman has some serious bazongas, but you know what I mean.”

Nate glanced nervously at the doorway, half-afraid he was going to see his mother lurking there, but luck was apparently with him. “Yeah, I guess,” he said.

“She’s pretty fucking terrified of him now,” Mike said. He ran the brush around the sink once before shutting off the water. “All I can say is better late than never.”

“Guess so,” Nate said. His hand stole over and started plucking nervously at the sleeve of his sweater.

Noticing, Mike winced. “Shit, sorry. You okay?”

“Yeah.” Nate straightened up, forcing his hand to unknot from his sleeve. “Yeah, it’s okay, it’s nothing, I’m just a little edgy, you know? Come on, let’s head out.”

Mike grabbed the kitchen towel that was hanging off the refrigerator and scrubbed his hands dry. “Right. You got everything?”

Nate touched his back pocket, confirming that he had his wallet. “Yeah.” He pulled his keys out of his front pocket and headed for the garage door, paying more attention to sorting through his keys than anything else. “You want to drive, or . . .”

“Shit, yeah, I wanna drive,” Mike said happily from behind him. “Last thing we need on top of this Farraday mess is one of your little fender-benders.”

Nate ducked his head and opened the door that led from the kitchen to the garage. The little button lock popped up against his palm. “I’m *really* not that—” *Bad*, he meant to say, but some sixth sense stole the breath from his lungs even before he realized what, precisely, was wrong.

Little squares and curls of black stuff littered the garage floor in an arc around his car, his car which was riding lower than it ought to be, his car which was flat on its rims surrounded by the slashed—*mutilated*—remains of all four tires—Nate dragged in a scream little breath and then Mike grabbed the back of his sweater and hauled him straight back out of the doorway. The last thing Nate

saw before Mike kicked the door shut again was the window above the washing machine, gaping open onto the back yard.

Mike jammed the thumb-lock button down and spun around, his gun appearing like magic in both hands. "Come on," he said tersely.

"Mom," Nate heard himself say, his ears buzzing.

"I'll go get her," Mike said. "Come on—" and letting go of his gun with one hand he grabbed Nate's shoulder and steered him forward. There was a little bathroom off the kitchen and Mike drove them both right to it, kicking open the little cabinet under the sink and revealing it empty. "Okay," he said. "See that? There is no way he can be behind you if you just—" he pushed Nate into the doorway "—stand there, okay? You draw your piece and you stay there, and I'll go get your mom. You *stay*."

Nate nodded, dumbly, too shocked to protest that he wasn't a dog. Mike nodded back and twitched around, inching out of the kitchen at what seemed to Nate to be both a foolhardy turn of speed and far, far too slow. Nate swallowed and fumbled his own gun out of its holster at the small of his back. Mike kicked open the pantry and stuck his gun in, menacing only a canister of oatmeal. Nodding, he nudged it shut again and disappeared, into the breakfast nook.

Useless, empty adrenalin burned in Nate's veins, freezing him in place. He was more aware of the texture of his gun's grip against his palms than he was of Mike's receding footsteps, and that was so wrong that he couldn't even comprehend it—he heard his mother's voice, raised in query, and he'd have closed his eyes in relief if he thought he could blink. But he couldn't, because he had to keep watch . . .

"Specs?" Mike said from somewhere around the main room, distracting him from his train of thought.

Nate swallowed. "Yeah," he called back.

"We're coming in, okay? Don't shoot."

"Okay," Nate said. He pulled his finger off the trigger, just to be safe, but he still twitched in momentary reflexive alarm when Mike appeared. Nate's mother followed him, confused and irritated, drawn along by Mike's grip on her wrist.

"Ma'am, I need you to get in behind your son," Mike said, weirdly all business. Nate shuffled out of the way and his mother pressed past him, her lips set in a thin line. Mike turned halfway around so that he could see both Nate and the rest of the kitchen, pulling his gun up until the top of the barrel just barely touched his cheek. "Specs, man, you want me to be honest, I think he's long, long gone, but all the same I don't think I want to take any risks. You with me on that?"

Nate nodded, his head bobbing frantically, like his spine was a spring. "Yeah," he choked out.

"Okay. Good." Mike glanced around. "I'll stand guard. You call Sandy, tell her what's up, get her and Johnny out here pronto, okay?"

“Sure—” Nate swallowed, clearing his throat. “Sure.” He was glad to put his gun back in its holster (ignoring his mother’s disapproving expression as best he could) and pull out his cell instead, looking Sandy’s number up in its address book. Staring blindly at Mike’s shoulder, staring so hard that he inadvertently memorized the pattern of white stripes in Mike’s shirt, Nate put his phone to his ear.

It rang only twice before connecting, assaulting Nate’s ear with a low hiss of road noise. “Sandra,” she said, half-shouting over the noise.

“Sandy,” said Nate, weakly.

Her voice immediately went sharp. “Nate? What’s wrong? Are you all right?”

“You need to come to my house right now,” Nate managed to say.

It sounded incomplete even as he was saying it, and he knew she was going to take it the wrong way even before she did. “*Are you all right?*” she demanded to know, her voice now so sharp it was brittle.

“Yes, yes, I’m . . .” Nate cleared his throat again and plunged on. “I’m fine, we’re all fine, but Farraday’s been here, he got into the garage and slashed my tires, he’s probably gone but we’re not *sure* . . .”

Sandra was absolutely silent for a second. “I’m on my way,” she finally said. The brittle edge was gone from her voice. “Five minutes. You call Texas, all right? I’m going to need my hands free.”

“Yes,” Nate said. Sandra hung up without saying goodbye. Nate squeezed his eyes shut. “She’s on her way,” he said.

“Awesome,” said Mike. “Goddamn, but I’ll feel better when they’re here.”

“I have to call Texas,” Nate said, already punching Johnny’s number up in his phone’s memory. His mother shifted slightly behind him, looking a bit more annoyed than frightened.

“Yo,” Johnny said in his ear.

“You need to come to my house right now,” said Nate. It was easier, making this call for the second time. “Farraday got into the garage, he slashed my tires, we think he’s probably gone but we’re not sure . . .”

“On my way,” Johnny said, just that. “Hang on.” He hung up.

Nate folded his phone away and sagged back against the wall. “They’re both coming,” he said, unnecessarily.

Mike nodded. “Then I guess all we gotta do is hold on,” he said, summoning up a grin from somewhere. “Anybody wanna play charades?”

It felt like an age went past before someone pounded on the front door, even though Nate knew from the clock on the microwave that it had barely been five minutes. “Take over,” Mike said, and jogged off before Nate could say anything. Nate drew his own gun again, very carefully not looking at his mother.

He heard a babble of terse voices from the direction of the front door, terse and familiar voices, and for the first time he managed to relax, suddenly almost limp with relief that someone had come to save them. It wasn't a very brave thing to think, he knew. Some lawman he was. The relief, however, was still real.

"Specs?" Johnny called from the breakfast nook. "I'm comin' in."

"Come on," Nate called back.

Johnny appeared, gun pointing at the floor, and loped over to take Mike's old position. "Takin' over for Honda," he said. "They're clearin' the house."

Nate nodded. He could hear Mike and Sandra thudding around, first downstairs, then upstairs, closets and cabinets slamming open and shut in their wake, the racket punctuated by their short calls to each other. It was almost soothing, in its way, to know that something was being done. Johnny put his back to the wall, the muzzle of his gun pointing to the floor between his feet.

The racket lessened a bit and Mike shouted something which neither of them understood. After a quick glance at Nate Johnny trotted back to the doorway. "What?" he yelled. Mike shouted again. Johnny looked back at Nate. "Wants to know if there's an attic."

Nate nodded. "There's a little trapdoor in the closet in the master bedroom."

"Closet in the master bedroom!" Johnny yelled. Mike's answering yell was still indistinct but much shorter, and Johnny returned to his post.

After another two or three minutes the thudding left off and Mike and Sandra came thumping back downstairs, conferring in a low undertone. "Texas, we're coming in," Sandra called, and she and Mike appeared a second later, both lightly flushed and sweating but cool-headed.

"Nothing," Mike said. "Not surprising, but it's good to know, you know?"

"The garage door was still locked when I opened it," Nate said. "He may have tried the door but I don't think he tried to get in the house beyond that."

Mike and Sandra glanced at each other, then Sandra nodded. "We'll go check out the garage next," she said. "Texas, I'm going to want you with us for that."

"Yeah," said Johnny. He glanced at Nate. "You oughta go upstairs. Close yourself and your mamma in one of the bedrooms, maybe pack a bag."

Nate considered this for a moment. "No," he finally said. "I want to stay within earshot. Mom, though—" He turned to his mother, who had passed all the way through 'annoyed' and hit 'long-suffering'. "Mom, you should go get your things together," he said, all in a rush, wanting to get it out before she interrupted him. "I think you need to go stay with Ruth for a while, okay?"

His mother looked at him, then turned her tight-lipped gaze on the bathroom door, where the rest of his team was clustered. "If I say yes," she said, "can I be let out of the bathroom?"

Nate's legs more or less gave out, dumping him unceremoniously onto the living-room couch. His mother was upstairs, behind a closed and locked bed-

room door despite her protests that that really wasn't necessary, *really*, Nathan, assumedly packing her things. A week with Ruth would drive her nuts, which meant that Nate would be paying for it in all sorts of small ways for the next month, but at least she should be safe there.

He'd been spared the lectures about how dangerous his job was, for now. He'd count that as a small blessing.

Nate drew his gun once again and held it in his lap, straining to hear the others. After some discussion they'd decided to open the garage door and send two people in from the driveway, which would give them more room to maneuver and look around; Johnny had gone in through the kitchen, covering all the ways. Nate had heard the garage door rumble up, and then . . . nothing. Which he could only suppose was a good thing.

When the garage door started to rumble shut again, he jumped. The door in the kitchen opened and the rest of the team came back in, all heavy footfalls and no talking. When they appeared in the living room they were even sweatier, but still reasonably calm. "Garage is clean," Sandra said. "So's the backyard."

Nate's shoulders slumped. He pushed his gun back into its holster with great relief and stood up, equally grateful to discover that his legs seemed willing to hold him. "So what now?"

"First of all we call your mother a cab," Sandra said briskly, "and get her out of here."

"Hey, Mrs. Waxman, you're a cab," Mike said under his breath. Sandra didn't bother to hit him, which was a clear sign of how seriously she was taking this. Mike looked a little disappointed.

"I'll go do that," Nate said, heading back into the kitchen. Johnny, he couldn't help but notice, trailed along behind him, taking up position in the doorway again.

They sat in awkward silence until the cab arrived. Nate's mother clearly wanted to make her views on the matter known, but she refused to cause a fuss in front of houseguests, for which Nate was grateful. His teammates, for their part, didn't want to alarm his mother or give too much away. However, with the specter of Farraday looming over the whole morning, small talk was damned near impossible to come up with, let alone pull off with any grace. It was a long, quiet, awkward twenty minutes, during which every single one of them peeked out of the curtains at least five times.

Finally the cab arrived and Nate's mother was bundled out the front door with an impressive escort (even if their guns were all firmly back in their holsters). After thoroughly checking out both the cabbie and the taxi itself—the sheer thoroughness of their examination wholly spooking the cabbie, who, like most DC cabdrivers, might or might not have been in the country legally—they shepherded

her in and put her bags in the trunk. "G'bye, Mom," Nate said, leaning in to kiss his mother's cheek. "Have fun."

"Ha!" said his mother, but she allowed herself to be driven off, which was an enormous load off Nate's mind. As soon as the cab rounded the corner they retreated back into the house itself.

"Nate, I want you out of here," Sandra said, pretty much the second she locked the front door behind herself. "This is a whole other thing, this is Farraday striking at you where you live, we are going to lock things down. Since Mike's also been compromised, I want you to go stay with Johnny—"

"No," Johnny said, his voice flat and intractable, stopping just where he was.

Sandra physically jerked at the contradiction, twisting to face him. "Why not?"

"'Cause either you or I are gonna be next," Johnny said, still flat. "If he's doin' us in order, he already got Simon, he got Mike, he got Nate . . ."

Sandra glanced swiftly at Nate out of the corner of her eye. "No offense, Nate—but compared to what happened to Simon and Mike, Nate got off pretty lightly. Farraday may not be done with him yet."

"Maybe he figures he got Nate good enough last time," Johnny said, and now his voice was so devoid of emphasis that it was frightening. "Not sayin' we should leave Nate here. Sayin' he shouldn't come to my place. Just in case."

Sandra thought that over for a moment, scowling. "All right," she finally said. "I concede your point. But frankly, we don't know if he 'got' Mike or if he was actually striking at Diana Fontaine. We don't actually know what he's *doing*, goddammit."

"Still, think we better move on to safer locations," said Johnny. "Get hotel rooms. Like Simon said."

For a long moment they were four corners of a taut square in the middle of the living room, eyeing each other warily. Then Sandra nodded, closing her eyes. "We'll do that. But there's a more pressing question at stake here."

"How'd he get in," Johnny said.

"Right," said Sandra. Her voice was grim. "Did he jimmy the window himself, or did Diana Fontaine unlock it while she was here?"

Nate jerked, startled. So did Mike. "Fuck," Mike breathed, recovering first.

"For that matter," Sandra said, "how did he know where Specs lived in the first place, if she didn't call him and tell him?"

"Um," said Nate. "If . . . if he knows my full name, my home phone's listed."

Sandra jerked both hands out in a frustrated gesture. "That's a dead end for now, then. Forget it. So that leaves the window."

"We can take fingerprints off the lock if no one touched it," Nate said, his terror momentarily receding as his mind latched onto the puzzle. "I mean, if she did unlock the window she probably wore gloves or wiped the lock or something, but if the lock's been wiped clean that'll tell us something in any case."

Sandra snapped her fingers. “Good idea. Can you do that yourself?”

“Sure,” said Nate, nodding. “I’ll have to go to the office and get my kit, but I can do that.”

“Okay,” Sandra said. “We’ll finish up here and then go get it for you. I don’t want you coming back here alone, though. Got it?”

“Got it,” Nate said fervently.

“Good,” said Sandra. “Go pack your stuff. We’ll wait.”

“Okay,” Nate said, heading for the stairs. He paused at the bottom, one hand on the railing. “I guess you could call Templar while you wait?”

Sandra blinked. “Simon?”

“You, uh, you did promise to keep him in the loop,” Nate said, hunching his shoulders.

“Yeah,” Sandra said, sighing. “Yeah, I did. Might as well, then. He’ll insist on showing up and looking at things, but since we’ve already locked the place down . . .” She trailed off there, resigned, and went to fish her cell phone out of her purse. Nate, relieved, scurried off.

◆ 51: Simon

Ironically, before the phone rang, Simon had been having a pretty good day, or at least as good a day as he could rationally expect to have right now. He'd conked out hard and slept like a rock (and he almost didn't mind giving Jeremy a grudging bit of credit for that) and woken at eight feeling more awake and refreshed than he had in a while. His last pain pill had lost its toehold and fizzled away at some point during the night and yet, still, nothing hurt until Simon gingerly swung his legs out of bed. Even then, it wasn't so bad. It had been worse, anyway.

He could only suppose he'd turned some sort of corner in his recovery. He couldn't precisely swagger into the shower, but he managed a decent (if stiff) pace anyway, pretty pleased with himself. And, all right, with Jeremy, not that he was ever going to admit to it in a million years. He wasn't even winded when he finished up in the shower, and he managed to dress himself in record time, and okay, he hurt like hell when he was done but it was some sort of kinder, gentler hell; he was just reaching for his phone in order to call Jeremy and demand breakfast when it rang, startling him.

Even before he saw Sandra's name on the screen, the ringing phone had killed his good mood. He flicked the phone open, trying to brace himself for anything. "Spring," he said. "What happened?"

"Farraday broke into Nate's garage and slashed his tires to ribbons," Sandra said, not bothering to soften the blow. Simon sucked in a breath. And winced. "All four of them—they're in pieces the size of my *hand*, Templar."

"Jesus," Simon said, grabbing his phone in both hands. "No one was hurt? Right? Spring, tell me no one was hurt. That's an order."

"No, everyone's fine, and we've confirmed that Farraday's gone. Nate packed his mother off to stay with relatives—"

"—smart—"

"—and we're moving everybody into hotel rooms this evening," Sandra finished. "If Farraday's started attacking people at home..."

“Good call,” Simon said. He caught himself pacing and didn’t make himself stop. “Tell me the rest—no, wait, don’t bother, I’ll call Archer and come see for myself.”

“Templar,” Sandra said, already sounding resigned.

“What? He’s long gone by now, right? All I’d be doing is walking very slowly around a crime scene. Christ, if I can’t do that by now I ought to check myself into a goddamned nursing home.”

“You know what, boss, I kind of figured you were going to insist on that.” Sandra sighed. “So much for leaving it to us, huh?”

“Yeah, well, I feel a lot better this morning,” Simon said, not even lying. “To hell with what I said yesterday. Wait there for me. I’ll be over just as soon as I can light a fire under Archer.”

“Right,” Sandra said. Simon hung up without saying goodbye and pulled up Jeremy’s number, checking the time as he did so. Not quite nine. He was probably going to wake Jeremy. The concept did not bother him unduly.

“Mm,” Jeremy said, purring sleepily into the phone. “*Good* morning, Simon. It’s so nice to know that your nocturnal exertions didn’t kill you after all—”

“—I’d tell you to put a cork in it, Archer, but I have the sinking feeling you’d enjoy that,” Simon said. “Hop to, lazyass, I need you pronto. Farraday took a swipe at Nate last night and we have a crime scene to visit.”

“Well, if you need me so,” Jeremy said, but suddenly he was all business. Simon could hear the mattress creaking in the background as Jeremy got moving. “Is Nate all right?”

“Yeah, he’s fine,” Simon said. “I’ll fill you in as we drive. Get a move on.” And he hung up before Jeremy could say anything else and jogged stiffly off in search of his sneakers.

Jeremy turned up in just under fifteen minutes, as impeccably turned out as ever, like he hadn’t been hurrying at all. “I guess it’s easy to get dressed in the morning when everything you own is black,” Simon said, edging himself into the passenger seat of his Jeep without assistance and fumbling for the seat belt. “Out of the parking lot, turn right, left at the second light, get on the freeway going south.”

“Good morning to you too, Simon,” Jeremy said, putting the Jeep in drive. “You seem to be feeling better. Or at least perkier.”

“You know, I feel pretty good?” Simon said. “No thanks to you, of course.”

“Of course.” Jeremy turned right out of the parking lot and completely failed to put on a burst of speed. Simon gritted his teeth and dealt with it. “So what’s happened?”

“Farraday broke into Nate’s garage and shredded all four of his tires into a pile of hand-sized pieces of rubber, apparently,” said Simon. “Or so Sandy tells me.”

Jeremy winced. "That has . . . unpleasant echoes, really."

"Yeah, it does," Simon said. "However, that's none of your fucking business, *really*, and I'll thank you not to say anything like that in front of my team. I suspect they've drawn the parallels for themselves and really don't need an outsider mashing it in their faces."

"Mm," Jeremy said. "I apologize. I spoke before I thought. I *must* be tired."

"Don't worry about it," said Simon. "Just don't bring it up again. I don't want to hear it from you."

Jeremy nodded. "Fair enough."

"There," Simon said, pointing. "See the really ugly truck? That's Johnny's. Ergo, that's the house we want."

"That truck is even uglier than I remember it being," Jeremy said, slotting Simon's Jeep neatly in behind Johnny's ruin of a truck. "That's quite a trick, really."

Simon freed himself from the seatbelt and slid out of the Jeep before Jeremy could come around to help or interfere. "Yeah, tell me about it," he said. "It's kind of a work of outsider art by this point."

"Outsider art," Jeremy repeated.

"Yeah, outsider art," Simon said, as patiently as he could. "What, am I supposed to be too ignorant to have heard of outsider art?"

"No, no," said Jeremy. "I was registering a general distaste for outsider art in general, not taking a potshot at your education or lack thereof, Simon."

"Oh. Well. That's fair. Snob."

"It isn't an insult if it's patently true," Jeremy said with amused patience. The front door opened and Sandra jogged out to meet them, her hand resting lightly on the butt of her gun. Jeremy smiled and went quiet, easing back behind Simon.

"Hey, boss," Sandra said. "How you doing this morning?"

"Better, actually," Simon said. "Okay! Enough small talk! Show me the garage."

Sandra turned halfway around and made a large overhead shooing motion in the general direction of the front door. The curtain in one of the windows twitched closed. "We'll raise the garage door for you, boss," Sandra said, ticking her head towards the driveway and starting towards it. Her hand stayed on the butt of her gun. "Archer? Crime scene. If you get your fingerprints on anything the results will be hilarious."

"Your concern is duly noted," Jeremy said, ostentatiously sticking his hands in his pants pockets. Simon snorted. The garage door started to rumble up and all three of them unconsciously raised their guard, going taut and still until the garage revealed itself to still be empty.

Once the door finished raising and went quiet Simon jogged up the driveway to take a look. Nate's battered little compact sat flush on four small pads of tire

rubber just barely larger than the footprint of the rims. Farraday had painstakingly cut away as much of the tires as possible and then shredded the pieces into palm-sized chunks and random looping curls, the remnants strewn in a wide arc around the car. "Jesus, this shit must have taken him hours," Simon said, then guiltily glanced towards the door that led into the house.

"Yeah," Sandra said. "Don't worry, Nate's not here. He and Mike took my car to headquarters to pick up Nate's gear."

"Small favors," Simon said, relaxing. "Christ, look at this mess. Think Farraday's trying to make a statement?"

Sandra huffed out a breath. "Statement my ass," she said. "This is a god-damned *press release*."

"So how'd he get in?" Simon asked. "That window back there?"

"Far as we can tell." Sandra started to pick her way carefully around the outer perimeter of the tire fragments. Simon followed. Jeremy, hands still in his pockets, brought up the rear. "It was open just like this when Nate first discovered the damage."

Simon leaned over to study the open window, jamming his own hands into his pockets to protect the scene. The muscle adhesion on his chest woke up and started baying in pain. He ignored it. "Huh. He jimmy it open?"

"We don't know," said Sandra, guardedly. "There don't seem to be any pry marks, so it's also possible that Diana Fontaine sneaked out here at some point while she was here and unlocked it for him."

Simon had to resist the momentary urge to beat his head against the washing machine in frustration. "Christ, of course that's possible. That woman pops up everywhere, doesn't she? Like a, a jack-in-the-box before the fact."

"She sure does," said Sandra. "Still, that doesn't look like a very strong lock. It's possible he didn't need any help to open it."

"Well, that, at least, is a question we can settle, seeing as how we have our very own bona-fide expert right here," Simon said, turning around and waving at Jeremy. Jeremy raised an eyebrow, but picked his way the rest of the way over. "Without touching anything," said Simon, "can you give me an idea of how much trouble this lock would be to open?"

"What lock?" said Jeremy, affecting exasperation. "That isn't a *lock*, Simon, it's window jewelry. I'd have to see how well the window fits in its frame before I could give you a hard estimate, but I assure you that I could open it from outside in five to thirty seconds without leaving a mark. With a piece of scrap wire."

"Huh," Simon said. "And someone without your much-vaunted skills?"

Jeremy shrugged. "Two minutes? Three? If you gave me fifteen minutes I could teach *you* to do it."

"Huh," Simon said again. "Well, that answers that, not that I'm liking this answer."

"If I may," said Jeremy.

“Huh?”

“How tall is this Diana Fontaine?”

“Christ, I don’t know. Average chick height?”

“A little shorter than I am,” said Sandra, shooting a glance at Simon.

Jeremy nodded. “Is she right-handed?”

“I don’t know,” said Simon, “and I don’t know what color underwear she was wearing when she was here, either.”

“Damn, and here that was going to be my very next question,” Jeremy said. “Let us assume that she’s right-handed, for the sake of argument.”

“Okay, I’ll buy that,” Simon said. “Out with it.”

Jeremy turned on his heel, studying the area. “If she did unlock this window under this Farraday’s auspices, I suspect there won’t be any fingerprints on the thumb-lock or on the doorknob over there. He’d have warned her against that, and those are the two most obvious things she would realize that she’d touched.”

“Uh, yeah, I think I could have guessed that myself, what with being a professional and all,” said Simon.

“And if she had access to gloves, well, so much for any of this,” Jeremy said, smiling a little, as if he were aware of how much this was starting to irritate Simon.

“Out with it, Archer.”

“But if she didn’t—if she was just using a hunk of tissue or somesuch—then there’s one place she might very well have touched without realizing.”

“Ouuuuuuut with it.”

Jeremy’s smile faded. “If she is a little shorter than Ms. Leone here, then she would have to lean fairly far forward over the clothes washer to get at the lock,” he said with no further prevarication. “So it’s likely that she put her left hand down somewhere for balance, which means that she spread out her hand here—” he splayed his hand out in the air a couple of inches over the top of the washing machine “—or here—” his hand lifted to hover a couple of inches away from the plaster wall “—or here—” his hand cupped lightly an inch or so over the raised top of the washer’s control panel “—and, as she’s not a professional criminal, she may not have realized that she was doing so.”

Simon frowned a little, then glanced over at Sandra. “You know, sometimes I could almost like him?”

Sandra and Jeremy shared a look, then (for no reason that Simon could discern) they both smiled. “What?” Simon said, piqued.

♦ 52: Dave

By the time Dave tore himself away from the laptop's text dump and checked the time, it was nine-thirty, and he was still the only one in the room. Therefore, something was definitely up. He wondered what. He wondered if everyone was okay.

That sort of stung a little, actually. Despite everything, despite knowing very well that it was too much to expect, he felt a dim stab of hurt that they hadn't even thought to let him know something was going on. He wasn't asking to be brought right into the inner circle, but some sort of notification would have been nice. Too much to expect, but nice.

Dave sighed. On the other side of the room the coffeemaker burbled a little, as if in answer. He'd conscientiously fetched in the contents of the inbox and started the coffee when he'd arrived, at eight, just like he'd been told to do, and then he, the coffee, and the stack of papers had all sat here keeping each other company for an hour and a half. That coffee had to taste like burnt mud by now. Dave considered dumping it out and making a fresh pot. He wouldn't mind another cup of coffee. Just . . . not that coffee.

It wasn't even as if he was getting that much *done* with all this peace and quiet. Dave scrolled listlessly through the massive file again, his eyes only half-focused, letting the garbage flow past. He'd spent so long working down in the Internet Crime cubicle farm that first he'd taught himself to work despite the constant noise and distractions, and now, apparently, he couldn't work without them.

Abruptly he shoved his chair back and stood up, his knees both cracking. Dave winced and hobbled out of the crowded lair, heading for the coffeemaker. He'd dump out the old coffee and make some more, and then he'd have another cup, and then whenever the others came back from wherever it was that they'd gone there'd be fresh coffee. Fresher coffee, anyway. "And then maybe they'll love me," he muttered under his breath, turning off the coffeemaker and extracting the pot. The coffeemaker made one final hissing protest and shut down. Dave patted it. "You're the only one who appreciates me, ma'am," he told the coffeemaker,

“and apparently I’m having conversations with inanimate objects now, oh my God.”

He gingerly carried the half-full pot of coffee-flavored sludge down the hall to the floor’s communal kitchen. It was farther away than the bathroom, but judging by the conversation he’d just tried to have, he seemed to be desperately in need of some human contact. The coffeemaker might have a name (and, apparently, a jealous husband), but it still didn’t count.

The communal kitchen was deserted when he got there, though. So much for that. Dave dumped the goo out into the sink, the stuff demonstrating a slight but real tendency to cling like motor oil to the sides of the pot, and rinsed the pot out. Then again, with soap. Even after two rinses the glass of the pot was still a dingy semi-opaque brown on the bottom, and Dave was frowning at this residue in perplexity when the door opened behind him.

“Morning,” the newcomer said. The greeting was perfunctory but not unfriendly, and after these last two days ‘not unfriendly’ was like music to Dave’s ears.

“Hi,” Dave said, glancing over his shoulder at the other guy and waving the empty pot. “I don’t suppose you know how to get this guck out.”

“Eh? I hear vinegar works pretty good,” the guy said. “Me, I just drink the communal slop.”

“Really? Huh. I’ll keep that in mind,” Dave said. “Oh, well.” He gave the coffee pot one last useless rinse and filled it with fresh water.

“Do I know you?” the newcomer asked, sounding only mildly curious. “I don’t think I’ve seen you around. Are you new?”

Dave opened his mouth to reply and discovered that he had no idea how to answer this question. “Uh. Sort of. I mean, yes, but I don’t know if I’m going to stick around. . . . I’m here provisionally.”

“Oh.” The guy wavered between politeness and a quick exit for a moment, then visibly gave in and stuck out a hand. “I’m Franklin, I’m with Bishop. Nice to meet you.”

“Oh, ah . . .” Dave switched the coffee pot into his left hand, wiped his right hand dry on his sweater, and shook Franklin’s hand. “Dave. For the moment, I’m with Templar.” God, it still gave him such a rush to *say* that.

Franklin’s eyebrows shot up. “Templar? Wow, they’re finally replacing Rich? I thought they’d have to force Simon to do it at gunpoi-oy-oy-oy.” He slapped a hand over his face and laughed ruefully. “*Whoa* boy, that was tacky of me, wasn’t it?”

Dave winced and laughed a little at the same time. “Maybe a little,” he admitted.

“Don’t tell him I said that,” Franklin said. “Uh. Anyway.” He filled his mug from the large communal coffee pot and headed out, flapping Dave a quick wave over his shoulder. “I gotta get back. Good luck.”

"Thanks?" Dave said, but Franklin was already gone, the door swinging shut behind him. Dave frowned at the door for a moment, unsettled and unable to quite pin down why, then checked the grungy coffee pot one last time and carried it back down to the saferoom.

"Hey, look who's late!" Mike caroled as Dave pushed the door open. Dave twitched back, startled, then sighed and carried the pot back over to the coffemaker.

The clatter in the supply closet momentarily got louder, then died away. Nate stuck his head out. "Oh. Hey."

"Hi," Dave said. He lifted the coffee pot in an awkward salute. "I was just making some more coffee..."

"Wow, you drank a whole pot by yourself? Simon's going to make you start chipping in extra," Nate said. He gingerly edged out of the closet, a large industrial-gray box in both hands, and kicked the closet door closed behind him.

"Well, no, but it had been sitting there for so long it had gone all sludgy." Dave dumped the wet filter and used grounds into the trash and replaced them. "So I thought I'd, you know, make some fresh stuff."

"You threw out *coffee*?" Nate said, startled. "Man, don't tell Simon, he'll have a cow."

Mike snickered. "Yeah, real men *like* scorched coffee sludge."

"Simon probably does," Nate said gloomily. "He likes to tell people how he used to eat instant coffee crystals straight from the jar on stakeout." Nate shuddered. "Why he doesn't have an ulcer by now I'll never know."

"He probably does and is too damn manly to cater to it," Mike said. "You just about ready, Specs?"

"Yeah, I got it," Nate said. "Let's go."

"Um," said Dave.

Nate stopped. "What?"

"What's going on?" Dave asked hopelessly. "Where is everyone? Is everyone okay?"

"... oh," said Nate, coloring a little. "That's right, no one probably told you. Uh."

"Farraday's been busy," Mike said, overriding whatever it was that Nate had been just about to say. "We're going back to document the crime scene. You can probably just stay here, this ain't a job for the computer."

Dave nodded, looking away. "But everyone's okay, right?"

"Yeah," said Mike, after a moment. "Yeah, no one's hurt."

"Good." Dave let out his breath. "Okay. I, I'll see you later, then."

"Yeah, later," Mike said, pulling open the saferoom door and hustling Nate out. Nate waved at Dave over Mike's shoulder just before the door boomed shut behind them.

Dave stared after them, adrift and maybe a little forlorn. A moment later someone pounded on the wall beside him, and Dave leaped away from the wall so fast that he stumbled when he landed and nearly fell flat on his ass. “Stop slamming the fucking door already!” whoever it was bellowed. Dave gaped at the wall, wondering if he should apologize or what. In the end he just crept back into the lair, trying to place his feet lightly, just in case.

The mystery person didn’t shout again. Silence fell, punctuated only by the soft bubbling hiss of the coffeemaker. Dave pulled up the massive text file and got back to work, halfheartedly at first. It was just so *quiet*. He kept getting distracted from his work by every little footstep from outside. Maybe he ought to bring in some headphones or something . . . of course, that wasn’t going to help him right now.

The text file spat up half a page of code, rendered nearly into gibberish by the mangling of its spacing. Dave copied it into another text file and reinserted as much of the spacing as he could. The code resolved. Dave scowled at it. Neat, yes, decently tight, but completely undocumented, how did he know that it was going to be completely undocumented? And these variable names were just . . . strange. Two years in Internet Crime had taught Dave that you could learn a lot about a man by looking at what he named his variables, a thought that was so incredibly nerdy that he felt socially inept just for having it. Well. More socially inept.

The coffeemaker beeped and shut off. Dave jumped, startled. His knee hit the underside of the keyboard tray, which rattled in protest. Dave winced. His first impulse was to apologize to the keyboard tray, which was a completely stupid idea but also, he had to admit, par for the course for today. His second, more suspicious impulse was to lift up the keyboard and hit the now-empty tray with his knee again. It still rattled.

Frowning, Dave put the keyboard back down and looked around, thinking very fast. It was a ridiculous idea, he told himself. However, everything about this day had been ridiculous—screw that, everything about this *week* had been ridiculous. And furthermore, he might as well admit to himself that he wasn’t going to be staying here. They didn’t want him here, and they’d made that abundantly clear. So . . . he had nothing to lose and everything to gain by being ridiculous. Right? Right.

The impulse drove him out of his chair in a bound and he threw open the door to Nate’s supply closet before he could think better of it.

◆ 53: Mike

“You know, I totally forgot about him,” Nate said, trotting to keep up with Mike as Mike headed for the motor-pool garage. The big gray box bounced off his thighs with every step, its contents rattling. “I guess someone should have called to let him know we’d be late.”

“What for?” Mike said. “He’s got his own job to do, right?”

“Well, yeah, I guess.” Nate fell a few steps behind, hitching up the box again. “It’s just . . . if it were me I’d want to know what happened even if it didn’t directly involve me, you know?”

“Yeah, well, tell you the truth, I don’t really care what he wants, Specs.” Mike spun and swooped down on Nate, yanking the box out of his grip. “Here, gimme that. You know, you really ought to get a box with a handle on top or something.”

“I know,” Nate said grumpily, falling into step with Mike again, still hurrying a little. “I keep meaning to.”

Carrying the box Mike slammed through the doors into the massive lobby of the main building, which was nearly deserted at this hour, all the good little drones hard at work. The rubber soles of his sneakers made little squeaky sounds on the polished stone floor; Mike grinned a little and started dragging his heels. The resulting cacophony shrieked off the high ceiling and made Nate hunch his shoulders and go a little pink. “Lighten up, Specs,” Mike sang, slapping Nate on the shoulder hard enough to make him stumble. “Ain’t no one here but us.”

“It’s still loud,” Nate mumbled.

“What?” Mike yelled, now enjoying this entirely too much.

Sure enough, Nate turtled up, tucking his chin into the high collar of his sweater, mortally embarrassed. “Quit it,” he yelled back.

“Awww, okay,” Mike said. He got off one last excellent screech and then stopped. After a few seconds Nate un-turtled himself, his blush starting to fade, which would normally have been Mike’s cue to start again, except they were already at the door that led into the garage. Mike contented himself with one last tiny squeak and Nate’s resulting twitch.

The van was parked over by the mechanics' work station, close to the exit ramp. As they got close, their footsteps echoing dully inside the huge concrete space, three heads popped curiously up from inside the work bays, followed shortly by a fourth. Nate waved. After a moment, one of the mechanics waved back, and one by one they disappeared again. "Man, it's just like playin' whack-a-mole or some shit," Mike said, fishing the van keys out of his pocket. He unlocked the back door of the van and put the gray box down on the bare metal floor.

"Aw, c'mon, don't be rude, I have to work with those guys sometimes," Nate said, leaning past Mike to push the box under one of the consoles. After a moment he frowned and crawled in after it, grabbing for one of the tiedown straps.

Leaving him to it Mike loped around and let himself into the van, leaning over to unlock the passenger-side door. Nate was still fussing around in the back of the van, so Mike settled in, got nice and comfortable, and shut his eyes. "Any day now, Specs," he said.

"Just a sec," Nate muttered, probably not listening to him at all. Mike considered this for a moment, gave Nate five more seconds, and then hit the horn. The resounding *WHONK!* boomed off the concrete walls and summoned, like magic, the heads of all four of the mechanics; Nate let out a little shriek and jumped so hard that the van shook when he landed. "Oh crap don't *do* that!" he cried, all in one panicky little breath.

Mike grinned a little. "Sorry."

Nate sighed and finished tying down the box, scrambling out of the back of the van and shutting the back doors. By the time he'd gotten around to the passenger side Mike had belatedly remembered that oh, yeah, maybe Nate had a little reason to be jumpy this morning, and his grin had deflated. "Sorry," he said again, trying for a bit more sincerity this time.

"It's okay," Nate said. He sounded kind of tired. "Let's just go, huh?"

Sandra was sitting out on the front porch steps when Mike pulled the van up behind Johnny's truck. In an eerie echo of Nate's 'sleepiest little serial killer' pose, she was armed; Sandra kept her gun half-hidden in her lap, though, which wasn't nearly so cute. Mike stopped the van. Sandra stood up and shoved her gun back into its holster, waiting for them.

"Get everything you need?" she asked Nate as he trundled up the front walk towards her.

"Yeah," Nate said, hitching up the box again. "I'll need half an hour, forty-five minutes."

Sandra nodded. "Johnny's out in the garage, keeping an eye on things. And as you can probably tell by the presence of the Jeep, Simon's here, which surprises no one."

“Yo, Sandy,” Mike said, jogging up behind Nate. She glanced at him. He tossed her her keys, which she caught. “It’s over in the side lot, kinda near the fence. Guess everybody beat us to the good parking this morning.”

Sandra tucked her keys into her jeans pocket. “Great. Thanks. Anything else?”

Nate cleared his throat. “Uh, the new guy was asking where we were.”

“The new—” Sandra slapped her forehead. “I completely forgot to let him know we’d be out, didn’t I?” she said, massaging her temples.

“Yeah,” said Nate. “I mean, it’s not important, I guess, but . . .”

“But I still should have called the switchboard and asked them to pass on a message or something,” said Sandra. “Shit. I should really get his cell number.”

“Anyway, we let him know that everyone was okay and that he didn’t need to worry or anything.” Nate hefted the box again. “Can I . . . ?”

“Oh, sure, go on,” Sandra said, stepping out of his way and waving him on towards the house. “Talk to Archer before you get started. He had a couple of ideas about where to dust for prints besides the obvious.”

“To Archer? Uh. Okay.” Nate edged past Sandra and headed on up the front walk, the box rattling. Someone opened the door before he got to it, and Nate smiled and said something that neither Mike nor Sandra heard before easing on into the house.

They stood there for a little, keeping a desultory eye on the house and the street, just in case. The wind picked up and rattled the dry leaves in Nate’s front yard. A cloud scudded across the sun. Mike thought he could sort of smell incoming rain.

“Seems like you’ve kind of become the go-to guy for Diana Fontaine,” Sandra said after a while, crossing her arms and watching the street over Mike’s shoulder. “I’d appreciate it if you’d come up with some excuse to call her here in a minute. Find out if she’s okay without letting on what’s up.”

“Sure, no problem,” said Mike. “Don’t even need an excuse, really. I was gonna go run her to the drugstore at lunch, since she doesn’t have a car or anything. I can just call and say yo, I’ll be there around eleven. . . . you think eleven?”

“Yeah, we should be done here by then.” Sandra didn’t say anything else for a long while.

Mike stuck his hands in his pockets and kicked at the dead leaves by his feet. “Guess I gotta do it in the van. I was gonna use Nate’s car, but . . . yeah, that ain’t happening.”

“Guess so,” Sandra said absently. “Careful she doesn’t wire it up in your absence.”

“Yeah, ’cause she totally carries a car bomb and a bug around in her knockoff designer purse.”

The garage door rattled up and they both glanced in that direction, Mike's hand creeping in under his jacket, just in case. Nate appeared for just a second, waved to them, and then crouched down, vanishing from sight behind the hedge. "Taking her to the drugstore," Sandra said musingly.

"Yeah." Mike shrugged. "She kinda left her place with nothing, you know?"

Sandra nodded. "Guess she did." She went quiet again.

Mike bore the silence for just about as long as he could. "Plus she's kind of a Farraday magnet right now, you know? So I figure I wanna stick with her in public, just in case."

"Just in case . . . what?" Sandra glanced at him.

"In case he shows his ugly mug? Duh."

"Well, yes, *duh*," Sandra echoed at him, reaching up to push her hair back behind her ear. "But why?"

And that made so little sense that Mike gaped at her, his mouth falling open. "Because if he shows his face, I can, I dunno, arrest him?"

"Is that why?" Sandra said, her voice going all taut and abrupt. "Is it because you want to arrest Farraday, or because you want to protect Diana Fontaine?"

The light dawned. "Ohhhh," Mike said, beaming. "I get it."

"Get what?"

"I-I-I get it," Mike said. "You? You are *totally jealous*."

Sandra's eyes narrowed, her mouth snapping shut with a little click. Unable to resist despite his sense of imminent doom, Mike did a little butt-wiggling dance right out on the front lawn in front of God and everybody. "San-dy's jea-lous," he sang.

"I'm not *jealous*!" Sandra snapped, slapping him away before he could actually hipcheck her. "I'm just worried that you're getting a little too personally involved. As far as we know the lady is an accessory before the fact and I worry that you're losing sight of that!"

"Awwwww, c'mon, admit it!" Mike looped an arm around her shoulders and gave her a half-assed hug. "You totally want me! It's okay, you can admit it, I won't laugh at you or nothin'." Sandra immediately elbowed him in the gut, hard enough to knock the wind right out of him. Mike doubled up, wheezing and completely victorious. "Oh, baby, you know I like it rough," he gasped, when he could, and doubled back up with a frantic case of snickering.

"Mike, I'm serious," Sandra said, sounding strained.

"Yeah, I know," Mike said. He stifled his laughter as best he could, but he couldn't quite erase the grin entirely. "I got as much dick as the next man—hell, twice as much, you wanted to know—but I'm not blinded by it or anything. I'm totally on top of it, you know?"

"As long as you're not on top of her," Sandra shot right back, which set Mike off again. After a moment he just gave up and collapsed onto the ground entirely,

whooping. Sandra rolled her eyes (fondly, Mike thought) and nudged him in the ribs with her toe. "Get up, idiot, you're getting dead leaves in your hair."

"Yeah, yeah," Mike said, flopping out at her feet. "I'm okay, though. For serious. It's just that, well, shit, maybe she's just a great actor or something but she really does seem scared, you know? I'm not taking her side or anything. I'm just trying to keep an open mind about things. Trying to keep everybody from just automatically assuming that she's guilty."

"I suppose so," Sandra said. She glanced around and then stared resolutely out across the street, ignoring Mike as best she could. "For all we know she's helping him *because* she's so scared of him. We don't know *anything*. I just want you to be careful and not assume too much yourself."

"I'm not stupid, yo," Mike said, with just the faintest flare of resentment.

"I never said you were," Sandra said, sighing. "I don't think you're stupid. A little careless sometimes, but never stupid."

"You better watch it," Mike said matter-of-factly, reaching over to untie her sneaker since it was right there and all. "I might start thinking you care or some shit."

Sandra jerked her foot back out of Mike's grip and then kicked him in the ribs. It hurt, but it made him feel a little better, like things were finally getting back to normal.

Eventually Sandra left him there and went over to see how things were going in the garage. Not bothering to get up—the lawn was surprisingly comfortable, really—Mike pulled his cell phone off his belt and called Diana Fontaine's hotel room. The phone rang twice before she answered. "Hello?" she said, nervously.

"Yo, lawyer lady," said Mike, half-shutting his eyes against the light of the sun. "Just wanted to let you know that I should be by around eleven, maybe a little later. That gonna be okay?"

"Oh! Oh, yes, that's fine," Diana said. Was her voice a little warmer? Mike decided he couldn't tell. Trick of the connection, probably. "I'll be ready then."

Mike picked a stubborn leaf out of his hair and stared at it, spinning it in his fingers. "Awesome. You need anything while you got me on the line? Speak up, you got my undivided attention."

"I-I can't think of anything," she said, with a hesitant little laugh. "I'll see you at eleven?"

"Yep. We'll get lunch or something, too. Hell, I'll even treat, 'cause I'm such a nice guy and all. Think about where you'd like to go, okay?"

"Oh . . . okay." She hesitated. "Thank you."

"Sure, any time. See you later." Mike folded the phone away and stuck it back in his clip, then tucked both hands under his head and grinned up at the pale October sun. Man. He was just *all* kinds of ladies' man today, apparently.

◆ 54: Sandra

A little gang of plastic evidence bags huddled together to one side of the garage door, each one containing a chunk of black rubber from one of Nate's ex-tires. Sandra paused in the doorway and surveyed the damage, frowning; Farraday had been so particular and so . . . *compulsive* about the placement of the tire bits that Sandra could clearly see the little gaps in the arrangement where Nate had selected his samples.

Nate was in the very back of the garage, wearing a face mask, rapt with concentration over the washing machine. Johnny was sitting on the steps that led up from the garage into the house proper, watching Nate work. His gun lay beside him on the third step up, turned at just the right angle that he could drop a hand onto it without looking.

Sandra picked her way through what remained of the rubber mosaic again. "Look at this shit," she said, once she was close enough. "I wonder if he went OCD in prison."

"Wouldn't surprise me," Johnny said. "Don't expect that prison makes people go *right* in the head."

"If so, I wish he'd developed a more classic strain of OCD," Sandra said. Johnny shuffled his feet obligingly out of the way and Sandra claimed a step for her own. "If Farraday spent all his time compulsively washing his hands and double-checking to make sure that the door was locked, he'd spend a lot less time making our lives hell."

Johnny snorted in agreement. "Maybe it's art."

"Art," Sandra repeated. "Right."

"Could be," Johnny said, shrugging. "Crazier things are."

Sandra checked the driveway one last time and then succumbed to the overwhelming need to shut her eyes. She could hear Johnny breathing beside her and, behind him, the faint squeak of Nate labeling an evidence bag with a marker. "What do you know about art anyway, Texas?"

"Took a class once."

"... an art class?"

“Art history.”

Sandra opened her eyes. “Really?”

“Yep.”

“You’re not shitting me?”

“Nope.” Johnny remained inscrutable. “Got like fifty hours of college credit before I went into the academy.”

“I learn something new every day,” said Sandra. “What else? Take any philosophy?”

“Not so’s you’d notice.”

A flicker of motion from the driveway caught Sandra’s attention and she glanced in that direction. Mike was ambling around out there now, keeping an eye on the street. He also still had a leaf stuck in his hair. She shook her head in resignation. “Simon inside?”

“Yep. Archer’s with him, case he starts bleedin’ on things.”

Sandra shut her eyes again. “Good,” she said. “He seems a little better, though.”

“Yep,” said Johnny. “Guess havin’ Archer around is good for him or something.” Sandra glanced at Johnny, startled. Johnny shrugged. “Think those two get on better than Templar lets on, that’s all.”

Sandra breathed again. “That’s probably true,” she said.

“‘Sides, if I’m wrong, maybe Templar’s getting better in a hurry just to get rid of him,” Johnny concluded. “Find anything?” Sandra was momentarily nonplussed until she realized that Johnny was speaking to Nate and not to her.

“Well, yes,” Nate said, his voice muffled by the surgical mask he was wearing. “I’ve got tons of decent latent prints, very clear. The only problem is that I have to match and discard any fingerprints left by me or Mom—I have to go *fingerprint* my *mother*, I’m really looking forward to that, I’m telling you.”

Sandra ducked her head, trying not to smile. Beside her, she heard Johnny struggle not to laugh and almost, almost lose. “So,” Sandra said, coughing, “was anything wiped clean?”

“No,” Nate said, glancing back at the open window, now smoky with silvery powder. “That doesn’t mean the lock wasn’t manipulated with gloves or something, but it wasn’t cleaned afterwards.”

“In other words, right now we’ve got a whole lot of nothing,” Sandra concluded.

“Well, no.” Nate stripped off his gloves, then tugged down the mask to hang discarded about his throat. “We’ve got a whole lot of stuff, it just might *mean* nothing.”

“Whole lot of nothing,” Johnny said.

Nate sighed. “Yeah.”

Sandra looked around the garage. “So can we start cleaning this mess up now?”

“Uh? I guess?” Nate said tentatively. “I’ve got everything I need, I think. I just have to run all this stuff out to the van, but you guys really don’t have to help—”

“But we’re going to,” Sandra decreed, standing up and dusting her palms off against her thighs. “Where do you keep the cleaning stuff?”

Nate blanched slightly. “Um. Under the kitchen sink and, uh, in the little closet by the fridge, mostly.”

“Right,” said Sandra, easing past Johnny. Nate yelped a warning and Sandra twitched her hand back, just a second too late; her hand came away from the doorknob coated from one end to the other with gray powder. Sandra eyed her smeared hand askance, then shook her head. “It’ll wash off,” she said, grabbing the doorknob again.

Simon was in the kitchen when Sandra let herself in, lounging against one of the counters with his arms folded loosely over his chest. He almost looked normal, like nothing at all was wrong, except that his folded arms hung a little crookedly to avoid putting too much pressure on the left side of his chest. “How’s it going?” he asked.

“Nate’s done,” Sandra informed him, heading for the sink. “Where’s Archer?”

“Behind you,” Simon said, nodding at the doorway that led into the dining room. Sandra glanced over her shoulder. Jeremy, leaning in the doorway, raised a hand in greeting. “Watch out,” Simon added, his voice a little sour.

“Yes, I *am* horribly prone to sneaking up behind people and coshing them over the head for no good reason,” said Jeremy equably. “A flaw of my English upbringing, as Simon would undoubtedly say. What is that on your hand?”

“Fingerprinting powder,” Sandra said, washing it off. “I forgot that Nate did the doorknob before I grabbed it.”

“Ah.”

“Anyway,” said Sandra, grabbing the towel on the fridge and drying her hands. “I’m going to see about getting the garage at least halfway cleaned up before we go. Boss, you want to maybe see about calling Nate a tow? He’s going to need a flatbed, with all four tires down to rims.”

“Good idea,” said Simon. “He got Triple A, do you know?”

“No clue,” Sandra leaned back and shouted out of the open door. “Nate, you got Triple A?”

“AARP!” Nate called back.

Sandra straightened up and frowned. “AARP? Why does he have AARP? He’s not even *thirty*.”

Nate appeared in the doorway, the crook of his arm filled with bags. “It’s Mom’s,” he said sheepishly.

“AARP?” Jeremy asked, curiously.

Nate went a little red. “American Association of Retired Persons,” he muttered.

Jeremy’s face went blank. “Ah.”

“Anyway,” Sandra said, and dove into the cabinets under the sink with their neat rows upon rows of cleaning products.

“I’ll call them for you, Specs,” Simon said, unfolding from his place by the cabinets and heading for the phone. “If they won’t send out a flatbed I’ll find someone who will. You go get that stuff squared away—that’s a priority.”

“Uh. Right.” Nate put the bags down on the kitchen counter and fetched out his wallet, producing a gray card, which he handed to Simon. Simon took it, studied it, shrugged, and picked up the phone. Nate went pink and picked up all his little bags again.

Cleanser and paper towels in one hand, Sandra opened the closet by the fridge and was confronted by the neatest display of brooms and mops that she’d ever personally seen. Everything had its own hook. Its own labeled hook. She was starting to see why Nate had gone a little green at the thought of someone else messing around in here: one thing in the wrong place would probably make Nate’s mother have an episode. Now she knew where Nate got it. Sandra shook her head and fetched out the biggest broom, sticking it under her arm long enough to pluck a big metal dustpan off its labeled nail.

She went back out into the garage. “Here,” she told Johnny, punching him not-exactly-lightly in the chest with the hand holding the broom. Johnny grabbed the broom in both hands, mostly to keep it from falling; keeping a completely straight face (with an effort) Sandra handed him the dustpan. “Get those tire pieces up, will you? I’m going to see what I can do about this powder.”

Johnny held the broom gingerly, eyeing it askance. Eventually he shrugged and silently carried it off.

Sandra watched him go, then pulled off a paper towel and prepared to confront the silvery-gray powdery horror of the washer and dryer. Behind her Mike whooped with glee, a sure sign that he’d spotted Johnny wielding the broom. Sandra pulled the window shut at last, turning the thumb lock before resolutely swiping a wide clean stripe across the window’s surface.

By the time the tow truck arrived, the garage was, if not clean, at least no longer obviously the scene of a crime. Sandra was hot, sweaty, cranky, and covered from tits to knees with a light dusting of gray powder that no amount of slapping or brushing seemed likely to remove, but at least Nate was in the same predicament (except without the tits). Of course, Nate just had to go upstairs and change. Sandra figured that she was probably stuck for the rest of the day.

They stood around in a loose semicircle silently watching the guys do their thing. Mercifully, the truck people didn’t seem inclined to ask for explanations, just tilted the truck’s bed back and hauled out the chains. “You’re probably gonna

have to buy all new rims,” one of them informed Nate. “I mean, look here, they’ve kinda dented in just by sittin’ here. Car’s too heavy for ’em.”

Nate nodded bleakly. “I saw.”

“Okay, then,” he said. “Put her in neutral for me.”

Nate leaned into the car and threw it into neutral, then backed out. The guy handling the chains yelled to the driver, who turned on the winch. The chains lifted off the ground and tightened, the metal links clinking against each other. Nate’s dented little car hitched slightly and started to ease backwards, off the little pads of rubber.

Sandra braced herself for it, but she still wasn’t quite ready for the sound of Nate’s bare rims lurching onto the concrete. She winced. They all did. The grinding noise was awful. Slowly the car backed up onto the tilted flatbed, grinding and squealing all the way; as soon as it was halfway on Johnny moved expressionlessly behind it, picking up the bits of tire that the front wheels had been resting on and carrying them to the trash.

The car looked even sadder once it was perched up on the flatbed truck out in view of everyone, riding low on its battered rims. Nate went to hand over his keys and sign things; now that the opportunity for rubbernecking was over the rest of them drew away, gathering up in a group at the back of the garage. “Anything else we need to do while we’re here?” Simon asked, glancing around.

“We’ll need to check with Nate, but I don’t think so,” said Sandra. “He should probably go shower and change—” she slapped at the gray powder on her own shirt for emphasis “—but after that, I think we’re done here.”

Simon nodded. “Very nice,” he told Sandra. “Fashion-forward. The look suits you.”

“Are you kidding?” Sandra asked. “There are maybe three people in the whole world who look good in straight gray, and boy, I’m not one of them.”

“I’ve never liked gray myself,” said Jeremy, his voice oddly pointed. He looked as if he were trying not to smile. Simon shot him a disgusted look for some reason and dropped it.

The tow truck’s engine started up, almost deafeningly loud, and they all glanced in that direction. Nate retreated, joining the group. “I think that’s it,” he said. “I just need to go get my bag from upstairs.”

“Go get it,” Simon said. “And change, while you’re at it.”

Nate looked down at himself, then laughed shakily and plucked at his dusty shirt. “Oh, man. I hadn’t even noticed.”

“Go on,” said Simon, patting Nate gingerly on the shoulder. Unsurprisingly, his hand came away gray; he rolled his eyes and wiped it off against the back of Nate’s shirt, provoking a round of tired laughter from the others. The truck finished pulling out of the driveway and trundled off down the street. Nate watched his car go, then hit the button to close the garage door.

“Okay,” said Nate, thumping back down the stairs with a duffel bag in his hand. His hair was wet again, but he was clean and changed; the circles under his eyes were the only sign of his recent scare.

“Right,” said Simon, knocking his knuckles on the wall he was leaning against. “Gather ’round, folks. Word before we go.” There wasn’t much gathering around to do, since they were all in the living room, but they drew closer together, in a ring around Simon. “Right,” he said. “I’m thinking lunchtime. We’ve only got three cars, but one of them is the van, so we’ve got plenty of transportation—”

“Uh,” said Mike, bouncing his own duffel absently against his knees.

Simon looked at him. “Honda?”

“I’m gonna have to split in the van,” Mike said apologetically. “I kinda promised Diana Fontaine that I’d come get her during lunch, and after this I wanna go check on her anyway. You know?”

Simon opened his mouth to protest, so Sandra quickly stepped in. “I told him to go ahead and do it,” she said, uncomfortably aware of Simon’s eyes snapping back to her. “Nate can ride with you and I’ll ride with Johnny. And frankly, I’d feel more comfortable if someone checked on Ms. Fontaine anyway.”

“She left home with pretty much nothing,” Mike said, jumping in after her. “Nate’s mom made sure she had clothes and stuff, but she needs to go to a drugstore, that kind of thing. I was gonna borrow Nate’s car and do it, but, uh, so much for that, huh?”

“Yeah, all right,” said Simon, visibly giving in. “Be careful. Don’t take your eyes off her for a second, don’t let her tell you where to go beyond generalities, don’t let her make any calls, and don’t tell her anything about this morning. But keep your ears open. If she mentions anything that she shouldn’t know about, I expect you to recognize it and to bring that information back to us, okay?”

“Hokay, chief,” said Mike.

Simon nodded, curtly, and then looked back at the rest of them. “Lunch,” he said. “And I think this afternoon we gotta meet.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” said Sandra. “Nate, is everything locked up?”

“As locked as it’s going to get,” Nate said with a little flicker of unhappy smile. “Can we go?”

“Yeah,” said Sandra. “Let’s go.”

“Yeah, I guess we’re done,” Simon said, almost at the same moment. “Onwards.” Sandra glanced at him. He wasn’t looking at her at all. Rather, he was gingerly herding people towards the front door, his left arm pulled slightly in against his side. Sandra repressed a sigh and followed him.

“You got any thoughts on lunch?” Johnny asked once Sandra was comfortably ensconced in his passenger seat.

Sandra dropped her purse between her feet and slid bonelessly down until the base of her skull rested against the seat. “I don’t care,” she said, flapping a hand at the windshield. “Anywhere’s good.”

Johnny grunted and sat for a moment, deep in thought. The Jeep pulled out from behind them and headed down the street at an unusually sedate pace, Jeremy at the wheel. Sandra closed her eyes. “Wherever they’re not going,” she amended.

“Yeah,” Johnny said, surprising her. He was doing a lot of that today. His truck started with its usual choking roar and Johnny turned it around, heading down Nate’s street in the opposite direction. “Italian?”

“Carbohydrates would be greatly appreciated,” Sandra said, sitting up long enough to watch Nate’s house dwindle in the rearview mirror. Johnny grunted, and they went the rest of the way to lunch without another word.

◆ 55: Johnny

Johnny would be just about the first to admit that he didn't much need nor appreciate small talk over his food, but there was small talk and then there was any talk at all, and Sandra ate her lunch in tired, angry silence. Johnny figured he couldn't so much blame her for that, but it still made things kind of awkward.

For his part he ate mechanically, his mind on other things. He'd never been so much for worrying about things before they happened—that was Simon's job, and Sandra's—but it didn't mean that he couldn't see things coming, sometimes. This afternoon wasn't going to be fun. Least he wasn't likely to get dragged into it, cowardly as that thought was.

Sandra didn't even fight him for the check. Usually she wasn't above defending her right to pay by punching someone. Not that Johnny minded paying, but he kind of wished she'd at least fuss at him about it. As it was, Sandra only blinked her way out of her weird angry trance when the server brought Johnny's card back. "Ready to go?" she asked.

"Yeah," said Johnny, signing the bill and sticking his wallet back in his pocket. "Anywhere else we need to go before we head back to base?"

Sandra sighed and eased her way out of the booth, standing up. "I don't think so," she said. "Let's just go."

"Right," Johnny said.

Sandra slumped down in her seat and closed her eyes before Johnny could so much as back the truck out of its spot. He'd have sworn that she slept on the way back, except that she never stopped frowning.

The van was parked over by the side door when they got back, but there was no sign of Simon's Jeep, which made Johnny breathe a little easier, much as he hated to admit it. Johnny parked over by the van. Sandra sat up, rubbing the back of her neck. It made little crackling sounds, and she winced.

"Right," she said. "Where's my—ah." Johnny squinted in the same direction. Her car was parked over by the fence, surrounded by empty spots. "It'll be fine there unless Farraday decides to shoot out *my* tires, too," Sandra said sourly.

"Could do," Johnny said. "Man's rackin' up those automobile assaults."

"God, don't say that. What's his tire count now, twelve?" Sandra picked her purse up off the truck's floorboards and popped it open, fishing out her keys. "I suppose it wouldn't hurt to move it now, while everybody's at lunch."

"Probably not," Johnny agreed. "Want me to come with?"

Sandra started to shake her head and then stopped. "That's probably not necessary," she said carefully, "but I think I'd appreciate it if you waited here for me."

"That I can do," Johnny said, opening his door. He went around the front of his truck and leaned against the front bumper, as an afterthought unsnapping the safety strap on his holster, just in case. The passenger-side door slammed shut, after a moment, and Sandra headed for her car, her own gun in her hand.

Johnny wasn't precisely holding his breath, although he was keeping his eyes open. There weren't any bushes or trees along the line of the fence because of potential incidents just like this one, and there was nowhere within about fifty feet of the fence where Farraday could conceivably be hiding. Of course, if he still had that rifle, then all bets were off, but Johnny's gut told him that Farraday was done for the day. He'd know that they were all riled up right now. Man wasn't stupid, which was the whole problem with him.

Sandra reached her car. Johnny sighed out a breath between his teeth. Once Sandra had her car started and was trundling towards him, Johnny straightened up and restrappped his gun, still scanning the line of the fence, just in case.

Sandra parked on the other side of the van and got out, joining Johnny by his truck. "Well, that was exciting," she said.

"Yep," said Johnny. "Heart's still pounding."

Sandra made a sound like a laugh and headed for the building, Johnny ambling in her wake. "I hate this," she said, out of nowhere. "All this useless paranoia."

Johnny shrugged. "Might not be useless."

"I suppose not," Sandra said, sighing. "It doesn't feel like it helps, though."

Johnny, not really having an answer for that, just grunted. Sandra swiped her card through the reader, letting them both into the building. "And if it's not Farraday, it's another thing," she said.

"Templar," Johnny said.

Sandra squeezed her eyes shut, shaking her head. She was nearly charging down the hall, and Johnny was a little hard-pressed to keep up. "I hate even *thinking* that," she said. "I can't exactly blame him for wanting to come back to work. And it's not like I didn't see this coming, either, he's always been damned near impossible to sideline."

"Yeah," said Johnny.

"Do you have any idea how disloyal it feels to even *think* things like 'the attack on Nate is all the excuse he needs'?" Sandra asked, throwing up her hands in defeat. "I wouldn't even mind handing the team back over, but it's my neck

on the line until Upstairs officially gives Simon permission to come back to work, which won't be for a *week* yet, and in the meantime he's second-guessing everything I do!" Exasperated, she wrenched the saferoom door open. "I swear, it's just about the last str—*what the hell?*"

She stopped dead in the doorway. Johnny, who hadn't been expecting her to stop, nearly plowed into her. He slid to one side and looked over her shoulder. His first thought was, of course, *what's Mike done now?* His second thought was *someone set off a bomb in here?*

Mike, however, was sitting innocent and bemused at the conference table, more or less hiding behind his laptop. He lifted a hand and wiggled his fingers at Sandra in greeting, but he didn't say anything. Maybe he didn't dare.

The spiral of destruction radiated outwards not from Mike but from Rich's computer lair. Or what was left of it. Rich's three computers were in pieces—and not only the computers. Both monitors, the industrial shredder, both printers, the scanner, all the detritus, both his *desks*, everything had been taken apart and spread out across the floor. The mess even spilled over onto the conference table. The new guy knelt in the eye of the storm, one of Nate's screwdrivers in one hand, one of Rich's power strips in the other. He looked pretty sheepish about it, but that weird light was on in his eyes again. "Uh," he said. "Hi."

"What is this mess—what are you *doing?*" Sandra said, finally picking her way gingerly into the room. Her voice went a little shrill. Johnny winced and followed her.

In answer, the new guy—what was his name again, Dave?—twisted halfway around and picked a little pile of things up, fanning them out in front of his face: unlabeled gold CDs like Rich used to use, three of them, in little plastic sleeves trailing tape. "I found these," he said, his voice full of barely-controlled excitement. "He had them stashed *inside* things."

Sandra went still. "What? Who?"

"Mr. Story," Dave said impatiently. He plucked the middle CD out of the fan like he was picking a card, any card. "I hit the keyboard tray with my knee and it must have knocked this one loose, he'd taken the tray apart and put the CD inside, I'd never have found it if the tape hadn't given way—"

"So . . . what's on it?" Sandra asked.

"I don't even know!" Dave said happily. "I haven't had time to look yet!"

"I see." Sandra put a hand over her face and took a deep breath. Then another. "All right," she finally said. "All right, Mr. Brassoff, that's . . . that's really good work, actually, and I'm impressed, but . . ."

"I'm sorry about the mess," Dave said, putting the CDs back down. "I promise I'll put everything back together before I leave tonight."

"Yeah," said Sandra, letting her hand drop. "Do you think we could shuffle some of this stuff into the mat room, at least? We all have to work in here."

"Um," Dave said.

“Ain’t gonna work,” Johnny said. “Mat room’s full.”

“What?” said Sandra. She was sounding more lost by the second.

Johnny couldn’t help but feel sorry for her. “Mat room’s full,” he repeated, jerking a thumb over his shoulder.

Sandra gingerly picked her way through the minefield to join Johnny at the door to the mat room, and they both surveyed the carnage. Johnny was damn near awed. All those old dead doodads that had been cluttering up the back of Nate’s supply closet had been dragged out, dissected, and left in neat little piles. “Oh, God,” Sandra finally said, very quietly.

“He was in Nate’s closet,” Johnny said, just as quietly. “Took stuff *out* of Nate’s closet.”

“Oh, God, I didn’t even think of that part,” Sandra said, clinging to the doorframe for support. “I was more ‘oh God’ing because *Simon* is going to *see* this, but now that you mention it . . . oh *God*.”

“Yeah,” said Johnny. He whistled, long and low. “Hell of a mess.”

“Simon’s going to pop a stitch,” Sandra said. Johnny couldn’t quite tell if what he was hearing was dread or anticipation.

“Yeah, well,” Johnny said, glancing back towards the door, “whatever he’s gonna do, he’s about to do it.”

Sandra twitched and leaned back out of the mat room, listening to the incoming footsteps. “Oh, God,” she said one final time.

Johnny frowned, then started sidling back towards the main door, as fast as he could go. “’scuse me,” he said. “Figure a little interference is called for—” and he pulled the door open.

Simon nearly lurched right into him, and Johnny’s hands both flew up in case he needed to catch him. Fortunately, Simon righted himself, and Johnny dropped his hands. “Whoops, sorry, Texas,” Simon said. “’scuse me.”

Johnny put up a hand again, blocking him. “Uh.”

Simon stopped, confused. “What?”

“Been a bit of a development in Rich’s thing,” Johnny said.

“Okay,” Simon said tentatively. His initial look of confusion was fading to suspicion.

“Good development,” Johnny clarified.

“Ohhh-kay,” Simon said, dragging it out patiently. “Is that why I can’t come in?”

“Came with a bit of collateral damage,” Johnny said.

“Oh boy, I just love collateral damage,” said Simon. “Am I sufficiently warned now?”

Johnny glanced back over his shoulder, then shook his head. “Ain’t no warning sufficient for this,” he said, and stepped back, letting Simon and the others look their fill.

Now it was Simon's turn to stop dead in the doorway, with Nate gawking behind him. "Jesus Christ," Simon finally said, shocked.

"Someone set us up the bomb," Nate said, apparently in agreement. Then he winced. "I can't believe I actually *said* that."

"Hi," Dave said, mostly unnecessarily.

"I know I'm going to regret asking this," said Simon, "but what the hell do you think you're doing?"

"... is that my toolkit?" Nate added, his voice going a little squeaky. Johnny prudently backed the hell up.

"Er," said Dave.

"Jesus Christ, is that Rich's desk? ... is that *both* of Rich's desks?" Simon asked, stepping over one of the vivisected printers and getting himself into the room. Nate followed him, boggling. Jeremy brought up the rear with no expression on his face at all.

"Ah," said Dave.

Nate squeaked again and pointed a shaking finger at the door to the mat room. "Are those all of Rich's dead peripherals?" he demanded to know. "You took all that out of my *closet*? You *moved things*? What all did you move? Oh God, I'll never be able to find anything again!"

"Um," said Dave.

"You didn't break anything, did you?" Nate said, now actively panicking.

"I don't think so," Dave said cautiously. Johnny winced. Wrong answer.

"You don't think so!" Nate said in real horror, tripping over a pile of cables in his hurry to get to the supply closet. Sandra lunged forward and caught him before he could break his head open on his own computer. The pile of cables went skittering across the floor, crashing into a teetering pile of CDs in jewelboxes and knocking them all flying. Everybody in the room winced away from the clatter.

"Would someone *please* explain to me what the hell is going on here?" Simon shouted.

Someone on Team Hall with even worse timing than usual pounded on the wall. "Shut up in there!"

Simon's head snapped left. He sucked in a breath. "Boss," Sandra said quickly, setting a breathless and panicky Nate back on his feet.

Simon jerked to a halt, then shut his eyes and let out the caught breath. "Yeah," he said. "Okay, shouting isn't going to help anything. Okay. Now. *What the hell are you doing?*"

"You're shouting," Mike said. Nate vanished into the supply closet and, a moment later, moaned.

"That is not shouting!" Simon snapped. "That is, uh, raising my voice for effect, now *will someone answer my question, please?*"

"I rather think they've been trying to," Jeremy pointed out, mildly enough.

"I didn't ask *you*!" Simon said, rounding on him with his hands in fists. Jeremy raised both eyebrows. Simon hissed out a disgusted breath and made his hands snap open.

"Um," said Dave. This time the whole room went quiet. Everyone looked at him. He held up the CDs. "I found these," he said.

"You found those," Simon repeated impatiently. "That's peachy. What are they?"

"Um, well, I don't know yet—"

"Oh, you don't *know* yet?" Simon said, his voice thin.

"Mr. Story hid them," Dave said, swallowing. "Inside things. I haven't finished looking for them. Once I finish looking I'll see what's on them." Simon stared at him. Dave, completely misreading the situation, plunged on. "He took apart the keyboard tray in one of his desks and put this one inside, and this one was taped to the back of one of the drawers in the other desk, and I found this one inside one of the dead printers in the closet—"

"Okay," Simon snapped, sharply enough to make Dave shut up with a little startled sound. "You know what, that's great. That is A-1 detective work. Good job. But Jesus Christ, look at this mess—the rest of us have to work in here too, in case you forgot that."

"Uh," said Dave. Johnny winced.

Simon slashed his hand through the air and cut Dave off, then hissed out a breath and clamped his arm to his side. "Here's what I want you to do," he said, his voice thick. "I want you to stop taking things apart long enough to clear the mat room. Those are all Rich's old broken doodads, right? Then unless Nate wants them, you can just run them all out to the dumpster, whatever, I don't care what happens to the dead ones. Once you've done that, you move all *this* crap—" he slung his arm out in a wide gesture that took in the rest of the mess "*—into* the mat room. Once you've done that, then by all means, whatever-your-name-is, continue making your mess *out of our way*."

"Ah," said Dave, swallowing. "Yes, sir. Dave, sir."

Simon paused. "What," he said, not even bothering to make it a question.

"Dave, sir. My name's Dave," Dave said, already faltering, like he knew how stupid he was being but just couldn't quite stop himself.

For a few ominous seconds the room was absolutely quiet. Then Simon heaved out a long and growling breath and rubbed a hand down his face. "*I don't care*."

Dave, incredibly, made a little noise, like he was planning to keep putting up a fight. Johnny, behind Simon, quickly shook his head. Dave shot a startled glance in his direction and shut up. Man *could* be taught. "In fact," said Simon, mercifully unaware of Johnny's intercession, "you get started on that right now. The rest of us need to meet, but we're not going to be talking about anything that's important to you. Nate?"

Nate stuck his head out of the closet. His face was a disturbing cheesy white color. "Yeah, boss," he said faintly.

Simon hesitated. "Everything okay in there?"

"I guess," said Nate, scrubbing the back of his hand across his lips. "I-I don't think anything's broken but a lot of things got moved around."

Simon nodded. "You want to keep any of Rich's old dead computer things?"

"I guess not," Nate said uncertainly. "I mean, I hadn't gotten rid of them, but I guess I wasn't going to do anything with them now that he's . . . you know. Gone."

Heaving out a breath, Simon nodded. "Then throw them away," he told Dave. "Anything that's broken, if you're done with it, throw it away. Now."

"Yes, sir," Dave said.

"And quit calling me 'sir'!" Simon said. "Jesus, I hate that."

Dave blanched. "Sorry, si—sorry."

"Christ," Simon said, looking away. "Yeah, this is just what I wanted when I woke up this morning. I'm going down to the machines to get myself a drink. When I get back, we'll meet, assuming we have a table to meet on at that point." He spun on his heel and left the room, throwing the door open.

They all stared after him, at the closing door. "Pardon me," Jeremy murmured, catching the door before it could slam shut and slipping out of it. It closed with barely a click. Johnny breathed again.

"Yeah, that was totally fun, we should do this more often," Mike said matter-of-factly.

"Uh," said Dave, sitting in the middle of his tremendous mess like an overgrown toddler.

Johnny couldn't help but feel a little sorry for the poor dumbass. "Hey," he said. "There's a dolly cart thing in the janitor's closet, you want it?"

"What?" Dave said faintly. "Oh. Um. Yes. Thank you." He drifted to his feet, dazed.

♦ 56: Simon

Aggravated as all hell, Simon stalked down the hallway towards the vending machines with his arms stiffly at his sides. He couldn't hear anyone following him, which meant that Jeremy was probably back there being all quiet at him again. "Jesus, what a day," he said, testing this idea.

"Mm," said Jeremy, just behind him. Hypothesis proven. "It certainly has been eventful, yes."

"Well?" Simon said, slowing a bit and letting Jeremy catch up. "Aren't you going to say something snide about me going off on the poor guy?"

"Who, me? I hardly think it's my place to tell you how to manage your team, Simon," Jeremy said, faking affront.

Simon made a sour face. "Why do I sense a 'but' coming?"

"Well, I suppose I *could* point out that by your own reasoning, he's not actually a real member of your team."

"Or you could shut up and mind your own business, not that you ever do," Simon said. He rounded the corner, fishing in his pocket for his wallet. "All this and I can't even have coffee," he said to no one in particular.

"Saturday," said Jeremy. "Saturday is when you're allowed caffeine."

"It's like being eight and waiting for Christmas to come." Simon plugged a dollar bill into one of the machines and got his bottle of water, then held out a hand towards Jeremy. "Advil."

Jeremy reached into his jacket and produced the squat little white bottle. "How many?"

"Four."

Jeremy paused, cap half-on and half-off the bottle. "Four?"

"Yes, four," Simon said impatiently. "I hurt like fuck and I'm not going to take a pain pill until five. Just give me four of the goddamned things."

"As you will, then," said Jeremy, uncapping the bottle and shaking out four capsules. Simon wiggled his fingers impatiently. Jeremy cupped his hand over Simon's and dropped the capsules into his palm, not neglecting to leave his hand

there a little longer than was strictly necessary. Simon scowled and twitched his hand away. Jeremy's answering smile was as opaque as ever.

Leaning back against the vending machine (it was cool against his back, which was nice) Simon popped his Advil one at a time. The radiant ache in his chest didn't respond right away, but he felt a little better anyway. Closing his eyes, he chugged off about half the bottle of water. "Christ," he finally said, not for any real reason, just getting that out there.

"Mm," said Jeremy, for what seemed like about the same reason.

"I probably shouldn't have lit into what's-his-name like that," Simon said.

"Mm. No, probably not."

"Not that I'm going to apologize."

"No, probably not."

"I just—he doesn't *belong* here, and he damned well shouldn't be taking those kinds of liberties with my stuff," Simon said, opening his eyes and staring blindly up at the ceiling. "He got wished on me by Upstairs when I couldn't fight it off, that's all, and he is *completely* wrong for my team."

"Mm," Jeremy said distantly.

Simon went still. "What?"

"Mm? What what?"

"See, as frightening as it is to admit this out loud and all, I know you," Simon said, pointing a finger in Jeremy's general direction, "and I know that when you say that like that, it's because you're *not* saying something else. So what is it?"

"How perceptive of you," said Jeremy. "I don't know whether to be flattered or frightened."

"How about you be forthcoming?"

"Touché." Jeremy paused, then shrugged, a gesture that Simon felt more than saw. "I'm merely wondering if you'd consider *anybody* right for the job."

"No."

"Ah," said Jeremy, after a startled pause. "Remarkable lack of equivocation on your part, there. Are you *certain* you're not some sort of Simon doppelganger?"

"Nobody would be right," Simon said, ignoring that last bit with every fiber of his being. "But he's just . . . *wrong*."

"Mm," Jeremy said, using that tone of voice again. This time Simon didn't press him for details, just finished off his water.

The big flatbed cart from the janitor's closet was parked outside of the saferoom when they got back, already about half-full of trashed computer equipment. Simon stepped carefully around the protruding end and maneuvered his way into the saferoom.

The piles of stuff had been shifted off the conference table, which was definitely a good start. The clattering from the mat room was a good continuation; even as Simon picked his way through the debris towards the table, the new guy

appeared, his arms full of something that had probably once been a printer. Spotting Simon, he ducked his head and made a shuffling beeline for the main door. Simon ignored him.

He sat down at the conference table—sat down instead of dropping down, which was satisfying—and slapped the table lightly. Everybody obligingly looked at him. “Right,” he said. “Let’s talk, folks. Archer, stay or go, whatever floats your boat.”

Jeremy gave this a moment of thought, glancing around. “Actually, if you’ll pardon me,” he said, and headed for the door, tossing a little wave back over his shoulder. “If you need me, I’ve my mobile.”

“Sure,” said Simon. “Go have your ‘me’ time.” The door shut behind Jeremy, a second too late to muffle his little laugh. Simon folded his hands on the table. “Okay! First things first. I’m sure this surprises no one, but after this morning’s brouhaha, I’m going to consider myself back on duty, no matter what Upstairs says.” He paused to see what the reaction to that would be. No one said anything, although Sandra made a slight breathy noise that Simon elected to ignore. “I can’t sit at home twiddling my thumbs and waiting to be called any more. It’s going to drive me insane. Now, officially Sandra’s in charge, and I see no reason why she shouldn’t be. Let’s pretend I’m a hired consultant or something. Okay?”

Sandra shifted beside him. “Actually, no, it’s not,” she said flatly. Simon blinked at her, and Sandra sighed, staring down at the table. “I’m not going to stop you from coming back full time, because I don’t think I can, at least not without getting building security involved,” she said. “But let’s be honest: if you’re here, I’m not in charge.”

Simon took a deep breath. “Okay. Yes. You’re right. I’m too used to being the boss here, and I’ve been stepping on your toes when you’ve been doing a perfectly good job on your own, and I’m sorry.”

“So you’re in charge, unofficially. Officially, I’m in charge.” Sandra paused and laced her fingers together, looking back up at Simon. “Is that the gist of it?”

“Yes, and I don’t like it either,” Simon said.

Sandra nodded, tightly. “I’m all right with taking responsibility for my own actions, but being officially held responsible when I’m not even the one making the decisions: that’s rough, boss. I don’t want to be your stalking horse.”

“That’s fair,” Simon said, and paused, thinking.

“So I’m not going to do it,” Sandra said. The room went quiet. Sandra pursed her lips and plunged on. “Either you go to Upstairs and you get him to officially reinstate you, or you *will* respect my authority, no matter how temporary, and Mike, don’t say it.”

“I wasn’t gonna,” Mike said faintly.

“You were thinking it,” Sandra said.

“Well, yeah. Duh.”

Simon tapped his fingers on the table. "I'll go talk to Upstairs once this meeting is over," he said. "Okay, Spring?"

"Good," said Sandra. "So we agree that, for the moment, I'm still in charge?"

"For the moment," Simon said, giving her a little smile, which she didn't return.

"Okay," said Sandra. She took a deep breath. "In that case, Templar, while I realize that you're in a foul mood thanks to your physical condition, you were out of line earlier, and I'd appreciate it if you'd try to keep a better rein on your temper." Simon went very still. A muscle in Sandra's jaw flexed and she looked away, glancing around the table without actually looking anyone in the eye. "In fact, that goes for all of you," she said. "I know you don't like having him around. No one likes the way he was just foisted off on us, but this has all gone too far. I'm calling a moratorium on the pranks, at least until Farraday is dealt with, and I want you all to strive to be at least civil." She took a long, choppy, shallow breath and splayed her fingers out on the table. "Templar was right in one respect: we *all* have to work here. For the moment, whether you guys like it or not, he's part of the 'all'. Okay?"

For a moment, no one said anything. Then Mike abruptly slumped back in his chair, letting his head fall bonelessly back onto his shoulders. "Hooooo," he told the ceiling. "Damn if it ain't Templar Lite over there."

"Yeah," said Simon, ducking his head and scruffing his fingers through his hair. "Yeah, okay, Sandy's right, as much as I am unused to having it dealt out in my direction, which: ouch. The new guy's not used to how we do things around here, so if he messes up again, let's try and point him in the right direction instead of having a meltdown, okay—"

Sandra reached over and put a warning hand on Simon's shoulder, and Simon stopped talking with his mouth still open. "That's good advice," she said, gently, stressing the last word. With her hand still on Simon's shoulder, Sandra looked at the others. "I'm not going to make anybody apologize or anything," she said. "If it's anybody's fault, it's mine, for letting it go on at all. And God knows that if we weren't in such dire straits I'd be happy to allow the hazing to continue. But right now we have bigger things on our plate. Okay?"

This time there was a faint, vague, embarrassed murmur of 'Okay' from around the table. Sandra let her hand drop. "Okay," she said. "Good. I'm glad we dealt with that. Okay, next. We talked earlier about getting away from our homes until Farraday is dealt with. The best place for us is probably the same Vantage Inn that we have Diana Fontaine stashed in. Anyone have a better idea?" She paused. No one said anything. She nodded. "As little as I actually like the idea, I'll stay with her, in her room. After today I think I want her to have an armed roommate."

Beside her, Mike stirred. "I'll do it," he said.

Sandra twitched and stared at him in flat disbelief. "What?"

"I'll do it," Mike repeated. "And no, I'm not gonna be mackin' on her, no matter how it looks, okay? You said it yourself, Sandy: far as Miz Fontaine is concerned, I'm totally the go-to guy." He shifted in his chair. "I'm the one she got in contact with first, I'm the one she's been counting on, so okay, I'll do it. You don't wanna do it anyway."

"No, I don't really want to, but there's this little detail where she's technically a female witness and Federal regulations require a female agent—"

"Man, since when have we given a shit about some piddly-ass regulations?" Mike asked, peeved. "Bet you anything she'd be more comfortable with me anyway. Hell, she's got some half-assed suite thing going, not like I'm gonna be all up in her face anyway. I got a couch to sleep on and everything."

"All right, look," said Sandra. "I'm not going to say yes or no right now, okay? When this meeting breaks up I'll call her myself and ask her if she'd prefer you or me. We'll let *her* decide. Okay?"

"I'm down with that," Mike said, settling back in his chair.

"I'm not sure if I am," said Simon, already holding up his hands to ward Sandra off. "No, seriously, just as a friendly bit of advice: we have no idea what kind of bullshit she's got up her sleeves, okay? I really don't like the idea of handing her Mike as a piece of leverage again. She's a goddamned lawyer, I don't want to know what she could make of that in court, if it came down to that."

Sandra frowned in thought. "I'll tape-record the call," she finally said. "All officially. I'll inform her of the recording before we start and everything. That should at least half cover our asses. She can't say that he was forced on her if she made the choice herself."

"Uh huh," said Simon. "And what if she starts crying rape later? What then?"

"Threaten to charge her as Farraday's accessory before the fact," Johnny said, shrugging.

"Uh," said Simon. "Well, yeah, that'd certainly put us a couple of inches up in the ensuing pissing contest, but . . ."

"Actually," Nate said, looking up. It was the first thing he'd said since they'd sat down to meet, and they all looked at him. Nate went a little pink, fidgeting with his pen, but his eyes were steady on Simon's. "I have a better idea."

♦ 57: Dave

By the time he finished hauling not one but two cartloads of dead and dissected peripherals out to the dumpster, Dave had worked up a pretty good sweat despite the breeze picking up outside. He stopped and yanked off his sweater, tying it around his waist; he knew it looked stupid, but right now all he cared about was getting some cool air on his skin. He smoothed down his rumpled t-shirt, then steered the cart back towards the door.

He put the cart back in the janitor's closet just where he'd found it and went to wash his hands, putting off the moment when he'd have to go back into that room again. The men's room was mercifully empty. Dave accordingly took his time, splashing some cold water on his face and running his wet fingers through his hair. He tried to avoid looking at himself in the mirror; he probably looked just about as tired and rattled as he felt, and given how the rest of the day had been going, he stood every chance of striking up a self-pitying conversation with his reflection. He really had no desire to earn himself a mandatory psychiatric evaluation on top of everything else.

Finally Dave admitted to himself that he couldn't spend any longer in the bathroom without looking like he was cruising, so he sighed and went back out. The closer he got to the saferoom, the slower he went, until he was trudging along at approximately the speed of mud, the door looming on his right like oncoming tragedy. He reached out for the handle—then snapped his hand back and put on a burst of speed, striding on down the hallway past the saferoom. Screw it. *Fuck* it. He didn't know precisely where he was going, but he was going anyway. He'd earned a break, hadn't he? He'd done a lot of work today, appreciated or not. Maybe he'd go down to the machines and have a drink, or to the cafeteria and have something to eat—he hadn't actually had lunch, he belatedly realized—or maybe he'd go up to the top floor and throw himself off the building. No, wait, scratch that last, it'd probably involve paperwork.

The little nook with the vending machines in it loomed on his left, and Dave decided that he wasn't really hungry after all and turned in. He spent a few moments debating the eternal issue—caffeine or no caffeine?—before admitting

that he'd had more coffee today than was technically good for him and settled for a bottle of Sprite. It was just what he'd needed, cold and carbonated, and he drank a good third of the bottle before recapping it long enough to put his sweater back on.

There was a cool breeze eddying through the door to the courtyard, which was slightly ajar. It felt good. Picking up his bottle Dave headed for it. He'd go enjoy the weather for ten minutes while he finished his drink, and then go start moving things around. He was going to be here until eight or so in any case. Ten minutes wasn't going to hurt anybody, and if the people in the room thought differently, well . . . well . . . well, they could lump it. What were they going to do? Kick him off the team? Dave laughed bitterly and let himself out.

The courtyard was mostly empty at this time of day. A little group of secretaries stood in a clump in the far corner smoking and chatting, and some guy in jeans and a hoodie looked to be asleep on one of the benches out under the trees. Dave considered the benches, then glanced up at the gray sky and changed his mind. It looked like rain. He'd stay over here under the overhang.

"Afternoon, Mr. Brassoff," someone said to his right, and Dave glanced over, startled. Jeremy Archer was at the railing not ten feet from the door, leaning lazily on his crossed arms, the stub of a cigarette dangling from one hand. A thin white stream of smoke eddied up between them, slightly obscuring Jeremy's face.

Dave stopped just where he was, uncertain and a little bit guilty, but in the end he gave in with a sigh and went over. "Hi," he said, leaning back against the railing and uncapping his bottle again. "Uh." He stopped, embarrassed, and took a long drink before adding, "I'm, uh, I'm sorry about yesterday."

"No harm done," Jeremy said, dismissing it with a wave of his hand. "Really, you don't get very far in my profession if you can't handle that sort of thing."

"Guess not," Dave said dubiously.

Jeremy smiled a bit and ground out his cigarette on the sole of his shoe, flicking the butt neatly into a nearby planter. Dave watched it go, frowning, but decided not to say anything (hadn't he embarrassed himself enough in front of this guy for one lifetime?) and took another long drink instead.

After a moment, Jeremy sighed, his little smile gone absent. "I suppose one more won't hurt," he said, fishing around in his jacket and coming out with a square silver case. He flicked it open and plucked a cigarette from one of the neat rows. "Would you like one?"

"Ah. No, thank you, I don't . . ." Dave trailed off there and shut his eyes. "Yes, actually," he said fervently. "Yes, I think I would. Please."

Jeremy held out the case, his own cigarette caught neatly between his first two fingers. "Any of the ones from the left-hand side," he said pleasantly.

Dave eventually managed to free one from the little metal tongue that was holding it in place and stuck it awkwardly into his mouth. "What's wrong with

the other ones?"

"Some of them explode," said Jeremy, lighting his cigarette.

Dave stared at him in confusion until Jeremy turned and held out the lighter, the flame still dancing between his cupped hands. "Uh," said Dave, and for lack of anything more suave to do he leaned down and stuck the tip of his cigarette into the flame, gingerly touching the back of Jeremy's hand to make sure it held still.

The first draw made him so lightheaded that he was forced to grab for the railing behind him. The smoke tasted strange (and it did not mingle well with Sprite at all) but Dave shut his eyes and sucked it down anyway. The weird, buzzing calm of nicotine spread through his system, an unmitigated relief. "God, I thought I ditched this habit in college," he mumbled around the filter.

"It's one of my few occasional vices," Jeremy said, putting the cigarette case back in his jacket. "Well. My personal vices, in any case. My professional vices are an entirely different schedule of events."

"Guess so." Dave took another drag, followed it with another sip of his Sprite, and made a face. Jeremy laughed a little and didn't say anything else.

They smoked in silence for another minute or so, until Dave's cigarette was half-gone and his nerves had finally settled. "God, what a day," he finally said, letting his head fall back.

Jeremy sipped at his own cigarette and sighed out a small puff of smoke. Unlike Dave's cigarette, his was barely a quarter burnt. "You *have* been having rather a rough time of it, haven't you," he said, with what sounded like marginal sympathy.

"This really isn't what I was expecting when I applied for the job," Dave said. He tried to laugh it off, but his laugh sounded so strained and ill that he stopped.

"Well." Jeremy lifted his hand, studying the coal on his cigarette with indifference. "What were you expecting, then?"

Dave opened his mouth and shut it again. "I don't know," he finally said. "Not this. I, I mean, I was sort of expecting them to give me a rough time and all, but . . ."

"But not this rough?" Jeremy asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I thought . . ." Dave shut his eyes and took another drag on his borrowed cigarette. "I don't even know what I thought."

"Mm." Jeremy looked away.

Dave leaned down and put his bottle of Sprite on the concrete by his foot, then ground the heels of his hands against his eyes, rubbing away the strain. His cigarette jutted out from between his first two fingers like a rude gesture. "I guess I thought I wouldn't be a *nuisance*," he said, his voice going gritty with resentment. "I'm not useless, you know? I may not be an almighty *genius* like this Story guy, but I'm perfectly competent! And yet they just keep sighing and shuffling me aside somewhere where they think I won't do any harm and then

getting upset when I manage to do exactly what they asked of me! If—” Dave abruptly remembered who he was talking to and strangled on the rest of that sentence, producing an unlovely croaking sound and a raw spot on the back of his throat that made him cough. He bent down, grabbed the bottle, and drank until the raw spot receded. Then he took one final drag on his cigarette, coughed again, and dropped the butt on the ground, grinding it under his heel. “What a clusterfuck,” he said.

“Mm,” Jeremy said again, but he sounded like he was laughing.

“What? What’s so funny?”

Jeremy took another idle mouthful of smoke. “Did you ever meet Mr. Story?”

“What?” Dave was momentarily nonplussed. “No. I’d heard about him, though. Stories. You know.”

“Mm. Well. I did indeed have that *unmatched* pleasure,” said Jeremy. “And I’d have to agree that he was a genius—”

“Oh, I know he was a genius,” Dave said bitterly.

“Oh?”

“Yeah. He was a genius, all right. Do you want to know how I know? Because he was *sloppy*.” Without a cigarette to gesture with, Dave was reduced to waving the bottle of Sprite meaningfully at a silent Jeremy. “I don’t know how much you know about coding—”

“—not bloody much—”

“—but you can tell a lot about a guy by the way he codes, okay?” Dave, warming to his topic, made an irritated gesture that slopped a little Sprite onto the cuff of his sweater. Jeremy leaned back, out of the way. “And he was sloppy! He was coding all these little pet projects solely for his own use, so he didn’t document anything, he insisted on doing things his own way, he never went back and streamlined anything! Why should he? It worked for him, and he could just get the Bureau to buy him a bigger computer if he needed one, right?” Dave groaned and collapsed back against the railing. “I’m not saying his code was full of holes. I wish it was. It’s not. But it’s a patchwork of coding styles—you can just tell that he was going back and grafting on new ideas as he picked them up. He was a genius, all right. And because he was *so* smart and *so* sure that his way was the right way, he never bothered to learn how normal people do it, or that normal people do it another way for a *reason*.” Dave ground to a halt and tossed off the last of his drink, then chucked the bottle overhand at the trash can by the door. For a miracle—first thing that had gone right all day—it went right in. “Two points,” Dave muttered.

Both of Jeremy’s eyebrows were raised. He was quiet for a moment, just long enough for Dave to suffer a crippling attack of self-consciousness—then he laughed slightly and looked away. “Nicely put, Mr. Brasso.”

“Yeah, well,” Dave muttered, scruffing a hand through his damp hair. “I don’t know. Maybe he just didn’t have enough time to scrap his old code and rewrite it,

or something—”

Jeremy held up a hand. “No, no, please, you don’t need to justify your rant to me. Let it stand on its own.”

“And yet they act like I’m functionally retarded,” Dave said, jerking his head over his shoulder in the vague direction of the saferoom. “They *hate* me. They like *you*. You’re more a member of that team than I am, and you’re a felon! Uh. No offense.”

“None taken,” Jeremy said pleasantly. “But I’m afraid you can’t really compare your situation to mine in any meaningful way.”

“Yeah, I suppose not,” Dave said, subsiding.

“After all,” said Jeremy, “I’ve never presumed to count myself a member of that team. I’m merely a . . . guest in good standing, I suppose. We get on well enough, for the most part, but there’s a line that I’ll simply never cross, and we’re all aware of that. You, on the other hand . . .” He trailed off there and made a weary little gesture, drawing a rising circle of smoke in the air.

“I . . . what?” Dave said suspiciously. He knew what was coming, but suddenly he just wanted to hear someone say it out loud for once.

“You’re an interloper,” said Jeremy. Dave winced. Maybe he hadn’t wanted to hear it so badly after all. Jeremy either didn’t notice or pretended not to notice the wince, just continued inexorably on. “They’re an extremely tight-knit bunch—I hesitate to say ‘family’ and yet, there it is—and up you pop, proposing to simply take the place of one of their own? Foisted off on them against their will by a higher-up?” Jeremy’s second dead cigarette joined the first in the planter. “And you’ve absolutely no idea how to go about overcoming that hurdle, have you?”

“Haven’t I?” Dave said faintly.

Jeremy paused, then looked at him. “Do you want my advice, Mr. Brassoff?”

“Do I?” He couldn’t get that hesitant tone out of his voice.

Jeremy’s mouth twisted in what could have been amusement or distaste. “Grow a spine, Mr. Brassoff.”

Dave twitched back. “’scuse me?”

“Actually, that’s my advice.” Jeremy looked away. “You seem like a bright enough fellow, you appear to know what you’re doing, and when you’re not cringing away from someone or other, you’re just mad enough to fit in with that lot. Unfortunately, they’re rather like schoolyard bullies: if you don’t stand up to them and play the game their way, they’ll never respect you. And they have to respect you before they can like you. Take it from me.”

“Yeah, but—”

“But nothing,” Jeremy said. “Every time they challenge you, you back down. Well, stop it. Stand up for yourself. The only one of that lot who’s likely to hit you is Ms. Leone, and she’s not going to hit you for being assertive.”

Dave put his face in his hands. One of them smelled like smoke, the other like Sprite. It was just another surreal note in his day. “God, this is like being in

elementary school all over again,” he said, muffled. “Only I don’t have milk on my pants.”

“Except this time it’s for real,” Jeremy said, not relenting in the least. “Do you want this job?”

“Yes . . .”

“*Spine*, Mr. Brassoff. Do you *want* this job?”

“Yes!” Dave jerked his hands away from his face and made a frustrated gesture so huge that he smacked his knuckles on the railing. He winced. “Of course I want this job!” he declared, rubbing his bruised hand. “This is the job I’ve wanted since I joined up—I didn’t join the FBI to drive a desk! This morning I told some guy I was with Templar, and do you know what a rush that was? God!”

The last word died away. The breeze picked up. Jeremy was quiet for long enough that Dave had another attack of self-consciousness, which he fought stubbornly against as best he could. He might have been blushing, though. He wasn’t sure. “There you are, then,” Jeremy said softly. “I think you’ll do nicely.”

“Well, I’m glad someone thinks so,” Dave muttered, looking away.

“Stand up for yourself and it’s possible you’ll convince someone else,” Jeremy said. “And once this Farraday nonsense is all over and done with, start answering in kind.”

Dave blinked at him, confused. “What?”

“Give them a taste of their own medicine, as it were.” Jeremy’s smile widened. “To be crude, Mr. Brassoff, they respect *balls*. They don’t think you have any. *Do* prove them wrong.”

“How?” Dave said, despite his resolve nearly wailing it.

“That, you’ll have to decide for yourself.” Jeremy straightened up, rolling one shoulder. “And now, if you’ll excuse me, Mr. Brassoff, I think I’d best get back before Simon calls and demands to know if I’m off wanking somewhere.”

“Uh. Yeah. Okay.” Dave waggled his fingers in an absent wave. “Thanks, I guess.”

“You guess? Oh, dear.” Jeremy laughed, moving past him towards the door. “I’ve been damned with faint praise.”

Dave watched him go, frowning. Behind him the first few drops of rain started to splat lazily on the gravel, and the guy in the hoodie abruptly woke up, lumbering to his feet and heading for shelter.

Jeremy was back in his usual seat when Dave let himself back into the saferoom, five minutes later. Everyone else was hard at work on something or another, except for Simon, who was leaning back in his chair looking grumpy. “There you are,” Simon said. “Thought you’d died or run away or something, left us stuck with your mess.”

Dave hesitated, then squared his shoulders mentally. “I stopped to get a drink,” he said. “I spent all morning working hard to *create* this ungodly mess, after all.”

Simon chewed on the inside of his cheek, staring narrowly at Dave. Dave nearly quailed—the butterflies in his stomach were having a hoedown—but he gritted his teeth and forced himself not to crumple. “Huh,” Simon finally said, looking away. “Guess so. See if you can’t get some of this stuff out of our way.”

“That was the plan,” Dave said, so lightheaded with relief (or possibly terror) that he spoke before he thought. “And I’ve already promised to put everything back the way it was before I left tonight.”

Simon glanced at the tornado of computer parts around Dave’s feet. “That’ll keep you working late.”

“Is that a problem?” Was he actually having a conversation with this guy?

“No,” Simon said. “Not a problem. Fact is, it’s kind of the norm.”

“Good thing I don’t usually have anything better to do, then,” Dave said, then stopped, aghast at himself, and swooped down to pick up the closest pile of parts (a monitor) in order to hide his blush. Fortunately for his equilibrium, though, Simon didn’t say anything else, just grunted. Dave was able to escape into the next room and put the disassembled monitor down before his knees quietly gave way. There was even a mat already there to break his fall. Things were looking up.

Two hours later he had stripped Rich Story’s computer lair right down to the two wide strips of black anti-static mat, incidentally finding three lost NERF balls in the process. He couldn’t help but notice that everyone else in the room kept glancing over at the bare spot where the computers had been—how long had it been since they’d seen this corner empty? Four years? Probably?

Judging by the general level of dust, dirt, and fuzz proliferating on the mats, his predecessor hadn’t really *cleaned* in four years, either. Oh, the equipment was well-kept, but apparently Mr. Story hadn’t often felt the need to move his towers and clean behind them. Dave wrinkled his nose and dusted off his hands, which were already a disquieting shade of gray. Before he started putting the computer lair back together, he was going to haul these mats outside and clean them off. Borrow a mop, maybe. And then he was going to put everything back together, only he was planning to rearrange things to suit his own tastes and to hell with what they thought of that. He was looking forward to it, in a weird way.

He grabbed one end of the nearest mat and folded it over, then started rolling it up. When he was halfway done something glinted at him from between his feet, and he nearly got clobbered in the shins by the unrolling mat when he swooped down to pick the CD up. “Ha!” he said under his breath.

“Hm?” someone said from behind him.

Dave (too busy fighting with the recalcitrant mat to turn around) glanced over his shoulder and held up the gold CD. “That’s four,” he said quietly.

“Good,” Simon said after a pause, and that, apparently, was that.

◆ 58: Mike

“There, that ought to do it,” Nate said from behind the dresser. After a minute he grabbed the edge of the dresser in one hand and levered himself upright, covered in dust and ancient cobwebs. He coughed, once. Mike was half-expecting him to wheeze out dust. “Give me a hand here, Mike,” Nate croaked.

“Sure,” Mike said, grabbing the edge of the dresser and walking it back into place, all macho-like. Diana Fontaine watched them both from her chair in the corner, arms crossed tightly over her chest. Mike restrained his grunt of effort as best he could. “That good?”

“That’s great.” Nate slapped uselessly at his pants, raising a cloud of dust, which only made him cough again. “Okay,” he said in Diana’s direction, with an awkward smile, and tapped the little satellite-dish microphone that now stood on its tripod next to the television. “We’re good to go. The mike’s probably not strong enough to pick up every little whisper—” he told this barefaced lie with a remarkable lack of fluster, although his ears went a little pink “—but it’ll pick up most anything said in a normal tone of voice, and if you call, we’ll be in here in two seconds. Okay?”

“All right,” Diana said faintly.

“And trust me, we do this for a living, we’ve heard it all before, so there’s no need to get embarrassed,” said Nate, the guy who still blushed every time Mike said . . . pretty much anything, really. Mike looked away, towards the door, because he probably had a big wise-assed grin on his face and neither of the people in here right now needed to see that shit. “Oh,” said Nate, and now he *did* get a little flustered, “and if you shut the bathroom door, you’d have to shout for the microphone to hear you. So it’s okay. Really. Promise.”

Right about then was when Mike tuned them out, scratching absently at his chest before he remembered and made himself stop. If he dislodged the wire he was wearing he’d have to get Nate to tape it back down, which meant that Nate would have to rip off the *old* tape first, and that shit hurt like a *bitch*—plus the recordings weren’t going to be of any use if all you could hear was Mike

scratching himself like a dog. Mike plucked at the neck of his sweatshirt, making sure it was still hanging loose.

“—and Sandra’s in the adjoining room,” Nate was saying when Mike tuned back in. Nate pointed over his shoulder at the door in the left-hand wall. “She’s promised to leave her half of the door locked but open, so you can run right in there and slam the door if you need to.” Nate pointed at the opposite wall. “And Johnny and I are right there. So we’ve got you surrounded.” He tried smiling again.

“All right,” Diana said again, her voice a little stronger. “It’s just . . . is this necessary? All this? Is he really . . .”

“Well, uh, the short answer’s no, it’s not necessary at all,” said Nate. “As far as we know he’s still got no idea where you are, and might not have an issue with you any more in any case.”

“He’s sure as hell got an issue with *us*, though,” Mike put in. “We’re all here because we had to go somewhere, and hey! Long as we’ve got to stay in a hotel somewhere anyway, might as well come make extra sure you’re okay, am I right?”

Diana laughed a little, unhappily. “I suppose that ought to make me feel better.”

“But it doesn’t, right?” Mike spread his hands. “We’re doing the best we can. Promise.”

“I know,” Diana said. She looked away. “And it’s not that I don’t appreciate it.”

“It’s cool,” Mike said comfortably. “I recognize that most people just ain’t up to my kind of kick-ass action-movie lifestyle.”

It took her a moment, but eventually, Diana produced another one of those unhappy little laughs. “So . . . now what?”

“Well, now I go make sure that all of us can hear you loud and clear,” Nate said, glancing towards the door that adjoined Sandra’s room. “If you hear me knock on the wall, say something loud enough for the mike to pick up, okay? Honda, wanna come with?”

“Yeah, I wanna hear this for myself, make sure it’s all good,” said Mike. “Sides, this way Miz Fontaine gets a whole five minutes to herself.”

Nate raised his hand in a tentative little wave, then opened Diana Fontaine’s side of the double door and went into Sandra’s room. Mike followed, tugging the door shut behind him. Nate and Sandra both stared at him, silent and intent, until Mike reached into his pants pocket and shut the broadcast pack off. “Wire’s off,” he said. They all relaxed.

Nate glanced at Sandra. “Sandy? How’s it sound?”

Sandra waved her hand at the little black speakers set up on her dresser. “Listen for yourself,” she said, reaching over to turn up the volume.

They all went quiet. The speakers made little scratchy sounds as an unaware Diana Fontaine shifted in her chair and cleared her throat. Something that sounded like paper rustled as she picked it up. A spring in her chair creaked, lightly. “Good,” Nate said softly, leaning forward to turn the speakers back down and knock on the wall.

They all heard Diana jump and catch her breath. “Yes?” she said a moment later, her voice clear and strident, as she enunciated unnecessarily for the microphone.

“Good!” Nate called, then lowered his voice. “And anything the satellite microphone doesn’t catch, Mike’s wire ought to, and we’ve got two separate recordings going, tape and digital. Whatever happens in there tonight, we’ll have a record of it, so if you’re planning to hit on her, try to do it using meaningful gestures and eye contact, okay?”

“Pssh, as if,” Mike said happily. “I’m totally gonna hit on her just so you can listen and learn from my example, Specs. You needs you some *technique*.”

“Technique?” Sandra said, raising an eyebrow. “You mean when you hit on other women you do more than grab your crotch and ask if they want to pet your trouser snake? I feel slighted.”

“‘Trouser snake’?” Mike squalled, affronted. “I never said ‘trouser snake’. I asked if you wanted to see my *fire hose*.”

“Because the way to a woman’s heart is through water sports,” said Sandra, glancing at Nate, who was pink but snickering. “I seem to recall being invited to ride the bucking bronco once, too.”

“Huh,” said Mike. “I totally do not remember saying that, but it sure sounds like me. Oh, and, uh, the offer stands, case you were wondering.”

“I wasn’t, really, but I’ll keep it in mind,” Sandra said evenly. “Besides, I get the feeling that you’re less of a bucking bronco and more of a Mexican jumping bean, anyway.” Nate just barely managed to stifle his horrified laugh by clapping a hand over his mouth.

“Shit, I take it back, I do not think I’d feel comfortable sharing my unique specialness with a lady who is racist,” Mike said, shaking his head sadly. “No ethnic sausage for *you*.”

“Uh, you know what, I’m just going to go make sure that the speakers in my room are working,” Nate said, edging past Mike with his shoulders shaking.

“Aw, man, Specs, I totally did not mean to make you jealous!” Mike called after him. “You want some of what I got, you know all you got to do is ask!”

“Ask Templar, maybe,” Nate shot back over his shoulder, and shut the door quickly on Mike’s whoop of glee.

Still grinning, Mike leaned back against Sandra’s dresser and let his head fall back, staring up at the ceiling. They were both quiet enough that they could hear Diana Fontaine shifting around in the other room, making little papery crackling sounds as she turned the pages of whatever she was reading. After a moment,

they heard another thump. “Yes,” Diana called. Nate called back something that was muffled to incomprehensibility.

“I better get back in there,” Mike finally said, pushing himself upright.

Sandra eyed him for a moment. “Be careful,” she finally said.

“Pfft,” said Mike, heading for the door. “Just because you can’t resist my suave Latino charms don’t mean *every* lady is compelled to jump my bones, more’s the pity. No, no, don’t beg, it’s totally degrading and shit.”

Sandra plucked a pen off the dresser and lobbed it at him, bouncing it off his hip. Mike sniggered and knocked on the adjoining door. “Yo, Miz Fontaine, it’s me.”

On the speakers, they could hear Diana Fontaine putting her book down with a rustle and getting to her feet. “Little pig, little pig, let me come in,” Sandra muttered under her breath.

“Aw, Sandy, your chin hairs ain’t nearly as long as you think,” Mike said happily. Fortunately for him, Diana opened the door before Sandra could get up and kick his ass.

“So you know what, I’m thinking dinner,” Mike said, shutting the door behind himself. Diana Fontaine turned away, heading for her chair, and Mike took advantage of this opportunity to stick a hand in his pocket and turn the wire back on. “I’m also thinking pizza delivery, because it doesn’t get easier to feed five people than that, you know?”

“That sounds fine,” Diana said. “I don’t really like meat on my pizza . . . mushrooms and black olives?”

“Aw, damn, way to ruin a whole string of sausage jokes,” Mike said, snapping his fingers. “But that’s coo’, I’ll save ’em for later, I got plenty of opportunities to talk about my meat.” He glanced over at the satellite mike and made a show of raising his voice. “Yo, Specs, call and order us all some pizza, huh? You heard the lady: large mushroom and black olives with sausage on one half for me, and get Sandy one of those fussy-ass little ‘lady pizzas’ with the chopped tomatoes like she likes!” He paused, already snickering; after a moment Sandra thumped on the wall once. “Love you too, Spring,” Mike gleefully told the microphone.

“Asshole,” Sandra said clearly through the half-open double door. Mike busted out laughing.

By the time the pizza arrived Diana Fontaine had settled in with her book again, and Mike was sprawled out on the couch with his laptop, avoiding doing any sort of actual work by the simple expedient of mucking around with random Flash games. He’d damned near broken his high score when someone thumped on the door to Nate and Johnny’s room, next door, and Mike put the laptop down and sat up, listening. His little guy died, tinnily.

After a buzz of conversation, Nate's door shut again, with Mike's little guy being the only casualty. Not that he was actually expecting Farraday to show up dressed as a pizza guy, but there was a lot of paranoia just sort of randomly floating around out there right now, and occasionally Mike caught some. Kind of an occupational hazard.

A minute or so later someone knocked at Diana's door. Mike got up and jogged over. "Yeah?" he said.

"Yo," Johnny said on the other side of the door. "Landshark."

"Sorry, we're on high alert, I'm gonna need to see your ID first," Mike said, snickering and putting his eye to the peephole. Johnny, waiting semi-patiently in the hallway with two pizza boxes balanced comfortably on one hand, flipped him off with the other. "That'll do," said Mike, unlocking and unchaining the door.

Johnny hit him in the stomach with the edge of a pizza box pretty much the second he got the door open. Mike whoofed out a breath and grabbed for his pizza in both hands. "Man, that's not cool," he said. "You're gonna make the toppings slide!"

"So the lady gets a little piece of your sausage," Johnny said expressionlessly. "Ain't my lookout."

Mike glanced over his shoulder at Diana. "See?" he said. "Told you I'd get a chance to use all those meat jokes."

"God save the poor woman," said Sandra, stepping out of her room to take her own, much smaller box from Johnny.

"Ain't no one around here got a sense of humor," Mike declared. "That's it, you're none of you invited to dinner."

"Drinks," Nate said, jogging up with a bunch of sweating cans in his arms. "Root beer for you—" he awkwardly lobbed a can overhand at Mike, who caught it in his free hand and put it down on the box's top—"Diet Coke for Sandy—" Sandra caught hers—"Dr Pepper for Johnny, and, uh..." Nate raised his voice. "Ma'am, did you want regular Coke or diet? I'll have whatever you don't want."

"Ah," said Diana. "Diet, please."

"Man, you ladies are all alike," said Mike, rolling his eyes and accepting the can from Nate. "Man *likes* a good handful of something or other, you know?"

"Don't know how you'd know," Sandra told him. "There's no chance you've got more than two, three inches in your pants, the way you brag."

"Aw, *man*," Mike said, making a show out of juggling his armful of food. "I didn't have all this stuff in my hands, I would *prove you wrong*, missy."

"How? Gonna show me you've got even less than that?" Sandra shot back, shutting her door behind her.

Mike beamed at Johnny and Nate. "Man, it is gettin' to be just like the old days around here! I, for one, am totally stoked by this development."

* * *

They ate more or less in silence, Mike manfully resisting the urge to act hurt when Diana picked all the little bits of sausage off her half of the pizza before eating it. Diana kept glancing over her shoulder at the satellite mike and then giving Mike a little embarrassed smile when he caught her at it. Mike figured that was what was making dinner so quiet.

Mike ate all of his half of the pizza and two slices of hers, finally collapsing back in his chair with a huge whoofing sigh. "Damn, hits the spot," he said.

"Yes. Ah. Thank you," said Diana, glancing at the mike again and lowering her voice to a bare murmur. "Not quite as good as a homemade meal, though," she said, glancing shyly in his direction, then down at her lap. Mike's day immediately took a turn for the better.

"Yeah, well, my cooking *is* pretty awesome," Mike said, lowering his voice too, even though the mike on his chest would be picking all this up as clear as day. "Hey, some day when all this is over, I'll totally cook for you again, assuming you don't start up with the hating me again."

"No, I . . ." Diana went a bit pink. "I don't think I could do that."

Mike grinned. "Man, my heart is totally warmed or some shit," he said. "You better be careful, though. If they caught any of that they're totally gagging by now."

Startled, Diana glanced at the satellite mike and went pinker.

Mike folded up the empty pizza box and forced it into one of the room's small wastebaskets, with some effort. Automatically he glanced at the clock: past eight. "What time do you think you wanna go to bed?" he asked over his shoulder.

"I'd like to have a bath first," Diana said, sounding mildly embarrassed. "But any time after nine should be fine. I've . . . I didn't sleep well last night and I'm tired."

"That's cool," said Mike. "Go have your bath and we can sleep whenever. Sleep is awesome."

"All right," Diana said, making a move towards the dresser and drawing up short. "Are you . . . going to be all right on the couch?"

"Who, me? Pfft, I'll be fine. I have totally slept in worse places on the job. Shit, I spent a week and a half sleeping behind a dumpster once, and lemme tell you, cardboard? Not comfy." Mike picked up the empty cans from the table and added them to the trash. "I'll just steal one of the pillows off your bed and I'll be set, 'kay?"

"All right." Looking a bit taken aback by the dumpster thing (for which Mike couldn't really blame her) Diana pulled open one of the drawers and rummaged around, eventually coming out with a little pile of clothing, mostly light blue and kind of silky-looking. Mike resisted the urge to whistle, figuring it was an impulse best suited for when she came out wearing . . . whatever that was.

Diana closed the bathroom door firmly behind herself. After a moment, she locked it. Mike couldn't help snickering. Once the water actually started running Mike went over and stole a pillow, just like he'd said, then flicked off the broadcast pack and went to knock on the door between Diana's room and Sandra's.

"Come on in, Mike," Sandra called, faintly.

Mike let himself in, propping Diana's side of the door open with the half-full wastebasket. "Hey, 'sup, we good? ... damn, woman, are those boxer shorts?"

Sandra rolled her eyes. "Yes, they are, and yes, I have underwear on under them, and no, you can't see."

"Awww," said Mike, dropping onto the foot of the bed and shamelessly getting his Sandy-ogle on. "Man, I ain't seen anyone look so hot in a t-shirt and boxers since the last time I looked in the mirror."

"They're comfortable, and your modesty is underwhelming," Sandra said, sounding vaguely defensive. "Anyway, Templar called, wanting a progress report, so I gave him one, not that there's much to report so far."

"Damn, sorry about that. You want, I can go stage a gunfight or something, make things a little more interesting."

"You know what, I think I'll pass," Sandra looked away, fiddling with one of her socks. "I wish he'd come with us."

"Yeah, well, you can't make the boss do anything he doesn't wanna," Mike flopped out on his back and tucked his hands behind his head. "'Sides, Farraday gets up to something over there and Archer'll just gas him or some shit. Total criminal cage match, you know? I'd buy a ticket to that."

"I suppose," Sandra said, and went all quiet.

Mike put up with it for a minute or so before flinging himself back upright. "'Sup?"

Sandra glanced at the speakers on the table, broadcasting an eerie, thin echo of Diana splashing in the bath. "I was just thinking that if I have to listen to you two flirt any more, I'm going to throw up."

"*Totally* jealous," Mike said happily.

"As if," said Sandra, rolling her eyes at him. "I'm not jealous. I'm nauseated by how *bad* the two of you are at it."

"Liar," Mike said. He pointed an accusing finger at her, rocking back and crossing his legs underneath himself. "It totally breaks your little tomboy heart that it's not you."

"If I ever caught myself participating in some insipid 'I like your cooking!' 'I'll cook for you again some time!' 'Yay!' conversation with you," Sandra said, making the air quotes every time, "I would shoot myself out of sheer embarrassment."

"Yuh huh, sure, okay," Mike said. "You're just jealous 'cause I never cooked for *you*."

“You used to force bits of stuff on me back when you used to bring your lunch,” Sandra pointed out.

“Shit, that doesn’t count, that was, like, leftovers and cold shit, and I didn’t make it specifically for you anyway.” Mike ran a hand absently through his hair and stopped himself from scratching his chest just in time. “Kinda wish I still had time to make lunch, though. Eating out’s way too expensive.”

“Yeah,” said Sandra, looking away. After a moment she laughed a little. “God, I exist on takeout and leftover takeout these days. If I die they’ll have to bury me in one of those little folding rice containers you get from the Chinese place.”

“Ain’t no way to live,” Mike said. “Good thing our jobs are so awesome or we might *resent* ’em or some shit.”

Sandra glanced around the bare, anonymous hotel room. “Yeah,” she said bitterly. “Yeah, our jobs are pretty fucking great.”

And Mike didn’t know what to say to that, so he pushed himself to his feet and had a good stretch. “I’m gonna head back in,” he said. “Lemme know if you need anything else.”

“I’m good,” Sandra said distantly.

“Yeah, I totally knew that,” said Mike. “G’night, Sandy.”

“Night, Mike. If you do end up doing the nasty with Ms. Fontaine, try and keep it down, will you? Some of us need our beauty sleep.”

Mike snickered, nudging the wastebasket back into Diana Fontaine’s hotel room. “You know, I ain’t gonna say anything to that, ’cause you made it too easy,” he said.

Sandra’s empty Diet Coke can hit the door right next to his head. Mike yelped a little, reflexively ducking, then booted the dented can back into Sandra’s room. It spun a trail of brown droplets across the carpet. “Love you too,” he caroled, pulling the door shut as quickly as he could.

Diana Fontaine eventually came out of the bathroom, pink and steaming and clean, wearing a pair of ladies’ pajamas that were pretty hot as long as Mike didn’t let himself remember that they probably actually belonged to Nate’s mother. Mike grinned at her, making her go even pinker. “Aw, ain’t that cute,” he said.

Diana pressed her lips together and looked away, obviously trying not to smile. “That’s sexual harassment, Mr. Takemura,” she said.

“Naw, naw, sexual harassment is more—” Mike broke off there and whistled at her, madly waggling his eyebrows. He thought he heard something that might have been laughter from over Nate’s way, but figured it was probably his imagination.

“Yes, that’s, ah, that’s definitely sexual harassment,” Diana said, now really pink. She edged away from him, depositing a tight roll of dirty clothes in one of the other drawers.

“And hey, you’d know, you’re a lawyer, right?”

“Yes, Mr. Takemura. I am, in fact, a lawyer.” Diana looked away and frowned down at the dresser. “If this goes on for too much longer I’ll have to find a way to do laundry.”

Mike shrugged. “Eh, we can probably handle that. And you’re totally allowed to call me Mike now, you realize.”

Diana went still, her shoulders squaring, then slumping. “I know,” she finally said. “It just feels so strange.” Eventually she rallied and laughed, a little. “And you still call me ‘Miz Fontaine’,” she said, deliberately mimicking the slur that Mike gave her name.

“Huh. Yeah, guess that’s true.” Mike snapped his fingers. “Okay! So I tell you what: I’ll start calling you ‘Diana’ if you call me ‘Mike’, how’s that?”

“That seems fair,” Diana said cautiously. “. . . Mike.”

“There you go!” Mike said, beaming at her. “Just lemme know when you want to turn out the lights, okay?”

“I’d like to read for a little while, first.” Diana retreated, pulling back the covers and sliding into the bed. Her pajamas made a little silky slithering sound against the sheets that Mike enjoyed listening to despite himself; he looked quickly down at his laptop before she could look back up and catch him leering. She picked up her book. Mike went back to writing his report, as unexciting as it was likely to be. ‘Hooked up microphone, ate pizza, macked on lady lawyer, went to sleep,’ he typed. He considered sending it just like that, but figured that it wouldn’t look good if anyone ever had to look this stuff up later.

Five minutes later he sent off his report and went back to mucking around online, mostly just killing time. Diana was silent at the other end of the room, the occasional flip of a page the loudest sound in the entire room. Every time she turned a page Mike had to restrain a little twitch. She was a nicer lady than she used to be, by a long shot, but Mike was pretty sure that she’d never be the kind of lady he could enjoy a companionable silence with. Too much old, bad blood between them, or something. He kept waiting for the other shoe to drop all the time.

Diana Fontaine shut her book with a little rustle and put it on the bedside table. “We can turn off the lights any time you’re ready,” she said.

“Sure, just a sec,” Mike said absently, quitting out of everything and shutting his computer down. Behind him the lights went off, leaving him sitting in a little pool of light all by himself. He closed his laptop and put it on the coffee table, putting his cellphone on top of it. His gun sat at the far end of the table, all tangled up in the leather straps of his shoulder holster. Mike picked it up, untangled it, and shrugged into the holster, hunching his shoulders to avoid knocking the

microphone askew. His fingers brushed against the butt of his gun and then fell away. Good as it was going to get. Mike got up and flipped the lights off, plunging the room into that weird utter darkness that he only ever saw behind the thick curtains in a motel. “G’night,” he said, groping his way back to the couch and stretching out, getting the holstered gun settled as comfortably into his armpit as he could.

Diana was silent for a long moment, although Mike could hear her shifting around in the bed. The sheets slithered against her pajamas. Mike squeezed his eyes shut and tried not to think about it. “Good night, Mike,” Diana said tentatively. “Sleep well.”

“Yeah, you too.” Mike opened his eyes and stared blindly upwards. Light from the hallway was filtering in under the door, and after a moment, he could dimly see the pattern on the ceiling. Behind him, Diana Fontaine shifted again and sighed out a breath. Mike listened to this, thinking about how he was never going to get to sleep if he kept *attending* to Miz Fontaine every time she so much as moved, and was still busy being grumpy about this when he drifted off to sleep, ten minutes later.

He came abruptly flailing out of sleep some unknown number of minutes or hours later, unable to figure out what had woken him but knowing that something had. He made a single, loud, startled sound—“Wha!”—automatically grabbing for his gun.

“Mike,” Diana Fontaine whispered urgently from right beside him, her hand appearing out of nowhere to pat gingerly at his shoulder and then grab hold of it with panicky strength.

Mike reached up and caught her hand in his, squeezing it—all she’d have to do was move her hand over two inches and she’d hit the tape that was holding the wire to his chest and then everything would go entirely to shit. “What?” he said, confused, starting to sit up. “Something—”

“No, it’s, shh,” Diana whispered, confusingly. The light from under the door made her profile nearly glow, and when she glanced guiltily over her shoulder at the satellite mike on the table, Mike could see her do it as clear as day. “I’m sorry,” she breathed. “It’s not . . .” She broke off there and dropped her head to his shoulder, right next to their clasped hands. Her hair tickled against the side of his neck. “It’s not that.”

Oh, crap, Mike thought but did not say, still squeezing her hand to keep it away from the wire, which he was horribly, utterly aware of like nothing else on earth at the moment. “What’s up?” he said, keeping his voice as low as possible, hoping to God that he was wrong.

Diana didn’t move. Her hand stilled in his like a captured bird. Mike swallowed and let his head fall back to the pillow, staring blindly up at the ceiling. “I can’t sleep,” Diana finally whispered in a tiny, broken voice.

"I'm sorry," Mike settled on saying, squeezing her hand in a way he really, really hoped was only comforting. "You want me to go ask Sandy for an Ambien?"

Diana shook her head in answer, raising gooseflesh up and down the side of Mike's throat. "Would," she whispered, and stopped, and swallowed. Mike shut his eyes. Yeah. He wasn't wrong. Diana made a little frightened sound and tried again, the whispered words spilling nervously out over each other in a rush. "Would you come sleep in the bed with me? I'm just so *scared*..."

His mind whirling, Mike patted her hand, buying himself some time to think. He could see the next hour or two unfolding in his mind as clearly as if it had already happened, and he sure couldn't deny that it was powerfully tempting—or it would be, if this room wasn't bugged halfway to shit, which was the worst kind of buzzkill imaginable. "That's really not a good idea," he finally whispered, regretting it with every fiber of his being, some fibers a little more than others.

She swallowed again, lifting her head just enough to glance back at the dresser. "We could unplug the mike," she whispered. Mike went really, really still. "Just for a little." Her eyes shone in the light, wide with nerves. "The others are probably all asleep by now, they'd never notice..."

"You know I can't do that," Mike whispered back. He wasn't much of a praying kind of guy, but all the same he sent up a prayer to whatever gods might be listening: *oh, crap, please let them be asleep, please let them not be hearing this, I will seriously never do anything bad again for the rest of my life, please?*

Diana shuffled forward on her knees until her breasts pressed against Mike's shoulder, which was enough to immediately draw about ninety-five percent of his attention. "Please," she breathed, so close now that he could feel that little puff of breath on his face.

"I *can't*," Mike said desperately. So, of course, Diana kissed him.

He'd seen it coming like a runaway locomotive and it still nearly stopped his goddamned heart. For a moment or two he was slack with shock, staring wide-and cross-eyed at the side of her face, reflexively squeezing her trapped hand and wondering if the microphone on his chest was sensitive enough to pick up *these* sounds. He figured that it probably was. Damn Nate anyway. "Hey," he mumbled against her lips, reaching up to touch the side of her face with his free hand and guide her away. "Miz Fontaine, you know you don't really want to do this."

"I do," she whispered insistently, desperate to believe herself. She closed her eyes and rubbed her cheek against his hand. "Please, even if it's just to sleep, I'm so *scared*..."

Mike, pretty much hating the entire world right now, blew out a breath and shuffled away, sitting up. He let go of her hand with some relief. "Okay, come on," he whispered, touching her shoulder. "You need to go try and get some sleep, okay?"

The little despairing noise Diana made in the back of her throat made him feel like absolute shit, but after a moment, she rocked back and stood up, making those damned slithery noises all the way up, which was *not helping*. “I’m sorry,” she breathed, her voice all choked and small, and she picked her way back across the room. The silky noises faded, and the bedsprings creaked.

Mike sat just where he was, stiff as a board in several respects, staring off at nothing and listening just as hard as he could. Sure enough, after thirty seconds or so he heard a faint, pitiful sniffing sound. Mike shut his eyes. “I’m sorry,” he said, low in his throat.

“It’s okay,” floated back to him, so softly that he wasn’t sure he’d heard it. Mike threw himself back onto the couch and rubbed his face briskly with both hands, resigned to the fact that he wasn’t going to get another wink of sleep all night.

◆ 59: Sandra

She'd been sleeping so well before Mike's yelp woke her up, too.

For the first few days after Simon's shooting she hadn't so much slept as passed out for a few hours every night, too worn out from the stress and the fear to get anything close to restful sleep. After she'd stopped fearing that Simon was going to die, she'd started being paranoid that Farraday was going to come after her, and she'd started sleeping lightly, twitching up and out of sleep at every little sound. But being here felt *safe* somehow. She'd actually been sleeping comfortably, getting some rest for the first time in what felt like weeks, and then Mike's voice had squawked out of the speakers and yanked her forcefully back to consciousness in the dark. **10:42**, the clock on the nightstand said.

She should have been up and through that door immediately, but sleep confounded her for a few crucial seconds. By the time she was awake enough to realize what had woken her, she was awake enough to realize what was actually going on over there, and awake enough to realize that her presence would not exactly be welcomed.

She lay still. Curled comfortably up on her side, with the blankets drawn up to her chin and half her face hidden in the pillow, Sandra listened expressionlessly to the broadcast of the goings-on from next door, staring blankly at nothing. It was pitiful, she decided after a moment. All that poor-helpless-me whimpering and begging—even knowing that Mike was going to be horribly embarrassed tomorrow couldn't make her any happier about this pathetic scene.

Staring at the far wall Sandra wondered what all was going on over there that she couldn't see. The whispers were accompanied by stealthy little rustling sounds—was Diana Fontaine brave enough to make an actual grab for Mike, or was she just petting at him, little fake-innocent touches, hoping like a college girl that if she touched him enough he'd make a grab for *her*? “Bitch,” Sandra muttered under her breath, nearly spitting out the ‘b’.

Diana's suggestion that they could unplug the mike made Sandra go cold and frozen; before she could recover from her shock, someone kissed somebody. Mike's wire broadcast every last little damp smacking sound of it, and it went

on for what seemed like forever, and while Sandra had a pretty damned good idea of who had kissed whom, she couldn't be sure. It was that uncertainty that broke her paralysis, and she lay there trembling with useless adrenalin-fueled rage. The sheer length of the kiss told her that Mike would have been all *over* that goddamned lawyer lady if the room wasn't wired to hell and back. Not that Sandra cared, except that it could have fucked over the team but good if Diana Fontaine wasn't on the level, which she goddamn well wasn't. Everybody knew it but Mike, who was thinking with his *dick*, like he always did.

Finally Mike reluctantly managed to extricate himself. Sandra could hear Diana's retreat as well as if she'd been in the room herself, could hear the bedsprings creaking—the theatrical little snuffle made Sandra roll her eyes and spit out a little 'tch!' sound, so that she nearly missed Mike's apology. She wished she had missed it. It made her feel sick.

"Jesus fuck," Mike breathed a few moments later, just loudly enough to be picked up by the wire on his chest. His voice was thick and trembling. Asshole was probably hard as a rock over there.

Sandra bared her teeth in disgust and waited to see if he'd say anything else. He didn't. "Jesus, fuck you too," she finally muttered, flipping over onto her other side and squeezing her eyes closed, willing herself to go back to sleep and leave this pathetic, sordid scene behind.

◆ 60: Jeremy

[thursday]

The sky was just beginning to go pink in the east when Jeremy drifted halfway back to consciousness yet again, curled up neatly in Simon's big ugly overstuffed armchair, alerted by nothing more tangible than his inner clock. He could hear Simon breathing in the other room, slow and thick and regular. It wasn't quite snoring. Jeremy couldn't in good conscience call what Simon was doing *snoring*, as much as he'd like to.

Half-asleep, still moving almost entirely on autopilot, he reached over and poked a finger through the slats of the mini-blinds next to him, tugging them down just far enough to glance out the window. Simon's Jeep sat in its usual spot. Jeremy compared it to his earlier mental snapshots: it hadn't changed, hadn't been touched. He dropped the blinds and settled back into the armchair, crossing his arms over his chest again. He could sleep for longer, if he liked. Simon wouldn't be up and about for a hour yet, at least.

Instead of drifting back off, however, he swam back towards consciousness, nudged in that direction by the pinkness in the sky. He opened his eyes again, stifled a yawn, shifted. Simon was still not-snoring in the bedroom. Jeremy looked out the window again, really looking this time, not just taking another half-conscious mental picture. The Jeep looked fine. No one seemed to be lurking about in the parking lot, or on the long concrete walkway, or by Simon's door. Apparently the night had passed without incident. Wasn't that nice? Jeremy smiled to himself and let the blinds go.

He uncrossed his legs and shook the kinks out, then rolled his shoulders, one, then the other. The harnesses on his forearms shifted, the tough webbing slick against his skin. Jeremy checked the safeties of his weapons automatically, flexing his fingers until the hair-fine threads pressed against the backs of his hands. Everything *was* in order. Now all he had to do was survive a morning-grumpy Simon, a thought which made Jeremy somewhat grateful to be armed.

* * *

6:32, said the clock in the kitchen. Jeremy barely spared it a glance. Not bothering with the lights Jeremy picked his way around the edge of the kitchen table. His groping fingers found the edge of the refrigerator and followed it along until they touched the handle; squinting in anticipation of the light Jeremy pulled the refrigerator open and reached blindly in, his fingers landing on and extracting an apple from its bowl.

He ate it in the darkness, eyes half-focused on the square of the kitchen window, listening more than seeing. The quality of the light outside changed, slowly, outlining everything in the room with a dim greyish chiaroscuro glow. By the time Jeremy pulled open the cabinet under the sink and threw his apple core away, the kitchen was light enough to allow easy manoeuvring, and he left without feeling his way along.

The bedroom was quiet now, Simon no longer not-snoring. Jeremy paused in the middle of the living room and tilted his head to the side, holding his breath, listening; after a moment he picked up the faint sounds of Simon's breathing again and relaxed, infinitesimally. He went back over to the chair and folded himself neatly back into it, content to sit on guard in the darkness, in silence, and listen to the almost-nothing of Simon's breathing.

When the clock hit seven Jeremy unfolded himself again and headed back into the kitchen, this time flicking on the lights and wincing slightly away from them. Eventually his eyes adjusted. The little half-empty bag of decaffeinated coffee sat forlorn and abandoned next to the coffee-maker and he picked it up, unrolling the top.

Once the coffee-maker was doing its thing (Simon had professed himself disgusted by the whole thing and had threatened to throw his tainted coffee-maker away when this was all over, but like so many of Simon's announcements, Jeremy suspected it to be all bluster and front) Jeremy went back out into the main room and turned on the lights there, then dragged the armchair back into its usual place, no longer bothering to be quiet. The scent of perking coffee wafted gently out into the main room. In the other room, the bedsprings squeaked slightly. Jeremy smiled and went back into the kitchen.

A few minutes later Jeremy heard the bedsprings creak again, and he leaned out of the kitchen, waiting. There was a pause and then a rumpled and mussed Simon dragged himself out of the bedroom, hunched over like a shambling bear. "Good morning," Jeremy said cheerfully.

"Gruh," Simon replied, making a rude gesture in Jeremy's general direction before dragging himself into the bathroom and shutting the door with a bit more vehemence than seemed actually necessary.

"Eloquent *and* charming," Jeremy said under his breath.

* * *

“See, I *told* you I didn’t need you to stand guard,” a much cleaner and more awake Simon said right off, scuffing into the kitchen and making a slow beeline for the coffee-pot.

Jeremy put his own barely-touched mug down. Really, the decaffeinated stuff *was* even less pleasant than the regular sort, but he didn’t particularly feel like admitting it. “And good morning to you too, Simon. Yes, I *did* sleep well, thank you for asking.”

“Hey, I’m wounded over here, the normal rules of courtesy and etiquette do not apply to me.” Simon wrinkled his nose and poured himself a mug of the decaf.

“Because, of course, normally you are the very soul of courteous behaviour,” Jeremy said.

Simon slotted the pot back into the coffee-maker. “Since you did have something not entirely unlike coffee waiting for me when I got up, I’m just going to pretend you actually meant that.”

“Suit yourself,” said Jeremy. “And speaking of wounded, how are you feeling this morning?”

“I’ll live,” said Simon, stiffly putting the mug down on the kitchen table, opposite Jeremy. “I mostly just hurt like hell, and I can deal with hurting. Toast, I think.” Jeremy raised an eyebrow at the non sequitur; Simon, ignoring the eyebrow, shuffled over to the fridge and gingerly reached for the loaf of bread lurking on top. His fingers had just barely brushed the side of the bag when the toaster spat up two slices of half-burnt toast. Jeremy endeavoured to look innocent. Simon gave him an exasperated look anyway, but took the toast, which Jeremy personally counted as something of a victory for his side.

“Just out of curiosity,” Simon said, taking the chair opposite Jeremy, “what would you have done if I hadn’t wanted toast?”

“Claimed it was mine,” said Jeremy, shrugging. “So! Since I saw neither hide nor hair of this Colonel Farraday and no one sent up the alarm in the middle of the night, I’m going to assume everyone made it through the night just fine.”

“Guess so.” Simon ate one piece of his toast in four giant bites, magnificently ignoring the crumb shower that this occasioned. Jeremy prudently leaned back and out of the way. Simon ignored that, too. “And hey, if he can’t find us, maybe he’ll stick his neck out too far and do something stupid. A guy can hope, anyway.”

“Of course, it would be harder for him to find you if you weren’t right here at home,” Jeremy pointed out, quite reasonably, he thought.

“Yeah, but he doesn’t *know* that,” Simon said patiently, gesturing at Jeremy with his half-eaten second piece of toast. “I mean, not only am I willing to bet that he doesn’t know where I live, since I am completely unlisted to prevent just this sort of thing, but officially I’m still in the damned hospital. You could call

'em right now and ask, and they'd tell you I was still there and, and on the verge of death or something."

"Mm," said Jeremy. Personally he had his doubts—and given the flat look that Simon shot in his direction, he'd managed to make that perfectly clear—but he supposed it was Simon's call, in the end.

Simon finished off his breakfast and shoved his chair back, abandoning his nearly-full cup of nearly-coffee to its fate. "I'm gonna go put my shoes on," he said.

"We can go whenever you like," Jeremy said, conscientiously transferring the breakfast dishes to the sink and turning on the tap.

Simon watched him do it with a bemused expression on his face. "Jesus, that's just weird," he finally said, disappearing into the main room.

By the time Jeremy had put all the rinsed dishes in the dishwasher and wiped the table down—it really was just like playing a role, and as such, almost fun—Simon was ready to go. "Weapons down, Archer," he said, pretty much at the very instant that Jeremy appeared in the doorway.

Jeremy rolled his eyes. "Yes, yes, I was *getting* to that, Simon," he said reprovingly, stripping off his forearm harnesses and filling the living room with the sound of ripping velcro. He slid his middle fingers free of the safety lines and deposited the whole mess into the little (and otherwise useless) drawer in the coffee table. "There, see?" he said, holding up his bared forearms for Simon's theoretical approval. "I am rendered harmless."

"In the first place, ha," said Simon, picking up Jeremy's jacket and holding it out. "And in the second place, it's too early in the morning for your attitude, Mr. Half-My-Shit-Secretly-Explodes."

Jeremy plucked his jacket neatly off Simon's outstretched fingers and slid into it. "You're never going to forgive me for that, are you," he said, not bothering to make it a question.

"It's my policy never to forgive you for anything," Simon said, almost cheerfully. "You ready?"

"As always," said Jeremy, edging past him and heading for the front door. Behind him Simon went quiet, reaching into his bomber jacket with a little rustling leathery sound. Jeremy stopped right where he was and glanced over his shoulder: Simon was standing flat-footed and braced with his right hand behind him, his upper lip drawn up just a tad. Jeremy raised an eyebrow. "One might almost think you were nervous, Simon."

"I'm not nervous, I'm *prepared*," Simon said. "Open the door already. If he's out there, he'll regret it."

"I'd much rather you be prepared in some way that didn't involve my being between your gun and the door," said Jeremy.

“Hey, think of it this way: if you die acting as a meatshield, it’ll be the most useful thing you ever do.”

“As a pet name, Simon, ‘meatshield’ leaves quite a bit to be desired.” Nevertheless, Jeremy checked the peephole—the walkway was clear—and then opened the front door, admitting nothing more threatening than a burst of damp, chilly air. He turned around and gestured at the open door. “Shall we?”

“Let’s,” Simon said, letting his hand fall from the butt of his gun. “Meatshield.”

The drive in proved uneventful, as did the walk from Simon’s Jeep to the door. Simon shifted impatiently from foot to foot as Jeremy produced his guest ID and swiped them in, the card reader beeping. “Christ,” said Simon, scowling out over the parking lot, “I am so glad to be armed again, I cannot tell you, not carrying my gun feels like being naked in public. Now all I gotta do is get Sandy to give me back my ID.”

Jeremy paused, his fingers on the handle of the door. “Do you mean to say that you’ve been walking around naked all this week and I somehow managed not to notice? That isn’t like me—”

“Shut up and open the door.” Simon lunged past him and tugged the door open half a second before the card reader could lock it again.

Jeremy smiled and followed Simon into the building, grudgingly clipping his guest ID to his lapel. “Are you sure you can fire that gun without hurting yourself?”

“Yes,” Simon said irritably. “Probably. Well, okay, maybe. In any case I’d rather hurt myself firing it than not have it when I needed it.”

“Mm. I suppose you have a point there.”

This close to nine in the morning, the hallway was full of people. Everyone they passed nodded or said hello to Simon, then casually checked Jeremy out, glancing first at his face, then at his guest ID, then away. Jeremy kept a meaningless, pleasant smile on his face and made certain to remain in Simon’s wake, just in case. Simon grappled with and opened the heavy safe-room door with only a slight hitch, although he let out a breath afterwards that was on the pained side. “Morning, folks,” he said, dragging his fingertips along the door until Jeremy could catch it. “We all still alive?”

“Aw, *fuck*, boss,” Mike wailed from the conference table, his head in his hands.

“I’m not into you, remember?” said Simon. “What happened? Diana Fontaine stick her hand down your pants and make you sing alleluia?”

“Yep, pretty much,” said Johnny.

Simon stopped just where he was, forcing Jeremy to slide around him to get into the room. “You know what?” Simon said. “I was kidding.”

Johnny shrugged. “I wasn’t.”

Mike collapsed face-first onto the table, folding his arms protectively over his head. "Aw, *fuck*, boss!"

Deciding that perhaps now was a good time to blend into the wallpaper, so to speak, Jeremy went over to the coffee-maker and fetched out his mug from the cabinet underneath. There was no sign of either Sandra or Nate, but Dave Brasso was lurking sheepishly in the corner, doing his own (much less practised) wallpaper imitation. Rich's computer lair had been entirely reassembled during the night—actually, Jeremy corrected himself, it wasn't really Rich's computer lair any more, not like that. Rich had made his desks into a box that enclosed him and separated him from the rest of the room, at least in spirit; Dave had rearranged everything, pushing the desks back against the walls in an open and more inclusive 'L'. The only drawback to that, as far as Jeremy could tell, was that it rather forced Dave to sit with his back exposed to the rest of the team, which seemed like a poor tactical move on his part.

"So what happened?" Simon asked, taking his seat. "Inquiring minds want to know!"

Johnny shut his eyes and tilted his head back. "Know how Nate was gonna tell her that the microphone couldn't pick up whisperm?"

"Yeah?"

"She bought it." Johnny cracked an eye open and stared up at the ceiling. "Bought it but good. Oughta hear the tape, boss."

"I would not miss this opportunity for the world," Simon declared. Mike made a muffled sound of pain, which Simon ignored. "Where is it?"

"Nate's got it."

"Great." Simon glanced around. "Where's Nate?"

"Sandy took him to pick up his car," said Johnny.

"Sandy hasn't said word one to me all morning," Mike added, his voice muffled by the arms clamped over his head. "She is *so pissed* at me. I didn't even do anything!"

"This time," Johnny added.

"You sent her packing, I'm gonna assume," Simon said. "Uh. Diana Fontaine. Not Sandy. I don't think you're man enough to send Sandy packing."

Mike's head popped up. "Fuck yeah I sent her packing," he said bitterly. "Hell was I supposed to do, strip down and let her see the wire all taped to my chest? Yeah, that'd have gone over great, chicks totally dig that 'being secretly recorded' shit."

Johnny glanced over at Simon. "Miz Fontaine did suggest they could turn off the mike," he said, leaning on that like it was significant. "Among other things."

"I'll be damned," Simon breathed.

"Jesus God I'm *still hard*!" Mike wailed, and dropped his head back into the cradle of his arms to the accompaniment of an tremendous amount of thoughtful silence. "Fuckin' wasted opportunity," he muttered.

“Fuckin’ attempt to maybe railroad you on a rape charge later, you mean,” Simon said.

Mike snorted. “Yeah, say that again after you hear the tape.”

Simon hesitated, then shrugged. “Yeah, okay, good point,” he said. “I’ll hear the tape before I pass judgement, all right?”

The room went quiet. Jeremy took the opportunity to sit down, although he kept his attention strictly on his coffee. After a minute or so of silence Mike heaved out a great sigh and sat back up, running his fingers through his hair. “The shit I do for my job,” he said mournfully. “You guys have any idea how long it’s been since I got any?”

“Didn’t you have a date or something last week?” Simon asked, tapping his fingers idly on the table.

“Well, yeah,” said Mike, “but, uh, there was this cop pulled me over, all flashers going, to let me know you got your ass shot, boss, and that kind of shit doesn’t really go down all that well with the civilian-type ladies, you know?”

“Oh yeah,” Simon said. “Damn, Mike, I’m sorry, here I went and ruined your whole evening.”

“Yeah, I ain’t never gonna forgive you for that,” Mike said, already sounding a bit more chipper. “You gonna make that tragic loss of tail up to me?”

“Keep telling you you’re not my type,” Simon said, plucking Jeremy’s mug out of his hands and unceremoniously chugging off about a third of its contents.

◆ 61: Nate

The light up ahead turned yellow, then red. The car in front of Sandra's stopped and Sandra glided to a careful stop behind it, her fingers flexing on the steering wheel. Nate risked a glance at her out of the corner of his eye—she was staring expressionlessly at the rear bumper of the car in front of them—and then leaned forward a little, pointing. His finger nearly touched the windshield. “See the yellow sign up there on the right? Just past the next light? That’s where we’re going.”

“Right,” said Sandra, increasing the number of words she’d spoken to Nate since they got into the car by a fairly large percentage. Nate sat back and uncomfortably focused his attention on the white CD in his hands, flipping it lightly between his fingers and watching the silver rim flash in the morning sun. It was in a clear plastic sleeve and carefully labeled in his own small, neat printing: his name, PROPERTY OF THE FBI, yesterday’s date and time stamp, the location where the recording was made, a short list of the identifiable voices. Very short. A list of two, in fact.

The recording was as clear as crystal and rich with nuance and undertone, almost like it had been recorded in a sound studio instead of a hotel room—but given the flat expression on Sandra’s face, Nate couldn’t really bring himself to be proud of it. In fact, he felt guilty. Not that this was really a new thing for him, but still, he thought that maybe this time he had some reason.

The light went green. The car in front of them was a little slow in accelerating, making Sandra mutter “Come *on*” under her breath. Fortunately for Nate’s nerves, the other car noticed and took off before Sandra could actually hit the horn. Nate let the CD fall to his lap again and folded his hands on top of it, trying half-consciously to hide the evidence from sight.

He was still struggling to think of something to say when Sandra turned into the tire place and into a parking spot. “You can just drop me off, if you want,” Nate offered, not without some relief.

“No,” said Sandra, dropping her car into park and shutting off the engine. “I’m going to stick close to you until we get back to base. I don’t want anyone

going anywhere alone until Farraday is dealt with.”

“Oh. Okay.” Nate glanced out the passenger-side window, then undid his seat belt and got out, carrying the CD. Puddles stood here and there on the parking-lot tarmac, fresh from last night’s rain, but this morning the sky overhead was clear and blue, with small clouds scudding across it. The day itself was crisp and cold, a good ten degrees cooler than yesterday. Nate shivered a little and hunched his shoulders, glad of his sweater.

Sandra joined him, dropping her keys into her purse. Nate couldn’t help but notice that she left her hand parked casually atop her unzipped purse as she escorted him into the shop (and that’s what she was doing, escorting him, not just walking with him). It should have been a struggle not to succumb to another bout of paranoia, but the morning was so bright and cool that it was actually fairly easy not to think about it too hard.

“Hi,” he said to the guy behind the counter. Sandra halted behind him and turned around, scanning the store windows. Nate barely noticed, just fumbled for his wallet. “Nathan Waxman? I’m here to pick up my car?”

“Oh yeah,” the guy said, with an appreciative glance at Sandra. “They’re vacuuming it out now. They’ll bring it around when they’re done. I can go ahead and ring you up for that, if you want.”

Ten minutes later his car had been brought around, standing a little taller than usual on four brand-new black tires and equally new rims. The new parts made the rest of his car look even more battered and shabby than it actually was—still, Nate was glad to have it back.

“I’ll follow you back to base,” Sandra said, fetching out her keys. The butt of her gun surfaced from her purse and sank back again, like a shark’s fin breaking the surface of the water. “Ready to go?”

“Yeah,” Nate said, closing his hand around his own keys. “I need to go see my mother about her fingerprints, but I was thinking I’d do that this afternoon—”

“Take someone with you,” Sandra said, looking not at Nate but down at her keys, sorting through them. “Mike or Johnny, whoever’s free.”

“Okay,” Nate said. He paused, awkwardly, then said “Okay” again and more or less fled to the dubious safety of his car. It started with its usual anemic mutter but rolled out of the parking lot with a smoothness which Nate was entirely unaccustomed to. Sandra backed out of her parking spot and pulled in behind him, waiting. Nate looked left, then right, then carefully trundled his car out into traffic, feeling decidedly uncomfortable until Sandra’s car fell in behind his.

Nate parked over by the side door, tucking his car neatly in between two SUVs that promised to hide it almost entirely from sight. He was almost used to the car’s new smooth ride now; it was nice, in a way. He’d never have done anything about the car’s jittering if dire circumstances hadn’t driven him to it.

Still, he wasn't feeling overly grateful. Among other things, it had been an expensive upgrade.

Sandra appeared, weaving her way between the SUVs, and knocked lightly on his window to let him know that she was there. Nate hurriedly pulled the keys from the ignition and got out, almost forgetting the CD. He had to dive back in to grab it. "Got everything?" Sandra said once Nate had straightened up, her voice oddly flat.

"Yeah," Nate said, half-heartedly waving the CD in her direction.

Sandra glanced at it, then away. "Good," she said. "Let's go." She set off for the building at a ground-eating pace, her hand once again resting on the top of her purse. Nate was forced to trot to keep up. Sandra glanced at him as he caught up, a little spasm of something that looked like embarrassment pulling at her face; after that she slowed down, just enough. "Sorry," she said.

"It's okay," said Nate, glancing sheepishly down at the CD in his hand. "I, uh, I really didn't want to hear it either."

Sandra's jaw set. Nate could have kicked himself, except that they hit the side entrance right about then and he gratefully dug for his keycard instead. Sandra blew through the door the instant that it beeped. This time, expecting it, Nate managed to keep up with her on the short jaunt down the hallway.

"Morning, you two," Simon said, pretty much the instant that they got in the door. Nate barely had time to register the fact that there was something different about Rich's corner of the room before Simon added, "Specs, I understand you've got something for me to *listen* to." Beside him, at the table, Mike moaned and hid his face in his hands.

"Sure do," Nate said, holding up the CD and not looking anywhere near Sandra. "It's forty minutes of Mike snoring. You'll love it."

"I don't snore," Mike mumbled from behind the protective wall of his hands. Sandra made a disgusted little noise and went straight into Simon's office.

"Um," said Nate, glancing at the CD. "I kinda have documented evidence that you do, in fact, snore."

"Fuckin' buzzsaw," Johnny said, apparently in agreement. "You share a hotel room with him, you'd know."

"Says the guy who grunts in his sleep," Mike said, rallying enough to let his hands drop. "Fuck, it's like sharing a room with a masturbating pig."

"You know what?" Simon said. "I really did not need that mental image. Like, at all."

"How's a pig jerk off anyway?" Johnny asked. "All they got's those little trotters—"

"—this is a line of conversation that I really do not want to be present for," Simon broke in.

"They got those curly little tails," Mike said thoughtfully.

Johnny shrugged. “Yeah, but they couldn’t do anything with those but stick ‘em up their asses—”

“—why is no one listening to me?” Simon asked the world at large, plaintively.

“No fun in it?” Mike said.

“Christ,” Simon said, holding out a hand. “Give me that. I’d *rather* listen to forty minutes of Mike snoring than hear another word about pig masturbation.”

Nate shook himself out of his mortified stupor and handed Simon the CD. “If you don’t want to listen to Mike snoring for some reason, the interesting stuff happens starting around minute forty-two.”

“Right,” said Simon, rubbing his thumb over the CD’s plastic sleeve and glancing at the lettering. “The computer will open it for me, right? I just need to stick it in?”

“Like a pig’s curly tail,” Nate heard himself say, already quivering with embarrassment and simultaneously trying not to laugh. Simon blinked at him, then put a hand over his eyes and groaned as the room exploded in whooping.

“Okay, okay, look what you guys did, you destroyed the last of Specs’ innocence,” Simon said over the ruckus. “Sandy? I’m gonna need my computer here for a sec, okay?”

Sandra didn’t answer right away. In the face of her silence, the hilarity died away quickly. “All right, Templar,” she finally said. “Give me a moment to finish this up.”

“Take your time,” Simon said, putting the CD down on the table in front of him. “I figure I can handle maybe thirty seconds’ more talk about pigs jerking off before I die of disgust.”

Eventually Sandra surrendered Simon’s computer and Simon vanished into his office, carrying the CD. Nate took a deep breath, recovering. Here in a minute he thought he’d head down to the lab and check on the status of the dismembered cell phone. Anything to put off the moment where he’d have to confront his mother with an ink pad and a fingerprint sheet; just the thought of it made his stomach squirm uncomfortably.

Mike had his laptop open and was staring at the screen with all his might, trying to ignore the world and especially the tiny percentage of it that was in Simon’s office right now. Johnny eyed him for a second, thoughtfully, then pulled out his own laptop and booted it up. The startup sound made Nate change his mind: check his email first, *then* go fight with the lab.

He went over and started up his computer, thumbing the monitor on. While his computer booted Nate finally succumbed to the urge to go over and check out what the new guy had done to Rich’s lair. If it could really be called ‘Rich’s lair’ any more. “Wow,” he said, putting a hand on the back of the new guy’s chair and

craning his neck to take it all in. “I didn’t think you’d get that mess sorted out this quickly.”

Dave ducked his head. “I was here until close to nine last night,” he said, sounding almost apologetic about it, as if there were something wrong with that. “I thought about putting it back the way he had it, but this really suits me better. I can work both desks at the same time without turning around. I guess all I need now is a real computer chair.”

“Huh,” said Nate.

“I don’t think he’d ever once moved or cleaned behind his computers,” Dave went on, glancing over at one of the new computers and typing something. “You should have seen it. My hands were *gray* when I was done.”

Nate made a face. “Uck. I know he moved them around when he needed to install or remove stuff, but I guess he didn’t really dust or anything.”

“They were pristine *inside*, though,” Dave said. “Typical.”

“Typical?”

“Typical computer nerd,” Dave said. “If he couldn’t clean it using canned air, it wasn’t worth cleaning.” A second later Dave realized what he’d said, or who he was talking to, or something, and went a little pink around the ears.

Nate resisted the urge to glance guiltily back at his own computer. “Guess so,” he said dubiously. “Guess I ought to clean behind mine before I get any more typical, huh?”

“Sorry,” Dave said. “I don’t have that much room to talk, really. I only clean behind my home machines when I have a new one to install. It’s just such a hassle.”

“Yeah, I always end up either ignoring any dust bunnies smaller than my hand or sitting on the floor at three AM wiping all my cables clean with a wet paper towel—”

“—disassembling a tower on the kitchen table and then eating on the couch for a week—”

“—I kind of miss cleaning wads of fuzz off the mouse ball, though, it was kind of therapeutic—”

“—yeah,” said Dave, almost wistfully. “I mean, I wouldn’t give up optical mice for anything, but—”

“—yeah,” said Nate. “So, uh, how’s it going, anyway? I keep saying I’m going to lend you a hand and then getting distracted by, uh. Things.”

“It’s going all right,” Dave said, glancing around the lair. “I ended up wiping the laptop but I got a lot of raw data off it. It’ll take me a while to sort through the data and see what’s what, but it’s a definite step in the right direction.”

“What about those CDs?”

“Encrypted,” Dave said with a sigh. “Still, that should be easier to crack than the security stuff on the desktop machines. That stuff is vicious.”

“Yeah,” Nate said unhappily. “I spent a long time mucking around with these before you came. Never got anywhere. No one ever used these computers but Rich, so he didn’t label *anything*.”

“Didn’t document anything, either,” said Dave. “Didn’t streamline his code. Didn’t do a lot of stuff. And his variable names are *weird*.”

“Really? Bad sign.” Nate frowned. “I wonder if he thought of it like a security measure.”

Dave shrugged. Behind him Rich’s smaller computer shut itself down. Dave sighed. “Maybe he just thought it was funny.”

“I don’t think so,” Nate said. “Rich never thought anything was funny. I remember once when I was talking to him I called that computer ‘Mama Bear’—” Nate waved a hand at Rich’s smaller desktop machine “—and he tried to hate me to death with his brain. It was just a joke, sheesh.”

“Mama Bear, huh?” said Dave, glancing over at the smaller computer just as it rebooted itself.

“Well, yeah,” Nate said. He was starting to wish that he hadn’t brought this up. “There’s three of them in all different sizes, right? So there’s Papa Bear, Mama Bear, and the laptop is obviously Baby Bear.”

“Obviously,” Dave said, jiggling the mouse to wake up the largest computer and bring up the single unlabeled text box that had been the bane of Nate’s life for close to six months. “Papa Bear, huh,” he said, laughing a little. He typed it one-handed into the text box, fingers dancing spiderlike over the keys: **papabear**. A string of asterisks appeared. “Why the hell not?” he told Nate, hitting the return key without even looking at the screen. “Guess his porridge has had time to cool, anyway.”

“Yeah, but you totally pithed Baby Bear, he’ll never get his—” Nate choked on the rest of that sentence. Dave blinked at him for a second, then turned around to look at the monitor. The big white box was still there in the center of the screen, but there were two empty unlabeled text boxes in it now, not just one. Dave and Nate sucked in their breaths simultaneously.

“Holy crap,” said Nate, grabbing the back of Dave’s chair in both hands. “I can’t believe I never tried that. Why didn’t I try that? Holy crap!”

“No wonder he tried to hate you to death if you just up and guessed his initial password,” said Dave. He spun halfway around in his chair and punched on the monitor connected to the smaller machine, then woke up yet another of the boxes and hit ‘cancel’ on a program it was running. Once the smaller computer finished booting up—Nate couldn’t help but think of it as ‘Mama Bear’ now—Dave typed **mamabear** into the empty text box. The asterisks and the box itself blinked out for a fraction of a second, then two boxes popped up to replace it. “Holy shit,” Dave said reverently. “I’ve got to update that cracking program.”

“I bet those two are for some version of user name and password,” Nate said urgently. “Doesn’t IT have a list of the passwords he used on message boards

and stuff?”

“Yeah,” Dave said, eyes glued to the monitor, “but if he reused one of those for something as sensitive as this, I’ll eat my hat.”

Nate glanced at him. “You don’t have a hat.”

“I’ll buy one,” Dave promised, typing **richardstory** into the first text box.

♦ 62: Simon

Simon ended up listening to the important parts of the recording four times. Once he was satisfied that he could recall it to mind whenever he needed them, he shut down the audio program and pushed his headphones off to hang around his neck. “Christ,” he said, closing his eyes and rubbing his temples. “I can’t decide whether to laugh at him or—no, actually, I think I want to laugh at him. A lot. But Christ, what a mess.”

“Mm,” said Sandra from behind him, the little sound so severely neutral that it made Simon blink and spin slowly around in his desk chair to face her. For just a moment the sheer pleasure of being back behind his desk distracted him from the thunderclouds on Sandra’s face, but that, unfortunately, couldn’t last.

“You okay?” he said carefully, pulling his headphones off and dropping them onto the keyboard.

Sandra shrugged. “A little angry, I guess.”

“Yeah, you know, I’m getting that.” Simon stopped, waiting to see if she’d incriminate herself.

After a moment, she did. “It’s just . . . he went out on such a limb for her despite the rest of us waving warning signs—he fucked m—*us* over to help her—and then this happens, and he has the gall to be *startled* by it.” Sandra hissed out a short, sharp sound and looked away, staring blindly at the wall.

Simon watched her for a moment. “Yeah, okay,” he finally said. “Okay. I can see that. But you seem a little too pissed for it to be just that.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I guess so.” Sandra looked back at him, then down. “*She* makes me angry. I’m pissed at Mike for buying her line of bullshit, but I guess really I’m pissed at her.”

“Jesus, I can’t blame you for that,” said Simon. “But . . .”

Sandra closed her eyes. “I know,” she said. “I need to let it go.”

“Yeah.” Simon levered himself out of his chair (with a faint twinge of regret and a sharper twinge of pain) and caught Sandra’s shoulders in both hands, stooping until he could look her in the eye. “I need you with us now, Sandy. Okay? I can’t blame you at all for being pissed off but frankly, it is a luxury that

we cannot afford right now. You wanna take Mike out back and beat the shit out of him once Farraday's back in prison, I promise you I will pin his arms for you, but right now I need both of you too much. Okay?"

After a startled moment, Sandra laughed painfully under her breath and reached up to push one of Simon's hands away. "I thought I already told you that I didn't need one of your pep talks," she said.

"Yeah, well, executive privilege, so sue me." Simon squeezed her shoulder and let go, straightening up. "Take five and get your game face on, okay? I'm going to go taunt Honda a whole bunch."

"Be sure to speak up," Sandra said, pushing past Simon and dropping into the chair he'd just vacated. "I don't want to miss this."

"Oh, Mike," Simon said, taking his seat at the head of the table and slowly shaking his head. "Mike, Mike, Mike."

"I knooooow," Mike groaned, letting his head drop into his crossed arms. "Oh, fuck, I should have seen it coming—"

"Actually, I was more 'oh Mike'-ing about your desperate and total loss of cool," said Simon. "I mean, that shit is *embarrassing*. I had more smooth than that when I was fourteen and my voice cracked on every sixth word."

"Yeah, well, I'd have totally hit that if I hadn't had a fucking microphone taped to my chest and an *audience*," Mike said indignantly, his head popping back up. "Shit, that is nowhere near a prime example of my smooth."

"Nope," said Simon, enjoying himself. "Not buying it. Seriously, your lack of mack is an embarrassment to this team, and I'd be pink-slipping you right now if you didn't have one or two other minor skills to fall back on."

Mike threw up his hands. "Oh, that's it," he said. "Next time I go out on a date I am totally wearing that fucking wire just so you guys can hear me *operate*. My lady skills are like a symphony of awesome or something."

"Kinky," said Simon. "Put that on the internet and I bet you'd make a few bucks."

"Not really," said Nate right on cue, looking up from whatever he and the new guy were doing. "Someone would just pirate the recording and pass it around. He'd be famous, but not really rich."

"I can deal with famous," Mike said thoughtfully.

Nate nodded. "You would totally be popular on the Internet."

"Thousands of hopeless geeks critiquing your performance and finding it desperately wanting," the new guy added absently, his eyes glued to the screen in front of him. Nate glanced down at him, startled, then shrugged at Mike, as if to say *the guy's got a point*.

Spotting an opportunity, Simon casually reached for Jeremy's unattended mug again. Jeremy, apparently wise to him by this point, picked it up and moved it out of Simon's reach. "Aw, come on," said Simon, settling back in his chair.

“Stolen coffee does not count. Let me have some and I’ll let you listen to the recording. I know you must be bursting with curiosity.”

“Actually, not terribly,” said Jeremy. “I’m sure it’s very entertaining, but I’m not really interested in listening to Mr. Takemura make a fool of himself again.”

“Again?!” Mike squawked.

“Liar,” Simon said cheerfully.

“You know he wants it,” Johnny added, picking up Jeremy’s mug and stealing the last of his coffee. Jeremy turned to look at him, piqued; Johnny shrugged, his face crinkling up into what was almost a grin.

“Shame on you, Texas,” said Simon. “Stealing from the thief. That’s not right.”

“It’s an ironic reversal of tropes or some shit,” Mike said.

Simon blinked at him. “Did you actually just use the word ‘tropes’ in a sentence?”

“So?” said Mike. “What you fuckers fail to realize is that I got me educated pretty good in college.”

“Got you educated pretty good last night, too,” Johnny pointed out, picking up Jeremy’s empty mug and carrying it over to the coffeemaker.

Mike hunched his shoulders. “Yeah, that was a total learning experience, and not one that I was longing for, shit.”

“It’s Diana Fontaine,” Simon pointed out, logically enough, he thought. “One way or another the woman is always going to try and fuck with you.”

“Man, if you had told me three years ago that Diana Fontaine was gonna be throwing herself on me one day . . .” said Mike, perking up a little. “. . . shit, who am I kidding, I wouldn’t have believed you.”

Johnny came back and put the full mug back down in front of Jeremy. “Thank you?” Jeremy said, glancing over long enough to quirk an eyebrow at Johnny. Simon promptly stole his mug again. Mike sniggered.

“See, Diana Fontaine’s the whole reason that Farraday’s out on parole right now despite, uh, everything,” Simon told Jeremy, giving him back what was left of his coffee. “Well, okay, maybe not the whole reason.”

Jeremy pulled the mug back against his chest, curling both hands around it protectively. “What happened?”

“Honda happened,” said Johnny, shutting his eyes.

“Yeah, not really my finest moment,” said Mike. “But I learned me my lesson: consequences *suck*.” Jeremy raised both eyebrows and waited, patiently. After a moment, Mike sighed. “Okay, so we left Rich with Nate and drove like mad fuckers to the outskirts of Massena, New York, right? And

◆ 63: *Mike*

gravel crunched softly under the wheels of the van as Mike pulled it off onto the side of the narrow two-lane road. Some little bit of the tightness in his chest eased: as much as he liked running without headlights on these tiny country roads, there was always the chance that he'd get them all smeared into road paste by an eighteen-wheeler or something. The chance of it was always enough to keep him on his toes.

From where they were parked they could see the dim lights of the cabin through the thick tree cover, almost a hundred yards away. Twenty feet or so behind them was the negligible entrance to the long dirt driveway. Mike, still nearly jittering in his seat despite the long drive, said, "You want, boss, I'll park this thing right across the driveway, box him in."

"Good idea," Simon said. "I'm not letting this fucker get away again, even if it means totaling the van and having to wait for a ride home. Do it."

Mike nodded and shot the van into reverse, trundling slowly backwards on the gravel shoulder. The back tires hit packed earth and bounced up onto it. Mike kept rolling until the front tires just barely hit dirt, then stopped the van again. "Check me," he said.

"Right. Quiet, people." Simon rolled down the window and leaned out. Mike damned near held his breath until Simon pulled his head back in and rolled the window up again. "Looks good," he reported. "He'll T-bone the van if he hits it, but it's not my van, I'll cope." Turning halfway around in the passenger seat Simon faced Sandra and Johnny, staring out of the darkness in the back. "Right, folks. Let's do this thing. Here's what I want from you: Honda, I want you with me. Texas, you're with Springheel. Spring and I will wear headsets. I want you two to circle around through the woods and come in from behind, let us all know if there's another way out of here that I'm missing. If you come across a vehicle, disable it. Quietly. Once you're in place, we're going to sneak up from opposite sides, cover both entrances, and block him in."

"He's gonna run," Johnny said, something like urgency in his voice.

"If he runs, warn him and then drop him," said Simon. "I'd prefer if you didn't shoot to kill, but take whatever shot you can. But remember that there is a teenaged girl in there, at least in theory, possibly a hostage—for Christ's sake, be careful about what you're aiming at, I'm not really eager to get crucified by the media. Or, uh, to kill her, either. Okay?"

"Right," said Johnny, glancing towards the cabin, although all he could probably see from his position was the blank metal wall of the van.

"Once I confirm where Carole Winston is, I'm going to kick in the front door and Mike and I will storm the place," Simon said. "With any luck that'll drive him out the back right into you guys. Once he's secured, Springheel, you get in there, find the girl, make sure she's okay and calm her down."

"Chick duty," Sandra said, and snorted. "Lucky me."

Simon ignored her. "I don't know what kind of weaponry he's got in there, but we're going in in vests. I don't care if he's not usually the gun type. Texas, pass 'em out." Johnny threw himself off the footlocker that he was sitting on and opened it. He passed Mike his vest; Mike wriggled into it, careful not to hit the van's horn with his elbow or do anything else critically stupid. By the time he finished fighting his way into the vest and zipped it up, everybody else was wearing theirs and Simon and Sandra were putting on their headsets. Johnny closed the footlocker.

"Any questions?" Simon said, wrapping his hand around the microphone of his headset. No one said anything, although Johnny's fingers flexed on the butt of his gun. "Right," said Simon. "I want silence on all frequencies unless it's mission-related. Springheel, Texas: go."

After Sandra and Johnny left, things got quiet in the van. Mike, without a headset, couldn't really hear much but Simon rubbing reflectively at his stubble. Occasionally Simon would cock his head to the side or tense up, listening to something that Mike couldn't hear. It kept Mike's nerves crackling.

"Right," Simon suddenly said, making Mike jump in his seat. "Tell me what you see—shit. Got it. You two hold your positions until I say." He covered the microphone with his hand again and glanced at Mike. "There's a back way out of here, Springheel says. Still, let's leave this driveway blocked."

Mike nodded. "We going?"

"We going," Simon confirmed, grabbing the doorhandle and easing up on it until the passenger-side door clicked free. Mike did the same, jogging around the front of the van and joining Simon by its side. He was painfully aware of the lights in the distance, dim and yellow. "We are heading up the front drive," Simon muttered, "repeat, heading up the front drive. Move in. If you spot a vehicle, report it and disable it."

Whatever Sandra said, it passed muster: Simon nodded. "Good." He glanced at Mike, his eyes two faint sparks of light in the darkness, and jerked his head

toward the cabin. Mike nodded, drew his gun, and fell in step just behind Simon.

The moon was still new—hard to believe that it was only last night that they’d made their last try for Farraday. The only lights in the world were those from the cabin, and those were dim; Mike picked his way through nearly absolute darkness, his heart in his throat. The hard-packed dirt under his boots occasionally gave way to undergrowth, forcing Mike back onto the path. “Shit,” he muttered. “Shoulda brought a flashlight.”

“Can’t risk it,” Simon muttered back, sweeping his eyes back and forth. “Just go slow.” He touched two fingers to the headphones, then added, “Springheel says there’s a white RV, nothing else that she can see. Spring, head for it, let me know when it’s dis—fuck, Honda, stop—”

The order came a heartbeat too late. Mike, with his eyes fixed on the cabin lights in the distance, never saw the rope, but he felt it twang across the bridge of his boot and whip away, and then the night filled with roaring—Simon’s arm came smashing around in an arc, slamming into Mike’s chest and knocking him sprawling backwards onto the driveway. There was a world-shaking thud and a sickening crunch. Simon bellowed, his voice cracking in the middle.

Mike thrashed his way up onto his elbows as fast as he could, for the moment not even concerned about where his gun had gone. A log lay sideways across the road and Simon was trapped under it—Mike’s heart stopped—no, not quite under it, although Simon was sprawled out on his face clawing at the road and gasping in breath in huge, wet sobs. His right leg was pinned under the log. “Fuck, Honda,” he wheezed, “get this thing off me—Springheel, let Texas get him—” Simon sucked in another of those horrible choking breaths “—get the Winston girl!”

In the distance Mike heard Johnny shouting, the sudden roar of a big engine, and two echoing shots. He scrambled to his feet and over to where Simon lay. “Ready?”

“Off!” Simon roared, nearly gagging.

Mike grabbed the log around the middle and heaved it up with all his strength. His back muscles strained against the Kevlar, but the log wasn’t as heavy as he’d feared—in retrospect that made sense, Farraday would have had to set this trap all by himself—and he was able to lift it a couple of inches. Swearing and gasping, Simon clawed at the road and dragged himself free. Mike duck-walked the log around, swearing a little himself, until he was able to drop it in the undergrowth, clearing the road.

“Yell for . . . Texas,” Simon said between gasps. “We’ll pursue . . . in the van—no, Spring, you . . . stay with the girl, we’ll send the locals, that’s an order—”

Mike sucked in a breath. “TEXAS!” he bellowed at the top of his lungs. “NEED YOU, MAN!”

“Coming!” Johnny yelled back a moment later, his voice thin and distant.

Mike dropped to his haunches beside Simon, his hands hovering impotently a few inches away from Simon's right thigh. It bulged oddly, visible even through Simon's loose pants. "Oh, shit, boss—"

"—it's broken," Simon gritted out.

Mike glanced behind him, at the lights of the cabin, which suddenly seemed a lot more inviting. "We'll get you to the cabin, there's gotta be a couch or a bed or something, we can call for an ambulance from there—"

"Fuck that," Simon said with alacrity. "We pursue. I am not letting that asshole get away even if it kills me."

"Fuck, boss, it might!" Mike said, getting a little panicky now.

The heavy rush of Johnny's footsteps snapped Mike out of it and he shot upright, leaving Simon stretched out at his feet. "Texas, Honda, help me up," Simon said, swallowing and finally catching his breath. "Right leg's broken. I need to get back to the van pronto. Put me in the passenger seat and get after that fucker."

"Boss," Mike wailed, but Johnny just nodded and bent down, hauling Simon's arm around his neck. Mike swallowed and dropped again, grabbing for Simon's other arm.

Somehow they made it back to the van, Simon cursing and bitching and trying to hurry all the way, making horrible gagging noises whenever his broken leg collided with Johnny's side. Mike was boosting Simon into the passenger seat when he remembered. "Fuck, my gun—"

"Forget it," Simon said, scrabbling at the floorboards with his left foot, pushing himself in. "Texas, get in the back, I got it. Honda? Fucking drive."

Mike had always been in his element behind the wheel—he shot past the cabin, already going close to thirty miles an hour. For a brief second of time he saw Sandra's face smeared against one of the cabin's windows, then she and the cabin were both gone. "Where," Mike panted, looking back and forth. "Where—there!" He hauled on the wheel and heeled the van around, sending it roaring down the second driveway in a spray of dirt.

Simon braced his left leg against the floorboard and hissed air through his teeth, his shaking hands pressing his right leg down. When he could talk again, he hauled off the headset and tossed it blindly behind him. Johnny caught it. "Texas," Simon said. "Need you to get on the radio. We need locals to the cabin and out of our way."

"Got it," Johnny said, kicking himself around and grabbing for Nate's big radio console bolted to one of the borrowed van's shelves. "Shot at his tires, but I probably missed."

The back driveway let out onto a dead end. The road only led one way from here and Mike took it. "Brace," he snapped, too focused on what he was doing to pay attention to anything else. He slammed on the brights and floored the van,

which roared in answer and lunged forward. Mike's world narrowed to the road in front of him.

Behind him the big radio was squawking. At intervals the radio went silent and Johnny grated information into it. "This is the FBI, repeat, FBI. We are in an unmarked gray van, Pennsylvania plate number FSV1088, repeat, FSV1088, we are in hot pursuit of a white Winnebago RV also with Pennsylvania plates, repeat, Pennsylvania plates. We are heading towards highway 37, need the way clear."

"Roger that," a voice crackled back at him. "Need assistance?"

Johnny hesitated. "Yes," Simon grated out, like it hurt him in several ways to admit it. "And send 'em to the cabin."

"FBI, officially requesting assistance, looking for a white Winnebago RV with Pennsylvania plates west of Massena, repeat, west of Massena," Johnny said. "Winnebago is probably heading towards highway 37, repeat, highway 37. Also need a car sent—"

Mike tuned him out right about then as the white butt end of an RV hove into view at the very limit of his vision. Beside him Simon stiffened and hissed out a warning, even as the RV hauled sharply right—well, as sharply as a Winnebago could—and vanished again. "I see 'im," Mike growled. "Fucker can't get away from me, not in that thing. Worst comes to worst he'll run out of gas before we do."

"Good," Simon said shortly, all three working limbs braced against something or other. "Sic 'em."

Mike was never able to remember details of that chase afterwards, just the dreamlike sense of pursuit. It was alternately harrowing and oddly, crushingly dull. Farraday stubbornly stuck to the back roads, taking turns seemingly at random, trying to shake off the van; a police cruiser eventually fell in behind Mike, flashers going. Then another. Behind Mike the radio squawked, yammering on about roadblocks set up here and here, but Farraday twisted and turned through the honeycomb of the countryside and Mike never saw a one. Occasionally the cars behind him would fall away and be replaced. He barely noticed, except at the animal level. He thought maybe he crossed a state line at one point, but he wasn't sure.

It would have been so easy to ram Farraday's huge, ungainly RV from behind and drive it off the road, but Simon was already badly hurt in the passenger seat and Johnny was completely unrestrained in the back. Mike set his teeth and prepared for a siege.

Hours passed, although Mike didn't notice at the time. Simon was semi-conscious at best in the passenger seat, supported by his seatbelt to an alarming extent, occasionally moaning thickly under his breath. Johnny was still working the radio. Mike only emerged from his trance when an enormous blinding flash of white light raced across the road in front of them and riveted itself to the

Winnebago, catching it in the spotlight. “Helicopter,” Mike said, raising his voice to be heard over the heavy thup-thup-thup noise from overhead. He squinted against the light. “Wonder if it’s police or media.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Simon said faintly, rousing himself enough to lift his head. “Long as it keeps him in sight.”

“Yeah, it’s doing that,” said Mike. He glanced down at the clock on the dashboard and blinked in surprise. “Fuck, how much more gas has he got? Can’t have much.”

“Hope not,” Simon said. He fell silent. Maybe he’d passed out. Mike wasn’t sure, and soon enough he tranced back out, aided by the lulling bass line of the helicopter’s rotors overhead.

Barely twenty minutes later the RV hitched once and drove straight off the road. As its wheels bumped across the uneven terrain the driver kicked open his door and bailed out, abandoning the Winnebago to its fate. The Winnebago lumbered fifteen feet further on and crashed into a tree, hard enough to jolt its back wheels off the ground; the driver lunged to his feet and bolted for the treeline. “Oh fuck you no—” Mike yelled, slamming on the brakes. The van slewed squealing off the road after the Winnebago, the police cruisers behind it fanning out across the asphalt to avoid hitting it. Simon made a horrible noise but Mike only barely heard it, smacking the van into neutral.

“I got it,” Johnny yelled into Mike’s ear, and Mike threw open the driver’s side door and hit the ground running alongside the still-moving van, holding onto its frame for a few seconds until he got his feet under him. He bolted after Farraday, the van jerking to a grinding stop behind him as Johnny threw it into park.

Farraday hit the treeline and vanished. Mike hit the treeline five seconds later. Behind him he could hear car doors slamming and state police yelling, and the red-and-blue strobe of their lights made the night into a crazy, flickering hell, occasionally bleached white by the spotlight from the helicopter overhead—Mike spotted the flash of something white moving through the trees and bolted after it, baring his teeth. He couldn’t get up enough breath to yell. He didn’t think it mattered.

The white thing raced ahead of him, twisting and ducking through the trees. Mike threw an arm up to protect his face and went straight through, breaking branches through his sheer momentum. One branch as thick as his thumb broke across the belly plates of his Kevlar vest and drove the breath out of him, but Mike stumbled onwards, wheezing “Fuck, fuck, fuck” under his breath, slowly but steadily gaining. The helicopter’s spotlight darted back and forth, searching the trees and failing to find either of them.

Up ahead there was a break in the trees, the forest thinning again to permit another road to run through. Farraday broke from the treeline, Mike hard on his heels, and the spotlight picked them both up immediately, the spotlight wavering

at the edges but otherwise steady. Shedding leaves and twigs, Farraday vaulted the ditch and hit the road, making for the other side and the relative safety of the trees.

He was halfway across when Mike brought him down.

Digging deep, Mike found one last burst of rage-fueled speed, clearing the ditch with a prodigious leap even as his vision went dim with fury. Farraday's boots hit the white line in the center of the road and Mike body-tackled Farraday from behind, slamming him face-first onto the asphalt, hard enough to shatter Farraday's nose on the road's hard surface. Farraday shrieked in outraged pain.

"I surrender!" Farraday yelled, although with his nose broken it came out sounding more like thurrenduh. He struggled over onto his back, raising his hands, the blood on his face an unearthly bright scarlet in the helicopter's spotlight. "I give, I give—"

Mike reared up onto his knees and drove his fist straight into Farraday's lying mouth, breaking off two of Farraday's teeth at the gumline and splitting the skin on his own knuckles. Farraday squealed like a pig and started to thrash and twitch around under him, but Mike's rage had full hold of him now— "Where are his glasses, you son of a bitch?" Mike screamed, closing one of Farraday's eyes for him, then the other. Farraday curled up on his side and threw his arms over his battered head, trying to protect himself; Mike drove his fist straight down into Farraday's side and had the dubious pleasure of feeling one of Farraday's ribs snap.

Farraday was face-down and motionless on the road and Mike was rabbit-punching him in the kidneys by the time Johnny hauled him off, and Mike got in one last good kick before Johnny managed to pull him away. "I asked you a question!" Mike yelled, and then it registered that Johnny was yelling at him to stop, and the night was suddenly full of troopers and lights and the thop-thop-thop of the helicopter overheard, and underneath it all he'd always swear to God that he could hear Farraday laughing—

◆ 64: Johnny

and that's how eight state troopers and a news helicopter witnessed me beating the shit out of a suspect who had kinda sorta already surrendered," Mike finished, flat and matter-of-fact. He shrugged a little, closing his eyes. "I ain't gonna lie, I'm not sorry I did it, but I sure as hell am sorry they caught it on tape, you know?"

The room was pretty quiet. Johnny checked over his shoulder, out of habit: even the new guy was listening, although he'd had the sense not to turn around. Nate was kind of pulled in on himself, but coping. Beside Johnny, Jeremy was quiet.

Eventually Simon roused himself a little. "Yeah, as you can probably tell, I missed all the excitement. I was still unconscious and strapped into the god-damned van when the ambulances came, one for Farraday and one for me."

"Guess they didn't want to put you two in the same ambulance," Johnny said. "Can't imagine why."

"Mm," said Jeremy. "Well. I think I'm beginning to see the shape of the problem here."

"Yep," Simon said, tapping his fingers idly on the table. "I was in traction for a while, which, Jesus, if I ever break my leg that bad again, just shoot me like a fucking horse and put me out of my misery, it'd be kinder, you know? And by the time I got out of the hospital it was all over except for the brand-new black mark a mile long on Mike's record."

"They cut a deal, didn't they," said Jeremy.

"And how," said Simon. "Three days after Farraday gets arrested his lady lawyer Miz Fontaine shows up, and she's got a whole bunch of pretty pictures and video footage, and she sits down with some guys who had no stake in the matter whatsoever and she just wriggled him free."

"It was all so fucking mutual I could just puke," Mike threw in, still sounding pretty bitter, even now.

Simon nodded at Mike. "Farraday agreed not to press charges against Mike if he wasn't prosecuted for the thing with Nate. And, well, shit, the FBI takes a

look at the two cases, with all this evidence against Mike and the public outcry and really only Nate's word for it against Farraday, and Diana Fontaine hints that she'll ask Nate how well he can see without his glasses if that goes to trial, and ta-da, a deal was struck."

Jeremy winced. "And the trap? Surely he could be prosecuted for breaking your leg."

"You'd think so, wouldn't you?" said Simon. "Farraday swore up and down that he didn't set that trap. Said that he always came and went through the back entrance, didn't even know it was there. Anyway, said cabin belonged to this crazy Unabomber-type guy who used to let Farraday use the cabin in return for God knows what—anyway, turns out he set that trap up himself to keep people off his land. So he says, anyway. Turned himself in a couple of days later, sold the cabin to pay for his copious legal bills. Some company bought the land and razed it, just logged it flat, and now the land's part of some goddamn factory of some kind, shit, I don't remember. So we couldn't pin that on Farraday, either."

Jeremy raised an eyebrow. "Kidnapping? Something-or-other with a minor?"

"Carole Winston was fine, if a little shaken, but she claimed that she went with him freely—"

"—and Amanda Winston fucking refused to press charges," Mike broke in, seething. "She wanted us to break up their little party but she was still all hot in the pants for Farraday, who knows why. Minute she gets her daughter home again she changes her mind."

Jeremy raised the other eyebrow. "Resisting arrest?"

"Diana Fontaine said that she'd use the video footage to prove to the jury that Farraday was fleeing in fear of his life," Simon said, curling his lip in disgust. "Mike's got kind of a record as a discipline problem already, see."

"Surely he went to jail for *some* real reason," Jeremy said.

Simon's blank look was positively sphinx-like. "Surely you're not insinuating that we railroaded him, Archer."

"No, no," said Jeremy, shaking his head. "Wouldn't dream of it. So what *did* he go to prison for?"

"In the end, Cole Farraday was prosecuted and sent up the river for smuggling crates of untaxed cigarettes across state borders," Simon said, his voice very even. "The state police found the crates in the back of the Winnebago and managed to tie them to him, all nice and neat—Jesus, it wasn't even our bust—and then of course Diana Fontaine brought out the pictures and video footage at the trial and convinced the jury that this poor fellow had suffered enough already, so he pretty much got minimum jail time, served a couple of sentences concurrently, got time off for good behavior—oh, and he sat in jail and leached off the taxpayers for almost a year instead of posting bond, crying poor, so he got credited for time served, too."

“My fault,” Mike said mournfully. “All my fault. After that video showed up on CNN they were falling all over themselves to keep Farraday from suing—how many of his prior charges did they drop? Like ten?”

“Lucky you didn’t get fired,” Johnny said.

“Christ, no kidding,” said Simon. “Mike was suspended without pay for like the next two months, all of which I spent stumping around the halls in my giant cast arguing with people. Eventually, you know, it blew over, some new scandal cropped up, people got tired of listening to me bitch, and they quietly unsuspended him—”

“Made me go to like two years of anger-management therapy, all that shit.” Mike abruptly slumped down in his chair, letting his head fall back. “And next time I fuck up in public, I’m out. They said.”

Simon reached over and patted Mike’s shoulder. “That’s my little psycho.”

“Good Lord,” said Jeremy. “I got off lightly, didn’t I?”

“You bet,” Simon said. “Far under the radar as you fly, I could pretty much have let Mike put you in an unmarked grave back then, if I’d wanted.”

“I’d done it, too!” Mike said, rallying a little.

“I’m rather glad you didn’t want, then,” said Jeremy. “I’m so glad I was useful enough to let live.”

“Not sure I’m so glad,” Simon said, “but your gratitude is heartwarming nonetheless.”

“And that’s pretty much the whole story right there,” Mike said, shrugging. “Farraday was being quiet in jail until about four weeks ago, and the rest you know.”

“Well,” said Johnny, unwilling as ever to let it drop, “ain’t quite the whole story.”

Mike hesitated, then snickered. “Aw, shit, yeah, I wasn’t here for that, I always forget about that part.”

Jeremy raised an eyebrow. “What part?”

“Oh, here we go,” Simon said, throwing up his hands in mock disgust.

Johnny shifted around in his chair to look at Jeremy. “Couple of weeks after Simon gets back, he’s got this huge cast all up to here, right—” Johnny chopped the side of his hand high up against his thigh “—and he’s all pissy ’cause he can’t do anything on crutches—”

“So Texas cracks all wise at the wrong time and Templar whips his empty mug at Texas’ head,” Mike broke in. “Came about this close to giving Johnny a concussion and reducing the team by another head. Shit, that’d have put us all the way down to two unwounded team members on active duty.”

“They’ve never let me forget that,” Simon told Jeremy. “Every time I get sick or hurt, it’s always ‘he throw anything at you yet?’. Christ. I lose my temper *one time* and I’m going to hear about it until I’m ninety.”

“Yep,” said Johnny, satisfied.

“Besides,” said Simon, “I was so sure he’d duck in time.”

“Man, remembering all this now, it makes me wonder why I ever gave Diana Fontaine and her note the time of day,” Mike said.

“Because she went all helpless and scared and appealed directly to your manly instincts,” Sandra said from the doorway to Simon’s office. “And by ‘manly instincts’ I mostly mean ‘dick’.”

Johnny thought it was kind of interesting how fast Mike folded in on himself once he noticed that she was there. “Yeah, I guess,” he said, abashed.

Sandra looked over at Jeremy. “We never could figure out if she was one of the ladies at Farraday’s apartment complex or not. Probably she was, but she’s not going to tell *us*.”

“Were they, ah, romantically entangled?” Jeremy asked. “Or was it purely business?”

“Dunno,” said Sandra, shrugging. “Personally, I think he was screwing her. Still is. But again, she’s not about to tell us.”

“And, you know, you’re allowed to say ‘fucking’,” Simon told Jeremy. “Fucking, fucking, fucking. Good old Anglo-Saxon word, fucking. Much less coy.”

“Coy,” said Jeremy, blinking.

“Coy,” Simon confirmed.

“And here I thought I was merely being polite,” said Jeremy with a shrug. “After all, there are ladies present.”

“Oh, fuck you,” Sandra said, sounding cheerful for pretty much the first time that day.

“Given the general tenor of this conversation, I find myself required to ask if that’s an offer,” said Jeremy.

“Hey!” Mike said, and then made a little embarrassed noise and shut up again.

“No, Archer, it’s not an offer,” said Sandra, ignoring Mike. “How about I tell you to go fuck yourself instead?”

“Well, then, I’d have to tell you that while I *am* fairly limber thanks to the demands of my profession, I don’t quite bend *that* far,” Jeremy said with a shrug.

Sandra almost smiled. “Have you tried?”

Johnny promptly pushed his cuff back and ostentatiously checked his watch, glancing up at Mike every couple of seconds. Simon eyed him. “What’s up, Texas?”

“Timing how long it takes Honda to ask Archer if he can suck himself off,” said Johnny.

Mike shut his mouth, looking injured, to the accompaniment of a whole chorus of choking sounds from pretty much every corner of the room. Jeremy looked thoughtful. “Do you know,” he said, “I’d never thought to try it?”

“So! I’m guessing Nate is bright red right about now,” Simon told Sandra, not bothering to check.

Sandra glanced over Simon's shoulder. "Pretty much," she said. "Mr. Brasso's ears appear to match his hair, too."

"I love you guys," Simon said affably, "but you have this way of assaulting me with mental images that were just not meant to be."

Sandra straightened up and stretched, rising onto her toes for a moment. "I think that's our cue to get back to work, folks." Turning, she vanished back into Simon's office. A moment later the springs in his office chair squeaked.

Mike sighed and popped open his laptop again. "Remind me to call Amanda Winston this afternoon, will you? I'm kinda looking forward to smacking her with the information that Farraday chose some other lady over her."

"Oh, right, crap, I was going to go down to the lab," said Nate, tearing himself away from Rich's old lair. "Texas, you want to come with me to my cousin's this afternoon? I have to fingerprint my mother, oh God, and Sandy says I should take someone with me when I go."

Johnny thought about it while he groped around in his shirt pocket. "Yeah, I can do that," he finally said. "Kind of at loose ends until Farraday shows his face anyway."

Nate nodded and, despite his earlier statement, went and sat down in front of his computer instead. Johnny bit down on his toothpick, searing his tongue with cinnamon, and closed his eyes, listening to the sound of typing all around him.

◆ 65: Sandra

One look at the stills from the security camera told Sandra that this incident report also had nothing to do with Farraday. She repressed a sigh and closed the image file, then deleted the report and moved on to the next one.

Wherever Farraday was, he'd gone to ground with an eerie totality. He wasn't robbing gas stations or liquor stores or even for-Christ's-sake *parking meters*. He hadn't shown his face in any airport, bus station, train station, subway terminal, or taxi stand within the ten-state area. He wasn't staying in any hotel, motel, hostel, flophouse, homeless shelter, RV park, parking garage, or any other even semi-legitimate form of shelter. He hadn't been caught on any security camera anywhere (so much for Homeland Security and their much-vaunted facial-recognition software) and despite every policeman within five hundred miles just jonesing to catch a glimpse of him, he'd managed to evade their semi-watchful eyes. He had not turned up in any crack house, meth lab, or prostitution busts. There were WANTED: REWARD posters up in the break rooms of every convenience store and food mart in the area, and they'd gotten a lot of false positives off those, convenience-store wages being what they were, but not a single lead worth following up. And, of course, his parole officer hadn't heard a word.

In short, he might be invisible, but he was also still, obviously, somewhere nearby. Sandra had long ago stopped wondering why it took him two weeks to get around to shooting Simon and had started wondering how on earth he'd found and outfitted the perfect hiding place in so short a time. He had to have a stolen car of some kind, since he'd been traveling too far for a bicycle and public transportation was theoretically impossible for him right now, so wherever he was hiding, it was probably big enough to hide a car. Maybe two.

On a hunch she called the Virginia impound lot to which Diana Fontaine's car had been towed. "Yes, ma'am, that car is still here," the attendant said. "It's in the back lot. I can see it from where I'm sitting now."

"Thank you," Sandra said, and hung up. So much for that hunch. So much for all of her hunches, in fact. Every day she thought of a new avenue of escape to

close off, and every day Farraday wasn't there. It was like playing Minesweeper and having every spot come up blank.

She'd just sent in a request to have both Diana Fontaine's driving record and her plates pulled when Mike bobbed up in the doorway and knocked tentatively on the frame. "Hey, uh, I'm gonna go get Miz Fontaine's lunch and bring it to her, okay?"

"Not without me, you're not," Sandra said with alacrity, hopping out of her chair and grabbing her purse. "After what happened last night I do *not* want you being alone with her, not even for five seconds."

Mike huffed out an irritated breath. "Shit, what's she going to do, wrestle me to the floor, tie me up, and rip my pants off? 'Cause as totally hot as that would be, I seriously do not think she has the upper-body strength, you know?"

"And I can see you gave that little fantasy a lot of thought before you decided it was unlikely," Sandra said dryly. "If you don't want me to come, that's fine, but you take someone else with you. And wear the wire, I don't care if you *are* just knocking on her door and handing her a sandwich."

"Hey, yo, I got that in place," Mike said, yanking up the bottom of his sweatshirt to expose the black wire that ran from his pants pocket all the way up to his chest, as well as a whole lot of skin and medical tape. "Off my ass."

Sandra rolled her eyes. "Can the male-stripper act, Mike."

"You know what, no," said Mike, although he did let his sweatshirt drop. "I'm gonna keep proving that I can do shit right until you start believing it."

"Let's just go," Sandra said, rounding the corner of Simon's desk. "We can take my car."

"Want me to drive?"

"No."

They ate in silence. Mike bolted down his sandwich in record time (even for him) and abandoned Sandra to the rest of hers while he went back up to the counter; by the time he returned with Diana Fontaine's lunch and a bottle of Diet Coke from the cooler, Sandra was just about done. She pushed back her chair and led the way out, Mike dogging her heels.

Mike spent the rest of the drive staring fixedly out the passenger-side window and tapping his fingers arrhythmically on his knee—after a while, it started to make Sandra feel a little guilty despite herself. The bag containing Diana Fontaine's sandwich sat in his lap, her bottle of Diet Coke nestled comfortably between his thighs. "I ought to tell Ms. Fontaine you crotched her lunch," Sandra said, tentatively.

"Don't do me any favors," said Mike, still staring resolutely out the window.

"Fine," said Sandra, nettled. "I won't."

Mike didn't even respond to that, just went silent again. It was unsettling, it was un-Mike, and it left her hanging. None of this did anything to improve

her mood. Her guilt blew away like smoke. After a moment he started in with the finger-tapping again, and Sandra had to fight down the momentary urge to scream or pop him one.

Fortunately, the lunchtime traffic was heavy enough to be distracting, and by the time they got to the hotel, she had other things on her mind. She parked around back and led the way in, Mike still following her like a sullen puppy dog. "Don't forget to turn on the wire," Sandra said in the elevator.

"Fuck me, I'm not going to forget," Mike said grumpily. "Give me a little credit, okay?"

Sandra snorted and looked away. When the elevator doors opened on their floor, Mike charged out ahead of her, which didn't really surprise her at all.

She caught up to him just as Diana Fontaine's door opened. "Mike, I really want to apologize for what happened last night," Diana said all in a rush, and then she caught sight of Sandra and choked, her cheeks going pink.

"Go ahead and apologize," Sandra said evenly. "Don't mind me."

"Here," Mike said, pushing the bag at Diana. "Don't worry about it."

"Oh. Um." Diana took the bag. Mike held out the Diet Coke and she took that, as well, carefully looking down at her hands instead of up at him. "Anyway, I'm sorry," she said, quickly, like she was afraid she'd lose her nerve. "It won't happen again."

"Don't *worry* about it," Mike said again, in a weirdly gentle and cajoling voice that set Sandra's entire spine on edge. "Need me to bring anything when we come back tonight?"

"Um . . . no, I don't think so." Diana Fontaine clutched the bag and bottle to her chest and looked up at Mike with a puppy's soulful eyes. "I'll see you then."

"Yeah," said Mike. "Enjoy your lunch."

Diana lingered in the doorway for a moment, then glanced away and stepped back, letting the door swing to. The moment it latched Mike looked over at Sandra, his expression completely flat, and deliberately reached up under his sweatshirt and turned the wire back off with an audible click.

"Might not want to do that in front of the peephole," Sandra said.

"Might not want to say that in front of the door," Mike shot back. He turned on his heel and brushed past her, heading for the elevator.

Sandra caught up with him in front of the elevator doors. "I see she needs coddling," Sandra said, completely unable to stop herself from being snide about it.

"Yeah, she does," said Mike, staring straight ahead and jabbing the down button again. "She's not some cast-iron bitch who's got to act tough and stomp on my balls all the time, like some people I could name."

Sandra jerked upright like she'd been electrocuted. "... you know what, even putting aside the implied insult to me—"

"—maybe I didn't mean you, you know—"

“—yes, you did, and *yes, she is!*” The elevator dinged. Sandra shut her mouth with a snap.

The elevator doors slid open, revealing a man with a suitcase. He glanced at them, then edged towards the back of the car, making room. Lots of room. Mike and Sandra both stalked aboard and rode down to the lobby in seething, infuriated silence. Sandra could just *tell* that the guy in the back was assuming them to be a married couple having a spat, which really only pissed her off more.

They all escaped from the elevator eventually and Mike strode off towards the back door, fast, without looking back. Sandra ground her teeth and followed him. “Or she was,” Sandra gritted out, when she caught up with him at her car. “I remember what she was like back then and so do you. Or you should.”

“Yeah,” Mike said. “Yeah, I remember. So? What? You want me to carry a grudge and let her get shot or something? Yeah, that’s real fucking professional.”

“You’re assuming that she’s not in league with Farraday—”

“—you’re assuming that she is!”

“You’re one to talk about being professional!”

Mike slammed his hand down on the roof of Sandra’s car, narrowing avoiding leaving a dent. “Yeah, well, you’re one to talk about other people being cast-iron bitches, *Sandy*.”

Suddenly Sandra was so angry that she did not dare give vent to it, not here, not now. “Get in the car,” she said, her voice completely devoid of inflection.

Mike jerked halfway around and glared out over the parking lot behind him for a second. “Fuck,” he finally spat, and yanked the car door open, slinging himself in.

Sandra took in a breath, held it, and let it out. “Fuck,” she echoed bitterly. Then, moving very carefully lest she wrench off the door handle in an explosion of fury—and she felt like she could—she let herself into the car.

◆ 66: Dave

A mere two hours after a breakthrough and he was stuck again, which was *also* pretty much the story of his life right now. The program that was trying to crack the smaller computer had been updated and was running again. Dave himself had returned to that interminably long text file and started splitting it up into smaller files: recognizable snippets of code in this one, English text in that one, gibberish over here in *this* one.

It was dull, repetitive work, but something he really didn't feel comfortable automating—what if his eye just happened to fall on some bit of text with an unencrypted password in it? Unlikely, sure, but stranger things had happened during his time with Internet Crime, and he wasn't going to dismiss the possibility of them happening again. So he did it by hand. It wasn't that bad, really. Just tedious.

Behind him things were happening, although he wasn't really paying much attention. After a while even the boom of the door stopped registering with his conscious brain, and the buzz of conversation was just comfortable background noise. At one point he surfaced just long enough to realize that he was alone in the room; it didn't really dawn on him why that might be, and he sank back down into his working trance.

Eventually, some unknown amount of time later, he realized that someone was standing behind him impatiently repeating his name, and he jumped a little. "Oh! Uh. Sorry, I was just..."

"Distracted?" Sandra asked, her voice thin. "I asked you where everybody was."

"... I don't know," Dave said, glancing at the clock on his computer. "I guess they're still at lunch? Oh, hey, that's right, lunch. I should do that."

Behind him, Sandra was ominously quiet. Dave twisted around in his chair. Sandra was standing in the middle of the room with her hands on her hips, glancing back and forth angrily. Dave cringed a little when her gaze finally drifted back to him and locked on. He couldn't help it. "Before you go," Sandra said crisply, "I want a status update."

“Oh. Sure,” said Dave. “Do you mind if I take a couple of minutes to get this process running first?”

Sandra stared at him like one of the two of them was crazy and she suddenly didn’t know which one of them it was. “Take your time,” she finally said, flatly, and vanished into the office.

Wincing, Dave whipped back around and pulled up the gibberish text file, feeding it to the ‘password-generation’ program that he’d put together. If the little program worked correctly, it ought to divide the gibberish into every possible password permutation between four and twelve characters long and spit the results back out in yet another enormous text file, which Dave could then feed to the program trying to break into the smaller computer, or ‘Mama Bear’, as he couldn’t help but think of it now. If there was a plain-text password hiding in all that gibberish, he’d find it. Sooner or later. He watched the program spit out text chunks for a moment. Once he was satisfied that it was working he pushed back his chair and stood up, making a note to himself to go bully a real desk chair out of the infrastructure people later. Sweeping up the four CDs, he made his way into the office.

Sandra was sitting behind the desk, paging through what looked like a whole bunch of emails. Dave quietly took a seat, the CDs clutched in his lap, and waited. The silence stretched for almost thirty seconds before Sandra, still apparently completely absorbed in her work, said, “Well?”

Dave jumped a little. “Oh! Sorry,” he said. “Um, anyway. The first thing I did was let the laptop finish deleting itself, and—”

“So now, what, we’ve lost all the data on one of his three computers?” Sandra said incredulously, finally kicking the chair around to face him.

“Um,” said Dave.

“Mr. Brassoff, that’s not—”

“Um. Please, let me finish,” Dave said, holding up a hand. “The data isn’t lost, not precisely. That copy of it is gone, but IT has an image of the laptop’s hard disk in storage, and Nate assures me that Mr. Story copied everything off the laptop onto one of his desktop machines every couple of days. I don’t think much was lost in any case, and I was able to interrupt the process enough to rescue a bunch of data, which is what I’m working with now.”

For a moment, Sandra was silent, eyeing him narrowly. Dave’s stomach did a slow barrel roll, but he clutched at his handful of CDs and willed it to be still. Finally, Sandra sighed and gestured brusquely at him. “All right, Mr. Brassoff. I see your point. Next?”

“Well, um. As you probably noticed, I disassembled Mr. Story’s space yesterday and found these hidden in various places,” Dave said, holding up the CDs like a hand of cards. “I don’t know what’s on them yet, or how important they are. I’m going to have IT make images of them before I start trying to break into their encryption, just in case. I suspect I’ll need whatever crazy homebrew

OS he was running in order to read them properly. So I'm currently ranking their priority as low."

"Low," Sandra repeated.

Dave nodded. "Lower than actually breaking through the security systems on his computers, in any case. Once I can access one of his computers, accessing the CDs should be child's play."

"And how likely do you think it is that you'll eventually be able to access one of his computers?" Sandra asked.

"It's hard to say," Dave said, temporizing. "Personally, I'm confident that I can do it, given enough time."

"Rich was supposed to be some kind of genius," Sandra said doubtfully. "Or, well, I suppose 'idiot savant' is closer to the truth."

"Judging from what he left behind, I'd have to agree with that," said Dave. "But trust me when I say that if he *was* some kind of computer genius, that actually makes my job a little easier."

"Why's that?" She was actually listening to him now, the irritation gradually clearing from her expression.

Dave hesitated. "I don't really want to, uh, speak ill of the dead—"

"—just tell me," Sandra said. "I wasn't inclined to tiptoe around him when he was alive and I'm even less inclined to do so now."

"Computer prodigies, real ones, tend to be sloppy," Dave said. In his lap, under the handful of CDs, he crossed his fingers. He wanted to knock on wood but he suspected that that would look a little unprofessional. "The kind that eat and breathe code, you know? They think they're so smart and so they do everything their own way, automatically assuming it's the best way just because they thought of it. A lot of times, they reinvent the wheel without ever bothering to wonder why normal people made the wheel the way it was in the first place. I don't mean that his code has holes, but it's . . . odd. I don't think it was ever properly stress-tested. Sooner or later I'll be able to force my way in."

Sandra raised her eyebrows. "Are you certain of that?"

"No," Dave admitted. "But so far, I haven't found anything to convince me otherwise."

"All right," Sandra said after a moment, looking down at the desk. "Anything else?"

"Uh, well, yesterday Nate and I managed to get past his top-level passwords," Dave said. "I'm working on cracking the second level of security now."

"I see." Sandra looked back up at him. "So what are your plans for the next few days?"

"I'm going to analyze the snippets of data I managed to pull off the laptop and keep working on that second level of security," Dave said. "They're really two parts of the same job. If I can just get access to one of his machines, the rest will be easy."

“Easy?”

“Easy.” Dave hesitated, his stomach churning again, and then went for broke. “I’m not saying he wasn’t good at what he did. It’s just that . . . I’m not bad myself, ma’am. And I’m bound to be a lot more thorough. Given enough time . . .” He trailed off there and shrugged, uncomfortably aware of his ears burning.

“Time is always the problem, isn’t it,” Sandra said, glancing back at the computer. “All right, Mr. Brassoff. Thank you. You probably ought to go get yourself some lunch before the cafeteria closes.”

“Probably,” Dave agreed, standing up. “I’ll, uh, be back in a little.”

“Take your time,” Sandra said, not really paying attention to him any more. She spun her chair around and settled in in front of the computer. “Oh, and Mr. Brassoff?”

“Huh?”

“Call me ‘ma’am’ again and I’ll break all your fingers,” Sandra said.

“Oh. Uh. Okay.” Dave hesitated, lurking in the doorless doorway. “You could, uh, call me Dave, then. Not that I’m going to break anybody’s fingers over it, but it’d be nice.”

“I suppose I could,” said Sandra, eyes on the screen. “Go have lunch.”

Dave came within a hair of saying ‘yes, ma’am’ but stopped himself just in time. “Okay.”

At just after one in the afternoon, the Special Ops wing was a quiet hive of activity, all of it taking place behind closed doors. The hallway was sparsely populated. Dave scuffed along, deep in thought, nodding absently at the few people that he passed. Somewhere deep down he was amazed at how little attention they were paying to him: a glance, maybe a nod or a wave, and that was it. He was still half-expecting to get buttonholed by someone demanding to know who he was or why he was here and where was his ID. The fact that he didn’t either meant that news traveled fast, or that he somehow looked like an FBI lifer. The latter was an oddly comforting thought.

He glanced into the vending-machine area as he shuffled past on his way to the cafeteria, his stride hitching a little as he spotted a couple of familiar faces. Simon was leaning back against one of the machines upending a bottle of water and didn’t see him, but Jeremy did. Jeremy raised a hand in greeting. Dave waved back, slowed down a little, thought better of it, and went on.

The cafeteria was largely empty, too. Still turning his meeting with Sandra over in his head, Dave drifted through the line and got himself some lunch, then found an empty table. Had it gone well? He thought it might have gone well. He’d just managed to convince himself that yes, it really *had* gone well when someone broke his concentration by calling his name. “Dave!”

Dave blinked and looked up just as the voice’s owner plunked down at the table opposite him. “Oh, hey, Rory,” he said, resigned to the man’s ‘company’

but determined to at least be polite about it.

“Long time no see!” Rory said. “How’s you?”

“Fine,” Dave said automatically, picking up his sandwich. “How are things up in Crime?”

Rory shrugged. “Same ol’, same ol’. Gwen’s pissed off because you left and now none of us will hold her hand when she blows up her computer yet again, Nick’s wife had her baby and it’s made him stupid and boring—unlike me, of course, the twins only made me even more glamorous and exciting—and I understand that somewhere in the department, internet crime is being investigated? Shocking.” Snickering, he unwrapped a packet of crackers and crumbled them into his soup. “So how’s Special Ops? You getting along okay up there?”

Dave hesitated. Once again he found himself unsure of the answer to that question—he covered the conversational stumble by taking a bite of his sandwich. “You know,” he said, swallowing, “I’m not really sure? But . . . you know, I think so.”

“Good,” Rory said. “Great. You get shot at yet?”

Prodded by a random, inexplicable impulse, Dave said, “Only by my team leader, but I’m told he hardly ever actually shoots to kill,” and watched Rory choke, which Dave found a lot funnier than he’d been expecting to.

◆ 67: Jeremy

“Oh, these are lovely,” Jeremy said, gingerly nudging his clear plastic goggles back up. They kept trying to slide down his nose, despite the enormous pair of blue noise-cancelling headphones that ought to have kept them pinned in place. “Very fashionable. I kept asking myself what my wardrobe was missing, and it turns out that the answer was ‘tacky plastic headgear’ all along.”

“Sorry, can’t hear you,” Simon said loudly, with what Jeremy considered to be an inappropriate amount of glee. He tapped one of his own earmuffs. “I’m wearing protective gear!”

Jeremy rolled his eyes and glanced around, half curious, half bored. Simon had insisted they go all the way down to the very last compartment, or whatever these little individual shooting booths were called. The firing range was a huge and cavernous underground room, capable of holding at least fifty or so shooters—at the moment, however, there were perhaps five other people in here, and most of them were down at the far end, by the double doors that led into the range. That, together with the (ridiculous) headphones that Simon had forced on him, meant that the noise of gunfire was reduced to a rather polite (if constant) echoing popping sound off in the distance.

Jeremy looked back at Simon. “Are you certain about this?”

“Absolutely,” Simon said, thereby completely putting the lie to ‘can’t hear you’. He touched a switch and the paper target ran outwards along its rail. Simon stopped it about halfway out; Jeremy estimated it was about fifteen metres away. “I want to know if I can do it before I actually need to.”

“I won’t stop you,” Jeremy said, glancing out at the man-shaped target and repressing a vague shudder of distaste. “But if it *does* kill you, I’m not looking forward to dragging your corpse all the way back down to the entrance.”

“Pfft, lazy-ass.” Simon pulled his gun out of the holster in the small of his back and fiddled with it for a moment, moving bits here and there and producing a number of seemingly random noises. “You may want to stand on the other side of me.”

“Oh? Why?”

In answer, Simon slid his feet apart and aimed the gun two-handed at the target, then pulled the trigger. The sharp crack of the bullet firing was shatteringly loud, like hearing his own skull fracture, even with the earmuffs on; a little gold cylinder popped out of the top of the gun and bounced off Jeremy's shoulder. Unthinkingly, he caught it. It was almost hot to the touch. "Gun tends to eject shell casings to the left," Simon wheezed, coughing.

Jeremy studied Simon, turning the casing over in his fingers. "That looks like it hurt."

"A little," Simon said. He caught his breath and swallowed. "Not too bad. I can live with it."

"Mm. Well, try not to damage yourself too badly," Jeremy said. "I don't know how I'd ever explain that to Ms. Leone." He put the casing down on the little counter and moved to the other side of the booth.

Simon gritted his teeth, aimed the gun again, and fired. This time, expecting it, Jeremy was a little less pained by the cracking noise, and the ejected casing hit the wall opposite instead of Jeremy. He glanced out at the target. The fellow painted on the paper had a neat hole in his chest and a second one in his left shoulder. The gun cracked again; a hole bloomed in the centre of the target, near the man's stomach. Jeremy winced. "Ouch," he said.

"Yeah, that guy's not doing too good," Simon said, extending the gun a little and shooting a neat hole in the centre of the man's face, just about where his nose ought to be. "There. He's no longer in any pain. Happy?"

"Never thought I'd find myself identifying with an outline," said Jeremy, glancing back at Simon. Simon was a little pale, with a thin sheen of sweat just starting to break on his forehead. Jeremy forbore from asking him if he was all right, since it was obvious that he wasn't.

Simon took his shots, pausing to breathe and recover a bit between each one. The paper target slowly filled with holes. Jeremy counted, silently. After fifteen shots the top part of the gun snapped back and stayed back, and Simon put it down on the counter. "Not too bad," Simon said, scrutinising the paper target as he reeled it in, the bottom half fluttering. He was hunched forward over the counter, holding onto the thin shelf for dear life, and he was trying to hide this fact from Jeremy by shielding his left hand and its death grip with the curve of his body. "I've shot better groupings in the past, but all in all—" Simon coughed—"it's acceptable."

"Acceptable," Jeremy echoed. Really, he hadn't the faintest idea.

Simon leaned out to pull the target down, then rolled it up and put it aside. His hands weren't quite shaking, but they didn't seem to be as steady as they ought to be; when he reached for a fresh target, Jeremy couldn't stay quiet any longer. "Far be it from me to interrupt your fun, Simon, but perhaps you ought to rest up a bit before the next—"

“Oh, I plan to,” Simon said, hanging the new target on the bar. “This one’s for you.”

Jeremy blinked. “Excuse me?”

“I’m going to teach you how to fire a gun,” Simon said, now sounding almost cheerful about it, despite the distressing waver in his voice. “Because it pisses me right off that you act so high and mighty about not knowing how to use one, like it makes you better than me or something. Ignorance is nothing to be proud of, Archer.”

“Erm,” said Jeremy, a bit bemused by this sudden turn of events. “Pardon me, these blasted headphones must be interfering with my ability to hear: I could have sworn that you just said that you were planning to teach me how to fire a gun.”

Simon touched the switch and sent the new target fluttering out, stopping it a bit closer than the last one. “Nope, sorry, I’m the only one who gets to use that excuse. I’m telling you, not asking you.”

Jeremy glanced out at the target in mild consternation. “I suppose there’s no getting around you, is there?”

“Nope,” Simon said, picking up the sprung gun and doing something to it. A long metal bit fell out of the handle, which he caught and set aside. Reaching into his pocket Simon pulled out another one of the metal things and put it into the gun, slapping it into place. “And for the record, if you end up liking it too much and start gunning down security guards while on the job, I’ll deny I ever met you, let alone taught you to shoot.”

Jeremy watched Simon manipulate the parts of the gun, although the gun was as much a mystery to him as ever once Simon was done. “Mm. Well, I suppose you always *have* had something of a talent for denial.”

“Shut up,” said Simon, turning the gun out to show Jeremy its side. “Okay! This here is a .40 calibre semiautomatic Glock 22, which has been moderately customised to my specifications. This is the barrel, this is the grip, this is the slide, and that—” he pointed to the empty metal thing on the counter “—is a magazine. It’s not the best gun in the world, but I like it fine, and it has the advantage of being standard issue, so if I lose one, I can just requisition another. It can hold up to sixteen rounds of .40 S&W ammo, one in the chamber and fifteen in the magazine, and you look like a deer in the headlights, stop panicking, you don’t actually have to remember any of this.”

“I am not *panicking*,” Jeremy said, with as much dignity as he could muster. “I’m feigning interest.”

“Sure you are,” Simon said. He put the gun—the Glock, Jeremy supposed—down on the counter, its grip pointing towards Jeremy. “You’re right-handed, I’m assuming.”

“I do tend to favour my right—”

“Great! Okay, gun safety in sixty seconds or less,” Simon said, tapping the gun’s grip. He took a deep breath and started rattling off words at a high rate of fire: “Don’t point the gun at anything you don’t intend to kill, don’t fire the gun at any hard surfaces including water, use the safety if the gun has one but don’t trust it, don’t touch the trigger unless you’re ready to fire, unload the gun when not in use but always assume it’s loaded and just itching to kill you, wear eye and ear protection if at all possible, and don’t lick the gun, it doesn’t taste good.” Jeremy compressed his lips, trying not to laugh; Simon aimed an accusatory finger at him. “See, you *are* listening.”

“All right, I suppose I am,” said Jeremy, giving up. “Go ahead.”

“Basically, you as the shooter have one job: to provide a stable and strong platform for the gun to fire from. Come stand here.” Simon pointed to the ground at the centre of the booth.

Jeremy, admitting to himself that he was interested, stepped into the centre. “Here?”

“Yeah,” Simon said, stepping oh-so-casually around behind Jeremy and wrapping his hands about Jeremy’s shoulders. Jeremy’s eyebrows shot up. Simon ignored them. “Now, you’re going to want to turn so that you’re not squared up to the target, like so.” Simon turned Jeremy bodily sideways, until one of his shoulders pointed vaguely in the direction of the target. “On the diagonal, like that,” said Simon, giving Jeremy’s shoulders a absent little squeeze before dropping his hands and stepping back, somewhat to Jeremy’s regret. “Spread your legs.”

“Oh dear, Simon, I don’t know if this is really the time—”

“Shut up and spread your feet.” Simon stuck a foot between Jeremy’s ankles and kicked Jeremy’s legs farther apart. “Try and think of it as being like a tripod with only two legs. A bipod. I don’t know. Anyway. Put your right hand on the gun, but don’t pick it up yet.”

Jeremy eyed the gun, then dropped his right hand onto the grip, fitting his fingers into what he could only assume were the proper positions. The textured grip felt rough and vaguely plastic under the palm of his hand. “Like this?”

Simon shook his head sadly. “Archer, what did I just say?”

“What did you—ah. Pardon.” Jeremy twitched his finger back off the trigger and pulled his hand back slightly. “Where does it go when I’m not firing, then?”

“Stretch it out along the barrel, like you were pointing.” Simon hooked one finger into Jeremy’s and tugged it out straight, then pressed it down, moulding Jeremy’s hand to the grip of the gun like it was so much warm clay. Jeremy obligingly wrapped the rest of his fingers around the grip. Simon inspected his handiwork, then nodded. “Good. Now pick it up.”

After a moment of hesitation, Jeremy did so, holding the alien thing gingerly. It was heavy, but lighter than he’d been expecting, all things considered. “Like so?”

“Yep,” said Simon. “Okay. I want you to point it at the target with both hands. Don’t fire it yet.”

“Ah—” Jeremy wrapped his left hand around the grip as well and brought the gun up, feeling like a right idiot. “Like this?”

“Well, yes and no,” said Simon. “If you fire it like that, the slide is going to break your left thumb when it comes shooting back. You need to have your thumbs together on the left side of the grip. Hold still—” and he put his hands over Jeremy’s, pushing Jeremy’s thumb over onto the other side of the gun’s grip before wasting a few entertaining moments nudging the rest of Jeremy’s fingers minutely into position. “You have to give the slide room,” Simon said once he was satisfied, leaving his hands cupped about Jeremy’s, which were curled about the gun. “Okay, now, is that how you plan to hold the gun when you fire it?”

“Well, I don’t know,” Jeremy said, a bit nettled despite the hands on his, which were definitely adding some interest value to his impromptu shooting lessons. “Is that how it’s supposed to go?”

“Not exactly,” said Simon. His hands slid down—oh, yes, Jeremy’s day was looking brighter—and wrapped around Jeremy’s wrists instead, squeezing them until they straightened. The barrel of the gun drifted upwards. “I know it’s against your faggot code of honour or something, but wrists straight, Archer. You want to absorb the recoil with the bones of your arm.”

“You know, if I’m the one holding the gun, you might want to ease off on the insults a touch, Simon.” In order to bring his wrists straight without pointing the gun upwards, Jeremy had to extend his right arm all the way. “Like this?”

“That’s almost it,” Simon said. He let go of Jeremy’s wrists and pushed at his left elbow. “Keep your elbows tucked in. You can bend your left elbow downwards, but not outwards.”

“Mm,” Jeremy said absently, rearranging himself. He supposed he must look very tough, but he felt ridiculous. “Like this?”

“That’s it,” said Simon, and he wrapped his right arm around Jeremy’s shoulders, a move which startled Jeremy sufficiently to make him quite glad he hadn’t had his finger on the trigger. Simon grabbed the edge of the counter in his left hand again. “All right,” Simon said, leaning in and sighting down Jeremy’s arm. “You see the little metal sight at the front end of the gun? You want that to be pointing at your target *and* to be centred between the two halves of the sight at the back end. Right now, you’d be shooting your opponent in the groin, which would probably incapacitate him nicely but isn’t really considered sporting.”

Hastily Jeremy brought the gun up a bit, sighting along the barrel at the centermost ring on the target. “You know,” he said conversationally, “this really is quite cosy.”

“Yeah, well, I’m doing it for a reason, and not the usual one,” Simon said, although his arm tightened for an entirely pleasant moment. “Sorry to disappoint you.”

Jeremy risked a glance left. “Not the *usual* one, you say,” he said.

“Trust me,” said Simon. “Ready?”

“No?”

Simon ignored him. “Keep your head up—don’t sight along your arm, use the gun-sights—and don’t close either eye. Don’t pull the trigger, squeeze it gently. Okay, whenever you’re ready: shoot him.”

“I’d rather you didn’t call it ‘him’,” Jeremy said, minutely adjusting his aim. “Entirely too personal—” and he slid his finger into the trigger guard and gingerly squeezed the trigger, automatically holding his breath.

The gun fired before he was expecting it to, bucking upwards in his hands and driving him snugly back into the crook of Simon’s arm. His palms stung. His ears stung. A bullet hole completely failed to appear on the target. “Well,” Simon said dubiously, “while that’s one seagull that’ll never crap on your head again—”

“Yes, ha ha, Simon,” Jeremy said absently, bringing the gun back into line and nestling shamelessly back against Simon’s arm while he was at it. This time he had a better idea of how much to brace himself; when he fired, a neat hole appeared in the throat of the human outline.

“Not bad,” Simon said—approvingly, Jeremy thought. “You’re still letting it kick up, though. Bring your arms down a tad. And try firing on the exhale instead of holding your breath. Here,” he said with deceptive casualness, already on the move, “I’ll help you brace.” And without further warning Simon slid behind Jeremy and wrapped himself bodily about him, pressing up against his back so closely that Jeremy could feel Simon breathing down the back of his neck. Still feigning nonchalance Simon stretched his arms out along Jeremy’s and wrapped his hands over both Jeremy’s hands and the gun itself.

“Mm,” said Jeremy. He thought that perhaps later, once he was done enjoying this, he might find a moment to be startled that Simon would do this *here*, of all places. “Oh, by all means, *brace* me, Simon.”

“Move that hip forward a bit,” Simon said, doing a remarkably good job of ignoring Jeremy despite, well, everything. He nudged his hip forward against Jeremy’s, which Jeremy found so entirely diverting that he resisted being moved for several seconds. “See? Not that hard.”

“Oh, on the contrary, very hard,” Jeremy said under his breath.

“I totally did not hear that because of my ear protection,” said Simon, although Jeremy was pressed back against him very tightly by now and therefore was *thoroughly* aware that he was lying. “You may fire when ready, Grisly.”

“Goodness, I’ll never protest your teaching methods again,” Jeremy said, shutting his eyes for a second. “Although as cosy as this is, it isn’t precisely making it easy to concentrate.” He opened his eyes, exhaled as ordered, and squeezed the trigger again. His knuckles thumped back against Simon’s palms and the bullet ripped through the centre of the target.

“And yet, there you go,” Simon said, letting his hands drop to Jeremy’s hips. “Of course, it’s mostly beginner’s luck,” he said, “but still—”

Piqued, Jeremy promptly put three more bullets through the poor paper fellow’s abdomen, the distraction of Simon’s hands notwithstanding. “As you’re so fond of saying, beginner’s luck my ass,” he said evenly. “I may not have fired a proper gun before but I bloody well know how to aim things.”

“Yeah? Guess you don’t need my help, then,” said Simon, dropping his hands and stepping away.

“Oh, well, I wouldn’t say that—”

“Just fire the gun, whiner,” said Simon. Jeremy adjusted his stance a tad and fired again, hitting the target’s ‘heart’ through a fairly even mixture of luck and design. Simon whistled. “Damn, okay, fine, guess you *don’t* need my help, wise guy. Okay. Take your finger off the trigger and put the gun down.”

Jeremy slid his finger free and placed the gun gingerly on the counter, shaking the sting from his hands. “Ouch,” he said conversationally.

“Yeah, it takes a little getting used to,” Simon said. “Turn around.”

“What?”

Simon stuck up one finger and twirled it. “Turn around. One full circle.”

Jeremy blinked. “Why?”

Simon rolled his eyes, grabbed Jeremy’s shoulder, and pushed him none too gently around. “Because I said so.”

“Oh, well, how can I argue with logic like that?” Jeremy completed the rotation good-humouredly. “All right, so what now?”

“Get back in your stance, pick up the gun, and fire it again,” said Simon, picking up the empty magazine. “Let’s see how much you’ve learned.”

“Oh, so it’s a test, I see.” Jeremy picked up the gun and slid his feet apart. “You could have just said so.” He drew in a breath and held it while he picked his target, then exhaled and shot yet another neat hole in the outline’s chest. For a heartbeat of time he was outrageously, absurdly proud of himself. “Oh, look,” he said, lowering the gun a bit. “I’ve learned something new. Do I get a merit badge?”

“Congratulations,” said Simon. The moment had passed; now he was leaning casually against the partition wall and thumbing bullets into the empty magazine, as if nothing at all had happened. “Go ahead and use up the clip. You’ve got six shots left.”

Jeremy glanced at him, then back at the target. He put three more bullets into the inmost circle, got bored with that, and wasted the last three firing at the target’s ‘head’. He hit it twice and most assuredly scared the poor fellow the third time. On the last shot the slide stayed back and he put the gun back down on the counter. “There we are.”

“Enjoy yourself?” Simon asked. He pressed the last bullet into the magazine that he was holding. “Go ahead and bring the target in and change it out. You’re a smart boy, I’m sure you can figure out how that works. Pro-tip: there’s a switch.”

Jeremy thumbed the aforementioned switch to bring the target in. “Actually, yes, I rather did,” he admitted. “Purely as an intellectual exercise, mind you.”

“Yeah, well, firing at a person is a whole ‘nother barrel of monkeys anyway,” said Simon, straightening up and picking up the gun. He changed out the magazines while Jeremy changed the paper targets, then nudged Jeremy out of the way and took up his stance at the centre of the booth again. “Send it about halfway out, will you?” he asked, pulling the slide back and letting it spring forward again.

Jeremy sent out the target, then settled back against the right-hand wall again. “I suspect my shoulders are going to ache tonight,” he said.

“Oh, probably,” said Simon. “Me, I’m gonna be hurting like nobody’s business, Christ. But still, it feels so goddamned good—” He snatched the gun up off the counter and fired off three rounds, achieving a decently tight triangle in the centre of the target.

“Mm,” said Jeremy, watching him. “Looks rather nice, too.”

Simon smiled faintly. “Sorry, didn’t catch that,” he said. “I’ve got ear protection on, remember?” He fired off a couple more shots; all in all this round of shooting seemed to be hitting him less viciously. “How much longer are you staying, anyway?”

“Mm? Ah.” Jeremy shrugged. “Until the weekend, at least. I suppose we’ll see after that.”

“Don’t you have something you should be stealing or something?” Simon asked over—or perhaps under—the racket. “I mean, I’d hate to keep you.”

Jeremy smiled. “Oh, do keep me, Simon. I’m on holiday in any case.”

“In DC? In October?” Simon paused to check something on the side of the gun, then shrugged and fired again. “If you’re going to come here on vacation, you ought to at least come in the spring. Best time to visit DC. I hear there are cherry blossoms or something.”

“Mm,” said Jeremy. “Really. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“You know what, you do that,” Simon said, putting the gun down. “You want to go again?”

Jeremy considered for a moment, then pushed himself off the wall. “All right,” he said, and he couldn’t help but smile. “But I can’t help but feel that my stance needs a little, ah, reinforcing . . .”

“Smooth, Archer, very subtle,” said Simon, but he wrapped himself around Jeremy readily enough.

◆ 68: Nate

Nate's mother hesitated, then carefully put her teacup down in its saucer, resting on her knees. Her back was ramrod straight, her body barely touching the couch she was, theoretically, sitting on. "You want to take my fingerprints," she said, without any inflection whatsoever.

Nate winced. "Yes," he said, rushing to add, "because that way we can eliminate the fingerprints that belong to you and me and concentrate only on the strange ones—"

"Like a common criminal," his mother marveled.

"No, Mom," Nate said hopelessly. He already knew it was useless. He didn't dare look over at Johnny, either.

His cousin's house (in direct contrast to his own) had been professionally decorated to within an inch of its life and then covered over with a rising tide of cheerful clutter: Ruth had three boys, two in their early teens and one rushing headlong in that direction, and the boys left things in their wake like they were spontaneously generated from the air. The place wasn't dirty, precisely—Nate couldn't see even a hint of dust—but the mess usually made his mother treat the entire house like it was contaminated. If she could have sat directly on the air, she would have. As it were, she perched stiffly on the very edge of the couch.

The house was mercifully quiet, with all three boys at school. Ruth was in the kitchen, pretending to wash dishes. The water was running; Nate might have been fooled if he couldn't see her shadow, cast clearly over the kitchen floor just in front of the door. He wondered if his mother knew they were being eavesdropped on. He wondered if Johnny did. "I fingerprint people all the time, even people who aren't implicated in anything—"

"Do you think I did it?" his mother broke in to ask, now almost willfully missing the point. "Is that why?"

"No, Mom," Nate repeated, suddenly too tired of everything to sound shocked by the idea.

It was a mistake. "You don't sound very certain," his mother said immediately. "If you're thinking that I left the window unlocked and that's how he got in, you

don't need my fingerprints to tell you that. I can assure you that I have *never* unlocked that window."

"No, Mom, I don't think you did," said Nate, as patiently as he could. "However, we think that Diana Fontaine may have unlocked the window while she was there—"

"That nice young lady?" his mother said, scandalized. Too late Nate bit down on his tongue, hard enough to hurt. 'Nice young ladies' were incapable of harming a fly in his mother's eyes, at least until they did something shocking like get pregnant out of wedlock, after which they were generally known as '*that* girl'. It would have been a little less exasperating if Nate's mother hadn't decided that any younger woman with even halfway-decent manners was automatically 'nice'. Some day, when he was strong enough to appreciate the hilarity, Nate vowed that he was going to ask his mother what she thought of Sandra.

"She's nice, yes, but she's also Farraday's lawyer," Nate said, picking his words as carefully as he could. "We're not sure if they're working together or not—"

"I'm sure they're not," his mother said, with a sort of school-teacherish patience that bordered on patronizing. "I know you must have all sorts of theories, but that poor girl was just terrified. You can't tell *me* that she was just putting on an act."

"Maybe she wasn't," said Nate. "The point is, we don't know. And the sooner I get your fingerprints, the sooner I can exonerate her."

His mother sighed. "So we're back to that."

"Yes, Mom. I'm afraid so."

"Well, if you must, I suppose you must." Transferring her cup and saucer to the coffee table (where they would sit untouched until carried into the kitchen, now that they had touched Ruth's supposedly-contaminated furniture) Nate's mother sat up and pushed her cuffs up to her elbows with swift and irritated motions. "I suppose you'll have to put black ink all over my hands, won't you. Like on television."

Nate ducked his head a little. "I'm afraid so," he said again. "We can do this in the bathroom, if that'd be easier—"

"No, no. Ruth's just had that bathroom redone and I'm not going to risk getting black marks all over her new wallpaper." His mother took a sharp breath and then held out both her hands, splaying her fingers.

Nate put his own cup down and stood up. "It'll, ah, actually be easier if I come sit over there," he said, picking up the gray box from the floor by his feet. Before his mother could protest Nate rounded the coffee table and sat on the edge of the couch beside her, then popped the box's lid.

Mindful of the fact that it was his mother, Nate had brought along half a plastic dropcloth from his supply closet. He risked a glance at Johnny while he fought with the stubborn, staticky thing: Johnny was still standing in the

entranceway, leaning against the doorframe, seemingly paying no attention to anything. It wasn't true, though. The instant that Nate looked up at him Johnny glanced over, the brackets around his mouth deepening a bit. Then he looked away again. Nate flushed in embarrassment and spread the dropcloth out over the coffee table as best he could, clattering teacups in their saucers and sending a single yellow Lego block tumbling to the floor. It was no one's idea of a fine lace tablecloth, but it would hopefully keep the ink from getting all over everything.

He put the fingerprint sheet in the clipboard and the clipboard on the dropcloth, then glanced at his mother. "Right hand first," he said, trying to sound professional and sabotaging his efforts by adding, "Please, Mom."

His mother's nostrils flared as she sighed, silently, but she put her left hand in her lap and reached over to give Nate her right. Nate balanced the ink pad on his knee and gingerly took his mother's hand—soft and powdery to the touch—and after that it was all autopilot. He did her right hand, one finger at a time, carefully rolling his mother's fingers from left to right across the labeled squares on the fingerprint sheet. He'd always been good at this.

His mother held her ink-stained right hand stiffly in midair, like it disgusted her, while Nate did her left. The instant he let go, after printing her thumb, his mother sprang to her feet, muttering something under her breath about washing her hands. Nate, unprepared, went lurching into the empty space where she'd been, and the ink pad fell off his leg. He yelped and grabbed for it. For a miracle he caught it before it could hit the floor, smearing ink all over his own hands like divine retribution. "Oh, dear," said his mother, her blackened hands held up in front of her like taut claws. "You didn't get any of that on Ruth's nice carpet, did you?"

"No, Mom," Nate said, finessing the lid of the ink pad shut with the heels of his hands. "Just my hands. Go on and wash up."

"I really don't want to hear it," Nate said ten minutes later, slamming the passenger-side door of Johnny's truck behind himself. He settled the gray box on his lap, crossing his faintly stained hands neatly on top.

Johnny almost grinned, although it was kind of hard to tell. "Wasn't gonna say anything."

"Thanks, Texas," Nate said, letting his head fall back against the truck's rear window. Johnny started the truck and pulled away, a rattling affair at the best of times. The silence wasn't much more comfortable than getting teased about his mother would have been; eventually, purely to fill the empty air between them, Nate said, "I think my cousin was insta-crushing on you a little back there."

"Noticed that," said Johnny. "Cute, too. Pity she's married."

"She's divorced, actually," Nate said before he thought. Then he did think, and he closed his mouth so fast that he bit his tongue a little.

"Divorced," Johnny said thoughtfully.

“And older than you, and the mother of three boys, and *Jewish*,” Nate said, a little desperately.

Johnny snickered. “Get the feeling you don’t want me asking her out, Specs.”

“You think?” Nate collapsed back into his seat.

“Ain’t gonna,” said Johnny. “Case you were worried.”

Nate waved a hand wearily at him. “Yeah, I know. It’s be weird.”

“Yep,” said Johnny. “So, uh, get the feeling your mom wants grandkids?”

“She *has* grandkids!” Nate said, throwing up both hands and nearly losing the box. “She has *four*!”

“Yeah, but not yours,” said Johnny, now grinning outright around his toothpick.

Nate cringed a little. “Great,” he said. It came out sounding almost bitter, which startled him. “I’ll go buy myself a mail-order bride. As long as I’m ordering women off the internet like computer hardware, maybe I can place an order for a nice Indian lady. We’ll raise the children to worship Ganesha and maybe then my mother will be sorry!”

Johnny didn’t say anything. After a moment, Nate risked a glance over at him: Johnny had a finger crooked over his lips and his shoulders were shaking, his eyes just slits in his face. A laugh bubbled up uncontrollably in Nate’s throat, startling him, and almost escaped before he could bite it back: he made a sound halfway between a croak and a hiccup. Johnny hunched up his shoulders almost to the level of his ears and then burst out laughing, and a second later Nate gave in and joined him.

“Touchy subject,” Johnny noted once the laughter had died down.

“A little,” Nate said, shrugging. “It’s just . . . who has time? Any self-respecting woman would get fed up with my work schedule in under a month—well, okay, a self-respecting woman wouldn’t look at me twice anyway, but you get my point.”

Johnny grunted.

“And even if she didn’t have a problem with my twelve-hour days, she’d probably freak out the second I got hurt or did something dangerous,” Nate said. He slid down in his seat a bit, folding in around the box on his lap. “It wouldn’t work.”

“Some ladies kinda like the danger thing,” Johnny noted.

“Well, yeah,” said Nate. “The kind of women who want to date *you*. Because, uh, you’re you, and I’m me, and it’s . . . it’s *different*.”

“Huh,” said Johnny, and went a little quiet.

Nate frowned, fidgeted a little, and finally burst out with “What?”

“Eh,” Johnny said. He shrugged. “Guess you’re right. Guess it is kind of a ‘kind’.”

“See, you look like you can handle yourself,” said Nate. His ears were already burning a bit, but he’d already said the first bit. “You look *tough*. Like if you

found yourself in a dangerous situation you could handle it. I look like what I am: a socially-maladjusted techie who'd drop his gun on his foot if he tried to use it."

"Guess so," said Johnny, momentarily diverted by a traffic light.

Nate sighed. "You could at least argue with me a *little*, you know."

Johnny's face creased up again. "Don't think you'd drop your gun on your foot," he said.

"That's better—"

"Shoot yourself in the foot, maybe," said Johnny, "but probably not drop it."

"Yeah, well, you're ugly," Nate said, and they both cracked up again.

◆ 69: Simon

"It's just weird," Simon said, pulling his shirt up and leaning forward over the sink to prod gingerly at his bandages. "I just finished firing four full magazines and it doesn't even hurt any more."

"Well, that's good," Jeremy said. He was leaning against the wall by the bathroom door, arms folded over his chest, blatantly watching Simon in the mirror. And smiling. Of course he was smiling.

Simon mostly ignored him, poking in a widening circle around the actual bullet hole, looking for bruises and finding none. "Of course, it doesn't hurt because I swear to Christ the entire left side of my body is numb."

Jeremy's smile shrank a little, becoming just a little quirk. "That's not so good."

"Guess I just overloaded my body's ability to feel pain or in fact anything," Simon concluded, pulling off his shirt and throwing it at Jeremy. "Think fast!"

Jeremy caught the shirt, glanced down at it, and then flicked it right-side-out with a disdainful little gesture, draping it neatly over his arm. As an afterthought, he reached up and locked the bathroom door. "Oh, yes, please, allow me to be your valet in addition to being your maid and your nurse—my goodness, Simon, is there anything I *don't* do for you?"

"Well, you never shut up," Simon pointed out, reasonably. Already wincing a little in anticipation—the left side of his body *was* oddly numb, but not that numb—he worked the corner of his thumbnail up under the end of the medical tape and peeled it free, then caught his breath and ripped the whole strip off. He bit back his gasp; Jeremy's reflection winced; the gauze pad fell down.

"I see you're of the school of thought that believes in not prolonging the agony," said Jeremy, recovering.

"Well, yeah, since I'm not a giant wuss," Simon said, rising up onto the balls of his feet to get a closer look at the wound. The entry site itself was almost perfectly round and still a dark purplish-pink in color, slightly lumpy on one side where healing flesh and muscle had fused to become one seriously annoying muscle adhesion. A fat pink worm of scar tissue, from where the doctors had

gutted him like a pig in order to clean the wound, ran from the purple circle out along the underside of his ribcage. And just to add insult to injury the outline of the gun's muzzle was printed very clearly on his skin, like it had been inked there—the bruise had faded to browns and yellows by now, with a few remaining disgusting greens. Simon gingerly prodded the muscle adhesion with one finger and winced a little.

Still, it was not bleeding, there were no new bruises, and he wasn't having muscle spasms or anything. In conclusion, firing the gun hadn't killed him yet, and wasn't likely to. Hooray. Simon folded the gauze pad back up and pressed down the tape until it stuck. Glancing up, he caught Jeremy's eyes in the mirror. "See something you like, Archer?"

"Quite possibly," Jeremy said, his little smile curling in on itself. "But in all honesty I was mostly curious about your war wound. I hadn't actually seen it before."

"Voyeur," Simon said, pushing himself upright and washing his hands as an afterthought. "Yeah, it's totally hot, isn't it? Look, we're twins."

Jeremy raised an eyebrow. "Actually, it looks rather like a giant pink sperm."

Simon stopped dead, his hands still under the water. "Oh, thank you," he said in disgust. "Yes, that's exactly the kind of thing I want to think about every time I see that scar in the mirror, especially here in a couple of years when it turns *white*. Thanks a lot, Archer. I'll send you my therapy bills."

"And here I thought you'd find it, I don't know, virile," Jeremy said. "Manly. Advertising."

"Do I look like I need to be any manlier to you?" Simon asked, thumping an unbandaged part of his chest with one wet hand. "I believe that I am sufficiently manly already, even with a, a bukkake spot on my chest, and I'd be happy to prove that to you at any time, *Archer*."

A silence fell. Jeremy's crooked little smile spoke volumes. Simon put up with it, well, manfully. "Perhaps later," Jeremy finally said. "I mean, the door *is* locked, but all the same this is probably not the place."

"Damn straight it's not, and also I'd like to note that that's totally rich coming from you," said Simon.

"Oh, be fair, Simon, it was a very *romantic* air-conditioning duct in the middle of a terrorist compound."

"See, this is why I can't take you anywhere," Simon said, grabbing a paper towel and drying his hands. "Give me my shirt."

Jeremy glanced down at the shirt draped over his arm. "What, this shirt?"

"Yes, that shirt, Archer," Simon said patiently, reaching out to grab one of its sleeves and tug at it.

"But you gave it to me," Jeremy protested, still smiling as he pressed his arm down and pinned the shirt to his side.

Not really wanting to rip the sleeve off his shirt, Simon stopped pulling. Of course, he didn't much feel like leaving it in Jeremy's possession, either, so he wrapped a good foot or so of that sleeve around his hand and stepped in, backing Jeremy up against the wall. Simon put a hand on the wall by Jeremy's head. "Give it," he said, tugging slightly.

"No," Jeremy said, enjoying this entirely too much for Simon's tastes, still resisting Simon's half-hearted efforts to pry up his arm and free the shirt.

"Look, how much more ominously do I have to loom, here? Shirt, Archer."

"Oh, I don't know, Simon. How much more ominously *can* you loom?"

"Remember when we agreed that this is *not the place*?" Nevertheless, with a quick glance at the locked bathroom door, Simon took a final half-step in, getting right up in Jeremy's face and nearly pinning him to the wall in the process. He waited for a beat or two, just to let Jeremy get a good sense of *imminence*, then narrowed his eyes to glittering slits. "Give me. My. Shirt," he hissed into Jeremy's face.

"Oh, very ominously done," Jeremy purred, apparently unimpressed. He paused, the silence stretching taut between them. Finally, with a flash of smile, Jeremy held out the shirt. "You only had to ask," he said.

"Funny how I did and you ignored me," said Simon, grabbing it. Since Jeremy was right there and all Simon leaned down and bit his ear, hard enough to make Jeremy jerk and hiss out a breath. The bite was also hard enough to make Jeremy's fingers spasm, allowing Simon to twitch his shirt the rest of the way free. Simon stepped away, triumphant. "Guess I win," he said, shrugging back into his shirt with only a faint twinge of pain for his troubles.

"Mm," said Jeremy, disagreeing without actually saying a word, reaching up to rub his bitten ear.

Mike was the only one in the saferoom when Simon slammed the door open, but it suited Simon fine: Mike was the one he'd been hoping for, anyway. "Mike," he said, trailing his fingers along the door until Jeremy, behind him, could catch it, "as your superior I command you to tell Archer that I'm manly."

Mike, being Mike, didn't even blink. "Seriously, Archer, he is *so* manly," he said, right on cue. "If he were any more manly he'd be impregnating chicks just by walking past them on the street. Seriously, I writhe in awe of his superior cock-power or some shit."

Simon spun on his heel, confronting Jeremy. "See?" he said, patting his chest.

"I wasn't *denying* it," Jeremy said with amused patience, easing the door gently shut.

"Not that I normally need an excuse to talk about how studly you are, boss, but what brought this on?" Mike asked.

Simon spun back around, gesturing back over his shoulder at Jeremy. "Archer here was denigrating my bullet wound, that's what."

“Oh, I was not,” said Jeremy in mock exasperation. “Honestly, Simon, you’re so *sensitive*.”

Simon made a strangling noise. Mike whooped. “Okay, you know what, them’s fightin’ words,” Simon said, recovering, “and I’d crush you right now if it weren’t beneath my dignity as a real man. Mike, where *is* everyone?”

Mike glanced around. “Dunno? Out, I guess.”

“Yeah? I’d never have guessed,” Simon said, sitting down. There was a little bubble of hilarity wedged just under his breastbone that was born mostly from relief (and partly from half a cup of stolen coffee): he didn’t feel like a goddamned invalid any more. It was a ridiculously liberating feeling, like discovering that he could fly. “You call Amanda Winston?”

“Sure did,” said Mike. “Got her voice mail, though, and I’ve got this weird feeling that she’s not going to call me back no matter how nicely I asked her to, you know?”

“Yep,” said Simon. “How nicely *did* you ask her to, just out of curiosity?”

“I swear to God I vomited up kittens and rainbows right after I hung up.”

“That nicely, huh?”

“*Kittens*,” Mike said in emphasis. “Little scruffy orange ones with big wobbly heads.”

“Damn, you can’t get much nicer than that,” Simon said, shaking his head. “Okay. Call her back around four.”

“Already in the cards, boss.”

Jeremy carried yet another cup of coffee over to the table and took his usual seat, accidentally-on-purpose putting the cup down within arm’s reach of Simon. “Enabler,” Simon said in peaceful accusation, filching it.

“That’s one of those psychological non-words that you Americans are so fond of flinging about, isn’t it?” Jeremy asked, watching Simon steal his coffee with a reasonable amount of calm.

Simon was saved from having to leap semi-savagely to the defense of his country by Johnny, who chose that moment to let himself in. He was alone. “Yo,” he said.

“Hey, Texas,” Simon said, putting Jeremy’s mug back where he’d found it. “What’s up? Where’s Nate?”

“Went down to the lab to turn in the print sheet,” Johnny said, ambling over. “Said he was gonna hang around down there until they felt guilty enough to cough something up.”

“Lab techs don’t feel *guilt*,” Simon said. “I am, however, confident that they feel pain.”

Johnny shrugged. “Not in the same way humans do.”

“Oof. True. Anyway, as I was about to tell Mike, once he gets hold of Amanda Winston and tells her the news, if she sounds even the slightest bit *off* I want the two of you to truck right out there and come up with some excuse to

drop by unannounced. Jesus, if there's one person in this whole mess I trust less than Diana Fontaine, it's Amanda Winston."

"Yeah," said Johnny. "Woman's not playing with a full deck."

"Doesn't help that Farraday used to play thirty-eight-and-a-half-card pickup with said deck, either." Simon shook his head. "Jesus, I could almost feel sorry for her if she hadn't dicked us over so bad. Who here remembers that recording of her visiting him in jail? Hands up."

Mike's hand went up. "Shit, and Sandy thinks *I'm* a dog, goddamn," he said. "I can't believe Amanda Winston fell for that shit."

"No, see, you're looking at it the wrong way," said Simon. "You gotta picture it as the end of some shitty chick flick, you know? There's a whole breed of lady out there who will believe any goddamn thing you say as long as you sound like some movie she watched once." He shook his head and had some more of Jeremy's coffee. "Seriously, you can't tell me he didn't have that shit scripted in his head."

"Chick flick," Jeremy repeated, sounding vaguely amused.

Simon glanced at him. "Yeah, you know, one of those little low-budget movies they make that are supposed to appeal to the ladies?"

"I know what they *are*," Jeremy said. "I just didn't know you were so familiar with them."

"Uh, in the interests of defending my masculinity here I'm just going to go ahead and admit that I am plagiarizing the chick-flick metaphor from a conversation I had with Sandy, okay?" Simon cleared his throat. "But it's true anyway. Honda, you've got your computer open, have you got the recording?"

"Yeah, I think so," Mike said, squinting at his monitor. "Hang on—yeah, I think this is it." He tapped the touchpad twice and suddenly the room filled with Amanda Winston's sobbing, rendered tinny by the laptop's tiny, shitty speakers.

"*I'm sorry, oh God, Cole—*" She hesitated and dragged in a huge, uneven, whooping breath. "*—you took off with Carole and what was I supposed to think? I know how men are! But I didn't want to hurt you, not like this—*"

"*Shh, shh, luh-love,*" Cole Farraday said, serene and syrupy as a hiccupping televangelist, a man totally in command of his situation. "*I know. I nuh-know.*" In the background Amanda Winston cried on, gasping out huge wet sobs like a child while Farraday made little shushing sounds. Eventually, she calmed. "*Amanda, Amanda, it's all right,*" Farraday crooned. "*I understand. I do. I promise.*"

"*—Cole—*" Amanda Winston said, too startled or awed or something to even cry.

"*I fuh-forgive you. See? It's all right.*"

A second passed in silence and then Amanda started sobbing again, in relief this time, mumbling "*Oh thank God*" under her breath at one point. Simon was just about to poke Mike and tell him to skip ahead past all the annoying weeping when Farraday spoke again. Simon subsided.

“Amanda—my beautiful, buh-beautiful Amanda—I know why you came, and it’s all right, but I don’t think you should come again.”

Amanda stopped dead, right in the middle of her weeping. *“Why not?”* she demanded to know, snuffling. *“You’re doing this to punish me, aren’t you?”*

“Duh,” said Mike, under his breath.

“Of course not,” Farraday said soothingly, contradicting Mike. *“It’s just . . . I hate that you’re seeing me like this.”*

“—it doesn’t matter—”

“It does, love. It matters to me. I cuh!—can’t bear it.” The hitch in his voice was nearly a spitting sound that time, and there was a light thump in the background, like Farraday had ticced right into something.

“I’m sorry . . .” said Amanda, in a tiny voice full of shame. She snuffled again.

“I want you to guh-go home,” Farraday said, his voice low and commanding, *“and I want you to hug your beautiful daughter tight, and I want you to remember me as I was, instead. Pretend that I’m dead, if it helps. All right? Will you duh-do that for me?”*

“Yuh,” Amanda said, already crying again, too hard to say ‘yes’ properly.

Farraday paused, this time waiting silently while Amanda cried. After thirty seconds or so there was another light, soft thump; whatever it was, it made Amanda choke off her tears. Farraday’s voice, when it came, was even softer, just a faint and throaty rumble. *“Wuh-wait for me,”* he said. Simon just barely restrained himself from spitting in disgust. Oblivious, Farraday went on. *“Some day I’ll get out, Amanda. It won’t be fuh!—forever. Wait for me.”*

“I will,” Amanda breathed, her voice full of awe. *“Oh, God, Cole—”*

“Wait,” Farraday said, and then a bored male voice in the background told Farraday that his time was up. *“Goodbye, Amanda,”* said Farraday, and the recording came to an end over the sound of Amanda Winston crying again, her voice cut off mid-sob.

For a moment the room was silent. Finally Mike reached up and hit some keys on his laptop, closing the recording. “Jesus,” Simon said, shaking his head. “I haven’t heard that in years. It’s even worse than I remember.”

“Total chick flick, you’re right,” Mike said in agreement. “Totally. Fuckhead even had cinematic timing. After he forgave her for being mad that he kidnapped her daughter. Which, I mean, what?”

“I don’t get women,” said Johnny. “Well, I get ’em, I just don’t understand ’em.”

Simon glanced at Jeremy. “So, as you can see, he played her like a harmonica.”

“Only not so much with the putting his mouth on her openings and blowing until she made noise,” Mike said.

Simon paused. “I walked right into that one, didn’t I?”

“Oh, man, face first, boss.”

“In that case, I think I’m contractually obligated to make the ‘mouth organ’ joke—” The door clicked open behind him, unsettling them all and startling Simon into silence. He glanced over his shoulder just as the new guy backed in, towing a computer chair behind him. “Christ,” Simon said, turning the rest of the way around in his chair. “You got a chair out of the physical plant in under a week? What the hell did you do? If you pulled a gun on them, I don’t think I want to know.”

“Uh,” said the new guy, stopping in the middle of the room and abruptly looking guilty. “Not exactly.”

“Not exactly,” Simon repeated.

“Well, uh, I put in a request for a chair and they said it would take three to five business days,” the new guy said.

“By which they mean a week, yeah, we all know,” Simon said. “So where’d that one come from, then?”

The new guy flushed a little and looked down at the chair, rolling it back and forth on its little wheels. “I went up to Internet Crime and stole the chair from my old desk,” he said.

“You stole it,” Simon repeated, his voice flat.

“Crime hasn’t replaced me yet,” said the new guy. The chair rolled back and forth, back and forth, and he stared down at it like he’d hypnotized himself. “And when they do they can just pull a chair out of the conference room.”

“You stole a chair from Internet Crime,” Simon said again, marveling.

Finally the new guy looked up, squaring his shoulders. “Yes,” he said. “And now it’s their problem.”

Simon stared at the new guy for a few seconds, waiting to see what he’d say. He didn’t say anything, although he wilted a bit. “Well,” Simon finally said, somewhat impressed despite himself. “I guess you’d better put your new chair over in your corner and get back to work, then.”

“I guess so,” the new guy said, and proceeded to do just that.

By the time Sandra returned, half an hour later, Simon had sunk nearly all the way down in his chair and was staring blindly at the far wall, sweating and trying not to move lest he aggravate the demons with hot pincers who were currently having a party all up and down the left side of his body. Now that the blissful numbness had worn off, he was paying for every goddamned bullet all at once. He wanted a pain pill like nobody’s business. He wanted people to stop glancing at him and looking worried, too. He also wanted a million dollars. None of these things appeared to be forthcoming.

“Hey, boss, good news,” Sandra said briskly, still talking as she vanished into Simon’s office to drop off the folder she was carrying. “Upstairs says you can have your position back officially on Monday, assuming you feel up to it—” She

came back out and broke off there, finally noticing the state of things. "Are you all right?" she asked, suddenly sounding a lot more concerned.

"Fine," Simon said, his voice coming out scratchy and petulant. "Monday, huh? Great."

"Assuming I think you're up to it," Sandra said. "Upstairs said no earlier than Monday, but aside from that it's my call."

"Monday," Simon repeated, trying to sound firm. "And I'm fine. I just pushed myself a little too hard this afternoon and I'm paying for it."

"Pushed yourself a little too hard?" Sandra said, suspicious. "What did you do?"

"Nothing."

"Uh huh." Sandra looked at Jeremy. "Archer, what did he do?"

"Hey!"

"He insisted on going down to the firing range," said Jeremy, with a shrug.

"The firing range," Sandra repeated dumbly. "The *firing range*?"

"Goddammit, I hate it when you two do that." Simon struggled halfway up, regretting it all the way.

"You're supposed to *stop* him from doing dumb shit, Archer," Sandra said, ignoring Simon entirely.

Simon rolled his eyes. "You say that like you think he *could*." Mike hunched his shoulders and snickered, and Simon caught it himself a moment later, pain or no. "... shit," he said, "that came out really wrong, didn't it?"

"He was most insistent," said Jeremy, now smiling a bit. "And truth be told, he was fine until just about fifteen minutes ago."

"And it's not like Archer could stop me," Simon added.

"Level 5 privileges shouldn't have gotten you into the firing range anyway," said Sandra, darting a glance at Simon.

"Well, technically it didn't, but the fellow behind the counter knew Simon, apparently?"

"Terrific security we've got around here." Sandra rolled her eyes.

"I just wanted to make sure that I could fire my gun if I needed to," Simon said. "As long as Farraday's around, I might need to."

That stopped her. Finally Sandra looked down at her hands. "I suppose that's true," she said, sighing. "Boss, are you sure you won't come stay at the hotel with us?"

"I'm sure," Simon said, as firmly as he could.

Sandra pinched the bridge of her nose. "All right," she said. "I suppose there's no arguing with you. But I want you to do me a favor."

"Yeah?" Simon said suspiciously. "What's that?"

"Go home," said Sandra, letting her hand drop to the table. "Take the rest of today off, go home, take a pain pill, get some sleep. If you're okay again tomorrow, I'll give you your badge back on Monday."

“And if I don’t go home right now you’ll hold my badge hostage, huh?” Simon pushed back his chair and inched upright despite the muscle cramps that were threatening to fold him in half. “Yeah, okay, I know a threat when I hear one.”

“It *wasn’t a threat*,” Sandra snapped, startling him. Simon’s head whipped up. Her face was set and angry. “Goddammit, Simon, I’m trying to look out for your best interests here!”

“I know,” Simon said after a moment, carefully. “It was a joke, Sandy.”

“The hell it was,” Sandra said, closing her eyes. “Go home, Simon. Archer, take him home.”

Wordlessly Jeremy pushed his chair back and stood up. Simon glanced at him, then back at Sandra, then decided that sometimes silence was the better part of valor and shuffled towards the door, Jeremy silent in his wake.

◆ 70: Jeremy

Simon slept for almost the rest of the day—by the time Jeremy heard him stirring in the other room, it was almost nine. Jeremy put his magazine down on his chest and listened, half-closing his eyes in order to hear better. Simon's bedclothes rustled again; this time, he made a weak little snorting sound to accompany the rustle. Jeremy leaned forward and put his magazine on the coffee table, automatically glancing out the window as he did so. The world outside looked perfectly normal. Simon's Jeep still stood in its usual spot, unmolested.

The rustling sounds had been augmented by the arrhythmic scratching of Simon rubbing his face. The noise made Jeremy smile, faintly. "Someone needs a shave," he noted under his breath. Still, that particular sound also generally meant that Simon was waking, so Jeremy stood up, shook the momentary stiffness from his legs, and went to check on him.

"Morning, sunshine," Simon said sleepily, just a voice and a faint shape in the semidarkness of his bedroom. His hands were still tented over his face, muffling his speech. "Christ, I'm hungry."

"Well, it *has* just gone nine," Jeremy noted, glancing at Simon's alarm clock. "You've been out for about five hours."

"Well." Simon yawned hugely. "Guess that explains that."

"I suppose so." Jeremy paused, studying the dim outline of Simon. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine," Simon said automatically, letting his hands fall back to his chest.

Jeremy couldn't help but smile. "Oh, good. I'm glad to hear it. And how are you really feeling?"

Simon made a slight sound that might have been either a snort or a laugh. "I'm fine," he repeated, sounding a bit less like he was on autopilot this time. "Seriously. Pain pill and a nap fixed me right up."

"Modern medicine triumphs again," Jeremy said. Nudged by a faint and selfish impulse he crossed to the bed, sitting on the edge of the mattress by Simon's hip. One of Simon's arms found its way around his waist. He couldn't find it in himself to complain.

"Yeah, so," Simon said, giving Jeremy a lazy squeeze. "You know what, I'm thinking dinner."

"Were you?" Jeremy said, glancing down at the arm around his waist. "Goodness, that wasn't the impression I was getting at all."

Simon lightly slapped Jeremy's hip. "It's a *friendly gesture*," he said, pretending to be exasperated. His hand spread out again. "You know what, you could shut up and take it in the spirit in which it was intended."

"And since you are now *massaging* my hip, that spirit is now . . . what?"

"Hungry," Simon promptly said. "Also in semi-dire need of a shower and a shave."

Jeremy laughed a little and put his hand on Simon's wrist. "Yes, I'd noticed," he said. "Given the time, perhaps I'd best run out and pick us up something while you have your shower. Otherwise we'll never get through dinner before ridiculous o'clock."

"If you're trying to insinuate that I spend too long in the shower, Archer, I'd have to say that you're one to talk." Simon yawned again, covering his mouth with the hand that wasn't rubbing slow circles up along Jeremy's hip. "Besides, I just took one hell of a nap, I think I'm totally up for ridiculous o'clock."

"Are you," Jeremy said, not bothering to make a question out of it. He settled carefully back against Simon's side, trying not to laugh when Simon slid his thumb under the waistband of his pants and gave them a small, subtle tug downwards. "I'm sensing a wealth of conflicting signals here, Simon."

"Yeah, I guess so," Simon admitted, withdrawing his thumb and letting his hand fall still. "And as much as I currently kind of don't want to get up, I think food is going to have to take precedence."

"Ah, well," Jeremy said, his regret only half-feigned. He was fairly hungry himself, after all. "I'll see to dinner and you see to getting cleaned up, and then . . . ridiculous o'clock?"

"Sounds like a plan," Simon confirmed. He gave Jeremy's hip one last pat and then let him go, his hand sliding down Jeremy's leg and away. "Buy me a decent enough dinner, Archer, and I will ridiculous your clock *all night long*."

Having no better ideas—and certainly not interested in Simon's idea of acceptable takeaway food—Jeremy threw himself into the armchair, picked up Simon's desk phone, and called his hotel. His request to be connected to the concierge resulted, inevitably, in his being put on hold. Jeremy rolled his eyes and settled in to wait.

Behind him he heard Simon go padding by. A moment later, the bathroom door shut, and the shower started up, and Jeremy smiled to himself even as someone finally picked up the phone. "Concierge's desk."

"Ahh, yes," Jeremy drawled, closing his eyes and letting himself—letting *James*—go lazy in the chair. "This is James St. John—in the Red Suite?"

“Mr. St. John!” The concierge’s voice went attentive on the instant. “Yes, sir, I’m very sorry for your wait. What can I do for you?”

“How kind of you to ask,” ‘James’ said, unable to resist the little jab. “I find myself in need of a takeaway dinner for two, you see. Whatever the kitchen thinks is appropriate. I’m certain I don’t care as to the details.”

He heard the concierge snap his fingers impatiently at someone. “Yes sir, Mr. St. John. Will you be coming to pick it up?”

“In half an hour or so, if it’ll be ready . . . ?” ‘James’ trailed off there. Of course it would be ready. Things generally were, when you threw enough money at them.

“Of course, sir!” Of course. “I’ll have it here at the concierge’s desk for you.”

“Excellent, thank you,” said ‘James’, and Jeremy hung up without further ado.

The shower was still going. Jeremy stretched back over the arm of the chair and put Simon’s phone back down on the table. He needn’t even leave for a good ten minutes yet—he picked up his magazine and flipped it back open to the article he’d been skimming, listening absently to the sound of Simon thumping around in the shower.

The shower shut off just as Jeremy was flipping through the last few pages. Jeremy put the magazine down and checked his watch. 9:16.

Plucking his jacket from the back of the couch Jeremy slid into it as he stepped into the hall, knocking lightly on the bathroom door. Steam seeped through the cracks and curled in the faint yellow light. “I’m off,” Jeremy said. “I’ll be back in half an hour or so.”

“Awesome,” Simon said through the closed bathroom door. Something clattered softly on the counter.

Jeremy tapped his fingertips lightly against the door again and headed for the front door, rolling one shoulder as he went to settle the weight of his jacket properly. He had the front door open onto the cool October night when Simon yelled, “Hold up!” from the bathroom.

Jeremy paused in the doorway and waited. The bathroom door opened and Simon leaned out, pink and damp and wearing only a towel around his waist, his wet hair hanging rather fetchingly in his eyes. “Stop somewhere and pick up a six-pack, will you? I deserve beer.”

“Well, I can certainly do that,” Jeremy said, rather savouring both the moment and the view, “but I find myself rather disinclined to *leave* all of a sudden.”

Simon glanced down at himself, running a hand through his hair. “Quicker you go, quicker you get back,” he pointed out.

“By which point you’ll have put *clothes* on,” Jeremy said. “You’re no fun at all.”

“*Fetch, Archer,*” Simon commanded, snapping his fingers imperiously at Jeremy before stepping back into the bathroom and firmly shutting the door. Jeremy laughed under his breath and closed the front door behind himself, locking it and dropping the key into his pocket.

It was a glorious night. The moon was high and full and the sky was full of scudding little clouds that caught the moonlight and scattered it around—even the glow of the city and the horrible orange lights of the parking lot couldn’t quite drown out the effect. The breeze was up, cool and damp, making the bushes that lined the lower pathway hiss and rustle. Fallen leaves blew in a yellow arc across the parking lot. Jeremy paused on the upper walkway and took a deep breath, enjoying the cool air for a moment before heading down the stairs.

It was a pity, he reflected, that he didn’t know how to take down the top of Simon’s Jeep. Tonight seemed to be a night that called for the open air. Perhaps he could talk Simon into opening the kitchen window while they ate. Perhaps he’d just open it himself. Perhaps they could open the *bedroom* window and scandalise the neighbours.

He hit the parking lot and started across it, fishing in his pocket for the key to the Jeep. Leaves crunched underfoot; as little as he liked making such noise, there was no avoiding it without hopping around like a great idiot. There wasn’t another person in sight but still he went ever so slightly on his guard, his eyes darting back and forth, scanning the deserted parking lot. He felt a bit silly, but he kept his eyes and ears open as best he could over the racket that he himself was making, heading for the black bulk of Simon’s Jeep.

The prongs of the fired taser hit the narrow strip of skin on the back of his neck, just between the high collar of his jacket and his hairline. Jeremy had a single instant in which to murkily appreciate someone’s excellent aim before he heard the *crack* and his mind exploded. He hit the ground in an ungainly, spasming pile, cracking his temple against a kerbstone, and everything faded to black.

♦ 71: Simon

“Any day now, Archer,” Simon said under his breath, checking his watch for the thousandth time. It was now exactly 9:56, or two minutes later than the last time he’d checked, which meant that it was about forty-five minutes since Jeremy had taken off, or fifteen minutes after the time Jeremy had said he’d be back. How long did it take to buy beer, anyway? Of course, it was *Jeremy* he’d sent after the stuff: Jeremy would probably spend half an hour trying to find a beer to please his own snotty-ass English-faggot palate before making his leisurely way back, five miles per hour under the speed limit all the way, just to piss Simon off.

Kicking his feet stiffly up onto the couch Simon finally let his curiosity get the better of him and picked up the magazine that Jeremy had abandoned on the coffee table, which he’d been eyeing askance for fifteen minutes now. It was written in English, at least (Simon had been expecting Italian, or possibly French, just for *maximum snot value*) and it read like one of Sandra’s ubiquitous fashion magazines ramped up to the *nth*: instead of pictures of five-thousand-dollar handbags and stories about famous actresses, there were pictures of fifteen-million-dollar condominiums on the Mediterranean (*Jesus*) and stories about European people Simon had never heard of and wouldn’t care about if he had. A couple of pages were dog-eared. Simon couldn’t really tell why those particular pages were marked, but he had the horrible (and vaguely funny) suspicion that reading Jeremy’s magazine was making him into some kind of accessory before the fact.

He was flipping through the magazine, lulled into a bemused stupor by the glossy photographs of a completely alien lifestyle—SETI was wasting their time, the extraterrestrials were already here and their UFOs had vast black marble floors—when his landline phone rang. Simon blinked and looked up, then gingerly swung himself off the couch. Normally no one called the landline except telemarketers and wrong numbers, but the caller ID box said *Old Line Hotel*, which had to mean Jeremy, calling on the landline for some strange, super-polite, ultimately English reason. Simon swept up the phone. “Yo, Archer,” he said. “Took you long enough.”

“Ah,” said a voice that Simon didn’t recognize, sounding confused and taken aback. “I’m sorry . . . may I please speak to James St. John?”

“Sorry, you’ve got—wait.” Belatedly Simon realized: one of Jeremy’s omnipresent aliases. “I mean, uh, he’s not here right now,” Simon said. “Apparently I’m playing secretary tonight, so . . . can I take a message?”

“This is the concierge’s desk at the Old Line Hotel, on Jay Street,” the voice said. “I’m calling in regards to the meal for two that he’d ordered—I apologize for bothering you, but he doesn’t seem to be answering at the number that we have on record for him.”

“Huh,” Simon said, a faint line appearing between his eyebrows. “No one’s answering? Not even his service?”

“No, sir. It just rings through to voice mail. I tried twice before I pulled this number up from our call records.”

“Huh,” Simon said again. Deep in the back of his mind a nearly-subliminal alarm started to sound, and he could only ignore it for so long. “Can you hold on a sec?”

“Yes, sir,” the concierge said.

“Thanks.” Simon carried the handset over to the window and stuck his finger in the miniblinds, pulling them down. His Jeep was still there—the subliminal alarm suddenly got liminal as hell. “I need to let you go,” Simon said, dropping the miniblinds and spinning around. “Something’s come up that I have to check on.”

“Yes, sir,” the concierge said again, startled. “If you should see Mr. St. John . . .”

The rest of the concierge’s message, which Simon suddenly could not have cared less about, was drowned out by the shrilling of Simon’s cell phone, at his waist. Simon shut his eyes in relief. “Hang on, that’s probably him now,” he said to the concierge, taking his phone off his belt and snapping it open one-handed. Pulling the landline phone away from his mouth, Simon put his cellphone up to his other ear. “Archer, what in hell—”

“Hello, Suh-Simon,” said someone who was most definitely not Jeremy.

Simon froze, a phone to each ear, the alarm in his mind switching over to a triumphant chorus of *I told you so, fucker! I told you!* When he could move again he put the landline phone gently back down in its cradle, hanging up on the concierge without further ado. “Farraday,” he said, fighting to keep his voice even.

“Nice night, isn’t it?” Farraday made a breathless little *uh!* sound, like punctuation.

“Eat me,” Simon said. His free hand snapped open and shut again. “What do you want?”

Farraday laughed his jittery little spill of a giggle. “Just a buh-bit of business,” he said in a hiccupping sing-song. “I just called to ask you if you’re muh-missing something.”

Gently—very gently—Simon reached up and pressed his knuckles against the rough plaster of the wall, like a slow-motion punch. “What do you *want*?” he said again, unable to keep it from becoming a growl at the end.

“I duh!—don’t want anything,” Farraday said, now openly gloating. Simon pulled his fist back about two inches and hit the wall for real, pulling the punch at the last instant but causing a hairline crack to appear all the same. “I just wanted to let you know that you were missing suh-something,” Farraday went on, “and maybe I’ll let you have it back—uh!—later. Or maybe not. I don’t know yet. It depends on how I fuh-feel.”

“He doesn’t have anything to do with this,” Simon said. It felt like he was listening to himself from a long way off, at the other end of a tight and red-lit corridor of rage. “He’s not a part of it. He’s got nothing to do with you. Let him go.”

“*The fuck he’s not a part of it!*” Farraday screamed, making Simon jerk the phone away from his ear. As quickly as Farraday had lost his temper, he found it again, but the gloating, giggling note was gone now. “If you wuh-wanted to keep your friend out of it, you shouldn’t have brought him in. See? It’s all your fault.” Farraday made an *uk!* sound. Simon heard a faint but definite thump.

“Let him go,” Simon repeated. He sounded very calm, from here. “Let him go, or tell me what you want in exchange.”

“I suh-*said*, I don’t want anything,” Farraday said, pretending to patience. “Muh-maybe all I wuh-want is for you tuh-to know that I’ve got hi-im and you cuh-can’t do a-anything abou-bout it.”

Simon closed his eyes and bowed his head, listening to Farraday’s tics spin madly out of control with an absent sort of horror. Blindly he punched the wall again, doubling the length of that small crack. “If you hurt him,” he said, and stopped, because finishing that sentence would either fail to live up to the level of threat that he’d like to convey or destroy his temporary and hard-won calm. He would *not* be goaded into shouting or threatening Farraday. He would *not*.

“If I huh-hurt him, it’ll buh-be because I wuh!—want to.” Farraday’s crackling giggle made Simon grit his teeth. “You cuh-can’t stop me. You can’t even fuh-*find* me. Maybe I’ll call you again luh-later and you cuh!—can beg me to luh-let him go.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you,” Simon said evenly.

“Oh yes,” Farraday breathed, exalted. “I-If you beg puh-prettily enough maybe I’ll suh-send part of him back—” and the connection cut off with an anticlimactic click.

For a moment Simon stood just where he was, head lowered bullishly, eyes closed, fist pressed to the wall. The little crack snaked out from under his first

two knuckles, shedding tiny flakes of plaster onto the back of Simon's hand. His phone beeped once and Simon closed it with absurd and extreme care, his phone disappearing into his fist with barely a click. "Shit," he said under his breath, letting his hand fall away from the wall. "Shit—" His head jerked up, his eyes flew open, and he slapped his cellphone back open, jabbing in Sandra's phone number one-handed.

"Sandra," she said in his ear a moment later. "What's up, boss?"

"Sandy, before I say anything, I need you to not shout or raise your voice in any way," Simon said, his voice staccato with restraint. "Okay?"

Sandra, getting the wrong idea entirely, sighed in tinny resignation. "What did you do to yourself this time, boss?"

"This is not about me," said Simon. "Is Diana Fontaine still there?"

"Yes?" Sandra said, the resigned note in her voice fading into something that sounded very much like dread. "I can hear her through the speakers. She's reading something. Occasionally she sighs."

"Farraday's got Archer," Simon said. The other end of the phone went very quiet indeed. "I don't know how, or why, but somehow he got the drop on Archer when Archer went to pick up dinner. He just called to gloat. I need you to get everyone to base *now*, and I need you to do it as quietly as possible, because I do *not* want Diana Fontaine to know about this. Get me?"

The silence from the other end was total, Sandra apparently not even breathing. "I get you," she finally said, her voice brisk but mercifully quiet. "Nate's in the other room, but Johnny and Mike are both out somewhere."

"Good," Simon said, meaning it. Without noticing he started to pace, back and forth. "If Honda's out, you don't have to extract him from under Diana Fontaine's nose. Call Texas and pass it on. I'll call Honda. Then get Specs out of his room and go, as quietly as you can, and I'll meet you—*shit*."

"What?" Sandra demanded.

"Swing by on your way and pick me up," Simon said, pulling down the miniblinds and glaring out at his Jeep. "Archer's still got the key to my truck."

"Will do, boss," said Sandra. "Calling Texas now." She hung up without another word.

With his left hand Simon flicked open the drawer of the coffee table, revealing a tangle of black webbing that he really hadn't wanted to see there. "Shit," he snarled again, and spun on his heel, heading for the bedroom and the holstered gun on his bedside table, his stride almost fast enough to be a run.

A minute later he was thudding down the stairs outside his apartment, gun drawn, cell phone open. He dialed Jeremy's phone number, covering all the bases even though he knew there was no way he'd get that lucky. He was right. His phone rang; a second or so later, another phone rang less than twenty feet away, startling him. Simon jogged over, numb, and plucked Jeremy's discarded cell phone out of the bushes where it had been thrown. Its screen was cracked and

dark, and there was a smear of something that looked like blood on its silver case.
“Shit,” Simon said under his breath.

◆ 72: Mike

The horrible little bar that Mike and Johnny were currently in had two (2) advantages, as far as Mike was concerned: it was close to the hotel, and it was so deserted on weekday nights that the staff apparently didn't give a shit that the two of them had been sitting in this booth for a couple of hours nursing a single beer apiece and airing their grievances. Or, well, Mike was airing his grievances, and Johnny was occasionally saying a few words. Same thing, really.

"Fucking sucks," Mike said, taking a tiny sip of his beer despite the fact that it was flat and warm. As long as he kept that beer moving, he was a customer. Right? Right. "I am so not looking forward to going back there tonight, shit, if it's not Princess Di on my ass, it's Sandy. For two fuckin' cents I'd sit here until last call."

Expressionlessly, Johnny shifted in his seat, digging around in his back pocket. Mike watched him do it, half an expectant grin already on his face. Johnny thumped back into his seat with a sigh and tossed two pennies on the table, then settled back and picked up his own nasty flat beer, not quite grinning himself.

"Ooh, big man's callin' my bluff," Mike half-sang, sweeping the beer-damp pennies off the table and into the palm of his hand. "And you know I'm way too macho to back this ass up, so guess we're sittin' here until two—"

"Beats listening to you snore," Johnny said.

"I *do not snore!*" Mike cried, gesticulating frantically and nearly splashing himself with beer in the process. Mike yelled. "Oh, shit, look what you made me do! I go back to the hotel smelling like beer and I might as well have PREDATORS WELCOME written on my forehead in big red letters—shit, it'll be a competition to see who gets to rip my balls off first."

"Yeah?" Johnny said, interested. "Gonna give me the odds so's I can place a bet?"

"I'll give your *mom* the odds," Mike said happily.

Johnny snickered. "My momma don't need your kind of odd, Honda."

“Oh, *Texas*, that wasn’t a *racist* insinuation you just made, now was it?” Mike said, delighted. He slammed his half-empty mug to the table and leveled a finger at Johnny. “I know all about you fuckin’ inbred white-trash redneck cracker sonsabitches—”

Johnny reached up and lazily slapped Mike’s hand away. He opened his mouth to retort, but got no further than “Cracked your—” before their phones both rang in near-total synchronicity, Mike’s *The Imperial March* punctuated by Johnny’s insistent ringing. They blinked at each other, then fished out their phones. “Springheel,” Johnny said over the ruckus, eyeballing the little screen on the outside of his phone.

“Templar,” Mike said, checking his.

They looked at each other. “*Shit*,” they groaned in unison. Johnny flipped his phone open; Mike pushed away his half-full beer and answered his own, his stomach tying itself into a knot. “Yeah, boss.”

“Honda, I don’t know where the fuck you are and I don’t care,” Simon said right off, rapping it out like he did when his blood was up. Mike was already sliding out of the booth, Johnny right behind him. “Get out of there, get in the van, and get to base. I need you *right now*.”

“On my way,” Mike said. He fetched out his wallet and tossed a tenner on the table. “What’s up? Besides the obvious.”

“Farraday’s got Archer,” Simon said. “*Now*, Honda. Break some laws getting here.”

“Jesus fuck,” Mike breathed. He shook it off a moment later. “Okay. Okay. Texas is with me. We’re *en route*.”

“Good,” Simon said, and he severed the connection with a bang.

Mike snapped his phone shut and stuck it back on his belt, then glanced back at Johnny. Johnny nodded at him, still on the phone, and headed for the door. “Right,” Johnny said into his phone, shoving the door open and heading out into the cool. “I’m with Honda now. On the way.”

“Fuck,” Mike said, letting the door slam shut behind him. Overhead one of the busted neon letters flickered back to life and he glanced up, startled.

“Run,” Johnny suggested, snapping his phone back into its clip and taking off. Mike squawked and bolted after him.

◆ 73: Nate

Nate sat in the passenger seat, his arms folded tightly and protectively over his belly, staring out the windshield and seeing nothing more than vague blurs of light, red and white. Beside him Sandra was almost completely silent, so focused on her driving that she seemed to have forgotten he was there, leaning forward over the steering wheel like it would somehow get them there faster. Nate shut his eyes and tightened his grip, his fingers digging into the flesh of his arms.

Not ten minutes ago he'd been sitting at the little desk in his hotel room, listening to the speakers broadcasting Diana Fontaine with half an ear and wandering around on the internet, ostensibly looking for a better set of tech sheets for the broken cell phone but really, in all honesty, not doing much of use. His own cell phone had rung and for a moment he hadn't thought much of it—he'd expected it to be his mother, or maybe, if he were lucky, one of the guys from the lab—but then he'd pulled it out of his pocket and discovered that the call was from Sandra. Sandra, who was literally twenty feet away from him. Something had to be wrong—but Nate answered the phone hoping against hope that there was a different, innocent explanation.

And then Sandra had ordered him to go into the bathroom and shut the door behind himself, in a low, brisk, businesslike tone, and Nate's evening had gone entirely to hell.

"Hang in there," Sandra said from beside him, and Nate jumped, startled. Sandra hadn't even glanced at him, he'd swear to that. Which meant that either he was broadcasting fear like a radio tower or she'd made a shrewd guess. Or both. Possibly both. Because he *was* scared, he'd admit it. He was scared out of his mind.

"I'm okay," he said, his voice a little rusty with disuse. "Um. Can I... can I turn on the radio?"

Sandra started to say no—he could swear he heard the 'n'—but then she darted a swift, concerned glance in his direction and visibly changed her mind. "Go ahead," she said, as kindly as she could. Nate nodded and leaned forward, turning the radio on and leafing quickly through Sandra's presets; he left it tuned

to the first station he found that was playing music instead of commercials. He wasn't sure which one it was.

The music helped, sort of. It took the edge off his thoughts. Which was good, because whenever he thought about Farraday abducting Jeremy he wound up wondering if Farraday was *hurting* Jeremy like Farraday had hurt *him* and that always led him right back into the sinkhole of his own memories, and as patchy and incomplete as some of them were, they still had the power to make him break out into a cold sweat—

Sandra hit the turn signal and swung into Simon's apartment complex, the wheels of her car bumping sharply against the incline. Simon was standing at the bottom of the stairs, shifting impatiently from foot to foot, his gun in one hand and his cell phone in the other. As soon as Sandra stopped the car—before, even, really—Simon made for it, pulling open the back door and throwing himself in. Nate heard him hiss in aggravated pain as his body hit the seat. "Go," Simon said shortly, pulling the car door shut behind himself. Sandra nodded and went.

For a minute or so no one said anything. Sandra was wholly occupied with driving, and Simon with finding a comfortable position in which to sit, and Nate with *not thinking about it*. "I can turn the radio off," Nate finally said, his voice small. "If you want."

"Yeah, Specs, I'd appreciate it," Simon said from behind him.

Nate nodded and punched off the radio. "I hope Jeremy's all right," he said inanely, filling the silence.

"I don't think Farraday will have hurt him yet," Simon said. "No percentage in it."

"Guess not," Nate said. He rubbed his arms absently, trying to get warm. "It's just. Well. Um. I know I probably shouldn't, but I like him, you know? Jeremy, I mean. He's a pretty nice guy. For what he is."

"Yeah," Simon said after a quiet moment. A momentary gust of wind sent dead leaves and rain skirling across the windshield. "I like him too, Specs."

◆ 74: Dave

The coffeemaker beeped, once, and Dave looked up from his ragtag bank of computers, startled. Hadn't he just put that pot of coffee on a minute ago? Come to think of it—he checked the clock on the closest monitor—if it was after ten, should he be having coffee at all?

Frowning, he looked back at the screen and the monstrous, endless text file that he was still slowly splitting up into several smaller endless text files. He was almost nine-tenths of the way through, and if he just kept at it for two more hours he might actually *finish* . . . and if he finished, he'd feel okay about going home and getting some sleep. He'd be home and in bed by one. No problem.

Dave slumped back in his chair and closed his eyes, rubbing his face with both hands. He liked working late, to a certain extent: it was quiet except for the faint squeaking of janitor's carts and no one was here to look over his shoulder. Still, he'd been here for thirteen hours now. He was tired. Also vaguely sticky. Maybe he ought to go down to the men's room and splash some water on his face.

He considered the idea in a wan, patient way, then dismissed it and went to fetch another mug of coffee instead. It was late. No one cared. He could wait to wash up until he got home.

Dave had just settled in to spend some quality time with his coffee and his text files when he heard the door at the far end of the hallway burst open and admit at least two people, running like hell, their shoes squeaking on the vinyl tile. Dave glanced up, frowning, then went back to work. This *was* Special Ops, after all, and emergencies didn't always wait for business hours. No one was yelling for help or firing a gun, so it had nothing to do with him, although he found himself wondering idly which team was having such a crappy night.

He was still wondering that when Mike kicked open the door to the saferoom and burst in, Johnny right behind him. Dave yelped and recoiled, nearly flailing himself right out of his chair. "Where's Templar?" Mike demanded to know, screeching to a panting halt not five feet away.

Dave grabbed hold of one of his desks and hauled himself back upright, panting a bit himself from the sudden adrenalin rush. “I-I haven’t seen him!” he wheezed, blinking madly.

“Must have beaten him here,” Mike said over his shoulder. Johnny nodded. Mike looked back at Dave, starting to develop a grin that looked pretty purely crazy. “Shit, did I scare you?” he asked with a certain amount of relish.

“Um,” Dave said warily. “You startled me a little.”

“Aw, it’s okay, you can admit it, I scared you!” Mike reached over and thumped Dave’s shoulder, hard enough to make Dave’s chair jump and roll about six inches back. Dave frowned and pulled himself back up to the desk. Mike whooped and twisted around. “Shit, Texas, you see that, David-Brassoff-Dave’s-Fine here nearly put a foot through his monitor, am I good or *what*?”

“Or what,” Johnny said from the other side of the room. “You want coffee?”

“Shit, yeah.” Mike untwisted himself and propped an arm on the side of Dave’s desk, beaming at him in a wholly unsettling way. “Aw, you had my coffee waiting for me and everything, that’s so sweet, babe,” he said.

“Um,” Dave said.

“Guess we’ll keep you around, then,” Mike said, ruffling Dave’s hair and making him duck. “If only because you fill out that sweater so nice, you know?”

“Um,” Dave said again, glancing down at his sweater in some consternation.

“Nah, I’m totally kidding, actually we only keep you around ’cause you’ve got a nice ass, you know?” Mike blew him a kiss before heading for the conference table, plucking his mug from Johnny’s hand along the way. Dave, wondering if there was something he didn’t know about Mike or *what*, found it prudent to sit very still until the bulk of the table was between the two of them.

Mike had barely dropped into his seat before the door at the end of the hallway boomed open again. “There they are,” Mike said, slugging back some coffee and baring his teeth.

“You think?” Johnny said, and then the saferoom door burst open again and the room was suddenly full of people.

“Okay,” Simon said, so obviously high on adrenalin and anger that he was nearly shaking. He slammed his hands through the air like he was trying to physically push people to the table. “Okay, everyone *sit*, we do not have time for formalities—what in hell are you doing here?” Simon said, his attention suddenly centering on Dave. Without waiting for an answer he spun on his heel and confronted Sandra. “What’d you call him for?” Simon demanded to know.

“I didn’t,” Sandra said, glancing at Dave, her eyebrows drawn down.

“Um,” said Dave. Simon went kind of still. Dave steeled himself and went on. “I was working late,” he said. “On the computers.”

“Christ, so you were still *here*?” Simon said, then dismissed the entire conversation with a shake of his head and an impatient gesture. “Never mind, it doesn’t

matter, I don't have time to care about you right now. Get back to what you were doing and keep it quiet. Everybody else, *sit*."

"Woof," Mike said under his breath.

Simon, either not noticing or ignoring it, turned on his heel and started pacing, three steps right, three steps left. Dave decided that the best thing to do right now was hunker down in his computer chair and pretend to be invisible—it was working for him so far, anyway. "Okay," said Simon. "Okay. As you guys have probably all heard by now, Farraday got the drop on Archer somehow, and Christ, let me tell you, if we get Archer back in one piece I am *never* going to let him forget it. But that's not important right now. What's important is that by abducting Archer—" Simon stopped where he was "—Farraday has finally made his fatal mistake."

Everyone else was quiet. "Why?" Nate finally said, pushing up his glasses with one quivering hand.

"Because Farraday's got absolutely no idea what he's got." Simon paused and let them all absorb that, his hands flexing at his sides. "Bet you anything you'd care to name. He thinks Archer is just some friend of mine, get it? And it's *Archer*. Jesus Christ, that's sure going to fuck up his night. If Farraday leaves Archer unattended for *thirty seconds*—"

"Assuming Jeremy ever regains consciousness," said Sandra.

"Or, uh, that he's still alive," Mike added. Sandra shot a glare in his direction. Instead of quailing, Mike stared back, a truculent expression on his face. "What?" he said sullenly. "Keep telling you guys Farraday ain't the same asshole he was—"

"*If Farraday leaves Archer unattended for thirty seconds*," Simon said again, leaning on it hard enough to squash them all, "then Archer is going to get himself free, and we all know that Archer can take care of himself. I don't think we have to worry too hard about Archer's safety, although yeah, it's a concern if he doesn't regain consciousness."

"So, um, what's the plan?" said Nate. "We sit here and wait for Jeremy to call and tell us where Farraday's hideout is? That would work—"

"Not exactly," Simon said, sticking his fingers in the front pocket of his jeans. "See, that's the other reason that Farraday just fucked up. Nate, fire up your computer and track the tracer with this number on it, will you?" Simon produced a slip of paper and held it out.

Nate didn't move for a second, blinking at Simon in confusion. In the end, it was Sandra who got it. "You put one of the FBI's tracking chips on Archer?" she asked in disbelief. "Not that I am complaining at the moment, but that's all kinds of illegal, boss—"

"It was a joke!" Simon insisted, throwing up both hands. "I tagged him with one of those little bastards the first time we met—well, okay, the second—and I've sort of . . . kept doing it ever since, okay? As a joke. I like making him throw

his stupid expensive jackets away out of sheer paranoia. My *point* is, he's got this tracker—" Simon waved the piece of paper like punctuation, and belatedly Nate edged out of his seat and ran to grab it "—in the inside front pocket of his jacket, and as long as he's got that jacket on him, whether he's conscious or not, he's going to lead us right to Farraday."

"Fucking *perfect*, boss," Mike said, slapping the table. "If I didn't know better I'd swear you set him up, you know?"

The pause was small, but it was there. "Not exactly," Simon finally said, hooking his thumbs through his beltloops and staring away over Sandra's shoulder somewhere. "I wasn't lying when I told you that I tag him as a joke. I did it to him when he went to Cincinnati with us, too. But I'd also be lying if I didn't tell you that it hadn't crossed my mind. I never lied to Archer about the danger he might be in, but I'm also not above using that danger to my advantage."

"Fuck," Mike said, his voice a weird mix of respect and revulsion. "That's cold, boss. Awesome, but cold—"

"We can discuss the dubious ethics of it later," Sandra cut in. Mike subsided into a sulk beside her. Sandra didn't appear to notice. "So that's why you stayed at home instead of coming to the hotel with us? Is that it? Making yourself into the only available target?"

"More or less," Simon admitted, still staring at the wall. "Plus mostly I wanted to recuperate in my own goddamned bed, but, uh. Yeah. More or less."

"Shit," Sandra said. "Did you at least let Archer in on your little plan?"

Simon didn't say anything. After a moment he reached up and rubbed his temples.

"*Shit*," Sandra said again, looking down at her hands. After a moment she shook her head sharply and looked back up. "I think I hate that, but right now I don't think I have time to hate it. So we'll track down Archer's jacket and see where it leads us? Is that what you're suggesting?"

"With a little effort," Simon said, unfreezing and turning on his heel. "Unfortunately it's not as easy as pushing a button and producing a thief. What's the range on those things, Specs?"

"It depends, Templar," said Nate, his nose nearly pressed to his monitor. "Ten miles or so? Less if there's a lot of metal between us and him. I'm getting the program up now."

"All right," said Simon. He took a deep breath. "Next. Sandy, I want my badge back." Sandra was silent, looking at him. After a moment in which she said nothing, Simon added, "Please."

Still Sandra said nothing, and the silence lengthened. Dave was afraid to move, but his eyes kept flicking back and forth, watching the wordless conversation that Simon and Sandra appeared to be having. "All right," Sandra finally said, looking away. "I suppose that these count as extenuating circumstances."

“Boy, howdy,” said Simon. “I promise you that I’ll go to bat for you if Upstairs says anything about it.”

“Believe me, I expect you to,” Sandra said, pushing her chair back and standing up. Her voice was like flint. “But I’m not just doing this out of the goodness of my heart, Templar. I don’t want this thing of yours busting up on *my* credibility later. You set Archer up all by yourself and you can take the fall for it, because I’m not going to.”

“Fair enough,” Simon said, after a hesitation so short as to almost be invisible. “You give me back my ID right now and I’ll make sure it doesn’t stick to you in any way.”

For a moment they stared at each other. “Deal,” Sandra finally said, stepping into Simon’s office. Instead of getting on with the briefing, Simon waited, staring at the wall again, tapping out an absent rhythm against his thigh; a minute or so later Sandra reappeared with a black leather ID folder.

Simon took it and stuck it in his back pocket, closing his eyes and faking a shiver. “Oh, man, that feels good,” he said with a quick little smile. A nervy laugh rippled through the room. “Okay,” Simon said. He opened his eyes. “Okay. As far as I’m concerned—as far as any of you are concerned—I’m now back in charge of this team. Anything that I tell you to do from now on, I will take responsibility for, assuming that you do it. Business as usual. Are we clear?”

The momentary tension vanished. People shifted and nodded. “Clear, boss,” said Mike.

“Great,” Simon said, clapping his hands. “In that case: Springheel, Honda, I want you two to cut that shit out right this second.” Sandra went very still. Beside her, Mike flinched back like Simon had smacked him. “Do you hear me?” said Simon. “I need you two at the top of your game. I need *all* of you at the top of your game. And no one is going to be able to work up to potential when the two of you are having some kind of, of *divorce* over there. Okay?”

“Boss,” Sandra said carefully.

“No, don’t ‘boss’ me,” said Simon. He uncrossed his arms and ran a hand down his face, for just a moment looking tired as hell. “Look, don’t you guys get it? Can’t you see what Farraday’s trying to *do* here? Look at us: I’ve been shot, Archer is *gone*, Specs is terrified, Honda and Springheel are at each other’s throats, Texas is, uh, well, okay, Texas is fine, and *Rich is dead*.” The last part of the sentence cracked out like a gunshot. “Don’t any of you see it?”

The room went quiet again. For a moment, the loudest sound in the whole room was that of Nate twisting halfway around in his computer chair to look at the others; everyone else might as well have been frozen. Dave held out against it as long as he could, but in the end, he couldn’t resist any more. “He, uh,” Dave said. Simon didn’t exactly look at him, but his eyes slid right. Dave swallowed and went for broke. “He’s trying to hamstring the team, isn’t he? Causing havoc in the ranks.”

“Yes!” Simon cried, slashing a hand through the air in Dave’s general direction and then wincing. “Exactly! That! What what’s-his-name—”

“—Dave, sir—”

“—*whatever!* said!” said Simon. He put his hands on the table and leaned into them like he was trying to stare his whole team down at once. “Jesus Christ. Look at us. This is not the kick-ass team that I am accustomed to leading, okay? This is a, a bunch of chickens with their heads cut off all running around pecking at each other—”

“How does a headless chicken peck at anything?” Mike put in, apparently suicidally unable to resist.

“*Very carefully,*” Simon snapped. “Okay, fine, a bunch of headless chickens running around *tripping* over each other, is that better? But my point is that he did this to us on purpose! For revenge or just for, for utility, I don’t know, but he is trying to destroy us as a team and you guys are *letting* him. Christ.”

Sandra abruptly shook her head, waking from her stasis. “There’s one problem with that theory,” she said, “although I personally consider it a given.”

“Yeah?” Simon said, calming a bit. “Enlighten us, Spring. What’s the problem?”

“If your theory is true,” said Sandra, “then Diana Fontaine is definitely working with Farraday.” Beside her, Mike stirred and then settled.

Simon nodded. “That’s true. One does kinda require the other. But guess what, folks: here’s where we find out where her loyalties really lie.”

“How?” Mike said suspiciously.

“Oh, boy, Honda, am I glad you asked that,” said Simon, straightening up. “Here in a sec you’re going to pull out your cell phone and you’re going to call her at the hotel. When she answers, you’re going to tell her this and nothing else: that we are going to be late getting back to the hotel because Farraday’s unknowingly finally made a crucial error and we’re about to be breathing down his neck. Encourage her to stay in the room and keep her head down. That’s it. No details. Nothing else. If she presses you, tell her that you can’t talk about it and you have to go.”

“And then we see if she tries to warn Farraday or if she stays put,” Sandra said.

Simon pointed at Sandra. “Exactly.”

“One problem,” said Johnny, speaking up for the first time since the briefing had started.

Simon twitched and looked at him. “Yeah?” he said. “What’s that?”

“She runs to warn Farraday that we’re on to him and Archer’s in deep shit,” Johnny said. “He ain’t away by then . . .”

Simon hesitated and let his head drop, hooking his thumbs in his beltloops again. “Yeah,” he said, quietly. “That’s true. If he hasn’t gotten himself free by then, there’s a good chance he’s a dead man.”

“So?” said Sandra. “What do we do?”

After a moment, Simon looked up, his face set. “It’s a risk I’m willing to take,” he said flatly.

A susurrus of shock ran through the room, leaving them all buzzing with it. “Cold,” Mike said again, shaking his head, still sounding half-awed and half-revolved. “That’s just cold.”

“No,” said Simon, something about the way he said it silencing them all. He wiped a hand down his drawn face and added, “That’s faith.”

♦ 75: Jeremy

Jeremy swam back to consciousness in dusty-smelling darkness, some unknown amount of time later. For a long time it was all he could do to keep himself conscious, the darkness greying out and swimming back in again while his head throbbed and his stomach rolled. Eventually he forced himself awake, only to discover that he was bound hand and foot and lying on an uncomfortable floor somewhere, face turned to the wall.

As far as he could tell, wherever he was, he was alone. Still, he regulated his breathing to mimic unconsciousness as best he could and spent a little while listening with all his might. It was more difficult than it might have been—his ears were ringing, which really made his day complete—but eventually he sighed and took a deep breath. Alone, then. Oh, good.

Shaking his head a little (and nearly fainting again for his troubles) Jeremy pulled himself together and took stock. Probably concussed, nearly electrocuted, certainly bruised all to hell, and unable to feel anything in his extremities but a dim, tingling numbness: whatever he was bound with, it was cutting off his circulation. Pressing his lips together he flexed his fingers and was rewarded with a bolt of pain in both wrists for his efforts, sharp enough to make him bare his teeth. Still, the pain was better than that disturbing numbness.

Twisting one hand around and up as best as he could, Jeremy groped blindly at his wrists and found hard plastic sunk deep into his flesh. He ticked his thumbnail off one of the jagged teeth of the hard plastic thing and sighed in relief. A zip-tie. Reasonably easy to deal with, all things considered. He stopped, listened again, and then slid his fingers up into the sleeve of his jacket.

The little sheath-knife had a triangular blade barely longer than the last joint of his thumb, but it was wickedly sharp, as Jeremy proved to himself by promptly fumbling the blade and nicking one of his wrists with it. He winced, inwardly cursing that damned numbness, and forced his fingers to hook properly around the T-shaped handle. After three deep, steadying breaths Jeremy let his left hand go limp—no problem there—and attempted to slide the blade into the tiny space between zip-tie and flesh.

He gave himself a nasty slice in the process, but now was not the time to worry about such things. He closed his eyes and pulled up on the blade. It bit bloodily into his wrist again, but the other edge caught on one of the zip-tie's teeth; a moment later the plastic snapped and his left hand was free.

Jeremy peeled the plastic out of the deep and reddened groove that it had carved in his flesh, then bit his tongue against the sudden and painful resurgence of feeling. As soon as he could he transferred the knife into his left hand and cut his right hand free, gashing that wrist as well—damned numb fingers—but freeing his hands. He pulled his knees to his chest and cut his ankles free, then dropped his knife carefully to the floor in front of his face and rubbed his hands together, wincing.

By the time he'd forced feeling back into his fingers, he thought he was probably doing well enough to sit up. He braced both bleeding hands against the floor and pushed himself upright, swaying groggily back against the wall that he'd been turned against; dimly, through his sudden attack of vertigo, he noticed that the wall was made of metal. Interesting. He filed that away and turned his attention back to getting hold of himself.

Once he felt reasonably steady, he cleaned his little knife off on his shirttail and slid it back into its sheath, nearly cutting himself again in the process. He felt weak and slack with fatigue—doubtless the after-effects of being hit with that much electricity—and he had to force his fingers to stop shaking before he reached into his jacket. The cuts on his wrist smeared blood across the front of his shirt. He thought he might be quite put out by that later on.

The housing of his goggles was cracked, one chunk of the smoked glass missing entirely. Jeremy hissed in dismay (equally upset by the possibility that the goggles might be broken and by how much it was going to cost him to repair the bloody things) and then put them on, tightening the strap despite how badly it exacerbated his headache. *Come on*, he thought, and touched two fingers to his temple. The goggles snapped and sparked once, startling him, but after a tense moment the infrared display flickered grudgingly to life and the room leapt into existence.

Jeremy took a deep breath and looked around, absently rubbing the marks on his wrists again. The windowless room was plain and empty, with corrugated metal walls and a concrete floor, and—Jeremy touched the floor and rubbed his fingers together—it was covered in dust. As was he, he suspected. There was only one way out: a plain metal door with a glass window in it. Well, then.

Actually getting to his feet nearly undid him all over again, forcing him to catch himself against the metal wall lest he fall down. Despite everything, Jeremy couldn't resist laughing ruefully, barely louder than a breath. "I am going to find this *so* professionally embarrassing later on," he muttered, groping for the little pouch stashed in the small of his back.

◆ 76: Johnny

“Yeah,” Mike said. “Yeah. You lay low, okay? Don’t leave the room, don’t use or answer the phone. That’s an order.” He paused and laughed what was just about the most forced laugh Johnny had ever heard, although it’d probably do you if you didn’t know Mike.

The rest of the team was silent and still, none of them actually looking at Mike but all of them listening. Although the tracing program was running Nate wasn’t typing anything into it, and Johnny couldn’t even hear the new guy *breathing*. Sandra was staring down at her hands, folding and refolding them with little dry sounds. Simon was standing at the head of the table with his arms folded over his chest and his eyes shut.

Diana Fontaine’s voice buzzed faintly against Mike’s ear. Johnny glanced up just in time to catch Mike shutting his eyes. “Don’t worry,” Mike said. “We’ll get him. He’s really screwed the pooch this time. Okay? Okay. Wish me luck.” Diana’s voice buzzed again. “Thanks,” Mike said, and he forced himself to laugh again and then closed his phone. “So?” he said, putting it back on his belt. “How was that?” Now that the call was over he sounded kind of odd to Johnny’s ears: usually a Mike with his game on was a hyperactive Mike, but right now he sounded flat and off.

“Perfect,” said Simon, flashing Mike a thumb’s-up. “You’re the man, Honda, and I mean that. How’d she sound?”

“Uh. Scared? Worried? Something. I don’t know.” Mike shrugged. “Guess she’d be worried either way, though, huh?”

“Guess so. It’ll all come down to what she does.” Simon spun around. “Nate, my man, tell me what’s up with the tracking.”

Nate made a startled little noise and looked up from his computer. “Well, I’m not getting a signal from the chip right now, boss, but I guess that’s not too surprising.”

“Yeah, not really. I mean, he’s got to be close, but probably not ‘within ten miles’ close.” Simon rubbed a hand down his face. “So: time to break out the handheld units, right?”

“Right,” Nate said, pushing his chair back. “Just to be sure, I want to run one of them up to the roof and try from there before we do anything else. Okay?”

Simon snapped his fingers. “Good idea, Specs.” Nate vanished into his supply closet and started banging around; ignoring the racket, Simon turned to look at the rest of them. “Okay, folks, listen up,” he said. The banging from the closet got a bit quieter. “Assuming that Specs has no luck scanning from the roof, here’s what we’re going to do. I’m going to split us up into two teams: Spring, you take Texas in your car, and Honda, I’ll be going with you in the van. Each team is going to take one of the handheld units and drive around the city, looking for the signal. For starters—crap.” He snapped his fingers at the new guy, who came back to life with a startled sound. “You. Get me a map of the DC area.”

“Yessir,” the new guy said, kicking his chair around and waking up one of the million computers in his zone. “One sec.”

“Don’t call me sir,” Simon snapped, losing it for a moment. He shook it off a second later. “Anyway. My team is going to head north. Springheel’s team is going to head south. When we hit 495, my team will go west and Springheel’s team will go east—” Simon drew the semicircles in midair with both hands “—so that we cover both halves of the loop. If we make it to each other’s starting places without picking up some kind of signal, we will start working the city grid.” Simon paused and raised his voice. “Specs, you stay here and start working out a driving pattern for the grid, in case we need it. If someone gets a hit on a handheld, we will call you and relay that information so that you can be looking it up while we reconvene back here.”

“Okay,” Nate called back.

“Map,” the new guy said, pushing his chair back.

Simon nodded and strode over, putting a hand on the back of the new guy’s computer chair. “Okay, here. Honda and I will take 295 heading north; Spring, I want you two to go hit up 395 and head south. Sound good?”

“Got you, Templar,” Sandra said. “Do we really need to reconvene here, though? The second team could just drive out to the first team’s location.”

“We’ll reconvene somewhere out of the way, yes, but someone will be coming back for Specs,” Simon said. “I am not letting Farraday split this team up again. When we go, we all go.”

“Fair enough,” Sandra said after a pause.

Nate hustled back out a moment later carrying two sturdy gray plastic things cradled against his chest. A thin sheen of sweat stood out on his forehead. “Give me a sec,” he said, dropping them both on his desk and turning them on.

Simon studied Nate for a moment, then reached over and put a hand on his shoulder. “You okay, Specs?”

“I’m scared,” Nate said, so abruptly that it made him sound almost angry. He picked up the piece of paper and started punching numbers into the first handheld device. “Don’t worry, I’ll deal with it.”

Simon squeezed Nate's shoulder and then let his hand drop. "So, anyway," he said, addressing the room in general, "once we have a signal to start from, we're aaaaaall going to pile in the van and follow the signal in on the . . . laptop . . . *shit*."

Every eye in the room went to Rich's old laptop, just dead as hell, currently sitting on top of one of the desks in Rich's old lair. After a moment, the new guy reached up and fetched it down. "I can reformat it and install the software while you're gone," he said tentatively. "I'll just need the discs."

"I'll burn it off for you," Nate said, not looking up from the handheld. His hand shot blindly to one of the drawers of his own computer desk and hauled out a spindle of CDs, plunking them down on the desktop with a thud.

Simon looked away. "Goddammit, Rich," he said under his breath, so much venom in his voice that it kind of took Johnny aback, despite everything. After a second he shook his head once, sharply, and raised his voice. "Okay. Yes. Do that. Specs, as soon as you can, run to the roof and do your check. The rest of you get ready to go." He stopped and took a breath, glancing around at everybody. Johnny could almost say it with him: "Let's do this thing."

♦ 77: Jeremy

The view from the little window in the door was completely unedifying: a narrow hallway, made out of the same corrugated metal as the room he was already in, extending off in both directions farther than he could see from in here. Jeremy checked the window in swift, darting bursts, unwilling to be framed in it should someone come by and glance in his direction.

Unlike the room, however, the hallway was lit, if only dimly. Bare, ugly, dusty bulbs provided sickly yellow light, just barely enough to see by. Jeremy tried the knob. Locked. Well, of course. After another quick glance out of the window, he lowered himself gingerly to his knees and studied the lock. It was almost literally nothing: ten seconds with the lock-pick gun would get him in or out of here, and as far as he could tell, there was nothing blocking the door from outside. In that case, some preparation was in order.

He let himself slide back to the floor, leaning back against the door and shutting his eyes wearily. He'd only been kneeling for twenty seconds or so and already the muscles in his thighs were quivering like he'd run a race. He listened with half an ear while he rested and heard nothing, not even the faintest echo of footsteps. Still, he wasn't such an optimist as to think that he'd been abandoned here, and once he'd caught his breath, he crawled back over to the corner where he'd originally been put and lay back down.

The little first-aid kit he carried was necessarily a bit on the sparse side, but it did yield up a couple of aspirin, which he swallowed dry, making a horrible face. He scrubbed as much of the blood off his wrists as he could using the tail of his (by now thoroughly ruined) shirt and inspected the cuts. Only one was still bleeding, and that sluggishly; he put a bit of medical tape over it and called that good enough.

He was debating the merits of taking two more aspirin when he heard the approaching footsteps, quick and nervous.

Ripping off the goggles he tucked them firmly against the curve of his chest, out of sight of the door, and scrubbed both hands through his hair to put it back to rights. Whoever it was, they were coming fast; he grabbed one of the zip-ties and

thrust his hands behind his back, wrapping the zip-tie back around his wrists as best he could and clumsily pinning the cut ends in places by pressing his wrists together. He'd just have to hope that whoever it was didn't notice that his ankles were no longer bound. He took a deep breath and let his head fall back to the concrete, half-closing his eyes, less than a second before the beam of a penlight stabbed through the door's narrow window and caught him in a spotlight.

He forced himself to breathe slowly and evenly, not daring to move a muscle, not even to relax. The penlight swept down, then back up; Jeremy played dead, not without finding himself somewhat grimly amused that after this he could quite nearly call himself a method actor. After an endless ten seconds, the penlight snapped off. Whoever it was retreated back up the hallway.

Jeremy waited until he could no longer hear footsteps before shaking the zip-tie off his wrists again and pushing himself upright. There was no point in waiting around any longer. His captor, having just satisfied his curiosity, probably wouldn't come back to check on him for ten or fifteen minutes, at least. As escape windows went, it was positively enormous. Picking up his goggles Jeremy put them back on and crawled back to the door, putting his ear to the metal and listening for five seconds before digging out the little silvery lock-pick gun. He would just have to hope that the rattling didn't attract too much attention.

He slid the pins into the lock, then closed his eyes and said a silent prayer, not so much to any particular god as to his own personal luck and whatever cosmic abacus kept track of such things; then he opened his eyes, firmed his jaw against the quiver in his muscles, and pulled the trigger.

Fifteen seconds later Jeremy eased out into the hallway, already feeling horribly exposed. He pulled the door nearly shut behind him, stopping just short of engaging the lock, just in case he needed a bolt-hole to retreat to. A glance to the left revealed a long hallway, full of doors just like this one, that ended in a blank wall. Some sort of storage facility, then. The hallway to the right was nearly the same, only instead of ending in a blank wall, it ended in a gaping square of blackness. Or what would have been blackness, had he not had the goggles on; instead it ended in a gaping square of greenness, with large square shapes lurking beyond the opening.

Well, then. One way to go. No point in hanging about. Straining his senses to the utmost—or what passed for his utmost in this state—Jeremy moved down the hall as swiftly as he dared, silently grateful for the concrete flooring. It made a much better sound baffle than it ever had a bed. Jeremy rolled one sore shoulder and winced.

The hallway opened up into a largish and high-ceilinged storage room, lined on all sides with boxes and crates ranging in size from 'two-man job' to 'tip the bloody forklift over'. The centre of the room was empty. An enormous set of double doors gaped open on the opposite wall, doubtless meant to accommodate

the aforementioned forklifts—the space beyond was clearly gigantic, even in comparison to the room that Jeremy stood in now. It was also brilliantly lit. Every fibre of Jeremy's body rebelled against stepping into that light.

Stepping into a convenient shadow, Jeremy leaned against one of the larger crates, caught his breath, and took stock. He was starting to have a few suspicions about his location. Testing them, he looked up, promptly causing himself a fit of vertigo that nearly dropped him to his knees. Jeremy squeezed his eyes shut and shook it away, then looked up again, both hands on the crate just in case he should go all dizzy again.

The series of large rectangles that marched along the ceiling stood out like windows in the darkness. He closed his eyes in momentary relief, then set about picking his way to a different corner, where a pile of smaller crates stood stacked up on one another.

◆ 78: Simon

“Anything?” Mike asked for approximately the four hundredth time, scanning the road in front of them as he accelerated past a slow-moving sedan. It was close to 10:45 at night and 495 was only mildly clogged, which meant that Mike was weaving in and out of traffic with abandon, the needle holding steady at seventy-five miles an hour. The bubble light was stuck to the roof of the van but not currently on.

“Not yet,” Simon said, not doing a good job of concealing his impatience. His eyes hurt from staring at the green-lit little screen that was infuriatingly refusing to register anything. His chest ached from . . . well, from everything. A lot of things. On his knee, his free hand flexed, closed into a fist around a handful of his jeans, and opened again. “I’ll tell you.”

“I know,” Mike said, ducking his head a little. “I just . . . yeah. Sorry, boss.”

“It’s cool.” Simon hefted the bulk of the machine—it was surprisingly heavy—and swung it in an arc from right to left, just in case. The device failed to register so much as a blip.

Mike patted the steering wheel in an odd, falling rhythm, then sighed and stopped. “And, you know, I’m sorry about the whole . . . you know, the whole thing with Sandy. It’s just—”

“Not now, Mike,” Simon said, although he reached over to clap his hand to Mike’s shoulder and take a little of the sting out of it. “Believe me, I understand, okay? I get it. It will be dealt with. But right now, I’ve got bigger things to worry about.”

Mike deflated. “Yeah, I know,” he said. “Just wanted to, you know, to apologize—”

Behind them a siren whooped, startling them both. A police car pulled out from the left-hand shoulder and fell in behind them, lights and sirens going. Simon rolled his eyes. “Oh, Christ.”

“Whoops,” said Mike, hitting the switch for the bubble light. “Guess I was speeding a little, huh?”

"I hereby give you permission to speed however you see fit," said Simon, twisting painfully around and grabbing the radio handset off the unit behind him. The blue light strobing on top of the van had already confused the police car, which was falling back a bit; Simon hit the transmit button and didn't bother to conceal the irritation in his voice. "This is the blue Chevrolet van with the by-God *DC Government* license plate number GT-2862, registered to the Federal Bureau of Investigation and currently on official FBI business, wanting to know if you are blind or *what*."

He let go of the button and waited. Unsurprisingly, the police car behind them didn't respond, but after a few seconds its lights flickered back off and it dropped away, quickly getting lost in the traffic behind them. "I think he flipped us off, boss," Mike said, turning the bubble light back off. "I for one am totally hurt and shit."

"You think he's mad at us?" Simon asked, checking the little screen on the handheld device. No blips had registered during the mini-fracas. "I'll send the MPDC a fruit basket on Monday. With a little card that says 'For Officer Butthurt'."

Mike snickered and fell silent, all his attention temporarily diverted by the intricacies of blowing past an entire convoy of nearly-identical little commuter cars. Simon twisted around again—*ow*—and put the handset back, then settled in with the handheld tracker again. He reached up to massage his aching side without really noticing that he was doing it, prodding at the tender flesh around the wound.

"I, uh, I'm kind of starting to worry here, boss," Mike said a few minutes later, fidgeting with the steering wheel. "I mean, 495 isn't that far across, you know? And between Sandy's car and the van we've pretty much covered most of it already..."

"It'll work," Simon said, willing himself to believe it. "We just need to get lucky, that's all. You heard Specs: metal messes with the signal, and metro DC is not precisely a picturesque little adobe village."

Mike frowned at the windshield, then hit the turn signal and heeled over into the left lane. "Guess so, boss," he said dubiously.

"It'll work," Simon said again. *It had better*, he thought, resisting the urge to cross his fingers underneath the bulk of the tracking device.

♦ 79: Jeremy

No more than halfway up the stack of crates and Jeremy had to stop, resting his forehead against the cool metal wall and blinking until the ominous black spots cleared from his vision. Oh, yes, ‘up’ had seemed like a wonderful idea from the ground, particularly when there was no retreat and not much going forward, but he was quite clearly in no condition for ‘up’—and should he put a foot wrong and turn ‘up’ into ‘down’, the concrete floor was unlikely to be welcoming. Still, no help for it. He reached up and caught the lip of the next box, easing himself up another four feet.

His captor could be returning to check on him at any time. Jeremy suspected that he still had a good ten minutes, but he couldn’t be sure; he kept one ear open for the sound of those echoing footsteps, even as he slowly dragged himself up towards the high warehouse ceiling. It seemed no closer than it had from the ground, but it was an illusion he was used to. It would seem like the ceiling was a hundred feet away until he could reach out and touch it.

Which, unfortunately, he was not going to be able to do just yet. The stack of crates that he’d chosen to climb—the highest stack in the storeroom—petered out a good ten feet from the ceiling. Jeremy sat carefully down on top of the last crate and looked up, considering his options. This close to the ceiling the rectangles had resolved themselves into the enormous roof vents that prevented the warehouse from overheating; the one above him was halfway open, thank God for small miracles. Jeremy could see stars and high scudding clouds from where he sat.

Those last ten feet would be a problem, however. The ripples in the corrugated metal meant that he couldn’t use the suction cups, which left him with the grappling hook. However, if he missed the opening and hit the metal ceiling, instead—definitely a possibility in his current state—he would advertise his presence to the world with a mind-numbingly loud gonging of metal against metal.

Shaking his head, Jeremy fetched out the hook and unfolded it, then let his fingers play over the metal while he thought. *Oh, well*, he eventually concluded,

if it's ruined anyway... Pinning the grappling hook between his thighs, he shrugged out of his jacket and stripped his ruined shirt off over his head.

October cold struck him like a physical blow and he hurried back into his jacket, buttoning it closed over his bare chest as best he could. "Quite a fashion statement," he said under his breath, then bit into the blood- and dust-smeared silk of his t-shirt and tore off a strip.

It was loud. It was *unconscionably* loud, especially in this echoing room. Jeremy gritted his teeth and made quick work of it, all the while expecting to attract someone's attention. When his shirt had been reduced to a pile of cloth strips and he still had not been discovered, it was almost upsetting. He'd let himself be surprised and overpowered by the very same someone who wasn't perceptive enough to notice that racket? Oh, that was just *embarrassing*. Quite possibly for both of them.

Seated tailor-fashion on the top of his crate Jeremy wound the arms of the grappling hook with the strips of silk, covering as much of the bare metal as he could. His fingers shook a little, forcing him to take his time, despite his very real suspicion that he hadn't much time left to take; still, in the end he was wielding the world's most expensive padded grappling hook, and no one had caught him at it yet.

He debated standing up on top of the crate. He debated standing on top of the crate, having a dizzy spell, and promptly falling to his death. In the end he compromised and rose only onto his knees, letting a couple of feet of wire play out between his fingers and starting up a lazy spin. The padded hook whickered by in the darkness, moving faster and faster until the wire whined through the air; he half-shut his eyes to listen to it, letting his arm take the measure of his projectile—then his eyes opened, his hand rose into the spin, and the grappling hook arced out towards the half-open vent, wire hissing after it.

The hook passed through the narrow opening with a hand's-width of space to spare on either side and landed on the roof outside with a muffled *kung!* sound. Nothing but net, as the Americans said. Jeremy pulled at the wire (producing another series of muffled bumps and thuds) until the hook caught firmly on the edge of the vent. Excellent. Now all he had to do was climb up the wire while concussed and battered—whose mad plan was this anyway?

With the last two strips of shirt wrapped around the palms of his hands for protection, Jeremy stuck his left hand through a loop of wire and got a good grip, then reached up as high as he could with his right and hauled himself up. Oh yes. *Mad* plan, he thought dizzily, hanging in mid-air with his thighs clamped around the wire, revolving gently in space. Still, nothing for it: gritting his teeth, he inched upwards.

By the time he hauled himself up onto the roof, he was shaking all over. He forced himself to at least reel in the wire before he braced his heels against the lip of the vent and sprawled out on the roof, adding a fine coating of rust and

bird doings to the layers of crud on his (once really quite nice) clothing. The chill October breeze plucked at his hair. Jeremy stared unseeing up at the clouds and forced himself to breathe evenly, for the moment too concerned about not passing out to even stand up and see where he was.

◆ 80: Sandra

“Got him,” Johnny said suddenly, jerking upright in the passenger seat.

Sandra, startled, nearly veered into another lane, setting off a positive shit-storm of honking. With a grimace she slapped the switch on her bubble light, strobing the world with blue; the honking cut off abruptly and the cars to either side of her dropped back with an alacrity that was almost funny. She hit the turn signal and slid into the right-hand lane. “There he is,” she said with some relish, glancing at the screen of the little handheld device and the small green dot that had just shown up.

“Callin’ Specs now,” Johnny said, pulling out his phone. “You call Templar.”

Sandra nodded and steered her car over onto the shoulder, stopping on top of an overpass. Killing the bubble light with one hand she dug her phone out of her purse with the other and flipped it open, dialing Simon’s number. She didn’t even hear the phone ring before Simon’s voice crackled through: “Tell me you’ve got him, Spring,” Simon commanded.

“We’ve got him,” Sandra said. “The blip just showed up a second ago. Texas is relaying the information to Specs now.”

Simon was silent for half a second or so—in relief, Sandra realized, with a little pang of sympathy that took her by surprise. In the passenger seat Johnny was reading out numbers, his voice low. “Where are you?” Simon demanded to know.

“South side of 495, in Maryland,” Sandra said, ducking and craning her neck to look out the window. “Near Route 4 and Andrews Air Force Base.”

“So within ten miles or so of there,” Simon said thoughtfully. After a moment he audibly shook it off and got back to business. “All right. You two? You two are *awesome*. Here’s what I want you to do: I want you to get off the freeway and find some place safe to park your car, and wait there for us. Keep an eye on the blip. If it’s moving, I want to know that. If it’s not, I want to know that too. If it vanishes again, I *really* want to know that. Honda and I will go grab Specs and head out your way. I’ll call you again once we’re *en route*.”

“Got it,” Sandra said, nudging her car up to walking speed and folding the phone away without bothering with goodbyes. Gravel crunched under her tires. Beside her Johnny was intent on the little screen, watching the blip avidly, like a hunter. Traffic fell away in the right-hand lane (thanks in no small part to the blue bubble light) and Sandra pulled back out, goosing her car back up to speed.

♦ 81: Simon

Simon slapped his phone shut and bared his teeth at the windshield in triumph. *Finally*. “Honda, how fast can you get this thing back to base?”

“This time of night? Eight minutes, and that’s in *this* piece of shit,” Mike said confidently, turning on the bubble light and sliding into the left-hand lane. Cars fell behind them as he accelerated. “You can fuckin’ time me.”

“I would, except that there is no need,” said Simon. “After all, you are the *man*. Get me back to base in seven and I’ll kiss you right on the mouth, swear to God.”

“Oh *baby*,” Mike nearly sang, putting the pedal all the way down. The van roared like an angry bear and surged past an eighteen-wheeler, nearly leaping forward into the next clear space on 495. “You sure do know how to motivate a man!”

Simon laughed and then fell silent, letting Mike concentrate. The van tore down 495 at a perfectly ludicrous clip and without really thinking about it Simon braced both feet against the floorboards in response—not that it would save him if Mike hit something at this speed.

They were five minutes out and closing fast when Simon’s phone rang again. Mike didn’t so much as react, his eyes on the road—he got into that sort of driving coma, it was like a Zen thing, Simon was used to it—but Simon twitched and dug out his phone. Nate. Perfect. Simon answered his phone with “So where is he, Specs?”

“Well,” Nate said, temporizing.

Simon squeezed his eyes shut. “Specs, don’t ‘well’ me, ‘well’ is for *bad* news. What’s up?”

“Well, uh, it’s not really bad news, it’s just weird . . .”

“Specs!” Simon said, nearly barking it. With an effort he reined himself in. “Just tell me.”

Nate swallowed. “The signal’s coming from the middle of the Potomac, boss.”

Simon seized up for a moment, assimilating this. Even his heart paused. “*Shit*,” he finally said, shooting bolt upright in his seat, completely oblivious to the twang of affronted pain from his chest. “A boat? A fucking *boat*?”

“Well—”

“No wonder no one ever saw him if he was using the Potomac as his own personal highway!” Simon said, thumping his leg with his fist. “The goddamned river would take him to within five miles of anywhere in the city!”

“That’s—”

“And it runs all the way down past Fredericksburg, too—” A little warning light went on the back of Simon’s head and he slapped a hand over his face, groaning aloud. “Oh, Christ, if he’s out on the river in a boat how are we going to catch him? How in hell do I go about requisitioning a boat? Are we going to get into some kind of, of boat chase now? Jesus, I’m uncomfortable enough with Farraday on land—”

“—Templar—”

“—I don’t even know if Honda knows how to drive a goddamned boat—”

“—Templar!” Nate’s shout was squeaky, but all the same, it startled Simon into silence for a moment, which was all the time that Nate needed. Nate swallowed and plunged on. “I don’t think he’s on a boat, boss. I mean, I think you’re right, I think Farraday has one, but for a boat to contain enough metal to flummox the tracking chip like that it’d have to be a battleship or something, and I don’t think Farraday has a battleship—”

“—and if he does, we have way larger problems than we thought,” Simon put in grimly.

“I think he’s in a warehouse,” Nate went on, nearly frantic with information, his words tumbling over each other in their need to come out. “A dockside warehouse. The older ones are mostly metal and they’d give him access to the river, so Farraday could come and go from there without ever touching a street, and the police don’t actually go down there that much!”

“That’s got to be it,” Simon said, staring unseeing out the passenger-side window. For a moment he allowed himself the luxury of putting two and two together: the Potomac ran within a few blocks of headquarters, within half a mile of Nate’s house, within a mile or so of *Truslow Road* . . . a determined psychopath with a motorboat and a good pair of hiking boots could reach any of them. His own apartment wasn’t a quarter of a mile from one of the Potomac’s little offshoots—Simon shook his head sharply, coming back to himself. “Okay. Okay. Specs, we’re incoming now. I want you waiting for us under the covered entry—we are going to stuff you in the van and drive like crazy. Grab what you need and have it waiting. There’s no time to waste.”

“Got it, Templar,” Nate said, and then Simon snapped his phone shut. The river. Jesus Christ.

“After this I am totally learning how to drive a speedboat,” Mike said suddenly. Simon jumped.

Three minutes later Mike screeched to a halt outside the covered entryway. Nate threw open the back doors of the van and jumped in, a small sheaf of papers caught in his teeth, his crowbar in one hand, his toolkit in the other; the new guy climbed in after him with Rich’s laptop hugged to his chest and a couple of CDs racked up on one finger.

Simon twisted around in his seat. “Wait, whoa, okay, who said you were coming?”

“I haven’t finished installing the tracking program on the laptop yet,” the new guy said, hefting the laptop a little like he was trying to demonstrate his point. “I’ll finish while we go.”

“Okay, you know what, *no*,” said Simon. “Nate can do it. I’m not going to complicate an already dangerous situation by taking an unknown quantity into the area with us. No way. Leave the laptop and go.”

The new guy—what *was* his name?—didn’t even hesitate. “There’s got to be something I can do,” he said desperately. Those weird pale eyes of his were nearly glowing in the dark. “I’m not helpless, I’m carrying, I want to help—”

Simon threw up his hands. “Christ, I do *not* have time to argue with you,” he said. “If you’re coming, then close the doors and *sit*.” The new guy’s legs immediately folded up underneath him and he plunked to the van’s floor. “I meant in one of the seats,” Simon clarified, “but hey, points for a speedy response.”

Nate reached over the new guy’s head and yanked the van doors shut, then threw himself into one of the two tech seats. The minute Nate’s ass hit seat, Mike took off like a bat out of hell. “Okay,” Simon said, raising his voice to be heard above the engine. “Listen up. I do not take kindly to this ‘arguing with me’ shit. For the time being I am your *boss* and I expect *compliance*. Do it again and you will not only be removed from my team but also officially reprimanded and possibly even fired. And if someone on this team gets *hurt* because you were arguing with me, I will kill you. Do you hear me?”

“I hear you,” the new guy said, putting Rich’s old laptop in his lap. The back of the van lit up as he raised the lid, bathing himself and the rear doors in weird bluish-white light.

“Good,” Simon said, narrowing his eyes against the ghostly glow. “Then hear this: until we return safely to base, you will immediately and wholeheartedly do whatever I order you to do, no matter how strange or boring you think it is. I will not tolerate arguing, waffling, hesitation, discussion, or creative interpretation. Those are privileges reserved for the actual members of my team, and even they sometimes lose those privileges when the shit hits the fan. If you have a problem with that, tough shit. You made your choice when you got in this van.”

The new guy looked up, even as he slotted the first CD into the laptop's drive. "I understand," he said, blinking.

"Good," said Simon, turning back around and pulling his phone off his belt. "First order: turn the backlight on that thing down. I don't want you blinding Honda while he's driving."

The new guy didn't say another word, but the light went out a second later.

◆ 82: Jeremy

Some unknown amount of time later, Jeremy stopped shaking. The black spots that had been massing threateningly at the edges of his vision receded. Pushing his goggles up to his forehead Jeremy first raised his head and then slowly got to his knees, moving slowly to avoid another dizzy spell, which would be catastrophic at this point. When the half-expected dizziness did not manifest, he pushed himself painfully to his feet and straightened up, scanning the horizon.

Really, the view was magnificent, especially looking north across the river, with the lights of the city spread out beneath the enormous bowl of the sky. The city across the river wasn't likely to be of any use, however; with a twinge of regret Jeremy turned his attention to the immediate area. The warehouse was one of six that Jeremy could see, all alike, all jutting out over the river. They were immensely long, tall, wide metal rectangles, and much to Jeremy's dismay they had no outcroppings that he could see; to climb down off this roof he would have to slide to the edge of the roof and rappel thirty feet straight down, with no stops along the way.

The temptation to do it—the *need*—was overwhelming. And it was true that down *was* easier than up. In his normal state making the drop would be simple. Child's play.

Jeremy shut his eyes and swayed in place. As little as he liked to admit it, he was simply not capable of getting down off the roof in this condition. No, that was untrue: he was certainly capable of *falling* off the roof, although he failed to see how it would benefit him beyond definitively making his nagging headache go away.

Sinking back down, Jeremy braced his feet against the lip of the vent again despite the complaints of his thigh muscles. The roof was obviously the safest place to hide from his captor, but he wasn't in any condition to stay up here, either; the slant of the roof was too pronounced. If he fell asleep or passed out again, he'd roll right off, and the vent's lip wasn't high enough to stop him. Back inside, then. The warehouse was enormous; surely he could find a safe place

to hole up, at least, and an actual escape route at best. He nodded to himself, resigned, and pushed his goggles back down.

Jeremy fed the wire back down through the vent and set the prongs of the grappling hook by hand, hooking two of them firmly under the vent's lip. He wouldn't be able to reclaim it, but it was a loss he was willing to suffer, particularly since it would serve to leave a decent false trail. Gritting his teeth, he wound a loop of the wire about his left hand again, then grabbed the edge of the vent in his right hand and let his body slither back through.

◆ 83: Johnny

“—I mean, of course Simon was right,” Sandra said. She made a frustrated little gesture with the hand that wasn’t holding onto the tracking box, nearly smacking Johnny in the shoulder. “It’s just . . . he doesn’t usually read people the riot act in front of the rest of the team.”

Johnny grunted, not really interested in having this conversation but unable to begrudge Sandra the friendly ear. Sandra’s car was parked at one end of a convenience-store parking lot and the two of them were sitting in it, huddled up over the gray plastic box with their heads nearly touching, watching the little green dot blink. It hadn’t moved much. Wherever Jeremy’s jacket was, it was holding pretty still. Johnny didn’t know if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

“But, then,” Sandra said, making a painful little sound that was probably supposed to be a laugh, “it’s Farraday, and it’s Archer, so I guess Simon’s a little more worked up than usual—”

“Hold up,” Johnny said, raising his hand like a traffic cop. Sandra blinked and stopped mid-sentence. Johnny tapped the screen. “Blip’s gone.”

“What?” Sandra said, craning around to get a better look at the screen, her shoulder pressing up against Johnny’s. “Oh, that’s not good—did the batteries die?”

“Nope.” Johnny leaned back in his seat and fumbled out his cell. “I’m callin’ Templar. Here.” He pushed the box into Sandra’s hands. “You keep an eye on it.”

Sandra nodded and took the box, resting it against the steering wheel. Johnny pulled up **templar** in his address book and hit the call button, chewing absently at the inside of his cheek in lieu of a toothpick. “Texas,” Simon said a second later, his voice raised against the roar of the van’s engine. Mike must really be hauling ass. “We’re about two minutes away from your location now—what’s up?”

“Blip’s gone,” Johnny said. Sandra reached past him and opened the glove compartment. Johnny shuffled his knees out of the way. “Didn’t move a bit. Just came and went.”

Simon let out a short, annoyed breath. “Okay,” he said. “We can do without it if we have to. Keep an eye on the thing. We’re almost there.”

“Right,” said Johnny. He hung up. “About two minutes out, Templar said.”

Sandra nodded, pulling her hair back into a ponytail and snapping a rubber band around it. “Let’s get out and wait.”

◆ 84: Mike

[friday, midnight]

Mike spotted Sandra's car even before he whipped into the lot, the van's front wheels bumping up against a rough bit of pavement and jostling the techies around in the back. He hauled the van left. Sandra and Johnny were already out, Sandra coming around the side of her car towards him—Mike stopped the van just past them, presenting them with the back doors as neatly as if they'd rehearsed all this shit a hundred times. Nate reached out and threw the back doors open and Johnny and Sandra piled in, Sandra with her hair already up, Johnny with the tracking device clutched to his chest. Johnny yanked the doors to behind him. "Go," he said.

Mike went. Mike went like the goddamned devil was after him, safe to say. The satellite map that Nate had printed out was stuck to the dashboard, a big-ass red dot drawn in the middle of one of the oblong shapes at its center. "Shouldn't be more than three minutes assuming we don't hit any fucking construction," he said, eyes on the road, drifting the van smoothly around a pothole almost before his eyes noticed it was there. Even this big clumsy tank of a motherfucking van felt like an extension of his dick or something when he had his game on, and it felt pretty goddamned good.

"I showed the night manager my ID," Sandra was saying from somewhere behind him, in response to a question Mike hadn't heard. "My car should be okay there as long as it needs to be, and I left him instructions to call HQ if we're not back for it by dawn, just in case."

Simon nodded; he was twisted around in his seat again, which had to hurt like fuck with that puncture in his gut. "Not a bad idea," he said. "If we don't show up by dawn then something's *really* fucked."

A traffic light was coming up and Mike's consciousness just kind of expanded to take in the entire intersection, noting that it was empty and that no cars seemed to be coming without needing to turn his head; he blew on through the red light without a problem, a momentary swell of triumph pushing against his ribs from the inside. Fuck, he loved this part of the job. His fingers jittered on the steering

wheel. At this time of night on a weekday the streets were mostly deserted, letting Mike own them all by default. He'd never been to this part of Maryland before but his gut knew which turns to take and which to avoid anyway, and they were there almost before he realized it, the glitter of the Potomac under the moon present at the edge of his vision, the row of warehouses looming on his right.

Mike slowed down, eyeing the chain-link fence around them. The fence itself looked to be all business, with barbed-wire panels up top to discourage fence-climbing. "Christ," Simon said. "Tell me that fucking thing's not electrified. I do not have time to wait for some property manager to come open it."

"You want me to knock it down?" Mike asked, cutting his eyes at Simon. "Big bastard like the van, no problem."

"I'll keep that in mind, Honda," said Simon, leaning forward to stare at the fence out the front windshield. "Right now, though, I'm aiming for something a little quieter. Christ, do they even have security?"

The warehouses slid by. The fence ended. Mike flicked off the headlights and pulled into the next parking lot over, rolling the van slowly to a stop. Even the full moon couldn't make that warehouse complex any prettier.

"Personnel gate over there," said Johnny from the back, tapping one of the rear windows. "Got a chain on. We could take that off no problem."

"I have bolt cutters," Nate volunteered, busily punching numbers into Rich's old laptop, which sat open in front of him. He referred to one of the handheld tracking doodads every few seconds.

Simon slapped the top of his seat back, drawing everyone's attention. "Okay. Honda, kill the van." Mike slid the van into park and pulled the key from the ignition. Simon nodded at him, then kicked himself the rest of the way around and winced. "Okay, listen up, folks. According to the last reading we got, Archer's jacket, and therefore probably Archer himself, is somewhere inside the second warehouse over. Do we have a reading again yet, or is it still blocked by the metal?"

"No reading," Nate said, looking up from the laptop. "I don't think I'm going to be able to draw a bead on it without taking a tracking device into the warehouse itself, Templar." His eyes were wide and worried behind his glasses; he was still sweating despite the cold.

"I see," Simon said, looking down at his hands.

"I, uh, I had an idea," Nate said. He stopped typing long enough to reach into his shirt pocket and dig out a small cardboard envelope. "This is another tracking chip like the one you put on Jeremy," he said, waving the envelope. "If someone carries it with them, then I can track both chips at once on the laptop and direct one to the other—kind of like, um, like playing Hot and Cold?" The words tumbled to a stop and Nate went a little pink, ducking his head. "We'll need the headsets, though."

“Headsets we can do,” Simon said, looking back up. “And that’s a damned good idea, Specs. The problem is that to do that, you’ll need to go into the warehouse with us.”

The van went very quiet. So quiet, in fact, that Mike could hear Nate swallow. “I, I, uh, yeah, I know,” he said, looking down at his hands and fidgeting with the envelope. “I’ll go.”

“Good man,” Simon said, very quietly. “Believe me when I say that we will keep you safe. Pass me the chip.”

Without looking up Nate held out the chip, the paper envelope flapping like a leaf in his trembling fingers. Johnny took it from him and handed it to Simon, who stuck it into his own shirt pocket and buttoned the flap over it. Sandra put her hand on Nate’s shoulder, earning herself a small but grateful little smile.

“Okay,” Simon said, in that weirdly soft tone of voice that meant it was time to be all ears. Adrenalin roared through Mike like fire; he leaned forward, half-shutting his eyes to fight against the jitters. “Okay,” Simon said again. “Here’s the plan. Listen up. Uh, you. New guy. You are going to stay here and babysit the van: lock all the doors, put on a headset, and stay in the back. Keep an eye on one of those trackers, just in case. If anyone approaches the van without announcing themselves over frequency, you raise the alarm. If we start yelling for extraction, you start the van, you knock that goddamned fence down with it, and you come get us. If I tell you to call for backup, the radio’s right there. Because you’re new to this, I’ll be nice and take a moment to explain that you are acting as this team’s linchpin and backup strategy. This is not an unimportant job. This is not makework. This is the job that the guy you are replacing used to do. Do you understand me?”

The new guy nodded, hugging one of the handheld trackers to his chest. “I understand,” he said. He seemed pretty calm. Mike, already twitching, figured that would last until just about when things actually started to happen.

“Good,” said Simon, marching inexorably on. “The rest of you I don’t need to explain things to. Here’s the plan. Assuming that the fence is not electrified—and I did not see signs to that effect, so I’m assuming not—we will cut the chain on that gate over there and cross to the second warehouse over, keeping to the shadows. Once we find a way in, we will go in, and we will split up.” Nate made a tiny little sound, which Simon ignored. “Honda, Springheel, I want the two of you to go in search of Farraday, and I want you to stick together. I’m serious. Do not split up any further. Okay?”

“Okay,” Mike said, his stomach clutching up for a sec.

“Right,” said Sandra, her voice very neutral.

Simon nodded. “Springheel will wear a headset; Honda, I want your ears open. I’ll also take a headset and move to retrieve Archer. Specs, I want you to find a place in the warehouse where you can get a reading off both chips, and I want you to guide me to Archer via headset. Texas, you stick with Specs, and

you stick with Specs like a burr. Try to find some place defensible, if you can. No headset for you. Okay?"

"Got it," said Johnny. He and the new guy were the only two people in the van not visibly charged up; Johnny was poking around in his shirt pocket, probably looking for another one of those toothpicks of his.

"At this point in time I do not know if extracting Archer will take top priority or not," Simon said. "It all depends on his condition when I find him. I want you all to stand ready to come assist me, if I ask. Once I have Archer well in hand, I will make a decision as to what to do next. If any of you come across Farraday's boat, I want you to either cut it loose or sink it. Okay? Questions?"

"Templar—" Sandra started to say, frowning.

Simon cut her off. "Spring, I know what you're going to say, and I can't even say that you're wrong. Yes, I'm going alone. Yes, I'm hurt. However, this is the way that we're going to do things. I'm counting on the two of you to deal with Farraday so that I don't have to. That's the best thing you can do for me right now."

"I'm not happy with it," Sandra said, her voice all edge, "but I understand. You'll call for help if you need it?"

Simon nodded. "Trust me."

"I hate it when guys say that to me," Sandra muttered, but she subsided, flexing her fingers.

"Any other questions?" Simon asked. He went silent. No one said a word. "Okay. One last thing: remember, if Diana Fontaine managed to beat us out here, Farraday may be waiting for us. I want everybody in vests, and I want everybody on their guard at all times. That includes while getting out of the van."

Johnny reached over and nudged the new guy's hip with his knuckles. "Vests and headsets are under that station," he said. "Scoot."

"What? Oh." The new guy edged out of Rich's old seat and into an unoccupied corner, sinking down as far out of the way as he could. Johnny disappeared halfway under the desk and dragged out the footlocker, popping the locks and passing the stuff out.

Mike wriggled into his vest, leaning back to avoid hitting the van's horn—by this point in his life he was pretty goddamned good at getting into that thing while still sitting in the driver's seat, and he was already doing up the buckles by the time Johnny got around to shrugging into his. "Okay," Simon said, once again facing forward in the passenger seat, a little breathless from getting into his vest. "Texas, I want you to take point. Specs, give Honda the bolt cutters, your responsibility is the laptop. Spring, bring up the rear. Ready?"

Mike reached out and took the bolt cutters from Nate. The need to make a joke about it was momentarily dire, but it passed as quickly as it had come. "Ready," he said, echoed by the rest of the team.

Simon nodded, raised a hand, and let it drop. "Texas, Honda: go."

◆ 85: Jeremy

The wooden lid of the topmost crate was rough against his cheek, but he couldn't bring himself to care. Jeremy shut his eyes and concentrated on catching his breath. Had he actually told himself not ten minutes ago that down was easier than up? He'd never make that mistake again. Down and up: they were both hell.

The cut end of the wire brushed against the back of his thigh, still swinging gently back and forth from that harrowing downward climb. Here in a moment, when he felt stronger, he'd make his way back down the pile of crates and find himself a bolt-hole of some sort. Even two or three hours of rest in relative safety would go a long way towards restoring his strength, and then perhaps he could make his way out of the warehouse in the dark hours just before dawn and find a public phone somewhere. He would derive a great deal of comfort from hearing Simon's voice right about now. Quite frankly, he would derive a great deal of comfort from hearing Simon call him an obnoxious English faggot right about now. He'd always found the name-calling to be rather charming, if he were to be honest.

He wished he knew what time it was. His abductor had stripped him of wallet, watch, and mobile phone—lucky the man hadn't bothered to search his jacket!—and the position of the moon told him only that it was somewhere around midnight. Still, while he might not know the time to the minute, he did know that it was time to get moving. Bracing his hands against the lid Jeremy pushed himself up onto one hip and slithered down onto the next narrow wooden ledge, leaving the wire dangling from the open vent above.

He was about halfway down the monstrous stack of crates when a forklift's engine rumbled to life in the massive and well-lit room that abutted this one. Jeremy froze, hugging the side of one massive box, and listened to the racket, only moving again when his thighs stopped complaining and actively started screaming. It was entirely too late at night and too early in the morning for this to be any kind of legitimate cargo hauling, as Jeremy well knew from many late nights of illegitimate cargo hauling. Still, fine. It was a distraction, whether or not his actual captor was the one in the forklift's seat.

By the time his feet hit the concrete floor, the forklift was silent once more. Ah, well. So much for that distraction.

◆ 86: Sandra

Sandra was the last to leave the van. She paused long enough to grab the open rear door and swing it halfway closed; Dave Brassoﬀ leaned out of the van and caught the door's inner handle, his eyes extraordinarily serious and calm in the moonlight, the familiar headset incongruous on his unfamiliar face. "Good luck," he breathed.

Sandra nodded once, sharply, and let the van door go. Dave pulled it gently shut, with only the barest click as the latch engaged, but Sandra had already dismissed both Dave and the van from her mind. She spun on her heel, once, studying the parking lot. It was empty. She completed her rotation and struck out after Simon, glancing from side to side. The night was so quiet that she could hear the traffic on 495, a few miles distant.

The dark shape that was Johnny was already at the gate, intent on the warehouse yard beyond. He had drawn his gun. Beside him, a second, larger dark shape was wielding the massive yard-long bolt cutters with extraordinary zeal. Moonlight flashed from Mike's momentary, maniacal grin. Sandra thinned her lips and jogged on.

By the time she caught up, they were all bunched up outside the gate, Mike just now patiently unthreading the chain from the fence. He dropped into a crouch and dropped both chain and bolt cutters into the scraggly patch of grass at the base of the fence; the bolt cutters could stay there until they returned. Johnny reached over Mike's head and unlatched the gate, pushing it open.

Sandra, braced for metaphorical impact, found herself oddly let down when there was none. No alarms rang, no security guards appeared to demand to know what they were doing—there weren't even any guard dogs, which was an unalloyed relief. Farraday, true to form, had chosen a bolthole with as little security attached to it as possible; a habit which worked in his favor, to be sure, but it was also a habit which would now work in theirs.

Johnny took five careful, sidling steps into the warehouse yard, moving sideways like a crab. The muzzle of his gun pointed steadily at the ground between his feet. After a moment, Mike followed, then Nate, then Simon; Sandra

slipped through and closed the gate behind herself, pushing the latch back down. She scanned the parking lot one last time. Still empty, except for the vague, dark bulk of the van, oddly forlorn in its corner. Satisfied, she turned and ran to join the others in the shadow of the first warehouse.

Here in the shadow the others were defined only by the faint, pale shapes of their bare faces and hands. The shape which was Simon—Sandra would know it anywhere—reached forward and took Johnny by the shoulder, then pointed to the next warehouse. Johnny nodded and took off almost in the same movement, his gun whipping up to cover the alleyway between the warehouses before he vanished, again, into the shadow. After a tense moment, Sandra heard his faint, insistent *hssst!*

Simon pushed Mike's shoulder. Mike dashed off. Simon put a hand on Nate's shoulder, hesitated, then pushed Nate after Mike; Nate stayed down, frozen in place, for half a second before bolting after Mike and Johnny. Simon glanced towards Sandra. Sandra nodded. Simon nodded back and ran to join the others. Sandra followed.

They bunched up again just before the corner of the warehouse. Johnny dropped to all fours and eased his head out at knee level, taking a single glance before pulling back; beside her Sandra could feel Mike nearly vibrating with the stifled need to make a joke about what else Johnny could do while he was down there, a staple joke in Mike's somewhat limited repertoire. Johnny rose to his feet. "Got an open door," he breathed. "Lights on. Like an invitation."

"Think we're expected?" Simon whispered back. "Anywhere to shelter?"

Johnny shook his head.

"Okay," Simon breathed. "In that case, next building over first, then stick close to the wall on the way down." He touched Johnny's shoulder. Johnny loped for the third building.

A minute later they were all together again, at the north end of the third warehouse. Without bothering to check with one another Mike and Sandra drew their weapons, as well, bringing the number of guns out to three; Simon's fingers flexed like he was aching to follow suit, but in the end, he didn't. Nate hugged the open, dimmed laptop to his chest, his crowbar dangling from one hand.

Simon looked around the circle, then nodded. "Single file," he whispered. "Go slow. Hug the wall like it was your mom."

"Hell, I'll hug the wall like it was *your* mom, Templar," Mike whispered back, unable to resist. Sandra rolled her eyes and stepped on Mike's foot, just hard enough to make her point. Mike jerked his foot out from under Sandra's but didn't elbow her or anything, which was . . . just fine with her, right now. Johnny's grin flashed in the darkness and then he was gone, edging along the wall, heading for the spill of brilliant light at the far end of the warehouse.

One by one they joined him there, just outside the radius of the light streaming from the open door. By the time Sandra got there Nate was shifting nervously

from foot to foot, holding out the laptop so that they could all see the two blips on the screen, an inch or so apart. Nate tapped the first dot, then reached out to tap the chestplate of Simon's vest, over his shirt pocket. Simon nodded. Nate tapped the other dot—Jeremy, or at least his jacket—then pointed off at an angle, indicating the back half of the warehouse. Simon nodded again.

Sandra glanced at the door. Through it she could see crates and boxes piled high, like any warehouse, and something which looked to be a forklift, and no one at all moving around. Simon touched Johnny on the shoulder, breathed "Opposite wall." and nudged him forward. Johnny dashed across the empty alleyway and flattened himself out opposite, craning to peek through the door. After a moment he nodded and waved them over. One at a time, they joined him.

"Through the door as fast as possible," Simon whispered. "Don't stop until you're up against that first big crate. Ready?"

Everyone around him nodded, even Nate. Simon held up three fingers. Everyone tensed. Simon folded down his third finger, then his second, then his first, then whipped his hand at the door. Johnny broke for it. The others were right on his heels.

Sandra was the last to enter the warehouse, only half a step behind Simon, less than ten steps behind Johnny. Her every nerve was on edge. She only had a heartbeat of time to look around, to spot the forklift parked half-on and half-off the giant conveyor belt with its lift raised all the way up and a single giant crate resting in the fork; before she could even properly articulate the thought that that looked awfully precarious, the conveyor belt started up with a rumble. Sandra threw herself backwards without a second thought, falling on her ass on the tarmac outside, screaming a reflexive, wordless warning.

Half of the forklift jolted forward on the conveyor belt. Half of it didn't. The forklift twisted to the side, already toppling, and the weight of the crate on top wrenched it the rest of the way over. Sandra had a single, fragmentary image of the rest of her team scattering before the crate hit the ground and exploded, sending what looked like gravel flying everywhere. She threw up her arms to protect her face, her feet pedaling frantically at the ground, pushing her backwards away from the door. Gravel ricocheted off her forearms with stinging, bruising force. The roar of the crash nearly pummeled her flat.

When it was over, all except the trickling sound of pebbles succumbing to gravity, Sandra slowly lowered her arms, her heart hammering. She was alone in the alleyway, the doorway in front of her blocked off by a twisted mess of splintered wood and mounded stone. One of the arms of the forklift was just barely visible, jutting out into midair at a crazy angle.

Sandra lunged to her feet and threw herself into a pool of shadow away from the door, already reaching for her headset.

◆ 87: Jeremy

The roar of the crash snapped Jeremy out of his concussed stupor, and he jerked his head up so fast that he nearly gave himself another concussion on the low roof of his bolt-hole, which would have been an exceedingly unromantic way to kill himself. What in God's name—?

The claustrophobic space that he'd found between the crates was barely larger than his own curled-up body and a good ten feet off the ground. Still, he'd never been afraid of tight spaces—one simply couldn't be in Jeremy's profession—and the space could only be reached by climbing a stack of crates and then eeling through a crack that was barely a foot wide, so in the end he'd chosen relative safety over relative comfort. With his knees drawn up to his chest, he even had something like a pillow on which to rest his aching head.

Placing both hands on the rough wood around him, Jeremy strained to hear something, anything. For a long moment all he could hear were the echoes of that rending crash, and it was with some difficulty that he talked himself out of climbing back out of his hiding place and going to investigate the noise; for all he knew, it was a ploy to lure him out. He hadn't heard anyone go by to check on his former prison, but he couldn't swear that he would have, not in this state.

He thought he was hallucinating the voices, at first; he had a head injury, after all. The voices were pitched so low that he couldn't make out a single word, just a faint hum at the threshold of his perceptions. It didn't surprise him. What surprised him was that he was not hallucinating any more vividly than he already was.

The sound of *Simon's* voice in the other room: that was definitely a hallucination, brought on by Jeremy's naggingly desperate desire to hear it. Jeremy closed his eyes and smiled ruefully at himself. One piddling little head injury and all his self-sufficiency went flying out the window—

"*Honda!*" Simon yelled from the other room, and Jeremy's eyes snapped open again. All right, not a hallucination. How on earth had they *found*—oh. *Oh.*

"Oh, Simon, *really,*" Jeremy muttered under his breath, half exasperated and half relieved beyond all measure. He patted absently at the ruins of his jacket,

wondering where, exactly, the chip was stashed this time. Oh, well. The filthy thing was getting thrown out in any case. No point in worrying about it just yet.

Gathering his legs under himself Jeremy started the slow and painful process of wriggling back out through the miniscule crack between the crates.

◆ 88: Simon

“Sound off, people!” Simon wheezed into his headset, putting his back against a crate and drawing his gun. He was alone on one side of the impromptu barricade, and he hurt like hell after the dive that he’d just taken. Gravel was still stuttering down the sides of the pile and rolling outwards in all directions; he’d have to be careful when he left or he’d slip and fall and hurt himself some more. “Everyone all right?”

“Fine,” Sandra said more or less instantly, her voice all on edge. Simon could hear her through the headset and again through the open, blocked doorway, like an echo of herself. “I’m trapped outside but unhurt.”

“What?” said the new guy, still outside in the van. “What?” Simon ignored him.

“I-I-I’m all right,” Nate said a second later, his voice shaking. Simon could hear two of him, as well, although he seemed to be farther away. “Texas is here with me, he’s okay—but I-I dropped the laptop when the forklift came down and now I can’t find it, I think it’s under the crate, it’s gone, I’m *sorry*—”

Simon shut his eyes. “It’s all right,” he said, aiming for and mostly hitting ‘calm’. “You got an initial reading, that’ll have to do. What about Honda?”

“He’s not with us,” Nate said, swallowing.

“He doesn’t have a headset,” Sandra added.

“Shit,” Simon muttered, then raised his voice. “*Honda!*”

“Yo!” Mike yelled back. “I’m all right!”

Simon exhaled in relief. “Stay put!” he yelled, then hit the headset button again. “Okay. Change of plans. Spring, you say you can’t get in the door?”

“It’s blocked pretty good, Templar,” Sandra said. “I can try to clear it, but it’ll take a while.”

“Leave it. There has to be another way in, probably down at the river end of the warehouse. Go find it, get in here, and meet up with Honda. I don’t like having him out of contact and I do *not* want him taking on Farraday alone. When you find the entrance, tell us all where it is. We will wait for you. Got it?”

“Got you,” said Sandra. Dimly Simon could hear her footsteps outside, retreating.

“Specs, Texas, find somewhere safe to hole up,” Simon said, glancing left and right. “Once I find Archer I may need your help, so hang loose, but be safe. Okay?”

“Okay,” Nate said. “Be careful, Templar.”

“That goes for all of you, too,” Simon said. “Be—”

The warehouse’s huge banks of overhead lights all snapped out at once, plunging them into the dark.

“—careful *shit*,” Simon said, instinctively cringing back against his crate and straining to see in the sudden pitch blackness. Strangled yelps came from all directions: the rest of his team, as startled as he was. “Okay,” Simon said, gritting his teeth. “Change of plans again! Someone get those lights back on, I don’t care who—I’m going after Archer *now*.”

“Good luck, Templar,” Nate said, worried.

“Yeah.” Simon put a hand on the side of his crate and gingerly followed it to the corner, kicking away loose gravel before he took each step. He knew there was a gap in the crates over this way, he’d seen it before the forklift trap went off...

By the time he reached the corner of the crate, his eyes were starting to adjust to what little light was left. Scattered moonlight was shining in from the large skylight things overhead, and there was the faintest hint of unpleasant yellow light in the direction he was heading. Off to his left, a narrow corridor snaked away between the crates. Simon set off at a slow jog, every footstep making his chest ache, holding his gun up and ready.

♦ 89: Mike

“Stay put?” Mike muttered indignantly, whipping around in a circle, straining to see over the tops of the crates that rose like wooden walls around him. He’d thrown himself straight forward when the forklift came down and there was now one fuck of a big gravel pile between him and all the others, not that he could see it any more. “Stay *put*? What am I, a potted fuckin’ plant now?”

At least being told to ‘stay put’ meant that no one had gotten hurt. That was something.

After a bit of consideration, Mike sidled about ten yards away, to a convenient corner formed by the intersection of two crates. Putting his back to the corner, he brought his gun up until the muzzle kissed off his cheek and waited. That was ‘put’ enough, right? Simon wouldn’t want him to be unnecessarily exposed, right? Right?

He didn’t dare shut his eyes all the way but he still slitted them about half-closed, the better to listen to his surroundings. It was dark anyway, what was he going to see, more darkness—someone scurried by on the other side of one of the boxes and Mike froze, barely daring to breathe again until he heard the terse rumble that was unmistakably Johnny, speaking too low to be understood. Mike relaxed and blew out a breath, wanting to laugh at himself but reining it in.

The footsteps faded away to the north and everything went quiet again. Mike glanced left, then right, straining to hear. Sooner or later Johnny and Nate would find their way to him, and Nate had a headset, and once Mike met up with someone with a headset he could get in touch with Simon and get permission to do something beyond *staying put*. Mike had never wanted a headset quite so badly in his entire life.

His hand stole down and touched one of the panels of his vest, bulged slightly out over the square shape of his cell. His cell was off—standard procedure—but he could turn it on, set it to vibrate, hope that someone realized he was adrift without orders . . .

Somewhere behind him one of the huge warehouse doors rumbled open, and the darkness lifted, just a bit. Mike glanced around, taking advantage of the new

light. He still saw no one. He wasn't totally sure if he was happy about that or not.

Two or three minutes dragged by. Mike stubbornly stuck to his spot despite the feeling like there were ants crawling on his skin. He was *not* going to fuck up this operation like he'd fucked up the last one, he was going to follow *orders*, even if it meant missing all the action—

A flicker of yellow light from off to his right startled him. A flashlight? He wouldn't be surprised if Nate had brought one. Nate was the kind of guy who always had a light, a Swiss Army knife, and a bit of wire in his pockets. If it was Johnny and Nate, well, Mike could probably get there from here, meet up with them, get his new orders.

And if it wasn't, Mike kind of wanted to know who it was.

For a moment he stuck to his corner, arguing silently with himself, watching the flashlight bob slowly through the maze of crates. Farraday wouldn't use a flashlight unless he had a good goddamned reason: the fucker was ex-Army, he'd have to know that the light stood out like a beacon. It had to be Nate. "Shit," Mike growled under his breath. He jogged anxiously in place for a second, then broke right, heading towards the light.

Almost immediately he ran smack up against another stack of crates, directly in his path, forcing him to veer left. Now he was heading almost directly *away* from the flashlight, the walls of crates rising high and unbroken to either side, forcing him to cross almost half the warehouse before a break in the crates finally let him turn right again. The weak beam of the flashlight was almost lost in the distance. Mike hissed in exasperation and broke into a jog, heading back towards the moving, bobbing light. He was totally not staying put and he'd get in trouble later—

The drawback to this plan hit him as he got close. He didn't exactly want to announce himself and then go walking face-first into Farraday, but at the same time, he didn't really want to burst in on Johnny and Nate unannounced and get shot (or hit with a crowbar) for his troubles. Mike slowed, trying to move quietly. He'd edge in close enough to see who it was first.

It made the last few seconds of his chase perversely irritating, to be sure. Twice he slunk around a corner just in time to see the light rounding a second corner ten or fifteen feet away, its bearer already out of sight. Finally, the third time it happened, Mike caught a glimpse of the bearer's ragged shadow thrown against a crate and snorted at himself, breaking back into a jog. He knew *that* shape, for sure.

"Spring!" he hissed, rounding the corner. "Shit, girl, wait up—" The words died in his throat and Mike jerked to a startled halt, his gun automatically leaping up.

Sandra spun to face him, the flashlight splashing gaudily across the floor, only it wasn't Sandra after all, and Sandra would kill him if she ever found out

that Mike had thought it was—“Mike,” Diana Fontaine said, her hand rising to her throat.

◆ 90: Nate

Nate stood beside the open door with his back to the wall, his gun in one hand, his crowbar in the other, and tried to control his racing heart. His heart wasn't having any of it. He glanced over at Johnny, looking for support, or comfort, or *something*. Johnny nodded at him in the semidarkness, then went back to watching the door. It wasn't much, but it'd do him, as Johnny would say. Nate glanced away again, watching the flashlight off in the distance with a fear that bordered on supernatural.

"I'm almost through this fucking fence," Sandra muttered over frequency, accompanied by the soft musical jangling of Nate's bolt cutters shearing through wire. "Who puts a chain-link fence around the dock side of a warehouse anyway?"

Nate reached up and touched the broadcast button over his left ear. "We're waiting for you at the door," he said, as softly as he dared. Any softer and Sandra might not hear him. Any louder and someone else might.

"Good," Sandra said. "Have you seen or heard anything from Honda?"

"Not specifically?" Nate cleared his throat. "Someone's using a flashlight on the other side of the room. It might be Honda. I don't know if he has a light."

"Way to broadcast your location, Honda," Sandra muttered. It sounded like she was talking to herself, so Nate didn't bother answering. After a moment there came a much louder jangling sound, loud enough that Nate could hear it both through the headset and in real life. "I'm through," Sandra said. "Heading your way—wait, no, I see Farraday's boat at the end of the dock. One sec." Her footsteps thudded dimly off in the distance, receding into silence; after a moment, there was a faint splash. "Templar, I have set Farraday's boat adrift. Far as I can tell it's heading out to sea."

"Good work," Simon said, his voice ever so faintly metallic with distance. Even just his disembodied voice was oddly reassuring. Nate's heart slowed a bit more. "Let me know when you're in."

"Heading that way now," Sandra said. Nate flicked his fingers at Johnny, who nodded again and faded back a step. He'd barely done so before Sandra slipped through the narrow opening and joined them. "Templar, I'm in," she said,

touching her own left ear. "I'm going to look for Honda now. Texas and Specs will stay here and guard our exit unless you need them."

"Got you," Simon said a moment later. "I need silence on frequency now."

Sandra let her hand drop and glanced at Nate. "Flashlight?" Nate pointed, trying really hard to keep his hand from shaking. Sandra raised up onto her toes and craned her neck, then nodded. "Texas, give me a leg up? I'm not negotiating Farraday's maze from ground level unless I have to."

Johnny grunted in acquiescence and dropped to one knee, putting his free hand on the ground for balance. Touching one hand to the nearest crate to steady herself Sandra stepped lightly onto Johnny's shoulder and scrambled up onto the top of the crate from there. She left a clear pale sneaker-print on the shoulder of Johnny's vest. Johnny slapped at it until it faded, his face crinkling up into what was almost a grin.

Wood creaked faintly under Sandra's weight as she stepped from one crate to the next, making her way into the warehouse proper. "Stay safe," Nate whispered after her, but either she didn't hear him or didn't have time to respond, because no answering whisper came back. He strained after the faint sounds of her movement until he couldn't hear them any more.

Silence fell again. The flashlight had stopped moving. Nate found himself watching it in near-superstitious awe, only to remember that if it wasn't Farraday, that meant that Farraday was somewhere else, maybe nearby, maybe *counting* on that flashlight to distract Nate so that he could get close—Nate made a tiny strangled sound before he realized that he was going to do it, jerking his eyes away from the lure of the flashlight and checking all the exits again.

Johnny glanced at him, then away again. Nate flushed, his face burning with shame. God, he felt so paranoid—"Not gonna let him near you again, you know," Johnny said, his voice low but matter-of-fact.

"I know," Nate said, going redder yet. "I just—I feel so *stupid*."

"Yeah? Why's that?"

Nate swallowed. "Because I'm way more scared than I ought to be," he said. "I mean, it's just one guy, right—I was thinking the other day about how somebody tried to kill me with an exploding satellite once and it still frightened me a lot less than Farraday does. Farraday *gets* to me."

"Can't blame you for that," Johnny said. He still wasn't looking at Nate. Instead he was continuously scanning the area, his eyes flicking back and forth. "Farraday's pretty scary."

Nate glanced at him. "Well, yeah, but I shouldn't let him get to me like this, you know? I mean, no one else is running scared like this."

"Yeah? Who told you that?" Johnny's eyes flicked towards him again. "Me, I'm scarer'n hell."

Nate gaped at Johnny for a second before shaking his head and recollecting himself. "Now you're just trying to make me feel better," he said accusingly.

“You’re scared of Farraday? *You?*”

Johnny shrugged. “Not Farraday exactly, although I guess that’s part of it. Guess what I’m scared of is that he’s gonna try and hurt you again.”

“Oh,” Nate said, when he could.

“Ain’t gonna let it happen twice,” Johnny said. “Ain’t gonna let it be my fault twice.”

Nate swallowed, then reached up to scrub his sleeve over his burning cheeks. “I guess you should really be scared for Jeremy, then. He’s the one who’s really in danger right now, not me.”

“Nope,” Johnny said. “He’s Templar’s lookout, and his own. I like the man fine and I don’t like that he’s hurt, but he’s none of my responsibility. Sorry if that’s cold.”

“Guess it is, a little.” Nate looked away. “It just makes me feel so helpless, you know? Like I need babysitting.”

Johnny considered this for a moment, then grunted. “You want, then, I’ll leave you here to guard the door. Expect Templar could use my help—”

“—no that’s all right,” Nate said, all in a squeaky rush.

“You sure?” Johnny asked, glancing at Nate again. Nate couldn’t quite tell if Johnny was smiling or not.

“I’m sure,” Nate said. Abruptly he holstered his gun and hunkered down, making a smaller target of himself. “You don’t have to rub it in, you know.”

“Wasn’t trying to.” Johnny shifted. “You wanna know something?”

Nate blinked up at him. “What?”

“Ain’t here just for you,” said Johnny. “I’m here for Templar and me, too.”

“I keep telling you, it wasn’t your fault, not really—”

“It was,” Johnny said grimly, “mine, and Templar’s, and a little of your own—much as I hate to admit that out loud—but mostly it was Farraday’s fault, and far as I’m concerned he used up the last of his chances when he shot Templar. He comes anywhere near us and I’m gonna put him down like the goddamned mad dog that he is.” Nate stayed just where he was, suddenly too petrified to move. After a quiet moment, Johnny went on. “Some people just need killin’. Templar shoulda believed me when I told him that.” Nate made a little strangling sound. Johnny glanced at him again. “I scare you?”

“A little,” Nate squeaked.

“Wasn’t my intention,” Johnny said, “but I’m not gonna lie to you, either.”

Nate swallowed and looked away, poking the side of the nearest crate with his crowbar. “You probably should have.”

“Yeah, probably,” said Johnny. “Guess that statement’d be all the proof of premeditation anyone needed, huh.”

“If I told them about it,” Nate said, with a bravado that he really wasn’t feeling.

Johnny snorted out something like a laugh. “You got my back, huh?”

“... yeah,” Nate said, straightening up again. “Us against the world, right?”

“Yeah.” Johnny scrubbed one hand over the bristles of his crewcut with a raspy sound. “Thing is, I told you ’cause I want you to know how serious I am. He ain’t gettin’ near you again, no matter what I gotta do to keep you safe.”

Nate started to say something in response to that and stopped, mostly because... well, what did you say to something like that? “I guess I do feel a little safer now,” he finally said. It sounded lame, because it *was*, but, he realized, it was also the truth.

“Good,” Johnny said. “That’s all I’m askin’.”

♦ 91: Simon

By the time Simon made it through the maze of crates to the far end of the main storage area, he was already breathing hard, much to his disgust. The ache in his chest had punched its claws in and settled down to stay, and he was getting a stitch in his side, to boot. Christ, he couldn't even jog a couple hundred feet any more.

The massive doorway that led into the secondary storage area gaped in front of him, big enough to admit a couple of industrial-sized forklifts side by side. He followed the metal wall up to it, going slowly, letting himself catch his breath; by the time he stopped and put his back to the wall a foot away from the door, he was more or less okay except for that nagging, persistent ache. He cocked his head and listened with all his might. He didn't hear a thing.

Simon took a deep breath and held it for the count of three, steadying himself, focusing his thoughts. On three he spun around and into the doorway, the muzzle of his gun stabbing out to threaten nothing more imposing than a bunch of wooden crates. Simon let out that steadying breath and took two rapid steps into the room, stopping with his back to one of the crates to let his eyes adjust.

The room itself was darkened, like the one that Simon had just come from. The three smaller hallways that led off from the far side of the room were lit with a dim and sickly yellow light, though, which wasn't quite enough to see by, but was enough to pick out the edges of things. The walls of the room were lined with crates, huge piles of them, all pushed back to leave the center of the room ominously empty. Anything that crossed that open, empty space would be neatly backlit by the hallway lights, framed in the massive, open doorway behind him: a perfect target. *Killing floor* ran crazily through Simon's mind and vanished again. Just the thought of crossing that empty space while Farraday was loose made the hairs on the back of his neck rise.

Jeremy could be anywhere. Jeremy could be *nowhere*. Simon wasn't about to call out, not yet, not with Farraday still out there somewhere. Bringing his gun up until it nearly touched his cheek, Simon scanned the room again and decided: he'd search the hallways first. That would allow him to start at the far end of the

warehouse and work his way back; maybe by the time he had to search this room Mike and Sandra would have apprehended Farraday and Simon could just start shouting. Assuming Jeremy was in any condition to hear him—Simon shook his head sharply, forcing himself to dismiss the thought.

Left hallway first, Simon decided, partially because it seemed logical and partially because he wouldn't have to cross that open space to get there. Simon nodded to himself, let his gun drop to point at the floor, and set off along the left-hand wall, sticking as close to the piled-up boxes as he could. Every few steps he checked over his shoulder, making sure that Farraday hadn't stepped into the doorway behind him.

He was a little more than halfway across the room when Farraday swung silently out from between two of the boxes and jammed the muzzle of a small gun up against the back of his neck.

Simon jerked and froze, his own gun half-raised impotently, threatening nothing. The gun against the back of his neck was small—almost certainly the same .22 that Farraday had used to shoot him in the parking lot a couple of weeks ago—but if Farraday pulled the trigger right now the bullet would go through the meat of his throat. No matter what it hit, trachea or artery, he'd die, and fast. "Drop the guh-gun, please," Farraday said, almost sounding amused.

Simon bared his teeth in a furious, helpless grimace and let his gun fall to the concrete in front of him. "Good," Farraday said, and then he made a little *uk!* sound, the muzzle of the gun jerking just a bit. The front sight of the .22 scraped painfully against the back of Simon's neck and Simon tensed, certain that the spasm would pull the trigger, too—but Farraday only brought it back to bear. "Now kick it away," he said. Simon hesitated until Farraday jabbed the gun against the back of his neck hard enough to push Simon's head forward. "Kick it away!" Farraday repeated, much less amused now.

With a little hiss, Simon hooked the toe of his sneaker under his gun and sent it clattering away, skittering over the concrete until it was lost to sight. "You realize that if you kill me, the sound of the gun will bring the rest of my team running," he said, striving for calm. "I sure wouldn't want to be you then."

"I wouldn't cuh!—count me out so easily," Farraday said, incongruously cheerful. His gun hand didn't waver this time, even as he twitched. "Hands on your head. Slowly, nuh-now."

Simon brought his hands up slowly, linking his fingers together behind his head. Farraday was so close, all he needed was a chance to grab the asshole's gun hand and it would all be over—"Don't move," said Farraday, and the gun pulled away from the back of Simon's neck. Farraday took three quick steps backwards, moving out into the middle of the room. "Tuh-turn this way."

So much for that. Simon turned in a slow circle, his fingers flexing on the back of his head. Farraday stood not six feet away, the muzzle of the gun a tiny black hole aimed unerringly at Simon's left eye. For a moment they eyed each

other, Simon furiously, Farraday idly, like Simon was some kind of interesting bug—then Farraday sighed a little and grinned, his shoulder jerking back. The gun didn't waver a bit. "Hello, Simon," Farraday said, laughing a little. "Fancy meeting yuh-you here."

◆ 92: Mike

Blood roared in Mike's ears. He was still pointing the gun at Diana, less from any actual need to threaten her with it and more because he was currently too shocked to stop. "Aw, shit," Mike finally choked out, and just like that his paralysis snapped: "Aw, *fuck*, lady," he said, "I can't believe I bought your shit—I went to *bat* for you!"

"I'm *sorry*!" Diana whimpered, wide-eyed and frozen in place like a deer in the headlights, staring at the gun as if hypnotized. "I didn't—it wasn't—he was threatening me . . ."

"Yeah, right, sure," Mike said. He readjusted his grip on his gun, bringing it up to point directly at her face. "You know what, I'm sorry, but I'm not gonna buy your shit any more."

"Please *listen* to me!" Diana's voice nearly rang off the rafters—or seemed to, anyway—and she winced away from it, as startled by it as Mike himself was. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to, I didn't *want* to, but he told me that if I didn't help him . . . something bad would happen . . ."

"Yeah? When was this?"

"Yeh-yesterday afternoon." Diana sobbed once, reaching up to scrub her eyes with the sleeve of her jacket. "He called my hotel room, do you understand? I don't know how he got the number or found me or *anything*!"

"Jesus fuck, and you didn't tell us?" The muzzle of the gun dipped an inch or two as Mike stared at her over it. "We could have moved you—we could have all been killed!"

"*He scared me!*" Diana Fontaine covered her face with both hands and sobbed again, the flashlight jutting up past her ear at an angle. Her voice was queerly muffled. "He knows where my parents live! He said so! He told me where he was hiding and said that all I needed to do was come warn him if you got too close and then I could go, and I was going, and then you *caught* me, and oh God, Mike, I'm so sorry!"

Mike sucked his lower lip into his mouth. "How'd you get here, anyway?"

“I-I called a cab from the hotel,” Diana said, sniffing a bit. “There’s a convenience store a couple of blocks away, he said—I was going to walk down and call another cab so that I could get back . . . I’m such a *coward*!” She burst into fresh sobbing, scrubbing madly at her eyes with both hands.

“Aw, shit,” Mike said, lowering the gun until it pointed at the floor. “Yeah, okay, you fucked up big-time, I ain’t gonna lie to you about that. The man just tried to drop a forklift on us ’cause he knew we were coming, and if any of us had died, that woulda been your fault.” Diana sobbed again. Mike grimaced and looked away, staring over her shoulder instead of watching her cry. “And either way you’ve made enough of a fool out of me, so I’m gonna take you back to the entrance and let Templar decide what to do with you—but if you’re telling the truth, then you’ll probably be okay in the long run. Extenuating circumstances or some shit, I dunno, you’re the lawyer here.”

Diana jerked like Mike had called her something much worse than ‘lawyer’. “Oh, God, I’m going to get *disbarred*!” she choked out, like this was just now occurring to her. “No matter what kind of charges get filed against me or whether they’re dropped later—he’s still technically my *client*, oh my God, what am I going to do?”

“Guess the real question is ‘what have you done’?” Mike said, glancing over at her and then away again. “I mean, shit, I got some sympathy, I guess, but again, you’re the lawyer, you should have thought of that before you did this, you know?”

“I know,” Diana whispered, abruptly dropping into a crouch and putting her arms protectively over her head. Startled, Mike jerked the gun up, then let it fall again. Diana didn’t even notice. “Oh, God, it’s all my fault. I’m the one who got involved with him in the first place and then he started threatening my *family* and I just . . . I was too scared to think! I’m going to lose everything and it’s all my fault!”

Mike winced. “Actually,” he said, “I were in your shoes, I’d be blaming him, not yourself—”

“No,” Diana said from under the protective cradle of her arms. “No, it’s my fault. It’s all my fault. I should have told you yesterday, I should have *trusted* you—” The words choked off there and she sobbed again.

“Well, uh, yeah, *duh*,” Mike said, shifting from foot to foot. “I know you don’t much like me and mine but we sure as hell coulda protected you if you’d just said something.”

“I know. Oh, God.” Diana snuffled, bringing one hand down to rub at her eyes. “I kept telling myself that I should and being too scared to, and then I made such a fool of myself throwing myself at you like that and I couldn’t bear to tell you after that—I’m such an idiot!”

“Guess so,” Mike said dubiously.

“What have I done?” Diana said, her voice soft and thick. “I’m so sorry, Mike. I never meant to—I didn’t want to hurt anybody. Least of all you—you’ve been so good to me even though I was such a bitch back then . . .”

Mike opened his mouth, discovered that he couldn’t think of anything to say to that, and closed his mouth again. Diana went quiet, huddled up on the floor, occasionally sniffing. “I,” Mike finally said, and against his better judgment he came within a hair of following that up with *never saw you, okay?* when a thoroughly unimpressed voice rang out from overhead: “Oh, Jesus,” Sandra said in disgust. “I am going to be *sick*.”

Mike yelped and reeled back half a step, his gun jerking up and dropping again. Diana let out a thin, surprised shriek and fell right on her ass, which under any other circumstances Mike might have found hilarious, but as it was he was a little too busy trying not to have a heart attack. Diana Fontaine scrambled to her feet even as Sandra jumped down from her perch atop one of the big wooden crates, landing neatly on all fours a few feet in front of Mike. “As amusing as it is to watch you practice your alibi on Honda,” Sandra said, rising to her feet, “there is only so much of that helpless-little-girl shit I can take.”

“I-I don’t blame you for not trusting me,” Diana began, her voice tremulous.

Mike couldn’t exactly see Sandra roll her eyes, but he could pretty much hear it. “Give me a fucking break,” Sandra said. “You aren’t *crying*. Honda here may be too much of a guy to know fake crying when he hears it, but back before I grew a brain and a spine I pledged a sorority, okay, and some of my former sisters were so much better at that shit than you are, you have no idea.”

“I’m not *faking*!” Diana cried, covering her face with both hands and sobbing again.

“Really?” said Sandra. “Okay, then, put your hands down and point your flashlight at your face.”

“Whuh-what?” Diana said, snuffling.

“If you’ve really been crying over there, your eyes ought to be really red and wet by now,” Sandra said. Diana went still, her hands still tented over her face.

“Uh,” Mike said, fascinated and a little disturbed by this sudden girlspllosion going on right in front of him.

“Shut up, Honda,” Sandra said crisply, glancing over her shoulder at him before looking back at Diana. “Well?”

“You don’t have to be so rude!” Diana said, snuffling again. Suddenly it sounded just a little fake to Mike; he wondered if it had sounded like that all along.

“Oh, Christ, now she’s pulling out the ‘you’re mean’ card,” Sandra said. “Newsflash: this isn’t high school. Calling me ‘rude’ is not going to make me feel bad. If I was the kind of girl who got upset at the thought that somebody, somewhere might not like me, I sure as hell wouldn’t have joined the FBI. Give it up. Point your flashlight at your face.”

Fifteen feet away, Diana was quiet, her hands still over her face. After a long moment, Sandra nodded. “Don’t want to, huh. Can’t blame you.”

“I don’t have to prove anything to you!” Diana said, her voice shrill. She let her hands drop, pointing the flashlight at the floor again. Mike leaned to one side, straining to see her face, but in the semi-darkness he couldn’t tell if her eyes were red or not.

“Well, to a certain extent, that’s true,” Sandra said. “But right now, it’s not about proving anything. It’s about interrupting Honda before he actually fell for your ‘poor helpless me’ act and did something terminally stupid. You might have been able to get past him, but you can’t get past me, not that easily.”

“I’m not trying to get past *anyone*!” Diana insisted. Her free hand rose and knotted in her collar, twisting it.

“Liar,” Sandra said. “You know what really pisses me off about all this?”

Diana went still, sniffing once, apparently not willing to give Sandra the straight line she was looking for—so Mike supplied it. “What?” he asked, genuinely curious.

Sandra glanced over her shoulder at him again. “Because she’s been fucking with you all this time,” Sandra said. “And she’s not allowed to. You belong to *me*.”

Mike, not exactly certain what he was hearing but secretly thinking that he might like it, blinked twice and shut up. Sandra looked back at Diana Fontaine, who was as still as a statue. “They *all* belong to me,” Sandra said, waving one hand in a gesture that took in the whole area. “They’re all like the obnoxious dick-obsessed brothers I never had. My point is: they’re mine. Not yours. And I’ll never forgive you for playing roughly with my toys.”

“Your toys? Oh, God, could you be any more condescending?” Diana said, rallying a little, tossing her head. “You could at least treat him with a little *respect*—”

“—oh, do not even give me that shit—” Sandra said tiredly.

“—I think you’re jealous—”

“—you’re damned right I’m jealous, he’s mine—”

“—at least I’m nice to him!”

“Oh, yes, because when I think ‘nice’ I think ‘toyed with my emotions and tried to get me killed on two separate occasions’,” Sandra said, throwing up her hands. “Do you have any idea at all how much you’re *not* fooling anyone besides Honda?”

“I don’t know what you’re—”

“—talking about, yes, I know,” said Sandra. “Did you know that Honda and Texas went back out to Truslow Road the day after Farraday pinned you down there? They came home with the cell phone you threw away, all in one piece, bagged and tagged according to regulations. It even still works. We’re maybe two days away from figuring out for certain if it really was bugged.”

Diana's eyes went wide, but again, she rallied. "You can listen in on cell phone conversations remotely with the proper radio setup—they're not on any kind of secured network. Everyone knows that."

Sandra sighed. "And you realize that when—not if—the rest of my team manages to bring Farraday down, we'll be able to tie the .22 that shot Simon directly to your law office, right?"

"What?" said Diana, taking half a step back. "I don't know what you're—"

"—talking about, yes, we established that," Sandra said, faking patience. "And you do realize that we have access to the phone logs for your hotel room, right?"

"I didn't call the cab from my room," Diana said quickly. Maybe a little too quickly. "I used a pay phone—"

"Remember when you said that Farraday called your hotel room to threaten you?" Sandra said. "Yeah, me too."

Diana twitched back, slightly. "I-I meant—"

"Please don't try to tell me he called your cell phone," Sandra said. "Because we have your cell phone in a little bag at HQ, getting taken apart by the lab right now."

"I..."

"I wonder how many of your fingerprints we'd find if we dusted the place where Farraday's been sleeping," Sandra said, glancing ostentatiously over her shoulder. "I wonder if any of them would match the hundreds of fingerprints we took from Nate's garage." Diana jerked like she'd been pinched. "Come to think of it," Sandra said, "I wonder how many other ladies' fingerprints we'd find in Farraday's hiding place. Farraday always was kind of a dog, you know, and you're really pretty dumb."

"I am not!"

"Yeah?" said Sandra. "Then ask yourself this, if you're not stupid: why is Amanda Winston so pissed off at you right this moment?"

"I..." Diana Fontaine took another half-step backwards, then drew herself up, her chin lifting. "I don't have to listen to this," she said, the Ice Queen of Mike's nightmares all over again. She spun on her heel. "I'm leaving."

Sandra drew her gun and racked the slide so fast that Mike barely saw her do it. The sound of it stopped Diana Fontaine in her tracks. "The hell you are," Sandra said, leveling the gun at the back of Diana's head. "Diana Fontaine, I am hereby placing you under arrest, and I suggest that you come along quietly."

Diana Fontaine turned back around, slowly. "In that case I have something that I'd like you to see," she said, with vast, soul-eating disdain. "I'm going to reach into my jacket to get it."

For a moment Sandra was silent, taut enough to make Mike quiver. "Fine," she finally snapped. "Do it slowly. And if you try to point anything that even looks like a weapon at me, so help me God I will respond with force."

"I'll remember that you said that when I take you to court," Diana said coolly, reaching into her jacket and pulling out a squat black box of some kind, easing it out slowly before letting it drop to her side.

"All right, I see it," Sandra said. "What is it?"

In answer Diana Fontaine flicked her thumb. A small plastic cover fell to the ground and an enormous blue spark snapped across the top of the box—"Shit!" Mike said, dodging to the side and jerking up his gun—

"No," Sandra snapped, flicking out her free hand and stopping Mike in his tracks. "It's not a taser! It's just a stun gun." She put her hand back on the grip of her own gun. "Big one, though."

"I'm leaving," Diana Fontaine repeated, her voice only shaking a little. The crackling of the stun gun was a loud and percussive background note. "If you try to restrain me physically I will hit you with this. If you shoot me, I will personally see to it that you spend the next five years in one courtroom or another, as well as publicly calling for an exhaustive investigation by the FBI's Office of Professional Responsibility that will almost certainly result in at least a black mark on your record. And if you shoot and kill me, one of my associates will see to it for me. Instructions have been left."

"You really want to play it this way?" Sandra said. Her gun didn't waver at all. "You have the guts for this?"

"I—" Diana stopped and flexed her fingers, making the snapping spark dance in midair. "I haven't got any choice."

"Well, that's just bullshit," Sandra said. "Here's your choice. Drop the stun gun and surrender and I promise that you won't be hurt."

For a moment Mike thought that Diana would back down. She kept glancing from Sandra's face to the gun and back, the spark of the stun gun jerking back and forth as her hands shook—but all the same she swallowed and lifted her chin again. "I'm leaving," Diana said, her voice trembling. She took a step backwards. "Go ahead and shoot me."

Sandra sighed a huge put-upon sigh and slammed her gun back into its holster. "Bitch," she said, striding forward, "I do not *even* need a gun to deal with you—" and she broke into a run.

Mike yelped. Diana gasped, falling back another step, then recollected where she was and what she was holding and stabbed the stun gun forward, drawing a blinding white streak through the air at eye level—Sandra went straight down, sliding the last few yards on one hip, looking for all the world like a baseball player stealing home. The stun gun shot harmlessly over her head and Sandra kicked straight up as it went by, slamming her heel up into Diana's wrist. Diana shrieked, her hand jerking up and flying open, the stun gun arcing towards the ceiling—

Clutching at her wrist Diana stumbled back another step, her eyes wide with terror as Sandra rolled upright less than a foot away. Diana whirled around and

bolted but Sandra grabbed her arm, nearly yanking Diana off her feet—without even looking up Sandra snatched the falling stun gun out of the air, brought it around in a tight arc, jammed it into the underside of Diana’s chin, and hit the trigger.

The impact of the electric shock snapped Diana Fontaine’s arms straight out away from her body. The flashlight flew from her hand and bounced off a nearby crate, rolling drunkenly across the floor until it came to a halt a few feet away from Mike, its yellow glow stuttering and dying. The air smelled like ozone and barbecue and Sandra was a black silhouette outlined by the brilliant blue-white stuttering of the stun gun as she held the trigger down for one second, two seconds, *three*—eventually Sandra let up on the trigger and Diana Fontaine slumped to the ground at her feet, still twitching and making little confused noises. “See?” Sandra said, breathing hard. “Told you.”

Mike dared to breathe for the first time since Sandra had reholstered her gun and slumped sideways against a nearby crate, fanning himself. “Oh, shit!” he cried, forgetting himself for a second. “If that wasn’t the hottest goddamned thing I’ve ever *seen*—”

“Shut up,” Sandra said, her voice so crisp that Mike actually did so—oh, shit, was she pissed? She was pissed. “You are an *idiot*,” Sandra snapped, confirming it. She pegged the stun gun off the concrete floor hard enough to shatter it and send the plastic bits flying, which was something of a relief, as Mike had momentarily feared that she was going to hit *him* with it next.

Mike straightened up, warily. “Yeah,” he said. Rather than look at Sandra he fetched the flashlight off the ground and shook it until it grudgingly lit up again, even dimmer than before. “Guess I am, huh?”

“*Such* an idiot,” Sandra said, pulling off her headset. Her hair was hanging about her face in messy tendrils and she combed her fingers back through it, reclaiming the rubber band as an afterthought. “Jesus Christ, Mike. You were about two seconds from letting her go her merry way, weren’t you?”

Mike blinked. “Course not!” he said indignantly. “Shit, bitch couldn’t pull that over on me—I saw through her all along! Right from the start! Ain’t no chick ever gotten the best of me!”

Sandra gave him just about the flattest look ever, making his heart quail. Mike hunched his shoulders and waited for it, already cringing—oh, shit, this was gonna hurt like fuck—but a couple of seconds later Sandra sputtered and started laughing, startling Mike so bad that all he could do was gape at her. “Oh, shit, you’re hopeless,” Sandra said, still giggling a little, and before Mike could gather himself enough to respond to *that* Sandra took three steps forward, threw her arms around his neck, and kissed him so goddamned hard that it was like all his Fourth of July fireworks went off at once.

Mike’s eyes popped open and he made a completely un-smooth “Yurk!” sound in the back of his throat. His arms found their way around her mostly by

reflex (and hugging a chick all mummified up in a Kevlar vest wasn't really all that exciting except for the part where it *totally was*) but she kept it up and after a second or so his brain started kicking him and screaming and Mike groaned and mentally told the rest of the world to go to hell.

Eventually—way too soon—Sandra pulled back, shook her head slightly as if to clear it, and looked up at him. “Farraday,” she said.

“Farraday,” Mike agreed, breathless, unable to resist touching her face, running his thumb along her lower lip and marveling. “But later—”

“We’ll talk about it,” Sandra promised, breaking away from him—he was pretty sure she did so reluctantly, or at least, he really hoped so—and pulling her handcuffs from her pocket. “Let me just clean up this mess I made first, okay?”

“Oh, fuck,” Mike said weakly, sagging against the crate again and rubbing the back of his hand across his lips. “Cuffing the lawyer lady, man, tonight is just *full* of hot—”

“Shut up or I will hurt you so bad your grandchildren will scream,” Sandra said evenly, hooking her hands under the semiconscious Diana Fontaine’s arms and dragging her towards one of the warehouse’s support beams.

◆ 93: Simon

“As you can probably tell by the fact that we found you so easily,” Simon said, fighting to stay (or at least sound) calm, “you’re fucked, Cole. Sure, you’ve got the drop on me, but there are four other armed and angry people in this warehouse, and you can’t keep that gun on me forever.”

“Sure I can,” Farraday said lazily. “And as for your friends, well, I suh-suspect they’re a little distracted right uh-about now. I’ve had—uh!” His left hand—the hand not holding the .22, more’s the pity—jerked outwards like a rude gesture before returning to rest against his thigh. “I’ve had plenty of time to pruh-prepare for visitors.”

Simon ground his teeth. Even in the dimness he could see Farraday’s face twitch every time a tic slammed into him: one eye would bulge or wink, or his jaw would grate to one side, or his eyebrows would slam down. Farraday’s tics had been disturbing enough three years ago and they were a lot worse now. The man couldn’t *stop*. “You’ve got to realize I’ll make a lousy hostage,” Simon said, playing for time. “I don’t cooperate with *anyone*, let alone with you.”

“Yuh-you make a lousy everything,” Farraday responded, snappily if not precisely truthfully, still grinning. “You’re a luh-lousy cop who’s alruh-ready lost his gun, and you’re a ruh-*really* lousy friend to have.”

“Yeah?” said Simon, not really wanting to agree with Farraday or anything but so pissed at himself right now that he couldn’t help but do so, at least a little. “Why’s that?”

“Guess you should ask your fruh-friend in the black jacket,” said Farraday. His tongue squeezed out from between his teeth and he made a soft, choking *guh!* sound before biting it back again. “I buh-bet he’s not too thrilled with you ruh-right now.”

“So he’s still alive,” Simon said, as confidently as he could. “Thanks, Cole! I was wondering.”

Farraday’s grin dimmed petulantly. “I duh-didn’t say that,” he protested, his tics going into overdrive and turning his face into a study in kinetic motion.

“Muh!—maybe he’s luh-looking uh-up from huh-hell ah-ah-already and huh-hating you-ou, huh?”

“Nah, I don’t think so,” Simon said, watching this process with a sick fascination. Mike was right: Farraday wasn’t the same man he’d been three years ago. He was fucked up, plain and simple. “I think you just slipped and don’t want to admit it now.”

Farraday bayed out an annoyed sound and his entire face slammed shut. Simon couldn’t help but wince backwards: it was grotesque. Farraday’s lips peeled back from his teeth in a rictus of a grimace that squashed his cheeks, wrinkled his nose, and furrowed his forehead, and his eyes gleamed out of the blotchy rucked-up mess of his face like two pinpoints of filthy yellow light . . . then Farraday relaxed, his face smoothing back out. When next he spoke, his tics were minimized again. “It duh-doesn’t matter,” he said, flicking the fingers on his left hand. “No one knows this place like I do. I cuh-could shoot you and your friend buh-both and still get away clean. This uh-isn’t the only hiding place I huh-have.”

“Jesus Christ, Cole,” Simon said, unable to keep from laughing a little, even though it came out sounding more nervy than he’d have liked. “You don’t look so good. Federal prison not the rehabilitative miracle it’s supposed to be?”

“Shuh!—shut uh-up,” Farraday’s eyes narrowed and one foot jittered like the man was preparing to riverdance.

Mentally steeling himself, Simon poked at him again. If he could just make Farraday have another major spasm—“Course, I guess they don’t call it ‘federal pound-me-in-the-ass prison’ for nothing,” Simon said, shrugging one shoulder. “How’d you like being some scumbag’s little blond bitch, Cole? Not so much fun to be on the other end, is it?”

“Shut uh-up,” Farraday said warningly, glancing—or ticcing—at the open doorway while still watching Simon from the corner of his eye.

“Make me,” Simon said, hoping fervently that he wouldn’t take a bullet through the eye now. “Come within grabbing range and let me get my hands on you. Or just shoot me again and bring the rest of my team down on your head like a ton of bricks. You’ve already fucked yourself by shooting me once, Cole. Do you have any idea how tenacious the FBI can get when it’s about payback? Let me tell you: you haven’t seen *shit* yet.”

“I duh-don’t care,” Farraday said, baring his teeth in something like a grin. His head jerked to the side. “As luh-long as I get my ruh-revenge.”

“Oh, your ruh-ruh-revenge?” Simon said mockingly. Just a little farther. “Oh, good. Have your ruh-ruh-revenge. You’ll go back to prison—for the rest of your life, this time. Or was that your plan all along? Been missing your buh-buh-boyfriend, Cole?”

“Juh-just for that I’m guh-going to kill your luh-little friend buh-before I go,” Farraday snarled, his eyes bulging with fury. His bootheel rang off the concrete with a report like rifleshot, making them both wince. “Huh-he’s guh-gonna

know ih-it's buh-because of you and he wuh-won't be able to duh-do anything abou-bout it—"

"See, that's where you're wrong," Simon cut in. "Poor Cole. You've got no idea who it is that you kidnapped, do you?"

Farraday's left fist hammered against his thigh, his eyes narrowing so blatantly that it could only be the result of a tic. "Yuh-you're just truh-trying to mess with muh-me—"

"Afraid not," said Simon. As subtly as he could he unclasped his hands and made his fingers into claws behind his head. "Bet you anything you'd care to name that he's already gotten away safely. See, you don't know what you've got, but I do."

"Yuh-yuh-yuh-you're luh-lying," Farraday said, his teeth chattering.

"Nope," Simon said, widening his eyes. "Look at my face, Cole, and then just try and tell me I'm lying again."

Farraday studied Simon, so glaringly intent on Simon's face that his tics faded almost to nothing. "Ih-it doesn't matter," he finally announced. "I've still guh-got you."

"Not for long," Simon said. "Just until the rest of my team gets here. Couple of minutes at the outside. And the instant you pull that gun off me I'll crush you like a bug, Cole. You know that, right?"

"I-I-I—" Farraday choked to a stop, his tongue out, his cheeks darkening. For a moment Simon dared to hope that the man was actually choking to death, but then Farraday spat out an "Uh!" sound, worked his jaw for a moment, and said, "I'll shuh-shoot you in the fuh-face if you truh-try."

"Oh, Cole," Simon said, shaking his head sadly. "Cole, Cole, Cole—"

"Stuh-stop saying my nuh-name!"

"—you really are a fuh-fuh-fuckup, aren't you?" Simon could barely stand still for all the adrenalin roaring through his system, magnifying his perceptions and slowing the rest of the world down. "Can't do anything right any more, can you? Can't kill me, can't even *shoot* Mike, can't scare Nate off—"

"Uh-Ask your fruh-fruh-friend if I cuh-can't do anything ruh-right," Farraday spat. Little dots of foamy spit were collecting at the corners of his mouth. One way or another it wouldn't be long now.

"Oh, I'm sure he'd agree with me," Simon said, letting his voice go soft. "See, it's like I keep telling you: he's not just 'my friend', Cole."

"Yuh-yeah?" Farraday sneered, shuddering. The muzzle of the gun wavered just a hair off true and Simon had to grit his teeth to keep them from chattering with the sudden rush. "Whuh-whuh-what is he, then, yuh-your buh-buh-boyfriend? Thuh-that why yuh-you're suh-suh-so obsessed with muh-my ass?"

Simon paused, then stopped trying to restrain his grin. "Yeah, maybe he is," he said, softly. "And unlike you maybe I'm muh-muh-man enough to admit it."

For a moment Farraday was too busy choking on shock to do or say anything at all. His face purpled and his eyes bulged, his foot tapping out a rapid tattoo on the concrete—then without warning his right shoulder jerked back and the .22 swung wide.

Simon was already in motion. Ripping his clawed hands forward he whipped off his useless headset and spiked it directly into Farraday's grimacing face, Simon himself not half a step behind—the headset hit Farraday right between the eyes and he reeled back half a step, choking out a startled little *gk!* sound. Simon grabbed Farraday's right wrist, neutralizing the threat of the gun, and it hurt pretty badly but right now he was too amped to care. Simon yanked Farraday's right hand straight up, stabbed his thumb deep into the nest of veins and nerves on the inside of Farraday's wrist, and drove his other fist into Farraday's face, rebreaking the man's nose for him.

Farraday's nose squashed to the side and snapped wetly under Simon's fist. The man set up a bellowing, choking clamor, trying to fend Simon off with his free hand. His left hand slapped hard against the side of Simon's head, making his ears ring, but Simon just bared his teeth and punched Farraday in the mouth, splitting his lip. "You fucked with Nate and you fucked with *me* and this time there aren't any witnesses to save your worthless ass," Simon snarled, squeezing Farraday's wrist until the bones ground together—and still the man wouldn't let go of the goddamned gun, couldn't he see he'd *lost*?

Farraday's head jerked back and his eyes flew open, huge and white in the middle of his blood-smearred face. "*Fuh!*" he said, unable to vocalize any more coherently than that, and drove two stiffened fingers into the healing bullet wound on Simon's chest.

The explosion of pain crushed Simon to his knees on the instant, an immense blank wall of it worse than anything he'd ever felt. He couldn't even scream although Christ knew he was *trying*. Every muscle on the left side of his body convulsed, making him flop around on the ground like a fish out of water, he couldn't breathe, he could barely *see*, and somewhere in the back of his mind he was aware that he was bleeding like fuck as Farraday yanked his hand free of Simon's relaxing grip and stabbed the .22 forward at Simon's eye, his lips pulled back in a furious grimace—

The sound of the gunshot was tremendously loud, the high metal walls of the room transforming it into a perfect echo chamber. Simon had a single heartbeat of time in which to think how appropriate that was for the shot that killed him, before he—

—somehow failed to die, although he could *hear* his brains splattering wetly across the concrete floor.

No. That wasn't—something wasn't right. Struggling against the fading shock Simon lifted his head from the ground and squinted, trying to see past the static that was still obscuring his vision.

Farraday was tottering backwards across that bare, concrete killing floor, one of his eye sockets now a huge, gaping hole. The .22 fell from his nerveless fingers to clatter to the ground. A mess of brains and blood and bone had splattered in a wide gory streak across the concrete—it'd never properly come out, Simon knew—and then Farraday dropped to his knees, wavered in place for a moment, and fell over, still twitching. Simon could see the opposite wall through the hole in the man's skull. Here in a minute, he might enjoy that.

"Took you guys long enough," Simon wheezed, barely able to raise his voice up above a whisper. The pain was receding, slowly, and his brain was starting to reassert itself, starting to wonder why no one was yelling now, or grabbing at him, or helping him sit up.

Simon struggled painfully up onto one elbow and finally realized what was wrong with this picture. For Farraday's brains to be smeared across the concrete to his *right* Farraday had to have been shot from the *left*, the wrong direction entirely—shuffling the weight of his body around Simon let his head roll left.

The gun was still smoking, slightly—his own gun, the one he'd kicked away about a thousand years ago. Simon would recognize it anywhere, despite it being a Glock 22 like any one of ten thousand other Glock 22s out there. It wasn't shaking. Despite everything, despite there being a thousand good reasons for it to shake, Simon's gun wasn't shaking; Jeremy's hands were as still and sure as stone, still aiming Simon's smoking gun at the space in the air where Farraday's right eye had been. His firing stance, some little part of Simon's brain noted, was perfect.

◆ 94: Simon

“Jeremy,” Simon said rustily, pushing himself up onto one hip. Half a second later he fell right back down as his shaking arm abruptly gave out. He strangled on a yelp and went fetal, his eyes watering. “Oh, Christ, that hurts,” he gritted out. He could faintly hear the sound of running footsteps from outside, but no shouting—no one on his team was going to waste their breath shouting once shots had been fired.

Jeremy said nothing. As far as Simon could tell, Jeremy wasn’t actually registering his presence at all. Or moving. The gun and his eyes were all focused on that little spot in mid-air that had contained Farraday’s head just thirty seconds ago, and Simon did not like the look of that thousand-yard stare at all.

Simon tried sitting up again. This time, he made it. Painfully, grabbing onto the corner of a box, Simon hauled himself upright. He made it, although his chest was now screaming out loud and he had to pant shallowly for breath for a few seconds before he trusted himself to let go of the box. “Archer,” he said, pleased to note that he sounded a lot closer to normal.

“Ah,” Jeremy said faintly, still frozen. After a long moment one of his fingers twitched on the gun’s grip, then another.

Simon took a careful step closer, making sure to stay to one side, just in case. “Archer,” he said again. “... Jesus, you look like shit.”

“Ah,” Jeremy said again, his voice dreamy and faraway, thus confirming that yes, something was really wrong here. The muzzle of the gun drifted slowly downwards; Jeremy’s arms stayed fully extended, leaving the gun pointed at nothing but the streak of drying gore on the floor.

Simon glanced at him, then down at the gun, then winced. Jesus, if that thing went off again while it was pointed at the concrete floor, who knew how the bullet would ricochet—“Archer,” he said again, trying very hard to sound exasperated. “What did I *tell* you about leaving your finger on the trigger?”

“Mm,” said Jeremy. After a long moment his index finger slid slowly free of the trigger guard and straightened—Jeremy put it back into its ready position pointing along the barrel of the gun, just like Simon had showed him how to do.

Simon relaxed, somewhat. At least they weren't in *imminent* danger of a catastrophic ricochet, and Jeremy was still in there, somewhere, as a bonus. Behind him Mike and Sandra burst into the room, Mike pulling up short with a wordless yelp of disgust as he nearly stepped in what was left of Farraday's brains—Simon threw up a hand without looking back at them and they both stopped where they were, falling quiveringly silent. Simon could feel them staring, but now was not the time to notice. "Archer, I need you to give me my gun back," he said, firmly.

For a moment it did not seem as if it would work—then Jeremy let his head fall, blinking down at the gun in his hands as if he were just now noticing it was there. "Oh," he said. "Yes." To his credit, he did not actually *point* the gun at Simon, merely pushed it sideways in Simon's direction. Somewhere behind Simon Mike and Sandra got out of the way with alacrity.

"That's not how you hand a gun to someone, Archer," Simon said, watching Jeremy carefully. "Take your left hand off the grip and put it on the top of the gun."

Jeremy's left hand drifted away and up, pausing cupped in the air over the gun's barrel. His hand turned back and forth in midair, and Simon eventually realized that it was asking a silent question: which way? "Thumb back towards you," he prompted. Jeremy's hand closed over the top of the gun. Simon nodded. "Okay," he said. "Now let go with your right hand and turn the gun so that the grip is pointing towards me."

Jeremy's hand came away from the grip with a faint tearing sound: at some point he'd squeezed the gun so hard that the textured grip had printed itself on the flesh of his palm. Simon heard more footsteps, another wordless noise of disgust—this one high and gagging, so probably Nate—and then nothing. Mike and Sandra had probably passed on the word. Simon did not have time to think about this right now, though, as Jeremy turned the gun and offered him the grip.

Simon took it, gingerly. "I've got it," he said. "You can let go now." Jeremy's left hand opened and fell away. Simon let out the breath he hadn't quite been aware he was holding and put his gun back into its holster. Jeremy was still gazing off at nothing—well, not at nothing, at the remains of Farraday, and that wasn't good—but Simon needed to take this one step at a time, and he needed to start with the steps that could possibly hurt someone else.

"Templar," Nate squeaked from behind him.

"Yeah," Simon said. He touched the bandage on his chest and winced when it made a wet sound: he was bleeding, and pretty hard. Not hard enough to kill him (he hoped, anyway) but hard enough that he'd have to have himself looked at again. Christ, Farraday must have jammed his fingers in past the first joint—Simon banished that thought as far away from himself as he could. "It's okay," he said instead, his eyes on Jeremy. "Someone bring me my headset, will you?"

In the end, it was Sandra who brought it to him, picking her way gingerly across the befouled floor. Her eyes ran over Jeremy and flicked away, apparently in embarrassment, or in reflexive politeness: Jeremy really did look like shit. Simon took the headset from her and put it back on. "Okay, folks," he said with a sigh. "The first thing we've got to do is—" Abruptly the lights all flickered and snapped back on. "—get the lights back on," Simon said, shading his eyes against the sudden glare. "Never mind." He reached up and hit the button on his headset. "Thanks, whoever that was."

"Uh," said the new guy, his voice crackling slightly. "You're welcome."

Simon blinked twice and then looked away from Jeremy for the first time, frowning at the far side of the room. "Didn't I tell you to stay with the van?"

"Well, um, yes," said the new guy, his voice a little uncertain, "but you also said that someone needed to get the lights on and you didn't care who it was, and I figured everybody already in the warehouse was kind of busy, so I called HQ and got someone I knew to look up the blueprints for this place—"

"All right," Simon said, raising his voice to cut the new guy off. "Yes, I did say that. Congratulations, you're saved. Where are you now?"

"In the overhead control booth," the new guy said. "There's an outside stairway that leads up to it if you know where to look. There's a lot of junk up here, too—I think this guy must have been sleeping up here—and I think I found Jeremy's wallet—"

"All *right*," Simon said again, leaning on it this time. "That's fine. Thank you. I want you to head back to the van now, okay? Just . . . go back to the van and wait there for us. We'll be out in a little."

"Okay," said the new guy, which Simon definitely liked better than his usual hapless *yes, sir*. "I'm heading back out there now."

"Good," Simon said. "And for the record, over frequency you call him 'Shadow', all right?"

"Shadow," the new guy repeated. "Got it."

"Good," Simon said again, and let go of the button. His eyes had finished adjusting to the new light level by now, and he glanced over at what was left of Farraday and winced: Jesus, what a mess. He looked back at Jeremy and winced again: Jeremy was gazing off at a particular point of nothing that just so happened to include said mess, which couldn't be healthy. "Okay, quit that," Simon said as gently as he could, taking Jeremy's upper arm and pulling him away. Jeremy was now staring right through him, which was . . . preferable, anyway.

"Templar, before you do anything else you need to know that Honda and I ran across Diana Fontaine while looking for Farraday," Sandra said quietly. "She . . . there was an altercation and she's been restrained, but she needs proper arresting."

"Ha," Simon said, clamping his left arm down hard against his side and waiting for the pinched feeling to subside. So this was how you relapsed into a

bullet wound. "I knew it. Bitch. Can it wait a few minutes, or is she liable to get away?"

"She's not going anywhere," Sandra said.

"Good," said Simon, and then he raised his voice a little. "Okay, folks. Before we do anything else, even call for the mop-up crew, I need you all to come back to the van with me, okay? We're going to have a little meet-up. We need to talk. Well, no, that's a lie: I need to talk and you guys need to listen up."

"What about Farraday?" Nate said, his voice hushed and horrified. Something not unlike a wince rippled across Jeremy's thousand-yard stare and vanished, and Jeremy folded his arms across his chest, hugging himself like he was cold.

"Leave him," Simon said. "He's not going anywhere in the next ten minutes." Turning away Simon got Jeremy moving, steering him bodily past the mess. After a moment Sandra came up on Jeremy's other side and put her arm around his shoulders, blocking his view of Farraday's body with her own; Simon nodded gratefully at her over the top of Jeremy's head, then devoted most of his remaining energy towards walking without hobbling like an invalid.

♦ 95: Dave

He'd barely been back in the van for two minutes before his headphones came to life again. "Hello, the van," Sandra said in Dave's ear, making him jump and nearly drop Jeremy's watch onto the empty tech shelf in front of him. "This is Springheel, calling ahead to let you know that we are incoming now—we'll be there in a minute or so."

Dave hesitated, then reached up and touched the button on his own headset. "I hear you," he said. No response seemed to be forthcoming, so he let go of the button again, carefully put Jeremy's watch back in his pocket, and shuffled out of the chair to go watch for them out of the back windows.

For a while all he could see was the moonlit expanse of the parking lot—then one by one the rest of the team emerged from the darkness like they were being created from nothingness at the limits of Dave's vision. Apparently the threat was past: they walked in a loose group, no longer checking over their shoulders or bothering to stay spread out. The clump in the middle finally resolved into Simon with one arm around Jeremy's shoulders; by that point Sandra had almost reached the van and Dave popped both back doors and pushed them open.

"Scoot back," Sandra said briskly, making a shooing motion at Dave. Obliging Dave started edging back; she kept shooing impatiently at him until he'd gone as far forward as he could, wedged into a corner and half-sitting on the back of the driver's seat to keep from whacking his head on the van's roof. Sandra crawled in after him and stationed herself in the opposite corner, perching on the back of the passenger seat.

Mike hopped in after her, the van's springs creaking under him, and ape-walked the length of the van, hunched over and grabbing at things to keep his balance. He flashed Dave a completely insincere grin. "Yo, if it ain't Dave's-Fine," he said, wedging himself in between Dave and Sandra and nearly shouldering Dave into the van wall in the process. Sandra snorted and thumped Mike in the chest, making him grunt.

The rest of them clumped up at the van's back doors, causing a bit of a traffic pileup. Simon said something too soft for Dave to hear, then patiently nudged

Jeremy until Jeremy climbed into the van under his own (somewhat slow) steam. Like a man in a dream Jeremy settled onto the van's floor nearly at Mike's feet. The rest of the team piled in behind him and Johnny pulled the van's doors shut, plunging the van into near-darkness.

"Okay," the dim outline of Simon said, scooting around so that he was sitting on the van's floor opposite Jeremy. "Specs, got a light?"

The dim outline of Nate patted at his pockets. "Yeah," he said distractedly. "Hang on a sec—"

"When you can," said Simon. He sounded a little strained, which didn't come as much of a surprise.

After a moment Nate fished something out of one of his pockets and cupped a hand over it, dimming the sudden brilliant white light. An LED, Dave was pretty sure. "Thanks, Specs," said Simon, and then he fell silent, glancing first at Jeremy and then up at the members of his team, who loomed uncomfortably around the two of them like a ring of trees.

Dave glanced down at Jeremy and couldn't help wincing. He didn't know what he'd been expecting, exactly, but the guy on the floor by Dave's foot—whom Dave recalled as a neatly-put-together fellow, if one maybe a little too fond of basic black—was now a mess worthy of a Jackson Pollock painting. He looked like he'd been through hell and hell was filled with dust, machine grease, dirt, blood, wood splinters, bird shit, and rust. A wide rivulet of dried blood had streaked the right side of his face with maroon and Dave couldn't quite stop looking at it, no matter how he tried. Of course, the guy was a kidnap victim; by all rights he ought to look worse than he did.

"Okay," Simon said, his normal tone of voice strangely loud in the tense silence of the van. Dave jumped a little and looked back at Simon, who was looking at Jeremy: "Archer, I need you to listen to me now, okay?" Simon said. After a moment in which there was no response, Simon reached out and snapped his fingers under Jeremy's nose, making Jeremy twitch slightly. "Okay?" Simon repeated. "Say something."

"Yes?" Jeremy said, faraway but polite, still gazing somewhere around Simon's chest.

"Hey, okay, that's a start." Simon reached out and put a hand on Jeremy's shoulder. "I want you to listen to me very carefully, okay? This is really important. And you know I don't just say that."

"All right," Jeremy said, not sounding all that interested.

Apparently it was good enough for Simon, though. "Okay," he said, and then went quiet again. Dave wasn't sure what was going on but he *was* sure that he wasn't going to be the one to ask. Finally Simon spoke again, staring intently at Jeremy's face. "You'd managed to escape and hide yourself in the secondary storage area," he said.

Jeremy nodded.

“You don’t know how long you were hiding there, but eventually, you heard us arrive. You heard a loud crash but at the time you didn’t know what it was.”

Jeremy nodded again.

“You didn’t want to come out and announce yourself, though, because the guy who’d kidnapped you was still around. So you stayed hidden.”

Nod.

“Eventually you saw me enter the area through the big doorway to the north. I had drawn my gun and was carrying it.”

Nod.

Simon exhaled and ran one hand through his hair, his other hand still on Jeremy’s shoulder. “When I was about halfway along the left-hand wall, Farraday came out from between two boxes and ambushed me from behind, putting a gun to the back of my neck.”

Jeremy was still for a moment, but eventually he nodded. A faint ripple of reaction ran through the van like a breeze, but no one else said anything, all eyes intent on Simon and his performance.

“He told me to drop my gun and kick it away. You saw me comply. The gun skittered over the concrete towards you. You picked it up, still without being seen.”

Jeremy nodded. In his lap, his hands flexed slightly.

“Farraday was holding me at gunpoint. We talked for a while. He seemed to be getting angry and he couldn’t hold still.”

Nod.

“Eventually he twitched in such a way that his right arm moved and the gun was no longer pointed directly at me. At this point I charged him and we fought for a moment.”

Nod. A little deeper than before. Dave noticed a pair of round black marks on the back of Jeremy’s neck that he hadn’t seen before, but he couldn’t tell if that was blood or not.

Simon hesitated, then reached out and put both his hands on Jeremy’s shoulders, squeezing them gently. “The fight was very short, but I managed to force Farraday to drop his gun. It hit the concrete and bounced, landing a short distance away.”

No nod. Jeremy hesitated, catching and holding his breath for a moment. Finally he looked up, focusing on Simon’s face for the first time; Simon tried to smile, although to Dave’s eye it looked kind of off. “There you are,” he said quietly. “I knew you were in there somewhere. Want to hear that part again? The fight was very short—”

“—Farraday dropped the gun,” Jeremy repeated, faintly.

“Good,” said Simon. “Keep listening, this is where it gets important.”

Jeremy nodded and shifted, straightening up a little. Dave, confused now, glanced across the van at Nate, which wasn't helpful: Nate looked just about as confused as he did.

"Farraday hit me in the chest," Simon said, still holding Jeremy's eyes. Somewhere off to Dave's left Sandra hissed in reflexive sympathy. "I crumpled and fell. You don't know why for certain, but if you had to guess—"

"—I'd say that he hit the place where you'd been shot," Jeremy said, completing the sentence. His voice was still soft and faraway but he was starting to sound interested.

"Right," said Simon, squeezing Jeremy's shoulders again. "Good. Can you say it just like that? You don't know why for certain, but if you had to guess, *et cetera*?"

"Oh, I think I'm capable of that," Jeremy said.

Something about the way he said it made Simon grin, for just a second. "Yeah, well, can't be too careful. Okay, ready to go on?"

Jeremy nodded.

"Good," Simon said. "Listen closely. Farraday got away from me and went after his gun. I got up and went after mine. I was coming towards you, so you put my gun on the ground and slid it to me."

"Slid it to you," Jeremy repeated. Suddenly the van was so quiet that Dave could hear his own heartbeat.

"I picked it up and turned to point it at Farraday just as Farraday picked up his gun and turned to point it at me."

"I see," Jeremy said.

Simon nodded. "He was aiming his gun at me when I shot him."

Silence. Jeremy knotted his fingers together in his lap, unknotted them, then knotted them again. "He was aiming his gun at you when you shot him," Jeremy finally said. "I thought he was about to fire."

Simon nodded encouragingly, still not letting go. "After I shot Farraday, I put my gun back in its holster and came over to see if you were all right," he prompted. "The rest of my team arrived shortly and found us there. My gun was already holstered at that point."

Jeremy glanced away for a moment. In the dim and fractured light of the LED Dave saw him smile, just a bit. "Of course it was," he said. "Why on earth would you need to hold *me* at gunpoint?"

Surprised, Simon snorted out a little laugh. "Can't imagine," he said. "Okay?" He left his hands on Jeremy's shoulders, but his eyes traveled in a slow, intent circuit around the ring of his teammates. "You got all that?"

"I believe so," Jeremy said. "Would you like me to repeat it to you?"

Simon finally let his hands drop and sat back. "Maybe you'd better," he said. "Let me hear it."

Jeremy took a breath and ran one dirty hand through his equally dirty hair. The rest of the team was silent, watching Jeremy like he was some kind of trained performing animal as he launched into his recital. "I'd managed to escape and hide myself in the secondary storage area," he said, then stopped. "Should I elaborate on that?" He lifted his hands out of his lap and held them out, palms up, displaying his bare wrists crusted with blood.

Simon winced and pushed those hands gently away. "It's best that you don't elaborate unless someone pushes you to," he said. "In any case, I think the cuts will speak for themselves, right?"

"I suppose so," said Jeremy. "Let's see. I don't know how long I was in hiding, but eventually I heard you all arrive. There was a loud crash, although I didn't know what it was at the time. I elected to remain hidden, though, because the man who'd kidnapped me might still be around, and I didn't want to announce myself until it was safe." Simon shifted restlessly, but nodded. "After a while—I don't know how long—I saw you arrive through the big doorway. You had your gun drawn at that point. You started to walk along the left-hand wall, next to the stacks of boxes. When you were about halfway along, Farraday stepped out from between two boxes behind you and put his gun to the back of your neck."

"Templar," Sandra said, her voice a little strained. Simon glanced at her, raising one finger and shaking his head; she fell still.

Once the interruption was over, Jeremy picked up the thread of his narrative from where he'd left it. "He told you to drop your gun and kick it away. You did so. The gun came in my general direction, so I picked it up. I don't think either of you saw me do it, but I couldn't say. Farraday held you at gunpoint for a while and the two of you spoke. He seemed angry about something and he couldn't keep himself still. Eventually he twitched in such a way that his right arm moved, which pulled the gun away from you for a moment. You charged him and the two of you fought." He paused again. "I shouldn't elaborate on that point either, should I?"

"Only if asked," Simon said.

"Fair enough," said Jeremy. He shifted again and swallowed, closing his eyes for a moment. "You forced his arm up and he dropped the gun. The gun bounced off the concrete and landed a short distance away from the two of you. Shortly thereafter Farraday hit you in the chest and you crumpled and fell. I don't know for certain why, but if I had to guess, I'd say it was because he hit the place where you'd been shot." Jeremy paused again.

"What?" Simon said after a moment.

"Ah," said Jeremy. "He knew just where you'd been wounded, didn't he? He knew where to hit you because he was the one who shot you in the first place. QED, I suppose."

Simon simultaneously winced and laughed under his breath. "Yes," he said, still laughing a little, "but let them think of that part themselves, please. Stick to

the facts and don't elaborate."

"I'm only pointing it out, Simon," Jeremy said. Absently he fiddled with one of his ruined cuffs.

"And your point is noted," Simon said. "Go on, now. We don't have much longer."

"Of course," Jeremy said. "Where was I—ah. Once you fell Farraday ran for his gun. You got up and ran for yours. When I saw you coming I put the gun on the ground—" Jeremy hesitated, then shut his eyes "—and I pushed it towards you. You picked it up and turned to point it at Farraday at the same time that Farraday retrieved his gun and turned to point it at you. Farraday was pointing his gun at you when you shot him—for a moment I wasn't sure which one of you had fired. Then Farraday dropped his gun and fell. After a moment you put your gun away and came to see if I was all right, and that's when the rest of your team arrived and found us there."

"And my gun was already holstered at that point," Simon prompted.

"Yes," said Jeremy, opening his eyes.

Simon nodded, slowly. "Okay," he said. "Sounds good." He glanced around again; Dave figured that it was probably just his imagination that led him to believe that Simon looked at him longer than anyone. "Everyone get that? Any questions?"

After a long moment, Sandra sighed and shifted. "No questions, Templar."

"Good," said Simon, as if she'd answered for all of them. "Okay, here's what we're going to do now. Archer and I are hurt and could use a little medical attention. Honda, I want you to drive us back to base and the infirmary there. Specs, you look a little peaky, I want you to come with us. Spring, I'm leaving you in charge here. Take Texas and, and, uh—" Simon broke off there and snapped his fingers in Dave's direction.

"Dave," Dave said, just about as loudly as he dared.

Simon heaved out a sigh and bowed his head in resignation, then looked back up. "Dave," Simon agreed. "Take Texas and Dave there, secure the scene, call the techies and the mop-up crew, go arrest Diana Fontaine properly and have her taken away, all that stuff. Honda, after you drop us off, take Specs either home or to the hotel depending on what he wants, and then I want you to come back here—the three of you do whatever Spring tells you to. Once you're done here, I want you all to go home and get some sleep. Don't bother coming in before noon tomorrow, at which point you'll probably all have to make statements. I'm sure the opportunity thrills you all. We'll make as short a day out of tomorrow as is possible and then catch up on our sleep over the weekend. Okay?"

"Got it," Sandra said. The spell of stillness cast over the group broke on the instant. Dave belatedly became aware that he had a crick in his neck and he winced, digging his fingers into it.

“Good,” Simon said, patting gingerly at his chest, which squelched alarmingly; his fingers came away bloody and he winced, letting his hand drop back into his lap. “Awesome job tonight, all of you. I’m so proud I could burst. Heck, I *did* burst a little. Off with you.”

Johnny popped open the back doors and hopped out, followed by Nate. “Oh,” said Dave, digging in his pockets and producing the little pile of Jeremy’s things. “Um, here.”

Jeremy’s little smile, calm as anything, was an incongruous note in the filthy mess of his face as he accepted them. “Thank you, Mr. Brassoﬀ,” he said.

“You wanna move up front, boss?” Mike asked, swinging his legs over the seat back (nearly kicking Dave in the face in the process) and thumping into the driver’s seat. He snapped his fingers impatiently until Dave handed him the keys.

“That’s okay,” Simon said, still watching Jeremy. “I’ll stay back here just in case Archer faints or something.” Incredibly, Jeremy laughed under his breath.

Edging past Jeremy and Simon, Dave clambered out of the back of the van. He straightened up, the vertebrae in his spine all crackling like crumpling paper; closing his eyes Dave put one hand on the back of his neck and cracked it with two loud pops. “Hell of a night,” he ventured, testing the waters.

“Trust me,” Johnny told him, “you ain’t seen nothin’ yet.” He did thump Dave on the shoulder, though, which Dave chose to interpret as a good sign.

♦ 96: Simon

What with one thing and another—it was, after all, always one thing or another—they didn’t let Simon go until nearly four in the morning. The good news was that he hadn’t been hurt nearly as badly as he’d thought: Farraday’s fingers hadn’t actually reopened his wound, just snapped the forming muscle adhesion apart. Simon could even stand up straight now, without the muscle in his chest pulling taut. In a weird, roundabout way the asshole had done him a favor.

The *bad* news was that he still hurt like hell and he’d probably have to go through another round of questioning tomorrow. But for now he was free, vindicated, full of Advil, and running on his very last reserves of manic energy, and thus, he silently decreed, it was time to go the hell home and get some sleep.

Jeremy was waiting in the saferoom when Simon turned up with a hapless field agent in tow. Someone had done a half-assed job of cleaning him up and bandaging the worst of his wounds, but Jeremy still looked pretty rough and exhausted to boot. “Come on,” Simon said, jabbing a thumb over his shoulder at the field agent and the hallway behind him. “This guy’s going to take us home.”

“Oh, is he driving to England, then?” Jeremy asked, his voice thin and tired. “How nice.”

“Yeah, you’re a funny, funny man,” Simon told him. “You’re going to sleep on my couch tonight so that I can wake you up every two hours and make sure that your concussion doesn’t kill you. Doesn’t that sound great?”

“Oh, well, I’m always open to new experiences,” Jeremy said, drifting to his feet like he hurt. Which he probably did. “By all means, then, let us go.”

“Okay!” Simon said, pretty much the instant that the door to his apartment had been closed and locked behind him. “Here’s what’s going to happen now, and you are not allowed to argue with me, because I am an expert or something.” He darted into the kitchen and came back out with a big black trash bag and one of the two kitchen chairs. “You are going to go have a nice, long shower. I’m sure my toiletries aren’t nearly as froofy as what you’re used to, but suffer. There’s a

first-aid kit under the sink for rebandaging yourself when you're done, and you can even steal one of my painkillers if you want it."

"And you thought I was going to *argue* with this?" Jeremy said, picking fastidiously at his grime-crusting sleeve.

Simon ignored him. "What's left of your clothes can go in here—" he brandished the trash bag "—and you can pick them apart to reclaim your stuff in the morning. I'll get you something to sleep in here in a sec."

"And the chair?" Jeremy asked, raising both eyebrows—a gesture which lost some of its impact when both his forehead and eyebrows were lost under a vast reddish shadow of rust.

"Oh, the chair," said Simon, carrying it into the hallway and putting it down outside the bathroom door with a thump. "While you're in the shower I'm going to sit out here and stand guard."

Jeremy went very still. "I'm sure that's not necessary, Simon," he said cautiously.

"Nope," said Simon. He stepped into the bedroom and fetched a pair of pajama pants from their drawer—navy blue was the closest thing he had to black, so he supposed that it would just have to do. "It's not necessary at all. Farraday's dead. But you know what? As long as you're in there, I'm going to sit out here and stand guard. Because believe me, once you're in there alone, you'll appreciate knowing that." He put the trash bag and the pants on the bathroom counter.

"Ah," said Jeremy, looking away. "Do you know, I suppose I might at that?"

"Once you're all done in there I'm going to clean up, too, and *you* are going to sit in this chair and stand guard while I do, because I *also* will appreciate knowing that someone's got my naked and vulnerable back," Simon said. "We'll fetch you your arm thingies before I go in. After we're all cleaned up, there will be sleep! And just in case you're wondering, I do mean *sleep*."

"I do hope the couch is comfortable," Jeremy said, his smile flickering on and back off.

"Couch, my ass," said Simon. "If you think I'm going to get *up* every two hours to come poke you, you're nuts."

Jeremy's smile flicked back on, and stayed this time. "Oh, good," he said. "I must admit, I *had* been wondering."

"Yeah, yeah," said Simon, waving at the bathroom door. "Go on. Quicker you shower, the quicker we can get some sleep." He dropped into the kitchen chair and drew the borrowed gun from his holster—the Bureau had wanted to keep his overnight—laying it ostentatiously in his lap and resting one hand over its grip.

Jeremy took a deep and not entirely even breath, then stepped past Simon and closed the bathroom door. A moment later, it locked. Simon smiled, just a little, and settled in to wait.

Half an hour later the door clicked open again, belching steam out into the hallway. Jeremy looked approximately a thousand times better than he had, clean, neat, and wearing fresh pants, with his hair all slicked back wetly against his skull; he wore a flesh-colored patch on one temple, neat turns of white bandage about both his wrists, and a matching slim collar of bandage around his throat. “Nice,” said Simon, looking this bare-chested apparition up and down. “You look just like a Chippendales dancer.”

Jeremy paused, the plastic bag dangling from one hand. “A what?” he said.

“Never mind,” Simon said, grinning. “Tell you later. Go on, put that bag in the kitchen and get your, your, uh, shooty thingies. I want to wash my face.”

“My *shooty thingies*,” Jeremy said, amused, and vanished into the kitchen. Simon reholstered his borrowed gun and bent painfully down to untie his shoes.

By the time Simon stumbled back out of the bathroom his reserves of energy were almost depleted—he was so exhausted that he was teetering on the verge of hysteria. Everything he saw threatened to make him laugh until he ran out of breath and fell over. Jeremy was sitting upright and alert in the chair, wearing his weapon harnesses over his bandages, and Simon bit back a snicker and patted him on the head. “You’re just about the cutest little male stripper of a bodyguard I’ve ever had,” Simon said. “Go put the chair back in the kitchen, or, if you’re paranoid, under the doorknob.”

“Doorknob, I think,” Jeremy said serenely, carrying the chair away. Simon heard it thunk into place a moment later, the knob on the front door rattling.

Limping a little, Simon made his way into the bedroom and set the alarm for seven. The very idea hurt him physically. “I think I could sleep the clock around,” he muttered.

“Mm,” said Jeremy, startling him a little: Simon hadn’t heard him come in. “Personally, I think that sounds like an excellent idea.”

“Pity it’s not going to happen,” Simon said, putting the borrowed gun down on the nightstand, within easy reach. “Come on, sleep now.” He turned out the light and burrowed under the already-rumpled covers on his side of the bed, nearly groaning with relief. On the other side of the bed Jeremy peeled back the covers and slid in, moving carefully. Simon threw out an arm and wiggled his fingers; after a moment Jeremy slid across the bed and settled diffidently up against his side, putting his head on Simon’s shoulder. His hair was still damp and clammy against Simon’s bare skin. Simon made a face at the ceiling, but decided not to mention it. “You going to be okay?” he asked.

“I think so,” Jeremy said, laying his arm gingerly across Simon’s waist. “I’m still a bit dizzy, but I expect that will pass.”

“Great,” Simon said. “G’night.”

“Good night, Simon,” Jeremy said, and fell silent. Simon closed his eyes.

Five minutes later he opened them again. "This isn't working, is it," he said.

"No," Jeremy said. "I'm exhausted but I can't seem to make my mind stop springing about."

"Yeah, I know how that is," Simon said, rubbing a hand over his face. "You smell weird."

Jeremy laughed silently, quivering against Simon's side. "I suspect that's because I smell like you. Or, at least, like your bath things."

"Yeah, actually," Simon said. "And that's weird. It's way too manly a smell for you. I keep thinking there's a *man* in bed with me or something."

"Oh, heaven forfend."

Simon yawned. "Yeah, it's awakening my territorial urges over here."

"Well, I *could* still go sleep on the couch, if that will satisfy the rampant male predator in you, Simon—"

"You know what, when it comes down to a battle between my territorial urges and my personal convenience, my personal convenience wins every time. You stay right there."

"Gladly," Jeremy said, pressing his face against Simon's shoulder for a moment. Simon absently looped his arm around Jeremy's shoulders and squeezed, staring at the ceiling and not really thinking about much. After a moment, he laughed a little. "Mm?" Jeremy said.

"'Rampant male predator'," Simon said, shaking his head. "Blatant, Archer."

"Would you prefer 'alpha male'?" Jeremy asked. "I do occasionally feel the urge to roll over and expose my belly in submission, after all—"

"Christ, don't do it *now*, I'm wiped out." Simon yawned again. After a moment he felt Jeremy's jaw clench, resisting the same yawn. "Also, I nominate this as the stupidest conversation we've ever had."

"Well, I do have a head injury," Jeremy pointed out. "I suppose we're both very lucky that I'm not actively hallucinating."

"Oh, I dunno, I'd probably find that pretty funny, particularly if there was twitching involved."

"Mm," Jeremy said, patting Simon's hip.

Things got quieter after that. Jeremy eventually left off patting Simon's hip and hooked his thumb under the waistband of Simon's pajama pants instead, leaving it there. "Hey," Simon said in warning, not so much actively protesting as letting it be known that Jeremy hadn't *actually* gotten away with anything.

"Hm?" Jeremy said, all innocence.

Simon hesitated. "It hits everyone hard the first time, you know," he finally said.

"I suppose it must," Jeremy said, after a slight hitch. "I think I might be quite a wreck if I were alone right now."

"Yeah, that's kind of how it goes," Simon said. "You'd probably better stick around for a few more days. After all, the FBI might want to question you again, and I know how much you must relish that kind of opportunity."

"Oh, yes, I certainly wouldn't want to hurt the FBI's feelings," Jeremy said.

"Not that the FBI actually gives a damn about you or anything."

"Of course not. I've always known I was merely the slave to the FBI's whims."

"And don't you forget it," Simon said.

Jeremy was quiet for a moment. "May I ask you something?"

"Do you know how tempting it is to say 'no' when you say that, Archer?" Simon gestured wearily. "Ask."

"How . . ." Jeremy's voice faltered, an event so rare that Simon couldn't help but mark it. "How did you cope, the first time?"

"Oh, shit," Simon said, putting a hand over his eyes and laughing a little. "The first time I shot a guy, I threw up."

"Well, that isn't exactly what I meant, but . . . really?"

"Mm-hmm." Simon let his hand fall to the pillow beside his head. "Well, see, I didn't actually pull the trigger until he grabbed me, so, uh, I . . . are you sure you want to hear this?"

"I'm sure," Jeremy said firmly. "Particularly if it's embarrassing for you."

"Bite me," Simon said. "Anyway, he was *right there*, so when I pulled the trigger I, uh, got him all over me, so to speak—" Jeremy made a face against the side of Simon's throat "—so after I shoved him off and got back up I managed to hold it together long enough to finish the raid—about five minutes—and then all of a sudden the smell got to me or something and I just *horked*. It was nasty. Lucky for me, though, no one saw me do it. Tough-guy reputation: maintained."

"Mm," said Jeremy. "How old were you?"

"Twenty-five," Simon said. "Year or two out of the academy."

"Ah." Jeremy paused, squeezed Simon's hip again, and then said, "What I meant was, how did you cope afterwards?"

"Oh. Uh. Camaraderie, mostly. Sharing war stories with people who had also been there. Also beer." Simon scratched his ear. "I guess I never really felt that bad about it, though. The guy was scum and he was trying to kill me. It didn't really . . . leave a dent, I guess you could say."

"Mm," Jeremy said neutrally. "For my part, I do rather feel dented."

"Yeah, well, you're kind of a sissy and all," Simon said. "But still . . . okay, look. You did the only thing you could have done, all right? If you hadn't shot him when you did, he'd have shot me. So I guess you sort of saved my life or something, not that you should let it go to your head."

Jeremy was quiet for a long moment. "I 'sort of' saved your life?" he finally prompted.

“Well, yeah,” Simon said. “It was only a .22. There was a pretty good chance that even shooting me in the face wouldn’t have killed me outright.” Jeremy shivered. Simon squeezed his shoulder. “You did the right thing,” he said softly.

“I did the right thing?” Jeremy repeated, uncertainly.

“Keep telling yourself that,” Simon said. “It was the right thing to do. It was the *only* thing you could have done, especially in that condition. Okay?”

“All right,” Jeremy said. He still didn’t sound certain, but it was, in Simon’s expert opinion, close enough for government work.

“Great,” Simon said, yawning so hugely that his jaw cracked. “Oh, shit, okay, that’s a sign,” he said, still yawning. “A sign that says ‘SLEEP’ in big neon letters.”

“I’ll give it my best shot. Er. To coin a particularly inappropriate phrase.” Jeremy shifted against him—in other, less exhausted circumstances Simon might have found that little motion interesting—and settled back down. “Do you realize,” Jeremy said, “we never did have dinner?”

“Aw, Christ, you had to remind me, now I’m going to be hungry.” Simon reached over and prodded Jeremy’s shoulder, lightly. “Go to sleep, Archer.”

“I’ll try,” Jeremy said, his jaw clenching as he bit back another yawn. “Good night, Simon. Again.”

“Night,” said Simon, and closed his eyes. Jeremy went quiet beside him, his breathing slowly evening out.

Ten minutes later, without opening his eyes, Simon asked, “You were too far away to hear the things I was saying to Farraday, right?”

“Oh, possibly,” Jeremy said, his voice sleepy but oddly smug. “I can’t guarantee it, of course, but I’d say that there’s a very good chance that I heard nothing at all.”

Simon snorted. “‘Very good chance’,” he said. “Anyway, I just want you to know that whatever you may or may not have heard, I was only saying that shit to provoke him and you shouldn’t believe a word of it.”

Jeremy smiled against Simon’s shoulder. “Trust me, Simon,” he murmured, “I don’t believe most of what you say about me.”

“Good,” Simon said. “. . . wait, what?”

“Shh,” Jeremy said, radiating an especially maddening sort of contentment, and Simon was still trying to get Jeremy to explain that one when sleep caught up with him and knocked him flat.

◆ Epilogue: Sandra

[monday]

“So he’s gone, then?” Sandra asked, leaning against the doorway to Simon’s office and watching Simon fuss over his violated desk like a mother hen. Watching Simon reclaim his nest was almost worth all the extra hassle she’d gone through as acting team leader.

“Yeah, he left this morning, since I never once needed him to be there and need him even less now,” Simon said, pulling out one of the desk drawers and scowling at it. “Christ, look at this dent.”

Sandra smiled. “It adds character,” she said.

“It adds *dent*,” Simon said darkly. “What’d you use to open it, a crowbar?”

“Yes, actually.”

Simon shot a glare in her general direction, then sighed and trundled the drawer shut again. “Yeah, okay, that was a stupid question. Guess I’m lucky there weren’t explosives involved.”

“Hey, it’s one of the first lessons you ever taught us, boss: explosives are always an option.” The main door opened and Sandra glanced over her shoulder, waving at Nate as he edged into the room. Nate waved back. “Right after ‘there are no problems that can’t be solved via the judicious application of fire’.”

“I like fire,” Nate offered, trotting over to join them. “It burns things. Pretty much by definition. Where’s Jeremy?”

“Gone,” Simon said impatiently. “Back to England or Fairyland or wherever guys like him come from. I neither know nor care.”

“Oh,” said Nate, sounding a little dejected. “I hope he’ll be okay.”

Simon made a face. “Guys like him always are.”

“Guys like him?” Nate said. “English ones?”

The saferoom door slammed open again. Mike came barreling in, Johnny in his wake. “Yo!” Mike said happily, bounding over and making a shameless grab for Sandra.

Sandra shifted neatly aside and stomped on his foot hard enough to make him yowl. “That’s what you get,” she said sweetly.

“Man, I ain’t missed that any,” Mike complained, leaning up against the wall and grabbing his offended foot in both hands. “So where’s Macavity?” he said, with ominously good cheer. Sandra froze.

Simon paused. “Macavity?”

“You know, Archer,” Mike said, rubbing his foot.

“Macavity?” Simon said again.

“My mother bought me that poster when I was in junior high,” Sandra said through gritted teeth, “and it is still on my wall for sentimental reasons only. Got it?”

“You bet,” Mike said sunnily.

“Macavity?” Simon asked Nate, now sounding downright plaintive.

“Um,” said Nate, shifting uncomfortably. “*Cats*. Uh, the musical, not the animals.”

Simon’s gaze switched back to Sandra. “You have a *Cats* poster on your wall and I’ve failed to notice and give you hell about it all this time?”

“I was twelve!” Sandra said, a little desperately. “You are allowed to have crap taste in entertainment when you’re twelve!”

“Well, yeah, that’s true, not that it ought to save you from ferocious mockery,” Simon said. “Where the hell are you hiding this poster that I haven’t managed to see it? Your apartment’s not that big.”

Caught, Sandra hesitated. For just a fraction of a second, but it was enough: Simon’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully, flicking from Sandra to Mike and back. Mike, of course, was oblivious to the bomb he’d just dropped. Sandra barely resisted the urge to stomp on his other foot and make him fall over.

The saferoom door opened again and Sandra gratefully seized the opportunity to derail the conversation. “Morning, Mr. Brassoff,” she said.

“Um,” said Dave, letting the saferoom door slam closed behind him. “Morning.”

“Oh, hey, are we all here?” Simon said, mercifully distracted from that line of questioning. “Great! In that case, let’s get to work!” This announcement precipitated a minor cascade of groaning, which Simon ignored. “Cleanup detail today, folks: write and file your final reports, then burn and/or print off all the Farraday-related materials and delete ’em from the active files. You too, new guy: if you don’t know how to write an Ops report, get someone to show you. We’ll start putting together the case against Diana Fontaine—”

“Bitch,” Mike said happily.

“—this afternoon,” Simon finished. He reached over and punched the power button on his own machine. “Go, go. I want to hear computers booting, stat.”

Grumbling a little (and occasionally punching at each other) Sandra’s teammates found their way to their usual seats. Sandra pulled her own laptop out of its bag and set it to boot up and connect to the server while she fetched herself

some coffee, which was why she was right outside the door to Simon's office when the metaphorical bomb went off.

Music—no, it was too loud and distorted to even properly be called 'music'—boomed out of Simon's office, deafeningly loud, making Sandra reel back a step and nearly spill hot coffee on her hand. Simon yelled in shock, the sound almost completely lost under the torrent of noise, instinctively kicking his chair back away from his computer. "Christ!" he bellowed. Sandra could only barely hear him. "What the—Sandy, what did you do to my computer?!"

"What—?" Mike yelled, putting his hands over his ears and already starting to laugh, which made Sandra come within an inch of accusing him of being behind this. Half a second later his own laptop started screaming a *different* song at the top of its tinny little speakers, nearly drowned out by the almighty ruckus coming from Simon's office but still adding to the confusion. Mike yelled and started hitting keys at random, trying to turn it off.

Two seconds later a third and a fourth song joined the almighty discord—Johnny's laptop and Sandra's own both wailing like mad—and by that point Team Hall was *definitely* pounding on the wall and yelling, although Sandra could only barely hear it. Johnny slapped his laptop shut reflexively, although it failed to go to sleep for some reason. "Nate!" Simon yelled. "Goddammit, Nate, make it stop!"

"I—" Nate started to say, and then the enormous speakers racked under his own computer went off like twin bombs primed with disco. The racket redoubled, something Sandra had not thought possible. Nate shrieked and nearly fell out of his chair, wrapping both arms protectively around his head.

"*Make it stop!*" Simon howled.

"Just a sec!" Nate yelled back, diving under his desk and grabbing for the manual volume knob on his speakers. Sandra saw him twist it all the way down, but it did not so much as put a dent in the cacophony. Nate popped back up like a jack-in-the-box, his face panicky, and grabbed for the keyboard.

Simon staggered out of his office, hands over his ears. "*Nate!*"

"*I can't stop it!*" Nate screamed, hammering at his keyboard. Windows opened and closed and the din did not lessen a bit. "The music files and the player aren't on our machines, they're stored on the server! I can't get to them! They're behind some kind of password!"

"Then shut it down!"

Nate swallowed, nodded, and hit the power button on his tower. After five seconds in which nothing happened, he blinked, let go of the button, and hit it again. Still nothing. "It's not working?" he said, mostly to himself, and grabbed the mouse again. Five seconds later he went white.

"Well?" Simon yelled.

"The server downloaded and installed something on my computer before starting the music playback!" Nate yelled back. "It won't shut down or let me

access the volume controls!”

“Then unplug it!”

Nate stared at Simon, horrified. “That’ll damage the machine!”

Simon threw up both hands, stomped to the main door, threw it open, and bellowed “*SORRY!*” down the hallway as loudly as he could. Letting the door slam shut behind him, he whirled on Sandra. “What the hell is with these . . . fucking . . . computers . . .”

He trailed off there, realization belatedly dawning, then turned slowly on his heel. One by one the rest of them followed suit, staring like deafened and hypnotized owls at Rich’s old corner and the only computers in the room that weren’t blaring music at top volume; Dave Brassoﬀ, his face utterly calm, reached into his bag and pulled out a huge pair of orange noise-cancelling headphones. Ignoring them all he put the headphones on before kicking his chair around and getting to work.

Mike was the first to crack up. Johnny followed suit. The wave of hysteria hit Sandra a moment later and she slumped weakly back against the empty desk at the front of the room, putting a hand over her eyes. “Ma’am,” she heard Johnny shout a second later, “may I have this dance?”

“Why not?” Sandra yelled back. “Just not the hustle, I don’t care what Nate’s computer is playing—*oh Jesus, Texas, not the hustle!*”

Johnny, pretending he hadn’t heard her, grabbed her hands and dragged her out into the open space in the center of the room. Simon only put up with the impromptu disco for a couple of seconds before stalking over to the apparently oblivious Dave, grabbing the back of Dave’s chair and forcibly spinning him around. “Turn it off!” he yelled.

“I’m sorry!” Dave yelled back, tapping one of his headphones. “I can’t hear you!”

Mike whooped and collapsed face-first onto his screaming laptop. Simon made a face, grabbed the band of Dave’s headphones, and yanked them off, dumping most of Dave’s hair in his face. “I said, *turn it off!*”

“What?” Dave yelled back, flipping his hair out of his eyes.

Simon threw up both hands, utterly frustrated. “*PLEASE!*” he bellowed.

Dave flung out a hand and blindly hit the space bar on the nearest computer. The music, all of it, cut off instantly, leaving Sandra’s ears ringing in the sudden silence. She and Johnny hustled on for a few more steps before coming to a slightly embarrassed halt. “What do you know,” Dave said, his voice quivering just a little even though his face was still extraordinarily calm. “*It is a magic word.*”

For a long moment Simon glared down at Dave, his hands in claws, like he was very seriously considering disemboweling the guy and depriving them of yet another computer tech. Mike was nearly strangling himself trying not to laugh, though, and Johnny and Sandra were leaning on each other and snickering, and

finally even Simon couldn't hold out: his shoulders shook, once, and then he put a hand over his eyes and cracked up.

Once Simon was laughing, none of them had a chance of resisting; Mike very quickly melted under the table, and Sandra's throat was sore by the time she made herself stop. "Okay," Simon finally said, wiping his eyes. "*You* do whatever it takes to clean up after this little stunt of yours. *I* am going to go back into my office and very carefully not say or do anything else that Team Hall might construe as an apology. The rest of you, get back to work as soon as your computers have been put back to normal."

"Will do," Dave said, sheepishly holding out his hand for his headphones. Simon bopped him lightly over the head with them, then gave them back.

"Man," Mike said, scrambling out from under the conference table. His face was bright pink. "Did you see that? Dave's-Fine didn't even crack a smile! Face like a stone wall, swear to God!"

"Stonewall, huh," Johnny said, raising a significant eyebrow at Mike.

"Yeah, Stonewall Davey," Mike said happily, and two seconds later it dawned on him. His eyes went wide. "Hey, *yeah*," he said, voice full of wonder.

Sandra shrugged and gave in to the inevitable. "Stonewall," she agreed.

Simon slapped his forehead. "You guys," he said, pained, or pretending to be. "Don't give the new guy a *nickname*. If you name him we'll never get *rid* of him."

"I don't think the pet store's going to take him back anyway," Sandra said, clearing her throat. "He's obviously imprinted on us."

"Ain't that right, Stonewall," Johnny said, glancing in Dave's direction.

"What?" said Dave, blinking madly. "Oh. I mean. Woof?"

After the adrenalin rush of the music bomb, even that was enough to set them off all over again, and they didn't stop laughing until someone from Team Hall pounded on the wall and started screaming for quiet.