
Shadow of the Templar:
High Fidelity

by
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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
as ever

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Fidelity, Bravery, Integrity

- official motto of the Federal Bureau of Investigation

There was only a bare, gray hint of dawn in the June sky when Simon parked his Jeep around back and slid out, but the day was already warm and humid, almost wet. It was just past five in the morning. Simon was so tired that he could feel a faint heart-deep quiver in his chest; Simon was so tired that he was wide awake, running on the edge, sliding into home on a rising tide of caffeine and pure nervous energy. The damp breeze moved sluggishly past his cheek and he glanced in that direction. The gray band of oncoming dawn was expanding in the east.

“Maybe today,” Simon told the dawn. “Just maybe.” He shut the door of the Jeep and headed for the entryway, sliding his ID from the back pocket of his jeans.

He let himself into a building so empty that it echoed. A janitor’s cart was parked at the far end of the hall, with no janitor in sight. The entire length of the hall gleamed wetly, studded every twenty feet or so with little yellow CAUTION: FLOOR IS WET, STUPID triangles, and the entire place smelled not unpleasantly of ammonia and soap. Simon squeaked towards the saferoom, leaving faint sneaker prints on the slick vinyl, the complex patterns tinted a faint gray with dirt. He only vaguely noticed and couldn’t bring himself to care. The janitors here had to deal with far worse than dirt smudges on a semi-regular basis, and after all, they were being paid to clean up other people’s messes, much like Simon himself was. The metaphor broke down fairly quickly after that, but Simon didn’t much care about that, either.

The inbox mounted on the wall next to Team Templar’s saferoom was stuffed so full of paper that documents were cascading down over the front, hanging in huge curls like some kind of exotic plant. Simon scowled at the inbox and scooped the papers out, settling them into the crook of his arm like a load of schoolbooks while he went prospecting for that last little bit of paper that always got stuck under the lip of the inbox. Finally he found it and tweezed it out between his first two fingers, adding it to the stack before he let himself in.

Johnny, sitting at the conference table wearing a pair of headphones, glanced

up at Simon and nodded, his face quirking into that little almost-a-smile of his. Simon wagged his fingers in greeting and caught the door behind him as an afterthought, easing it shut.

Johnny didn't exactly look tired, but then, Johnny was just about the hardest son-of-a-bitch to read that Simon had ever met. Dave, on the other hand, looked like he'd spent the last week being beaten by tiny elves with whiffle bats, which might have been true, for all Simon knew. His red hair straggled down across his forehead in damp spikes and the deep bags around his eyes looked puffy and bruised, like the elves had gotten in a couple of lucky shots. He hadn't looked up when Simon came in. He never did. It would take a good-sized explosion to make Dave notice his surroundings when he was glued to one of the three monitors in his corner, which he currently was, frowning at the largest and occasionally making little 'hm' noises under his breath.

Simon rolled his eyes at the back of Dave's head, prompting another near-smile from Johnny, and carried his armload of paper into his office, leaving a trail of rapidly-drying sneaker prints in his wake.

He'd barely put the pile down and booted up his own computer before Johnny appeared in the doorway, wielding a mug of coffee in each hand like a pair of six-guns. "Yo," Johnny said. "Coffee's up."

"Marry me," Simon said in automatic response. He started sorting rapidly through the pile of paper and dividing it into three piles: center of desk, edge of desk, and straight into the trash.

"Ain't gonna," Johnny said affably, putting Simon's coffee down on the corner of Simon's desk, where a pattern of interlocking ring-shaped stains waited for the mug like a helipad. He sighed and dropped into the visitor's chair with his own mug. "However, might not say no to a quick blowjob in the men's, you're offering."

Simon glanced up at him, then snorted and went back to his papers. "I'll keep that in mind, *Mike*. In case my mouth gets bored."

Johnny snickered and drank off about half his coffee, closing his eyes for a moment. "Forgot to bring in the daily crap," he said. "Sorry."

"It's cool." Simon waved a hand dismissively. "You've been busy. I'll blame Stonewall the next time he surfaces."

"Fair enough," Johnny said. He put a hand on the back of his neck and twisted his head sharply to the right, producing a series of muted crackling noises like a zipper being pulled down. "Haven't heard a peep all night. Got us transcribed up through about last Thursday while I was waiting."

"Thank Christ," Simon said, dropping into his own chair with a whoof of breath. "You are the man, or should I say, the secretary. How long have you been here?"

Johnny considered for a moment. "Seven last night?"

Simon whistled. "Okay. Sandy doesn't show up to relieve you by five-thirty, call her, bust her ass out of bed. Mike answers her phone, bust *his* ass out of bed and let him cover her shift."

"What he gets," Johnny said comfortably. "Inter-office relations are a bitch."

Simon nodded absently, picking up a pen from beside his computer and attacking the first stack of paper. Each one was, presumably, an important document that all the team leaders were required to read, sign, and send on; Simon slashed his name across the first blank line of every signature sheet, right under Hank Hall's completely illegible signature, and flipped the 'signed' documents into a new pile. He was done 'reading' approximately forty sheets of paper in just under two minutes. Johnny stayed where he was, working on his coffee and watching the papers dance.

Dave's chair screeched faintly out in the main room and Dave himself appeared in the doorway a moment later, weaving slightly from side to side. "Morning," he said faintly. "... I forgot to bring in the paper, didn't I?"

"Yep," Simon said, picking up the pile of signed papers and holding them out. "You're fired and also you suck. Go dump those in the outbox, will you?"

"Okay," Dave said, leaning forward and taking the pile of papers. He came within a hair of losing his balance and falling right into Johnny's lap; Simon was kind of disappointed when Dave managed to recover in the nick of time.

Simon held on to the pile for a moment after Dave caught on to it, just in case Dave's grip was as shaky as the rest of him. Eyeing this spectacle, he sighed. "How long have you been here, Stone?"

"Uh," Dave said, hugging the pile of papers to his chest and blinking sleepily. "Since ... eight yesterday?"

"Uh huh," said Simon. "Which eight?"

"Huh?"

"Which eight? AM or PM?"

"Oh." Dave thought about it. "AM."

Simon rolled his eyes at Johnny. "Jesus Christ, Stonewall," he said. "Okay, so you've been here for twenty-one hours, I think that entitles you to go home and get some sleep."

"I took a nap," Dave volunteered.

"He did," Johnny said. "In the mat room. Whole hour."

"Christ, that's almost a workman's comp claim, there. Texas, once someone gets here to relieve you, take Stonewall home, will you? I'm not going to unleash him on the roads in this condition."

"I'm fine," Dave said, blinking again. "I pulled longer all-nighters in college."

"And just as you are not in college any more, you are not on the clock any more, either. You are not allowed to kill yourself via overwork. I've already replaced one dead tech and I don't plan to go through that shit again." Simon

pointed at the door. “Go put those in the outbox and then go lay down in the mat room until Johnny’s ready to take you home. That’s an order.”

Dave dithered in the doorway for a moment, glancing back at his computers. “Okay,” he finally said, his narrow shoulders slumping. “I’ve just got to shut everything down—”

“Texas, go save his progress and shut his computers down,” Simon said, turning his attention to the second pile of papers. “If I let him do it himself he’ll be fiddling with them for another five hours.”

“Right,” Johnny said, leveraging himself up and out of the visitor’s chair.

“But—!” Dave protested.

“Do not ‘but’ me,” Simon said. “Outbox. Mat room. Home. Bed. In that order. Do not make me come over there and punch you out, because that’s the only way I know how to make you go to sleep and I doubt you’d like it.”

“But,” Dave said again, and then thought better of it. He turned around and wove his slow way to the saferoom door, like he was already sleepwalking. Johnny followed him out.

Simon leafed through the pile of papers, scowling. These looked more important, deserving of at least casual scrutiny, but he was in no mood for it; he waited until Johnny came back and then pushed them across the desk. “Take a look at these, will you, Texas? Let me know if there’s anything important in there.”

“There ever?” Johnny asked, but he picked up the pile and started sorting through it.

Relieved of his papers, Simon turned his attention to the computer and started going through the email that had piled up overnight. In blissful contrast, the email in his inbox was usually short, casual, and most of all, relatively important; Rich had disabled every ‘Reply To All’ button in the building three years ago (after one infamous email exchange about reserved parking spaces that had grown, like a tumor, to be almost a megabyte in size) and no one had bothered to fix it yet. Rich’s legacy was Simon’s mercifully uncluttered inbox. Simon was just tired enough to contemplate the idea of having someone go carve ‘He Made Computers Not Suck As Much’ on Rich’s gravestone back in Seattle. It made him wince a bit, when he caught himself at it.

Simon started rattling out one- or two-line replies to his emails, one after another, taking a sip of coffee after each press of the ‘Send’ button. On the other side of the desk Johnny rustled papers, occasionally dropping one into the trash can. In the other room Dave collapsed onto a pile of mats with a soft *whumpf* sound and shortly thereafter started snoring quietly. He had an odd snore: short, quiet, almost ladylike snuffling sounds. It made him sound like something was startling him in his sleep, over and over. Possibly elves with whiffle bats.

“Professional Responsibility wants to see you,” Johnny said after a moment, rubbing a pink message slip between his thumb and forefinger.

“Huh,” Simon said, not looking away from the screen. “And we all know how much I love talking to the OPR. Wonder what Mike did this time.”

Johnny put the message slip down on Simon’s desk. “Doesn’t say,” he said. “Just says to come see, uh, Norton Fowles? At your convenience.”

“Which is internal affairs-ese for ‘right fucking now no matter what’,” Simon said, rolling his eyes. “Christ, Mike. Okay, I’ll deal with that when it’s not five in the morning. Anything else?”

“Not yet,” Johnny said. He went back to the pile of papers; after a moment Simon went back to his email inbox.

Simon was three-quarters of the way through his inbox and halfway through his coffee when Johnny paused, rattled a piece of paper in a meaningful way, and said, “Uh.”

“Huh?” Simon said, his fingers pausing on the keys. “Something actually important in the daily toilet paper? Say it ain’t so.”

“Ain’t rightly sure it’s important,” Johnny said slowly, “but maybe you ought to take a look just the same.”

“You know what, I don’t think I like the sound of that, Texas,” Simon said. He sent off one last email, threw back the rest of his coffee, and kicked his chair around, holding out his hand. “Gimme.”

Wordlessly, Johnny passed the stapled document over. Simon squinted at it. Upstairs had written **FYI: Templar** on the top in red pen, then—congenitally unable to use two words when more would do—had added **Let me know if we need to involve ourselves in this in any way.**

Simon frowned a little and scanned over the topmost sheet. Some kind of arrest report, nothing unusual about that; a glance at the top confirmed that it was from Scotland Yard, which was the only interesting thing about it. Some unlucky idiot named Jeremiah Harbottle, who had a name like that anyway—

As tired as he was, it took Simon almost five seconds to figure out why that name sounded familiar. Once he did, though—once the coffee made a few more neurons start firing—his eyes jerked down to the ‘Known Aliases’ section of the arrest report. Unusually (yet unsurprisingly) it was jammed full, filled from edge to edge and capped off with a helpless **cf. addendum, page 3** on the end, but the first line was all he needed to see:

aka Jeremy Archer,

Simon stared at that for a good five seconds, a sudden and useless burn of adrenalin tingling through his limbs and dissipating. “Well, shit,” he finally said. Johnny grunted in agreement.

◆ Two

“Okay,” Simon finally said, putting the arrest report down on his desk with care, like it might bite him. His stomach clenched once, hard, like a fist, and then relaxed again. “Okay. Not much I can do about it, really. I’ll get Upstairs to request the full report, just in case, but . . . well, Archer’s a criminal, and criminals get caught. Way of the world.”

“Sometimes, anyway,” Johnny said.

“Hey, I caught him,” Simon protested. “I just didn’t bother to keep him. He didn’t fit with the rest of my collection.” He turned back to his keyboard and hit the ‘New Message’ button, picking Upstairs out of the list of addressees. “Anything else important in that pile?”

Johnny rifled the stack quickly. “Don’t think so.”

“Okay. Trash it, then. I’ll get Upstairs moving and then I’ll take over monitor duty until Sandra gets here. Go pack up your stuff and wake Stonewall, will you?” Simon considered for a moment and then typed **ASAP: Archer** in the subject line. After a further moment of consideration he deleted **ASAP** and replaced it with **URGENT**.

“Will do,” Johnny said, standing up with alacrity and dropping the rest of the papers into the trashcan. “Thanks, boss.”

“No problem,” Simon said. “Get out of here. Sleep. Come back at . . . let’s say six.”

“Six,” Johnny agreed, picking up his mug. Simon let him go, turning his attention fully to his email program. **Please acquire full arrest report with all the trimmings ASAP**, he typed. **I won’t know if anything needs to be done on our end until I know exactly what happened.**

He heard the murmur of voices from the other room as he sent off the email, coincidentally and pleasantly with the time stamp of 5:23AM on it. Simon would take his brownie points where he could. Johnny stuck his head back into the office, Dave bobbing sleepily along behind him. “We’re out,” Johnny said. “Doodad starts squawking, you wanna go listen.”

“Great,” Simon said, distracted. “Lemme just answer these last couple of emails and I’ll go wear the headphones of shame until Sandy gets here. Go the hell home. Stonewall, if I see your face here before six PM I’ll just send you home again, so you might as well stay there.”

Dave blinked, a long, slow production in which his eyelids slid shut independently of each other. “Okay,” he finally said.

“Ain’t gotta tell me twice,” Johnny said, his mouth quirked a bit. He vanished from the doorway. A moment later, the saferoom door swung to behind Dave, who dreamily caught it and eased it shut. The squeak of their footsteps faded away down the hall.

Alone, Simon quickly finished up his emails and shut his computer down. The clunky recording device in the main room was mostly quiet, although occasionally it emitted a tiny chirp that sounded unnervingly like birdsong. Disdaining the headphones for the moment, Simon picked up the arrest report again and read it from front to back, flicking through the pages. The actual arrest summary was short, factual, and mostly uninformative; like most police everywhere, Scotland Yard agents apparently didn’t like to write any more than they had to.

Anonymous phone tip rec’d 6/14 06:56 re: current location of #AJ-45, Jeremy Archer. Caller also provided Archer’s birth name—unconfirmed, being fact-checked ASAP. Officers dispatched to indicated location detained one Caucasian male, late 20s, features matching general description of Jeremy Archer. Upon confrontation, detainee was noted to smile, say, “I’m afraid you’ve caught me,” admitted to being Archer. Detainee transported to headquarters for processing.

Simon dropped the report onto his desk and made a single, jerky, frustrated gesture that encompassed not only the arrest report but the rest of his office, the saferoom outside, and, in a general sense, the entire world. “*Jesus*, Jeremy,” he said, his voice hurt and angry. Maybe a little too hurt. He subsided, now grumpy at himself as well.

Outside, in the other room, the recording device made or transmitted a low rumbling sound. Simon’s head jerked up, and he pushed himself up and out of his chair. What was happening across the Atlantic would happen with or without him and wasn’t really any of his business anyway; what was happening here was his *job*.

Simon was sitting at the conference table wearing the oversized headphones and listening to three men have a conversation in a language he didn’t speak when Sandra arrived, banging in through the saferoom door bearing a carry-tray with four paper Starbucks cups on it. Upon finding only Simon, she stopped in

the doorway, started to say something, and then closed her mouth.

Simon pushed the headphones down around his neck. "It's cool. The doodad is set to record and they're talking in Martian again anyway."

"Portuguese," Sandra said patiently, but she stepped into the room and let the door close behind her. "Where is everyone?"

"Sent 'em home before they died," Simon said, unplugging the headphones. The room immediately filled with the low sound of conversation. Sandra glanced at the recording device and then came over and sat down, wiggling a paper cup free of the carry-tray. Simon held out a hand for it.

Sandra checked the label on the cup and then put it down by her side. "You don't want this one," she said.

"You are vastly underestimating my ability to tolerate unnecessary frills if there's coffee at the bottom, but I'll take your word for it," Simon said.

"It's not even six in the morning. I *need* frilly coffee," Sandra said defensively. "Some extremes require sugar and that's all there is to it."

Simon held up both hands in surrender. "I fully support your right to drink fifteen hundred calories' worth of fancy-ass coffee-flavored dessert if that's what floats your boat," he said. "Especially if one of those others is plain black."

Sandra checked the various cups, then wriggled a second one free. "Quintuple espresso," she said, putting it down in front of Simon. "The barista made me say it four times. I think she wanted to make me sign a waiver."

"I forgive you for every wrong you've ever done me," Simon said generously, and picked up the cup. "Unless you got that soy milk shit in yours, in which case I am totally going to call you a girl."

"Simon, I am a girl."

"Really? Huh. You don't say."

"Fuckhead."

"That's *Boss* Fuckhead to you, woman."

Sandra flipped him off lazily and flopped back in her chair, sucking at her coffee. Her upper lip came away from the to-go lid with a little spot of whipped cream on it; Simon decided not to mention it. "So what's been happening?" Sandra said.

Simon ripped the lid off his cup. "Well, let's see. Our Martian friends—"

"—Brazilian—"

"—were apparently quiet all night, so Texas got the English bits transcribed right up until Thursday night. Stonewall forgot to go home again. What's his current record?"

"Uh." Sandra thought about it, her eyes flicking right. "Twenty-six hours?"

Simon blinked. "Jesus, how did I miss that one? Anyway, he only managed to go twenty-one before I sent him home, so his record remains unbroken. Uh, let's see, next, apparently OPR wants to see me."

"What'd Mike do this time?" Sandra asked.

“I have no clue. Figure I’ll ask him before I head down that way.” Simon pulled the headphones off from around his neck and dropped them onto the table. “And, last and least, Jeremy Archer got himself hauled in by Scotland Yard yesterday.”

Sandra, in the process of pulling the two extra cups free of the carry-tray, went still. “Oh,” she finally said. “Whoops.”

“Yeah, so much for *that* stellar career arc, huh?” Simon snorted out a laugh or something like it and promptly burned the roof of his mouth on his coffee.

“I guess so.” Sandra studied Simon’s face for a long moment. “Are you going to do anything about it?”

Self-conscious and kind of irritated about it, Simon shrugged one shoulder, looking down at his cup. The cardboard sleeve was starting to come unglued and he picked at the loose corner with his thumbnail. “Upstairs is requesting the full arrest report for me now, just in case, but I doubt there’s much to be done. I mean, I can probably fix it so that he doesn’t get extradited to the US, but the list of his alleged crimes is as long as my arm whether or not we get in on the party. Hell, he could spend the entire rest of his life just paying for his crimes against the French, not that anybody else cares what he did to a bunch of snail-eaters.”

Sandra was quiet for so long that the Brazilians finished their conversation and wandered away from the listening device. “Oh, well,” she eventually said. “Guess it was nice while it lasted.”

“Guess so,” Simon said. The sleeve abruptly gave way and fell to the table, a useless curl of cardboard.

◆ Three

It was almost eight before Simon heard Mike incoming, whistling his way down the hall in that weird tuneless way of his. The whistling stopped just outside the saferoom door, and Simon was already rounding the corner of his desk when Mike booted open the door and announced (in a suspiciously cheerful voice) “Holy shit, mah peeps, but it is already like living in someone else’s mouth out there—”

Simon stuck his head out of his office. “Mike!”

Mike’s mouth snapped shut with a click. Without a further word he spun on his heel, caught the closing door, and marched right back out into the hallway. The door slammed shut behind him.

Snickering a little despite himself, Simon cupped his hands around his mouth. “Miiii~ike,” he called.

No response. Sandra pushed down the headphones and glanced at Simon. “Want me to go get him? You know I always relish the opportunity to put him in a headlock.”

“Nah, shouldn’t be necessary, as funny as it might be,” Simon said, pulling out his cellphone and punching in Mike’s number. After a brief pause (in which, presumably, distant satellites were doing their thing) he heard *The Imperial March* blaring tinnily on the other side of the saferoom door.

After a moment, it stopped. “Yo, boss,” Mike said, eerily echoed by his own voice out in the hallway. “Just calling to let you know that I’m totally sick and might be a little late—”

“Ohh, I see,” Simon said, nodding. “When do you think you’ll get in?”

“Uhhh, well, how’s Thursday for you?”

Still holding his phone to his ear Simon crossed to the door and yanked it open, revealing Mike, who blinked. “Get in here, slackass,” Simon said cheerfully, snapping his fingers and pointing to the ground at his feet. Now it was *his* voice that was oddly doubled, coming both from his own mouth and from the speaker of Mike’s phone.

“On my way, boss,” Mike said, grinning, and then closed his phone and scuffed on in.

Folding his own phone shut, Simon stood aside for Mike and then let the door swing to behind him. “So!” he said.

“Aw, shit, I hate that tone of voice,” Mike said, scuffling to a stop and hunching his shoulders. “What’d I do this time?”

“See, actually, that’s what I was about to ask you,” Simon said.

“Huh?”

“I need to know what you’ve done that has OPR wanting to see me,” Simon said.

Mike’s eyes went round. “Aw, shit, boss,” he said, and then stopped to think about it. “Actually, I can’t think of anything?” he finally said. “I mean, shit, we’ve been working this surveillance bullshit for like three weeks, I haven’t gotten near enough a criminal to break *anything* of his except maybe a restraining order—”

“—does anyone *have* a restraining order out on you?” Simon asked, just to be safe.

“Last one expired back in March,” Mike said happily. “That one was totally bullshit in any case, just some lawyer trying to ‘fluence a jury.”

“Yeah, okay,” Simon said. “Huh. Wonder what this is about, then. Sandy, you haven’t started knocking over convenience stores in your spare time, have you?”

“And I would have gotten away with it, too, if it hadn’t been for you meddling kids,” Sandra said dryly, putting the headphones back on.

The hours crept by at a snail’s pace. Once people who spoke English started coming within range of the four listening devices that Simon’s team had planted almost three weeks ago, it claimed everybody’s attention. Now Sandra and Mike were both wearing their headphones and staring off into space, occasionally taking notes.

Simon, headphone-free by dint of being the boss, sat in his office staring blearily at his monitor and wishing he could just put his head down and take a nap. Despite the ridiculous amount of caffeine in his system keeping his body going, his mind was bogging down. Three weeks on short rations of sleep were starting to take their toll. If Rappaport would just show up, they could notify the NYPD, wait until Rappaport had been arrested and/or shot, and then all go home and sleep for twenty hours. Gosh, that would be nice.

His somnolent musings were interrupted when Nate pushed open the door and stuck his head in. “Morning,” Nate whispered, edging in and shutting the door carefully behind himself.

Simon heaved himself out of his chair with an effort that nearly made him grunt. “Morning, Specs,” he said, not bothering to whisper, although he kept it down a bit. “Hey, you haven’t been out curbstomping bad guys again, have you?”

Nate blinked at him owlishly—the poor guy looked just about as tired as Simon felt, and abruptly Simon felt a little bad about teasing him. Only a little, though. “No,” Nate finally said. “And there’s an Aryan Nation joke in there somewhere but I’m too tired to frame it properly. Why?”

Simon shrugged. “OPR wants to see me and Mike swears it’s not his fault this time.”

“He’s probably lying,” Nate volunteered. “Covering his tracks. Very clever. As soon as you leave to go talk to OPR he’s going to bolt and fly to some country without an extradition treaty.”

“Yeah, that was my first thought.”

“Hey,” Mike said, injured. “I heard that, seeing as how I am sitting *right here* listening to a couple of bent-nosed guys very seriously debate whether Subway or Blimpie has better sandwiches.”

“Christ, how stupid can you get?” Simon said, rolling his eyes.

“No kidding!” said Mike. “Blimpie. No competition.”

“Uh,” said Nate.

Simon cleared his throat. “*Anyway*,” he said. “I’m starting to run out of ideas, unless Stonewall has been hacking into people’s bank accounts or something. . . . what time is it?”

Sandra checked her watch. “Just after ten.”

“Huh. Okay. Nate, go empty the doodad and run last night’s recordings up to the translator guy.”

“Yeah, okay,” Nate said. “Also? Subway, totally.”

Mike made a gagging sound. Simon, trying not to smile, retreated into the safety of his office and, after a moment of thought, picked up the desk phone and punched one of the white buttons in the bottom row.

Danielle, Upstairs’ secretary, snatched up the phone on the first ring. “Simon, I only sent off the signed request an hour ago,” she said, mildly irritated. “Scotland Yard probably hasn’t even had a chance to fetch it off the fax machine yet.”

“What?” Simon said, unable for a moment to figure out what in hell she was talking about. “Oh! Nah, fuck a bunch of him, actually. This is about something else—Danielle, go ask the big guy if he knows why OPR wants to see me, will you?”

“Professional Responsibility wants to see you?” Danielle said curiously. “It’s news to me. Anyway, he’s over in the main building right now, but I’ll ask him when he gets back and give you a call. Okay?” She paused. Simon could hear her writing something down. “And I’ll send down the arrest report as soon as it comes in over the wires, since it’s apparently so urgent.”

“That’d be great,” Simon said. He shut his eyes and leaned back in his chair. “You’re so good to me, Danielle. Why don’t I treat you better?”

“I ask myself the same thing every day, Simon,” Danielle said primly, hanging up on him a moment later.

Whatever Danielle had promised, eleven o'clock rolled around without a word from her on either subject. Simon checked his watch, thought about it for a moment, then shut his computer down and strolled out into the main room. "I'm going to go drop in on OPR before I get lunch," he said, surveying the room. "You guys stagger your lunch breaks, okay? I want someone on the headphones at all times, as I have no doubt said four thousand times in the last three weeks. If Rappaport turns up, hit the panic button."

Sandra looked up at him, followed shortly by Mike. Nate remained where he was, hunched over the recording device, frowning and muttering to himself. "Okay, boss," Sandra finally said, tugging her headphones down. "Good luck with that."

"Yeah," Simon said, pushing a hand through his hair. "Wish I knew what this was about. You sure you haven't kicked anyone's ass lately, Mike? I encourage you to share it with the class, if so, because bottling up your rage is unhealthy."

"Honest and for true, boss, I ain't done nothin'," Mike said, crossing his heart.

"Ha *ha*!" Nate cried, his head popping up fast enough to make his shaggy blond hair explode out into a halo. He pointed a dramatic finger at Mike. "You have incriminated yourself via double negative, good sir!"

"What?" Mike said, blinking.

"Yeah," Simon said. "What?"

Nate (and his hair) deflated a little. "See, when he says he 'ain't done nothin' the two negatives cancel each other out, so that means he *has* done *something*, and also this was slightly funnier before I had to explain it."

"Oh," Simon said. "A grammar joke. Yeah, I've totally had enough sleep to appreciate that sort of rarefied educational humor."

"Sorry," Nate muttered, wilting further.

Simon rolled his eyes. "Aw, jeez," he said. "I was just teasing you. Sandy, ruffle Nate's hair for me, will you?"

Sandra switched her pen into her other hand and reached out, smoothing down the remnants of Nate's halo. "You need a haircut," she noted.

"Yeah, I know," Nate said. "I haven't had time to go get one. What with the stuff."

"Yeah, the stuff," Simon said. He pivoted on his heel and headed for the door. "Which you guys should get back to. I'm off to see the wizard."

"What?" Mike said. "Drain the lizard?"

"Jesus, the quality of humor around here has sure gone downhill lately," Simon said, pausing with one hand on the open door. "We catch Rappaport and I'm signing you all up for remedial stand-up comedy lessons, swear to God."

“So a terrorist, a Klingon, and a gay guy walk into a bar—” Mike yelled after him, but fortunately the saferoom door swung shut quickly enough to cut off the rest.

The Office of Professional Responsibility occupied its own floor, partitioning it off from the rest of the building; just hitting the button for the seventh floor was enough to make people edge away from you in the elevator, as if whatever you had was catching. It was not a comfortable place to be under any circumstances, and when Simon didn’t know what he was walking into, doubly so. “Hey,” he told the receptionist, flipping open his ID folder and successfully quashing his urge to park a hip on her desk, as she did not look like the kind of woman who would appreciate that sort of familiarity. “My name’s Simon Drake, I’m supposed to see, uh . . .”

“Norton Fowles,” the receptionist supplied, barely glancing up from her keyboard for long enough to check his ID. Her voice was markedly cool. “He’s waiting for you in Interview Room H. Down that way.” She pointed down the left-hand hallway.

“An interview room?” Simon said uncertainly. “Seems awfully formal. I don’t even know what this is about.”

“Mr. Fowles tends to prefer them,” the receptionist said. She hadn’t looked at Simon since that initial swift glance. After a moment, the speed of her typing redoubled, as if to prove that she had better things to do than pass the time of day with a field agent, even one as ruggedly handsome as Simon generally considered himself to be.

Simon waited for a second or two, just to prove that he would not be dismissed so easily, and then headed down the left-hand hallway. He didn’t like any of this. Private interview rooms were for ongoing investigations, extremely serious matters, and formal questioning, not for initial meetings. Simon himself had only been inside private interview rooms on a few serious occasions, and as one of those times had been the dim and blurry hours just after he’d shot Rich, it was no wonder that this place was giving him the heebie-jeebies.

The hallway itself was carpeted, a rare touch of class for headquarters. While it was the same industrial gray-brown carpeting that graced the management floors, here in OPR it had been padded, thickly enough to swallow Simon’s footsteps entirely. The lighting was dim in a way that was probably meant to be peaceful but came off as ominous instead. The walls were battleship gray and slightly too close together; the doors were plain steel, marching down the hallway in matched pairs. All in all, it was so mundane as to be somewhat surreal, and so quiet as to make Simon’s ears ring. He couldn’t hear anything from behind the doors. If there were other agents in there, having the metaphorical thumbscrews applied, he’d never know. If there were other agents in there, they’d never know he was out here. It was a thought that was comforting and disquieting all at once.

Interview Room H was on his right, a steel door just like all the others. Simon eyed it in distaste. An *interview room*, Jesus. Most OPR agents had the common decency to start out at their desks, playing a round or two of ‘we’re-all-on-the-same-side-here’ before the gloves came off and the interview rooms came out. If this was a ploy of some sort to throw him off-balance, Simon was irritated to discover that it had worked, to a certain extent.

Quashing his paranoia, Simon vowed not to be led along like he had a ring in his nose. Thus, instead of knocking, he grabbed the knob and opened the door, revealing the dimly-lit room beyond it and the man sitting at the plain steel table in the center.

Simon’s first blurred impression was of a white shirt and tie, and right away he knew this wasn’t going to go well. Norton Fowles himself was so ordinary a man that Simon’s eyes slid right off him. In his forties somewhere, with plain steel-rimmed glasses, light brown hair receding back from his forehead, a neck that was just starting to thicken, and that damned white shirt and muted, professional tie; Norton Fowles couldn’t have announced that he was an FBI agent of the old school more clearly if he’d had a sign that said so. Simon, a card-carrying member of the new school, knew that he tended to inspire disdain in men like Norton Fowles. Disdain, or worse.

Norton Fowles regarded Simon blankly for a moment before he smiled, a automatically-friendly smile that left his eyes as hard as bullets behind his glasses. “Mr. Drake,” he said, gesturing to the chair opposite him. “Please, come in, have a seat.”

Simon entered the room warily, automatically reaching back to catch the steel door and ease it shut. He didn’t bother holding out his hand; Fowles hadn’t risen or offered his own, and that made it clear that Simon’s initial impression had been correct. “Mr. Fowles,” Simon said instead. “What’s this about?”

“Hm,” Norton Fowles said absently, looking back down at the papers strewn in an arc about him. Simon crossed to the other chair and sat down, leaning forward to get a look at them himself; the light was in his eyes, though, and he couldn’t make out much. “Let me see,” Fowles said, plucking a single sheet of paper from the mess and consulting it. He paused after a moment and showed Simon that friendly smile again. “Ah, here we go, Mr. Drake. You’ve been in charge of your own team for . . . hm, hm . . . four years now, if I’m correct?”

“Almost five,” Simon said.

“Ah, yes, almost five.” Fowles put the piece of paper back down, picked up a pen, and made a brief note on it. “That would have made you . . . hm . . . twenty-five when you were first given the responsibility? That’s quite impressive, Mr. Drake.”

“Thank you,” Simon said. “I don’t see what bearing that has, though—”

Norton Fowles held up his hand like a traffic cop and Simon subsided, more out of habit than anything else. “Please bear with me, Mr. Drake,” Fowles said,

still smiling. “I promise it will all become clear in good time.”

Simon didn’t dignify that with a response, merely crossed his arms on the table and waited. Fowles shuffled through his papers again and came up with a different one, holding it up to be squinted and frowned at in its turn. “I’m sure I don’t need to tell you this, Mr. Drake, but you have been questioned regarding shots fired on seven different occasions, three of which resulted in fatalities—”

“—and one of which was a member of my team, yes, Mr. Fowles, I’m aware of that,” Simon finished for him, nettled. “Do you have a problem with that number? Because if so, I feel that I should point out that I was fully exonerated by the Office on all seven occasions and commended twice. If there was an issue, it should have been dealt with at that time.”

“Hm,” Norton Fowles said again, putting that piece of paper down and picking up his pen. “It’s a bit too early to say that there is a problem, Mr. Drake—” The piece of paper skidded underneath his pen and Norton Fowles broke off there, ticking his tongue off his teeth in irritation. He brought up his left hand—no, Simon noticed with a jolt, he brought up the stump of his left arm, propping the stub of his elbow on the paper to hold it in place while he made his note. His half-empty left sleeve was neatly folded up and pinned in place. “—but a few minor issues have recently come to light and, well, I’d wanted to ask you a few questions. Just to clear things up, you understand. The Office of Professional Responsibility answers to the American public, after all, and therefore we must *have* those answers.”

“Huh?” Simon said, belatedly twitching his eyes up. Norton Fowles was regarding him with an unpleasant little smile on his face, one that made his eyes glitter; abruptly Simon would have liked nothing better than to punch the man straight in that smirk. He cleared his throat instead. “I’m more than willing to answer your questions, Mr. Fowles, but I assure you my answers haven’t changed. Could you be more specific about these new issues, maybe?”

“In a moment, perhaps,” Fowles said, his voice offhand again. He put his pen down and shuffled through his papers once more—the constant shifting and rustling was starting to get on Simon’s nerves—and finally picked up yet another, consulting it in its turn. Having already used his shock tactic, he left the stump of his left arm resting on the table in plain sight. “Hm. In regards to the shooting of Mr. Richard Story—”

“Hey,” Simon said, putting his hands on the table and leaning forward.

Norton Fowles blinked at Simon mildly. “Yes?”

“Get to the point, Mr. Fowles. Is this about Rich? Because that whole mess was vetted by the OPR six ways to Sunday, thanks to the international implications of Rich’s little fuck-up—” Fowles winced at the profanity, Simon couldn’t help but notice “—and I was assured at that time that everything checked out. If something new has come up regarding Rich’s death or his illegal activities, I should have been one of the first people told.”

Fowles sighed. “No, Mr. Drake, nothing new has come up regarding Mr. Story of which I am aware. I just have one question.”

“One question,” Simon repeated. “All right. What’s your question?”

Fowles looked back at his piece of paper. “It says here that during the interview you were initially vague as to how long you had spent attempting to negotiate with Mr. Story before you pulled your weapon, and you eventually settled on ‘ten minutes or so’. Do you still stand by that, Mr. Drake?”

“Yes,” Simon said, gritting his teeth. “And if I was vague during parts of the interview, I might point out in my defense that I had just *killed* a man who I considered to be my *closest friend*.”

“Of course,” Norton Fowles said absently, putting his paper down, pinning it with his stump, and making a brief notation. “It’s been well over a year by this point, however, and I thought that perhaps you might have a different answer now that you’ve had some time to think about it.”

“Actually, I try not to think about it,” Simon said flatly. “But my answer hasn’t changed.”

Fowles made another note. “Mm-hm, I see,” he said. “I might point out that you have, technically, been trained in negotiation, Mr. Drake—”

“I was, yes,” Simon broke in. “So was Rich. Christ, he and I took that course together. Richard Story remains the smartest man I have ever met, he had a gun on me at that time, and he was, furthermore, hysterical. Standard negotiation techniques were useless in that situation, Mr. Fowles!”

“There’s no need to shout, Mr. Drake,” Norton Fowles said, looking mildly wounded.

“I wasn’t shouting,” Simon gritted out.

“Hm,” Fowles said. “Very well, then. Let’s move on, shall we?”

Simon exhaled hard. “Yes. Let’s.”

Fowles did his paper-shuffling dance again. “You are aware that you currently lead the agents in your section in official Professional Responsibility audits, Mr. Drake?” he asked, offhandedly, like this was his idea of small talk.

“I wasn’t aware of that,” Simon said, striving to sound neutral. “Are you counting the times that I’ve interceded on Mr. Takemura’s behalf?”

Light sheened off Norton Fowles’ glasses as he glanced up. “No, Mr. Drake, I was not.”

“Ah,” Simon said. “Just checking.”

“You were one of the youngest team leaders ever appointed and at this time you are the youngest team leader in your section, Mr. Drake, and yet you still have been officially questioned by the Office of Professional Responsibility more times than anyone else in your section. Including, since you brought it up, Mr. Takemura.” Norton Fowles shuffled his papers. “Some people might point to that as evidence that you are somewhat . . . free . . . in your methods. Hm.”

“Yes, and some people believe that tiny monsters suck out the brains of goats through straws,” Simon said.

“Really,” Fowles said. The papers stilled.

“If this wasn’t so serious an interview, I’d be tempted to tell you that I read it on the internet.” Simon laced his fingers together. “I’d appreciate it if you’d get to the point, whatever it is, Mr. Fowles.”

“Hm, hm,” Fowles said again. “I’m glad you appreciate how serious this is—”

“Actually, I don’t,” Simon said. “I don’t, because I don’t know what’s going on here. Enlighten me.”

Norton Fowles sighed, dropped his truncated left arm onto the stack of papers with an audible, fleshy thump, and crossed his other arm over where his forearm might once have been. His hand curled protectively over the stump of his elbow. For a moment Simon could almost pretend the man had two normal arms. “You’re aware that about three months ago, legal action was officially brought against the Bureau for the wrongful death of one Cole Farraday, a man whom you do not deny shooting and killing.”

“Yes, I’m aware of that,” Simon said, some sixth sense making the hairs on the back of his neck rise. “The suit was brought on behalf of one Diana Fontaine, the deceased’s lawyer and long-time lover, then as now serving serious prison time as the deceased’s accessory both before and after the fact. The last I’d heard, the suit was bogged down in negotiations because Ms. Fontaine is too personally involved with the case to see that there is, in fact, no case.”

“She *is* somewhat emotional about it, isn’t she,” Norton Fowles noted. His little commiserating women-are-so-irrational smile gave Simon the contrary urge to say something in Diana Fontaine’s defense, which would have been difficult, as Simon considered Diana Fontaine to be generally indefensible. “In any case, Mr. Drake, I was heavily involved in preparing the Bureau’s defense at the time. While our case is not quite watertight, owing in part to the, er, unusual eyewitness to the shooting, I feel that it is safe to say that the evidence is firmly on our side.”

“There’s a ‘but’ coming, isn’t there,” Simon said.

“However,” Fowles said, with a faint flash of smile, “I will admit to some . . . misgivings about the evidence at hand.”

“The time to bring up your ‘misgivings’ was during the official OPR investigation,” Simon said shortly. “I was fully exonerated by a panel of your peers.”

“This isn’t an official interview, Mr. Drake—” Norton Fowles started to say.

“It isn’t?” Simon said. He pushed his chair back and stood up. “In that case, I’m wasting my time here and I have a job to get back to—”

“—but I’ve been given a certain amount of latitude by my superiors in order to clear up my issues with the statements,” Fowles said, talking right over him.

“I’d like to do this off the record, Mr. Drake. If you can satisfy my misgivings, this need go no further than here and now. Won’t you sit down?”

Simon wavered, shifting from foot to foot, the door only a few steps behind him. This was a bad idea, he *knew* it was a bad idea, and yet the idea of keeping this off his official record was definitely a lure—an obvious one. He knew better than to fall for it. “Why don’t you start by telling me what your misgivings are,” he said, sitting back down.

Norton Fowles looked back down and went into his interminable paper-shuffling routine again. Simon kept his mouth shut, resisting the invitation to fill the silence. “I suppose it wouldn’t hurt,” Fowles finally said, reluctantly. “Essentially, my primary issue is with how very *similar* the wording of your statement is to that of the eyewitness, a Mr. . . . hm, hm . . . Jeremy Archer—who, I might add, is an associate of yours despite being a known felon—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Simon immediately said, holding up both hands. “It sounds uncannily like you are *accusing* me of something. If that’s the case, this interview is over.”

“No one is accusing you of anything, Mr. Drake,” Norton Fowles said reproachfully. The ‘yet’ went unsaid and yet Simon heard it as clear as day. “I’m just curious.”

“I’m not here to satisfy your curiosity, Mr. Fowles,” Simon said. His stomach clenched. “Given that we were both testifying about the same incident, I wouldn’t be surprised if our official statements were similar. In fact, I’d expect it.”

“Hm, of course,” Fowles said, his voice once again absent as he picked up his pen and made a note. “So you haven’t anything to say about it . . . ?”

Simon knew a leading question when he heard one. “I stand by my official statement made at the time,” he said shortly, standing up. “And as I have not read Mr. Archer’s statement, I can’t possibly be expected to comment on it.”

“Mr. Drake,” Fowles started to say, already making another of his damned little notes.

“No more questions,” Simon said, cutting him off. “We’re done here. If you have an accusation I expect you to make it through official channels.”

For a long moment Norton Fowles stared silently up at him, as if willing him to rush forward into the silence and blurt out something incriminating. Simon gritted his teeth and waited it out. Finally Fowles sighed gustily and looked back down at his papers, tapping his pen on the table. “I’d hoped you’d be a little more cooperative, Mr. Drake. I’m sorry that we couldn’t clear up this little matter.”

“Yeah? As far as I’m concerned there is no matter,” Simon said. “You’re chasing shadows instead of doing something productive with your time.”

“It is my job to clear up any potential holes in the Bureau’s defense in this suit,” Norton Fowles said, just a touch of steel in his voice now. His assessing gaze was suddenly not very friendly at all. “I would call that ‘something productive’, Mr. Drake.”

“If that’s the case, Mr. Fowles, that’s all the more reason to do this officially and on the record,” Simon said. “You’d damned well better be wholly on the up-and-up if you’re going to produce this stuff in court.”

“Yes. Well.” Norton Fowles swept up all the papers on the table, shoving them into his waiting hand with the stump of his arm. “Thank you for your time, Mr. Drake.”

“Goodbye, Mr. Fowles,” Simon said, heading for the door. Norton Fowles said nothing else, shepherding the papers into the waiting folder.

As soon as the heavy steel door whuffed silently shut behind Simon, leaving him alone in the dim, narrow, gray-and-steel hallway, he hissed out a short breath between his teeth and willed his stomach to settle. Once it had, Simon strode out of the Office of Professional Responsibility as fast as he could go without actually running, heading for the elevators and a simpler place.

◆ Four

Once in the elevator Simon punched the button for the first floor and slumped back against the wall, staring blindly up at the unfriendly fluorescent lights. Of all the things to come back and bite him in the ass—it had been six months since the Office of Professional Responsibility had officially exonerated him of any wrongdoing in the matter of Farraday’s death. Of course, as only Simon and a few other trusted people knew, he *was* innocent of any wrongdoing in the matter of Farraday’s death. He was, quite frankly, innocent of Farraday’s death, period.

The elevator was empty, this close to noon. Simon shut his eyes. He knew all too well what had driven him to shoulder the official blame in the matter, and even now, he couldn’t quite kick himself for it, as much as he would have liked to. “Damn him anyway,” Simon muttered under his breath, uncertain whether he was referring to Farraday, Fowles, or Jeremy. It didn’t really matter.

Simon changed his intended destination the instant that the elevator doors opened onto the first floor. Instead of going back to the saferoom, he went right past the door and out to his Jeep. Lunch first. Then he’d go back and face the afternoon.

Actually getting some food in his stomach did a good deal to restore his equilibrium. By the time he finished his lunch, he felt, if not one hundred percent better about things, at least a good forty-six percent better. He doubted that any of Fowles’ misgivings, no matter how strong, could possibly force the man to swear out an official complaint; Professional Responsibility agents, like rats and mushrooms, tended to prefer lurking in dark and shit-filled environments.

If Norton Fowles did overcome his aversion to the light of publicity and attempt to reopen the case based solely on his misgivings, he would be laughed out of his boss’ office. Upstairs swam in the murky waters of the old-boy network like they were his home. Simon was about ninety percent sure that he’d heard the last of it.

Ninety percent was not one hundred percent, of course, and a faint, stray bit of doubt still niggled at the back of Simon’s mind, but he was tired enough to be

able to ignore it.

As for the Archer thing, well, he'd been right this morning. Jeremy was a criminal, first and foremost, and as a criminal he had only gotten what was coming to him. It had nothing to do with Simon at all. Jeremy would just have to look after himself. Simon was sure that he could. Ninety percent sure.

When he got back to base, only Sandra was still there, wearing the headphones and picking at the remains of something that had once been a nasty-looking fast-food salad. "Hey, boss," she said, pushing her headphones down. "How'd it go? What was it about?"

"As well as possible, given that it is, in fact, Professional Responsibility," Simon said shortly, pausing in the doorway to pluck a brown interoffice envelope out of the inbox. "It's probably nothing anyway."

"Which means that it's something but you don't think I need to know about it," Sandra said. She stabbed a limp bit of lettuce with her plastic fork and scowled at it. "Well, I hope you're right."

Simon stuck his thumb under the sealed flap of the envelope and ripped it open. "Yeah," he said. "Me too. Any news?"

"No, nope, and nothing," Sandra said. "Unless you count a bunch of earnest talk about horse-racing to be news."

"Huh. Any hot tips? Should I call my bookie?"

"You don't have a bookie, boss," Sandra said patiently.

"I don't? Why don't I have a bookie, Spring? This is a serious lack, and one I should look into—" The phone in Simon's office rang. "—later," Simon finished, carrying the envelope into his office and picking up the desk phone. "Yello, Templar."

"Simon, the big guy's still over in the main building, but he called over for his messages just now," Danielle said, her voice unnecessarily brisk. "He said to tell you that under no circumstances are you to go to Professional Responsibility until he's had a chance to look into this. It's the first he's heard of it, and you know how he gets when he's been cut out of the loop."

"Yeah," Simon said, "buuuut unfortunately, he's a bit late."

"Oh, *Simon*. You've already been?"

"Afraid so," Simon said, upending the envelope onto his desk. A folder slid out, marked **FYI: TEMPLAR** in Danielle's handwriting. "And let me tell you right now, something is fishy in the District of Columbia. I don't think Mr. Norton Fowles is very fond of me, Danielle. Can you put me on Upstairs' calendar? I think I may need some preemptive clout."

Danielle sighed. "Already done, Simon. You're due up here to be shouted at at 4:15."

"Great," Simon said absently, flipping open the folder. A full-length Scotland Yard arrest report stared him in the face, the name *Harbottle, Jeremiah* typed

neatly at the top. “Oh, hey, and here’s that arrest report. Thanks, Danielle. You are truly a marvel of modern efficiency.”

“You make me sound like a washing machine, Simon,” Danielle said. She banged the phone down.

Simon hung up and collapsed into his desk chair, which groaned in complaint. For a moment he allowed himself the luxury of simply doing nothing, staring off into space and trying not to think about anything. A minute or two later he got bored and picked up the arrest report, paging through it.

The top two pages had Jeremy’s vitals and particulars. The next two pages dealt with the actual arrest, then there were six or seven pages of the transcribed interrogations—Jeremy was being fairly closemouthed, but the arresting officers sure weren’t—a two-page precis of Jeremy’s career to date that Simon put aside to read at his leisure later, the black-and-white mugshots . . .

Simon seized up for five seconds and then burst out laughing, crazed relief blooming in his chest like the opposite of a heart attack. “Oh, *Jesus*,” he said, picking up the paper and carrying it to the doorway. “Spring, who’s this look like to you?”

Sandra squinted at the paper. “I don’t know. Some rodent’s third cousin. Why?”

“According to Scotland Yard, that’s Jeremy Archer,” Simon said, turning the paper over so that he could look at the mugshots again. “I don’t know, the hair’s right . . .”

Sandra held out a hand. “Let me see that,” she commanded.

Still grinning a little, Simon sauntered over and gave her the paper. Sandra took it and stared at it for a moment, then shook her head. “Definitely not Jeremy,” she said. “Unless Jeremy had extensive plastic surgery and is wearing a set of novelty teeth.”

“And I don’t think Archer would be caught dead in that jacket, either,” Simon said, taking the paper back. “Christ. I don’t know what Archer’s up to over there, and I guess I ought to feel bad about laughing at the woes of fellow law-enforcement officers, but: ha!”

Sandra shook her head sadly. “Taking the side of a known felon, Simon—it’s the first step on the road to ruin.”

“Aw, Sandy, I took the first step on that road ages ago,” Simon said cheerfully. He felt better than he had all day.

Mike came back fifteen minutes later, carrying a Blimpie bag so pointedly that Simon had to laugh. “Specs is still out somewhere,” he said, toasting Mike’s effort with his mug. “Guess you went to all that trouble for nothing.”

“What, this?” Mike clutched the bag to his chest, outraged. “I just got in the mood for it, hearing those guys talk about it this morning, that’s all.”

“Uh huh,” Sandra said, pushing her headphones down again. “And I’m sure you weren’t planning to moan your way orgasmically through that sandwich if Nate had been here.”

Mike eyed the bag, then shrugged and dumped it on the table. “Maybe a little,” he admitted. “Little bitty pants-dampener.”

“Man,” Simon said, grinning a little. “You better watch what you say, Mike. No chick with any taste is going to sleep with a guy who gets off on fast food.”

Sandra pursed her lips. Mike just looked hurt. “Damn, boss, it was a metaphor or some shit, you know?”

“Sure,” Simon said. “Tell you what, though, if Nate comes in here with a Subway bag, I am not going to referee the cage match that will follow.”

Fortunately for everybody’s sanity, Nate came back without any food at all, and Simon was able to whip them all back to work with minimal trouble. Once everyone was quiet, Simon headed into his office and sent Upstairs a second email:

False alarm: the guy they think is Archer is not actually Archer. Inform the Yard of this if you feel the need. Personally, I’m against it. Let them figure it out on their own.

He sent the email, smiling faintly, before sitting down to look over Johnny’s painstaking transcription of seven days’ worth of tapes. The transcription job was dull, mindless, repetitious work, studded with thousands of notations of [street noise] and [footsteps]. Reading it wasn’t much more interesting. Poor Johnny. Still, there were occasional nuggets in the mountain of dreck, some of them fascinating in their sheer retardedness; the next time Simon looked up, it was three. He ambled out into the main room. “Spring. Go home.”

“What? Already?”

Simon held up his hand and tapped the face of his watch. “It’s three. That’s nine hours of day shift. Go home.”

Sandra hesitated, then took off her headphones and stood up. “I wouldn’t argue, except that I know you’ve been here longer than I have.”

“Yeah, but I have a meeting with Upstairs at four,” Simon said. “I’ll go the hell home after that, believe me. Wild horses with guns could not keep me here.”

“See, you *say* that, but we all know you’re lying,” Sandra said. She picked up her purse and slung it over her shoulder. “Right, I’m out. I’ll come back tomorrow morning at the asscrack of dawn,” she said, heading for the door.

Mike watched her go with longing naked on his face, although whether it was for Sandra or for the opportunity to leave, Simon couldn’t tell. “Man,” Mike said once the door had shut behind Sandra, digging the heels of his hands into his eyes. “When’s Texas due back?”

“Six,” Simon told him. “Hang in there. You can go home as soon as Texas gets here.”

“Yeah, I’m cool. I’m just sayin’.” Mike slumped down in his chairs and readjusted the band of his headphones. “Shit, I wish Rappaport would turn the fuck up.”

“You and me both,” Simon said. “Specs, how much longer, do you think?”

Nate shook his head, emerging from his computer trance, one of the big tapes from the recording machine in one hand. “Um, what time is it—I’m guessing the backups will all be done by seven?”

“Gotcha. Far as I’m concerned, you can go at any time after Stonewall gets here, but, you know, finish up your stuff first.”

“Yeah,” Nate said, already distracted. “Scuse me, I gotta . . .” The rest of his sentence faded off to nothing as Nate fell back into the rhythm, plunking the tape he was holding into the tape reader by his side. It whirled up. Nate was gone.

“Oh, Jesus Christ,” Simon said, rubbing his eyes.

“What?” Dave said, confused. He was down on one knee in his lair, frozen in the light of Simon’s glare, plucking at the handle of his briefcase. He’d been in the middle of slotting it into place when Simon came out, and he was still hunched over it.

“He asks me ‘what’,” Simon told the room in general. “Dave, what time is it?”

“Um.” Dave let go of the briefcase’s handle to check his watch. “Just after four. Why?”

“And now he asks me ‘why’,” Simon added. “What did I tell you this morning?”

Dave cringed a little. “Um.”

“Daaaaaave?”

“Um.”

“You don’t remember, do you.”

“Um, no?” Dave twiddled the briefcase’s handle back and forth, staring down at it, abashed.

“Think that has anything to do with you having been here for twenty-one hours?” Simon said.

“Maybe?”

Simon sighed heavily. “Stone, I told you that if you came back here before six PM, I’d just send you home again.”

“Oh,” Dave said, the light dawning. “Yeah, I kind of remember that now. But, um, if I go home now, I’ll barely be there for an hour before I have to come back . . .”

“Am I going to have to put a cot in the mat room for you? Is that it? Hell, there’s a cafeteria and showers down in the gym, Stonewall, why don’t you just move in here? Then you could always be close to your precious computers.”

“Uh,” Dave said, hunching his shoulders. “I don’t know where I’d keep the rest of my stuff . . .”

“That was sarcasm!” Simon threw up his hands. “I am being sarcastic to keep from coming over there and throttling you! And in case you’re wondering, *that* was hyperbole!”

“Templar is a master of the forms of the English language,” Nate said with great gravity.

“What?” Simon said, swiveling to look at Nate askance. “Seriously, I don’t know what that has to do with anything, you need more sleep—and I’m going to be late for my meeting with Upstairs. Fine, Stone, stay, but if you’re still here when I get back tomorrow morning at five . . .” He trailed off there, threateningly.

“Yes?” Dave said, unable to avoid walking right into it.

“Then I will kill you,” Simon said with great satisfaction, backing towards the door. “Because if you don’t listen to your boss, you deserve to die. I’m out of here. Honda, go home as soon as Texas gets here. Specs, go home as soon as you’re done with that, and someone shut down my computer for me—” Simon spun around and hit the door running, shaking off the lethargy of a long afternoon by sprinting for the elevators.

“Hey, Danielle,” Simon said cheerfully, jogging past her desk, breaking left to avoid her as she rose to her feet. “Bye, Danielle—”

“You’re late,” Danielle called after him, her hand glancing off his arm a second too late.

“Best not make me any later, huh?” Simon said, flashing her a grin over his shoulder before yanking open the door and more or less diving in.

It was dim in here—it always was, since Upstairs loathed fluorescent lights—and almost as quiet as the seventh floor, except for Upstairs’ heavy, stentorian breathing from behind his desk. The sepulchral atmosphere served to damp the last Simon’s burst of energy nicely. “Sir,” he said, pulling up just inside the door and making himself walk instead of jog to the visitor’s chair.

“Simon,” Upstairs said, resigned. “One of these days you’re going to burst in on something you really shouldn’t hear, you realize.”

“Hasn’t happened yet,” Simon said, sitting down. “Besides, I was already late, so I figured you were waiting on me. Did you get my email?”

Upstairs coughed, gently. “I did,” he said. “I tend to agree with you, but that’s not why we’re here.”

“No, sir,” Simon said. “So what’s up with this Norton Fowles character, anyway?”

Upstairs was silent. After a moment he heaved himself out of his office chair and went over to stand in front of the window, gazing out at the back parking lot and, behind it, the rest of Washington. “Danielle tells me you went to see him before I could get hold of you,” he said.

“Yes, sir,” Simon said. “I can’t say it went well.”

“No.” Upstairs sighed ponderously. “I’m not surprised. Tell me everything you can remember.”

Simon complied. Recounting his adventure with Norton Fowles killed the last of his good mood and a great deal of his optimism; by the time he finished, with Upstairs still staring silently over the back parking lot, he felt somewhat hunted all over again.

“Is that all?” Upstairs finally said.

“Yes, sir, as best I can remember.”

“Hm.” Upstairs was quiet for a moment, ruminating. “You did about as well as possible under the circumstances,” he finally said. “Although the chupacabra joke was probably uncalled for.”

“Yeah, I know,” Simon said, looking away. “I couldn’t resist.”

“Well, hopefully it won’t matter,” Upstairs said, with an air of finality. “Any Professional Responsibility business that involves you—or any of my subordinates, for that matter—should have been gone through me, and both Mr. Fowles and his superiors know that. Something shady is going on, and I intend to personally shine a light upon it. If Mr. Fowles should get in touch with you again, cut off contact and inform me immediately. Have Danielle page me if necessary.”

“Yes, sir,” Simon said, feeling a bit better despite himself. “Any chance of finding out what this is all about?”

Upstairs sighed, his breath forming a little white circle on the glass. “Office politics,” he said. “I won’t bore you with the details.”

“I wouldn’t mind—”

“That should be all, Simon,” Upstairs said. He didn’t look away from the window until Simon stood up and saw himself out.

By the time Simon finished kidding around with Danielle and said goodbye, it was 4:45. The mass exodus had already begun, headed by the less-dedicated agents who were trying to get a jump on the horrendous DC traffic; Simon joined it without a word to anyone else, letting the flood of humanity carry him out to his Jeep and out into the world. It was like living in a wet sock. Simon had never been much for summer.

He drove home on autopilot and went inside, kicking off his sneakers inside the doorway. “Jesus, what a day,” he muttered under his breath, shaking his head.

He ate, showered, wasted an hour in front of the television, and was in bed by shortly after seven, reluctantly setting the alarm for four AM and turning his back on the sun still streaming in through the blinds. For a little while he stared

at the far wall, watching the sunlight's slow progress across it and brooding over the day. *Jesus, I'm never going to get to sleep after all this shit*, he thought. He passed out a moment later.

The next thing he was aware of was jerking awake in the darkness, his hand landing on his ringing cell phone before the rest of him hit consciousness. He flipped it open, squinting against the miniscule glare of the phone's screen, and checked the time. 2:12 AM. Jesus. " 'lo," he rasped, flopping back down onto his pillow and scrubbing his eyes. "Simon Drake."

"Simon," Jeremy said pleasantly. "I do apologize if I woke you."

Simon's eyes flew open in the dark, a ripple of shock washing over him. The last vestiges of sleep shredded away, leaving him awake in the darkness. Wide awake, and chilled: after the events of yesterday, it was weirdly like getting a call from a dead man. "Archer. Jesus." Simon cleared the frog from his throat. "It's two in the morning! What kind of hours do you think I keep? No shit you woke me!"

"And I apologized," said Jeremy. "I'm afraid I haven't much time before my transport leaves, however, and I need to beg a favor."

"Guess you do," Simon said. Abruptly the covers started to feel hot and itchy and he kicked them away, scratching idly at his chest with his free hand. "Seeing as how you've been arrested and all, although I can't say I remember you looking quite so much like a rat with bad teeth."

Jeremy was quiet. Behind him Simon could faintly hear the sound of traffic, layered with a thin covering of transcontinental static.

"Archer?" Simon prompted, after a minute.

"I suppose I should have expected you to notice a little detail like that," Jeremy said, laughing a little. It sounded forced. "I'm afraid your information is currently more up-to-date than mine. I've been arrested in England, then?"

Simon took the phone away from his ear long enough to raise his eyebrows at it, then put it back. "Yeah, by Scotland Yard, early yesterday morning local time. Somebody apparently tipped them off as to your location—since you can't see me, you'll just have to imagine that I'm doing the fingerquote thing around 'your'—and also gave them your real name. No fingerquotes."

Jeremy hissed in a breath. Simon heard that very clearly. "Oh, dear," Jeremy said a moment later, a bit shakily. "So much for that identity, then. *And* they're less than a day behind me . . ." Jeremy paused, took a single deep breath, and then reclaimed his opaque good cheer with an effort that was clear to Simon, halfway around the world. "I'm indebted to you for the information, Simon. I imagine you must have been quite pleased, however briefly, to think that I'd been—oh, how would you put it—brought to justice at last?"

"Yeah, well, I *am* an agent of the law and all that, and as such, I totally root for, for the home team when it comes to you," Simon said, his brows knitting in

consternation. “And because of that, whatever favor it is that you were meaning to ask, the answer is, and I quote, ‘ha ha ha no’.”

“Oh, it’s nothing like that,” Jeremy said. “I’m not asking for your help in your professional capacity, as it were. I just need you to call someone and pass on a message.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m afraid I only have time for the one call to America,” Jeremy went on. “And, well, I’ll admit that it wasn’t very sensible to choose you, but I do always so enjoy the comfort of your manly voice . . .”

“Archer,” Simon said warningly.

“Oh, indulge me, Simon,” Jeremy said, laughing a little. “After all, I’ve recently been arrested. It must have been very traumatic for me.”

“Christ, fine,” Simon said, giving in. “Who am I calling?”

“Just call my service, as usual,” Jeremy said. “When the operator answers, ask for Annabelle.”

“Annabelle,” Simon repeated. “Right. Got it. What’s the message?”

“That’s it.”

Simon struggled up onto one elbow. “That’s it?” he said suspiciously. “What is this, some kind of, of advanced thief code?”

“In a sense,” Jeremy said.

“In a sense,” Simon repeated, on full alert now. “In what sense, Archer? You’ll forgive me if I’ve never actually learned to trust you any further than I can throw you. Spit it out. What sense?”

Jeremy hesitated. “Well, if you must know, it’s a red-alert code,” he finally said. “She needs to drop everything and get out—”

“Ohhh no,” Simon said, sitting up and swinging his legs out of bed. “I am not your accessory and I am not going to help your little accomplice evade the police, Archer—”

“—it’s not the police—”

“—who the hell is it, then?” Simon shoved his hair out of his eyes. “What’s going on, Archer? Something’s going on over there and I want to know what it is. Don’t try and tell me this shit is normal, even for you.”

On the other end of the line, Jeremy was silent. Simon heard a plane taking off in the distance, and someone speaking rapidly in a language that he didn’t understand. “I’ll be right there,” Jeremy said, his voice muffled, and then he came back. “I’ve got to go, Simon,” Jeremy said. “I’ll call again if possible—”

“Goddammit, Archer!”

Jeremy sighed. “All right,” he said, defeated. “If I must. You and I have a certain Russian friend in common who very much wishes to have a few words with me. And since I’m quite unwilling to speak with him, he’s gotten very insistent about it.”

“What? Russian friend? We have Russian fr—” Simon’s eyes went wide in the dark as it struck him. “Wait, you mean Kar—”

“*Don’t*,” Jeremy said urgently. “Just in case, Simon. Don’t. But yes, I’m afraid so. It’s a long story and I promise that some day I’ll tell you the entire thing, but right now I *must go*. Please, Simon, I’m begging you, call and ask for Annabelle. And please don’t worry about me—” His phone clicked off.

“I wasn’t planning on it,” Simon told an empty line.

◆ Five

Simon carefully folded his phone shut and fumbled it back onto his bedside table, painfully alert and yet mentally stunned, like a deer in the headlights. One thing was clear, though, even in this state: there was no point in trying to get back to sleep, especially when his alarm was going to go off in a little over an hour anyway. It was two-thirty in the morning and he was up for the day. The thought nearly bowled him over with exhaustion. “Jesus, Archer, your timing is ass,” Simon groaned under his breath, rubbing his face with both hands.

Stubble rasped under his palms, and as if that were its cue, his bladder woke up and starting poking him. Simon groaned again and slapped off the alarm, stumbling out of bed and towards the bathroom, stripping as he went. His sweatpants and underwear joined yesterday’s, left to rot wherever they fell.

Jeremy apparently on the run, leaving behind a rat-like duplicate to be arrested in his place, and now the sudden specter of Viktor *Karpol* turning this from a cop farce into something much darker—it was too much to deal with all at once, especially with his brain as numbed as it was. Simon temporarily dismissed the whole mess in favor of getting himself into a hot shower as quickly and painlessly as possible.

Once in the shower, Simon stuck his head under the spray and shut his eyes. His hair plastered itself to his forehead and curtained off his eyes. Wet, it was almost long enough to touch his cheeks; Simon vowed, as he did every morning, to get a haircut the moment that the goddamned Rappaport ‘operation’ was over and done with.

After a minute or so spent in silent communion with the hot water, Simon shook his head and scraped back his hair. His brain started to slog along again, poking gingerly at the edges of this new complication. Did he believe it? Yes, he decided after a moment, he believed it. Viktor Karpol had the money, the connections, and the tenacity to pull the entire world down on Jeremy’s head, if he so chose. And, as little as Simon liked to admit it, Karpol had a reason.

Plus, people didn’t just wake up one morning and start pretending to be Jeremy Archer—yes, ha ha, a certain Irishman to the contrary, Simon thought,

thank you, brain—and even if they did, they didn’t usually do it with Jeremy’s full knowledge and apparent approval—yes, again, a certain Irishman to the contrary, thank you, *brain*—without a good, sound reason. Like, say, doing Jeremy a favor. A big one.

Finally, and most essentially, Jeremy hadn’t seemed to be lying. Of course he’d just woken Simon up in the middle of the night, which might have addled Simon’s perceptions—but, Simon grudgingly had to admit, Jeremy didn’t often bother to lie to him. Besides, what would be the point of lying to him about this? All he’d asked Simon to do was make a phone call—

Now that he thought about it, Simon didn’t like the sound of that phone call one bit. It was a perfectly innocent and even important thing to do, if everything Jeremy had said was true . . . but if even one part of Jeremy’s story was a lie, then Simon would be sliding into a seriously gray legal area. If it was actually the law that was hot on Jeremy’s tail, Simon would be aiding and abetting a criminal in his illegal activities—yes, in a different way than usual, *thank you, brain*.

Simon was torn. He remained flummoxed by the problem until he was out of the shower and shaving, and then it came to him so abruptly that he nearly cut himself: he knew an easy way to check up on Jeremy’s story, didn’t he? Simon smiled at himself in the mirror and rinsed off his razor. Sure he did.

It was still fully dark but already disgustingly humid when Simon left his apartment, shortly after three. The day was shaping up to be a scorcher; Simon was still sweating lightly from his shower and his jeans were sticking to his legs by the time he got down the stairs. He started the Jeep, then jacked the air conditioning up to full and stuck his face into the cool blowing air for a full minute before he put the Jeep into reverse. Summer in DC was hell, pure hell; not for the first time Simon mentally threatened to chuck it all and move to Alaska.

Since he was out and about almost two hours early, Simon treated himself to a seriously unhealthy fried breakfast and then got a bag of assorted fried things to go. They were still steaming when he pulled into the lot at work, and he left two of them with the poor schmuck who’d been stuck with security duty at the gate; the rest he carried into the building with him, dumping them ceremoniously in front of Johnny. “Fried shit for you!” he announced. “Give Dave some, if he snaps out of it.”

“Huh?” Dave said, blinking rapidly.

“Hot damn,” Johnny said, digging into the bag with alacrity. “Might almost think you liked me or something.”

“Couldn’t have that,” Simon said. “Hey, good morning, Stone. I note that you are still here!”

Dave shrank in his seat. “Please don’t kill me,” he said.

“Nah, you get a pass because I turned up so early,” Simon said, feeling magnanimous. “However, if you’re still here in an hour, I’ll kill you then. How’s

that sound?”

“Like a threat,” Dave said uncertainly. “Can I have some hash browns before I die?”

Wordlessly, Johnny leaned back and held out a cardboard sleeve over his shoulder. Dave leaned forward and snagged it. Simon grinned and left them to their negotiations.

He turned up the specific piece of paper he was looking for after only ten minutes of searching his desk drawers, which, for him, for this desk, was about as good as it got. Particularly since he’d made a vague effort to hide the paper from prying eyes and thus ended up hiding it from himself, as well.

The piece of paper had ten random strings of letters and numbers written on it. The first two had been crossed out. Simon could only hope that first of all, the rest of them still worked, that second of all, their owner would be willing and able to communicate with him, and that third of all, she didn’t just tell him to go piss up a rope. He carefully typed the third string into his email program and appended @cia.gov, then settled in to amuse himself.

Langridge:

Long time no annoy the shit out of me. Developed lung cancer yet?

Enough small talk.

Need an unofficial favor, will owe you two unofficial favors. Good rate of exchange.

- S. Drake

Simon studied the email, then sighed heavily, deleted the first part, and sent it. As fun as it might be, it probably wasn’t the way to renew their friendship, or whatever it was that they had; he crossed off the third line on the sheet of paper and hid it from himself again.

After that, it was just a matter of waiting to see who would pop up to annoy him first. The Norton Fowles front was silent, for which Simon was profoundly grateful; Upstairs was also silent, which Simon chose to take as a good sign. Jeremy didn’t call back, not that Simon was expecting (or wanting) him to. The responsibility of the phone call that Jeremy had dumped onto Simon’s shoulders niggled uncomfortably at him, but he didn’t want to take the plunge there until he’d heard back from Langridge. Who was, of course, also being uncommunicative.

Attempting to dismiss the whole mess—both messes—Simon settled in to get some pointless work done. Approximately two pounds of paper were waiting on the corner of his desk, fresh from the Portuguese translator in the other wing of the building. It promised to be excruciating reading. Simon kicked his feet up onto the corner of his desk and got down to it.

Dave went home a few minutes before five, narrowly saving himself from death at Simon's hands. Sandra arrived and sent Johnny home. Nate came in an hour later, tiptoed in to deposit a fresh cup of coffee on Simon's desk, and tiptoed back out. Mike came bombing in. Simon stopped breathing a couple of times out of sheer boredom. And still, no one called. No one sent email. Simon was beginning to feel somewhat unpopular.

He finished reading the translations around nine and actually went to the trouble of filing them himself, just to have something to do. Once they were filed in the proper places he tapped his fingers irritably on his desk, then kicked himself around and sent Upstairs a progress report.

And still no one got in touch. By eleven, Simon gave up on the entire world and went out to get himself lunch, even going so far as to offer to buy the others lunch just to feel popular again. It worked nicely, and Simon returned to base just before noon laden down with bags and drinks.

His cell phone finally rang just before one and Simon snatched it up in relief. He didn't recognize the number. Even better. He flicked his phone open. "Templar."

"Mr. Drake," Dorothy Langridge said, enunciating each syllable coldly and clearly: *Mis-ter Drake*.

Simon cringed and grinned simultaneously. He couldn't help it. It was so *Langridge*. "Langridge," he said. "And here I was beginning to think you were just going to ignore my cry for help."

"Believe me," Langridge said, "I'd have loved to. And yet I have gone to all the trouble to find a working payphone, just so that I might ask you if you are an *idiot*."

"Gosh, Langridge, I don't know. Am I an idiot? Why don't you tell me?"

"In point of fact, Mr. Drake, you *are* an idiot. What on earth do you mean by sending such a cryptic email to an official CIA email address? Do you have any idea how many of my fellow spooks are going to take an interest in it?" Langridge paused in her diatribe long enough to light a cigarette. Simon heard the ratchet of her lighter. "I am going to be under light observation for weeks, damn you. This does not precisely put me in any mood to help you with your unofficial favor."

"Aw, Dotty, you haven't even heard what the favor is," Simon said, putting his feet up on his desk and shutting his eyes. An exasperated exhalation from the other end of the line told him that his shot had hit home. Simon almost laughed.

"Well," Langridge said after a pause and a second exhalation. "As long as you have me on the line, you might as well tell me what this is about. I could use a good laugh at someone else's expense."

"You're a prince, Langridge." Langridge smoked hard, like it was the most important thing she was doing at any given moment, and listening to her wring the enjoyment out of it almost made Simon wish he had a cigarette of his own.

Even one of Jeremy's faggy flavored things—Simon banished the thought, but it had already killed most of his good mood. "Do you remember the last time we met?"

"You say that as if I could possibly have forgotten," Langridge said acidly. "Believe me, I remember."

Simon opened an eye and glanced at the open doorway. No help for it. "You weren't the only person who got in trouble that day. Remember that?"

"Yes, I remember that," Langridge said.

"Well, that other person called me this morning and suggested that, uh, the events of that day have come back to bite him in the ass. In a big way. . . . Jesus, listen to me, I sound like a spook myself. This kind of paranoia is going to make me old before my time."

"As I recall, Mr. Drake, a touch of maturity would not hurt you any," Langridge said with asperity. However, she was also starting to sound interested. "And I suppose you want me to confirm or deny his story?"

"That's about the size of it," Simon said, thumping his fist against his leg.

On the other end of the line, Langridge was silent, except for the nearly-subliminal sound of her breath. Simon shut his eyes and waited. "I'll see what I can do, Mr. Drake," Langridge finally said. "Keep an eye on your personal email."

Simon blew out a relieved breath. "A prince, like I said, Langridge. I owe you."

"Big time," Dorothy Langridge said, with some satisfaction. "You have no idea. Forget taking it out of your hide: I am going to have you stuffed and mounted for my trophy room before all this is over."

"Gosh, that's kinky, even for you, Dots," said Simon. "Still, guess it *has* been a long time since I've had a good mounting—"

"—one more word along those lines and I will throw up, Drake," Langridge said sharply.

"And we wouldn't want that," Simon said, feeling generous. "Thanks, Langridge."

"Don't thank me," Langridge said. "I hate it when you thank me. Also, try to never contact me again. You bring me nothing but trouble."

"Aw, Langridge, I thought that's why you liked me so much," Simon said, but Langridge had already hung up, and for the second time that day Simon found himself talking to an empty line.

Simon had barely closed his phone before Mike appeared in the doorway, eyes alive with curiosity. "Who was that, boss?"

"No one," Simon said, snapping his phone back into its belt clip. "Old friend, doing me a personal favor, which is shorthand for none of your goddamn business. What's up?"

“Oh, uh, actually I was just gonna go have a piss—”

“—not on me you’re not—”

“—aw, boss, that’s not what you said last night,” Mike said, faking dejection. “Anyway, it’s just that you never said why the OPR wanted to see you, so I’ve totally been drinking myself into a stupor in mortal terror or some shit?”

“Oh, right, sorry about that.” Simon said, kicking his chair around and waking up his computer. “Turns out it wasn’t about you anyway. Congratulations. You’re safe as houses.”

Mike sagged against the doorframe in theatrical relief. “Oh, awesome, boss. If I’m going to get into shit with the OPR I want to know what I’m in trouble *for*, you know?”

“Yeah,” Simon said, rolling his eyes. “Me too.”

“So what’d they want?” Mike asked, straightening back up.

Simon shrugged. “The guy wanted to clear up a few things about Farraday’s death before we actually go to court. No big deal.”

“Ooh,” Mike said dubiously, his face pinching shut in a wince. Like most of Simon’s team, he was at least partially aware of the real circumstances behind Farraday’s death. “Any, uh, any problems?”

“Hope not,” Simon said. “Go pee. Somewhere else, please. And by ‘somewhere else’ I don’t mean the mat room.”

Mike, failing utterly to take the bait, glanced over his shoulder. “Yeah. Uh.” He glanced back at Simon, chewing on his lower lip. “Yeah.” After a false start, Mike tore himself out of the doorway and left Simon alone.

The afternoon crawled by. There was silence on all fronts, for which Simon was mostly grateful; right now, after the events that had dogpiled on him yesterday, he found himself welcoming a little boredom. Despite his early start he grimly stuck it out as long as he could, eventually giving up around four, when he caught himself dozing off in front of his computer. Shaking his head to clear it, Simon shut his computer down and went out into the main room. “I’m out, Jesus,” he said. “Honda, go home when Texas gets here, Specs, go home when Stonewall gets here, Springheel, why are you still here?”

“Because I just love my job,” Sandra said, pulling off her headphones and depositing them onto the table. “Mrs. Murchison on the third floor was just now sharing her recipe for chicken popovers with the crazy tinfoil lady on the first, and as a chick I am always interested in recipes and clothes and shit.”

“Goddamn, but I love the crazy tinfoil lady,” Mike said reflectively, chewing on his pen. “Once this is all over I’m gonna go back to Brooklyn and ask her to marry me. We can have us a whole passel of mongrel babies. Dress ’em all in tinfoil.”

“Anyway,” Simon said, jumping in before Sandra could actually tear Mike’s head off. “Spring, go home, and don’t forget that we’re rolling the shifts forward

on Friday. Anything I need to know before I head out?" No one said anything. "Great," Simon said, clapping his hands. "Get some rest. See you guys tomorrow."

Simon's first priority after getting in the door was to crank the air-conditioning down another two notches. His second priority was Langridge's email, and accordingly, he headed for what was laughingly called his 'office'. Simon used his home computer so seldom that he had to clear a stack of old, paid bills off the keyboard before he could boot it up. Last year's tax return winked at him from the middle of the pile. Some day he should really file or shred most of this stuff.

The computer booted up with a surprised sound. The monitor was covered with dust; Simon frowned at it and swiped his hand across the screen, leaving behind a clean swathe of glass. He swiped as much of the rest of the dust off as he could, then beat his hand against his jeans leg until it was reasonably clean. The ensuing dust storm made him cough, and there was now a gray smear on his thigh, but the monitor was visible, which was really all he could ask for.

His personal email account was bulging with spam and junk, but nothing that looked like it was from Langridge lurked in the mess. Just to be safe, Simon paged through everything that had fallen into his inbox that day. Nothing. Simon sighed and deleted the entire contents of his inbox, then settled in. Might as well poke around on the internet until Langridge's email arrived.

At five, with no email from Langridge in sight, Simon left the computer on while he ate dinner (the cold remains of last night's pizza). Nothing was waiting for him when he came back except a stray spam mail promising to add three inches onto his dick. Simon opened it anyway, just in case Langridge had a sick sense of humor. "The ladies will love u", the spam mail informed him. "The ladies already love me," Simon informed his computer, deleting the email.

Langridge still hadn't emailed him back at six, so Simon left the computer running while he showered again. When he returned, showered and wearing his last clean pair of sweatpants, his email inbox promised to sell him Viagra, cheap replica watches, and discreet male encounters. Simon checked them all, just in case. This was starting to get very, very old.

By the time seven rolled around Simon could barely keep his eyes open. He'd gotten one more spam mail, this one promising to add *four* inches to his dick—the offers just got better all the time—but that was it. Nothing from Langridge. "To hell with it," Simon finally said, shutting down his computer and going the hell to bed.

Addled by his unceremonious wake-up call of the night before, he slept like the dead for nine hours. When his alarm went off at four a still-exhausted Simon thrashed his way up and out of that deep, dark sleep and dragged himself into the bathroom more asleep than awake, so sluggish that he nearly dozed off again leaning against the wall of the shower.

It took twenty minutes in the shower and two cups of coffee to make Simon feel even vaguely human, and he was still dragging ass when he dropped down in front of his computer in his underwear and started work on his third cup. “Come on, Langridge,” he muttered under his breath, booting up his computer.

The spambots had been busy overnight. Simon had no fewer than ten emails promising him this or that, but the third one down was from a **dlang2121**, entitled **re: favor**. The shock of recognition tingled in Simon’s fingertips.

The email was short and to the point:

Drake - It is my considered opinion that your friend is indeed in a hell of a lot of Russian trouble. - Langridge

Simon stared at the single terse line for close to a minute, as if willing it to magically cough up more information, which he was too stupefied to process anyway. His mind clutched at the words and then slid right off. Eventually he caught himself at it and smacked the mouse, deleting the message without bothering to respond. Langridge wouldn't thank him for it.

Entirely on autopilot Simon shut his computer down, eased out of his chair, and carried his half-empty mug into the kitchen, chugging down the last of the coffee before rinsing out the mug and putting it in the dishwasher. Shutting his eyes, Simon leaned forward against the rim of the sink, the metal of it cold through the front of his underwear. Gooseflesh prickled up along his bare belly. *A hell of a lot of Russian trouble.*

Your friend.

Jeremy.

Simon shook his head sharply, trying to dispel the mental fog. After three weeks of sleeping funny, it was getting harder and harder to do. It was only a matter of time before he did something catastrophically stupid because he was so tired—he'd done it before—and he could only hope that whatever it was this time, it didn't screw him over with the OPR or kill Jeremy or something.

Simon slapped his forehead, hard enough to sting, driving the fog back a few inches. "Jesus," he said, more to get himself moving than anything else. It worked. He padded out of the kitchen and went to get dressed.

By the time he sat down on the foot of the bed to tie his sneakers, he was not precisely awake, but he could see awake from here. It didn't look inviting. All he could see from here was the fact that Jeremy was in trouble, on the run, possibly running for his life, and it was *Simon's fault*—Christ, the phone call!

Simon grabbed for his cell phone, then hesitated. Sure, he could call Jeremy's 'service' at not-quite-five in the morning and root her out of bed, but there was just something so *wrong* about it. From Simon's admittedly cops-and-robbers viewpoint of the world, this cloak-and-dagger nonsense was just too Hollywood for words. How would Karpol's thugs get onto her anyway? Hell, Simon himself

had once spent a couple of slow days trying to track down her location, and even with Nate's help he hadn't been able to narrow her hiding place down much further than 'Colorado or maybe Utah'. At the time he'd thought that that was a strange place for someone like Jeremy to stash his answering service, then gotten frustrated and given up. What resources did Karpol have that Simon didn't? ... other than the willingness to extract answers through violence. Shit.

Simon thumbed his phone open with no further ado and punched in the number from memory. The phone started to click in his ear as the signal bounced through the relays, seven, eight, nine of them; there was a pause, and then the phone started to ring.

Half-listening to the ringing, Simon went over to the dresser and picked up his wallet and keys, distributing them to the appropriate pockets. He clipped the empty cell-phone clip to his belt. The phone was still ringing. Simon closed his eyes, picked up his gun, and got the holster settled inside the back of his jeans, the barrel of his gun a comforting pressure against his tailbone. The phone was still ringing.

Dressed now, Simon pulled the phone away from his ear and double-checked the number, just to be sure; he was so tired that he didn't want to swear to anything, but he was almost positive he hadn't misdialed. And the phone was *still* ringing...

Abruptly, Simon snorted out an embarrassed laugh. It was nearly five *Eastern* time, which meant that in 'Colorado or maybe Utah' it wasn't even three—Jeremy's 'answering service' was probably too deeply asleep to hear the phone. Maybe she'd even turned off the ringer. "Yeah, that was bright," he said, jabbing the CALL CANCEL button. His voice was just a little uneven. He tried not to notice.

Deciding that he'd try again once he got to work—where he could also double-check the number—Simon snapped his phone back into its holster and jogged back out into the main room, letting himself out the front door and into the sauna.

"Oh, Christ," Simon said, stopping dead in the doorway.

Johnny stared mournfully back at him from behind the monstrous pile of labeled CDs that was taking up the entire south half of the conference table. "Yeah, guess what," he said, yawning. "Newest batch of surveillance-camera footage came last night. Honda threatened to shoot the courier."

"Didn't we just do this last week?" Simon said peevishly, getting himself moving again. The door thudded to behind him. "Why does it take so many CDs?"

"Um," Dave started to say, looking up from one of his monitors. The man had three, not counting the laptop. It was sick.

Simon held up a finger, forestalling him. "Rhetorical," he said, as kindly as he could.

"Oh," Dave said. Behind him, the largest computer hitched, groaned, and shut itself down with a descending whirring sound. The computer he was in front of spit out one of the CDs; Dave pulled it out and stuck in another, then put the first one away in its case. It joined a sadly small pile of CDs on the floor by his foot.

"Times like these I'd gladly give up most of my civil liberties just for a single copy of a facial-recognition program that worked more than thirty percent of the time," Simon said to no one in particular. "I mean, seriously, Big Brother can watch this shit all he wants if it'd save us the trouble."

"Un-American," Johnny noted, yawning again. "Oughta tell the ACLU on you."

"Always knew you wanted me to infringe your civil rights personally," Simon said, edging towards his office like the pile of CDs was threatening to jump him. "I gotta go make a quick phone call and deal with the daily crap and then I'll help with that. Okay?"

"Okay," Dave said distractedly, already buried in footage. The largest computer rebooted and whirled back up. He ignored it.

Simon escaped into his office with a definite feeling of relief, thumping into his desk chair and pulling open the dented top drawer of his desk. As always, it was a rats' nest of dead pens, old memos, and mostly-useless office supplies; Simon sighed and raked everything haphazardly to the front, then insinuated his hand past the pile of crap and wriggled it into the back corner. His fingers touched paper. Simon caught the envelope between his first two fingers and tugged it out.

The envelope was torn and battered, so crumpled by now that it would never lay flat again. Some of the oldest creases were going soft and furry with wear. Almost but not quite two years ago—Jesus, had it actually been that long?—the envelope had held his electric bill; a certain someone had fished the empty envelope out of Simon's trash and written a phone number across it in a small, precise hand, crossing the sevens. Actually reading the number was beginning to be something of a challenge. Simon had to smooth the envelope out and pin it to the desk with both hands to check the digits. The ink was starting to fade, particularly on the creases. It was a little unsettling, that fading ink.

Pinning the envelope down with one hand as best he could, Simon fished out his phone with the other and flipped it open, double-checking the number that he'd typed in earlier. As he'd suspected, it was correct. Ignoring the twinge in his belly, Simon hit REDIAL and put the phone back to his ear. He'd let it ring until someone answered, dammit—picking up the envelope, Simon shoved it back into the drawer and pushed it all the way to the back, shoving the drawer's contents back in after the envelope and doubtless crumpling it again.

The phone was still ringing when Simon pushed the drawer nearly shut (it

didn't close all the way any more) and turned his attention to the pile of paper that had been in the inbox this morning. Manipulating the pile one-handed was a challenge, but still possible, and he worked his way through the pile while listening with half an ear to the ringing.

By the time he'd signed the last piece of useless paper and put it on the corner of the desk, the phone was still ringing. Of course, it wasn't even six, so it was still just around four in Colorado. Simon vowed to try again at lunch and hung up.

After dropping off the papers in the outbox, Simon snagged an armload of CDs from the table and carried them into his office. Each one contained about half an hour's worth of high-resolution footage from one of three surveillance cameras overlooking a street in Brooklyn; thank Christ that the cameras were motion-activated, or there would be three times as many CDs on that table out there and no one would sleep again, ever.

Simon put the stack on his desk, plucked a CD from the top, and shucked it out of its jewel case, scowling. This was a bullshit job. He knew it. They all knew it. They were 'cooperating' with the NYPD in a 'support position', doing all the eyes-and-ears work while the NYPD did the actual footwork—it was a PR stunt, a goodwill gesture, and it had been foisted off on Simon and his team because Simon had been shot in the chest six months ago. The latest casualty always got the cushy bullshit jobs. Simon almost, almost wished that someone else would hurry up and get shot.

Unconsciously he touched the slight depression on his chest that was all that was left of the wound. He'd healed, done his physical therapy, and returned to work, running at close to ninety-five-percent capability after two months. Two months after that, four months after Farraday shot him, Simon was closer to ninety-nine percent, with barely a twinge and a dent left to remind him of the bullet. Six months down the road he was fine, better than fine, and itching to get back out there and do something important. Simon stuck the CD into the drive on his computer and vowed to raise hell if Upstairs tried to assign him any more desk work after this.

The street flickered to life on his monitor, and Simon glanced at the sheet of mug shots to refresh his memory, then settled in to watch the parade of humanity. It was dull, dumb, repetitive, brain-killing work, and three weeks of it had left Simon's brain numb in more ways than one. In order to avoid front-loading too much work onto the day shift he had to keep switching people around, day shift, night shift, day shift; just when he was starting to get used to one sleep schedule, he'd have to trash it and start all over.

They were all tired. Simon, filling in the blank spots in the schedule as well as supervising, was flat-out exhausted. Sometimes he could fight it off with coffee and needless physical activity, but sometimes he couldn't. And tomorrow he'd

be pushing the shifts forward and staying up an extra eight hours—the thought nauseated him.

“Christ, Archer, next time I see you I ought to pop you one,” Simon muttered, fast-forwarding through a useless bit of the video footage and trying not to let himself think about the possibility of there not being a ‘next time’ at all.

Outside in the other room his team members came and went. Simon noticed every time someone arrived for the day, because to a man (and woman) they all groaned aloud at the sight of the CDs piled high on the table; he noticed every time someone left because they were in such a hurry to go that the saferoom door slammed shut behind them. Other than that it was just Simon and the footage and a dim, nagging worry.

Despite his palpable longing to take a break and get away, when lunchtime rolled around Simon only noticed because Nate popped up in the doorway and asked if he wanted anything from Subway. Out in the other room Mike bellowed in mock outrage. Simon surfaced long enough to laugh at them both; Nate scurried off, red around the ears.

Simon watched the last ten minutes on the CD currently in his computer—two women sitting out on the stoop and fanning themselves just energetically enough to keep the motion-activated video cameras from shutting off, around here the excitement just never stopped—then ejected it, racked it into its case, and added it to the small but growing stack of CDs that had already been vetted. Kicking his chair around, he pulled his cell phone from its holster and hit REDIAL, listening to the phone on the other end ring while he stretched the morning’s soreness from his muscles.

No one answered. Simon couldn’t say that he was all that surprised.

He tried again when he got home at four. No one answered. Simon sighed, put the phone down on his bedside table, ate a bowl of cereal, and went to bed.

The answer, so simple and clear, dawned on him with enough force to wake him shortly before his alarm was scheduled to go off at four the next morning. Simon scrubbed both hands over his face and laughed rustily aloud. Of course: when Simon had started dragging his feet, an exasperated Jeremy had made enough time to call and give the red alert himself rather than depend on Simon to do it. It would have taken him, what, thirty seconds at most? Jeremy’s ‘answering service’ had been long gone by the time Simon had even thought to write to Langridge, let alone by the time Langridge had written him back.

It was simple, plausible, and *just like* Jeremy, especially the part where he’d let Simon worry for twenty-four hours rather than call him back and inform him of the little change in plans. The relief of it (plus eleven hours of uninterrupted sleep) dropped a little backbeat back into Simon’s groove. Not even the thought

of staying in the office until midnight tonight could put more than a minor dent in Simon's newfound serenity.

He did make one last attempt to call, though, on general principles, right before he headed out the door. No one answered.

◆ Seven

“Stone!” Simon said, letting the door slam shut behind him and snapping his fingers impatiently until Dave finally looked up. “How long have you been here, Stone?”

Like something in a neo-Pavlovian experiment Dave immediately developed a hunted expression, hunching his shoulders. Simon found this pleasing. “Since six yesterday,” Dave said warily. “PM. I promise.”

Simon looked at Johnny. “Is that true?”

“Far as I know,” Johnny said, shrugging.

“Great!” Simon said, clapping his hands. “Texas, go home. You get a twenty-four-hour vacation, aren’t you lucky? Stonewall, since you seem to be *so* inclined to never sleep again, I want you to stay as long as you can—five PM would be optimal but I’ll take what I can get—and do the footage while I run the headphones. I’ll get someone to take you home if I can. Specs and Springheel will turn up at some point this evening, Honda will come in around midnight, we all know this drill by now, Texas, why haven’t you left yet?”

“Enjoyin’ the performance,” Johnny said lazily, pushing himself up and out of his chair. “See you tomorrow, boss.”

“Not if I can help it,” Simon said. He clapped Johnny on the shoulder as Johnny went by, then took the still-warm chair, picked up the headphones, and settled in. Johnny flapped him an absent wave and left, the door shutting behind him.

Thought rapidly became impossible. While things were quiet at five in the morning, they’d started to pick up at six, and by seven Simon’s head ached from trying to follow three different surveillance microphones at once. The trick was to unfocus: stop listening to the words and just let the sounds flow by, listening for anything that might be Rappaport’s accented whine or his girlfriend’s particular variety of shrill Portuguese or the grunting of the particular thugs that chose to run around with Rappaport for no real reason that Simon could determine. Simon was capable of maintaining that state of unfocus for a short while, but something

would always make him tune back in every few minutes. He wished he had more backup. He took a couple of aspirin with his next cup of coffee.

Dave kept up the flow of CDs in and out of his computer, looking more and more drawn as the day went on. His cheeks shadowed over with stubble, the bags around his eyes went puffy and dark, and his eyes themselves just got wider and wider as Dave lost himself in the video footage; he barely spoke, although sometimes he'd reflexively glance in Simon's direction if Simon moved. Simon took to occasionally snapping his fingers at Dave just to make sure Dave was still alive in there.

Finally, right around noon, when the noise from the headphones was reaching its atonal apex, Simon looked up just as Dave ejected a CD. Simon checked his watch, then rubbed his face with both hands, the movement momentarily attracting Dave's attention. "Jesus, Stone," Simon said, his voice thick with disuse. "You look like something out of a refugee camp and I'm the one that's got to look at you over here. It's completely unfair to me. Take a break. Order us a pizza or something and then go wash your face."

Dave blinked at him, slowly, then nodded and turned back to his computer. More or less accustomed to Dave's little weirdnesses by now, Simon just waited; after about five minutes Dave pushed his chair back and unfolded in a series of cramped and jerky little motions. "Pizza's on the way," Dave croaked, eventually getting himself upright. He put a hand on the back of his neck and cracked it twice. "Can I have some of those aspirin?"

"Christ, take four, just watching you stand up is making my spine hurt," Simon said, pushing the bottle in his general direction. Dave took it, fumbled off the lid with unsteady hands, tapped out a few aspirin, and headed for the door. The stiffness in his stride was already starting to smooth out as he left. Simon shut his eyes and let himself fall back into the morass of noise.

Sandra showed up around three, technically a couple of hours early, but Simon was more inclined to kiss her feet than to scold her for it. Gladly he abandoned the headphones to her and fled into his office, where he finally, belatedly got to dig into that morning's paperwork. Stuck in the middle of the pile was a plain brown interoffice envelope, so light that it might well have been empty, addressed only to Simon's box number in Danielle's handwriting; intrigued, Simon abandoned the rest of the pile and pried open the glued flap, eventually shaking out a single piece of paper with PERSONAL : CONFIDENTIAL rubber-stamped in red at the top and no salutation at all attached to the two terse paragraphs.

After having had my ear to the ground all week, I have decided to take the offensive and call an official meeting with the Office of Professional Responsibility to discuss Norton Fowles' harassment of and ongoing private interest in you. It is in our best interests to move

quickly. Once you have shredded this document, call Danielle and tell her what time on Monday would be acceptable to you. I will make it happen.

This is only a formality. I stress this: this meeting is only a formality. I believe the best defense is to openly force Mr. Fowles' superior to hear of and acknowledge his behavior towards you; you need only attend to answer any questions that I may personally put to you, and of course to simply be officially present at a meeting that concerns you. Everything else is my concern.

The note, unsurprisingly, was unsigned. Paranoia reigned in the halls Upstairs.

"Ongoing private interest?" Simon said, frowning his brow. This was the first he'd heard of any *ongoing private interest*, an uncomfortable thought at the best of times (unless, of course, the lady was pretty) and a seriously unsettling thought when it came to Norton Fowles. He'd actually thought the matter closed—he'd assumed that Upstairs would handle it without Simon needing to do anything else, like he usually did. Apparently not.

That particular unsettling thought was followed quickly by a more annoying one: *Monday*? He'd be working the night shift by Monday—crap, there was no help for it, was there? Simon got up long enough to drop the paper into the shredder by his desk and then picked up the desk phone, punching one of the white buttons on the bottom row.

Danielle snatched up the phone before it could ring. "Hello, Simon," she said. "What time were you thinking?"

"Christ, Danielle, I'll be working nights on this Rappaport operation by then," Simon said, shutting his eyes and swaying forward against the lip of his desk. The wood dug into the front of his thighs. "So, I guess, I don't know: four in the afternoon? Any time after that."

Danielle made a little acknowledging sound and typed a note. "That should be acceptable," she said crisply. "I'll get back to you Monday morning with the actual time of the meeting, but it will be no earlier than four. Try to come up here a few minutes ahead of time and he'll walk you up personally."

"Right," Simon said, wincing at nothing. Office politics. Ugh. "Anything else you need from me?"

"Not at the moment," Danielle said, her tone warming slightly. "We did receive notification from Scotland Yard that the arrest report we requested on Tuesday was no longer to be considered valid, although other charges may or may not be pending. Did you want a copy of the notification, or will it be enough just to know it exists?"

Despite everything, it made Simon crack a smile. "Send me a copy if it's not too much trouble," he said. "No hurry. I just want to gloat a little. Pointing and laughing is good for the soul."

“I can do tha-at,” Danielle said, drawling the last word softly as she got distracted by making a note of Simon’s request. “Enjoy your *schadenfreude*, Simon.”

“Whoa, whoa, Danielle, you don’t have any proof that I’m into those weird German sex fetishes,” Simon said. “And I’m pretty sure that publicly confronting me with my alternative lifestyle constitutes sexual harassment—”

“Ha!” Danielle said. “Sexual harassment. You only wish.” On that note, she hung up.

“Hey,” Dave said, knocking on the wall by Simon’s door an hour or so later, swaying gently in place. Out in the main room, voices buzzed. “Nate’s here, so . . . I’m going to take off, if that’s okay? If I take off now I can grab a ride home with somebody . . .”

“Go, go,” Simon said, hitting SEND on his latest email and flapping a hand at the saferoom door. “Do not come back until six AM tomorrow. Seriously. Just because I won’t be here doesn’t mean that I won’t authorize Springheel to kick your ass on my behalf.”

“Okay,” Dave said, starting to move away.

Simon whistled sharply through his teeth. “Dave!” he called.

Dave drifted back into the doorway. “Huh?”

“What time are you allowed to come back, Dave?”

“Um . . . six AM tomorrow?”

Simon gave him a desultory round of applause. “Very good. Now, for my next question: what will you not be doing before six AM tomorrow?”

Dave was starting to look harassed. “Coming back here?”

“Very good,” Simon said. “Next question: if you come back here before six AM tomorrow, who will be kicking your ass for it?”

“Sandra?”

“Tell you what, I am impressed now, because I did not think you’d be able to retain this much information in this state,” Simon said. “Final question: is Sandra capable of kicking your ass to my satisfaction? Given that she’s out there right now, I suggest you consider your answer very carefully.”

Dave swallowed. “Um. Yes?”

“Great! Read it back to me, Dave. Tell me what your current standing orders are.”

“Um.” Dave ran a hand through his hair, which behaved for a microsecond before starting to straggle across his forehead again. “I’m not supposed to come back before six AM tomorrow or Sandra will kick my ass.”

“The man’s so smart I just can’t stand it,” Simon told the world in general. “Bonus round! What day *is* tomorrow, Dave?”

Dave looked blank.

Simon groaned and slumped forward, putting his face in his hands. “Tomorrow is Saturday, Dave,” he said, muffled by his palms.

“Oh,” Dave said. “Okay. Can I go now?”

“Go,” Simon said, not looking up. After a moment, Dave shuffled away.

Simon finished up his emails and went back out into the main room, ruffling Nate’s hair before dropping into the chair opposite Sandra. “Hey,” he said, kicking his legs out under the table and picking up the other set of headphones. “If you see Dave before six AM tomorrow, kick his ass for me, okay?”

“Okay,” Sandra said, distracted. “Am I allowed to break bones?”

Simon thought about it. “I find that acceptable,” he finally said, “as long as it’s only one leg. Both legs and he might have trouble getting up to fetch more CDs to watch, and he needs everything else.”

“Got it,” Sandra said. She made a note on the pad in front of her. Simon craned forward, but was disappointed to discover that the note had nothing to do with Dave’s leg, broken or not. Sandra drew a circle around the little notation and dropped her pen onto the table. “I was thinking I’d run out around eight and get us food from that rotisserie-chicken place,” she said. “You know. Roast chicken, stuffing, mashed potatoes, corn-like shrapnel, biscuits, maybe some actual green stuff. Fake ‘real home cooking,’” she concluded, with appropriate air quotes.

Simon’s stomach growled with a speed and urgency that startled him. “I guess that’s a ‘yes,’” he said, crossing an arm protectively over his belly and pressing down to quiet it. “Jesus, that sounds really good, actually. I’ve been on pizza and Chinese takeout for too long.”

“I’ll get a whole chicken just for you, then,” Sandra said, with a sympathetic smile. “Mike’ll probably scavenge your leftovers later, eat whatever you don’t.”

“In that case, remind me to thoroughly lick everything before I stick it in the fridge.” Simon put the headphones on and settled in.

Aided greatly by the food, so like real food that he could barely stand it—Sandra had even brought him a carton of milk, and after looking at it askance for two seconds Simon had nearly inhaled the stuff—Simon limped valiantly over the nineteen-hour finish line shortly before midnight. “Christ, I don’t know how Stonewall does it,” he said weakly, slithering down in his seat and scrubbing at his eyes. “I feel like I just finished starring in a Russian ballet. You know. Hobnailed boots, tractors, large women shaped like barrels calling you ‘comrade’.”

Mike, crouched in front of the tiny fridge, stuffed an entire cold chicken drumstick in his mouth before loading his arms full of little styrofoam bowls and toting the whole mess to the table. “So go home already,” he said around the jutting drumstick, rapidly spreading out his armload of leftovers like he was dealing blackjack. “We got it covered, boss. For real.”

“Need someone to drive you home?” Sandra asked. “I suspect Nate could use a break and some fresh air—”

“—ha ha, no,” Simon broke in. “That’s okay. Seriously.”

“Actually, I was thinking about hitting the 7-11 and getting a monster Coke,” Nate said. “I could follow you home and get my Coke on the way back. You know. Just to make sure you make it.”

“Really, it’s not necessary, I’m okay,” Simon said. “Besides, then who’s going to follow you back to make sure *you* make it?”

“Yeah, actually, do that, Specs,” Sandra said, overriding him. “For my sake, if not for his.”

Simon snorted. “I’m fine,” he said, but he was too tired to argue, even too tired to care. Gathering his legs under himself he marshaled his strength—he’d need all of it just to get up.

◆ Eight

Simon woke early on Saturday afternoon with the sun defiantly in his eyes, four hours before he had to be back at the office. He'd slept for close to thirteen hours. He felt like he'd been beaten with hammers.

Groaning, he threw himself out of bed and yanked off the sheets in almost the same motion, rapidly assembling a pile of laundry in the center of the room. He threw on an old t-shirt and a pair of swim trunks—laundry day attire—and five minutes later toted the whole mess out into the molten Saturday afternoon, wincing his way to the laundry room to stuff everything into two washing machines. He didn't even have to wait for them. It was Saturday and yet no one was using the laundry room; it was that hot out.

Simon had his shower, ate some breakfast, ran the dishwasher, braved the heat to run put his clothes in the dryers, gritted his teeth and did fifteen minutes of housecleaning that he didn't dare put off any longer, sprawled in front of the television for half an hour and drank two glasses of ice water, emptied the dishwasher, fetched his laundry hot out of the dryer and tried very hard not to sweat all over it as he lugged it home, dumped everything on the bed, and dealt with it, remaking the bed last. That done, he ran the cold water and threw himself back into the shower for five minutes, then put on real clothes to go buy groceries and toiletries and put gas in his Jeep. Everything absolutely necessary to the cause of surviving this hellacious schedule for another week was done by four PM, and Simon celebrated by breaking into the orange juice and drinking half of it.

He felt like crashing for another couple of hours, maybe having a beer or two. Instead, working on the theory that the FBI could afford better air conditioning than he could, Simon drove into work early and went down to the firing range. It was nice and cool and non-sunny down there in the windowless basement, and after ten minutes, almost chilly. Simon spent forty-five minutes punching holes in paper targets. He felt a lot better when he was done, the muscles in his arms tingling and lightly sore.

A photocopy of Scotland Yard's sheepish 'disregard that' notification was

waiting on his desk when he got in, on top of the usual piles of paper. Simon was first startled and then briefly, vaguely ashamed; he'd barely spared a thought for Jeremy in two days. Of course, he reasoned, he had his own problems to deal with, and worrying about Jeremy would help exactly no one. And the notification *was* funny. Simon filed it in with the original arrest report and tucked it away to entertain himself with later.

Twelve hours later, at five in the morning, Simon drove himself home, the streets nearly empty. It was still humid and unpleasant, and nothing on this earth could have induced Simon to turn off the Jeep's AC and roll down the windows, but in comparison, it was almost nice. By all rights he ought to have been worrying about something or another, but he drifted into his apartment in a state of nearly Zen-like calm, left a trail of discarded clothing leading from the front door to the bedroom, took a couple of aspirin and a couple of vitamins, and slid into the clean sheets with a little groan ten minutes after he walked in the door. It had been so long since he'd had the luxury of going to bed when it was dark.

Five minutes later he was fast asleep, sprawled out across the bed to maximize his surface area. His mind drifted to Jeremy and away again just before he nodded off, and those thoughts turned into weird and lazy dreams that he only barely remembered—but remembered fondly—when he woke.

Sunday was an 'almost' day. Simon woke feeling almost rested. The day's work was almost inoffensive. The weather was almost not terrible. Simon almost didn't think of Norton Fowles—or of Jeremy—at all.

The highlight of the day was finally getting through the pile of CDs on the table and gladly chucking them all into storage, which was to say, the mat room. It took all three of them, Dave and Nate and Simon, working zealously to winnow through the mess while the others manned the headphones, but shortly before three in the morning Nate ejected the last CD from his drive. "And there was much rejoicing," he said, sleepily.

"Yaaaaaay," Dave automatically added, poking at one of his computers.

"We're done with footage until, uh, Thursday," Simon said, nodding. "Stonewall, *why* are you still *here*?"

"I've got nowhere else to go," Dave said, so plaintively that Simon thought he was serious for several seconds.

That morning, when Simon got home, he reluctantly set his alarm for three PM in order to make his meeting on time. He fervently hoped that Danielle would email him about the meeting time, or even send another of those PERSONAL : CONFIDENTIAL messages, but he had the sinking feeling that she was going to call him, instead.

The charge on his phone's battery was running low; Simon plugged it in and put it on the bedside table, where it sat quietly and glowed blue. Its battery life seemed to be getting shorter. The phone was getting old. Simon patted it like a dog and fell asleep watching the eerie blue glow pulse across the ceiling, thinking idly about a getting a new phone, something rugged and manly-looking. One of those quasi-military ones with the heavy rubber outer casing. Something that could survive being run over by the Jeep.

As if to punish him for having disloyal thoughts, his current phone jerked him out of sleep just after ten AM. Simon grabbed the phone and promptly smacked himself in the eye with its flying cord, turning his groan of complaint into a yelp of startled pain. "Templar," he rasped, rubbing his watering eye with his free hand.

"I know you were sleeping, Simon, so I'll make this quick: your meeting is at 4:45 this afternoon," Danielle said.

"4:45," Simon repeated, blinking rapidly.

"You got it," Danielle said. "Go back to sleep."

"Awesome," Simon said, snapping the phone shut and dropping it back onto his bedside table. He set his alarm ahead an hour, collapsed back into the hot place on his pillow, and was snoring again a minute later, his lashes still wet.

◆ Nine

Upstairs was already waiting for him when Simon got off the elevator shortly after 4:30, and Simon automatically stuck his arm between the doors to keep the elevator from leaving again. Upstairs lifted his hand, glanced at his massive steel watch, and then let his hand fall back to the head of his cane. “Let it go,” he said—pronounced—with the air of a man making an executive decision. “I believe we’ll wait a few more minutes before heading up.”

Simon obligingly let the elevator go free and settled in opposite Upstairs, leaning against a filing cabinet and stifling a yawn. “How long is this likely to take, do you think?” he asked.

Upstairs frowned, giving this question heavy thought. “I can’t predict with any accuracy,” he finally said, as if somewhere in that massive skull he had been consulting charts, running numbers, and firing incompetent accountants. “Obviously the best result is to be had in a short meeting, however, so let’s hope for that.”

“Right,” Simon said, trying not to sound tired. The yawn came back in full force and Simon gritted his teeth, forcing it out through his ears instead; Upstairs did not so much as glance in his direction, but Simon couldn’t shake the feeling that he’d noticed anyway. Silence fell.

“Something you might find interesting came to my attention this morning,” Upstairs said after a moment, his voice carefully, heavily offhand.

“Yeah?” Simon said, shaking his head and coming back from his drifting reverie. “What’s up?”

True to form, once confronted, Upstairs decided to temporize. “I have always kept one ear to the ground with regards to your freelancer,” he explained, shooting one cuff, then the other, then carefully bracing his cane on the floor between his feet. “I find it both expedient and prudent to keep a few flags placed here and there. Mostly to keep him honest regarding our agreement, you understand, but also simply on general principles.”

“Archer,” Simon heard himself say, as if from a long way off. “So that’s why the arrest report caught your attention?”

Upstairs nodded approvingly. "Quite," he said.

"So . . ." Simon tried to brace himself. Suddenly the roaring in his ears was back, louder than ever, and his stomach was a knot under the arch of his ribcage. "So what's this tidbit?"

"This morning, during the routine lights-on headcount in the maximum-security wing of McCreary, the prison guards came up a head short," Upstairs said, delivering this news with a certain ponderous relish. "Which was odd, because during the last headcount before lights-out yesterday, they had their full complement."

Simon blinked, the roaring in his ears subsiding as quickly as it had come. "What's that got to do with Archer?"

"It's apparently caused a tremendous uproar, which is unsurprising," Upstairs said, unwilling to be swayed from telling the tale in the manner he'd chosen to tell it. "No one can quite figure out how the fellow was subtracted from the prison population, but it seems that subtracted he was. A certain man by the name of Bran Lindsey—does the name ring a bell?"

Simon's head jerked back so fast that he nearly hit his head on the wall behind the filing cabinet. Of all the things he'd been prepared to hear, that was not one of them. "Lindsey?" he finally managed to croak, his eyes wide.

Upstairs cast a glance in his direction. "You seem unduly startled," he noted mildly.

"No," Simon said, shaking his head violently and reaching up to rub the back of his neck. "No, it's just that . . . coming so hard on the heels of Archer's 'arrest', I can't help but wonder if there's a correlation." Like, say, jumped-up Russian thugs with a long, long reach, he didn't add.

"Ah," Upstairs said, apparently mollified. "Yes, I'll admit that had occurred to me as well. I had thought perhaps Mr. Lindsey had heard of Mr. Archer's arrest and taken what he considered to be appropriate steps, but if that is the case, I have no idea where he would have gotten the information. According to the warden Mr. Lindsey received a single letter every week, but the contents were generally cheery and uninformative, and nothing in the last letter seemed out of place or even really different, save that two days later, Mr. Lindsey went missing."

"Mail, huh," Simon said slowly. "Postmarked from where?"

Upstairs smiled tightly. "I thought you might ask that," he said. "Postmarked from any one of seven cities around the United States, apparently at random, but always written in the same hand and signed with the same name. Would you care to hazard a guess as to what that name might be?"

Simon, who could think of several possibilities, each one more interesting than the last, nevertheless said, "No, sir, with all due respect, I don't think I could. What was it?"

“Ethan,” Upstairs said. “And yet cursory handwriting analysis suggests the handwriting is feminine. Isn’t *that* interesting?”

Simon shook his head slowly in sheer admiration. “It really, really is,” he said. On a hunch, he added, “What was the postmark on the last one?”

“Durango, Colorado,” Upstairs said.

Bingo! Simon crowed internally, his brain replaying for him Jeremy’s dry, harried voice: *well, if you must know, it’s a red-alert code.* Outwardly, however, he only said, “Well, I can’t imagine that Mr. Lindsey is going to cause us any trouble—after all, I wasn’t even the one who ultimately arrested him, more’s the pity—but I’d be glad to dig those files out of cold storage if anyone needs them. We still have all of Archer’s analysis.”

“You’ll be pleased to know that I have already made that offer on your behalf,” Upstairs said, checking his watch again. Simon checked his own: 4:47. “Well!” Upstairs said, obscurely pleased. “Shall we go? We have a meeting to attend.”

The Office of Professional Responsibility hadn’t changed since Simon’s last visit, but the brisk receptionist was marginally more polite in the face of Upstairs. “Mr. Hart is waiting for you in his office,” she said, taking her hands off her keyboard long enough to fold them neatly in front of her.

“Thank you, Cheryl. I know the way.” Upstairs swept majestically—and slowly—around the side of her desk, his cane working erratically at his side. Something in the way the man moved had always reminded Simon of ocean liners, not that he’d ever felt it prudent to mention this. Accordingly, Simon smiled at the receptionist (half out of habit and half out of sheer bullheadedness) and bobbed off like a tugboat in his wake.

The silent gray hallways were still the same, although Simon could see the occasional window, far off at the end of any hallway that stretched off to his left. Eventually the too-close hallway opened up into a small waiting area, presided over by yet another neatly-kept older woman; “Go on in,” this one said, with a small, professional smile. “He’s ready for you now.”

“Thank you,” Upstairs said, limping over to the door, pulling it open, and half-blinding Simon with a blaze of light. Through an effort of will, Simon managed to avoid raising a hand to blot out the late-afternoon sunlight, although it was a near thing. A neat trick, too. For a moment the two figures in the large office were entirely backlit in the wash of sunlight, which proclaimed the status of the office’s owner more clearly than any expensive office furniture could have.

Like Upstairs, Baker Hart was a section chief, and Baker Hart resembled Upstairs physically, to boot: a large, heavysset man somewhere in his late forties or early fifties, close-cropped hair just starting to run to gray and expensively-suited frame just starting to run to fat. While Upstairs wore his war wounds in the form of the cane that ticked rapidly along at his side, Baker Hart wore his in the form of a neat semicircle of flesh missing from the upper rim of his right ear.

As they entered Baker Hart looked up, seemed to smile—with the backlighting, Simon couldn't be sure—and stood up, spreading his hands in bluff, effusive greeting. The man wore a vest and an honest-to-Christ *watch chain*. Norton Fowles, lumped silently in a side chair like a slumping scoop of mashed potatoes, looked like the fussy clerk he was in comparison, his missing left arm half-hidden behind him.

Upstairs took his sweet time limping across the none-too-vast expanse of the office to Hart's desk, which Simon suspected was for his benefit. By the time Upstairs reached the desk, shook Baker Hart's hand, and completed the usual how's-the-wife-how're-the-kids-how's-the-golf-game routine, Simon's eyes were used to the glare and he'd had a moment to glance around. "Baker, this is Simon Drake, one of my team captains," Upstairs said, bringing the pleasantries to an end.

"Pleasure," Baker Hart said, shaking Simon's hand. His voice was so deep and warm, his handshake so firm, that Simon almost *wanted* to trust him. "Have a seat, let me just get these blinds."

Simon took one of the two chairs in front of the desk. Upstairs lowered himself into the other. Baker Hart slid out from behind his desk and moved across the wall of windows from one side to the other, pulling the blinds. It was an unmitigated relief. Simon blinked rapidly as the brilliance fell away, leaving him in gloom, but he resisted the urge to rub his eyes. "Now, then," Baker Hart said, returning to sit behind his desk and lacing his fingers together. "What's the issue? Why are we here?"

"The *issue* is that one of my employees has been subjected to a certain amount of harassment and inquiry without regards to protocol," Upstairs said, thumping the butt of his cane on the floor once, like punctuation. "I expect to at least be informed when the Office of Professional Responsibility decides to take an interest in one of my subordinates, and yet the first I heard of this was when Simon called my office to ask if I knew why he was being asked for an interview. An *interview*, Baker."

"I see," Baker Hart said. He and Norton Fowles traded swift glances. "You must understand that Mr. Fowles *is* allowed a certain amount of leeway in how he chooses to accomplish his tasks—"

"Of course I understand that," Upstairs said with just a touch of glacial irritation. "However, Mr. Fowles has overstepped his bounds. Again. If he found something that was worthy of further investigation, it was at that time he should have brought it to you, instead of attempting to trick Mr. Drake into incriminating himself in some manner. I do not mind investigation, Baker, but secret interviews are far, far over the line."

"While I tend to agree with you—" Baker Hart started to say, but just then Norton Fowles shifted and cleared his throat, and both section chiefs glanced at him with something like amazement. "Yes, Norton?" Baker Hart said, after a

pause.

“Allow me to apologize for that,” Fowles said, his voice reedy and thin by comparison. “It was not my intention to, hm, make Mr. Drake incriminate himself, as you put it. I was merely tacking down some tiny details at the time, things I considered so generally inconsequential that it did not seem . . . hm . . . worthwhile to open the can of worms involved with an official inquiry.”

“Inconsequential,” Upstairs said heavily. “Insinuating that my employee or his eyewitness may have fabricated their statements, Mr. Fowles? Somehow I do not consider that inconsequential.”

“I’m afraid that Mr. Drake mistook my intention,” Norton Fowles protested. “At that point the interview was almost over and I was just, ah, thinking aloud. I do tend to be a little overly suspicious. It comes with the job. I’m very sorry that he was confused.” That hard little smile of his flashed and vanished. Simon tried not to grit his teeth.

“I see,” Upstairs said, after a moment. “And are you now satisfied? Have you tacked down your ‘tiny details’?”

“There’s no need to be snide, Carstairs,” Baker Hart put in mildly.

“I assure you that should I choose to be snide, you’ll know it,” Upstairs said, equally mildly. “Well, Mr. Fowles?”

“If I may explain—” Norton Fowles began.

“Please do,” Upstairs said.

“The plaintiff in this suit is, mm, how should I put it, very heavily and personally involved,” Fowles said. “She was also a lawyer at one time—albeit not a very skilled one—and currently has a large amount of time on her hands. Hers is not the most difficult of complaints that has ever been brought against the Bureau, but she and her lawyers are throwing an amazing amount of dirt and chaff at us, just to see what sticks. Any little niche in the dark corners of the law that she can exploit, she has exploited. There is absolutely no question in my mind that if I leave any little detail unexamined, she will find it, grab onto it, and peel it back. I don’t wish to leave the Bureau or Mr. Drake vulnerable in any way—”

“Yes, and your dogged thoroughness on Mr. Drake’s behalf does you credit, I’m certain,” Upstairs said, breaking in. He glanced at Hart. “That was my being snide, for the record, Baker.”

“So noted,” Baker Hart said, his voice still mild.

“But you still haven’t answered my question,” Upstairs said, turning his attention back to Norton Fowles. “Are you now satisfied?”

Norton Fowles was quiet. Aware of the two section heads glancing in his direction, Simon forced himself to furrow his brow. Finally, with a sigh, Norton Fowles shut his eyes and shook his head. “I wish I could say that I were,” he said. “The fact of the matter is, the more I dig, the more things simply fail to add up. If I may—”

"If these are *new* concerns, it's unfair of you to spring them on us without warning," Upstairs said immediately.

Baker Hart glanced at Upstairs again. "You're the one that called this meeting, Carstairs. For God's sake, let's just have this out and get it over with." Upstairs harrumphed, but settled, both hands on the head of his cane, his eyes glittering unpleasantly. Baker Hart waited a moment, then looked back at Fowles. "All right, Norton," he said. The tone of his voice sounded like a warning, Simon was secretly pleased to note. "Let's hear it."

"Before I begin, I want to say that I sincerely do not believe that Mr. Drake has, hm, actually set out to deceive anyone," Fowles said, turning halfway around to pick up a manila folder off the table behind him. "Mr. Drake had been shot in the chest less than two weeks before the incident in question, after all, and he was re-injured during the scuffle that occurred and questioned shortly afterwards. While I believe that it was perhaps, ah, a dubious judgment call on Mr. Drake's part to have accompanied his team at all—" Simon's nostrils flared with his sudden need to protest heatedly and at some length "—I also believe that his recent prior injury certainly contributed highly to any, ah, mental lapses and irregularities on his part. That being said."

"Yes, that being said," Upstairs said impatiently. "Your concern for Simon's mental health is touching, Mr. Fowles."

"I'd like to call your attention to these photos of the scene," Norton Fowles said, flicking the folder open neatly with the stump of his left arm and plucking a sheaf of large photographs off the top of the pile of papers. He let them cascade out of his hand onto the clean surface of Baker Hart's desk, Cole Farraday dead in front of Simon all over again, in technicolor and in plural. "If you'll note the official time-and-date stamps, you'll note that these were taken by, ah, one Ms. Sandra Leone, who is Mr. Drake's second-in-command, and who was left in charge of the crime scene after Mr. Drake left to seek medical assistance."

Upstairs gave the photographs a cursory glance. Simon looked from left to right, fascinated a little despite himself. Baker Hart picked up one of the closest photos, mimed a little shudder, and fastidiously let it drop. "In and of themselves, these photographs are innocuous," Norton Fowles said, plucking a folded piece of paper out of the folder. "However, I took the liberty of having both Recreations and Ballistics visit the site and put these photographs into context for us—"

"Oh, God, Norton, my budget," Baker murmured under his breath, not without some humor.

Ignoring him, Norton Fowles unfolded the paper with a snap of his wrist and let it drift down onto the desk, mercifully covering the photographs with stark black-and-white line drawings and tiny little hand-lettered labels. "This is, ah, an aerial view of the warehouse in question with the scene overlaid, as you can see," he said.

"I can see that," Upstairs said ominously. "This is also the first time I've seen it. Baker, I must protest—"

"No, no," Baker Hart said, still mildly. "Now I'm curious. Let him have his say, since you called this meeting and Norton went to all the trouble of preparing for it. I promise I won't ask for an official response from you or Mr. Drake today."

Upstairs snapped his jaw mulishly shut and turned his attention back to the map. "As I was saying," Norton Fowles said, tapping the paper. "As you can see, this would be the body of Cole Farraday in the position in which it was found. Ms. Leone has officially stated that the body was not moved or tampered with in any way beyond a check for a pulse, surely a formality in this case. This—" Fowles drew his finger around a vast and vaguely triangular splotch, carefully, almost lovingly detailed, which made Simon a little sick to his stomach "—is, ah, the spray of blood, bone, and brain matter that came from the exit wound in Mr. Farraday's skull. As you can see, Mr. Farraday staggered back a few feet before collapsing, which is certainly not unusual, and is consistent with statements."

He paused, as if to give Upstairs time to protest. Upstairs made an impatient little gesture. Norton Fowles nodded, his finger moving on. "Here is Farraday's gun, a .22 pistol. Ballistic tests proved that it was both the gun that was used to shoot Mr. Drake two weeks before *and* the gun that was stolen from, ah . . ." He paused again. Simon gritted his teeth, refusing to be led into the gap, and after a moment Norton Fowles sighed and consulted a paper still in his folder. "Adams, Mackenzie, Procomo, Attorneys at Law, coincidentally the law firm where Diana Fontaine was employed at the time."

"Not so coincidentally, I think we can assume," Upstairs murmured under his breath.

"Ms. Fontaine denies having anything to do with the theft, of course, and an actual break-in did occur around that time, but your point is, ah, well taken," Norton Fowles said, with a thin little slice of smile. "The attorney to whom the .22 is registered has also officially identified it as his, but this is all tangential to the actual point that I wish to make."

"And that is?" Upstairs said.

"The point is this," Norton Fowles said, pointing to a tiny black splotch on the paper. All three of the others craned in to look at it, Simon just as confused as the rest of them. "A small amount of blood of a different blood type from Mr. Farraday's," Fowles clarified. "In fact, it matches Mr. Drake's blood type and is consistent with his statement regarding the reopening of his wound and his fall at that time."

Upstairs arched one eyebrow. "So . . . everything is consistent with statements made? I'm failing to see your point."

"I, ah, was just getting to it," Norton Fowles said, almost humbly. Something about that humble tone made Simon apprehensive. Fowles put the folder down

on the desk and started flicking through it one-handed. “If I may refer back to the official statements—or may I paraphrase?”

“Refer to the statements, please,” Upstairs said shortly.

“Of course,” Fowles said, bobbing his head. He selected a sheet of paper, put it on top of the pile, reached up to adjust his glasses, and then picked up the paper. “In his statement, Mr. Drake clearly states, ‘Farraday dropped his gun during the struggle. It fell and landed a short distance away.’ He then goes on to describe the fight and continues, ‘When I fell, Farraday shook away from me and ran after his gun. I picked myself up and ran after my gun. While I did not see Jeremy Archer at that time, I did see my gun moving towards me along the floor, as if it had been kicked or slid back in my direction. I picked up my gun and turned to face Farraday just as Farraday picked up his gun and turned to face me. He was bringing his gun up, so I also brought my gun up and fired.’” Norton Fowles cleared his throat and looked at Simon. “Is that correct, Mr. Drake?”

Simon almost strangled on it, but he managed not to say anything. “Mr. Drake and I will not be making statements at this time,” Upstairs said testily. “Get to the point.”

“Ah, hm,” Norton Fowles said absently, flipping the sheet of paper over. “I refer to the statement made by one Jeremy Archer, real name unknown, Mr. Drake’s eyewitness and the only other witness to this shooting: ‘Simon and Farraday fought for a moment, and Simon made Farraday drop his gun somehow. It fell to the ground, bounced once, and slid, winding up a little ways away.’ And further: ‘Farraday spun and ran for his dropped gun. When I saw Simon coming in my direction, I realized all at once that he must be after his gun, so I put it on the ground and slid it to him. He ran over, picked it up, and turned to face Farraday. By that point Farraday had also reached his gun, picked it up, and turned to face Simon. At the time I was unsure as to which of them fired, because they both brought their guns up at once, but then Mr. Farraday’s eye—the interviewer notes a brief pause here—blew out, and he dropped the gun, staggered backwards, and fell.’” Fowles paused, as if for emphasis.

“Close call, I see,” Baker Hart murmured in vague sympathy.

“I, ah, I’m not certain about that, sir,” Norton Fowles said, putting down the piece of paper and adjusting his glasses again. “You see, these statements are almost perfectly similar. Nothing about the one contradicts the other at all, and yet, there’s the sort of variation you’d normally expect from two disparate witnesses. But the facts, sir: both these statements contradict the facts.”

Upstairs was silent. Simon, his stomach clenching, was also silent. Baker Hart glanced at both of them, then back at Fowles. “Very well, Norton,” he said, a little more warmly than before. “How?”

“Look at where the blood spray from Mr. Farraday’s head begins,” Norton Fowles said, tapping the large irregular shape. “And look where the blood splotch from Mr. Drake’s chest is. Both testimonies have clearly stated that Mr.

Farraday's gun wound up a short distance away, and that when he broke free, he 'ran' for it—but judging by this spray, Ballistics concludes that he was right around two feet from Mr. Drake's clearly-marked position when he was shot. He would not have to 'run' for that. He'd barely have to turn around. Indeed, I might almost call it 'arm's length' from Mr. Drake's position, and the measured length of Mr. Farraday's arm, taken during his autopsy, confirms that."

The room was silent. Norton Fowles paused, this time almost surely for effect, and then touched the black-and-white drawing of Cole Farraday's body, almost reverently. "The autopsy also raised the second issue, namely, the bullet's angle of entry. According to both statements Mr. Drake and Mr. Farraday 'turned to face one another', both trying to shoot the other, when Mr. Drake fired. If that was so, the bullet should have entered Mr. Farraday's face straight on—but the autopsy shows that it entered his face at an oblique angle. To be precise, Cole Farraday had his face turned almost eighty degrees away from the gun in question when the bullet entered his eye socket and exited—not through the back of his skull, but, ah, through the opposite side. This is, of course, reinforced by where the bullet from Mr. Drake's gun was eventually found, which is to say, here." Fowles traced a line through the rendering of the mess to the little circled bullet, at the mess' far edge.

Baker Hart's brow furrowed. "Huh," he said.

"Furthermore," Norton Fowles went inexorably on, "if we connect Mr. Farraday's blood spray, Mr. Drake's blood splotch, and the bullet's angle of entry, they form a nearly-perfect right triangle, suggesting that when the bullet entered Cole Farraday's skull, he was looking not here, from where Mr. Drake claims to have fired—" Fowles touched a vague dotted circle on the diagram "—but, in fact, here." Norton Fowles' finger landed with a meaty thump on the little splotch of Simon's blood. It was pure theater. Simon was in no mood to appreciate it.

"That *is* odd," Baker Hart said after a moment. "Do you have a theory, Norton?"

"No, sir," Norton Fowles said, radiating both contentment and innocence. "I merely find these things odd. Mr. Drake was badly wounded and shaken at the time, and Mr. Archer no less so; I'm sure that the situation was much more confused than these clean statements would lead a jury to believe. As a fellow member of the Bureau, I know quite well how these things can get . . . muddled, and I'm certain that even an agent of Mr. Drake's experience can occasionally slip and, ah, unduly influence the eyewitness report."

"That is a specious charge," Upstairs stormed, but Norton Fowles was certain of himself now and rode right over him: "The fact also remains that nearly half an hour passed between Mr. Farraday's confirmed time of death and Ms. Leone's call for official backup. Half an hour, despite the fact that both Mr. Drake and Mr. Archer were wounded at the time—and Mr. Drake and Mr. Archer did not reach base and the medical facilities here until fifteen minutes after Ms. Leone's call,

despite Mr. Takemura's, ah, *fabled* driving record. They were not *en route* during that half an hour, unless Mr. Takemura got lost on the way, which seems unlikely. Now, there are ways to account for this, of course: Mr. Drake had to make sure that Mr. Farraday was dead and that Mr. Archer was all right, I'm certain, and recollect his team from a maze-like situation, and so on. Still, however, half an hour. It doesn't sit right with me. But, as I said, my job has made me a little overly paranoid." His smile sliced on and back off. "In fact, I'm sure all these things have simple explanations that I'm overlooking. I've spent so long staring at these things that I am, perhaps, a little, ah, snowblind?"

"No, no," Baker Hart said absently, turning the diagram around and studying it. "These are all good points, Norton. I just have one question."

"Sir?" Norton Fowles said, tilting his head. Light sheened from his glasses.

"About this Archer person: you said 'real name unknown'," Hart said. "Why is that?"

"Ah." Norton Fowles bowed his head and touched the bridge of his glasses with one finger, like a salute. "Jeremy Archer is a known felon who works under many aliases, sir. He is also an associate of Mr. Drake's and has, in fact, worked for the Bureau in an official capacity before, under Mr. Drake's aegis."

"With my informed consent," Upstairs rumbled, breaking out of whatever trance he was currently in.

"What sort of felon?" Baker Hart said, frowning.

"Burglar, sir," Norton Fowles said. "Burglar, sneak thief, and, of course, confidence man."

"Huh," Baker Hart said again. "Interesting. And that's the only witness?"

"Yes, sir," Fowles said.

"Hm." Baker Hart studied the diagram for a few moments in silence, then carefully folded it up. "Norton, may I send this with Carstairs so that he and Mr. Drake can prepare their counter-statement?"

"Of course, sir," Norton Fowles said, bobbing his head. "I have copies."

Upstairs led the way to the elevator in an injured silence that contrived to be vast, enveloping the numbed Simon as he plodded along in the man's slow, hitching wake, hating Norton Fowles with every inch of his being that he could spare. Damn the man anyway—*no*, thought Simon, *the man only put things together from evidence. That's his job. This is my fault. I thought I'd get away with it. I did it to protect Jeremy but I'll never be able to explain to anybody why...*

The elevator doors closed on the two of them. Simon opened his mouth, but Upstairs immediately held up a hand like a policeman stopping traffic. Simon shut his mouth again. Upstairs nodded once and selected not the second floor, but the parking garage below the first. Simon opened his mouth again. Upstairs' hand snapped up again. Simon closed his mouth.

They rode in stiff silence down to the garage, where Upstairs handed his keys to the man in the booth, who checked them against a list, checked Upstairs' ID, and trotted off. They waited for Upstairs' car in silence. Once it arrived—it was a massive dark blue sedan, which surprised Simon not one bit—the valet opened the passenger-side door for Simon while Upstairs limped around and settled himself behind the wheel. Simon settled in and buckled his seat belt, moving entirely on autopilot. Upstairs got himself and his cane settled to his satisfaction, started the car, and waved to the man in the booth, who obligingly raised the bar. The wheels bumped over the severe-tire-damage spikes and out into the heat of the early evening.

Once Upstairs had pulled out of the lot and onto the road, Simon opened his mouth again, already ducking his head a little. Upstairs shook his head. Simon closed his mouth and subsided in concentration, thinking hard.

They rode in silence for a few minutes, out to one of the closest branches of the Potomac. It made Simon think of Farraday, but, Simon had to admit, most everything would, right now. Upstairs parked illegally, dropped an FBI—OFFICIAL BUSINESS placard in the front window, and led the way away from the car, until he and Simon were a good thirty feet from it and standing on the little bridge overlooking the river, roasting gently in the evening sun. It was kind of pretty, despite the heat. DC was full of tiny, pretty spots like this one, if you knew where to look. “Well, Simon,” Upstairs finally said, almost gently.

“Yes, sir,” Simon said. He sounded pathetic and wanted to kick himself for it.

“That man’s certainly made himself quite a case from the gory details, hasn’t he,” Upstairs went on. “Do you have any idea how any of this came about?”

“No, sir,” Simon said. “I mean, Farraday did, uh, twitch a lot, sir. Especially under stress. I suppose it’s not impossible that his head jerked to the side at exactly the wrong moment.”

“That’s certainly possible,” Upstairs said. “And, of course, Norton Fowles may not *believe* any of those things he said about your being . . . confused, but frankly, it could very well be true.” He held up a finger. “No, don’t argue with me.”

“I wasn’t planning to,” Simon said truthfully.

“Mr. Fowles is attempting to use the power of suggestion against us, in essence,” Upstairs said, looking away over the green bend of the river. “And Occam’s Razor, of course. Personally, I’ve always found Occam’s Razor to shave less and less finely the more chaotic a scene is, and this scene sounds chaotic in the extreme.”

“Sir,” Simon said.

Upstairs glanced back at him. “When Farraday dropped his gun the first time, did you actually see where it went?”

“I didn’t stop to measure the distance, if that’s what you’re asking,” Simon said carefully. “I wasn’t watching when he fetched it back. I just know that it fell

and bounced. For all I know he was able to just lunge down and pick it up, and the delay was in casting about for it.”

“Good,” Upstairs said. “That’s good. What we need to do here, Simon, is construct a plausible scenario that contradicts Mr. Fowles’ unspoken assertion that Mr. Farraday was, in fact, simply executed in revenge, possibly shot by someone else—say, this convenient criminal—while you held him helpless.”

Simon sucked in a hot breath. “Sir, I wouldn’t—*Archer* wouldn’t—”

“I know,” Upstairs said. “You wouldn’t do such a thing. I know that very well.”

“Sir,” said Simon, “about Norton Fowles—”

“He’s a bitter old man who wrongly believes himself to be underpromoted and underutilized,” Upstairs said, needing no further prompting. He drove the butt of his cane into the gravel with a crunching sound. “Thirty years ago he and I went through the Academy and started as field agents almost together, and even then the man’s skills were limited. He’s never forgiven me for getting the jump on him back then, and once his accident derailed him into the Office of Professional Responsibility, he’s been attempting to be a thorn in my side ever since. And usually failing.” Upstairs glanced in Simon’s direction and smiled wryly. “I assume that answers your question?”

“Yes, sir,” Simon said, blinking.

“I, of course, never said anything of the sort,” Upstairs said in conclusion, looking away again.

“Yessir.” Simon mopped his brow with the back of his hand. “How’d he lose his arm?” he asked, out of sheer curiosity.

“Slipped and fell under a garbage truck while pursuing a suspect on foot,” Upstairs said.

Simon pressed his lips together in an attempt not to laugh. For one thing, it wasn’t funny—okay, it was—and for another, it was the sort of dumb-luck accident that could happen to anybody. Even to Simon. Except it wasn’t: a *garbage* truck, Christ. “Heh,” Simon finally said, kicking at a bit of gravel.

“I’ll admit to finding the humor in the situation myself, even if it’s a little unbecoming to admit it,” Upstairs said. “I never liked him. He’s the sort that takes refuge in the rules because he hasn’t got any talent for anything else.”

“You know, I’d gathered that,” Simon said. The pain in his midsection was easing. The next few days would suck, and he might end up with a pretty mighty black mark on his record, but Upstairs was being so calm about it—“So what happens now?” Simon asked.

“I’ll construct an alternate scenario that takes into consideration the things we’ve spoken about here,” Upstairs said. “It’ll thrash around in Professional Responsibility like a dying fish for a few days and then Baker will order all of Norton’s research marked confidential and destroyed, because no matter how badly Norton wants to damage me through you, Baker is not going to let Diana

Fontaine's lawyers see these documents or even learn that they exist. Norton's made his point and rubbed my nose in it a little, or so he thinks, Baker will look at me askance for a while and think that I owe him a favor, and you will probably be officially reprimanded for going back on duty while injured too badly to properly handle the situation that arose. In one way that will not look good on your record, but in another, it will look quite good, if you follow me."

"Yes, sir," Simon said, letting out a breath that he hadn't known he was holding.

"In the grand game of office politics, Special Ops lost a little ground," Upstairs said, shrugging. "And I certainly wouldn't have let you go haring off injured if I'd known before the fact, so I suppose that I am officially a bit upset with you. But as long as there's nothing you're not telling me, Simon, it'll all come to nothing in the end." He paused. "Is there anything you're not telling me, Simon?"

Simon, who hadn't been expecting it, jerked and took half a step back. Caught out without a ready lie, startled, he hesitated. Then he caught himself hesitating and kicked himself, but it was already too late. The silence stretched thin between them, Upstairs' eyes going wide, going narrow, and then going wary and just a little sad, an expression Simon had never seen on him before—"Ah," Upstairs said heavily after a moment, looking down.

"Sir," Simon protested. "Sir, it's not—"

Upstairs held up his hand, still looking down. "Don't," he said. "I don't want to know. It's better if I don't."

"Sir," Simon said, subsiding.

"I invested a lot of trust in you, Simon," Upstairs said, after a moment that felt like forever. "Right from the start. You've never let me down before."

"I know, sir," Simon said, almost inaudibly.

"Whatever it was that made you finally decide to abuse that trust..." A car roared by and Upstairs turned his back on Simon to watch it go. "...well. I hope it was worth it."

"I..." Simon looked at the uninformative spread of Upstairs' broad shoulders under the gray fabric of his suit. "I'd like to think so, sir."

Upstairs nodded. "In that case, you realize that I can't promise anything," he said. "I'll do what I can, and in all likelihood it will turn out the same in either case, but if the evidence is against you for any reason..."

"I know, sir," said Simon. "I, uh, appreciate whatever you can do for me."

"I'll do what I can," Upstairs repeated. "You've been my fair-haired boy for years, after all, and the consequences of your actions therefore reflect directly on me and on the quality of my judgment. While ultimately my loyalty is to the Bureau..." He trailed off there.

"Yes, sir," Simon said. He'd never felt quite so small.

"It's too hot out here," Upstairs said, though he hadn't managed to break a sweat even inside that suit of his. Without turning back towards Simon he limped

off, crunching slowly back towards the heat-shimmering mirage of his car. “Let’s go back to base. I believe we both have some work to be doing.”

“Yes, sir,” Simon said again, trailing after him, scuffing his feet through the gravel and leaving twin trails behind him.

It was close to six by the time Upstairs dropped Simon off, just outside the Special Ops wing. The ride back had been silent and uncomfortable; Simon had given up on staring out the side window after a while and just shut his eyes, cursing himself nine ways to hell for being such an unimaginable idiot. “There you are,” Upstairs said, pulling up at the door. It was the only thing he’d said since leaving the riverbank.

“Thank you, sir,” Simon said, and got out of the car. Upstairs drove sedately off without another word, his car disappearing around the back of the building. Simon fumbled in his pocket, fished out his ID, and let himself into the building and into the stale, cool air.

He was almost an hour late for his shift, but instead of heading directly for the saferoom, he veered off into the men’s room closest to the outside door. He caught a single glance of himself in the mirror, flushed and disheveled and grimy, and then he stuck both hands in the cold water and caught his breath in an unsteady hiss.

By the time Simon finished splashing cold water on his face and running his wet hands through his hair, he felt almost human again, if a bit wet. He dried himself off as best he could, then turned to throw the handful of paper towels away and made the mistake of meeting his own hunted eyes in the mirror. It stopped him in his tracks.

He was already overheating again, a sheen of fresh sweat gleaming on his face, and the painted concrete wall was cool and dry when it rose up to meet him. Simon leaned weakly against it and shut his eyes, then gave in and let his head fall, resting his forehead against the cool surface.

“Shit,” Simon said under his breath, lifting his head and letting it fall back again. Thunk. The impact jarred him and woke a raging ache in the muscles of his neck, but knocked his thoughts back into alignment; leaving his eyes shut Simon reached up and splayed both hands out against the wall, letting the wall hold him up for a few precious seconds longer.

“Hey, boss,” Sandra said, raising one hand as Simon let himself into the saferoom. “You’re running a little late. Everything okay?”

“Eh,” Simon said, shrugging. He caught the door and eased it shut. “Had a meeting with Professional Responsibility. That’ll take the starch out of your dick, you know?”

Sandra said nothing for a moment, although her gaze sharpened until Simon found himself forced to look away. “I suppose it would, in theory,” she finally said. “Is it anything we need to worry about?”

Once again, caught, Simon hesitated. “I’m not sure, Sandy,” he finally said, hating himself for it but needing to go ahead and get the idea out there. “I want to say no, but I can’t.”

Sandra hissed in a breath, but didn’t say anything. Simon forced himself to meet her gaze, and this time it was Sandra who flinched. “Let me know if there’s anything I can do,” she said, looking down at her hands.

“Actually, now that you mention it, yeah, there is: keep your head down and stay out of this,” Simon told her, pushing himself away from the door and heading for the dubious sanctuary of his office. “It’s all high-level politics now. The fewer of us who end up getting peed on, the better.”

“What?” Dave said in confusion, surfacing.

Simon laughed under his breath, despite everything. “Nothing, Stone,” he said. “Also, your timing is as perfect as ever, and by ‘perfect’, I mean ‘ass’.”

“What?” Dave said again, piteously, like he already knew he wasn’t going to get an answer.

After half an hour’s halfhearted work, the surface of Simon’s desk was once again clean except for the random stains that littered the fake wood veneer. Nate poked his head in to say hello and then got to work; accordingly, Simon told Dave to go home. Fifteen minutes later, he told Dave to go home again. It was all so normal that it felt positively surreal.

He dealt with his email purely by rote, emptying the inbox of all its petty concerns. Once that was done, he shut his computer back down and kicked his chair around, folding his hands on his desk and staring down at them. After a moment he unfolded his hands and cupped them around an empty double handful of air, thinking hard.

Right now, he had three problems. Simon moved that empty handful of air to the left. His first problem was the official Rappaport operation. It almost wasn’t a problem at all. Rappaport was the very definition of makework, and Simon’s team was more than equal to the job even without his supervision. Sooner or later Rappaport would turn up, or he wouldn’t, and either way it didn’t really make a difference to Simon. So: Rappaport was his first problem, but right now, there

was nothing he could do about it but wait. Simon parted his hands. Okay, then. Let it go.

Simon moved his hands back to the center of the desk and cupped up another handful of air. His second problem was Professional Responsibility and Norton Fowles, and that was without a doubt his biggest problem right now. Unfortunately, it was now almost completely out of his hands—Simon let that handful of air go, dimly pleased by the symbolism of it—and it had snowballed into something a lot bigger than just him. Something political. So: Norton Fowles was his second problem, but right now, that problem rested firmly in Upstairs' hands. Okay, then. Let it go.

Simon picked up a third handful of air and moved it to the right. His third problem was Jeremy and Jeremy's current problem with Viktor Karpol. Technically it wasn't Simon's problem at all, except for the part where he had to accept a lot of the blame for creating the situation in the first place, a thought which left a bitter taste in the back of his mouth. But Jeremy had gone to ground who knew where, and even if Simon had known how to get hold of him, there wasn't anything he could do to help. So: Jeremy and Viktor Karpol were his third problem, but right now, Simon was helpless to do anything about it. Okay, then. Let it go.

Simon opened his hands and let that final handful of air go, then abruptly snapped both hands shut again. There *was* something he could do there, wasn't there? If only to satisfy his own curiosity. He couldn't do it officially, but . . .

Pushing his chair back, Simon stood up and headed out into the main room. He already knew what he was going to see, and he was not disappointed. He strode right over and grabbed the oblivious Dave by the back of his shirt collar. "Da-ave," he half-sang.

Dave yelped and nearly fell right out of his chair, arms flailing. "I was just shutting things down!" he protested, once he recovered. "I swear! I'm heading out right now!"

"Great!" Simon said. "It's always so nice when you listen to me, Dave."

Dave paused and tugged experimentally against Simon's grip on his collar. "Um," he said.

"Nope," Simon said, mimicking a cheerfulness he was almost feeling. Something about picking on Dave always made him feel better. "I'm not letting go until all nineteen of your computers have been shut down."

"That could, um, be a problem," said Dave, "since I only have five."

"Oh, my bad, you only have *five* computers over here, Jesus Christ," Simon said. "Something is very, very wrong with you."

"And two of them are already turned off," Dave added. The computer in front of him went black and he turned off the monitor. "So, um."

"Okay, tell you what, I'll compromise," Simon said, feeling magnanimous. "You shut down two more computers and we'll call it even."

"I'd kind of like to leave that one running," Dave said, twisting awkwardly in Simon's grip and pointing to the one behind him. "If that's okay with you?"

Simon swung his elbow up and over Dave's head, manually turning Dave's chair until Dave was facing the other way. "Will you leave it running and go home?"

Dave grabbed the armrests of his chair and rode the spin out. "Um," he said, blinking. "Yes?"

"Will you promise not to try and get into it from home?"

"Yes?"

"Then you may leave that one running," Simon declared. "See how easy I am to get along with? Aren't you lucky I'm not a hardcase?"

Dave ducked back under Simon's arm and shut down a second computer, then leaned way back and punched off the monitor attached to the one that was still running. "Okay," he said, tugging against Simon's grip again. "They're off."

"Awesome," Simon said, spinning Dave around in his chair just because he could. Dave yelped and slammed both feet down, putting on the brakes and nearly choking himself on his own collar in the process. "Okay!" Simon said, adjusting his grip. "Now stand up." Dave, smart enough not to protest, got warily to his feet, ducking under Simon's arm again and pulling his shirt even more sadly askew. "Get your briefcase," Simon said, pulling Dave to the left. Dave reached blindly down and picked up his briefcase. "Okay," Simon said. "Now I am going to walk you out of the building—no, no, I insist. Come on." And he headed for the door, towing a hapless Dave stumbling backwards in his wake.

Having made his point, he let go of Dave's shirt collar once the saferoom door had closed behind them. Keeping one wary eye on Simon, Dave paused long enough to yank his shirt back down and tug his collar back into place. "Um," he said.

"No, you're not actually in trouble," Simon said, jerking his head towards the exit. "You're just heading for a burnout and I cannot afford to lose you, now or ever."

"Yeah, but . . ."

"Walk *and* talk," Simon said, pushing lightly at Dave's shoulder to get the guy moving.

Dave obediently fell into step beside him, still tugging at his wrinkled collar. "I'm fine," he said, although he didn't sound certain.

"Yeah, okay, I will give you that. For now, you're fine," Simon said. "But I don't know how much longer you can keep this shit up, and I don't intend to find out. Okay?"

"Okay," Dave said, ducking his head.

Simon sighed and clapped Dave on the shoulder, a move that made Dave squawk and duck like he was expecting to be hit. "The team needs you with us,

Dave,” Simon said, squeezing his shoulder. “I need you with us. And I need you sharp. Okay?”

“Okay,” Dave said again. He looked a little bug-eyed. It was a look that Simon was not unaccustomed to.

“And if you waste all your awesome on a piece-of-shit job like *Rappaport*, I’ll kick your ass,” Simon said genially, opening the door for Dave. “There. Go home. Come back tomorrow morning.”

“Um. Yeah. Okay,” Dave said, squinting against the setting sun for a moment before edging out into the light. Despite his general geekish pallor he failed to burst into flames on the spot. “G’night.”

“Night, Dave,” Simon said, leaning against the door.

Dave hesitated at the edge of the portico. “Did you need something else?”

“Me? Nope,” Simon said. “I’m just going to watch until you get into your car and go home. Just to be certain.”

“Oh,” Dave said faintly. He took a step or two backwards, then turned around and trudged out to his car, tugging at his shirt.

Simon watched him go, smiling just a bit. Once Dave’s car pulled out of its spot and headed for the security gate, Simon stepped out into the evening and let the door close behind him, pulling out his cell phone. Just after seven; just after five, Mountain Time. It only took a few seconds of dicking around with his phone to get the number he needed.

“Durango Police Department,” the woman on the other end of the line said.

“Yeah, hi,” Simon said, shutting his eyes. “I’d like to speak to someone about a missing person, please.”

“Yes, sir, please hold.”

Simon held. Simon also edged back into the slanting shadow of the portico and sat on the low stone wall there. It was still hot from the sun, but not unpleasantly so, and there was a sluggish breeze blowing; Simon thought he could smell rain on the way. Wishful thinking, maybe.

His phone clicked. “This is Sergeant Powell,” a voice said. “How can I help you?”

“Ah, yeah,” Simon said. “My name is Simon Drake, and I’m with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Having said that, let me stress right now that this is currently a completely unofficial call, but if you’d like to check my bona fides, you can call the Washington DC branch at any time and ask about me.”

Sergeant Powell chewed on that for a moment. “Ah, what’d you say your name was?”

“Simon Drake,” Simon said again. “I’m with Special Ops, out of the main branch. The switchboard can confirm all that for you.”

“Okay,” Sergeant Powell said, warily. “Why don’t you tell me what you need and then I’ll decide what to do from there.”

“Sounds good to me.” Simon rubbed the back of his neck. “Like I said, right now this is completely unofficial and off the record. What I need to know is if you’ve had a missing person reported in the last few days with the first name of Annabelle or something similar.”

The silence from the other end of the line told Simon a lot more than he was currently happy to be hearing. “Sir, at this time I’d like to call and confirm your identity before proceeding,” Sergeant Powell finally said, managing to kick Simon in the stomach from two time zones away.

“That’s fair,” Simon said, hunching forward to stare at the ground. “Once you’ve done that, I’d appreciate it if you’d call me back at this number. It’s my cell.”

“Got it,” Powell said. “I should get back to you shortly.”

“Thank you,” Simon said, hitting the CALL CANCEL button with his thumb and folding his phone closed.

It was close to ten minutes before Simon’s phone rang again, long enough that the breeze had picked up and started to freshen. Simon snapped his phone open. “Simon Drake,” he said.

“Agent Drake,” Sergeant Powell said, somewhat less wary now. “I’m sorry it took me so long to get back to you, but I wanted to run this by my captain before proceeding.”

“No need to apologize,” Simon said. “I completely understand. And judging by your reaction, I’d say that the answer to my question is ‘yes’.”

“Ohh yes,” Powell said. “I did not even have to stop and think about it. One Annabelle Lamb was reported missing last Thursday, and let me tell you, an FBI agent calling out of the blue to ask about it is only the latest weird circumstance attached to this case.”

Simon winced. “You know what, I’m not sure I like the sound of that. Can you fill me in?”

“Sure can,” Powell said. “The report was initially filed last Thursday, at around three in the afternoon, by one, ah, Shawna Traviston, she’s Ms. Lamb’s caretaker—”

“Caretaker?” Simon said, blinking.

“And there you hit weird thing number one,” Sergeant Powell said, not without some satisfaction. “Apparently Ms. Lamb is a paraplegic and normally confined to a wheelchair, although according to Ms. Traviston she does well enough for herself that the hospice only looks in on her twice a week.”

“A *wheelchair*?” Simon said, his voice nearly cracking on that one.

“Absolutely. She’s got one of those really fancy expensive hydraulic ones—I mean, we’re talking about one of those big chrome sonsabitches that cost about as much as a decent car and look like something out of a sci-fi movie—as well as a more standard wheelchair that’s kept folded up in the closet for emergencies.

And that's where weird thing number two comes in: we know this because they were both still there, in her apartment. Her big one was all plugged into its recharging station and everything."

"So it's unlikely that she just decided to go somewhere without telling anyone," Simon said. "I mean, unless she crawled."

"Yep," Powell said. "Given that fact, we decided to waive the twenty-four-hour rule, especially since she could have disappeared any time between Monday evening, when Ms. Traviston last visited, and Thursday afternoon, when Ms. Traviston discovered her missing."

Simon shut his eyes and sent up a silent, selfish prayer to whoever might be listening: please, please don't let her have vanished on Wednesday. Please, not during that twenty-four-hour period when he'd been waiting on Langridge. "Any sign of a struggle?" he asked, instead.

"None at all," Sergeant Powell said. "The apartment was clean and in perfect order. Nothing appeared to have been stolen, either, except weird thing number three: a suitcase and a selection of Ms. Lamb's clothes."

"A suitcase?" Simon said, grabbing onto this idea with a lunatic hope. "So she *could* have done some kind of runner—"

"—which brings me to weird thing number four," Powell said. "I won't lie to you, that's what I thought, too. Some lady goes off with her boyfriend on the spur of the moment, forgets to tell anyone, it's happened before. But then an officer actually went out and spoke to Ms. Lamb's neighbors."

"Uh oh," Simon said. The momentary fizzle of hope died.

"Oh yeah," Powell said. "First couple of neighbors didn't know nothin' about nothin', but the third one tells the officer not to be ridiculous, Ms. Lamb's not missing, the poor thing's in the hospital. She knows this, of course, because she saw the ambulance on Wednesday afternoon, and the two uniformed paramedics carrying an unconscious Ms. Lamb out of her apartment on a stretcher."

"Oh, Jesus," Simon said weakly, hunching over and folding an arm across his midsection.

"Yeah, a local nursing home *did* have an ambulance stolen on Wednesday morning, before you ask," Sergeant Powell said, oblivious. "We found it abandoned outside the city early Thursday morning, figured at the time it was joyriding kids with weird tastes. I ask you, Agent Drake: what kind of asshole goes to that much trouble just to steal themselves a crippled woman?"

"I don't know," Simon said, because he had to say something. "Any luck tracing her from there?"

"Not much," said Powell. "I mean, if they transferred her into a car from the ambulance, by now she could be anywhere. We've put out the alert—there are people watching for her at every airport from here to Albuquerque, hell, the local Bureau has the alert if you want to look it up—but the sad fact of the matter is that her abductors had a twenty-four-hour head start before anyone even discovered

she was missing. The best news I can give you right now is that her body hasn't turned up anywhere."

Simon nodded dumbly, then remembered that he was on the phone. "Yeah," he said. "So . . . Wednesday afternoon."

"Right," Sergeant Powell said. "Somewhere around two PM local time. I gotta tell you, if you guys want to pull rank and take this one away from us, you're welcome to it."

"I doubt it. It wouldn't be me in any case," Simon said, dropping his head until the fringe of his hair nearly touched his knees. "I'm only trying to check out a story here."

"Huh," Sergeant Powell said. "Anything that might be important?"

"I wish I were at liberty to say," Simon sounded like he was choking, even to his own ears; he forced himself upright, then pushed himself to his feet. "Thank you for your time, Sergeant. I'll let you know if anything turns up."

"Yeah, I've heard that from the feds before," Powell said, without too much malice. "I appreciate the thought, anyway. Anything else I can do for you?"

The breeze lifted again and Simon lifted his face into it, staring unseeing at the clouds gathering in the west. "I think that's it for now," he said. "I appreciate your taking the time to talk to me."

"No problem," Powell said. "Good luck." He hung up.

Simon folded up his phone and put it back in its holster, his mind elsewhere. The smell of rain was everywhere now, thick and close, and thunder muttered unhappily in the distance as Simon swiped himself back into the building.

The storm broke an hour or so later, exploding over DC with a vengeance. The part of Simon's team that was currently in the saferoom kept glancing uneasily at the tiny casement windows every time that the sky lit up outside; Nate went into extreme data-protection mode, saving his work every time he so much as paused for breath.

Simon sat in his office and barely heard any of it. Even when Mike came staggering in, soaked to the bone and bitching, Simon only vaguely noticed. Ostensibly he was going over the latest stack of transcribed recordings, but he kept catching himself having 'read' five or six pages without having read them at all; his mind was stuck in an endless feedback loop of *my fault—fucked up—my fault*.

Now that he knew what to look for, he'd gone out and pulled the report of Annabelle Lamb's abduction off the Bureau's internal network. It didn't give him much that was new, beyond a vague description of the mysterious Annabelle: medium build, brown hair, green eyes. Some help that was. Someone thought they'd seen her at the Albuquerque airport, but it had turned out to be a false alarm. Someone tried to link her disappearance to his own pet theory about a serial killer stalking the four-state area. Someone asked if there were any recent

photos of the abducted woman. Someone confirmed that there were not. It was all useless.

Simon shook his head sharply, went back a couple of pages in the transcriptions, and started over. He'd debated pointing Upstairs to the police report, but in the end, he'd decided against it; now was not the time to abuse Upstairs' good nature by pursuing lines of inquiry not directly related to his official assignment. Besides, if he did that, he'd have to explain how he knew why this woman was important, and that led inevitably back to the last topic in the world he wanted to be discussing and the secret that was at the core of everything. It was all so complicated, all of a sudden. How had Simon ended up in this position, anyway?

He'd done it to himself, that was how. Two years ago he'd made the mistake of getting personal with entirely the wrong person, so to speak, and then he'd made the further mistake of trying to maintain a professional relationship with the same goddamned person. Step by step he'd tracked the mud of his personal life back into his professional life, and now that everything was going to hell the two were so inextricably tangled up that he couldn't cut anything free, not even to save himself—Simon smacked the top of his desk hard enough to make the palm of his hand sting and interrupt the conversation in the other room. And now he was sitting here feeling sorry for *himself* when he was the one who had directly endangered the lives of not one, but two people, one of whom—*admit it, Drake*—was a friend.

Simon bared his teeth and flexed his aching hand. If only Jeremy didn't get under his skin so damn badly—yeah, dumping the blame off on Jeremy, that was a really classy move. Sure, Jeremy got up in Simon's face like it was part of his religion, but Simon was the one who let him. No, Simon's current predicament was all his own fault, and Jeremy's current predicament and its complication was *also* largely Simon's fault, and that was the truth, as much as it made Simon feel sick to admit it.

Glancing at his watch, Simon discovered that it was shortly after eleven. He shook his head a little and tried to make his eyes focus on the paper in front of him, then snarled under his breath and slapped the folder shut. Picking up his empty mug Simon drank down the dregs of his stone-cold coffee, then abandoned the mug to its fate and stumbled out into the main room. "You kids got it under control here?" he asked, grabbing his temples as a headache burst around him. "Little as I like to admit it, I'm pretty fucking well all in. I'm going home."

The desultory conversation died. For a moment they were all silent, all three of them staring at him like he'd sprouted horns. "We're good, Templar," Sandra finally said, shifting in her chair. "It's late. Hardly anyone's moving around up there and there are two of us on the headsets if that changes. Go home and get a little extra sleep. You sound like you could use it."

"Yeah," Simon said. He shut his eyes, swaying on his feet. "Christ, I feel like shit. How much longer is this going to go on?"

“Forever, probably,” Mike said equably, plucking at his damp t-shirt. “We all died and went to hell and we just don’t know it yet.”

Simon shuddered. “Oh, Jesus, don’t say that, I could almost believe it right now.”

“Yeah?” Mike perked up. “Long as you’re feeling credulous, I could use a salary review—”

“Sandy, pop him one for me, will you?” Simon said, rubbing his eyes. The smack and the yelp were almost instantaneous. “Thanks,” he said.

“Any time,” Sandra said. Mike whined a little. Sandra ignored it. “You need a ride home or anything? If you’re getting sick . . .”

“I’m not getting sick,” Simon said. After a moment’s thought, he added, “I don’t think.” He dropped his hands and sighed. “I’m just tired, is all. I need some of whatever Dave is on.”

“No, you don’t,” said Sandra. “One ticking burnout bomb on this team is enough, thanks.”

It wasn’t quite midnight when a rain-spotted Simon let himself into his apartment, almost five hours early. Technically he’d barely been at work for seven hours, but those seven hours felt more like fourteen. Moving was like wading through glue. The feedback loop of accusations in his brain had dimmed to a vague, nauseous sensation of guilt.

Too tired to wait for delivery, let alone cook anything, Simon settled on a bowl of cereal for dinner, leaning against the counter and wolfing his food without bothering to turn on the lights in the kitchen. He chased his dinner with the rest of the orange juice, drinking it straight from the carton.

Stripping out of his jeans and shirt woke phantom itches all over his body, and Simon threw himself into the shower to get rid of the dried sweat. Once he was clean and dry and relatively comfortable, Simon dug around in his medicine cabinet until he turned up one of Sandra’s Ambien, which he’d stashed in an empty Advil bottle for just such an occasion as this. The Ambien was so old that it had probably turned into a chunk of white chalk, but right now Simon thought he’d welcome anything that might give sleep an edge. He washed it down and threw himself into bed, setting the alarm just as a precaution.

The ancient Ambien took forever to kick in, if it ever kicked in at all. Simon stared at the ceiling and wallowed in *my fault my fault my fault* until the mental voice faded and diffused and either exhaustion or Ambien dropped him into blackness; the next thing he knew it was two in the afternoon and the sun was in his face, and he felt so rested and alive that the entirety of Monday might have been nothing but a bad, bad dream.

◆ Eleven

“Oh, man, kids, I feel pretty good,” Simon announced, kicking open the saferoom door at a little past three. “Sleep is a *positive thing*. Who knew? Apparently not Dave.”

“What?” Dave said, surfacing from what looked like a fairly serious computerized coma. After a moment, his eyes focused. “I sleep!” he protested.

“You know what, Dave, I feel so good that I’m not even going to take issue with that blatant lie,” Simon said. “Anything big going down?”

Johnny snorted. “Not a goddamn thing,” he said.

“That your official progress report, Texas?” Simon said, patting Johnny’s head and getting a handful of prickles for his trouble. He whistled and scrubbed his knuckles up the back of Johnny’s neck. “Damn, you get your crewcut sharpened or something?”

“Yeah, on Friday,” Johnny said. “Felt like a goddamn hippie.”

“Man, that feels great,” Simon said, getting both hands into it for a moment. “Like petting a bulldog or something, you know?”

Johnny put up with it for a little while longer, then ducked and swatted at Simon’s hands, snickering. “You wanna fondle a fresh haircut, get your own,” he suggested.

“Jesus, I totally need one, too,” Simon said, getting in one last ruffle before heading for the coffeemaker. “Hope you don’t have a problem with *working* for a goddamn hippie, Texas.”

“Hey, you cut me in on some of that free love shit, I’ll deal,” Johnny said, running a hand back over his hair and putting it back into place, not that it looked any different when he was done.

Simon toasted him with a mugful of coffee. “Free love, my ass, Texas. You want some of this, you gotta buy me dinner first,” Simon said, patting his hip, and then escaped into his office before that particular conversation could get any worse.

* * *

The pile of paper on his desk put a damper on his good mood. Simon put his coffee down, braced himself, and attacked the pile, expecting to have a PERSONAL : CONFIDENTIAL envelope leap out at him at any second. It was almost a letdown when he got down to the bottom and had seen nothing worse than a reminder that the back parking lot was going to be closed for resurfacing next week. No news was good news; Simon chucked out most of the pile, ran a much smaller pile of papers out to the outbox, and then settled in with his email.

Nothing horrible was lurking in his email, either. It only reinforced his confused conviction that the events of Monday had been a bad dream. The Missing Persons report was still lurking on his desktop, but in the clear light of Tuesday afternoon it gave him no more than a slight twinge of remorse. Simon shut his computer down and went to help Johnny with the headphones.

He'd been at it for about half an hour, sunk deep into his unfocused trance, when Dave made a little noise. For a moment Simon thought he was just hearing things, or that he'd heard something over the headset and it had confused him, but then Johnny twisted around in his seat to look at Dave. Simon pushed his headphones down. "What's up, Stone?"

Dave looked up, blinking. "Uh." He touched a few keys. "It's probably nothing."

"You know, if you told me that you just found Rappaport, it'd make my entire goddamned year," Simon suggested.

"What? Oh! No, nothing like that," Dave said. "It's definitely not Rappaport."

"Aw, damn, way to get me all het up for nothing," Simon said, disappointed. "Oh, well. Carry on."

"Yes, sir," Dave said absently, already sinking back into his oblivious trance.

Simon sighed, picked up a pen, and threw it at him. The pen bounced off Dave's forehead, leaving a blue mark; Dave made a sound that Simon could only classify as a 'squeak' and threw his arms up to protect his head, a moment too late. "Don't call me 'sir', Stone," Simon said.

Dave hesitated, then lowered his arms, revealing a reproachful look so piteous that it made Simon grin. "Um. Sorry," Dave said.

Sandra turned up about four with three bags of Chinese takeout dangling from one hand. "Food," she said, dumping the bags on the table. Johnny made a little noise and dove for them.

"Hey, Sandy," Simon said, leaning forward to watch Johnny pry the lids off containers and flip open cartons. He claimed a spork and the first carton that came up fried rice, raised his eyebrows at the spork, then shrugged and dug in. "You ought to go rub Texas' head," he said around a mouthful of rice and shrimp. "It's awesome."

"Yeah, *Sandy's* allowed to rub my head, she wants," Johnny offered, poking an eggroll into his mouth like a cigar before continuing on his prospecting. Dave

pushed himself away from his computers and wandered over, lured by the smell of food.

Sandra ran an exploratory hand over Johnny's head. "Oh, nice," she said, scratching the back of Johnny's neck. "I love freshly-cut man hair. It's like petting a horse."

"Goddamn, you wanna keep doing that, I ain't gonna kick," Johnny said, closing his eyes the rest of the way. Dave took the opportunity to make off with half of the remaining fried things and a carton of plain white rice.

Sandra laughed. "You need a lady friend, Texas," she said, squeezing his shoulders. "Jesus, you're like wire under there."

"Aw, man," Johnny said, nearly groaning it. "Do that again."

"I feel like I'm watching something I shouldn't ought to be," Simon told Dave.

"What?" Dave said, looking up from his food, a shrimp tail poking out of the corner of his mouth.

Sandra pursed her lips and set about rubbing Johnny's shoulders. "Your problem is that you have a filthy mind," she informed Simon, even as Johnny nearly melted under the table. "I think you *all* need lady friends."

"Oh, yeah," Simon said, picking up an invisible pen and writing on the air. "I'll pencil her in somewhere between 'work fifteen hours' and 'sleep eight hours'. Every lady wants a man who'll devote a whole fifteen minutes a day to her needs."

Sandra rolled her eyes. "No matter what I say next, this conversation is eventually going to devolve into a discussion of the relative merits of hookers and strip bars, isn't it?"

"Well, maybe not," Simon said. "Mike's not here. And also, in my position as team leader, I strenuously protest the fact that I was not offered the first backrub."

"You don't get quality hookers in DC anyway, 'less you're a senator or better," Johnny put in. Sandra smacked the back of his head.

By the time Nate turned up, Simon was back in his office, going through the pile of new transcriptions with a much higher rate of success; after all that sleep, he was focused enough to be bored to death by them. "Hey, boss," Nate said, poking his head in. "What's up?"

"The sky, clouds, various aircraft," Simon said, flipping a page. "Alternately, absolutely nothing. What's up with you?"

"Today, not much," Nate said, glancing over his shoulder. "But I'm supposed to go give my deposition tomorrow? Devlin thing?"

Simon smacked his forehead. "Shit, I completely forgot," he said. "What do you need from me on that?"

"I should probably go home early and get some sleep," Nate said, wincing. "I hate going to court enough as it is."

“Yeah,” Simon said, blowing out a breath. “Christ. Okay. Do that. We’ll get along without you for a while.”

“I can stay,” Dave called from the other room.

Simon shut his eyes in exasperation. “No, you can’t,” he said, raising his voice.

Dave bobbed up in the doorway opposite Nate a moment later. “No, seriously, I’ve got something working, I’d kind of like to stay in any case,” he said, the very picture of earnest innocence.

Simon eyed Dave and that look, then sighed. “Will you at least go crash in the mat room for a while?”

“I can do that,” Dave said. “I mean, I’ve got something working, but there’ll be hours where it’s just . . . working. Like how computers do.” He made a vague and frustrated gesture that took in a circle of air in front of him.

Simon glanced at Nate, who was nodding in perfect understanding. “Okay,” Simon said, looking back at Dave. “Stay. But seriously, I want you to crash when you can, and I reserve the right to decree how long you have to stay at home depending on how long you’re here. Okay?”

Dave bobbed his head. “Okay,” he said.

“What do you have, anyway?” Simon asked.

Dave glanced over his shoulder at his computers, chewing on his lower lip. “I kind of don’t want to say just yet?” he said. “I mean, it’s probably something, but I don’t know how much of a something, and I really, really want to see where it goes before I commit to anything.”

“You know, I’m really learning to hate it when my team members tell me that,” Simon said. “Okay, fine. If it turns out you’re hiding something vitally important from me, I *will* kill you.”

“Okay,” Dave said, vanishing from the doorway.

Simon looked back at Nate. “I’m beginning to think that that threat is losing some of its power over Dave,” he said.

“I guess some day you really ought to kill him, just so he knows it’s not an empty threat,” Nate said.

The evening dragged on. Mike turned up and stripped the fridge bare of cold leftover Chinese food with the thoroughness of a plague of locusts. Nate sneaked out at eleven like he was doing something wrong. Dave vanished into the mat room for a couple of hours, only to reappear, drawn and scruffy, when one of his computers started chiming. Simon resisted the urge to go over there and check up on him, since chances were pretty good he wouldn’t understand what was going on anyway.

Dave was still there at five when Simon was preparing to go home. Simon sighed and hunkered down by Dave’s side. “How long have you been here, Stone?”

“Twenty-three hours,” Dave said, eyes on the screen.

Simon rested his forehead on the armrest of Dave’s chair. “All right,” he said, resigned. “You’re a big boy now and I’m tired of fighting with you over this. The minute that Nate turns up, you go home, okay?”

“Okay,” Dave said, typing something. “Actually, I can go nap for a couple of hours as soon as I get this process running. Maybe ten minutes.”

“Good,” Simon said, standing up. “Do that. And please God don’t kill yourself.”

“I’ll really try not to,” Dave said, still staring at his monitor. Gibberish reeled off his fingers and spilled across the screen. Simon squinted at it for a minute, then gave up and went home.

◆ Twelve

Simon could hear the heavy humming thump of the printer from the hallway outside when he turned up on Wednesday evening. He closed his eyes, pausing with his hand on the door handle. *Please don't let that mean what I think it means*, he thought, and then pushed on in.

A thoroughly bemused Johnny was turned halfway around in his chair, headphones on. Nate was sitting at his own computer in his shirt and tie, his suit jacket draped over the back of his chair; as the door opened he spun around, already looking guilty.

"Jesus God," Simon said, stopping just where he was. "Dave. Are you *still* here?"

"Yes," Dave said. He looked like hammered shit, but he sounded pretty awake. In fact, he sounded pretty damn snappy, like he was wired halfway to hell on something. The printer dropped another page and he plucked it out, adding it to the very large pile of papers in front of him. "As soon as this finishes printing, I need to talk to you," Dave said, watching the next sheet of paper get sucked into his printer. "And after I talk to you, I'll go home for as long as you want me to. Swear to God."

"Ohhh, Christ, but I hate the sound of that already," Simon said. "Have you really been here for thirty-five hours?"

"Yes," Dave said again. "I took a couple of naps, though. And I had a lot of coffee. I put a couple of bucks in the kitty."

"You know what, I think that's the least of my worries right now, as much as I hate to say that about coffee," Simon said. "How much longer is that going to be printing?"

"Half an hour?" Dave said, shrugging. "Something like that."

"Okay," Simon said. "I'll go do the nonsense, then. Come grab me as soon as you're done."

Dave picked up the freshly-printed sheet and added it to his pile. "Will do."

"Thirty-five hours," Simon told the room at large, shaking his head. "*Thirty-five hours.*"

This time, since he wasn't expecting it, the sealed interoffice envelope with the PERSONAL : CONFIDENTIAL memo in it jumped right out of the center of the pile and bit Simon on the ass. Already dreading it, Simon broke open the seal and pulled it out:

Please come by my office at 4:30 tomorrow afternoon; if that time does not suit your schedule, feel free to call Danielle and reschedule your appointment, but I must see you on Thursday.

It was like getting punched in the stomach. Simon stared at the memo, willing it to magically contain more information. As it was, it could mean anything at all, but probably nothing good. Trying not to think about it Simon dropped the memo into his shredder; he felt a little better once it was gone, but only a little. He handled the rest of the papers without seeing them at all, and answered his email in a like state. Outside the printer continued to thump with monotonous regularity.

He was staring at his monitor and not seeing it when Dave appeared in the doorway, clutching what appeared to be an entire ream of paper to his chest. "Boss," Dave said.

"Stone," Simon said, blinking a couple of times and looking up. "Right. What have you got for me?"

"Could we go somewhere else to talk?" Dave asked, his eyes straying to the empty hinges that had once held up Simon's office door. "Somewhere a little more private?"

"Stone, I don't have any secrets from my team, you know that—" Simon broke off there as abruptly as if someone had kicked him in the crotch. That wasn't true any more, was it? Christ, had it ever been true? Simon shook his head sharply and stood up. "But okay, we'll play it your way," he said. "Come on, we'll go find us a niche."

"I'd appreciate it," Dave said. He took a couple of steps backwards and stood there, waiting impatiently. As Simon went by Dave fell into his wake, still clutching his papers; Simon could feel Nate and Johnny staring after them as the door closed. He didn't want to think about that right now. He didn't want to think about any of this right now. As far as he could tell, he didn't have a choice.

The little courtyard just past the vending machines was empty; it was close to six and almost everyone else had already gone home. It was hot and close outside, but bearable, at least in the shade. Simon picked his way to the far corner, made sure he could see both doors, and then stuck his hands in his pockets. He didn't turn around. "Okay, Stone," he said, staring off at the far door. "What's got you so fired up?"

"I broke through the security protocols on Rich Story's computers," Dave said. "Yesterday, actually, but I had to play it safe until I made sure I was actually in and home free."

Simon blinked, swiveling to stare at him. "Wait, what?" he said.

Dave took a deep breath and started to repeat himself. "I broke through—"

"I heard you," Simon said, interrupting. "I'm just—you were still *working* on that? All this time?"

"Yes?" Dave said, confused. "I mean, no one ever told me I should stop, so I kept poking at them whenever I had a moment . . ."

"Is that why you've been pulling these crazy hours?" Simon asked, aghast. "Jesus Christ."

Dave hunched his shoulders, ducking his head over the heavy pile of papers like he was trying to protect them with his body. "I thought it was a priority?"

"Well, yeah, but . . . I . . . oh, Christ," Simon said. He yanked a hand out of his pocket and clutched at his temples, getting a grip on himself. "No, okay, I'm doing this wrong. Seriously, Stone, that's amazing, and as soon as I get over being startled I'm going to be really impressed—okay, okay, there it goes, yeah, I am now totally in awe, holy shit. Tell me everything. Well, okay, not everything, I'm computer stupid. Summarize it for me. Use small words."

Dave straightened back up, looking hopeful. "Well, basically all you need to know is that one of his computers got shut down only after it started chewing up and deleting his security protocols, so his security wasn't airtight any more. Like how a padlock doesn't work quite right if a large chunk of it is missing."

"I *understood* that," Simon said. "Amazing. So you were able to get in that way?"

"Eventually," Dave said, nodding. "It's way more complicated than that, but that was basically it. Once I got into one computer, it was pretty easy to get into the others. I haven't broken the protection on those CDs yet, but that's next."

Simon shut his eyes and heaved out a huge, relieved breath. "You are the *man*, holy crap. We've got access to his stuff again?"

"Some of it," Dave said warily. "I mean, a lot of it got deleted or partially deleted. Some of it I can patch back up, given some time. Some of it is just . . . gibberish. And some of it is completely gone."

"Still, that means we have some of it back now," Simon said, taking another deep breath. "Christ, I can't tell you what a relief that is. So, what's that you've got there?"

"This," Dave said, glancing down at his burden. "Um. This is the reason I wanted to have this talk privately."

Simon went still. "Oh."

"Yeah. Um." Dave hefted his armload of paper. "This is, um, almost everything he ever sent to Viktor Karpol." Simon froze, his face turning to stone. Dave made a little frightened noise but the words kept tumbling out anyway. "He had

it all in a hidden file—it started in the middle of a page and I don’t know how much got eaten by the deletion, but I don’t think it was much, given where the file starts—”

Simon held out his hands. “Let me see.” He though he sounded calm enough.

Wincing, Dave handed over the pile of papers. It was depressingly heavy. “I really only skimmed it,” Dave said. “But there’s, um, there’s a lot there. And there’s something weird about it.”

“You mean, besides the fact that an FBI agent with a decent security clearance was funneling it to the Russian mafia,” Simon said flatly.

“Yeah. Um. Besides that,” Dave said. “There’s a line at the bottom of every page, if you look, it says ‘PROPERTY OF THE FBI CONFIDENTIAL DO NOT DISTRIBUTE OR REPRODUCE’?”

Simon looked at the top sheet, which appeared to be part of the FBI’s payroll record. The first name and salary listed was ‘Delacroix, Annette’ and the page number at the bottom was 36; Dave was right. Not too much was missing. Also, Annette Delacroix was pretty severely underpaid for a field agent. Stonefaced, Simon checked the bottom of the page. “Yeah, I see it. What about it?”

“Well, that’s weird,” Dave said. “None of the original documents have that line on them. As far as I can tell Mr. Story went through and added that line to every page he ever sent to Karpol, by hand.”

“And?” Simon said.

“And it’s weird!” Dave flapped his arms in a helpless gesture. “There are some hidden characters in that line, too—stuff that doesn’t show up or print unless you highlight it—but it’s just . . . a bunch of gibberish. It might be a PGP key or a long password or something, but if so, why stick it there before sending it out? There has to be a reason!”

Simon shut his eyes for a moment. “See, Dave, that’s what I’m counting on you to tell me.”

“Yeah,” Dave said, subsiding. “I’ll figure it out eventually. But, um, I guess I don’t have to tell you how potentially explosive that is, right there.”

“Yeah,” Simon said. “No, you don’t. I get it. Thanks for your discretion. I won’t let it out of my sight until I can personally hand it over to Upstairs.”

Dave nodded. Now that he’d said his piece, the crazed look was starting to fade from his face, leaving him gray and exhausted and wearing two days’ worth of reddish stubble. “Oh, boy, I really need some sleep,” Dave said, making a noise that was probably a laugh.

“Uh, yeah, yeah, I’d say you do,” Simon said, forcing himself to come back from the small, angry place where he’d gone and pay attention to business. “If I tell you to go home and not come back for twenty-four hours, will you do it?”

“Yeah, um, I think I will,” Dave said, rocking back on his heels and nearly staggering. “I mean, I’m done. That’s the big thing, done. If I come back

tomorrow evening, I'll get here just in time to help with the next batch of footage—"

"—oh, Christ, don't remind me—"

"—and I'm so wired it's going to take me like three hours to relax enough to sleep," Dave said. "So, uh, yeah. I'll take it. If that's okay."

Simon shifted the stack of papers to rest in the crook of one arm and slapped Dave on the back, nearly knocking him over. "Dave, my man, I would give you a *week* off right now if it were mine to give. Which it is not. But yeah, take twenty-four hours. Get a lot of sleep. Come back tomorrow evening. Also, I love you like a brother and I swear to God I'll never threaten to kill you again and mean it."

"I guess I can't ask for more than that," Dave said. His smile was small and tired.

They split up in the hallway outside the saferoom: Dave trudged off towards the parking lot, his keys jingling in one hand, and Simon watched him go. Once he was gone, Simon hefted the papers against his chest, gritted his teeth, and let himself back into the saferoom.

Sandra had arrived at some time while Simon was away, and given the wary way she was looking at Simon, someone had filled her in. "So," she said after a moment, nodding at the pile of papers that Simon was carrying. "What's up?"

Simon held up his free hand. "Give me one minute and then I'll explain," he said. "Swear to God."

Sandra's eyes narrowed, but she nodded. "One minute," she said.

Simon carried the papers into his office. There was exactly one drawer in his desk that still had a working lock on it—all the others were currently broken, thanks to Sandra having gone after them with a crowbar when Simon was in the hospital—and it was that drawer into which Simon deposited the document, covering it over with a handful of blank papers as an afterthought. Simon shut the drawer, locked it, and tucked the key into his back pocket. It would do for now. "Time?" he called.

"Fifty-two seconds," Sandra called back after a moment.

"Oh yeah, I'm good," Simon said under his breath. He tugged on the drawer's handle, double-checking to make sure that it was locked, and then headed back out.

"Well?" Sandra said, the instant that Simon reappeared.

Simon took a deep breath. "A few hours ago, Stonewall broke open Specs Two's computers," he said. "We're back in."

The shock shut them all up. Johnny was the first to recover, whistling long and low. "Daaaamn," he said. "Only took him, what, six months?"

“Yeah, something like that,” Simon said. He’d never felt less like laughing in his life, but he laughed a little anyway, a small, mostly humorless sound. “Apparently we never told him to stop.”

Sandra glanced aside, making some rapid mental calculations. “He’s right,” she said after a moment. “We never did. Or, at least, I never did, and I was the one who got him started.”

“Yeah, I didn’t tell him to stop either,” Simon said. “And now apparently he’s done it.”

“So we’ve got all of Rich’s stuff back?” Nate said, nearly bouncing in his seat. “We have access again?”

Simon held up a hand. “Some,” he said. “Don’t get too excited, Specs. Stonewall says that a lot of stuff got completely or partially deleted before the plug got pulled.”

“Still, holy cow, that’s *great*,” Nate said, deeply, nerdily impressed. “I didn’t think it was possible—I thought for sure that stuff was gone forever!”

“Yeah, me too,” Simon said, glancing over at Dave’s lair, currently dark and silent. “Anyway, I sent him home for no less than twenty-four hours, seeing as how he was here for close to thirty-six.”

“Thirty-six?” Sandra said in disbelief. “*That’s* a record.”

“It is also completely insane and under other circumstances I’d kick his ass for it,” Simon said. “But apparently he was putting in all that overtime because he was trying to break into Rich’s computers, so maybe he’ll work normal human hours from here on out. We can only hope.”

“So what was that pile of papers, then?” Sandra asked.

Simon hesitated, weighing his decision. “This goes no further than this room,” he finally said, leaning on the words. “That is an order. Word of this gets out and we are in such deep shit, I don’t even want to think about it.” Sandra nodded impatiently. Simon checked Nate and Johnny—both quiet and attentive—then squeezed his eyes shut and sighed. “Rich kept a log file of everything he ever funneled out to Karpol,” Simon said. “That’s it.”

“Oh, Jesus,” Sandra said weakly, collapsing in her chair. “That huge thing?”

“That’s not all of it, either,” Simon said. “Part of it got chewed up when Rich’s computers were deleting themselves. See why I don’t want anyone finding out we’ve got that?”

Sandra nodded. “So what are you going to do with it?”

“Keep an eye on it personally until I can dump it on Upstairs tomorrow afternoon,” Simon said. “I’ve already got an appointment.”

“You going to go through it?” Sandra asked, raising both eyebrows.

Simon jerked his eyes away, staring into the corner. “I don’t know if my heart can take it,” he said. “But yeah, I’ll probably look through it. I . . . I have to know. You know? I have to know just how deeply Rich put us in the shit. Because I feel responsible.”

Sandra snapped, “Oh, bullshit—”

“I said I *feel* responsible,” Simon snapped right back, overriding her. “Not that I am. Okay?”

Sandra twitched back, startled. She bit the inside of her cheek, then sighed and made herself relax. “Okay,” she said.

“Yeah,” Simon said, heading for his office and its dubious sanctuary. “Sorry I snapped at you, Spring. Texas, go home. Specs, stay as long as you can handle, but don’t hurt yourself, and take off that tie before I strangle.”

In the end, he ended up dicking around with the transcriptions for almost an hour before he could force himself to look. He didn’t want to know, but he needed to know so goddamned bad—finally, growling under his breath, Simon dug the key out of his back pocket and fetched the pile of papers out of the drawer. Glancing up at the empty doorway (and wishing like *hell* the door was still there to give him some privacy) Simon dropped five pounds of paper on his desk, cleared off the empty sheets that he’d covered it with, and settled in.

Two hours later Simon marked his place, deposited the whole stack of papers both read and unread back in the drawer, and locked it. Numbly he ran a hand over his face, then headed for the door.

Mike had arrived at some point while Simon’s attention had been engaged. Simon hadn’t even heard him come in. Judging from the expression on Mike’s face, half cringing and half angry, the news had continued to filter down; he and Simon stared at each other for a moment, then Mike tore his eyes away and looked down. “Bad, huh,” Mike said, his voice a little rough.

“Mm,” Simon said distantly. “I’ll be back in a few minutes. Hold the fort.”

“Yeah,” Mike said, but Simon barely heard it, heading for the saferoom door and freedom. The sun had set and the hallways were empty and echoing; somewhere off in the distance the maintenance crew was running either a vacuum cleaner or a floor polisher, filling the air with a fine humming susurrus. Simon marked the noise with half an ear and headed for the courtyard.

It was still hot and damp outside, but bearable in the early evening. Simon sucked in a lungful of clean air, held it for two seconds, then let it back out; he still felt dirty when he was done, but a little less so. And he was only halfway through the pile. Only halfway. Simon took another deep breath, then went back inside, turning towards the main building and the humming sound.

The sound of the floor polisher echoed confusingly throughout the building, but it wasn’t too hard to track it to its source: two guys in coveralls pushing the heavy machine around the cavernous main lobby. “Hey,” Simon called, pitching his voice loud enough to be heard. One of the maintenance team looked up, frowned, and elbowed the other, who jumped and shut the polisher down. The silence that followed was huge and stunning. “I know one of you guys has to

have a pack of cigarettes on him,” Simon said, glancing back and forth between them. His voice echoed in the silence. “Even if neither of you do, you know someone in this building who does. I’ll pay ten bucks for any pack that’s more than half full, as long as I get a lighter out of the deal too.”

The maintenance guys glanced at each other, confused but not really surprised. Then the taller one shrugged and stuck his fingers into his breast pocket, coming out with a hard pack of Marlboros. “You’re in luck,” he said, his otherwise-reedy voice bearing the growling hallmark of the pack-a-day smoker. “I just ripped into this one an hour ago.” He tossed it at Simon.

Simon caught it and checked: four cigarettes missing and a cheap butane lighter tucked into the empty spot. “That’ll do,” Simon said, unbuttoning his own breast pocket and tucking the pack away before reaching for his wallet and rifling his bills. “Fuck it, here’s a twenty, keep the change.”

The maintenance guy raised both eyebrows at the twenty, then pulled out his own wallet and tucked it away. “You’re ever in the market again, look me up,” he said. His grin was unpleasant and vaguely feral, or maybe it was just Simon’s imagination.

“Yeah,” Simon said, flipping them a wave over his shoulder, already heading out. A moment later the floor polisher revved back up behind him.

He went straight back to the saferoom. He was careful not to look at anyone. Instead he headed right for the coffeemaker and the little cabinet it stood on; he hunkered down in front of it and poked around for a moment, then gave in to the horrible yet cosmically appropriate impulse and fetched out the heavy black mug that was lurking, dusty and unused, in the very back of the cabinet.

Simon carried Jeremy’s mug into his office and put it down on the desk, then unlocked the drawer and fetched out the pile of papers again, turning back to his marked place, halfway through. Closing his eyes he fished the hard pack out of his shirt pocket and shook out the lighter and one of the cigarettes, poking the cigarette into his mouth and negotiating with the cheap lighter until he got a flame.

The first harsh lungful didn’t even make him cough. Simon opened his eyes and stared at the glowing coal for a moment, breathing out the smoke that he’d just sucked in, wondering when this bad habit had gotten to be so easy. Outside in the main room Nate was turned halfway around in his computer chair, watching Simon with an expression halfway between shock and dismay. The corner of Simon’s mouth turned up. He toasted Nate with the burning cigarette, then stuck it back into his mouth and sucked down another lungful.

The weird and distant calm of nicotine tingled through him. The length of ash on the end of the cigarette grew. Simon tapped the ash off into Jeremy’s mug, spent a bitter moment appreciating how right that was, and then went back to the file, leaking smoke through his gritted teeth.

He went through the papers, slowly, tapping the ashes into Jeremy's mug and stubbing out the dead butts against its thick ceramic side. The cigarette debris in the bottom grew thicker. The taste in Simon's mouth grew worse. Occasionally he cleared his mouth out with a swig of cold coffee, then went right back to the cigarettes. The pile of papers in front of him shrank.

Eventually Simon became aware of a slight shape in the doorway to his office and looked up, his latest cigarette caught between his first two fingers. "There's coffee up," Nate said timidly, holding the glass coffee pot clutched against his chest like a shield. "Do you want some more?"

"Yeah," Simon said, carefully turning over the topmost page so that only its blank back showed. "Yeah, Specs, that'd be good. Hit me."

Nate edged in, carrying the pot, and nearly poured coffee into Jeremy's mug. He yelped and jerked back when he noticed his mistake, almost sloshing coffee onto Simon's desk, which would, in some ways, have been a relief. Nate mumbled an apology and filled Simon's mug instead. "It's not so good, huh," he said awkwardly.

"Nah, coffee's always good," Simon said, switching his cigarette to his other hand so that he could pick up his mug and have a sip. "Or were you talking about something else?" Nate hugged the coffee pot to his chest and gave Simon his very best wounded-puppy look. Simon sighed. "You're going to stand there and continue to make awkward conversation until I tell you how bad this stuff is, aren't you?"

"Boy, I sure am, boss," Nate said, trying to laugh. "I'm glad you saved me all that trouble and got right to the point."

Simon stubbed out his latest cigarette and dropped the dead filter into Jeremy's mug. "Sit down," he said. Nate put down the coffee pot, pulled up the visitor's chair, and obediently sat, the expression on his face almost comically intent. Simon eyed him for a moment, then picked up the pile of papers that he'd already read through. "You sure you want to know?"

"Well, no, I'm not," Nate said, blinking. "But . . . yeah, I'd like to know."

"Suit yourself," Simon said, thumbing through the stack. A closely-typed page headed 'Waxman, Nathan Daniel' popped out at him and Simon pulled it out, dropping it onto the desk in front of Nate.

Nate picked up the paper. A single glance at the top and his face fell, so hard and so fast that it nearly broke Simon's heart. "Oh," Nate said, clutching at the paper until it wrinkled, reading down the page.

"I knew that man for *seven years*," Simon said, no longer bothering to hide the bitterness. "I always said he was a vicious little knee-biting bastard, but . . . Jesus Christ, I had no idea how right I was."

"These are my medical records," Nate said, his voice tiny and hurt. One hand fumbled at the collar of his dress shirt, which was still buttoned all the way up to hide the scars.

"I know," Simon said, closing his eyes. "Want a cigarette? Trust me, it helps."

"I don't smoke, Templar," Nate said, still in shock. Then his eyes snapped into focus. "... wait, *you* don't smoke!"

"Yeah, well, tonight I do," Simon said. He shook another cigarette out of the pack, noting in passing that he was down to about five, and held the pack out.

After a moment Nate nodded and took it, fumbling a cigarette out with shaking fingers. Simon lit them both. Nate held his awkwardly, sipping at the smoke instead of inhaling, and still he started coughing. It made Simon smile a little, despite everything. "Jesus, look at you," he said, taking a drag on his own. "You smoked once in high school to impress some girl and ended up throwing up on her, didn't you?"

"At least Rich didn't tell Karpol about that," Nate said, coughing again and staring at the cigarette in his fingers. "I'd never live it down."

"Yeah," Simon said, breathing out smoke. He didn't say anything else—he didn't feel like sharing any of the things that were going through his mind—and the silence was awkward but companionable for a minute or two. "You know," Simon finally said, talking mostly to the ceiling, "there was a time in my life, like a year and a half ago, when I thought I had a pretty good handle on who was trustworthy and who wasn't."

Nate nodded. "I know. Everyone on the team was trustworthy. Everyone else wasn't."

"Six of us against the world," Simon told the ceiling.

"Criminals beware." Nate smiled wanly and took another cautious mouthful of smoke.

"Now—Jesus, I just don't know any more," Simon said. He sighed. "It's late, Specs. You should probably go home and get some sleep. Come back in the morning."

Nate leaned over and awkwardly tapped his cigarette against the rim of Jeremy's mug, knocking off the ash. "I'm tempted to go to a motel instead, you know," he said. The sour note in his voice made Simon shut his eyes. "Since apparently Karpol has my home address."

"Hey," Simon said.

"I know, it's stupid," Nate said. "I mean, he's had it for years, apparently, there's no reason he'd suddenly do anything now—"

"Hey," Simon said again, leaning on it. "You seriously think that he's going to try and start shit with us? Like, ever?"

"He did with Rich," Nate said, studiously watching his cigarette burn down instead of looking up at Simon.

"Nah," Simon said. "Nah, he didn't. He got *Rich* to start shit with Rich. That's worlds away from actually throwing down, and you know it."

Nate shrugged one shoulder. "I guess."

“Nate, they’re thugs with cheap guns,” Simon said. “How can they compete with us, even if they wanted to? They can’t, and they know that. We are better-funded, better-trained, better-equipped, and, I might add, *vastly* better-looking.” Simon jabbed the butt of his cigarette at Nate. “Frankly, I expect you to go home and sleep like a baby, knowing in your heart that you and your mom are safe as houses under the outstretched wing of, of the American bald eagle. Fuck them all. They can sneak around all they want, but the minute they poke their noses out of hiding, we are going to kick their asses.”

After a long moment, Nate sighed and glanced up at Simon. “So, should I applaud or just salute you now? I don’t actually know what’s appropriate here.”

“Just go home, smartass.” Simon flopped out in his chair. “And put that cigarette down before you hurt yourself, Christ.” Nate smiled wanly and held out his half-smoked cigarette. Simon plucked it from Nate’s fingers, considered it for a moment, then stuck it in his mouth and stubbed out the butt end of his own. “Only got five left,” he muttered.

“And I don’t think you’re allowed to smoke inside the building anyway,” Nate pointed out, standing up and picking up the coffee pot.

“Yeah, well, you don’t tell anybody and I won’t have to break all your fingers,” Simon said. “Go home. Come back in the morning.”

“I’m going, I’m going,” Nate said. He carried the coffee pot out of Simon’s office.

Simon watched him go, what little smile he’d managed to summon up for Nate’s sake fading and vanishing. He wished he could believe his own bravado. Between what was happening to Jeremy right now and what had happened to Langridge in the past . . . whatever, as long as Nate slept well tonight. Right now, that was what mattered.

An hour or two later, halfway through the last cigarette, when Simon was so deeply shell-shocked that he thought nothing at all could startle him any more, Simon hit the last page and found himself with Jeremy’s old FBI file at his fingertips once again.

It shouldn’t have come as a shock. And really, after a nasty little jolt, Simon realized he wasn’t actually shocked—after all, Jeremy’s file *was* just about the last thing that Rich had had a chance to send to Karpol—but, still, it left him angry all over again. And more than angry: unsettled. Some things were etched into his psyche too deeply to ever be erased. “Goddammit, Rich,” Simon muttered, shutting his eyes and sucking so hard on his cigarette that it left him lightheaded.

Blindly he turned the last page over, finishing off his readthrough of the Karpol document. He checked his watch—close to one AM—and then stubbed out his cigarette. His clothes reeked of smoke and his mouth tasted like he’d been licking sidewalks. Simon shuddered and rinsed out his mouth with cold coffee, once, then again.

Outside in the main room, things were quiet. Simon could hear people shifting around, but no one was actually talking. He shuffled the Karpol document into a folder that didn't have a hope of actually containing it and locked the folder away in his desk drawer, making a mental note to retrieve it before he went home; he had no intention of letting that folder out of his control before he personally placed it in Upstairs' hands tomorrow. His bladder nudged at him. Simon stood up, his stiff joints making the rise awkward, and as an afterthought picked up Jeremy's ash-filled mug. *Disposing of the evidence*, he thought, not really amused.

Sandra and Mike both looked up as Simon came out of his office. They were sitting on opposite sides of the conference table, both in headphones, barely paying attention to each other. "You kids behaving yourselves?" Simon asked. It came out as a croak and he winced.

"Yeah," Mike said. He kicked Sandra's foot under the table. Sandra kicked him back.

"What for?" Simon asked, carrying Jeremy's mug towards the door.

◆ Thirteen

Contrary to his normal habit, Simon showed up for his meeting with Upstairs a good fifteen minutes early, the Karpol document clutched to his chest. It still smelled like smoke, a fact which Simon was valiantly attempting to ignore. “Hey, Danielle,” he said. “There any chance I could sneak in a bit early?”

Danielle glanced at the fat folder, then favored Simon with a cool, calculating look. “That depends,” she said.

“Yeah? On what?”

“Is that bad news?” Danielle inclined her head at the folder.

Simon looked down at it, flexing his fingers. “Yes and no?”

“Then I suppose you can and can’t sneak in early,” Danielle said, then relented. “I’ll ask, but he’s kind of in a bad mood,” she said, turning back to her computer. “You can go have a seat over there and I’ll let you know.”

“Thanks,” Simon said. He didn’t budge. After a moment Danielle sighed and picked up the phone.

Upstairs’ office was as dark as ever, blinds drawn against the afternoon sun, and Simon paused in the doorway to give his eyes the necessary chance to adjust. The bulky shape of Upstairs shifted behind his desk; a moment later, his desk lamp clicked on, half-outlining him in dim yellow light. “Simon,” Upstairs said. His gravelly voice was noticeably cool, or maybe that was just Simon’s paranoia talking.

Simon kicked the door shut and held up a hand. “Sir, before we get started on anything else, I really need to dump this on you,” Simon said, all in a rush, hefting the folder with both arms. “It’s important.”

Upstairs hesitated—Simon could almost see the mental gears re-aligning themselves—then inclined his head. “All right. What is it?”

Simon crossed the room and finally, finally put the massive folder down, abandoning it on Upstairs’ leather desk blotter. “Dave Brassoff finally managed to break open Rich’s computers,” he said, patting the folder’s cover. “That right there is a master log file of almost everything Rich ever funneled out to

Viktor Karpol—some of the file got eaten by the deletion, but I think it's largely complete."

"I see," Upstairs said, flicking open the folder and glancing at the topmost page. After a moment, he closed his eyes in pain and pulled the folder shut, moving a heavy brass paperweight on top of it. "Who knows about this?"

"Myself and most of my team," Simon said. "You, now. No one else that I know of."

"Mr. Brassooff hasn't informed IT of his success?"

"Not to my knowledge. I can call and check."

"In a minute, yes," Upstairs said, tabling the idea with a wave of his hand. "But first: did you look through this?"

"Yes, sir, I did," Simon said. "Dave skimmed it while it was printing, but he claims that he didn't read it in too much depth. Given his mental state at the time, I'd be surprised if he remembers much."

Upstairs settled back in his chair and touched a finger to his lips, thinking. "How bad is it?" he finally asked.

Simon took a deep breath. "Sir, it's pretty bad," he said. "Rich told me that he sent as little as he could get away with, but I'd have to say that was a lie. He's compromised a lot of sensitive information."

"I see." Upstairs was quiet for most of a minute, his fingers steepled in front of his face, his brow furrowed. "I'll reserve judgment until after I've looked through it for myself," he finally said. "I'll have to take this higher—is Mr. Brassooff available now?"

"He's probably still at home," Simon said. "Or, at least, he'd better be."

Upstairs nodded. "Call him now," he said, nudging the desk phone towards Simon. "Find out if he told IT anything about this. If so, I need to know who he told. If not, tell him not to inform anyone else, including IT. For the time being, I want this to go no further than it has."

"Yes, sir," Simon said, picking up the phone. "I'm guessing he hasn't told anyone. He's been recuperating at home ever since telling me and he seems to be pretty aware of, of the implications."

"Let's hope so," Upstairs said. After some hesitation, he moved the paperweight away and started flipping through the Karpol document, frowning, while Simon punched Dave's cell phone number into the phone on the desk.

"Okay," Simon said, hanging up the phone. "Sounds like we're good. Or as good as we can be with a hot potato like that one sitting between us."

"So it does," Upstairs said, marking his place and flipping the folder closed. Even that brief exposure to the Karpol document had left him looking about ten years older. "As for the rest of your team..."

"They won't tell anyone," Simon said. "I made it an official order, and you know as well as I do that they're trustworthy." *Most of them, anyway, now*, Simon didn't add, trying not to glance at the folder on Upstairs' desk.

Upstairs nodded. "Good," he said. He put the paperweight back on top of the folder. "This will be . . . unpleasant, to say the least. Mr. Story managed to do a lot of damage."

"I know, sir," Simon said, looking down at his hands.

"What's worse, of course, is the timing." Upstairs massaged his temples with both hands. "If I'm to deal with Norton Fowles with any success I need the administration to be looking the other way, and your role in the Richard Story mess is distressingly central. You'll be the focus of a lot of attention at precisely the time that I had wanted you to be out of sight and out of mind."

"Yes, sir," Simon said.

"And, of course, I certainly can't put off dealing with this issue," Upstairs added, patting the paperweight. "I dislike throwing around the phrase 'matters of national security'—it smacks of cheap jingoism—but, well, there it is, and I don't think anyone can argue with the invocation of the term."

"No, sir," Simon said.

"In short, this leaves us both in a nasty predicament," Upstairs concluded. He nudged his chair around and folded his hands together, staring resolutely at the closed blinds. "Simon, I am placing you on paid suspension until such time as the Fontaine court case is resolved or dismissed."

Simon's stomach contracted into a shocked knot so tight that he folded in around it, clamping his arms over his belly. "What?" he croaked. "Sir, that's . . . that'll be *months* from now!"

"I'm aware of that," Upstairs said testily. "I'm also aware that Norton Fowles very sincerely believes that he has found evidence of some grand conspiracy on your part, and furthermore, our little talk on Monday has left me aware that he may not be entirely incorrect. Originally I intended to suspend you only to placate Baker and deflect Norton, but . . . when the administration On High turns the spotlight onto the Richard Story mess, the very *convincing* complaint that Professional Responsibility has leveled against you is going to be literally the first thing they see, and if they do not see you being restricted or punished in some way, they will want to know why. And once they take an official interest in your case, Norton Fowles will have *carte blanche* to pick and pry at you for as long as he likes, and nothing Baker and I can do will stop him. Do you understand?"

"Sir," Simon said numbly.

Upstairs shut his eyes. "Neither Baker nor I *want* Fowles to keep picking at your case," he said wearily. "Anything he uncovers from here on out will ultimately only harm the Bureau—he's providing Diana Fontaine's lawyers with vast amounts of ammunition, and he doesn't care, as long as some shit ultimately sticks to me." Upstairs spat out the rare profanity with visible distaste. "Baker and

I could have fobbed Norton off, given enough time. But once the administration sticks its nose in, our little under-the-table deal turns into the kind of three-ring conspiracy circus that wins Pulitzers for reporters. If I suspend you, it will look like something is actively being done—" Simon could hear the bitterness even over the roaring in his ears "—for just long enough to get us through the Richard Story mess. After that, Norton will again be just a lone voice in the wilderness."

Simon ducked his head, pressing the heels of his hands against his eyes until he saw stars. "Sir, it's not that I don't understand," he started to say.

Upstairs held up a hand for silence. Simon felt it more than saw it. "Let me be honest with you, Simon," he said. "I called you here today in order to suspend you for the duration. The sudden existence of this document—" he tapped the folder "—only confirms that my decision was the right one. I realize it's hard to believe, but ultimately I am suspending you to *protect* you."

"I know that, sir," Simon said helplessly, still grinding his palms into his eyes. "It's just—what about my team?"

"Ms. Leone is more than capable of leading them for the duration of the current operation," Upstairs said. "I'll speak to her after we're done here and let her know. In the long run . . . well. You have my word that I'll look after them."

Simon let his hands drop. "Am I at least allowed to speak to them?"

"I'd prefer it if you wouldn't do so officially or on site," Upstairs said, "but on your own time, I can see nothing wrong with that."

"On my own time," Simon repeated, looking away. "And what am I supposed to do in the meantime?"

"I believe that that is entirely up to you, but your career-related options are more numerous than you think," Upstairs said. "Go back to the Academy and enroll in a class. Apply for one of the out-of-state intensive courses. If you play your cards right you'll come back with a better jacket than when you left."

"I suppose so," Simon said, defeated. "So . . ."

"If I can recall you to active duty earlier, I will," Upstairs said, his voice as gentle as it ever got. "But putting you on paid suspension is just about the best thing I can do for you, right now. If I leave you on active duty, I'll just be making a target out of you."

"I know," Simon said. Abruptly he stood up, still hunched forward over the knot in his stomach. "I guess really I made a target out of myself, huh?"

"That's the impression I'm getting, yes," Upstairs said. "Do you still think it was worth it, whatever it was?"

"Can I get back to you on that?" Simon said, making a weak attempt at a grin, and he stumbled towards the door, light, and more freedom than he technically wanted.

He went straight home, making the drive without paying any attention to it. It was too much to comprehend and so he didn't even try, just kept himself moving

forward.

His apartment smelled unpleasantly of yesterday's cigarette binge, the clothes in the hamper having infected the entire place. Regardless of the heat Simon threw open all the windows, still not letting himself think about it, running on impulse and reflex alone. The need to get back out of here, to do anything but sit around and stew, was almost overwhelming; guided by nothing more than the vaguest whim Simon went back into his bedroom, stripped off his jeans, and changed into shorts and a t-shirt, putting his sneakers back on when he was done. He hit the streets a minute later, his front-door key in the zippered pocket of his shorts.

Simon had never been much of a runner. He was *capable* of moving fast, but his build had always favored size over speed, and he was more than willing to go along with it. For the most part he maintained his fighting weight through good genes, forgetting to eat, physically restraining his team members, and the occasional bout of guilt-induced sit-ups in the mornings. Still, nothing worked better to clear and focus his mind than sustained physical exertion, and right now Simon craved both that and the exhaustion that came along with it.

He was sodden with sweat within seconds, flicking his wet hair out of his eyes. The sun beat down on him without pity, so bright that Simon could barely see; he narrowed his eyes against both sweat and sunlight and kept going, pounding over the pavement, his heart thudding reproachfully before settling down to business. The muscles in his calves went as hard as rock. Simon welcomed the discomfort, worked through it. Now that ninety percent of his attention was consumed by the physical work, the enormity of the situation could and did start to unpack itself in his mind, expanding like one of those trick cans full of spring-loaded snakes. His whirling thoughts started to sort themselves out.

Suspended. He'd been suspended. And suspended for the duration, to boot, a serious thing; the last guy that Simon knew of who'd been suspended 'for the duration' had killed his own wife and eventually gone to prison for it. Diana Fontaine's case was unlikely to be settled in less than six months—if Simon was going to remain on suspension for six months, he might as well resign and go to work as a security guard somewhere. It'd do less overall damage to his career.

A stop sign loomed on his right and Simon turned left rather than cross the street, only subconsciously noting which street he was on. He flicked his hair out of his eyes again and scrubbed his arm over his forehead, dashing away sweat. If he ran more than two or three times a year, he'd own a sweatband. As it was, he just plowed grimly on.

No matter what Upstairs had promised, there was no way that his team would still be there waiting for him six months down the road. Six months in career-time was an eternity. The best Simon could hope for was for Sandra to take over and hold the team together—but then he'd face the choice of bumping her back down to second-in-command or leaving her in control of his original team while he put

together another. Neither choice was appealing, and Sandra wasn't the type to go quietly in any case. Simon knew very well that being his second-in-command wasn't the end of her career arc; the others might well be content where they were, but Sandra was on her way up, and usually Simon was wholly in support of her goal. Not when it meant that she'd be stepping into *his* position, though.

Simon was breathing hard now, his chest heaving as he fought for air. The air was heavy with humidity and resisted him, making him work to pull in every breath. He only had a vague idea as to where he was; he'd never actually been this way before. An apartment complex slightly nicer than his own sprawled to his left, with so many air-conditioning units running that it sounded like the building was breathing. Cars swept by on the other side, the Dopplering rise and fall of their tires on the pavement only dimly registering.

Maybe Upstairs would be able to call him back sooner than that, though. Maybe Simon would only be out for a month or so before Rich's legacy blew over and the OPR found bigger, newer, juicier targets. A month was survivable. Hell, two months might be survivable. Simon would hate every minute of it, but he'd survive and still get his team back at the end. It was only when his suspension edged up towards the three-month mark that he'd really start to get *replaced*. Like a flat tire.

Simon staggered and slowed to a walk, gasping, his heart thumping heavily. The muscles in his legs had relented and loosened back up, and then gone past 'loose' and into 'jelly', trembling with exertion. For a moment Simon thought he might drop to his knees. He gritted his teeth and pushed through it, kept moving. At the next intersection he turned left again and forced himself back to a jog.

At least his suspension meant that he'd never have to deal with waiting for Rappaport again. If he was really lucky his team would continue to track Rappaport for two or three more weeks, working according to Simon's last orders; the longer the team spent on Rappaport's trail, the less time Sandra would have to flex her own boss muscle. That was good. Bad for Sandra, but good for Simon. One of his three big problems had just gone away, vanished into thin air.

Simon hit a traffic light and turned left again. His shirt was wet all the way through and he plucked irritably at the collar, pulling it away from his neck; the fabric sucked unpleasantly at his skin but finally deigned to come away, letting in the faintest breath of a breeze. The slight and tiny pleasure of it was nearly enough to make Simon shiver. Instead he dropped his shirt and pounded on.

In fact, in a way, the second of his three big problems had also gone away. Simon's suspension was a powerful weapon in the conflict with Norton Fowles—too bad it was a weapon that cut both ways. The more Simon thought about it, the more he thought that going back to the Academy or even out west to a training clinic was a good idea. Get him out of the way, out of touch, and Fowles wouldn't be able to pick at him. Upstairs was right: out of sight meant out of mind. After a while, the suspension would simply *be* his punishment. Even

Fowles couldn't argue with that too hard, particularly not with both Upstairs and Baker Hart ranged against him.

The next street was large, busy, and familiar, lined with stores and restaurants. Simon turned left again, completing the square; he had to dodge around other, slower pedestrians now, but if he just went this way, he'd be home in ten or fifteen more minutes. He'd have a shower, do a load of laundry, get the stink of cigarettes out of his apartment, and then find some way to kill the rest of the evening—unconsciously, Simon slowed.

His third problem, though: that one wasn't going anywhere. Sooner or later Jeremy was going to call him again and confront him with his failure to warn Annabelle, a failure for which Simon could do nothing but apologize, as much as that rankled. That was, assuming Jeremy was still in any position to call him—assuming that Jeremy was still alive.

Simon pushed the uncomfortable thought away, then gritted his teeth and increased his pace, the muscles in his legs screaming. The light at the next intersection changed against him and he stumbled to a halt, bending over and putting his hands on his knees, wheezing with his head down. The other people waiting for the light to change glanced at him in something like sympathy, or possibly just simple disbelief: it was far too hot for that kind of physical exertion.

The worst part about it was the guilt. He hated the guilt. He just wasn't used to fucking up, especially not in a dangerous situation, and he'd fucked this one up pretty hard in the name of protecting himself—sure, that was important, but he'd put a woman's life in jeopardy just to protect his own career, and some people might call that a messed-up set of priorities.

The light changed. Simon glanced left and right out of sheer habit, then jogged out into the intersection, moving a bit slower now, lost in thought. He could just barely see the rooftops of his own apartment complex, mostly hidden behind other buildings. Ten minutes, if that. The discomfort and the sweatiness became so utterly complete that they faded into the background and Simon ran on, moving easily now, lost somewhere in the zen of running for the sake of running.

He couldn't do anything to fix the damage he'd done, either. If he still had access to his authority he might be able to do *something* to help find and save this mysterious Annabelle, but he didn't even have that any more. She had almost certainly been moved out of the country by now in any case, and Jeremy had gone to ground somewhere else entirely, and without Jeremy's 'answering service' Simon had no real way of getting in contact and nothing to offer even if he had. Without the might and power of the United States government behind him, Simon was just one guy with a few skills. What was he going to do with those? Fly to Europe, find Jeremy hidden in the midst of millions of Europeans like a real-life Where's Waldo puzzle, and offer to shoot people on Jeremy's behalf until the problem went away? It might work—it was just stupid enough to work—but it

would put Simon firmly on the wrong side of the law and endanger the job he didn't actually currently have, and anyway, in order to do something so stupid, he'd have to be . . .

. . . free?

The immensity of the realization stopped Simon in his tracks in the parking lot, and he had to grab for the railing to keep himself upright. It was a completely idiotic option, but it also certainly *was* an option, and a new one, to boot. Twenty-four hours ago Simon had been so certain that the only option available to him was to wait and see what happened next. Well, he'd done that, and he'd seen everything that was important to him get stripped away. Now he was at loose ends for the first time in years. He was on suspension. He was free.

Simon trudged the last few steps and hauled himself up the stairs to his apartment, his mind on fire. His apartment was a sauna, but the smell of smoke had dissipated; he closed the windows, stripped off his sodden running gear, and threw himself in the shower, dousing himself with cold water and yelping in shock. His mind cleared, reshuffling the facts and laying them out in a cool, clear, new order.

Right here, right now, he had the perfect window of opportunity to personally atone for his fuck-ups. He was *free* to do so. Was he going to man up and do something to set things right, or was he going to continue esteeming his career over his real responsibilities? Over somebody's *life*?

By the time Simon stepped out of the shower, the apartment had cooled down and so had he. He put on a clean pair of jeans and ran the contents of his laundry hamper down to the washing machines, then came back and booted up his computer. Five minutes of negotiating with Google and consulting various websites first jogged his hazy memory and then provided him with the number he needed. Simon closed his eyes for a moment, aware of the chasm in front of him, aware that if he did this there would be no going back to the moral high ground—then he opened his eyes and dialed the number.

"Oly Tamson Museum of Architecture," said the pleasant female voice on the other end of the line.

Simon hesitated for a moment. "Ah," he finally said. "Yes. My name is Simon Drake, and I'm with the Federal Bureau of Investigation—"

It really was a lot like jumping off a cliff: only the first step was difficult.

◆ Fourteen

“Yes, sir,” the woman on the other end of the line said, her voice going hushed with awe. Simon had not believed until this very second that a woman so credulous could possibly exist in Manhattan. “What can I do for you?”

“I need to speak to Judith Tamson,” Simon said. “Is she by any chance available?”

“Just a moment, sir, I’ll check.” She sent Simon into phone limbo; Simon settled back in his chair, closed his eyes, and waited. After about a minute she picked up the phone again. “Transferring you now, sir,” she said, breathless and pleased.

“Thanks,” Simon said, half a second before he was thrust back into phone limbo and out again, like getting ducked underwater.

“Curator’s office, Judith Tamson,” a second, brisker feminine voice said. “Can I help you?”

“I sure hope so,” Simon said. “As I told the lady who answered the phone, my name is Simon Drake, with the Federal Bureau of Investigation—”

“—yes, that’s what Maxine said,” Judith Tamson said, much less awed. Not suspicious yet, but very, very neutral.

“Anyway, the reason that I’m calling is that I need to get in contact with, ah, Ethan West.” Simon crossed his fingers. “Mr. West recently endowed a gallery at your museum, correct? The Cathedral Hall?”

“Yes?” Still neutral.

Simon thought very fast, made a couple of (probably unfair) snap judgments about Judith Tamson, and let his voice drop half an octave. “Ms. Tamson, let me be honest with you: as Mr. West is not actually a resident of the United States, acquiring his unlisted phone number through official channels would require me to negotiate a hell of a lot of diplomatic red tape. I don’t have time for that, and so I’m hoping to avoid it.” She started to say something. Simon cut her off, quickly. “Now, I’m not asking you to give me the number that you have for him. I realize that that probably wouldn’t sit right with you.”

“You’re right, it wouldn’t,” Judith Tamson said. The words were sharp, but the tone was vaguely mollified.

Simon crossed his fingers. “What I *am* going to ask you to do is this, Ms. Tamson: I’d appreciate it if you would call Ethan West at the number you have for him and pass on a message for me. If he chooses to call me back, that’s wonderful. If not, I’ll start cutting red tape. Either way, I promise I will not bother you further.”

On the other end of the line, Judith Tamson was silent. Simon waited, his nerves on edge; if she decided to challenge his authority she’d find out he didn’t have any—“I suppose I don’t have a problem with that, Mr. Drake,” she finally said, reluctantly, like it hurt to admit that. “I’ll leave the message with his service, but it must be close to midnight in the UK. He may not call you back until tomorrow.”

Simon clenched his free hand into a fist and pumped it in the air. *Yes*. “That’ll be fine, Ms. Tamson.”

“Very well.” Judith Tamson made a little breathy sound. It sounded annoyed. “What is the message, Mr. Drake?”

“Ah, yeah: please ask Mr. West to call Simon Drake as soon as possible regarding Jeremy Archer,” Simon said. He waffled for a moment, then gave her his cell phone number; he could hear the scratching sound as Judith Tamson wrote it down.

“Regarding Jeremy Archer,” Judith repeated. She read his number back to him, flat and unimpressed.

“That’s right,” Simon said. “He can call me at any time. That’s my cell.”

“Hmph. I’ll call and leave the message before I leave the museum tonight,” Judith said. “I can’t say for certain when or even if he’ll call you back, of course.”

“Guess that’s just a risk I’ll have to take,” Simon said.

Hanging up his phone, Simon checked his watch. It wasn’t quite 6:30. Had Sandra been informed by now? Knowing Upstairs, the answer was probably yes. Simon steeled himself, took a deep breath, and called her cell. Sandra answered her phone on the second ring with an urgent and distressed “Boss!”

“Gosh, Spring, I’m guessing by the sound of your voice that you’ve heard the news already,” Simon said, aiming for ‘cheerful’ and maybe, at best, hitting ‘nonchalant’. “But, uh, let’s skip the sympathy and the poop-flinging, all right? Where are you?”

“I’m here,” Sandra said. “I mean, in the office. I just got done talking to Upstairs—”

“Who all knows so far? Texas and Specs, right?”

“And Stonewall,” Sandra said. The distress in her voice was fading fast. “He got in just a couple of minutes before you called.”

“You mean to tell me he actually took twenty-four hours off, like I told him to? Wonders never cease,” Simon said. “Anyway, go ahead and tell Honda when he gets in, it’s not like he’s not going to find out in a hurry anyway. Buuuuut, that’s not why I called. You get off around eight or nine in the morning, right?”

“Right,” Sandra said. “That’s when I’ve been leaving, anyway. I may have to step up my hours now that, you know, it’s just the five of us again.”

“Right,” Simon said, wincing. “Anyway. I was thinking maybe we ought to get together tomorrow morning once you get off work. Have breakfast. Something like that. You up for it?”

“Yes. Yes, I think that sounds like a good idea,” Sandra said. “Why don’t you come over to my place? I fry a pretty decent egg, all things considered.”

Simon hesitated. “I’d really prefer to speak to you alone, Spring,” he finally said.

“Mike ought to still be here at the office, if that’s what you’re referring to,” Sandra said, irritated.

“Yeah, actually, it was,” Simon said, relaxing. “I was just checking, ’cause, you know—”

“He *does not live with me.*” Sandra’s voice climbed, getting a little sharp.

“Yuh huh,” Simon said, now actually grinning, despite everything. “That why he keeps answering your phone?”

“Once! He answered my phone *once!* And I kicked his ass for it afterwards!”

“Yeah, okay, you keep telling yourself that, Spring, because it’s totally hilarious when you doth protest too much and all. Tomorrow morning? Eight-ish?”

Sandra heaved out an irritated sigh. “Eight-ish, my place,” she said. “I accept donations of fresh baked goods, preference given to bagels or cinnamon rolls.”

“What the hell, I’ll even bring three, so Mike can have one when he gets home—”

“I hate you, boss,” Sandra said evenly, “and some day I will have my revenge.”

“Whatever keeps you going, Spring. Whatever keeps you going.”

She couldn’t exactly bang her phone down, but the connection cut off with a loud clap of plastic on plastic: she’d smacked her cell phone shut. Still smiling a little, Simon closed his own phone, considered it for a moment, and then went in search of a clean shirt and his sneakers; what the hell, he wasn’t doing anything right now, he might as well go get his hair cut.

On the way home from the barber shop he stopped in at a Target and picked up a cheap pay-as-you-go cell phone and the largest reloadable phone card they sold, just in case. The gift cards by the cash register caught his eye on the way out, and he threw a prepaid Visa into the stack as an afterthought.

Simon was sitting in front of the television not really watching a movie and nursing his second beer when his phone finally rang, at a little past midnight. He pulled his phone off its clip and checked the number. The digits made absolutely

no sense: an international call. Simon sat up, muted the television, and answered his phone. "Simon Drake."

"Mr. Drake." The voice was older, wearier, deeper, and lacking the sardonic edge of Jeremy's, but the accent was exactly the same. "I must say, this was an unlooked-for surprise."

"Yeah," Simon said, closing his eyes. His heart was suddenly hammering and he had no idea why. "What can I say? I'm just full of surprises."

"Mm," the other man said, the sheer familiarity of the sound making Simon shiver. "Tell me, is this a good time for you to talk?"

"Not really," Simon said. "If you'll give me a number where I can reach you, though, I'll call you back in about half an hour?"

"Of course." The other man read him off a number—American, with an area code that placed it in New York City. Simon couldn't say he was surprised. "I'll be expecting your call."

"Talk to you then," Simon said, folding his phone shut and abandoning his half-empty can of beer on the coffee table. He grabbed his keys and his sneakers and hit the door running, his heart rate still just a little up.

Fifteen minutes later he was halfway across town, parked outside a twenty-four-hour grocery store with a row of pay phones in a pool of dirty yellow light against the front wall. The first two didn't work, unsurprisingly, but the third gave him a dial tone; Simon fished his new phone card out of his wallet and punched in the number that he'd been given.

The pay phone clicked eight or nine times before ringing, and someone picked it up on the second ring. "Answering service," the woman on the other end of the line said, just to complete the picture of Simon's *déjà vu*.

"Uh, yeah," Simon said, putting his hand over his other ear to mute the late-night traffic. "My name is Simon Drake and I'd like to leave a message for Ethan West, please."

"I can take that message for you," the woman said, typing something. "Your message?"

"Tell him that I'm returning his call and I'd appreciate it if he'd call me back as soon as possible," Simon said. He leaned in and read off the number on the pay phone's faceplate. "That's a pay phone. I don't know if it makes a difference."

"It shouldn't," she said. "I'll pass that message along as soon as I can."

"Thanks," Simon said. He hung up, then put the phone card back in his wallet and put his wallet away.

The pay phone rang less than two minutes later, the harsh sound loud enough to make Simon jump a little. He grabbed the receiver, his heart unaccountably in his throat; the parking lot was nearly deserted and a stockroom clerk on a smoke break, forty feet away, was the only person in sight, but still Simon hunched forward over the pay phone as if he were shielding it with his body. "Yeah," he said, clearing his throat. "Simon Drake."

"I assume that this is a better time?" Ethan West said neutrally.

"Yeah, I think so," Simon said, glancing over his shoulder. "Sorry about earlier, but I didn't really want to have this conversation on my cell phone, just in case. This should be okay."

"You'll forgive me, Mr. Drake, but this seems like an unusual amount of scruple on your part," Ethan said. "It doesn't particularly fill me with confidence."

"Yeah, I get that," Simon said. And now that he'd actually come right down to it, he had no idea how to *say* it. He hesitated, then equivocated. "I, ah, I don't know how much of this you're aware of—"

"I believe I'm aware of most of the salient details," Ethan said, cutting in on him.

"Then you *are* still in touch with him," Simon said, blowing out a breath. He propped his forearm up on the top of the pay phone and rested his forehead on it, staring blindly down at his own feet. "I was hoping you were. I figured that if he was still talking to anyone, it'd be you."

This time, the hesitation was on Ethan's end. "Clever," Ethan finally said, faintly amused. "He doesn't precisely call every day, but yes, word does filter back to me on occasion. Why? Were you looking to get a message to him?"

"No," Simon said. He shut his eyes. "I want to help him."

"Mm," Ethan said, noncommittally. "As I recall, Mr. Drake, he asked for your help already—"

"—and I fucked it up, yeah, I know," Simon said. It came out louder than he'd been intending, and he choked and lowered his voice. "Jesus, believe me, I'm aware of that."

"All right," Ethan said, after a moment. "Putting aside the question of blame for a moment: when you say 'help', you mean . . . what, exactly?"

Simon glanced over his shoulder again. The stockboy had gone back in and the parking lot was still empty, except for the little huddle of employee cars off at the far end of the lot. Simon put his head back down on his arm. "I don't know," he said. "What do you think he needs? Tell me, and I'll do it."

"Ah," Ethan said, plainly startled. "I'm not entirely sure what good the FBI could—"

"Actually, uh," Simon said. Belatedly he became aware that his hands were shaking. "I can't help him officially. I'm talking personally."

"Personally," Ethan repeated.

"Personally," Simon confirmed. He swallowed and added, "Anything?"

Ethan was silent again. For a brief moment his silence was so complete that Simon could hear not only the hiss and pop of international transmission but something that sounded like an opera recording, playing at so low a volume as to be nearly subliminal. Whatever it was, it was pretty. "I see, Mr. Drake," Ethan said, after several seconds of silence. "In that case, perhaps you and I need to talk."

Simon couldn't help it: "I, uh, thought we were talking," he said.

"Yes, I suppose we are," Ethan said, clearly not amused. "May I be honest, Mr. Drake?"

"Sure," Simon said, shifting. His hip bumped into the plexiglass shield that surrounded his pay phone, startling him. His eyes flew open, then closed again. "Go ahead. Hit me."

"Personally, I have always been of the opinion that Jeremy places a little too much trust in you," Ethan said. "On the one hand, his judgment is generally sound, but on the other, I fear that he's letting the physical component of your relationship influence him unduly—Mr. Drake?"

"Sorry," Simon wheezed, still coughing. "I, uh. Wasn't aware you knew about that."

"Ah." Ethan fell silent, courteously giving Simon time to recover.

Simon coughed a few more times, then swiped at his watering eyes and cleared his throat. "So, uh," he said. "Uh, yeah. You were saying."

"Ah, yes. As I was saying, Mr. Drake, you may very well be completely sincere about wishing to help Jeremy, but in order to do so, you need my help—and I have no particular reason to believe you'd be of any real use, or, indeed, to trust you at all. Particularly not after you left poor Annabelle hung out to dry like that."

"Guess that's fair," Simon muttered, scrubbing his free hand over his eyes again. "So . . ."

"So if you want my help, you'll have to convince me to give it to you," Ethan concluded, his voice still cool. "And I do prefer to do business in person, Mr. Drake. I always have. Tell me, do you think you can get away?"

"Any time," Simon said confidently. Being able to say that felt like passing his first test. "I'm free and ready to go. Just give me the word."

Ethan made a little 'hm' sound that might have been approving. "Well," he said. "That's more than I'd expected from you, frankly. I'll call around and make a few arrangements—I should get back to you by tomorrow evening. If I were you, I'd be packed and ready to go by then."

"Not a problem," Simon said, exhaling in relief. "Anything else I need to know?"

"Mm. Well. I trust you don't have a problem with, ah, less conventional means of transport? I do think it would be best if there weren't a record of your departure from your country, given the circumstances."

Simon shut his eyes. "No problem," he said. "Actually, I was about to suggest that. I'll leave it up to you."

"Good," Ethan said. "Oh, and by the way, I suggest you leave your official identification and such at home. You'll be traveling in the care of people who prefer to avoid attracting the attention of the law."

“Already planning on it,” Simon said. “I mean, I’ll feel a little naked, but . . . yeah. I know what I’m getting into here.”

The little pause gave Simon ample time in which to kick himself for the blithe overconfidence. “Do you, Mr. Drake?” Ethan finally asked. “Do you really?”

“Well, when you put it like that . . . no, I guess I don’t know. But I’ll, uh, try to be open to new experiences?”

“I suppose that’s the most I can ask for, Mr. Drake,” Ethan said. “Tomorrow evening, then. What number shall I use?”

“Oh! Uh. I’ve got a safe cell,” Simon said. He dug the instruction sheet from his new cell phone out of his pocket and read off the number. “It’s one of those pay-as-you-go ones, and my name’s not associated with it yet.”

“Mm. I see you’ve given this *some* thought,” Ethan said. “Very well, I’ll call you at that number tomorrow.”

“I’ll be ready,” Simon promised.

“Well, then. I suppose I’ll see you soon.” Ethan paused and made a little sound which might have been a laugh. “Good night, Mr. Drake.”

“Yeah,” Simon said. “G’night.”

The phone clicked in his ear, the connection cutting off; Simon stood in front of the pay phone and swayed gently for a second or two before hanging up himself. Leaving his fingers curled around the pay phone’s handset, he took a few deep breaths, steadying himself before he trudged back to the Jeep and let himself in.

He closed the Jeep’s door. The dome light went out, leaving him in darkness. Simon put his hands on the steering wheel and let his head fall back against the headrest, staring blindly up at the Jeep’s canvas top. “Jesus,” he muttered, his voice unduly loud in the silence. “What the hell do I think I’m doing?”

After a few moments in which no one answered him, not even himself, Simon lifted his head and started the Jeep, pointing its nose towards home. He wasn’t sure how well he’d sleep, since he was currently acclimated to sleeping days, but he had six hours before he had to start getting ready to have breakfast with Sandra. He thought that maybe it’d be best to try.

◆ Fifteen

Simon was lounging in the hallway by Sandra's door when she got home, a bag of groceries cradled in the crook of her arm. "I see you beat me here," Sandra said, jingling her keys.

"Guess so," Simon said, straightening up. It was closer to eight-fifteen than to eight. He'd been there for several minutes. A white bakery bag dangled from his fingers and he saluted her with it. "So . . . where's Mike?"

"Do not even make me hit you over the head with the groceries," Sandra said coolly, unlocking her door. "There are eggs in here and giving you a concussion with them would be satisfying but kind of wasteful."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Simon said. Sandra toed her front door open and edged in and Simon followed, glancing furtively about. There were no overt signs of Mike's occasional occupation that he could see, much to his regret. "So I guess what you meant to say is 'he's still at the office, boss'?"

Sandra put the bag of groceries down on the tiny kitchen counter and started rapidly unpacking its contents into a little pile. "You can take it that way if you like, yes."

"Here." Simon put the bakery bag down on the counter, neatly filling up the very last square inch of space. "Bagels *and* cinnamon rolls. You know. Peace offering." He paused. "Three of each."

Sandra sighed and punched Simon in the side, her fist glancing off his hipbone. Simon yelped. "Ow, damn," Sandra said, shaking her bruised hand. "I always forget to compensate for your height. Anyway, stop being such a bastard and go put some coffee on."

"Oh, hey, that's the magic word," Simon said, rubbing his hip. The coffemaker was on the other side of the kitchen, which in Sandra's kitchen was about half a step away; Simon leaned over and opened the cabinet above the coffemaker, fetching out the half-empty can of coffee. Behind him Sandra was still rattling around, folding up the empty grocery bag and putting it away before redistributing the food on the counter.

Neither of them wanted to be the first to bring it up, so for the first few minutes, they worked in silence. It was strained at first but rapidly became almost companionable; Sandra broke eggs into a bowl and ripped open a little paper package of fresh sausages, and Simon finished putting the coffee on before leaning past Sandra to snag the bread knife and slice the bagels. “You know,” he said, balancing one of the bagels on its edge, “they say that bagel-related injuries have surpassed falls as the number one cause of injuries in the home?”

“Goddamn, but we’re a yuppie society,” Sandra said, reaching past him to turn on one of the stove burners. Simon obligingly shuffled aside. Sandra banged a frying pan down on the burner. “Bagel-related injuries,” she repeated, snorting.

“Yeah, that does sound kind of ominous, doesn’t it?” Simon carefully shifted his grip on the half-sliced bagel before he could add himself to the statistic and finished slicing it in two. “Toaster?”

“Use the broiler,” Sandra said, stepping aside and pulling open the oven door. It dropped with a bang and she twisted the knob to BROIL. “You think I have room in here for a toaster?”

“What, you expect me to rough it?” Simon asked. He sliced the second bagel and stuck all four halves in the oven, then kicked the oven door up.

Sandra stepped back into place, the slightly-open oven door pressing against her stomach. “Yes, well, you start paying me more and I’ll get a bigger place,” she said.

“Hell, Sandy, all you gotta do is start charging Mike rent,” Simon said, and then found it prudent to remove himself from the kitchen before Sandra could kill him.

“Food,” Sandra announced a few minutes later, carrying two plates out of the kitchen and depositing them on the postage-stamp-sized kitchen table. Her voice was still a bit terse, but now well within the range that Simon thought of as ‘she’ll get over it’.

“Oh, hey, awesome, smells great,” Simon said. He dropped the magazine he’d been leafing through—it was a *Cosmopolitan* and he hoped like hell she hadn’t actually caught him looking at it—and got up, easing his way past Sandra and into the kitchen. “Coffee,” he said in explanation. “Need me to bring anything else while I’m in here?”

“No coffee for me,” Sandra said, pulling out her chair and sitting down. “Get me a glass of orange juice instead. I need my sleep.”

Simon fetched a cup of coffee for himself and a glass of orange juice for Sandra, carrying them back into the breakfast nook and putting them down. Sandra pointed her fork at the other chair. “Sit. Eat. I don’t want to talk about anything until I’ve eaten, just in case I lose my appetite or need to kill you.”

Simon sat and picked up his own fork. “That’s fair.” He dug into his eggs with real appetite—he hadn’t felt much like eating last night, for some reason—and

made a pleased sound. “Damn, food’s good,” he mumbled around his mouthful of food.

“One might almost think I was a chick,” Sandra said, ripping her bagel into pieces.

Pleasantries over with, Simon got down to the real business of eating. It *was* good, and he was starving. Sandra’s apartment was even smaller than his, but it was a pleasant place to be, especially in the morning light; for a few moments Simon had nothing weightier on his mind than enjoying his breakfast. It couldn’t last.

Without conversation to slow it down, breakfast was gone in ten minutes flat. Sandra piled up the plates and carried them into the kitchen, dumping them in the sink and running some water over them. Simon fetched himself some more coffee. “You want some more orange juice?” he asked.

“I’m good,” Sandra said. She turned off the water and abandoned the dishes in the sink. “Let’s go sit back down.”

“Yeah,” Simon said, carrying his coffee back to the breakfast table. Sandra followed.

They both settled in at the table. “So,” Sandra said, folding her hands together on the table in front of her. “Apparently you won yourself a six-month paid vacation and you didn’t even have to kill anyone to get it.”

“That’s the long and short of it, yep.” Simon blew on his coffee, looking down at it instead of at Sandra. “Upstairs tell you why?”

Sandra looked down at her hands, flexing her fingers. “Not in so many words, but it’s not like I don’t know, boss. You covered for Archer on the Farraday kill and got caught at it.”

“It’s more complicated than that,” Simon said, “but . . . yeah, basically. Did he explain Norton Fowles to you at all? The political bullshit?”

“Just that Fowles was the one who kept picking at your story until it came apart.”

“Yeah, well, he did that, but he did it because he’s got a hate on for Upstairs, basically,” Simon said. “He’s trying to use me as a bludgeon to hammer Upstairs, aaaand I’m sad to say that I handed him the opportunity to do so.”

“Yeah, that you did.” Sandra reached across the table and plucked Simon’s mug from his hands, taking a sip of his coffee. “Does Upstairs know? About the cover-up?”

Simon winced. “You know what, I hate that word,” he said, reclaiming his mug. “It’s so, so *Washington Post*. But, yeah, the answer is ‘more than I’d like him to’.”

“Mmph.”

“Yeah.” Simon looked away. “He doesn’t know exactly what went down. But I seized up at the wrong moment and now he knows *something*.” A vague ache seized Simon about the temples and he reached up to rub it away, his hand

cupped over his eyes. "I don't actually think he's mad at me, that's the worst part. I mean, he's been with the Bureau for how long? He knows how the machine works. It's just that . . . in a sick kind of way, I think I broke his heart."

Sandra hissed in sympathy. "God, paternal guilt."

"Yeah. Jesus, and it works, I feel like shit about it." The ache refused to let up. Simon gave up on it and turned his attention to his coffee instead, burning the roof of his mouth a little bit. Outside a cloud scudded aimlessly across the sun, dyeing the room gray for a few moments.

The cloud eventually drifted away. Sandra heaved a sigh and pushed her hair back behind her ear. "Okay. So. Moving on. I'm trying not to get pissy with you, because yeah, you kinda deserved this, but it's not like I don't get why you did it."

"Yeah," Simon said. "I mean, Jesus . . ." He broke off there, made an aggravated gesture, and drank more of his coffee.

"Probably best not to tell me, yeah," Sandra said. "I mean, it's not like I can't put the pieces together, but . . . well, that's the problem. We were all there, and none of us are stupid. We all pretty much know what happened, even if you never told us in so many words. If OPR ends up calling the rest of us onto the carpet in your absence, we could *all* get in trouble."

"No," Simon said, holding up his hand. "That's not true. You may suspect you know what happened, but *none of you actually saw it* and that is God's honest truth. The only people who were there when Farraday died were me, Archer, and Farraday. Archer's not around, and Farraday's not going to be talking unless Fowles uses a ouija board."

"Yeah, but—"

"But nothing. If they start pressing you, you need to harp on that. You didn't see it happen. You didn't arrive until after Farraday was dead. None of you did."

"But—"

Simon leaned forward and put his hand on Sandra's. Sandra shut up with a little startled yip. "I'll go down for this if I have to," Simon said. "Seriously, Sandy, you know me, you know I get off on taking responsibility, right? So let me do it. The rest of you take care of yourselves and you do it with the truth: you didn't see it happen."

"Yeah." Sandra heaved out a breath. "I'll get with the others tomorrow and make sure our stories are straight. They'll be okay, though. Seriously, some of us are pretty canny, boss."

"And some of you are Nate," Simon said, trying to grin.

Sandra glanced up at him, then half-smiled. "Right."

Simon nodded and drank some more coffee. "Take care of my team, Spring," he said, carefully not looking at her. "Upstairs has promised that he'll look out for you guys while I'm gone, and the man does keep his word."

"The problem is that six-month absence, you know," Sandra said. "That's a hell of a long time at our level."

"I know." Simon caught his mug in both hands and swirled the remains of his coffee around, watching it instead of Sandra. "Upstairs promised me flat-out that he'd unsuspend me the moment that he thought it was safe," he said. "That could be as little as a month from now."

"And if it's not?" Sandra's voice was flat. Simon couldn't tell if he was imagining the challenge in it or not.

He took a deep breath and looked up at her, pinning her squarely in his gaze. "I'm not stupid, Spring," Simon said, keeping his voice matter-of-fact with an effort. "I know this is one hell of an opportunity for you—"

"Oh, Jesus fuck," Sandra said, dropping her face into her hands. "You think this is about politics for me? Is that it?"

"Well . . . yeah? Sort of? Not primarily but deep down in your little weasel heart?"

"You know, I ought to be offended, except that you're right," Sandra said, lifting her head. "Actually, I think I'm going to be a little offended anyway. I so seldom get the chance."

Simon held up both hands by way of apology. "Yeah, I put that badly, and I'm sorry. I know it's not your first priority or anything, but either the thought has already crossed your mind or you're a lot stupider than I, personally, think that you are."

"I think Norton Fowles has you seeing politics everywhere you look, both above and below you," Sandra said, "but you're not wrong. However, in my defense, I thought it and then I felt bad about it."

"Well, don't. I thought it too." Simon tilted his head back and drained off the last of his coffee, considered another cup, and then put his empty mug aside.

"And . . . what did you think?" Sandra's voice was neutral.

"I think that if I'm out for more than three months, it would be unfair to bump you back down to being my second-in-command," Simon said. There. It was said.

Sandra watched his face for a moment, then inclined her head. "All right, we agree," she said. "So . . . how do we handle this?"

"We don't have to," Simon said. "Right here, right now, you're already on the spot. Upstairs is going to be watching. I dropped a couple of words in his ear about how well you handled things when I was in the hospital—"

"You did?" Sandra said, unable to keep the surprise out of her voice.

"Christ, of course I did," Simon said, a little irritated. "We both know that you're not going to stay on my team forever."

Sandra put a hand over her mouth, doing a bad job of hiding her little smile. "Well, I did," she said, "but I wasn't aware you were so eager to get rid of me—"

“Yeah, yeah, cry more, it gets me so hot,” Simon said. “But, seriously. I’m on your side in this, okay? Sooner or later you’re going to move on up and get a team of your own, and if this suspension knocks me out for six months, well, it’ll be sooner. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” Sandra said.

“Just one thing,” Simon said. “Team Templar, as the name might suggest, is mine, and it’s going to stay mine. Unless, you know, I end up getting fired or dying or something. When you move up I’ll be happy to advise you on putting together your own team, but you can’t have mine.”

Sandra’s mouth twitched. “That’s fine,” she said. “I mean, I like the guys a lot, but I think it would create a lot of unnecessary problems if I took it over.”

“Yeah,” Simon said. “For one thing, your boyfriend might not like having you as his boss—” and then he jerked back, letting Sandra’s fist pass harmlessly a few inches in front of his nose.

Sandra sat back down, looking for all the world like she hadn’t just taken a semi-serious swing at him. “That,” she said, “and I’m not particularly interested in trying to fill your shoes. I’d like to lead a team that *won’t* be comparing me to someone else all the time.”

“Ooh, good point,” Simon said. “I’m a hard act to follow.”

“Or a unique one, anyway,” Sandra said. She leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes, pushing her hair back behind her ear again. “Well, that was all fun and entertaining. So what are you going to do with yourself while you’re on suspension? Upstairs mentioned that you might go back to the Academy for a while.”

“Uh, well, that’s the other reason I wanted to talk to you,” Simon said, trying to keep his voice light.

Sandra picked up on the false note with disconcerting speed. Her eyes popped open, then narrowed. “Oh, God. Whatever you’re about to say, I’m going to hate it, aren’t I?”

Simon took a deep breath. “No, no, you’re not,” he said, “because the conversation that we’re about to have, we never had. Okay?”

“No! No, it is not okay! Who do you think I am, Rich?” Sandra threw up both hands in frustration, then slumped down in her chair. “Okay. Jesus. Hit me. What?”

“We’re not going to have had this conversation?”

“Far as I’m concerned it never happened,” Sandra said, irritated. “Unless it pisses me off so bad that I pitch you out the window. *What?*”

Simon looked down at his hands, picking intently at one of his fingernails. “Well, uh. I’m on suspension for at least a month, right?”

“Right...”

“So. Uh.” Simon folded his hands together white-knuckle tight and spat it out. “I’m going to Europe to find Archer,” he said, as fast as he could. “He’s in a world of trouble right now and it’s my fault—”

He got no farther than that before Sandra lunged straight out of her chair and decked him. She pulled the punch at the last possible moment—her fist connected with his forehead and not with his nose—but Simon’s head still snapped back and his chair skittered back a couple of inches. “*Jesus Christ!*” Sandra said, throwing herself out of her chair and stalking off a few paces.

“Ow,” Simon said, shocked. His eyes were wide and watering and his headache was back out in force.

Sandra crossed her arms tightly across her chest and glared out at her living room. “I cannot *believe* what a giant fucking idiot you are—”

“No, seriously, *ow*,” Simon said, curling a hand over the back of his neck. The muscles there twanged in affront. “My neck hurts like hell—”

“Good!” Sandra said, throwing her hands up in frustration. “I can’t believe—you can’t seriously—I could believe this kind of stupid shit from *Mike*, but I never thought I’d catch *you* thinking with your dick!”

“... what?” Simon said, freezing with his hand on the back of his neck.

Sandra whipped around and pinned him with her stare. “You heard me!”

For a long moment the silence stretched taut between them, then Simon dropped his head to the table and folded his arms protectively over it. “Christ, does *everyone* know about it by now?” he said, his voice muffled. Sandra didn’t answer, and after a moment, Simon’s head popped back up. “How long have you known?”

“Known for sure? For about—” Sandra checked her watch “—ten seconds?”

Simon stared at her for a minute, his head pounding. “Oh, Jesus, I walked right into that, didn’t I,” he finally said, grabbing his temples.

“If it’s any consolation, I don’t think anyone else has figured it out,” Sandra said. The anger was already leaching out of her voice, but she turned her back on him again anyway. “Men can be pretty clueless about these things.”

“Rich knew,” Simon said. The bitter tone in his voice didn’t startle him at all. “He, uh, caught us at it once.”

“... oh, God,” Sandra said, half fascinated and half repulsed.

“Yeah. I guess I’m lucky he didn’t tell Karpol about *that*. Hell, some days I’m half-convinced Rich sold Archer out to Karpol out of sheer jealousy oh God that’s so gross I don’t even want to think about it,” Simon finished, all in a shuddering rush. “But I swear to you this isn’t about getting laid, okay? ... will you come sit down? And not hit me again?”

Sandra flapped her hands one last time and then spun around and came back, sitting down. “So. Where were you, that Rich could catch you at it?” she asked.

Simon winced away from her, already anticipating the next outburst. “Mat room,” he muttered.

"The mat room." Sandra's stare was flat and accusing. "Tell me I heard that wrong, boss."

"You know, Spring, I wish I could—"

"The *mat* room!" Sandra said, baring her teeth in a disgusted grimace. "God-dammit, Simon, I use those mats for sparring—that's disgusting!"

"No!" Simon said, waving his hands frantically. "No, Christ, no! There was no, uh, no mess, okay? Nothing got on the mats! Seriously! You have not been thrashing around in anything!"

"Now I feel itchy," Sandra said. She scratched her shoulder for emphasis, wrinkling her nose. "Holy crap, talk about unsanitary."

"The janitor mops in there every couple of days anyway," Simon muttered, scrubbing the back of his hand over his uncomfortably-warm cheeks.

Sandra eyed him for a moment, then sighed. "Tell me the two of you are at least being safe."

"You know what, I'm going to pretend you didn't say that because *ough* things I do not want to discuss with anyone ever, but yes, thank you, I'm stupid but not that stupid," Simon said. Now he was certain that he was red in the face. "Can we move on now? Please? There's some stuff you need to know."

"Oh my God, I hope not—"

"Christ, not about *that*!"

Sandra subsided, still idly scratching her arm. "Okay," she said. "Keep in mind that I am only temporarily tabling my God-given right to give you hell about this, however."

"So noted," Simon said. "Okay. So. You want to know why I'm going after Archer? This is why . . ."

The whole situation with Karpol, the thing with Annabelle, everything: it took almost five minutes to explain. By the time Simon was done he was sweating, just a little, which irritated him—what the hell was *wrong* with him?—but the suspicious look in Sandra's eyes had faded and vanished, replaced with something that might almost be sympathy. "I see," she finally said.

"Yeah," Simon said, looking away. "It's just . . . it's my fault. And I'm going to step up and take responsibility for it."

"It's not your fault," Sandra said, her anger flaring a little. "The actual situation is Rich's fault, not yours, and as for this Annabelle thing, no one can blame you for wanting to cover your ass when it comes to dealing with a criminal—"

"I can," Simon said bleakly.

Sandra subsided, although she was still unhappy. "Okay," she said softly. "But I think you're beating yourself up over it a little too much."

“Maybe,” Simon said. “And if he was just another criminal, even one we’d worked with, yeah, I’d totally agree with you. But he’s not. You know? He’s—” Simon floundered for a moment and settled on “—my friend.”

“Your friend,” Sandra repeated. “Okay, your friend, I’ll be nice and allow that phrasing.”

“Yeah, okay, good.”

Sandra’s eyes glinted. “Your *special* friend.”

“Oh, Jesus.” Simon shuddered and dismissed the whole mess with a wave of his hand. “So, uh, as long as we’re not having this conversation, there’s some information I don’t want you to have.”

Sandra eyed him for a moment. “All right,” she said. “What?”

Simon twisted around and grabbed the pen and paper from beside Sandra’s phone. “This may or may not be the number of the cell phone I’ll be carrying while I’m in Europe,” he said, writing down the number of the prepaid phone. “Don’t call it unless it’s vital. I’ll be leaving my real phone plugged in at my apartment so that I can call it and check my voice mail without its battery running down—you can call that one instead.”

Sandra tilted her head, watching him write. “Okay,” she said dubiously.

“And *this*—” Simon added the number for Ethan West’s answering service “—is a number that you are most emphatically not supposed to have. If you call it, there’s this certain guy in England who’s going to kick my ass and strand me in, in Poland or something. But if there’s a real, tremendous emergency, or if I call you screaming for help: call it.” He tore off the sheet of paper and held it out.

Sandra gingerly took it, holding it like it was germ. “You really know how to make a girl feel confident in your decision-making skills,” she said. “Anything else?”

Simon fumbled around in his pocket and produced a key ring, which he slid across the table. “Keys: apartment, mailbox, desk, and truck. Not that I think you’ll need any of this stuff, but I want you to have it in case you do.”

“Uh huh,” Sandra said, flicking through the key ring and pausing at the fifth key. “What’s this one?”

“Oh. There’s a little fireproof safe in the closet in my office at home,” Simon said. “All my vital docs are in there.”

Sandra wiggled the safe key back and forth on the ring, then sighed and dropped the ring to the table with a clatter. “That doesn’t precisely make me feel any better about this. Nothing says ‘everything’s going to be all right’ like telling me where you keep your will.”

“Yeah, well,” Simon said. “Consider it ‘preparing for every contingency’. Come on. I’m a planner. You know that.”

“Yeah.” Sandra sat back. “Yeah, I know.”

Simon drummed his fingers on the table, then pushed his chair back and stood up. His head still hurt, and his neck still hurt, but the relief of being almost done

with this chore was enough to make him feel pretty good anyway. “I think that’s it,” he said. “I’ll call you when I can, just to let you know that I’m okay. Okay?”

“Do that,” Sandra said, standing up. “For the record, I still think you’re insane, but I do get that this has something to do with salving your precious masculine ego—”

“Hey,” Simon said, stung.

“—and I also get that it’s important to you, for several reasons, one of which is named ‘Jeremy Archer,’” Sandra finished, putting her hand on Simon’s chest. “Just . . . be careful. All right? And if you need anything that I can get away with giving you, feel free to ask. I can always laugh in your face if I need to.”

“Yeah. Thanks, Spring. You’re the best, you know that?” Simon slung an arm over her shoulders and gave her a one-armed hug that was only slightly awkward.

“Believe me, I know,” Sandra said, patting his chest. “Come on, I’ll walk you to the door.”

“Yeah, I guess I’d better get out of here before Mike comes home,” Simon said. Sandra smacked him.

◆ Sixteen

Simon was back home by nine-thirty in the morning, before the worst of the day's heat hit. He shut the front door behind himself, locked it, kicked off his sneakers, and then fell back against the door and took a deep breath; then he let it out, pushed himself upright and got to work.

Most of his clothes were already clean, so packing was a snap. After a moment of consideration, Simon settled on his battered duffel rather than the larger suitcase. He had no idea where he was going—Jesus, for all he knew he was going to Russia and would therefore probably freeze to death—so he tossed his bomber jacket on the bed and called that good enough. The duffel he stuffed to capacity. If he needed more or different stuff, he'd just buy it there. Wherever 'there' was.

When he was all packed, he carried the duffel and his jacket out into the main room and tossed them on the couch. He fished out both his cell phones and plugged them in, putting them on the table beside his landline, then went into the kitchen and poured the rest of the milk down the sink, not letting himself think about why.

Half out of necessity and half out of a need to stay busy, Simon spent the next hour or so cleaning the place straight down, even going to far as to locate and use the vacuum cleaner. He ran and emptied the dishwasher, then emptied the last few bits of perishable food out of the fridge and chucked the trash out of the kitchen window and into the dumpster. An hour later he'd actually gotten around to throwing out or filing the contents of the pile of errant papers in his office, preparing as best he could for—he let himself admit it—a long absence.

When the place was cleaner than it had been since Simon had moved in several years ago, Simon took a last, satisfied look around, then went into his office and closed the door behind him. Dropping to his knees in front of his desk, Simon unlocked the upper file drawer and pulled it out as far as it would go, then lifted it up off its rails and pulled it the rest of the way out, setting the drawer down on his desk chair.

The black plastic bag was duct-taped to the inside of the desk's drawer

housing. As hiding places went, it was pretty crappy, and Simon knew it, but somehow he'd never gotten around to devising a better one. It didn't matter now in any case. Simon picked at one edge of the duct tape until it came loose, then ripped the whole package free and tore open the plastic.

The pistol was clean in every sense of the word: it was brand-new, had only been test-fired a few times, and didn't exist on any registry or database known to man. Six years ago, in the chaos following a major arms bust, someone in the Bureau had put it in his pocket and walked off with it, as tended to happen in the midst of chaos. It had found its way to Simon a few weeks later; he'd put it in his own pocket and brought it home, and it had been taped to the inside of his desk ever since, not existing, just in case. The extra magazine and the ankle holster did exist, in theory, but Simon had paid cash for them both six years ago and he wasn't too worried about those coming back to haunt him.

His jaw set, Simon carried the whole mess into the kitchen, pitching the shredded plastic bag out into the trash before fetching out his kit and settling in to clean what was already the world's cleanest handgun.

Half an hour later Simon added the holstered pistol to the little pile on the couch. He'd had a short night the night before and three weeks of hard road before that, and it was all beginning to tell on him; unplugging the prepaid phone, Simon carried it into the bedroom with him and plugged it back in there, then fell into bed. He was asleep within minutes.

The prepaid phone's annoying default ringtone woke him five hours later. Simon scrambled for it, bleary-eyed. "Yuh," he said, scrubbing at his eyes. "Simon Drake."

"Mr. Drake," Ethan said. The connection rendered his voice faint and tinny, but still he sounded cool and awake despite the fact that it must have been close to two in the morning on the other side of the Atlantic. "Are you ready to go?"

Simon swung his legs out of bed and sat up. "Yeah," he said. "I'm all set. So, uh, where am I going?"

"Do you know where the Potomac Airfield is?"

"Not a clue," Simon said, reaching for his jeans, "but I bet I can look it up."

"Most likely," Ethan said. "At any rate, that is indeed where you are going. Your pilot should be waiting for you in the lobby—try not to keep him waiting more than an hour or so."

Simon winced. "Whoo. Guess I better hurry, then. What's his name?"

"I'm told that his first name is 'Charlie' and that he tends to wear a red baseball cap," Ethan said. "As for his last name, I have no idea."

"Huh," Simon said. "That's not really . . . reassuring."

"I wasn't aware I had to arrange for your transport *and* reassure you in the bargain, Mr. Drake," Ethan said with asperity.

"No, I was just saying," Simon said. "I mean, I'm going. Coming. Whatever."

“Mm. Very well, then. I shall see you when you get here, Mr. Drake. Good luck.” Ethan West rang off without another word. The phone made scratchy sounds in Simon’s ear before jittering over into a dial tone.

Simon frowned, folding up the phone. “Good luck?” he said.

He called for the taxi from his prepaid cell phone, then went back into the bedroom and dressed, still thoughtful. He put a little more care into dressing than was strictly necessary, his loosest jeans and a decent button-down shirt over a t-shirt; layered under his bomber jacket, the shirt and t-shirt should carry him through most climates that weren’t arctic. The loose jeans would hide the ankle holster. It still didn’t take more than five minutes to dress.

Simon trotted back out into the main room, hoisted up the right leg of his jeans, and strapped the ankle holster on. It was tight and heavy, like an ankle brace gone wrong. The weight felt strange, but the little SIG was invisible under his clothing, and that was the best that he could ask for.

The extra magazine, a box of .40 cartridges, and a pared-down cleaning kit went into one end of his duffel, and that was that. Simon slung the bomber jacket over his shoulder, picked up the duffel, then dumped both things back on the couch and went to turn the thermostat up to 80. No sense in air-conditioning an empty apartment. Simon picked his things back up and let himself out, locking the door behind himself.

It felt like it should mean something, leaving his home behind to head out into the unknown. It didn’t, really. Simon ran down the stairs and out into the parking lot without a qualm, heading for the main drag and the motel that was a block and a half away.

The taxi picked him up in front of the motel fifteen minutes later. “Hey,” Simon said, slinging himself into the back seat. “Dulles, please.”

“Sure, mac,” the driver said, bored as hell. “You want me to turn up the a/c, let me know.”

Simon, sweating, undid an extra button on his shirt. “Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, that’d be good.”

The taxi let him off in front of the airport twenty minutes later, only nominally gouging Simon for the trip. Simon paid, tipped decently, and headed into the airport, uncomfortably aware of the pistol strapped to his ankle.

The air conditioning hit him like a wave of frost and Simon shivered. It was getting on close to eight and the airport wasn’t particularly crowded; the people that were still there weren’t paying much attention to anything. Simon headed past the ticket counters and into the closest bathroom, closing himself up in a stall.

Five minutes later he left again, taking the escalator down to the baggage claim. Here it was busier—some plane or another had just landed—and Simon had to thread his way through the crowds to the exit and the taxi queue there. Simon tossed his jacket and his duffel into the back of a taxi and climbed in after them. “Hey,” he said. “I need to go to the Potomac Airfield, it’s out 210?”

“Yeah, I know where it is,” his second cabbie said, flicking on the meter and pulling out of the queue. “This time of night it shouldn’t be more than fifteen, twenty minutes.”

“Awesome,” Simon said, settling in and closing his eyes.

The Potomac Airfield was already lit up like a supermarket parking lot even though the sky wasn’t completely dark yet. The cabbie let Simon off in front of a long, low white building and gouged him again, bringing Simon’s cash reserves down to a single twenty and a handful of singles.

Lowering his duffel to the ground, Simon ran a hand through his sweat-damp hair and took a look around. He’d never been to a private airfield before, but it looked about like he’d expected: a single long runway, a couple of anonymous buildings, and a bunch of tiny planes lined neatly up on the grass to either side of the runway. Simon picked up his duffel and headed into the building.

The lobby, on the other hand, looked nothing like he’d expected, not that he’d really had any idea what to expect. He’d expected something with concrete floors and big, echoing ceilings like an airplane hangar; instead he got something that looked like the lobby of a reasonably nice hotel. He’d barely had a moment to look around before a guy wearing a red baseball cap heaved himself up out of one of the chairs, dropped his magazine onto the table, and came over. “You Simon?”

“Yeah,” Simon said, blinking at the use of his first name. “That’s me. You Charlie?”

“Yep,” Charlie said, nodding. “Sure am. Damn, you sure took your time getting here—anyway, come on, I’m all fueled up and ready to go whenever you are.”

“Sorry about that—had to wait for a taxi,” Simon said. “I need to do anything before we go?”

“Nah, just get settled in, I’ll take care of the rest,” Charlie said. He led the way out the back door of the lobby and along a row of quiet, parked planes, all tied down like horses. Simon nearly tripped over the first cable and stuck closer to Charlie after that.

Charlie pulled up in front of a little white plane that looked, to Simon’s inexperienced eyes, like pretty much every other little white plane on the airfield. “How long’s our flight time?” Simon asked, ducking under the wing.

“Eh, four hours, about,” Charlie said.

Simon paused. “That’s it?”

“Yeah, that’s it,” said Charlie. “Course, it helps that we don’t have to stop and refuel.”

“Hell, I don’t know where we *would* stop,” Simon said, laughing a little. “Some aircraft carrier?”

Charlie pulled the passenger door open, then paused with his hand on the handle and blinked at Simon. “Huh? Nah, we’d just stop in Tennessee somewhere, probably—why, where’d you think we were going?”

Simon hesitated, sensing a trap. “Where *are* we going?”

“Corpus Christi.” Charlie pushed his baseball cap back and scratched his thinning hair before helpfully adding, “Texas.”

“Ah. Huh. Okay.” Simon ducked his head and stepped up into the tiny passenger cabin, his duffel bouncing along behind him. “Someone else arranged this flight for me, so I didn’t know . . .”

“Nah, s’cool, I knew that,” Charlie said. “Go ahead and put your stuff away and get seated, we’ll probably take off in fifteen or twenty minutes.” The heavy door swung shut behind Simon with a whuff of displaced air and chunked solidly into place.

The cabin only had two seats in it, side by side, with a locker behind each one; one of the lockers was open, so Simon put his things into that one and closed it before settling in. The plane was small but long on leg room, which was a pleasant change from commercial aircraft.

The passenger compartment was separated from the cockpit by a thin curtain. The radio was already squawking, broadcasting its weird aircraft code; outside the plane Charlie said something to someone, laughed, and then opened the other door and swung in. The little plane settled slightly on its wheels. “You all settled back there?” he said.

“Yeah,” Simon said. “Stuff’s in the locker.”

“Great,” said Charlie, pushing the curtain aside and confronting Simon with a daunting world of dials and gauges. Formalities over with, Charlie turned his attention to the radio, which was shortly drowned out by the roar of the engine. It sounded really *close*, in a way that the engines of big airplanes never did. Simon resisted the wimp’s urge to put his hands over his ears.

The short ride to the runway was bumpy, to the point where Simon nearly clocked himself against the wall of the plane. The field had been smooth underfoot—why it felt like a minefield inside the plane, Simon had no idea. At least the runway was reasonably smooth going, although the actual takeoff left Simon’s stomach tumbling about twenty feet behind him. A little plane like this one really brought home the idea that there was only a thin double layer of metal between Simon and thirty thousand feet of empty air. It was about as close as Simon would ever get to flying by sticking out his arms and flapping them really hard.

After a while the ride smoothed out somewhat, and Charlie dropped the curtain between them. The world went dark as pitch. “You want the cabin lights on?” he asked, yelling to be heard over the noise of the engine.

“Nah!” Simon yelled back. “That’s okay! I’m gonna try and sleep!”

“Okay!”

Battered by the engine noise and still a little unnerved, Simon settled back in his seat and folded both hands over his cranky stomach; ten minutes later, much to his surprise, he dozed off, lulled to sleep by the noisy drone of engine noise and radio chatter.

Some unknown amount of time later, Charlie yanked the curtain back. Simon jerked out of his doze, startled. “We’re about twenty minutes out,” Charlie said.

“Great,” Simon said, scrubbing at his eyes. His face was sticky and his mouth tasted like paste. Hopefully, when they landed, he’d be able to grab a restroom somewhere. Actually, what he’d really like to see when they landed was someone waiting there to meet him. Yeah. That would be great.

The actual landing was just about as horrible as Simon had been expecting. He rode it out with his jaw clenched and his hands white-knuckled on the armrests, his stomach rolling over lazily in his belly; he was about five seconds from throwing up when the plane came to a rocking halt at the end of the runway.

“Okay!” Charlie said. “You can go ahead and get on out here—just make sure to go straight away from the plane instead of towards the front or rear. I’m gonna run up to the pumps and refill the tank. Hope you had a good flight!”

“Well, I didn’t throw up, so I guess I did,” Simon said, deliberately letting his voice get almost drowned out by the engine noise. He fetched his things from the locker, grappled with the passenger door in confusion for a minute or two, finally figured out how to get it open, and stepped out into a sauna so incredible that it stole his ability to breathe for a few seconds.

Simon left the plane behind, trotting towards the edge of the runway. He barely got clear before he dropped his duffel and his jacket to the grass and shucked out of his shirt, tying it around his waist. His t-shirt was already damp and getting damper. That done, he pushed his hair back with both hands and took a look around.

This time of night, the buildings were dark and shuttered, although the runway was still well-lit and a few lights glittered off in the distance. Simon picked up his things and picked his way around the side of the building, hoping against hope there’d be a restroom or an open lobby or something; he didn’t find either, but he *did* find a green taxi, parked in an dark and otherwise empty lot with a guy sitting on its hood.

The guy looked up at the sound of Simon’s footsteps. “Hey!” he called. “You happen to be Simon?”

“Yeah!” Simon called back, jogging over (and immediately regretting it, as the mild exertion made him start sweating in parts he didn’t even know he had). “Hope you didn’t have to wait too long, my plane just landed.”

“Eh, it’s cool, it’s all on the meter,” the cabbie said, grinning.

“In that case, I sure hope someone else is paying you.” Simon glanced around. “Christ, let’s get that thing running and get some a/c going before I melt into a pile of slime.”

“Oh, yeah,” the cabbie said, sliding off the hood. “Welcome to Texas.”

At this time of night, Corpus Christi was nothing but a sea of ugly yellow and blue lights that smelled faintly of garbage and salt water. Their route took them past something that looked like a factory gone berserk. “Oil refinery,” the driver said, even though Simon hadn’t asked.

“Huh,” Simon said, not interested. “It supposed to be on fire like that?” The taxi’s air conditioning wasn’t really up to the job, unfortunately, and he was sweltering in the back seat and picking at the heavy fabric of his jeans. The skin under his ankle holster felt positively slimy. Little tendrils of cool air drifted in from the front, and Simon ducked his face into the nearest one and shut his eyes.

The air conditioning was just beginning to catch up when the cabbie pulled up in front of a nondescript little house. “Here you go,” the cabbie said.

Simon eyed the house askance. By this point he had no idea what he *was* expecting, but still, somebody’s house wasn’t it. “This is it?”

“Hey, that’s the address I was given,” the cabbie said, waving a piece of paper. “I can call and confirm that if you want me to, but I promise this is it.”

“Nah, I’ll give it a try.” Simon gathered up his things. “Do me a favor and stick around until they let me in, just in case?”

The cabbie flapped a lazy hand at him. “Sure, bud, no problem. It’s all on the meter anyway.”

“I pity the poor guy who’s going to get stuck with that bill,” Simon said, getting out of the cab.

Lights were still on inside the house, at least, and the porch light was on, throwing a dim light over the cracked and uneven front walk. Picking his way carefully along, Simon ducked a low-flying moth and made it up onto the porch. Pushing the doorbell set off a immediate and frantic chorus of baying and yelping from inside the house, making Simon jump; inside the house some guy started yelling at the dogs to shut up. It had no effect on the ruckus.

After a while, the din didn’t so much lessen as it did relocate, moving generally away from Simon and towards the back yard. Now that the dogs had apparently been corralled, a smiling middle-aged lady opened the door. “Hi! Come on in,” she said, beaming. “We’ve been expecting you.”

Simon turned around and raised an acknowledging hand at the cabbie, then stepped into the house. It was run down and smelled strongly of dogs, cigarettes,

and old books, but it was air-conditioned, and that was all Simon cared about at the moment. “Hey,” he said. “Not to skip the formalities or anything, but you got a bathroom I could use?”

“Sure!” she said, pointing. “Down that hallway, first door on your left.” She patted his shoulder as he went by.

Simon followed her directions, found the dingy bathroom, and shut himself in. He didn’t even bother to take off his t-shirt before sticking his head under the cold-water tap, sluicing away what felt like multiple layers of wet and dry sweat; by the time he’d cooled off, his hair was sopping wet and his t-shirt was soaked with water. He couldn’t bring himself to care. Simon untied the shirt from around his waist and managed to wedge it into his bulging duffel, negotiating patiently with the zipper until it deigned to close.

By the time he let himself back out of the bathroom, the woman had disappeared and her husband had taken her place. He had the squinty and distrustful look of a middle-aged thug, as solid as a concrete brick, his red face pitted with old acne scars and his scalp showing through his close-cropped hair. “Hey,” he said, nodding to Simon.

“Hey,” Simon said. “So—”

The man immediately held up a warning hand. “Lemme give you the ground rules, right off,” he said, his voice brisk but not unfriendly. “We don’t wanna know your name, and we *really* don’t wanna know your business. We’re just going to take you for a little ride, and once you’re gone, we’re gonna forget we ever saw you. It’s better for everyone. Okay?”

The perverse urge to just come right out and tell these people that he was FBI nearly strangled Simon. It would be hilarious, right up until the point where they shot him. Instead he nodded. “I assume that’s a mutual thing,” he said.

“Yep,” the man said. “You don’t need our names either.”

“I can deal with that,” Simon said. “Are we going now?”

The man glanced at his watch. “Yep,” he said. “If you’re ready.” His wife came trotting out of the kitchen carrying a paper grocery bag and favored Simon with another sweet, motherly smile before vanishing into the attached garage. Her husband glanced at Simon, then jerked his head at the garage door. Out in the back yard, one of the dogs started barking at nothing; Simon just shook his head and followed the woman into the garage, her husband bringing up the rear.

The man drove and his wife sat placidly in the passenger seat, her hands folded over the paper bag. Simon sat in the back, his duffel on his knees, trying not to appear too curious; the silent, awkward ride was mercifully short, at least. Five minutes later they turned into a large boat dock, poorly lit and nearly deserted. The night sky was festooned with tall masts, ticking lazily back and forth like metronomes. “Sure, a boat,” Simon muttered under his breath, watching the boats bob up and down on the water. “Why not?”

“Huh?” the guy said from the front seat.

“Nothing,” Simon said. “Talking to myself. So which one’s yours?”

“One at the end there,” the guy said, tilting his head at a small, nondescript powerboat with a grayish hull. He pulled the car up at the foot of the dock. “She’ll get you boarded while I park the car.” His wife ducked out of the car, still carrying her paper bag. Simon opened his door and followed, carrying his things.

“Could you hold this a moment?” the woman said, handing Simon the paper bag without waiting for an answer. Simon clutched the bag awkwardly to his chest with the arm that was carrying his bomber jacket. The heavy bag was cool and sloshed in a promising manner. The woman put her hand lightly on the side of the boat and vaulted in, making it look easy. “There we are,” she said. “If you’ll just hand me your things one at a time, I’ll get them all stowed, and then you’ll have your hands free for boarding.”

Obligingly, Simon handed her the bag, then his jacket, then his duffel. She vanished into the tiny cabin, arms full. Simon, left to his own devices, eyed the boat askance. He did not *do* boats. He was a Midwestern boy at heart, and he could count the number of times he’d been on a boat on one hand. If he tried to jump in like she had, he’d fall on his ass—and that was a best-case scenario, one that didn’t involve him falling into the water and getting squashed against the dock.

After some grumpy consideration of his options, Simon grabbed one of the pilings on the dock, stretched his leg out as far as it would go, and managed to get one foot on the boat’s pitching floor after some groping around. Quickly, before this could get any more farcical, he threw himself out after his questing leg and stumbled aboard the boat with a minimum of lost dignity. There were seats in the back of the boat. Rather than push his luck, Simon picked a dry one and sat down.

The woman reappeared, carrying something in either hand. “Care for a beer?” she said, dimpling as she smiled.

Simon’s breath exploded out of him in a relieved rush. “Oh, Christ, yes,” he said. “And also you ought to know that you’re an angel, just in case no one’s told you that recently.”

Giggling, she handed him the can, cold as ice and already sweating lightly. Simon felt better already. Settling more comfortably into his seat, he slung one arm out along the back of the boat and rolled the can over his forehead, sighing shakily as the cold stabbed daggers straight into his brain. The woman took one of the other seats and popped open the other can. “You look like you needed that,” she said archly.

“Ma’am, you have no idea,” Simon said. He popped open his own and slugged down about half of it. Heavy footsteps thudded down the wooden dock behind him; Simon glanced over his shoulder just as the woman’s husband jumped heavily aboard, rocking the boat, and busied himself at the instrument panel.

The boat roared to life a couple of minutes later and slid out of its berth, heading for the open ocean. A light and cool salt spray stung on the back of Simon's neck. Closing his eyes, he took another pull on his beer; out on the water it was cooler, and with the beer and the breeze conspiring to keep him cool, it was almost pleasant.

The lights of Corpus Christi dwindled behind them. Simon checked his watch. It was close to midnight DC time, or almost eleven PM here. He'd been traveling for five hours already and had only just left his own country, and that, only technically. He had a long way to go yet—God knew when he'd actually get to England. Simon glanced out over the lapping water of the Gulf of Mexico and finished off his beer.

For the most part they clammed up and left Simon alone with his thoughts, which was okay with him. Eventually the woman roused herself and offered him another beer, which he refused, and a Dr Pepper, which he gratefully accepted, purely for the caffeine; she spent most of the rest of the trip watching the waters around them while her husband snorted and muttered and guided the boat first in one direction, then in another.

An hour or so since they'd left port, the boat slowed to an idle and then shut off, leaving Simon's ears ringing in the sudden silence. Simon sat up and looked around: there was nothing but empty, open water in all directions. His nerves prickled. "So," Simon said. He tried to speak softly, but he sounded far too loud in the sudden silence, and he winced and lowered his voice. "What now?"

"We wait here," the man said. "Don't worry, we're not gonna hit you on the head and throw you overboard."

"Thought never crossed my mind," Simon lied.

The other man grinned. "Sure."

Ten minutes later, Simon's ears picked up the faint growl of another outboard motor, heading their way. Both the man and his wife went still, scanning the horizon; they weren't precisely tense, but Simon hunkered down anyway, just in case.

The sound of the other boat drew closer, and closer yet, and finally the rising sound of the motor cut off. Out here away from the lights of the land the night was almost black; Simon still couldn't see the other boat, but he could hear the wavelets lapping against its hull, wherever it was. A voice drifted across the water, soft and careful. "*¿Hola?*"

Immediately the man relaxed. "*Hola,*" he called back, equally soft. His wife jumped to her feet and rooted around under the seats, pulling out what looked to Simon like long square pillows on ropes; these she tossed overboard, where they hung against the side of the boat.

The other boat finally hove into view, drifting alongside their own. Someone in the other boat threw a rope across, which the woman caught; belatedly, Simon realized what they were expecting him to do, out here in the middle of the ocean, miles from shore. “Oh, hell,” he muttered.

“Don’t worry,” the woman said, flashing him a smile even as she and her husband hauled the other boat in. “It’s just like stepping over a low wall. We’ll get it all nice and steady for you.”

“I hope so,” Simon said, watching the other boat come alongside. “I’m pretty boat-stupid.”

She laughed. She had a nice laugh. “‘Boat-stupid’,” she repeated. “That’s funny. I’m going to use that.”

“Feel free,” said Simon. “No charge.”

She laughed again and vanished down into the little cabin. The other boat bumped up against the white bumpers and came to a halt; her husband lashed the rope to a little knob that was bolted to the side of the boat, making it fast. Two figures waited in the other boat, indistinct in the night. “Hey,” one of them said, his voice richly accented. “Any trouble?”

“Not a bit,” the man said, spitting overboard to punctuate it. “Quiet tonight. Too hot for the coasties, maybe.”

“Let us hope so,” the other man said. His grin was a flash of white. “Our package?”

“Right here.” The man turned to Simon and waved him over. “You wanna step on over, we can hand you your things.”

Privately, Simon was none too certain about that—about any of this, really—but he figured that arguing would be impolitic at best. The boats were lashed tightly together, bobbing up and down in sync. Stepping over was actually as easy as she’d promised: Simon grabbed the side of the first boat, swung a leg over the two sides and the padded bumpers, and stepped over, coming upright with no problems at all.

The woman came up from below, carrying Simon’s things. “Your jacket,” she said, handing it over, “and your duffel, and here’s some food for you. Just part of the service.” She laughed again, low in her throat.

Simon’s stomach growled as he took the paper bag. “Oh, man, thanks,” he said. “It’s been a long time since I’ve eaten.”

“I figured as much,” she said, still laughing. “Best eat the sandwiches first and save the dry food for later. I don’t know where you’re going, but it sounds like a long trip.”

“Yeah,” Simon said. The ropes were untied and cast away, and the boats started to drift apart. “Yeah. I’m starting to get that idea.”

◆ Seventeen

The boat he'd come in floated away and lost itself in the night sea. It was a little disconcerting, how quickly Simon lost track of it. The two guys in his new ride were huddled together by the wheel, talking to each other in low tones and ignoring Simon entirely. Simon carried his things to the back of the boat and found a dry place to sit down.

The new boat was slightly larger and more battered than the first one. Somewhere off in the distance, Simon heard the first boat's engine start up again; the sound made one of the two men look up, then glance in his direction. Simon thought he smiled. "We take off in, eh, five minutes," the other man said, holding up a hand with his fingers spread. "We travel for maybe an hour, maybe two. Okay?"

"Sure," Simon said, stacking his duffel and his jacket on the seat next to him. The boat's pilot went back to talking with his companion. Simon leaned down and, under the pretense of retying his sneaker, checked the little gun on his ankle holster, making sure that it was riding loose. He wasn't particularly worried—he didn't feel terribly threatened at the moment—but, still, who knew what these guys might do with him if the Coast Guard showed up? Simon tugged the leg of his jeans back down and tied his other shoe, then sat up and opened the paper bag in his lap.

There was a turkey sandwich on top, neatly bagged, and some potato chips. Simon's stomach growled again, louder this time. Ripping open both bags, he devoured the contents, not particularly caring what they tasted like. Once his stomach had been pacified, he rooted around in the bag, taking inventory: several granola bars, a generous handful of beef jerky, some more potato chips, some homemade cookies in a Baggie, and three bottles of water. Excellent, if worrying: it was enough for two or three smallish meals, which didn't bode well for his upcoming travel time.

The boat's motor started with a low, throbbing growl. A fine spray of salt water stung Simon's cheek. He edged away from the motor and rolled the top of the paper bag closed again, then settled in to wait.

The two men in the second boat were, if anything, even less interested in Simon than the couple in the first boat. The one at the wheel hadn't looked at him once. The other one, the one who had spoken, glanced vaguely in Simon's direction every time Simon moved, their eyes never quite meeting.

Forty-five minutes or so into the trip, the one at the wheel hissed something under his breath and shut off the motor, letting the boat splash to a silent stop. The other one looked back at Simon, touched a finger to his lips, then spread out a hand and pushed it downwards: *be quiet, stay put*. Simon edged down in his seat and stayed quiet.

The boat rocked, wavelets slapping against the side with little hollow thuds. The two men in the front of the boat hunkered down, both staring off to one side. Simon wondered if it was port or starboard, and if he cared. Eventually, just when the tension was about to drive him crazy, Simon heard the dull rumble of another motor, even bigger than the one behind him; running lights drifted through the night almost at the horizon, a searchlight sweeping the ocean at their head. Simon went very still.

Five endless minutes later, the bigger boat was out of sight. The two men in the front of the boat stayed down and quiet, though, and so Simon did the same, half-shutting his eyes and listening with all his might; he lost track of the larger boat fairly quickly, but it was still a good while before one of the men blew out a relieved breath and stood up. The motor behind Simon roared to life again.

Mexico, when it came into view, was not so much actual land as it was a black space on the horizon where there were no stars. The boat ran parallel to the coast for a while, then abruptly cut in at a narrow little strip of beach that glowed faintly blue under the starlight. The man at the wheel cut the motor at the last possible moment and ran the boat's nose directly up onto the beach, cutting an angled ditch in the sand with a hissing sound. The other man jumped out and turned to offer Simon a hand.

Simon handed him the paper bag. "Here," he said, and then grabbed the side of the boat in his newly freed hand and vaulted over, landing on the sand with a little scuffling sound.

The man laughed, faintly, and handed the bag back. "You see the path there?" he asked, waving a hand at the trees.

Simon squinted, took a step or two forward, then squinted again. Eventually a faint, pale stripe resolved out of the undergrowth, and Simon nodded. "There," he repeated, pointing at the path.

"Yes, there," the other man said. "You must follow the path to the top. Someone will meet you there."

Simon hesitated. The other man's smile faltered a bit. "You must follow the path," he repeated. "My friend and I, we will leave now."

“Right,” Simon finally said, shifting his grip on the paper bag. The sand crunched under his sneakers as he headed for the path; behind him the two men pushed the boat back into the water and started it back up with a roar. By the time Simon hit the treeline, the boat was gone.

It was monumentally dark under the trees, and after a moment of thought, Simon pulled his cell phone off his belt and flipped it open, washing the area with the dim gray light of the phone’s little screen. The path, barely as wide as Simon’s shoulders, followed the curve of the hill, gently sloping up and to the right. Simon glanced around, then set off, holding his phone angled down at his feet.

The bushes to either side of the trail kept snagging on his duffel and his jacket, until Simon found himself hugging the bundle of his things to his chest; the night was viciously hot and damp and the light of the phone attracted insects, which seemed to find Simon’s sweat delicious. After ten minutes of this, Simon hated everyone and everything in the world, but particularly himself and Jeremy. If there had been any way to go back, he gladly would have taken it—fuck a bunch of foggy Englishmen anyway.

The insects eventually grew to be too much. Simon stopped long enough to close his phone and let his eyes get used to the dark again. The sandy path was just a shade or two lighter in color than its surroundings, its ragged edges evolving slowly out of the night. After a few cautious steps, Simon found himself able to follow it fairly well.

He almost walked right out into the clearing before he noticed that it was there. Simon came to an abrupt halt five feet from the treeline and squinted, his nerves suddenly on full alert. A massive airplane bulked silently at one end of the long clearing—no, runway—and the firefly lights of four cigarettes winked and darted under the plane’s nose. Now that he was still, he could hear the faint sound of conversation and laughter, drifting in like the breeze.

Simon dropped lightly to one knee and checked his gun again, making sure it was still riding loose and clear in the ankle holster. His finger dotted lightly off the safety switch. Simon frowned. Leave the safety on, or prepare for the worst? Leave it on. He switched everything to his left arm, freeing his right, and stood back up.

Flexing his fingers, Simon took a deep breath and stepped into the clearing, feeling his way across the empty darkness towards the lights of the cigarettes. When he was halfway there they heard him coming. All four cigarettes paused in midair, then one broke away from the group and headed towards Simon, drifting along at hip level. Eventually the man carrying it became apparent, a silhouette against the night sky. “Simon?” he said, giving it the Spanish lilt: *see-mohn*.

“Yeah,” Simon said, unsettled despite himself at being so *expected* in this clearing in the woods in the middle of nowhere.

The man jerked his head back at the plane, made a little ‘come on’ gesture, and headed back the way he came. Simon hitched up his stuff and followed.

The closer they got to the plane, the bigger it looked. Its shape was odd, bulky and bottom-heavy, nothing like the passenger planes that Simon was used to; a huge curved doorway gaped open in its midsection, the door resting on the ground. As he and his guide walked past the others, they all threw their cigarettes on the ground, stamped them out, and followed.

Simon’s guide stopped at the open door and switched on a flashlight, pointing it at the door. There were steps in the middle, leading up into the belly of the plane; his guide ran the flashlight up the stairs once and then waited. Taking the hint, Simon picked his way up the stairs and into the plane.

The flashlight flicked back off, leaving Simon alone and in darkness. His nerves prickling, Simon fetched out his cell phone again. The dim gray light picked out the edges of enormous crates, stacked two and three deep and lashed to the walls with thick canvas-covered chains. What it did not pick out was any sort of seat whatsoever.

A faint, bone-deep rumble sounded from the wings to either side. A moment later, a sickly green light came on, just barely bright enough to see by; glancing back out the door, Simon saw the plane’s wing lights come on. He flipped his phone shut and headed towards the back of the plane, looking for a place to sit.

He was quickly coming to the conclusion that maybe the seats were at the front, instead, when one of the crew came trotting by, intent on something else. Simon put out a hand and stopped him. “Where do I sit?”

“Ah?” the man said, giving Simon a sick grin. “Ah, *no habla ingles . . .*”

Simon fumbled for a moment, then waved his hand back and forth. “Uh, sit? Seat, chair?” Groping back to his two years of high-school Spanish, Simon tried, “*La silla?*”

“Ah!” The man laughed, half at himself and his incomprehension. “No,” he said, and then pointed to the empty space between two of the large piles of boxes. When Simon didn’t immediately move to occupy the little alleyway, the man frowned and pointed again, more emphatically.

Simon held up his hands in surrender. “I’m going,” he said, stepping back into the empty space. The other man smiled in relief and darted off, leaving Simon eyeing his new nest dubiously.

“Yeah, this is great,” Simon muttered, kicking the side of one of the crates. The chains clunked dully inside their canvas coats. The metal floor looked clean enough, but it was still a bare metal floor. Simon scowled at it, then put his jacket on the floor and gingerly sat down on it. It’d have to do. Simon wedged his duffel under the chains behind himself, which gave him something of a cushion to lean back against and ensured that his stuff would be nominally safe, then put the paper bag in his lap and waited, grumpily. If he ever made it to England, he was going to have to have words with his travel agent.

A few minutes later the faint green light flickered back off, leaving Simon in darkness. The massive engines came to life with a choked roar that threatened to loosen his kidneys. Simon braced his feet on the crate opposite, just in case.

The big door rumbled shut with a wheeze of ancient hydraulics and the plane lurched forward, rocking Simon back against his duffel. Simon winced and locked his fingers together behind his neck to give it some support; between Sandra decking him this morning—yesterday morning?—and the strain of the constant, random travel, it was really starting to ache. If this kept up, he'd dig the Advil out of his duffel.

After a lumbering run down the runway, the massive plane threw itself at the air, missed, bounced on its wheels a couple of times—*ow*—and then heaved itself headlong into the air again, dragging itself airborne with a clumsy force that squashed Simon against the floor. His stomach rolled over again. Simon clutched at it with his free hand and concentrated on his new mantra—*don't throw up, don't throw up*—until the plane settled in, wallowing along in the air with all the grace of a cow flung from a catapult.

After five minutes passed without Simon becoming either a pancake or a fireball, he let his feet fall again. Working entirely by touch—he didn't want to drain his phone's battery any more than he had to—Simon located a bottle of water and his little bottle of Advil. He took four, then settled in to try and doze.

Eventually, some hours later, a bit of faint sunlight started to filter in through the high, tiny windows. The belly of the plane was still gloomy, but Simon could see well enough to maneuver, if not well enough to do anything else. It was cooler at this altitude; Simon dug out his shirt and put it back on, then turned his attention back to his bag of food. He ate the other bag of potato chips and a granola bar, then finished off the bottle of water he'd opened last night and took two more Advil.

His neck ached. His legs ached. His back ached. Succumbing to his need to stretch, Simon got carefully to his feet, grabbing one of the chains just in case. The plane shuddered and groaned around him, the engines coughing and roaring in a highly disconcerting manner, but the floor was still reasonably steady; after a moment Simon let go of the chain and groped his way out into the main aisle, following the prodding of his bladder. Surely there had to be a bathroom of some kind around here *somewhere*. Simon hoped so, in any case, because he didn't really feel like peeing into an empty water bottle.

The cargo compartment was even bigger than he'd thought it was. It seemed to take ten minutes just to reach the front of the plane and the honest-to-Christ *stairway* leading up to the cockpit—but no bathroom. Simon eyed the cockpit door, then decided against it and headed back towards the tail of the plane.

In the end he found the bathroom, or what passed for it, half by luck and half by smell. The little chemical toilet was enclosed in a closet at the very back of

the plane, as far away from the cockpit as it could get; Simon, reeling back from the physical presence of the stench, did not blame the designers at all. Still, it would beat the bottle, if only somewhat. Simon sucked in a lungful of air, shut himself in, and did what was necessary, sipping just enough air through his teeth to prevent himself from passing out.

His head was spinning by the time he fell back out, gasping for air. “*Kill my travel agent,*” Simon muttered, wiping his hands frantically on the legs of his jeans.

Bored out of his mind, Simon took to wandering around in the cargo hold, studying the crates without any real interest while he stretched his legs. When the appeal of random, pointless wandering started to dim, he went back to his niche and sat down to rest.

Eventually, he became aware that large chunks of time were starting to vanish. Simon had spent most of his travel time dozing in short, unsatisfying bursts piled on top of three weeks of hard work—he was exhausted. Occasionally he would rouse himself enough to glance at his watch, only to notice that an hour or two had vanished while he stared fuzzily at the walls. He grazed on the contents of his bag of food without really tasting them, washing them down with swallows of lukewarm water from the second bottle. He was starting to develop the dull, tight headache of caffeine withdrawal. He was too tired to really care.

When the plane hitched and coughed and started to drop, Simon thought he was imagining things. He’d been half-convinced that he had died and gone to hell, and this plane was it. The chemical toilet was a pretty decent argument in favor of this theory.

The landing gear dropped with a resounding thud that would have scared the shit out of Simon, had he not been so dazed. As it was, he barely had enough time to brace his feet against the crate before the plane hit the ground and bounced. Simon nearly fell onto his side, catching himself on his forearm at the last moment. A rivet smacked into his funny bone. Simon yelped, suddenly a lot more awake.

The plane bounced twice more before the brakes locked with a screeching sound that threatened to pop Simon’s eardrums. The entire plane shuddered, hard enough that one of the crates at the front of the plane fell off its stack and burst, sending its contents flying; the plane went slewing sideways, fighting to stop, and suddenly the air was full of thousands of little blue pills. It was hailing drugs. Simon threw his arms up to protect his head; he so, so did not even want to know.

Eventually the plane came to a halt. Simon lowered his arms, blinked twice, then rolled gingerly to his feet. Pills crunched underfoot, nearly pitching him right back down again. Up at the front of the plane, someone cursed volubly in Spanish. Simon could only agree.

Simon had just finished pulling his duffel free of the chains when he heard

the crunching footsteps coming his way. One of the pilots appeared and nodded, his smile anxious. He nodded at Simon, then pointed back towards the cargo door. “So,” Simon said, picking up his jacket. “I guess that means that this is my stop?”

“Yes?” the pilot said uncertainly, taking a step back and glancing towards the cargo door. Other people were crunching through the thin layer of pills that covered the bare metal floor, rattling chains and heaving crates around. Simon slung his jacket over his shoulder and picked his way carefully towards the open cargo door.

After so many hours in the cool dimness of the plane’s belly, the heat and sunlight hit him like a sledgehammer. Simon winced away from it, his eyes watering. For a few seconds, all he could see was the glare. Eventually his eyes started to get used to it and the landscape came into focus—Simon was immediately sorry.

The plane sat in the middle of a vast, drab, hard-packed plain, the unrelieved tan of desert sand. In the distance, behind the plane, Simon could see mountains, but out here the biggest feature was a small cube-shaped shelter built from corrugated steel. The heat was insane. It was too hot to *sweat*—the air sucked moisture directly from Simon’s body, leaving him feeling as dry as one of the chunks of beef jerky left in his paper sack. “You have got to be fucking *kidding* me,” Simon said, looking around and licking his lips.

Behind him the plane’s crew were unloading some of the smaller crates, stacking them inside the little steel shelter. Simon, seeing the logic in this, headed over there himself. Underneath the steel roof, out of the sun, the desert heat was slightly more bearable. Simon pulled up a crate and sat down, watching the crew unload the plane.

The plane was even uglier in full daylight. For one thing, someone had once painted it sky blue from top to bottom—all the better to evade notice while in the air, Simon assumed—but the paint was ancient, faded, and peeling, revealing huge swathes of rusty steel. It looked like a pregnant whale. A sky-blue pregnant whale. Looking at the thing, Simon was amazed that it still flew at all, let alone that he’d trusted himself to it.

One of the crew put down the last crate and paused to swipe a dirty bandanna across his forehead. “Yeah,” Simon said, stripping off his shirt again. If he was out here for much longer, he’d probably take his jeans off, too. “So I guess you’re just going to leave me here?”

“*No habla ingles.*”

“Yeah, I was afraid of that,” Simon said.

The crewman stuck his bandanna back in his pocket and waggled his fingers at Simon. “Bye-bye,” he said, grinning.

“Yeah,” Simon said, expressionless. He raised a hand. “Bye-bye to you too. It’s been loads of fun.”

The crewman disappeared back into the belly of the plane and the cargo door hitched shut with a grumble. Watching the plane take off was a lot more entertaining than experiencing it from the inside—sky-blue, pregnant, *bouncing* whale—but once the cough of its engines had faded into silence, the reality of the situation became clear: Simon had just been abandoned inside a rusty metal shed in the middle of the desert somewhere, with only a single small bottle of water. Just thinking about it made him thirsty.

After ten minutes in which no one showed up, Simon decided that his dignity could go fuck itself and shucked off his jeans and sneakers, unstrapping his ankle holster. He was still not comfortable—nothing on earth could have made him comfortable, except perhaps the next ice age—but he felt slightly better for having done it anyway.

A small blue oblong fell out of one of his cuffs and bounced on the hard-packed ground. Simon reached down and swept it up: one of the pills from the broken crate. *Pfizer*, it said on one side, and *VGR 100* on the other. Surprised, Simon laughed aloud. “Oh, Jesus Christ,” he said, bouncing the Viagra tablet in the palm of his hand. He’d caught a ride to . . . wherever this was . . . with a gang of hard-on smugglers—Simon glanced over his shoulder at the stack of crates, then snickered again and tucked the stray pill into the end of his duffel bag. Hey, waste not, want not.

Unfortunately, the amusement of sharing a shelter with enough illegal Viagra to bring his nation’s capitol to a standstill didn’t last for long. Not expecting much, Simon pulled out his phone and flipped it open. No bars. What a shock. Simon angled it one way, then another, and much to his surprise got a single, wavering bar. He stared at it for a moment, watching it appear and vanish; he’d been so sure he’d never get reception out here that he didn’t know what to do with it now that he had it.

There wasn’t really anyone he wanted to call, assuming he could maintain connection for more than a few seconds anyway. Simon thought for a minute, then pulled up the phone’s GPS function. He wasn’t sure he wanted to know, but he might as well find out.

The phone went quiet, searching. Simon opened his last bottle of water, drank off a mouthful, and capped it again. The connection dropped again, and the phone beeped out an error message. Simon restarted the search.

Eventually, through luck, the phone managed to stay connected to the satellite for just long enough to inform Simon that he was somewhere in southern Morocco. “Thrilling,” Simon said, slapping the phone shut.

The sun slid slowly downwards, although the afternoon didn’t get any less hot because of it. The plain was still a barren wasteland of cracked hardpan and loose sand. Simon, under cover of the steel shelter, was out of the sun and the wind

alike, but he was still baking in the heat, bored out of his mind, and starting to become paranoid. He had a little less than a half a bottle of warm water left, and once it was gone . . . This was not a situation he'd ever expected to find himself in.

"I'm stranded in the Sahara," Simon informed the little steel shelter. "They do not cover situations like this at the Academy—oh, Christ. Now I'm talking to myself." He shook his head and drank some more water.

Finally, an hour or so after the cargo plane had lumbered off (and about half an hour after Simon had shaken the last few drops of water out of the bottle), Simon heard the faint drone of an approaching plane. It failed to register for a moment, but once it did, Simon hopped down off his crate and pulled his jeans back on, as unpleasant as the necessity was. Not only did he not particularly want to be caught with his pants down, so to speak, the jeans were necessary to hide the gun—Simon checked it, too, then stepped into his sneakers.

He was tying the second one when the little light plane skimmed overhead and bounced to an energetic halt on the plain. If Charlie's plane had been small, this one was *tiny*: it was all wings and almost no body, and it barely looked large enough for the pilot, let alone the pilot, Simon, and the five crates of illegal erections that were sharing the shelter with Simon. Was this his ride? Simon hoped so. At this point he'd gladly wedge himself into a cargo bay just to get out of here.

The plane turned in a tight circle and skittered back to where Simon was waiting, coming to a halt a few feet away from the shelter. The propeller on the front spun to a halt. Simon waited. A few moments later the door on the side of the plane opened and the pilot dropped out, pulling off his helmet—no, Simon corrected himself, her helmet. His latest ride was pretty, in a certain tough and bony way, with brown hair that had been severely chopped off at her jaw. "Hallo!" she called, flipping back her hair. "You must be the, euh, the passenger?"

"Christ, I hope so," Simon said. "These crates belong to you?"

"One crate," the new pilot said, heading back to the tail of the plane. She did something—Simon couldn't quite see what—and part of the tail folded away, revealing a small and crooked hidden compartment. "The rest we will leave here."

Simon looked back at the pile of crates. "I sure hope those little blue bastards can stand the heat," he said dubiously.

"Oh yes, I think so," the pilot said. She stood back and frowned at the open compartment. "Will you be so kind as to bring one of the crates here?"

"Hey, in exchange for a ride out of here, I can stand to be your drug mule for a few minutes," Simon said. He crouched down, got his shoulder under one of the crates, and hefted it with a grunt. It was lighter than he'd been expecting, but still heavy enough to make him stagger under its weight. "You want it in there?"

“Oh, yes, I think it should fit,” she said, standing aside and flashing him a smile. “They have, in the past.”

Obligingly Simon staggered over to the plane and heaved the crate at the open compartment. It didn’t want to fit. “Ah, I see the problem,” the pilot said from behind him. “If you can lift a little, the opening becomes larger.”

“Grgh,” Simon said, eloquently. He sucked in a breath and heaved, the muscles in his shoulders bunching; the front of the crate skittered up along the tail of the aircraft and suddenly popped in, the wood of the crate scraping against the angled sides of the opening. Simon heaved again, lifting the tail end of the crate over his head and shoving it in. The crate went banging in and came to rest at an angle inside the compartment. The plane skittered forward an inch or two like Simon had goosed it. “Good enough?” Simon said, flexing his fingers.

“Oh, yes, that is good,” the pilot said. “If you will just go get your things . . .”

“Right, right,” said Simon, going back to the shelter to grab his duffel and his jacket. The dregs of his food he abandoned to its fate; he wasn’t hungry, just desperately thirsty and tired of carrying the bag around. Maybe someone else would get some use out of it, although it was probably rude to offer salted beef jerky to a man who was dying of thirst.

The compartment was closed again. Even knowing that it was there, Simon couldn’t see it; he didn’t know whether to be impressed or unsettled. “Your things will fit in the space behind the second seat,” the pilot said, gesturing towards the door. “Please put them away, then have a seat and put on the, euh, the headphones. Otherwise we will not be able to speak.”

Simon craned his neck, looking into the plane. It was just about as tiny as he’d thought. The second seat was actually behind the pilot’s seat, and there were controls in front of it—“I guess I’m not supposed to touch the controls,” he said, glancing back over his shoulder.

“Ah, no, I would not suggest it,” she said, smiling. “We will pretend that you are my copilot, but perhaps you should not try to be, yes?”

Simon stepped up into the plane, ducking under the low-hanging ceiling. “That’s definitely a good idea,” he said, half to himself, leaning over the back of the copilot’s seat and stowing his things.

Once he was properly harnessed and headphoned—a process which took a thoroughly embarrassing amount of time to achieve—the pilot swung into the seat in front of his and pulled the door shut behind her, pulling on her helmet. “Ah, there,” she said, her voice crackling slightly. “Can you hear me?”

“Yeah, no problem,” Simon said, frowning down at the controls. He wasn’t about to actually touch them, but there wasn’t really any other place to put his hands. He ended up lacing them together in his lap.

“Very good,” the pilot said, flicking switches and consulting gauges. “Your pardon. I will have us in the air in a very few minutes.”

Simon leaned back in the copilot's seat and let his head fall back, staring at the roof of the tiny plane. "You're French, aren't you," he said.

"Ah hah. Yes, but I am told my English is good," she said, laughing a little. "You may call me Marie-Claude, if you like. It is not my name, but for this, I believe he will do well."

"Fair enough," Simon said. "My name's Simon."

"Yes," Marie-Claude said, fiddling with something. The plane started up with a high whining roar. "This I already knew."

They were in the air almost before Simon knew it. Marie-Claude's little plane was so light and quick that it darted into the air like a bird, barely dragging on Simon's stomach at all. Simon leaned back in the copilot's seat and eyed his control stick askance: it was moving in time with Marie-Claude's own, like there were ghost hands guiding it. "So where am I going this time?" he asked, reaching up to touch the microphone out of long habit.

"Calais!" Marie-Claude said, cheerfully. "It is in the north of France. We must also land once to refuel—this plane, he is speedy, but he does not carry so much gas."

"So . . . how long?"

"Euhh . . . four hours? Perhaps?"

"Great," Simon said. "Mind if I get some sleep? I'm freaking exhausted."

"Please, you must suit yourself," Marie-Claude said. "I will be speaking on occasion, but I am speaking to towers, not to you."

Simon put his head back and shut his eyes. The tiny plane shuddered lightly around him, but nothing could disconcert him too much any more. "That's fine," he said. "Wake me if you need to."

How long he slept for, Simon didn't know. Time was rapidly ceasing to lose any meaning at all. Voices droned pleasantly in French in his ears, one of them Marie-Claude's, and the plane rocked around him like a hammock. He woke only when the plane touched down, bouncing lightly down the runway like a stone skipping over water. The sun was low in the sky on one side of the plane; on the other side of the plane, purple twilight was starting to shade down to darkness. "Refueling?" he said groggily.

"Yes indeed," Marie-Claude said, far too cheerfully for Simon's current state of mind. "We will be here for, euh, perhaps half of an hour? If you would like to stretch your legs or have something to drink—"

Simon was out of the plane like a shot. The man at the snack bar either didn't or wouldn't speak a word of English, but Simon still managed to acquire a bottle of cold water with minimal fuss, charging it to his prepaid Visa. Simon sucked down the first half so fast that he managed to give himself a cold headache. It was wonderful anyway.

Now that the initial edge of his thirst had been taken care of, Simon carried the bottle back outside to where Marie-Claude was supervising the refilling of her tiny plane's gas tank. "Better?" Marie-Claude asked, raising one eyebrow.

"Oh yeah," Simon said, taking another long drink and wiping his mouth. "If I could only get some coffee, I'd be in heaven."

Marie-Claude waved a hand. "Pssh, coffee is easy. One moment." Leaving the sleepy-eyed attendant overseeing the plane, she sashayed off towards the main building; Simon watched her go (with a certain level of appreciation) before trotting after her.

By the time he caught up, she was in the pilot's lounge, negotiating with a large copper cylinder that didn't look much like any coffee maker that Simon had ever seen. It was hissing at her—Simon placed the sound at approximately the same time that Marie-Claude turned back around, a tiny cup in either hand. "Here you are," she said, handing him one cup of the espresso. "I will not fly without two shots or more, myself."

"I love you," Simon said, with perfect sincerity. "Can I have another?"

Marie-Claude smiled and handed him the other cup that she was carrying, then turned back to the machine.

They were underway again fifteen minutes later. Simon's caffeine headache was gone at long last, and he was alert again; it wouldn't last, but he was determined to enjoy it while it did. The little plane flew low and fast, and from Simon's vantage point, was almost all windows. The twilight view was immense and exhilarating. "What country is this?" Simon asked, touching one of the earpieces of his headset.

"This is the south of France," Marie-Claude said. She glanced out of one of the side windows. "She is pretty, no?"

"Yeah," Simon said under his breath, putting a hand on one of the side windows. After a moment he shook his head, clearing it. "I don't think I've ever flown this low before."

"This plane, he is not quite, euh, what is it, an ultralight? At any rate, he will not go so high." The little plane banked sharply to the right and the world spun dizzily around Simon. Simon swallowed and braced both hands against the sides of the tiny plane. "He will also not go so far, alas," Marie-Claude concluded cheerfully, bringing the plane back to rights.

"Hey, as long as it's far enough," Simon said, swallowing again. "How far away from Calais are we?"

"Two hours? A bit more, perhaps."

"Great," Simon said, settling in. Even two shots of espresso couldn't make headway against his exhaustion for too long, and his head was beginning to fog up again. "I'm gonna watch the view go by until I fall asleep."

“You may feel free,” Marie-Claude said. “You are, euh, what is it, in good hands.”

Simon napped, woke, watched France fly by below him, napped some more, and woke again. It was fully dark now and the countryside below him was black, studded with lights. It could have been anywhere. His body had either acclimated to this craziness or simply given up on reminding Simon what a bastard he was for putting it through this. He felt fine. Lazy and calm. A large city of some sort slid by on his left—all Simon could really see was a clot of lights—and then all was darkness again.

Eventually another clot of lights appeared on the horizon in front of them. “That is Calais,” Marie-Claude said, easing the plane over a bit. “We will be landing in twenty minutes, and I would ask a favor from you.”

“Sure,” Simon said. “What is it?”

“There is a, euh, what is it, a clipboard? On the wall to your left? If you would fetch it out, please.”

Simon groped around on the wall and found the clipboard, hung on a peg. “Okay, got it.”

“When we land, I will turn on the lights, then say some numbers to you. You must write them down. You will see the openings for them.” Marie-Claude sounded amused. “We must convince the ground crew that you *are* my copilot, no?”

“Ah,” Simon said, squinting at the clipboard and determining that he couldn’t see a damned thing. He patted the edges of it and found a pen. “Okay?”

“You may also put your hands on the control stick when we land, although you must not try to move it,” Marie-Claude said. “This is not necessary, but it is clever.”

Simon watched the control stick move for a moment. “You know what, I think there’s such a thing as too clever,” he finally said, hugging the clipboard to his chest.

The spot of light on the horizon grew and fractured, until parts of it were sliding underneath the belly of the plane. Twenty minutes later Marie-Claude was skipping the little plane neatly down a brightly-lit runway and bringing it to a halt. Simon’s stomach didn’t so much as mutter.

“Here we are,” Marie-Claude said brightly. “Please be consulting the clipboard.” The overhead lights went on, momentarily dazzling Simon; even though he couldn’t quite focus on the papers yet, he made a show of looking at the clipboard. Once his eyes cleared, he found himself looking at a lot of little boxes and French text. The top sheet of paper was about half filled in.

Marie-Claude wheeled the little plane off into the grass and parked it in a slot. The high whine of the engine whirled down and cut out. “Are you ready?” she

said.

“Yeah,” Simon said, picking up the pen. “I just go down this first empty column, right?”

“That is correct,” Marie-Claude said. Her fingers flicked over the complicated instrument panel and she started rattling off numbers. Simon wrote them down—he had no idea what any of them meant, but he wrote them down anyway. Outside the plane, a member of the ground crew threw a line over the nose of the little plane, tying it down. He barely spared Simon a glance. So far, so good.

“One five seven two six dot five seven,” Marie-Claude said. A thump from behind Simon heralded a second line landing on the plane’s tail. “And that should be all, no?”

“Yeah,” Simon said. He put the clipboard back on the hook. “We all done here?”

“Oh, yes, we are quite done,” Marie-Claude said, shucking off her helmet and unfastening her harness.

Accordingly, Simon took off his headset and wriggled clumsily out of his own harness. “What about the cargo?” he said, pitching his voice a little low, just in case.

“It stays where it is,” Marie-Claude said, equally low. “Someone will remove it in five or six hours. I am only the pilot.”

“Ah.” Simon twisted around in his seat and reclaimed his things. His duffel and jacket were a bit cold. It felt nice. “So now what?”

“Now—” Marie-Claude booted open the door and turned sideways in her seat “—we shall go ride in a taxicab.”

“Oh,” Simon said. “Joy.”

They left the little light plane being fussed over by two members of the ground crew and headed down along the runway, past the lobby. A little staircase led down to street level and a handful of cabs, huddled together outside a small stand that reminded Simon a little too much of the steel cube in the desert. Marie-Claude headed for one of them. Simon followed.

Slinging herself in the back seat, Marie-Claude said something in French to the cabdriver, who nodded, threw his cigarette out the open window, and took off like a bat out of hell. Simon, who’d still been negotiating the open doorway, fell heavily back into his seat and yanked the door shut just before a second taxi could slam it shut *for* him. “Christ!” he hissed. Marie-Claude looked unruffled.

The rest of the ride was, not to put too fine a point on it, terrifying. Simon clutched at the door and the seat beside him as the taxi careened through the narrow (but fortunately uncrowded) streets. At one point the taxi screamed so close to a pedestrian that Simon could swear that he heard the whisper of the man’s pants rubbing against the taxi’s side; the man yelled something after them and took a swing at the taxi with his motorcycle helmet, narrowly missing. “Does

everybody in France drive like this?" Simon asked Marie-Claude, trying to sound cool.

"No, no," she said. "Most of them are much worse."

Simon blinked, then narrowed his eyes. "You're just fucking with me, aren't you?" The startled look on her face made him quickly revise that: "*Messing* with me, sorry. Uh. I meant that you're joking."

"Oh!" She looked relieved, which really did not do Simon's ego any favors. "Yes. Yes, I am . . . fucking with you, as you say." She pronounced it *focking*. Simon thought that was kind of cute.

A few minutes later, they ran out of city. Beyond the streetlights Simon could see nothing but long docks and choppy water, nearly invisible in the darkness. "That is *La Manche*, your, euh, English Channel," Marie-Claude said, waving a hand at it. "Sometimes, when there is sun, you can see England beyond."

"So I'm almost there, thank Christ," Simon said, staring out at it. The taxi jogged left and Simon's face smacked into the window, leaving a noseprint on the glass. "Ow," he muttered, rubbing his nose.

"Yes, but 'almost there' also means 'not there', no?" Marie-Claude said. The taxi turned sharply into the port area, running along one of the smaller docks. "Ah," Marie-Claude said, glancing out of the window. "Here, we are almost there."

"So we're not there?" Simon said, still rubbing his nose.

"Yes, ha ha," Marie-Claude said. She snapped something at the driver, who braked with such alacrity that Simon nearly brained himself on the back of the seat on front of him. He only barely managed to catch himself in time.

"Jesus, my reflexes are shot," Simon said, grabbing his duffel. "Is this it? Where am I going?"

"Yes, this is the place," Marie-Claude said. She handed the driver some money and got out. Simon followed her, quickly. God forbid he still have one foot in the car when the driver decided to take off. Marie-Claude was already heading away, moving down a steep little wooden staircase towards a different section of dock.

The damp boards of the dock echoed hollowly under Simon's feet, sometimes squelching. For the second time in—two days? two days—Simon could smell salt water in the air. Marie-Claude walked briskly ahead of him, heading for the end of the dock and giving Simon another moment to appreciate the view. The boats here were small, mostly pleasure craft, but bobbing at the far end of the dock—"Is that a seaplane?" Simon said, craning his neck.

"Yes, yes," Marie-Claude said. "That is your next ride—hallo?"

"'Ullo!" a male voice called from somewhere behind the seaplane's open engine compartment. A man ducked into view, holding a large wrench. "You got my passenger, then? Excellent!" he said, ducking back behind the open door and

muffling his unabashedly English voice. “Time for our ride to miraculously work again!”

“Yes, this is Simon,” Marie-Claude said. She turned to Simon and smiled, even as an alarming banging sound echoed from the seaplane’s engine. “Well! This is where I will leave you, yes?”

“Guess so,” Simon said. He shuffled his duffel into his left hand and stuck out his right. “Thanks a lot, Marie-Claude, or whatever your real name is. You’ve been just about the best company I’ve had on this goddamned trip so far.”

Marie-Claude took Simon’s hand, then rose up onto her toes and kissed him on both cheeks, a rapid, practiced one-two one-two maneuver as steady as a drumbeat. “It was a pleasure,” she said, dropping again. “I wish you luck—” and she stepped past him and headed back up the docks, towards the staircase. Simon turned to watch her go.

“She’s a one, idn’t she,” the man said, almost at Simon’s elbow. Simon jumped. The man just grinned and stuck out his hand. “Name’s Tom, it’s a pleasure.”

“Simon,” Simon said, shaking Tom’s hand. “So, are we ready?”

“Right away,” Tom said. “Go ahead and hop in, I’ll just close up the bonnet.”

‘Hopping in’ proved a little more complicated than Tom had made it sound. Simon eyed the bobbing seaplane. To get in, he’d have to step onto the nearest pontoon—Simon hefted his duffel and threw it into the plane, then put on his jacket. Hands free, he grabbed the nearest wing strut and put a tentative foot on the bobbing pontoon. Once it touched, he threw the rest of his body after it. The move had served him well enough in Texas and it didn’t fail him here, although he still felt pretty stupid.

Getting into the plane from the pontoon was just a matter of stepping in. Simon shoved his duffel under the seat and did up his seatbelt; outside the plane Tom slammed the hood shut and edged along the other pontoon until he could climb up into the pilot’s seat. “This ought to take not but half an hour,” Tom said, turning a key. The seaplane’s engine caught and revved. “Half an hour and you’ll be on England’s shores!” Tom shouted over the sudden noise.

“Thank God,” Simon said, slumping in his seat as the seaplane taxied out of the harbor.

Tom, one of nature’s great talkers, kept up a light and steady stream of chatter as he piloted the plane northward. Simon grunted in most of the right places, but it was getting harder and harder to pay attention. He was filthy, hungry, thirsty, and most of all, *tired*—he’d embarked on this odyssey almost twenty-four hours ago, and that wasn’t even taking jet lag into account. The thought was mind-numbing.

From up here, in the dark, England looked exactly like France, a thought which Simon was smart enough to keep to himself. The seaplane banked lightly

to the right, sweeping around the lights of a city on the coast. "That down there is Dover," Tom shouted. "Welcome to England, such as it were!"

"Are we landing there?" Simon shouted back.

"Ha! No, no, don't know how I'd explain you!" The seaplane was running along the coast now, leaving Dover behind. "No, we've a little rendezvous in the middle of bloody nowhere!"

"Never would have seen that coming," Simon said. Tom burst out laughing. Simon himself didn't find it all that funny.

Ten minutes later the seaplane was skimming low over the waves, England bulking dark on Simon's left as the seaplane touched down, throwing up huge sheets of water to either side and hiding the land from view. It was a rough, dragging landing, pontoons being not as accommodating as wheels. Simon's stomach pressed back against his spine and shuddered.

"Nice landing, what?" Tom said cheerfully, twisting halfway around in his seat to grin at Simon. "No worries, we're just about there."

"Great," Simon said, kneading his belly. He was almost glad that there wasn't anything in it. "Now what?"

"Now that," Tom said, cutting over to the left and a dim swath of beach, barely visible.

"Huh," said Simon. "*Déjà vu*."

"Eh?"

"Nothing."

"Suit yourself," Tom said. At the very last minute he slewed the seaplane sideways, and one of the pontoons grated up onto the beach with a rasping sound. The seaplane jerked to a stop. Simon's stomach flipped over again. "Now, then," Tom said, blithely unaware. "Your ride ought to be hereabouts—" Up at the head of the beach, a car flashed its lights once, dazzling Simon's eyes. "—and there we are!" Tom said, pushing his door open. He jumped out onto the pontoon, sand grating under it, and pulled open the door to the passenger cabin. "Out you get," Tom said. "Need a hand?"

"Nah, just hold this," Simon said, holding out his duffel. Tom took it. Simon grabbed the wing strut and swung carefully back out onto the pontoon, stepping from there onto the squelching sand. "England at last," he said, taking his duffel back. "I feel like I ought to kiss the ground, except for the part where I'd get sand in my mouth. Thanks for the ride."

"Not a problem!" Tom slammed the passenger door shut again. He put his shoulder against the wing strut and heaved; the plane slid forward a few inches, slithering through the wet sand. "Best of luck, what?"

"What what," Simon said dizzily, heading up the beach towards the car that he could barely see silhouetted against the night sky. Behind him sand grated again as Tom pushed the plane back out to sea.

The figure standing by the side of the car raised a hand. “Good morning,” it said. “You must be Simon—”

“Yeah,” Simon said, trudging through the sand. Up here it was dry and loose, and it dragged at him, shifting under his weight and pouring into his sneakers. Every step was harder than the last, and his duffel felt like it weighed a thousand pounds. “Do me a favor: just tell me how long this part of the trip is going to take, and reassure me that it’s the last part.”

“Oh, it is that,” the man said. “I’ll have you to Mr. West in three hours, just about.”

The soft sand gave way to hard asphalt under Simon’s feet. Unprepared, he staggered. “Hallelujah,” he said, once he caught himself. “Mind if I sleep on the way? I’ve had it.”

“Not at all,” his driver said, opening the back door for Simon. “Mr. West said you’d likely be quite tired.”

Simon tossed his duffel bag into the back seat and crawled in after it, almost literally. “Yeah, well, he ought to know,” Simon said, sinking down into the plush seat with a groan. “Also, hey, nice car.”

“It is, isn’t it?” The driver started the car and backed up, turning the car around; Simon dozed off again almost before the car was straightened out.

Now that he was less than three hours from his destination—and had spent much of the past day sleeping in short bursts—Simon was having some trouble staying asleep and an equal amount of trouble staying awake. He kept struggling back to consciousness, glaring blearily out the car windows, and then drifting back off. The man driving the car did so in silence, only occasionally humming or tsking to himself. Simon had no idea what time it was, nor did he care, but the roads were reasonably empty. He told himself that they must be making good time. He fell asleep again a minute later.

He didn’t snap back to full consciousness again until the car slowed almost to a stop, the wheels bumping up a slight incline. By the time Simon sat up and rubbed the sleep from his eyes, grimacing at the sweaty grime on his face, the car had rolled into a large garage and come to a halt, parked next to two others. The garage door rumbled down again behind them. “We here?” Simon said, his voice rough.

“Here we are,” the driver said, unlocking the doors.

“Great. Christ, finally.” Simon sat up, his back crackling, and let himself out. His legs nearly buckled under him. Gritting his teeth, he rode it out; once his legs deigned to support him again, he turned around and fetched out his duffel bag, then slammed the car door. “So. Now what?”

“Now I suppose you might as well come in and make yourself at home,” a familiar voice said from behind him.

Simon spun around, nearly losing his balance in the process. “Ah,” he said, rustily, unable to believe what he was seeing. Jeremy was standing there, backlit by the lights of what looked like a large kitchen—no. Not Jeremy, although the basic shape of the man in the doorway was exactly the same, as well as the hipsprung way he stood and the loose, quick way he moved. Simon would have recognized that body language anywhere, although he’d have put the wrong name to it. It was positively eerie. It also confirmed that he was, indeed, in the right place.

“Welcome to England, Mr. Drake,” Ethan West said, his voice even and dry. “I trust you had a good trip?”

Simon shut his eyes, swayed on his feet, and gave up. “Oh, Christ, fuck you,” he said weakly, no longer giving a shit if he offended the man or not.

After a moment Ethan laughed under his breath and came forward, finally relieving Simon of his thousand-pound duffel.

◆ Eighteen

The uncanny resemblance to Jeremy faded as Ethan got closer and Simon got a better look at him. The basics were eerily similar but the details were all wrong: Ethan looked to be somewhere around sixty, his weathered face deeply lined and his wavy hair more gray than brown. Still, he was in good shape, for an old guy. Simon was all too willing to let him deal with the duffel.

Behind Simon, the driver of the car opened the door and let himself out. “Anything else you need before I go, Ethan?” he said. Simon wheeled halfway around, getting out of the way of the conversation.

“No, no, I believe that should be all,” Ethan said. “Thanks ever so. You will be careful, won’t you?”

“Absolutely,” the other man said, touching his forehead in a half-assed salute. “Won’t move from the gate until I make sure the street’s empty.”

Ethan nodded once, maybe almost smiling. “Good,” he said. “I’ve enough to worry about without having to ransom you, as well.”

The other man laughed and closed the car door, the slam echoing dully off the high, bare ceiling. “I’d like to see the bastard who could catch me, I would.”

“I wouldn’t,” said Ethan. “Well, then. Come along, Simon, I’ll show you about the place.”

Simon blinked, then hurried to catch up. “Oh. Uh, yeah. Coming.”

Simon followed Ethan out of the garage and into a kitchen so enormous that it struck him dumb. It was large enough to feed an army and everything about it screamed *oh shit, money!* loudly enough to make Simon uncomfortable. “In case it weren’t obvious,” Ethan said, waving a hand, “this is the kitchen.”

“Yeah,” Simon said, clearing his throat. “Yeah, I think I noticed.”

Ethan led the way out through an honest-to-Christ restaurant-style swinging door and into a long, narrow hallway, comparatively plain and normal. Simon breathed a sigh of relief. “And that,” Ethan said, gesturing at the door opposite, “is the exercise room, which you are welcome to use, if you’d like.”

“Yeah, uh, thanks, but—”

“And up these stairs here are the bedrooms,” Ethan said, mowing over Simon’s protest so smoothly that Simon couldn’t even collect his thoughts enough to protest. Ethan headed up the stairs, carrying Simon’s duffel; Simon gaped after him for a moment, then followed. The staircase was narrow and curved in the middle, eventually opening out onto a hallway that was much wider and more ostentatious, plush like a grand hotel’s. “Those are my rooms at the end of the hall,” Ethan said, tilting his head, “and I’ve taken the liberty of putting you in these rooms here.” He pushed through the door immediately to his left, leading Simon into what looked like a small library or office or something.

Simon followed him. “That’s great, but—”

Ethan held up a hand. “Please, Simon, let me finish.” Simon subsided. Ethan nodded, then continued. “That’s the bath, and that’s the bedroom. I expect you’d like to clean up a bit and have something to eat before you sleep.”

“Oh, Christ, yes, but—”

“The suite between this one and mine is currently empty,” Ethan said, trampling Simon’s protest again. “As you are a guest in my house, you are perfectly welcome in any of the rooms that I’ve just shown you—even mine, although I *would* prefer it if you’d be so kind as to knock first. However, and I cannot stress this strongly enough, I recommend that you not attempt to go anywhere else in the house.”

Simon paused, his protests momentarily stilled. “The, uh, defense mechanisms, right?”

“Oh, yes,” Ethan said, with a tight little smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “After what happened to poor Annabelle, I felt that perhaps I ought to take, ah, precautions. You have my personal assurance that as long as you stay to the inner rooms, you will be perfectly safe, both from stray Russians and from the house itself.”

“Yeah. Ouch. I’ll try and restrain my exploratory urges,” Simon said. “So—”

“You’re welcome to anything in the kitchen, of course,” Ethan said. “As you can see, I tend to keep odd hours, so please feel free to make yourself something to eat whenever you’re hungry, although I do try to have dinner at seven every evening.”

Simon’s stomach twinged. He pressed his hand to it until it quieted. “Okay,” he said. “So—” He paused, waiting for Ethan to interrupt. Ethan only raised both eyebrows at him. Feeling like an idiot, Simon winced and plunged on. “I don’t know what it’ll take to convince you that I’m serious about wanting to help Jeremy—”

“I know you are,” Ethan said, almost kindly. “But right now isn’t the time to talk about it, is it? You could probably do with a bath, a meal, and a good night’s sleep before I put you on the spot.”

“Yeah, but—” Simon hesitated again for a split second, then plunged on when Ethan didn’t interrupt “—the longer I spend here, the longer Jeremy’s out there

on his own—”

“Let me be honest with you, Simon,” Ethan said. “Right now, at this very moment, I haven’t the faintest idea where Jeremy’s gotten to. He left his current billet a day or two ago and is on the move—he prefers not to stay in one place for too long, for obvious reasons. When he has a moment, he’ll let me know where he is. Once he’s done that, if you’ve managed to convince me that you’ll be of some use, I’ll send you to him. In the meantime, you might as well rest up. All right?”

Simon thought about it, then decided that he couldn’t argue with that, especially not with the promise of a long, hot shower in the offing. “Okay,” he said. “So, uh. Bath’s in there?”

“Oh, yes,” Ethan said, holding out his free hand. “If you’ll just give me your jacket I’ll put your things in the bedroom for you. Once you’ve finished up in there, come on down to the kitchen and I’ll see if I can’t feed you.”

“You know what, I’m guessing you can,” Simon said, handing over his jacket. His stomach knotted, right on cue.

Leaving his dirty things in a pile on the bathroom floor, Simon hit the shower as soon as the water was lukewarm. It had been a long time since he’d felt this filthy: he was caked with multiple layers of dried sweat and the grime of several continents. There was sand crusted on him in the strangest places, some of which Simon didn’t want to think about.

He stood under the spray, head bowed, hands braced against the wall, until grains of sand stopped swirling down the drain. The water heated around him; by the time it ran clear, it had also lulled Simon into a stupor. He shook his head once, then again, slinging water against the wall. Finally, snapping out of it, he grabbed the soap.

By the time he poked his head out of the bathroom, he felt better and more awake than he had since—he considered—since about Mexico. There was no sign of Ethan, and the hallway door was closed. Clutching his towel about his waist just in case, Simon edged over and stuck his head into the bedroom: also empty. His duffel and jacket sat on the floor by a large chest of drawers, surrounded by a faint dusting of sand. “Whoops,” Simon muttered, crouching in front of the duffel and unzipping it.

Simon dug out some clean (but incredibly wrinkled) underwear and put it on, then dumped the rest of his things into the empty dresser. The jacket he hung in the closet. A stray burst of self-consciousness prodded him back into the bathroom, where he first found a hamper to shove his filthy clothes and empty duffel bag into—leaving another scattering of desert sand behind on the tiles—and then reclaimed his gun in its ankle holster, bringing it into the bedroom and ‘hiding’ it under the clothes in the dresser. Ethan would probably find it if he so much as sneezed in the general vicinity of the bedroom, but Simon was pretty

sure he didn't care enough to look for a better hiding place right now. Instead he put on a clean shirt and jeans and picked his way out into the hall.

Somewhere off in the distance Ethan was clattering around in the kitchen, but after a single glance in the direction of the narrow stairway, Simon headed the other way. Feeling a bit like an intruder (but taking Ethan at his word) Simon stuck his head in the empty suite of rooms and found that they were just that: an empty suite of rooms, much like the one that Simon was staying in. Simon nosed around, just in case, and then headed for the far end of the hallway.

An enormous and lushly carpeted wooden stairway curved gently down and away between the empty suite and Ethan's own. Simon eyed it askance: it hadn't been part of the tour. It might be safe or it might not, but the entry hall at the bottom almost certainly wasn't; either way, Simon decided not to press his luck and moved on. The door that led into Ethan's suite was closed. Simon reached for it, then stopped with his hand a couple of inches from the doorknob, reconsidering. Ethan had said that he was welcome, but all the same, Simon's imagination was having a field day. "Maybe some other time," Simon said under his breath, then headed back the other way.

He went down the narrow and relatively plain back staircase and found himself back in the downstairs hallway. The kitchen sounds (and smells) were much clearer now, making Simon's stomach growl again. Kneading absently at his stomach, Simon glanced from the double doors leading into the kitchen to the door opposite them and back. Just a quick look . . .

The door opposite the kitchen opened onto echoing darkness. Simon couldn't see a thing but he could still sense *space*. Gingerly he patted the wall by the door and found the light switch. Fluorescent bulbs popped and hummed as they warmed up, leading off into the distance—despite himself, Simon flinched back. "Whoa," he said, when he recovered. The so-called 'exercise room' was more like an entire gym, bigger than a basketball court, with wooden floors that looked like they'd echo. There were enormous mirrors and what looked like a ballet barre, of all things, on the opposite wall—the ensuing mental images made Simon snicker—and off at the far end of the room there was a large stack of exercise mats and a couple of complicated-looking pieces of exercise equipment—

"It used to be the poolhouse before I bought the place," Ethan said, behind him. Through sheer willpower Simon managed not to jump, although he yelped a little before he could stop himself. Ethan pretended not to notice. "The pool's still there and should be clean, if you'd care to use it. You just have to retract the floor to expose it. The control panel is down there by the gymnasium."

"Retract the floor," Simon repeated, numbly. "Christ, and they say crime doesn't pay."

"Oh yes, so they say," Ethan said. "Shall we eat?"

The smell of something cooking assaulted Simon with nearly physical force

the moment he pushed through the kitchen doors. Ethan went directly over to one of the ovens—one of the ovens, Christ—and started fussing with it, leaving Simon to fend for himself. Uncomfortable all over again, Simon glanced around. One corner of the massive, frightening, industrial-sized kitchen proved to have a fairly nice little breakfast nook hidden in it, so Simon went over and sat down before he could break something.

Behind him, Ethan was still busy. Simon folded his hands together on the table and stared down at them, uncertain of what to do or say now. “I kind of brought half the Sahara with me,” he finally said. “Seriously, I tracked in a lot of sand.”

“Yes, I noticed,” Ethan said. “You needn’t worry about it. I’ll take care of it tomorrow after you wake.”

“Sorry about that,” Simon said. He fell silent again, listening to the ongoing clatter from behind him. A minute or so later Ethan swept in, put a napkin-covered basket and a butter dish on the table, and then swept back out. Simon pulled the basket over and investigated it: bread. He fetched out a piece, buttered it, and ate it in four giant bites, barely pausing to taste it. “Guess that’s what you get for sending me through Morocco,” he said around his mouthful of food.

Ethan didn’t quite laugh. “Yes, I suppose so,” he said. “I’m afraid it was the best I could do on such short notice—I hope you weren’t stranded in the desert for too long.”

“Hour or so,” Simon said, snitching another piece of bread. “Felt like forever, though.”

“Mm,” Ethan said.

His current store of conversational topics exhausted, Simon shut up and emptied the breadbasket instead. Whatever was cooking smelled wonderful, and Simon was debating the merits of saying so when Ethan reappeared, carrying two heavily-laden plates. Simon picked up his fork and studied the contents of his: chunks of fresh fruit and a large square of something that was mostly yellow—it looked like some kind of egg casserole. “Is this quiche?” he asked, half curious and half suspicious.

“It’s frittata, actually,” Ethan said, taking the seat opposite Simon. “Quiche has a crust. Frittata is just an exceedingly puffy omelet.”

“Oh, well, omelets I can deal with,” Simon said, spearing a corner of the square and putting it in his mouth. His eyebrows flew up. “S’good,” he mumbled. “S’in this?”

“Ham, asparagus, roasted potatoes, a bit of leftover onion, this and that,” Ethan said, shrugging. “Frittata is an excellent way to get rid of things that are cluttering up the fridge.”

Simon swallowed the first bite and sliced off another. His empty stomach set up a clamor that nearly hurt. “It’s really good,” Simon said.

"I'm glad you like it," Ethan said. "Cooking's become something of a hobby for me in my retirement—I'm afraid I can be insufferable on the subject."

"Hey, as long as I get fed like this, I can't say that I mind too much," Simon said. Ethan just smiled in response and Simon abandoned the awkward conversation in favor of stuffing his face.

Two helpings and several pieces of bread later, Simon was finally beginning to feel like he'd plugged the howling hole in his stomach. Sighing, he slumped back in his chair. "Thanks," he said. "I needed that."

"It's no problem," Ethan said dismissively, pushing his own chair back and standing up. He brushed past Simon and headed back into the kitchen proper. "Would you care for tea?" he said. "There's fresh."

Simon went a little still. "Uh."

"You're allowed to refuse, you know. You needn't just sit there looking like I called your mother a terrible name." Ethan came back, carrying his steaming teacup in both hands. "I expect you're a coffee drinker in any case."

"Yeah," Simon said, looking away. "Yeah, pretty much. But not right now, Christ, I'm going to fall asleep in fifteen minutes whether I'm near a horizontal surface or not."

"In that case, I suppose I'd best let you get to it," Ethan said. He sat down and reached for the sugar bowl, barely glancing at Simon. "Good night, Simon. I'll see you in the morning, or whenever you wake."

"Uh, yeah," Simon said. "G'night." Embarrassed into something like good manners, he picked up his empty plate and carried it to the nearest sink, abandoning it there. It felt wrong to just leave, but he couldn't think of what else to do, since Ethan was no longer paying any attention to him at all. Simon paused by the sink, indecisive, then shook his head and headed for the doors, leaving Ethan to his tea.

Simon let himself back into his rooms and fell back against the door, heaving out a breath. His exhaustion was a bone-deep clamoring ache, a physical thing, but he was crazily, painfully wired to boot. Jet lag times a thousand, not mitigated at all by all the cat naps he'd stolen *en route*. If he went to bed right now, he'd either thrash around until dawn or sleep like the dead for two hours and *then* thrash around until dawn; neither option was appealing. Fortunately, he had a third option, one he'd come prepared to exercise.

Heading into the bathroom (and wincing at the grit of sand under his bare feet), Simon opened the little bottle of Advil that he'd brought along and shook the contents out into his palm. Mixed in with the big green capsules were a few tiny white pills: five fresh Ambien, begged from Sandra two days (or a lifetime) ago. Simon took one, washing it down with water cupped in his palm, then

opened the medicine cabinet to put the bottle away . . . and hesitated, noticing for the first time the little brown scratches in the white paint.

Some previous guest had defiantly carved his initials into the back of the medicine cabinet, the spiky little letters hidden in one corner where they'd be invisible behind even something as small as the bottle in Simon's hand. Simon squinted at them, then opened the cabinet door wide enough to get some light on the letters:

JH JA

"Huh," Simon said. He blinked. "*Huh.*" Straightening up, he glanced around the bathroom, then bent down and opened the cabinet under the sink. It was empty. Simon went out into the main room and racketed around for a few minutes, opening and closing drawers and rooting through cabinets. Those that weren't empty were filled with ordinary, everyday things, mostly office supplies and the like. Simon studied the books on the shelves—unforthcoming—then headed into the bedroom and started yanking out drawers there.

It wasn't until he pulled open the closet and ran his hand along the top shelf that he had any luck. Something slid under his hand; Simon clapped his hand down on whatever it was and slid it forward, sending a couple of cheap Polaroids fluttering to the carpet. He crouched down and picked them up.

The color was already leaching out of the pictures, leaving them bleached a weird reddish-yellow, but the subjects were still clear: Ethan, about ten years younger, halfheartedly holding up a hand to ward off the photographer—who had carefully written *Ethan* on the white strip at the bottom of the picture, in case it wasn't already clear—and a familiar-looking teenaged boy with longish hair and a sullen expression jabbing two upraised fingers at the camera. The second picture had been labeled *Bran*. Simon would have known that scowl anywhere.

Laughing a little, Simon plunked down on the rug in front of the open closet with the pictures. The handwriting was a lot messier than it would become in later years, but it was still familiar enough. Simon glanced over his shoulder at the bedroom: it was reasonably large and well-furnished, but now that he knew what to look for, he could see scuff marks on the walls and chipped varnish on the bedframe. Ethan hadn't just put him in a guest room.

Simon got back to his feet, put the old Polaroids on the dresser, and wriggled out of his jeans. He was starting to come up on the Ambien and his thoughts were getting a little fuzzy. Plodding back out into the main room, Simon killed the lights. He groped his way back towards the bedroom in the resulting darkness, getting fuzzier all the time.

He managed to crawl under the covers about half a second before his legs would have given out under him. His brain had been reduced to mush, giving off nothing but static; Simon gazed stupidly up at the ceiling and tried to figure out if there actually *was* a Jeremy-shaped dent in the mattress or if he was just imagining things. A couple of minutes later, still undecided, he fell asleep.

◆ Nineteen

The clock on the bedside table was one of the old analog kind, with the round face and the hands and the two bells on top. The first time that Simon blearily blinked his eyes open to a grayish morning, it informed him that it was just before ten o'clock. Simon made a grumpy sound, yanked the covers up to his nose, and went back to sleep.

The next time he roused himself enough to look at the clock, it was eleven-thirty, and still gray. Simon shut his eyes and did his best to wring a little more sleep out of the day, but it wasn't happening; after ten minutes or so of listening to the clock tick, Simon was forced to accept that, for better or worse, he was awake.

His brain felt muddy and slow. His muscles felt like they were full of sand, like the carpet. Simon sat on the edge of the bed and took stock: he was pretty sure he'd live. Simon picked up the clock and fiddled with it while his brain fought to clear.

Okay, so: as far as he knew, he didn't have to go anywhere or do anything today, which made a nice change. So first off, he'd have a shower. It might clear some of the mud from his brain, and then he could go downstairs and find something to have for lunch. There probably wouldn't be *coffee*, unfortunately, but food would go a long way towards fixing what was wrong.

The lure of lunch was enough to propel Simon the rest of the way out of bed. Putting the clock back down on the bedside table, he headed for the bathroom, shedding clothes in his wake (and then going back and picking them all up again once he remembered that he wasn't at home). He stuffed his clothes in the hamper, wincing yet again at the sand on the bathroom floor. Maybe if he got really bored, he'd figure out where Ethan kept the broom—it'd beat walking on sand every time he needed to use the bathroom. Simon grimaced, scraped his feet on the bathmat, and got into the shower.

He still felt slow by the time he got out, but it was a faster kind of slow. He'd settle for that.

Once he'd shaved and brushed his teeth, Simon headed back into the bedroom, tracking yet another ton of sand in with him. At least his clothes were clean and reasonably sand-free, although Simon ended up having to carry his sand-filled sneakers *back* into the bathroom and dump them out into the sink, which meant that he tracked through the sand in his socks. Simon was currently of the opinion that if he never saw sand again, it'd be too soon. He was also of the opinion that someone was going to clean all the sand out of here today, even if that someone ended up having to be him. Not right now, though. Now was for lunch.

Opening the hallway door, Simon stuck his head out. The house was still eerily quiet. Whatever Ethan was doing, he was doing it either quietly or elsewhere. That was fine with Simon. He headed for the back staircase, fighting down the absurd impulse to tiptoe.

The kitchen was empty. It was still ridiculously huge, and seemed even more so now that it was daylight, but Simon felt up to the challenge now that he'd had some rest. Wandering around, he poked through the cabinets, stuck his head in the vast, overstuffed fridge—which was taller than he was and about as broad as his outstretched arms—studied the complicated control panel attached to the range, and generally got as used to the place as humanly possible. He still felt a little weird about eating someone else's food, but not weird enough to keep him from raiding that gigantic fridge and the matching walk-in pantry.

It was almost an embarrassment of riches. Fifteen minutes later Simon had produced two sandwiches, one of which involved last night's frittata on toast, which promised to be excellent. He added an orange and a can of something Italian that promised to involve caffeine to his hoard, then carried his prizes to the little breakfast nook and set to with a will.

He was polishing off the last of his second sandwich and vaguely considering making himself a third—cold frittata on toast *was* excellent—when he heard what sounded like a car in the driveway outside. Simon sat up and twisted around in his chair, peering out of the window behind him. There *was* a car idling out there, some kind of anonymous little silver thing. It didn't look like any of the cars he'd seen in the garage last night.

"Good morning, Simon," Ethan said, from behind him.

Simon jerked in his seat, nearly tipping his chair over backwards; he hadn't heard the hallway door open. "You know, I'd only just started to get used to *Jeremy* doing that," he said, once he recovered. "Anyway, morning. Or afternoon, I guess. Were you expecting someone?"

"Yes, I've just come down to let him in," Ethan said, heading for the door that led into the garage. "I see you found yourself something to eat."

"Uh, yeah," Simon said, discomfited. The man had told him he was welcome to anything in the kitchen, but it seemed rude to get caught taking him up on it.

“That’s good.” Ethan pushed one of the buttons on the wall and the garage door started to rumble up. The little silver car pulled in, vanishing from Simon’s view.

Simon awkwardly gathered up his dishes and carried them to the sink. “Are the dishes in the dishwasher clean or dirty?” he asked, turning on the water and sticking the first plate underneath it.

Ethan glanced up at him, looking mildly startled, like he’d forgotten that Simon was there. “Mm?” he said. “Oh, you don’t need to worry about those—” Outside in the garage, the car’s engine shut off. Ethan broke off in mid-sentence to close the garage door again. “You can just leave those in the sink, that’s perfectly all right,” he said, and then he vanished into the garage, his greeting echoing off the concrete. A car door slammed.

Simon rinsed the crud off his lunch dishes anyway, feeling mulish, then stacked them in one corner of the sink and eyed the dishwasher. Out in the garage Ethan and the new arrival were talking, although Simon couldn’t make out what was being said; after a bit more thumping Ethan reappeared, his arms full of stuff. A little man with a mustache was bobbing along in Ethan’s wake, carrying a huge black box. “You guys need help with that?” Simon asked, straightening up.

“No, I think we’ve got it,” Ethan said, resting his chin on the topmost box. “However, if you could do me a favor . . .”

“Sure?”

Ethan glanced at Simon, then nodded as best he could with his chin in the air. “Go back upstairs and fetch down a second shirt, please. We’ll be setting up in the exercise room.”

Simon looked down at himself. Okay, he *was* just wearing a t-shirt, but he thought it was a pretty decent one. “What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?”

“Nothing’s wrong with it,” Ethan said. “You’ll just need a change of clothes. Bring the other shirt to the exercise room when you’ve a moment.” He backed out through the swinging doors, the little guy following.

Simon watched them go, confused, then shook his head. “Is *everyone* in this country allergic to explaining themselves?” he muttered, heading after them.

Rooting around in his dresser produced a wrinkled gray polo shirt. Simon flapped it around until the worst of the wrinkles fell out, decided that that was good enough, and carried it back downstairs, draped over his arm.

All the lights were on in the exercise room when he poked his head in. Ethan and the weedy little guy had their heads together, conferring while they worked together to set up some kind of frame against one wall. “What’s up?” Simon said. “Will this do?”

Ethan glanced at him, took in the polo shirt, and nodded. “Oh, yes, that should be fine. You can just put that down over there—” he nodded at the ballet barre against the other wall “—and we’ll use the t-shirt first.”

Simon took a deep breath, shut his eyes, opened them again, reminded himself to be patient, and asked, "For what?"

"Pictures," Ethan said, which was no help at all. "Just a moment and I'll explain."

Simon gritted his teeth and tried not to say *that'll be the day*. Instead he dropped his shirt over the barre and settled in to watch while the two of them finished setting up the frame. Once it was up and reasonably stable, Ethan pulled out a fat roll of something and slung it over the top of the frame, while the other guy picked up a heavy-duty tripod and screwed it into the bottom of the big black box that he'd carried in. Five minutes later there was a monstrous professional-looking camera standing in the middle of the room, flanked by two huge lights and pointed at a backdrop of light blue matte fabric—Simon was beginning to get the idea. He wasn't sure if he liked it or not, but he had it. "You're going to run me up some fake IDs?" he asked, testing this theory.

"Absolutely," Ethan said. He was kneeling by one side of the frame, pulling the fabric taut and tying it off. "I can't keep on stuffing you into the holds of ships whenever you want to go anywhere."

"You know what, I've got to agree with you there," Simon said.

"So we'll make you up a decent false identity and then you can run around to your heart's content," Ethan said, testing the knots. "Well, for a year or so, anyway."

"Yeah? What happens after a year?"

"Your driver's license will expire," Ethan said. "Teddy makes quite a good fake, but all the same, I don't recommend attempting to renew it."

"Uh, no. No. Good point. Yeah." Simon scratched the back of his head. "So . . . does this mean you *will* be sending me to wherever Jeremy is?"

Ethan stood up and dusted off his knees. "That's still up in the air, Simon," he said. "But even if not, the false identity will make it much easier for me to send you home again. Still, it will take Teddy a day or two to run you up a set, so either way, it's best to get this process started now."

The little guy with the mustache—Teddy, Simon supposed—cleared his throat. "All right," he said in a nervous little voice, dry-washing his hands and not quite looking at Simon. "If you'd just come stand in front of the drape, please—thank you . . ."

Simon tugged his t-shirt down and headed over. He still wasn't sure he liked this, but he knew that he liked the idea of traveling by pregnant whale again even less. "Here?" he said, coming to a halt in front of the drape.

"A step or two forward, please," Teddy said. The little man was already busy making adjustments to his massive, blocky camera: it hitched up an inch, then another, then a third. Simon took a step forward. "There you are, that's perfect," Teddy said. "Just wait there a tick."

The black glass square on the front of the camera twitched left, then right, until Simon could see a dim reflection of himself in it. "There we are," Teddy said, still distracted. "All right. You can smile if you like."

Simon twitched his face into the little rictus of a smile that always resulted from requests like those. Beside him, Ethan made a faint *tch* sound. "Oh, don't smile," Ethan said under his breath. "At least, not like that."

Startled, Simon glanced over at Ethan. "What?" he started to say, but Teddy interrupted: "Look at the camera, please," he said, vaguely irritated. Simon's head swiveled back. Too self-conscious to do anything, he just stared at the camera, aware of Ethan's eyes on him; a moment later the camera's flash fired, dazzling him.

"Oogh," Simon said, reaching up to rub his eyes. "Should I put my other shirt on now?"

"Let me get a couple more shots, just in case," Teddy said. "Look at the camera again, please."

Still seeing nothing but spots, Simon complied. The monster flash went off a second time, then a third, ensuring that Simon was thoroughly blinded. "There we are," Teddy said. "All right. Go put on the other shirt, then muss up your hair and smooth it down again."

"Wh," Simon started to say, and this time it was Ethan who interrupted him: "Teddy's a bit of a perfectionist," he said soothingly, catching Simon by the elbow and guiding him towards the mirrors. Simon, blind, couldn't find it in him to object too much. "He doesn't want your hair to look exactly the same in both pictures, just in case."

"Guess that makes sense," Simon said, groping for the barre. His hand collided with the soft mass of his shirt and he picked it up, shaking it out; by the time he pulled it over his head he could almost see again. He smoothed the polo down and buttoned it up, then scraped his fingers through his hair, rearranging how it fell over his forehead. "How's that?" he said, glancing at Ethan in the massive mirror. Behind them Teddy was shifting the huge lights around, rearranging the shadows.

"Oh, quite good," Ethan said, studying Simon. "You might also rub your cheeks a bit, bring up some flush. If you don't, he's bound to suggest it."

Simon studied himself in the mirror, then scrubbed his palms over his cheeks and bit his lower lip. "Like that?" he said. "Sheesh, I didn't know it was going to be this complicated."

"Well, Teddy *is* quite proud of his handiwork," Ethan said. "There. You look like you've been standing in line at the license bureau for hours and are about to snap."

"And that is a look that I specifically cultivate," said Simon, heading back towards the camera.

Five minutes and another severe temporary blinding later, Teddy was packing up his camera while Ethan took down the backdrop. Simon leaned against the wall and scrubbed his eyes. "Tomorrow afternoon," Teddy was saying. "I *could* have it for you by noon, but it would be a bit of a rush."

"Mm," Ethan said, rolling up the backdrop. "It shouldn't be necessary, I don't think. When you can is fine."

"By three, then, I expect," Teddy said.

Simon shrugged out of his polo shirt. "So what nationality am I going to be?" he asked, smoothing down his hair again.

"Oh, American," Ethan said. He and Teddy were breaking down the frame, working together like they'd done this a hundred times. They probably had. "I don't think I could possibly pass you off as anything else."

"You know, people keep saying that, and I can't tell if they're insulting me or not," Simon said.

"Really?" Ethan piled up the pipes, then picked them up. "How terrible for you."

Simon opened his mouth, then shut it again. "*Ouch*," he finally said.

"Mm." Ethan's little smile looked almost real.

"Well, I've been told," Simon said to no one in particular. "You guys need a hand getting that out to the car?"

"Oh, I think we've got it," Ethan said serenely, heading towards the door with Teddy bobbing in his wake. "You can go put your shirt away, if you'd like."

Simon put the polo shirt back in the top drawer and closed it. From up here, the sound of the garage door going up was faint, almost subliminal; he couldn't hear Teddy's car at all. The only way he could tell that Teddy had gone was by listening for the garage door to go down again.

Picking absently at his t-shirt, Simon leaned against the dresser and thought. His brain was still a bit sluggish; Ambien did that to him on occasion, particularly when he was using it to smooth out a couple of days of bad sleep, like he was now. Coffee would usually sharpen him up, but he hadn't found any on his initial safari through the kitchen. Just tea. Simon could not imagine a world in which he was so far gone that he'd willingly drink tea.

Still, coffee wasn't the only way. Simon dug out the sole pair of shorts he'd brought with him and changed into them, then trotted back downstairs, keeping one eye out for Ethan, who was, once again, nowhere to be seen. Simon let himself into the exercise room and headed for the far end, where the complicated machinery was. Up close, it proved to be a comprehensive rack of free weights, a lifting bench, and one of those all-in-one Nautilus things. Perfect. Simon set the pin at five weights down, tested the weight, moved the pin down two more weights, then settled in at the machine to do some reps.

It was simple, repetitive, mindless hard work. Simon stopped thinking about much after five minutes. The sand sifted out of his muscles and the mud leaked out of his brain as he worked up a sweat—a decent, honest sweat that had nothing to do with the weather outside. It wasn't coffee, but it would do. Once he'd exhausted the possibilities of the machine, he moved on to the free weights; there were weightlifting gloves at one end of the rack, and he put on a pair before setting up the bar for a bench press.

He was on his back on the lifting bench, with his hands on the bar, when Ethan said, "I'll spot you, if you'd like to add some more weight."

Simon twitched, then shut his eyes. "Jesus, I'm glad I hadn't picked that thing up yet," he said, swallowing. "I'd have dropped it on my chest just now and I need those ribs."

"Well, that's why I spoke up before you lifted it," Ethan said, moving past him to the racks. "More?"

"Yeah, give me another thirty pounds, would you?" Simon let his hands drop to his chest, staring up at the high ceiling and listening to Ethan clang around behind him. Eventually, mostly to fill the silence, Simon added, "At least I'm starting to get used to you popping up out of nowhere and scaring the shit out of me."

"And here I was having such fun, too." Ethan's hands flickered in Simon's peripheral vision, putting another weight on one end of the bar.

Simon shut his eyes and tried to laugh. "Now you sound like Jeremy."

Another clang announced the addition of a second weight to the other end of the bar. "In point of fact, I expect he sounds like me."

"Well, yeah, but I met him first, so . . . I guess you're just going to have to suffer. We set?"

"I believe so," Ethan said. "Give it a go."

Simon opened his eyes and put his hands back on the bar. Most of Ethan was a vague shape at the edge of Simon's vision; only his hands, clasped loosely around the center of the bar, were clearly in focus. Simon stared up at them as he took a deep breath, then another, focusing himself. Ethan's hands were squared-off and looked strong, even if his knuckles were turning into hard knots as he got older—Simon hissed out his last breath through his teeth and heaved, lifting the bar off the pins.

Ethan's hands rode loosely along as Simon lowered the bar almost to his chest. Simon sucked in a breath, blew it back out, and pushed the bar up and away from his chest until his arms were straight. Ethan's hands fell away as Simon brought the bar back down.

Ethan was courteous enough to wait until Simon was on his third rep to ask, "So, what made you decide that it was suddenly so important to drop everything and race to Jeremy's aid?"

"We going to do this now?" Simon gritted out, bringing the bar back down.

Ethan shrugged, somewhere at the very limit of Simon's field of vision. "Well, here we both are, and personally, I find that exercise focuses the mind quite nicely."

"Yeah," Simon said. "Okay." The bar lay hard across his chest and he paused long enough to blink and swallow. "See, what you've got to understand is—" Simon heaved the bar up again "—a lot of this is my fault."

Ethan's little "Oh?" was neutral.

"Yeah." Simon's elbows locked at the top of the rep and he flexed his fingers. "Not all of it. But a lot. See, once upon a *hgh* time, I had a teammate named Rich. There were two problems with Rich: one, he just hated Jeremy, which I knew, and two—" the bar touched Simon's chest again, completing his fourth rep "—he'd been compromised a couple of years before by *haa* Karpol's people, which I did not."

"I see," Ethan said.

"And then I brought Jeremy in on *hgh* the thing that turned out to be this Bran guy—" Simon broke off there, belatedly remembering what Bran was, besides a pain in the ass. "Uh."

"Mm," Ethan said distantly. Simon paused with the bar against his chest, unsure of what to do now. "It's all right," Ethan finally said, although it didn't sound all right. "Let us leave Bran out of this for now, if possible."

"Fair enough," Simon said, gritting his teeth and getting the weights moving again. "Anyway, long and short of it is that *hgh*! Rich is the one who brought Jeremy to Karpol's attention in the first place. And he wouldn't have done that if *haaaa* I hadn't brought Jeremy in."

"So you feel responsible," Ethan said.

"I *am* responsible," Simon corrected him. Simon's locked arms were trembling a little—it had been a long time since he'd done any serious weight training—but he'd be damned if he was going to stop now.

"I see," Ethan said. Simon barked out a harsh breath and let the weight fall again, moving slowly to keep from moving too fast. Somewhere above him, Ethan's fingers flexed, reacting to the stumble in the rhythm. "So," Ethan said after a moment, "is that why?"

The bar lay across Simon's chest while Simon panted. "Part of it," he wheezed. "I mean, Jeremy thought he could stay ahead of Karpol thanks to his fake identities and stuff, and the Karpol expert from the CIA thought that Jeremy would only be in danger if he did something to call attention to himself, so *haa*!" Simon heaved the bar upwards. "So he must have used an old identity or something. Or maybe somebody gave him up. I don't know what happened there. Jeremy didn't say."

"Mm," Ethan said.

"The other thing is this thing with Annabelle," Simon said, then broke off abruptly as one of his elbows snapped out. Ethan grabbed the center of the bar before Simon could even yelp, and together they wrestled the weight back under

control. “Christ,” Simon said, straightening the bar out across his chest. “Thanks. Glad to see you don’t want me dead yet.”

“If nothing else, it’d be difficult to explain to the authorities,” Ethan said. He almost sounded amused. “So . . . tell me what happened with Annabelle.”

Simon shut his eyes, flexed his fingers, and ground the weight upwards again in short, hitching increments. “I called someone to confirm Jeremy’s story,” he gritted out, wincing against the burn in his muscles. “I like the guy, but he’s like you: he doesn’t ever want to explain anything—” the weight trembled at the top of its arc “—and he *is* somewhat non-law-abiding, and I didn’t really . . .” Simon trailed off there.

“Didn’t really?” Ethan prompted, grandly ignoring the backhanded insult.

Simon eased the weight back down. “I was going to say I didn’t really want to lose my job over Jeremy, which is ironic for reasons I’ll get into in a minute,” he said. “Help me get this little bastard back on the pins?”

Ethan reached down and grabbed the bar around the middle, pulling it up as Simon heaved. The weight clanged back onto the pins and Simon let his hands fall, shaking the strain out of his arms. “You were saying?” Ethan prompted, again.

Simon flexed his fingers, wincing. “Anyway, it took me a little less than twenty-four hours to confirm Jeremy’s story, and by then, it was too late. Karpol’s people had taken Ms. Lamb out of Durango just a few hours before.”

“Mm,” Ethan said again, his mind obviously elsewhere. He sounded so much like Jeremy when he did that. It still had the power to make Simon shiver. Simon very firmly put that thought out of his mind and concentrated on pressing his elbows down to either side of the bench, stretching out his pectoral muscles. The little knot of scar tissue on his abdomen had seized up pretty badly, but with patient stretching, it started to loosen. Eventually, Ethan sighed, tapping his fingers on the bar. “Was that supposed to impress me, Simon?”

“Was what—oh.” Simon couldn’t help but grin up at him. “Well, no, but if you *want* to be impressed by my superior detective skills, I won’t argue. Wanna know how I figured it out?”

Ethan’s answering smile was small and wry. “Yes, actually, I believe I would.”

“Well, see, it was those letters that Bran had been getting in prison,” Simon said. “Signed by you, apparently, although I’d bet you five bucks that Jeremy actually composed them and Annabelle did the writing and mailing. I think they just signed your name to them—probably with your blessing—to make sure that Bran would actually read them.”

“Ah,” Ethan said, still smiling. “Is that what you think?”

Simon tucked his hands behind his head and gazed up at the ceiling, waiting for his arms to stop quivering. “Something like that, anyway,” he said. “Anyway, those little bastards were postmarked from all over the country, but the last one—the one with the red-alert code in it, the one that basically propelled Bran over

the walls of McCreary like his ass was on fire—that one had a Durango postmark. Since it was the only one that could have been considered time-sensitive . . .” Simon trailed off there and shrugged, not bothering to hide his own smile any more.

Ethan raised both eyebrows. “It’s an impressive chain of logic, if nothing else.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m right and you know it,” Simon said, reaching up to grab the bar again. “In fact, if I had to guess, I’d say that the actual red-alert code was referring to Bran by name in the last letter. I haven’t actually seen these letters for myself, but given what *Annabelle*’s red alert was . . .” Simon let the sentence trail off there and heaved the weight back off the pins. Ethan’s hands leaped spooky-quick to the bar again, riding it back down. “And given that I’m such a stand-up guy,” Simon wheezed, “I’m not even going to ask you how Bran got out of a maximum-security federal prison.”

“I’m sure I wouldn’t know in any case,” Ethan said, but that smile of his was starting to look pretty persistent.

“Anyway—” Simon braced himself, hissed out his breath, and pushed the bar up again. “—yeah, I fucked up really good on the Annabelle thing, and then I found out she was a paraplegic, which didn’t exactly make me feel better about it—” he brought the weight back down with a grunt “—and right about then is when everything else blew up in my face.”

“Yes?” Ethan said, after a moment.

“Mind if I get in a couple more reps before I launch into this part?” Simon said.

“Stalling,” Ethan said, nodding wisely. “Well, if you must.”

Simon grinned a little. “You’re damn right I’m stalling,” he said. The bar went back up.

He did the next seven reps in increasing struggle and silence, watching nothing but his own hands on the bar and Ethan’s hands, hovering just above. Finally, once he’d gotten to fifteen, he called it good enough and guided the bar back onto its pins about two seconds before he could drop it onto his windpipe and kill himself. “Christ, I need to start going to the gym again,” he rasped, swiping the sweat off his forehead. “I’m not in bad shape but I could be in better.”

“Mm,” Ethan said, clearly refraining to comment out of sheer politeness. “Have you finished stalling, then, or should I bring you the dumbbells?”

Simon swung his arms around, loosening them. “Actually, give me another forty pounds on the bar, if you would,” he said, hoping it wasn’t just bravado. “And while you’re working on that, I’ll give you the next bit.”

“Please do try not to kill yourself,” Ethan said. “I’d have to pay a ridiculous amount of money to have your body smuggled back into America.” He reached up and pulled the two smallest weights off one end of the bar, though, complying.

Simon folded his hands on his chest. “Okay, so . . . did Jeremy ever tell you about what happened with Farraday?”

The clanging behind him momentarily stilled. “Oh, yes,” Ethan said grimly. Simon winced. And they’d been doing so well, too—“How much?”

“Enough, I believe,” Ethan said.

“And of course you’re not going to expand on that assertion,” Simon said, mostly to himself. “Okay, so you know that I took the official heat for the shooting. It just made things easier for everyone, for me as well as for him. Okay?”

“Yes?” Ethan said, now firmly stuck back in neutral. He reappeared with a large weight in his hands and put it on the bar.

“Couple of days ago that finally came back and bit me in the ass,” Simon said. It came out bitter, which shouldn’t have surprised him as much as it did. “And seriously, I never thought it would. I thought it was *over*. I thought Jeremy was clear, I thought I was safe, and I *knew* Farraday was dead as hell, which meant that everything was right with the world. And then some . . . some *clerk* with a hard-on for my boss dug up Farraday’s corpse . . .” Simon winced and flapped a hand, dismissing that disturbing mental image. “Uh. Not literally. But anyway, long story short, I’ve been suspended to get me out of the way while the, the politics rage overhead.”

Ethan paused with his hands on the weights on the other end of the bar. “I see,” he said.

Simon held up both hands like he was trying to ward Ethan off. “They still don’t know about Jeremy’s part in it,” he said. “Before you ask. He’s still clear. And that’s only partially about him, but it *is* still about him. Okay?”

“I suppose changing your story now *would* leave your position precarious,” Ethan said, still neutral. He pulled the two smallest weights off the other end of the bar and carried them away, vanishing from sight.

Simon sighed sharply. “Yeah, it would. I’m not gonna lie about that. But if you think that it’s all only about me—if you think that I’m only concerned with my own ass here—then fuck you, you need to learn how to listen.”

Ethan was silent. Somewhere behind Simon the two weights clanged into the rack and another, larger weight clanged out of it. Simon flexed his fingers and stared resolutely up at them, even as Ethan drifted back into view and put the weight on the other end of the bar. “There you are,” Ethan said. “And, for the record, I said nothing of the sort, and I don’t feel that you’re being fair about my position.”

“Fair? Jesus.” Simon grabbed the bar and gulped in a breath, bracing himself. “There’s nothing *fair* about any of this. There’s nothing fair about what’s happening to Jeremy *or* to me, and you know what, all I can do right now is throw my weight around on Jeremy’s behalf and hope that I can make *something* come out all right.” He dragged the bar off the pins with a choked-off shout; Ethan grabbed

for it at the same moment, and together they stabilized it about six inches away from Simon's chest. "I got it," Simon wheezed.

Ethan's fingers loosened, leaving his hands curled lightly about the bar. Weight settled on Simon like an avalanche. "If you say so," Ethan said.

"Yeah, I do," Simon said, letting the bar settle to his breastbone, already knowing that he'd overdone it. Still, if he could just lift it once . . . "Before you ask, I don't know what I would have done if I hadn't gotten suspended," he said, coughing out the words. "Probably just sat around and felt like shit, waiting for Jeremy to call again." The bar raised an inch, then another.

"Well, that's honest, at any rate," Ethan said.

Simon almost grinned, hitching the bar up another inch, his arms trembling. "Hey, I'm a crappy friend, but at least I'm honest," he said, his voice airless. The bar edged upwards at the speed of continental drift. "I just . . . believe me when I say that I've always done the best I can."

Ethan's hands uncurled, hovering over the bar like a magic trick. "I believe you," he said. "It's just that I remain unsure whether your best is going to be enough."

"Wanna find out?" Simon said, nearly whispering now. "'Cause you know what, I do." He shut his eyes, ground his teeth, and gave the bar a single almighty heave. His elbows straightened and locked and Simon's eyes flew open, leaving him gazing up in disbelief at the weight, and Ethan's hands still hovering over it, not touching it at all.

"Mm," Ethan said. Without consulting Simon he took hold of the bar and guided it back onto the pins, and Simon gladly let it go. The weight crashed back into the stand with a sound like a small car accident; Simon let his arms fall, boneless. His hands brushed against the cool wood of the floor and Simon spread his arms wide, gasping and crucified on the weightlifting bench. "Far be it from me to dictate terms," Ethan said, after a long, silent moment, "but I suspect that you're done. Or at least that you ought to be."

"Oh yeah," Simon said. His voice sounded like it was coming from a long way off. "I'm done. And as soon as I can move again, I'm going to go have four Advil and a very hot shower."

"In that case, you'll be glad to know that I've cleaned all the sand out of your suite," Ethan said.

Simon shut his eyes. "Yeah," he said, and coughed. "Gotta tell you, that makes my day."

By the time Simon managed to haul himself upright again, wheezing all the way, Ethan was gone. To where, Simon had no idea. Simon's chest ached like he'd just been kicked in it, and the little knot of gunshot-scar tissue had pulled so tight that Simon had to fight not to list to his left like a drunkard, but all the same, he felt pretty damned good. Like he'd won something. He didn't know if he'd

actually won or not, but he was pretty sure he'd made a decent showing, and that was all he could ask for. Staggering upright, he headed for the door.

The floors in his rooms were sand-free, the rugs newly printed with vacuum-cleaner tracks. His bed had been made. The Polaroids on the dresser had been shifted a couple of inches to the left. Simon grinned at that, then peeled his t-shirt and shorts free of the sweat on his limbs and dropped them on the floor, only to swear at himself and bend arthritically in half to pick them up again. The hamper, he discovered, had been emptied; he dropped his sweaty things into it and got into the shower, turning up the hot water until steam filled the room.

It wasn't quite two by the time Simon was dressed again, his skin pink from the heat, like boiled shrimp. Simon had no idea what to do with himself now, but he had to admit that being free to be at loose ends was kind of great all by itself. He wandered over and twitched the curtains open, cupping his hands over his eyes and staring out the window.

It was lawn and landscaping pretty much as far as he could see. There was a curve of driveway half-hidden by the trees and what looked like the front walk directly beneath him, but almost everything else was some shade of green, except the sky, which was an unrelieved gray. In the distance Simon could just barely see what looked like a high wrought-iron fence with spikes on the top, and beyond that, what might have been a road.

It looked pretty peaceful, right now, but Simon was pretty damn sure he wouldn't want to go running around out there. The fence looked like pretty serious business, too. He couldn't tell how tall it was, but for it to still be visible from that far away . . . Simon looked for a nearby tree to compare it to and discovered that there weren't any trees anywhere near the fence, which made him go *hmm*.

There was a polite knock on his door. Simon twisted around and dropped the curtain, feeling oddly guilty, like he'd been caught at something. "Yeah?"

Ethan pushed the door open and offered Simon an opaque little smile. "I've just brought your laundered things back," he said, putting the basket down just inside the door. "Also, dinner's at seven."

"Oh, hey, thanks a lot," Simon said. "... can I ask you a question?"

Ethan paused, caught in the middle of his retreat. "Yes?"

"You don't always do the housekeeping stuff yourself, right?" It was a stupid question, but for some reason Simon wanted the answer.

"Oh, no," Ethan said. "But I thought it best to limit the amount of traffic in and out of the house for the time being, for everyone's safety. The outer perimeter can stand to get a bit dusty, and I can certainly handle the inner bits by myself until this fuss blows over."

"Yeah," Simon said, looking away. "That's what I thought. Uh. Sorry to bother you."

“It’s no bother,” Ethan said pleasantly, already closing the door behind himself.

Simon put his clean things away, including the duffel. He couldn’t remember the last time that had been washed, actually. It might have just been his imagination, but he could have sworn that his duffel hadn’t always been this pliable. He checked on the gun, still hidden under his clean clothes. It didn’t look like it had been touched, but that didn’t mean anything.

That little bit of excitement over with, Simon went looking for something to do. He hadn’t actually seen a television in the house—there had to *be* one, but it was probably either in Ethan’s room or somewhere in the outer rooms, and Simon didn’t particularly want to explore either place—so he poked through the bookshelves in the main room of his suite instead.

Most of the books were of the technical or reference variety, including a row of what looked like actual textbooks on the bottom shelf, but there was a row of battered paperback fiction stashed on the bottom shelf. Simon took a leisurely poke through the books, reading the backs, then picked out three or four that didn’t look too bad and carried them into the bedroom, dumping them in a pile by the analog clock. A quick troll through the other, empty suite turned up a few more decent prospects, which Simon added to his stack. Picking one at random, Simon got into bed and propped himself up on a pile of pillows to read.

He dozed off about half an hour later, the book open on his chest.

It was the smell of roasting meat that woke him a few hours later; Simon blinked his eyes open and gazed unseeing up at the ceiling, just contemplating that wonderful smell. He felt . . . well, he felt great, loose and rested and awake. He wasn’t even sore. That might change when he actually roused himself enough to move, but somehow, he didn’t think so.

The smell only got stronger. Simon decided that he was in favor of this and glanced at the clock: it was about six-forty-five. He rolled upright, stretched luxuriously, and went to clean up a little before dinner.

“Ah, there you are,” Ethan said when Simon drifted into the kitchen, following his nose. “I was beginning to wonder if I was going to have to go knock you up.”

Simon opened his mouth, shut it again, shook his head, and went to lean on the counter. “I’m just going to be nice and admit that I know what you meant,” he said. “That smells really good.”

“I think it’s turned out well,” Ethan said, eyeing the oven critically. “If you’d like to get yourself something to drink, I’ll finish things up.”

By the time Simon sat down, Ethan had pulled everything out of the various ovens and was, with great concentration, putting together a salad. “You really shouldn’t keep feeding me like this,” Simon said, watching the greens rise and

fall with fascination. “I don’t know if I can still digest real food, and also, I may never leave.”

“If I may be honest with you, Simon, I’m rather enjoying having the opportunity to cook for someone, even if it *is* you,” Ethan said absently, paying more attention to the salad than to Simon. “Most nights it’s just me, save when Jeremy’s about.”

“So . . .” Simon twisted halfway around in his chair and slung an arm over its back. “Basically, you’re enjoying getting to feed me, and I’m enjoying getting fed . . .”

“Match made in heaven,” Ethan said, so primly that Simon couldn’t help laughing.

“Aw, Christ, that was good,” Simon said, slumping back in his chair and picking up his glass. He’d scraped his plate so clean that it looked like he’d licked it. “I don’t want to alarm you or anything, but I’m in imminent danger of exploding over here, which might ruin some perfectly good wallpaper.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it,” Ethan said, blatantly ignoring the rest of Simon’s statement.

“What, the wallpaper? Yeah, it’s great,” Simon said. He tipped his head back and drained off the last of his water.

Ethan smiled, letting it go. He’d maintained a polite, distant silence throughout the meal, which might have been awkward if Simon hadn’t been so busy stuffing himself. Now he folded his hands neatly in front of himself, his own drink dangling negligently from his fingers—it was club soda with lime, which surprised Simon not at all—and lost both the smile and the distance, studying Simon like he was an interesting specimen.

Simon very carefully did not sit up, although he mentally raised his shields. “What?” he said, clattering the ice cubes around in his glass. “Don’t try to tell me ‘nothing’, either.”

Ethan shook his head a little, like he was clearing it. “No, no,” he said. “I was only thinking . . . I’ve entertained any number of truly *odd* people here over the years, but I think this is the first time I’ve ever knowingly had an FBI agent at my table.”

“Huh,” Simon said, slowly. “Yeah. I guess I keep forgetting . . .” He stopped, made a frustrated little gesture, and finished with “. . . who you used to be.” They both winced even as he said it, and Simon hurried to patch things up. “Maybe if I’d pulled up *your* file I’d remember a little better.”

“I wonder if my FBI file still exists,” Ethan said. Like Simon he settled back in his chair, gazing thoughtfully off into the distance. “I must have had one, back in the day, but I certainly never had the opportunity to see it, and I’m long since clean.”

"In the 'statute of limitations' sense, sure, but the only way you wouldn't have a file any more is if it got lost before someone put it into the computer system—which, I might add, could totally have happened." Simon paused and drank off a dribble of icemelt. "I could get someone to look," he said. "If you're interested."

"Mm," said Ethan. Like an echo he brought up his own glass, draining off most of his club soda. "I admit, I might find it interesting, but I'd hate to put you to any trouble—"

"Why not?" Simon said. "I'm sure as hell putting you to some."

Ethan acknowledged the shot with a quick twitch of a smile. "In that case, I'd be interested."

"If it still exists, I know a guy who can find it," Simon said. "Seems like the least I can do."

"Well, then." Ethan inclined his head, accepting the offer.

Simon nodded back. "Course, I can't guarantee its accuracy. Ar—uh, Jeremy seems to think his file is hilarious, and his was *active* until about two years ago. Art Theft does the best it can, but, uh . . ."

"It's Art Theft?" Ethan supplied.

Simon pointed at him. "Bingo."

"Far be it from me to speak ill of your organization, of course."

"They aren't part of *my* organization, no matter what they say," Simon said. "They've been pissed at me for *years*, ever since I arranged to have Jeremy's file closed. It's like the constant, distant yapping of chihuahuas."

Ethan looked down to hide a smile. "In some ways, the incompetence of the various art-theft departments over the years has been the best friend I ever had."

"Makes sense," Simon said, shutting his eyes. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Mm?"

Simon resisted the impulse to open his eyes, slumping down in his chair until his chin nearly touched his chest. "Are you going to send me to Jeremy or not?" he asked, trying not to sound truculent.

The fragile, friendly truce popped like a soap bubble. Ethan sighed sharply. "I still don't know," he said. "It goes against my better judgment, you understand."

"No, I don't understand," Simon said, cracking his eyes open. "Is this still about Annabelle? How many times am I going to have to apologize for that—"

"I assure you, it isn't just about Annabelle," Ethan said.

"Then . . ." Simon made a little *come on* gesture. "What?"

Ethan shut his eyes, sighed, and opened them again, regarding Simon levelly. His little smile looked to be only polite. "In fact, it's about Jeremy."

Simon went a little still. "Is this about, uh . . ."

Ethan's smile quirked just a hair wider. "Your . . . relationship?" The word made Simon wince. "In some ways," Ethan said, politely ignoring Simon's reaction. "But I assure you that it is not for the reasons you think."

“Okay,” Simon said, wary and patient. “So . . . why, then?”

“Jeremy is like a son to me,” Ethan said, his voice pleasant, if cool. “Can we agree that that’s fair?”

“Well, yeah,” Simon said. “I mean, I get that.”

“Good,” Ethan said, still pleasant. “Neither he nor Bran are my biological children, it’s true, but I still consider them to be my sons. Bran, at least, is legally so.”

“Okay,” Simon said, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“So, all thanks be to you, one of my sons went to prison and the other has been shot, has killed a man, and is currently running for his life,” Ethan said, and now his voice was so incongruously pleasant as to be grotesque.

Simon froze. Ethan inclined his head. “And as far as I can tell, this never occurred to you,” Ethan said, putting his glass down. “All that you saw was a man in a position to give you what you wanted. I resent being treated like a useful tool.”

Simon gritted his teeth and looked away. “Yeah, well, okay, maybe you have a point about that—”

“Of course I have a point,” Ethan said. Somehow he was still being pleasant about it. “Jeremy is free to live his life as he chooses, and I *will* admit that you can be charming when you put your mind to it, but I am not overly fond of you and I doubt that I will ever be.”

“Yeah,” Simon said, blowing out a breath and trying to sort out his whirling thoughts. “You know what? That’s fair. You don’t have to like me. And I’m sorry about . . . you know, the other thing. I guess I assumed you’d like me because Jeremy likes me.”

Ethan shrugged. “That he does,” he said. “I don’t understand why, to be honest. As I said, you can be charming, and I’m led to believe that you’re not unattractive, and I can only suppose you’re good in bed—” Simon choked and started coughing “—but while you may not be a *bad* person, you seem to heap calamity on Jeremy’s head on a fairly regular basis,” Ethan finished, seemingly oblivious to the uproar he’d caused.

Simon coughed one last time, thumped his chest, and swallowed. “And yet,” he said, his voice a little strained, “despite everything, you know what, he keeps coming back to me.”

“Turning up like a bad penny?” Ethan asked, the corners of his mouth quirking upwards.

“Yeah, basically,” Simon said. He had the beginnings of a headache now, and pinching the bridge of his nose only barely drove it back. “So . . . you done now?”

Ethan’s answering smile was tight and mostly humorless. “I suppose so.”

“Okay,” Simon said, letting his hand drop. “Because you know what, I’m not going to take responsibility for what happened to Bran. I’ll take responsibility for a lot, but not for that. He was killing people within the bounds of the United States,

the FBI had already taken notice, and it only fell to me because I recognized Bran's *style*. I admit I asked Jeremy for his help on that, but the key word there is 'asked', okay?" Simon paused, sucked in a breath, and plunged on. "He could have turned me down. Hell, he could have taken me up on it and doublecrossed me nine ways to Sunday. He didn't do either."

"He wouldn't have doublecrossed you," Ethan said quietly.

"Yeah, I know," Simon said. "But let's take this from the beginning. Yeah, okay, Jeremy got shot on my watch. I'm willing to take some of the blame for that." Simon spread his hands out on the table. "But Jesus, it's so much more complicated than that—it's . . . I don't even know where to start. I didn't shoot him. I didn't want him to get shot. I did the best I could to make him, uh, not get shot. If I'd known back then what he was like, what he was going to *do*, I think maybe I could have done something to prevent it. But I didn't, and I couldn't, and . . ." Simon trailed off there and hissed out a frustrated breath. "*He* forgave me."

"All right," Ethan said, watching Simon with mild curiosity, like Simon was pulling rabbits out of a hat on the other side of the table.

"The thing with Bran—" Simon took a deep breath "—yeah, I asked. If I'd known who Bran was, I wouldn't have. But I didn't. I asked. He said yes. Didn't tell me anything else. The thing with Karpol went down in the big middle of that, and it would have been so easy for Jeremy to just . . . walk away and go to ground. Logical, even. And he didn't. Again, his choice."

Ethan was silent. Simon scrubbed the back of his hand across his mouth and plunged on. "Jeremy killing Farraday? Okay, you got me there. You're damned right he wouldn't have been there if it weren't for me. But you know what? He did it to save my *life*. So yeah, that one's my fault, but Christ, I'm so not sorry that he *saved my life*. I'm kind of attached to it."

"Mm," Ethan said, pursing his lips.

"And now we come to the Karpol thing, and I've admitted that that's my fault so many times that I can't imagine you want to hear it again. And you know what?" Simon pointed at himself with both hands. "Here I am, doing my damndest to fix what I broke."

Ethan shifted in his chair. "All right," he said, and sighed. "All right. You're correct: Jeremy made certain choices of his own free will. And I realize that you weren't actually *trying* to put Jeremy in danger." Simon let that one pass unremarked, striving for his best poker face. Ethan, not noticing, went on. "But . . . you don't seem to understand that 'taking responsibility' is no longer going to be enough."

"Best I can do," Simon said.

"Is it?" Ethan said, tight-lipped. "Don't get me wrong: I'm glad you're not trying to deny your culpability. But 'taking responsibility' is what a man does after things go seriously wrong. That's not a skill I'm anxious to make use of."

Simon threw up his hands. “All right,” he said. “This isn’t getting us anywhere. What do you want me to tell you? Do you want me to make empty promises about how I’ll shoot anyone who tries to hurt Jeremy in the future? Is that it?”

“Please don’t insult my intelligence,” Ethan said, his voice finally going sharp. “I don’t want anything from you. I brought you here because you seemed sincere about wanting to help Jeremy—”

“I am,” Simon gritted out.

“—then do more than go on about how you want to fix your mistakes,” Ethan said. “That’s excellent, up to a point. I’m tired of hearing it. It’s not the convincing argument you think it is.”

Simon dropped his head into his hands, knotting his fingers in his hair in frustration. “What more do you want to *hear*? I don’t have any idea what’s happening to Jeremy, so I can’t be any more specific—”

“How about this?” Ethan said. “Let us pretend for a moment that the man on the spot is not Jeremy. Everything else about the situation is the same, including your precious culpability, but the person—the criminal—that you inadvertently sicced Viktor Karpol on is just that: just another person.” Ethan paused, tapping his fingers on the table. “Would you still be here?”

Simon hesitated, opening his eyes so that he could stare blindly down at the table. He knew what was coming—he could see it looming in the distance like a tidal wave—but, like a tidal wave, there was nothing he could do to escape it. “No,” he said, heaving a sigh. “Probably not.”

“I’ll not insult either of us by asking ‘why not,’” Ethan said. “The difference between the two things—between your staying at home and feeling guilty, and your coming here to ask my help—is whatever Jeremy is to you. Agreed?”

“Yeah,” Simon said, still staring at the table. His ears were starting to burn.

“Mm,” Ethan said, and fell silent.

Simon, still fascinated by the table, waited for the other shoe to drop. Ethan picked up his glass, drank from it, and put it down, still not saying anything. Finally, after almost a minute of silence, Simon said, “Well? Go ahead. Say it.”

Ethan sighed, not in frustration, but in acknowledgment. “Actually, Simon, I was thinking that I’ve just managed to convince myself to send you on.”

“... what?” Simon said, glancing up, startled.

“When I put it that way, I find it a good deal more enlightening,” Ethan said, staring resolutely out the kitchen window at the gathering dusk. “Isn’t that embarrassing? I’ve just won the argument for you.”

Still wary, Simon sat up, combing his fingers through his disheveled hair. “You’re going to send me to Jeremy,” he said, fishing for confirmation.

“I believe so,” Ethan said. “Still, if you wanted to make absolutely certain of it, I suppose a bit of expanding on the topic wouldn’t go amiss at this point.”

“Oh, Christ,” Simon said, dimly horrified. “You want me to...?”

"I'd consider it a favor," Ethan said. He smiled, just a little. "And, I suppose, a mitigating factor in my ultimate decision."

"Right," Simon said, heaving himself up out of his chair and grabbing his glass. "If it's going to be like that, I need more water first."

Ethan picked up his own glass. "You know where it is, I'm certain."

The trek from the kitchen table to the refrigerator was a long one. The sun had set and the kitchen was dim, most of the vast expanse lost in gray; fortunately, Simon knew the way. Simon refilled his glass with ice and water and carried it back to the table, his face set. Ethan waited, expectantly.

"I like him," Simon said with no preamble, sitting back down. He drank some water, wiped his lips on the back of his hand, and put his glass back down. "He drives me insane and half the time I want to deck him, but I like him anyway. I just..." Simon hesitated, curled a hand over his eyes to give himself the illusion of privacy, and sorted through his thoughts. "He's *good*," Simon finally said. "Most criminals are so goddamned stupid—"

"I know," Ethan said softly.

"—and he's not," Simon said. "I guess I... respect him? Sort of? I don't trust him any further than I could throw him, but I trust him to... uh... be himself, I guess." Under the cover of his hand, Simon winced: could he be rambling any worse?

Across the table, Ethan waited; when it became clear that Simon had stumbled to a stop, Ethan laughed under his breath. "Oh, yes," he said. "You can always count on Jeremy to be himself."

"Yeah," Simon said. "But it's more than that. I mean... when Farraday had kidnapped him and I was mobilizing my team to go after them, one of my team members asked me: what if Archer doesn't get himself free in time? What then?" The words were coming slowly, Simon having to pull each one loose. "And I told them that I had faith that he would."

"Ah," Ethan said, very softly.

"There's more to it than that, but that's the gist of it," Simon said. "Can I please be done now? If I get any more sappy I'm either going to throw up or, uh, throw up."

"Your definition of 'sappy' is an unusual one," Ethan said. "Still, I take your point."

"Oh, good," Simon said, letting his hand drop. "Because seriously, I couldn't take much more of that. It's embarrassing."

Ethan smiled. "Here, give me some credit," he said. "I haven't yet used the word 'feelings'."

"Small favors," Simon said, shuddering.

"Since you're so desperate to be done, allow me to take a turn," Ethan said, settling back in his chair and folding his hands together. "Once, a year or so ago, I asked Jeremy much the same question—I'm sure he wouldn't mind my

betraying a small confidence—and he told me that he liked you because you could handle just about anything he threw at you, and he never had to slow down or make allowances or even explain very much. Is it like that for you?”

“Really?” Simon said, blinking. “Huh. Yeah. I guess that’s just about right.”

“Someone like Jeremy really has very few peers in this world,” Ethan said. “I suppose it’s only natural for him to cling to the one he’s found. Metaphorically speaking.”

“Yeah, that makes sense, I guess.” Simon scratched the back of his head, suddenly self-conscious. “He’s definitely more of a challenge than most people.”

Silence stretched between them for a moment before Ethan abruptly clapped his hands together and sat up. “Well, I believe that satisfies me,” he said. “If you’ll just help me get everything to the sink, I’ll do the dishes.”

“Yeah, okay,” Simon said, drifting distractedly to his feet. “Sure.”

◆ Twenty

Stifling a sigh, Simon let his half-read book fall to his chest and glanced at the clock. Just after three in the afternoon and he was now *officially* bored to death. Feeling better than he had in weeks, but bored. There was a lot to be said for regular sleep, regular meals, and regular exercise, but one of the things he *couldn't* say for them was that they crammed full all the hours of the day.

For lack of anything better to do, he'd read two of the books in his little pile. The one on his chest was the third. It might have been a decent book, but reading was really starting to lose its luster, not that it had had much in the first place. If there was a television anywhere in the rooms Simon was allowed to visit, he hadn't found it. He'd already done all the showering and exercising that he was going to do for the day, and he wasn't hungry yet—the real problem, Simon admitted to himself, was that he was developing a serious case of cabin fever. He needed to get *out* of here. Being confined indoors was bad enough without the nagging sensation that he was going to put a foot wrong on some innocent-looking bit of hallway and wake up naked in a cage in the basement or something.

Someone knocked on the door, interrupting that disturbing line of thought. Simon dropped the book onto the bed and sat up. “Yeah?”

Ethan pushed open the door and stuck his head in. “Your documents have arrived,” he said, wagging a blue US passport folder.

“Oh, hey,” Simon said. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood up. “You know, it takes closer to a month or two to get a real one? There's something very, very wrong with this picture.”

“Mm,” Ethan said. “At any rate, you've a passport, a driver's license, a library card, and a pair of credit cards—which, I hasten to add, are not actually functional, but will make the contents of your wallet look more real.”

Simon took the passport folder from Ethan and shook the loose cards out into his hand. Leafing through them, he said, “Man, nobody's going to believe this is a real driver's license, the picture is too good—wait, I'm from Iowa now?”

“Iowa,” Ethan confirmed.

Simon frowned at the fake license. It really *was* a good picture. He kind of wished he could keep it; the picture on his DC license made him look like a crazy hobo. “Why Iowa?”

“Because it’s unlikely that anyone who checks your passport will have been there, so you won’t have to field any awkward questions,” Ethan said. “Also, as a bonus, it doesn’t require you to put on any sort of strong regional accent.”

“Man, you’ve got an answer for everything,” Simon said, flipping open the passport. “Seriously, though, I’m from Indiana originally, you could have just asked.”

“I don’t actually know if Teddy has the proper templates for Indiana, but I suppose if it ever becomes necessary, I can find out.” Ethan paused, watching Simon page through his passport. “Well. You’re a law-enforcement official. Do they pass muster?”

Simon glanced up and snorted. “Oh, yeah, because I’m a traffic cop and look at these things all day. Seriously, it looks good to me. What would happen if I tried to run it through the computer?”

“Oh, it’s real, to a certain extent.” Ethan shrugged. “It would take a fair amount of concerted digging to find out that the person on the license didn’t exist a short time ago.”

“Huh.” Simon closed the passport folder and stuck the cards back in it. “So is this the same kind of stuff that Jeremy uses?”

Ethan’s little smile confirmed it. “Although his are British, of course,” he said. “You’ll want to take a few minutes to memorize the name and address on those, and then put them in your wallet in place of the real ones. Put the real ones in your jacket pocket or somesuch.”

“Right,” Simon said, sticking the loaded passport in his front pocket. “Anything else I need to know?”

“If you’re asking if I’ve heard from Jeremy, the answer is no, not yet,” Ethan said. “If everything is all right, I expect to hear from him tomorrow or the day after.”

“Actually, I was asking if there was anything else I needed to know,” Simon said carefully. “But okay, that *was* going to be my next question.”

“Well, then, I suppose that answers that.” Ethan put his hand on the doorknob, preparing to go.

Simon cleared his throat. “Uh, actually . . .”

Ethan paused. “Yes?”

“Have you got a TV or something?” Simon asked, embarrassed just to be asking. He jammed his hands into his pockets. “I’m going a little stir-crazy over here.”

Ethan’s expression softened, surprising the hell out of Simon, who hadn’t thought it was possible. “Of course, I can imagine you must be feeling a bit cooped up. Anyway, come along, I’ve one in my room.”

“You sure?” Simon asked, still hanging back. “I mean, I don’t want to intrude, it’s just that I’m about to claw my face off or something. I’m not used to sitting around and doing nothing.”

“I doubt Jeremy would ever forgive me if I let you claw your face off,” Ethan said. “It won’t be a bother—I’ll be in the workshop in any case.”

“Workshop, huh,” Simon said, following him out the door.

By the time Simon actually got around to sitting down with his new identity, dinner was long since over. Apparently, according to his new driver’s license, his first name was still Simon (he suspected he was being babied a bit, but hey, it made things easier) but his last name was now Moorhead. Where that came from, he had no idea.

Simon Moorhead lived in some little town in Iowa that Simon *Drake* had never heard of, which meant that your average European border guard would have no clue. Excellent. Simon chewed on his lower lip and repeated his new address to himself a few times, then put the driver’s license face-down on the bed, closed his eyes, and repeated it again.

That done, Simon turned his attention to the rest of the pile. The credit cards sure looked real, and were even a bit scratched up, to boot. In fact, nothing in the pile looked brand-new, which was a nice touch. Simon paused, recited his new address again, nodded, and picked up his library card. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d *had* a library card. Apparently his alter ego was more well-read than he was. That was embarrassing.

Simon fished his wallet out of his back pocket and emptied it into his lap. There wasn’t much there, really. His real driver’s license with the crazy-hobo picture, his debit card, his credit card, his insurance card and voter’s registration . . . the rest was a motley collection of stamp cards from every mediocre fast-food place in DC and one lonely Starbucks gift card that the team had given him for Christmas a couple of years ago. He didn’t even have any pictures.

Simon put his empty wallet on the bed and picked up the pile of stuff in his lap. It made a completely unimpressive little stack. It got even less impressive when he pulled out the Starbucks card and tossed it onto the bed with the rest of his false identity. They had Starbucks in Nowhere, Iowa, right? Of course they did. It would add verisimilitude or whatever. Simon hopped down off the bed and went to put his real self in the drawer with the gun, pausing once in mid-step to recite his new address aloud again.

He dug the prepaid credit card and phone card out of the side pocket of his duffel—the trip through the washing machine hadn’t done them any favors, but they were relatively intact—and carried them back to the bed with him. Still muttering his new address under his breath Simon filled his wallet with the new things. It looked a little scanty, but there wasn’t much to be done about that.

Putting his (thinner) wallet back in his pocket, Simon picked up his book and

settled in. He'd barely had time to read a paragraph before someone knocked on the door. "Yeah?" Simon said, marking his place with one finger.

Ethan pushed open the door. "You'll be leaving tomorrow," he said.

"Whoa, really?" Simon said, sitting up. The book fell to the bed and slapped closed, losing his place. He barely noticed. "He called?"

"He's been in touch, yes," Ethan said. After a single glance in Simon's direction he swung away and looked around the room like he was cataloguing it. "I expect there'll be time to wash your things in the morning—I'll go ahead and schedule your travel before I sleep. Do you have any preferences?"

"Actually, what I have is a gun," Simon said brightly.

Ethan paused, his shoulders straightening. He didn't look back at Simon. "Is that a threat?"

"Nah, it's more like a state-of-the-Simon report," Simon said. "I have a gun. I'd kind of like to keep it. I'm not totally fond of the idea of threatening Jeremy's enemies by pointing at them and saying 'bang'. So I'm guessing airline travel is out."

Ethan sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "You realize that if you need a gun, Jeremy can probably lay hands on one? There's really no need to bring your own—"

"So, you want me to depend on *Jeremy* to acquire a gun for me. Yeah. I'm sure that'll work out great. After all, Jeremy knows so much about guns—seriously, no, I'd rather bring my own. Asking Jeremy to get me a decent gun is like . . . it's like . . ." Stumped as to what it was like, Simon flailed for a minute before settling on, "It's like asking some guy to buy you underwear and telling him you like blue, okay? You'll get something that is recognizably blue underwear, but it won't be the brand you're used to, or the kind you like, and maybe it'll be the wrong shape, and it probably won't even fit, and why do you people keep letting me use metaphors?"

"I assure you I don't know," Ethan said, looking mildly horrified. "I suppose you've made your point. God knows I'll never forget it. But if you are bound and determined to carry your gun with you, you'll turn what could be a simple five-hour trip into an odyssey that's closer to twenty hours, and significantly less comfortable to boot?"

Simon shrugged, conceding the point. "See, I hate that. I totally, utterly hate that. And yet, goddammit, I need that gun. So, you're the famous retired criminal mastermind, you tell me: how do I get where I'm going in a timely manner and still keep the gun?"

"My God, you're a trial," Ethan said, throwing up his hands in surrender. "I'm surprised Jeremy doesn't gas you more often. Is the gun clean?"

"Clean as a whistle, and believe me, I ought to know. Legally, it doesn't exist at all. High-end law-enforcement agencies tend to leak guns like that."

The corner of Ethan's mouth twitched. "You shouldn't sound so proud of that, you know, I might insult us both and attempt to set up a supply route—all right, then. Is it absolutely necessary to your peace of mind that you have it with you at all times, including on the trip down?"

"Maybe," Simon said, watching Ethan closely. "Tell me what you're proposing. Let's see if I laugh at you."

"If you think you can live without it for twenty-four hours, I can have it, ah, shipped to you through alternate channels." Ethan ticked his tongue off his front teeth. "It'll be an annoyance, of course, but everything about you is an annoyance. In the grand scheme of things, what's one more?"

"Twenty-four hours, huh," Simon said. Somewhat to his surprise he was starting to enjoy himself. "Well, I guess it's better than nothing, but if Jeremy and I get shot full of holes in the meantime, it's your fault."

"There are so many flaws in your logic that I think I may have an aneurysm," Ethan said. "Fair enough. If you die in the first twenty-four hours, it will be my fault."

"You have to promise to forgive me for Annabelle, too," Simon said.

"I don't see what the two situations have to do with each other—"

Simon held up a finger. "Sometimes twenty-four hours makes all the difference."

"—ah." Ethan rubbed his temples. "Thank you, now I *do* have a headache. Very well. You're comparing oranges and horse's asses, and I'm sure you know that, but I concur: if you die, I'll not only feel terrible about it, I'll forgive you for leaving Annabelle in the lurch. Perhaps I'll even come to your funeral. There. Are you satisfied?"

"Hey, I couldn't ask for more," Simon said. He went over to the dresser and dug out the gun in its ankle holster, then added the box of shells and the cleaning kit to the pile. "The gun's unloaded, although it's always best to assume that that's a lie."

Ethan closed his eyes for a moment. "Yes, thank you, I'm aware. All right. I'll make arrangements for the gun's transportation, and for yours—have you had a moment to look over your new identification?"

"I think you mean the identification of one Simon Moorhead, 113 Titan Drive, Hinton, Iowa, 51024?"

Ethan nearly smiled again, although he controlled it into a faint twitch a moment later. "There's no need to be smug about it," he said.

"Sure there is," Simon said, beaming. "Admit it, you thought you were going to catch me out. Right?"

"You certainly do get cocky when you think you're going to get your way," Ethan said, still not quite smiling. "I've the undeniable urge to strand you in Romania."

“Yeah, but if you did that, Jeremy’d be wondering where the hell I got to,” Simon said.

“Ah,” said Ethan, tilting his head. “Right. About that.”

“Yeah?”

Ethan clasped his hands in front of himself and *actually* smiled, immediately putting Simon on his guard. “I’m afraid Jeremy doesn’t actually know that you’re coming.”

“What?” Simon said, unsure if he’d actually just heard that.

“I can’t in good conscience just foist you off on him,” Ethan said, still smiling. Bad sign. “So I’m washing my hands of the decision-making process entirely. I’ll make arrangements for your paths to intersect. When that happens, you can make your case directly to him. If you can talk him into letting you stay, wonderful. If you can’t, the identification that I provided you will allow you to safely make your way home, undetected.”

“I guess that’s fair, although you’re still a weasel,” Simon said. “All right, if I have to do that, I can do that. At least I’ve had some practice dealing with *him*.”

“Wonderful,” Ethan said, the amount of good cheer in his voice positively suspicious. “You may as well put your real driver’s license and things in the pile with the gun. I can ship those to you as well, and that way you needn’t worry about a customs agent finding them in your things.”

Simon considered this, then dug the little pile of his real identity back out of the dresser. “See, that’s the thing,” he said, gesturing at Ethan with the thin stack of cards. “How much do I trust you?”

Ethan pursed his lips. “Enough to sleep under my roof, eat my cooking, and let me spot you when you try to lift entirely too much weight?”

“Good point,” Simon said, tossing the cards onto the pile of things on top of the dresser. “I assume you’ll take responsibility if the courier runs off with my stuff?”

“I don’t believe you’ll have to worry about that,” Ethan said. He moved past Simon to pick up the little pile of things, handling the gun gingerly, like it was rabid. “Will there be anything else before I go? Would you care to insult me some more? I do so enjoy being mocked by a man half my age less than half an hour before I sit down to decide his immediate destiny.”

Simon held up both hands to ward him off, laughing a little. “Hey, maybe it’s just my way of coping with the unknown. Have a heart.”

His hands full, Ethan headed for the door. “You really are extremely irritating,” he said, glancing back over his shoulder, not quite smiling.

“Jeremy usually just calls me a prick,” Simon volunteered.

“In that case, I bow to his superior judgement,” Ethan said, letting himself out. “Get some sleep, if you can. I’ll go make arrangements.”

* * *

Even with the help of one of Simon's remaining Ambien, sleep was slow in coming. A faint, deep quiver of anticipation—or perhaps just dread at the threat of *yet more goddamned travel*—kept Simon just this side of conscious despite his best efforts. Midnight came and went before Simon managed to sink all the way through the fog of drugs to the other side.

It was close to ten in the morning by the time he woke. By eleven he was showered, mostly packed, and perched on the edge of the tub hammering as much sand out of his grimy sneakers as he could. Every time his palm smacked against the sole, another fine dusting of sand cascaded out to land on the porcelain. Dammit, these sneakers weren't more than a year old. Simon hit his left sneaker one last time, gave up, and put it on.

Ethan was leaning against one of the kitchen counters when Simon came loping downstairs, carrying his repacked duffel in one hand and his jacket in the other. "Good morning, Mr. Moorhead," Ethan said, most of his attention on the teacup in his hands.

"113 Titan Drive, Hinton, Iowa, 51024," Simon said in response, dropping his things by the back door. "Oh yeah, I'm awesome. Have I got time for lunch?"

Ethan waved an absent hand at the fridge in permission. "Your ride should be here in about an hour, more or less."

"Oh, good," Simon said. He dove into that massive fridge and laid claim to the rest of the roast beef from the night before. Assembling it into a pair of chunky sandwiches took him about five minutes. Simon carried his bounty to the kitchen table, edging past Ethan with a muttered apology.

Simon was about halfway through the second sandwich when Ethan put a small can down by his hand. Simon made an inquiring sound around his mouthful of food and picked it up, consulting the label: some kind of French canned espresso. "I'm afraid it's the best I can do," Ethan said over Simon's strangled noise of relief. "I haven't a coffee maker."

Simon swallowed, dropped his sandwich, and popped the top of the can. "You *do* love me," he said happily, then chugged off half the espresso at a gulp. The mild caffeine headache that he'd been carrying around for days receded.

"God forbid," Ethan said, shuddering. He carried his cup over to the other side of the table and sat down, waiting politely for Simon to finish eating.

It didn't take long. Simon popped the last bite of sandwich into his mouth, tipped up the empty can on the off-chance that a few stray drops of coffee were lurking in the bottom, and then got up and carried his dishes to the sink. "So," he said over the noise of the running water. "What's the plan?"

"I was just about to go over that with you," Ethan said, pulling a sheaf of folded papers from the inside pocket of his jacket. "Come have a seat."

Simon shut off the water and went back to the table, holding out a hand for the papers. Ethan glanced at Simon's outstretched hand, then went back to leafing through the papers. Simon grumpily reeled in his hand and waited. "Eddie will

take you to the station and put you on the train for London,” Ethan said, flicking a finger against the topmost page. “You’ll change trains at Paddington—” Simon couldn’t help but grin a little “—and take the train to Heathrow from there.”

“Okay,” Simon said. “Heh. Paddington.”

“Mm-hmm,” Ethan said. “In any case, you’ll be flying to Milan.” He paused. “Which is in Italy.”

“Really? Well, shoot, and here I thought I was going to the one in Siberia,” Simon said.

“Just making certain. I can never tell, with Americans,” Ethan said pleasantly. “In any case, you’ll want to get a taxi at the airport. Give the driver this sheet—” he flicked the corner of a second piece of paper “—and he’ll take you into the city and drop you off in the proper place. Once you’re there, the rest is up to you.”

On a hunch, Simon stuck out his hand again. This time Ethan deigned to hand him the papers. Simon flicked through them—basic itinerary, tourist-y directions, a sheet of paper with a bunch of Italian written on it, that sort of thing—and then folded them up and put them down on the table. “I’ll look at it on the train,” he said.

Ethan fetched an envelope out of his jacket and passed it across to Simon. “Twenty pounds for the Heathrow Express, and far more euros than you will need for the taxi in Italy, although I’m sure you’ll have a use for them.”

Simon opened the envelope and riffled the ridiculously colorful bills inside. There were a lot. They looked like something he could download from the internet and print out. “Wow, play money,” Simon said, adding the envelope to his stack of papers. “Thanks!”

“Spends as well as the other sort,” Ethan said. “In fact, these days it spends rather better than the American dollar. Aren’t you lucky?”

“*Ouch*,” Simon said, wincing. “Okay, so. Anything else I need to know?”

“I think everything you need is in that little pile there,” Ethan said, nodding at Simon’s hands, folded on top of the papers. “And you’ve my number, if you should find yourself, oh, I don’t know, stranded in Romania?”

Simon snickered. “Now you’re just *trying* to scare me,” he said.

“Is it working?” Ethan asked, raising both eyebrows.

“Nah,” Simon said, picking up the pile of papers and tapping it on the table. “I know you secretly like me. It’s okay, you can admit it.”

Ethan sighed, shaking his head slowly. “I won’t say it hasn’t been interesting, but all the same, I think I’ll be relieved to make you into someone else’s problem.”

“Yeah, I’m always someone’s problem,” Simon said. He pushed his chair back and stood up, heading for the duffel that he’d dropped by the door. “Funny how that works.”

* * *

The same man who had brought him here—Eddie, Simon assumed—came to pick him up about half an hour later. Where he came from, Simon had no idea. How he got into the garage, Simon had no idea. It was as if he'd teleported in; the first hint Simon had that his ride had arrived was the pounding on the door. Simon jerked, reflexively grabbing for a gun that wasn't there before he recovered. "Christ," Simon said, thumping a fist against his chest, "how does he do that?"

"Eddie's always been good at getting into places unnoticed," Ethan said, far too serenely for Simon's peace of mind. He tapped on the other side of the door, letting Eddie know that he'd been heard. "Have you got everything? Are you ready?"

"Ready as I'll ever be," Simon said, picking up his things and checking to make sure that the papers were safely in the outside pocket of his duffel. About half of the money had been transferred into his wallet. "So . . . guess this is it, huh."

"I suppose so," Ethan said. For a moment they both stood there awkwardly, uncertain of how to proceed. "Well, then," Ethan finally said, with a quick smile. "Best of luck."

Simon nodded and shifted his duffel from one hand to the other. "Thanks," he said. "For, uh, for everything. Really. I know I'm kind of bad about saying so, but I really appreciate what you're doing for me."

For the barest second, Ethan's face softened into something like a real smile; then he caught himself and shifted back into the vaguely exasperated expression he usually wore. "Oh, goodness," he said. "Now I *am* going to feel badly about stranding you. Not badly enough to do anything about it, of course."

"Yeah, yeah," Simon said. "I'll send you a postcard from Romania. It'll just say HELP."

"Do that," said Ethan, pulling open the garage door. Eddie, who'd been leaning against the fender of the nearest car, straightened up and touched two fingers to his forehead, saluting them both. "Make sure he gets on the proper train, Eddie," Ethan said.

"Will do," Eddie said. "Come on, then, we'd best get a move on if you're to make your flight."

"Right," Simon said. "Which car?"

With a jerk of his head, Eddie indicated the car parked in the middle spot. Simon loped down the steps and let himself into the car, sinking into the plush upholstery of the back seat with a sigh and dropping his things on the seat next to him. Eddie got into the driver's seat a moment later. Simon resisted the urge to tell him that he was sitting on the wrong side of the car.

The garage door rumbled up and the car purred to life. Eddie put it in gear and sent it rolling sedately out of the driveway; Simon glanced back over his shoulder. For a moment Ethan was visible, standing in the doorway, framed by

that massive, monstrous kitchen—then the wall of the garage slid by and hid him from sight.

“We’ll be at the station in about ten minutes, traffic permitting,” Eddie said, guiding the car around the curve in the driveway.

The expanse of Ethan’s yard bloomed around them as they left. Simon craned his neck, finally getting a decent look at the house that he’d been in. “Sure,” he said, distracted by the sudden view. “That’s great.”

Thirty minutes later he was making his way down the train’s aisle, looking for a place to sit. Eddie had seen him on board with a great deal of dry courtesy, leaving Simon to wonder uneasily if he was supposed to tip the guy or if this was just how he was or what. Thorny questions aside, it had been way too easy in comparison with his last trip. Simon was still waiting for the other shoe to drop.

The back half of the car was nearly empty, so Simon made a beeline for the rearmost seats, ‘claiming’ the one in the aisle by tossing his bomber jacket into it. He bent down and shoved his duffel under the seat, then slid out of the way of passing traffic. Not that the train was particularly crowded at this time of afternoon, but people were still making their way up and down the aisles while the train wheezed and rumbled around them. Simon settled in, took a good look around, then bent down and groped for the outer pocket of his duffel.

The pile of papers that made up his itinerary was thin, covered in Ethan’s small, angular handwriting. It took Simon less than ten minutes to read from front to back, although for all he knew, the sheet written in Italian told the cabby to take him to the docks and ensure that he slept with the fishes. Were there docks in Milan? Simon found that he had no idea.

Shaking his head in mixed respect and bewilderment, Simon read through his itinerary again. The last part still made him snort in disbelief. “Spy movie,” he muttered under his breath, refolding the papers.

Simon was bent over, stuffing the papers back in the side pocket of his duffel, when the train huffed once, loudly, and heaved itself forward. He caught himself against the back of the seat in front of him and sat up, just in time to watch the station sliding past; he scanned the platform to see if Eddie was still there. If he was, Simon didn’t spot him. Oh, well.

He had both seats in his row to himself. Simon shifted into the window seat, spread his legs out across the aisle seat, and settled in to watch England go by, in comfort.

The other shoe failed to drop at Paddington, even as overwhelming (and *loud*) as the massive station was. Simon followed the signs right to the Heathrow Express, negotiated for his ticket with a minimum of fuss—hooray for countries that spoke English—and was on another train in less than five minutes, leaving the unnerving sky-high expanse of the arching ceiling behind him.

Heathrow, though—Heathrow promised to be not only a shoe but a great big steel-toed boot. What he was about to do didn't feel real to Simon until he carried his duffel into Terminal Five and headed for the check-in counter noted in Ethan's itinerary. For all that it was British and brand spanking new, Heathrow's Terminal Five looked and felt just like every other airport terminal that Simon had ever been in, which meant two things: aggravation and security. Suddenly the fake ID in Simon's wallet weighed a thousand pounds against his hip. For a moment, Simon thought he could taste shame.

He got into line at the counter, shifting his duffel into his other hand. Gazing down at the floor, he silently repeated his new name and address to himself, trying not to move his lips. Airport security might not be the sharpest bag of tacks in the world, but a guy staring at the floor and mumbling to himself was probably pretty obviously Not Right—Simon made himself look up and stare tiredly off into space, like everyone else in the line.

Years before he was ready, he made it to the front of the line. Simon shifted his duffel back and shuffled forward as the ticket agent beckoned, dropping his duffel between his feet. He dug out his wallet. "I'm supposed to pick up my ticket," Simon said, fishing out the fake driver's license and trying to convince himself he wasn't broadcasting nerves like a radio station. "My name's Simon Moorhead?"

Somewhat to his surprise he was neither struck by lightning nor immediately dogpiled by ten beefy security guards. The ticket agent looked at his driver's license, nodded, smiled, and turned her attention to her computer. After a few horrible minutes, she looked back up at him, still smiling. "2:40 flight to Malpensa in Milan, yes, sir . . ."

Simon dutifully passed over his equally fake passport when asked. It was getting harder and harder to hear or think—his head felt like it was filling with roaring air—but still he went through the motions. Five minutes later he walked away from the ticket counter with a ticket folder, his duffel and jacket, his fake identity, and an urgent need to go lock himself in a bathroom stall for a minute and put his head between his knees.

His plans changed abruptly when he caught sight of the security gates, and beyond them, miracle of miracles, a Starbucks. Ninety percent of his conscious mind was immediately entranced by the sight. Simon handed over his fake identification at the security checkpoint with barely a qualm, conquered the metal detector, stomped back into his only-slightly-sandy sneakers, and vanished into the Starbucks like they were reeling him in on a wire.

It seemed a little less like a miracle when he passed the second Starbucks in the terminal three minutes later, but Simon just clutched his to-go cup to his chest and floated on past, feeling, quite frankly, terrific.

Flopping out in a chair near his gate, Simon fished out his ticket to check his

seat number. Something about it looked wrong. Simon considered it while he finished off his coffee. When he got up to throw his cup away, he took a detour, stopping by the gate and putting the empty cup down on the desk. "Scuse me," he said. "I just want to make sure that this *is* first class?"

The young woman at the gate gently took the ticket from him, checked the number on it, and smiled when she handed it back. "Yes, sir, that's correct. We'll be boarding first class here in about fifteen minutes or so, so I wouldn't go too far, if I were you."

"Great, thanks," Simon said, picking up his empty cup. "Just making sure."

All in all, it was one of the better flights Simon had ever endured. As an apology for the sky-blue pregnant whale, it was acceptable, and Simon made a mental note to call Ethan's 'service' some day and say so. In the meantime, he was just going to stretch out here and enjoy the novel sensation of having enough leg room.

Once the view out the window lost what little interest it held, Simon dug the book he'd been reading out of his duffel. Some day, he thought, he might feel bad about having stolen the pile of books from Ethan's house, but not right now. When the flight attendant came by, he asked for coffee, and then everything was just about as right as it could get.

By the time he finished his book, the plane was already starting to descend. Simon surrendered his long-empty coffee cup to the attendant and stuck his book back in his duffel, then turned his attention to the customs declaration card. He wrote his new name almost without thinking about it. It was a little unsettling, how naturally it was coming to him now.

The customs agents glanced at Simon's fake passport, then poked listlessly at his duffel bag before waving him through. Simon pocketed his passport and shouldered his bag, heading out into the airport proper. He could not deny that he was relieved that all the flying was over; no matter how many times Teddy's creations got him through identification checks, there was always the dim and nagging sensation that *this* was the time that Simon would be accosted by men in cheap suits and politely escorted off into a warren of glass-walled cubicles to be beaten to within an inch of his life, or, more frighteningly, asked questions.

Malpensa, much like Heathrow, was definitely an airport. Simon was hard-pressed to remember he wasn't at home, except for the part where he didn't understand the voices on the loudspeakers, and the part where English was the second language on the signs, under the Italian. He'd been expecting to wander around lost until he found someone who spoke English to point him to the taxi stand. Instead, he found himself shunted right there. He'd had a harder time getting around in *Boston*.

Throwing himself in the back seat of the first unoccupied taxi, Simon dug

in the side pocket of his duffel until he found the sheet of directions written in Italian. He passed it to the driver with an embarrassed smile and a half-hearted shrug, the universal sign for ‘oh, boy, I don’t speak your language’; the driver took it willingly enough, read down the list of instructions, then returned an equally embarrassed look. “Espensive,” he said, tapping the paper sheepishly.

“Okay,” Simon said, giving him a thumb’s up. “Expensive is okay.”

“Okay,” the driver dubiously repeated, putting the taxi in gear.

Recalling his absolutely terrifying taxi ride in France, Simon braced every available limb against the nearest surface, just in case. It turned out to be a prophetic decision.

Malpensa was out in the countryside a good hour’s drive from Milan proper. It was a very pretty countryside, Simon supposed, but he rapidly got bored with it, especially now that he was almost to his destination; what replaced his somewhat-stunted sense of adventure was his much less stunted sense of anticipation. If Ethan was correct, Jeremy was somewhere in that city on the horizon, and Simon was on his way to meet him.

He still couldn’t believe it was actually going to happen. He’d been believing this whole trip to be a fool’s errand for so long—now that the end was in sight, Simon was unbearably anxious to get it over with. Three hours from now, more or less, he’d find Jeremy; until then, there was no sense in making plans. Simon felt disconnected. He hated that.

Hissing out a disgruntled noise, Simon shifted around, trying to get comfortable without sacrificing his braced state. It wasn’t really possible.

Milan evolved around them like most cities do, a bit at a time. Simon, glancing out the windows, admitted that yes, maybe the city was very pretty, not that he cared. For one thing, he wasn’t here for the sights, and for another, he wasn’t sure he was going to survive another ten minutes in this careening taxi from hell.

Somehow, he did. He was so busy cringing at oncoming traffic that he kept forgetting to look out the windows and figure out where they were going, and he was really starting to get stiff, but he survived. With no warning whatsoever his little white taxi screeched to a halt in the exact middle of the street, setting off an explosion of squeaky honking. The driver held up Simon’s paper, tapped it, and pointed at a street corner. “There,” he said, with the usual embarrassed half-smile. “Seventy-five euro.”

“Thanks,” Simon said, gathering up his stuff. He picked through his wallet, selected a hundred-euro note—it was at least green, although an eye-searing grassy green instead of the dignified dark green of real money—and poked it at the driver. “Keep the change,” Simon said, getting out the taxi and narrowly

avoiding getting creamed by a scooter. It beeped at him in irritation and hurtled on.

Simon fled for the sidewalk. Two more scooters tried and failed to kill him. Horns blared all around him, some of them undoubtedly blaring at him. He couldn't understand anything that was being yelled at him, but he thought he got the gist of it. Once he gained the sidewalk (and it was a narrow thing) he scooted up under the protective arm of the nearest building to catch his breath. "Jesus Christ," he muttered, wheezing.

Once he could reliably breathe again, Simon fished out the last page of his itinerary. **There will be a small newsstand on the corner**, Ethan had written. Simon looked over at the giant cascading heap of newspapers and magazines just barely held together by a white canvas awning, nodded, and looked back at the paper. **Jeremy informs me that he will check with the owner for messages every evening around seven-thirty. If for some reason you should miss him, a reservation has been made in your name at the hotel across the street. You can then try again on the next day.**

"Thinks of everything," Simon muttered, folding up the paper and sticking it back in his duffel. There was a large clock across the street that claimed it was just after six-forty. Simon ambled past the newsstand, looking for his hotel; what he found was a sidewalk café with an espresso sign, right around the corner and out of sight. That, he thought, would do.

One shot of espresso later—Simon thought it might have been pretty good stuff, given how the waiter sneered at his pronunciation of 'espresso'—Simon finally noticed the discreet sign on the building across the street. The sign proclaimed it to be the hotel in question. Simon's eyes traveled up. It looked pretty nice, with all that fancy old stonework and stuff. Simon hoped he could afford it. He had several more of those hundred-euro notes in his wallet, though, so he thought he probably could.

After a while, bored out of his mind and barely able to sit still from the anticipation, Simon went to the newsstand to see if there was anything in English. He quickly discovered that half the newspapers in the spinning rack were English-language papers, and treated himself to a ridiculously expensive *Washington Post* purely for the irony value. He retreated back to his table, ordered another espresso, rolled his eyes at the offended waiter's retreating back, and settled in with the paper.

Seven o'clock came and went. By seven-twenty Simon had given up on concentrating on the paper and instead just held it up like a shield, watching the street out of the corner of his eye and listening for the sound of English with all his might. By seven-forty, Simon was having trouble sitting still and was having to fight the urge to jump up and go look up and down the street to see if he could see Jeremy coming.

Every minute after that—and there were way too many—convinced Simon that something was horribly wrong. His stomach clenched in dismay. Christ, he'd fucked up with Annabelle and now, after he'd gone to all this trouble, he was too late to help Jeremy, too—

“Pleasant evening, isn't it?” The voice at the newsstand was English, affable, and painfully familiar. Simon's heart thudded hard, once. “I'll have a *Times*, please—” Simon was already grabbing his duffel and moving “—and are there any messages, by chance?”

Simon blew around the corner of the newsstand, grinning like a madman. The man in front of the newsstand jerked and fell back half a quick step, his shoulders snapping into a straight line, his hands rising defensively, and Simon grandly ignored every last familiar warning sign. “Fucking *finally*,” he declared.

The other man seized up for a heartbeat of time before his hands fell again. “Simon,” Jeremy Archer said, sounding not at all happy to see him.

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“Yup, that’s my name,” Simon said. A crazy glee was blooming under his breastbone, leaving him dangerously close to giddiness. “Good to see you too. What in the hell are you wearing?”

Jeremy fell back a second step, glancing left and right—but he also touched the lapels of his jacket like he was reminding himself of the answer. “I rather think there are more important questions—”

“It’s tan,” Simon said, waving a hand at Jeremy. “You are wearing *tan*.”

“Wheat,” Jeremy protested, then shook his head and glanced at the man behind the counter, who looked confused. “Any *other* messages, then?”

“And a *hat*,” Simon said, unwilling to let go of this conversational advantage. “Tan, white, and some kind of crazy straw fedora thing—’scuse me, but I’m looking for some other fellow, dresses all in black like an asshole—”

“Simon, *please!*” Jeremy’s voice was sharp enough to disrupt Simon’s train of thought and line of attack. Simon allowed himself to be silenced, although he was still grinning. It was hard to stand still. Jeremy spared him one last exasperated glance, then turned his attention to the guy at the newsstand.

The counterman spread both hands in an expression of futility. “Nothing,” he said, in passable accented English. “Except that, and I did not know that he was with you.”

“He’s not,” Jeremy said.

“Liar,” Simon said.

“I assure you,” Jeremy told the counterman, “I’m as confused as you are.” He switched his gaze to Simon and took another couple of quick steps backwards. “I suppose telling you to go home is out of the question?”

“Sure is,” Simon said, following Jeremy. “For the record, I also refuse to accept any loose talk about how this is none of my business.”

Jeremy took one last stubborn step backwards then came to a halt, balanced lightly on the balls of his feet in the middle of the sidewalk. Pedestrians streamed by to one side and traffic to the other, no one paying them the slightest bit of attention. Jeremy glanced around again, then dipped his head, hiding his eyes

behind the brim of his hat. "In that case, I expect we're about to have quite a row, but first I think I'd rather like to get off the street."

"Nooo problem," Simon said. "I've got a hotel room right around the corner, apparently. C'mon." He took one last long step forward and caught the sleeve of Jeremy's jacket in his free hand, the fabric light and nubby under his fingers.

Jeremy stiffened like Simon had attacked him, his free hand leaping up into a defensive gesture that vanished as quickly as it appeared. Instead, Jeremy sighed and put his hand on Simon's, squeezing Simon's hand briefly. "All right," Jeremy said, giving in, but with a warning note to his voice that promised that it was only temporary.

Simon tugged at Jeremy's sleeve, getting him moving in the proper direction. Jeremy followed him. After a moment, Jeremy was nearly leading him, and Simon was forced to use his grip on Jeremy's sleeve to haul him back. "Slow down," Simon said under his breath.

Jeremy hissed out a breath through his teeth. "As little as I like to admit it, you're right," he said, reining himself in. "I'm not comfortable on the street, however. And I'd appreciate it if you'd let go of my arm."

"Promise you won't run away?" Simon asked, giving Jeremy's sleeve a little tweak.

"I doubt it would do me any good," Jeremy said.

"You're probably right," Simon said. He dropped Jeremy's sleeve. "Also, nice hat. Do you have trouble with goats trying to eat it?"

Jeremy rolled his eyes. "Oh, yes, why don't we get the potshots at my wardrobe out of the way first? That ought to clear the way for the meatier subjects. Go ahead. Ask me why I'm not wearing black."

"Okay," Simon said, following Jeremy to the corner. He shook his head, still grinning. "Why aren't you wearing black? I mean, if August in DC couldn't pry you out of it, I don't see why July in Italy can."

"I always wear black, then, do I?" Jeremy asked, pausing at the curb. He rolled his weight forward so subtly that Simon almost missed it, carrying his shoulders square and his arms loose. His fingers flexed gently.

"Well, duh," Simon said. "I mean, the only time I've ever seen you in something that wasn't all black was the first time, when you had that tuxedo on. Well, and now."

Jeremy quirked an eyebrow at him before going back to scanning the people around them, feigning idleness. "So would you say that I'm *known* for wearing all black?"

"Yeah," Simon said, and then got it. "Oh."

"Precisely," Jeremy said. The light changed. The crowd around them surged out into the street like a truculent and suicidal animal, Jeremy and Simon relatively sheltered in its midst. Somewhere on the perimeter there was honking, and once, the screeching of tires, which made Jeremy flinch and look around. "And also,

we're in *Milan*," he added as an afterthought. "If I wore a black suit in July, the Milanese would be stopping me in the street to loudly critique my ensemble, and quite frankly, my nerves couldn't take it at the moment."

Simon glanced back and forth at the herd of Italians around them. Somewhere up ahead, a scooter tore through the outer edge of the crowd and was driven off by the shrieking of epithets. "Nobody's said anything about my clothes," he pointed out, feeling obligated.

"Well, yes, but you look like an American," Jeremy said. Despite everything he favored Simon with a thin, quick, cool slice of smile. "I suppose they've learned that some people are beyond saving."

Simon rolled his eyes. "Ha ha," he said. They gained the other curb and relative safety, although another outburst of screaming heralded another rampaging scooter. Simon touched Jeremy's shoulder and nodded to the hotel, on the right. "There," he said.

"Mm," Jeremy said, tilting back his head and glancing up at the hotel's facade. "Very nice. I suspect you didn't choose it yourself."

"Nope," Simon said. "Also, I'm not checked in yet, although I have a reservation. Shouldn't take long, though, and then we can go yell at each other in comfort, privacy, *and* safety. Man. I ought to get some brownie points for being so thoughtful."

Jeremy glanced at Simon, then huffed out a sharp, exasperated sigh and looked away. "Go check in, then," he said. "I'll meet you at the stairs."

"Stairs?" Simon asked, reaching past Jeremy to pull the door open.

"It's only five stories tall," Jeremy said. After a moment of hesitation, he went in, glancing around the lobby with what appeared to be disinterest. "It's not going to have an elevator."

Simon started to follow him and managed to get the strap of his duffel hung up on the door's handle. By the time he freed his bag and got inside, Jeremy was nowhere to be seen.

"Jesus, this place is fancy," Simon said. He started to throw his duffel and jacket on the bed, then checked himself and put them down with more care, just in case the bed was as antique and valuable as it looked. "Also expensive, even if it *does* only cost play money."

"Mm," Jeremy said, exploring the perimeter of the room. He paused by the door, his fingers prowling over the locks, before moving on again. "Well, I suppose you needn't stay here for long."

Simon watched Jeremy stalk around for a moment before shaking his head. "I'm not even going to ask you how you meant that. So, weren't we going to fight or something?"

"Oh, yes," Jeremy said. Halting in front of the little table Jeremy took off his hat and put it down, then ran both fingers through his hair, putting it back

to rights. Even hat-head couldn't slow Jeremy's hair down for long, although it did seem to lay a little flatter. "We are most certainly going to have words. I'm just trying to decide where to *start*—" He broke off there and made a frustrated gesture. "All right, forget 'how', for the moment. I've a sinking sensation that I know how, or at least the rough outlines of it. Which leaves us with 'why'."

"Actually, you know what, why don't I start?" Simon said. "'Cause I know where to start, and once we get started we can just go all the way through."

Jeremy closed his eyes for a moment. The tautness leached out of his face, leaving him looking just about like death warmed over. "All right," he sighed. "Start, then."

"I," Simon said carefully, putting a hand on his chest, "am *so fucking sorry*."

Silence fell. Jeremy didn't open his eyes. After a long moment, he reached up to pinch the bridge of his nose. "About Annabelle, you mean," he said flatly.

"Yeah," Simon said. "About Annabelle. And about getting you into this mess in the first place, but . . . yeah. Definitely about Annabelle."

"Mm." Jeremy was a statue by the window, his face mostly hidden by his hand. "Well. I'd like very much to tell you that it's all right, or that you're forgiven, but you'll forgive me if I can't, just yet."

"It's cool," Simon said, waving that away. "Jesus, I sure as hell can't forgive myself, why should you?"

"Good question." Jeremy let his hand drop and opened his eyes. "Go on."

Simon snorted and looked away. "'Go on', he says," Simon informed the wall. "Okay, so. I guess we both know that Karpol wouldn't have gotten your name if it weren't for me and Rich. So this whole mess—" Simon swept one hand around in a circle, taking in the world "—is ultimately my fault."

"Mm."

"You can agree with me. It's okay. It's fair."

"Yes, I suppose so," Jeremy said. "I can't discount the possibility that Bran might have sold me out eventually, but I'm certain it wouldn't have been so quickly, or so . . . *so thoroughly*."

"Yeah," Simon said. He sat down on the foot of the bed, quickly discovered that it was sturdier than it looked, and bounced once. "So I guess you could say that I'm here to try and make amends. I got you into this and I should get you out. Right?"

"So you . . . what? Took a leave of absence?" Jeremy crossed his arms over his chest. "What did you say when they asked why? 'Toodles, I'm off to Europe to meddle in the affairs of criminals and possibly break a raft of laws, don't wait up'?"

Simon took a deep breath. "That's a long story."

"I assure you," Jeremy said, flicking a hand at the clock, "it's in your best interests to make time for it."

“Right.” Simon rubbed a hand down his face. “The story starts with a man named Norton Fowles, and believe me, it only gets worse from there.”

“... and so...” Simon shrugged. “I’ve been suspended until further notice.”

It had taken longer to stumble through that part of the story than Simon had thought it would. Jeremy was silent through most of it, watching him incuriously and taking it in. Eventually Simon ran out of words and staggered to a stop. He wasn’t panting, but he felt like he should be. “I see,” Jeremy finally said.

“Yeah,” Simon said. “I mean, I’m not going to lie to you: if it hadn’t happened, I probably wouldn’t be here.” He rubbed his upper arms, staring off in the general direction of the floor.

“Because you’ve told me a thousand times that your job is more important to you than I am,” Jeremy said, as offhandedly as if he were remarking on the weather.

Simon winced. “Yeah,” he said. “And, and it’s true, okay? Except that... well, Jesus, I take responsibility when I fuck up. And I fucked up.”

“Mm,” Jeremy said in agreement. “So you decided to hare off to Europe after me. And given that I’ve only had time to tell one person about the newsstand message drop, I believe I can see the gist of your next move.”

“Yeah,” Simon said, scuffing a foot against the rug.

Jeremy hooked out a chair and dropped into it, folding himself neatly into the chair like origami. “Clever,” he said. “So tell me, how did you find Ethan? His old FBI file? He must have one.”

“Nah,” Simon said. He laughed a little despite himself, rubbing the back of his neck. “I called that museum you took me to in New York and got the head curator to relay a message.”

“That *was* clever,” Jeremy said, raising an eyebrow. “And since you’re here, I can only suppose you managed to impress him somehow.”

“You know, I’m not sure?” Simon glanced over at Jeremy. “I mean, I guess I said the right things, but I’m like ninety percent certain he thinks I’m a giant asshole.”

“Well,” Jeremy said, his little shrug managing to clearly convey the concept of *you are*.

Simon grinned a little. “Yeah, yeah, I know. But he said he’d give me the chance to convince you, and here I am.”

“Yes, well. About that.” Jeremy paused and reached up to pinch the bridge of his nose again. “I can understand why you might think you have this tremendous obligation to fix things. God knows you *should*. But... this isn’t something you ought to get mixed up in.” He paused and looked at Simon expectantly, waiting for the outburst. Simon only returned the stare and kept his mouth shut. After a moment, unsettled, Jeremy shifted in his chair. “It’s a tremendous mess, is what it is, and I simply haven’t time to pause and observe your scruples at every step.

I intend to take whatever chances are open to me, whether or not they're legal, moral, or ethical—if your role in this ever came to light, I suppose that being suspended from your job would be the least of your worries.” Again he paused and looked at Simon, waiting.

“Okay,” Simon said.

Jeremy's lips thinned. “Now I'm beginning to think that you weren't listening to me.”

“No, I heard you,” Simon said. “I just think you're about half full of shit.”

“That's more like it.” The shadow of Jeremy's usual smile flickered across his face and vanished.

“There's got to be any amount of stuff I can do to help you that isn't illegal, first off,” Simon said, ticking off one finger. “I mean, even if it's just running down to check your messages or fetching the paper or take-out or whatever, I can totally help you keep your face off the street.”

Jeremy inclined his head, apparently accepting that.

“And secondly,” Simon said, ticking off a second finger, “I'm not actually here at all. As far as anyone knows, I'm still in DC. Okay, sure, if I get caught and dragged into a police station the shit is going to hit the fan, but otherwise? I've got plausible deniability. I've got this brand-new fake identity—”

“Ah, so you've met Teddy, then,” Jeremy said. He looked mildly impressed by this revelation.

“That's the guy,” Simon said. “And I kind of got smuggled out of my country in the first place, and believe me, after we're done fighting I have got to tell you about my odyssey, not that you probably haven't done worse.”

“Mm,” Jeremy said. “Go on.”

“Okay, so third of all, Jesus Christ, how stupid do you think I am?” Simon ticked off his third finger and waited.

“I fail to see how that's a convincing argument, although it was nicely delivered,” Jeremy said.

“Bite me. It's a convincing argument because if you think I somehow got all this way without realizing that I might have to do some illegal stuff, then you think I'm stupid.” Simon smacked the back of his hand against his palm. “I knew that before I left the States. I'm here to help, okay? I've broken the law for you before. I guess I'll just have to do it again.”

Jeremy was silent, his eyes watchful. Simon dragged in a breath and plunged on. “And you know what, maybe I won't ‘pause to observe your scruples’ either,” he said, unable to resist the fingerquotes. “I've got a clean gun coming. I don't exactly want to go on a killing spree, but if it comes down to shooting someone or watching you get shot, I know which one I'd choose. Maybe I think you need a bodyguard. I'll do it.”

“Simon,” Jeremy said, pained. Whatever had been about to follow Simon's name didn't.

Simon punched the mattress, exasperated. "Goddammit, you don't have to do this alone!"

He winced even as the echoes faded and died away. "I mean, uh," Simon said, and stopped. "Well, yeah, I guess I meant that, huh. You didn't get into this alone, you shouldn't have to see it through alone, right?"

Jeremy was blessedly silent, just watching Simon.

"And besides, you need me," Simon said, hurrying on to get away from his discomfort. "I mean, come on. You haven't even said anything suggestive yet, and normally you'd already be inside my pants by now. Hell, if I can't do anything else I can still be, uh, the world's biggest stress-relief ball, Christ, I didn't think that pun was going to be so awful when I started it."

Jeremy made a little sound that might have been a laugh, tenting a hand over his eyes. "I must admit that that was just about the last thing on my mind," he said.

"Yeah, I know," Simon said. "And I guess I can't blame you, but shit, look at you."

"What about me?" Jeremy asked, pulling his hand away and looking down at himself. "Besides the lack of black."

Simon heaved himself off the bed and crossed the distance between them in two strides, grabbing a handful of Jeremy's white t-shirt and yanking it upwards. It came free of Jeremy's pants with a little whispering sound. "I mean that," Simon said, nodding at Jeremy's bared stomach. Absently he twisted his hand, gathering more of the t-shirt about his fist.

"Simon, you're stretching out the fabric," Jeremy said patiently. "That shirt *was* expensive."

Simon snorted. "Of course it was," he said. "But my point is that you are taut as a wire, and I could see it from there, okay? Take off your jacket and I bet your forearms would be just as bad. You're starved down to muscle and nerve, and I bet you've been working out to keep from going nuts or something, because Christ, I do not remember you being this ripped. Ripped, yeah, but . . . now I can see your *ribs*."

Jeremy craned his neck slightly, looking past Simon's wrist at his own stomach. "Yes, all right, I concede your point," Jeremy said. The muscles of his stomach quivered as he spoke and Jeremy looked away again. "Would you mind letting go of my shirt?"

"Try again," Simon said, flexing his fist inside its mummy wrapping of silk t-shirt. "That's not the right way to ask, and you know it."

Jeremy hesitated. "Please?" he finally said.

"Closer, but no cigar." Simon hunkered down so that he could look Jeremy in the eyes. "Come on. I know you've got it in you."

"Simon, this is really not the time," Jeremy said.

“Pssht, sure it is,” Simon said. “There’s no way anyone could be onto my ID yet. Hell, this is the safest you’ve been for weeks. Come on. Where’s the Jeremy I know? He’s got to still be in there.”

“Simon,” Jeremy started to say, pained, and then shut his eyes. “I suppose you’re not leaving me much choice.”

Simon couldn’t help but smile. “Nope,” he said. “None at all. Come on, I came all this way.”

For a long moment Jeremy was silent, his eyes shut, his face drawn and oddly gray. His exposed stomach shifted every time he breathed, the sharply-delineated muscles flexing to accommodate his sigh—then Jeremy let his eyes drift open and favored Simon with the ghost of a smile. “Well, Simon,” he said, and the raw purr of it made Simon shut his eyes. “If you want me to take it off that badly—”

“Oh yeah,” Simon breathed unsteadily, looping another turn of the t-shirt around his wrist and reeling Jeremy in. “That’s what I was looking for.”

“Christ,” Simon croaked.

Beside him, Jeremy exhaled a long, steady breath. “Mm.”

The air in the room was hot, and close, and damp, the miasma of sweat so pervasive that Simon could taste salt on his tongue. The sun had set half an hour ago. The thin curtains over the window let in just enough of the streetlights to illuminate the edges of things and the silhouette of Jeremy, sprawled out on his back with his arms thrown lazily up over his head. With an effort Simon rolled onto his side and splayed his hand out on Jeremy’s sweat-slick stomach. “That was like getting mauled by a rottweiler,” he said. “You know, in case you were wondering.”

Jeremy shifted. Simon’s hand slipped, not unpleasantly. “Hopefully not *exactly* like,” Jeremy said.

One of Simon’s fingers dipped into Jeremy’s navel and slid back out. “Well,” Simon said, “I have bitemarks.”

“Ah,” said Jeremy. “I suppose I take your point, then.”

Simon started to say something else, but Jeremy chose that exact moment to roll over onto his side and Simon’s thoughts scattered. A fair amount of Jeremy slid past under Simon’s hand, including a faint unevenness nestled into the hollow of his lower belly that Simon knew very well. “So,” Simon said, putting his hand on Jeremy’s hip instead, “feeling better?”

“I suppose you’d find it gratifying if I admitted that I was,” Jeremy said. Most of his face was in shadow, but Simon could just make out the edges of his features and the dim glint of his eyes. “I can’t shake the conviction that it was foolhardy, however.”

“Yeah, well, maybe it was, but I don’t think so,” Simon said. “You seem calmer and hey, nobody’s kicked the door down yet.”

The sparks in Jeremy's eyes winked out as he shut them. "I suppose so," he said.

"Great!" Simon said. His hand slid down the incline of Jeremy's hip and settled at his waist instead. "So I guess that means I'm staying."

"Simon," Jeremy said, with something very close to despair. For a little while afterwards he was quiet, and so was Simon. Finally Jeremy took a deep breath and opened his eyes. "I'm just afraid that you'll drag me down," he said.

"Drag you down?" Simon echoed, immediately outraged. "Drag you *down*? Jesus Christ—"

Jeremy smacked his hand firmly over Simon's mouth, pressing his palm down until Simon's only choices were to bite him, edge back until he fell out of bed, or shut up. Simon gave all three some serious consideration before subsiding with a grumpy "Mrphnn."

"I'd appreciate it if you'd hear me out," Jeremy said, his fingers flexing against Simon's cheek.

"Hfnng."

"It isn't only you that would drag me down," Jeremy said. "It's *anyone*. I've managed to keep myself at liberty these past few weeks by being ready to abandon a hiding place with thirty seconds' notice—your being with me can't *not* slow me down, even if it's just a matter of fifteen seconds to inform you that we're leaving. And, quite frankly, it's hard for me to picture you doing whatever I say without any arguments. My God, if there's one thing I haven't got time for at the moment, it's arguing with you, as enjoyable as it usually is."

Any number of counterarguments flashed through Simon's mind, but for the moment he contented himself with narrowing his eyes and voicing a muffled "Fnghmp."

"And, well . . ." The faint glints of Jeremy's eyes dropped, then rose again. "I don't want to be responsible for your safety as well as mine. It's a tremendous responsibility—I don't like to think of the consequences of failure."

Simon was silent. After a moment Jeremy sighed and let his hand fall away from Simon's mouth. "Go ahead," he said. "Argue with me. I can tell you want to."

"I thought you didn't have time," Simon said, trying not to sound too nasty about it.

Jeremy exhaled. "You know what I meant, Simon."

"Yeah." Simon deflated a little. "Yeah, I know what you meant. And, and I see your point, okay? But what you're doing here is looking at me just as a liability, and that's—" Simon broke off there, abruptly.

"That's what?" Jeremy prompted, after a moment.

Simon shut his own eyes. "I was going to say that's not fair, but if I have to resort to arguing about what's *fair*, then I've already lost."

"Mm. True. Although now I'd rather like to hear you explain yourself."

“You can’t just think of me as a, a boulder you have to drag around,” Simon said. “You have to think about it this way: do the things I can possibly do for you outweigh the risk of keeping me around? Seriously, think of me like, like, uh, whatever’s in your suitcase right now. I bet everything in there had to pass that test: is having it with you important enough that you’ll drag it along the next time you run?”

Jeremy breathed out a little sound that might have been a laugh, reaching up to put his hand on Simon’s chest. “I suppose it wouldn’t make you feel much better to know that I’ve abandoned everything but the items in my pockets three times so far?”

“Uh. No, not really.” Simon squeezed his handful of Jeremy, not really thinking about it. “But my point still stands. I’ll make myself useful enough to justify keeping me around. Okay?”

“I suppose so,” Jeremy said.

“Okay,” Simon said, satisfied.

Jeremy patted Simon’s chest once, lightly. “Will you promise me one thing?”

“What’s that?”

“I need you to trust me,” Jeremy said, and he hurried on before Simon could respond. “I *can’t* be arguing with you over every move we make. Sometimes I’ll need to be able to snap my fingers and have us both jump.”

“See, I’m liking this, because you’re starting to sound like my staying is a given,” Simon said cheerfully.

“Simon,” Jeremy said, exasperated.

“But, getting back to your point, yeah,” Simon said. “If you say we go, then we go. I get that—”

“It isn’t just that,” Jeremy said.

“What, then?”

Jeremy’s hand drifted up, pressing against Simon’s shoulder, and the rest of him followed. Simon found himself being pressed back against the bed, Jeremy slow and heavy on top of him, like his limbs were weighted with lead. “I need you to do what I say, Simon,” Jeremy breathed, his nose an inch from Simon’s own, his hands on Simon’s shoulders, his legs astride Simon’s own. “This isn’t like before. You aren’t the defender of the free world on this side of the ocean.”

“Yeah, I get that,” Simon croaked, catching Jeremy’s hips in both hands. “Also? I am totally appreciating your debating technique right about now.”

“I don’t think you do get that,” Jeremy said, so softly that Simon had to crane up to hear him. “I know you. The moment you think you know better than I do, you’ll fight me every inch of the way. But what you need to understand is—” he broke off there and rolled up against Simon, boneless as water, making both of Simon’s hands clench “—if anyone in this mess is ‘just this guy’, it’s you.” Jeremy paused, letting that sink in, then added, “Not me.”

“Christ, were you saying something, I think I missed it,” Simon muttered, lunging up to catch a mouthful of Jeremy’s neck. Jeremy twitched his head to the side, eeling free with ridiculous ease. Simon’s head thumped back to the pillow. “Okay,” he said, swiping the back of his hand over his mouth. “Yeah.”

“Mm?” Jeremy said, arched forward over Simon like a gargoyle.

“Yeah,” Simon said again. “I get it. Okay? Jesus, keep that up, I’ll agree to anything—”

“All right,” Jeremy said, and for a moment he did keep it up, and Simon hissed and clawed at Jeremy’s hips and growled mostly incoherent encouragement. All too soon Jeremy slowed, coming to a halt, bowing his head.

“What?” Simon rasped. “Jesus, *what*, don’t stop now—”

“I don’t know how I’d live with myself if you got hurt on my account,” Jeremy said, his own voice oddly thick. Simon went still. Jeremy’s fingers flexed against his shoulders. “I hate that you’re here. It takes all my ingenuity to keep myself alive and free while I maneuver to free Annabelle—there have already been casualties—now I’m to be responsible for you as well, my God, I hate it...”

“Shut up with that defeatist bullcrap and *do that again*,” Simon said, grabbing at him.

Simon’s hands stole back from Jeremy’s hips and linked together in the small of his back while Simon fought to catch his breath; outside it had finished becoming dark. A car horn blared and someone yelled imprecations after it in Italian. Simon was pleased to note that Jeremy barely twitched. “So I’m staying,” Simon said, closing his eyes.

Jeremy, sprawled heavily out atop him, rubbed his face against Simon’s shoulder like a cat might. “It seems that way,” he said.

“Yeah, I knew you couldn’t resist my charms forever,” Simon said.

Jeremy laughed a little. “As I recall, Simon, I’ve never really bothered *resisting* your charms, even when you’d really rather I try.”

“Well, see, I totally understand that I’m irresistible, so.” Simon unlaced his fingers and ran both hands up along Jeremy’s spine. “So, in all seriousness, has he really got you running that scared? Because, I mean, Jesus, people have put actual bullets into you in the past and you’ve handled it with more aplomb than this.”

“It isn’t that I’m running scared,” Jeremy said patiently. He shifted a little on top of Simon. “I’ve never played for stakes quite this high before, that’s all. Generally, in my line of work, even if I bungle things utterly, the only life at stake is my own.”

“Huh,” Simon said. A stray bit of guilt nudged at the back of his mind, but he banished it in favor of splaying his hands out on Jeremy’s shoulderblades and making sure that Jeremy didn’t go anywhere. “So...”

“So?” Jeremy said, subsiding.

“What’s next?”

Jeremy pursed his lips, apparently giving this some thought. “Well,” he finally said. “I’d been thinking I’d have a shower—”

“Ha ha,” Simon said, punching Jeremy’s shoulder. “I meant, you know, generally.”

“Ah.” Jeremy sat up slightly, crossing his arms on Simon’s chest and resting his chin on them. “Next, *generally*, is the matter of Annabelle.”

The guilt that had been sulking in the back of Simon’s mind roared to life on the instant. “Oh. Uh. Yeah,” he said, looking away. “So . . . she’s okay? Uh, I mean, in the general physical not-dead sense?”

“As far as I know,” Jeremy said. “They’ve been using her as a bargaining chip, you understand. I turn myself over and they’ll let her go. So . . .” He paused, sighed, and looked away himself, his face falling into shadow. “I’ve spent the past few weeks negotiating the trade, in between bouts of running like hell.”

“Yeah, but you’re not actually going to turn yourself in, right?” Simon said. After a moment of silence, he said “Right?” again, leaning on it.

Jeremy’s laugh this time was faint and unhappy. “Well, if it comes down to that, then yes, I will. But I don’t intend to unless I have no other choice.”

“We’ll think of something,” Simon said, mostly to be saying something.

“In any case, it’s taken this long just to agree that the trade will happen in Milan,” Jeremy said. “Which is part of why I’m so jumpy at the moment—they know that I’m here somewhere—but more than that we haven’t hashed out yet, so we’ve yonkers of time to arrange things to our advantage.”

“Now that’s the kind of thing I want to hear from you,” Simon said, patting Jeremy’s arm. “Makes you sound like . . . you know. You.”

Jeremy paused just long enough to let his lips drift over Simon’s jaw. “All I’ve really done so far is consigned myself into the hands of a particular crony,” he said. “Our Russian friend has friends wherever the crime is organized, but he isn’t so popular among . . . mm . . . how to put it. Freelancers. Like myself.”

“Criminal craftsmen,” Simon promptly said. “So we’re up again, what, the Mafia? What is this, a bad movie?”

“It’s not the *Mafia*, Simon. That has a particular meaning around here, and not the one you’re looking for. It’s just . . . a bunch of well-organized fellows in extremely good suits.”

“The Mafia,” Simon said again, pleased with himself. “So why here?”

Jeremy smiled against Simon’s ear. “I have a lot of connections here,” he murmured.

“Yeah, I do like the sound of that,” Simon said. He shut his eyes and tilted his head slightly.

“Really, I know more people in Milan than . . . nearly anywhere else,” Jeremy said, nipping obligingly at Simon’s offered ear. “Milan and Paris, but organized crime in France is so . . . well.”

“French?” Simon supplied.

“Yes, that will do,” Jeremy said, with a bit of a laugh. “But our friend doesn’t know that. He believes that Milan is neutral ground, because it isn’t Russia, and it isn’t England. I’ll let him go on believing that.”

Simon gave Jeremy one last good squeeze and then, with some reluctance, let him go. Jeremy slithered off to land by his side. “Better and better,” Simon said, stretching out his sore muscles. “So, I’m thinking you ought to go have a shower, and then I’ll have a shower, and then I’ll run out and get us something to eat, because Christ, I’m starving. Sound like a plan?”

“And there you go, already trying to take charge,” Jeremy said, but to his credit, he was laughing when he said it.

◆ Twenty-Two

“Food,” Simon said, booting open the door about half a second before he would have lost control of the pile of boxes in his arms. Finding a restaurant that was nearby and would lower itself to provide takeout hadn’t been easy; finally Simon had resorted to pretending to be Jeremy and thrown ten-euro bills at anyone who looked like they might be able to help. Ten-euro bills were *orange*. Simon had been sort of glad to get rid of them.

His hotel room was empty. His duffel bag still lay where it had been thrown two hours ago, flopped upside-down in a corner like a dead thing. His bomber jacket was crumpled half under it. “Food,” Simon said again, kicking the door shut behind himself and heading towards the table.

He was just putting the boxes down when the deadbolt engaged behind him. “*I am* hungry,” Jeremy said, putting on the chain and wedging a chair under the doorknob. “I’ve been eating as well as I can, but I’m afraid that often isn’t very well.”

“And in Italy, too,” Simon said, shaking his head. “I’m guessing that’s some kind of crime. Were you hiding in the bathroom?”

“Substitute ‘lurking’ for ‘hiding’ and I’ll allow it,” Jeremy said equably.

Even lukewarm, the food set Simon’s stomach growling. Jeremy fell on his half like a starving wolf, which was so unusual that Simon postponed his own meal for nearly three seconds just to stare. They ate in hurried, appreciative silence, only acknowledging each other when they grabbed for the same piece of bread, and then it was mostly glaring.

Simon was plowing his way through the last of his half of the food when Jeremy rose and went to wash his hands. He came back from the bathroom shrugging into his jacket, his hat in one hand. “I’m going to go reclaim my things from my current room and bring them back here,” Jeremy said, rolling one shoulder to settle the jacket.

Simon swallowed his current mouthful. “Want me to come with you?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Jeremy said. “I intend to try and slip in and out without anyone seeing me, and that would be difficult with both of us along. I should be back in an hour.”

“Okay,” Simon said. “So, just out of curiosity, how hard should I worry while you’re gone?”

Jeremy flipped his hat onto his head and gave the brim a twitch, like a character in an old movie. “Well, it’s quite dark and I’ll be able to travel over the rooftops for part of the journey. I’d say you needn’t worry overmuch unless I’m gone for more than two hours.”

“Rooftops,” Simon said, and snorted. “Anyway, that’s cool. I really need to call home and pick up my messages anyway, maybe touch base with a couple of people.”

“If your phone’s American, it may have trouble getting signal here,” Jeremy said. He pulled a black phone from his waistband and tossed it to Simon. “Use that one.”

Simon caught the phone and cringed even as he did so—it was thinner than anything he’d ever seen, a flip phone like two credit cards hinged together. He was momentarily afraid that he’d crushed it. “I’m not going to leave you without a phone,” he said, tossing it back.

Jeremy fielded it neatly, swept it around in a circle, and returned it, tossing it underhand this time. “I have another,” he said. “See?” He groped around inside his jacket and came out with a second, chunkier phone. “I go through them at the rate of about two a week, unfortunately, so I’ve resigned myself to always carrying a backup.”

“Huh,” Simon said, eyeing the phone. “Okay.”

“Hit the star button twice, dial zero zero one, area code, phone number,” Jeremy said. “If I should need to call you for any reason, I’ll call on that phone.”

Simon gingerly flipped the phone open, checked it, and closed it again. “Okay,” he said. “You expecting any calls that I should know about?”

“If someone calls on that phone and it isn’t me, hang up immediately and throw the phone out the window,” Jeremy said. The suggestion was casual, like he was telling Simon to take a message.

Simon eyed him, waiting for Jeremy to laugh and say he was just kidding. Jeremy just raised both eyebrows. Simon shook his head. “Christ,” he said. “Uh, crap. What time is it in DC?”

“Three in the afternoon,” Jeremy said, not even checking his watch.

“Right,” Simon said. “Okay. Get out of here. If you’re not back in an hour, I will hit you *so hard*.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Jeremy said. He pulled the chair out from under the doorknob, unlocked the door, and slipped out, the door closing noiselessly behind him.

Simon finished the last few bites of his dinner, now completely cold, more out of stubbornness than anything else. Full—beyond full—close to bursting, he flopped back in his chair and considered their leavings. He should really throw the dinner detritus away, but he wasn't in the mood to move, let alone clean up after himself. Simon eyed the tiny wastebasket by the desk, snorted, said, "Fuck it," and abandoned the mess where it was, heaving himself up out of the chair with an effort and rolling the three steps to the bed.

The bed was a total mess, a fact which Simon had conveniently forgotten. Impatient, Simon grabbed a handful of the bunched-up covers and sent the whole shebang waterfalloing onto the floor, leaving himself with the bottom sheet and a couple of misplaced pillows. He sprawled out, stuffed a pillow under his head, and flipped the phone open again. "Star key twice," he muttered, punching it with his thumb. The phone hitched at him, then made some kind of noise. "Zero zero one . . . area code . . . number."

A minute later he was listening to a tinny rendition of himself, telling him to leave himself a message. Simon winced at the weird, throttled sound of his own voice—the version of him on his voice mail sounded drugged or constipated or both—then negotiated with the menus until his cell phone coughed up his messages.

Message one, the day after he'd left: "Hey, boss," Sandra said. She sounded like she was determined to sound cheerful. "It's, uh, seven PM here. Anyway, I was just checking in—I'll call tomorrow." There was masculine muttering in the background. "Mike says to tell you hi," Sandra said, and then she hung up, over what sounded like more aggravated muttering. Simon smiled.

Message two, the day after that: "Hey, boss," Sandra said again. There was road noise behind her, this time, and she sounded a lot less cheerful and a lot more determined. "Checking in again. Give me a call or something when you have a chance, because I'd really like to know that you're not dead."

Messages three and four were exactly the same, only progressively more aggrieved. Simon was beginning to feel somewhat guilty. Also apprehensive: upsetting Sandra was not good for his health.

The voice-mail lady informed him that he had no more new messages. Simon sighed and hung up, flipping the phone closed. There'd been no call from Upstairs, not that he'd really been expecting one. No chance that things were just going to blow over, then.

So: Sandra. Simon flicked open the phone, hit the star key twice, got the noise, and dialed in the string of numbers. The phone rang three times before it was answered; Simon heard a lot of clattering, a faint scratching sound, and eventually, a bit of raspy breathing. "Sandra Leone," Sandra groaned.

"Christ, Sandy, you sound like hell," Simon said cheerfully. "Leadership not the endless party it's cracked up to be?"

"I just got to sleep an *hour* ago, you unforgivable *bastard*," Sandra said, her voice still thick with sleep but much more alert. In the background an equally sleep-clogged male voice said something and Simon had to pull the phone away before he could laugh in Sandra's ear. Sandra put a hand over the phone's mouthpiece. "Yeah," she told the voice, then came back. "Also, it's been four days with no word, boss, and I am therefore entitled to kill you."

"Tell Mike I said hi," Simon said.

"After I get done reaming you out, you can tell him yourself," Sandra said. "So . . . what kept you from calling? Do you actually hate me? Were you planning to ensure your continued leadership of the team by giving me a heart attack?"

"You know what, I hadn't thought of that, but now that you mention it, that is a *great idea*," Simon said. "So is now a good time to mention that I may very well get into a shoot-out with the Mafia?"

The noise Sandra made was close to indescribable. "I hate you," she said. "Tell me you're kidding."

"I'm probably kidding about the shoot-out part," Simon said. "Probably."

"I'll shoot you myself when you get back," Sandra promised.

Simon smiled up at the ceiling. "I'll hold you to that," he said.

"Mrph." Sandra coughed twice, clearing her throat. "So can I assume you found him?"

"Sure did," Simon said. "About two hours ago. That's why I haven't called until now."

Sandra dismissed this excuse with a snort. "So . . . where are you?"

"Italy, apparently," said Simon. "The food is great, and hopefully I'll get to enjoy a little more of it before I get run over by an insane person on a Vespa."

"Italy," Sandra repeated. Behind her, Mike muttered something. "Gosh, boss, if I thought *I'd* get a trip to Italy out of the deal, I'd try and get my ass suspended too."

"Yeah, it's not bad, except the whole shoot-out with the Mafia thing," Simon said. "So what's up over there? NYPD catch Rappaport yet?"

Sandra's laugh was prolonged and bitter.

Phone calls over with, Simon rolled back out of bed and made a half-hearted effort to clean up the dinner boxes. He eyed the wastebasket for close to a minute before admitting to himself that there was no way he was going to get even the smallest box in there, and settled for putting the whole shebang out in the hall for the maids to take away.

He checked his watch, realized that it was still set to DC time, and checked the clock on Jeremy's cellphone: 10:19. Jeremy had only been gone for about half an hour. Simon put Jeremy's phone down on the little table and went to investigate the television.

He quickly discovered that most Italian television was American television with a crappy dub. Eventually, patient flipping around netted him some kind of variety show, which was entertaining in a train-wreckish fashion; Simon watched it with the disbelieving sneer of the amateur anthropologist. Ten minutes or so was about all he could stand, even after the sudden introduction of a bunch of half-naked girls.

Leaving the variety show crashing on in the background, Simon picked up his luggage and dealt with it, hanging the bomber jacket in the closet and dropping his duffel bag on the floor. The covers were still in a huge, untidy heap on the floor, so Simon picked them up and made a half-assed attempt to put them back on the bed, then sat back down on the foot of the bed and flipped through the channels again.

The clock crept towards eleven like it was crawling through mud. Simon found himself checking the time every five minutes, then every two minutes, then every thirty seconds—finally he gave up, turned off the TV, and threw the window open, blasting himself in the face with steam.

The street below was still pretty busy, considering the hour. Simon crossed his arms on the windowsill and scanned the sidewalks for any sign of Jeremy's hat. He wasn't terribly surprised when he didn't see it. He could see the newsstand from here, but it was closed and shuttered, its dirty white canvas top glowing under the streetlights. Scooters were still tearing by, nearly colliding with taxis, pedestrians, and other scooters. Simon decided it was a lot more interesting to watch than the television, particularly after one minor accident turned into a screaming match with lots of gesticulating.

No matter what, though, the cell phone in his pocket felt like it was burning against his hip. Simon sighed, pulled out the phone, checked the time. 11:04. Jeremy had now been gone for an hour and fifteen minutes. Not that Jeremy was particularly overdue, but still, Simon was aware of a low-level creeping sensation in the pit of his stomach. If he'd come all this way just to lose Jeremy to Karpol three hours after he'd found him—Simon derailed that train of thought at the station and threw himself on the bed, instead.

The sound of traffic still filtered in through the open window. Simon dropped the phone on his chest, stuck both hands behind his head, and stared up at the ceiling, waiting. Jeremy was bound to notice that he was overdue and call soon. Assuming he didn't just appear, pretending nothing was wrong, which would be just like him, the bastard—assuming that nothing *was* wrong—

The realization that Jeremy wasn't coming back hit Simon like a baseball bat to the back of the head and knocked him bolt upright. The phone, forgotten, fell into his lap. Of course Jeremy wasn't coming back: he didn't want Simon here, did he? He'd sure as hell made that clear. And he'd gotten tired of arguing with Simon, so he'd fucked Simon into submission, availed himself of a shower and a free meal, and then walked right back out of Simon's life, and like an idiot Simon

had *let him go*. Jeremy was miles from here by now, and tomorrow he'd call Ethan and set up a new contact point, and all he'd lost was a phone that would be worthless three days from now in any case. "Stupid," Simon muttered under his breath, smacking his forehead. "Stupid, stupid, *stupid* . . ."

Leaving the phone on the bed, Simon went back to the window and stuck his head back out. There were still no white hats in view, but now he wasn't expecting one. The urge to go out and look for Jeremy was strong and completely idiotic—if half the criminals in Milan couldn't find Jeremy, Simon sure as hell had no chance. Simon bit his thumbnail, now furious at himself. He couldn't even call Ethan and beg to know the new contact point. Ethan would tell him that he'd had his chance and blown it, and the hell of it was, he'd be correct.

Simon whipped back around and grabbed the phone off the bed, flipping it open and calling up the contacts list: empty. He poked through menus until he found its call history: empty, except for the two calls he'd just made. Simon groaned, slapped the phone shut, and threw it back onto the bed, only barely resisting the urge to peg it as hard as he could. "Son of a *bitch*," Simon informed the empty room, windmilling his arms. He was, officially, the biggest idiot he knew.

For a moment he stood undecided in the center of the room, fighting the urge to search the city, to call Ethan, to do any one of a number of ridiculous, useless things. Eventually the urge subsided, replaced with dull rage like a stone in his belly. "Fine," Simon said under his breath. "*Fine*." He'd get a good night's sleep, here in this overpriced Italian hotel room, and then tomorrow he'd go back to the airport—he had to have enough play money to buy Simon Moorhead a one-way ticket to America. This whole trip had been a fool's errand and he was lucky to get out of it before anyone got wind of what he was up to.

His movements jerky with repressed anger, Simon changed into his pajama pants and turned out the light. Beneath his open window the city raged on; Simon didn't bother to close it out. Instead he curled up into a knot under the covers, knees drawn halfway to his nose, and demanded of himself that he sleep.

How long he lay there simmering, he had no idea. He only knew that he was no closer to sleep than he'd ever been when someone tapped on the door, just a light little patter of fingertips against the wood—for a long moment Simon thought his ears were playing tricks on him. In the end, still surly, Simon rolled out of the bed and groped his way to the door, opening it a crack.

"Did I wake you? I'm sorry," Jeremy said, his voice hushed out of respect for the darkness as he slipped in past Simon. His fingers trailed across Simon's bare chest as he went, light as feathers. "I didn't think I'd been gone *that* long."

Simon grunted in acknowledgement and groped back to the bed, curling up again. He was still angry—couldn't quite not be, despite the obvious fact of Jeremy rustling around in the darkness behind him. Simon didn't bother to roll over, not even when Jeremy crawled into the bed. On the other hand, just lying

here made him feel like an idiot—"Just a *little* late," Simon muttered.

"I apologize," Jeremy said. As if the apology magically made everything all right he slithered over and pressed himself against Simon's back, wrapping an arm around Simon and splaying his hand out on Simon's chest. "I didn't mean to worry you."

"I wasn't *worried*," Simon said, and fell silent. His anger was beginning to collapse sheepishly in on itself, but it was apparently planning to go down fighting. After stewing for a few minutes, Simon forced himself to admit, "I didn't think you were going to come back."

Jeremy was quiet for a moment. "I hadn't been planning to," he finally said.

In the face of that bald statement, what was left of Simon's rage paradoxically vanished, leaving him blank. "Huh," he said. "What made you change your mind?"

Jeremy shrugged—Simon couldn't see it, but he could feel it, Jeremy's shoulder nudging against his own. "For one thing, I feel that Ethan must have had a reason to send you," Jeremy said, patting Simon's chest.

Simon waited. Jeremy didn't go on. "And?" Simon finally prompted.

With his face pressed between Simon's shoulderblades, Jeremy smiled; Simon could feel the smile against his spine, and it made him shiver. "And I couldn't stop thinking that I was running away from the one person in this whole mess that I know I can trust."

"Oh," Simon said. Outside a car horn blared, loud and long, rising and falling as the car it was attached to swept by; Simon sighed and put his hand over Jeremy's, pressing it to his chest.

By the time Simon thrashed up and out of sleep the next morning, Jeremy was awake, clean, dressed, and sitting at the little table reading the paper. "Good morning, Simon," he said, his voice absent, most of his attention on the paper in front of him.

"Gruh," Simon said, scrubbing his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "Timesit?"

Jeremy checked his watch. "Eight forty-five, more or less."

"'Kay." Simon thumped back down onto his pillow and shut his eyes. "Fi' minutes."

"All right," Jeremy said.

Simon burrowed back under the covers and tried very hard to get back to sleep. It wasn't happening. The periodic rustling of Jeremy's paper kept attracting his attention, and for all that it was kind of a nice, peaceful sound, Simon would have preferred more sleep. Finally, admitting to himself that he was awake, Simon sat up and swung his legs out of bed, rubbing his face with both hands. "Breakfast," he said.

"Mm," said Jeremy. "What about it?"

Simon opened his mouth and then stopped himself before the first word could come out. "I'll go get it," he said instead. "Gotta be a place."

"At least one more night here, I think," Jeremy said, over breakfast. It wasn't much of a breakfast by Simon's standards—mostly bread and fruit—but there was coffee, and it was hot. Jeremy was eating blueberries, one at a time, picking them daintily from their little bowl and popping them into his mouth. "Since you say you have a gun coming."

Simon, his mouth full, nodded and swallowed. "Ethan said twenty-four hours."

"Then we'll see what comes with the day's messages," Jeremy said decisively. He rolled a blueberry between his fingertips for a moment before putting it in his mouth. "After that, we can make a more informed decision."

"Sounds like a plan," Simon said. "So what do we do until then?" Jeremy paused, fingers pressed to his lips, and gave Simon a long, thoughtful look that was either suggestive or, worse, incredulous; Simon coughed. "I meant, you know, besides that."

"Oh, *besides* that," Jeremy said, suddenly all maddening innocence. "Well, first I intend to finish my paper, as you popped up yesterday before I could so much as glance at the headlines, and then I need to get in touch with a large number of people."

Simon grunted and submerged himself in his coffee. "Oh yeah, that sounds exciting as all hell. I'll go make myself popcorn now, before the show starts."

For lack of anything better to do, Simon read the parts of the paper that Jeremy had already finished. He was semi-engrossed in the letters column—English people got pissed off at each other so politely—when Jeremy sat back down at the table with a little book and the paper-thin black phone, already dialing the first number from memory.

Simon listened with half an ear, mostly because he couldn't escape the noise. Listening to half of a phone conversation that wasn't about him was usually about as interesting as watching the specks float around inside his eyes. Listening to Jeremy touch base with half of Milan was slightly more interesting, partially because of the disconnect between Jeremy's affable, laid-back phone personality and the intent, narrow-eyed look on his face, and partially because Jeremy-on-the-phone appeared to be allergic to nouns, proper and otherwise. It was exactly like eavesdropping on a drug deal. Simon, who ought to know, fiddled with the corner of Jeremy's paper and debated the merits of telling him this.

"I see," Jeremy said, momentarily closing his eyes. When he opened them again, he picked up a pen and made a little check mark next to one of the names in his book. "And the information? ... ah. Yes, that should be fine."

"What was that all about?" Simon asked, once Jeremy had closed the phone.

Jeremy blinked at Simon like he'd forgotten that Simon was there. "What was what about?"

"That," Simon said, reaching across the table and tapping the little check mark.

"Oh, that," Jeremy said. He took a deep breath. "One fellow claims that another's been making noises about the possibility of selling me to Volpe—that would be the particular crony that I am attempting to avoid."

Simon eyed Jeremy for a moment, then picked up the book and riffled the pages with his thumb. Fully half the names in there had at least one check by them, many had two or three—what most of them *didn't* have was any kind of a last name or identifying caption. Just a bunch of first names with phone numbers and, in many cases, check marks. "So . . . that's what all these little marks are?"

"They're rumors," Jeremy said. He reached across and gently took the little book back. "Such-and-so says in an unguarded moment that perhaps they ought to just hand me over, or muses about how much I might be worth, or simply complains about how loud Volpe's people are getting. Word of his little conversational mishap gets around, and eventually, it reaches someone who's willing to tell me."

"Yeah, that makes me feel great inside," Simon said, blowing out a breath. "So all those people are working for, uh, this Volpe guy?"

"Hardly," Jeremy said. "I have no way of knowing if a given rumor is true at all, let alone whether the person in question was just blowing smoke or was being serious about it. But still, I have to keep track."

Simon slid down in his chair and knuckled at his cheek. Stubble scraped at his fingers, startling him. "Guess so," he said. "Well, this is all too complicated for me, so I'm gonna go shave before I turn into your trained ape for real. Let me know if you need anything."

"I will, in half an hour or so," Jeremy said, tapping another number into his phone.

Jeremy snapped his phone shut with a definitive clack and dropped it onto the table, reaching up to rub his temples. "All done?" Simon asked, glancing up from the muted television.

"For the moment," Jeremy said. He sounded tired. "Could I get you to run a few errands for me?"

"Hot damn but I thought you'd never ask," Simon said, hopping up off the bed with alacrity. "I am bored to *tears*."

Jeremy's little smile was distracted at best; he was writing something on one of the hotel's little notepads. "Really, Simon, you needn't sit around waiting to be needed," he said. "Milan is a lovely city. You're welcome to go see some of it while you wait."

Simon made a rude noise. "I'm no tourist," he said. "Besides, if I'm off looking at, at churches or whatever, you could get snatched off the street by some guys in a black van and I'd never know."

"I expect you'd figure it out sooner or later," Jeremy said, tearing the topmost sheet off the pad. "I need you to go to a newsstand and buy me these papers," he said, poking the piece of paper at Simon. "I'd prefer it if you didn't go to the one on the corner there—there are newsstands on damned near every block, it shouldn't be too much trouble to find another."

Simon accepted the paper. Jeremy had listed five newspapers, all of which sounded suspiciously Italian. "Yeah, I went past like two others on the way to get dinner last night," Simon said. "No problem. Anything else?"

"Yes, actually," Jeremy said, pushing the little black phone across the table. "Take this a couple of blocks away and drop it down a sewer grating, please."

Simon looked up. "Are you serious?"

"As a heart attack, I'm afraid," Jeremy said, tapping the phone. "I've had it for three days now and it's time to get rid of it."

"Man, seems like kind of a waste," Simon said. He took the phone and stared at it, flipping it open. "I mean, look at this thing. It had to be expensive."

Jeremy smiled a little. "Oh, yes, very," he said. "But it's also potentially dangerous—I have no idea whether Volpe actually has the capability to track cell phones on a global-positioning device, but really, I'd rather not find out."

"Yeah," Simon said. He closed the phone and stuck it in his pocket.

"And please do put it down a sewer grating," Jeremy said. "Trash cans might be easier, but they're not as . . . thorough."

Simon half-assed a little salute, already in search of his sneakers. "Right, right," he said. "Papers, phone disposal. I'll get lunch if I'm out for more than an hour. Anything else?"

"Not right now," Jeremy said. "I may have to send you after something this afternoon, but I don't yet know."

"You're the boss," Simon said. He managed to keep a straight face for close to two seconds after saying it.

The particular newsstand that Simon had in mind was located across the street from what looked to be a pretty large electronics store, a good five blocks down and two blocks over from the hotel and only half a block away from the restaurant that had deigned to put together the takeout for him last night. Simon joined the mob of people heading in that general direction and let the crowd bear him along.

Up ahead of him, the light changed, not that it really stopped anybody. Simon, eyeing the potential carnage, decided to go ahead and play the cowardly American and stopped at the curb to wait. There was, he noticed idly, a sewer grating in the

opposite curb—Simon reached into his pocket and pulled out Jeremy’s radioactive cell phone, holding it loose and ready against his thigh.

The light changed. The crowd around Simon surged out into the intersection. Simon ambled along, purposefully going a bit slow to let the people ahead of him pull away and leave an empty space. The sewer grating appeared at the other end of Simon’s forced space like a soccer goal—Simon dropped the phone on the ground in front of himself and kicked it neatly in. The phone vanished with a clatter and, Simon imagined, a distant, faint splash. No one around him so much as raised an eyebrow; most of them were on their own cell phones and oblivious to the world. Simon made the other side of the road safely and strolled on, feeling weirdly proud of himself for playing it so cool. Maybe he was good at this stuff after all.

Milan really was a pretty city, he decided. Not that he’d actually seen much of it, but what he’d seen was neat, a bunch of fancy old stone buildings that modern society had colonized like hermit crabs. If it weren’t for the Milanese—Simon leaped for the curb before he could *actually* get fucked up the ass by a speeding taxi—Milan would be awesome. Yeah. Where had he heard something like that before?

The electronics store that he remembered appeared on his right. Deciding that Jeremy’s papers could wait, Simon buttonhooked through the crowd and banged on in.

“Okay, we are *all* set,” Simon said, letting himself back into the hotel room with slightly more decorum than usual, to avoid jostling his package. “I got your papers—”

The room was, of course, empty. The bed had been made and the rest of the room returned to its antiseptic glory. Simon rolled his eyes, stopped talking, and shut the door behind himself. “Okay,” he said, “you can come out now.”

He waited. Jeremy failed to appear. Simon snorted. “Okay, whatever,” he said. Jeremy’s Italian papers made a pretty significant stack, so he abandoned them on the table, dumped his own bag on the bed, and kicked off his sneakers.

The portable DVD player and stack of movies had cost him another couple of play-money bills, but Simon was of the opinion that it’d be worth it. He was fighting with the poorly-translated instructions when Jeremy tapped on the door and let himself in; Simon raised an absent hand and then went back to exploring the Italian-language menus. “You’d think this thing would have an English-language selection somewhere,” he said.

“Doubtless it does,” Jeremy said.

“Somewhere,” Simon agreed. “So where were you?”

Jeremy laughed under his breath. “Lurking in the stairwell, if you must know. I’d wanted to get out of the maid’s way.”

"You and your lurking, you lurker," Simon said cheerfully. "Hey, I found English!"

"I can't believe that you're in Milan and you're going to spend your free time flopped out in bed watching movies you could watch at home for much cheaper," Jeremy said.

Simon picked up one of his DVDs and clawed at the plastic wrap. "I can't believe I'm in Milan, period," he said. "So my intention is to ignore it."

"Suit yourself," Jeremy said, sitting down with his papers.

Simon, most of his attention focused on getting this damn DVD out of its plastic, nevertheless kept vague track of what Jeremy was doing. Jeremy flipped through each paper in turn, picking out sections and discarding the rest—most of each paper, actually. Simon finally got the DVD case open by chewing on the wrapper until it tore. "Do you even speak Italian?" he asked.

"Unfortunately not," Jeremy said, piling the discards up on the other chair. "I've never had an ear for languages."

"Then . . ." Simon made a little come-on gesture. "What, exactly, are you looking for?"

Jeremy's smile was quick. "Messages," he said.

"What?"

In answer, Jeremy held up one of the paper sections that he'd retained. It was in Italian, but even so, the format was familiar—"You're shitting me," Simon said after a moment. "Classified ads?"

"Classified ads," Jeremy confirmed. "Somewhat outdated, but still an excellent way to get in touch with someone who refuses to communicate in any other way."

"Huh." Simon scratched the back of his head. "You'd think they'd be a lot more eager to talk to you."

Jeremy flicked open the first classified section. "They are," he said. "I'm the one who's refusing to communicate."

"But," Simon said, and then stopped, because he wasn't really sure what to protest. He finally settled on "What about Annabelle?"

"I know it sounds counterintuitive, but right now, she's safest just where she is, wherever that is," Jeremy said, looking up. For a moment, he looked very old. "She's a tremendously important hostage and their only real bargaining chip. They can't risk hurting her before they have me."

Unsettled, Simon looked away. "I guess so," he said. "Christ, I *hope* so."

"So do I," Jeremy said, his voice a little rough. After a moment he cleared his throat and went back to his paper, turning the page with a rustle of newsprint. "Right now it takes upwards of three days to exchange information once—we haven't even agreed on how to *open* communications, let alone begun communicating in earnest."

"So . . . why? What does this buy you? Besides more time?"

“Sooner or later they will get me on the phone,” Jeremy said. “There’s no preventing that. And once that occurs, nothing will stop them from naming a date, place, and time, and informing me that either I am there or something terrible will happen to Annabelle. They won’t say that in a classified ad. Too public. It might pique someone’s interest, and it would definitely leave a paper trail. Also, I suppose *some* newspapers still have scruples.” He laughed shortly and sobered just as quickly. “So long as I can draw out this stage of the negotiations, Annabelle is still reasonably safe, and I have more time to get my own forces in order.”

“But,” Simon said again. And stopped again.

Jeremy paused, marking his place with a finger, and looked back up. “There’s really only one acceptable outcome to this mess,” he said. “It’s one in which I rescue Annabelle and then get away myself. The longer the exchange takes, the better my chances become. I don’t much *like* leaving her in their hands, but believe me, there are worse things.”

“Yeah, I . . . I get that.” Simon laced his fingers together in his lap, poking idly at one thumbnail. “Shit, I’m sorry.”

“So am I,” Jeremy said, turning another page.

The most exciting thing that happened after that was Simon running out for lunch.

After the pulse-pounding excitement that was lunch, the afternoon kind of dragged on. Simon finished setting up his little DVD player and settled in with the Italian release of a bad American action movie—fortunately with the English track intact—and Jeremy flipped through all five classified-ads sections, occasionally frowning. Simon was just at the exciting part of the movie (or what passed for one) when Jeremy said, “When you’ve a moment, I’m afraid I have another errand for you.”

Simon paused the movie and looked up. “What’s up?”

Jeremy waved an envelope at him. “I need you to take this to a post office, buy a stamp for it, and mail it.”

“Yeah, it’s a thrill a minute around here,” Simon said. “Can it wait like twenty minutes, or is this crushingly important?”

“Take your time,” Jeremy said, twitching out a little smile.

Simon took the movie off pause, suffered through another five minutes of bad one-liners and decent explosions, then sighed and turned it off. “Kind of hard to enjoy a bad movie when you’re being whanged in the head with guilt,” he said, putting the DVD player on the nightstand. “Any idea where the nearest post office is?”

Jeremy shrugged. “None, I’m afraid. The front desk ought to be able to tell you.”

“Any special cloak-and-dagger-type instructions?” Simon stepped back into his sneakers. “I mean, if I need to be careful not to leave fingerprints on the envelope, now’s the time to say so.”

“Oh, no, nothing like that,” Jeremy said. “Really, most any postbox would do, only I haven’t any stamps.”

“Gotcha,” Simon said, holding out his hand for the envelope.

Jeremy handed it over with mock solemnity, bowing slightly. “If you like, you can stop by the newsstand on the way back and ask if there are any messages. I have no idea if he’ll actually hand things over to you, but we may as well find out.”

“Oh, right, my *gun*,” Simon said, perking up. “So, uh, if he won’t give me the stuff, what do I do? I assume that threatening to arrest him is right out.”

“Yes, although I’d certainly enjoy watching you try,” Jeremy said. “If he’s reluctant, it’s fine. I’ll go by later and ask after my messages myself.”

“Ah, the boring approach. Right. Back in a bit,” Simon said, heading out.

After a bit of hand-waving and stuttering, the man at the front desk managed to convey that there was a post office a few blocks in the other direction. At least, that’s what Simon thought the man was trying to say. If he was going to be here for much longer, he was going to need to buy a phrasebook, because after a while, pointing and gesticulating just wasn’t going to cut it.

Simon left the hotel, started to turn left, and hesitated—a woman with a cell phone glued to her ear nearly ran him down, dodged at the last moment, and snapped something Italian at him. “Yeah, same to you and more of it, lady,” Simon said, distracted. As he recalled, the guy at the newsstand spoke pretty good English. Maybe he ought to stop there first and confirm his directions.

The man behind the counter straightened up as Simon approached. Judging by the suspicious look on his face, he remembered Simon from yesterday. Or maybe he just hated all Americans. No way to tell. “Hey,” Simon said. “Can you tell me where the nearest post office is? I hear it’s that way.” Simon pointed.

“Yes, that way,” the counterman said, his eyes still slightly narrowed. “It is . . . seven blocks. Maybe. There is a big . . .” He trailed off there and made a hapless circling motion with one hand. “Cars drive in a circle.”

“Gotcha,” Simon said. “I think I can find that. Hey, I gotta ask: do you remember me from yesterday?”

The man’s chin lifted maybe half an inch and dropped again. “I remember,” he said.

“Great! So, if I were to tell you that my friend sent me to pick up his messages, would you give them to me or tell me to go get fucked?” Simon beamed, actually sort of enjoying himself.

The suspicious look dimmed, replaced by mild confusion. The man's eyes slid away from Simon as he repeated Simon's words to himself, only getting more confused as he went on; finally he settled on "I have no messages."

"Aw, no messages?" Simon said. "So when you say that, do you mean that you actually have no messages, or that you have messages and you won't give them to me?"

"No messages," the man repeated, developing a stubborn crease between his brows. Simon folded his hands on the counter and waited. After ten seconds or so, the counterman sighed sharply and amended his answer to "No messages yet. Maybe later."

Simon nodded. "Gotcha," he said. "Thanks, you've been a help."

"Okay," the counterman said. "You want something?"

"Nothing I can't subtract from a jackalope in a howdah," Simon said with a manic good cheer he was almost feeling. The counterman's confusion came back in force, and Simon made good his escape while the guy repeated the words to himself.

The Italian post office was disappointingly unconfusing. Simon took one look at the lines for the windows and went to buy a pack of stamps from the machine instead; two minutes later he was walking back out the door, Jeremy's letter duly stamped and mailed.

On a whim, he stopped by the newsstand again on his way back. "Any messages yet?" he said, beaming.

The counterman threw up his hands in a gesture of pure frustration. "No messages! Not for you! Not for him!"

"Just checking," Simon said. "Thanks a lot!"

"Your letter has been mailed, I got some more stamps, and also I think I totally pissed off the guy at the newsstand," Simon announced, bursting into the room. "Aaaaaand some day I will learn not to start talking to you until I'm sure you're here."

There was, predictably, no answer. Simon shut the door behind himself and, like magic, Jeremy drifted out of the bathroom, looking pleased with himself. "Dare I ask what you did to the poor fellow?" he asked, reaching behind Simon to trip the deadbolt.

"I just asked if there were any messages," Simon said. "*I think* he said that nothing had come yet, but I guess he could have been lying to me because I'm not you. I guess we'll have to go check later."

Judging by the expression on Jeremy's face, he wasn't quite buying it. "After dinner, then," Jeremy said, letting it go. "We'll wait for the sun to go down a bit."

"Awesome," Simon said, kicking off his shoes. "I'm gonna get back to my movie."

After dinner they headed out, Jeremy with his hat carefully pulled down over his eyes. “Perhaps it’s paranoid of me,” Jeremy said, just before they hit the lobby, “but I think perhaps let’s keep our voices down. I’d hate to attract unwanted attention just because someone on the street noticed I was speaking English.”

“Yeah, that’s totally paranoid,” Simon said. “Let’s do it.”

Jeremy huffed out a faint laugh and led the way across the street. It wasn’t quite dark—it was July, after all—but it was dim enough to trip the streetlights, and that plus Jeremy’s hat was enough to keep his face in shadow. As disguises went, it wasn’t bad. Simon, lagging three steps behind, found himself thinking that he would know Jeremy anywhere just by the walk, but he had to admit that he probably had an unfair advantage.

The counterman saw them coming, judging by the half-grumpy, half-resigned look on his face. By the time Jeremy got there he was already pushing an honest-to-God briefcase across the counter. “Here, here,” he said, irritated. “One hour ago.”

“Thank you,” Jeremy said cheerfully, picking up the briefcase. “And for the record, he’s with me, and it’s perfectly all right to give him my messages.” He gestured lazily at Simon, who waved.

“I will remember,” the counterman said. His grim face said *you bet I will*, and he watched them leave like he was expecting them to turn around at any minute and pester him some more. Simon was tempted to do so, but Jeremy was already heading back across the street and Simon had to jog to catch up.

“So,” Simon said, once they were safely inside the hotel, “a mysterious man dropped off a briefcase. You know, every movie I’ve ever seen leads me to believe that it should be full of banded hundred-dollar-bills in neat rows.”

Jeremy laughed a little, heading for the stairs. “I won’t deny that it’s happened in the past,” he said. “Although these days it’s more likely to be euros or pounds. The state of the world being what it is.”

“I’m kind of hurt that we didn’t have to exchange code phrases to get our hands on it,” Simon said. “You know. ‘The black dog barks at midnight.’ That kind of thing.”

Unsurprisingly, the briefcase was locked. Jeremy spun the wheels of the combination lock, setting them to what looked like a completely random number, and opened the briefcase; after a long, sick look, Simon declared, “That *does not count*.”

“Why not?” Jeremy asked.

“Because it’s only *half* full of banded euros, Jesus Christ, how much money is that?”

"I estimate it at fifty thousand euros, more or less," Jeremy said. He picked up one of the bundles—pink money, *pink*, it offended every last fiber of Simon's being—and riffled the bills. "Walking-around money, mostly. I can't exactly access my own accounts at the moment."

"If that much money wants to go walking around, it had better hire a body-guard," Simon said. "Still, great, we're rich, woo hoo, where's my gun?"

Jeremy considered the contents of the briefcase for a moment, then selected a lumpy package wrapped in brown paper and handed it over. Simon tore into it and reclaimed his gun with unalloyed relief; he felt safer just having it to hand. He dropped into one of the chairs and laid everything out, thumbing cartridges into the magazine.

"Here are your real papers," Jeremy said, dropping the little pile of Simon's identity by his hand. "And this is . . . hm."

"Hm?" Simon said, distracted.

"Another set of false papers for you under a different name," Jeremy said, "and . . . two more sets for me, wonderful, and two more phones. That isn't your usual gun, is it? It seems smaller."

Simon snorted. "Hell, no," he said, slapping the magazine home. "My usual gun has one hell of a paper trail attached. This right here is a SIG P239 SAS that walked away from the scene of an arms bust a couple of years ago. It doesn't exist. It's small enough to wear as a hideout gun, or it would be, if it existed, which it doesn't."

"Ah," Jeremy said. "Let's just pretend that that string of numbers meant something to me, shall we? What kind of ammunition does it use? I can probably lay hands on bullets, at least."

"This one uses standard .40 S&W cartridges, which is one of the reasons I like it," Simon slid the loaded gun back into the ankle holster, but left it on the table. "I've got enough for now, but I'll keep that in mind."

Jeremy nodded, then repacked everything in the briefcase, including the extra cartridges and the little cleaning kit. "We'll move on tomorrow," he said, setting the combination locks back to 000.

Late, late that night, Simon drifted out of a sound sleep, dimly aware that the bed next to him was empty and someone was speaking quietly nearby. Still more asleep than awake, Simon cracked one eye open in foggy curiosity.

Jeremy was standing by the side of the bed, holding his phone to his ear and looking down at Simon, his gaze cool and remote like Simon was a piece of paper on the sidewalk. The cell phone hummed softly with someone else's voice. "Tell him twenty thousand," Jeremy said, still looking down at Simon; then he turned away and Simon fell back to sleep before he could do more than decide to ask Jeremy about it in the morning.

When he woke he'd forgotten all but the sleep-tainted vow to do . . . something.
It bothered him for half an hour or so, and then he forgot it entirely.

◆ Twenty-Three

The next morning they moved to a different hotel. Or Simon moved to a different hotel, anyway; Jeremy turned up half an hour later, tapping quietly at the door to be let in.

The new place was a tall, narrow building in a quiet side street, more like the apartment buildings around it than a hotel; Simon checked in paying cash in advance and using his new set of fake papers, which identified him as one ‘Trent Darcy’. Simon had no idea where the name came from, but Trent Darcy lived at the same Hinton, Iowa address as Simon Moorhead, saving him from having to memorize another address, at least. The landlady was a wizened stick of an old lady who spoke both Italian and horribly fractured English with unnerving fierceness. The magical words ‘cash in advance’ made her look at Simon wisely before holding out her hand; Simon, who couldn’t shake the feeling that he was breaking several laws, handed over three of the horrible pink bills in exchange for two chunky metal keys. “Five day,” the landlady said, closing her claw over the money and making it disappear. “You want more, you tell me four day. Not five day. Four day.”

“Sure,” Simon said, putting the keys in his pocket.

“Friday clean,” she said. “Also Tuesday clean.”

“Sure,” Simon said again. His landlady eyed him narrowly, then busted out a cracked giggle and patted his hand before bustling off. Simon absently scrubbed his hand against his jeans leg, wondering just what the hell he’d gotten into here.

The hotel room turned out to be an actual apartment, with appliances and bathroom fixtures straight out of the fifties. It was a tiny, dim, rundown little place, grungy in a way that had nothing to do with dirt and everything to do with age and lack of paint. The mattress sagged in the middle. Still, it was clean, it felt safe, and no one would look for them here, or so Jeremy said. Simon put his duffel bag down by the dresser, put the briefcase next to it, and put his bomber jacket in the closet.

The next three days passed largely like the first one had, except that Simon

went out and bought groceries to stock their terrible little kitchen. Jeremy spent all his time inside, placing call after call, reading the papers, and dispatching Simon on errands that ranged from commonplace to weird as hell; at night he paced for a while before relaxing enough to come to bed, sleeping lightly and waking often, nestled against Simon inside the bowl of the ancient mattress.

Despite the nagging feeling that he was being used—and really, wasn't that exactly what he'd told Jeremy to do with him?—Simon found himself enjoying those three days a fair bit. His little portable DVD player hooked up to the cheap TV set, so he could watch movies in the main room while Jeremy paced and talked and read in the bedroom; there was a bookstore around the corner that carried both DVDs and a slim selection of English-language books and magazines; and Simon happened across a televised soccer game—football, whatever—and ended up enjoying it, somewhat to his surprise. The rest was easy. Soccer was *always* on.

The neighborhood was okay, too. It was a lot quieter, the streets were too narrow for much in the way of insane driving, and most of the people on the streets actually lived there—but the best thing about the neighborhood, Simon thought, was the cat.

The cat was a tiny little white thing with a black splotch on its head like a bad toupee and a black tail to match. Simon, not feeling particularly creative, immediately nicknamed the cat 'Wig', since the cat answered to Wig as readily as it answered to anything, i.e. if it felt like it. (It answered to 'dumbass' just as readily.) Still, as cats went, Wig was friendly, and generally came trotting over to sniff Simon's fingers every time Simon came out of the building to run this errand or that one. Feeling like a bit of an idiot, Simon brought the cat half a sausage from his breakfast; Wig promptly ran off with it, tail held high, and was thereafter convinced that Simon was the best person on earth. Suddenly Simon couldn't set foot out of the building, day or night, without Wig appearing to bump up against his shins and rumble like tiny machinery.

Simon had no idea if Wig was a stray or just a rambler. Wig wasn't wearing a collar, but he looked pretty fat and glossy. The landlady caught Simon scratching Wig under the chin one afternoon and laughed at him, not in an unfriendly way. Simon didn't really care. He liked the cat. The cat liked him.

On the evening of the fourth day, Jeremy sent Simon out with three letters in his pocket and the silver phone that he'd been using, which was old enough to be verging on dangerous. Thinking more about where to pick up dinner than anything else, Simon loped down the stairs and let himself out of the building, already looking for the cat.

A raspy chain-smoker's mrowl from the alleyway informed Simon that Wig had also been looking for him. The cat came trotting out to greet him, its tail high, its belly wobbling, its claws ticking slightly on the pavement. Simon hunkered

down and let Wig throw himself against his hand. “Hey, dumbass,” Simon said, scratching Wig’s ear until Wig nearly fell over in bliss. “I don’t have any food for you, you know. Seriously. Gravy train’s over. You want to eat, get a job—”

Simon broke off there, startled. Crouching to pet the cat had brought him down nearly to street level, and at this level Simon could see straight into the tiny sports car parked in an alley across the street. Two heads were silhouetted against the fading daylight—Simon quickly looked back down at Wig, running his fingers along Wig’s side until the cat fell over for real. “Yeah, kitty, that’s all you get,” Simon muttered, scratching the cat’s belly.

The guys in the sports car were still there when Simon stood back up and made a show of patting his pockets. Still there, not moving, and watching the hotel that Simon had just come out of—Simon patted his back pocket, mimed frustration, and went back inside. The moment the door shut behind him he broke into a run, taking the stairs two and three steps at a time.

“Hey I don’t know if it’s anything but there are a couple of guys in a car watching the front of the building,” Simon said, bursting into the bedroom and gasping it all out in a single breath. “I made like I’d forgotten my wallet and came back up.”

Jeremy, sitting on the bed, went very still for two seconds before throwing the paper aside. “We’re going,” he said, bounding off the bed and grabbing his own suitcase in the same movement. “Get whatever you can’t live without. Leave the rest. I’ll replace it.”

“Right,” Simon said. Following Jeremy’s example, he’d left his clothes in the duffel and the rest of the stuff in the briefcase, so it was really just a matter of grabbing his jacket and the pile of DVDs he hadn’t watched yet. The little player was still hooked to the television. Simon abandoned it with a groan.

Jeremy threw on his jacket and his hat and hit the apartment’s door, nearly running. He had the briefcase. “Roof,” he said, his voice oddly calm. “Come on.”

“Right behind you,” Simon said. He yanked his apartment key out of his pocket and dropped it on the kitchen counter—right next to Jeremy’s, he noticed, which was holding down a green bill—then ran after Jeremy, duffel in one hand, jacket in the other.

The roof was a completely normal tarpaper-and-pebbles affair. Jeremy kicked the door shut after Simon and wedged it shut with a chunk of wood that (Simon suspected) was usually used to wedge it open. “They’re in front, you said?” Jeremy said, hunkering down.

Simon crouched opposite him. “Yeah,” he said. “I don’t know if there are any in back. I didn’t exactly feel like going to go look.”

“Good,” Jeremy said. He glanced over his shoulder, then pointed to the building next to theirs. “Let’s go that way. Try to walk lightly.” He picked up the briefcase and his suitcase and headed for the edge, his footsteps nearly silent. Simon, following, wasn’t nearly as lucky. The tarpaper crackled and

crunched underfoot, no matter how carefully he placed his feet; finally he gave up and scuffed along like he was trying to build up a static charge, which helped, although not much.

Their building butted right up against its neighbor, sharing a single wall. Getting from one roof to the next was a question of stepping down about two feet. Jeremy went first, putting his suitcase and briefcase down, stepping down, and picking his things up again. Simon followed.

They went across to the next building, and the next, and the next, until finally they hit the last one on the block. Getting up onto that one required scrambling up about four feet. Jeremy went up first, vaulting up with ridiculous ease. Simon handed up their bags one by one before heaving himself up after them. "So now what?" he said, dusting off his hands. "Down the stairs?"

"Look after these for a moment?" Jeremy asked, putting his suitcase and the briefcase down at Simon's feet. Dropping into a crouch, Jeremy rolled forward, edging towards the front of the building.

Simon warily straightened up and looked around. The front of the building opened onto twenty-five feet of roadway, five stories down: no going that way. The side of the building looked out over another, larger roadway. No going that way, either. The back of the building overlooked an alleyway full of garbage cans and parked scooters; it was narrower, but not that narrow. Maybe there was a fire escape, or something—Jeremy blew past Simon like a momentary tornado and was airborne before Simon could even yelp.

For a moment that felt like forever Jeremy hung suspended in midair above the alleyway, one hand flung out for balance, the other holding onto his hat. His jacket whipped out behind him like a cape. Simon sucked in a breath, but somehow Jeremy made it across the gap, hitting the roof across the way with both feet and stumbling headlong a few steps before catching himself.

His heart pounding, Simon looked down at the alley, five stories below. He looked across at Jeremy, twelve feet away. He flipped Jeremy off. "Okay, screw you, no way am I doing that," he hissed, unsure if his voice was loud enough to carry but unwilling to speak any louder.

"You don't have to," Jeremy called back, his own voice pitched low. "They saw you go in after your wallet. You should go back out the same way. Just throw me the bags, before you go. You can do that much, I hope?"

Simon rolled his eyes, grabbed the briefcase, and heaved it across the gap. Jeremy caught it neatly and put it down by his side. Jeremy's suitcase followed—it was oddly heavy for something so small—and then Simon swaddled his duffel in his bomber jacket, zipped the jacket closed around the duffel to produce something that looked unsettlingly like a disembodied torso, and threw it after the suitcase.

"Go back out the front door and mail the letters," Jeremy said, unzipping Simon's jacket and extracting his duffel. "If they follow you, go immediately to

the busiest place you can find and stay there. If not, find a taxi stand and tell him to take you to . . . ah . . . Santa Maria delle Grazie. I'll meet you out in front."

"Santa Maria della whosis now?" Simon hissed. Standing this close to the edge of the building was making him nervous, so he crouched down again.

"Santa Maria delle Grazie," Jeremy repeated. A breeze whipped between the two buildings, nearly snatching his words away. "If you can't remember, just mention the Last Supper and talk about Leonardo da Vinci until the driver figures it out."

"Okay," Simon said dubiously. He patted his pocket, still bulging with the shape of Jeremy's phone. "I'll keep this phone until we meet up again, just in case."

Jeremy nodded, already shepherding the bags into a portable arrangement. "Good," he said. "Do that. Go on, hurry."

Simon nodded, fell back a step, and then headed back the way they'd come, so amped it was hard not to jitter.

Wig came trotting over the moment Simon came back out, confused but happy, rasping out his pack-a-day mew again. Being careful not to look in the direction of the car, Simon hunkered back down and gave the cat one last petting. "Guess this is it, little guy," he muttered under his breath. "Take care of your bad self."

He risked a glance towards the car while he was straightening up. It was still there, still parked, with two indistinct shapes still in it. The nearest mailbox was at the end of the street. Simon headed towards it, forcing himself to walk slowly, trying very hard not to ball his hands into fists; the gun strapped to his ankle felt painfully heavy. Simon strained his ears, listening for the sound of a car starting, or worse, the sound of its doors opening.

Nothing happened. Simon made it to the end of the street without incident, put Jeremy's three letters in the mailbox, and nearly had a heart attack when Wig spoke up at his feet. "Oh, Jesus, cat," he said, shuddering out a jagged breath. The cat mrowled at him again, butted its forehead against his ankle, and waited impatiently. Simon bent down and ruffled its little head. "I'm going that way," he said. "You can follow me if you want, but don't think it's going to amount to anything." He stepped over the cat and headed up the street; Wig followed him for another half a block before giving up. Simon was sort of sorry to see him go, despite the fact that the last thing he needed right now was a mascot.

It was three blocks to the taxi stand, but it might as well have been three miles. Simon braced himself every time he heard a car coming, forgetting to breathe until the car swept on by. He'd never missed his Kevlar vest so acutely before. He made a note to ask Jeremy about getting his hands on one. Milan was a hot, muggy, nasty city, but Simon would rather be sweaty than punctured any day.

None of the cars that went past him looked like that little sports car. As far as Simon knew, it was still there, parked out in front of the hotel, biding its time—what it was waiting for, he didn't know. It could have been just a couple of teenagers making out, or two people having a conversation in the only privacy afforded to them, but Simon knew deep in his soul that that wasn't the case. He'd never seen the car before, and it had looked expensive, and the people in it had just been sitting there. Watching. Simon fought down a frisson of nerves.

A taxi pulled up to the stand and disgorged its limp, shaken passengers when Simon was still half a block away. He broke into a run and made it to the stand before the taxi could pull away, yanking the door open and throwing himself in. "Hey," he said, a bit breathless. "I need to go to, uh, what was it, Santa Maria Grassy?"

"Santa Maria delle Grazie?" the taxi driver said uncertainly.

Simon snapped his fingers. "Yeah, that," he said. "Leonardo da Vinci."

The light dawned. "Yes yes," said the driver, suddenly more confident. He screeched out into traffic. Simon grabbed for whatever he could catch.

The stars were out by the time the taxi spat a well-chewed Simon out. The church itself was a bulky, complicated shape in the darkness—the lights here were few and far between—and Simon realized only after the taxi had sped off that he didn't know which end was the front. He picked the end that had a darkened plaza in front of it, figuring he had a fifty-percent chance of being correct.

Simon picked a bench and sat down, only to jump back to his feet a few minutes later. This was no good: the skin on the back of his neck kept crawling, and he had to fight the urge to look over his shoulder every five seconds. Suddenly having a wall against his back seemed like a good idea. Simon groped his way over to a shadowy spot against the front of the church and leaned against the bricks, still warm from the heat of the day. After a while, he even managed to relax a little.

Somewhere in the building he was leaning on was the Last Supper, apparently. Simon had never felt less like sightseeing in his life, but he did feel a little guilty for coming so close and failing to go in. Some day Sandra was going to give him hell for that. Assuming he lived that long—Simon bent down and loosened the gun in its holster under the guise of retying his sneaker.

The plaza was largely empty at this hour. An indeterminately-shaped lump on one of the far benches turned out to be a couple making out like a pair of crazed weasels. It made Simon uncomfortable all the way over here. He tried to look away, to give them the privacy they obviously did not want, but every few seconds something would flash pale in the dimness and Simon's attention would get caught on it, only to realize a moment that it was just skin, again. Passersby

largely ignored both Simon and the loving couple. Most of them were intent only on their phones.

The minutes crawled by. Simon gave up eventually and watched the couple go at it. Even that got boring after a while; he found himself thinking that their technique could use some work. The crowd on the sidewalk, already thin, thinned some more. Eventually, unable to stand it a second longer, Simon pulled out Jeremy's phone to check the time, and thus he was amply distracted when Jeremy breathed his name from a nearby shadow. Simon's heart stuttered painfully for a few seconds. "Christ," he wheezed, thumping his chest.

"Sorry," Jeremy murmured, slipping into Simon's own shadowed niche by the church door. "I assume, then, that they didn't try to follow you?"

Simon massaged his heart for a moment longer, then let his hand drop. "Nope. Far as I know, the car's still there. So, uh, what now?"

"Good question." Jeremy went silent. "I'm running out of people to trust, and most real hotels in the area aren't fond of doing business on a cash basis, alas," he finally said.

"I have a prepaid credit card," Simon offered. "It doesn't have a name attached..."

Jeremy's attention snapped to him, so intense that it felt like physical contact. "How much is on it right now?" Jeremy asked.

"Three hundred dollars? Something like that."

Jeremy was silent for a moment, then abruptly lunged up and kissed Simon with a thorough swiftness that threatened to bang Simon's head off the bricks. "Perfect," he breathed, once he was done. "Let's get a cab, shall we?"

They stopped only once on their way out of Santa Maria delle Grazie, to drop the phone down a sewer grating.

An hour and a half later they had an ugly, anonymous room at an ugly American chain hotel that squatted like a toad near the city limits. Simon's 'Simon Moorhead' identity and prepaid Visa had secured it for them, and Jeremy had drifted in like the fog ten minutes later, like he did. "May I see the credit card, please?" Jeremy asked, putting Simon's duffel down on the bed.

Simon, too tired and too curious to argue about it, pulled out his wallet, extracted the card, and winged it at Jeremy, who snapped it neatly out of the air. "This room was something like two hundred dollars, I don't know exactly, I don't speak euro," Simon said, dropping onto the foot of the bed. "There's not enough left on the card to pay for a second night, though, I know that much."

"Mm," Jeremy said, flipping the card over and studying the back. "Let's see if I can't do anything about that, shall we? May I borrow your phone?"

Simon's hand flew to his waist. "My phone? Don't you have like two more phones waiting for you?"

“Well, yes,” said Jeremy, “but your phone is American, and it’s an American I intend to call.”

“Huh. Well, okay, if it works all the way out here,” Simon said. He unclipped his prepaid phone from his belt and tossed it at Jeremy.

Jeremy tossed Simon’s credit card into his left hand and caught the phone with his right. “It should,” he said. “This is an American-owned hotel, after all. They make arrangements.” Jeremy performed the internationally-recognized ‘looking for bars’ gesture, swinging the phone around in a circle; eventually he found something that pleased him and tapped a number into Simon’s phone from memory, spinning Simon’s credit card in a lazy figure-eight around his fingers. “Hilary?” he said, after a moment. “It’s Jeremy, love. I’m afraid I need a favor.”

Simon, who was listening and trying not to let on, couldn’t make out anything but a vaguely feminine buzzing from the other end of the phone. “Oh, I’m doing as well as possible under the circumstances, thank you for asking,” Jeremy said, sending Simon’s credit card dancing over his knuckles again. “At any rate, I’ve an American prepaid credit card here that needs reloading.” The card finished its last rotation, winding up between his thumb and forefinger, and he read off the numbers on the front and back. The voice on the other end of the line hummed again once he was through. “As much as you can,” said Jeremy. “At least a thousand dollars, please.” He listened for a moment, then shut his eyes. “You’re a godsend,” he said. “Thanks ever so—of course. Yes.”

Jeremy waved the credit card at Simon, then skimmed it towards him sidearm, the little square of plastic humming through the air like a tiny Frisbee. Simon fielded it with both hands, then stuck it back in his wallet. “The *large* one, definitely,” Jeremy said, laughing a little. “The largest they make. Take care of yourself, love—oh yes. I’ll try.” He closed the phone and tossed it gently onto the bed next to Simon.

“So,” Simon said, “who’s Hilary?” He stifled a yawn.

“Ethan’s answering service,” Jeremy said. He took off his hat and put it on top of the dresser, then slithered out of his jacket. “Lovely woman. At any rate, she’s going to reload your credit card for us. We’ll move on tomorrow no matter what, but having the card to fall back on is a huge load off my mind.”

Simon leaned back, propping himself up on his hands. “You’re welcome,” he said.

Jeremy went still for half a second before laughing ruefully. “Yes, of course, thank you too, Simon. I’m terribly sorry, I can’t imagine what’s happened to my manners—”

“I’m kidding,” Simon said. “Mostly.”

“Oh, *mostly*,” said Jeremy.

“Yeah, I’ll cut you a break because of the whole ‘running to save your skin’ thing,” Simon said, flopping out on the bed. “Man, I am not going to miss that

horrible mattress one bit,” he said, bouncing a little. “It was like sleeping in a taco.”

“Mm.” Jeremy kicked off his shoes, then stripped off his t-shirt. The effort of it made him stagger a little. “I expect that I could sleep on concrete, right about now,” Jeremy said. “Thanks to you, I needn’t do so.”

Simon shut his eyes, tucked his hands under his head, and blindly toed off his sneakers. “Hooray, I’m useful,” he said, yawning hugely. His own adrenalin was long since gone, leaving him nearly dizzy with exhaustion.

“I never said you weren’t,” Jeremy said, amused. His hand flicked out and killed the lights. Simon only dimly remembered pushing himself up onto the bed before he fell asleep, still in his jeans, still on top of the covers.

He woke up again some unknown number of hours later, deep in the night. Someone had stripped off his jeans and thrown the covers over him, but Simon was, once again, alone in the bed. Muzzy, Simon rolled over and lifted his head.

The light of Jeremy’s cell phone screen lit one corner of the darkened room with a dim grayish light. Jeremy was half-hunched over it, barechested and tousled, his eyes closed; “I see,” Jeremy murmured, rubbing his shoulder absently. “Tell him there’s a perfectly insane amount of money in it for him. And tell him I’ll come alone.”

Simon furrowed his brow, trying to make his brain close on the word *alone*, but it was no use; the words slipped away from him like fish in water. Simon’s head thumped back down. A moment later, he was asleep again.

◆ Twenty-Four

By three o'clock the next afternoon Simon had a different hotel room, under a different name, in a different ugly American chain hotel less than a quarter of a mile away from the first one. The room was slightly less tacky and was, therefore, slightly more expensive. Simon, long inured to terrible motel rooms, cared only that his credit card worked and that the hotel provided free breakfasts.

Even Jeremy seemed disinclined to complain, although he did touch the bedspread gingerly and then shudder. "My God," he said, his distaste visible, "what's the point in coming to Italy at all, if you insist on staying in a hotel room that's just as awful and generic as one you'd get at home?"

"Well, first of all, you're a goddamned prima donna," Simon said reasonably, "and second of all, you chose this place, not me."

Jeremy sighed, then gave Simon a quick smile. "Generic 'you', Simon," he said patiently. "Well, generic American 'you', I suppose. And for all that it's soul-crushingly bland, a hotel of this monolithic size does have a few advantages."

"Yeah?"

"Laundry service for both of us, to start," Jeremy said, ticking off his points on his fingers. "English-language television for you. And, I might add, an extremely fancy exercise room, which I intend to go make use of, if you wouldn't mind lending me your keycard."

Simon, already investigating the television remote, flapped a hand at Jeremy. "Knock yourself out," he said. "I think I'll vegetate for a couple of hours, maybe call home. Touch base. You know."

"Good idea," Jeremy said. He plucked the room's keycard off the desk and vanished into the bathroom with his suitcase. Simon turned on the television and spent a few minutes flipping through the channels, barely noticing when the door closed behind Jeremy.

Unsurprisingly there was nothing on that Simon wanted to watch, although at least the stuff he wasn't interested in was the same stuff he wasn't interested in at home. Eventually Simon left the television tuned to the middle of some action movie that looked vaguely familiar and went to dump out his duffel, making a

pile of his dirty things on the floor—‘laundry service’, Jeremy had said, and truth be told Simon could use a little laundering. He dug out the plastic laundry bag in the closet and stuffed it full of his dirty clothes. Hopefully Jeremy wouldn’t come banging back up here in an hour and insist that they leave.

That done, Simon found himself at loose ends, again. He muted the movie, letting it explode on in silence, and went to dig out his prepaid phone and sprawl out on the bed with it. True to Jeremy’s word, the American phone did get bars here; Simon called his own phone to pick up his messages—none, which was unsurprising but a little depressing anyway—and then called Sandra, who snapped open her phone on the first ring. “Hey, boss,” she said.

“Oh, hey, you’re still awake this time,” Simon said, putting his free hand behind his head. “What time is it there?”

Sandra’s laugh was hollow. “Nine in the morning,” she said. “And, just so you know, nine in the morning is a horrible time to *still* be awake.”

“Really? It’s three in the afternoon here—”

“—and that’s one of the many reasons why I hate you,” Sandra said. “So! I note for the record that you are still alive! Poor marksmanship amongst the Italians? How sad.”

Simon snickered. “Careful, Sandy, I might almost think you care or something.”

“I’m not sure what gave you that impression.” Sandra paused. “So how goes it?” she asked, the mocking edge gone from her voice now. “You still okay?”

“So far, so good,” Simon said, closing his eyes. “We did have to run for it once, but it was just a couple of hard guys staking out the hotel. No violence whatsoever, just a bunch of leaving. Swear to God.” Sandra made an indescribable little choking noise. “What?” Simon asked. He was almost enjoying this.

“You know what, boss?” Sandra said. “If you think you can say that and then leave it there, you’ve got another think coming.”

Simon shut his eyes. “Well, if you insist—”

“—and then we got ourselves a hotel room using one of my brand-new identities,” Simon said. “And here we are, safe as, uh, things that are really safe.”

On the other end of the line, Sandra was quiet. She’d barely said a word since Simon launched into his explanation. Simon would have liked to think that she was just listening hard, but he knew her too well; halfway around the world Simon pulled the phone an inch or so away from his ear and braced for the metaphorical impact.

When it came, though, Sandra’s voice was only worried. “Boss, I know it’s none of my damned business, but I really don’t like the sound of any of this,” she said. “I mean, I know why you’re doing this, but . . . I guess I didn’t think that you’d be breaking so many laws to do it.”

"And here I thought you'd scold me for missing an opportunity to experience Great Art—"

"Simon." Sandra did not sound amused.

It had been a weak joke anyway. "Yeah, yeah, okay," Simon said, sitting up. "I get what you're saying. Okay? I'm not really all that fond of that part of it either, but . . ." He trailed off there and flapped his free hand helplessly, groping for the words. "I have to do this," he finally said.

"I know you feel that way," Sandra said. Her voice was subdued and a little too rational, what Simon had always thought of as her 'I am reasoning with you now' voice. "And I understand why you feel responsible for the situation, but, Simon . . . there's a *line*."

"Yeah," Simon said. He rubbed a hand down his face. "Yeah, I know. I figure I crossed it like a week ago. Do you want to know where it was?"

"Not really," Sandra said. "Tell me."

"I called someone who could put me in touch with someone else who could put me in contact with Jeremy," Simon said, avoiding as many names as he could. "I told her I was with the Bureau, to convince her to help me. It wasn't a lie, but . . . Christ, that was the line and I saw it go whistling by. There's no taking that back."

"No, there's not," Sandra said, her voice quiet and defeated.

Simon folded forward over his crossed legs, wrapping himself into a ball. "It's just that I'm *responsible* for this mess," he said, his voice a little thick. "I fucked up and I got a lot of people in trouble, and . . . when you get right down to it some things are more important than the letter of the law."

"And . . . this is?" Sandra asked. "This was worth it? *He* was worth it?"

"I don't know." Simon let his head fall. "I keep asking myself that. If I figure it out, I'll let you know."

Sandra breathed out a little noise of assent. "All right," she said, sighing. "I'm not interested in being your mother. Just . . . try not to fuck this up, boss. We need you."

"I'm trying," Simon said. "Cross your fingers for me."

"Okay," Sandra said. For a moment she sounded like exactly what she was: sincerely worried. Simon fought back a rising surge of guilt. "Are you okay?" Sandra asked. "You sound kind of weird."

Simon pushed himself back upright. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah, I'm okay. I'd apologize for worrying you, but I think I'm way too manly."

Sandra laughed a little. "You've been worrying me for years, Simon," she said, and hung up.

" . . . what?" Simon asked the empty line. "Excuse me?" Sandra was long gone, though, and there was no answer. Simon snorted and folded the phone shut.

The television banged silently on. In the corner, the air-conditioning unit clicked twice and exhaled. Suddenly the room felt small enough to crush him. Simon rolled off the bed and headed for the balcony.

The balcony was plain and ugly to match the rest of the hotel, with plain iron railings and a cement floor. The view was of the equally ugly and anonymous row of buildings across the way—new apartments or warehouses with windows, Simon wasn't sure which—and Milan itself was mostly just the muted sounds of traffic somewhere off to the south. Simon caught the rail in both hands and stared off into the distance.

It was hard to defend himself to Sandra when he could barely defend himself to himself. "What in the hell do I think I'm doing, anyway?" Simon asked the spectre of Milan, articulating the question in hopes that it would trigger some kind of answer. It didn't work. The longer he was here, the less sure of himself he became; the ready answers that had convinced Jeremy to let him stay sounded more idiotic with every boring, unnerving day that passed. He didn't know what he'd been expecting, but this? This wasn't it.

Tapping his fingers on the railing, Simon struggled to sort it all out. The sun moved sluggishly through the muggy afternoon air; the air conditioning curled out of the open balcony door and licked against the back of Simon's shirt. Simon let it. He wasn't paying for it, after all.

"Enjoying the view?" Jeremy said, behind him.

Simon didn't so much as twitch. "Nah, it sucks," he said. "When are we going to stop running away and start doing something?"

Silence from behind him; then Jeremy appeared at his side, folding his arms on the railing a foot or so away from Simon. Jeremy was still sweating from his workout, his muscles tensed like cables. He had on weightlifting gloves and—Simon wasn't sure what the hell that thing was, but Jeremy looked like an Olympic gymnast in it, which was to say, ridiculous, effeminate, and weirdly hot. "Soon," Jeremy said. "I realize it doesn't seem like much is going on, but I'm making arrangements."

"I hope so," Simon said, tearing his eyes away from the spectacle of Jeremy's unitard-thing and going back to contemplating the ugly buildings across the way. "I can't stand just running and reacting. There's got to be something we can *do*."

Jeremy sighed and ran a gloved hand over his sweat-soaked hair. "All I can say is 'soon'," he said. "If you really can't stand the pressure, you're welcome to go home. I won't hold it against you."

"I've thought about it," Simon admitted. "It's hard to remember why I'm here, sometimes. Like when I've been sitting around all day, or when the extent of my help is mailing letters and fetching newspapers. No, don't," he said, holding up a hand to forestall Jeremy's answer. "I know I volunteered for it. Hell, I even know it's a help. But it's hard to remember that sometimes. That's all I'm saying."

"Mm," Jeremy said. "Well. It's a huge help, to be honest. Things have gotten ever so much easier since I've started using you as my public face. And I've come to be grateful for the company. More than that, I really can't tell you."

Simon glanced at him. "Just . . . tell me you've got a plan that involves more than running away a lot," he said. "Assuming you do."

The silence stretched between them for a moment. Jeremy's eyes were unreadable. Simon's stomach knotted . . . but then Jeremy shook his head and laughed a little, dispelling the illusion. He turned around, leaning back against the railing. "Simon, think about who you're talking to," he said. "I'm hurt that you think so little of my organizational skills."

"Yeah?" Simon asked. "You're not just saying that?"

Jeremy's little smile curled in on itself; just like that, Simon found it easy enough to believe him. "Oh, I definitely have a plan," Jeremy said. "I rather suspect you'll hate it."

Simon snorted. "Yeah, I'll buy that," he said. "I hate all your plans. Hey, remember the time one of your plans got you shot? Or the time you got Texas shot, that was a good one—"

"In fact, I'm working on several fronts at once," Jeremy said, blatantly ignoring Simon. "Once things begin to move, there'll be no stopping them, so I have to have all my dominos in a row before I tip the first one over. So to speak."

"Huh. Yeah, okay, I feel a little better," Simon said. "I just have one question."

"Mm?"

"What in the hell are you wearing? I mean, seriously, is that a leotard?"

All in all, they stayed in the ugly American hotel for three days. The sheer size of the place made it both easy to blend into the crowds and hard to tell if they were being watched, everyone on staff and most of the guests spoke English by preference, and the nearest newsstand was almost five blocks away and shiny in a way that didn't seem very Italian. It didn't really feel like being in Italy at all, not that Simon would ever admit this to Jeremy's face. Simon ran errands and, as the days passed, watched Jeremy tauten like a bowstring. Outwardly he was still the same as ever, but behind the shield of his easy good manners he was wound tight, his skin grayish under its tan; he paced the room constantly while on the phone and slept in fits and starts.

It was starting to wear Simon out just to watch him. Despite the irritating passive boredom of his days Simon's own nerves were wound pretty tight, to the point where he was aware of every shift Jeremy made. Jeremy woke him three times in one night, slithering out of the bed to go have a quiet cigarette on the balcony, and on the third occasion Simon crawled out and followed him, scrubbing sleep from his eyes. The east was just barely beginning to lighten, and birds were singing from somewhere. The muggy cool of the early morning clung

to Simon's bare skin as he stepped out onto the damp concrete. "What's up?" he said.

Jeremy's lighter ratcheted. The little flame illuminated his face and the corner in which he was hiding; his cheeks drew in and the tip of his cigarette flared. "Ah, did I wake you?" he said, vanishing as the flame snapped out. "I apologize."

"Well, yeah, you did, given that you've been jumping around like a cricket all night," Simon said. "Something's up. What is it?"

The shadow that was Jeremy sighed out smoke, the glowing orange coal of the cigarette dropping to hang by his hip. "I'm out of time," he said. "I daren't stall any longer."

"Okay," Simon said, resisting the urge to add *finally*. "So what do we do?"

"Soon—this afternoon or the next—they'll be able to get me on the phone." Jeremy paused long enough to tap ash off the end of his cigarette. "And once they've got me on the phone, things are going to start happening."

"Okay," Simon said again. "Tell me the plan."

"We'll move hotels tomorrow," Jeremy said.

Simon waited for him to go on. When he didn't, Simon said, "Well, yeah, I figured as much, smart guy. Tell me the rest."

He sensed more than saw Jeremy's smile. "And then we wait," Jeremy said. "Or we don't. It all depends on when, exactly, *la Repubblica* received my letter."

"Yeah, and . . . ?" Simon said, making a little come-on gesture.

"Then they'll have a number at which I can be reached," Jeremy said. He took one last sip off his cigarette and flicked the half-smoked end over the balcony railing. It fell like an orange meteor. Simon lost track of it in seconds.

"Aaaand?"

Jeremy evolved from the shadows and put his hand lightly on Simon's chest; it was oddly cold. "And then we'll have to take the call in a place we can run from," he said, moving past Simon, heading back into the room. "Just in case."

"You're just going to keep on with this inscrutable crap, aren't you," Simon said, following Jeremy. He shut the balcony door behind himself, closing out the humidity.

"Yes," Jeremy said. "I thought you knew better than to ask. Come back to bed."

Simon groped his way back to the bed, dropping down on top of the covers. "Sometimes I just want to shake you until words fall out," he said.

Jeremy laughed a little and touched Simon's arm, his fingertips still cool. Simon waited, in case that meant that an explanation was forthcoming, but if it was, it didn't come until after Simon had fallen back to sleep.

Simon had barely unglued his eyes the next morning before Jeremy sent him off after a copy of *la Repubblica*. Simon trudged the five blocks to the newsstand

and back still half-asleep, gave Jeremy his precious paper with a grunt, and went to throw himself in the shower.

The shower did more to wake him than the walk had, not that that was saying much. Simon braced his hands against the tile and sputtered under the spray, starting to think about breakfast and coffee, not in that order. The hotel's free continental breakfast was lavish, if not particularly great, and there was real coffee that didn't come in thimbles—the thought propelled a nearly-human Simon out of the shower. He wasted a couple of minutes in front of the mirror, rubbing his chin and trying to decide if he needed a shave. Eventually, he decided that the answer was *yes, but screw it*, slung a towel around his hips, and padded out of the bathroom. “Yeah, so I'm thinking breakfast,” he said, and stopped there, the words trailing off into silence.

Jeremy was sitting at the table, his hands folded neatly on top of the paper. He might have just been lost in thought, except that his knuckles were a bloodless white and his right eye was twitching, just a bit. To top it all off, he hadn't even raised an eyebrow at Simon's state of undress.

Simon went equally still. “Today, huh,” he said.

Jeremy shook his head and came back to himself. “It seems that way,” he said with unnecessary briskness. “Breakfast if you must, but we need to switch hotels quickly.”

“Just lemme get dressed,” Simon said. He dropped his towel and grabbed for his jeans. Even this display didn't seem to merit a comment. Simon was oddly hurt.

An hour later ‘Simon Moorhead’ had a room in yet another of the ugly chain hotels that dotted the road between Milan and the Malpensa airport. He'd barely set foot in the room before Jeremy tapped urgently on the door; Simon dumped his duffel on the bed and went to let Jeremy in.

“We have to go,” Jeremy said, blowing past Simon and into the room, so alert that the air around him seemed to vibrate. He dropped his suitcase on the floor next to the briefcase. “Leave everything you can, and leave it packed, just in case.” He paused. “Bring the gun,” he added, his voice just the slightest bit uneven.

“Already wearing it,” Simon said, hitching up the leg of his jeans to display the ankle holster. “Where are we going?”

Jeremy twitched out a smile. “To a youth hostel, believe it or not,” he said.

“I'm not even going to ask,” Simon said. “Oh, wait, that's a lie: why a youth hostel?”

“Three reasons,” Jeremy said, holding up three fingers. “Reason one—” he twitched his pointer finger “—because youth hostels cater to teenagers, they're willing to do business on a cash basis. Reason two—” his middle finger twitched “—we're laying a false trail, just in case they *are* able to track this phone call. And

reason three—" he folded his hand into a fist "—I mailed the phone in question to myself two weeks ago. It's waiting for me there."

"In case they're already tracking it?" Simon asked.

Jeremy nodded. "In one," he said. "If we get there and someone is already watching the place, we're blown, and we leave."

"And I suppose you're going to want me to scout the place out before you set foot inside," Simon said, shaking his head. "You're lucky I like you so much."

"Aren't I just?" Jeremy shut his eyes and blew out a breath. He flexed his hands twice, then let his eyes drift open. Just like that the nervous energy was gone, leaving him calm to the point of serenity. "Call down to the front desk, would you, and have them call you a taxi," Jeremy said. "We'd best leave."

"Yeah," Simon said, picking up the desk phone. Helpless to stop himself, he added, "Let's do this thing."

The cab spat them out half an hour later, in the midst of an unfamiliar neighborhood that looked to be mostly apartment buildings. Jeremy flicked the driver a folded bill and headed for cover with alacrity; Simon followed, joining Jeremy in a deeply recessed doorway lined with mailboxes. Simon glanced left, then right, and then frowned. "So where's—"

Jeremy's hand flicked out and down. "A bit softer, please," he murmured, running his fingers along the brim of his hat to make sure it hid his eyes.

"Right," Simon said, rolling his eyes and lowering his voice. "Paranoia is go. So where's this hostel?"

"A block that way," Jeremy said, jerking his chin up the street, "and to the right, about half a block along. There ought to be a sign."

Simon glanced up the street. Out here, at least, he could see no one loitering, either on foot or in a parked car. "Right," he said. He took a deep breath and thumped his fist lightly against his thigh; the world sprang into high focus. "Right," he said again, more firmly. "I'm going to make the block first. You wait here."

Something poked him in the side. Simon looked down to discover that he was being prodded with a baseball cap. "Here," Jeremy said, his smile faint but present. "Just in case one of the same fellows that was staking out the other place is staking out this one."

Simon stared down at the cap until Jeremy poked him with it again, then took it with ill grace. "Yeah, okay, that idea has merit," Simon said dubiously, rolling the cap's bill in one hand, "but seriously, a *Redskins* cap? Is this your idea of appropriate?"

Jeremy raised both eyebrows and did a poor job of looking innocent. "Well, you *are* from Washington."

"Bullshit," Simon said, ramming the baseball cap onto his head and pulling the bill down. "I'm from Hinton, Iowa. Just ask Ethan. Besides, the Redskins

broke my goddamned heart two years ago, which you would understand, if you weren't such a, a huge Englishman. Okay, I'm going."

"Luck," Jeremy breathed, touching Simon's arm before withdrawing back under the building's overhang.

Simon hesitated, then followed him, backing him up against the entryway door. Jeremy's shoulders bumped up against the glass; he glanced over his shoulder, then back at Simon, raising both eyebrows. "Yes?"

"'Luck'? That's it?" Simon glanced over his own shoulder, making sure that they were reasonably unobserved, then leaned forward and lowered his voice. "What, I don't even get groped for luck this time?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Simon," Jeremy said primly, his little smile neatly belying his tone. "I refuse to molest fellows wearing billed hats. It's gauche."

Simon snorted and poked Jeremy. "Not to chop some goddamned logic or anything, but the hat was your idea—"

Jeremy's hand flashed up and plucked the baseball cap off Simon's head, dumping Simon's hair in his eyes. "There," Jeremy said, his smile going crooked. "Problem solved."

Snickering—and jamming the baseball cap back on his head—Simon came reeling back out of the recessed doorway a minute or so later. If anyone had noticed Jeremy wishing him luck, they weren't letting on. Simon fought down his grin and headed up the street, falling in with the rest of the crowds.

At the intersection Simon fought his way back out of the pack and took shelter at the corner, pulling out his cell phone and flipping it open. Covertly, he studied the cross street over the top of the screen. The cross street was wide and fairly busy, without the usual complement of poorly-parked cars along its sides. Good. Simon flipped his phone closed, put it back in its clip, and set off.

Ten seconds later he ran afoul of his first problem. The architecture around here was way too fancy, almost baroque, and the stone front of every building was pitted with deep recesses around the doors and windows. A person tucked away in one of those hideaways was going to be nearly invisible until Simon got almost directly opposite him, and while that made Simon feel even better about Jeremy wishing him luck, it didn't particularly endear Milan to him. Simon gritted his teeth and forced himself to amble along, playing the gawking tourist. If he'd thought, he'd have brought a map to frown at.

The hostel *della Piana* unfolded on his right, a fancy-ass stone building just like all the others on this block. Simon slowed a little more. There were café chairs and tables outside the building, blocking foot traffic, and clustered around these tables lurked Simon's second problem: something like twenty teenagers of assorted nationalities, screaming enthusiastically at each other in what sounded like multiple languages. Huge and serious backpacks slumped on the sidewalks all around them, narrowing Simon's corridor of passage to a single-person lane.

Simon picked his way past, taking ample advantage of the slowdown to check the nooks and crannies of the buildings opposite. No one was there, but no one needed to be. Any one of these teenagers could be someone on the lookout for Jeremy—all right, it didn't seem likely, but it didn't seem particularly unlikely, either. Simon thought for a minute, then veered past a smallish herd of nomadic backpacks and pushed his way into the hostel.

He stopped just inside the doorway, waiting for his eyes to adjust. Once they did, he wasn't impressed. The woman behind the shabby desk looked up at him and frowned. "I'm sorry, sir, we're currently on turnout. No one is allowed back into the hostel until two PM."

"Ah, no, I don't need a room," Simon said. "Do you have a payphone? My cell phone's dead."

She compressed her lips for a moment, then pointed down a dimly-lit back hallway. "Back there," she said. "Please make it quick."

Simon gave her his second-best grin, making her take a startled half-step back. "You're a *lifesaver*," Simon said fervently. He darted off down the back hallway before she could respond.

The hallway, much like the lobby, was shabby, the carpeting beginning to ruck up in dirty folds. Simon guessed that any facility that stored teenagers must take a beating on a regular basis. The battered pay phones ran along the wall to his left, several of them, at least two missing their handsets. Simon loped right past them, past the restrooms, around a corner, past the double doors that led into the kitchen, past a couple of offices with nameplates. . .

The back door was at the very end of the hallway. Simon pulled up short and considered it. It didn't appear to have been alarmed, or, at least, it didn't have any signs to that effect. The door had a simple doorknob and deadbolt; Simon unlocked the deadbolt and twisted the knob, and the back door sprang open, letting sunlight spill in.

The back door opened onto a narrow, deserted alleyway full of garbage cans and loose garbage. The alley stank like cheap beer and vomit, which at least meant that it was likely to stay deserted. Simon reached around and tried the knob on the other side. It didn't turn. "Huh," Simon said under his breath. He eased the door shut again and pulled out his wallet.

Most of Simon Drake's effects were still back in the hotel. Simon Moorhead's personal effects were few and far between, and eventually Simon gave up and sacrificed his Starbucks gift card to its fate; he bent the heavy plastic in half, opened the back door again, and folded the bent card over the door latch. He eased the door shut. The weight of the door trapped the card against the doorjamb, pinning it in place; the door appeared to be closed, latched, and locked, assuming no one looked too closely. Hopefully the half-a-card that showed would go unnoticed for a few minutes.

Simon sped back to the lobby and gave the woman behind the counter another

smile and a wave. “Thanks a lot,” he said, and hit the front door, heading back out into the mass of teenagers.

“Okay,” Simon said, zipping into the recessed entryway where he’d left Jeremy. “We’re good, but I don’t know for how long—I’ll explain while we go. Come on, we’re going that way, around the back of the block.”

Jeremy didn’t need to be told twice; he popped out of the doorway like a cork, forcing Simon to trot a couple of steps to catch up. “Is there a problem?” Jeremy said under his breath, glancing from side to side.

“Maybe. Not really. Sort of. To the corner here and turn left.” Simon forded the lunchtime crowds with Jeremy alert in his wake. “See, the hostel’s on turnout, which means that there are something like four thousand kids sitting out front waiting for it to open up again, and who knows who could be lurking in the crowd, right? So I went in and loided the back door with my Starbucks card, and now we have to get there before someone notices the rigged door—oh, yeah, same to you, lady,” Simon snarled under his breath, cutting a wide swath through the angry crowds as he led Jeremy around the corner. “I figure it’s probably paranoia, but better safe than sorry, right?”

“Indubitably,” Jeremy said, smiling faintly. “So I suppose this means that I owe you some coffee.”

Simon let the crowds force him to the curb and lengthened his stride. “You owe me so much coffee that your puny mind cannot begin to comprehend it,” Simon said. “You owe me a *lifetime’s* worth of coffee. You owe me, like, coffee every day for the rest of your life.”

“Mm,” Jeremy said, loading the little sound with so much meaning that Simon sped up to avoid it.

Simon almost walked right past the mouth of the narrow alley. Unmarked and unobtrusive, the alley opened out onto a side street, nearly overshadowed by the awnings of the buildings to either side; if Simon hadn’t caught a whiff of that beer-piss aroma, he’d have missed it entirely. “Here,” he said, stepping into the alley.

Jeremy followed him, stepping with extreme care, his nose wrinkled in distaste. “And who says Italy isn’t charming,” he murmured, easing around a splatter of something disgustingly chunky. “Which door is it?”

“No clue,” Simon said cheerfully. “Pull on the doorknobs until one opens and a Starbucks card falls out, I guess.”

Jeremy’s smile twitched on and off. “Somewhere in the middle, I presume,” he said. He reached out and tugged the nearest doorknob, just in case.

The fourth door answered to Simon’s pull. His Starbucks card, now bent in two places, fell at his feet; Simon eyed it, eyed the dirty cement that it was touching, and abandoned the card to its fate. Jeremy slid past him and into the

hostel's back hallway with alacrity. Simon followed, pulled the door shut, and relocked the deadbolt. "Just like I left it," he muttered under his breath, jogging to catch up with Jeremy. "It's almost like I didn't break and enter at all."

"Keep telling yourself that, if it helps," Jeremy murmured.

The woman at the desk looked up as they entered the lobby, startled. "I'm sorry," she said, thrown a little off-balance by their sudden appearance from the back. "The hostel is on turnout, no one's allowed back in until two—"

"Good afternoon," Jeremy said, his English accent suddenly pronounced and as smooth as butter. "My name is Roger Thawte—I believe you're expecting me?"

After a moment of fluster, the woman at the desk said, "Oh! Oh. Yes. Just a . . . just a moment." She took a couple of steps back, then turned on her heel and hurried into the back room.

Simon glanced towards the front door, then craned up onto his toes and tried to peek into the back room. "Sure hope she's not back there selling you out," he said under his breath.

"My goodness, so do I," Jeremy said, sounding almost cheerful about the possibility.

"Well, you sound better," Simon said, or started to; he broke off abruptly as the woman reappeared, carrying a small and incredibly battered cardboard box.

Jeremy accepted the box with a smile. "It's so kind of you to allow me in early," he said, slipping back into that buttery English. "I've just stepped off the train and I'm *exhausted*."

"Well, since you did call and make arrangements beforehand, ah—you're welcome," she said, still a bit flustered. "Ah . . . the semi-private room is twenty euros per . . ."

Jeremy held out a green hundred-euro note. "For both of us," he said. "He'll pay me back later."

"News to me," Simon said, glancing around the lobby again. "Man, what happened to that box? Taxi run over it?"

"Oh, quite possibly," Jeremy said, darting a narrow glance at Simon.

The woman finished making change and handed Jeremy a pair of brass keys. "Up the stairs and to your left," she said, pointing. "It'll be the last room on the right, and the bathroom is right next to your room—I'm sorry. It's liable to be noisy."

Jeremy put a five-euro bill on the counter and pushed it across. "Madam, I'm unlikely to be in any shape to notice by the time that turnout ends. Thank you, you've been a darling."

After a bit of protest, she picked up the bill and tucked it into her pocket. Jeremy beamed at her, then headed for the stairs; Simon waved and followed.

* * *

“Smells like feet,” Simon noted, turning in a circle to take in the rest of the room. He was immediately sorry. The room was basically a walk-in closet with two twin beds and a tiny desk jammed into it. What little he’d seen of the communal bathroom ensured that he didn’t want to see any more.

“Doesn’t it just?” Jeremy smacked the palm of one hand against the window sash until it tore free in a shower of dirty white paint and rust. Wriggling his fingers into the newly-created gap, he pried the window open; it dragged upwards with a scream and another shower of paint chips. Jeremy poked his head out the window. “Ah, good, a fire escape,” he said, his voice muffled.

Simon sat gingerly on the foot of one of the twin beds. It barely compressed under his weight but redoubled the smell. “So . . . what’s the plan?”

Jeremy pulled his head back in, dusting paint chips off his shoulders. “The plan,” he said, “is to sit here until someone calls. I don’t expect to have to wait more than an hour or two.”

“Yeah, sounds exciting,” Simon said. “And if they come after you?”

Jeremy waved one hand, taking in the whole room with a minimum of effort. “We have two escape routes, both of which lead up as well as down, our things are cached elsewhere, and furthermore, we’re both armed.” He tugged back the sleeve of his jacket, revealing one of his wrist harnesses. His smile went tight. “I suspect that the first time they come after me, they’ll be overconfident. They won’t send enough people. My goal is to keep them from finding me at all, but if necessary, I’ll accept not letting them find me twice.” That pronounced, he let the sleeve of his jacket drop.

“Okay, then,” Simon said, after a moment. “So we’re going to sit around in this charming room for a couple of hours and then split. I can handle that. Do you want me to go sit in the lobby and keep an eye out?”

“I’d prefer it if we stuck together.” Jeremy picked up the cardboard box and started picking at the tape. The box had been so sadly smashed by its trip through the Italian postal service that it resembled a small cardboard football. “Besides, around here I’m afraid you’d stand out like a sore thumb.”

“Yeah, probably,” Simon said. “Christ, that thing had better not be broken.”

Jeremy ripped the top of the football open. “Fortunately, I’d planned for this,” he said, extracting a small metal box. It was a bit dinged up, but not too badly. “Now, if they’d managed to tear the package open, I suppose the box would have fallen out and gotten lost, but these are the risks we must take.” He popped open the metal box, extracted a cellphone and a charger, and plugged the cellphone in. “Now we wait.”

They settled in, the plugged-in cell phone lurking on the desk like an ill omen. Simon kicked himself around so that he could lean against the wall by the door and listen to the noises from the hallway; Jeremy lounged on the other bed, keeping a lackadaisical eye out on the fire escape.

Half an hour or so after they'd arrived, turnout ended with a vengeance. Suddenly the hallway was packed full of teenagers without volume knobs, thumping and screaming and banging things around. The toilet next door flushed without stopping for ten minutes straight. "Goddamn kids," Simon said, mostly as an observation.

"Now you see why I haven't been hiding in hostels," Jeremy said. His expression was particularly flat and unamused. "Even the better ones cater to the youth crowd, and this, quite frankly, isn't one of the better ones."

"Yeah? You're kidding. I thought all the best hotels featured exciting new stenchies."

"On the other hand, no one in their right mind would look for me here." Jeremy folded his arms across his chest and sighed. "I suppose it's something to keep in mind."

A teenager of indeterminate gender went screaming up the hallway, thumping indiscriminately on every door it passed. The door next to Simon rattled in its frame and nearly popped open. Simon flinched away from the door, then settled warily back again. "I feel old," he said. "I'm *thirty*. I should not be having a 'you kids get off my lawn' moment."

"I expect you were a handful in your day," Jeremy said, poking idly at the drift of chipped paint in the corner of the window.

Simon scowled at him. "Scuse me? How would you know?"

"Well, you seem the type." Jeremy dusted his dirty fingertips off on the bedspread.

"The type," Simon repeated, and snorted.

The awkward demi-conversation petered out. Outside the initial ruckus was starting to die down, although the occasional hosteler went thudding by. Someone turned on the shower. Simon tried to get comfortable, failed, sighed sharply, and sank down until he was nearly prone across the foot of the bed, poking idly at Jeremy's shins with the toe of his sneaker. "I wasn't a *handful*," he finally said, grumpily.

"Mm?"

"What you said. I wasn't a handful. I was a perfectly normal kid."

"Ah," Jeremy said, the light dawning. "You wanted to get drunk and have sex with anything that moved."

"Well, yeah, but I wasn't an *asshole* about it," Simon said. "And I did pretty good in school—"

"—pretty well, I assume you mean—"

"—yeah, okay, eat me," Simon said, halfheartedly trying and failing to kick Jeremy in the knee. "But my point is that I never went screaming up and down the hallway of a hostel like a giant moron, because I had half a brain, okay?"

Jeremy held up his hands in surrender. "All right, all right. I suppose I was only making conversation."

“Well, this conversation you made is stupid,” Simon declared. “Let’s kill it. Anything moving in the alley?”

Jeremy pushed himself off the wall and peered out the window. “Nothing that I can see,” he said, after a moment.

“I wish the asshole would hurry up and call,” Simon said.

“So do I,” Jeremy said, glancing at the silent phone on the desk. “I’m sure it won’t be long.” He sighed and reached for the phone—and someone hammered on the door.

Simon shot bolt upright with a squeak of bedsprings, grabbing for the nonexistent gun in the small of his back. Jeremy nearly teleported out the window—one moment he was sitting on the foot of the bed, the next he was straddling the windowsill with one foot on the fire escape. Simon threw up a hand to keep Jeremy from bolting entirely, then reached down and drew his hideout gun. He couldn’t put his back against the wall—the room was too small—so instead he crouched down between the beds and brought the gun up until the front sight kissed off his cheek. “Yeah?” he called, his voice gruff.

From outside the door, silence. Then someone sniggered and said, “Land-shark.”

Simon jerked, rocking back onto his heels. Jeremy was still frozen half-in and half-out of the room, breathing silently through his half-open mouth, his eyes on the door. “Aw, no,” Simon muttered, slamming the gun back into its holster and lunging to his feet. He stomped over to the door and threw it open. “No, you are *not* here, I am *not* seeing this—I nearly *shot* you, dumbass!”

“And here we brought pizza and everything,” Mike said, still snickering. He had the cardboard box up over one shoulder like a waiter. “Totally bad form to shoot the messenger, boss.”

“How—why—*Jesus Christ*,” Simon eventually concluded, slapping a hand over his eyes. “Okay, I demand answers and I already know I’m going to hate ’em, but first you all need to *get in here* before half the goddamned city notices we’re here.” Simon stepped back and jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

“Awesome,” Mike said, ambling into the tiny room and automatically taking up half of it just by being Mike. “Man, this place is swank.”

“I’m almost afraid he means that,” Sandra said, grimly herding the rest of the team into the room. Nate, at least, had the good sense to look sheepish, but he was the only one displaying anything like remorse for this boneheaded maneuver; even Dave, who could usually be counted on for sheepishness, was too busy interacting with the tiniest laptop Simon had ever personally seen.

“What can I say, I got ghetto tastes,” Mike said. He spun the pizza neatly down on the desk next to the plugged-in cell phone. “Yo! Archer! Nice threads! You actually fuckin’ that windowsill or what?”

Warily Jeremy pulled his leg back into the room and stood up. His shoulders were so taut that it hurt Simon just to look at them. "Well," Jeremy said, his voice thin, "this is certainly an . . . unlooked-for surprise."

"Hey, don't look at me," Simon said, forced to raise his voice just to be heard. He was having to talk to Jeremy over the heads of his team, none of whom were particularly quiet human beings. There were now seven people crammed into a room that was barely large enough for two, and Johnny and Mike were already staging a desultory kicking fight over one of the beds. Simon glanced back to Jeremy. "Shut the window," he suggested.

Jeremy compressed his lips into a thin line and did as he was told. The window hitched back down and finally consented to close; the moment that it slotted home, Simon smacked the top of the desk with a sound like rifleshoot. The sound cut cleanly across the discord and killed it. The kicking fight came to an abrupt end. "Everybody sit down and shut the fuck up," Simon suggested, his voice overly bright.

Nate dove for the nearest bed, tugging the semi-oblivious Dave down after him. Sandra perched on the foot of that bed and kicked Mike's feet out from under him, dumping both Mike and Johnny onto the bed opposite. Mike squalled, pushed himself off Johnny, took one look at Simon, and visibly shrank. Now that that was settled, Simon looked at Jeremy. "Seriously, this was not my idea," he said.

"Mm," Jeremy said. "No, I didn't think you'd be quite this stupid."

"You know, I think that's the nicest thing you've ever said to me?" Simon swung to confront Sandra, who was still perched on the foot of the bed by the door, looking grim. "So how the hell did you guys find me?"

Sandra nodded back over her shoulder. "Dave."

"What?" Dave said, looking up from his tiny laptop and blinking.

Sandra sighed. "We found you using Dave," she repeated with fading patience.

"Oh! Yes. Right." Dave hugged the little laptop to his chest, still looking a bit scattered. "I, ah, I tracked the signal from your cell phone," he said. "Um. Global positioning. You know."

Simon's hand flew to his belt and the squarish shape of the phone clipped to it. "My phone?" he repeated.

"It's really very accurate," Dave started to say, but Sandra hushed him with a terse gesture. "I gave him the number that you left with me," she said. "It led us right here."

"Okay, well, that's one question answered," Simon said. His own patience was wearing thin. "How about this one: what the *hell* are you guys doing here?"

The grim expression fell off Sandra's face on the instant, replaced by a fake smile so incredibly savage that Simon's hand flew to his throat. "We are on *vacation*," Sandra said with dangerous good cheer. "Rappaport got shot by

Miami airport security three days ago! Isn't that lovely? So our current bullshit job ended with a bang, and when I went in to give Upstairs his final briefing, I suggested that maybe now would be an excellent time for us to take some of this vacation time that we never have time to use! My goodness, I know that *I* haven't had a day off in something like four years!"

Simon opened his mouth, then shut it again at the sight of Sandra's narrowed, glittering eyes. Implacably, Sandra went on. "Since none of us had less than *five full weeks* of paid vacation time, and since we had just finished up four weeks of exhausting round-the-clock work, *and* since we seemed to be *minus a boss*, it seemed like a very good idea! Upstairs concurred! Indeed, he seemed to be of the opinion that it was an excellent idea to get us the hell out of his hair!" At some point during this recital Sandra had drifted to her feet; now she stood nearly toe-to-toe with Simon. She was wholly, ominously still, coiled to spring. "I've always wanted to see Italy," she said softly. "And so here I am. On vacation. *Boss.*"

"You know, I'm getting the sense that you're displeased with me, Spring," Simon said, leaning back away from that carnivorous fake grin. "I mean, it's just a feeling I have."

"Ha!" Sandra cried. "Do you think? No, seriously, *do* you think?"

"*Excuse* me." In his corner, Jeremy stirred. His face was blank and his voice was bland and cool. "Far be it from me to break up this little tête-à-tête," he said, "but I *am* attempting to keep something of a low profile here—"

Sandra rounded on him, her hands snapping into fists. Whatever she'd initially intended to say, she swallowed it. "Hello, Archer," she said, her voice weirdly calm. "I'm not unaware of your issues, no. None of us are quite in your *class*, but we do have some resources, and we've taken a few precautions. I believe you'll find that our profile is fairly low."

"Mm," Jeremy said, squaring his shoulders, his fingers flexing at his sides. They faced each other across not nearly enough space, two incredibly pissed-off human beings daring each other to be the first to move. The rest of the team was silent, hypnotized or just plain frightened; Simon prudently backed up until his shoulders bumped against the wall. "How nice for you," Jeremy finally said, his voice thin enough to cut like a razor. "Milan *is* a lovely city. I do hope you enjoy your vacation—"

Incredibly, it was Nate who found his balls and spoke. "We came to help," he said, his voice faint.

Both Sandra and Jeremy sagged, half the crackling energy in the room dissipating—Simon wondered, not for the first time, just how aware Nate was of his powers. "Yes, all right," Sandra said in a much more normal voice. "We came to help. But not you." Still holding Jeremy's gaze, she stabbed her forefinger into Simon's chest, hard enough to hurt. "Him."

"Ow," Simon said, just getting that out there.

"I see." Jeremy rubbed a hand down his face. "So . . . you are proposing what, exactly?"

"We need him back," Sandra said, tapping Simon's chest again. "We need him back soon, in one piece, and not implicated in any sort of international brouhaha. But since Mr. Chivalry-Is-Not-Dead isn't going to let us drag him back to the States until he's righted this terrible wrong he imagines he's done to you—"

"—hey!—"

"—we're going to help fix this shit, shut up, Simon," Sandra finished. "And once you're out of danger, we're taking him the hell home."

"I see," Jeremy said. "Is that what you think, then?"

"We took a vote!" Mike volunteered. "It was fair and not rigged at all!"

Simon waved both hands until he caught a few people's eyes. "Jesus, don't I get a say in this?" he asked, outraged.

"No," Sandra said.

"No, apparently not," Jeremy said slowly. "So . . . you're here to help."

"Yes," Sandra said. "Don't get me wrong: I don't particularly care what happens to you. But *Simon* cares, apparently. And as long as Simon cares, I care."

Jeremy was silent, considering this. He pursed his lips. "To the best of your various and sundry abilities?"

Sandra nodded. "We're yours until we can pry him off you," she said.

"Hey," Simon said, the skin on the back of his neck prickling. "I protest! I find the wording of your last statement nauseating!"

"Of course, if you get any of us shot, killed, arrested, or fitted for cement boots, I'll kill you personally," Sandra told Jeremy.

Jeremy inclined his head. "Of course," he said. "I thought that went without saying."

"No one's listening to me," Simon told the nearest person, which happened to be Dave.

"What?" Dave said.

Simon sighed. "Nothing." He swung both arms around in a huge gesture, gathering the room's attention again. "You guys, I hate this," he said. "Jesus Christ, I'm not going to put you guys in danger like this!"

"That's right, you're not," Sandra said. "You don't have a say in this. We're not in the States. You've been suspended and I'm a free agent. I'm not leaving until you do—and guess what? You can't make me."

"Nanny-nanny-boo-boo," Johnny said matter-of-factly, the first thing he'd said since they arrived.

Jeremy cleared his throat. "We can discuss this more at a later time," he said. "Also, somewhere else. I'm only here because I needed neutral ground to wait for a phone call."

“Fair enough,” Sandra said. “Mike and I are the only two people who are officially in Italy, but we seem to have a suspiciously large suite. We can go back there.”

“Er, possibly,” Jeremy said. “I’ve been taking a ridiculous number of precautions—”

The phone shrilled. Everybody in the room shied away from it, except Jeremy, who jerked upright like someone had pulled his strings. “Silence,” he snapped, grabbing up the phone. “You—” he tapped Johnny’s shoulder “—keep an eye out the window, let me know if anyone enters the alley, you—” he pointed at Simon “—listen at the door, and the rest of you had damned well better not exist.” The phone shrilled again; Jeremy shut his eyes, hissed out a breath, flicked the phone open, and *changed*. “Jeremy Archer,” he said, nearly purring it, like he hadn’t a care in the world.

Johnny eased down to the foot of the bed and put his forehead to the glass, cupping his hands around his eyes. Simon slithered past Sandra and put his back against the door, turning an ear to it. Jeremy, both hands on the phone, listened for a few moments, then made a sound like a laugh, all the more creepy because his face was entirely devoid of expression. “Ah, well, I’d say that I’m sorry, but you know how these things are,” he told the person on the other end of the line. His voice was still eerily light and cheerful. “So! To whom do I have the privilege . . . ? Ah? Really? Well! In that case, I *am* honored.”

The room, packed wall to wall like a can of sardines, was weirdly quiet. Simon could hear them all breathing, and over that, the growl of the voice on the other end of the line. He couldn’t make out any of the words, although he tried. “Of course,” Jeremy said. “But I’ll need to speak to Annabelle first, before we go any further. I know you’ll understand. . . . yes. Yes. I’ll wait.” He paused, staring blindly off at the wall above Nate’s head, his face empty like a doll’s.

Abruptly Jeremy squeezed his eyes shut, the blood draining from his face. He went white, and then such an alarming shade of gray that Simon forgot himself and reached for Jeremy’s arm; Jeremy warned him off with a blazing glare. Simon yanked his hand back like it was burnt. “Annabelle, love,” Jeremy said, his voice just the slightest bit uneven. “Yes. Yes, it’s me. Are you all right? They’re treating you as well as possible?” He paused. “I see,” he said. “That’s good, then. Don’t worry, we’ll have you free in no time. I promise.” His voice was soft and reassuring, but his face was blank and pale. Simon was pretty sure that Nate had stopped breathing entirely.

The growling voice came back. Jeremy flinched like he’d been hit. “Yes, I believe that does satisfy me,” he said, digging down deep to reclaim that carefree voice. “Would you care to make threats at this point, or shall we skip the nonsense and get down to business?”

Sandra turned away, compressing her lips. She was either angry or trying not to laugh. Simon couldn’t tell which. “No, no, I suppose you’re right,” Jeremy

said, still cheery. “So, how are we going to do this? You understand that we can’t make the exchange just anywhere.”

The voice on the other end of the line growled on. Jeremy sagged back against the wall, an expression on his face that could only be relief. “Opening night?” he said, now looking almost as cheerful as he sounded. Simon was wholly confused. “My goodness, how am I going to get fitted for proper attire in only six days? Ah, well, needs must when the Devil drives, I suppose. Generous and civilized of you, to be certain. Yes. Yes. Of course. She’ll be there? I *would* like to confirm her state for myself, you’ll forgive me if I seem untrusting—”

Two minutes later Jeremy carefully folded the phone shut. He was still crumpled against the wall like it was the only thing holding him upright, and he was staring down at his own feet. In the other corner of the room, Mike whistled in appreciation. “Daaaamn,” he said.

Jeremy looked up at that, his face composed. “That’s that,” he said. He looked around the room, then bent down and unplugged the phone from the wall. When he straightened up again, he was almost—almost—smiling. “It seems that I accept your offer,” he told Sandra. “I can use you.”

“Hey,” Mike said, immediately and happily outraged. “Nobody uses Sandy but me!”

◆ Twenty-Five

“Well, then,” Jeremy said, picking up his hat and turning it thoughtfully in his hands. “That’s settled, I suppose.”

“Like hell it is,” Simon said.

Jeremy ignored him. “We ought to leave in ones and twos—safety in numbers and all that, yes, but moving in a pack would be a bit much.” He looked up. His eyes skipped right over Simon and landed, after a moment, on Johnny. “Would you be so kind as to go first?” Jeremy asked.

Johnny shrugged and pushed himself up off the bed. “Your call,” he said.

“Mm.” Jeremy was already looking out the window, his brow lightly furrowed. “If you would, please go out the back way,” Jeremy said, tapping the glass. “If the coast is clear, stop and give me a sign.”

“Sure,” Johnny said. He stepped over Mike, lazily dodging Mike’s half-hearted kick, and brushed past Sandra. “We meeting back at the place?”

Sandra glanced at Jeremy, then nodded. “At least for now,” she said.

“Right,” Johnny said. He paused long enough to clap Jeremy solemnly on the shoulder, then edged past Simon without a word and let himself out. The door creaked to behind him.

“Welp, we got rid of the deadweight,” Mike said cheerfully, grabbing the pizza box off the desk. He sprawled out across Johnny’s vacated seat with it, popping open the lid and grabbing a slice before passing the box on. “Now we can have some actual fun!”

Jeremy’s laugh sounded mostly polite. “Fun,” he repeated, and shook his head. “Tell me, do you have a hired car?”

“Aw, man, I wish!” Mike said. He stuffed about half the slice of pizza into his mouth. “People around here drive like fucknuts and I so totally want to play,” he mumbled around his mouthful.

“Mm,” said Jeremy. Sandra offered him the pizza box, which he declined with a wave and an absent smile. “I think perhaps a car or two would be in order. Do you have an international driver’s permit?”

Mike swallowed and made a rude noise. "Well, duh," he said. "I ain't gonna come to *Italy* without one. You know. Just in case I see a car what needs driving."

"Excellent. We'll see to that—I'll pay for it, of course." Jeremy turned his attention back to the window. "Simon, why don't you go next? Ah... have Nate see you off at the front door, I think. If you see anything odd, send word back with him."

Simon thought about making a stink, but in the end, he just sighed and straightened up. "You're the boss," he said, trying not to sound too pissy about it. "Where am I going?"

"Oh, here," said Sandra. She fished in her purse and came out with a keycard. Simon held out a hand for it; Sandra poked him in the chest with it anyway. "The name and address is on the front of the card," she said. "Just show it to the taxi driver."

Simon plucked the card out of her fingers and looked at it. Suite 1008, Hotel *degli Alberti* blah blah blah. "Yeah, okay," he said, tucking it into his shirt pocket. "Specs, you coming?"

"Just a sec, pizza," Nate said, fighting against about ten strands of melted cheese, a battle he was pretty much fated to lose.

By the window, Jeremy craned his neck. "Ah, there he is," Jeremy said under his breath, putting a hand against the glass.

"Yeah?" Simon said, picking his way past Sandra to the window. Johnny was ambling down the alley, taking his own sweet time about it; at the mouth of the alleyway he paused and fished around in his shirt pocket, idly looking up and down the street. A few seconds later he turned halfway around, stuck a toothpick in his mouth, and flashed Jeremy a momentary thumbs-up as he did so. "Damn, that was pretty smooth, I have to admit it," Simon said, resisting the urge to rest his chin on the top of Jeremy's head. Outside, Johnny ambled off. "Where'd Texas learn those spy-movie moves, anyway?"

"Spy movies, probably," Sandra said, unimpressed. "God, I work with adolescent boys. Your turn, Nate."

Nate popped the last bite of crust into his mouth, licked his fingers clean, and bounced to his feet. "Okay," he said. "So I'm just walking Templar to the door?"

"Well, a couple of steps beyond, probably," Simon said, picking up the baseball cap. "But yeah, we'll go 'say goodbye' out front."

Mike eyed the Redskins cap. Simon braced himself, but Mike picked up the scent of a different, better joke and ran with it instead: "Aww, you gonna kiss him goodbye?" Mike caroled, snickering. "Damn, this scene's all Templar and his bitch rentin' a room for some afternoon delight—"

Nate went red all the way to the tips of his ears. Sandra smacked the top of Mike's head. "Behave," she said severely.

"Not likely, since he's still Mike," Simon said. Since the danger had passed, he went ahead and put on the cap, pulling it down over his eyes. "One thing

before I go, though.”

“Mm?” Jeremy said, raising both eyebrows.

Simon ignored him, just to give him a taste of his own medicine. “Dave,” Simon said.

Dave looked up from the laptop, blinking. “Yes?”

“I have to ask,” Simon said.

Dave’s expression went hunted. “What?” he said, resigned, like he knew what was coming.

“Are you at all aware of how fugly that Hawaiian shirt is?” Simon asked. “I mean, you must know, right? You’re wearing it ironically, right?”

Dave picked at one of the buttons on his shirt, his own ears going red. “I like it,” he said defensively. “It’s vintage.”

“Ohhhh,” Simon said. “*Vintage* fugly.”

“I never get a chance to actually wear them,” Dave said. “But, well, I’m on vacation, sort of, and I guess it . . . seemed right?”

Simon almost missed the important part of that sentence. Almost. “Them?” he asked. “How many do you have?”

Dave wilted. “Nine,” he mumbled.

Simon eyed Dave until Dave crumbled into a heap, then shrugged. “I guess every boy’s gotta have a hobby,” Simon said, feeling obscurely better about things. “Okay, I’m out. Archer, if I don’t hear from you in an hour . . . well, uh, I’d better hear from you within an hour.”

“Of course,” Jeremy said. He was still gazing out the back window, ignoring most everything that was going on around him. “I’ll be certain to travel in company.”

“Well . . . good,” Simon said. He hesitated in front of the door for a moment, oddly unwilling to take his eyes off Jeremy, then realized how weird he must look and grabbed for the doorknob. “You guys had better all take care.”

“Simon,” Jeremy said. Simon twitched and glanced over his shoulder; Jeremy was holding out the loaded cellphone, with its charger still dangling from one end. “Take care of this, will you?” Jeremy asked. “I’m rather uncomfortable being in the same room with it.”

Simon caught the cord of the charger and reeled in the phone. “Yeah,” he said, winding the cord around the phone. “Good idea.”

“Don’t answer it if it rings,” Jeremy said. He flashed Simon a little, private smile, then turned back to the window.

“Yeah, no, not that stupid, thanks.” Simon stuffed the cellphone in his jeans pocket and left before things could get any weirder. Nate trailed after him.

The shabby hallway was mostly empty and echoed with the cacophony of at least four competing bass lines cranked up to eleven. Every few seconds a teenager would dart out of one room and into another, blasting Simon with noise

and slamming both doors. None of them paid Simon the slightest bit of heed. He might as well have been invisible. "Now I really feel old," he said.

"Yeah," Nate said behind him.

Simon edged past a wet spot on the carpet, thudded down the stairs, and emerged into the crowded lobby. There were kids lined up at the desk and sitting around in little groups, and it required pretty much all of Simon's shredded patience to pick his way through them to the front door. "Tell Archer that the lobby is packed," he told Nate, once they were safely out on the sidewalk. "Be sure to tell him that half the people are just sitting around."

Nate nodded. "I'll tell him," he said. "Uh."

Simon, who'd been on the verge of heading off, stopped. "What?"

"It's good to see you again," Nate offered, tentatively.

Simon sighed and ruffled Nate's hair, making him duck. "I'd say it's good to see you too—and don't get me wrong, it is—but I really wish you guys weren't mixed up in this."

Nate looked down at the sidewalk, then back up. "I know," he said. "I didn't think you'd like it. But . . . I thought you probably ought to have help anyway."

"Maybe." Simon sighed. "Christ, I don't know. Anyway. Wave goodbye, Specs. I'll see you in a bit."

Nate raised a hand. "Bye, Templar," he said.

Simon backed off a few steps, then spun on his heel and sank into the crowds. Once he was around the corner and Nate was out of sight, Simon stopped long enough to drop the cellphone down a sewer grating before heading off in search of a taxi stand.

The hotel *degli Alberti* was a fairly boring gray stone building in a part of Milan that Simon hadn't been to yet. It didn't look like anything particularly special. Simon wondered how Sandra had found it. For one particularly conspiracy-theory-level moment Simon wondered if Sandra had called Ethan and asked for recommendations, then he shook it off and went in.

It wasn't a particularly special-looking hotel on the inside, either. The lobby was brightly lit and aggressively bland, just barely weird enough to be obviously not American. No one was behind the desk. In fact, Simon saw no one from the moment he entered the building to the moment he let himself into 1008, which he generally took as a good sign. The room was dim, the overhead lights still off. Johnny, sprawled out on the couch with an arm slung over his eyes, glanced in Simon's direction as the door clicked open. "Yo," he said.

"Hey," Simon said, shutting the door behind him and glancing around. It was certainly a suite of some sort. The main room was large and there were doors on all three of the other walls that looked to lead into bedrooms. Definitely a suite. "Nice place," he added, not sure why he bothered to say so.

"It'll do," Johnny said.

Sensing that their conversation was over for the moment, Simon poked around. The place was . . . nice. There was really nothing else to say about it. It was clean and reasonably neat, except for the clothes decorating the floor of one bedroom and the computer cables spiderwebbing one of the others. The furniture was comfortably inoffensive. There was even a coffeemaker with an inch of stone-cold coffee lurking in the bottom of the pot. The very mediocrity of the place was strangely restful, and after Simon finished looking around he went to collapse on the other couch, toeing off his sneakers as an afterthought. "So where's Mike sleeping?" he asked.

Johnny grinned a little. "Depends," he said. "You mean technically or actually?"

"Yeah, that's what I thought," Simon said. "Keeps his stuff in your room and his body in Sandra's, huh?"

"Yep," said Johnny. "Least it's quiet." He thought about that for a moment, then amended that to "Sort of."

Simon snickered. "He's snoring at someone else, huh?"

"Shit, no." Johnny sat up, laced his fingers together behind his neck, and pulled his head down. His spine crunched with a sound like someone stepping on a bowl of dry cereal. Simon winced. Johnny flopped back. "Sandy gets him with the elbow when he snores. Showed me a coupla bruises."

"Guess you shoulda tried that, huh?"

"Guess so," Johnny said equably. "Course, we'd have to be sharin' a bed, but hell, I'm liberal."

"Yeah, 'cause when I think Texas, I think liberal," Simon said. "Christ, I'm tired. You mind if I nod off for a few minutes?"

"Nah," Johnny said.

"Didn't figure you would," Simon said, shutting his eyes.

Fifteen minutes later Mike came banging in, flipped on all the lights, and started crashing around with an enthusiasm that even Simon couldn't sleep through. "Man, I cannot *wait* to get behind the wheel over here," Mike said, bouncing on his toes. "Motherfuckers are *crazy*."

"Yeah," Simon said, checking his watch. He felt a little better for the micro-nap. "That they are. Made me think of you whenever I wasn't in immediate fear for my life."

"Aw, boss, that's sweet!" Mike screeched to a halt long enough to blow Simon a kiss. "I knew I was totally unforgettable."

Simon snorted. "That you are," he said. "Make us some coffee, will you?"

Mike simpered in Simon's direction for a couple of seconds before bounding back off to clatter around in the mini-bar. The clattering eventually took on a familiar sound. "Coffee'll be up in ten or so," Mike said, zipping off again. Simon melted onto the couch, pleased.

Johnny slid grudgingly upright, rubbing his temples. "So," he said.

"So," Mike echoed happily. "You still got that headache, Texas?"

"Yeah," Johnny said. "Goddamn planes."

"Awesome!" Mike said, popping up out of nowhere to thump Johnny on the head. Johnny didn't quite wince, but his eyes tightened, deepening the web of lines around them. Mike prudently bounded back out of range. "Man, I ain't never been to Italy before," he said, throwing himself across one of the overstuffed chairs. "And here I even got a perfectly good excuse not to have to wander around museums and shit. Goddamn, this is awesome, boss, you ought to go runnin' off after Archer more often."

"Yeah?" Johnny said, still rubbing his temples. He glanced at Simon past the edge of one hand. "He ain't caught on," Johnny observed.

Simon went still, a useless pulse of adrenalin stapling him to the couch. Mike didn't notice. "Ain't caught on to what?" he said amiably. "That you're one closemouthed motherfucker? Honest and for true, I noticed."

Johnny let his hand drop. "Archer said he'd be coming back in company, right?"

"Yeah?"

"Tell you one thing, he ain't comin' back with the techs," Johnny said. "Man just scammed you out of half an hour alone with your girlfriend."

Mike's jaw dropped. "Naw," he said. He hesitated, then glanced over his shoulder at the door. "Naw," he said again, a good deal more uncertain.

"Dunno," Johnny said. "Still, gotta admit, man's pretty smooth."

"Well, yeah, but . . ." Mike flailed around a little. "Naw."

Johnny's face was as unreadable as ever. "Course, Sandy's not gonna do nothin' she don't wanna—"

"Yeah," Mike said, relaxing.

"—but she and him got awful close a ways back," Johnny concluded, still deadpan. "I ain't the only one remembers them rollin' around on the mats like that, right?"

"Texas has a point," Simon said, lightheaded with relief. They didn't know. Even now, they really didn't know. "If Archer really wants to steal your girlfriend . . . well, he *does* steal things for a living."

"Shit," Mike wailed. "Archer's all suave 'n' shit! Plus he's worth like three kabillion dollars! How in hell's a guy supposed to compete with that?"

Johnny, satisfied, fished out a fresh toothpick and bit down on it. "Better hope Sandy likes you as much as you think she does," he said. He turned that bland, unreadable gaze on Simon and nearly smiled. "Guess my work's done here."

"Guess so," Simon said.

Mike glanced back at the door a second time, his mouth still hanging half-open. "Naw," he said again, but he still looked pretty worried.

Nate and Dave arrived a few minutes later, Dave with that tiny laptop clutched protectively against the hideous orange-and-brown splat of his shirt. “We’re back,” he announced, unnecessarily.

“So I see,” Simon said. He had a cup of coffee—normal coffee, the kind that arrived in cans and left in mugs—and he was definitely feeling better about things. “Sandy and Archer following?”

“I guess so?” Dave picked his way across the living room, heading for the bedroom with all the computers in it. “Archer said that no one would look twice at a couple and Sandy said that made sense, so I guess they’re coming together.”

Mike moaned in horror and slithered bonelessly out of the big chair, landing with a thump on the floor. “That’s it,” he said. “She was totally ever mine to lose and all that shit.”

“Um,” Nate said. “What?”

“Honda’s been outclassed,” Johnny said. He definitely looked pleased now.

“What?” Nate said again, and then belatedly got it. He twisted around to stare at the door. “Wait, you think . . . oh, that’s just *weird*.”

Dave reappeared, minus the laptop, but sadly not minus the abomination of a shirt. “What?”

“They think Jeremy’s after Sandy,” Nate said, marveling. “That’s just so weird.”

“After?” Dave furrowed his brow. “You mean, uh, *after* after? But that doesn’t make any sense—why would Archer be interested in *Sandy*?”

Something in his voice gave him away. Simon, his nerves prickling, shuffled around on the couch and caught Dave’s eye before he could say anything else. Dave subsided, but he looked at Simon for a long moment before blinking several times and going to fetch himself some coffee.

“What?” Mike said, still flopped out on the carpet. “You don’t think Sandy’s good enough for him? That it?”

“What? I never said that . . .” He would have been fine if he’d left it there—well, almost fine—but Dave, inevitably, protested too much. “Sandy’s ‘good enough’ for pretty much anyone.”

Mike immediately levered himself back upright, his eyes shining with the joy of the hunt. “Oh, I get it,” he said, beaming a grin so insincere at Dave that Simon could see his molars. “You *want* her, don’t you?”

“Um,” Dave said. “No?” He was already pulling in on himself, hunched over his coffee mug. “I mean, she’s great, but . . .”

“Ohhhh,” Mike said, nodding ferociously. “That’s right, you’re *gay*, I totally forgot.”

“No,” Dave said again. “I’m really not.”

“He’s in denial,” Mike told the room at large. He flopped out on the carpet again.

“He’s got a girlfriend,” Nate pointed out.

Mike stuck both hands behind his head. “Serious denial,” he said, pontificating at the ceiling. “Either she’s a beard or she doesn’t actually exist. Trust me, I totally know these things.”

“ ‘Cause you’ve been there?” Johnny said. Mike kicked out at him, missed, and stubbed his toe on the arm of the couch.

Ten minutes passed. Then another ten. Simon had a second cup of coffee, avoided looking at Dave, and watched Mike get progressively more uncomfortable. Fidgeting had given way to something a little too spastic to be called ‘pacing’ by the time they all heard the keycard in the door.

Jeremy opened the door and bowed Sandra in, a little display of manners that made Mike both snort and go all wobbly-eyed. Sandra knuckled Jeremy’s shoulder lightly as she went by, making a beeline for the rumbling little coffeepot.

“I’m sorry that took us so long,” Jeremy said, closing the door behind himself and flicking on the chain. “I’d wanted to be absolutely certain that we weren’t being followed, so we changed cabs at the Duomo.”

“We had business to discuss anyway,” Sandra added.

Simon sat up. “Business?” he asked, not sure he liked the sound of that.

“Business?” Mike echoed.

“Business,” Sandra confirmed, her eyes skating over both of them. “I wanted to make sure he knew where our boundaries were. We’re here to help, but there are limits.”

Jeremy took off his hat and ran his fingers back through his hair. “I believe we understand each other’s positions now,” he said. Without further ado he plopped his hat on the table by the door and went to take the big chair that Mike had abandoned, settling neatly into it and crossing his legs. “And now that that’s taken care of—”

“Hang on,” Simon said.

Jeremy blinked at him. “Yes?”

“You know I still don’t like this,” Simon said. “I guess I don’t exactly have the right to order you guys around, goddammit, but I’m going to ask one last time: will you please stop with this and go the hell home? I don’t want you to get messed up in this.”

“Too late,” Sandra said, carrying her coffee over to the couch. “We’re already messed up in it.”

Jeremy smiled, just a bit. “And to be honest, I can use them,” he said. “In for a Simon, in for a team, so to speak. That being said, if you’d all like to come have a seat, I think it’s time to discuss strategy.”

“Ooh, stradigy,” Mike said, plopping down on the couch next to Johnny. “So what’s the deal?”

“Guys,” Simon said, pained.

Sandra patted his knee. "You're stuck with us, boss," she said. "Deal with it."

Simon switched his gaze to Jeremy. "Archer," he said warningly, and then stopped, unable to formulate the rest of the sentence.

"I intend to keep them as safe as possible, Simon," Jeremy said, picking up on the threat anyway.

"You'd better," Simon said, and gave up.

"So," Jeremy said. He steepled his fingers, looked around the room, and then smiled. "Ms. Leone assures me that you all know the basic situation, more or less, so allow me to get right to the meat of the thing: six days from now, I am supposed to turn myself over to a man named Battista Volpe, who essentially runs the underside of Milan. Over the past couple of weeks, I have made a number of gambles based on Volpe's preferred methods of operation; this afternoon, they paid off." He paused there and touched two fingers to the bridge of his nose, closing his eyes. "Battista Volpe is an enormous opera aficionado, you see. He maintains a private box at every major opera house in the city, and is known to conduct, ah, sensitive business there—really, it's an ideal situation from his standpoint. Six days from now a performance of *Turandot* opens at the *Teatro Domenico*, where he maintains a box. There is only one entrance, and once the door is closed and guards are stationed outside, it might as well be a cell. The only other way out is down. Forty feet down, to be precise."

"So you're going to the opera," Simon said.

Jeremy's smile went crooked. "No, Simon," he said. "*We're* going to the opera."

◆ Twenty-Six

Jeremy ruthlessly dumped Simon out of bed at nine the next morning. “Ms. Leone will be here in half an hour,” he said, dusting off his hands. “If I were you, I’d attempt to get showered and dressed before she arrives.”

Simon grabbed the edge of the bed and levered himself upright. “I take it back,” he rasped, scrubbing a hand down his face. “I miss the days when I had nothing to do but sit around and fret. Let’s go back.”

“Too late for that, I’m afraid,” Jeremy said, sounding better than he had in days. “Go have your shower.”

“And for the record, I hate it when you’re this cheerful,” Simon told him, and stomped off.

By the time he finished showering and shaving, Sandra had turned up. So had breakfast. Simon wriggled into his jeans and t-shirt, grunted something like a greeting, and threw himself at his food. Jeremy and Sandra both favored him with long, cool, slightly amused looks, then went back to conniving with each other. Simon was convinced it was their default state.

“This should be far more than enough,” Jeremy said, folding a fat wad of bills into Sandra’s hand. “Better safe than sorry, of course, and if it should end up costing all of that, I won’t be heartbroken. I leave him in your hands. Do whatever seems best to you.”

Sandra’s hand closed around the money. “If only my real job were more like this,” she said, tucking the bills away in the depths of her purse.

“I suppose there *is* more fun to be had on the dark side,” Jeremy said with a little smile.

“Hey,” Simon said grumpily. “What have I told you about recruiting my people to a life of crime?”

Jeremy quirked an eyebrow. “Never in front of you?”

“Never at *all* is more like it,” Simon said, ripping into a roll. “Speaking of recruiting my people, you going to get Nate started today?”

"He and Polito started almost four hours ago, Simon," Jeremy said. "Assuming everything's gone as planned. I can't really get anyone else started until I run a few errands, although I do intend to get Mike a couple of cars so that he can, er, practice." His smile was seraphic; Simon shuddered.

Sandra checked her watch, glanced out the window, checked her watch against the clock on the bedside table, and then sighed. "Come on, boss. Time's a-wastin'."

"Jesus, let me eat something," Simon said, irritated. "I know you chicks are all about the shopping but you can wait like five minutes. Seriously."

"Simon, this isn't shopping," Sandra said. "This is *haute couture*. I will never again in my life have an opportunity like this, and on someone else's dime to boot. You can have five more minutes and then I am dragging you out of this hotel by your ear."

Jeremy turned away, doing a particularly poor job of hiding his smile. Simon glared at him, threw back the rest of his coffee, and went truculently in search of his sneakers. They could drag him to *haute couture* but they couldn't make him dress for it.

"Yeah, I can tell this place is expensive," Simon muttered, glaring up at the front wall. "Five pieces of black clothing artistically placed on a brown marble wall. Awesome."

"Don't be ridiculous, Simon, that one jacket is gray," Sandra said. She stopped half-in and half-out of the lobby and eyed him. "You know, for someone who ran halfway around the world just on the *off-chance* that he could be of some use, you sure are being a gigantic pain in the ass about actually being of some use."

Simon sighed and allowed himself to be tugged down a few feet further down the hallway. "When I said I wanted to help, I was thinking more about shooting people."

"Well, don't shoot anyone in here," Sandra said. "I'm sure they'd charge you an arm and a leg for the privilege."

Simon started to say something else, but an extremely well-dressed man was already heading in their direction, his polite salesman's expression only slightly marred by his flared, disgusted nostrils. "Yes?" he said coolly. "Can I 'elp you?"

Sandra's own smile was equally cool. "I doubt it," she snapped. "My name is Sandra Leone. I am here to see Ullisse, not some . . . clerk."

One of the two names was magical. Simon couldn't figure out which one. The salesman's supercilious expression didn't change a hair, but he took half a step back and bowed over his outstretched arm. "Yes, madam," he said. "This way."

"I know the way, thank you," Sandra said, brushing past him. Simon, somewhat bemused by the sudden explosion of *nouveau riche*, tagged along after

her.

Sandra led him unerringly through several more mostly-empty rooms lined with brown marble, folded black shirts, extremely shiny shoes, and unhelpful salesfolk. “How do you know where you’re going?” Simon asked under his breath, trying not to look at anything in case someone thought he meant to buy it.

“There’s a map of the store on the internet,” Sandra murmured, glancing left and right. “I cheated.”

“That’s my girl,” Simon said.

The endless string of brown rooms eventually gave way to a larger one, heavily mirrored along the back wall. The man that came trotting to meet them this time was older, stout, and bald, and he beamed at them both like he was actually pleased to see them, which couldn’t be true. A thin woman with cheekbones like cliffs lurked in his wake. “You are Ms. Leone?” the tubby man asked, giving it the Italian three syllables, *ley-oh-nee*. “I am Ulisse, and this is Eugenia—it is our pleasure to be at your service today!” His English was blurred, clogged, and lilting, his accent doing unconscionable things to every vowel it tripped over. Ulisse picked up both of Sandra’s hands, casting a professional eye up and down the shape of her. “Oh, yes, the things we can do for you,” he said, beaming. “Eugenia will see to you personally, and I shall help your gentleman friend—Eugenia?”

The skinny woman swept Sandra away with professional ease, leaving Simon alone with the diminutive Ulisse. Ulisse swept around Simon in a circle, frowning and hm’ing to himself. “Yes, yes,” he murmured to himself, his accent turning the word into *yais, yais*. “Ver’ nice. Would you like something to drink before we begin?”

“Coffee,” Simon said firmly. “Please.”

Rumpled, flushed, and grumpy—he’d been in there for almost two hours, which was just about five hours too long—Simon chose to wait for Sandra outside. Outside and twenty feet away, where hopefully none of the overdressed Milanese passersby would connect him with the severe brown edifice.

Sandra was also flushed and rumpled when she emerged, half an hour later, carrying a shopping bag. She wore a new black blazer, sharp enough to put your eye out, and an expression of near-total serenity. She looked, in short, like a woman who had just fulfilled a lifelong dream, and Simon felt bad for what he was about to do for almost two seconds before declaring, “*Haute couture* can bite me.”

“The problem with you is that you have no soul,” Sandra said, drifting past him.

“Provably untrue,” Simon said, falling grumpily into step behind her. “I have a soul. What I almost certainly do not have is the kind of snotty-ass attitude necessary to appreciate that kind of place. Did Archer buy you that jacket, too?”

Sandra touched one of the jacket's narrow lapels. "Oh, no," she said, her voice still dreamy. "I bought it for myself. I've always wanted one."

"I'm happy for you," Simon said. He wasn't. He figured she could probably tell. "Me, I just spent two hours with some strange little Italian ramming his knuckles up into my balls, which is not usually my idea of a good morning."

"Oh, Simon," Sandra said, her eerie patience beginning to fade. "It does not take two hours to measure your inseam, so you can stop exaggerating any minute now. Anyway, it's all over, and I'll come back in five days and pick up the suit. Without you."

"Good," Simon said. "There's a really short list of people who are allowed to touch my balls, and that guy is not on it."

Sandra sighed, snapping back to herself with a pop that was nearly audible. "Really," she said. "It can't be that short of a list, as I know of at least two people in the immediate area who are on it."

"Sandy," Simon groaned, his stride hitching.

"You reap what you sow, jerkface," Sandra said. "Stop bitching."

"I am not *bitching*," Simon said, gathering the shreds of his dignity. "I am *complaining*. There's a difference."

"And that difference is?"

Simon stuck his hands in his pockets and grinned down at the sidewalk. "I'm male?"

Normally Sandra would have laughed at that. And probably punched him, too, but not hard enough to hurt. Today she just rolled her eyes and made a face like she'd smelled something bad. "Simon," she said, exasperated.

"Not today, huh?" Simon said, prudently falling back a step. "Okay. I'm sorry. You know I'm just joking."

"I know," Sandra said, coming to a halt at the street corner. "I guess I was just hoping to enjoy the afterglow for a little longer."

Simon stopped behind her and looked away. "Yeah," he said. "Sorry."

"I guess I shouldn't have expected any better from you," Sandra said. The light changed and they both surged out into the street, the Milanese streaming past them on both sides.

Simon waited until they were 'safely' in a taxi and heading away from the fashion district at maximum velocity to ask, "So, uh, who's the other?"

"What?" Sandra said, glancing at him.

"You said two people," Simon said. "Two people on the, uh—" he glanced at the back of the taxi driver's head "—the list. And, uh, I'm guessing you were taking a potshot at Archer, but who's the other?"

Sandra was silent. The taxi ripped around a corner, nearly going up onto two wheels. "If I were Mike," Sandra finally said, "and if I were not crammed into the back seat of a taxi, I would answer that question by kneeling you in the balls."

“Mmf,” Simon said, turning his attention very firmly out the window. The rest of the ride passed in silence.

Sandra was still angry when the taxi pulled up in front of the hotel, and she led the way up through the lobby without a word. Simon trailed a prudent five feet behind her until they got into the elevator. “Sorry,” Simon muttered. Sandra blew out a breath and nodded, visibly getting hold of her temper.

The main room of the suite was empty. Sandra peeled away and vanished into the room on the right, carrying her bag; Simon headed for the room at the back, following the sound of voices.

“Yeah, it’s working fine,” Nate said, squinting at a large flatscreen monitor that certainly hadn’t been there the day before. “Their security cameras are kind of hard to read, but the stage camera is beautiful.”

“I expect that’s because they want the best possible recordings of their performances,” Jeremy said. He was seated crosslegged on the foot of the nearest bed, twirling his hat idly in his fingers. “Hello, Simon.”

Simon wandered over and peered over Nate’s shoulder. The screen was full of windows, each one unspooling camera footage. Most of the footage was gray and grainy, but the largest window showed the stage in such sharp full color that Simon could count the folds on the curtains to either side. Tiny people stood silently around on the stage, watching another tiny person wave its arms. “Guess it worked, then,” Simon said, patting Nate’s shoulder.

“Like a charm,” Nate said happily. “That guy Polito and I blew out the security cameras at five this morning, showed up to ‘repair’ them at nine, and were into every system in the building by ten. Man, *nobody* pays attention to you when you wear coveralls and keep your head down. Do you want to hear them practicing? I can turn on the microphone.”

“That’s okay.” Simon went to sit on the bed beside Jeremy, trying to find the optimum distance between ‘too close’ and ‘falling off the edge’. “How goes it?”

Jeremy glanced at Simon, obscurely amused by Simon’s seating trigonometry. “Oh, quite well,” he said. “We’re hooked into everything in the opera house that’s run by computers and I’ve, er, made arrangements to let myself in late tonight. Oh, and I have some discs for you.”

“Okay,” Simon said. “Great. Dave? What’s up with you?”

“What? Oh.” Dave hesitated. His eyes slid away. “Do you really want to know?”

“Yeah. This isn’t like at home. I do, actually, want to know.”

Dave touched the screen of his tiny laptop. “I’m, uh, breaking into the computer system for the cargo company we used to get over here,” he said.

“Okay,” Simon said. “Why? In fifty words or less, hopefully.”

“Um.” Dave thought for a minute. “We’re not supposed to have left the country,” he finally said. “Cargo haulers don’t have very good computer security,

so once we're safely back in the States, I can go in through this back door I'm installing and change our names in their records without too much finessing of Homeland Security." He paused, drumming his fingers on the desk. "That's, um . . ."

"Forty-nine words, assuming contractions only count as one word apiece," Nate said, who'd been counting. "Fifty, but only if you count the 'that's' at the end."

Simon awarded Dave a slow, meaningful golf clap. "Very nice," he said.

"I try," Dave said modestly.

"So where do they think you are?" Simon asked, sprawling out on the bed.

"Nate's in Portland visiting friends—"

"—I don't even *have* friends in Portland," Nate said happily, like this fact made him extra-smooth.

"—Johnny went home to Texas for a while, and I'm attending a computer-security workshop in Redmond," Dave finished. "And Mike and Sandy are officially, legally here."

Simon whistled in appreciation. "You guys are pretty slick," he said. "Archer could stand to learn a thing or two from you. Who cares about fake identities, just hack in and change the name by main force later."

"Without access to governmental levers, it doesn't work quite as well as you'd think," Jeremy said, amused. "And now, if you'll pardon me . . ."

"You want me to come with you?" Simon asked, rising up onto his elbows.

Jeremy put on his hat and tweaked the brim. "I think I'd best go alone," he said. "The fellows I'm dealing with can be somewhat twitchy."

"You know," Simon said, "that sounds like a good reason in *favor* of having some backup."

"I do appreciate the offer," said Jeremy.

"Huh," said Simon. He flopped back down. "Guess I know a 'thanks but no thanks' when I hear one."

Jeremy left. Half an hour later Mike and Johnny came slamming back in, bearing pizza. "Oh, *man*," Mike crowed, bubbling over with enthusiasm. "You can totally run over pedestrians in this city and no one even *notices*, let alone cares. I'm totally going to love it here."

"I hope you haven't actually tested out this theory," Sandra said, emerging from her room, lured by the siren call of pizza. She looked much less annoyed, but Simon hung back a little anyway.

"Well, not so much," Mike said. "I'm just extrapolating based on eyewitness data or some shit. I swear I saw a scooter climb a lamp post this morning."

Nate stuck his head out of the back bedroom, then joined the general exodus. Dave followed him, blinking like he'd just woken up. Silence fell. Pizza vanished. By the time Jeremy let himself back in, carrying a fat metal-sided briefcase, the

pizza was almost entirely gone. “Shit, Archer, you’re a little late,” Mike said. “Uh, there’s some left in one of these boxes—this one? No . . .”

“Thank you, but I’m not hungry,” Jeremy said, dismissing the offer with a wave. He put the chain on the door before joining them, shooing Nate over and sitting down on the couch. “I’m afraid this is the best I could do on short notice,” Jeremy said, placing the briefcase neatly on his lap and popping the locks; he lifted the lid and started piling holstered guns onto the coffee table, making a neat stack between the pizza boxes. Simon nearly spat out his coffee.

“Woo, it’s like *Christmas!*” Mike dove into the pile, pulling one gun after another out of its holster. “Whoa, oh, shit, hey, Texas . . .”

“Desert Eagle,” Johnny said, kicking himself upright. “Gimme.”

“Christ, that thing’s bigger than your fucking arm, Texas, where are you going to hide it?”

“Sure ain’t room in my pants,” Johnny said, curling an appreciative hand around the massive black barrel.

Mike snickered, then went back to pawing through the stack. Jeremy edged one of the pizza boxes aside and put the briefcase on the table. “There’s ammunition for all of them in there,” he said. “I’m assured that they’re clean and in working order. If you’re willing to drive for half an hour or so, the people from whom I got them have a compound out in the hills where you can try them out.”

“‘The people’, huh,” Simon said. “What kind of ‘people’ just happen to have nine billion clean guns lying around? Including that hand cannon that Texas is fondling?”

Jeremy laughed a little. “They’re members of an anarchist cell, actually,” he said. “*We are in Italy.*”

Sandra leaned over Mike’s shoulder and plucked one of the smaller guns out of his hands. Mike whined out a little hurt sound, then dove back into the pile and started passing out guns. Five minutes later they all had one, even Nate, who accepted his with an uncertain wince. Simon waved off Mike’s efforts to press one on him. “I have one,” he said. “You know what, I’m really hoping that we can get through these trying times without actually shooting anyone, folks. Not that that’s an order or anything, except for the part where it totally is.”

“Sure, boss,” Mike said, popping the magazine out of the pistol he was holding. “Suuuuure.”

Johnny claimed the gun that Simon had turned down, bringing his total to three, including the massive Desert Eagle. “I’m serious,” Simon said. “Christ, if Texas fires that bazooka of his he could bring down a goddamned satellite. It’s an international incident waiting to happen.”

“Yeah?” Johnny eyed the Eagle. “Now I wanna try.”

Dave shrugged into a shoulder holster, twitching both shoulders spastically to get it to settle. “I’m going to need a different holster,” he said. “It’s too hot for a jacket.”

“Yeah, and also shoulder holster plus Hawaiian shirt equals eighties cop drama,” Simon said, eyeing this vision askance.

“*Turandot*,” Jeremy said, sitting down at the table opposite Simon and dropping a small pile of CDs in front of him.

“Eh?” Simon said, cracking his eyes open. They’d only gotten back to their own room about half an hour ago, and after the *haute couture* of the morning, Simon had sort of been looking forward to a nap.

Apparently it was not to be. “*Turandot*,” Jeremy said, tapping the pile of CDs. “Four different recordings, four different companies, three different decades. You can’t afford to get too used to one version, as every company’s performance—every *performance*—is slightly different.”

“Okay, okay,” Simon said, picking up the topmost CD. “Gosh, that’s *Turandot* all right,” he said. “I’d recognize it anywhere by the big word *Turandot* printed at the top.”

“We’ll be making our move during *Nessun dorma*, in the early part of Act 3,” Jeremy said, ignoring Simon’s sarcasm. “If Volpe is half the aficionado that he’s rumored to be, he’ll be entirely distracted during the aria, especially since I’ll have behaved impeccably for so long that he and his guards will have relaxed.” He paused and folded his hands together, considering Simon. His little smile faded away.

Simon suffered under Jeremy’s even gaze for a full two seconds before saying, “What?”

Jeremy sighed. “I don’t have to tell you how important the timing of this is, do I?”

“No. I mean, I get it.” Simon ducked his head, curling a hand about the back of his neck. “So . . . show me.”

Jeremy picked up one of the CDs and shucked it out of its case, popping it into the little portable player that he’d bought. The CD whirled up with a little sound. Jeremy started skipping tracks. “What you’ll be listening for is the female chorus,” he said absently, watching the window on the CD player. “Once they start singing, you’ll have about ten seconds to get into position. Ah. There.”

The CD settled in. Opera happened. “Hey, I know this song,” Simon said, sitting up. “It was in some movie.”

“It’s a famous aria,” Jeremy agreed. “Which is why I’m hoping that Volpe will be paying more attention to it than to me. I’m told that the tenor in question is young and somewhat controversial, which ought to distract him further.” He fell silent.

Simon stared down at the table and listened. “Kinda pretty,” he eventually said.

“Mm,” said Jeremy. “Here, this part, coming up, right about two minutes in. See, the tenor stops singing, and there’s the female chorus . . .” He raised one

finger. "They finish their line, and the tenor sings four notes, and *there*." The tenor's voice went up and Jeremy's hand chopped down. "Right there, at the end of the word *dilegua*. We'll do it then."

"Dilega-what-a?" Simon said, and just as quickly held up his hands in surrender. "Kidding. Kidding. I got it."

"I'd like you to listen to this track as many times as you can stand it," Jeremy said. "And the same track on the other three CDs. I want you to utterly internalize that moment. If you're one beat too fast or too slow—"

"I know," Simon said. "I will." He poked the CD player, putting the CD back a track. *Nessun dorma* began to play again. Simon put it on repeat. "What's, uh, dillawhatsis mean, anyway?" he asked, picking up the empty case.

"*Dilegua*," Jeremy said patiently. "The word itself means 'vanish'." His smile was tight. "The last line, freely translated, means 'vanish, o night, set, stars, set, stars. At dawn I will win, I will win, I will win'."

Simon glanced up from the back of the CD case. "You did that on purpose," he said accusingly.

"I admit nothing," Jeremy said, his smile now beatific.

An hour later, Simon was so sick of *Nessun dorma* that he started listening to other random bits of the opera CDs just to crowbar the aria out of his head. He had to admit that it was working, though; every time one of the tenors hit that note, Jeremy would snap his fingers (without actually looking up from whatever he was doing) just as Simon nodded. It made Simon feel like a total tool, albeit a reasonably well-prepared one.

Simon took a nap, or tried to—the damned aria was stuck in his head so thoroughly that it kept him awake—then went right back to the CDs. Jeremy spent a large part of the afternoon on the phone, chatting amiably with any number of people and adding a discouraging number of check marks to his little black book. "Jesus," Simon eventually said. "You know, I think that guy with seven checks by his name might seriously trying to sell you out."

"I'd have to agree with you," Jeremy said. In the background, *Nessun dorma* hit the critical note again and they tapped the table in unison. Jeremy glanced up, twitched out a smile, and went back to his address book. "I know you're unhappy about it," he said, "but frankly I find it something of a relief to have your friends here. They may not care for me overmuch, but at least I can be certain that none of them are going to sell me to Karpol."

"Yeah," Simon said. "Well. Now."

The silence hung between them for long enough that the aria started over. "Mm," Jeremy finally said, and by mutual unspoken agreement they dropped the subject.

Late that night Simon thrashed up and out of a semi-sleep state that was

endlessly scored with *Nessun dorma* when Jeremy laid a hand on his shoulder. It felt weird, and Simon in his dazed state could not figure out why for several seconds—then Jeremy pulled his hand back and Simon saw the latex glove. Everything became clear.

“I apologize for waking you,” Jeremy said. He was crouching by the side of the bed, his jacket off, the top half of his body limned in soot. Simon, still a little foggy, reached out and touched Jeremy’s chest, his fingers slipping right off the frictionless surface of the catsuit. It made Jeremy smile, just a little. “I’m leaving for the opera house now,” he said, patting Simon’s shoulder with latex-tacky fingers.

“Gotcha,” Simon grated out, blinking the sleep from his eyes. “You want me to come with you?”

Jeremy breathed out a laugh. “No, no,” he said. “Go back to sleep. I just wanted to let you know that I was going.”

“Okay.” Simon grappled vaguely with the back of Jeremy’s head until he managed to haul Jeremy in for a fuzzy kiss. “Good luck,” he said, once that was done, and fell back onto his pillow.

Jeremy drifted soundlessly to his feet, his goggles dangling from his other hand. “I believe that when it comes to stagecraft, you’re supposed to say ‘break a leg,’” he said, but Simon was already mostly asleep again and didn’t answer.

Jeremy was back by the time Simon woke up the next morning, cool and unruffled, the catsuit nowhere in evidence. Simon almost thought he had dreamed the whole thing. “How’s it going?” he said, still groggy. “I mean, how’d it go?”

“Oh, quite well,” Jeremy said, turning the page of his newspaper. “Everything’s in place and has been tested. Perhaps some day when I’m too old to make a proper thief I’ll take up stagecraft instead.”

Simon squinted at him, trying to figure out if he was kidding. “I can sort of picture that,” Simon finally said. “I mean, doesn’t the stage crew have to wear black and stay really quiet?”

Jeremy looked up, gazing thoughtfully off at nothing. “Perhaps I ought to keep it in mind,” he said. “At any rate, I think we ought to switch hotels today.”

“Okay,” Simon said. He yawned and padded off towards the bathroom.

◆ Twenty-Seven

The next few days passed in a whirlwind of activity. Jeremy kept them all on the run from morning to night, but himself most of all. If Jeremy slept at all during those days, Simon wasn't aware of it. He was always already awake when Simon woke up, and he was always still awake when Simon went to bed. One cellphone or another was constantly glued to his ear, and he took over the mundane errands, to boot. A pile of emptied, discarded briefcases grew in one corner of the room—Ethan was sending them along at the rate of one every two days.

On the second day Mike stuffed them all into one of his cars—he had three now, two rental cars and an authentic Italian taxicab which Jeremy had procured from somewhere—and drove them out of the city and into the foothills of the Alps, to a little rundown farmhouse that was so deserted as to be somewhat creepy. There was a decent target-shooting range set up out back, though, and Simon and his team spent a good three hours getting a feel for their new guns by plinking at targets. Or, in Johnny's case, thundering at them.

Simon listened to the various recordings of Nessun dorma so many times that he started to develop opinions about them. He now had opinions about opera. Probably wrong ones. He'd never felt so much like a poseur in his life—but the critical note shot him full of adrenalin each time and made his heart stand still, so he was grudgingly convinced that all this posing might just be working.

Jeremy arranged for the rest of them to attend a symphony performance at the *Teatro Domenico* on the evening of the third day. Simon paid the actual performance no attention, and he was pretty sure that he wasn't alone in that. What he paid attention to was the building; he and his team took full advantage of their cheap nosebleed-seat tickets and roamed the building from top to bottom, surreptitiously trying doors and avoiding security cameras. Nate, the only one of them who had been here before, managed to get lost twice anyway.

While Simon listened to the CDs with half an ear he twined a piece of cord around his fingers until he was pretty sure he could tie and release a double bowline in his sleep. When tying the knot became second nature he switched to tying it off around the leg of the chair he was sitting in, nearly standing on his head to do it, his face going red and heavy with blood. Eventually he was able to tie the knot without feeling like he was about to pass out, although Jeremy still remarked on the flush in his cheeks afterwards.

By the fifth day Simon was so bored and wound tight that he went with Sandra to pick up their fancy-ass opera clothes. Ulisse promptly made him stand for another hour's worth of last-minute fittings, making infinitesimal adjustments here and there and fussing endlessly. Even the fittings beat listening to *Nessun dorma* another thirty times, although Simon caught himself humming it on two separate occasions. He asked Sandra to shoot him if she caught him at it again. Sandra laughed at him.

When Simon absolutely had to have a break from Turandot and double bowlines, he went down to the hotel's exercise room and pushed himself until he thought he would drop. He did chin-ups until his biceps burned with acid, then switched to the free weights. He put a quarter of an inch of muscle on his arms in four days and took to casually tossing around and catching the bigger barbells, at least until a hotel employee caught him at it and nearly had a heart attack. Simon tried to be a little more circumspect after that.

Nate and Dave spent most of their time jealously guarding and improving their connection into the opera house's computer systems, and doing dead-run practices in the middle of the night while the opera house was theoretically empty. Mike went screaming around the city, learning the streets in one of their two rental cars, racking up minor dings and near-collisions, apparently having a wonderful time. Sandra spent most of her time shopping—both for the long list of items that Jeremy had asked her to buy, and for herself—and Johnny, alone amongst them all, played tourist, wandering around museums by himself until shiftily Milanese turned up to give him shopping bags full of those things that Sandra couldn't buy. Then he wandered around the museums some more. He seemed to like them.

Neither Simon nor Jeremy slept much, if at all, on the last night. Simon eventually dozed off an hour or so before dawn and didn't wake until noon, and all of a sudden it was seven hours until showtime and there was no more time to do anything but prepare.

* * *

"This? This is not clothing," Simon said, fussing with the knife's-edge pleats on his tuxedo pants. "This is some kind of, of S&M gear. Not only are there these hidden tabs on the shirt that connect to secret buttons inside the pants, but the pants button up over my *hip*. Not to mention that I'm wearing suspenders. I might as well be strapped into this goddamned gimp suit. I will never be able to pee again as long as I live. Or do anything else, for that matter. The chastity belt lives on."

"Mm," Jeremy said absently, fiddling with one of his cufflinks. The four thousand remaining pieces of their tuxedos were spread out over Mike's nearly-unused bed, filling the room with unnecessary complications. Simon's team was a constant and cheerful din outside, most of them having to wear nothing more complicated than a Hawaiian shirt. For a moment Simon hated them all like poison. "The tabs are to keep your shirt laying flat and tucked into your pants," Jeremy said, brushing invisible lint off his starched shirtfront. "And if you've gotten this far in life without learning to undo buttons, Simon, perhaps you have larger problems than mere black tie."

"That is *beside the point*," Simon said. "My point is that I do not wear my dick on my hip—"

"I'm aware," Jeremy said, his little smile gone seraphic.

"—and so I should not wear my fly there, either," Simon finished, trying to ignore that. "Peeing should not involve having to detach my shirt from my pants, either. It's just common sense, something which formalwear completely lacks."

Jeremy picked up his waistcoat and slid into it, buttoning it across his midsection with absent little flickers of his fingers. His bow tie still hung untied around his neck, like a scarf. "Do you need any help with your cummerbund?" he asked, his attention more on his waistcoat than on Simon.

"No," Simon said, touching it just to make sure he wasn't lying. "It's a band of fabric that goes around my waist. I think I'm up to that, even with the multitude of sins we're requiring it to hide."

"It also buttons onto your pants, you realize," Jeremy said. "There ought to be a tab inside the front."

"What? Christ. You're kidding." Simon insinuated his fingers under the cummerbund and promptly got one of them caught in a loop of elastic. Muttering under his breath, Simon sucked in his stomach long enough to hook the loop around yet another button on the inside of his pants. "Tell you what," he said, carefully tugging his cummerbund back into place. "Next time let's just go somewhere that requires me to wear scuba gear, how's that? It'd be easier."

"If not nearly as attractive," Jeremy said, glancing up long enough to favor Simon with a thin smile. His fingers ticked down the row of black studs that dotted his shirt front.

Simon looked away. "Yeah, well," he said. "I think you're overlooking the sheer focative power of skin-tight rubber, there."

“Mm.” Jeremy gazed off into the distance for a moment, contemplating this vision, before shaking his head to dismiss it. “While I concede that you may, indeed, have a point, I also think you’re discounting the fine figure you cut in decent black tie. If you’re been wearing *that* tuxedo instead of that awful hired suit you had on at the Mornings’ home, I’d have had no choice but to invite you to dance instead of asking Sandra, and then where would we be?”

“Making huge fools of ourselves, maybe?” Simon tugged at his cummerbund again. “Is this thing on straight? It feels weird.”

Jeremy glanced up, his eyes skating over Simon’s midsection. “Straight, yes, but you’ve got it on upside down.”

“I hate the world,” Simon said, throwing up his hands in defeat.

“Oh, now, that’s hardly fair, it doesn’t hate *you*,” Jeremy said. He made one last minute adjustment to his cuffs, then made a little finger-twirling gesture at Simon. “Here, turn about and I’ll get it.”

Giving up, Simon turned around and put his hands in the air, his undone cuffs flapping loose about his wrists. “I surrender,” he said. “Formalwear has beaten me. My only complaint is that it wasn’t a fair fight.”

“And yet you must outweigh your opponent by a good fourteen stone,” Jeremy said, suddenly so close behind Simon that he could feel Jeremy’s breath on the back of his neck. The hairs there fought to rise and failed, foiled by the heavily-starched cloth of his collar. Jeremy’s fingers lit on the small of Simon’s back and slid under the cummerbund’s band, his knuckles pressing into Simon’s spine as he worked the clasp. The undone cummerbund fell away. Jeremy caught it, tugging against the loop that was still attached to the inside of Simon’s pants. “Do you want me to get that?” Jeremy asked, tugging at the cummerbund again, now plainly amused.

Simon sucked in a breath and went prospecting for the elastic loop again. “As much as I’d just love to let you stick your hand down the front of my pants while the door is unlocked,” he said, “I think maybe it would be, oh, I don’t know, a catastrophically stupid idea?”

“Ah, well, I suppose we haven’t enough time to do the idea justice in any case,” Jeremy said. The cummerbund’s ridiculous elastic loop came free, snapping against Simon’s fingers hard enough to sting. Simon grabbed for the cummerbund. Jeremy beat him to it, reaching around Simon’s waist to flip the band over; he didn’t linger too much, just pulled the cummerbund tight across Simon’s stomach and did up the clasp in back. “There we are,” Jeremy said, patting Simon’s hip. “Shall I tie your tie for you, while I’m here?”

“Think you can do it without putting your hands down my pants?” Simon asked, hooking the elastic loop to the hidden button again. “Because seriously, I never know with you.”

Jeremy laughed under his breath and tugged at Simon’s hip, turning Simon to face him. “I promise I shall be the very model of decorum,” Jeremy said,

touching two fingers to the underside of Simon's jaw. "Chin up, if you would."

Obligingly, Simon lifted his chin, staring out across the top of Jeremy's head. The band of the bow tie pulled lightly against the back of his neck, once, then again; one end of the tie and Jeremy's fingertips stroked down the front of Simon's throat, making him swallow despite himself. "You know, real bow ties come pre-tied," he said, trying to ignore the tugging. "Some of them even clip on, for maximum convenience."

"Oh, yes, but why stop there?" Jeremy asked, knotting the two ends of the tie together. "You may as well just cast the entire thing in cheap plastic and attach it to a stickpin. Then you could have an entire wardrobe of the things in various horrendous prints and colors to attach wherever you saw fit—there we are." He patted Simon's chest.

Simon swiveled to check himself out in the mirror. "Not bad," he admitted, grudgingly.

"Very nice," Jeremy said in agreement, tying his own tie.

Cufflinks in, jacket on, Simon submitted to being fussed over with ill grace. Jeremy pulled Simon's shirt cuffs out to the correct millimeter, smoothed his lapels, checked his shirt studs, and made minute adjustments to Simon's bow tie, all with a certain frowning demeanor that made Simon feel like a mannequin, or maybe like an oversized Barbie doll. Finally Jeremy pronounced himself satisfied and went to nitpick his own tuxedo. Simon took the opportunity to escape.

The main room of the suite was a cheerful shambles, littered with pizza boxes, empty cans, stray computers, and one member of Simon's team, sprawled sideways across the overstuffed chair. Mike looked up as Simon came out and whistled, long and low. "Damn, boss," he said. "Bet you could be a headwaiter at any joint in town, you wanted—lookin' pretty smooth."

"Feeling something like a masochistic penguin, though," Simon said. He caught himself tugging at his wing collar and made himself stop, lest he unravel something and give Jeremy an excuse to fuss over him again. "We just about ready?"

"Sandy's still puttin' her face on or whatever it is chicks do," Mike said, glancing over his shoulder at the closed door of Sandra's room. "Me, though, I'm good to go whenever." He tilted his head, showing Simon the Bluetooth headset clipped to his ear. "We're all hooked up and ready to go. Nate just got done testing the connection and everything."

Simon brushed nervous fingers over his lapels. "Great," he said. "Where's mine?"

"Nate's got it," Mike said.

Simon headed for the back bedroom, halting in the doorway and surveying the damage. "Christ, either you kids clean your room or I'm docking your allowance," he said.

“Awww, Ma,” Nate said. He had his nose nearly pressed to his new oversized monitor, watching a few early opera-goers drift through the hallways of the opera house. “Halt camera five, Stone.”

Dave, seated cross-legged on the foot of one of the beds, tapped a command into his laptop. “That get it?”

“That’s got it,” Nate said, pleased. “Turn off the main camera and turn it right back on.”

Dave tapped out another command. The largest window on Nate’s monitor went black and then went red again, focused on the closed curtains of the stage and the box seats nearest it; tiny figures already moved in one or two of the boxes. “I think we’re ready,” Dave said, blinking nearsightedly at Simon. “You look really good.”

“Wish I could say the same for you, Stone,” Simon said. “Specs, I understand you’ve got my earpiece.”

“What? Oh, yeah.” Nate tore himself away from his monitor and picked up a little white box, holding it out. “It’s not quite as small as the ones we use at work, but I don’t think anyone will really notice.”

Simon held out his hand and waited. Nate eventually noticed, blushed, stood up, and gingerly picked his way through the spiderweb of cables to hand Simon the box. Simon flicked it open and pulled out the little pink plastic earpiece, wedging it into his left ear like a wad of Silly Putty. “I hear the hearing aid is *the* new look in formalwear,” Simon said, trying to push the thing farther down his ear canal and failing. “I guess I’ll have to hope that no one notices it.”

“I don’t think they will,” Nate said. “I mean, nobody’s going to be looking at you anyway.”

“Really? What’s that supposed to mean, Specs?”

“Well, ah . . .” Nate flapped his hands helplessly. “. . . have you *seen* Sandy’s dress?”

Simon tried to call it to mind; all he remembered was something silvery inside a clear plastic garment bag. “I guess the proper answer to your question is ‘sort of,’” he finally said.

“I guess what I’m trying to say is that you look really smooth, boss, but as long as Sandy’s in your general vicinity, well, uh, I know what I’d be looking at,” Nate said.

Simon eyed him. “Wow, Specs,” he said. “Was that some kind of appreciation of the opposite sex that I just heard?”

“No, I’m just being sleazy,” Nate said. “Seriously, wait until you see that thing.” He turned around and started picking his way back to the computer, nearly tripping over one particularly high-hanging cord. “Give me a sec and we’ll test your earpiece,” he said, more or less falling back into his computer chair and grabbing his headset. “Ready?”

“Ready,” Simon said, touching two fingers to his ersatz hearing aid.

Nate hit a button on the headset. "Testing for Templar," he said. His voice doubled tinnily in Simon's ear, and Simon nodded. "One, two, three, many. Say hi to the boss, Texas."

"Yo, Templar," Johnny said, his voice crackling slightly with distance. "I'm online."

"Hey, Texas. Okay, sounds good," Simon said. "Has Springheel got her earpiece?"

"Honda's got it," Nate said, taking off his headphones again.

Out in the main room, Mike whistled. Simon swiveled around just as Jeremy let himself out of the other bedroom, impeccably black tie'd and wearing what amounted to a long-suffering expression. "God *damn*," Mike said, fanning himself. "I feel all constricted 'n' shit just looking at the two of you."

"Yeah? You ought to feel it from the inside," Simon said.

Mike leered at him. "Was that a proposition or something, boss, 'cause I can peel you back out of that thing no problem—"

"Christ, at this point I'd almost take you up on it, just to get out of this goddamned penguin suit," Simon said. Forgetting himself, he pulled at the collar of his shirt; Jeremy caught his eye and Simon desisted, grumpily.

"Have you got everything?" Jeremy asked, raising both eyebrows.

Simon unbuttoned his jacket long enough to stick his fingers under his cummerbund and run them from front to back. "Yep, it's all there," he said, rebuttoning the jacket. "And I've got my earpiece in, to boot. All we really need is Sandy, and we're good to go."

"Awesome," Mike said, picking up Simon's Redskins hat and jamming it onto his head. "You guys are gonna tip the driver, right?"

"Tip him, hell, I'm not even planning to pay him," said Simon. "And if he bitches, I'll tell him I know where he sleeps."

Mike snickered. "Aw, man, boss, was that a threat or was that a threat—"

The door on the far side of the room clicked open and Sandra shimmered out. There was no other word for it; Simon caught himself gaping. Part of the dress *was* silver, he'd remembered rightly, but a lot of it was just exposed Sandra: the dress was a halter top, a skirt with an uneven pointy hem, four zillion tiny beads, and well over half of Sandra's skin, bare to the air. "*God*, I feel pretty," Sandra announced to no one in particular.

Mike made a high-pitched yelping noise like a chihuahua that had been stepped on and slithered bonelessly out of his chair. "Oh God, take me now," he moaned from somewhere under the coffee table. "No, wait, fuck that, oh, *Sandy*, take me now . . ."

"Not a chance," Sandra said, picking up her little clutch purse and touching her neat updo. "It took me like two hours to put up my hair." She glanced across the room at Simon. "Well?"

"Nice," Simon said, not quite strangling on it.

Sandra looked at Jeremy. “What do you think?”

“Oh, very nice,” Jeremy said, twirling his fingers. “Turn about.”

Sandra obligingly spun in a circle, holding her arms out. “It’s cut maybe half an inch above the crack of my ass,” she noted in an offhand voice. Mike, who’d been climbing back into his chair, moaned and collapsed onto the floor again. Ignoring him Sandra completed her spin, the heavy beaded skirt twisting momentarily about her legs before dropping back into place with a weighty rustle. It even *sounded* expensive. “Seriously, I can’t believe that I own this gorgeous thing,” Sandra said, touching the high neck of the halter top. “Usually I only get to borrow them.”

“I’d say it was money well spent,” Jeremy said with the ghost of a smile. “Although, if I might?”

“Hm?”

“Lose the bracelet,” Jeremy said, flicking his fingers at her. “The earrings are good—the earrings are *very* good—but the bracelet is too much.”

“Yeah, I wasn’t sure about it either,” Sandra said, pulling off the bracelet. Simon hadn’t even noticed it was there. “Better?”

Jeremy considered her for a moment, then nodded. “Perfect,” he said.

“I do not understand how you can look at that and critique the *jewelry*,” Mike said, from the floor. “Is that some kind of English thing?”

“Believe me, I am only just restraining myself from undignified display,” Jeremy said, just barely smiling. His fingers rose to touch the front of his throat.

Deciding that he’d had enough of this, Simon cleared his throat. “Okay, people,” he said, pitching his voice to carry; Mike scrambled back into his chair and Nate and Dave appeared at the doorway of their room, Nate still wearing his headset. “Are we ready?”

“We’re ready,” Nate said. “Texas left half an hour ago, so he should be in place now.”

“Great,” Simon said. For a single, shining moment it felt just like any other operation, and he allowed himself to bask in that, ignoring Jeremy’s quiet, formal presence as best he could. It didn’t last. It couldn’t. Simon forced his doubts to be quiet—it was way too late to call this off—and clapped his hands. “Well, then, hell, let’s do this thing,” he said, as formal an invocation as he ever spoke. “Game on, people.”

The ripple of reaction spread outward through the room. Mike bounded to his feet and grabbed the car keys off the table. “Right, we’re out of here,” he said, tweaking the brim of the Redskins cap. “You guys ready?”

“Ready,” Sandra said, tucking her Bluetooth headset into her tiny clutch purse and heading for the door.

“Ready,” Simon echoed. He turned to follow her. Mike bounded past him and out into the hallway, yelping cheerfully at Sandra.

Simon turned to close the door behind himself and hesitated, framed in the doorway. The techs had vanished back into their room, leaving Jeremy alone and supremely out of place amidst the happy chaos of the main room; Jeremy was watching Simon, his expression grave. Simon cleared his throat, then nodded, once.

Jeremy nodded back, favoring Simon with the slightest curve of a smile as Simon shut the door.

◆ Twenty-Eight

The outside of the *Teatro Domenico* had been spotlit to within an inch of its life. Simon, ducking to look out of the taxi's windshield, could see the overspill of light from a block away—and that was all he was likely to see for a while, since traffic outside the little opera house was snarled into a Gordian knot that reached all the way down the block.

"Yo, Specs, we're about two minutes out," Mike said from the front seat, his voice redoubled in Simon's left ear. Mike patted the steering wheel and glanced from side to side, the Bluetooth headset glinting.

"Two minutes out," Nate confirmed over frequency, a ghostly extra presence inside the car. "How long before you get back here to pick up Shadow?"

"I'd say . . . seven, eight minutes," Mike said. A tiny space opened up between two momentarily-unwary cabs on his right and Mike hauled the wheel around without hesitation, wedging the front end of the taxi into the space amidst an infuriated crescendo of honking. "Yeah, closer to seven," he said, snickering.

"You drive like a native, Honda," Simon said, glancing uneasily at the gesticulating cab driver on their right. "And believe me, that isn't a compliment."

Mike slid the rest of the taxi into the space as it opened. His back bumper kissed lightly off the front bumper of the cab they'd cut off, jolting Simon minutely to one side. "Sure it is," Mike said cheerfully, accelerating. "It is too totally a compliment, Templar. Just 'cause you didn't mean it as one doesn't mean it's not."

"What'd he say?" Nate asked.

"Told me I drive like a native," Mike said, shamelessly thinning a herd of scooters who were trying to zip by on their left. Through sheer luck he didn't actually hit any, but now there were five scooters bottled up behind him. Most of the drivers were yelling at him, although one leaned over to tap on the back window, trying to get Sandra's attention. Sandra flipped him off, which made Mike hoot before he pulled away again. "God, I love this city," Mike said, still snickering.

"So do I," Sandra said, "but probably not for the same reasons."

Somehow they made it to the front of the opera house in just under a minute, Mike screeching to the curb by the edge of the plaza. The opera house was small by Milanese standards but still looked pretty imposing when it was lit up, four stories of ornate gray stone lit a hellish yellow by the huge floodlights sitting in a circle around its base. Simon leaned forward and handed Mike a folded American dollar bill. "There you go," he said. "I want my change."

Mike snickered and batted at Simon's hand. "Yo, Specs, we're here," he said.

"Roger that," Nate said. "We're cutting the camera feed now. You should be good to go in five."

Simon touched two fingers to his bow tie. It was absurdly puffy compared to the flat pre-tied kind, and he kept thinking it was about to come undone. "Okay," Dave said. "Camera feed has been diverted to us. You guys are good to go."

"Right," Simon said, kicking open his door and, true to form, nearly getting creamed by a scooter. This time, however, he'd been expecting it, so he just flattened himself against the side of the taxi and edged around until he was in nominally safe territory and could open the other door for Sandra.

Sandra put her hand demurely in Simon's and shimmered up and out of the taxi. The silver spangles of her dress caught the spotlights, turning her into a blindingly-sparkling . . . something. She looked an awful lot like a sequined Christmas-tree ornament, actually, although Simon didn't dare tell her that. Already they were starting to attract some attention; Simon reached behind Sandra and shut the door of the taxi. Mike peeled out, abandoning them to their fate. "Well, then," Simon said, glancing at Sandra. "Shall we?"

"Let's," Sandra breathed, scanning the plaza in front of them. "I've wanted to do this all my life."

Simon laughed under his breath and put his hand lightly on the bared small of Sandra's back, guiding her forward. "Gosh, I sure haven't," he said.

"That's because you have no soul," Sandra said. "As I believe I've noted."

They headed across the expanse of the plaza towards the massive double doors, propped open to let the light spill out. The plaza was already half-full of opera-goers, most of them dressed more or less like Simon and Sandra, but, Simon had to admit, not nearly as effectively. More than one person turned, openly or covertly, to watch the two of them go by. "I'm *en route* back to the hotel," Mike said, now just a disembodied voice in Simon's ear. "Tell Shadow to be ready."

"He's ready," Nate said. "Down in the parking garage waiting for you."

Simon and Sandra joined the thin stream of people making their way through the double doors into the buttery-yellow opulence of the main lobby. There was no other word for the color of that vast expanse of marble, even when it was shot through with the blood-red of the carpets. Simon led Sandra off the red carpet, testing their footing on the marble proper; whatever it was that Jeremy had done

to the soles of Simon's dress shoes, it had worked like a charm. It was almost like wearing sneakers. "You good?" Simon asked, under his breath.

Sandra tossed her head. "Perfect," she said, jutting out her hip and striking a pose on the marble flooring. Simon, who was watching for something else entirely, saw her twist the ball of her foot against the marble and faintly heard the rubberized sole of her sandal squeak. "See?" Sandra said, glancing sidelong at a passing ticketholder. "I'm good."

"Probably ought to turn it down a notch, though," Simon said. "I mean, we don't actually want any of these old guys throwing themselves at your feet, right?"

"Wrong, buster," Sandra said, poking Simon's chest. "You need to turn it *up* a notch. You're supposed to look like someone who belongs here, remember?"

Simon sighed a little and offered Sandra his arm. "Right, right, *nouveau riche* American socialite, I remember," he said, putting on a smile. "C'mon, Spring. Let's go dazzle some of the poor people."

"Best idea I've heard all day," Sandra said tartly, pivoting neatly into the crook of Simon's arm and incidentally thwacking him across the thighs with the heavy swing of her beaded skirt. Manfully not wincing, Simon escorted her across the massive lobby towards the internal doors. It was a long, long trip, almost disconcertingly long, and the marble-sheathed walls made it into a perfect echo chamber; even though the lobby could easily hold five times as many people as it currently held, the din was already enormous. Simon glanced around as he went, but if Johnny was inside, he was well out of sight. Probably a good thing, all things considered.

"Shadow and I are *en route*," Mike's disembodied voice said. "I estimate ten minutes."

"Ten minutes," Nate repeated. Dimly, under the hum of voices echoing off the walls of the lobby, Simon could hear the clicking of someone's keyboard, and someone honking at Mike. Nate made a humming sound under his breath, then sighed in relief. "I've got Templar and Springheel on camera four. Boy, that dress is easy to spot."

"Specs likes your dress," Simon murmured, his lips half an inch from Sandra's ear.

Sandra laughed. "I'll bet he does," she murmured back.

They joined the short line of people waiting to be admitted into the auditorium proper. Simon left his hand in a proprietary position on the small of Sandra's back while she shimmered and pouted and put on a performance for the people around them; Simon tried to look like he found her antics entertaining. It was difficult. Not because they weren't entertaining—indeed, they were just about the funniest thing Simon had seen all day—but because his senses were on high alert. Any of these people could be *someone*—"Never knew you were such a girl,

Spring,” Simon said under his breath, trying to shake off some of the paranoia. Sandra cut her eyes at him and contrived to step on his foot mid-pose.

Once they made it up to the podium Simon fished their tickets from the inside pocket of his jacket and handed them over, feigning boredom. The usher checked their tickets and promptly bowed, saying something obsequious in Italian as he led them over to a staircase that was closed off with one of those thick velvet ropes. Simon could feel eyes on his back as he waited for the usher to stop bowing and scraping long enough to unhook the rope. It was a distinctly uncomfortable feeling. Simon could only suppose that he wasn’t cut out for socialite-ing. Socializing. Socialism. Whatever.

Taking Sandra’s hand, he led her up the broad marble stairway, both the crowds and the unholy racket fading away as they went. The stairway, not short by any means, doubled back on itself twice, losing half of the remaining roar of the crowd each time. By the time they emerged into the second lobby the din was only a faint background rumble, not loud enough to obscure the sound of their footsteps. The luxurious horseshoe-shaped second lobby was smaller, dimmer, and much more sparsely populated, the inside of the horseshoe lined with wide doors half-hidden behind heavy, tied-back curtains. A few people glanced at them, then away again, not interested.

Sandra’s hand tightened on Simon’s arm. Simon turned to her, letting his eyes drift across the room, and halfway through his turn he saw what she had seen. The private box that must belong to Battista Volpe was obvious, even from here: it was the only door in the room flanked by a pair of gorillas in tuxedos and expensive shades. “Step in front of me and hold your hands out,” Sandra breathed.

Simon did so, putting his back to the door gorillas with great misgivings. Sandra reached up and made a few minute adjustments to Simon’s bow tie, glancing under his arm at the guards. “They’re carrying way too much gun,” she murmured after a moment. “It pulls their suits out of whack.”

“Well, now we know,” Simon said, smiling down at her, purely for the benefit of anyone who might be watching.

Sandra nodded. “I’m going to go freshen up,” she said. “Meet me at the bar?” Before Simon could respond she slipped past him and shimmered off across the lobby, drawing a few admiring stares—including, Simon noticed, that of one of the monoliths at Volpe’s door. Simon watched her go, still wearing his smile, then went to go lean decoratively against the bar.

Thirty seconds later Sandra was speaking into his ear, all her mannerisms gone. “Two guards on the outside of Box 13, armed for bear, but I didn’t see any down in the main lobby,” she said. “If they’re there, they’re well hidden. We’ll be heading into the box here in a moment.”

“Gotcha,” Nate said.

“I’ll tell Shadow,” Mike said. “And we’re about four minutes out, I estimate.”

“Four minutes,” Sandra repeated. “Right. Templar and I are on our way in.”

Mike’s voice dropped to a low, thick hum as he blocked the microphone, conveying Sandra’s message to Jeremy. Simon glanced over just as Sandra reappeared and headed his way. Simon straightened up. “Ready?” Sandra said, holding out her hand.

Simon took it. “Any time you are,” he said. Bracing himself, Simon led Sandra across the lobby, heading for the door marked with a discreet brass ‘12’. Their path took them right past the bodyguards, who watched them go by with incurious suspicion; Simon, painfully aware of the heavy shoulder rigs under their jackets, forced himself not to tense up. Instead he opened the door to Box 12 and shepherded Sandra in, relaxing only once the door had closed again behind them.

For the moment they paused in the back of the private box, letting the side curtains block them from view. The box was essentially a small, curved room that was missing a chunk of wall; a wide, padded brocade railing ran around the top of the box, hip-high on Simon. There were six seats, lushly padded and well-spaced—but, Simon was pleased to note, bolted to the floor like any other theater seat. The roar of conversation rose faintly up from below. “Nice,” he said.

“Oh, come on,” Sandra said, heading for the front of the box. Simon followed her, resting his hands on the padded railing and looking out over the theater below. Far below them the orchestra seats stretched out like a sea of red, only about a third of them currently occupied; there was another row of private boxes below them and a third row above them, their curved and padded railings looping artistically through empty space. The enormous stage curtain was closed, the orchestra pit about half-full of musicians.

Sandra dug around in her tiny clutch and came out with the opera glasses which Jeremy had borrowed just for the occasion. “Want them?” she asked, holding them out to Simon.

“Yeah,” Simon said. He took the little fake binoculars and sat down, training the opera glasses on the orchestra pit. The left lens showed him the musicians, far below; the right lens showed him nothing but the palm of his hand. Simon shifted his grip, clearing the lens of the hidden periscope, and Volpe’s booth leaped into pristine, miniature focus. Simon shut his left eye and took stock.

There were already five people in Battista Volpe’s private box. Two of them, standing near the back, looked to be bodyguards much like the gorillas on the outside of the door. Volpe himself was obviously the white-haired man with the unfortunate hooked beak of a nose and the bored expression; the man sitting beside him had the look and general demeanor of a secretary, or some kind of factotum, anyway.

The fifth person—Simon swept the opera glasses slightly to the right, trying to get a better view. The fifth person in Volpe’s private box was a youngish woman with brown hair that had been put up into a froth of ringlets. She was

wearing some kind of sparkly blue strappy evening dress and a distant expression. Annabelle, Simon could only assume, tucked away in a convenient corner. On a closer look he could see what looked like the handles of a wheelchair jutting out into space behind her back.

Simon lowered the opera glasses and handed them back to Sandra, who promptly put them to her own eyes. "Looks like we've got four," Simon murmured. "Plus our friend."

"I make four too," Sandra murmured back, smiling. "I'll call it in." She stood up, touched Simon's shoulder, and headed for the back of the box, hiding herself behind one of the drawn curtains. "We've got five people inside the box, one of which is presumably our friend," she said a moment later, her voice oddly loud inside Simon's left ear despite barely carrying to his right. "Besides her, I make two more guards, a secretary of some kind, and the big guy."

"Got it," Mike said. "We're just now pulling up outside. Shadow will be go in ten seconds."

Nate apologetically cleared his throat. "We need silence on frequency now unless it's urgent."

"Right," said Sandra. "I'm going off frequency." A minute later she rejoined Simon, taking the seat by his side and putting the opera glasses to her eyes.

"Shadow is *en route*," Mike said. "Going off frequency."

Simon nudged Sandra. "Can I see those?"

Sandra swayed towards him, laughing softly, and put the opera glasses in his hands. For the moment Simon left them in his lap, touching his forehead to Sandra's and closing his eyes; his senses strained outwards. "This is cozy," he muttered, laughing under his breath.

"I might almost think you liked me," Sandra muttered back.

"Heck, I might almost start treating you like a real girl, you keep this up," Simon said. "Anyway, shut up. I'm trying to listen for Shadow."

"Asshole." Still smiling, Sandra sat back and patted Simon's thigh.

Simon put the opera glasses to his eyes and scanned the crowds below, keeping his right eye closed. "Watch it," he muttered, ninety percent of his attention elsewhere. The auditorium was beginning to fill up, the din from below increasing. Simon replayed his own trip across the plaza and through the lobby in the back of his mind, counting steps—Jeremy was probably just now entering the doors of the lobby, entering the jaws of the trap that had been set for him. Simon let the opera glasses play up over the stage curtain and the boxes nearest the stage. Most of them were occupied by now.

Simon drummed his fingers on his thigh, counting mental steps in the back of his mind. By now Jeremy was probably at the ticket podium, giving them his name—now he would be heading for the private stairs—now he was taking the first flight—the second—the third—now he was in the horseshoe-shaped second lobby—

Behind the screen of the opera glasses Simon shut his eyes and listened with all his might. Beside him Sandra swayed forward, to do what, Simon had no idea. The roar of the crowd from below was huge, almost a physical presence in its own right, and yet Simon almost thought he could hear footsteps ringing out across the marble and a pleasant English voice outside Volpe's box.

The door to Battista Volpe's private box opened with a click that carried clearly to Simon's ears, ten feet away. Simon's eyes flew open. His left eye saw nothing but the floor of the stage; his right eye saw Jeremy, calm and smiling, caught in the center of a square of four bodyguards.

Simon shut his left eye again and watched, forcing himself to sweep the opera glasses idly from right to left across the stage. The door shut behind Jeremy with a second click. Jeremy looked at one of the two remaining bodyguards and said something, still smiling, spreading his hands; after a moment the bodyguards closed on him, one of them seizing both his wrists and pulling Jeremy's arms out away from his body, the other patting him down with professional speed and thoroughness, undoing both Jeremy's jacket and his waistcoat to run his hands underneath. Battista Volpe hadn't bothered to turn around yet.

The bodyguard doing the patdown went down on one knee, mostly vanishing from Simon's sight as he ran his hands down Jeremy's hips. Jeremy's face was, at best, the size of a dime in Simon's periscopic view, but Simon still saw Jeremy's eyebrows twitch when the man's hands ran heavily over Jeremy's crotch. Despite everything, Simon stifled a laugh, smiling for real for possibly the first time all evening. Beside him Sandra nudged his shoulder, murmured something, and laughed a little, playing along. Simon barely noticed.

A moment later the bodyguard rose to his feet. Apparently satisfied that Jeremy was unarmed, he nodded to his partner, then leaned down to speak into Volpe's ear. The other man let go of Jeremy's wrists and stepped back, putting himself between Jeremy and the door. Jeremy merely shot his cuffs and rebuttoned his waistcoat, waiting. Eventually Volpe glanced over his shoulder and said something; Jeremy inclined his head and moved to one of the empty seats, next to Annabelle.

Simon pretended to scan the crowds below. A band of pressure was starting to clamp down over his temples—he'd have to stop using the opera glasses soon. In the box next to theirs Annabelle flung her arms around Jeremy and clung to him like she was drowning. Jeremy held her, patting her back and murmuring something, his eyes closed and his smile gone. Simon, feeling uncomfortably like he was spying on something private, put the opera glasses back down. "We're in place," he said, handing the glasses to Sandra.

Sandra put them up to her own eyes. "So we are," she said after a moment, her voice oddly constricted. "Christ, that poor woman."

"Yeah," Simon said, looking down at his hands.

* * *

The auditorium continued to fill, as did the orchestra pit. The squeaks and squawks of instruments being tuned was a constant note in the din, pierced occasionally by little ripples of actual music as some violinist or another got carried away. Simon watched the audience or the orchestra or Sandra and very carefully paid no attention to Volpe's box at all; occasionally Sandra swayed over against Simon's side to take a momentary glance and confirm that everything seemed all right over there so far. "Smile," she said, and Simon did.

The house lights dimmed momentarily, laying a brief spell of silence on the auditorium. The ruckus, when it picked back up, sounded more purposeful. Forty feet below Simon, people hurried to find their seats. The orchestra pit was full and the conductor was standing at the podium, waiting. The enormous stage curtain rippled once as someone bumped into it from behind.

A minute later the lights went down for good, dousing the crowd noises like a bucketful of water. Sandra grabbed Simon's hand and squeezed it, once, dropping it a moment later. The conductor tapped his baton on the podium and the orchestra hushed; one instrument—Simon had no idea which one—wailed like a heartbroken duck and the rest of the orchestra bloomed around it. Simon risked flicking his eyes right in the darkness. He could only just make out Jeremy's profile. He glanced away again. The orchestra fell silent again, and then crashed into performance as the curtain rose.

Simon, who had been fully expecting to be bored to tears, instead found himself somewhat flabbergasted by the initial spectacle. His exposure to opera was mostly limited to flipping past the cable arts channels at full speed; he'd been expecting cheesy painted backdrops, not some freakishly lush fantasy city teeming with extras in fancy dress. He'd have thought it was CGI if it hadn't been so obviously there. "Whoa," Nate said in his ear, sounding just about as taken aback as Simon felt. "Uh, sorry, folks, pardon the interruption. Opera's starting."

By the time one man stepped out of the crush and started to sing, though, the initial shock of the set dressing had worn off, and Simon was just about as bored as he'd been expecting. He'd never liked this song on the CDs—a whole bunch of words sung on the same damn note, there were fourteen-year-old pop singers with more range—and so after another swift glance to the right Simon slid his fingers up under his cummerbund.

The rope coiled tightly about Simon's waist was pink and distressingly thin. One end of the rope hung down over Simon's right hip, just about where Simon was accustomed to wearing his cell phone; Simon caught it between his first two fingers and pulled it free of the coils with a slight jerk. The rope tightened about his midsection and bit into his stomach, giving way just a moment before it drove the breath out of his lungs. Simon pulled in a long, slow, relieved breath and inched the rope free.

Sandra sat forward, to all appearances actually engrossed in the performance

below, and put her hand on Simon's thigh. Simon put the end of the rope into her hand, then sat back, eyes on the stage, and let his fingers unspool sixty feet of thin rope from under his cummerbund like a magic trick, carefully keeping his upper arms and shoulders still. He took his time. He had hours before *Nessun dorma*. Possibly days.

"Lobby's totally deserted," Johnny said over frequency. "Looks like all his people are up there with him."

Nate blew out a relieved breath. "Good," he said.

Sandra coiled the rope back up as Simon uncoiled it, producing a neat, untangled bundle. The necessity of not attracting attention kept the process agonizingly slow, but eventually Sandra was holding sixty feet of rope in her hands and Simon's midsection felt a lot less constricted. Sandra nudged the coil against Simon's leg. Simon took it, kept one end, and carefully dropped the rest on the floor at his feet even as some song ended and the audience burst into applause. Pinning the end between his knees, Simon also applauded, although he'd be damned if he could tell what he was clapping for.

Nothing left to do during the first act; nothing to do but to sit and wait it out. Toying with the end of the rope, Simon let his eyes go unfocused and let the meaningless music wash over him.

A few years later, Act I ended (to more applause) and the house lights came up on the first intermission. The babble of conversation immediately rose all around them. Simon blinked and shifted, waking up out of his near-trance; he had been wound too tightly to actually fall asleep, but it felt like it had been a close call. Stifling a yawn behind gritted teeth, Simon rolled both shoulders to loosen them, glanced down at his feet, and then leaned forward.

Instead of tying his shoe, he whipped the end of the rope around the legs of the seat he was sitting in and tied it off in a neat double bowline, anchoring his line to the bolted-down seat. Thanks to days of practice he managed to tie the knot in under five seconds, yanking it tight and sitting back up, hardly even pink in the face. "I'm awesome," he told Sandra.

"I know," Sandra said, touching his shoulder and handing him the opera glasses. "I'm going to go powder my nose, and before you ask, yes, I do mean that literally." Wrinkling her nose Sandra stood up, gave a little shimmy to settle her fancy-ass dress properly, and headed for the door.

Simon stayed where he was. A couple of minutes later the ghost of Sandra was speaking in his ear. "It's act one intermission now," she said, her voice weirdly cheery—she must not be alone in the bathroom. "Everything's just fine—no static at all."

"We're on schedule, then," Nate said. "Templar, if you want to give Shadow the high sign, cough twice."

Simon put his fist over his mouth and coughed, once, then again. He didn't dare glance over to see if Jeremy had reacted, even though he wanted to check with every fiber of his being. As long as the opera was actually going on, it wasn't so bad, but during intermission, with Sandra away and Jeremy *right there* in the midst of trouble, it took everything Simon had not to look. The muscles in his shoulders twinged. Simon forced himself to relax and nudged the coil of rope with one toe.

Sandra came back just as the house lights dimmed in warning. Her nose didn't look any different to Simon, but Simon knew better than to point that out.

The lights went out and the curtain rose. Act II crashed in around Simon, as incomprehensible and flashy as Act I but about twice as racially insensitive, which was kind of a trick. Simon left his eyes on the stage and flexed his fingers in his lap, turning the plan over and over in his mind while three horrible Chinese stereotypes wailed on about something on stage.

There was nothing for Simon to do during Act II but keep his eyes open, applaud when everybody else did, and wait for it to end. By the standards of the CDs Simon had spent the last week listening to, he supposed that this opera company was . . . good? He had no idea. The audience seemed enthused, though. Nate and Dave were a nearly subliminal buzz in Simon's left ear, punctuated by the faint sounds of typing. Once or twice Simon thought he heard Johnny, but officially all was silent over frequency. Simon blew out a breath and ran over Act III in his mind again.

Simon was so deep in his mental recital that the end of Act II came as a surprise. For a moment he sat there blinking in the house lights, startled; then he pushed himself up out of his seat and automatically leaned in to kiss Sandra's cheek. "Back in a moment," he said. Sandra smiled at him. Simon turned and left the box.

The second lobby was a lot more crowded than it had been before the show. Simon shouldered his way through the crowds, heading for the restrooms and carefully not paying any attention to the two bodyguards still guarding Volpe's door. There was a long line outside the ladies' room, as usual, but the door to the men's room was unblocked. Simon pushed his way in and found the men's room only about half-full, with all of the stalls empty.

Simon picked a stall and locked himself into it. He pondered the idea of actually using the toilet and eventually decided against it; it would take him damned near five minutes to pry himself out of his pants, for one thing, and for another he was too focused on the minutes ahead to care.

Instead Simon locked his hands into fists and stretched his arms up over his head, trying to loosen the knotted muscles in his shoulders. They twanged like guitar strings. Simon winced and dug his fingers deep into the muscle, then stretched his arms up over his head again. Much better. Simon grabbed the top of

the closed door and hung from it for a moment, then turned to face the toilet and punched the air, loosening his muscles as best he could in the enclosed space.

By the time he let himself back out of the toilet stall, the bathroom was entirely empty and the muscles in his arms and shoulders were tingling with warmth. Still flexing his fingers Simon headed back for Box 12, barely noticing when the gorillas watched him go by.

Sandra was waiting for him, her purse already in her lap, the opera glasses nowhere in sight. One hand held the coiled rope, down and out of sight. "All right?" she said.

"Ready as I'll ever be," Simon said, taking his seat. Sandra nudged his knee with the coil of rope and Simon took it, trapping it between his knees. "Going to storm out now?" he asked, picking over the coils until he found the end that was tied to his seat.

"In a second," Sandra said. She glanced down at the closed curtain, then back at Simon. "Think it's going to work?"

Simon shrugged. "I'll hold up my end," he said. "As for Shadow, that's his lookout."

"Kind of cold," Sandra said.

"It's his plan," Simon said. "If he wants to make part of it be 'I'll take care of myself from this point on', then I'm not going to argue, much as I'd like to."

Sandra looked away, tapping her fingers on her purse. "I was hoping there'd only be one guy on the outside of the door."

"Yeah," Simon looked down at the rope, caught between his knees. "Me too."

"Good luck," Sandra said. "Keep yourself safe. Think I ought to slap you now?"

Simon pretended to consider this. "You know what, I'm thinking no," he said. "If only because that would probably be overacting, and certainly not because I'm afraid you'd actually break my cheekbone."

"*Fine*, then," Sandra snapped, jumping to her feet. Behind the furious mask of her face her eyes were wary. "Stay. I'm leaving." Before Simon could say a word she stormed off, slamming the door to the box behind herself.

Simon twisted around to stare at the door, then sighed and settled back in his seat, rubbing a hand over his face. "Women," he muttered, mostly to himself.

Thirty seconds later Sandra's brisk voice crackled in his ear. "I'm out and good," she said. "Templar's ready. Texas, where are you?"

"'Round back," Johnny said. "Heading around to the side now."

"Meet you there in one."

"Okay, people," Nate said, his voice suddenly urgent. "Lights will dim in two minutes and then it's showtime. Honda, are you there?"

"Yo," said Mike. "Already parked out front and gettin' honked at, heading for the front door now."

Someone punched a door open. “Be there in a minute,” Sandra said. “I’m letting Texas in now.”

“In,” Johnny said. “Go.”

“I’m gone.” Sandra fell silent.

The house lights dimmed in warning—a bolt of pure adrenalin shot through Simon and dissipated, leaving him eerily calm. The world snapped into high focus. He flexed his fingers in his lap. One minute to showtime. Simon unbuttoned his jacket. “One minute,” Nate said.

“I’m in place,” Sandra said. “Honda’s heading back to the taxi now. We’re all good to go.”

“Then I need silence on frequency now,” Nate said. “I’ll count us off when it’s time. Good luck, Templar.”

“Good luck,” Sandra echoed.

“Yeah, what they said,” Mike said, snickering.

Simon shifted in his seat, casually poking a hand into his jacket. The heavy leather climbing gloves were still tucked into the back of his cummerbund, their Velcro wristbands held undone by strips of masking tape; as unobtrusively as possible Simon extracted one glove, then the other, and put them in his lap. He was easing the masking tape off when the lights went down and the curtain went up. Three minutes to *Nessun dorma*, more or less—Simon ripped off the rest of the tape under the cover of the orchestra, balled it up, and dropped it to the floor.

Below, *Turandot* recommenced, the chorus droning ominously. In his box, Simon eased his left hand into one of the climbing gloves, pulled the strap tight around his wrist, and pressed the Velcro together with exaggerated care. He could hide the sound of the masking tape coming off, but no cacophony on earth could hide the telltale sound of Velcro ripping open; if he didn’t get the gloves perfectly strapped on the first time he tried, he would just have to live with it.

Simon flexed his left hand, testing the wrist strap. It held. Simon clamped his hand over his wrist just to make sure and then slid the other glove on, repeating the process. The chorus stampeded across the darkened stage below, carrying real torches, really wound up about something. Simon squeezed his right wrist, then caught the top end of the coil of rope and let the rest fall. Measuring across his knees Simon counted out about ten feet of rope, hesitated, then wrapped a turn of rope loosely about his left hand and left the rest where it was. One minute until *Nessun dorma*. Simon waited, aware mostly of his own heartbeat and his eyes wide in the dark.

The chorus fled off to the right. The tenor who was singing the lead role drifted on from the left, his gaudy costume nearly lost in the darkness. Simon sat up; judging by the sudden rustle from below, he wasn’t the only person in the auditorium doing so. The tenor ambled down a set of steps and paused, halfway down, gazing off into the distance after the long-fled chorus, and the orchestra segued into a tune that had been ingrained in Simon’s bones. For a single moment

of time Simon was frozen in his seat, his heart standing still; the tenor opened his mouth and intoned the first two words—

Nessun dorma

—and Simon snapped out of it, suddenly, coldly awake. His left hand flexed about the rope. The deep rustle from below sounded both surprised and satisfied, as the Italian audience judged the tenor and found him, apparently, acceptable. Simon, who'd only recently begun to have any opinions about opera at all, couldn't care less.

*Nessun dorma! Tu pure, o Principessa, nella tua fredda stanza—guardi le stelle
che tremano d'amore, e di speranza*

Simon risked another swift glance to his right. Volpe sat hunched forward in his seat, eyes bent around the tenor on stage below, hands steeped in front of his face, wearing an expression that might be either disgust or utter rapture. Simon couldn't tell which. Beside Volpe Jeremy sat upright and perfectly still, his face locked into that calm, pleasant expression that could mean anything at all.

*Ma il mio mistero è chiuso in me—il nome mio nessun saprà! No, no! Sulla tua
bocca lo dirò quando la luce splenderà*

Simon caught himself fiddling with the loop of rope around his left hand and forced himself to stop. The aria flowed on, the live performance turning it from merely pretty into something that was nearly beautiful. Simon felt a momentary pang of regret that it was being wasted on him, his left hand tightening on the rope again.

Ed il mio bacio scioglierà il silenzio che ti fa mia . . .

Simon tucked his feet under himself and shifted his weight onto them, only barely sitting in his seat any more. The tenor hesitated and glanced offstage, and the mournful chorus drifted in like ghost song:

Il nome suo nessun saprà—E noi dovrem, ahimè, morir, morir

Simon's heart slammed, once, and fell back into its normal rhythm.

Dilegua—

Simon shot to his feet and twisted around. Eight feet away, Jeremy was already on his feet, on the move; behind him the others were just beginning to react, the bodyguards reaching forward, the secretary's mouth opening in a large, stupid O. Simon's eyes met Jeremy's across the intervening empty space—then Jeremy scooped Annabelle out of her wheelchair and threw her across the gap.

Too startled even to scream, the woman in blue arced across the empty space, flinging her arms out for balance. Simon lunged forward and caught her, the solid weight of her body thunking into his outstretched arms. Reflexively she grabbed him around the neck, gasping. On the other side of the gap Jeremy was already turning away, striking at the nearer of the two bodyguards—"Hi!" Simon said. "You need to hold on to me *right now*." And, having said that, he jumped up onto the padded railing and off the other side, falling over the side of the box. Annabelle's arms went tight around his neck, her startled squeak momentarily louder in Simon's ear than the triumphant final line of *Nessun dorma*.

The rope snapped tight five feet down, Simon thumping hard against the outside of the box. The knot held—Simon's heart began to beat again—and the bones in his left hand groaned but accepted their burden. The trailing end of the rope fell into the darkness below with a hiss. Simon clamped his legs around the rope and got his right hand on the rope, untangling his left. Annabelle was clinging to him with all her strength, her useless legs dangling alongside his own; Simon took them both down the rope, hand over hand, his legs taking as much of their weight as they could. Dimly, in the darkness, he saw the smeared white Os of startled faces peering out at him from the box below his own.

"Templar's on his way down!" Nate shouted in his ear. "People, we are go! Stonewall, *now*!"

"I'm on it," Dave said. Somewhere above Simon's head the world exploded in light, and someone yelped, the sound quickly choking off. "Spotlight's on," Dave added, unnecessarily.

Simon slid down the rope as fast as he dared, expecting at any moment to hear a shot or a yell from above. Somehow, ridiculously, the opera was still going on all around him—it seemed impossible that no one had noticed anything and yet the tenor was still singing that final line—and then Simon's feet hit the carpet of the aisle. He gasped once, abandoned the rope to its fate, scooped Annabelle up again, and bolted up the aisle.

The lobby doors loomed in front of him. Simon lowered his head and drove his shoulder into the doors and they burst open, slamming back to bang against the wall. The spangled light of the lobby nearly blinded him after the darkness of the auditorium. Simon clutched Annabelle to his chest and ran across that stupidly massive lobby, heading for the front doors.

"Texas, they're heading your way!" Nate said in his ear. "Springheel, Templar is heading towards your position, be ready!"

Johnny appeared at the edge of Simon's vision, running flat-out towards the stairs that led up to the second lobby. He had both of Jeremy's weapon harnesses strapped to his own bare arms and an expression of complete concentration on his face; half a second later Simon heard the horrible flat *crack*! of Jeremy's taser and a sudden babble of voices from behind him. "Shit," he muttered, redoubling his speed.

“What the—?” Nate said, then burst out laughing, startling Simon. “Oh, my God!”

Belatedly, Simon became aware that Annabelle was thumping on his back, peering over his shoulder. “Your friend missed one,” she panted in an oddly familiar voice.

“What?”

“He missed one!” Annabelle pointed back over Simon’s shoulder just as someone behind them yelled something in Italian.

“Shit,” Simon groaned. The doors were still a long way away, and the guy in pursuit wasn’t carrying anything.

“I’ll slow him down,” Annabelle said, her eyes wild and her mouth a thin line, and suddenly she was clawing at Simon’s jacket, dragging herself bodily up and over his shoulder.

“What?” Simon said, grabbing her dangling legs to avoid dropping her. “No, wait, we’ll just—” Annabelle, draped over his shoulder, yanked up the back of Simon’s jacket and grabbed his gun out of the holster at the small of his back. “Christ, *don’t*—” Simon yelled, and then his gun cracked, the recoil driving him bodily forward and nearly pitching him right over onto his face. The bullet whined off the marble somewhere behind them, and the guy chasing them yelled in alarm.

And suddenly the doors were right there—“Springheel, now!” Nate said, and Sandra jerked the door open less than a second before Simon would have faceplanted into it. Simon and Annabelle burst out into the night and Sandra kicked the door shut behind them, jamming the crowbar through the handles a heartbeat before someone slammed into the other side.

The handles groaned and the wood splintered with a sharp sound, but the crowbar held. Volpe’s bodyguard banged against the door twice more—“Yo, asshole,” Johnny said from inside, and suddenly, all was silence. “All done now,” Johnny said, his voice still conversational. “On my way out.”

Sandra slapped Simon’s unoccupied shoulder. “What are you waiting for?” she snapped. “Go!”

“Right!” Simon dragged Annabelle off his shoulder and hugged her to his chest again, racing across the plaza, Sandra in his wake. Annabelle was still clutching his gun in both hands, its muzzle pointed somewhere up at the sky; across the plaza Mike yanked both passenger-side doors open and threw himself across the hood, heading for the driver’s seat.

Sandra beat Simon there by a couple of yards and ducked into the front seat, one last swirl of silver marking her passage before the door shut behind her. Simon hit the curb and kicked himself around, throwing himself backwards into the back seat; he fell across the seat cushion, a gasping Annabelle sprawling out on top of him. “Go!” Simon yelled, and Mike peeled out, shutting the back door by casually smacking it into a lamp post.

“Specs, we’re out!” Sandra said, touching her earpiece.

In the back Simon inched up into a sitting position, wincing, and carefully lowered Annabelle onto the seat next to him. “Are you all right?” he asked, patting her shoulder.

“I think so,” Annabelle said, fumbling the gun back into Simon’s hands. “But Jeremy . . . what about Jeremy?”

“We’re working on that,” Simon said. He pulled up the tail of his jacket and put his gun back in its holster. “How’d you know I was carrying?”

Annabelle shrugged, picking at her skirt with trembling fingers. “I hoped, mostly,” she said. “Jeremy told me where you wore it, once . . .”

“Making the block,” Mike said into his headset, hauling the wheel right and cutting someone off with a blare of horns. “Got three passengers, just waiting on my fourth.”

“I’ll let you know,” Nate said. “He’s coming . . . wait . . . there! Honda, stage door! Stage door!”

Mike slammed on the brakes, smacked the turn signal, and whipped the taxi over into an alleyway that was barely larger than the car. Garbage bounced off the car’s bumper and hit the windshield, making everyone inside duck; two seconds later the taxi’s headlights picked up a moving flash of white and Mike stomped on the brakes, the taxi slewing to a stop. Jeremy yanked open the dented door and threw himself into the back, jostling Annabelle up against Simon’s side. “I’m in,” he said, slamming the door. “Go.”

Mike went, with a screech of tires and a happy whoop. “Four passengers, full up!” he cried, the taxi peeling back out onto the roads and immediately getting lost in the horde of identical cars.

For a moment, everyone was quiet, breathing hard. Then Jeremy laughed under his breath and put a hand over his eyes. “Annabelle, love, allow me to introduce you to Simon,” he said, and after a moment of spellbound silence everyone in the car cracked up.

◆ Twenty-Nine

The rush wore off soon enough, leaving them all worn out and disinclined to talk. The taxi wove through traffic as Mike took them away from the *Teatro Domenico*. He was humming under his breath, occasionally tapping the steering wheel. Sandra was silent in the front seat, her eyes closed, her breathing deep and even. It was dark and quiet inside the cab.

"I'm out," Johnny said over frequency. "Got a cab. On my way."

Nate let out a heartfelt sigh of relief. "We're good, then," he said, slumping down in his chair—Simon couldn't see it, but he knew Nate. "We'll see you guys when you get back."

"I estimate ten minutes," Mike said, glancing left. "Ain't no way anybody could be on our tail, but I'm gonna make sure before I head back."

Simon picked at the Velcro strap around his left wrist, fumbling with it until he managed to pry up the end. He shed the climbing gloves with some relief, flexed his left hand—it was sore where the rope had snapped tight around it—and then picked out his earpiece, dropping it into the inside pocket of his jacket. He always felt an odd sense of letdown after a successful operation, and this one was no exception; he slumped down against the door and let himself go limp, his muscles twitching as the last dregs of adrenalin worked their way out. Fighting the urge to doze off, Simon glanced over at Jeremy.

Annabelle and Jeremy were a dim huddle in the opposite corner. Whatever store of bravado had fueled Annabelle this far was gone now; the shaking Annabelle clung to Jeremy for dear life, her face hidden against his shoulder. Jeremy held her tight and stroked her hair, murmuring reassuring little nothings in her ear while she cried herself out.

Simon shifted uncomfortably. "Before you yell," he said, then winced and lowered his voice. "It wasn't me that fired the gun."

Jeremy's eyes drifted open in the darkness, regarding Simon over the spill of curls coming loose from Annabelle's updo. "Oh, Simon," he said, his own voice low. "Really, you ought to have more respect for classical architecture. And passersby."

“Hey, I said it wasn’t me,” Simon said, pointing semi-dramatically at Annabelle for emphasis.

Jeremy closed his eyes again and curled his hand about the back of Annabelle’s head. “Ah, well,” he said. “Needs must.”

There it was again, that little pang that Simon recognized guiltily as jealousy. He made himself settle back. “Yeah,” he echoed, closing his own eyes. “Needs must.”

Mike took them on a leisurely tour of Milan, doubling back on his route several times and cutting down handy alleyways on two separate occasions. Once he was satisfied he took them back to the hotel, pulling into the underground lot; Johnny was waiting for them there, his forearms bare again, Jeremy’s weapons harnesses dangling from one hand. Mike sniggered and made a lazy attempt to run Johnny down, just because he could. Johnny kicked the side of the cab as it went by. The metallic sound made them all jump.

Mike parked the car and rolled down his window, sticking his elbow out. “Yo, Texas,” he said.

“Yo,” Johnny said, stooping down to look inside the cab. “Parking lot’s empty, lobby’s empty, and the hallway outside the room’s empty. Think we’re good.”

“Awesome,” Simon said. “Still and all, I’d feel better if you went and hung out in the lobby until we were all safely upstairs.”

Johnny patted the car’s roof and straightened up. “On it,” he said, and jogged off.

Simon glanced over at Jeremy, still holding the now-semiconscious Annabelle. “You, uh, need any help?”

“I have her, I believe,” Jeremy said. “If you’d just come and open the door?”

“Yeah. Yeah, sure.” Simon let himself out of the cab, already wincing. He was going to be so goddamned sore in the morning—he straightened up with some difficulty, took a moment to stretch out the muscles in his back, and then trotted around to the passenger side and opened the back door.

Jeremy edged backwards and slid out, carefully cradling Annabelle against his chest. She hung limp in his arms, her face pressed against the side of his throat, one hand clutching a wrinkled handful of his once-pristine shirt front. Simon couldn’t tell if she was catatonic or just asleep.

“Texas says the lobby’s still clear,” Mike reported, touching his earpiece. “I’ll go call the elevator.” He ran off.

Sandra shut her door and joined them. “Is she all right?” Sandra asked, nodding at Annabelle.

“She’ll be fine, I think,” Jeremy said, glancing down at her. “Let’s get her upstairs.”

“Right,” Sandra said. She took a step back, still shimmering under the dull lights of the parking lot, before spinning on one heel and heading for the elevators.

Jeremy followed, carrying Annabelle; after one last glance over his shoulder Simon brought up the rear, still feeling weirdly bereft.

The suite was just about the best thing Simon had seen all day, unholy mess or not. Mike whooped and threw himself full-length on one of the couches, kicking his feet up onto the armrest. “God *damn* but that was awesome,” he said. “Shadow brings us to the funnest spots.”

“And to think, all you did was drive,” Simon said wryly, shutting the door behind himself and feeling a lot better for it.

Dave appeared in the bedroom doorway, blinking. “Hey,” he said. “So, uh, is that her?”

“Aw, Stone, don’t be stupid,” Mike said. “Course it ain’t her. We just stole some random lady from the nosebleed seats and called it close enough.”

“Oh,” Dave said, apparently accepting this. “Anyway, Templar, Specs says you ought to come look at this.”

Simon yanked at his bow tie until it came undone. “Can it wait?” he asked, popping open his collar button. “Sooner I get out of this penguin suit, the less chance I kill somebody.”

“It won’t take long,” Nate called from somewhere behind Dave. “It’s just . . . you’ve got to see this.”

“Okay, okay,” Simon said, picking his way across the main room. Behind him Jeremy carried Annabelle into Sandra’s room. The door closed behind them.

Nate was sitting exactly where Simon had left him, still peering at that giant monitor, which was still displaying the footage from the various opera-house cameras. “Hey, Templar,” he said, blinking up at Simon.

“Hey yourself,” Simon said, leaning on the back of Nate’s chair. “So what’s up?”

Nate snickered. “Okay, so this is the main stage camera, right?” he said, wheeling the mouse pointer in a little circle over the largest window, the one in crisp, full color. He clicked on one corner and the window expanded to fill the entire monitor, popping into full resolution a minute later.

“Yeah?” Simon said.

“Anyway, this is from earlier,” Nate said, hitting the space bar. The image jumped from red to a dark, glittering blue, the thin strains of *Nessun dorma* popping out of the computer’s tiny speakers. Onscreen the lead tenor was an indistinct figure about the size of Simon’s little finger.

Even at this volume *Nessun dorma* poked the back of Simon’s brain, making him shiver. He clutched at the back of Nate’s chair and watched the tiny figure gesticulate. “So there’s the chorus,” Nate said, “and there’s your cue.”

Dilegua—the tenor sang, and a weary jolt of electricity ran up Simon’s spine. It was a good thing he’d never really cared about the song, because now it was probably ruined for him forever. Simon grunted.

“Now here’s where Dave turns the spotlight onto Volpe’s box,” Nate said, tapping the screen. The stage lights hung in a complicated array at the very top of the camera’s field of vision, most of them glowing some color of blue. Below them the tenor still sang on, bringing the song to its triumphant conclusion; somewhere just off the top of the screen one of the lights popped on, directing its brilliant white glare straight out into the auditorium. Simon thought he heard the choked-off yelp all over again. “So much for *their* aim,” Nate said, snickering. “Now watch here.” He traced the mouse pointer along the row of boxes on the left-hand side of the screen.

Simon leaned in until his chin was nearly resting on the top of Nate’s head. “Okay,” he said. “I’m watching.”

Nate sat back and folded his arms across his chest. The tenor, apparently still wrapped up in his performance, threw his arms wide and hit the final note; thirty feet above him a dark-clad figure dashed onscreen from the right, his arms thrown out for balance as he ran full-tilt along the wide padded railings of the private boxes. Nate hit the space bar, pausing the recording, and tapped the screen. “That’s Jeremy,” he said.

“Yeah, I figured,” Simon said, squinting at the screen, “but what the hell is he doing? Christ, where does he think he’s *going*?”

“Watch,” Nate said. He hit the space bar again and Jeremy flickered back into motion, vaulting from one box down to the next. Behind him there was motion, nearly invisible in the dark, as startled operagoers leaned out of their boxes to watch him pass.

Onscreen Jeremy lowered his head and threw his arms out behind himself, somehow managing to pick up speed. He vaulted down onto the railing of the very last box, hitting it squarely, and put on one final burst of speed to nowhere; half a second later he ran entirely out of railing and dove cleanly out into the open space above the stage. Despite himself Simon yelped.

The swan dive flung Jeremy into the massive red curtains. He caught one fold in both hands and turned his dive into a wild swing, his sheer momentum yanking the curtain nearly halfway shut as he sailed around in a lunatic arc. Below him half the orchestra crashed unmusically to a stop, dragging down the other half, and the audience screamed almost as one. The tenor, lost in some world of his own, held the note to the bitter end despite the sudden pandemonium.

The curtain jerked and shuddered and swung, heavy folds of red fabric sweeping out across the stage. Jeremy clung to the curtain like a beetle, his legs drawn up to kill his excess momentum. Finally the tenor noticed and took half a step back, lifting his hands to protect himself even as the curtain shuddered to a stop.

Jeremy swung over, grabbed the edge of the curtain, and slid down, his hands two little pale blurs of motion against the red cloth. He hit the stage a few seconds later, staggered, and spun around to face the tenor. The tenor flung his arms out

in as perfect an expression of *why, God, why* as Simon had ever seen; Jeremy hesitated, then bowed deeply to the aggravated singer before spinning around again and darting offstage, vanishing behind the curtain and leaving the rest of the auditorium in chaos. Nate hit the space bar and paused the footage. “And that’s why we can’t have nice things,” he said, his voice uneven with hilarity.

Simon rubbed a hand down his face. “Oh, Christ,” he said, cracking up.

Getting out of his mangled tuxedo took Simon exactly as long as he’d been fearing it would. The pieces piled up in an untidy heap on the foot of Mike’s ostensible bed and Simon happily abandoned them there, getting back into his plain jeans and t-shirt with a joy that was damn near sensual. He stomped into his sneakers and slammed back out into the main room, announcing, “*Christ*, that feels better.”

“Yeah?” Johnny looked up. “What, you finally get to pee?”

“What? No, but thanks for reminding me,” Simon said, turning on his heel and banging back into the bedroom.

When he came out again, he felt pretty close to great, despite the lingering ache in his shoulders. Mike and Johnny were sprawled out on the couches lobbing a tennis ball back and forth—where they’d gotten it, Simon had no idea—and Dave was puttering around in the minibar, futzing with the coffeemaker. “I’m gonna go check on things,” Simon announced to nobody in particular, and went to knock on Sandra’s door.

She opened it a moment later and ushered him in. The frothy silver thing was gone; Sandra was wearing a t-shirt and sweatpants, her face washed clean, her hair down. “Hey, boss,” she said, closing the door behind him.

“Hey yourself,” Simon said. “What, no dress? Way you were enthusing over it, here I thought you’d probably sleep in it for a couple of days.”

“Everyone knows the best part of formalwear is taking it all off at the end of the night and getting comfortable again,” Sandra said serenely.

Simon clapped her on the shoulder. “Sandy, I could not agree more,” he said with real feeling.

Annabelle was sitting on the foot of Sandra’s bed, still wearing the sparkly blue dress. Jeremy had pulled the desk chair over to sit with her, holding both her hands; they both looked up as Simon edged past Sandra and came over. “Hey,” he said. “How’s it going?”

“As well as can be expected,” Jeremy said. “Annabelle’s had a bit of a shock, but I think she’ll be all right.”

“I’m okay,” Annabelle echoed faintly. “I’d kind of like to get out of this dress, though.” She let go of Jeremy’s hands and started picking at the unholy mess of her hair, pulling out pins and setting them down beside her. Her curls slithered free.

Sandra reached past Simon to toss another t-shirt and pair of sweatpants on the bed. "I'll get you my brush," she said, her voice gentle.

"Thank you," Annabelle said, still in that disturbing faraway little-girl's voice. She sank both hands into her hair and fluffed it up, scratching at her scalp with vigor. "That's a lot better," she said with a sigh. Sandra handed her a hairbrush and Annabelle attacked her hair, wincing.

"Ethan has plenty of clothing waiting for you," Jeremy said, touching Annabelle's knee. "Tomorrow after you've had some rest you can call your caretaker and let her know you're safe."

Annabelle looked up at that, her hair newly lank about her face. Her eyes focused a little more, bringing her more firmly into the present. "Oh, God, Shawna's going to have a fit," she said, grimacing. "She's a sweetie, but she treats me like being in a wheelchair means I'm made of glass."

"Imagine if she knew how you ended up there," Jeremy said with the ghost of a smile.

Annabelle hesitated, then made a sound like a laugh. "Oh, *God*," she said. "I do believe she'd have a brain hemorrhage."

Simon glanced from Annabelle to Jeremy and back, then sighed. "Okay, look what you guys did: now that you've said that, I have to ask. How *did* you wind up in a wheelchair?"

The brush paused. "He doesn't know, huh?" Annabelle said.

"It isn't my story to tell, love." Jeremy patted her knee. "However, I think I'm in a position to say that he can generally be trusted with details like that."

"Details," Simon said, and snorted. "Yeah, wheelchairs are just details."

Smiling to herself, Annabelle went back to brushing her hair. "I fell off a third-story roof a few years back," she said, her voice matter-of-fact. "Landed on a concrete patio."

"A roof, huh," Simon said. He glanced at Jeremy. "And you were up on a roof because..."

"Once upon a time Annabelle was a cat burglar," Jeremy said, confirming Simon's theory. "A professional acquaintance, as it were."

"Hey," Annabelle said, poking Jeremy in the chest with the hairbrush. "Tell him the truth. I was a damned good cat burglar."

Jeremy glanced at Simon. "It's true," he said, just barely smiling. "She was."

"And don't you forget it, buster," Annabelle said, brushing all her hair back and gathering it up into a loose ponytail. "But that's not really a line of work you can pursue in a wheelchair, so now I work for Jeremy."

"Or she did, at any rate," Jeremy said. His little smile faded.

Annabelle put the hairbrush down on the bed. "I still do," she said firmly. "Most of the time it's a really good job. It keeps me sharp."

After a moment, Jeremy nodded. "We'll hash out the details when this mess has been sorted out," he said.

“Okay, you two, out,” Sandra said, popping back out of the bathroom. “She needs to get changed already and nobody gets a free show.”

Needing no further prompting, Jeremy stood up and spun the desk chair back into place. “I can tell when I’m not wanted,” he said, heading for the door. “And I *also* need to get changed.”

“Yeah, your tux is looking a little worse for wear,” Simon said. He followed Jeremy out into the main room. “Do you want me to come with you to drop Annabelle off?”

“Yes, that might be good,” Jeremy said, brushing at his mangled lapels. He was coated with a thin dusting of bright red fibers. “Mike can drop us both off at the other hotel afterwards.”

Simon nodded. “Makes sense,” he said. “Want to bring anyone else?”

“Anyone who wants to come,” Jeremy shrugged. “There’s room enough for five of us, as I think we’ve proven.”

“I’ll come,” Johnny said, tossing the tennis ball up in the air and catching it again. “Honda needs managing.”

Jeremy glanced at Simon. “That’s settled, then,” he said, and headed for the opposite bedroom.

Simon watched him go. “Hey, Archer!” he finally said, unable to resist the urge for a single second longer.

“Yes?” Jeremy paused in the doorway.

“You do realize that’s not what ‘stage-diving’ means, right?”

Jeremy glanced over his shoulder. For just a moment he looked exhausted, to the point where Simon felt guilty about making him parse the sentence—but then Jeremy shut his eyes and smiled, just a little. “I suppose I’ve always been a touch literal-minded,” he said, shutting the door behind him.

An hour later Simon stood in a floodlit clearing thirty miles outside Milan, squinting against the freshening breeze. Milan wasn’t quite as sodden and awful as DC in the summer, but it was still undoubtedly summer; out here in the foothills it was actually pretty nice, which almost made Simon glad he’d come.

The clearing wasn’t so much a runway as it was a long strip of tamped-down lit-up dirt. A small passenger plane was parked at one end, refueling itself from a hose attached to the back of a small tanker truck. Annabelle sat on the hood of the car, hugging a small bag to her chest and waiting. Jeremy sat next to her, one arm about her shoulders.

After one last look up and down the clearing, Simon shrugged and headed over. “—meet you there and take you directly to Ethan’s,” Jeremy was saying. “He’ll have a chair with him.”

“Good,” Annabelle said fervently, dropping her head to Jeremy’s shoulder. “No offense, handsome, but I don’t actually like being carried everywhere.”

Jeremy laughed a little. “None taken,” he said. “I’m afraid it’s not as good a chair as you’re used to, but hopefully it will do until we can get you properly resettled.”

Annabelle picked at the legs of her borrowed sweatpants. “Is it wrong to admit that what I’m looking forward to most of all is checking my email?”

“Can’t blame you for that,” Jeremy said, smiling and looking away.

“I think they’re almost done,” Simon interjected, wandering up. “If you wanna go ahead and get her settled.”

Jeremy hopped down off the hood of the car. “Probably a good idea,” he said. He glanced at Annabelle. “Do you think you can stand to be carried about for a bit longer, love?”

“If I have to,” Annabelle said, holding out her arms. Jeremy scooped her up and carried her towards the plane.

Simon watched them go. “Nice meeting you,” he finally called.

“It was nice to finally meet you, too!” Annabelle called back, waving at him over Jeremy’s shoulder. “And after all this time! You be careful, huh? Keep Jeremy safe for me!”

“Yeah, I’ll sure try,” Simon said under his breath, as the breeze carried Jeremy’s little laugh clearly back to his ears.

No one had the energy to say much on the drive back into the city. Even Mike’s usual boundless energy was pretty well sapped, most of his attention focused on driving without getting them killed. At this time of night, it wasn’t impossible.

Mike let Simon and Jeremy off a block away from their hotel. Simon stumbled out of the car like he’d become geriatric overnight, and Jeremy was carrying himself stiffly, like he also hurt and was determined not to let it show. “You guys sure you don’t want Texas to walk you up?” Mike asked, rolling down his window. “I can wait.”

Jeremy and Simon glanced at each other, then Jeremy shook his head. “I think we’ll be all right,” he said. “We’re here under a brand-new name and we’ve only been here a day. Go home and get some sleep. I think we could all use it.”

“Shoot yourself,” Mike said cheerfully. “See you guys tomorrow.” He rolled up the window and pulled back out into the thin late-night traffic.

They watched him go, too tired and sore to do much else. “Want me to go first?” Simon finally asked, shaking his head to snap himself out of it.

Jeremy nodded. “I think that would be best,” he said. “I’ll meet you up at the room.”

“Yeah,” Simon said, taking a step back. “Yeah. Okay. I’ll . . . yeah, see you there.”

He barely got ten steps before Jeremy called his name. “What?” Simon said, turning around.

Jeremy's smile was a momentary flash in the darkness. "She's an old, dear friend," he said. "And that's all she's ever been." He paused, letting it sink in. "In case you were wondering," he added.

"I wasn't wondering," Simon said, after a pause that felt about a second too long. "I mean, I know you better than that. So I'll just, uh, go make sure the coast is clear, okay?"

"Thank you, Simon." Jeremy stepped back and lost himself in the night—much like the Cheshire Cat's, his smile seemed to be the last thing to go.

◆ Thirty

Simon rolled carefully out of bed late the next morning, expecting to ache like a bastard and feeling somewhat let down when he didn't. Putting his left hand down on the bed prompted a bolt of pain to flare up his arm, though: there were patches of reddish-brown bruise encircling his left hand like a bracelet, patterned like the rope.

His left hand seemed to be the only real casualty. He'd taken four Advil before collapsing into bed and they'd apparently killed off most of the incipient muscle pain. Simon flexed his hand and hissed a little, then flexed it again.

"Wounded?" Jeremy asked, startling him.

Simon looked up. Jeremy was tucked neatly into an armchair on the opposite side of the room, half-hidden behind a newspaper with his legs kicked casually out in front of him. "Nah," Simon said, rolling his left hand into a loose fist. "Couple of bruises, nothing serious."

Jeremy flicked the corner of his paper aside and raised both eyebrows at Simon. Simon held up his hand. Jeremy winced in sympathy. "That'll be attractive tomorrow, I'm certain."

"I'll live," Simon said. "How about you?"

Jeremy's little smile was wry. "Allow me to put it this way: I'll be trying very hard not to shrug for a while."

"See, that's what stage-diving gets you," Simon said, then hesitated. "Seriously, you okay?"

"Oh, yes," Jeremy said. "A bit sore, but it's nothing to worry about. I'll be right as rain in a day or two."

Simon massaged the swollen palm of his hand and flexed his fingers again. The more he worked at it, the more easily his hand moved. "We sure are a couple of tough guys," he said.

"None tougher," Jeremy said.

"So, what's the plan, tough guy?"

Jeremy nearly shrugged, winced, and abandoned the movement halfway through. "For the present we'll lie low and keep our faces off the street, at least until the initial uproar fades."

"Yeah, sounds like a plan." Simon let his hand drop. "And after that?"

The corner of Jeremy's newspaper rose again, hiding his face. "I've a couple of things working," Jeremy said. "For the moment, though, I've cut off all communications. It seems safest."

Simon eyed the uninformative blank wall of Jeremy's newspaper. "You aren't nearly as subtle as you think you are," Simon finally said, heading for the bathroom.

Two more Advil and a shower later, Simon was feeling pretty good, except when he banged his hand against something. "So, any word on Annabelle?" he asked, wandering back out into the main room in his towel.

Jeremy lowered the paper again, started to say something, and stopped. The expression on his face grew so thoughtful that Simon hiked up his towel in purest self-defense. "Guess you're feeling more like yourself," Simon said.

"Mm," Jeremy said, just barely smiling. "In any case, to answer your question, I'd actually got word several hours ago. Annabelle's safe with Ethan."

"Oh, good." Simon picked up his duffel with his wounded left hand, wincing, and dropped it on the bed. "So now that she's out of the equation, we can concentrate on getting Karpol off your case."

"Or you could go home," Jeremy said from behind him.

Simon paused, then turned around. "What?"

In lieu of shrugging, Jeremy made a lazy gesture with one hand. "Annabelle's safe. You've more than atoned for your lapse. You're welcome to go home and take your friends out of danger, if you want."

"No," Simon said, immediately, without thinking. He caught himself and flapped his free hand helplessly. "I mean . . . well, okay, I guess I do mean 'no'. I'm not going yet. In for a penny, in for a pound, right?"

Jeremy was silent, watching Simon, hiding behind that meaningless little smile of his. Rattled, Simon hitched up his towel again. "It wasn't ever just about Annabelle anyway," he said. "I'm also here because I have to take some responsibility for Rich, remember?"

"I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that you feel that way," Jeremy said, looking away. "Would it change your mind at all if I told you that I consider you absolved of your responsibility?"

"No!" Simon shoved his damp hair out of his eyes. "You can't do that anyway," he said. "It's not about what *you* think I'm responsible for, all right?" He hesitated. "Do you *want* me to go? Is that it?"

Jeremy looked back at Simon, his eyes tired. He sighed. "I'd like you to be out of the line of fire, as it were," he said. "But I must admit that I take some comfort from having you here."

"So . . . I'm staying," Simon said uncomfortably, getting a better grip on his towel. "So shut up about it already."

Jeremy laughed under his breath and held up both hands in mock surrender. "All right," he said. "I just want you to know that it's an option."

"Yeah, it's the coward's option," Simon said. Now that that was decided, he turned back to his duffel and fished out a clean pair of underwear. "Besides, all I'd be doing back in Washington is sitting around my apartment suffering from boredom and random attacks of, of paranoia," he said, adding a clean shirt to the pile. "Might as well be here, being of some use to somebody."

"Which you are," Jeremy said, touching two fingers to the nape of Simon's neck. Simon, who hadn't even heard him get out of the chair, stiffened in surprise; Jeremy, affecting not to notice, ran his fingers down along Simon's damp spine. Simon shivered. "Did I remember to say 'thank you' yet?" Jeremy asked, his fingers coming to rest on Simon's tailbone, half an inch away from the top of the towel. "Honestly, I don't know where my manners have gotten to."

Simon shut his eyes and leaned his head back, his skin still tingling in the wake of Jeremy's fingers. "Actually, no, I don't think you did," he said, his voice uneven.

"Appalling," Jeremy said, laughing under his breath. "I don't know how I'll ever make it up to you."

"I'm sure you'll think of something," Simon said. Jeremy tugged at the top of the towel; Simon let it slip an inch or two. "Also, hi, it's good to have you back, where have you been?"

"Oh, here and there," Jeremy said, running those fingers the rest of the way down.

◆ Thirty-One

There was only so much lying low that Simon could stand. He put up with it well enough for a while (aided greatly by having Jeremy's undivided attention) but on the evening of the third day, what little of Simon's patience remained snapped with an audible twang. "I'm sick and tired of being cooped up in this room," he announced, pushing the remains of his dinner away. Idly he flexed his left hand; the bruises had darkened to blue and purple over the course of the last three days and were starting to fade again, yellowing around the edges. "I mean, I get why we're lying low, Jesus, but I haven't been out of here in three days except to use the weight room."

"That's rather the point of the exercise," Jeremy pointed out, maddeningly calm. "And here I thought I'd been sufficiently distracting. Oh, dear. I shall have to try harder."

"You're trying enough as it is," Simon shot back. "Look, once it gets to be fully dark, let's get Mike to come pick us up and take us over to the other hotel, assuming Sandra hasn't killed him yet. Not that you're not, uh, stimulating company, but a change of place and face is just what the doctor ordered."

Jeremy's eyes drifted away as he thought about it. "All right," he finally said, resigned. "Actually, why don't you go without me? I should probably go ahead and get back in touch with a couple of people, and I'm certain I'd be extraneous in any case."

"You think it's safe?" Simon asked.

"Well, no." Jeremy smiled faintly. "But things are happening even without my input, and I can't just hide forever." The little smile curled in on itself. "After all, I have a career to resume."

"Is that what you call it in British?" Simon said, pushing his chair back and standing up. "I'm gonna call Mike. Maybe we can get up a poker game or something. Have some beer. Christ, that sounds great right about now."

"It rather does," Jeremy said, distracted. He was already fetching out his little address book and his latest cell phone, a glossy red monstrosity with a

scratched-up case. "Have a good time, and do be careful when you're outside. It'd probably be a good idea to wear the hat."

Simon snorted, picking up the room phone. "Yes, Mom," he said.

"I am going to kill them all," Sandra announced, flinging the door open in answer to Simon's knock.

Simon just grinned and eased past her, Mike vaguely sheepish in his wake. At some point during the last three days his team had deigned to let the maids in; the clutter was contained in little piles in the corners, at least in the main room, and the air didn't smell quite so pervasively of human any more. "Chin up, Spring," Simon said, heading for the coffeemaker. "Archer says you can probably resume your shopping and sightseeing tomorrow, assuming you're careful."

"Three days," Sandra told the world. "I have been cooped up in this suite with these guys for *three solid days*. By this point I'd almost walk right into Volpe's headquarters, if only to enjoy some sophisticated conversation before they shot me."

Simon poured himself some coffee and carried it over to the conversation pit. "I know what you mean, Spring, but you've got to admit Archer has a point. Any of those assholes could have seen your face."

"It's not like any of them were looking at it," Sandra protested. "In that dress? They were all too busy ogling my tits."

"Aw, bull," Mike said cheerfully. He kicked off his sneakers by the door and threw himself onto one of the couches. "Half of 'em were probably checking out your ass instead."

Sandra paused. "Point taken," she said, "but my initial point still stands."

The door behind Simon clicked open and Johnny ambled out of the left-hand room, still yawning. "Yo, boss," he said, blinking sleepily.

"Yo, Texas," Simon said. "How's all this enforced confinement treating you?"

"Eh," Johnny said, shrugging. "Catching up on my sleep."

Simon glanced back at Sandra. "See, you ought to take Texas' example to heart, Spring. Go Zen. Become one with the imprisonment and let it pass through you, and all that stuff."

"Right," Sandra said. She snorted. "Now get him to tell you about the desk chair that he and Mike broke during their scuffle yesterday."

"I was caught up then," Johnny said. "Plus he deserved it."

Mike hooted and went for him; Simon threw a leg over the arm of his overstuffed armchair and drank some of his coffee, a dispassionate spectator at the fight. "You know what, kids, I had an idea," he said the next time he could get a word in edgewise.

"Oh boy," Mike said, grabbing Johnny in a headlock. "He's got an idea!"

Instead of fighting his way free, Johnny caught Mike's arm in both hands and pulled it down an inch or so. "Got my boots on," he noted mildly.

“Yeah?”

“You got your shoes off,” Johnny said with great patience. “You make me stomp on your foot and I’m gonna break somethin’.” As if to illustrate his point, he cracked the edge of one bootheel against the floor. An inch and a half of stacked wood striking the floor made a pretty hellacious racket, and—Simon craned to check—left a small dent behind.

Mike’s face sagged. He pretended to consider for a moment, just to salve his ego, then threw up his hands and backed off a pace. “Yo,” he said. “I been told.”

“Anyway, kids!” Simon said brightly, shifting in his chair until he could stick a hand in his back pocket. “What I was thinking was that if we’re going to be stuck in here anyway—” he pulled out a fresh pack of cards that he’d bought at the hotel gift shop and held it up “—we might as well pretend it’s Saturday, right? Let’s play some goddamn poker.”

Nate stuck his head out of the back room, as if summoned. “Poker?” He looked back over his shoulder. “Hey, Dave, poker.”

“Poker?” the as-yet-still-invisible Dave said. “Sounds good.”

“Sounds pretty fucking awesome,” Mike said reverently. “Course, we got no beer.”

Simon tossed the cards onto the coffee table. “Then I nominate you to go get us some, Honda,” he said. “Assuming Italians drink beer, anyway, ’cause you can’t drink *wine* with poker.”

“Gotta be something,” Mike said. He bounded to the door and stomped back into his sneakers. “I’ll be back in half an hour. You guys start without me and I’ll cry or some shit.”

“Half an hour,” Simon said, making a show out of checking his watch.

It was close to two AM by the time Simon got back to his own hotel. He had a nice little three-beer buzz on, nothing overwhelming, just enough to smooth out the edges of his evening and blunt the remaining ache in his hand. Cognizant of the time, he eased the door open as quietly as he could, slinking in.

The room was dark, but Jeremy was not asleep. Rumpled and barechested he sat at the little table, exactly where Simon had left him, the hideous red phone still glued to one ear; he glanced up as Simon edged in, wagged his fingers in greeting, and then went back to tapping the pen against his lower lip. “Mm-hmm,” he said, staring off at nothing. “Yes. Yes. You can count on it.”

Simon eased the door shut behind him and kicked off his sneakers, listening to Jeremy’s half of the conversation with half an ear. “I suppose you’ll just have to trust me,” Jeremy told the person on the other end of the line, a hint of a laugh threading through the words. “No? Even after I gave you my word? Well. That’s your prerogative, I’m sure.”

It sounded so much like something he might say to Simon that Simon couldn’t help but grin a little. His eyes were quickly growing used to the dark, thanks

in no small part to the glowing screen of Jeremy's phone; Simon shucked off his shirt and stuffed it into his duffel, then wriggled out of his jeans. "In any case you've time to think it over," Jeremy said. "Believe me, it'll be worth your while."

The person on the other end of the phone buzzed something, then went silent. Jeremy pulled the phone away from his ear, looked at it, and then folded it closed. "He hung up on me," Jeremy informed Simon, putting the phone down.

"Who was it?" Simon asked, most of his mind occupied with the thorny question of whether to put on pajama pants or just sleep in his damn underwear.

Jeremy laughed. "Just another acquaintance I can't trust worth a damn," he said. "Aren't they all, these days?"

"Judging by the state of your address book, yes, they are," said Simon, giving up on the pajamas and draping his jeans over the top of his duffel. "Advil and then bed, I'm thinking. You coming?"

"Mm. You sound cheerful."

"I am, actually." Simon groped his way towards the bathroom. "I had a good evening and I've got a pretty sweet little buzz on. Christ, but I needed that. You should have come."

Bedsprings creaked softly in the room behind him. "I suppose it might have been entertaining," Jeremy said. "But I did get an awful lot accomplished while you were out."

"Awesome," Simon said. "Tell me about it in the morning."

The bruises on Simon's hand had developed some interesting green patches by the next morning, the deepest of the purples starting to fade. Simon studied his hand in the mirror while he shaved, fascinated. The patch of bruise around the heel of his hand had the rope pattern printed clearly across it, and not just the rope, but the seam of the climbing glove. "Christ," he said, then snickered and ran the razor under water.

By the time he finished up in the bathroom, breakfast had arrived. "Good morning, Simon," Jeremy said, already inspecting the tray. "There's no rush, but when you've got a moment, I'd appreciate it if you could go pick up my messages."

"Sure, no problem," Simon said, picking up last night's jeans and putting them back on. "I'll get Mike to run me over there."

"Whenever you have a moment," Jeremy said dismissively, picking over the strawberries in the bowl with a frown.

Breakfast over with, Simon got on the room phone and summoned Mike. "He'll be here in fifteen minutes," Simon said, hanging up the phone. "You need any papers while I'm there?"

Jeremy started to say something, then hesitated. "Actually, yes, that might not be a bad idea," he said, picking up the little notepad. "I doubt they'll have anything interesting to say to me, but you never know."

"Could be good for a laugh, too," Simon said. "I bet Volpe is just *furious*."

"Furious," Jeremy repeated, like that hadn't occurred to him. "Yes, I expect he is. And probably rather frightened, as well. I can't imagine Viktor Karpol is any too pleased with him at the moment."

Simon whistled out a low, sliding note. "Damn, wouldn't want to be him right now."

"Wouldn't want to be him at all, actually," Jeremy said pleasantly, tearing off the sheet of notepaper and holding it out.

The guy behind the newsstand's counter saw Simon coming from half a block away. By the time Simon got there, the counterman already had a briefcase flat on the counter, a sour look on his face. "Came this morning," he said. "Now they come in the mornings, too."

"Great, thanks," said Simon, pausing to rifle the racks of newspapers. Jeremy had asked for the same five Italian newspapers that Simon was accustomed to fetching for him, as well as a London *Times*, a New York *Times*, and, somewhat improbably, a *Paris-Match*. Simon made a stack of newspapers in his arms, detoured to the wall of magazines to get the last title, and dumped the whole shebang on top of the briefcase. "And those, please," he said, dropping a twenty-euro note onto the counter. "You know what, I hate coins, keep the change."

The note vanished like magic, as did about half of the counterman's frown. "Thank you," he said, already counting out euro coins from the register and dropping them into the front pocket of his apron. Simon hugged the stack of newspapers to his chest and picked up the briefcase—it was oddly light, this time—and headed back down the block to where Mike was double-parked.

"Delivery service," Simon announced, booting the hotel room door open. Unsurprisingly, there was no answer, not even after Simon had kicked the door shut again; he checked the bathroom, just as a matter of course, determined that there was, in fact, no Jeremy inside, and abandoned both the briefcase and the newspapers on the table.

Jeremy came back a little over an hour later, wearing that leotard thing again, sweating from his workout. "Ah, thank you," he said, scrubbing a towel up along the back of his neck while he toed his shoes off. "I'll just have a shower and then get down to business."

"Sure, no problem," Simon said, squinting at him. "You know, far be it from me to question your godawful fashion sense, but most people work out in plain shorts and a t-shirt, thereby *avoiding* looking like a tremendous faggot. Were you aware of that, or is this some kind of huge revelation for you?"

Jeremy laughed a little, peeling the leotard's shoulder straps down. "Well, yes," he said, "but for one thing, the unitard offers better support with fewer seams, and for another, I can wash it in the shower and have it dry completely in under ten minutes. I can also then roll it up into a bundle smaller than my fist, and I *am* trying to travel lightly."

"Yeah, but there's 'light' and then there's 'stupid'," Simon said, watching Jeremy peel himself out of the damp unitard with a certain amount of appreciation. True, the leotard was ridiculous, but it had some advantages.

Jeremy's little smile curled on his face. "Oh, heavens, the American doesn't approve of my fashion choices," he said, heading for the bathroom with the top half of the unitard dangling loose about his hips. "It's like being advised on my choice of wine by a mumbling toothless fellow who lives in an alley."

"Yeah, well, so's your mother," Simon said, picking up the remote and unmuting the television.

"Not a thing," Jeremy finally said, dropping the last section of the last paper onto the large, untidy stack at his feet. "I suppose the time for negotiation is over."

"I was at least expecting a 'fuck you' or something," Simon said. The afternoon was wearing on and Simon had given up on the television an hour ago, now just lying around bored out of his mind. "Or, you know, unveiled threats to make you sleep with the fishes."

Jeremy smiled and scooped up the entire stack of papers, dropping it onto the table. "I expect they'd rather just shoot me," he said, sounding not at all worried about this concept. "In case you're wondering, I don't intend to give them the chance."

"No, really? Why not? Sounds exciting," Simon said. "At this point I'd almost welcome a little mayhem. I am bored to death."

"Are you going to go back over to the other hotel tonight, then?"

Simon tossed the remote up into the air and caught it again. "Yeah, probably," he said. "Unless you want me for something."

"Mm. Well. I tend to want you for many things," Jeremy said, "but I expect I can spare you for a few hours. Particularly if you're willing to get rid of this phone for me."

"Sure." Dropping the remote onto the bed next to him, Simon dropped his arms to the mattress above his head and vented a huge yawn. "I was thinking I'd go over there for dinner," he said, still yawning. "You want to come?"

"I think I'd best stay here," Jeremy said. "Things to do, and all that rot. I'll just call down for room service later."

"Whatever works for you," said Simon.

Jeremy absently rifled through the stacked-up papers, glancing at headlines. "We probably ought to switch hotels in the morning," he said. "It's been four days, after all."

Tucking his hands behind his head, Simon shut his eyes. "Yeah, good idea," he said. "I'm gonna take a nap. Wake me at five?"

"Of course," Jeremy said. "Any preferences as to how?"

"I'm gonna go on downstairs and wait for Mike in the lobby," Simon said, picking up the everpresent Redskins cap and putting it on. A two-hour nap piled on top of a largely-inactive day had left him feeling a little groggy. He yawned again. "You sure there's nothing you need before I go?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine," Jeremy said, dismissing Simon with a little flick of his fingers. "I'll see you when you get back, and we'll see to moving on in the morning."

Simon shook his head, trying to dispel the mental fog that was eddying steadily about the perimeter of his brain. "Yeah," he said. "Okay. Have fun or whatever."

"I'll try," Jeremy said, his smile flickering on and off.

Simon let himself out into the hallway and jogged off towards the elevators, hoping that the motion would wake him up a little. The hotel they were currently in was kind of run-down and ugly, the carpet thin and faded under Simon's sneakers; he wouldn't mind getting out of here. Of course, there was no guarantee that they wouldn't move to some place worse, but at least 'worse' would mean a change of scenery. Simon caught the elevator and headed down to the lobby.

The lobby was fairly crowded, with a short line of tired people waiting at the desk to be checked in. No one seemed to be just sitting around, though, and after a bit of careful checking Simon decided it was probably safe enough. Mike would be pulling around to the little side door that opened onto the tiny parking garage; Simon headed over there. Something, a bit of stray memory, was nudging at the back of his mind. Simon couldn't quite call it up to the light.

The little hallway that led to the garage was completely empty. After checking to make sure that Mike wasn't already there and waiting, Simon leaned against the wall and tried to put his finger on what was bothering him. He was pretty sure that he'd done everything that he'd meant to do—Simon patted down his pockets, making sure he had everything. His wallet was there, as were his keys. His cell phone was clipped to his belt. The little SIG was strapped to his ankle—

That stray memory nudged at him again, a bit more pointedly. Simon hesitated, then patted his pockets down again. Wallet: was it something to do with his wallet? Probably not. He had the correct set of ID, the room key, and a decent amount of pocket money. Keys: he had both his own personal keys (for no real reason besides being uncomfortable about leaving them behind) and the room key, so that wasn't it. He didn't need a car key. Cell phone: clipped to his belt,

despite the fact that he probably wouldn't be able to use it. He'd called home to check for his nonexistent messages earlier this afternoon, so that wasn't it—

"Oh, goddammit," Simon said, slapping his forehead: Jeremy had asked him to get rid of the red cell phone and he'd forgotten to grab it. Simon pushed himself back up and headed for the elevators, grumbling under his breath. At least he'd remembered before he left. If Mike showed up, he'd just have to wait.

Simon rode back up to their floor, fishing the room key out of his wallet. Jeremy was going to give him shit about this—or worse, he wouldn't. The thought of Jeremy being all *understanding* was almost enough to make Simon turn around and leave again. Almost, but not quite. Simon swiped himself back into the room. "Sorry," he said. "I forgot to grab that cell phone for you . . ." He trailed off there.

The white t-shirt and beige pants that Jeremy had been wearing not five minutes ago had been thrown across the back of a chair. The briefcase that Simon had fetched that morning was lying open on the table, empty. Jeremy himself was motionless in the center of the room, wary and resigned, caught in the process of putting on his jacket—his *black* jacket. Like a blast from the past he was dressed in sleek black from head to toe, right down to the sunglasses threaded through the collar of his black t-shirt. "Simon," Jeremy said, putting his jacket the rest of the way on and smoothing the lapels down with both hands. His voice was even. "To be honest, I'd forgotten asking you to take it. How sloppy of me."

"Yeah, I guess so," Simon said, carefully shutting the door behind himself. "So. Uh. I can't help but notice that you're dressed to go out, and once again wearing all black, despite your once telling me that wearing your trademark asshole colors out in public would basically be a, a huge signpost saying HERE I AM in neon letters. So."

"So," Jeremy echoed.

Simon put his room key back in his wallet, and his wallet back in his pocket. "You were trying to get rid of me," he said.

Jeremy sighed. "Yes, I was," he said. "I'm meeting with an extremely nervous fellow tonight, and the only way I could talk him into meeting me at all was to promise, repeatedly, to come alone. I suppose I ought to have run the idea past you, only I was certain that you'd argue with me, despite having promised not to do so."

"Yeah, well, *duh*," Simon said, leaning against the door. If Jeremy wanted to leave the room, he'd either have to go through Simon or over the balcony, not that he was entirely incapable of either. "I mean, you want to appear to be alone, that's your business, but there's no reason at all that you shouldn't have backup anyway. Jesus Christ, that's my *job*—I do that shit for a living! If you'd given me even an hour's notice I could have had you within an invisible net with a two seconds' response time—instead you tried to ditch me and run off by yourself while every criminal in the, the European Union is on the lookout for you, pardon

me, I'm not exactly over that part yet!"

Jeremy looked away from Simon, fiddling with his cuffs. "I take your point, Simon," he said, his voice clipped. "And if I thought there was any real danger whatsoever, I assure you that I would have consulted you in a heartbeat."

"You made *Johnny* stay off the street for three days just because it's 'better safe than sorry'," Simon pointed out. "I like how 'better safe than sorry' applies to everybody but you."

"If I'd told you what I was planning to do and yet still insisted on going alone, would you have let me?" Jeremy shot back.

"I don't know. Maybe." Simon thumped one fist against his thigh. "I guess my point is that maybe you should have trusted me enough to try!"

Jeremy was silent. Simon's words echoed in his ears, making him more uncomfortable by the second. "Uh," Simon said. "But seriously, that 'inscrutable' crap really gets old. You never tell me *shit* unless you think I need to know, and you try to do everything yourself unless you can't—" Simon broke off there and clutched at his head with both hands. "Christ," he said, his voice uneven. "Is *this* what it's like to work for me?"

"More or less," Jeremy said, his voice still neutral.

"Mmph," Simon said. After a long moment he straightened up and pulled his phone off its clip, dialing a number. Jeremy watched him, silent.

After two rings, someone picked up the phone. "Hello?" Sandra said, confused.

"Hey, it's me," Simon said. "I want you to call Mike and tell him to come back. I've got something I need to do tonight after all."

Sandra's voice went sharp and wary. "Is there a problem?" she asked.

Simon very carefully did not look anywhere near Jeremy. "No, no problem," he said, sort of hating himself for it. "Just something I forgot to do earlier. I'll see you guys tomorrow, okay?"

"All right," Sandra said, still sounding a little suspicious. "Tomorrow, then. Call me if you need me."

"Yeah." Simon shut his eyes. "Yeah, I will. Sorry, Sandy."

"It's no problem," Sandra said. "Later."

Leaving his eyes shut, Simon folded his phone away and stuck it back on its clip. "Okay," he said. "So now we're both a couple of, of secret-keeping assholes, and don't think I don't see the irony in that, as it is huge and hideous. I don't know where you're going or what you intend to do when you get there, but I'm going with you. I'll wait wherever you tell me to wait, and I'll stay out of sight, but goddammit, I'm not letting you walk into trouble alone."

For a long, long moment, Jeremy was silent. "All right," he finally said, sighing. "Just . . . promise me that you'll stay out of sight. If he discovers that I haven't really come alone, *that's* when things might get dangerous."

"All right," Simon said. "Give me the red phone, and let's go."

Jeremy handed over the phone without another word.

Jeremy waited in the shadows of the tiny parking garage while Simon dropped the phone down a sewer grating and ran down to the taxi stand to fetch a taxi. Five minutes later the cab pulled up in front of the parking garage and Jeremy slid out of the shadows and into the back seat with a quick economy of motion that minimized the time he spent exposed to Milan. “Malpensa, please, Terminal One arrivals,” he said, and the driver grunted and swung out into traffic.

The ride out to the airport was long and passed mostly in silence. Simon stared resolutely out the window, watching Milan go by—at some point in the past two weeks he’d learned to cope with the crazy drivers, a thought which gave him some pause—and Jeremy remained folded into his own seat, gazing quietly down at nothing. Once or twice during the trip he started to say something, stopped, and went silent again. Simon didn’t bother to ask him what he’d been about to say.

Malpensa was lit up like a Christmas tree and crowded nearly to capacity. The driver let them off in front of one of the terminal entrances, accepted a folded bill from Jeremy with another grunt, and drove away. Without looking back at Simon Jeremy headed into the massive parking garage opposite the terminal. Simon followed.

Jeremy took the stairs up to the third floor, pausing at the top to look around before heading off into the rows of parked cars. He dipped one hand into his pocket and came out with a blocky black electronic key; pointing it in the general direction of the rest of the parking garage, he pushed one of the buttons. Somewhere off in the distance, one of the cars went *mip-mip!* in answer. “There we are,” Jeremy said, heading that way.

Two more pauses and two more *mip-mip!*s later, they stood in front of one of the sweet little sports cars that Jeremy seemed to favor. This one was red and sleek and looked like nothing Simon had ever seen; a quick glance at the hood confirmed that it was, apparently, a Lotus. “Huh,” Simon said, touching the car’s side. “Elan?”

“Elise,” Jeremy said, giving Simon a quick, distracted smile. He opened the door and slid into the driver’s seat. “It’s unlocked.”

Simon wrestled with the passenger seat until it deigned to slide back and make room for his legs, then got in. “Where are we going?” he asked, buckling his seatbelt.

“A fair ways,” Jeremy said, which was no answer at all.

Jeremy paid the car’s parking fee and took them out of Malpensa at a measured and perfectly legal pace. Milan lay somewhere off to the south and east; after a brief jog to the west Jeremy headed almost directly north, quickly abandoning the highways and larger roads for the darkness of the countryside.

The minutes went by. The world went darker around them, trees and hills off in the distance. The road was empty both before and behind them, not another car in sight. “Hey,” Simon finally said.

“Mm?” Jeremy said, eyes on the road. The expanse of a lake yawned off to their left, glittering faintly in the moonlight.

“So . . . why are you all, uh, back in black, to coin a phrase?” Simon asked, flapping a hand at Jeremy’s ensemble. “I mean, that seems kind of unnecessarily dangerous.”

Jeremy laughed under his breath, guiding the little Lotus over onto yet another smaller road. “Well, yes, it most likely is,” he said. “But it’s also something of a show of strength, if you will. If I were to show up in anything else, I would look, well. Less than perfectly confident, if you follow me. Like I was hiding who I was because I was afraid.”

“Yeah, I follow you,” Simon said. “I just also think that sounds kind of stupid. I mean, you’ve got half the goddamned Mafia after you—”

“—not the *Mafia*, Simon—”

“—I’d think that would make a person a little less than perfectly confident,” Simon finished, stubbornly.

“Oh, it does.” Jeremy was silent for a moment, watching the road. “It’s just that now is not a good time to show it.”

“Huh,” said Simon. “Okay. It’s your show.”

“That it is,” Jeremy said.

Twenty minutes later Jeremy pulled the car off the road and parked on the graveled shoulder, shutting off the engine. “Stay in the car, please,” he said, unbuckling his seatbelt.

“Okay,” Simon said, ducking his head to look out the window. Far, far in the distance he could see the headlights of rushing cars—it looked like a highway—but all around them was darkness. As his eyes got used to the darkness the shape of a small building slowly evolved out of the night, a few hundred feet away. It looked like a warehouse, or maybe a barn. Simon couldn’t tell.

“I don’t believe I should be more than half an hour,” Jeremy said. “Roll down the windows. If I need you, I’ll shout.”

“Okay,” Simon said again. He rolled down both his window and Jeremy’s, then settled more comfortably into the passenger seat. “I’ll wait here. I don’t know where else I would go.”

Jeremy glanced around, then huffed out a little laugh. “I don’t know where you would go either,” he said. “I’ll be back shortly.” He patted Simon’s thigh and got out of the car, dropping the keys on the driver’s seat before shutting his door and heading off, towards the warehouse or whatever that was. Dressed all in black like he was, the night swallowed him within three steps, leaving Simon completely alone.

Simon counted to a hundred, then picked up the keys and stuck them into his pocket. Gritting his teeth he eased the door handle up, holding the armrest tightly in his other hand; the latch disengaged with a soft and oddly meaty sound, the car door springing open less than half an inch. The dome light came on. Simon reached up and turned it off.

Simon slid out of the car and onto the gravel shoulder, shifting his weight slowly to keep the gravel from crunching underfoot. He nudged the door shut until it caught, then abandoned the car, taking exaggeratedly slow steps until he was off the gravel and into the grass.

The little building was too small to loom—too small to do anything but huddle. Simon found a road about a hundred feet in and turned to follow it, his sneakers nearly silent on the cracked asphalt surface. Breathing slowly and shallowly through his open mouth Simon crept up on the building, pausing about twenty feet out to drop smoothly into a crouch.

A dim light burned inside, spilling out of the crack under the nearest door. The building itself was in sorry condition, Simon now saw, its unpainted sides heavily blotched with rust and dirt; around the corner from the door a bit of the metal siding had rusted away entirely, leaving a long jagged lace-edged hole eaten into the wall. Dotting his hands off the ground for balance, Simon edged up to it, following the light and, soon, the soothing sound of Jeremy's voice. Crouching to one side Simon put his cheek nearly against the wall, glancing sideways through the hole and into the building.

The light came from a guttering Coleman lantern that threw huge, ridiculous shadows out around itself in all directions. The flickering made it hard to see at first, but Simon persisted, and after a moment he grew used to it; the room leaped into being like a magic-eye poster.

"—left him in the car," Jeremy was saying, his voice confident, pleasant, and calm. He was standing in the center of the warehouse with his hands thrown casually out to the sides, like it was entirely his own idea. "I'm here alone, as I promised."

The other man bared his teeth, his posture half aggression and half nerves. There was less than a hand's span of space between the two of them, the other man all up in Jeremy's face, and—Simon froze—he had the muzzle of a small and ugly gun jammed so hard up into the underside of Jeremy's jaw that it had forced Jeremy's head up, leaving Jeremy speaking to the ceiling over the other man's head. "Oh, aye, I shoulda known yeh'd pull some kind of shady bullshit," Bran said venomously, his familiar lilting accent like a punch in the gut.

◆ Thirty-Two

“Oh, Bran, don’t be ridiculous,” Jeremy said, gazing up at the metal roof of the ugly little warehouse. He had on that vague little smile of his, which was the same as no expression at all. “If I were trying to pull something shady, I wouldn’t have told you he was there at all. I’m only starting like I mean to go on.” He paused. “Which is to say, honestly.”

Outside in the damp heat of the evening, Simon shuddered once and then froze again. Bran had his finger crooked over the trigger and was so obviously nerved up that his shoulders were quivering; in this state he was liable to paint the wall with Jeremy’s brains if a car on the highway had a blowout. Or if Simon did anything at all, including cough.

Bran glared at Jeremy for a moment, then prodded him with the gun, forcing his head up a little higher. “Take off yer jacket,” he said. “Slowly, mind.”

Jeremy’s hands drifted up, almost dreamlike in their slowness. “I’m unarmed, Bran,” Jeremy said softly, curling his fingers around his lapels. “Just as I promised.” His jacket slid off his shoulders, an inch at a time, and slithered gradually down his arms until it hung from his fingers. “I’m going to drop the jacket now,” Jeremy said, his voice still soft. “There’s not much in it, but I wouldn’t like the sound to startle you.”

“Bet y’ wouldn’t,” Bran sneered. “All right, drop it, then, and I’ll try not t’ shoot yeh when yeh do.”

“Much obliged,” Jeremy murmured, shutting his eyes. His fingers uncurled and the jacket slipped from them, piling up around Jeremy’s feet with a whisper. Jeremy’s hands drifted back up, displaying his bare forearms for Bran (and Simon) to see. “There,” Jeremy said, letting his eyes drift open again.

“All right,” Bran said. He jerked his own chin back, studying Jeremy with an odd combination of loathing and newfound confidence. “Yer a fuckin’ idiot, yeh ken.”

Jeremy’s hands curled slowly shut in mid-air, to either side of his face, but his expression didn’t change at all. “Why?” he asked. “Because I trust you?”

“*Trust* me!” Bran cried, his voice cracking. “Trust me t’ kill yeh, then! Have y’ got any idea how much I hate yeh?”

“Oh, I rather think I do,” Jeremy said. “Why’d you come, then?”

Bran’s upper lip curled, baring his teeth. “’Cause y’ got somethin’ up your sleeve,” he said. “Y’ bunged me int’ prison and then sprang me right back out again, and I won’t be wanderin’ around wonderin’ what yer up to.”

“Ah,” Jeremy said, like that was at all reasonable. “And also I did promise you a perfectly ridiculous amount of money.”

“Don’t care about that,” Bran promptly said, shoving the gun up until Jeremy made a little helpless choking sound.

Jeremy swallowed—Simon could see his throat working from here—and waited until Bran’s gun hand relaxed a bit. “In that case, what if I promised you that I could get you free of Viktor Karpol? How about that?”

Bran’s eyes went wide, then narrow. “Y’ don’t know anything about it—”

“No,” Jeremy breathed, so softly that Bran automatically quieted just to make out what he was saying. “That’s true. I don’t know why you originally agreed to work for Karpol, or why you allowed yourself to be chained to such a punishing schedule, or anything. But I do know that I can get you free, if you’ll only work with me.”

“Work with yeh!” Bran nearly spat the words, his face twisting in automatic revulsion. His hand danced the sign of the Cross over his chest, his knuckles brushing against Jeremy’s chest in passing. If he knew he was doing it, he gave no sign. “Shows what yeh know, y’ fuckin’ wee faggot! Whatever yeh’ve got in mind, y’ can just forget all about it—he’d never stop lookin’ for me a day in his life, and he’s got eyes in damn near ever’ country—”

Jeremy let his eyes drift closed. Incredibly, his little smile widened. “He wouldn’t if he thought you were dead,” he said.

“Oh, *yeah*, what’re yeh gonna do, invite him to my funeral?”

“Agree to help me, and I’ll tell you,” said Jeremy.

“Fuck yeh!” Bran twisted his wrist upwards, the muzzle of the gun dimpling the soft skin under Jeremy’s jaw. “And even if I was ‘dead’—” the word came out sounding like *deid* “—what am I supposed t’ do for money? Can’t bloody well work for a livin’ if word might get back, *yeah*?”

“Well, you see, that’s the thing,” Jeremy said. Bran subsided into a sullen, angry silence and Jeremy went silent with him, and for a moment the world was so quiet that Simon could hear them both breathing. “I need you, Bran,” Jeremy finally said, cajoling and soft. “I can’t do it without you. But neither of us work for free, do we, and no one knows better than I do what your skills are worth.”

For a long moment, Bran was silent, watching Jeremy through eyes that were no wider than slits. “*Yeah*?” he finally asked, unwillingly dragging out the word. “How much are y’ plannin’ on payin’ me, then?”

Jeremy's eyes drifted open, nearly black in the flickering lamplight. His little smile was soft and oddly sure. "I'd pay you approximately seventeen million pounds," he said. "In legal, laundered, tax-free funds, to boot."

The sheer idiotic size of the figure startled both Bran and Simon into shocked and gaping silence. Jeremy's smile only widened, his fingers flexing absently in mid-air. "With that much money at your fingertips, you'd never have to work again if you so chose," he said. "You could lay as low as you liked. Karpol could go on thinking you dead for the rest of his life."

Bran came to before Simon could, shaking his head violently to snap himself out of it. "Oh, yeah, so y' say," he said. "Where's this money comin' from, then?"

"I own a thriving gemstone-import business under the name of St. John Thawte," Jeremy said. "All perfectly legal and aboveboard, privately held, and the company's assets were worth slightly over seventeen million pounds at the close of the business day two weeks ago. Mr. Thawte is an absentee owner, however, and none of his current employees have ever seen him." Jeremy paused there, rolled his hands into loose fists once more, and cleared his throat, the skin of it working around the muzzle of the gun. "The company's yours if you can present certain documents along with an ID and papers that identify you as St. John Thawte. Help me, and the documents are yours."

Bran snarled—the sound had a touch of desperation to it now—and ground the gun up into Jeremy's jaw. "Yer havin' me on! Why should I believe that buncha hooley—"

"You don't have to believe me," Jeremy said. "I can prove it to you."

"Yeah? All right, yer so smart, yeh go on and prove it, then."

Jeremy hesitated, his little smile going wry. "I'm afraid I'll need my cell phone," he said, his voice apologetic. "It's in my jacket."

Gun still jammed up under Jeremy's jaw, Bran glanced sideways down at the jacket on the floor, then curled his lip in disgust. "Guess y' got a problem, then," he said. "'Cause I won't be pullin' the gun away, will I now?"

"That's easily enough solved," Jeremy said. His hands strayed down an inch or so, the little motion exaggeratedly slow. "Come down with me. It ought to be child's play for the both of us, oughtn't it?"

Bran studied Jeremy's face, pure and simple curiosity warring with old hatred in his expression. "Slowly, mind," he finally said. "Y' start jerkin' about and I can't guarantee what'll happen."

"Oh, yes," Jeremy said. "Slowly. Of course." His arms drifting out for balance, Jeremy lowered himself towards the floor, floating down onto one knee with a slow and easy grace that entirely belied the gun still thrust up under his jaw. Bran went with him, equally slow, equally easy, for a moment Jeremy's shadow in almost every way . . . after a slow and breathless eternity they knelt opposite one another on the dirty concrete floor, so close as to be breathing each

other's air, Bran's free hand on Jeremy's knee for balance. "I'm picking up my jacket now," Jeremy said softly against Bran's cheek. His hands wafted down like falling leaves.

"Yeah," Bran said, equally softly. Jeremy's hands landed on the material of his jacket and curled into it, lifting the jacket up and off the floor. He brought it around in front of himself and reached inside the pocket—"Slowly," Bran rasped, nudging the gun up in warning.

"Slowly," Jeremy agreed, his voice now a bare and soothing whisper. To Simon, still frozen outside, it seemed that his hand didn't move for close to a minute, and the eventual production of the silver phone from the black of the jacket looked like a magic trick. "I'm going to drop my jacket again," Jeremy added.

"Right," said Bran.

Jeremy let the jacket fall back onto the concrete without a second thought. Cell phone in hand he rose again, bringing Bran with him, like some sort of weird and courtly dance; once they were both upright again Jeremy lifted the cell phone, bringing it up to the level of their faces. "I'm going to open the phone now," he said. "I'll call a number and put it on speaker, so that we both can hear."

"Just do it already," Bran snapped, the enforced languidness of the past few minutes finally getting to him.

Jeremy shut his eyes and flipped the phone open with his thumb. "All right," he said. Without looking away from Bran—or, at least, without looking away from the space slightly over the top of Bran's head—Jeremy punched a number into the phone's keypad, blindly hitting the buttons. The phone clicked and connected; the sound of the phone on the other end of the line ringing carried clearly over the speaker both to Bran and to Simon, outside.

After two rings, someone picked up the phone. "Jeremy," Ethan said, his voice grave and entirely unmistakable.

Outside in the dark Simon exhaled slowly through his open mouth. Bran, for his part, winced like he'd been hit, his little breathless 'huh!' just barely audible; Jeremy glanced down at Bran, then away again. "Ethan," he said, sounding just as calm as if there weren't a gun forcing his jaw half-shut. "Would you please tell me what I asked you to do yesterday?"

"Of course," Ethan said, his disembodied voice metallic and flat with distance. He paused, papers rustling. "You asked me to access one of your safety-deposit boxes and fetch out the papers in the folder marked 'Thawte Gemstone Importers, Ltd.—St. John Thawte'. I have those here. You also asked me to have Teddy begin preparing the best possible set of identity papers under that name, under the assumption that pictures were to be taken later. I've done so. Teddy is working on them as we speak." Ethan paused again. "Is that all?"

"Yes, Ethan. That's all." Jeremy glanced down at Bran again. "I'll speak to you again later."

“Very well,” said Ethan. The papers rustled again. “I’ll be waiting for your call.”

Jeremy flipped his phone closed, severing the connection. Bran was absolutely silent, his mouth half-open, shock and outright pain predominant on his face; Jeremy closed his hand about his phone and let it drift back down, his hands once again held out to either side. “You see?” he said. “Ethan will give you those papers and the identity if I tell him to do so, and then the money is yours.”

“Yeh . . .” Bran stopped and swallowed, his eyes narrowing. “Y’ did that on *purpose*, yeh bastard . . .”

“I suppose it would be useless to deny it,” Jeremy said. “You may not trust me, Bran, but there’s no one in the world whom you and I both trust more than Ethan.”

Bran’s snarl was reflexive and desperate. “I’m not *going* to—”

“You don’t have to,” said Jeremy. “If you insist, you can meet with Teddy on your own and have Ethan mail you the papers. You needn’t lay an eye on him if you can’t handle it.”

Thwarted, Bran went silent, glaring at Jeremy with renewed loathing. His shoulders were still as taut as wire; with lunatic concentration he began grinding the barrel of the gun up into Jeremy’s jaw, driving Jeremy’s head back and marking the flesh there. Jeremy’s eyes narrowed slightly, the only outwards sign of what must have been pain. “What do you say, Bran?” he asked, his voice still impressively even. “Will you help me? In exchange for my getting you free of Karpol and paying you somewhat upwards of seventeen million pounds?” When Bran did not answer, only bared his teeth and continued bruising Jeremy’s jaw, Jeremy shut his eyes and dropped his voice to a low and confident murmur that only barely carried to Simon. “I need you, Irish,” he breathed. “Help me now and I swear it’s the last time you’ll ever have to see me.”

“Hah,” Bran spat. “Fuckin’ likely.” The gun stopped moving and pulled back maybe half an inch, leaving a ring of reddened skin printed neatly on the underside of Jeremy’s chin. Bran considered Jeremy in silence for a moment, then sneered at him, something like triumph lighting in his eyes. “Yeh want my help that bad?” he asked, a sudden, taunting, sing-song note in his voice. “Yeh want it that bad, yeh can blow me, too. Right here and now, on yer knees, yeh want it that bad.”

Outside, Simon jerked back, then bared his teeth and ground one white-knuckled fist hard against the flesh of his thigh to keep from snarling. For a moment Jeremy was quiet, not quite looking at Bran’s crazy, gloating face; then he closed his eyes and laughed, a low and weirdly intimate sound. “Oh, Bran,” he said, still laughing just a bit. “Did you actually think that demand would even slow me down? Me?” They were less than a hand’s width apart and Jeremy’s hand drifted across that gap, drawing two fingers up along the obvious shape outlined against the front of Bran’s pants.

Bran nearly folded in half in his terrified haste to get away from that hand. Wheezing like Jeremy had punched him in the stomach, Bran whipped away so fast that Simon barely saw him move at all, only registered that suddenly he was four feet away with the gun pointed at Jeremy's face instead of jammed up under his jaw; Jeremy lowered his head for the first time and met Bran's eyes across the newly-formed gap. He was smiling. "I'll do it, you know," he said. "If that's what it'll take."

"Fuck yeh," Bran said shakily, his eyes wide and rolling like a spooked horse's. "Fuckin' nasty arsebandit, yeh'd like that, wouldn't yeh." He yanked the gun off Jeremy and shoved it into the thigh pocket of his battered cargo pants, then scrubbed his hands together like he was washing them clean of invisible filth. "All right, fuck yeh, I'll help yeh, just don't fuckin' well touch me again, yeh filthy bastard."

"Thank you, Bran," Jeremy said, apparently wholly pleased. He leaned down and picked up his jacket, shaking off the worst of the dust before shrugging back into it and putting his cell phone away.

Simon hesitated for a moment, then rolled back half a step and eased away from the building, not daring to rise to his feet until he was a good twenty feet away. There was just enough moon to light his way as he groped his way back to the car; his heart was still thudding along when he got there, though, leaving him disinclined to get back in. Instead he leaned against the car's side and folded his arms across his chest, staring up at the stars.

Twelve minutes later by Simon's watch, Jeremy melted out of the darkness a few feet away from the car. He was wearing that small and meaningless little smile again, his hands stuffed casually into his pants pockets, not a hair on his head out of place. "Well, then, that's that," Jeremy said. "I'm sorry that took so long—I do hope you weren't too worried."

Simon ran a hand down his face with a long, drawn-out scratchy sound. "You know what," he said, "let's just not even pretend that I didn't follow you and see most of that."

Jeremy was silent for a long, long minute, most of his casual attitude leaching away. "Ah," he finally said. "How much of it did you see?"

"Enough," said Simon. "More than enough. Jesus."

"You know, I rather thought my sixth sense was trying to tell me something, but I honestly thought you'd keep your word and stay in the car," Jeremy said, looking away. "Ah, well. I suppose I ought to be angry with you, but at the moment, I'm only glad to have an excuse to ask you to drive us back."

Simon nodded, even the opportunity to drive one of Jeremy's expensive and zippy little cars failing to distract him overmuch. "Yeah," he said, pulling the Lotus' keys out of his front pocket. "I'll drive, that's fine."

Jeremy smiled, quickly and unconvincingly, and went around to get into the passenger's seat. Simon adjusted the driver's seat and folded himself into the tiny car, fiddling with the mirrors and adjusting the tilt of the steering wheel; Jeremy waited patiently, gazing out of the side window and into the night. "On further thought," Jeremy said, "I suppose I'm not surprised. It seems very . . . *Simon* of you, to have followed me despite everything, including your promise."

"Yeah, well, if there's one thing I'm awesome at, it's being myself," Simon said, slotting the key into the ignition. He buckled his seatbelt, put his hands on the wheel, paused, and added, "How'd you know he wasn't serious about it?"

"About what?"

"About blowing him," Simon made himself say, an echo of that impotent rage boiling up again. "How'd you know he didn't mean it?"

"Ah." Jeremy put on his own seatbelt, fussing with the shoulder belt until it lay just so over his chest.

After three or four sick seconds, Simon said, "You didn't know, did you."

"He was raised in the Catholic church in accordance with his family's wishes," Jeremy said, maintaining his breezy tone only through obvious effort. "It's not a religion that sits easily with his, ah, preferences. So I suppose you could say that I didn't know for certain—but I hoped."

"Would you—no. Never mind. It doesn't matter." Simon started the little car, its engine roaring eagerly to life. "I probably don't want to hear the answer anyway."

Jeremy fished around inside his jacket and came out with the little square silver case, extracting a cigarette and his battered metal lighter. Poking the cigarette into his mouth, he put the case away and flicked the lighter's wheel. "No, probably not," he said quietly, trying and failing to light his cigarette, his hands shaking so badly around the lighter that they snuffed out the flame.

◆ Thirty-Three

Drifting towards wakefulness the next morning, Simon slowly became aware of a constant and warm weight pinning his arm to the bed, a sensation so utterly novel that he woke up the rest of the way just to investigate it.

Jeremy was still asleep, his head resting on Simon's bicep, one of his own hands curled catlike in front of his face. Simon lifted his head from the pillow and blinked foggily down at Jeremy, trying to recall if he'd ever seen this before. He was pretty sure that he hadn't: Jeremy's habit of being awake and dressed before Simon woke up was so thoroughly ingrained that even last year's concussion hadn't broken him of it. Of course, after yesterday . . .

Jeremy had a mild case of bedhead going on, which just about doubled the weirdness factor. Simon reached up and pushed a bit of Jeremy's hair back into place. Jeremy's forehead creased slightly, the cadence of his breath changing; Simon went still.

Still mostly asleep, Jeremy ran his fingers through his hair and then draped that arm over his hip. His breathing and face both smoothed out again. Asleep, his face lost most of its expression and all of its animation; the skin around his deep-set eyes looked lightly bruised, as did the corner of his mouth. And under his chin there was a shadow—

Simon nudged Jeremy's chin up with his thumb, the better to see. The bruise nestled in between the twin curves of Jeremy's jawbone was large and vaguely circular, dark red starting to shade to purple; there was a tiny patch of unbruised skin in the center, turning the circle into a fat ring. The bruise on Simon's hand, in contrast, had faded to ugly yellows and browns, only tiny dots of purple remaining. Simon put his hand on the side of Jeremy's throat to compare, then stroked his thumb up over the ring of bruised skin.

Jeremy's eyes fluttered open and focused, but otherwise, he didn't move. Simon glanced up at him, then back down at the bruise. "Yeah, that's attractive," Simon grated out, his voice still thick with sleep.

"Mm," Jeremy said, lifting his chin a little more. His eyes drifted half-closed, leaving him watching Simon from under his lowered lashes.

Nudged by some instinct older than he was Simon leaned down and put his mouth on the bruise, making Jeremy hiss in surprise and catch his arm; the bruised skin was strangely warm, nearly hot, like it was feverish. Simon shut his eyes and ran his tongue over that weird heat, then woke up a little further and wondered what the hell he was doing. “Dibs on the shower,” he said, pulling back as casually as he could.

“Fair enough,” Jeremy said after a moment, lifting his head to free Simon’s arm.

Having gotten off to a weird start, the day showed no inclination to get back to normal. Firmly back in his anonymous beige and white Jeremy attempted to carry on like usual, but the bruise under his jaw tugged at Simon’s eye every time Jeremy moved his head, reminding Simon of just how dangerous—and how weird—everything had gotten. As a result, Simon kept losing track of the conversation. “What?” he said, looking up in confusion.

“I asked if you were planning to stare at it all day,” Jeremy said, patiently, lifting his chin as if to give Simon a better look at the ring of bruised skin.

“Oh.” Simon coughed and looked away. “I guess so, huh?”

Jeremy touched the backs of his fingers to the bruise, frowning. “I suppose there’s no covering it without makeup.”

“Have you *got* makeup?”

“Not with me,” Jeremy said, letting his hand drop. “And I dislike the stuff in any case. Although I’ll admit it does have its uses.”

“Oh yeah,” Simon said. Helpless to resist, he added, “It brings out your eyes and accentuates your lashes, for one thing.”

Jeremy raised one eyebrow. “Spoken like a man who knows.”

“Eh, I only know what I read in magazines,” Simon said. “So! What’s the plan?”

After a long and thoughtful moment, Jeremy shrugged and let the subject drop. “Bran’s fetching something for me. It’ll likely take him a day or two to lay hands on it, so . . .”

Bran’s name made Simon grind his teeth, a fact which he manfully tried to hide. “So,” he repeated. “So what?”

“So right now it’s a question of acquiring certain things in advance of the day,” Jeremy said. “What we ought to do now is check out of this hotel and carry all our things over to the suite. We can discuss things there, as a group.”

“Right,” Simon said, pushing his chair back and standing up. “Sounds like a good idea. In that case, I’ll go summon our Mike-ly steed.” He slid around the side of the table, heading for the phone; as he went by Jeremy reached out and trailed his fingers over Simon’s hip. Simon crashed to a stop. “What?”

“Mm? Nothing,” Jeremy said, letting his hand drop. The smile he offered Simon was entirely opaque.

Sandra read down the list in her hands, frowning, then flipped over to the pictures. “Well, no, none of this should be a problem,” she said. “I know most everybody’s sizes.”

“Excellent,” Jeremy said, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees, his eyes gleaming. “Mind you, no one will be looking too closely at the bottom layer of clothing, so you’ve plenty of leeway—and as for the more iconic items, I’ve contacts who’ll be acquiring them for us.”

In direct contrast to his languid manner of the morning, Jeremy had been bristling with excess energy ever since they’d arrived at the suite; the sheer force of his sudden personality shift had kept anyone from asking about the bruise under his chin, although Simon had seen most of them notice it. Jeremy’s eyes flicked over the room, taking them all in. “All right, then, next question,” he said. “I need someone who can shout a fair amount of memorized Italian without a noticeable accent. Who here is best with languages?”

Half the people in the room pointed at Mike, including Mike, who pointed at himself with both hands for emphasis. “Man, I am so good at accents, you have no idea,” Mike said, letting his hands drop again. “I am *way* totally a man of all ethnicities.”

“Despite the impression he may have given you over the years, he really can be counted on,” Simon put in.

“Good to know,” Jeremy said, controlling his little smile. “I’ll put you in contact with your language coach in a couple of days, then.”

Mike perked up. “Is she hot?”

“Yes, Archer, *is* she hot?” Sandra asked, still consulting the little file of pictures.

“I suppose it depends on your definition of ‘hot,’” Jeremy said. “Also, on your definition of ‘she.’”

“Aw, man,” Mike said, slumping back in his seat.

Jeremy switched his assessing gaze over to Johnny, his smile fading again. “Tell me,” Jeremy said, “if I can secure you access to a machine shop, can you reload your own ammunition?”

“Whoa,” Simon said, sitting up. “Whoa. *Whoa.*”

“Yep,” Johnny said, paying no attention to Simon at all. “Need brass, though.”

“Of course, you’d just have to let me know what you’d need—”

“Why does no one ever listen to me when I say ‘whoa’?” Simon asked Sandra, aggrieved.

Sandra glanced up. “I don’t know,” she said, “but as interim team leader I officially hate you for not having previously put a stop to this behavior.”

Having found no sympathy on that side of the room, Simon glanced to the other side. “Why do I have to take so much lip from you people?”

“What?” said Dave, blinking. Simon subsided, entirely thwarted.

Jeremy coughed. "Actually," he said, "the reason that I ask is that I find myself in need of a large number of blank cartridges. They're nearly impossible to get hold of in this country without leaving a hellacious paper trail."

"Not blanks," Johnny said.

Jeremy blinked. "No?"

"You want to fire a gun without killin' anybody? That it?"

"Yes?"

"Not blanks," Johnny said. "Wax bullets. Works better."

Jeremy held up both hands in surrender. "That I'll leave up to your discretion. I'm sure you know more about the subject than I do."

"Probably," Johnny said.

"That's settled, then," Jeremy said. He let his hands drop. His eyes darted swiftly left, catching Simon's for just a moment before Jeremy put on his most innocent smile and turned to Nate. "So, let us say for the sake of argument that I wanted to blow up a building—"

"Whoa!" said Simon, jerking upright again.

Eventually the meeting, such as it was, broke up. Nate and Dave retreated to the minibar, Nate already scribbling on a legal pad and chewing on his lower lip. Sandra found a pen somewhere and started making notes, referring to the photographs every few minutes. Johnny spent a few moments in intense consultation with Jeremy, then announced, "Gotta go back up to that firin' range, scavenge our brass. Honda, you up?"

"Yeah, sure," Mike said, hopping up. Alone amongst Simon's teammates, he was at a loss for something to do. "Can we shoot some more shit while we're there?"

"Plan," said Johnny. He took a look around the room while he fished a toothpick out of his shirt pocket. "Anybody else comin'?"

Sandra looked at Jeremy. Jeremy shrugged. Sandra looked back at Johnny. "I'll come," she said. "I can do this shopping tomorrow."

"Anybody else?" Johnny asked. "Boss? You bored enough to come?"

"Bored? Me? Nah," Simon said. "I'm totally looking forward to spending a couple of hours doing absolutely nothing. As you guys can see by the muzzle-shaped bruise under Archer's chin, every time I acknowledge that I'm bored, the universe decides to sucker-punch me just for maximum irony points."

Every conversation within earshot died away. As one the members of Simon's team looked over at Jeremy, who turned a completely blank gaze on Simon. Simon, relatively content with his petty revenge, settled further back in his chair and got comfortable. "Guess what," he added. "The guy who gave him that is theoretically on our side."

"You'll note that he didn't actually shoot me," Jeremy said, his voice noticeably cool. "He just needed to assert himself a bit."

“Guess he did that,” Simon said.

Jeremy’s habitual little smile was nowhere in evidence. Instead, his face was utterly blank, almost serene in its lack of expression; mentally, Simon braced for impact. “Oh, come along, Simon,” Jeremy said, his voice ever so slightly sharp under its bland pleasantness. “You may as well drop the other bomb while you’re about it. Go ahead. Tell them who it is.”

“Well, since you asked so nicely,” Simon said, nettled. “You folks remember once upon a time when we were chasing after some guy who was pretty much Archer’s exact double? And later we found out that that was because he was Archer’s foster brother, who also, coincidentally, hated his ass like poison?”

“It’s true,” Jeremy said. “Bran and I have . . . come to terms, I suppose you could say.”

Sandra’s head came up as she picked up on the obvious problem posed by Bran’s involvement, which Simon had been expecting. “I thought he despised you,” she said. “Why is he so willing to work with you now?”

“Self-interest,” Jeremy said flatly. “He has almost as much to fear from Karpol as I do. More, perhaps. If he helps me now, I’ve assured him that he’ll end the day with Karpol off his back and enough money to keep it that way.”

“Ah,” Sandra said, looking unconvinced.

“Let me put it this way,” said Jeremy. “I’ve bought him. He’ll stay bought.”

Sandra hesitated. “Ah,” she said again, sounding a little more convinced this time.

“And if it makes you feel any better, I don’t intend for your paths to ever cross—except once, for approximately ten seconds,” Jeremy said. “I’ll tell him nothing he doesn’t need to know.” He paused there, looking around the room, meeting everyone’s eyes in turn; then he smiled and shook his head. “I trust him, but I see no reason why the rest of you should have to.”

“I suppose that’s fair,” Sandra said. She still didn’t look entirely convinced, but she’d run out of handy protests. “Are you sure this is a good idea?”

Jeremy’s nod was immediate and definite. “Absolutely,” he said. “For several reasons. And, well.” Jeremy shrugged. “He *is* my brother.”

“Among other things,” Simon muttered, too softly for anyone else to catch.

Jeremy vanished into the back bedroom with both of the techs, Nate already beginning to say really uncomfortable words like *blasting caps* and *accelerant* and *C4*, Dave just tagging along out of curiosity. The rest of the team packed up their guns and left, heading out to the creepy abandoned farm where they’d done their shooting last week.

Simon settled into his chair and listened to the conversation coming from the back bedroom with half an ear. Eventually he started to hear slightly less uncomfortable words, like *don’t actually want anyone to be hurt* and *give them*

plenty of time to escape; Nate's side of the conversation got so technical after that that Simon tuned it out.

Sighing, he let his eyes unfocus, flexing his hands against his thighs. Foremost in his mind was that petty, balked irritation, and underneath that, a pervasive sense of unease. Simon half-shut his eyes and banished first the irritation and then as much of the unease as possible, letting his mind go empty. He was out of his depth and not in control of anything—Christ, but he hated not being the one in control of things—but that was no reason to stop using his brain.

So. Simon spread his hands out. The only person in this room who trusted Bran at all was Jeremy, but in a sense, Jeremy was the only one who had to. Even if Bran *did* attempt to sell Jeremy out—which Simon wouldn't put past the crazy bastard—Simon and his team wouldn't be caught in the crossfire that would result. So: if Jeremy wanted to place his trust in a crazy bastard, it was his business.

A stray memory drifted to the top of Simon's emptied mind: Jeremy saying *Bran's fetching something for me*. A day or two, Jeremy had said. It seemed to Simon to be a fair barometer of Bran's mental health. If the item in question (whatever it was) simply failed to show up, then Bran was wisely distancing himself from the whole matter, and Jeremy would just have to think of a different, less crazy plan. If the item showed up, then either Bran was on the level or Bran was following his revenge trip all the way—and if Bran were really out for revenge, he'd just have shot Jeremy yesterday and called it done. None of this was terribly helpful, but it was interesting. Simon resolved not to worry about Bran's intentions until after he'd given or failed to give Jeremy whatever it was.

The rest of the plan was . . . only marginally insane, except for the part where it relied on Bran, who *was* insane. If everything went according to plan, then it would actually be significantly less dangerous than rescuing Annabelle had been. Of course, Simon was far, far too canny to think that everything would go according to plan. Still, even if everything went to shit, his team would be safe, and *he* would be safe, if, perhaps, feeling a little guilty. He prodded at this feeling for a moment and decided that it was acceptable: he was here, doing everything that Jeremy asked him to do. If something happened to Jeremy now, it would still be Simon's fault, but Simon would rest secure in the knowledge that he'd done everything he could to prevent it.

Simon sighed out a breath and shut his eyes, letting his head fall back. That bone-deep sense of unease still pulled at him, but he was able to deny it, for the most part. Jeremy's pleasant English voice hummed just above the threshold of Simon's hearing, too soft for Simon to make out any of the words; Simon dozed off still listening to it, his hands folded loosely in his lap.

"Can you see?" Jeremy said some unknown amount of time later, waking Simon from his impromptu nap.

Simon lifted his head and blinked groggily. Jeremy was standing behind the chair opposite Simon's with his arms crossed on its back, regarding Simon coolly through the opaque black glass of his high-tech goggles. When Jeremy wore his usual all-black getup, the goggles looked appropriate, possibly even necessary to the look; against the backdrop of Jeremy incognito, however, they looked nothing short of ridiculous. "See what?" Simon said, blinking again.

"Yeah, I see it, it's working!" Nate called from the room behind Simon. He sounded excited, like a kid with a new toy. "Looks like you woke up Templar—wave for the camera, Templar!"

"What?" Simon said again, pushing himself up. Jeremy's little smile turned self-deprecating, and he tapped one finger against his temple. Simon scowled at him. "You've got a camera in there too?"

"Not a very good one," Jeremy said. "But, yes, I've a pinhole camera in the right lens, and a small radio transceiver back near the ear. I hardly ever use them because I tend to work alone."

Simon eyed the mirrored oblong askance. Its surface was not forthcoming, and Jeremy's eyes were entirely hidden behind it. "Hey, Specs," Simon finally said, raising a hand.

"Hey, Templar!" Nate said from behind him, way too amused. "Isn't this great? I can see and hear what Jeremy's doing from—um, actually, what did you say the range was?"

Jeremy turned his head, scanning the room with those sci-fi goggles. "I've only ever tested it up to about a quarter of a mile," he said. "I'm sure the range is greater."

"Oh," Nate said, vaguely dejected. "That's not really all that far. We'd better test the range before we do this for real."

"Ah, well, I'm sorry to have disappointed you," Jeremy said. The opaque shield of his goggles scanned back across the room, moving over Simon without stopping.

Simon watched him do it, considering. "So," he said, thoughtfully. "In theory Nate can now see and hear what you're doing from halfway around the world."

"Mm?" The goggles turned back in his direction. "Yes, that's the idea."

Simon shook his head in wonder. "Man. Think of how happy Scotland Yard is going to be when I get Nate to hand them the number of that frequency. Bet there's a commendation in there for me."

Jeremy's head stilled. "Mm. Good point. I shall have to change the frequency I'm using once we're out of this mess."

"Aw, Templar! Why'd you have to go and say anything?" Nate said, hurt.

◆ Thirty-Four

Two days later, when Simon stopped by the newsstand to pick up a couple of newspapers and Jeremy's messages, the counterman pushed across not a briefcase, but a small and battered paper bag. "Now more people come, also delivering messages," he said, grumpy. "I am not a post office."

Simon, his senses on full alert, picked up the bag and peeked inside. The bag contained a locked metal cashbox, of the kind found at any office-supply store, and no key. Thwarted, Simon rolled the top of the bag shut again. "Yeah, I don't know," he said. "I'm pretty sure this one was just a one-time thing, but I guess you never know."

The counterman grunted, picking up the little pile of Simon's newspapers and starting to ring them up. "Hey," Simon said, after a moment. "The guy that dropped this off—what did he look like?"

"Eh?"

"The guy who dropped this off." Simon waved the bag. "Was he a pale guy, kinda blond hair, pissy expression?" Simon mimicked Bran's habitual scowl as best he could.

The description rang no bells with the counterman, but the scowl made his eyes light with recognition. "Yes," he said, pointing at Simon. "Like that."

"Awesome," Simon said. "Just curious." Fishing out his wallet, Simon picked a fifty-euro bill from among its contents and pushed it across the counter. "Keep the change," he said. Hey, it wasn't his money.

"Your best friend sent you a birthday present," Simon announced, once he was safely back inside the hotel room and the door was shut. It was a slightly nicer hotel than the last one, but only just; in Simon's near-expert opinion on these matters, only the truly astonishing breasts sported by the desk clerk made this hotel in any way memorable.

Jeremy raised both eyebrows and accepted the bag from Simon. "Well," he said. "That was quick."

“He didn’t send the key, though,” Simon added, putting the newspapers down on the table. “Guess that would have been too mannerly of him.”

Jeremy slid the cashbox out of the paper bag and turned it over in his hands. Whatever was inside made a clunking sound. “Why on earth would I need the key?” he asked, distracted. “Sending the key along only ensures that anyone can open it. That’s hardly the point.”

“Okay, point,” said Simon. “So what’s in there? Knowing Bran, it’s probably a bomb.”

The box stilled in Jeremy’s hands, which gave Simon a small and mean little burst of pleasure. “I certainly hope not,” Jeremy said, after a moment.

“Well, yeah, I hope not too, but doesn’t he have IRA affiliations? Seriously. It’s a bomb. Don’t shake it.”

“Mm.” Jeremy turned the box over again, frowning. “Actually, I suppose that, in a sense, you’re correct.”

“Now you’re just trying to scare me,” Simon declared, pulling out his phone. “I’m going to check my messages.”

“All right,” Jeremy said. He put the cashbox on the table and went to poke around in his suitcase.

Simon threw himself on the bed and called his regular cell phone. Checking his messages like this had become second nature to him, not least of all because it always went the same way: Simon called his phone, negotiated with the menus, learned that he had no messages, and hung up. It shouldn’t have been a surprise. The only people who called him on a regular basis were his teammates, his boss, and his boss’ secretary, and his teammates had better ways to get in touch with him.

Neither Upstairs nor Danielle had called since Simon had been suspended. Simon didn’t like to think about that. If he weren’t in Italy he’d call Danielle and try to get a sense of what was going on—in a way, it was good that he was here, because bugging Danielle could only be counter-productive. It wasn’t like Upstairs had forgotten him. Christ, if anything, it was the opposite.

Simon keyed in his passcode and waited for the nice automated lady to tell him he had no messages. “You have . . . one . . . new message,” she said instead, much less surprised by this than Simon himself was. “Message one. Tuesday, June 30, 8 . . . 43 . . . PM.”

Simon waited, his stomach all in a clutch. If it was Upstairs—instead, it was just about the last person Simon had been expecting to hear from. “Mr. Drake,” Dorothy Langridge said, her voice clipped and cool. “Because I have apparently gone soft in the head, I am calling of my own volition to inform you that whatever your freelancer has just done has caused an immense uproar back in the mother country. There are some heavy hitters *en route* to somewhere in Italy—these are mop-up artists, Mr. Drake. If you have any way of contacting your freelancer, tell him to leave the country, or failing that, to be very careful.” There was a brief

pause, and then Langridge huffed out an irritated breath. "This has been my one display of altruism for the year, Mr. Drake. I hope you'll appreciate it, but I doubt you have the brains *or* the manners to do so." Her phone rattled in his ear.

The automated menu lady came back, pleasant and anonymous. Numbly Simon negotiated his way through the menus, deleting Langridge's message and dropping the connection. Suddenly and for no good reason the phone felt explosive in his hands; Simon held the power button down until the phone shut itself off, then snapped the phone shut and dropped it onto the bed.

"Is there a problem?" Jeremy asked.

Simon looked up. Jeremy had a pair of strange little hooked metal tools in his hands and the cashbox on the table in front of himself, but for the time being he wasn't doing anything with any of them; instead he was watching Simon, intent. "Yeah, maybe," Simon forced himself to say, rubbing a hand down his face.

A thrum of energy ran through Jeremy like electricity, pulling him upright. "Do you need to go home?" Jeremy asked, putting down his tools. "I can have you on a plane in an hour, if need be—"

"No," Simon said. "No, it's not that kind of problem. It's not really about me at all."

Jeremy hesitated, still taut with anticipation. "What is it, then?" he asked.

Simon blew out a breath. "That was someone who's hooked into our Russian friend's computer network. Apparently Volpe's little fuckup at the opera caused a shitstorm to go down, and there are some big-time hitters on the way down to, uh, mop you up, as it were."

The news wiped Jeremy's face clean and left it blank. "I see." He looked down at the little cashbox, then started picking up his tools and putting them back in their little leather case. "In that case, I believe that the time has come to leave Milan," he said, his voice brisk. "Wouldn't you say?"

"Can we do that?" Simon asked. "I mean, is there any reason we need to stay?"

"None beyond convenience, now that Annabelle is safe," Jeremy said. He put the leather case back into his suitcase, followed by the unopened cashbox. "Call your friends," he said. "Tell them to pack their things and get ready to go. I'd like to be underway within the hour."

"Sandy says to tell you that they'll be ready to go by the time we get back," Mike said, pretty much the instant that Simon slid into the back seat of the car. "I just gotta turn this car in and get some kind of van. Otherwise I can't take all of us plus our stuff, and I think Nate would totally cry if he were parted from that monitor."

"All right," Jeremy said. "I'd like you to take us into town and drop us off a block or so away from the newsstand. Once you have the van, come back and pick us up. I need to put a few things in motion."

Mike put the car in gear and bumped on out of the parking lot, melding seamlessly with the chaos of traffic. "Will do," he said, checking the rearview mirror. "Shouldn't be more than, uh, forty-five minutes, an hour."

Simon settled back and dispassionately watched the Milan traffic go by. It was funny how it didn't look quite as insane as it had at first. Mike drifted through it like an old pro, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel and occasionally snickering as someone behind him went insane with horn-honking fury; on the other side of the car Jeremy pulled his hat down to shade his eyes and looked down at the seat between them, hiding his face from the casual scrutiny of passersby. His hands were folded neatly in his lap, and—Simon checked—not white-knuckled in the slightest. Jeremy's relative calm was contagious. Simon's own sense of hyperalertness faded.

"Oh, hey, I meant to ask," Mike said, startling Simon. "What about the taxi? Do I just leave it there or what?"

Jeremy glanced up, then back down. "Yes, that should be fine," he said. "I'll tell its owner where to find it once we're safely out of the hotel." He paused. His forehead creased and then cleared again. "I don't believe we'll be needing it again, no," he said, with an air of finality.

"Kay-o," Mike said. A tiny space opened up in the lane to his left and he wedged the car into it, whistling tunelessly under his breath to drown out the yelling.

Mike dropped them off a good two blocks away from the newsstand and screeched back off into traffic. Jeremy made for the dubious shelter of a building overhang with alacrity; Simon looked around, ascertained that he did, in fact, know where they were, and then followed, tugging the Redskins cap down over his eyes. "What's up?" he asked, carefully putting himself between Jeremy and most of the traffic.

Jeremy gave his human shield a distracted smile and reached into his jacket. Paper crinkled under his fingers. Jeremy shut his eyes, nodded, and pulled his hand back out. "Will you do me a favor?" he asked.

"Sure," Simon said, a little thrill of nerves making the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

Jeremy nodded across the street. "Go over there," he said. "Walk by the newsstand and make sure everything looks normal. Don't go near it, just walk by and then come back. I'll wait here."

"Yeah," Simon said. He glanced across the street, then said it again. "Yeah." His mind already largely occupied with the reconnaissance ahead, he patted Jeremy's shoulder, then stepped back and lost himself in the traffic. The hordes of Milanese pedestrians gave way for him only grudgingly, but eventually he was swallowed up by the crowd. The light changed and Simon crossed the street, safe in the midst of the pack.

The foot traffic swept him onwards in the general direction of the newsstand. Soon enough Simon could see the familiar dirty white awning on the opposite side of the street; the awning was not on fire or anything, which Simon counted as a good sign. Slowing a little, he drifted towards the edge of the crowd.

The counterman was there, leaning both arms on the counter and staring out at traffic. He looked bored. Another good sign. All around him the city was bustling; Simon couldn't see anyone loitering, although there were several people sitting at the little café that butted up against the back of the newsstand. None of them looked familiar, but Simon resolved that maybe he and Jeremy ought to come around from the back of the block, just in case.

Simon let himself be carried along to the traffic light and across the street, then shifted from one crowd to another and crossed the other street at the intersection, preparing to make the block. If the guy behind the counter saw Simon walk by, he didn't give any sign; there was no one loitering on the other side of the newsstand, either. Simon relaxed, fractionally, and sped up. He could be back to Jeremy in five minutes.

Out of habit Simon kept an eye out all the way back. No one was paying him any attention at all, including those people who really ought to be, like the guy who stepped on his foot and the woman on the cell phone who nearly ran into his back. By this point Simon was used to the casual assault that passed for interaction around here, and he barely glared at either of them, too intent on making the block and getting back to Jeremy. He wasn't nervous, not precisely, but Jeremy's obvious dislike of being out in public had rubbed off on him by now; he'd feel a little better once he had Jeremy safely stashed away somewhere, like a valuable artifact. Simon snorted at himself for this silly turn of phrase and sped up a little further. The corner where he'd left Jeremy was in sight—but, as Simon discovered not a moment later, it was unoccupied.

Simon ground to a halt on the corner and glanced from side to side, his heart rate speeding up just a bit. The people behind him made their displeasure known and surged around him on both sides, obscuring his line of sight. Simon fought his way to the overhang where he'd left Jeremy not ten minutes ago; deep in the back of his mind a warning bell was starting to sound, but right now he was fighting not to listen to it. Putting his back to the wall Simon pulled out his cell phone and flipped it open, scanning the area over the top of it. No Jeremy. Those warning bells were getting louder.

Completely at a loss, Simon glanced down at his cell phone and realized that it was still off. He punched the power button and went back to looking around while the phone sang a cheery little tune and booted itself up. No sooner had it started booting up than it chimed happily, nearly giving Simon a heart attack; **1 New Text Message**, the screen said. Trying not to clutch at his chest too obviously, Simon called it up.

Meet me there?

Simon scowled at his phone. Meet him there? Where? ... for that matter, how the hell did he know that it was Jeremy that sent the message? He had no idea what Jeremy's current phone number was; anyone with a non-American phone could have sent that message. Still, there was only one 'there' Simon could think of. Snapping his phone shut, Simon melded back into traffic, heading for the newsstand. If he'd been alert before, now he was almost painfully so. The faces in the crowd around him jumped out into clear and absolute focus. Simon imagined he could hear them all breathing.

Jeremy materialized at his side between one heartbeat and the next, for the moment just another person in the crowd. Simon hissed out a relieved breath through his teeth. "What—" he started to ask, and then stopped; Jeremy wasn't paying the first bit of attention to him. He was walking just briskly enough to keep himself a pace or two in front of Simon. A woman in a business suit shunted in between them and Jeremy let her do it, distancing himself just a little more.

Simon looked away, gazing carefully out over the heads of the people in front of him instead of watching Jeremy. Still, now that he'd spotted Jeremy, Simon remained aware of him, like a blip on the radar. All right, if Jeremy wanted to play it that way—Jeremy headed for the newsstand, and Simon slid out of the crowd and went to stand around the side, out of sight. He pulled out his phone again to give himself an excuse to be there.

"I just gave—" the counterman started to say.

"Please accept my condolences on the sudden death in your family," Jeremy said, smoothly cutting the other man off. Paper crackled as Jeremy pulled the envelope out of the inside pocket of his jacket. "I understand it requires you to close up shop and leave the city for at least two weeks? That's a tough break indeed."

For a moment, there was silence, punctuated only by the rustle of paper. "I see," the counterman finally said. "I am to go immediately?"

"So I understand," said Jeremy.

The counterman appeared around the corner a moment later, intent on the spinning racks of newspapers. Spotting Simon, he jumped, then swore under his breath in Italian and clutched at his chest. "Sorry," Simon said, waving the phone. "Just checking my messages."

"Yes," the man said, already distracted. The envelope stuck up out of the pocket of his apron, its flap folded awkwardly back to display the thick sheaf of pink bills inside. He grabbed the first rack and toted it back around to the front of the newsstand, then returned for the other one.

Two minutes later the newsstand was an anonymous white huddle in the middle of the sidewalk and the man was pinning a handwritten note to the front. Jeremy was nowhere in sight. Simon hung around and 'checked his messages' until the counterman shucked off his apron and balled it up around the envelope, then headed off down the street. He didn't look back once.

Simon looked left, then right. No Jeremy. Operating on a certainty, Simon closed his phone and headed back the way he'd come. He was halfway there when his phone buzzed again, and Simon flipped it open to display another text message:

When M. comes, come one block south, stop at corner.

South? Simon looked around, frowning, then fought his way out of the crowd again and argued with the keypad until he managed to type:

Whic way is south

Not caring enough to fix the typo, Simon hit 'Send'. The answer didn't come right away, leaving Simon with the indelible mental image of Jeremy raising a snide eyebrow at the screen of his phone. A minute or so later, when Simon was almost up to the corner, his phone finally buzzed:

Towards midtown.

Simon folded his phone away and found himself a convenient place to lean, out of the way. After a long, careful look at his surroundings, Simon pulled his Redskins cap down to hide his eyes and settled in with his phone.

You hiding

Pause.

Yes.

Why

Paranoia?

Simon laughed a little. Text messaging was rapidly losing its allure—he was not patient enough for this shit—so he simply typed

Good answer

and sent it.

A few seconds later, his phone buzzed.

I thought so.

Simon fought down a smile and deleted the message.

Fifteen minutes passed, tortoise-slow. Simon kept one eye out for anyone paying an undue amount of attention to him, but after a while it was just a formality. Most of his attention was focused on every van that rolled past, hoping that the next one would be the one that pulled to the curb with Mike at the wheel; Italy wasn't quite as minivan-happy as the US, fortunately, so Simon wasn't driven entirely to distraction.

Despite the fact that Simon was watching for it, the van that finally did pull to the curb still managed to startle him. Simon eyed the spectacle askance. He'd been expecting some kind of rental-agency minivan, not a battered white windowless thing that lacked only terrible spray-painted logos to belong to a shady plumber, or alternately, lacked only a FREE CANDY sign to belong to a child molester. Still, it was definitely Mike behind the wheel, grinning like a madman. He waved at Simon, then leaned over to unlock the passenger-side door. "Yo, boss," he said as Simon climbed in. "Your stuff's in the back. Where's Archer?"

"South a block," Simon said. He crawled over the front seat and into the back. "Christ, Honda, where'd you get this thing? Steal it off a florist?"

"I kinda sorta bought it," Mike said, snickering and putting the van back into gear. "Which way's south?"

"What? Oh, Jesus. I don't even want to know." Simon settled into the back seat, giving up on a seatbelt after a token search. The way the rest of the van looked, he was surprised it had a second set of seats at all. "Towards midtown."

"Right," said Mike, gunning the van twice to warn off scooters and then pulling out into traffic. Neither of them paid a moment's attention to the ensuing honking.

The van crawled up to the appointed corner, hindered by floods of uncaring pedestrians and the occasional rampaging Vespa. Simon ducked down and scanned the streets through the windshield, hoping to catch a glimpse of Jeremy, or at least a glimpse of that white fedora of his. The crowds surged around the van like the tide, however, and Simon couldn't pick Jeremy out of them at all.

Mike stopped at the light like a good citizen, apparently pissing off the taxi behind him. Two seconds after the van had rocked back on its wheels the passenger-side door jerked open and Jeremy threw himself in, closing the door behind him; he glanced over his shoulder, confirming Simon's presence, and then put on his own rudimentary seatbelt. "Back to the hotel, I think," he said, affable but brisk.

"On my way," Mike said, hitting his turn signal. "So what was that all about?"

“Playing it safe,” said Jeremy. He hesitated, then undid his seatbelt again. “Alternately, jumping at shadows. If you don’t mind, I believe I’ll join Simon, if only to get away from the windows.”

Simon obligingly scooted over. Jeremy slid over the front seat with as much grace as possible and sank into the dimness of the back of the van. Casually, as an afterthought, he dropped his hand to Simon’s thigh and gave it a squeeze, his hand gone again almost before Simon registered the touch. Simon strangled on his little yelp of surprise. “You okay back there, boss?” Mike said, glancing at Simon in the rearview mirror.

“Yeah,” Simon said, his voice a little uneven. “Archer just stepped on my foot, is all.”

Jeremy’s arch little smile was quite nearly a smirk. Simon did his damndest not to pay it any attention.

The rest of them were sitting around down in the parking garage of the hotel *degli Alberti*, their bags heaped haphazardly around them. The tableau made them look like refugees, although Nate’s giant monitor and Dave’s little laptop tended to spoil the illusion. They all looked up as the horrible van pulled in—to a man their expressions were priceless. Simon wished he had a camera.

“All right, folks,” Simon said, kicking open the back doors and dropping out. “I want to be out of here in double time, load up and let’s go. I claim shotgun by divine right. The rest of you can decide who gets the back seat in any manner that you see fit, although I do draw the line at casualties.”

Nate peered into the dark interior of the van. “Looks like we can put three people into the back seat,” he reported. “So two of us have to sit on the floor with the baggage.”

“Not it,” Sandra and Johnny said, almost in unison. They glanced at each other. Johnny raised his hand and Sandra solemnly high-fived him.

“Actually, I’d also prefer to sit in the back seat, if no one minds,” Jeremy said. “I’ll need access to a window in order to give directions.”

Dave looked up from his laptop. “Um, what? What are we doing? I’m sorry?”

“Consigning you to sitting on the floor, apparently,” said Nate.

Dave blinked. “Oh. Um. Okay?”

Johnny picked up the two duffels nearest him and hopped up into the back of the van, stuffing them up under the back seat next to Simon’s own duffel and Jeremy’s things. Something like a bucket brigade formed behind the van as Simon’s team jammed their belongings into the back; Jeremy watched this process for a moment, then went around to the far side of the van. “Have you got the keys to the taxi?” he asked Mike.

Mike shifted in the driver’s seat and fished around in his front pocket. “Yeah, here you go,” he said, handing over a keyring. “Tell him he needs to get his

fucking wheels aligned, it's like driving some chick's vibrator or some shit, not that I'd know anything about things like that. Being a manly man and all."

"Mm," Jeremy said, accepting both the keys and the sentiment with raised eyebrows. "I'll be certain to pass that on."

"Yeah, you do that," Mike said, snickering.

The taxi was parked over against the far wall. Jeremy went over and unlocked the passenger-side door, crawling halfway in; Simon watched him incuriously, most of his attention focused on getting the van packed up without significant casualties or excessive horseplay.

Eventually everybody was in the van except Simon and Jeremy. The techs found places to sit in the back, Nate sitting on one of the wheel-wells, Dave crosslegged on the floor with his laptop in his lap. "Yo!" Simon called. "We're ready!"

"Coming!" Jeremy called back. He shut the taxi's door and jogged over, hopping up into the back of the van. "Pardon me," he said, edging past Nate. Sandra scooted over, making room for Jeremy in the back seat. Simon shut the van's back doors and ran around to the front, climbing up into the passenger seat.

"Where am I going?" Mike asked, starting the engine.

"Take the A7 south, all the way out of the city," Jeremy said.

Once the van was safely underway, Jeremy cleared his throat. "If you could grant me a few moments of silence," he said, "I need to make a couple of quick calls."

No one had actually been saying much, but they obligingly went silent anyway. "You heard the man," Simon added.

Smiling absently, Jeremy dug his latest cell phone out of his jacket pocket and dialed a number. "Sergio," he said, after a moment. The voice on the other end of the line buzzed. "Yes. Yes, we're done with it. It's parked in the garage under the hotel *degli Alberti*. The keys and a token of my gratitude are in the glove box. Thanks ever so."

Jeremy hit the disconnect button, sipped in a quick and nervous breath, then dialed another number. "It's me," he said. "I am shutting everything down. I'll re-establish in a day or two." He hit the disconnect button again.

"Ain't this a movie," Johnny noted under his breath, glancing at Sandra.

"Welcome to my life," Jeremy said, distracted, already dialing again. Someone answered the phone; Jeremy's voice went quick and staccato. "Yes. Tell him that the Russians are coming. Tell him to get out of the city immediately. My drop box has been closed. Take whatever precautions you feel necessary, but keep this line open." This time Jeremy slapped his phone closed to disconnect it, staring off into space with a disturbing lack of expression on his face. "There," he said after a moment.

"Bran?" Simon asked, very carefully keeping his expression neutral.

"Oh, yes," Jeremy said. "Any one of the incoming Russians might already know his face. Best to get him out, as well."

Simon shifted uncomfortably in the front seat. "Unless Bran's working with them," he pointed out. "Hell, for all we know he's the one that called them in."

"I suppose that's possible," Jeremy said. He reached into his jacket and fished out the little black address book. "That's why I sent our friend at the newsstand on walkabout, after all. Bran knows he has a connection to me, so . . . well, it's best to be safe."

"So you don't actually trust Bran, then," Simon said, twisting around in his seat until he could see Jeremy.

Jeremy's eyes skittered away from Simon's. "I trust him to a certain extent, yes," Jeremy said, slowly, like he was handpicking every word. "But there's no need to be foolish about it. And closing up my mail drop should also serve as a layer of protection in case Bran is forced to give me up against his will."

"Uh huh. Yeah. Right. 'Against his will'," Simon said, unable to resist adding the fingerquotes.

"One more phone call, I think," Jeremy said, exhaling. He flipped through his address book and dialed a number, then took, held, and released a deep breath before hitting the CALL button and putting the phone to his ear. "Ah, Matteo," he said, suddenly lazy and congenial. "Would you happen to know anyone off the top of your head who could run me to Malpensa tomorrow evening? I'm afraid Milan is getting a bit too *warm* for me, so a dignified retreat is in order—mm-hmm. Ah. I see. What? Oh, yes, back to the homeland, you know how it is. I suppose events have conspired to make me a bit homesick." Jeremy laughed, a lighthearted sound that was completely at odds with his face. "Oh, no, you needn't bother to call me back, I'm just about to switch phones. I'll call you this evening. Of course. Goodbye, Matteo."

Simon, fascinated, watched Jeremy fold the phone away. "Isn't Matteo that guy who's been telling everybody and their mother that they should sell you to Karpol for a profit?"

"Oh, yes," Jeremy said. "I'm *so* hoping that he attempts to sell that bit of information to someone. Would you mind rolling down your window?"

"Huh?" Simon twisted back around to blink at his window, then cranked it down. The wet heat of Milan slapped him in the face like a dead fish, ripe with exhaust. "What's up?" Simon said, squinting against the onslaught.

Jeremy leaned forward and put his hand on Simon's shoulder. "Tying up a loose end," he said, leaning past Simon to stare out the window. The van rolled on past a street corner; Jeremy's other hand flashed past Simon's ear, pegging the cell phone neatly into a sewer grating as it flashed by. Jeremy patted Simon's shoulder and sat back. "There we are."

"Right," Simon said, rolling the window back up.

* * *

After half an hour or so, they left Milan behind them. South of the city the land gave way to anonymous farms and little villages, like and yet unlike rural areas of America; sometimes Simon forgot what country he was in until a highway sign in Italian forcibly reminded him. Sandra spent a lot of the journey with her arms folded on the seat in front of her, staring out the front windshield at the scenery, such as it was.

Eventually Jeremy also leaned forward, directing Mike off the A7 and out into the countryside. The hills weren't quite as dramatic out here, rolling gently away from the road instead of spiking dramatically up towards the Alps. The farms fell behind the van and vanished, replaced by tracts of forested land.

"So where are we going?" Mike eventually asked, even as Jeremy directed him off one small road and onto a road that was even smaller. "I mean, shit, if this ain't the back of beyond out here."

"It's not much farther," Jeremy said.

"A'ight, awesome," Mike said. "Course, that's not what I asked."

Jeremy gave him a quick, distracted smile. "No, I suppose not," he said.

After a moment, Mike burst into a ripsaw laugh that startled everyone in the van. "Aw, shit, he did it again," he said, still giggling like a loon.

"Mm?" Jeremy said, blinking in mild confusion.

"Where are we *going*, Archer?" Mike asked, grinning widely enough to show most of his teeth.

Simon snorted. "Yeah, good luck with that, Honda. Might as well be trying to armwrestle a snake."

"It's possible that I simply don't want to spoil the surprise," Jeremy said, all injured patience. "But if you must know, we're going about halfway up the hill we're currently spiraling about."

"Christ!" Simon said. "That was an answer! How'd you make him do that, Honda? You got some kind of inside dirt on his mother?"

"Guess it's possible I'm just that awesome," Mike said, guiding the van around a long curve in the road. "Or maybe it's 'cause I've got like five years of experience at prying answers out of closemouthed people, huh, *boss*?"

"Vote for the latter," Johnny put in.

Simon put a hand over his eyes. "Okay, you guys, seriously, I'm hurt—"

"Why?" Sandra said. "They're right, you know. It *is* like pulling teeth to get a straight answer out of you, sometimes."

"No," Simon said patiently. "I'm hurt because they're comparing me to *Archer*."

"Whoa, shit, you're right, that was totally unfair and hurtful of me," Mike said, pulling a shocked face. "Man, I'm an asshole. Guess an apology is in order, huh?"

Simon, sensing a trap, let his hand drop. "Let me guess—"

“Goddamn, Archer, I’m totally sorry about that,” Mike said, confirming Simon’s suspicions before whooping off into a hyena laugh.

“Yeah, thanks,” Simon said sourly, the words almost lost under Mike’s whoops.

Jeremy shifted forward, crossing his arms on the seat back behind Simon. His forearm brushed lightly against the back of Simon’s neck, probably on purpose. “There should shortly be a white stone gate coming up on the right,” Jeremy said, raising his voice to be heard. “We’ll be turning in there.”

Mike laughed himself to a choking stop. “Gotcha,” he said, still grinning. “White stone gate, huh? Sounds fancy.”

“Oh, yes,” Jeremy said absently, sitting back. His fingers ran up the back of Simon’s neck as he pulled away, definitely on purpose this time, making Simon have to fight not to shiver even as the skin on the back of his neck prickled.

It was Sandra who spotted the white columns first. They stood to either side of a hardpacked white gravel drive, the heavy wrought-iron gates between them open to the road; a low white stone wall ran away from the columns in both directions, vaguely boxing off the land beyond. The gravel drive curved off into the trees. “Is that it?” Sandra asked, pointing. Mike promptly slapped on the turn signal and slowed.

“That’s it,” Jeremy confirmed. “If you’ll stop just beyond the gate, I’ll pop out and close it.”

“I can get it,” Simon offered. “I mean, since I’m in the front seat and all.”

Jeremy fished his little black address book back out of his jacket. “Thank you,” he said, distracted.

The van turned off the road and crunched onto the gravel, precipitating a little surprised yowp from the easily-startled Dave. Mike brought the van to a halt ten feet inside the gate; Simon pulled open the door and hopped out, the gravel shifting under his sneakers. Up here in the hills the air was cooler, if still damp, and carried a faint, pleasant tang of both wood and salt. Simon headed for the gates, looking around.

There was a covered keypad set flush with the stone of the right-hand column. Simon put a hand on the nearest gate and gave it a little push, just to make sure; it didn’t budge under his hand. Right. Electronic gates. Another crunch of gravel announced someone else’s exit from the van behind him; Simon ignored it in favor of investigating the keypad, hoping against hope that there would be a button plainly marked CLOSE THE DAMN GATES or something.

“Some day I expect I’ll remember that Americans say ‘no, thank you’ when politely declining an offer,” Jeremy said, amused. “As I was intending to say, Simon, I’ve the gate codes here, so I’ll have to close the gate myself.”

“Yeah, I’d just about figured that out,” Simon said, falling back a step. Jeremy stepped past him and flipped up the plastic cover, pausing to refer to his address book. Simon put his back to the van, making sure he was between Jeremy and

Mike's rearview mirror. "While I'm here, Archer," Simon said, pitching his voice both low and soft. "Stop with the goddamned secret touching already. It's one thing when it's just us, but that's twice now you've damn near molested me right in front of my team. You know I'm not going to stand for that."

"Mm," a distracted Jeremy said, pausing long enough to punch in a six-digit code. The keypad beeped obligingly and the gates shuddered, starting to swing ponderously closed. Jeremy glanced over his shoulder at Simon, his little smile crooked and worrisome. "Really," he said. "Not even a little?"

"No," Simon said, irritated. "Not even a little. I have to *work* with those people in the future, you know?"

"Oh, yes, I know," Jeremy said, watching the heavy gates swing shut. "And I suppose this means you also won't want to share a bed once we're all under the same roof?"

Simon spluttered, caught off guard. "Hell no," he said, when he could, glancing over his shoulder to make sure no one was watching. "Christ, if we're all going to be in one house I want you to keep your hands to yourself—I'd think that ought to be obvious."

Whatever Jeremy had been about to say was interrupted by the clang of the gates meeting in the middle of the drive. They locked together and swung into position, sinking heavy iron rods into the ground and falling immensely, eternally still, like they'd never moved at all. "There we are," Jeremy said, consulting his little book again. "Let me just set the alarm and then we'll get a move on."

"Quit avoiding the subject," Simon said.

"Oh, I'm not." Jeremy typed another six-digit code into the keypad and was rewarded with a series of beeps and a single, ominous, deep-throated thrum from the gates. Jeremy sighed, shut the little book, and made it disappear. "I assure you, Simon, I'll act with as much decorum as I feel is necessary—"

Simon snorted. "Oh, yeah, that says a lot."

"As hard as it may be for you to believe, I don't actually want to destroy your carefully-constructed life," Jeremy said sharply. Helpless not to, Simon hunched his shoulders and glanced behind himself again. Jeremy's voice dropped to a husky murmur. "They won't notice," he said. "The ones who were going to notice noticed a long time ago."

"Yeah," Simon muttered, scruffing a hand through his hair. "You know what, I've been discovering this."

"I've something of a sixth sense for knowing when I'm being observed in any case," Jeremy added, his little smile firmly in place once again. "Believe me when I say I'm actually being quite careful—well, shall we go?"

"Yeah, let's," Simon said, both unnerved and vaguely, dimly relieved. He'd just started to turn around when Jeremy brushed casually past him, heading for the gravel drive. For just a heartbeat of time Jeremy's body was between Simon's

own and the sight line of the van, and Jeremy reached down and gave Simon a *hard* squeeze right through the denim of his jeans.

Simon choked on his next breath but Jeremy was already gone, heading back towards the van as if nothing whatsoever had happened. Simon fought down his irritation and followed Jeremy, stopping for half a second in the van's blind spot to make a few necessary adjustments.

The gravel drive wound through the trees. In some places the forest was so overgrown that ferns brushed against the sides of the van with little whispering sounds, but the trees themselves were neatly cut back, their branches arching overhead.

After a minute or so Simon could see a vague lightening in the trees ahead of them. Behind him, Jeremy shifted, leaning forward to cross his arms on the seat back again. This time his arm barely brushed Simon's shoulder, which was something of a relief—but he was also radiating a cat-like smug contentment, which Simon could feel without even turning around. "There we are," Jeremy said cheerfully, as the van burst out of the forest and onto the immense, manicured lawns. "I'm afraid it's not a real Italian villa, only a modern recreation, but it's fairly attractive for all that."

"Jesus Christ," Simon said, too shocked to hold the outburst back. Half the hillside had been bared to form the grounds for the immense white building that swept forward in two giant wings to enclose a plaza as large as any in Milan. Mike whistled under his breath, the van slowing to a crawl; in the back of the van Nate and Dave were craning forward to see. Simon shook his head, sharply. "Okay, you've had your surprise, Archer. Want to tell us what's up with this?"

"It belongs to, erm, a satisfied customer," Jeremy said, still radiating triumph. "I've worked for him on three separate occasions in the past, and we've developed something of a rapport over the years. At any rate, he once told me that the place was mine if I ever felt that I needed a vacation, and so today I called and took him up on it."

"Can you trust him?" Sandra asked, glancing from the villa to Jeremy and back.

Jeremy waved Sandra's question away. "I believe so. He's as rich as Croesus and completely barking mad to boot, but in the useful sort of way. I don't believe Karpol or Volpe could possibly offer him enough to interest him, even if they did somehow figure out that I was here. The villa itself is wired for phone and internet and alarmed halfway to hell. I believe it'll be safe enough."

"In that case," Sandra said, "my only question is: why didn't you bring us here sooner? My God."

"Yeah, Archer," Mike added. "Way to hold out on your buddies."

Jeremy laughed a little. "Unfortunately, it isn't all that convenient to Milan and my support network, and to be honest, I hadn't thought of it until today."

The villa was only getting larger as Mike wound up the long gravel drive. Simon's frame of reference kept insisting on comparing the long, low building to a mall, which felt kind of impious, for all that it seemed true. Simon fought off a moment of American shame and said, "So what's this guy's name?"

"I'd rather not tell you," Jeremy said. "He's in South Africa at the moment in any case, so you needn't worry about meeting him. Technically the villa is closed for the season, so we'll have to fend for ourselves."

Eventually they ran out of driveway and wound up in the massive circular driveway that encircled the plaza. Jeremy directed Mike around the back to a hidden garage. "Wait here a tick," Jeremy said, letting himself out of the back of the van; he disappeared around the side of the garage and returned a moment later, carrying a garage-door opener. He pointed it at the garage and the nearest door rumbled up, revealing an empty slot. Mike trundled the van on in and parked it, turning off the engine.

Jeremy handed the opener to Mike, who clipped it to the van's sun visor. Simon let himself out of the van, stepping down onto concrete so new that it still gleamed white; his team spilled out of the back, carrying their bags and gaping about them. Jeremy vanished into the back of the garage. A moment later an alarm system chirped twice in welcome. "There we are," Jeremy said, reappearing. "If someone will just hand me my things..."

Johnny hopped down, carrying Jeremy's bags. "Yo," he said, tossing Jeremy first the briefcase, then the suitcase. Jeremy fielded them both neatly, one after the other. Johnny ducked back into the van, fetched Simon his duffel, and then went back one last time for his own bag.

Nate had his chin hooked over the top of the enormous monitor, which he was having to use both arms to carry. "Okay," he said, sounding a little choked. "Where are we going, and can we go there now before I drop this thing?"

"Need me to get it?" Johnny asked.

"I'm good as long as we go now," Nate said grimly. Johnny eyed him askance for a moment, then shrugged and picked up Nate's duffel bag.

◆ Thirty-Five

They followed Jeremy up a set of three steps and into a vast, dim space that revealed itself to be a kitchen once Jeremy got the lights on. It was even bigger than Ethan's kitchen, huge and glossy and vaguely offputting, leaving Simon in mortal fear of touching anything.

The door opposite opened onto an enormous, echoing hallway. The floors were glossy marble, the colonnaded walls had colossal windows on one side and equally colossal gilded mirrors on the other, and the vaulted ceiling rose to a dizzying twenty-five feet high—and all Simon could think about was how wrong his team looked inside that space, how small, how *scruffy*, huddled sheepishly along one wall like the space intimidated them. Jeremy, on the other hand, was standing nonchalant and impeccably dressed in the center of the hallway, apparently perfectly at home as he looked back and forth. "That way, I believe," Jeremy said, setting off at a brisk pace down the hallway, his steps oddly failing to echo at all.

They strung out behind him in a long and ragged line, Simon bringing up the rear and keeping a wary eye on Nate, lest Nate drop the gigantic monitor on his foot. The hallway flung back every noise they made until they sounded not unlike a herd of cattle wearing rubber-soled shoes. No one came out to challenge them, though, and no alarms went off, and after a while, Simon managed to relax, at least somewhat.

The hallway opened up onto a massive round atrium crisscrossed with sweeping staircases and studded with enormous marble statues. Another hallway led off in the opposite direction. "Up these stairs here," Jeremy said, making for one of the two staircases.

"Someone help," Nate said quietly, and both Johnny and Simon lunged to catch the monitor seconds before Nate could drop it. A general flurry of luggage-dropping followed as people rearranged their loads.

Jeremy paused on the lowest step and put the briefcase down. "I apologize," he said, abashed. "I should have warned you: it's a bit of a trip."

"I think we probably should have noticed," Sandra said. She was standing at the center of the atrium with one hand on the pedestal of a statue, looking up at the ceiling fifty feet above. A huge circular skylight let in the afternoon sun, pinning Sandra and the random Roman god in an ellipse of light splashed across the marble floor.

"Whoa, check it out, tiny marble dick," Mike said, ambling over to where Sandra was standing and putting a casual arm around her waist. Sandra thumped her knuckles lightly against his chest. Mike snickered and added, "So, Archer, you steal any of these for him?"

Jeremy arched an eyebrow at Mike. "I rather suspect I shouldn't answer that question, lest I incriminate myself," he said.

"Besides, that one's like twenty feet tall," Simon put in. "Not exactly the sort of thing Archer can stuff down his pants and saunter away with."

"It *would* take a bit of fancy maneuvering to steal that one, I suppose," Jeremy said equably. "Although if you can't live without it, Simon, I expect that I could have it out of here in twelve hours."

Simon looked up at the giant naked marble guy, twice as tall as the highest ceiling in his apartment. "You know what?" he said. "I think that'll be completely unnecessary."

"Oh, well, as you like, Simon. You can't say I didn't offer." Jeremy picked up the briefcase. "Shall we?"

After a bit more chaos they got underway again, Johnny carrying the monitor, Nate carrying Johnny's duffel bag and his own. Jeremy led them up the staircase and into a second hallway much like the first, lined with gilded pastel-colored doors, disturbingly far apart. "Any one you like," Jeremy said, waving a negligent hand at the doors. "I'll take the one at the far end, if no one minds."

"Why that one?" Simon asked, coming to a bullish halt in the archway. "Trying to steal the best one for yourself, huh, Archer?" He'd been aiming for a joking tone, but the words came out almost completely unamused, almost challenging. Simon stopped, startled at himself.

"Haven't the foggiest if it's the best or not," Jeremy said, after a nearly unnoticeable moment of hesitation. "I'm only attempting to save you all the walk."

Simon eyed him for a moment, then snorted. "I'll take this one," he said, heading for the door nearest the stairs.

"Take an hour to get unpacked and settled," Jeremy added. "Shall we all meet down in my suite at, ah—" he checked his watch "—let us say, three? I've a few things I'd like to go over."

There were nine guest suites strung out along the hallway like beads on the world's longest string. The suite Simon had chosen lurked behind a white door, and whatever diseased mind had done the decorating had carried the 'white'

theme to ridiculous extremes behind it: all the furniture was either white or made of some pale, ashy wood that matched the floor, and the white-painted walls were decorated with abstract white-enameled metal birds in lieu of something normal, like pictures. The white-brick fireplace had a polar bear skin in front of it for a rug, and the massive bed had floating white drapes around it and an honest-to-Christ canopy over the top. The glare was tremendous. Sleeping in here would make Simon either snowblind, or a twelve-year-old girl, or both.

The only patch of real color in the room was the door on the far wall, an eye-searing bloody red. The splash of arterial color kept snagging Simon's eye like a fishhook, and finally he wove past the conversation pit and opened the door, expecting a bathroom.

Instead, he got the blank expanse of a second door, this one the same eggshell white as the walls. For a minute Simon thought it was just art, some kind of stupidly meaningful statement, but then he heard movement behind the white door. Simon knocked.

A moment later Johnny pulled the white door open, revealing a second guest suite that looked like the aftermath of a horrific accident. Johnny stopped dead in the doorway and raised a hand, automatically blocking out the glare of the white room; Simon gaped at the expanse of dark red stretching away behind Johnny, boggled. "Jesus Christ, it's a bordello," Simon finally said.

"You die and go to heaven or something?" Johnny asked, dropping his hand.

"I don't know, maybe?" Simon said. "Are they all like this?"

Johnny glanced over his shoulder. The walls in the red room were padded with some kind of wine-colored striped silk, a curtain of the same stuff half-hiding a dull orange door in the opposite wall. "Shit, guess so," Johnny said.

"Christ, I feel sorry for whoever wound up in the orange one, then," Simon said.

"Yeah," Johnny said. "You wanna go see?"

"Hell, yes," Simon said, stepping through into the red room. Unlike the clean, spare lines of the white room, the red room was padded and pillowed to within an inch of lunacy. Johnny's battered old green duffel sat on the froofy rosewood canopy bed like an obscenity, and Johnny himself looked like he'd been Photoshopped into the picture. "Christ," Simon said again.

Johnny crossed the room, his boots sinking deep into the high-pile carpet, and pulled open the orange door. The red door behind it was already open, the room beyond it a pumpkin. "Shit," Johnny said. "Masque of the Red Death, right?"

"Yeah," Simon said absently, not really listening. The orange room was empty, the yellow door on the other side also open. Somebody had looked at the orange room and decided it was too hideous. Acting on a certainty, Simon went to check the yellow room beyond. No one was in there either, and why should they be? With seven people having nine rooms to choose from, who in their right mind would sleep in the orange or yellow rooms? Not Simon, that was for sure.

The hardwood floors in the orange room were a rich orange-gold that tiled to a honey-blond at the threshold to the yellow room. The green door on the far side of the yellow room had a gigantic Chiquita Banana sticker painted on it, the first sign Simon had seen of a sense of humor; in its defense, it *was* pretty damned funny. Behind him Johnny snorted out a laugh. "I forgive 'em," he said.

Simon opened the green door to expose the closed yellow door behind it. "Yeah, that's not bad," he said, knocking on the yellow door. After a moment, Nate opened it. "Hey, Nate," Simon said, craning his neck to check out the green room. "Damn, that's actually not horrible. Somebody's slipping."

"Kind of girly, though," Nate said, stepping back to let Simon and Johnny in. The green room's walls had a subtle leafy-ferny pattern to them, like being lost in a forest, and the carpet underfoot was springy and mossy-looking. Somebody had spent a whole lot of money to have trees carved up into different, smaller trees; the interlocking oak saplings that made up the bed looked kind of like a torture device, at first glance. Nate's giant monitor and a couple of computers sat on the massive oak bole of a desk, wholly out of place.

Dave bobbed up in the doorway that led to the blue room, as befuddled as ever. "It's like that one Poe story," he said, blinking.

"Masque of the Red Death," Johnny said.

Dave pointed at Johnny. "Yeah, that one."

Simon pushed past Dave and into the blue room. "Now that's more like it," he said, hooking his thumbs into his beltloops and looking around. The walls were a pure, plain blue; most of the furniture was glass and metal, and someone with the same twelve-year-old's sense of appropriateness had painted fluffy clouds on the sky-blue ceiling. "Blue is almost bearable. Kind of restful."

"I like it okay," Dave volunteered. "It's kind of like living in an aquarium, though."

"Yeah, it is, now that you mention it," said Simon. "Needs a couple of metal clownfish on the walls. So . . . next is indigo, then violet, right?"

"In theory?" Dave said. His latest abomination of a Hawaiian shirt was orange and yellow, which fit the general 'aquarium' theme fairly well.

Simon pulled open the dark blue door and knocked on the lighter blue door behind it. "Yo," he called.

"Yeah?" Mike said from the opposite side, sniggering. "Candygram?"

"Fucked-up-room inspection crew," Simon said. "I've got a warrant. Open up or I'll have to ask you to open up again."

Mike opened the door, still grinning. "Check it out," he said, waving a hand at the indigo room. "That shit on the walls is *denim*."

"Oh, nice, like living on someone's ass," Simon said, wandering in. The furniture all looked to be upholstered in denim, too, and the denim comforter on the bed was, quite frankly, so awesome that Simon was already half-seriously plotting to run off with it. "Five bucks to whoever finds the red Levi's tag first."

“Shit, after the blue room I guess I’m lucky I ain’t got constellations on the ceiling,” Mike said.

Behind Simon, the other members of his team were ducking from room to room, checking them all out. Incredulous shouts and hoots of laughter echoed all the way up and down the chain of rooms. The doors between indigo and violet were also open. Inside the purple room Sandra was moving back and forth, actually unpacking her things instead of gawking like the rest of them; the walls of the purple room were painted with incredibly-detailed irises, splashed with gouts of eye-burning gold close to five feet high. “Wow,” Simon said, violently fighting down his initial reaction.

“Go ahead and say it,” Sandra said evenly, stashing her bag in one of the drawers. “It’s nothing I haven’t thought.”

“You know what, no,” Simon said. “I’m just going to pretend I have some class and instead mention what’s-her-name in a, a knowing fashion.”

“Georgia O’Keeffe,” Sandra supplied.

“Yeah,” said Simon. “That. Those.”

“Twat room,” Mike said cheerfully. “Guess that’s appropriate *owwww shit kidding! Kidding—*”

For the moment ignoring the sudden ruckus behind him, Simon glanced at the opposite wall, already knowing what he was going to see. He was not disappointed. Tucked neatly away between two of the anatomically-disturbing giant irises there was one final door, a black so deeply glossy that it looked like obsidian. Simon scowled at it for a moment, then stalked over, threw it open, and pounded on the purple door behind it. “You *knew*,” he said accusingly, the moment that Jeremy opened the door to reveal the void. “Don’t even try to deny it, you *knew* the last room was the black one, didn’t you?”

Jeremy’s crooked little smile admitted everything.

After fifteen or twenty minutes, the novelty wore off and everybody settled down, more or less. Simon warily retreated to the white room, put his things away, and went to wash his hands, experiencing the equally white bathroom for the first time. At least white was a reasonable color for a bathroom to be. He didn’t even want to imagine what the purple bathroom must look like.

Now out of things to do, Simon threw himself onto the white leather couch and tucked his hands behind his head, staring up at the ceiling. The vast white expanse was broken up by two long, slanted skylights set into deep recesses—because obviously what a white room needed was *more light*—and a bunch of fancy track lighting for whenever he just didn’t feel blinded enough. Simon snorted in disdain and shut his eyes.

He woke abruptly from his impromptu nap when someone pounded on the door. “Yo, boss,” Johnny called, his voice echoing down the hallway outside. “Archer says to tell you we’re meeting.”

“Yeah,” Simon called back, kicking his feet back down off the couch and sitting up. “Just a sec.” The little nap had done him some good, he decided; the weird irritation he’d been fighting ever since Jeremy’s little trick in front of the gates was gone, or at least muted. Simon scruffed his fingers through his hair, knuckled the sleep from his eyes, and headed for the door.

Walking down the hallway was a lot easier on the eyes, although the echoes of their footsteps threatened to deafen Simon, just for variety. The color-coded doors slid by on his left, gentle pastel-colored versions of the rooms lurking beyond, which was almost not tacky at all. The wall to Simon’s right was all massive windows and marble columns, looking out over a jaw-dropping view. The forest spread out for miles below them, a rolling sea of green. Beyond the forest lay the white mottling of some kind of small town, and beyond that—“Is that the ocean?” Simon asked, coming to a halt outside the pale blue door.

Johnny stopped at his side and shaded his eyes. “Looks like,” he agreed.

“*Christ*, but I’m in the wrong business,” Simon said, apropos of nothing. Johnny grunted, apparently in agreement; Simon got himself moving again.

Whoever had decorated these rooms had basically thrown up his hands and said ‘fuck it’ when he got to the black one: the floor was glossy black marble, the walls and ceiling were painted a flat and unadorned black, and everything else in the room was either black leather, volcanic glass, or gleaming chrome. The monstrous, elevated bed that lurked in the depths of the room looked like it probably ate unsuspecting people.

The recessed lights over the little den area were on, and a good thing too, because the room was already pitch-black. If there were any windows in the black room at all, they were curtained off. Once the door shut behind Simon, it might as well have been midnight. It *felt* like midnight.

To absolutely no one’s surprise—or at least, not to Simon’s surprise—Jeremy had changed back into his blacks, all the better to match the gothic absurdity of his room. Against all that black, the black-clad Jeremy was little more than a face and a pair of hands. He was folded neatly into one of the two huge overstuffed black leather chairs in the conversation pit, the battered silver cashbox in his lap with his hands resting on it—in lieu of a fluffy white cat, a snifter of brandy, and other such evil-mastermind trappings, Simon had absolutely no doubt.

The rest of his team were spread out on the couches, valiant little splashes of spotlight color against the void. To a man they all seemed to be somewhat intimidated by the ominous black room, for which Simon couldn’t blame them—it was like a movie set, or an emo teenager’s wet dream. “Okay,” Simon said, taking the other overstuffed chair. “We’re all here. Let’s meet.”

“All right,” Jeremy said. After a single lingering glance in Simon’s direction, Jeremy looked over at Dave. “Have you been able to connect to the house’s internet?”

Dave nodded. "Oh, sure," he said. "Signal's strong and everything. We got most of Nate's computers set up, too, although we're not quite done."

"Good," Jeremy said. "Once we're done meeting here, a couple of us should probably go down to the town and buy some groceries. The kitchen downstairs is at our disposal, but there isn't likely to be much beyond staples there."

"I'll do it," Mike volunteered. "I need to gas up the van anyway. Anybody who wants can tag along."

Beside him, Sandra stirred. "I'll come," she said. "If anyone needs anything in particular, let me know."

"I guess there's not much hope of getting Coke, is there," Nate said.

Simon sat back and listened with half an ear while his team debated out their shopping list. Opposite him Jeremy was also silent, his face blank, apparently giving even this conversation his full and undivided attention; Jeremy's fingers occasionally played over the metal of the cashbox, toying with the hinges or ticking at the seam that divided the lid from the body of the box. He was otherwise so still and so *focused* that Simon unthinkingly went still as well, anticipating a bombshell. Eventually Simon became aware of a lull in the conversation and dropped "Coffee." into it.

"First thing on the list, Templar," Sandra said. "You didn't even need to mention it."

"As always, you guys are totally on the ball," Simon said. "Well, Archer? What's next?"

Jeremy came back to life with a little flicker of smile. "I suppose this is next," he said, ticking his fingernails off the top of the cashbox with a dull metallic rattle.

"All right," Simon said, folding his own hands in his lap. "Give us the skinny. What is that?"

"For everyone's edification, this is what I asked Bran to bring me when last we met," Jeremy said. One hand dipped into his jacket and came out with those two little hooked tools that Simon had seen him toying with earlier; Jeremy leaned forward, put the cashbox on the black glass top of the coffee table, and inserted the ends of both picks into the tiny lock. "I don't particularly know where he was keeping these things, but I *was* gratified to learn that he still had them." Jeremy twisted both hands in a complicated, flickering pattern, and the little cashbox clicked and popped open. Jeremy smiled thinly and made the lockpicks disappear again.

Simon sighed. "Has your sense of drama been adequately fulfilled, Archer, or do you need a drumroll too?"

"I'm on it!" Mike cried, leaning forward to drum his fingers on the coffee table.

Jeremy picked up the cashbox and put it back in his lap, more or less ignoring the impromptu drumroll. He flipped the lid up and extracted something the size

of a fat paperback book, wrapped in dull black cloth, then put the cashbox aside. “Any day now, Archer,” Simon said, not particularly aggravated but still feeling the need to keep a measure of control over the proceedings.

Jeremy flashed Simon a quick smile and unwrapped the bundle. The first thing he put on the table was a small gray plastic box; Simon was still trying to figure out why it looked so familiar when Jeremy added a black Zip disk to the pile. ‘Design Specs’, the masking-tape label on the Zip disk said, the end of the tape curling up to the point where it almost hid the final ‘s’. Mike’s drumroll died away to nothing. Simon went very still.

“A year and a half ago, you and I set a trap for Bran,” Jeremy said into the resulting startled silence. “We baited that trap with three fake silicon bullets in a case liberally salted with tracking devices and a Zip disk that purports to be the design specs but is, in reality, as vicious a machine-killing computer virus as Mr. Story could come up with over the course of twelve hours. After the fiasco that resulted from springing that trap, Bran put that bait in a safety-deposit box until such time as he could get further instructions. It’s been there ever since. I don’t see why we can’t make use of it ourselves.”

It was hard to make himself disrupt that hypnotic monologue, but Simon stirred anyway. “I hate to bring you down or anything, Archer, but you do realize that the point of tracking devices is to be tracked, right? As in, tracked right to wherever we are if someone at the CIA glances at a monitor at the wrong moment?”

“Well, yes and no,” Jeremy said. “I was forced to admit to Bran what these things really were, in order to get him to agree to bring them to me. He wasn’t happy about that at all—” Jeremy lifted his chin, displaying the browning remnants of the gun-muzzle bruise for a fraction of a second “—but he eventually saw my point. When he went to fetch them from their box, he picked out all three of the tracking chips and left them behind. The CIA shouldn’t notice a thing.”

Simon subsided, still wary. “All right,” he said. “I’d feel better if I could double-check that for myself.”

“By all means,” Jeremy said, picking the gray plastic box out of the stack and sliding it across to Simon.

Simon picked it up and opened it, prying the foam lining out of the box; three reasonably convincing ‘bullets’ crafted of silicon fell into his hand, but nothing else. There was still a slight dent in the foam where he’d hidden one of the chips. Simon nodded, put the box back together, and put it down. “It’s clean,” he said.

“Unfortunately, as much as I hate to bring it up, the machine-killer is another issue,” Jeremy said. His shoulders tensed so subtly that Simon almost missed it. “Given the revelation of Mr. Story’s link to Viktor Karpol, I no longer have any idea exactly what’s on that disk, or what Mr. Story really intended it to do. I think we need to know.”

“Yeah,” Simon said, hating to admit it. He’d gotten to the point where entire

days could go by without thinking about Rich, but every time he slipped, Rich's betrayal ripped at him all over again.

Jeremy inclined his head, then looked over at Dave. "What would you need in order to open and examine the contents of that disk? Safely?"

Dave blinked at Jeremy, then picked up the disk and frowned at it. "It's a Zip disk," he said.

"Yes?" Jeremy said, raising both eyebrows.

"Well, I mean . . . it's a Zip disk," Dave said, floundering. "What is this, 1998?"

Nate stirred and pushed up his glasses. "It's old tech," he translated. "It was actually pretty old tech even back then. It's going to be hard to find a working Zip drive—"

"I have one in my suitcase," Jeremy said pleasantly. "I've been assured that it won't invoke the click of death, whatever that is."

"—oh," Nate said, subsiding.

Dave turned the Zip disk over in his fingers, flicking at the little loose bit of masking tape. "I can try and take a look," he said dubiously. "I don't want to risk my good machines on it, though. Can you maybe get your hands on a junk computer from somewhere? Three or four years old, preferably with an older OS?"

"I can probably do that," Jeremy said.

"Okay," said Dave. "As long as I'm not hooked up to the internet, it should be more or less safe to take a look." He turned the Zip disk over one last time, frowned down at it, and then put it down.

Jeremy shut his eyes, his relief obvious, at least to Simon. "That would be extremely helpful," he said.

◆ Thirty-Six

After a few more minutes of minor business, the meeting broke up. Jeremy vanished into the depths of his room, only to reappear a minute later, disembodied like a specter, carrying a small Zip drive in both hands. Dave took the drive after a noticeable hesitation. “I haven’t seen one of these in years,” he said, turning it over in his hands. His tone didn’t precisely sound ripe with nostalgia.

“I’m assured it still works,” Jeremy said. “Still, I suppose it would be best to test that assertion thoroughly.” He produced a three-pack of blue Zip disks, seemingly out of nowhere, and handed it over. “Those are brand-new—I certainly hope they’re blank.”

Dave piled the blue disks on top of the drive, then added the black machine-killer disk and the box of fake bullets to the pile. “I’ll just, uh, take this all to my room,” he said.

“Don’t lose any of that,” Simon added. “’Cause then, you know, have to kill you and all.”

“Okay,” Dave said, hunching his shoulders defensively and hugging the little pile of stuff to his chest.

“So, who all wants to go into town?” Mike said, fishing the keys to the van out of his front pocket. “Course, keep in mind, you come to town, you gotta help tote groceries and shit. I ain’t toleratin’ freeloaders.”

Jeremy vanished into the darkness again. “Give me a moment,” he said, his disembodied voice floating back. “I’ll copy out the gate access codes for you.”

“Not coming, huh?” Mike said.

“I’ve another errand to run, I’m afraid.” Halfway across the massive black space another spotlight popped on, revealing Jeremy and a desk both lurking against the wall. Jeremy rifled the desk drawers until he found a notepad, then fetched a pen out of his jacket.

Simon sat up, twisting halfway around in his chair. “Yeah?” he said. “Need me to come with you?”

"If you like," Jeremy said, copying numbers out of his address book onto the pad. "I don't believe I should be in any danger, but I suppose I'd be glad of the company."

"You suppose, huh," Simon said. "Okay, I'll come with you."

Jeremy tore the piece of paper off the pad. "Thank you, Simon," he said, his voice absent; he put the notepad away and rejoined the group, handing the piece of paper to Mike. "The top number turns the alarm on and off, and the bottom number actually opens and closes the gate. Please do try not to set the alarm off."

"Yeah, that would kinda suck," Mike said. He stuffed the paper into his shirt pocket. "Anybody else coming?"

"You need an extra pair of arms, I'm willin'," Johnny said.

"Awesome. Me and Sandy and Johnny makes three." Mike scanned the room. "Nate, you wanna come?"

Nate shook his head. "I want to finish setting up the computers," he said.

"Shoot yourself," said Mike.

The villa's intimidating spell was starting to wear off as everyone got used to the monstrous space. Out in the hall footsteps and voices combined to make an unholy echoing racket as Mike and Sandra and Johnny headed for the stairs, from the sound of it no longer lurking sheepishly against the wall. Nate and Dave were off in the middle rooms, rebuilding their setup; Simon could hear nothing but the occasional thumping noise, which was par for the course.

Simon picked up the empty cashbox and studied it, mostly out of boredom. One of the keys for it was still taped to the underside of the lid, inside the box. Simon picked the key off and stuck it in his pocket. "You need to change or anything before we go?"

"Are you suggesting that I should?" Jeremy said, not bothering to keep the amusement out of his voice. "Is this some clever ruse on your part to trick me into taking off my clothes?"

Simon shot a glance at the door to the purple room, which was, fortunately, closed. "I need a clever ruse now?" he said, feigning surprise. "I'd pretty much come to the conclusion that if I wanted you naked, all I had to do was get off alone with you and wait for you to suggest it."

"Touché," Jeremy said, laughing. The light over the desk flicked back out; Jeremy vanished into the darkness. When he reappeared he had his shades threaded into the collar of his black t-shirt, completing his transformation. Not really thinking, Simon reached out and flicked his finger against the sunglasses, making them jump against Jeremy's chest.

Jeremy glanced down at his sunglasses, then back up at Simon. "Yes?" he said, smiling crookedly.

"Nothing," Simon said, doing it again.

Pinning his sunglasses to his chest with one hand, Jeremy reached out and laid his other hand flat on Simon's chest. It had barely landed before one of the techs dropped something with an almighty thud and a squawk; Simon jumped and Jeremy twitched his hand back like it had been burnt, both of them shooting startled looks at the closed purple door. "Guess we'd better go," Simon said, clearing his throat.

"I suppose so," Jeremy said, pulling the shades from his collar and putting them on.

There was a shallow metal safe set into the wall by the door that led from the terrifying kitchen to the monstrous garage. Jeremy tapped a four-digit code into the keypad and twisted the handle, and the safe sprang open to reveal six sets of keys on hooks. "Mm," Jeremy said, frowning.

"Are those for the cars in the garage?" Simon said, not wanting to let himself believe it.

"Mm-hmm," Jeremy said. He plucked one set of keys off its hook, frowned at it, then put it back.

Simon's heart surged joyously in his chest. "Oh, Christ," he said. "Ask me which one I want to take. Come on. Please. I am never going to get an opportunity like this again."

Jeremy paused with his hand on a second set of keys. "You do realize I'm driving?"

"I will allow it, if only because my getting arrested for breaking the sound barrier would screw me to kingdom come—but! If you obey the speed limit in *any* of those cars," Simon said, pointing over his shoulder, "I am honor-bound to shoot you or revoke your license to carry a dick or, or something, you know that?"

Jeremy rolled his eyes, although he was smiling. "The theoretical speed limit on the *autostrada* is a hundred and thirty kilometers per hour, Simon. I think you'll find it acceptable."

"Yeah? How much is that in a real unit of measurement?"

Jeremy cut his eyes to the side, thinking. "About eighty miles per hour."

"Not too shabby," Simon allowed. "Come on. If you're going to drive, I want to pick which one."

"All right, Simon," said Jeremy, giving in. "Which one do you want to take?"

Simon flung open the door to the garage. "I don't know yet," he said, bounding down the stairs. "I'll let you know in a minute!" He was pretty sure he'd made up his mind by the time he hit the bottom step, though, and he was back in fifteen seconds. "*That* one," he said, stabbing a finger at the keyring on the first hook.

Jeremy took the keys off the hook and inspected them. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised," he said, resigned.

"It's a Lamborghini," Simon said. Just saying the name was a low-level religious experience. "I've never been within fifty feet of one before. Come on."

"It's a Lamborghini *Reventón*, Simon—"

"—awesome—"

"—there were only twenty ever made—"

"—even better—"

"—it's a million-euro concept car—"

"—so I have excellent taste," Simon said, poking Jeremy in the chest. "Stop whining and come on."

"All right," Jeremy said. He closed his hand about the angular platinum keychain. "Although if I damage an irreplaceable car worth one point four *million* dollars thanks to your insistence, I reserve the right to take it out of your hide."

Simon bounded back down the steps, heading for the greeny-gray sci-fi car parked in the farthest slot. "Pfft, what's the problem, it's not like you can't afford it," he said.

The Lamborghini's doors pivoted upwards to reveal a disturbingly tiny passenger compartment, all in black and dull green suede. Between the two seats was a little plaque that said *Reventón 04/20*; the rest of the car looked like a cross between a jet fighter and a time-traveling DeLorean. Simon barely fit inside: his head nearly brushed against the car's low roof, his knees were pressed up against the dashboard, and he had to hunch his shoulders just to get the door back down.

"That doesn't look very comfortable," Jeremy said as he fitted himself into the low-slung green suede sling of the driver's seat. More compact than Simon, he fit perfectly.

"I *don't care*," Simon said happily, packed into the passenger side of the car like a sardine. "I am willing to suffer for this experience."

Jeremy popped out the key and gingerly inserted it into the ignition. "If you say so, Simon."

"Maybe you get to ride around in cars like this all the time, but this is my one chance," Simon said. "Shut up and start the car."

Jeremy shut his eyes, looking for all the world like a man saying a silent prayer, and twisted the key in the ignition—somewhere behind Simon's head a thousand-pound cat snarled in warning before settling into a low growl. Simon went limp, transported.

Putting the car in reverse, Jeremy backed it out of its stall. He wasn't even touching the gas and yet the car idled backwards at the speed of a brisk walk—Jeremy looked much less tense once he managed to get the car moving forward. "I think it's quite safe to say that I've never driven a 'car like this' before," he said, nudging the massive thing down the drive.

“Hey, think of it as a character-building experience,” Simon said. There was a panic handle built into the dashboard by his left knee and Simon absently wrapped a hand around it.

Jeremy left the Lamborghini running while he hopped out to open the gate, leaving Simon alone inside the belly of the beast. Once he was sure Jeremy wasn’t looking, Simon reached out and ran a loving finger over the padded curve of the steering wheel. Mike was going to die. Simon was looking forward to it, sort of.

The gate swung ponderously open; Jeremy ran back to the car and dropped in, buckling his seatbelt. “Here goes nothing,” he said, nudging the car’s nose out past the open gates, towards the street.

“Mm-hmm,” Simon said, not listening at all.

The roads that ran around the hill were narrow and curving, constraining the Lamborghini to maybe the bottom fourth of first gear. Simon was torn between appreciating the growl behind him and anticipating the wider streets ahead; Jeremy drove with a near-total concentration, adjusting his grip on the wheel every few seconds. “So,” Simon said, after a minute or two. “I suspect that you would not thank me for putting my hand on your leg right about now.”

“You would be correct,” Jeremy said.

“See, that’s the sort of thing that makes you such a pussy,” Simon said. Jeremy drifted the car neatly around a curve and Simon’s eyes fought to close in appreciation; Simon shook it off a moment later and added, “A *real* man would understand that there is nothing better in life than getting a handjob while driving a sweet car like this one, except maybe doing all that while occasionally firing a high-caliber weapon out the window.”

Jeremy glanced at Simon for a fraction of a second. “Sometimes it’s so hard to tell if you’re being serious,” he said.

Instead of heading south to the little town at the foot of the hill, Jeremy guided the Lamborghini down the hill to the east. Simon started to see signs for the E25, which would have made him sit up and take notice, if sitting up wouldn’t have meant hitting his head on the low roof of the car.

Five minutes later they rolled gently up onto the *autostrada*. Jeremy took a quick breath, flexed his fingers, and gave the engine its head. The Lamborghini leaped forward spooky-quick, leaving Simon feeling a good deal less slammed back into his seat than he felt he ought to be. Ahead of them people in smaller cars were already shifting over, putting their wheels on the shoulder to clear a path; Simon could see the pale ovals of faces turning towards them. Jeremy let the car drift over to the left, his little smile going crooked. Ahead of them was nothing but empty road as far as Simon could see—“Well,” Jeremy said, nearly purring it.

"Oh, Christ," Simon said, grabbing for whatever he could catch.

"I expect I may come to regret this decision," said Jeremy. He dropped his foot and the Lamborghini exploded forward.

Twenty seconds later Jeremy brought them back down to a semi-reasonable speed, leaving Simon gasping for breath in the seat next to him. They were still going at a good clip, faster than anyone else around them. Cars shifted out of their way with alacrity as they blew past. "Christ," Simon said, when he could speak again. "Warp speed."

"Are you happy now?"

"Oh yeah." Simon swallowed. "I'm not gonna say that was the highlight of my life to date, because that would be kind of sad—but still, as moments go, it's pretty far up there."

Fifteen minutes later the initial rush had mostly died off and Simon was starting to cramp up. He didn't regret his decision, not for an instant, but a Lamborghini was not the ideal car for touring, particularly for a guy of Simon's size; for the fifth or sixth time he tried to wiggle himself backwards in his seat and buy himself a little more leg room. He failed this time, too. "How much further are we going?" Simon finally asked.

"At this rate, another ten minutes or so," Jeremy said, slowing slightly before accelerating into the curve. "Are you all right?"

"See, here's the problem," Simon said, hunching his shoulders. "I'm starting to hurt a little, yeah, but you're not allowed to say or even insinuate that you told me so, because I still find it an acceptable tradeoff."

Jeremy's little smile was mostly reflexive. "I assure you, I was intending to say nothing of the sort."

"Yeah, right, sure, I'll buy that."

"You ought to be able to get out and stretch once we reach our destination," Jeremy added.

"Uh huh," Simon said, dropping his chin onto his chest. "And where's that?"

Simon wasn't expecting an answer—Jeremy wasn't in the habit of giving straight answers, ever—but Jeremy surprised him once again. "We are, in point of fact, going to a pawn shop," Jeremy said. "A pawn shop a few towns over, just to be safe."

"A pawn shop."

"Mm-hmm."

Simon lifted his head, nearly braining himself against the car's roof again. "So, let me get this straight. We're going to a *pawn shop*."

"Yes, Simon," Jeremy said patiently.

"We are going to a pawn shop . . . in a *Lamborghini*."

Jeremy pressed his lips together, imperfectly stifling a laugh.

Simon's neck was starting to develop a pretty severe crick by the time Jeremy guided the car back off the *autostrada* and onto the surface streets. They rolled past expensive houses and heavily-wooded lots, dropping slowly but inexorably towards the sea that glimmered off to their left.

One last turn put them on a winding road that hugged the land's edge. Beyond it there was a sharp drop-off, and beyond that, the Mediterranean. Simon slid down an inch or two and stared out the windshield, for the moment thinking of nothing beyond the view and the dull ache building in his muscles. "Man," he said, after a moment.

"Hm?" said Jeremy, mostly occupied by the road.

"Nothing." Simon waved a hand. "Heck of a view, is all."

Jeremy smiled and dropped the subject.

Another minute or two on the road dropped them rather abruptly from expensive-beachfront-property Italy to rundown-working-shipyards Italy. The Lamborghini looked more out of place than ever. People stopped to stare as it slid past, and one car pulled a sharp U-turn just to follow them for a block or two. Jeremy watched it in the rearview mirror, his lips compressed; Simon pressed his ankle against the door, checking the comforting weight of the little SIG in its holster. Still, after a minute or so the car went on about its business and they both relaxed.

"So much for keeping a low profile," Jeremy said, laughing under his breath.

"Yeah, well, with that much Lamborghini to stare at, no one's going to be looking at its driver," Simon said. "In a weird way you're as anonymous as you ever were."

Jeremy put on the turn signal and took them off the cliff's edge road, back up into the little town. "I suppose you're right," he said.

"I'm always right," Simon said. "It's just that some times I'm more right than others."

The pawn shop looked a bit nicer than the pawn shops that Simon was used to, but not much nicer. It was a long, low, anonymous little white building with a tiny parking lot off to one side; Simon could see the by-now-familiar white ovals of staring faces from inside the shop as Jeremy took the Lamborghini up and into the parking lot. "Would you mind terribly staying with the car?" Jeremy said, shutting off the engine. "For some reason I'm a tad loath to leave it unguarded."

"Yeah, no, I'll stay with it," Simon said. "No problem."

By the time Jeremy let himself out of the car there were two loose clumps of gawkers forming, both a respectful distance away. Jeremy ignored them utterly, rounding the butt end of the Lamborghini and vanishing into the pawn shop; Simon pushed up the passenger-side door, unfolded himself like origami from the passenger compartment, and staggered around until the muscles attached

to his spine unkinked. Some of the original gawkers moved on, replaced by others. After a moment's thought, Simon rounded the car and leaned against the driver's-side door, folding his arms over his chest.

Eventually Jeremy reappeared, carrying a large bag. "Well!" he said, studying Simon over the top of his sunglasses. "You look proprietary."

"That is the *whole point*," Simon said, patting the Reventón's side.

Jeremy smiled and flicked his sunglasses back up. "Unfortunately, it's time for you to start folding yourself back in," he said.

Simon winced. "Yeah, I'm looking forward to that," he said, straightening up. "And you still don't get to tell me that you told me so."

"I wouldn't dream of it, Simon," said Jeremy, raising the driver's-side door.

Now that the novelty of the Lamborghini had worn off, the drive back to the villa was uncomfortable, long, and sadly, rather dull. Even eighty miles per hour on the *autostrada* couldn't quite offset the ache in Simon's knees; by the time Jeremy halted the car outside the gates Simon was pretty sure that his spine would never unknot again.

Leaning out the window, Jeremy typed the six-digit code into the keypad. The gates shuddered and swung slowly inward. "Am I going to have to carry you into the house?" Jeremy asked pleasantly.

"You say that like you think you *could*," Simon said.

"Mm. Good point. You *are* something of an overgrown brute." Jeremy trundled the car in through the gates and up the drive, stopping it about fifteen feet in.

Simon looked around, confused, then looked at Jeremy. "Why'd you stop?"

"I was going to ask if you'd like to drive it back up to the garage," Jeremy said. Behind them the gate started to shut again.

"... seriously?"

"Yes?"

"Hot *damn*," Simon said, his minor pains forgotten in the midst of the rush. He stumbled out of the car and around to the driver's side like an old man, too intent on this opportunity to really care; Jeremy slipped neatly by him and into the passenger's seat, his expression enigmatic.

Getting his knees around the steering wheel was something of a trick. The dashboard still nudged up against Simon's shins, making access to the pedals a little difficult—Simon put both hands on the steering wheel and sagged in something like ecstasy. "Okay," he said all in a rush, "maybe this *is* the best moment of my life," and he twisted the key, making the massive V12 engine behind him roar to life. "Oh, Christ," he said weakly.

Jeremy's hand dropped featherlight onto his thigh. "What was that you were saying?" Jeremy said, feigning an innocence that the purring tone in his voice belied. "About there being nothing better in life ...?"

Simon squeezed his eyes shut, his knuckles going white on the steering wheel. “While I totally meant that, because it is deeply, profoundly true,” he said, trying and failing to keep the shiver out of his voice, “I think that actually trying to put it into practice would result in my driving this gazillion-dollar car directly into a tree, do not pass Go, do not collect one-point-four million dollars. Plus my current gun is, sadly, of an insufficient caliber.”

“Pity, that,” Jeremy said, his fingers toying with the inseam of Simon’s jeans.

“Oh Jesus yeah,” Simon breathed, in perfect agreement.

After a long, breathless moment, Jeremy patted Simon’s thigh and pulled his hand away. Simon opened his eyes, cleared his throat, and put the Lamborghini into gear.

◆ Thirty-Seven

“Um,” said Dave, clumsily juggling his armload of battered laptops. There looked to be at least three in the pile, although from Simon’s vantage point he couldn’t be sure.

Jeremy’s smile was patient, bordering on long-suffering. “You said three or four years old,” he reminded Dave.

“Well, yeah . . .”

“I have no idea how well any of those will work, or exactly how much computing power you’ll need,” said Jeremy, shrugging, “so I just bought them all.”

“Okay,” Dave said, obviously at a loss.

Jeremy arched an eyebrow. “Is there a problem?”

“What? Um. No, no problem.” Dave shuffled over to the blue glass desk and carefully deposited the stack of computers on it. “I guess I wasn’t expecting your solution to be so . . . thorough?”

“Ah.” Jeremy handed over the plastic bag from the pawn shop. “There are the power cords and such. Will you need anything else?”

Dave dubiously extracted a Gordian Knot of cords from the bag and inspected it. “I don’t think so, assuming at least a couple of them work—oh, hey, bonus Ethernet cable.” The plastic bag fluttered to the floor, forgotten, as Dave bent all of his considerable attention on prying a blue cord free of the tangle. “It’ll take me a couple of hours to get things up and running,” he said, talking more to himself (and to the knot of cords) than to Jeremy, or to Simon. “They’re probably all running some version of Italian-language Windows, and I don’t even *speak* Italian . . .”

“Let alone Windows,” Nate added.

Dave’s head came up. “I speak Windows,” he said, taken aback. “I was in Internet Crime for years!”

“So what are you going to install on those?” Nate asked, gesturing at the pile of laptops.

Dave glanced over his shoulder. “Probably a Gentoo distro? I don’t know yet, that’s pretty hardcore for a temporary setup . . .”

“Nerd,” Nate said happily.

“And that’s our cue to leave, before the geekiness gets too deep,” Simon said loudly, catching Jeremy’s shoulder and guiding him firmly towards the door. “Come get me if and when you’ve got something to show.”

The blue cable whipped free of the knot. “Okay,” Dave said, putting the cable aside and picking out the end of another cord.

The rumble of the garage door going up was so muted by the ridiculous distance that Simon at first thought he was imagining it. Mike bellowed out a welcome as soon as he hit the kitchen; upstairs, in the white room, it was just barely audible. Still, the combination of the two served to convince Simon that yes, the rest of his team was back. Simon put aside his book and headed downstairs.

‘Heading downstairs’ in this overgrown shopping mall of a house was actually a fairly serious undertaking, which only added to Simon’s general sense of isolation. Still, once he got into the downstairs hallway he could hear thumping and cheerful bellowing from the direction of the kitchen, which helped. “—*so* good,” Mike was saying as Simon booted the kitchen door open.

“What’s good?” Simon asked.

Mike glanced over his shoulder, wielding a wide-bladed kitchen knife, a fat wedge of tomato poking out of his mouth. “Good produce,” he said around the tomato, incidentally spraying tomato seeds over the counter. Mike winced and grabbed a paper towel.

Simon eyed this vision askance. “Wait,” he said. “Wait, wait, wait. *You* eat raw vegetables? I’ve seen you scavenge two-day-old pizza crusts out of discarded boxes.”

“Yeah, well, you eat what’s available,” Mike said, finishing off the tomato slice. Sandra, unloading provisions into the massive brushed-metal fridge, paused long enough to snatch a second wedge of tomato off the cutting board.

Johnny thumped up the stairs from the garage, arms full of grocery bags. “Yo, boss,” he said, dumping the bags on the ever-growing pile on the counter, which Sandra was doing her best to diminish again. Bags abandoned, Johnny wheeled around and headed back out to the van again.

Simon rolled his eyes and rounded the counter to pitch in. The first bag he pulled towards himself was full of bread in bakery bags—still warm, his hands informed him. “Goddamn,” Simon said. “So where do you want the bread? Assuming, you know, that I don’t just eat it all right now.”

“Bread in the breadbox,” Mike said, pointing with his chef’s knife. “Produce by the sink until I can wash that shit. Raw meat in the bottom drawer in the

fridge, cheese and sandwich-type meat in the top drawer, juice and bottled crap in the fridge door, Nate's Cokes wherever. Eggs and milk on the top shelf."

Simon listened to this recitation with growing bemusement. "Yes, *sir*," he finally said, filching a roll before picking up the bag full of bread and carrying it over to the massive wooden breadbox.

By mutual unspoken agreement, they ate dinner standing up, ranged around the granite-topped kitchen island. The dining room was a massive and intimidating space, bigger than your average restaurant's dining area, with long mahogany tables capable of seating twenty or thirty people apiece—Simon had dismissed it with a shudder after a single look around, and apparently most everyone agreed with him.

Working with a furious, whooping clatter, Mike had managed to produce some kind of pasta with fresh vegetables which surprised Simon by not only being edible, but actually pretty good. "Damn, Honda," he said, swallowing. "You got any other hidden talents I need to know about?" He knew it was a tactical error the moment he said it.

"Ohhh yeah," Mike half-sang, leering at Simon over his beer. "Man, my talents are the hiddenest. You come to my room later tonight and I'll totally fill you *in*, boss."

"I have never in my life been so glad that someone said 'in' instead of 'up'," Simon said, faking a shudder. "Someone pass the damn bread, I've got to get this foul taste out of my mouth."

"You *could* say 'please', Simon," said Jeremy, obligingly holding out the breadbasket. Nate took it from him, picked out a piece of bread, and passed it on down to Simon.

Simon took two pieces of bread and lined them up on the edge of his plate. "Yeah, I suppose I could," he said. "Anyone else want some bread before I eat the rest of it?"

Dave looked up from his plate and made 'gimme' motions until Johnny took the basket from Simon and passed it back on down. "Thanks," Dave said, swallowing his mouthful of pasta before stripping the breadbasket bare, like a plague of locusts.

"Any progress on the disk, Stone?" Simon asked.

Dave held up a hand while he finished his mouthful of bread. "Not yet," he said once he'd swallowed. "I'd just finished stripping and setting up the laptops when Nate came to get me for dinner. I'll take a look at it once I'm done eating."

"Okay," Simon said. "Great. Mind if I come watch?"

"No?" Dave ate another giant mouthful of bread. "I mean, it may not be very interesting . . ."

"That's fine," Simon said firmly. "In fact, you know what, I think I'd prefer it to be uninteresting."

Simon picked up a bit of discarded computer innard and squinted at it. "What is this?"

"Internal modem," Dave said absently, hooking up the Zip drive to one of the four laptops on his desk, ranged in a neat half-circle. The two of them had retreated to the blue room after dinner, leaving the others behind in the kitchen to deal with the dishes. "I really, really don't want to be forced to connect to the internet if this thing is as badass a machine-killer as you say."

"Huh. Okay. Good call." Simon put down the modem and picked up a different random thing from the pile. "What's this?"

Dave booted up the laptop. "Wireless card. Same deal."

Nate poked his head in from the green room. "Hey," he said. "Did I miss anything?"

"Not yet, Specs," said Simon, finding himself a convenient place to lean. "Stonewall's just getting things set up now."

"Oh, good." Nate dragged in a chair and set himself up behind Dave, straddling the back of the chair and folding his arms on top. "I have to admit, I'm kind of curious . . ." He trailed off there and ducked his head, rubbing the back of his neck. "You know. Despite everything."

Simon shut his eyes. "Yeah, Specs," he said. "I know."

"Me too," said Dave, his attention mostly on the laptop in front of him. "I mean, I know I never knew the guy . . ." He picked up the black Zip disk, eyed it askance, and then slotted it into the drive. "Here goes nothing," he said, pushing it in.

The disk made a chunking noise and then whirled up. All three of them tensed. The drive whirled for a while longer and then the disk's icon appeared on the screen; after a few seconds in which nothing happened, Simon asked, "So . . . what's going on?"

"Well, nothing." Dave brought up a couple of windows. "It's not executing itself, anyway, which is . . . huh." He pulled up another window. This one had three files in it, *specs.xls*, *specs2.xls*, and *designspecs.doc*.

"Heh, Specs and Specs Two," Nate said. ". . . that's really not funny, is it."

"Specs Two's ego strikes again," Simon said.

Dave did something and the view of the window changed. "There," he said, tapping the screen. "See, they look like Excel and Word files, but they're all executables. I guess for these to work, someone has to load up the disc and try to open one of the files."

"So . . . go ahead, open a file," Simon said. "Hell, even if it reduces that computer to slag, you've got three more, right?"

"Well, there's always the chance that running the disk could make it erase itself," said Dave. "But I don't need to actually run the executables if I can just

look at the code.” More windows bloomed into existence, full of complete and utter gibberish. “Huh,” Dave said, and settled in, scrolling through the mess.

After five minutes or so, just as Simon was starting to consider poking Dave, someone knocked on the hallway door. Jeremy pushed the door open a crack and stuck his head in. “Any luck?”

“Not yet,” Simon said. “Dave’s still reading.”

Jeremy let himself in, closing the door behind him. “Far be it from me to interrupt,” he said, finding an out-of-the-way spot in which to lurk.

“Uh,” Dave said, rousing himself from his computer-based coma. “This is going to take a while. If you guys want to come back in an hour or so, I’ll probably know more then?”

“I want to stay,” Nate said.

Simon straightened up. “I’ll leave you to it,” he said. His stomach turned over. He tried to ignore it. “But . . . I need answers, Stone. Just for my own damned peace of mind.”

“I know,” Dave said, blinking. “I’ll find some.”

“I’ll be in the white room,” Simon said, flipping them all a wave and heading for the door. “Come get me when you’re ready.”

After a moment of hesitation, Jeremy followed Simon back out. The door to the blue room closed behind them, leaving them both mostly in shadow; the massive windows of the hallway faced east, already displaying a deep purple band of sky across the horizon and one or two ambitious stars. Simon went to the windows and crossed his arms over his chest, watching the stars blink on. “You know, I have absolutely no idea how I feel about this,” he said, pitching his voice low to avoid echoing too badly.

“I know,” Jeremy said.

“I mean, even if that disk is completely on the level, it’s still a little piece of Rich, you know?” Simon pinched the bridge of his nose, fighting off an incipient headache. “And if it’s not . . . God knows what it is, or what Rich meant it to do. I feel like I narrowly avoided being responsible for a catastrophe.”

“I know,” Jeremy said again. His fingers lit on Simon’s arm for a bare moment before falling away.

“I guess you do,” Simon said, letting his hand drop. “You’re the one who asked him to make it.”

After a moment of hesitation, Jeremy moved up beside him, his face shadowed and anonymous in the gathering dusk. “I suppose that in the matter of Mr. Story, there’s enough of a burden of responsibility for several people to carry.”

“Yeah,” Simon said. “And yet, no. Rich is Rich’s fault, pure and simple. Whatever’s on that disk is his fault, too. But I have to bear responsibility for the things he did under my aegis—”

“I know,” Jeremy said, his little smile a flash in the darkness.

"Guess you do." Simon thumped the back of his hand lightly against Jeremy's chest. "And yeah, it was your idea to have him make the disk. Christ, if I'd known how much we were playing right into his hands . . ."

"You couldn't have known," Jeremy said. "No one could."

Simon hesitated. "You knew," he finally said. "Not right away, but . . . you knew."

"I *suspected*," Jeremy looked away. "And that only because Nate looked at Rich's computer at just the wrong time. Or the right time, if you prefer."

"Yeah," Simon said. Jeremy was half-turned away from him now, looking out the windows; Simon looked down at the marble floor between his feet. "I just—"

"Don't," Jeremy said, his voice painfully kind. "It's all right. It's *over*."

Simon subsided, grumpily. "You don't even know what I was going to say."

"No, I suppose not, but if I had to hazard a guess . . . well, I could." Jeremy sighed. The little sound was uneven.

"Guess so," Simon said, a heartbeat too slow.

Jeremy hesitated, glancing at Simon and then away. "I'm going to go back to my room," he said, the words carefully light. "Do come get me when Dave's ready to explain—"

Simon reached out and grabbed Jeremy's arm before Jeremy could take more than a step away. Jeremy turned back, raising his eyebrows quizzically at Simon; after a moment Simon dropped Jeremy's arm again. "Never mind," Simon said. "You're right. It's over."

"There you are, then," Jeremy said. He touched Simon's shoulder before moving away, heading off down the hall without the slightest trace of an echo dogging his footsteps.

All in all, it took Dave slightly over two hours. Simon was within twenty pages of the end of his book when someone knocked on the hallway door. "Templar?" Nate said, his voice muffled by the door. He sounded oddly breathless: relieved, or hysterical, or something. "We're ready."

Simon dropped his book onto the coffee table. "Yeah, I'm coming," he called, fighting down a little frisson of nerves. "Go get Archer, will you? Actually, round up everybody."

"I'm going," Nate said. His footsteps pattered off down the hall, quick and light.

Simon took a quick detour into the bathroom to splash water on his face and have a couple of Advil, then let himself back out into the hallway. Someone had found and turned on the hallway lights, turning the monstrous windows into dark mirrors and the entire world into antique gold. The hallway was mostly empty, save for a little cluster of people gathered around the blue door; they filtered into the room even as Simon headed that way, and by the time he got there everyone had found a place to sit, out of the way.

Dave looked up as Simon came in, and Simon stopped in his tracks. Dave's eyes were wide and his face was drawn, a sure sign that *something* was up, and whatever it was, it was big. Simon shook his head and got himself moving again, finding himself a place behind Dave. "So what's up?" he said.

"Well," Dave said, and then Jeremy let himself into the room. After a quick glance around, he closed the door behind himself.

Simon nodded to Jeremy, then turned his attention back to Dave. "Well, what?"

Now that he'd said that, of course, Dave was left flailing for a way to explain himself. "It's . . . well, it's definitely a machine-killer," he finally said. "If one of Karpol's people loaded this disk into a drive and ran any one of the three executables, I think Karpol's entire network would be a smoking crater in something like twenty-four hours. They might never know what hit them."

Simon let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding. "Okay," he said. "That's great. I mean, seriously, I'm glad to hear that. Now let me hear the 'but' that's coming."

Mike sniggered at that, just like Simon had been expecting. Sandra, sitting on the bed next to Mike, smacked him. Mike said "Oof!" and went quiet.

"It's not really a 'but'," Dave said. "It's more of a 'how'."

"Then let me hear it," Simon said, controlling his little burst of irritation.

Dave turned back to his laptop and started shuffling windows, absently and at speed, like a nervous twitch. "It took me like half an hour to realize what I was looking at," he said, enthralled. "The executables are all programmed to look for a particular string of characters written to the drive of any computer, see? They seek out and destroy any machine with that string written to its hard drive, and they just hide on clean machines and scan the data that's coming in, looking for the string. It checks all sectors, too, so it'll find the string even if the document that it was in got deleted, assuming those sectors haven't been written over yet—and if a machine is clean but later gets that string of characters uploaded to it, the machine-killer kicks in and eats that machine, too. You could set it off with an *email*, if you knew what you were doing—"

"Okay," Simon said patiently. "In English?"

"Oh. Um. Right." Dave bit his lower lip, thinking. "It's like a disease that's ninety-nine percent fatal if you have freckles," he finally said. "You can be a carrier for the disease and pass it on to other people even if you don't have freckles. If you had freckles as a kid and grew out of them, though, it'll still kill you about half the time, and if you spend too much time out in the sun later on and develop freckles, then the disease in your system will kill you."

"Okay," Simon said again, somewhat unsettled. "So . . . I guess the question I'm supposed to ask now is: what is the computer equivalent of a freckle?" He stopped. "Did I actually just say that?"

Dave touched the screen of his laptop. "Oh, man, it's *evil*," he said happily. "That's what took me so long, remembering where I'd seen the string before." Dropping his hands to the laptop's touchpad, Dave highlighted a random string of letters and numbers that lurked in the middle of all the gibberish. "There," he said.

Simon squinted at it. "Yep, there it is," he said. "So . . . what is it?"

"Those are the hidden characters in the line that Mr. Story added to the bottom of every page of information that he funneled to Viktor Karpol," Dave said. "Remember, I told you about it? The one that says 'PROPERTY OF THE FBI CONFIDENTIAL DO NOT DISTRIBUTE OR REPRODUCE', that he added by hand to every page? That's it."

Simon went very still, one hand on the back of Dave's chair. He wasn't quite sure he understood, but he was starting to see the dim outline of things, and he didn't know if it was wonderful or terrible. "Spell it out for me, Stonewall," he said.

"Mr. Story wrote this machine-killer specifically to seek out and destroy every machine that had ever come into contact with the leaked FBI information," Dave said. "If he and this disk had their way, it would erase every copy of his, uh, indiscretion from the face of the planet and take down most of Karpol's network to boot. I can almost guarantee it."

Somewhere behind Dave, Simon's knees gave out. He sank more or less gracefully into a crouch, clutching at the back of Dave's chair with both hands. Dave, mostly unaware, just babbled on. "With code of this skill level, I wouldn't be surprised if he'd done a lot of the preliminary footwork for me—I can write a program to monitor its spread, he must have had one already but I never found it—it'd be possible to target and destroy any computer, even completely clean ones, just by sending the right email—oh, crap, I'd better write some kind of removal tool before the script kiddies find it . . ."

"That's," Simon started to say. All that came out was a puff of air, and he had to stop and swallow. "That's great, Stone," Simon said, hauling himself painfully to his feet and clapping Dave on the shoulder. "You're the man."

"They couldn't even restore from *backup*," Dave said, completely unable to stop talking. Above his flapping jaw his eyes were still wide and startled. "The machine-killer would just destroy the machines all over again, and probably damage the backups—and that's assuming they have backups at all! What kind of IT department does the Russian mafia have anyway, I bet it's not so good . . ."

"Dave," Simon said, holding up a hand. Dave broke off in the middle of a sentence with an audible click of teeth. "How safe is it?" Simon asked. "If we let this thing go, is there any chance it could get out of control?"

Dave swallowed. "Not much," he said. "I mean, yes, it could, if it spread far enough that a smart programmer could get his hands on it and use it himself, but I can have a patch for it all ready to go by the time it gets set off . . . we could

probably let it run rampant for a couple of days and then shut it down, and it wouldn't damage *too* much beyond Karpol's own network."

"Okay," Simon said. "How long will it take you to write these programs that you need?"

"A day, maybe two," Dave said.

"Will you need anything else?"

"I don't think so," Dave touched the screen of his laptop again.

Simon nodded. "Okay," he said. "Think carefully about this next one, because a lot depends on your answer."

"Okay?"

"If that disk gets into the hands of Karpol's cronies and is unleashed on the world—" Simon tapped the Zip drive "—there's no chance that Rich will destroy the Internet from beyond the grave or anything, right?"

Dave flapped helplessly for a moment before his jaw firmed. The light which sprang into his pale blue eyes was nothing short of crazy. "Give me two days and I'll make sure of it," he said. "My God, this is going to be *great*—"

"Good man," Simon said, cutting that off before it could get any more disturbing. He took a deep breath, scrubbed a hand down his face, and looked at Jeremy. "It's yours," he said. "That motherfucker took Rich down for the sake of his own convenience—you take that Zip disk and you make him choke on it."

After a moment, Jeremy bowed his head in acquiescence. "Done," he said. "Done, and done."

Dave sank into rapt communion with one of the laptops, rapidly forgetting that there was anyone else in the room at all. Nate seemed to be there for the long haul, but the rest of them stood up and left in ones and twos, mostly quiet, mostly reflective.

Simon hung onto the back of Dave's chair, absently rubbing his chest. "You comin'?" Johnny said, stopping by Simon to thump him companionably on the shoulder.

"Yeah," Simon said, straightening up and glancing around. Mike and Sandra were gone, the door to the indigo room closed; Jeremy had vanished, as usual, probably back off to his own room. "Yeah," Simon said again. "Let's go."

They let themselves out into the hall and headed for their rooms, down at one end. Johnny was silent for most of the trip, his bootheels stunningly loud in the echo chamber of a hallway. "Interesting," he finally said, just as they drew up level with the door to the red room.

"Yeah," Simon said. They both stopped, the echoes of their footsteps dying away to nothing. "I guess Rich thought we'd finally given him an out. Christ, he must have thought he saw the light at the end of the tunnel."

Johnny glanced over his shoulder, then shrugged. “Least it means he wasn’t entirely under Karpol’s thumb. He was, that’d have been a disk full of pretty pictures or something.”

“I don’t know if I’ll ever forgive him,” Simon said. Something in Simon’s chest, some long-held tension, started to loosen—“I mean, he fucked up and he did us all wrong, but . . . well, Jesus, he paid the price, and now I find out that he was trying to fix things at the eleventh hour, no matter how bass-ackwardly.”

Johnny was silent, his half-closed eyes intent on Simon’s face. Simon reached up and pressed a hand to his chest again. “I’ll probably never forgive him for what he did,” Simon said, aware of the pain lodged just under his breastbone, “but maybe now I don’t have to hate him in the bargain. You know?”

“Yeah,” Johnny said. “You wanna come in and drink to that? I got a bottle of something . . .”

Simon blew out a breath, and just like that, the pain in his chest dissolved and vanished. “Christ, yes,” he said, managing to smile. “Let’s drink to that, Texas. You have the best goddamn ideas.”

By the time Simon let himself back into the white room, buzzing gently along, the moon had risen over the hills. Simon drifted around, changing into his pajama pants—white, he noted, just buzzed enough to find this funny—locking all the doors, and turning off the lights.

The high windows and massive skylights let in the moonlight, dyeing the white room and Simon both a brilliant grayish-blue. It was bright enough that Simon could still see clearly, bright enough to throw long black shadows on the floor—Simon picked his way over to the gigantic bed. The bed was tall enough that he actually had to climb in instead of just flopping out, but once he was up there, it was worth it: people who were rich enough apparently didn’t skimp on anything, including mattresses. Simon muzzily shut his eyes and thought of clouds, then snorted at himself for sounding like a commercial.

“Man,” he said under his breath, for no real reason, just getting that out there. It had been a hell of a day, for many reasons, and by all rights he ought to be exhausted, but right now his brain was ticking along, booze fog or no booze fog. He still felt like an interloper in this vast and obscenely wealthy white space, but the villa was quiet and the bed was welcoming and the moonlight was nice against the white walls . . .

Simon snapped out of his light doze when the edge of the mattress dented under the weight of someone who wasn’t him. Jeremy slid into Simon’s line of sight like a hovering specter; he was still wearing his black pants and t-shirt, and the combination, together with his everpresent tan, made him a shadow against the moonlit walls in every sense of the word. “How’d you get in here?” Simon muttered, too sleepy and booze-foggy to pay much attention what he was saying. His hands, with no real input from their owner, reached up to curl over Jeremy’s

hips, fiddling his t-shirt free of his pants. Simon licked his lips. “I locked the doors.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Simon,” Jeremy breathed, drifting down to touch his lips to Simon’s own.

◆ Thirty-Eight

By the time Simon pried his eyes open the next morning, the sun was well up, the room was a blinding white in the morning sunlight, and Jeremy was gone. Both doors were still locked; if it hadn't been for the odd taste in his mouth and the fact that his pajama pants were currently heaped on the floor, Simon might have thought he dreamed the whole thing. As it was, Simon ran his tongue over his lips, grimaced, and slithered carefully out of bed while his system tried to decide if he deserved a slight hangover or not.

A long shower and another couple of Advil convinced his body that the answer was 'no', and Simon got dressed and let himself out of his room. Everything was quiet. Simon paused to wince grumpily at the glare of the east-facing windows in the hallway, then, after a moment's thought, he wandered down to the blue room and put an ear to the door.

His reward for this little act of espionage was the sound of typing. Simon knocked desultorily on the door with one hand and let himself in with the other, already knowing what he was going to see.

Nate, still fully dressed, was curled up on top of the covers of the blue bed with one arm thrown over his face, sound asleep and snoring lightly. Dave was sitting in front of what Simon thought of as his 'real' computer, the tiny palmtop that Dave carried everywhere; Dave's face was long and drawn, his eyes were wide and bloodshot, and he desperately needed a shave.

It was, in short, so utterly familiar, here in this place so far away from everything that Simon was used to, that it warmed his heart just to see it. "Dave," he said.

Dave grunted a little. Simon tried not to laugh at him. "Daaa-ave," he said, drawing it out.

"Huh?" Dave tore his eyes away from the screen—Simon's imagination supplied a sound like Velcro ripping apart—and blinked at Simon. He winced and scrubbed his eyes with his fists. "Morning, Templar," he said. "What's up?"

Simon hunkered down by the side of Dave's chair. "So!" he said. "Far be it from me to dictate terms to a man on his vacation, but I'm thinking you could

use some sleep.”

“I . . .” Dave’s protest trailed off. “Oh,” he said. “I guess I didn’t sleep.”

“Guess not,” Simon agreed. “So! Here’s what I recommend, since I can’t actually order you around right now: come downstairs with me and eat something for breakfast. Once you’ve done that, you should crash for a while. Will you do that for me? You know, as a favor, one friend to another?”

Dave stared at Simon for a moment, uncomprehending, like he wasn’t speaking English. His neck creaked as he turned around to look at the bed. “Huh,” Dave said. “Nate fell asleep.”

“Yes, he did, and also I am completely impressed with your razor-sharp observational skills,” Simon said. “You can always go crash in the green room if you need to, or poke him until he gets up. He should probably get out of those clothes anyway.”

“Yeah,” Dave said, scrubbing at his eyes again. “Let me just make a couple of quick notes and I’ll shut everything down, okay?”

Simon checked his watch. “Five minutes,” he said. “And I’m going to wait right here until then, too.”

Dave hunched his shoulders and turned back to his laptop. Simon watched him for a moment, just to make sure he wasn’t getting sucked back in, then straightened up and went to wake Nate. “Hey, Specs,” he said softly.

Nate groaned a little, contracting into a smaller, tighter ball. Simon, privately of the opinion that this was adorable, nudged Nate’s shoulder. “You need to go next door and go to bed for real, okay?”

“Kaaay,” Nate moaned, not actually moving, his voice clotted and sticky. Still, with a little poking, Simon managed to get Nate both upright and tottering towards the green room. Nate stumbled towards the crazy forest bed, picking at the buttons of his shirt as he went. Simon shut the blue door to give him some privacy.

Dave closed the lid of his laptop, putting it to sleep. “Okay, Templar,” he said, linking his fingers together and stretching his hands up above his head. His spine crackled like a bowl of Rice Krispies.

“What, I don’t even get to poke you?” Simon said, genuinely startled. “Here I thought I’d have to fight you for like twenty minutes before you shut that thing down.”

“Well, um, you said something about food,” Dave said.

“Is *that* the trick?”

Dave looked hunted. “Sometimes?”

They went all the way down to the kitchen without seeing anyone else. The villa was quiet around them—although given its size, there could have been a smallish land war going on in the opposite wing and they never would have known—and the kitchen, when they got there, was empty.

Dave made a beeline for the fridge. Simon, not quite as hungry, went to check the garage. The van was gone, as was whatever car had originally been parked in the third space. Simon tried to remember; his brain kicked up a picture of something smallish, sporty, and bright red. "Guess everybody took off without us," Simon reported, shutting the door to the garage.

"Oh, yeah," Dave said, piling the makings of a truly impressive sandwich on the counter. "Sandy said to tell you that she and the guys were going back into Milan to pick up some stuff and that they probably wouldn't be back until about four." He wandered off to raid the breadbox.

"She did?" Simon said. "And you were going to tell me this . . . when?"

"Um. Just now?"

"I suppose I'm lucky she didn't leave me this message by sticking a Post-It on your head," Simon said. "I wonder where Archer went."

Dave carried half a loaf of bread to the cutting board and selected a bread knife from the butcher's block. "I don't know," he said. "He didn't tell me. Are you sure he's gone?"

"Well, someone took off in one of the other cars, and I think Archer's the only one with access to the key safe, more's the damn pity." Simon jiggled the safe's handle, just in case. It didn't budge. "Oh, well. As punishment for not passing Sandy's message on earlier, I sentence you to make me one of those sandwiches."

"Okay," Dave said, sawing two more slices of bread off the loaf.

Simon dumped his plate into the sink. "Okay," he said. "You know what, Stonewall? In the service of making sure that you get some goddamned sleep, I am even going to lower myself to do the dishes. How's that for amazing?"

"I can get them," Dave offered, leaning over to add his plate to the pile.

"Nope," said Simon. "You can go right back upstairs and put yourself to bed. Of course, you and I both know that you're probably just going to go stare at your computer for twelve more hours, but as long as I don't actually check up on you, we can both pretend that you're sleeping. How's that?"

Dave scrubbed both hands over his scratchy cheeks. "I think maybe sleep would be good," he said.

"Hey, what do you know, we're in agreement." Simon turned on the faucet, picked up a plate, and held it under the water. "So how's everything going, anyway?"

"Pretty good," Dave said. "I decided to write the removal tool first, because it's the easier of the two programs, and I'm actually pretty much done with it. I just need to set up a LAN and test it—oh."

Simon ran the other plate under the rapidly-warming water. "Oh?" he prompted, after a moment.

"I just realized . . . if the machine-killer gets as far as my work machines, it'll probably take out the big one, since it has the Karpol file on its hard drive." Dave

scratched the back of his head. “I mean, I’m guessing that Mr. Story immunized his system against the machine-killer, but for all I know the patch got eaten when it started deleting files . . .”

“Is that going to be a problem?” Simon asked, reaching for the soap.

Dave considered this for a moment. “Probably not,” he finally said. “I mean, the machine is off right now—or it should be, anyway—and I can take it off the network when we get back and patch it.”

“So . . . no problem,” Simon said. “Go to bed, Dave.”

“Okay,” Dave said, scuffling sleepily away.

Simon’s explorations had taken him almost to the eastern treeline before he saw the little red car winding up the drive towards the villa.

Shading his eyes with his hand, Simon watched the car’s progress. He’d spent most of the morning exploring the rest of the villa—rich people weren’t actually people at all, he’d concluded, but some kind of strange rarefied alien species—and after a late lunch he’d set out to explore the grounds, or at least as much of the grounds as he could cover without taking camping gear. So far, all his explorations had really netted him was a useable laundry room and a vague sense of awed disgust. Oh, well. At least his clothes would be clean.

The red car approached the bend in the gravel road nearest to Simon and slowed to a stop. After one last glance at the trees, Simon decided that he’d had enough nature for one day and headed for the car, breaking into a lazy jog halfway there. The red car waited patiently. “Hey,” Simon said, pulling open the passenger side door. “Man, this place makes me think that the communists had a point—what are you *wearing*?”

“Isn’t it horrible?” Jeremy said, feigning a shudder. “Hop in, I’ll run you back up to the house.”

“Seems to me your passenger seat’s occupied—” Simon picked the offending object up and found himself holding a yellow hard hat with a discreet British flag on the front. He studied this vision askance for a moment before slinging himself into the tiny roadster, the hard hat nestled in his lap. “Christ. I don’t even want to ask, do I?”

“I rather expect you don’t,” Jeremy said, peaceably putting the little car back in gear. His tie had been discreetly loosened and the topmost button of his shirt undone, but he was still wearing a real tie, and wearing it with an honest-to-God gray suit; his hair was neatly swept back as usual, but subtly dented where the band of the hard hat had pinned it to his head. “Plausible deniability and all that.”

Simon turned the hard hat over in his hands, running his thumb over the little British flag. “No, okay, I have to know. Anything that could make *you* put on a suit and tie has got to be at least hilarious.”

“As you like, Simon,” Jeremy said, preoccupied with guiding the little car into the garage. “Do congratulate me: as of this morning I am a highly-placed

executive in a certain enormous British investment firm.”

“Oh, hey, *congratulations*,” Simon said. “I am *really happy* for you. That is one hell of a promotion for a guy with no legitimate work experience whatsoever.”

Jeremy shut off the engine and got out of the car, absently tugging his suit coat straight. “Sarcasm is so becoming on you, Simon,” he said, not ruffled in the least. “In any case, said investment firm is backing a fairly large construction project down in Genoa, so, as their representative here in Italy, I felt it necessary to acquire a translator and go poke about the site. Making certain that our money is being spent wisely, and all that.”

“Yeah?” Simon said, opening the door to the kitchen. “What’s the verdict?”

“While the construction company is certainly wasting acceptably low levels of the company’s money, I must say, I was appalled by the poor security on their job site,” Jeremy said. He reached into his jacket and produced a small, grubby key ring. “If they don’t start taking more care to lock up behind themselves and secure their keys properly, they’re simply asking for some opportunistic thief to come in and rob them blind.”

Simon shook his head sadly. “And that would be a damned shame, not to mention utterly illegal,” he said. “So, did you mention that to them?”

“Not in so many words, no.” Jeremy twirled the keys about his finger, just barely smiling. “Sometimes people just have to learn things the hard way, I’m afraid.”

An hour or so later, newly possessed of clean clothes, Simon wandered back down to the kitchen and started poking around, more out of boredom than actual hunger. Mike had bought a cheap American-style coffee maker somewhere and left it on one of the counters; Simon was rummaging around in the cabinets, trying to figure out where Mike had put the coffee, when the garage door rumbled up and the van pulled in. Abandoning the search for the moment, Simon went to welcome home the prodigals. “Hey, folks,” Simon said, leaning in the doorway. “What all did you bring us?”

“Souvenirs!” Mike cried, bounding out of the driver’s seat. He kicked the door shut behind him and loped around to the back of the van, pulling the doors open; Johnny hopped out, carrying a duffel bag that bulged oddly. Simon could clearly see the shape of small boxes within. Sandra climbed down out of the passenger seat with a good deal more reserve.

“Oh, hey, souvenirs,” Simon said, shifting aside to let Johnny in. “What kind of souvenirs?”

“Kind that need to go in the fridge right now,” Johnny said, putting the duffel bag on the counter.

Mike pulled two large black garbage bags out of the back of the van. “*Second shelf, dammit, Texas!*” he yelled. “You put that shit anywhere else and I’ll end up toppin’ pizzas with it, swear to God!”

“You guys got me authentic Milanese garbage as a souvenir?” Simon said. “I’m . . . really, I’m touched. Seriously, you shouldn’t have.”

Sandra pulled another pair of garbage bags out of the back of the van. “We get to have a fashion show,” she said, her voice oddly grim.

“Oh, you went to pick up *that* kind of stuff,” Simon said. “Dave only said stuff. I wasn’t sure.”

“There’s plenty more if you want to pitch in,” said Sandra, shouldering past Simon and thwacking his legs with one of the garbage bags. Whatever was inside was relatively soft, at least.

Simon watched her go, then went over to see what Johnny was putting in the fridge. The second shelf of the fridge, empty a few minutes ago, was now about half-full of assorted boxes of ammunition. Simon blinked. “Is this where you tell me that everybody keeps their spare cartridges in the fridge while insinuating that I’m ignorant? Is that it? Or is this more of an elaborate practical joke?”

Johnny pulled two more battered boxes from his duffel and stacked them in the fridge. “Nah,” he said.

“Nah to which? First or second?”

“Both?” Johnny paused long enough to flash Simon half a grin, then went back to loading the fridge with ammo. “Ain’t real ammo,” he said, after a moment. “Wax bullets, mostly, all bang, no buck. Some blanks, too.”

“Ohh, right, I remember that now. Guess that explains the need for refrigeration.” Simon clapped Johnny on the shoulder and headed out into the garage.

When Sandra said there was plenty more, she hadn’t been kidding. There were two more black garbage bags, one of which bulged like it was full of watermelons, and—Simon hopped into the van to get a closer look—a stack of six honest-to-Christ riot shields. The words *Raggruppamento Operativo Speciale* had been carefully stenciled across the black bar at the center. Simon picked one up, frowned at the lettering, then flipped the shield over and fitted his arm through the crossbars. It was tall enough to cover him from head to knees but still decently light; the clear high-impact plastic was lightly scratched and worn. Wherever these had come from, they’d seen use. Vaguely unsettled, Simon took off the shield and put it back on the pile.

The watermelon bag proved to have riot helmets in it. Simon was not surprised.

“I think that’s it,” Mike reported, banging back in carrying the last two riot shields. They’d decided to use the orange room as their storage area, since it wasn’t much use otherwise; it was still like living inside a pumpkin. Simon tried not to look at the walls too much.

“Okay,” Sandra said, distracted. Six piles of gear lay on every convenient surface in the room, and she was making the rounds between them, distributing things from the garbage bags. She currently had a pile of black turtlenecks in

her arms and was picking at the necks, looking for the tags. “So has Dave killed himself yet?” she asked.

Simon shrugged. “Last time I saw him he was okay and making noises about getting some sleep real soon now,” he said.

“Uh huh. And when was that?”

“Ten this morning?”

“That’s Dave,” Sandra said, finishing up the turtle necks and returning to the pile of bags. “So where’s Archer?”

“Closeted with Nate having an indepth discussion about chemical explosives,” Simon said.

Sandra fished out a pile of black balaclavas. “And that’s Nate,” she said.

Simon considered this for a moment, then pushed himself up and off the dresser. “I’m going to go check on Dave,” he said. “Just to be certain.”

“Probably a good call. I’ll drop off the pile that’s yours when I’m done.”

Sandra dropped a balaclava on the nearest pile.

Simon left the orange room, blinking to rid himself of the slight blue after-images burned on his retinas. The door to the yellow room still stood open, the room itself empty; the green door was shut. Simon paused, then moved on.

Listening at the blue door once again netted him the sound of typing. Simon knocked and let himself in, mildly exasperated. “You know, it’s only been like seven hours,” he said. “You *are* allowed to sleep more than that.”

“I couldn’t really sleep,” Dave said, not looking up. He looked better—he’d showered and shaved, at least—but his face was still drawn and pallid. “I slept for a little while, though, and once I finish testing the removal tool and patch I’ll get some more. Promise.”

“Okay,” Simon said, closing the blue door behind himself. “And when will that be?”

“Um. Two, three more hours?”

“So . . . after dinner.”

Dave paused to think about this assertion. “Oh, yeah, there’ll be dinner, won’t there.”

“Sometimes I think that you’ve got to be faking it, Dave.” Simon clapped him on the shoulder. “You can’t genuinely be that clueless.”

“What?”

“That’s my guy,” Simon said. “I’m gonna go check on Nate. You carry on and try not to kill yourself, okay?”

“Okay, Templar,” Dave said, subsiding back into a typing trance.

Leaving Dave to it, Simon went over and knocked on the blue door that separated Dave’s room from Nate’s. He couldn’t actually hear any conversation going on behind it—the rooms were just too damned large—but he still had a momentary perception of startled silence before Nate called, “It’s open!”

Simon pushed the door open and let himself into the forest. Nate and Jeremy were both seated cross-legged on the giant bed, Nate holding Jeremy's cell phone, Jeremy with a legal pad in his lap. "You know, if you're actually going to be in bed together, it'd probably be a good idea to lock the doors," Simon said matter-of-factly, shutting the door behind himself.

Nate flushed. Jeremy raised one eyebrow. "Oh, dear," he said. "Have we been outed?"

After a moment of hesitation Simon decided that he really did not want to follow up on this line of conversation. "So what are you two up to? Besides the obvious."

"Um." Nate brandished the cell phone. "Looking at pictures."

"I took a few covert snaps inside the construction site," Jeremy added. "Nate's making a wish list."

"Ah." Simon hesitated. "Are you going to do that tonight?"

"Most likely." Jeremy kicked himself around to face Simon, hanging one leg off the edge of the bed. "They've almost certainly discovered that the keys are missing by now, so the longer I wait, the more likely it is that they'll start changing locks. I also made a few other slight, ah, revisions, and those will probably be undone over the next few days as well."

Simon scratched the back of his neck, looked down at his feet, then looked back up. "I can come with you, if you want," he said.

"That shouldn't be necessary," Jeremy said. "I do prefer not to have to worry about others while I'm working."

Simon relaxed, trying not to be too obvious about it. "Okay," he said. "But if you change your mind, let me know. And come poke me before you leave, just so I know you're going."

Jeremy was silent for a beat longer than this statement deserved; then his little smile curled in on itself. "As you like, Simon," he said.

There was an ominous black pile of clothing waiting on the bed in the white room when Simon let himself back in, with a riot helmet perched neatly on top. One of the riot shields leaned against the foot of the bed like a grayish lens, with a pair of battered black combat boots standing at its foot. Sandra had left a note pinned under the helmet: *try it on—make sure it all fits*.

Simon picked up the helmet and turned it over, tugging idly at the chinstrap. There was a Darth Vader-ish flared plastic bit in back for extra neck protection. Simon laughed a little and put the helmet aside, then rummaged through the pile, sorting everything out.

The turtleneck and pants were both ordinary and plain black, apparently brand-new. Simon checked the tags, then stripped off his jeans and t-shirt and put on his new clothes. They seemed to fit, although the pants were a little tighter

than Simon was accustomed to. The turtleneck was pretty ordinary, even bearable once Simon rolled the collar down about halfway.

Simon smoothed down the front of the turtleneck, then yanked the belt off his jeans and threaded it through the beltloops on the black pants. There had to be a mirror around here somewhere—Simon loped over and opened the door to the closet, confronting himself with a full-length mirror and the spectacle of himself dressed in head-to-toe black. Simon tugged the turtleneck down again, then snickered at himself and went to lace on the boots.

After the boots came the knee-high shin guards, made out of some kind of dull black metal. Getting those strapped on was something of an adventure—Simon ended up propping his foot up on the dresser and leaving black scuffmarks on the wood—but eventually he figured out which clasp went where. He sorted through the pile again.

Balaclava next, probably, then gloves. Simon picked up the hood and examined it: it had the same matte black sheen as everything else he was wearing and stretched under his fingers like spandex. Fortunately, it wasn't a ski mask. Five minutes in a knitted balaclava in early July and Simon would probably kill himself just to get away from it. Simon rolled it up into a neat watchcap-like bundle and rolled it back down over his head, tugging at it until the wide hole was centered over his eyes and the bottom edge was tucked neatly into the turtleneck. He picked up the gloves and put them on.

Now breathing through his mouth—he hated facemasks, he never felt like he was getting quite enough air—Simon picked up the heavy bulletproof vest and shrugged into it, zipping it up the front. It had a collar with a discreet red stripe around it, four thousand cargo pockets, and a division logo on the breast. He tried not to glance at the mirror as he picked up the heavy black belt and strapped the vest into place. Getting the various holsters settled took him another few minutes, and then he dug out the little SIG and slid it into the hip holster. The holster had been made for something of a much larger caliber and Simon's hideout gun was nearly lost in it, but Simon strapped it down anyway.

Simon picked up the riot helmet and put it on, nudging the elastic chinstrap into place. The material of the balaclava was slippery, making the plastic chin-guard a ricochet waiting to happen. He'd have to do something about that before the time came to wear this gear for real. Simon flipped down the face mask, picked up the riot shield, and slid his left arm into it, getting a good grip on the second crosspiece.

Twisting from side to side, Simon made sure that everything moved with him, then paced a few steps back and forth. He'd worn heavier—he'd worn *worse*—he glanced at himself in the mirror and went still, the hairs on the back of his neck prickling. He no longer looked like a third-rate burglar. The combat vest and boots lent him a disturbingly military aspect and the solid black of his ensemble made that aspect ominous; he was heavily armed, heavily armored, and

completely, utterly faceless, like something out of a fascist nightmare. A little too appropriate for Italy, perhaps.

Unnerved, Simon flexed his fingers about the grip of his riot shield. It made him uncomfortable just to be in the same room with his reflection—hastily Simon put the riot shield down, then pulled off the riot helmet (nearly clocking himself in the eye with the rebounding chinguard) and yanked off the balaclava. His hair fell into his eyes in a staticky, messy explosion, but the face in the mirror was once again identifiable, and Simon was finally able to relax.

Someone knocked on his door, startling him. “Templar?” Sandra called. “You decent?”

“Am I ever?” Simon called back, having to force himself back to levity. He ran his gloved fingers through his hair, shoving it out of his eyes. “Yeah, I’m dressed, come on in.”

Sandra let herself in. Like Simon she was wearing everything but the balaclava and the helmet, her hair tied back in a neat ponytail. “How’s everything fit?” she said, closing the door behind herself.

“Oh, fits fine,” Simon said. “The only problem I can see is this chinstrap—”

Sandra held up a sheet of paper studded with black Velcro dots. “Already on it,” she said.

The sheer practicality of the solution made Simon grin. “You’re the man, Spring,” he said, holding out his hand.

“In this outfit? I very nearly am,” Sandra said. She tore off a strip with three or four little Velcro dots and handed it over. “You ought to see me with the helmet on—”

“No,” Simon said. “No, I really shouldn’t.”

Sandra hesitated, then nodded. “I know what you mean,” she said, subdued. “On the one hand, we need something like this for the sake of our anonymity—but on the other hand, Mike came busting in to show me his full kit and I swear I would I have shot him if I’d been carrying.”

“It’s not like it’s even all that different than SWAT gear,” Simon said, fiddling with one of the pockets on his vest. “It’s just . . . Christ, I don’t know. Military. How’s Mike taking it?”

“He thinks it’s great,” Sandra said, a sour note in her voice. “He’s bouncing around and talking about Halloween. Michael is not known for his powers of thoughtful analysis.”

“That he’s not.” Simon glanced at the riot helmet, abandoned on the dresser with the balaclava draped across it. “Tell you what,” he said, blowing out a breath, “I think I’ll wait and gimmick that thing up a little later.”

Sandra pushed a stray bit of hair back behind her ear. “Can’t blame you,” she said.

* * *

The rest of the evening passed uneventfully. Mike's threat of pizza had not been a lie—fortunately, it was not garnished with wax bullets—and after dinner Simon hung around in the indigo room for a couple of hours, shooting the shit with the others while sticking Velcro dots onto the inside of his chinguard. Eventually he caught himself yawning for the third time and excused himself, carrying the helmet back to his room; he hid the rest of the *carabinieri* gear in the closet, trying not to think too hard about it, then washed his face and went to bed.

Simon swam out of sleep at some point after midnight with Jeremy's hand on his shoulder. "I'm leaving now," Jeremy said, pitching his voice low.

"Ngh," Simon said, rubbing at his eyes. The room was as brilliant with moonlight as it had been the night before; Jeremy was all in black again, sitting on the edge of the bed. Simon rolled his head to the side, looking for a clock that wasn't there while he reached for Jeremy. "Timesit?"

"Just after one." Jeremy let his hand fall to the bed. "I most likely won't be back until five or so—should I wake you then?"

Simon's groping fingers hit the linen of Jeremy's jacket and nudged it aside, landing on Jeremy's t-shirt underneath. "Yeah, do that," he said, pulling Jeremy's t-shirt free of his pants.

Jeremy paused and looked down at Simon's hand. "I do hate to discourage your explorations, Simon, but I've the bodysuit on underneath—"

"Yeah, that's what I'm after," Simon said complacently, tugging Jeremy towards him so that he could get both hands in under Jeremy's t-shirt. The bodysuit was slick and oddly cool under Simon's hands; he shut his eyes and scrubbed his hands over the frictionless surface. "I love that thing," Simon said.

Jeremy waited, more or less patiently, a little smile on his face. "So glad you approve," he said. "Still, I really must go."

"Guess so." Yawning hugely, Simon let his hands drop, leaving Jeremy's clothes rumpled. "Good luck. Try not to get caught. I'd probably have to laugh at you."

Still smiling a little, Jeremy tugged his t-shirt back down and tucked it in, then resettled his jacket. "Oh, come now, Simon. If even *you* can't catch me, what can a few Italians possibly do?"

"I caught you," Simon protested sleepily. He grabbed Jeremy's knee. "See?"

"Ah. My mistake." Jeremy pulled his leg free and stood up, brushing off his t-shirt. "Go back to sleep, Simon. You're very silly when you're punchy."

"Punchy," Simon said, snickering. He was already half-asleep again by the time Jeremy let himself out.

What woke him four hours later wasn't so much the hand on his shoulder as the smell of sweat, old and dried; the moon had set and the sun had not yet risen, and Simon dragged himself back to consciousness in a room that was as dark as it probably ever got. "All done," Jeremy breathed.

Simon hooked a sleepy arm around Jeremy's shoulders. It nearly slid right off. The bodysuit wasn't cool any more: it was warm, almost hot to the touch, but still as slick as oil. The weird sensation woke Simon up a little further. "How'd it—" he cleared the frog from his throat "—how'd it go?"

"As well as possible," Jeremy said, allowing Simon to pull him down. "I had to gas one poor fellow, but I went in anticipating security, so . . ." He trailed off there and shrugged, nearly unseating Simon's arm again.

Still half-asleep, Simon shut his eyes. Jeremy was warm and slippery against his side, still smelling of sweat. Simon let his hand slither down Jeremy's back and away. "Get everything?" he asked, groggily.

Jeremy nodded, patting Simon's chest. "It's all under a bit of tarp out back," he said. "Very explosive. Nate should be pleased. Myself, I'm for a shower and bed, I think."

"Yeah," Simon said. Despite everything he was rapidly sliding back down into unconsciousness—"You need one," he managed to mutter, just before he fell asleep again.

◆ Thirty-Nine

Lightly addled by being woken twice in one night, Simon slept late and woke up feeling a little sluggish. He checked the garage on his way down to grab an early lunch: the van was gone again, but all the other cars were still present and accounted for. Simon considered that for a moment, then abandoned the idea of lunch and went to check on the others.

Dave was once again at his computer, but alert and freshly showered; when poked, he protested that he'd gone to sleep directly after dinner the night before and slept for nine hours, and he looked rested enough that Simon didn't bother calling him a liar. Both doors to Jeremy's room were locked—Simon checked, rattling the doorknobs out of a general urge to be an asshole—and no one else seemed to be around. Mike, at least, was off with the van.

After some thought, Simon let himself out of the villa and went in search of last night's payload. He found it behind the garage, stacked a careful fifty feet from any of the walls of the villa. The industrial-blue tarp had been peeled back, revealing a decently-sized stack of wooden boxes, most of which had urgent-looking warnings stenciled on the sides. *Pericolo!*, they said, and *Attenzione!*, and in most cases, *Esplosivi!*.

Nate, an old hand with most everything that was *esplosivi*, was kneeling on the folded-back tarp shuffling through the boxes, wearing heavy leather gardening gloves that were at least two sizes too big for him. He looked perfectly happy and at ease (and had not been blown up yet) so Simon felt no qualms about heading over there, although he did stop a few feet away, just in case. "Gosh, Specs, those wouldn't be *illegal* explosives, would they?"

"Oh, no, never in a million years," Nate said, pausing long enough to push up his glasses and blink at Simon. "I hear they fell off the back of a truck."

"Which is truly the hallmark of legality," Simon said, nodding. "So did you get all the perfectly-legal explosives that you need, with which to do perfectly legal and harmless things?"

Nate absently hugged one of the smaller wooden boxes to his chest. "Oh, man, Templar," he said, his voice hushed with awe and his eyes positively afire with

enthusiasm, “with this much bang I could turn this whole place into a smoking crater thirty feet deep—”

Simon glanced over his shoulder at the massive villa. “Uh. Great?” he said. “I mean, I’m glad you’re happy, but all the same, try not to do that, okay?”

“You never let me have any fun,” Nate said mournfully.

Warily, Simon circled the pile of boxes. “Do you actually need this much, Specs? Tell me you don’t actually need this much, Specs.”

Nate blinked at the pile of boxes, like he was just now realizing the size of it. “Oh, no, Templar,” he said defensively. “I definitely don’t need this much, but I needed a lot of different kinds of things, so I ended up telling Jeremy to just grab everything he could?”

“And he grabbed—”

“—a lot,” Nate said, flapping his arms helplessly.

A sound behind him made Simon turn: Johnny had just rounded the corner of the garage pushing a wheelbarrow along. “Found it in the gardening shed,” he said, parking the wheelbarrow next to the pile and pulling on his own gloves. “Hey, Templar.”

“Morning, Texas.” Simon eyed the wheelbarrow. “I thought you’d probably gone off with Mike and Sandra, wherever they are.”

“Gettin’ the van painted,” Johnny said. “Any of this stuff gonna explode if I pick it up?”

Nate picked up one of the boxes and put it into the wheelbarrow. “It should be okay,” he said. “Although you probably shouldn’t drop anything. Or shake anything. Or jostle it around too much. Definitely don’t drop any boxes onto any other boxes. Oh, and if you hear ticking, run away.”

Johnny eyed Nate for a long moment, then quirked out half a grin and ruffled Nate’s hair. “You’re shittin’ me,” he said.

“Yep,” Nate said, laughing a little. “No, seriously, it’s probably okay. Just be a little careful.”

“Moving this stuff somewhere?” Simon asked, edging another couple of feet away, just in case.

Johnny jerked his chin in the direction of the back of the house. “Gazebo,” he said.

“Jeremy stole an *awful* lot of bang,” Nate added, laying another box in the wheelbarrow. Johnny put another on top. Nate settled back on his heels and surveyed the pile with a worried eye. “I mean, these are terrorist-threat levels of loose explosives, and I bet a lot of law-enforcement agencies are worried right about now. I kind of want to move them somewhere where they can’t be seen from, like, a helicopter.”

Simon digested this. “Oh, Christ,” he said, faintly.

“I don’t think anyone’s seriously going to come looking,” Nate hurried to add. “Not up here, anyway. Once we’re done we’ll get rid of the leftovers.”

Simon looked at the ground between his feet and waited until he thought he could reliably speak without his voice cracking. “Okay,” he said. “Okay, yeah, that’s a good idea. And I think we should do it as soon as possible, okay? Before we attract the attention of, of our Italian counterparts?”

Johnny picked up the handles of the full wheelbarrow and peacefully trundled it away. Simon watched him go. “The level of police presence in this country is insane,” Simon said, now talking mostly to himself. “I really do not want to come to their attention. Not now, not ever.”

“I know, Templar,” Nate said, his voice small. “We’ll hurry.”

“It’s not your fault, Specs. Don’t worry about it.” Simon picked up the loose tarp and bundled it up, mostly to have something to do with his hands.

Simon was finishing off the last of the cold pizza when Jeremy let himself into the kitchen, impeccably turned out and apparently unaffected by his night’s work. “So!” Simon said, putting down his half-finished pizza. “I understand that you may have stolen enough explosive material to cause the police to believe us a terrorist threat?”

“Have I?” Jeremy said, raising both eyebrows. “I suppose we’d best get rid of some, then.”

“And soon,” Simon said. “Talk to Nate, figure out how much you need to keep, and ditch the rest. Call in an anonymous tip, too, so they’ll find it and stop *looking* for it, Christ.”

Jeremy took a bottle of water out of the fridge. “I’ll do that,” he said, leaning against the fridge and opening the bottle. “I’m afraid that I simply took everything rather than risk coming back without some vital component.” He paused long enough to drink some water. “And I was a bit pressed for time, in the bargain.”

“Yeah, I get that felony burglary isn’t exactly like grocery shopping,” Simon said. “Just . . . fix it. Okay?”

“Of course.” Jeremy drank some more water. “Where is Nate now, do you know?”

“Out back, in the gazebo.” Simon picked up his pizza again. “He hid everything in there so that *police helicopters* wouldn’t spot it. Jesus, what a thing to hear when you’ve barely been awake for half an hour.” Simon shook his head and took another bite.

Jeremy headed for the door, carrying his bottle of water. “I’ll go speak to him now, then—if he agrees we can have the excess out of here by midnight.”

“Good!” Simon said around his mouthful of pizza.

All three of them were still in the gazebo when Simon went to check on them. The gazebo itself was large enough that the pile of wooden boxes made a fairly insignificant little mound in the center; Jeremy and Nate were kneeling in front of the pile, while Johnny lounged against a column, chewing on a toothpick and

playing the benevolent onlooker. “Hey, Texas,” Simon said, jogging up the steps. “Holding up the walls? Oh, shit, looks like they’re gone, guess you failed.”

“Yeah, well, rest of the place ain’t fallin’ down on my watch,” Johnny said.

“Hey, Templar,” Nate said, handing one of the boxes to Jeremy. “We’re separating out the stuff we need now.”

Jeremy put the box aside on a much smaller pile. He was wearing thin white latex gloves, unlike Nate’s clown-sized gardening couture. “I’ll, ah, make arrangements for a truck this afternoon,” he said. “We’ll have the rest out of here in short order.”

“Don’t think I didn’t hear that significant little pause followed by a charming euphemism,” Simon said. “So, what? You’re going to steal someone’s truck?”

“Or rent one under a false name, if it comes to that,” Jeremy said, undaunted. “But, yes, I’ll most likely steal one. Most likely from a building site. Fewer people to see my face that way, after all.”

“Christ,” Simon told Johnny. “If this isn’t the world’s slipperiest slope.”

“What you get,” Johnny said comfortably. He didn’t qualify the statement, and Simon didn’t quite dare ask *that’s what I get for what?*

Eventually the stolen explosives had been divided into two piles: the disturbingly large pile full of everything that Nate didn’t need, and the smaller but still worrying pile of everything that he did. Jeremy plucked at the wrist of one of his latex gloves. “All right,” he said. “Did anyone touch these without gloves on?”

“I’m good,” Nate said, displaying his oversized gloves.

“Same,” said Johnny, patting the gloves stuck in his belt.

Jeremy surveyed the stack, then nodded. “Good,” he said. “Unsanded wood doesn’t hold fingerprints all that well, but it’s better to be safe than sorry.”

“I *know* that, you know,” Nate said, piqued.

“I expect you would.” Jeremy offered Nate a quick, apologetic smile, then rose to his feet. He peeled off his own gloves, tucking them absently into the inside pocket of his jacket. “I’ve a few errands to run this afternoon,” Jeremy said, glancing at Simon. “We’ll handle the removal later tonight, after the sun has set.”

“You need me to come with you?” Simon asked.

“It’s up to you,” said Jeremy. “I don’t expect I’m walking into any danger—”

“—it’s usually when you don’t expect danger that it comes for you,” Simon said. “I’ll come.”

“In that case, let me just go pick up a few things from my room and then we’ll be off,” Jeremy said. “Unless there’s something you need to do first.”

Simon pretended to think about it. “Nope,” he finally said. “I’m all yours—” He bit his tongue, a moment too late.

“Mm,” Jeremy said, heading down the steps to the lawn. The undercurrent of laughter in his voice was painfully clear. “Well, then. Aren’t I lucky?”

“Is that it?” Simon said.

Jeremy glanced down at the battered box under his arm. “Yes?” he said.

Simon sighed. The little red roadster was parked semi-legally on the street outside a post office on the outskirts of Genoa; Simon had stayed with the car to ward off tow trucks and irate drivers while Jeremy ran in and retrieved his package. It hadn’t really been an exciting ten minutes. “If I’d known that was all you were doing, I . . . no, I’d have come along anyway, out of sheer boredom.”

“Well, I do have one more purpose to being here, although I suppose you can’t quite call it an errand,” Jeremy said, sliding into the driver’s seat. He dropped the package peremptorily in Simon’s lap. “Be a love and see if you can’t get that open, won’t you?”

Simon picked up the package and studied it while Jeremy started the roadster and pulled out into traffic. The postmark put its origin somewhere in Milan; Simon turned the box over, carefully. “So, what are the chances that this is a bomb, or bugged, or marked with some kind of radio transmitter?”

“Fairly low, I expect, unless you’ve put a bug on it yourself,” Jeremy said. “If you’re that worried, I’ll open it myself once we get where we’re going.”

“Man, bug a guy’s jacket four or five times and he never lets you forget it.” Simon picked up the box and put it to his ear, listening. All he heard was the car’s engine and Jeremy’s faint, acknowledging laugh. Trying to recall as much as he could of Nate’s casual bomb-disposal lessons, Simon put the box upside-down in his lap and dug out his keys. The key to his Jeep was long and relatively sharp; Simon caught it in his fist like a dagger and drove it into a random spot on the underside of the box. After two seconds in which the box did not explode or start ticking, Simon relaxed and started widening the hole, sawing the jagged edges of the key through the worn and battered cardboard.

“I suppose it’s a bit late to mention that some of the things in that box might be fragile?” Jeremy said, taking them further out of Genoa.

“Guess so,” Simon said, prying up the flap that he’d created. “Don’t worry, I think the key hit metal anyway.” The box’s contents were wrapped in black plastic, entirely unedifying.

The little roadster’s wheels bumped up onto an incline as Jeremy guided the car up into the parking lot of a small shop. Disdaining the empty spots in front of the shop, Jeremy took the car around the side of the building and parked it in a spot there, shutting off the engine. “You see, when I asked you to open the box, I expected you to, say, pull up the tape,” said Jeremy, plucking the opened box out of Simon’s lap and ripping the bottom open.

“Well, yeah, but Nate always says that when faced with a box that might be a bomb, you should always enter the box in some way that the bomb’s maker

doesn't expect," Simon said.

"It isn't a bomb, Simon," Jeremy said patiently, pulling one of the plastic-wrapped bundles out of the box. He tore off the plastic, revealing a pair of standard-issue Italian license plates. "Back in a tick," he said, hopping out of the car.

Simon blinked, then rolled down his window and stuck his head out. "Are you serious?"

There was a soft *thunk* from the front of the car. Jeremy straightened up, still holding one of the license plates. At this angle, Simon could see both the discreet hook over the top and the magnets on the back. "Oh, yes," Jeremy said, heading towards the back of the car.

Simon turned to watch him go. "Do I even want to know?"

Thunk. "I don't know," Jeremy said. "Do you?"

"Yes!" Simon said. "...no! Christ, I don't know! And it's not like you're going to drop everything and give me a full explanation even if I do ask, so I don't know why I'm bothering."

Jeremy got back in the car and started the engine. "That's probably true," he said, flipping a switch on the dash; something behind Simon hummed and the roadster's ragtop started to fold back.

Simon hunkered down in his seat and looked up, watching the top pull back to reveal the sky. Something poked him in the side; he looked down to see Jeremy offering him the damned Redskins cap again. "Oh, for—" Simon grabbed it and put it on, pulling it down over his eyes. "So, let me guess. Fake license plates, top down, you in your asshole blacks, me with my face conveniently hidden... we're going to let somebody *see* you, aren't we?"

"Now, see, Simon, that's why I like you," Jeremy said. He flicked out his sunglasses and put them on. "Whenever you can stop demanding answers for half a second, you almost always manage to produce them on your own."

Jeremy took the car out of the store's parking lot and aimed it in the direction of Genoa proper. Simon stayed slumped down in the passenger seat, one hand clamped onto the baseball cap to keep the slipstream from ripping it off his head. "Tell me when we get close," he yelled over the noise.

"A bit further yet," Jeremy said, his voice humming underneath the wind.

Simon grunted in acknowledgement. Conversation was damned near impossible with the top down, so he didn't even try, just watched Genoa go by. It looked like pretty much every Italian city he'd ever been in, which was to say, Milan: narrow streets, traffic circles, wide stone plazas, impossibly ancient stone buildings currently inhabited by modern businesses, and a zillion statues, fountains, monuments, and assorted bric-a-brac. The only real difference, as far as Simon could tell, was the constant flickering presence of the Mediterranean

on his left and the jutting port that the ocean's presence justified. Genoa was probably pretty, not that Simon cared.

A touch on his leg made him jump. "Here in a moment," Jeremy said.

"Gotcha," Simon said, slumping down further in his seat and directing his gaze somewhere around his knees. The cap's bill prevented him from seeing much beyond his own legs and the inside of the car door, but hopefully it would also prevent anyone from seeing his face.

His fingers flexing on the steering wheel, Jeremy guided the car up to the traffic circle. "Hold on," he said, his voice deceptively pleasant, and at the very last minute hauled the wheel right, cutting off a taxi. Simon yelped and grabbed the side of the door. The taxi's brakes screeched as the driver swerved to avoid the little red roadster, already screaming imprecations; the moment the cabdriver realized that he had avoided the collision, he hit the horn with both hands. Jeremy raised a lazy hand at the furiously-honking taxi. "Terribly sorry!" he called, a bit more loudly than necessary. "No harm done, I trust?"

"*Focking Eengleesh!*" the cabdriver screamed. Jeremy waved at him again, still beaming guilelessly, waiting his turn to enter the traffic circle; a few seconds later there was a miniscule break in traffic and Jeremy took the opening, goosing the little car forward. There was more honking, of the desultory everyday type, and then they were around the traffic circle and away.

Simon belatedly realized that he was clutching at his chest and made his fingers relax. "I suspect that got you noticed," he said, thumping his chest absently to restart his heart.

"Goodness, I certainly hope so," Jeremy said, taking the next right.

After making a bewildering series of lefts and rights at speed, Jeremy pointed the car north and got the hell out of Genoa. As soon as they reached a relatively unpopulated area Jeremy pulled over, took off the fake license plates, and put the car's top back up. "There we are," he said, dropping the fake license plates back into the box. "Back to the villa now, I expect, as quickly as possible. I sincerely doubt anyone was able to pick up our trail so quickly, but . . . help me keep an eye on the road?"

Simon twisted around in his seat to glance back at Genoa. "Right," he said. "Just have to hope your friends don't have helicopters."

"I expect we'd notice a helicopter," Jeremy said sagely, starting the car.

Simon saw no helicopters on the way back, although he did see a lot of cars. If anyone was on their tail, though, they fell off when Jeremy took the little red car up the winding hillside road that led, ultimately, to the villa. Jeremy still drove a mile or so past the villa's gates, then turned around and went back, just to make certain; they saw no other cars on the way back and got through the

gates without incident. "I believe I ought to stop using this car now," Jeremy said, following the gravel drive through the woods.

"Yeah, probably not a bad idea," Simon said. "It's a little noticeable. You know. With all the red and the tiny and the Ferrari and stuff."

The car emerged from the woods and into the sunlight again. The villa looked just the same as it had when they left and had not been blown up even a little bit. Simon relaxed. Jeremy glanced at him, then away, just barely smiling.

Jeremy parked the car in its usual spot and got out, still carrying the battered and mangled cardboard box. The license plates stuck jauntily up over the edge like a flag of felony. "Not much else to do until it gets dark," Jeremy said. "I believe I'll go have a liedown, since I'll apparently be up late a second night in a row."

"Yeah," Simon said, checking the spot nearest the door. The van was still missing. "It's your own fault, though."

"Yes, what was I thinking?" Jeremy said, brushing past Simon. "I should have just taken Nate into the site with me and allowed him to select his own materials, that would have saved me ever so much trouble—"

Simon couldn't decide whether to shudder or to laugh, so in the end he did a little of both. "Okay, okay, you've made your point, smart guy," he said. "And also, what did I say about not recruiting my people?"

Dave was still working at his desk, eyes glued to the screen. Nate had spread a bunch of the smaller boxes out on the floor behind Dave's chair and was sorting through a box of blasting caps with a matter-of-factness that Simon found positively unnerving. Simon shut the door behind him with excess care; for all he knew, startling Nate might bring down the whole wing. "That's safe, right, Specs?" he said, trying to keep his voice low.

"Should be," Nate said, holding up one of the thin metal cylinders and frowning at it. "I mean, as long as I don't jam one of these into an electrical outlet, and even then I'd probably only hurt myself."

"So...don't do that," Simon said. "Wow, saying that makes me feel so responsible. So, Dave, have you noticed that I'm here yet?"

"Uh huh," Dave said absently.

"Did you remember to have lunch, Dave?"

"Uh huh."

"Can I stick my finger in your ear, Dave?"

"Uh huh."

"My work here is done," Simon told Nate. "Where's Johnny?"

"I don't know," said Nate, still giggling a little. "Did you check in his room?"

"That was more of an idle question than an actual need to know," Simon said. "It's no big deal."

Nate picked up another of the blasting caps. “Oh, okay. I haven’t seen him since I finished up with the boxes and came inside.”

“What?” Dave said, belatedly surfacing.

“Halloooo!” Mike bellowed, out in the hall. The hallway caught his voice and bounced it back, amplifying it into something that by all rights should have broken windows and neutered animals; it definitely woke Simon, who’d been catnapping on the white couch. “We’re hooooooooome!” Mike cried.

Simon swung his legs down off the couch and went to the door, opening it just as Sandra jabbed an elbow into Mike’s side. Mike yelped, only adding to the general din. “So,” Simon said, “I take it you’re *home*.”

“Gosh, you’re smart, Templar,” Mike said, cheerful despite being nearly doubled over. “I guess that’s why you’re the boss!”

“Among other reasons, yes,” said Simon. “Spring, what are those?”

“Riot batons,” Sandra said, spinning one expertly in her hand. “Want one? There’s a special holster on the uniform belt for them and everything.”

Simon eyed the baton, then held out a hand. Sandra spun it around in a high and showy arc and smacked the end into Simon’s palm. Simon manfully did not wince, although he’d have liked to, and took the baton. “Where’d you get these, Spring?”

“Martial-arts store,” Sandra said. “There was one a couple of blocks away from the auto-paint place. I only got two because buying more would look strange, but this way some of us can have them.”

Simon flipped the baton over and took hold of the crosspiece, trying to ignore his stinging palm. “Goddamn, look at you, Spring, you’re all *Terminator 2* with that thing. You actually know how to use one of these?”

“I think it’s safe to say that I could cause you irreparable harm with one,” Sandra said.

“Over the years I’ve come to accept the fact that you could probably cause me irreparable harm with anything you happened to be holding, Spring,” Simon hesitated, then held out the baton. “Nah, I’ll pass. Let someone else wear it.”

Sandra took it back, tossing it into the air and catching it neatly by the crosspiece on its way back down. “Okay, boss. I’ll give it to Johnny, probably—”

“Awwuh,” said Mike, his face falling. “C’mon, babe, I want one! I need it to look macho!”

“Macho? What are you going to do, stuff it down your pants?”

“Ooh, *kinky*—”

“Kinky is if you stuff it down the *back* of your pants, Honda,” Simon said. Movement from down the hall caught his eye, and Simon glanced in that direction, then raised a hand in greeting. “Oh, look, you two woke up Archer. Good job.”

Jeremy joined them a moment later, looking irritatingly well-rested. “Couldn’t help but overhear the din,” he said affably. “Has the van been finished, then?”

“Sure has!” Mike said. “Goddamn, I’d a known a coat of shiny new black paint would make that van look so good, I’d a had it done earlier. I am seriously almost not ashamed to be seen driving it.”

Sandra spun one of the riot batons again, making Jeremy take a prudent step back. “We left it parked outside,” she said. “The paint’s mostly dry but still giving off some fumes.”

“Excellent,” Jeremy said, poking a hand into his jacket. “Oh, and I’ve something for you—”

“For me?” Mike squealed in a grating falsetto. “Oh, *Archer*, you shouldn’t have!” Snickering, he dropped back into his normal voice approximately two seconds before Simon could tell Sandra to hit him. “No, seriously, you really shouldn’t have, my old lady is like right here, she’s gonna get all jealous an’ shit . . .”

“Your old lady currently has riot batons in *both hands*,” Sandra said patiently. “Perhaps now was not the best time to make that insinuation.” She nudged Mike’s hip with the jabbing end of one baton.

“Man, why you threatenin’ *me* and not the guy who’s hittin’ on your man?” Mike whined.

“Habit?”

Jeremy cleared his throat. “Far be it from me to break up this tender moment, but . . .” He dropped a small green metallic square into Mike’s hand.

“An iPod?” Mike unwound the earbuds, boggled. “For serious? You got me an iPod? Aw, man, that’s sweet and all, but I ain’t no Mac fag.”

“Look again,” Jeremy said. “I think you’ll find that what you’re holding in your hand is actually your Italian tutor.”

Mike blinked, then clipped the tiny iPod to the collar of his t-shirt and stuck the earbuds in his ears. He pushed the button on the front and his mouth fell open. “Huh,” Mike said. “Goddamn! That’s awesome!”

The faint, scratchy sound of someone speaking in a measured voice carried ever so faintly to Simon. “I expect you’ll have two or three days to learn your lines,” Jeremy said.

“Sure, no problem,” Mike said, his eyes sliding half-shut. “*Arrestate*,” he said under his breath, “*Raggruppamento Operativo Speciale* . . .”

“That’s what’s stenciled on the riot shields, isn’t it?” Simon said. “What’s that mean?”

“The ROS is the elite anti-terrorist and anti-organized-crime arm of the *carabinieri*,” Jeremy said, crossing his arms over his chest. He was watching Mike, his eyes narrowed in assessment.

Simon considered this. “Elite is good,” he said, carefully. “As we are totally elite by nature and therefore deserve no less. Of course, that means that they’ll be *really* pissed at us if they catch us impersonating them.”

“True,” Jeremy said. “However, they’re exactly the branch of the Italian police that Volpe would be the most concerned with—I expect that he lives half his life expecting them at any moment.”

“*Nessun movimento*,” Mike said, apparently in agreement.

Mike still had the earbuds in at dinner, the tiny green iPod clipped to his collar like jewelry. Sometimes, during those odd little lulls when everybody happened to fall silent at once, Simon could hear the measured little voice droning tinnily on.

After dinner Johnny tossed a tarp over the kitchen island and proceeded to break down and lay out all three of his guns for cleaning. Feeling a little guilty, Simon jogged back to his room and fetched down the little SIG, which hadn’t been cleaned since Annabelle fired it. The two of them talking shop and cleaning guns attracted the others like they were magnetized, and by the time Jeremy came downstairs there were four of them around the island, which was covered with gun parts from end to end. “Well, that’s a rather unnerving sight,” Jeremy said, pulling on a pair of latex gloves.

“Only if you’re a criminal,” Simon said. “Oh. Wait. I forgot.” The sight of the gloves made him sit up and take notice, though; Simon put the SIG down. “Are you heading out now?”

Jeremy glanced at the kitchen windows, measuring the gathering dusk. “I thought I might,” he said. “By the time I get to Genoa it ought to be full dark, and I expect it will take me an hour or so to find an . . . appropriate vehicle.”

Following Jeremy’s gaze, Simon looked over at the windows. “You want me to come with you?”

“Thank you, but no,” said Jeremy. He was wearing the nondescript beige suit and the stupid white fedora, once again dressing like he didn’t want to be noticed. “For the actual, ah, shall we say ‘vehicle rental’? I’d prefer not to have to coordinate our efforts. I *am* accustomed to working alone.”

“Gotcha,” Simon said.

“If you’d like to come with me when I return the vehicle, though, I’d certainly welcome the company.” Jeremy headed over to the key safe and typed in the combination.

“Huh,” Simon said. “Let me see. Do I want to be caught in a stolen truck, with an internationally-wanted career criminal, sitting on top of enough stolen explosives to destroy half the city, when I’m already in the country illegally?”

“Sure you do,” Mike said genially. “C’mon, that shit is fuckin’ *manly*.”

“I’ll think about it,” Simon told Jeremy.

Jeremy plucked a set of keys from the key safe and swung the door closed. “Whatever you decide, Simon,” he said. The door to the garage opened and shut and he was gone. A moment later, a car started.

Sandra worked in silence until the garage door had rumbled back down and the headlights from Jeremy's car had made their way halfway down the drive. Glancing over her shoulder, she put her gun down and sighed. "Far be it from me to be the voice of reason here—"

"—but she's gonna be," Mike said.

"—but if he doesn't absolutely need you, you should probably let him go alone this time," Sandra finished, barely glancing in Mike's direction. "If he gets caught, or pulled over . . ."

Simon's immediate, reflexive reaction was irritation. He fought it down. "You know what, Spring? You're right." Mike whistled; Simon held up both hands. "Nope, nope, it's true, she's right. There are better things to risk my ass on."

"Which means you're going with him," Sandra said neutrally.

"Yeah, probably," Simon said. He picked up an empty clip, turned it over in his hands, and put it down again. "It's counterproductive and unintelligent, but now is not the time to start being logical about this."

"Maybe it is," Sandra said, her voice just a little sharp. "I didn't say we should drop everything and abandon him. I said maybe you should let him go alone, just this once."

"And you're right," Simon said. "I admit that, okay, Sandy? It's just that . . . well, it's too easy to picture some bentnose stepping out of a Genoese alley and shooting him in the head, and maybe I'm just being paranoid—"

"—maybe—"

"—but I'd rather be along and have nothing happen than vice versa," Simon finished, no longer bothering to hide his irritation.

"Normally I'd tell you that you're the boss right about now, but you know what, I can't," Sandra said, throwing up her hands. "If you're caught and made, how long will it be before they link you to us? Five minutes? Ten? We're on *record* as being on vacation in Italy! No one would ever believe that was a coincidence, even if it was!"

"Sandy," Simon said, striving to sound placatory.

"Don't you 'Sandy' me," Sandra said. She looked at Mike, then at Johnny. "Someone back me up here, Jesus."

Mike twitched back with alacrity, throwing up his arms to ward her off. "Aw shit, don't you drag me into this," he said. "I ain't gonna try and tell Templar what to do any more than I am gonna argue with you, shit."

Sandra's lips thinned. "What about you?" she asked Johnny.

After a moment of deep, intense thought, Johnny shrugged.

"Okay! Never mind." Sandra braced both hands against the edge of the counter and squeezed her eyes shut. "*God*, I hate this."

"Sandy," Simon said again, still trying to smooth things over.

"Don't you dare try and placate me," Sandra snapped, her eyes still closed.

Simon went still. "Okay," he said.

“You know, I get why you’re here,” Sandra said, after nearly a full minute of steaming. “And I know why *we’re* here. And I can even make a pretty cogent argument for why it’s the right thing to do, *especially* now that we’ve got that Zip disk back, God, I want to see Archer ram that thing sideways up Karpol’s ass as much as anybody else here—” she stomped on Mike’s foot without breaking her conversational stride and Mike yowled and didn’t say it “—but just because it’s the right thing to do does not make it any less than terminally stupid, and now you want to add a heaping helping of unnecessary risk!”

Simon waited for a moment, just to make sure she was done. Sandra knew way too much for him to risk *really* pissing her off. “I know,” he said. “You’re right.”

“And yet you’re still going,” Sandra said, snapping off every accusatory word like some kind of Old Testament proclamation.

“I won’t go,” Simon said. “Okay? I want to, but you’re right. It’s an unnecessary risk.”

That took some of the wind out of Sandra’s sails, and she deflated with relief. “Okay,” she said, letting her head fall forward. “Thank you.” She sighed, then looked up. “Archer can take care of himself,” she said.

“Yeah, that he can,” Simon said. Some contrary part of himself made him add, “Inasmuch as anybody can take care of themselves in the face of an anonymous bullet from an alley.”

“What would you do in that case, if you were there?” Sandra said, her voice going neutral again. “Throw yourself in front of it? Are you going to take a bullet for Archer now?”

Simon paused, then picked up the little SIG and slid it back into the ankle holster. “Why not?” he said, his voice even. “He took one for me.”

Sandra spluttered. “That is *not* a fair comparison—” Her protest broke cleanly off in the middle like her tongue had snapped in two. “Okay, no,” she said, more calmly. “I am not going to be the bitch here.”

“No, like I said, you’re right,” Simon said. “And I won’t go, because you’re right. Sure, he took a bullet for me and, I might add, personally saved the life of every person at this table—*island*—whatever, but he’s also the one who put us into that situation in the first place. So you’re right about that, too. It’s not a fair comparison.”

“Goddammit, stop being reasonable at me,” Sandra said, putting her hands over her eyes. “Now you *are* making me into the bitch.”

“Not my intention, Spring,” Simon said. “You know I count on you, right? Well, I count on you to step up and tell me when I’m being an idiot, too. It’s part of your job description. Right under ‘beat up whoever I tell you to’. That’s not bitch, it’s boss. Okay?”

For a long moment the kitchen was quiet. Eventually Sandra sighed again and let her hands drop, leaving a little smear of gun oil on her forehead. “I don’t

know if any of you have noticed this, but I'm really deeply uncomfortable with this whole situation," she said, her voice overly bright.

"You're not the only one," said Simon. "Three or four more days and it'll all be over, Spring."

"I know," Sandra said. She picked up her gun. "I just hope it's worth it."

"Like I said," said Simon, "you're not the only one."

Jeremy was gone for close to three hours. By the time headlights splashed back up the driveway Simon had completely lost the ability to sit still, although he tried to fake it whenever someone was looking at him; even Sandra was starting to look a little uncertain by the end, which gave Simon this cruel little feeling of *so there*.

The headlights galvanized them all. By the time Jeremy pulled up outside the garage and shut off the engine, everyone but Dave was out there waiting for him, Johnny already pulling on a pair of gloves. The truck that Jeremy had managed to steal had a distinct governmental look to it, something about that bland, blocky whiteness and clean, information-free logo.

"Please don't touch the truck with your bare hands," Jeremy said pleasantly, dropping down out of the driver's seat. Simon very nearly did a double-take: Jeremy was wearing a pair of ugly dark blue coveralls, matching work gloves, and a service-sector hat, his hair scraped messily into his eyes like overlong bangs. His face was vaguely gray and speckled with black, like that of a man who got filthy for a living and never quite managed to wash all the dirt off. "Nor the boxes: this truck and its contents will be scrutinized quite thoroughly, later. Let's do hurry. I'd like to be underway in half an hour."

Simon's team streamed around the side of the garage, heading for the gazebo out back. "That's a new look for you," Simon said once they were gone, lingering long enough to pull on his rock-climbing gloves. "Very, uh, earthy. I could almost be fooled into thinking you know what it's like to work for a living."

"God forbid," Jeremy said, trotting around behind the truck to open the back doors. His eyes nearly gleamed in the dark; his blood was up. "Of course, if the working-class look excites you, I suppose I could be convinced to slum a bit on occasion?"

Simon's eyes flicked to the corner of the garage. No one was in sight. He relaxed. "Nah," he said. "For one thing, that is not the kind of dirty that turns me on, and for another, manly just looks so wrong on you—" His ears picked up the faint sound of someone returning and Simon broke off there.

Mike was the first to return, lugging one of the larger boxes in both hands; Nate was right behind him, carrying a smaller box. Jeremy took the box from Mike and hopped up into the back of the truck to stow it. After one last look Simon joined the queue, passing Johnny and the wheelbarrow on his way out to the gazebo.

The gazebo was emptied in slightly under ten minutes. Jeremy ranged around in the back of the truck, strapping down the boxes; the rest of them stood in a loose semicircle, watching. There was a bunch of loose crap in the back of the truck, more sets of coveralls, random tools, clipboards, and just plain junk. Jeremy kept pausing to kick it aside.

Finally Jeremy deemed himself satisfied and jumped down out of the truck, reaching up to tweak the brim of his cap like it was his fedora. "There we are," he said. "I shouldn't be more than an hour, this time. Did you want to come, Simon?"

"I think I'm going to stay here," Simon said, carefully not looking at Sandra. "If you needed my help for something or if Volpe was breathing down your neck, that'd be one thing, but as it is, it's just an unnecessary risk on my part."

Jeremy tugged at his work gloves. "That's true, I suppose," he said, pleasantly enough. "Ah, well, your loss, having to stay here in this glorious villa instead of driving about in a battered water-services truck that smells faintly of chlorine and excrement—"

"You pass me some of those coveralls, I'll come with you," Johnny offered.

It was hard for Simon to tell who was the most surprised, Jeremy, Sandra, or himself. Jeremy was the first to recover. "I'd be glad of the company," he said, hopping back up into the truck and rummaging around.

"You sure about this?" Simon asked.

Johnny pulled the holstered gun off his belt and waited. "Yep," he said. "Coupla guys in coveralls, who's gonna look twice?"

"It's your call," Simon said, relaxing. Johnny was a level-headed guy, and *armed*—"Hell, I'm not the boss of you at the moment, couldn't stop you if I wanted to."

"Try this one?" Jeremy said, holding out one of the blue uniform suits.

Johnny handed his gun to Mike and stepped into the coveralls; they proved to be a bit too long for him, but a fair fit all the same. Johnny zipped them up, then patted them down. Jeremy handed him one of the caps, which Johnny pulled low over his eyes, and the gun went in the pocket of his coveralls. "Right," Johnny said, heading for the passenger seat. "Let's get the hell out of Dodge."

"Texas," Sandra said, and stopped.

Johnny nodded at her, shifting his toothpick from one side of his mouth to the other. "Nothin' to it," he said. He swung into the passenger seat and shut the door behind him.

Jeremy closed the back doors, hiding the boxes. "An hour or so," he said, touching his fingers to his cap in a half-assed salute. "I wouldn't worry until it's been two hours."

"Yeah, easy for you to say," Simon said, watching Jeremy climb into the driver's seat. A moment later the truck started up with a rumbling, rattling, farting sound and crunched off down the drive.

Whatever Jeremy had said, it did take them close to two hours to get back. Simon had tried to get some sleep, and mostly failed at that, and tried to read, and mostly failed at that, and had finally pulled on a t-shirt over his pajama pants and picked his way down to the darkened kitchen to wait, and to watch out the front window, and incidentally to scavenge the leftover pizza from dinner.

The sight of the headlights coming up the drive made Simon's stomach unclench for the first time in hours, and possibly for the first time all day. Not really thinking about why Simon stepped back into the shadows; the car's headlights splashed in through the window and ran lightly over the darkened kitchen but never quite got to where Simon was standing. The garage door went up, the car pulled in, and its engine shut off.

Simon stayed where he was, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning back against the counter. He wasn't hidden, not precisely, but in a kitchen as big and dark as this one it would take some looking around to actually spot him. The garage door went back down and two car doors slammed, two sets of footsteps heading for the door.

Against the darkness of the kitchen the light from the garage was a muddy, too-bright yellow. Johnny was the first one in, no longer wearing the coveralls, his gun once again on his belt; Jeremy followed him, carrying his jacket slung negligently over one shoulder. His hair was smoothed back again, same as ever.

Simon opened his mouth to say something and then thought better of it. Jeremy closed the door behind himself and cast them all into nearly-perfect darkness. "And there we are," he said, tiredness coloring his speech. "Safe and sound. Thank you for coming with me."

"Sure," Johnny said. "Goin' on upstairs. Need a bath and some sleep."

"My God, so do I," said Jeremy, laughing a little. "Go on, then. I've just got to put these keys away." He turned to the key safe, rapidly tapping out the combination despite the darkness; Johnny headed for the door, his bootheels loud on the kitchen floor.

By the time Jeremy hung up the keys and closed the safe, the sound of Johnny's passage was just a dying echo in the hallway outside. Jeremy turned and headed for the door, but his steps slowed halfway there; eventually he drifted to a stop, his eyes searching the darkness around him.

Simon couldn't help but grin, just a little. "Hey," he said.

Jeremy shut his eyes and breathed out a laugh, his shoulders relaxing. "I *thought* I sensed something," he said. "What are you doing down here in the dark?"

"Raiding the fridge," Simon said. "The rest of that pizza and I deserved each other. Also, waiting for you."

"As always, I see you have your priorities in order," Jeremy said, drifting across the kitchen floor towards him and stopping a prudent ten feet away. "As

for myself, I believe my first priority is a bath. My God, the things some public servants wear.”

“On general principles: hey, I resent that, unless it wasn’t aimed at me, in which case I resent it anyway.” Simon plucked absently at his pajama pants. “Everything went okay, I’m assuming.”

Jeremy nodded, a motion that Simon could only just barely see. “Perfectly well,” he said. “We left the truck parked illegally just half a block or so from a police station and walked back to where I’d left the car. They’ll discover the truck any moment now, and after a rousing bureaucratic dance, someone will eventually get around to looking inside. In twelve hours they’ll all be patting themselves on the back for having pinched the truck and explosives right out from under the noses of the stupid criminals who made the elementary mistake of parking their stolen truck illegally, and . . .” He paused there and made a lazy, all-encompassing gesture with his free hand. “The world will, presumably, keep on turning.”

“Vivid,” Simon said approvingly. “Also, sounds about right.”

“People are the same the world over,” Jeremy said, some of that tiredness leaching back into his voice. “God above. A bath now. If I weren’t so bloody filthy I’d just fall directly into bed.”

Simon pushed himself off the counter. “That? Is a plan,” he said. “Want company? I mean, if the tub in the black room is anything like the tub in mine, six people could comfortably play water polo in it, so I’m guessing there’s room.”

“Mm.” Jeremy fell still and eyed him thoughtfully. “I don’t know that I’m up to . . . ah . . . *water polo*, Simon.”

“See?” Simon asked, putting his hand on Jeremy’s shoulder and getting him moving towards the door. “Significant pause, charming euphemism. You do it *all the time*.”

The next day dawned clear, brilliant, and scorchingly hot, even up in the hills. Air-conditioning was just one of the many modern conveniences that the massive villa boasted (and Simon did not want to think about how expensive that must be), but even air-conditioning couldn't compete with the July sun shining in through twenty-foot-high windows. The air in the hallway outside wavered, and the windows were hot to the touch.

Inside the white room, it was comfortable, if blinding. Simon had given up on his book a long time ago—he was running out of books anyway, he should make this one last—and wandered over to the smaller windows in his room, resting his forehead against the glass and staring out at the vast green expanse of the back yard and, off in the distance, the gazebo.

The grounds were hallucinogenically green. Simon knew how this was accomplished, having tripped over more than one hidden sprinkler head while rambling about the grounds, but it still looked wrong. Like Astroturf. The gazebo was empty, the reduced amount of explosives having been moved elsewhere—hopefully somewhere cool, Simon thought, and he made a mental note to ask Nate about that—and the paths that led to and from the gazebo were just as blindingly white as the room Simon was standing in.

For his part, Simon was surprised how calm he felt. It had something to do with events coming to a head with Sandra last night: it was out, it had been said, and his resolve had withstood the test. And Johnny was demonstrably on his side, if quietly, which wasn't exactly a surprise but was still nice to know—Johnny appeared at the limits of Simon's peripheral vision like a heat hallucination brought on by that train of thought, and for a moment Simon believed him to be just that.

Simon idly craned his neck to watch Johnny go. Despite the heat Johnny took his time, rambling down one of the paths towards the gazebo. He disappeared under the eaves, moving under shade, and didn't come out again. "Huh," Simon said. "Too hot for that shit, Texas."

If everything went according to plan, this would all be over two or three days

from now. Of course, there was little chance that everything *would* go according to plan, especially not when a large part of the plan seemed to hinge on a crazy fucker like Bran, but that's how Jeremy wanted it, and whether Simon liked it or not, Jeremy was in charge. Simon only wished he knew a little more about the actual plan; Jeremy's style of leadership was so closemouthed that it had made Simon vow repeatedly to stop being such a need-to-know bastard once he got his job back. Assuming he got his job back—Simon wrenched his mind away from that thought.

As long as he was thinking about it, he pulled out his phone and called home. No messages. Again. Good sign? Bad sign? Both? Simon had no idea. A few more days and it wouldn't matter; a few more days and he could sit around his apartment all he liked, going stir-crazy with boredom and nerves. It didn't sound appealing. It never would.

A brief flash of black caught Simon's eye. Jeremy had just rounded the corner of the garage, heading up the path towards the gazebo, apparently impervious to being roasted alive inside all that black. He was moving pretty quickly, though; maybe he was trying to get back under cover before he burst into flame. Frowning, Simon watched Jeremy until he, too, vanished into the gazebo, then went to put on his sneakers. He didn't feel quite so calm any more.

Dave squawked and shied away from Simon's door as Simon threw it open, accidentally stumbling into the sunlight, which made Dave yelp and throw himself in the other direction before he could broil. "Uh. Morning, Templar," he said.

"It's afternoon, Stone," Simon said. Despite the heat and his hurry, he paused, intrigued. "What are you doing out of your trance?"

"I finished up the monitoring program just now!" Dave said happily. "So I was coming to tell you that, and then I was going to go have some lunch and then go back and start testing everything to make sure it all works."

Simon clapped Dave on the shoulder. "You are the man, Stone, and I should tell you that more often," he said. "Come on, I'll walk you down to the kitchen while you reassure me that this monitoring program is safe and secret and can't be tracked back to us in any way."

"Okay," Dave said, then blinked and hastily added, "And it's totally safe, I promise!"

"Tell me about it," Simon commanded, heading for the stairs and the promise of momentary cool.

Dave hurried after him. "Well, the machine-killer sends out this microsecond-long squirt of data whenever it finds a tagged machine, and then deletes the communications protocol before it does anything else, so it's already gone by the time the machine starts to go even a little funny," he said, breathless. "Even if someone is smart enough to get a clean copy of the viral program and dig out the data squirt, the destination is encrypted and pretty anonymous anyway, so they'll know it went somewhere but not where or to who? And then every few seconds

the destination re-encrypts the data squirts that it's received and bounces them to me, but not directly, and I don't think anyone without some kind of governmental backing can follow them out from there . . ."

"So it's safe?" Simon said, interrupting the flow of words. The atrium was an oven. Simon edged around the pool of white-hot sunlight beaming down from the skylight. "Because I gotta say, while I know most of those words, they don't make any sense in that configuration."

"It's safe," Dave said earnestly, following him. "It's like . . . could you track a gnat if you didn't know it was there and didn't see it leave?"

"Maybe I could," Simon said, trying not to grin as he pushed through the doors and into the lower hallway. "You never know, Stone. After all, I'm relatively awesome."

Dave wilted. "Um," he said, squinting in thought.

Simon waved him to silence. "It's okay," he said. "I'll take your metaphor in the spirit in which it was intended."

"Oh," Dave said, perking up. "Okay, then. Because you'd still have to interrogate the gnat once you caught him, and I don't think you speak gnat, no matter how awesome you are."

"Your facility with the English language never ceases to bemuse me, Stone," Simon said. He banged into the kitchen, Dave on his heels.

Mike and Sandra were both there, washing up after lunch. Or Sandra was washing up, anyway; Mike was wandering around, still wearing the little green iPod and absently bopping back and forth to his Italian lessons. "Hey, Templar," Sandra said, rinsing a plate under the faucet and sticking it in the dishwasher. She looked and sounded tired, but there was none of last night's anger to it. "You missed lunch."

"I had a late breakfast," Simon said. "Wow. It's actually cool in here."

"*Cadalo*," Mike added. "*Congelate. Fermate*. Whoa. It's a Dave."

"Is that what that is?" Sandra asked, squinting at Dave. "It's been such a long time. I'd forgotten what they look like."

Dave ducked his head. "Just thought I'd have a sandwich," he said weakly, heading for the fridge.

"Man, I work, and I slave, and he thinks he can just waltz in here and have a sandwich," Mike said, and then Simon pulled open the door and stepped into the garage and the rest of that exchange was lost to posterity.

The heat waiting beyond the outside door was like a sledgehammer to the forehead. It was all Simon could do not to reel back into the relative cool of the garage, and his skin prickled, warning him that he was going to start sweating like a pig as soon as his body got over the initial shock. Firmly ignoring it Simon headed out into the backyard at a deliberately slow pace. "La, la, here I am, just wandering around, what a coincidence," he muttered under his breath.

They were both still there, standing in the shade just about an arm's length apart, so intent on their conversation that Simon unconsciously sped up. Johnny had his thumbs hooked in his belt and Jeremy was leaning casually against one of the gazebo's columns with his arms crossed over his chest; his eyes flicked to Simon as Simon drifted closer. *Here comes Simon*, Jeremy said, tilting his head and raising a hand in greeting; Simon couldn't hear the words but he could see Jeremy's lips shaping them, as plain as day. Johnny glanced back over his shoulder, then nodded at Simon, wheeling halfway around to include him in the conversation. "Goddamn, kids, it's too hot to be out here," Simon said, tromping up the steps and stopping a few feet away. "Especially if you tend to dress in all black like the inside of a closet."

"Ain't that bad," Johnny opined. "You grew up in Texas, you'd know hot. This ain't it."

"Inside of a *closet*," Jeremy said, laughing. "Just what are you insinuating, Simon?"

"All I'm saying is that the two of you were *deep* in conversation when I spotted you," Simon said, trying to grin and mostly succeeding. "You two having some kind of, of whirlwind Italian romance?"

Johnny glanced at Jeremy. "Think someone's jealous?"

"Possibly," said Jeremy, eyeing Simon with undisguised amusement.

"Yep," Johnny said with great satisfaction. "Knew he wanted my ass."

"Because if it's not a *romance*, I'm going to start worrying that you're scheming behind my back or something, and you really do not want to make me paranoid at this point in time," Simon said. "Also, I have no official opinion on the state of your ass, Texas."

"It's nothing like that," Jeremy said, waving the implication away. "He had a few questions about his role in the upcoming—oh, what is it you call them, Simon—the upcoming *operation*, and I was doing my best to answer those questions."

That was so patently absurd that Simon snorted out a laugh. "Sure you were," he said. "And I'm sure I interrupted you two just seconds before you pulled out the graphs and the pie charts. Who are you kidding? You don't answer questions."

"I'm not kidding anyone," Jeremy said.

"Just answered a question, too," Johnny pointed out. "Case you didn't notice."

Jeremy had to press his lips together to keep from laughing again. "He had very specific questions about his particular role in things," Jeremy said. "I'll certainly answer those."

"Huh," said Simon. He glanced at Johnny. "You get your answers?"

"I'm good," Johnny said.

Simon considered them both for a moment. As odd as it seemed, they were united *against* him—"I don't suppose either of you feel like filling me in," he said, throwing the idea out there.

"I assure you that I'll explain in detail during the briefing," Jeremy said. "Or in as much detail as I can—"

"Knew that was coming," Simon said under his breath.

"—because Bran and I will largely be winging it," Jeremy finished. "I can't say exactly what will happen when the two teams are separated. Ultimately that depends on Volpe and his people."

"And on Bran," Simon said.

Jeremy inclined his head. "And on Bran."

Simon held up both hands in surrender. "Okay," he said. "Okay. I've made my feelings on the Bran matter clear and I won't chew that mouthful twice. These are my people, though, and even when I'm not responsible for them, I'm responsible for them, okay?"

"I'm aware," said Jeremy. "You've made that very clear."

Simon started to respond to that, then stopped to examine it a little. Had he heard that internal eye-rolling or hadn't he? "Have I?" he finally said, keeping his voice neutral.

"I don't want them to be hurt any more than you do," Jeremy said. "I'm doing the best I can to minimize their risk."

"Yeah," Simon said, relaxing a little. He glanced at Johnny. "Texas, can you give us a minute?"

Johnny scratched the back of his head, then shrugged. "Sure," he said. "We're done here anyway." As he went past Simon he knuckled Simon's shoulder in a generally friendly fashion, then thumped down the steps and headed back towards the garage.

Both Simon and Jeremy watched him go. Simon took a quick look around, just to make sure that there weren't any other members of his team hiding in the bushes, then looked down at his feet. "Sandy kind of reamed me out last night," he said, dropping his voice. "She's not happy with us being here at all."

"I know," Jeremy said, his own voice equally soft. He nodded towards the garage, where Johnny had just been. "Johnny told me as much when we were out with the truck."

"Guess I'm not really happy with us being here either," said Simon. "When it was just me, that was one thing. I've got the right to be suicidal if I want to be, you know? But I don't want them here, and I really don't want them involved, and the fact that I don't have any *say* in the matter . . ." He trailed off there and laughed, more bitterly that he'd been intending.

Jeremy was silent for so long that Simon finally looked back up. Jeremy was looking off into the distance, gazing at the faraway treeline, hazy and wavering

in the heat. "If I tell you that 'now you know how I felt when you popped up in Milan', you'll get angry, won't you?"

"No," Simon said, fighting down his immediate pulse of anger. "No. Because . . . I mean, on the surface, the situations are similar. I get that. But I'm just one guy and I can take care of myself. You and I both know that."

"So can they," Jeremy pointed out.

"Some of them," Simon shot back. "And you had a say. You had plenty of say. You had a God-given perfect opportunity to walk off and take me right back out of the picture, and you didn't take it."

Jeremy was silent.

"And," Simon added, tapping his chest, "I'm here because this situation is my fault. They don't have that excuse. They're just here because they think I need some kind of, of *help*."

"What do you want me to do, then, Simon?" Jeremy looked back at him. "Should we leave them here and go? Abandon them in hopes that they'll go home?"

"No," Simon said, unwillingly. "Not that I haven't considered it, but . . . if I did that to them, they'd never trust me again."

"You could always go home. Take them with you. It'll discommode me quite a bit at this point, but I can certainly come up with something else—"

"No! I mean . . . I came because this is my fault and I wanted to fix it, right?" Abruptly Simon dropped onto the nearest bench and put his face in his hands. "I just hate not having any goddamned control over anything any more," he said, his voice muffled.

After a moment, Jeremy touched his shoulder. "I know," Jeremy said.

Shrugging off Jeremy's hand, Simon sat back, staring up at the bell-shaped roof of the gazebo. "I'm trusting you with my *people*," he said.

"I know," Jeremy said again.

"And . . . I wouldn't, if I had a choice," Simon said.

Jeremy's silence managed to clearly convey another *I know*.

"Because you trust Bran." Simon sighed. "Which calls your judgment into serious question."

Jeremy was still silent.

"But . . . Christ, I don't even know any more. Forget it." Simon stood up. "All I can say is that you'd better pull this off, whatever it is. If any of them get hurt or killed because of your cockamamie plan and your . . . your Bran . . ." Simon stopped.

"You'll kill me?" Jeremy asked, raising both eyebrows. He didn't sound like he was joking.

"No," Simon said. "No, probably not." He paused again and looked out over the acres of lawn so green they almost looked plastic, while in the back of his mind several certainties and impulses came together and hardened into something

like concrete. He looked back at Jeremy, his face and voice both carefully under control. "If any of them get hurt because of you," he said, measuring the words, "whatever this is between us, it's over."

Already mostly expressionless, Jeremy's face went absolutely blank. His right eyelid twitched, once. "That is a dire threat," he finally said, reaching up to massage the twitch away.

"That includes your little deal with the Bureau," Simon said. "Your file goes live again and gets updated to the best of my recollection. I won't come after you—not my jurisdiction—but I'll cooperate with anyone who wants to. And if I see you again . . ."

"I take your point, Simon," Jeremy said, looking away.

"Okay," Simon said. His stomach hurt a little, but he was, once again, calm.

The silence stretched taut between them. Finally Jeremy stirred, still not looking at Simon. "Do you still want to come with me this afternoon, then?"

"Well, yeah," Simon said, shrugging. "I mean, that's why I'm here."

Jeremy laughed under his breath, sounding more astounded than amused. "Of course," he said. "That's why you're here." He patted Simon's shoulder and headed for the steps. "We'll go in an hour or so," Jeremy said.

"Right," said Simon, following him.

A little over an hour later they were in the red Ferrari once again, with the top down and the fake license plates on, rolling towards Genoa. Jeremy was in his blacks, wearing his sunglasses, apparently unbloodied by their little talk; Simon, slouched in the passenger seat, wore the Redskins hat, his little SIG in the ankle holster, and one of Johnny's three guns in an inside-the-pants holster in the small of his back. The pressure of it against his tailbone was a little more comforting than Simon liked to admit, and occasionally he shifted in his seat just to check that it was still there.

The newly-black van followed a discreet distance behind them, Mike at the wheel, Sandra beside him, Johnny lost somewhere in back. It *was* amazing, the difference that a shiny new coat of paint had made. The van underneath was still ugly and lightly dented, but newly ominous in an entirely different way. Less 'child molester' and more 'serial killer', to Simon's way of thinking.

Simon was on his guard all the way into Genoa; the roar of the wind made conversation pretty much impossible anyway, and after a few desultory attempts, Jeremy gave up. It seemed impossible that they would make it all the way to Jeremy's chosen hotel without incident, and yet, they did, making their escort mostly superfluous. Jeremy pulled the Ferrari into the hotel's turnaround, popped the miniscule trunk, and tossed the keys casually to the valet, followed by a folded bill. "Careful with my car, now," he said cheerily, fishing his suitcase out of the trunk and closing it again. "I'm rather attached to it." The van rolled on by, patrolling the perimeter. Jeremy ignored it.

Simon tossed the Redskins cap into the car and followed Jeremy into the hotel. It was one of those tiny jawdroppingly-expensive boutique hotels that Jeremy seemed to favor, the kind that always gave Simon a severe inferiority complex; Simon stuck close and tried not to stare at anything, following Jeremy up to the desk.

"I'm afraid I haven't a reservation," Jeremy told the desk clerk, abashed. "But I *have* stayed here in the past and I was hoping you had a room to spare. Anything's fine. My name is Thomas Angobrinde?" A folded fifty-euro bill peeped out from his left hand, just barely visible under the Thomas Angobrinde ID.

The desk clerk looked snootily uncertain right up until he typed that name into the computer in front of him. "Oh! Yes, Mr. Angobrinde—" his accent turned it into something like *yais, meester Angobreend*—"if you will just give me a minute . . ."

Two minutes later Jeremy had a keycard and was heading for the stairs. As soon as he went around the corner, his stride lengthened and his meaningless, pleasant smile vanished. "Ten minutes," he said, his voice brisk.

"Ten minutes," Simon agreed, checking his watch.

Jeremy put the little 'Do Not Disturb' sign on the door and shut it behind them. He put his suitcase down by the side of the desk, took a deep breath, and then snatched the suitcase back up off the floor, yanked it open, and rifled its contents, leaving them on the floor where they fell.

Simon pulled out the desk chair and put it on its side on the floor, one eye on his watch. "Seven minutes," he said. "Is that good?"

Jeremy tossed his empty suitcase into a corner. "Angle it a little more back towards the window," he said. "And then come here, please."

Simon looked down at the chair, then kicked it into position. "There," he said, stepping over the chair and heading for Jeremy. "What's up?"

Jeremy put his back to the bed. "Give me a shove," he said.

Simon boggled at him. "What?"

"I said, give me a good shoving," said Jeremy, thumping the heels of his hands lightly off Simon's chest, as if to demonstrate. "You're upset with me, aren't you? It shouldn't be such a stretch."

"I'm not going to—" *Hit you*, Simon meant to say, but before he could articulate the words Jeremy's hands slammed into his chest, rocking him back onto his heels. Unprepared, Simon staggered back half a step, even as he reflexively straightarmed Jeremy away in response. Jeremy went windmilling backwards. The corner of the mattress caught him behind one knee and Jeremy went down, bouncing off the wall, dragging the mattress halfway around and pulling the covers most of the way off. The opposite corner of the mattress slammed forward into the nightstand, knocking it over; the lamp broke when it

hit the floor. “*Shit!*” Simon yelped, cringing against the sudden outbreak of noise. Bracing one hand against the wall, he reached for Jeremy with the other.

Jeremy gently pushed Simon’s outstretched hand away, then struggled to his feet, pulling the covers even more sadly askew. “There,” he said, surveying the damage. There was a small dent in the plaster where his shoulder had hit and a faint dusting of plaster on the sleeve of his black jacket. Simon was trying not to look at it. “That’s perfect,” said Jeremy. “Nothing more—how much time have we got left?”

Simon checked his watch, panting. “Five minutes, and was that really necessary?”

“Adds verisimilitude,” Jeremy said, with the ghost of a smile. “Besides, admit it, you rather wanted to do that.”

“Jesus, I don’t know what kind of vicious thug you think I *am*—” Simon threw up an arm to block Jeremy’s hand as it darted for his face, then grabbed Jeremy’s wrist before he realized what he was doing and slung him against the wall.

Jeremy bounced lightly off the plaster and came back up, his eyes sparkling, his grin intent, his hands hovering in front of his stomach. “*God*, I love your reflexes,” Jeremy said, nearly purring it, and struck lightly at Simon’s face again.

This time Simon drove him into the wall and pinned him there, more to make him stop than anything else. They were both gasping. Plaster flaked gently off the wall behind Jeremy. “You know what you’re insane I don’t think that this is the *time*,” Simon said, growling it all out in a single breathless phrase, and then he sank both hands into Jeremy’s hair and kissed him hard enough to bounce his head off the wall again.

A handful of precious minutes passed in a red haze—finally Jeremy broke away, breathing hard against the side of Simon’s face. “How long?” he asked, his voice hoarse.

“Uh?” Simon said, blinking to dispel the fog. “Oh.” He checked his watch. “Shit, we really need to go, they’re going to wonder what happened to us.”

Jeremy nudged at Simon’s shoulder, laughing under his breath. “I can’t go anywhere with you pinning me to the wall, Mr. Drake—”

“Well, Jesus, whose fault is that?” Simon threw up his hands and backed off, still breathing hard.

Thirty seconds later they abandoned the trashed hotel room, leaving the ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign on the door. Jeremy darted down the hallway, nearly running, and then abandoned the ‘nearly’ and simply ran headlong down the stairs, a silent, light-footed black blur; Simon took the stairs two and three at a time, trying not to make too much of a racket. Jeremy pulled up sharply two feet from the corner and Simon nearly ran into him. “Slowly now,” Jeremy breathed, patting Simon’s

chest. He took a single, deep breath, let it out, then sauntered around the corner and into the lobby as if he had all the time in the world.

No one was there besides the desk clerk, who straightened up hopefully. "Will you need your car, Mr. Angobrin?" He was already holding the phone expectantly.

"You see, this is why I insist on staying here when I come to Genoa," Jeremy informed Simon, the glitter in his eyes almost overshadowed by his lazy grin. He waved dismissively at the clerk. "No, thank you," Jeremy said, angling towards the counter. "We'll be walking tonight, I believe, but I do thank you for asking."

Simon just barely saw the folded note that passed from Jeremy to the desk clerk, but whatever it was, it was large enough to make the man snap upright and damned near salute; the valet leaped to attention as Jeremy came out. Jeremy waved him off as well, and the two of them headed away from the hotel on foot. Simon put himself between Jeremy and the street, just as a matter of course.

As soon as they were out of sight of the hotel, Simon reached back and casually tugged his shirt free, clearing the gun in the small of his back. The van was nowhere in sight—still circling the hotel, probably. "Keep walking or hole up?" Simon asked under his breath.

"We ought to get off the street, if we can," Jeremy said. The fancy-ass hotel was surrounded by equally fancy-ass apartment buildings and expensive little shops, and the third or fourth one they passed had one of those deep entrance hallways like a tunnel punched into the front of the building. Jeremy ducked into it. "That will do," he said, retreating down the entryway almost to the door.

"Right," Simon said, leaning against the wall by the entrance and pulling out his phone.

Passersby paid him little attention, except when one of them decided he was in their way, and even then they only edged by with a put-upon sigh. Pretending to listen to the nonexistent voice on the other end of the line, Simon watched the street. Two minutes later the black van rounded the corner, down by the hotel. "There they are," Simon said, straightening up. "Gotta go, Ma. Call you later." He folded up the phone and put it away; somewhere behind him Jeremy laughed low in his throat, a faint whisper of a sound like a cool finger running up along Simon's spine. Simon hunched his shoulders.

The van pulled in just past Simon, to the accompaniment of the usual fusillade of honking, and Johnny kicked the back doors open. "There you guys are," Simon called, jogging over; he was nearly in the van—had his hand on one of the back doors—when Jeremy flashed past him and vaulted into the back. It was neatly done. He'd been exposed for two seconds, at most, and now he was just a slight shape in the darkness of the back of the van. Simon snorted, hopped up into the van, and pulled the doors shut. "We're in, Honda," he said, hunkering down. "Get out of town."

"We are *outta here*," Mike proclaimed, hitting the van's horn and producing

a rusty blatting sound. “Man. Did you guys really trash a hotel room? ’Cause seriously, that’s, like, on my list of things to do before I die, and I am hurt that I did not get to help.”

“Well, yes and no,” Jeremy said. He was still hidden in the back of the van, currently just a voice in the dimness. “The room may be a shambles, but very little has actually been damaged.”

“We broke a lamp,” Simon volunteered.

“True,” said Jeremy. “Does that count as trashing?”

“Huh.” Mike pulled the van out into traffic, flipping off some irate guy on a scooter. “Yeah, I guess that’s kinda mini-trashy, like a fourteen-year-old in a tube top, you know?”

Once the van was well underway Simon shifted up and peeked out of the van’s back windows. He didn’t know what he was looking for, exactly, but whatever it was, he didn’t see it. The cars behind them looked pretty normal. Grabbing hold of the back of the back seat, Simon duckwalked over to it and gratefully sat down next to Johnny. “So, how long do you think it’ll take them?” he asked.

“If my presence was actually noted in Genoa yesterday, then they’ve been looking for me to turn up and they’ll likely be *en route* within the hour, if not already,” Jeremy said. “If not, well, the compromised Thomas Angobrand identity ought to throw up a red flag sooner or later.”

“Think the car’s going to be safe?” Simon asked. Mike hooked a right through an alley and burst out onto a parallel street. Simon braced himself.

“It should be,” Jeremy said. “These are professionals we’re talking about, after all. They might slash the tires to make certain I can’t use it, but I suspect they won’t touch the car, especially not after they see the room.”

“Good,” said Simon. “’Cause, I mean, I don’t really care what happens to you, but to damage a Ferrari . . . that’s going too far.”

Mike ran the van in circles through Genoa for a good ten minutes before declaring them safe and heading for the *autostrada*. Simon shifted halfway around in his seat and kept one eye out the back windows, just to be sure. To be sure of what, he wasn’t sure. It wasn’t like he could tell a car following them from a car going in the same direction.

No one followed them up the hill, in any case, and they got safely onto the villa’s grounds and into the garage without seeing another person. Jeremy dropped out of the back of the van and stretched. “I’m going to have to pass on dinner tonight,” he said, his tone apologetic. “I’ve a long night ahead.”

“Yeah, about that,” Simon said, jumping out after him. “How many people are you planning on taking?”

“As few as I can get away with,” Jeremy said. “I’ll need Nate, of course, and since we’ll be taking the van, I’d thought to bring Mike—”

“And me,” Simon said. He slashed his hand through the air. “That’s it.”

Jeremy looked at him for a moment, then shrugged. “That’s fine with me, as long as it’s all right with the others.”

“As long as what’s all right with the others?” Sandra asked, coming around the side of the van.

“Only taking me and Nate and Mike with him on tonight’s little mission,” Simon said. “I want as few people along as possible, just in case.”

Sandra hesitated, her eyes narrowing in thought. “That’s probably not a bad idea,” she eventually said, although it seemed to hurt her to admit it. “Think Nate could rig up something to keep the rest of us in the loop? I don’t mind staying behind if it lowers our profile, but I don’t want to sit around not knowing what’s going on.”

“Good idea,” Simon smacked the back of his hand against his palm. “Let’s go talk to him while Archer gets some sleep.”

Nate cupped his hand around the microphone on his headset. “Stonewall, you online?”

The speakers of Nate’s laptop—actually one of Dave’s laptops, repurposed for the occasion—crackled tinnily. “Online,” Dave said. “I can hear you just fine—see you, too. Shadow, give me a soundcheck for those of us back at base?”

Jeremy turned his head slightly. The only light in the back of the van was the cold blueish-white light of the laptop’s screen, and it made Jeremy’s goggles look like a band of static across his face. “Can you hear me?” Jeremy said, touching the side of his goggles briefly.

“Loud and clear,” Dave said. “Twice, actually, since I can hear you through Specs’ headset. Look back at Specs for a moment?”

In the back seat, Simon relaxed. The van was parked along the shoulder of a tiny back road, its hood up; Mike was outside with a flashlight, poking at the crippled engine to add verisimilitude to the illusion. And it *was* legitimately crippled, to boot: Simon had a bit of dirty wire rolled up in his pocket. When they were done, Mike would put it back.

Outside it was full night, just after ten, and still broiling hot. The driver’s side door was open to give them a little air, but it wasn’t enough. Simon’s t-shirt clung damply to his back. How Jeremy could stand wearing all that black Simon would never know, let alone the damn catsuit—

“We’re ready to go whenever, Templar,” Nate said, breaking into Simon’s reverie.

“Right,” Simon said, shaking his head and coming back from where he’d gone. Jeremy was also watching him, as far as Simon could tell. At least, the blank glass face of Jeremy’s goggles was turned in his direction. Simon raised a hand. “Hey, Stone.”

“Hi, Templar,” the speakers on Nate’s laptop said. “I can barely see you—”

“Here,” said Jeremy, touching the side of his goggles. There was a nearly-subliminal hum, and then Nate gasped out a startled laugh. “Can you see him now?” Jeremy said, pleased with himself.

“Wow,” Dave said. “Night vision?”

“Well, of course,” Jeremy said, looking away and smiling. “At any rate. If no one has any objections, I’ll get ready to go.”

Simon nodded, crossing his arms on the back of the seat. “Let’s go, people,” he said.

Jeremy drifted to his feet, shrugging out of his jacket, which he draped over the seat next to Simon. He wore no shirt underneath it, only the bodysuit, its high collar folded down across his chest; the suit’s dull gray surface ate the light, forcing Simon to squint to see Jeremy’s torso at all. “You’ll pardon my familiarity, I’m sure,” Jeremy murmured, toeing off his shoes and kicking them aside.

Simon rested his chin on his crossed arms. It had been a long, long time since he’d seen Jeremy in full working gear—in fact, the last time he’d seen it had also been the *first* time he’d seen it, and he’d had Jeremy at gunpoint at the time and hadn’t had time to properly appreciate it. Mike was outside the van and Nate was not clueful enough to notice, so Simon let his eyes droop half-closed and watched Jeremy strip. “Man, I haven’t seen that in a while,” he said, watching Jeremy undo his fly.

“What?” Nate said, looking up just as Jeremy stripped off his pants. He made a little choking noise, then got very interested in his laptop, his cheeks going dark in the stark blueish light.

If Jeremy was aware of Simon’s casual ogling, he gave no sign, only hooked his belt around his waist and strapped on the thigh pouches. “Yes, well, I’d wear it more often, but I’m afraid it’s a little conspicuous,” Jeremy said. “It’s funny how *unreasonable* some law-enforcement officials can be when I’m wearing my gear.”

“Yeah, funny,” Simon said. “Ha ha. In my defense, I was being unreasonable because you were—wait for it—stealing something.”

“You see? Completely unreasonable,” Jeremy said. He fiddled with his thigh pouches a bit more, until Simon began to believe he was doing it entirely for effect, then ran his fingers up the side of his throat, zipping the neck of the bodysuit into place with a faint purring sound. Grayed out and nearly invisible from the jaw down, his eyes hidden by blank, black glass, Jeremy pulled on a pair of latex gloves, snapped the suit’s glovelets in place over the top, and then held out his hands. “There we are,” he said. “Take a good look, it’s liable to be quite some time before you see it again.”

“Yep,” Simon said, looking him up and down. “It’s official: you are up to no damn good.”

“But, you must admit, looking quite sharp.” Jeremy turned the face of the goggles towards Nate. “Where is the bag?”

“Here,” Nate said, picking up a large backpack from beside himself and holding it up, still not quite looking up at Jeremy. Given that his face was just about on a level with Jeremy’s crotch, Simon could not blame him for that at all. “The suction cups are on top, and everything else should be stacked more or less in order.”

Jeremy took the backpack and shrugged into it. “I’m ready to go,” he said, resting his hand on the door handle.

“Right,” Simon said, leaning back. “Honda!” he called. “Clear?”

“Clear!” Mike called back after a second. “No one coming, either direction!”

Jeremy opened the van’s back door and slipped out, vanishing into the night.

The ominous greeny-dark hulk displayed on the screen of Nate’s laptop had at one time been a farm-equipment garage, big enough to hold three eighteen-wheelers side by side, with gigantic garage doors at the far and near ends. It was long since deserted, home to wood rot, termites, and junk, surrounded on three sides by piles of old farm equipment and overgrown grapevines; there was one cracking asphalt road in and one overgrown dirt path out, and two minutes’ drive would put a car on the A7 and safely away.

At one point the garage had housed two combine harvesters, but the family that owned the farm had gone bankrupt and auctioned off the machines before losing the farm to the bank. The bank had put the farm on the market. It still languished there, two years later, while the fields grew wild and the buildings slumped towards the earth, paint peeling from their sides in huge curls. Fifteen minutes’ search on the Internet had found the farm, and an hour’s reconnaissance had found the garage. Nate had deemed it perfect, and Jeremy had agreed.

Simon had seen the garage in the daylight and not been overly impressed. However, sitting on the van’s floor in the darkness and watching the garage approach the camera in leaps and bounds like something out of a low-budget horror movie, Simon could not help but be aware of two things: how ominous the ramshackle structure really was, and how utterly isolated. “Your camera work is for shit, Shadow,” he said, trying to shake the creeping feeling.

“My apologies.” Jeremy’s little laugh crackled out of the laptop’s speakers. “Perhaps next time I’ll bring along a tripod to prop up my chin.”

“I kind of like it, actually,” Nate said, fiddling with the laptop’s volume controls. “It’s got that *Blair Witch* Handicam look to it, you know?”

“You mean cheap?” said Dave, back at the villa. “I mean, it’s cool and all, but I feel like I’m watching some high-school kid’s homemade slasher flick on YouTube.”

Onscreen the bulk of the garage rose up and blotted out the green-tinted sky entirely. Somewhere out there Jeremy paused to readjust his goggles; the

garage and all the crap piled up around it evolved out of the darkness, drawn and animated in crackling green lines. "I'll start on the roof," Jeremy murmured, the image tilting crazily as he looked up at the sky. "Once I have the antenna in place I can drop the wires and work my way back down."

"Roger that," Nate said. "I wonder if there's still power all the way out here? I mean, I know the batteries will last, but I'd really feel better if there was ground current to tap into."

"Mm." Jeremy looked back and forth. The swaying image on the monitor made Simon feel mildly seasick. "I wouldn't think they'd run power lines out here, but I could be wrong . . ." The green lines vanished, replaced by almost nothing; squinting, Simon could just barely make out the garage's roofline, black against the midnight blue of the sky. "No," Jeremy said. "There's no power."

"Oh, well," said Nate.

"What am I looking at?" Dave asked.

The sky vanished, leaving the screen entirely black. "Electrical current," Jeremy said, "or the lack thereof. Here, I'll show you." The dark screen gave off the vaguest sense of motion and then Jeremy peeled back his glovelet and exposed the face of his watch, a blurry, luminous white in the dark. The glow was slightly off-center, focused around a small lump that might be a battery.

"Huh," Simon said.

The screen blurred away from the glow of Jeremy's watch and focused on the garage again. "And there's no current outside the barn at all," Jeremy said. "I'll check again once I'm inside, but there aren't any cables that I can see, and I really can't see a farm running wires underground."

"Don't worry about it," Nate said. "The batteries will be fine."

Jeremy's fingers flickered in front of his eyes and then the green night-vision light returned, throwing the barn into relatively high focus. "Silence for a minute, please," Jeremy said. "I'd like to listen for a moment before I actually move in."

"You heard the man," Simon declared. "Silence on all frequencies until such time as Shadow says it's all right."

"... thank you, S—Templar," Jeremy said, sounding mildly bemused, and then he went silent. Simon could hear Mike thumping around outside and whistling tunelessly, and Nate breathing beside him, but from the laptop's speakers, nothing. The image on the screen swung sickeningly as Jeremy looked back and forth, changing from green low-light to the freakish rainbows of infrared and back. "All right," Jeremy finally said. "I'm reasonably certain that I'm alone and unobserved. I'm heading for the roof now."

"Might want to check the ultraviolet spectrum, too," Simon said. "Never know when a Predator is around, right?"

"Templar, that *is* the Predator," Nate said patiently.

"Oh, yeah. Hey, Shadow, can you unhinge your jaw? I might need to know."

"I'm not even going to ask," Jeremy said, laughing under his breath. He sprang to his feet; the barn hunkered down and spun by onscreen as Jeremy circled it, coming to an abrupt halt on the far side. "Look at that," Jeremy said, scanning the goggles up and down a pile of rusting metal drums. "I shouldn't even need the climbing gear." The drums grew onscreen, then started to vanish off the bottom of the window as Jeremy went up. Simon thought he could hear faint metallic thrumming noises. "Phew," Jeremy said. "Ancient petrol. I expect they were fueling here."

"Really?" Nate said. "Gas is good—I can use that."

The last of the drums fell away, leaving Jeremy looking up at the gentle slope of the roof. There was a large window set in the roof, currently propped open for ventilation. Jeremy's hands appeared onscreen, clawing at the roof's shingled surface as he scrambled up towards the window. "Nothing to it," Jeremy said, sounding vaguely smug. "It's an easy climb."

"Hell, I could have done it myself," said Simon. "Who needs you?"

Jeremy laughed softly and flattened out on the roof just a few inches from the slight peak of the roofline. "The building seems fairly sturdy," he reported, switching back over to the infrared rainbows. "I suspect this roof is less than ten years old, and the woodrot doesn't seem to have gotten too far yet." He stuck his head up above the top of the building and scanned the rolling hills below him, picking up mostly pixelated purple and blue tones. "All right," he said, satisfied. The world went green again. "I'll set up the antenna now."

"Huh," Nate said, digging a small notebook out of his shirt pocket and flipping it open. He consulted the numbers, squinting in the dim light from the laptop screen. "We'll go ahead and use the medium load, then. We want this place to go *up*."

"Not too quickly, I hope," Jeremy said affably. Onscreen his hands dipped into the backpack and brought out a small black box with a stubby plastic antenna attached to it; Jeremy flipped up the antenna and flicked a switch. "There," he said. "Specs, are you getting that?"

"Sec," said Nate, switching windows. He and Simon both winced away from the sudden brightness, then squinted at the window Nate had just pulled up. There was gibberish in it; even as Simon watched, another line appeared, then another, pulsing onto the screen at two-second intervals. Nate switched back. "We're good," he said. "Go ahead and put it in place."

Jeremy flipped the black box over and peeled the backing paper from the adhesive discs on the underside. Settling the box up against the edge of the window, he pressed it down, then adjusted the antenna. "Check again?"

Nate flipped windows. "Still good, Shadow."

"Excellent." Jeremy's hands dipped back into the backpack.

"Hey, we maybe got company," Mike called from outside, his voice low and urgent.

Simon's head jerked up. "Company," he said, "silence on frequency *now*," and he picked up a blanket and threw it over Nate, laptop and all. The grainy light from the laptop's screen vanished. Simon hunkered down and strained his ears, eventually picking up the sound of an engine in the distance.

"Yeesh, like it wasn't hot enough in here," Nate muttered. Simon put his hand on Nate's shoulder and Nate subsided.

The grind of the engine seemed to go on and on, getting neither louder nor softer, while Simon breathed through his mouth and listened to his heart hammer in his ears. Finally, eventually, the engine noise faded away. "Gone," Mike said a minute later. "I don't think they even noticed us, they were down on that road by the edge of the farm."

Simon pulled the blanket off Nate, then snickered. "Nice hair, Specs," he said, smoothing the tufts of Nate's damp dirty-blond hair back down.

"Bedhead," Nate said in apparent agreement. "And I wasn't even in bed. Okay, folks, we're okay. Shadow, how's it going?"

"I've got the wires attached," Jeremy said. "I'm going to run them down the outside of the garage—they'll be too obvious if I put them through the ventilation window."

"Okay." Nate scraped his fingers through his mussed hair. "What's that window made of? Glass?"

There was a pause, then a flat thunking sound. "Plastic," Jeremy said. "It's gone a bit foggy with age."

"Okay, good," Nate said. "Check the ones on the walls, if you could. I need to know where there's glass."

"Will do." The image onscreen went from green to darkness, split neatly in half by a glowing white box and a long, thin line running from it. "Wires are carrying the current," Jeremy said. The image went green again.

Fifteen minutes later, Simon was officially bored out of his skull. Sitting in a sauna watching someone wire up a garage and occasionally pause to answer Nate's exacting questions was just about as much fun as pulling hairs out of his head one by one, and Simon was on the verge of field-testing this assertion when the actual explosives came out. The possibility of explosion and death always made things a bit more interesting.

"This place reeks of old petrol," Jeremy said. Onscreen his green-gloved fingers were carefully twisting a blasting cap onto the wire. "There are barrels everywhere—it's a bloody firetrap even without being helped along."

"I can work with that," Nate said. "Really, the stink ought to reinforce the illusion. Plus two bonus to the roll and everything. Put that one between the middle barrel and the wall, if you can."

Jeremy's hand dipped into the backpack and came out with a palm-sized cube of what looked like clay, wrapped in paper. "Half?" he asked, pinching the cube

in half.

“Half,” Nate confirmed, avidly watching Jeremy mold the plastic explosive around the blasting cap, something like longing in his eyes.

Jeremy and Nate worked on through the night, placing, shaping, and camouflaging the small detonators, one after another. Simon found himself with nothing to do at all. At one point his ears picked up the faintest hint of a voice outside, and he tensed until he recognized the little green square of the iPod at Mike’s collar; that was it for the excitement. Half an hour later Simon dozed off on the floor of the van, flushed and sweating, Nate’s voice humming on in the background.

He didn’t wake up again until the timbre of Nate’s voice changed to relief. “And that should do it,” Nate said, slumping back against the side of the van. “That place is going down. And by down, I mean up. You should probably check the wiring one last time before you go.”

“Mn,” Simon said, scrubbing at his eyes. “You guys done?”

“Just about,” Jeremy said, the laptop’s speakers crackling.

Simon struggled upright, his sweat-soaked clothing sticking to him like glue, and checked his watch. Close to two in the morning; Jeremy had been up there for four hours. Simon peeled his t-shirt away from the skin of his back and made a face.

Onscreen the image went from green to black one final time—this time, however, the blackness was criss-crossed by thin white lines. Jeremy panned his goggles from left to right, blurring the lines. “I believe everything’s in order,” he finally said.

“Yeah, I think so,” said Nate. “Go check from the back one last time?”

The white lines drifted by as Jeremy moved towards the back of the garage, looking like nothing so much as an old-fashioned screensaver. Jeremy reached the back of the barn and turned around, panning across the maze of wires. “It looks fine from this angle as well,” he said.

“Okay,” Nate said, heaving a sigh. “We’re all done. Come on back when you can, Shadow.”

The screen went green, the white lines disappearing into the night-vision noise. “I’ll be on my way momentarily,” said Jeremy.

Simon fished the bit of dirty wire out of his pocket and climbed painfully over the van’s front seat, dropping out into the night a moment later. It wasn’t much cooler out here and Simon was stiff from his impromptu nap on the bare steel of the van’s floor, but the knowledge that they were almost done gave him something of a second wind.

Mike jumped when Simon tapped him on the shoulder. “Shit, boss, nearly gave me a friggin’ heart attack,” he said, clutching at his chest.

“That’s what you get for listening to Italian people on the job, Honda,” Simon said, holding out the wire. “Here, put this anywhere that turns you on. I mean, turns the van on.”

“Good thing you qualified that statement, boss, ’cause those are two entirely different places.” Mike took the wire, twisting it around his fingers. “We’re finally done? Shit, I coulda built a garage from scratch in that much time, built the detonators right in.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Simon, heading back towards the van. He paused with his foot on the running board. “Working with you guys, I always got the idea that destruction just sort of happened, you know?”

Nate shut down the monitoring programs, the view from Jeremy’s goggles finally vanishing offscreen. “Man, I’m almost down to backup battery power,” he said. “I’m glad that didn’t take any longer than it did.”

“My God, so am I,” Jeremy said fervently, picking up his jacket, frowning at it, and draping it back over the seat. Despite the heat he’d consented to put his trousers and shoes back on, fortunately for Simon’s peace of mind, and the bodysuit was unzipped to his shoulder once again. He was definitely on the grimy side, and he looked hot and tired. The stripe of skin over his eyes was noticeably cleaner than the rest of him, banded with shiny pink marks where the edge of his goggles had pressed against his cheeks and forehead.

Nate ducked his head. “Yeah, I . . . yeah. I would have come and helped if I could have.”

Jeremy waved the half-apology away. “Criminal trespass is best left to professionals,” he said. “I do appreciate the thought, however.”

“I guess so,” Nate said. “You, uh, you got some . . .” Nate trailed off there and plucked meaningfully at his own messy hair.

Following Nate’s example Jeremy ran his fingers through his hair, wrinkling his nose at the collection of spiderwebs that came loose. “Eugh,” he said, wiping his hand on his pants leg. “Days like today make me reconsider wearing a hood, that’s for certain.”

“Hope you didn’t bring any spiders into the van with you,” Simon put in. “Hey, I’m thinking we could take you back outside and hose you down, just to make sure. You’d definitely smell better if we did, which, I mean, bonus.”

Jeremy scraped both hands through his hair again, then beat them clean against his thighs. “Believe me, Simon, if we had access to a garden hose, I’d be the first to turn it on myself. I feel *foul*.”

“Hate to break it to you, Archer, but that feeling is not lying to you,” Simon said with mild relish.

The van’s hood dropped and slammed shut, making Simon twitch and glance over his shoulder. Mike trotted around and swung himself into the driver’s seat.

"We about ready to go?" Mike said, poking the key into the ignition. "Anyone wants to grab shotgun, now's the time."

Nate looked expectantly up at Simon. Simon shrugged. "I'm fine where I am, Specs," he said. "Go for it."

"Okay," Nate said happily, shutting his computer down and casting the inside of the van into darkness. Simon felt more than saw Nate edge past Jeremy and scramble over into the front seat, awkwardly carrying the laptop.

Mike turned the key. The van's engine hitched a couple of times, then caught with a choking roar. "Oh yeah, I'm the man," Mike said, putting the van into gear. "Sit or fall over, Archer, it's gonna be one or the other."

"I may fall over in any case," Jeremy said, but he gingerly lowered himself to the floor of the van behind Simon. His head fell back against the van's side with a soft but audible *bong*.

"Hey, don't pass out on us, Archer," said Simon. "You're filthy and encrusted in spiders and I refuse to carry you anywhere as long as you smell like a hobo."

"Your generosity of spirit never fails to impress me, Simon," Jeremy said. "Would you mind handing me my jacket?"

Simon picked up Jeremy's jacket. "You sure?" he asked. "I mean, you're just going to ruin it if you handle it now."

Finally Jeremy laughed, if only a little. "All right, all right, I take your point, I smell a bit off—"

"—like a *sweaty* hobo, doused in gas—"

"—so, since you're so very concerned for the state of my jacket, I'd settle for just my cell phone," Jeremy finished, grandly ignoring the latest round of insults. "It's in the breast pocket."

Simon dug around in Jeremy's jacket and fumbled out the skinny black phone. "Here," he said, holding it out.

Jeremy's gloved hand reached out of the darkness and took it from him. Its screen lit when he flipped it open, pinning Jeremy against the wall of the van in a circle of dirty gray light, which didn't make him look any prettier. "Pardon me," Jeremy said, his voice absent as he typed a number into his phone and put the phone to his ear. It buzzed twice—Simon could just barely hear it over the car's engine—and then someone answered. "Is he there?" Jeremy asked, his voice suddenly flat and peremptory. "Let me speak to him."

Simon glanced back over his shoulder at the front seat. Mike and Nate were carrying on some kind of desultory conversation, not really paying much attention—"Hallo, Irish," Jeremy said, his voice light with a heavy effort, yanking Simon's attention back in his direction.

Jeremy was slumped bonelessly back against the wall of the van, his knees drawn up to his chest, his eyes closed. "All done," he said, still maintaining that aura of mastery, audibly a man in control of his world. "Go ahead and make the call whenever you like." He paused for long enough to allow Bran to buzz

something. Simon couldn't make out the words, but he could swear that he heard that petulant, thwarted anger, loud and clear. "Yes, I know," Jeremy said. "Just remember that you're also doing it for yourself, and for the opportunity I'm giving you, and, of course, for seventeen million pounds." Bran's voice cracked harshly across the connection. Jeremy squeezed his eyes shut. "Well, as you like, Irish," he said. "Tell them it was room 418 in the hotel *Zaffiro*, in Genoa. Tell them I called you. Tell them . . . Thomas Angobrind."

Unnerved despite himself, Simon reached over the back of his seat to put his hand on Jeremy's shoulder. Jeremy was hot and damp to the touch; after a moment his free hand crept up and curled around two of Simon's fingers. The phone's tiny speaker transmitted another long, ranting burst of Bran, and Jeremy's hand tightened on Simon's. "I've every faith that you'll handle it with skill, Irish," Jeremy said. "I'll be waiting for your call." He folded the phone closed to cut off the connection, his head falling back against the van's side with another slight, metallic thump. His hand fell away from Simon's. "Godspeed," Jeremy said, speaking to no one at all.

◆ Forty-One

Simon woke up to a steamy, ominous morning. Clouds had boiled up overnight and hung threatening and low overhead, turning the white room a dull gray. The storm had not yet broken, but it hung there, waiting to do so. Simon frowned, made a mental note to ask Nate if this would cause any problems, and went to go shower.

It was still fairly early when Simon let himself out of the white room and into the hall. Without the sun beating down on the glass the hallway had stayed reasonably cool, but Simon could hear the air conditioner droning on in the background to make it so. Overcast, yes, but not cool by any stretch of the imagination, and probably humid as hell to boot.

No one answered when Simon tapped on the green door. Simon thought for a moment, then went to tap on the blue door. That got a response, as someone fumbled their way up and out of a chair; Nate opened Dave's door, blinked, then eased out into the hall and shut the door behind him. "Hey, Templar," he said, blinking worriedly. "What's up?"

"I just wanted to check," Simon said. He waved a hand at the giant window behind him. "Is the rain going to cause any problems with the garage?"

Nate craned up to look over Simon's shoulder. "It shouldn't, Templar," he said, after studying the thunderheads. "I mean, everything's under a roof except the antenna, and it's waterproof..."

"Okay," Simon said, relaxing somewhat. "And what about actually taking the place down? Will that be a problem if the wood is wet?"

Nate was already shaking his head by the time that Simon finished his sentence. "No way, Templar," he said confidently. "I built like three levels of redundancy into the wiring—even if the rain takes out the initial fire, I can fake an explosion and restart the fire by hand. The garage is like half-full of old diesel barrels and stuff. People would *expect* multiple explosions, especially once they see the barrels that are still outside."

"Okay," Simon said. "Damn, but that makes me feel better."

"I take my arson *very* seriously," Nate said, with semi-misplaced pride. "I'm a professional! Seriously, there ought to be a motto involved. Maybe in Latin, even. *Qui burnibus est, nunc est torch il bastardus, ipso facto.*"

"Ave Maria," Simon said gravely. "What does all that mean?"

Nate shrugged. "No clue. It sounds kinda Latin-y, though, doesn't it?"

"You should probably hold off on getting the t-shirts made, then," said Simon. "So what's up with you?"

Nate glanced over his shoulder at the blue door. "I was mostly just messing with Dave's little palmtop, because it's cool," he said sheepishly. "Dave crashed a couple of hours ago, but he said to tell you that everything's tested and ready, if you asked."

"See, I do not doubt that in the slightest, because Dave does not sleep if there is work left undone, ever," Simon said. "I fear the day that I assign him a three-week-long project. Anyway, I'm thinking breakfast. You want to come?"

"Oh." Nate shuffled his feet, embarrassed. "I already ate, Templar. Sorry."

"Don't *apologize*, Specs," said Simon, patting Nate's shoulder. "And get some more sleep, Christ, I know how late you were up."

Nate shoved his glasses back up. "I will, Templar," he promised. "I'll take a nap after lunch."

"Good man," Simon said. "Go do your email thing. I'm off for breakfast."

"Okay, Templar." Nate let himself back into Dave's room and quietly closed the door.

Simon headed for the kitchen, his sneakers squeaking faintly on the marble flooring. All was quiet. At this time of the morning, most everyone was probably still asleep. He was halfway down the stairs, just about on a level with the heads of the statues, when the first drops of rain blatted against the skylight above his head; by the time he made it to the kitchen door, the rain was falling, hard and steady, like it intended to keep this up all day.

The kitchen itself was dim and gray, the wind rattling the rain against the windows on the south wall. Simon was so intent on the fridge and the potential of breakfast that he was halfway across the kitchen before he noticed Jeremy, sitting on the low windowsill and idly tossing an apple from hand to hand. Simon slowed. "Hey," he said.

"Good morning, Simon," said Jeremy, not taking his eyes off the window. He was back in his anonymous tan and white ensemble, once again clean and obnoxiously well-groomed; the apple thunked into his right hand and Jeremy brought it up and bit into it with a clean, sharp snap.

Simon got himself moving again. There was nothing in the fridge that really interested him, so he poured himself some orange juice and dropped two slices of fancy Italian bread into the toaster, twisting the dial all the way up. While he waited for his toast to burn, he leaned against the counter and drank half his orange juice. "You sleep okay?" he asked.

Jeremy laughed under his breath. "Like a rock, I'm afraid," he said. "Even nerves can only keep one awake for so long, after a day like yesterday."

"Yeah, well, you had a real job, you'd work in a nice air-conditioned office all day," Simon said. "So, you know, ha ha, sucks to be you."

"Occasionally it does," Jeremy said. He ate more of his apple, still watching the rain.

Simon didn't know what to say to that, so he carried his orange juice over to the garage door and checked the row of cars. All seven were present and accounted for, including the van. Simon shut the door again. "I'm guessing everybody else is still asleep," he said. "Except Nate, who's insane."

Jeremy made a faint sound of acknowledgement. The apple dangled from his fingers, half-eaten, while Jeremy ignored it in favor of the rainy morning. Simon racked his brain for something to say, then snorted at himself and fell willfully silent; eventually his smoking toast popped up and Simon transferred it to a plate, only mildly burning his fingertips in the process. He kept catching himself almost saying *so, hey, listen, about yesterday* and forcing himself to stop. There was nothing he'd said yesterday that he hadn't meant. "Heard from Bran yet?" he asked, instead.

"Not yet," said Jeremy. He remembered his apple and ate some more of it. "I'm hardly surprised, though."

"Yeah?" Simon carried his toast and orange juice over, sitting on the opposite side of the windowledge. "Why's that? You expecting him to ditch you?"

Jeremy rested his forehead against the windowglass, closing his eyes and sighing through his little smile. The glass fogged in a little circle. "Not at all," Jeremy said. "I told Bran I had faith in him, and I do. But . . . there's a process to these things. A certain protocol, if you will. It's the same process that I took advantage of to hold Volpe off for three weeks."

"Yeah, the process where nobody takes anybody's word for anything," Simon said.

"Exactly," said Jeremy. "So . . . even assuming that Bran called immediately, the actual negotiations will be on hold until Volpe can send someone around to check out Bran's story. See the hotel room for himself, check the hotel register, that sort of thing."

"Makes sense," Simon said, and turned his attention to his toast.

Jeremy bit into his half-eaten apple, not really paying much attention to it. For a few moments they both ate in silence, listening to the steady downpour. "I expect to hear from Bran at some point this afternoon," Jeremy finally said, turning the apple core over and over in his hand. "And . . . really, I expect it all to go down tonight."

"Yeah?" Simon said, a faint spark of adrenalin stiffening his spine at just the thought. "That quick?"

"If I hadn't embarrassed Volpe so very badly at the opera, perhaps not. But as things stand . . . well. He'll be very anxious to get his hands on me, both for personal reasons and to regain face with Viktor Karpol." Jeremy's eyes went bleak. "I doubt I'd enjoy that very much."

Simon shuddered a little. "Yeeeah, no," he said. "Maybe I'll just be tactful for once and not regale you with the stories that the CIA likes to tell about Karpol."

"I'd definitely appreciate that tact, all the more for its rarity—"

"—because, I mean, I'm in a position to have heard a whole lot—"

"—thank you, Simon, but no," Jeremy said firmly. "And I believe that we ought to go ahead and hold the briefing after lunch, so that the team can be ready to move on a moment's notice."

Simon popped the last bite of burnt toast in his mouth and washed it down with the last slug of orange juice. "Good idea," he said, hopping back off the windowsill and carrying his dishes to the sink. "Let's do that." He turned on the water, then hesitated. "You doing okay?" he asked, quietly, picking up his plate and rinsing off the crumbs.

"As well as can be expected, I suppose." Jeremy's answer was half-lost under the sound of running water, but Simon heard it all the same.

"Yeah," Simon said awkwardly. He rinsed out his mug and abandoned his breakfast dishes in the sink. "Take heart, It'll all be over soon."

"One way or the other," said Jeremy.

Simon turned off the water. "That better not be fatalism I'm hearing, Archer," he said, striving for normality. "I don't allow fatalism on my team. Counterproductive."

"I'm not on your team, Simon." Jeremy looked back out the window. "As you've made very clear."

Simon winced. "Yeah, well, I meant it, uh . . . in the greater spirit of, uh, team-iness—okay, you're right, that was tacky of me, forget I said anything."

"It's forgotten," said Jeremy, flicking his fingers like he was shooing the thought away.

"Still, dammit, I don't want to hear any defeatist talk from you," Simon said. "Sure you're not on *my* team, but we're sure as hell on yours right now. You've got all of us on your side! Half a dozen of the best! What more could you possibly need?"

"Well, I suppose I can't argue overmuch if you put it that way, Simon." Jeremy unfolded from the windowsill and dropped his apple core into the garbage. "I've some things to do before things get too hectic. I'll see you at lunch?"

"Yeah," Simon said, watching Jeremy go.

"So, then," Jeremy said, settling back into the overstuffed armchair and crossing his legs. "I haven't actually heard back from Bran yet, but I'm reasonably certain that it will all happen tonight."

The desultory conversation ceased, as did most of the shoving. Everyone was still suffering from their lunch-related attention-deficit disorder—it had required most of Simon’s patience to herd them all into the black room for the briefing—but Jeremy’s statement, mild as it was, engaged their attention like nothing else could. Simon ascribed it to everyone liking to watch shit blow up. “Can’t imagine why Volpe might be eager to get his hands on you,” Simon said, taking the other armchair.

“I suppose it’s possible he just wants to make me feel special,” Jeremy said blandly. “But somehow, I doubt it.”

“I’m sure you already feel you’re special,” Simon said, his voice equally bland. He looked around the room and summarily dropped the mild facade, smacking one hand off the thick glass top of the coffee table, which rang like a bell. “So!” Simon said, sitting back. “Let’s get this briefing underway, folks. I want us ready to gear up and move out with half an hour’s warning, whether it goes down tonight, tomorrow, or in the middle of next week. Sit down, shut up, pay attention, all that good stuff—I know this isn’t what they pay us for, but pay attention anyway, because I said so.”

By the end of this little speech the members of Simon’s team were more or less quiet and attentive and Jeremy’s smile had gone all crooked with some private amusement. “*Thank* you, Simon,” he said. “As I was about to say: some of you know more than others about what’s been going on these last few days, and I apologize for not filling you all in before now. That’s what I intend to do now, in fact.”

Simon settled back in his own armchair, leaning against the armrest so that he could watch Jeremy and keep a subtle eye on Sandra at the same time. Sandra’s own gaze was neutral and her hands were folded loosely in her lap, betraying no undue nerves or tension: so far, so good.

“First of all, as most of you are aware—” Jeremy’s eyes flicked towards Dave and away, but he didn’t pause “—there is a fair amount of bad blood between Bran and myself, mostly but not entirely on Bran’s end of things.”

Simon didn’t bother to restrain his snort. “That’s an understatement,” he muttered, aware of eyes on him.

“Mm. Yes. That it is,” said Jeremy. “At any rate, it’s fairly well known amongst a certain class of person that Bran despises me, as Bran has never made a secret of that fact. That is precisely what I am counting on. You see, late last night or early this morning, Bran called Battista Volpe and offered him my head on a platter, as it were.” A faint murmur of reaction raced around the room; Jeremy’s eyes unfocused, leaving him staring off into the black space around them. “Bran will have claimed to have overpowered me in my hotel room and imprisoned me—a claim which my trashed hotel room will amply support—and will have then offered to trade me to Volpe, in return for, ah, certain considerations.”

Sandra's fingers flexed lightly in her lap: advanced bullshit meter, pinging. Simon remained silent. "What considerations, Archer?" Sandra asked, picking at one of her nails.

"I'm getting to that," Jeremy said, with a quick, apologetic smile. "As far as Viktor Karpol is concerned, Bran has committed a fairly serious breach of trust: he failed to complete his job at Annadale Labs. Thanks to us, and to Bran's untimely imprisonment, the goods from Annadale have languished in a safe-deposit box, where Karpol could not get at them. All this adds up to a serious disappointment for Viktor Karpol, a man who does not take disappointment lightly. It is our intent to make Volpe—and by extension, Karpol—believe that Bran intends to make good for his lapse by capturing me. To put himself back in Karpol's good books, as it were, and to reclaim his job."

Sandra nodded, her hands falling still: she was satisfied. Simon relaxed.

Jeremy took a deep breath. "Even as we speak Volpe is assuring himself of the truth of Bran's claims. I believe that the evidence we have fabricated is convincing—and Volpe is certainly eager to get his hands on me, for, ah, some reason." Jeremy laughed a little. "Bran will, at that point, hold most of the cards, and be able to make demands accordingly. He will demand that Volpe meet him at a place of his choosing to make the trade, which is to say, the garage. He'll also have the bullets and the Zip disk in his possession, and he will endeavor to get these into Volpe's hands before the deal goes sour."

Sandra was silent. Her own gaze was sharp, concentrated on Jeremy like a laser, but she was not protesting, not yet.

"And the deal *will* go sour," Jeremy said. "How, exactly, I cannot say. If all else fails and no more natural openings show themselves, Bran will think of something." Jeremy's smile was thin enough to see through. "Bran's always been quite good at finding a way to take offense over nothing."

Simon snorted in acknowledgement, which made Jeremy clear his throat. "At any rate," said Jeremy, "once we have queered the deal, Bran will fire a shot. That will be your signal." Jeremy looked at Nate, who was clutching a legal pad to his chest and looking uncertain.

"This is as good a map of the garage as I can draw," Nate said, putting the pad down on the table between them. Everyone craned forward to get a better look at the crude blueprint, including Sandra, who still looked doubtful. Nate tapped one wall. "This wall here is the front of the garage, which the road leads up to. The garage door there will be open, to admit Volpe when he arrives. Now, we, on the other hand, will be hiding back here, around the back side of the garage." He tapped the scribble that denoted the tangle of grapevines behind the garage. "Or I guess I should say you guys will," he added, flushing a little. "I'll be back in the van, handling our coordination. Uh, anyway, as soon as you hear the shot from inside, you'll burst in through this little door here, which will be open an inch or two." Nate tapped a small doorway on the back wall.

“Your actual entrance order is up to you, but I recommend that Mike either lead off or come second, as he’ll be the one shouting for surrender in Italian,” said Jeremy, smoothly taking back the flow of conversation. “What happens next must happen *very quickly*. If we allow Volpe’s people to draw their weapons, they will use them, and your weapons, like Bran’s, will be loaded with false rounds.” Jeremy tapped the blueprint. “Volpe and his people will be here,” he said, drawing his finger in a line across the front of the garage. “I will be here, nearly at your feet—” he touched a spot near the small doorway “—and Bran will be over here.” His finger slid across to a spot in the other corner, completing the square. “When you come bursting in, cover Volpe’s people with your weapons, so that they do not draw. Bran will take aim at you, as his weapon is already out.”

“That’s when I shoot him?” Johnny said.

“Yes,” said Jeremy. “I’d recommend firing at least twice, but it’s up to you.”

“Why Texas?” Sandra said, stirring.

“Because he has that perfectly massive Desert Eagle,” said Jeremy. “In that enclosed space it’ll sound like thunder and flash-blind Volpe’s people, and no one on earth would be surprised if a gun of that caliber punched all the way through Bran’s body, through a barrel, and into the leftover gasoline sludge, causing an explosion.”

The matter-of-fact tone in his voice was, quite frankly, unsettling, and Simon shifted in his chair. Jeremy, unheeding, tapped the little cluster of circles that denoted the barrels. “The explosion will start here, behind Bran, immediately upon the occasion of Johnny firing his weapon.”

“It won’t come anywhere near you guys at that point,” Nate said confidently.

Jeremy nodded at Nate in thanks. “Once it starts, immediately go back the way you came. Disarray is fine, as long as you remember not to say anything in English. Don’t worry about Bran, or about me. We will take care of our own—oh, how does Simon say it—extraction. Just get out and away from the garage. If you want to fire off a few rounds while Volpe and his cronies are escaping, then do so—”

“Fire *into the air* if at all,” Simon said, cutting in on that in a hurry. “I don’t want one of you hitting someone by accident. If Volpe’s people figure out that we’re firing wax rounds, we will *drown* in shit.”

“Ah. Yes. Simon has the right of it, I believe,” said Jeremy. “Once you’re out, make your way back to the van, and try not to be seen. Once the six of you are all present and accounted for, come back to the villa. Don’t wait for me.”

“Why not?” Sandra said. She was lacing her fingers together and unlacing them, over and over again, a clear sign of bullshit scented.

Jeremy turned slightly towards her, acknowledging his opponent. “I’ll have to rendezvous with Bran and complete my part of the deal,” he said. “That could take a while, and meanwhile Volpe’s people might put the Zip disk into a drive at any point. I’d prefer if Dave were here to monitor the fallout.”

“We could leave Dave here,” Sandra said, a faint challenge in her voice.

“Yes, you could.” Jeremy’s own voice was cool. “But, frankly, your numbers need bolstering. The real ROS wouldn’t tackle this situation with fewer than twelve men—we are *already* counting on Volpe believing that the ROS had a breakdown in communications, resulting in the second team being catastrophically late. I believe he’ll accept that, since you are ‘obviously’ responding to the fired shot.” Jeremy provided the fingerquotes, complete with a raised eyebrow. “Nate has to stay behind to monitor communications and fire the building—that puts you at five people. Without Dave, your numbers drop to four. That’s entirely too few.”

“Mmph.” Sandra stopped dry-washing her hands, although she didn’t settle down entirely. “All right, I’ll buy that—but you’re bullshitting somewhere, Archer,” she said. “I can’t put my finger on it, but I *know* you’re fucking us in some orifice.”

“Do let me know when you figure out which one,” Jeremy said, with a flat, unpleasant smile. “I assure you that I am telling you as much as I currently know—”

“You’ll forgive me if I don’t quite trust that assertion,” Sandra said, her voice mostly edge, and then Jeremy’s phone rang and made them all jump.

Jeremy’s hand darted into his jacket and came back out with the little black phone. “Pardon me,” he said, flicking it open. “Yes?”

Everyone else was still, watching Jeremy like they were hypnotized. At this remove, the voice on the other end of the line was nothing more than a hum, barely audible. Simon stole a glance at Sandra; she had subsided but was staring at Jeremy with her upper lip ever so slightly lifted. The phrase *coiled to strike* flitted through Simon’s mind.

“All right,” Jeremy said. “How many?”

Even as Simon watched Sandra looked down and started mumbling to herself, her fingers flicking through the air as she talked to herself with her hands.

Jeremy closed his eyes. “Good,” he said. “When do you—ah.”

Sandra’s hands dropped, then rose again, an expression of frustration marring her features for a moment. She’d gone through Jeremy’s story once and found nothing to protest; now she was doing it again. It was uncannily like watching himself, Simon thought.

“I understand,” said Jeremy. “Thank you, Irish. I would tell you that you’ve exceeded my expectations, but quite frankly I knew you had it in you all along.”

The line of bullshit made Simon and Sandra snort as one; they traded vaguely sheepish glances, then Sandra went back to picking over Jeremy’s story and Simon went back to watching her.

Jeremy laughed under his breath. “I’m afraid I don’t quite bend that way,” he said pleasantly. “I’ll see you then, Irish.” He folded the phone away and made it disappear into his jacket like a feat of legerdemain. “Well,” he said, folding

his hands in his lap. "It seems I was correct: Volpe wishes to make the exchange tonight."

The rush snapped up Simon's spine like an electric shock, and judging from the way half his team suddenly sat upright, he wasn't alone. Jeremy unfolded his legs and sat forward, his lazy facade falling away. "Quickly, then," he said, his voice as intense as Simon had ever heard it. "There will be three of them, plus a driver, unless Volpe intends to double-cross us. Dave. Is the disk ready?"

"I think so?" Dave said. "I mean, yes, it's ready. I've tested it six ways to Sunday, I can't find anything wrong—"

Jeremy snapped his fingers and Dave shut up, startled. "Good," Jeremy said, pointing at the door. "Go get it, and the box with the bullets." Dave hesitated, and Jeremy added, "Please. *Now*."

"Okay," Dave said, bounding to his feet and scooting past Nate. He was already trotting by the time he hit the door, and full-out running once he hit the hall outside. The daylight, gray as it was, still half-blinded Simon until the door swung shut again.

"Nate, is there anything else you need?" Jeremy asked, turning his gaze on Nate. "Anything else we need to know?"

"I," Nate croaked, then cleared his throat. "I don't think so."

"Good." Jeremy looked at Mike. "As soon as we're done here I need you to run me down the hill. When you've dropped me off, come back here. The meeting with Volpe is scheduled for ten o'clock tonight—I want the van in place by nine at the very latest. If you want to be there earlier, that's your call."

"Sì, *signore*," Mike said, tapping his forehead in a goofy salute.

Jeremy didn't hesitate, just looked back at Sandra. "I don't know how else to reassure you," he said. "Believe me, I've racked my brain trying to make sure I've told you all everything that you need to know."

"I know," Sandra said, frustrated. "I just . . . there's *something wrong* and I can't put my finger on it." She looked to Simon for help.

Simon held up both hands to ward her off. "Don't look at me," he said. "If I could put my finger on it, I'd have said something, and I've been trying for days."

"I'd hope I wouldn't lie to you about something which is supposed to be directly to my benefit," Jeremy said, with a quick, guarded smile.

Sandra threw up her hands in defeat. "I know," she said. "All right. I accept that you're leveling with us as best you know how, and nothing you're asking us to do violates the parameters that we agreed upon. We'll do our part as you've outlined it."

"Thank you," said Jeremy, his voice almost humble. It sounded so wrong on him that Simon sat up, then caught himself and made himself subside again. If Jeremy noticed, he said nothing, only looked around the room, meeting everybody's eyes in turn. Simon couldn't figure out if Jeremy actually held Johnny's eyes for a beat too long, or if he was just being paranoid.

Dave slammed back in, carrying the gray box and the black disk. “Here,” he said breathlessly, holding them out. “They’re ready to go.”

Jeremy accepted both things, folding his hands tightly around them, like they might try to escape. “Thank you,” he said. “All right. I need to get ready to go—the rest of you have several hours. Spend them however you see fit. If you’d give me a moment . . . ?”

Sandra got to her feet. Most of the others weren’t all that good at comprehending unspoken requests—Simon had not picked them for their skills with subtlety—but when Sandra stood up, they got the idea. The meeting broke up as everyone headed for the door. “Mike, I’ll meet you in the kitchen in five minutes or so,” Jeremy said, disappearing into the depths of his room. “Simon, would you stay behind for a moment?”

“Yeah, okay,” Simon said, flopping back into his chair.

The door banged open and banged shut several times in succession, each time letting in a blast of grayish daylight and the sound of rain pattering against the windowglass. The two of them were alone in short order, Simon under the lights of the conversation pit, Jeremy lost in the midnight blackness of his room. Simon could hear Jeremy rattling around. “Are there actually windows in here?” Simon asked, mostly to fill the silence.

“I have no idea,” said Jeremy. “I haven’t gone looking.” His laugh floated back to Simon. “I tend to prefer the darkness, after all.”

“Like all small and scuttling creatures, hiding under things and hoping not to be noticed,” Simon said, pushing himself up and out of the chair. “You know, Sandy’s right.”

“Is she?” said Jeremy, distracted.

“You *are* bullshitting us, somehow,” said Simon. “I can feel it just like she can. The only difference between what Sandra feels and what I know is that I’ve met Bran, and she hasn’t.”

Jeremy said nothing. He could have been anywhere. Simon looked around, didn’t spot anything, gritted his teeth, and plunged on. “I don’t know what you’re stonewalling about—Christ, when they hung that name on Dave they screwed up a perfectly useful word—but you are. Stonewalling, I mean. And it’s got something to do with Bran.”

Simon paused, just in case, but Jeremy still said nothing and Simon gave up. “I just hope that whatever you’re hiding, it won’t fuck us up,” he said, squinting and scanning the darkness in front of him.

“Simon,” Jeremy said, and just for a moment he sounded so utterly desolate that Simon snapped his mouth shut, startled. Jeremy paused, presumably getting himself back under control, then added, “I wasn’t lying to Sandra, you know. I *have* been racking my brains to make sure that your team has all the information that it needs.”

"I know," Simon said. "God help me, but I think that by now I know when you're lying and when you're not. So . . . I guess I'll buy that. You really do think you've told us everything, which means that whatever you're hiding, you're hiding it from yourself, too." He paused to think about that, then shivered. "Christ, that doesn't precisely make me feel better."

"Simon," Jeremy said again.

"Yeah," said Simon, looking down at his feet. "I know."

"I promise I have every reason in the world to keep your team safe and unharmed," said Jeremy, drifting out of the darkness with one of Ethan's omnipresent briefcases in his hand. "As for some reason I *would* like to keep you around, even when that means that we have to continually have horrible conversations like this one."

Simon fumbled for a moment. "You're still wearing the beige suit," he said, grasping at that conversational straw. "I thought for sure you'd be wearing black when you came back."

"Not for this," said Jeremy. He tried to smile, but it looked off, almost painful. "I think this outfit is more . . . appropriate for the occasion, as it were."

"Oh-kay," Simon said, openly dubious. There were bottomless conversational chasms to the left and right of him, and the slightest misstep would drop him into one. "Uh," he said, retreating into incoherence, as a safety measure.

Jeremy put the briefcase down. "Well, then, Simon," he said lightly. "Have I forgotten anything? Is there anything I need to tell your team to fire them up properly?"

"I think they're pretty fired up," Simon said, embracing the topic change. "I mean, there are going to be explosions and shooting, and they like those."

"Of course," said Jeremy, still sounding somewhat amused. "I should have guessed. In that case, I'm counting on you to keep them motivated."

"Okay, you know what, I do that for a living, I don't think you need to remind me," said Simon. He fell silent, trying to think of something else to say that wouldn't make things worse. The silence stretched between them, until Jeremy's waiting presence seemed to fill the room from end to end.

"Perhaps I should have said that I'm counting on you, period," Jeremy said, his voice quiet.

Simon looked away. "Yeah, I know," he said. "That's why I came, remember?"

"Mm. Yes, that is why you're here, isn't it?"

"Good luck," Simon said helplessly. "And, you know, be careful—Christ, I hope you're right about Bran. I really do."

"So do I," Jeremy said. He was still standing there, just a bit too close, making no move towards the door.

Simon glanced over his shoulder at the door, almost lost in shadows. “You should probably get going—” Jeremy’s fingers brushed against his cheek, startling him. Simon spun back around, already starting to say “What—”

Jeremy caught Simon’s face in both hands and kissed him with a ferocity that nearly knocked Simon off his feet. Simon only saved himself by grabbing the back of the couch. For a moment he could only stand there in awe of the assault, one hand clutching the couch for balance, the other hovering impotently an inch or so away from the hand on his cheek; then he groaned out a heartfelt sound of surrender and grabbed Jeremy, nearly crushing him against his chest. His hands knotted in the back of Jeremy’s jacket, doubtless rumpling it.

Jeremy’s hands slid back and tangled in Simon’s hair, dragging his head down. Simon’s knees came within an inch of buckling and he swayed back against the back of the couch, lost and starving, a fierce need clawing its way up his spine to shatter against the base of his skull—Simon was breathless and gasping by the time the kiss broke, Jeremy clutching at him like a man drowning.

Simon clung to Jeremy’s back and tried to catch his breath, his mind stunned into silence. Jeremy didn’t move, his face hidden against the side of Simon’s throat, his own breath coming quick and hard. Eventually Simon painfully unknotted his fingers and tried to smooth out the creases he’d left in Jeremy’s jacket, and Jeremy stirred, lifting his head, looking up at him with dimmed, half-lidded eyes and no other expression on his face at all—

Someone pounded on the door. “Yo! Archer!” Mike yelled. “You comin’ or what?”

Jeremy’s face slammed shut on the instant. “Just a moment,” he called back, his voice perfectly, heartbreakingly normal. Unclasping his hands, he let his arms fall, letting go of Simon; he twisted neatly free of Simon’s own grip, then picked up the briefcase, patted Simon’s chest lightly, and left. The door opened, just wide enough to admit Jeremy. He slipped through, the door closed behind him, and he was gone.

Simon was left rumpled and gaping, still leaning against the back of the couch. Eventually he reached up and scruffed both hands through his hair, putting it back to rights. “The hell was that about?” he muttered, his voice just the slightest bit uneven.

◆ Forty-Two

“Specs, time?” Simon demanded, rapping his knuckles on the top of his riot helmet, sitting on the van’s floor at his feet. Outside the rain continued to slash down unabated, pounding on the van’s metal roof and forcing Simon to raise his voice.

Nate glanced down at the screen of his laptop. “Nine-thirty-two, Templar.”

Simon nodded. “All right, folks,” he said, looking around. They were crouched in a loose circle in the back of the van, which was parked even further away than it had been the night before, hidden behind a screen of overgrown grapevines; there was a significant hill and a low fence between them and the garage. “Our target time is ten o’clock, but if Volpe doesn’t try to push it and arrive early, I will eat this helmet without ketchup.” Simon thumped on the helmet again. “Here in ten I’m going to send Texas out to make our initial reconnaissance. The rest of us will stay in here until such time as Texas informs us that Volpe and his crew have arrived and finished doing any scouting that they plan to do.”

“Won’t that be cutting it close, Templar?” Sandra asked, snapping a rubber band onto the end of her braid.

“Yes,” said Simon. “However, we’ll just have to hope that the negotiations take some time, as we can’t run the risk of being spotted before Volpe enters the garage. The best way to minimize that risk is to send Texas out by himself, as he is this team’s designated stealth bastard, and, I might add, possesses one or two unfair advantages.”

“Sweet talkin’ gets you nowhere,” Johnny said sagely, touching the goggles that hung around his neck again, as if to reassure himself that they were still there. Alone amongst them all Johnny was already wearing his balaclava, most of his ugly mug lost to view.

“Once Texas gives us the high sign, we will make our way to the back of garage with all due haste,” said Simon. He glanced up at the roof of the van. “The rain will help cover any noise we make, thank Christ, but still, keep it as quiet as you can. Stonewall, if this is a problem for you, don’t hesitate to lag

behind. I would rather make this entrance at less-than-full strength than tip off the people in the garage.”

Dave nodded. Like everyone else in the van he was wearing full ROS body armor, bulletproof military vest, shinguards, and all; it made even a stringbean like Dave look intimidating. “I’ll be fine, Templar,” he said, his face extraordinarily calm. “I can be quiet.”

Simon nodded. “Good,” he said. “But just to be safe, I want you to stick as close to Springheel as you can and watch where she puts her feet. Okay?”

“Okay, Templar,” said Dave.

Simon glanced back at Johnny. “You want to take your shield, or have someone else bring it to you?”

Johnny shrugged. “I’ll take it. Keeps the rain off.”

“Okay.” Simon leaned over to look at the laptop’s screen. “Everything okay on your end, Specs?”

“Everything’s fine, Templar,” Nate said, paging over to a different window. Every two seconds the antenna sent out a blip—currently it was saying HELLO WORLD over and over again, which was apparently hilarious to geeks—and even as Simon watched, the antenna said HELLO to the WORLD again. Nate nodded and switched back to the goggle-cam. “The antenna’s still broadcasting and the network’s still in place. We’re good.”

“Good,” said Simon. “I want you to doublecheck that signal every few minutes, just to be safe.”

Nate nodded and pushed up his glasses again. “Already on it, Templar.”

“Christ, you’re all great at this shit,” Simon said, allowing himself a brief grin. “I don’t know what you need *me* for.” The grin fell away as Simon sank back into ready mode. “Once shots are fired from inside the garage, we will pile in. I want Texas to go first, since he has a role to play, and I want Honda to follow him to do the shouting. I’ll go third. Stonewall, you’ll come after me, and Spring, I want you to bring up the rear. For all I know you won’t even make it inside the garage, but that’s all right, because you’ve got the best rear-guard action I know of, shut up, Honda. Any complaints, speak your piece now.”

Mike sniggered and made a desultory grab for Sandra’s ass. Sandra smacked his hand away. Threat averted, Sandra’s hand darted across her chest, checking her holsters. She had two guns, one loaded with wax rounds at her hip and one loaded with real rounds inside her Velcro’ed kangaroo pocket, and one of the two riot batons dangling at her other hip, ready for a cross-draw. “Got it, Templar.”

“No complaints? Awesome.” Simon looked around, trying to think if he’d forgotten anything. The others were quiet, watching him, every one of them in identical military black and combat boots—even Nate, who looked like a kid playing dressup. It hadn’t gotten any less fascist-creepy. Simon fought down a quiver of disquiet and scratched the back of his neck. “Okay, then. Let’s do this thing, whatever the hell it is.” He paused long enough to let the ripple of reaction

run its course, then knocked on his helmet again and pointed at Johnny. "Texas, gear up and go. I want you in place inside five minutes. If you're not going to make it, then I want to know why."

"No problem," said Johnny, pulling up Jeremy's goggles and settling them into place across his eyes, adjusting one of the dials on the side. He picked up his helmet and put it on, then flipped down the faceguard. Faceless and anonymous, he picked up his riot shield and slung it over his shoulder like a turtle's shell. "Someone get the door," he said, his muffled voice doubled by the speakers on Nate's laptop, like an echo.

Dave reached up and pulled down on the handle, popping one of the back doors open. The hiss of the rain redoubled in immediacy. One hand on his riot baton, the other holding his riot shield, Johnny duckwalked past Nate, paused on the van's threshold, and then eeled out into the rain. He vanished within seconds. His splashing footsteps lingered for a second or two longer before dying away.

"Shut that thing, Stone," Simon said. Dave obligingly pulled the door shut, blocking out the rain again. Simon pushed back his sleeve and checked his watch, watching the seconds spin away.

He'd been timing Johnny for about a minute when Johnny's flat and oddly choked voice rasped out of the computer's speakers. "Over the fence," he said. "Nobody." The image on the computer's screen changed from green to blues and purples, shading to yellow on a few edges. "Nobody," Johnny said again, and switched the image back to green.

Simon ignored the image on the computer screen, preferring his watch. Thirty seconds later, Johnny said, "Top of the hill. Nobody. . . . Nobody." Beside Simon, Sandra shifted restlessly, then checked her braid again; Mike was staring off at nothing, his mouth forming silent words. Nate was enthralled by Johnny's heads-up display, and Dave was perfectly still by the van's back door, utterly and freakishly Zen about everything.

It was almost two minutes before Johnny spoke again. "I'm in place," he muttered, the need for quiet turning his rough-edged voice into a hellish lupine growl. "Nobody around that I can see." Nate's screen went infrared as Johnny panned the goggles across the area. "Nobody," Johnny rasped, and flicked the goggles back to night-vision.

"You all saw that," Simon said, his voice conversational. "Texas got from here to there in just about three and a half minutes, and that's with all the extra precautions he was taking. We can do it in three. Hell, we can probably do it quicker than that, as you guys are the best."

"Gonna take a short prowl, look around," Johnny muttered. The image on Nate's screen began to move again as Johnny eased through the overgrown rows of grapevines.

Simon closed his eyes and took a long, deep breath, centering himself and quashing his mild case of nerves. Right now, in here, with these people, he

was fully in his element and in control of his world, no matter what else might be going on out there. He never felt so alive as he did in moments like these. Simon flexed his gloved fingers, then reached blindly out to touch his riot helmet, reassuring himself that it was there. "Let's put on our hoods, folks," he suggested, and enjoyed the immediate rustle of fabric that followed.

His own balaclava was in the big front pocket of his vest. Simon pulled it out, then pushed the little SIG back in; like Sandra and Johnny he was carrying double, a big gun with wax rounds in the real holster and his hideout gun, loaded with real rounds, in his kangaroo pocket. Simon rolled the balaclava up and pulled it down over his face, tucking the bottom into the top of his turtleneck. He didn't open his eyes. The sight of his team in facemasks was something he intended to avoid for as long as he could.

"Shit, if we ain't lookin' like a bunch of ninja," Mike said, snickering.

"Or like we're about to rob a convenience store," Sandra said dryly.

Simon let his eyes drift open. The sight was about as disquieting as he'd been anticipating, but the unease faded quickly: even hooded, Mike was still Mike, obviously different from Sandra, next to him. Dave, on the other hand, had only become eerier, his weird, luminous eyes now floating disembodied in space. "I'm going to have to vote for the convenience store," Simon said. "Well, except Honda. He's half Japanese and he can be a ninja if he wants. I'll give that my leaderly seal of approval, if only because I like the idea of bossing around a ninja."

"Aw, yeah," Mike said cheerfully. "Chicks totally dig ninja."

"News to me," said Sandra.

"Well, I meant, you know, girl-type chicks," said Mike, flapping both hands. "I didn't mean you—"

Simon ducked his head, sputtering out a laugh—he couldn't watch. There was a thump and a yelp from Mike, but the altercation didn't last long. Everybody was in business mode.

"Nobody," Johnny reported, his voice still a low growl. "Back door's open an inch just as promised, no static. Ain't gonna show myself to look in, but things seem quiet. I'm settlin' in."

"Roger that," said Nate. "No static on our end. Waiting for your signal." Nate was wearing his headset instead of a balaclava, and the normality was refreshing. Simon shut his eyes again and settled in to wait, listening to the endless pounding of the rain.

The wind picked up briefly, spattering rain against the windows. Grapevines scraped against the side of the van, probably damaging the paint they'd paid to have put on a few days ago; Simon opened his eyes about halfway, reassured himself that everything was normal, and shut his eyes again. The wind died back down a moment later.

Nate's soft, infrequent typing ceased. After a moment, Nate made a little noise and started punching keys. "Specs?" Simon said, not opening his eyes. "Problem?"

"I don't..." Nate let the sentence trail off there, his fingers clattering over the keyboard.

Simon opened his eyes, a sizzle of apprehension making the hairs on the back of his arms stand up. "Specs," he said again, low and urgent.

"Hold on, it's rebooting now," Nate said. Behind his glasses his eyes were wide, but his voice was still calm. "It's probably just... *crap!*"

"Tell me what's going on, Specs," Simon said, making it an order. Any kind of profanity from Nate, even a mild one, meant that something was seriously wrong.

"I'm getting an error from the antenna," Nate said, his fingers flying. Onscreen the HELLO WORLD window was about half-filled with HELLO WORLDS and half-filled with ##NETWORK ERROR##s. Even as Simon watched, another ##NETWORK ERROR## blipped onscreen. Nate swallowed. "That's—that's—the antenna is still functioning and broadcasting signal, but it's lost contact with the wires—" He broke off there, his eyes rolling up into his head as he stared up at the van's roof. "Oh my God, I think maybe the rain knocked the wires loose," he said, his voice hushed and full of dread.

"What are the chances of that?" Simon asked, letting one hand drop to the topmost clasp of his right shinguard.

"It's not supposed to happen but I guess if the rain and wind were hard enough..." Nate trailed off there, punching keys. "The network is definitely gone," he said, nerves thrumming underneath his too-calm voice.

Without further ado Simon ripped off his right shinguard and went to work on his left. "I'll handle it," he said. The second shinguard followed the first, and Simon unbuckled his weapon belt and let it fall with a thud. "Tell me what to look for, Specs."

"Ah..." Nate punched a few keys, seemingly at random.

"Specs!" Simon snapped his gloved fingers under Nate's nose. "Talk to me."

Nate shut his eyes and swallowed. "The antenna is a little black box glued onto the roof by the skylight, around the left side of the garage," he said. "If the wire's come loose then it'll be hanging from the edge of the roof, or else on the ground—I think Jeremy stapled it into place. Find the wire. It'll split into two parts near the end, and the very ends will be stripped metal."

"Find the wire," Simon repeated, rearing up onto his knees and ripping himself out of the military vest. The vest thunked heavily to the van's floor, leaving Simon in his shirtsleeves.

"There are two holes in the lowermost part of the antenna box," Nate said, rattling off the information at a high rate of speed. "Poke one end of the wire into one, and one end into the other—it doesn't matter which is which. There

are screws which are supposed to hold the wires in place when tightened. If you tighten the screws they ought to clamp the wires in place, I guess the weather worried them loose, I should have double-checked—!" It was nearly a wail by now; Nate broke off there, panting.

Abandoning his body armor in a pile on the van's floor, Simon leaned past Dave and grabbed the back door's handle. "I'll fix it, Specs," he said, his voice staccato and controlled. "Hear me? I'll *fix* it. I need you to calm down. The rest of you stay here and get ready to go. Spring, you're in charge until I get back. Texas gives you the word before I come back, you go and do this thing without me. Specs, tell Texas I'm coming so he doesn't shoot me."

"Roger that, Templar," Sandra said. "Go."

"I'm gone," said Simon, and he hit the doorhandle and threw himself out of the van.

The initial onslaught of the rain nearly sent him reeling, forcing him to catch himself before he lunged for the fence. The blood-warm rain battered at him like a thousand tiny fists, soaking him to the skin, and his combat boots sank up to the instep in sucking mud. Simon threw up both arms to protect his face and bulled through the overgrown grapevines, using his weight to break through. Vines snapped across his forearms. Roots ripped out of the earth as his boots caught under them. Simon sucked in a breath through the thin fabric of his balaclava and hurtled on, just barely in control of his own velocity.

The fence loomed in front of him so suddenly that he nearly ran full-tilt into it. Simon grabbed the topmost rail and vaulted over without slowing, landing badly on the far side and nearly falling. He staggered for a few steps, caught his balance, and ran for the top of the hill, trying to stay low.

At the top of the hill he stumbled to a stop, breathing hard, and shaded his eyes with one hand to keep out the rain. The abandoned farm spread out below him, banded on the horizon by the racing white lights of the A7. The garage was a large animal huddled in the midst of the undergrowth, dim yellow light spilling from its filmy plastic windows, almost absurdly inviting in comparison to the hot, wet night. Simon fixed his eyes on the skylight, huffed out an acknowledging breath, and raced pell-mell down the hill, arms up to protect his face.

Even two years' worth of untended overgrowth couldn't withstand his momentum. Simon plunged through the night, running downhill so fast that he was nearly falling, barely able to see for the rain that lashed at his face. Johnny was out here somewhere but Simon never saw him, hardly even looked for him, intent on the garage and his rapidly-approaching deadline.

Three feet away from the sides of the garage, the undergrowth petered out. An accumulation of empty fuel barrels formed a rough pyramid on one side of the garage, tall enough to allow a determined someone to scramble onto the wet roof from its top. Simon staggered to a halt at its base and looked wildly around, searching the night for the wire.

In the end, the wire found him. A gust of wind blew the rain into Simon's face and lashed him across the face with the end of the wire, which stung like a bitch even through the thin fabric of his hood. Simon grabbed the wire before it could hit him again, wrapped a turn of it around his left hand, and scrambled up the unstable pyramid of barrels before his self-preservation instinct could kick in.

Somehow he made it to the top without falling or knocking over the barrels. Simon sprawled out on his stomach on the edge of the roof, his legs still dangling in space as he clawed for purchase. Whatever the garage was shingled with, it was rough and sticky to the touch, like rubber—the first bit of good luck that Simon had had all day—and he was able to swing a leg up and clamber onto the roof without killing himself. Simon made sure he still had the wire, then inched upward on his belly, heading for the skylight and the small black shape he could just barely see to the left of it.

The little black box waited for him, a pinpoint of red light glowing on its surface, its stubby little antenna jutting jauntily towards the sky. Simon pulled himself up to the box and squinted at it, shielding it from the rain with the bulk of his body. On one end there were two holes, presumably for the wires in his hand to slot into; there were two screws on the top of the box that intersected the holes. When tightened down all the way they would press the wires against the metal bottom of the box and complete the circuit.

Simon frowned at the screws, then stripped the glove from his right hand with his teeth. He poked the two ends of the wire into the two holes. The red light winked out and a green one lit up. Simon heaved out a sigh of relief.

Motion from inside the garage startled him. Simon froze. Bran drifted into view and paused—from this vantage point Simon could really only see the top of Bran's head and his shoulders—and then slid back out of sight. Simon ground his teeth and turned his attention back to the box.

The screws were going to be a problem. When Jeremy had attached the wires he'd screwed them down until they were flush with the box's surface, presumably using some sort of tool; in his haste to get down here Simon had neglected to bring anything like a screwdriver with him. He jammed the ball of his thumb against one of the screws and tried to force it to turn. It refused to budge, even when Simon tried the edge of his thumbnail on it. Letting go of the wires meant that they slithered free of the holes and made the red light flash. Simon stuck the ends of the wire back into the box and mentally ransacked his pockets, hoping for a decent substitute screwdriver.

Headlights splashed over the garage from the far end of the road. A car was turning in—“*Shit*,” Simon hissed under his breath, flattening out behind the raised lip of the skylight and putting his head down. Hopefully the rain would help to hide him. If Volpe's people saw him up here, he'd be lucky if all he did was fuck up the deal.

“Awright, I see yeh,” Bran said from within the garage, his voice rich with

both satisfaction and nerves. He moved into view again, a cell phone pressed to his ear. "I want yeh t' park the car a good twenty meters away. I'm nervous, me." His laugh was a flat and twitchy thing. "Park out there an' walk in, an' there better not be more'n the three of yeh."

The car purred up the drive, turned halfway around, and stopped at more or less the demanded distance. The engine shut off. For a moment nothing and nobody moved, then one of the car's back doors opened and an umbrella bloomed in the newly-created space. Volpe's secretary stepped gingerly out of the car, grimacing as his foot splashed into a puddle, and raised the umbrella aloft. Battista Volpe himself ducked out of the car and under the umbrella a moment later, the expression on his face somewhere between grim and disgusted.

The door on the other side of the car opened and a third man got out, apparently insensible to the weather. Simon froze, then instinctively ducked his head, hiding the pale flash of his eyes from view. The third man had slicked-back hair, deep-set eyes with black circles underneath them, and the dead, weaselly face of a psychopath; he wore a long black trench coat and a suit that was way too sharp and ill-fitting to be Italian. Russian, almost certainly. Simon put his gloved hand over his face to hide his eyes, peeking out between his fingers.

The Russian slid around the back of the car to join Volpe. For a moment none of them moved, all three of them staring at something within the garage; it was impossible to read their expressions from here, but they didn't precisely look happy. After a moment Volpe shook his head in distaste and stalked forward. His assistant jumped and hurried to catch up, keeping the umbrella over his boss' head at the expense of his own; the Russian drifted along in their wake, head bowed to deflect the worst of the rain. They disappeared from Simon's view, vanishing under the edge of the roof.

Simon stayed down, afraid to so much as shift his weight. He kept the wire pressed into place with his bare hand, for the moment not bothering with the screws—he'd wait until they were a little more distracted to try again. "So," Bran said, somewhere below. "Here we all are, then."

"The chauffeur will stay with the car," Volpe said. Simon couldn't see him, but the secretary wouldn't have a voice that deep, and the Russian wouldn't have that accent. "He will not interfere."

"Awright," Bran said. His voice was loud and quavered slightly with something that was either nerves or misplaced hilarity or both. "Seems y' kept yer part of the bargain, so! Allow me t' introduce yeh to th' famous Jeremy Archer!"

"We've met," Volpe said, with obvious disgust.

Jeremy said nothing. In fact, no one said anything. The rain picked up, hammering down on the roof and on Simon's back alike; after a moment Simon risked rolling up onto his elbows and peeking in through the skylight.

The plastic was old and filmed with white on the edges, but Simon's eagle's-eye view of the scene was clear enough. Volpe stood just inside the door of

the garage, casually holding his hands just far enough away from his sides to demonstrate that he was carrying nothing; behind him, his secretary was shaking the furred umbrella dry, his eyes firmly on Bran. The Russian stood three paces from Volpe, in the same empty-handed pose.

Bran and Jeremy were in the middle of the garage, ten feet apart—Simon froze, making a helpless little croaking sound before he could stop himself. Jeremy sat slumped and apparently unconscious in an old wooden chair, bound to it by multiple turns of duct tape that glittered dully in the light from the Coleman lantern. His ankles were taped to the chair's front legs, and another few turns of duct tape had been wrapped around his head to serve as a makeshift blindfold. Jeremy's white t-shirt and beige pants were filthy with dust and blood. Somewhere along the line he'd taken a hell of a beating.

Bran stood planted in one spot, with a large and ugly gun trained on Jeremy's battered face. "Lemme tell yeh how it's gonna be," Bran told Battista Volpe, baring his teeth in something like a grin.

◆ Forty-Three

“Then there *is* a point to this charade,” Volpe said, already exasperated. “Very well, get on with it.”

Bran’s fingers flexed on the grip of his pistol. It wasn’t the small gun he’d threatened Jeremy with before; this one gleamed in the lamplight, both larger and showier. He studied Volpe for a moment, still sneering, then glanced at the silent Russian. “*Zdrastvyteh*, Alexei,” Bran said. “I know yeh speak English.”

The Russian winced a little. “Better than you speak Russian,” he said, his accent thickening every word into a clotted singsong soup.

“Oh, aye, and considerin’ I can’t say but ‘hello’ and ‘goodbye’, that’s easy enough,” said Bran. The hilarity that underscored his voice was getting clearer by the moment. Bran jerked his head at the unconscious Jeremy. “So, are yeh here for him, then?”

“I might be,” the Russian—Alexei—said phlegmatically.

Bran shifted slightly, enough to see Jeremy without quite taking his eye off Alexei. “Sent yeh all this way just for him,” Bran marveled. “Can’t bloody fathom it.”

“It is not my place to ask why something is done,” Alexei said. “Only to see it is.”

“Course it is,” said Bran, grinning. “Think yeh could say y’ speak for Karpol while yer here?”

Alexei shrugged. “I would not like to presume this,” he said.

“Oh, aye, and yer just his pitbull, then,” said Bran. “Awright, lemme put it another way. Everything yeh see and hear while yer here, yeh’ll report back t’ him?”

“Of course,” Alexei said, raising both eyebrows, like that should be obvious.

“Fuckin’ brilliant,” Bran said with savage satisfaction. “I want yeh t’ tell him somethin’ for me, then.”

The Russian said nothing, simply waited expectantly, and after a moment Bran’s confident smirk wavered a bit. “I want yeh t’ tell him that I never gave him

up, not bloody once,” Bran said. “I’ve not failed him, no matter what it seems like.”

For a moment all was silent as Alexei chewed this statement over. Finally Alexei looked over at Volpe, still standing there and fuming at being ignored. “Do you think that is supposed to be his apology?” Alexei asked Volpe, raising both eyebrows.

“That is beside the point,” Volpe snapped. “This is ridiculous. Dragging us out here to this . . . this *place*, just so you can put on your little performance—just tell us what it is you want in exchange. I’m prepared to pay you whatever you ask, within reason.” He snapped his fingers at his secretary, who reached into his jacket.

“Nah, nah,” said Bran, waving his free hand. “Y’ can put up yer checkbook, there. Don’t care about yer money.”

“Then what do you *want*?” Volpe said, exasperated. “I am a busy man and I have no time for nonsense.”

Bran snickered. “Sure yeh do,” he said. “When it comes t’ him, y’ got all the time in the world. Everyone’s heard about what he did t’ yeh. Y’ can’t afford t’ let him get by with it, can yeh?” Bran paused, looking from Volpe to Alexei and back, his cocky little smirk fading. “Tell yeh what I want,” he said. “I want a bloody promise, that’s all.”

“A promise,” Volpe repeated, making a face like the word tasted bad. “All right. What is it?”

“Not from yeh,” said Bran. He pointed at Alexei with his free hand. “From him.”

Alexei stirred. “As I say, I have no authority—”

“Horseshit!” Bran spat, instantly enraged. “He bloody well sent you here t’ retrieve this bastard, didn’t he? There’s your fuckin’ authority! Either y’ make me this promise or I’ll blow his fuckin’ face off, and y’ can see how much yeh like carryin’ a fuckin’ headless corpse back t’ Russia with yeh!” Snarling, he stabbed the gun at Jeremy’s face, making Simon’s heart pause in his chest.

Alexei fell silent, considering this. The expression on his face never changed. “If that is situation,” he finally said, “I believe that it would not be out of bounds for me to . . . negotiate.” Simon abruptly realized that he wasn’t breathing and whooped in some air.

“Awright,” Bran said. The rage vanished on the instant. “Fuckin’ brilliant. Let’s negotiate. First, though, I got somethin’ for yeh. Take it t’ him for me, free of charge, like.”

“Yes?” Alexei said.

Bran’s free hand dropped to the pocket of his cargo pants and popped the snap. “I’ll do this slow-like,” said Bran, sliding his hand into the pocket. Volpe and Alexei both watched his hand, Volpe tensing in anticipation, the Russian seemingly not caring. The object that Bran pulled out was approximately the

size of a paperback book, wrapped in a white plastic bag; he stooped to drop it onto the floor at his feet, then kicked it across the garage. It clattered over the concrete to land at Alexei's feet. "That's for him," Bran said. "Fetched it for him the bloody minute I got out of the clink, I did."

Alexei swept up the bag and unwrapped it, then pulled out the little gray box and the Zip disk. "This is what?" he asked, apparently unimpressed. Simon swallowed.

"That's the swag from the Annadale job," Bran said. "I got away with it free and clear, but got nicked before I could turn it in."

"It is year late," Alexei noted, popping open the box and studying the fake bullets inside.

Bran hissed out a breath between his teeth. "Oh, aye, s'why it's a freebie. Got some pride, me."

Alexei snapped the box closed and put it back in the bag. The Zip disk he barely glanced at before tossing it in the bag as well; bundling up the bag, he stuck the packet into his trench coat. "I will deliver it," he said. "Will it please him? I cannot say." Despite everything else Simon felt a dim stab of relief: whatever else came of this night's work, the loaded disk might yet make its way to Karpol.

"Aye, well, that's where the promise comes in," Bran said. "I wanna hear it from yeh direct: I wanna know that there's no bad blood between me and yer boss." He gestured at Jeremy with the gun again. "I fetched him for yeh fair and square, and in exchange, I want my fuckin' job back, and no hard feelin's."

Alexei rumbled out an uncertain sound. "I cannot promise."

"Oh, aye, yeh can, and no mistake," said Bran, the sudden softness in his voice more threatening than all his bluster. "'Cause if yeh don't, yeh can't have him. I'll blow his fuckin' head off before I let yeh."

The rain let up, suddenly and nearly completely. Simon's wet clothes clung to his back, rapidly growing uncomfortably cold despite the hot, damp air. He didn't dare move, not even to pluck his shirt away from his clammy skin—any motion might draw someone's eye, any noise might catch their ear, and in his haste to repair the wiring Simon had wound up trapped on top of the garage roof without so much as his keys to defend himself with. He was so bitterly angry with himself for this uncharacteristic lapse that the sound of Volpe's voice didn't register—"HE'S NOT MY FUCKIN' BROTHER, YEH FUCK!" Bran screamed in response, startling Simon so badly that he jerked back and nearly pitched himself off the roof.

"No?" said Volpe, his voice thin. "And yet I am told you grew up together in the same house, calling the same man 'father'? That is a brother."

Suddenly Bran was jittering back and forth, caught in the clutches of his ancient, thwarted, insane rage. The muzzle of the gun juddered around in a tight circle. "An' what the fuck would you know about it, aye?" Bran hissed. He stabbed the wavering gun at Jeremy. "He slunk in like a fuckin' alley cat and

nicked what was rightfully mine! Everything I ever had!” Bran jabbed the gun at Jeremy again. “My own fuckin’ father prefers him t’ me! And yeh think that since we lived close by for a few years that I’m havin’ yeh on? Oh, *aye*, he and I are just havin’ our little joke? Well, *fuck* yeh! I oughta shoot him right here and now, just t’ prove t’ yeh how little he means t’ me!”

“By all means, shoot him,” Volpe said. He was very still, not wanting to provoke Bran too far, but still he contrived to sound bored. “*I want* him dead, if you’ll recall, you idiot.”

“Aye, well, maybe I oughta—”

“Go ahead,” Volpe said, still bored. “And then perhaps you’ll do me the favor of explaining how you managed to find him so quickly when all my men could barely pick up his trail. A man with his apparent resources and you found him mere days after entering the country? How would you even know to begin looking in Genoa? I cannot buy into this. Especially if you hate him so much, as you say. Surely he would not expose himself to someone who hated him, not at this time—but to a brother, certainly. A brother he would call.”

Bran curled his lip at Volpe, still twitching. Volpe affected not to notice, but gestured languidly in Jeremy’s direction. “So,” he said. “Go ahead. Shoot him. I would like very much to see this.”

A taut silence fell. Suddenly Simon was having trouble breathing, nearly light-headed with apprehension. Twenty feet below him Bran was nearly shaking, and Simon willed him to just give up, fire at Volpe or at the ceiling, and end this stupid charade—but then his ears picked up an unfamiliar noise and Simon went still.

Bran was laughing, a cracked and rusty sound. At first it was barely audible, his shoulders shaking as he tried to control it, but then he gave up and bayed out a laugh right into Volpe’s face, the sound spiraling madly up and out of control. Behind him Jeremy stirred, finally struggling back to consciousness with a faint groan. “Oh, *aye*!” Bran cried, ignoring Jeremy entirely. “Aye, he called me, yeh’ve the right of it! He had himself a little plan, he did! Thought that if he stretched his fuckin’ hand down from heaven and offered t’ get me free of Karpol, I’d forget everything and lick his fuckin’ boots in gratitude!”

Simon froze even as Bran threw his arms wide, nearly howling with laughter now. “I ain’t that kinda forgivin’, me!” Bran cried, thumping his chest with his free hand. “Sure an’ maybe he could wrangle summat—and have me in his debt for the rest of my life? Always remindin’ me of it wi’ that nasty sweet smile of his? Fuck a bunch of that! I’ll square things with Karpol me own way an’ get me revenge on this fuck t’ boot!”

Jeremy lifted his head a few inches, like it hurt. “Bran,” he rasped, coughing. “Bran, don’t—”

“Aah, yeh fuckin’ wee bastard,” Bran snarled, darting two strides forward and slashing Jeremy across the face with the front sight of his pistol. The chair

skittered backwards an inch or two, its legs screeching on the concrete floor; Jeremy's head snapped to the side and a thin line of blood welled up on his cheek. Simon stifled his hiss of dismay. "Fuckin' beg all yeh want," Bran sneered, dropping back again. "Told yeh once I'd see yeh dead and I intend to. Fuck yer *plans*."

"Please don't," Jeremy said, his voice low and hopeless. "I never—" His head fell forward again, the blood running down his cheek.

Bran looked at Volpe, his feral eyes glittering. "Yeh still think I won't shoot him?" he said. "Y' can just think again."

Wary and watchful, Volpe opened his mouth to say something that never came. Alexei coughed pointedly, drawing all eyes to him as he finally broke his intent silence. "I must ask you do not kill him," Alexei said, apologetically. "Orders were very clear. I am to return with him, alive, if at all possible." He shrugged. "What can I do?"

Bran went still. "Oh, aye?" he said. "That so?"

"It is so," Alexei said. "Viktor wishes to drop word or ten in his ear, after all, and he cannot do so if ear is dead."

"Aye, suppose not," Bran said thoughtfully, studying the semiconscious Jeremy.

"Viktor will surely forgive you for earlier disappointment," Alexei said. "Fine gift you have brought him. He wants this man very much—"

"Oh, aye, I'll bet he does," Bran said, nodding. "S'only Jeremy fuckin' Archer, after all, he's fuckin' famous, isn't he? Diddled up Viktor Karpol, can't be allowed t' get away wi' that, aye?"

"It is true—"

Bran's eyes glittered. "And he's a brilliant thief t' boot? Better'n me, even?" Alexei shrugged. "I have heard this said."

"Heh. Powerful thing t' have yer hands on, yer an important fellow like Karpol." Bran scratched at his cheek, grinning absently. "Y' wanna hear somethin' funny, Alexei?"

"If I must," Alexei said impassively.

"Y' know what it is if I let Karpol get his stinkin' mitts on this fucker? Y' know what that is?"

Alexei hesitated long enough to parse the slang. "It is what?" he finally asked, sounding honestly curious.

Bran's grin fell right off his face. "Poor fuckin' job security," Bran said, and before anyone could move he shot Jeremy twice, once in the chest and once in the face.

◆ Forty-Four

The shots were ear-shatteringly loud in the enclosed and echoing space, the second impact splattering a fan of dark blood and whitish stuff over the barrels behind Jeremy's head. Jeremy jerked against his bonds, the chair rocking back onto its hind legs, his head flying back—Simon got one brief, horrible look at the gaping meaty-red pit in the blindfold where Jeremy's eye had been—and then the chair went over and Jeremy fell heavily to the floor like a dropped sack of meat. His head hit the floor with a crack and he convulsed against the duct tape like a man having a seizure, even as his t-shirt soaked through with red and blood pooled under his head. The chair scraped on the concrete as Jeremy's spasms dragged it around, then he went limp, and the awful sound stopped.

Simon's mouth fell open, but he found himself unable to so much as croak. Enough adrenalin exploded into his system to electrocute him, a wave of static roaring through his mind and pinning him in place. Below him Volpe shouted something and Alexei ducked down and stuck a hand into his trenchcoat—and then the back door slammed open and his team piled in, guns out, right on cue. Sandra skipped back from Jeremy's still and bloodied form, taking it in and dismissing it in the same heartbeat.

"*Arrestate!*" Mike roared, making a huge gesture with his free hand as if to wave in their reinforcements. Four guns snapped out in near-perfect sync—

—five guns, as Bran shrieked out an infuriated sound and whipped his gun towards them—

—Johnny's massive Desert Eagle thundered like cannonshot, twice, making Simon's ears ring, its muzzle flash nearly blinding him.

Bran whipped halfway around like he'd gotten struck a glancing blow with a car and fell heavily to the floor, his scream turning into a horrible choking sound. He hadn't even hit the concrete before the barrels behind him exploded with a roar. A wave of heat so palpable as to be solid hit the roof under where Simon lay, making it bulge upwards. Simon's eyebrows frizzled instantly even as the plastic window next to him warped and started to melt.

A flaming barrel came within a foot of flattening the Russian, and a second hit the wall a few feet away from Volpe. Simon's team jerked up their riot shields half a second before the rusty hail of shrapnel hit; Mike was still bellowing "*Raggruppamento—*" when Johnny reeled back into him, and then they were pulling back, Sandra with her hand on Dave's shoulder. Volpe was jogging backwards in his haste to get out of the garage, his secretary was already running full-tilt for the waiting car, and Alexei was retreating with an odd side-skipping gait that allowed him to watch both behind and before him, his gun in hand.

A second barrel went up a moment later and Simon snapped out of his shock. Around him the roof was deforming, the rain-wet shingles steaming fiercely as the fire parched them. They'd go any second—baring his teeth Simon ground the pad of his thumb down onto one of the screws with all his might. The groove in the screw's head tore his thumb bloody but the screw finally consented to turn an infinitesimal bit, and when Simon let go of the wire, it held. It wouldn't hold for long, but hopefully it would be long enough—Simon took one last agonized look at Jeremy's still-bound form, half-hidden behind a screen of flame, then threw himself over onto his back and went skidding down the crumpling roof on his ass.

He reeled headlong down the stack of fuel barrels, taking huge, ridiculous, splay-legged steps, and hit the ground hard, stumbling, falling over, and tumbling into the undergrowth. He sprawled out in the cold mud, which sucked eagerly at him as he dragged himself upright. Somewhere in the distance several people were firing shots and a car's tires were squealing as Volpe and his people got the hell out of there; Simon could hear Mike bellowing something else in Italian, sounding exasperated. Shuddering as another wave of adrenalin slammed into him, Simon sucked in a shaking breath and fled the burning garage before it could explode again.

Barely twenty feet away Simon nearly collided with a faceless, helmeted, black-jacketed form. It caught him with both hands and Simon's atavistic terror made him shy away for a heartbeat's worth of time before he could get hold of himself. Behind them something else in the garage blew up, fire jetting from the gaping holes where the windows had once been and turning the faceless figure's helmet into a reflection of hell. "Templar!" the helmeted form screamed over the pandemonium, revealing itself to be Sandra. "Templar, are you okay?"

Simon swallowed and bobbed his head, then realized some other answer was in order. "Yes!" he yelled, grabbing at Sandra's shoulder. "Come on, we've got to get out of here before the real police come!"

Sandra nodded and shoved at Simon's back, pushing him towards the hill. "Go!"

Forcing everything out of his mind but the next step, Simon ran back up the hill. All around him there were faceless black shapes, crashing through the undergrowth, most of them using their riot shields to clear a path before them.

Simon couldn't tell them apart or even manage a headcount, but he'd seen them all leave the garage, so he put it out of his mind and concentrated on running.

A final explosion rocked the night behind him, this one setting off a chain of smaller explosions that cracked like a string of fireworks. Simon risked a single brief glance over his shoulder as he breasted the hill: the garage was a fireball forty feet high, every last inch of it outlined in flames. There were no figures silhouetted against the glow, and even as Simon watched, the roof fell in with a roar and a spiral of sparks.

Simon threw himself into the back of the van, unmindful of his waterlogged clothes or the wide streak of mud that he left behind him. "Are we all here?" he yelled, too crazed on adrenalin to modulate his voice. "Sound off, people!"

Mike snatched open the driver's-side door and threw himself in, yanking off his helmet and balaclava. "Yo, boss!"

"Yo," Johnny said, scrambling up after Simon. Sandra came after him, nearly dragging another helmeted figure—it took Simon a moment to realize that that had to be Dave—and Nate squashed himself into the far corner to get out of their way. To a man they ripped off their helmets and hoods the instant they got into the van.

"One, two, three, four, five, *six*—" Simon thumped his own chest with a wet, muddy sound "—Honda, get us the fuck out of here!"

"On it!" Mike cried. He grabbed the steering wheel, took a single long, deep breath, then started the van and pulled out at a measured, unexceptional pace. The steering wheel creaked in his fists, the only outward sign of how hard he was controlling his urge to step on it.

Simon fell into a huddle against the back wall and scrubbed at his arms, his teeth chattering. Soaked through and plastered in mud, with the adrenalin rapidly leaching from his system, he couldn't stop shaking. Even his heart was thudding irregularly, hard enough to hurt his chest. "Oh, Christ," he said. "Everyone's okay? Tell me everyone's okay!"

"We're all fine—" Sandra started to say, then she got a good look at Simon and hissed out a breath. "Jesus, Templar," she said, snatching the hood off him and pulling at the hem of his turtleneck. "Come on, let's get you out of that stuff, you're chilled enough!" She snapped her fingers at Nate. "Specs! Where's that blanket?"

Nate dove under the front seat, looking for the blanket. Simon, now shuddering so hard that he couldn't even make his hands work, let Sandra yank his sodden shirt off over his head and throw it aside. Sandra studied him for a moment, then shrugged out of her vest and settled up against his bare chest, wrapping her arms around him. She was only somewhat damp and still hot from running, and after a short while the radiant heat of her body seeped into Simon's and quelled the

worst of the shaking. Simon's heart calmed. Nate dug up the blanket and dropped it over Simon's shoulders; Sandra pulled it around them both.

"Templar's half-naked and cuddlin' your girl, Honda," Johnny reported.

"Knew it was too good to last!" Mike whooped, strain making his voice crack.

The van's wheels hit real asphalt. Somewhere far behind them fire engines were tearing down the road towards the shell of the garage, sirens going. Simon shut his eyes. "Christ, Archer," he said weakly, and then all the stuff he'd been working so hard to repress smacked him between the eyes and he shot bolt upright, nearly dislodging Sandra. "Did anyone see Archer get out?" he demanded to know.

Everyone looked at each other. "I didn't," Dave said after a moment, his voice uncertain.

"Nope," said Johnny.

"Me neither!" Mike called from the front seat.

"I'm sure he's fine, Templar," said Sandra, trying to get him to settle back down.

"Fine? Jesus Christ, he was duct-taped to a chair! That crazy fucker shot him twice! I saw him do it, Spring! *I saw the blood, okay?*" Simon was shouting at her by the end and he couldn't make himself stop.

"I know!" Sandra shouted back, grabbing his shoulders. "I saw that too! Jesus, Templar, I don't know! But he told us to go before we got caught and *we're going!*"

Simon deflated, shouted down. "Yeah," he said, squeezing his eyes shut. "Christ. Sorry, I didn't mean to shout at you, Spring."

"It's okay, Templar," Sandra said, settling back up against his chest. After a moment, Simon put his arms around her, just because he felt like he needed to.

Mike stuck to the back roads and kept their speed down to a number that would be sedate even in the States. How much it cost him to throttle himself back like that, Simon didn't know. The drive took close to an hour, most of which Simon spent semiconscious; somehow, despite the constant howling of sirens in the distance, they made it back behind the gates of the villa without so much as getting looked at twice, let alone pulled over or arrested. Criminals could and did get clean away from crime scenes all the time—Christ, Simon knew that well enough—and yet, here on the other side of the fence, it felt like every eye was on them. It was a minor miracle when Mike pulled the van into the garage, out of sight. Simon needed that miracle. He needed it a lot.

By the time Mike shut the van off they were all calm, nearly somnolent, the hyper-focus of game-on mode having long since faded away. Simon's team crawled out of the back of the van like they were sleepwalking, carrying the discarded bits of their gear, tracking mud everywhere. Simon slid out last of all,

still clutching the blanket around his shoulders and cringing at the touch of his soaking-wet pants.

“Go get in the shower, Templar,” Sandra said. She was making a neat stack of her gear and Simon’s on the floor of the van, preparing to carry it all in. She added Simon’s sodden, muddy turtleneck to the pile, adding “You need to get warmed up before you make yourself sick.”

“Yeah,” Simon said, picking at his pants. “And Stonewall needs to get online and keep an eye out.”

Sandra glanced around. “He’s already gone, Templar. Probably in front of the computer already, knowing Dave.”

“Oh,” said Simon. He closed his eyes and opened them again. “Good. That’s good. . . . none of you got hurt, did you?”

“Everybody’s fine,” Sandra said. She snapped the rubber band out of her hair, wincing, then scruffed at her sweat-damp hair until it fell out of its braid. “Nate set it all up so that the explosion went . . . away from us. You’re the only one who got damaged, you’ve got a little . . .” She touched Simon’s cheek where the wire had hit it, which stung.

Simon winced away from the touch. “So nobody’s hurt,” he said.

“Well,” Sandra said, looking away. “None of us.”

“Yeah,” Simon said faintly.

Sandra eyed him for a moment, then put a hand on his shoulder and pushed him bodily towards the door. “Shower and dry clothes *now*, Templar. Stonewall can handle the computer without you for half an hour.”

“Yeah,” Simon said again, shuffling along. “Yeah, that’d be good.”

Simon peeled himself out of his wet pants and underwear and abandoned them in a pile on the bathroom floor. He glanced at himself in the mirror and immediately regretted it: his face was flushed like he’d been out in the sun too long, bits of black ash flaked away when he touched his crisped eyebrows, and blood was crusted on his cheek where the wire had struck it. His eyes were flat and haunted. Moving mostly on autopilot Simon took three Advil, then crawled into the massive white tub and turned on the hot water.

The tub filled around him, the water warm, then hot, then too hot. Simon adjusted the temperature once and then gave up on it, staring blindly up at the ceiling while the water deepened, graying faintly as it soaked the dried mud off his skin. Eventually it got deep enough that he could float and Simon turned off the tap, wincing a little at the sudden, echoing silence. The raw spot on his thumb stung, and his burned face stung—Simon sat up long enough to run cold water over a washcloth, then lay back and draped it over his face. The cold felt good, as did the excuse to shut his eyes and not think about anything. Heat soaked into his muscles and worked them loose, aided by the Advil. He’d be sore in the morning, but right now he was fine. Just fine.

Exhausted, Simon dozed for a while—how long, he wasn't sure—and only came back to himself when the grayish water was lukewarm around him. His skin was clean and a healthy, parboiled pink. Simon pulled the plug to let the tub drain, then ducked under the shower long enough to knock the last of the mud off. The hot water stung on his face. Simon winced away from it, his eyes watering.

Once he was clean and dry, with a towel slung around his hips, Simon bent over the sink and sluiced his face with cold water until it was aching and numb. He still *had* eyebrows, he was dimly pleased to see, although they weren't quite as thick as they had been and the lashes around one eye were a bit shorter than usual. Simon prodded at his burnt face, avoiding his eyes in the mirror. Maybe Sandra had some face cream or something. He should ask.

Once clean, the scabbed-over cut on his cheek was thin and of no account. It'd heal on its own in a few days. Simon leaned in to inspect it and twitched back as his mind threw up the matching image of Bran slicing open Jeremy's cheek with the front sight of his pistol; the image was random and disconnected, however, and Simon was able to force it away with a minimum of effort. Simon stuffed his wet and clammy things into the hamper, hung up the towel, and shut off the bathroom light.

It was close to midnight by the time he staggered back out of the bathroom. The urge to collapse right into bed and sleep for fourteen hours was strong, almost overwhelming, but instead Simon stumbled around, getting himself dressed again. The day wasn't over yet. Simon laced up his sneakers and left his room.

The hallway was dark and quiet and Simon stuck close to the wall, oddly embarrassed by even the nominal amount of noise that he was making. Outside the clouds hid the moon and disgorged a slight, desultory mist that beaded up on the windows and obscured the view. The lights in Johnny's room were off, as were the lights in Nate's; light shone under the door of Dave's room, though, and Simon knocked lightly and let himself in.

Everyone else was already there, sitting wherever there was room to sit, ranged in a loose half-circle around Dave. No one was talking. They had all cleaned up and changed, much like Simon, and much like Simon, they looked exhausted. Half of them didn't bother to look up when Simon let himself in; Sandra, curled up against Mike's chest on the bed, didn't so much as open her eyes. Simon shut the door behind him, taking care to do so quietly. "Hey, folks."

The answering mumble of "Hey, boss" was quiet and dispirited. Simon put his hand on the back of Dave's chair. "Anything yet, Stone?"

"Nothing yet," Dave said, his eyes intent on the screen. Alone amongst them all, he seemed to be wide awake, enraptured by the laptop he was staring at. Every few seconds he pressed the space bar with great gravity, intent on the screen, waiting for something to happen. "I'm not really surprised, though. It's possible no one will stick it in a drive until it gets back to Russia."

“Or at all,” Nate added gloomily. He was curled up in the overstuffed chair in the corner, barefoot and tousle-headed. It made him look about twelve.

“Or at all,” Dave agreed. He ran his hand through his damp hair. “If you want to go to bed, I can handle this. I’ll come wake you if something starts to happen . . . ?”

Dave trailed off there; Simon was already shaking his head. “Although I *am* tired,” Simon said. He looked around the room, meeting the eyes of everybody who would look at him. “I know we’re all tired. Fuck a whole bunch of post-mission debriefing, that’s what I’m thinking. It’s not like we’re going to have to write this one up. I’ll sum up: you’re all terrific and it is as much a privilege to work with you as always. Now piss off and get some sleep.”

“What about you, Templar?” Mike asked. He was stroking Sandra’s hair, not really paying much attention to what his hands were doing.

Simon glanced at Dave’s computer—it was all gibberish to him—then picked his way over to sit on the foot of the bed. Sandra obligingly shuffled her feet out of the way to make room. “I’m thinking I’ll hang out here for an hour or so, just in case, and then crash,” Simon said.

“I’m too tired to get up and go to bed,” Sandra said, yawning. “I’ll stick around for a little longer.”

“Guess that means I’m stuck,” said Mike, not sounding particularly put out about this.

Simon let his head fall back to thunk against the wall. “In that case, Spring, I’m about to feel really bad about asking you if you’ve got anything in your girly toolbox that I could put on my face.”

“Mm?” Sandra lifted her head and cracked her eyes open, then hissed and sat up. “Are those burns?”

“Yeah,” said Simon. “A little matter of a fireball to the face. No big deal. Happens every day.”

Nate winced. “Sorry, Templar.”

Something about his tone of voice gave Simon pause. “It’s not your fault, Specs,” Simon said carefully.

“Yeah, but—”

“It’s *not*,” Simon insisted. He held up his hand so that everyone could see the abrasion on his thumb. “It’s no one’s fault. Archer screwed those wires down so tight that I shredded the fuck out of my thumb trying to screw them down any tighter, see? Those wires should not have come loose, and I, for one, am convinced it was a freak accident.”

Some of the guilt leached out of Nate’s eyes. “Okay, Templar,” he said, leaning his head against the wing of the chair. Johnny, perched on the top of the bookshelf next to him, leaned over and rumbled Nate’s hair.

Sandra slid off the bed and pattered sleepily off. Mike whined a little and made a perfunctory grab for her as she went by; she smacked his hands lightly

aside and squeezed his shoulder before vanishing into the indigo room, heading for violet. Watching the two of them made Simon tired, so he shut his eyes. It was a mistake: the memory of flames erupted in the darkness behind his eyelids. Simon winced, sat up, and rubbed his eyes.

"You okay, boss?" Johnny asked.

"Yeah, I'm good," said Simon, dropping his hands into his lap. "Little sore, is all." He hesitated, then decided not to say anything else. He poked at his thumb instead, inspecting the little laceration and the forming scab.

Sandra reappeared a minute or two later, carrying a tube of something clear and greenish. "Aloe gel," she said, dropping the tube into Simon's hands.

"Thanks, Spring," Simon said. Sandra nodded and climbed back up onto the bed, settling up against Mike's chest like she'd never left; Simon climbed down, wincing at the stiffness in his muscles, and headed for the blue bathroom.

The metal clownfish that he'd joked about a lifetime ago hung on the walls. Simon blinked at them, certain for a moment that he was hallucinating, then spun on his heel. The bathroom was painted like an aquarium, right down to the sandstone tiles on the floor—Simon snorted out a tired laugh and headed for the fancy glass sink. His skin was starting to feel hot and tight again, so he sluiced his face down with cold water, patted it dry, resigned himself to looking like an idiot, and spread a thick layer of aloe over the burns.

His skin sucked up the gel like a desert absorbing rain; two minutes later it was gone, absorbed, barely even leaving a shine behind. Simon smeared on another layer, then stuck the tube in his pocket and left the bathroom.

"Glossy," Mike said in general approval, watching Simon climb back up onto the bed. "Like strawberry Jell-O bukkake. With lime bits."

"Yeah, get bent," Simon said with no real malice. He raised his voice. "I assume nothing's happening, Stone?"

"Huh?"

"That would be a yes," Simon said. The laugh he got in return was pretty perfunctory, and then everything went quiet. No one felt like talking, least of all Simon.

Letting his head fall back against the wall again, Simon shut his eyes and willed his mind to go blank. It wasn't easy. Whenever he relaxed his iron control, his memory flung up a disconnected image of the fireball boiling up towards him, or of Bran snarling and pulling the trigger, or of Jeremy's head flying back to show Simon the bloody pit of his right eye—Simon forced the wayward images away. It got easier, after a while, and finally Simon's mind uneasily consented to empty.

Folding his hands in his lap, Simon picked idly at the scrape on his thumb and replayed the events of the evening from the start—or he tried to, at least. He was fine—detached, even—until the moment at which Bran pulled the trigger, and then Simon's heart clenched like a fist. The memories harried Simon's mind

around in ever-darkening circles until he was aware only of the godawful mental slide show, and of the pressure on his chest, like drowning.

“Templar?” Sandra said, worried. “Did you say something?”

Simon snapped back to himself only to discover that he’d slumped forward into a semi-fetal ball, one fist pressed to his chest to mitigate the ache. “I’m going back,” Simon rasped, blinking down at his crossed legs. He had to swallow to fight down the lump in his throat.

“What?”

“I’m going back to the garage,” Simon said again, sitting up and sliding off the edge of the bed. “Mike, where are the keys to the van?”

“On my dresser,” Mike said, at the same moment as Sandra said, “I’m not sure that’s a good idea—”

Simon’s head snapped up. He had no idea what the expression on his face looked like, but it shut Sandra up in a hurry, whatever it was. “It’s been—” Simon checked his watch “—close to two and a half hours, and it’ll have been closer to three by the time I get there. If there are still any fire trucks or police cars there, I swear I’ll just drive by and come right back. I’m just . . . I’m going back. I can’t just . . .” He trailed off there and made a helpless, frustrated gesture. “I have to go see for myself. That’s all.”

Sandra’s worried expression was so wholly sympathetic that Simon had to look away before he embarrassed himself. “Do you want someone to come with you?” Sandra asked, pitching the question as neutrally as possible.

“No,” Simon said, heading for the indigo room. “I want you all to stay here where it’s safe. Get some sleep if you can. I’ll be back in an hour or two.” Leaning into Mike’s room, Simon snagged the keys off the dresser.

Now they were all awake; *now* they were all looking at him, with varying amounts of confusion and hapless pity on their faces. “Are you sure—” Sandra started to say, then shook her head and overrode herself. “Be careful, Templar,” she said instead.

“Hey, I’m always careful, except when I’m not,” Simon said, trying to smile and failing miserably. “Stonewall, is it all under control?”

“No problem, Templar.” Dave prodded the space bar again. “In theory I don’t even need to be sitting here, since it’ll set off an alarm if anything happens.”

Simon nodded and stuck the keys to the van in his pocket. “If you need anything, from anyone, you ask for it. Okay? What you’re doing right now is the most important thing that’s left to be done.”

“Okay, Templar.”

“My man, Stone,” said Simon, and then he left the blue room, heading for his own. Halfway there he broke into a run.

* * *

A fine mist was still falling as Simon jockeyed the van out of the garage. It was a bulky, slow, clumsy vehicle at the best of times, and the mist made it hard to see no matter whether the wipers were going or not; Simon left the wipers set to intermittent and babied the van down the gravel drive. The darkness was nearly total, aside from his headlights.

He was well underway before he realized his mistake in coming alone. It was late, the roads were empty, and there was no one along to distract him; driving the van required little more than perfunctory attention, which left his mind free to dwell on whatever it liked. Blunted pulses of guilt and anger pummeled at the back of his mind, accompanied by jumbled recollections and scattered memories. Simon couldn't fight them off. By the time Simon hit the A7, he was sunk so deep into a numbing black fugue that he could barely feel his hands on the wheel, his mind plodding around and around in painful circles.

"Jeremy's dead," Simon said aloud, trying the thought on for size. He wanted to think otherwise, but the duct tape, the bullets, the *fire*—he'd seen the spray of Jeremy's brains on the barrels behind him. The thought didn't hurt much yet. There was still that stone in his chest, but that was just a harbinger. A placeholder.

The exit came up and Simon took it, barely aware he was doing so. He drove by the farm, keeping a careful eye out for official vehicles. He saw none. If there were policemen or firemen still up by the garage, they were sitting there in total darkness, which didn't seem likely. Simon couldn't even see what was left of the garage.

Simon drove on, parking the van in the same place they had left it two days or a lifetime ago, when they were first here to rig up the garage and set the trap. The mist clung to him the instant he stepped out of the van, condensing coolly on his face. It felt good, Simon dimly realized. He paused by the van's side, absently rubbing his chest, and tried to think of the best plan of attack. In the end, he gave up and headed down the road.

As it turned out, his scruple was almost entirely unnecessary. Cars were parked here and there on the roads and the driveway itself, most of them blocking one another off; a handful of gawkers had braved the weather to stand around and do their thing, huddling in little clumps and conversing in low, awed tones. Occasionally someone would wave a hand at the remains of the garage.

Simon slowed. If this had been his crime scene, he'd have seeded the crowd with his own people and told them to keep a lookout for anyone behaving suspiciously. Arsonists liked to return to the scene, he knew that much, and here he was, burnt face and all. Not for the first time he wondered just what the hell he thought he was doing—then he drifted into the crowd and made his way forward.

There was almost nothing left of the garage. One corner and half a wall of its skeletal, blackened frame still stood, but most of the garage was a heap of ash and burnt wood; coals still glowed here and there. The vines had withered away in a circle around the garage, some of them festooned with firefighting foam. Simon

stopped a safe distance away from the remains and looked the garage over. There was no sign that the garage was being treated as a crime scene. Yet. That was a good sign, although ultimately meaningless: just because they hadn't found a body in the wreckage yet didn't mean they wouldn't find one tomorrow.

The wind picked up a little, blowing a desultory swirl of sparks towards the circle of onlookers. Most of them flinched back, including Simon. His nostrils filled with the smell of smoke, burnt rubber, and deceased gasoline. Simon turned away, kicking absently at the tarmac, noticing for the first time the twisted metal scattered around. The remains of exploding fuel barrels, probably. Simon stuck his hands in his pockets and poked one of the chunks of metal with the toe of his sneaker, too numb to think about much any more.

Simon flipped the chunk of metal over, then paused, frowning. Something, some memory, some *something* was nudging at the back of his mind. Simon turned back to look at the remains of the garage, to see if anything there would jog his memory; it looked the same as the last time he'd looked, and the stray bit of information still refused to rise to the top of his mind. Simon forced his mind open and emptied it, staring at the glowing coals and waiting.

After a couple of minutes, the wind rose again and brought with it the information that Simon had been trying to recall. He smelled smoke, certainly, and burnt rubber and all kinds of petrochemicals, but what he didn't smell was burnt pork. Simon's job had only brought him into contact with that smell once, but he'd never forgotten it. The firemen would be familiar with that smell, and would have torn the garage apart if they'd smelled it, and this place would be an official crime scene now.

Barely daring to hope—his mind still mocking him with the image of Jeremy's right eye exploding in a bloody haze—Simon squinted against the breeze, studying the burnt wreckage to see if it had anything else to offer. One of the blackened timbers abruptly split in the middle, exposing the glowing orange center and sending up a swarm of sparks. They rose in a crackling swirl, winking out one by one, except for the one that reversed direction in mid-air, dropping again, pausing, then rising, pausing, dropping . . .

Entirely on autopilot Simon swung around and walked back down the drive, very carefully thinking about nothing at all. It took him five minutes to reach the van and then he walked on past it, up the hill; once he'd crested the hill and dropped out of sight, he turned into the vines, found the fence, and jumped it. Mud squelched under his sneakers. He ignored it.

The long, winding dirt track that led down the hill to the farmhouse was deserted, completely hidden by the tangles of overgrown vines. Simon ambled along, stubbornly taking his time, refusing to do anything that might suggest his heart was in his throat, even after he rounded a gentle bend in the road and saw that spark again.

The smell of smoke didn't hit him until he was ten paces away, and Simon

came to an abrupt halt, squinting against the darkness under the farmhouse's ramshackle porch roof. After a while a face and a shape evolved from the darkness—"Simon," Jeremy Archer said tiredly, taking another long drag on his cigarette.

◆ Forty-Five

Simon stuck his thumbs into his beltloops and looked away, waiting until the tidal wave of shock and relief stopped roaring through him. “Hey,” he finally said, sounding a bit more gruff than he’d meant to. “People can see the light of your cigarette from the garage, you know.”

Jeremy pulled the cigarette from his mouth and studied the glowing tip. “Can they,” he said, manifestly disinterested. “I suppose I ought to do something about that, oughtn’t I.” Shutting his eyes, he took another long drag, momentarily lighting his face a hellish orange.

Kicking absently at the hard-parked dirt of the trail, Simon studied Jeremy out of the corner of his eye. Jeremy still looked like hell—his split lip was puffy and bleeding heavily, his arms were covered in bruises and abrasions, and the hand that held the cigarette was streaked with blood—but he was undoubtedly alive, unless Simon was hallucinating. The center of Jeremy’s t-shirt was a red, torn ruin, through which unmarred skin shone like a beacon; the long cut on Jeremy’s cheek was smeared and crusted, but not all that bad, underneath the dried blood. Simon picked his way over to the porch and found a sheltered place to sit, a good ten feet away from where Jeremy stood. “You could have called or something,” he suggested, after the silence started to grate on him.

“I’d meant to,” said Jeremy. He dug in his back pocket and came out with something. “Unfortunately I managed to fall on my phone when Bran shot me.” The cell phone hit the porch about halfway between them, the hinge shattered, the two halves of the plastic shell now connected only by a single yellow wire. Jeremy looked away, sighing out smoke. “I’m afraid it’s quite dead.”

Simon reached over and picked up the damaged phone, poking at the buttons. He managed to eke out a single, weak flash, but nothing else. “Yeah, okay,” he said, tossing the phone back onto the porch. It skidded over and hit Jeremy’s shoe. “I guess that was that loud crack I heard.” Simon hesitated, then damned himself for a coward and added, “I thought it was your skull hitting the concrete.”

Jeremy reached down and picked up the phone, putting it back in his pocket. “In that case, I expect its death only worked in my favor,” he said, still not all that

interested. "So, that was you on the roof, then?"

"Yeah," Simon said.

Jeremy's expression remained dispassionate. "Given your behavior in the past, I can't say I'm surprised." He wasn't even *smiling* when he said it.

"Hey, no, it wasn't like that," Simon said, stung and unnerved. "The heavy weather managed to work the wires free from the antenna box thing. The whole network went down—I had to go reconnect the wires before Nate hit the button and failed to blow anything up."

"Ah," said Jeremy. Not even this news served to ruffle him. "I expect I owe you a round of thanks, then."

"Well . . . *yeah*," Simon said, floundering.

"Thank you, Simon," Jeremy said, in exactly the same tone of voice he might have used to thank Simon for passing the salt.

Simon subsided. His rising bafflement was starting to make him angry; he tried to quash the anger the best he could. "You could sound a little more grateful," he suggested.

"No," said Jeremy, reaching up to rub his temples. The butt of his cigarette jutted out from between his first two fingers. "No, I really couldn't, Simon. Not right now."

"Christ, give me a foothold here!" Simon said, aggravated. "Don't just stand there being all grim—did something go wrong? Is that it?"

"Not that I know of." Jeremy ground the butt of his cigarette out on the sole of his shoe, then flicked it out onto the roadway.

"Then . . . what?" Simon hesitated, then added, "Also, I'd be kind of remiss in my duties if I didn't point out that that's littering."

"Mm," Jeremy said, and fell silent.

Simon waited for ten seconds or so, then held up his hands in surrender and said, "Okay, I'm sorry, obviously now is not the time for banter."

"No, not particularly."

"Yeah. Sorry." Simon gave it another five seconds, then accepted that he wasn't going to get an answer. "So . . . why are you still here? It's been three hours—why haven't you come back to the villa?"

"I'm waiting for Bran," Jeremy said. "We agreed to meet up here when we could."

"He's a little late, you know," Simon pointed out. "Are you sure he's coming?"

Jeremy finally smiled, sort of: it was thin and wintry and vanished in a heartbeat. "No," he said.

"Ah." Simon paused and considered this. "But you have to wait anyway," he said, trying on the words for size. "Just in case. Because you said you would."

"Exactly," said Jeremy.

Simon followed Jeremy's gaze, looking off down the road. "He didn't die in the fire," Simon said, after a while. "If you're worried about that."

“I suppose I’m not really worried, *per se*, but still, it’s nice to know.” Some microscopic amount of strain left Jeremy’s battered face. “After all, if *I* was able to get out, then he ought to have been able to escape the fire while walking on his hands.”

“Yeah,” Simon said, looking down at his hands. He hesitated, then said, “Okay, look, I have to know how you did that. I mean, you were duct-taped to the chair, I saw you get shot in the face, I *saw* what was left of your eye . . .”

The sound that Jeremy made might have been a laugh or just a huff of irritated breath. “Cheap special effects,” he said. His suit jacket sat folded on the porch by his foot; Jeremy stooped, dug around in it for a moment, then flipped something towards Simon. It hit the porch with a rustle and a clunk.

Simon picked up the length of duct tape and studied it in the faint light. Whoever had crafted the blindfold had covered most of the inside with cloth, leaving only two thin strips of adhesive to hold the blindfold on. Simon flipped the blindfold over and looked once again into the bloody pit of Jeremy’s right eye, now not attached to Jeremy’s head at all. This close up, he could see the plastic from the blood bag, and the blackened remains of the special-effects explosive, contained in a little metal cup. “Sneaky,” Simon said, turning the blindfold over and examining the second, larger blood bag on the back, this one flecked with both fake blood and something that looked and smelled like oatmeal. A few of Jeremy’s hairs were caught in the adhesive. “Where’d you get these?”

“From a hobbyist in Milan,” Jeremy said. He’d produced another cigarette from somewhere, and his lighter ratcheted, briefly lighting his face. “He believes we’re shooting some sort of independent film. Those and the one on my chest came in the same box with the license plates and the iPod, actually.”

“Huh.” Simon tossed the blindfold back onto Jeremy’s jacket. “Is the rest of that stuff makeup, too?”

“Oh, no. The rest of it is quite real.” Jeremy studied his blood-streaked hand in the light from his cigarette. “Your pardon, I take that back. I’m fairly sure this is just corn-syrup runoff.”

“So . . . what? You let Bran knock you around a little before he taped you to the chair?”

Jeremy tilted his head to the side. “Yes?” he said, like that was a stupid question. “I had to look like I’d put up a fight, after all, and I expect Bran enjoyed doing it.”

Simon snorted. “Well, shit, I guess so,” he said.

“Better to let him work out his aggression that way than to let it continue to build up until he decided to shoot me for real,” Jeremy said, with another of those thin, frozen smiles.

“Guess so,” Simon said, subsiding. “So how’d you finesse the duct tape? Same way?”

“Same way,” Jeremy confirmed. “Lined with cloth and slashed open on the side facing away from Volpe. It was a matter of ten seconds to rip free once it was safe to do so, assuming I didn’t mind trailing banners of duct tape after me.”

“Well, when the alternative is burning to death, sure, who’d mind?” Simon fell silent and looked Jeremy over. He was battered and smelled like smoke, but he didn’t seem all that *hurt*. “So,” Simon said, shifting. He sounded awkward, which only served to make him angry at himself. “You okay? Only lightly toasted?”

“A bit crisp, yes.” Jeremy meditatively feathered the fingers of one hand through his hair, which was oddly short on one side. “I expect a week or two of lying low should put me to rights,” he said. “Well. And a haircut.”

Simon’s hand flew to his pocket. “Here,” he said, pulling out the half-full tube of aloe gel and tossing it onto Jeremy’s jacket. “It’s Sandy’s burn stuff. I forgot I was carrying it.”

“Mm? Ah.” Jeremy stooped to pick it up, studying it in the dim light. Sticking his cigarette into the corner of his mouth, Jeremy opened the tube and squeezed a fat worm of aloe gel onto his fingers, smoothing it onto his cheeks. “Ah,” he said again, nearly sighing it.

“Yeah, you’re welcome,” Simon said, watching Jeremy spread the stuff over his forehead. “Don’t mention it. Happy to help.”

Jeremy capped the tube and tossed it back to Simon, who caught it. “Thank you, Simon,” Jeremy said, without so much as a twitch to acknowledge the sarcasm.

“Jesus, you’re no fun any more,” Simon said, aiming for levity and missing.

Whatever slight softening the conversation had wrought on Jeremy’s demeanor, the weak joke destroyed it. “You’ll pardon me, I’m sure,” said Jeremy, his voice once again wholly devoid of inflection. He leaned against one of the porch supports and breathed out smoke, one cool shoulder turned in Simon’s direction.

“Christ, I’m sorry!” Simon said, throwing up his hands in exasperation. “It was just a joke, dammit—I don’t know what else to say!”

Jeremy’s eyes drifted about half-shut, the smoke from his cigarette eddying about his face and obscuring his features. For a long moment he was silent, either considering what Simon had just said or simply ignoring him; finally Jeremy opened his mouth to say something and then shut it again, straightening up and going still.

Simon blinked at him, then looked out at the road again. A skinny figure was making his way towards them, his steps quick and light, continually glancing from side to side like he expected an attack at any moment. Bran pulled up about fifteen feet from the porch, his jacket flung over his shoulder, a wide stripe of soot smeared over one cheek. He had a fake-blood stain to match Jeremy’s on his shirt, high up on his belly. “Jesus, but I thought those looky-loos’d never get,”

he said, and then noticed Simon and shied back a step. “Aaw, Christ,” Bran spat in disgust. “What’s *he* doin’ here?”

“I expect he’s come to make certain that I’m still alive,” Jeremy said, flicking his half-smoked cigarette into a puddle by the side of the road. “Hallo, Irish.”

“Aye, well, good thing someone gives a toss about yeh, then,” said Bran, still scowling. “Anyroad, I’ve done what yeh asked. Gi’ us what yeh promised.”

“That you have,” Jeremy said. “Have you a phone I could borrow? I’m afraid I fell on mine and broke it when the chair went over.”

“Oh, that’s just bleedin’ deadly, innit.” Bran hawked and spat off into the overgrown vines. Digging around in one of the pockets of his cargo pants, Bran produced a battered silver phone and hucked it overhand at Jeremy, who snapped it neatly out of the air. “Go on, then.”

“Thank you, Irish,” Jeremy said, punching a number into the phone and putting it to his ear. There was a pause, during which Simon stayed quiet and Bran glared hopefully at Jeremy, and then Jeremy closed his eyes and summoned up a real smile from somewhere. “Ethan,” he said, with a rush of relief. “It’s done, then.”

The faint buzz of Ethan’s voice carried clearly to Simon and turned Bran to stone. “Yes,” said Jeremy. “Yes, I think so. In any case, the job’s done, and I’ll pay what’s owed. The fellow ought to be in touch shortly—you’ll know him because he has the proper names.” Jeremy paused to listen, then smiled again. “Tell her that her faith in me is underwhelming.”

Bran shifted impatiently. Jeremy’s eyes flicked up, then back down. “In any case, I must go,” Jeremy said. “. . . yes, I’ll be fine. I’ll be in touch if I need anything.” Ethan said something else, something which made Jeremy smile again, and then the smile faded from Jeremy’s face like smoke and he hung up. “There you are,” he said, pitching the phone back to Bran. His voice was stuck in neutral again.

“Awright, fair enough,” Bran said, putting the phone away. “Right. I’m off, then. And if I haul my carcass all the way t’ England and find yeh’ve been havin’ me on, I’ll put one in yer head and one in yer gut for real.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Jeremy said, rubbing his eyes. “Goodbye, Bran. Take care of yourself.”

“Go an’ fuck yerself, yeh tosser,” Bran said, almost pleasantly. He headed back the way he’d come. Simon and Jeremy both watched him go until the night and the mist swallowed him and hid him from sight.

Jeremy sighed. “Charming as always,” he said, mostly to himself.

“Yeah, he’s a real sweetheart, I’m gonna marry that man some day, just you wait and see,” Simon said sourly. “You know what really chaps my ass?”

“Mm?” Jeremy said, uninterested.

“You just paid that asshole something like twenty-five million dollars to knock you around and pretend to shoot you,” Simon said. “He hates your guts

and yet it was him that you went running to for help in cooking up this scheme. Me? Who does not, under normal circumstances, hate your guts all that much? You couldn't even be bothered to tell me what to *expect*, let alone give me a say in the proceedings."

Jeremy shrugged. "Well," he said. "He's my brother."

"Well, okay, yes, but I'm . . ." Simon trailed off there, uncertain how to finish that sentence.

"You're what?" Jeremy asked, looking at Simon for the first time, his face completely expressionless. "You're *just this* guy. Remember?"

Simon flinched back from the sheer matter-of-factness in Jeremy's tone. "Okay," he said after a moment. "Maybe I deserved that—"

"It's possible." Jeremy swept up the jacket at his feet and put it on, buttoning it up over the hole in his t-shirt. "Thank you for all your help, Simon, and please convey my immense gratitude to your friends," he said. "Feel free to hang about the villa for a few more days if you like, but I expect you'll want to be heading home. Leave behind anything you don't want to take with you. If you should need anything that's not quite legal, I expect Ethan will be happy to help."

"What?" Simon said, caught flat-footed. "Where are you going?"

Jeremy jumped down off the porch. "To lie low," he said.

"But—Jesus, you know, you can come back to the villa. It's plenty low." Simon pointed up the road. "I've got the van. It's right there."

"Mm. No. I don't think so. I've been through rather a lot in the past few weeks, and I believe I'd prefer to do my initial recuperation somewhere where you aren't about to be a prick at me." Jeremy paused to light another cigarette, exhaling a cloud of smoke and flipping Simon a casual wave over his shoulder. "Do give me a call some time, though," he said, walking away. "I expect I ought to have my network back up and running within the week—the number I gave you should start to work again then." His voice drifted back to Simon through the mist, even as Jeremy himself blended with the night and vanished; he was entirely lost to sight by the time he finished the sentence, and then he was simply gone.

"Hey!" Simon said, bolting to his feet and racing after him. Jeremy was nowhere to be seen—"Hey!" Simon yelled. There was no answer. Simon pulled up a few feet down the road, looked wildly in all directions, and then threw up his hands in exasperation. "Jesus Christ," he told the night. "Archer, you frigging drama queen!" No one answered this charge. He was alone, with nothing left to do. After one last look around, Simon gave up and headed for where he'd parked the van, muttering under his breath.

◆ Forty-Six

They were all still in the blue room when Simon got back, although half of them had fallen asleep. “Hey,” Simon said, letting himself in and closing the door behind himself. Sandra woke with an unladylike snort, which startled Mike awake; Mike’s startled “Huh!” woke Nate, who twitched upright in the armchair with a yelp. Despite everything Simon was suddenly hard-pressed not to laugh. “That? That was really cute,” he said. “You guys should put together a comedy routine on the off-chance that we all get fired for this shit.”

Sandra ground the heels of her hands into her eyes. “Well?” she said, yawning. “Did you find anything?”

“Yeah,” Simon said, yawning in automatic response.

Sandra waited patiently for Simon to elaborate. When he didn’t, she sighed. “What did you find, Templar?”

Simon took a deep breath. “Archer’s okay,” he said.

“Oh, good,” Sandra said, slumping back down against Mike’s chest. On the other side of the room, Nate went limp with relief.

“Apparently it was all a big staged production for Volpe’s benefit?” Simon said, leaning back against the closed door and hooking his thumbs in his beltloops. “Anyway, Archer’s fine, so is his asshole of a brother, and they’ve both taken off in different directions to lie low until such time as Karpol forgets about them. Also, that garage is *serious* toast. Remind me never to get on Nate’s bad side.”

“Mmph.” Sandra blinked her eyes open with an effort. “So he’s not coming back?”

Simon shrugged. “Nope, seems he’s not,” he said. “Archer said we’re welcome to stay for a few more days, and that we should just leave behind anything we don’t want to take with us. So!” He slapped a hand against his thigh. “Folks, I know you all just hate the idea of ditching this scenic country, but I’m thinking we ought to go the hell home before we get caught at this. We’re done here.”

“Goddamn, sounds good,” Johnny said.

“Woo hoo!” Mike said, sleepily happy. “Two weeks in Italy and I didn’t get dragged to a single museum—I cannot *believe* I got away with that shit. I don’t need culture, a’ight? On account of me not being yogurt and all.”

“Texas did enough museums for all of us,” Sandra said, pushing herself back upright.

Simon, switching tracks, glanced over at Dave. He hadn’t so much as moved since Simon left, still sitting there poking the space bar. “Nothing yet, Stone?”

“Nothing yet,” Dave confirmed.

“All right, then.” Simon looked around the room. “Folks, I’m back safely and everything is now fine. We are, in fact, a huge success, and Archer said to tell you all thanks. So: thanks. Now get out of here and get some sleep already, Jesus, it’s like being surrounded by Rip Van Winkle.”

For a moment no one moved, probably all too tired to get up and go to bed. After a while Sandra slid off the blue bed and stretched, and the little motion triggered the general exodus. There was a lot of groaning and yawning. Simon looked back at Dave. “You said it’ll set off an alarm if anything happens?”

“Yes?” Dave said, blinking.

“Then go to bed,” Simon said. “If it wakes you up, come get me pronto, but I’m guessing that if Rich’s bomb is going to go off at all, it’s going to go off tomorrow morning, after Volpe’s people manage to dig up a Zip drive. You might as well sleep now, while you still can.”

Dave looked dubiously back at the screen of his laptop, then poked the space bar again. “You’re probably right, Templar.”

“I *am* right,” Simon said, “and if you don’t get out of that chair by the time I count five, I’ll kill you. Okay?”

“You can’t kill me in *Italy*,” Dave said, flustered. He slid out of his chair and tottered upright, though, which was about all that Simon could ask for.

Simon considered this for a moment. “What, you’re immortal, but only in Italy? How does that work?”

“No, I mean—” Dave hesitated. “Never mind,” he said, padding off towards the ridiculous aquarium bathroom.

“Trust me, I didn’t intend to,” Simon called after him.

By the time Simon made it back to the white room, his ass was seriously dragging. And sore. He left a trail of clothes behind himself as he moved from the hallway door to the bathroom door, too tired to put them in the hamper, almost too tired to take them off at all. Just struggling with his damp jeans threatened to make him pitch a fit like an overtired toddler. Simon restrained himself, just barely.

He washed his face in cold water one more time, then spread on another thick layer of the aloe gel, using up the tube. Simon made a mental note to buy Sandra some more, or at least foist her off with a five-dollar bill or a cup of coffee or

something, then dropped the empty tube in the trash, took another three Advil, and stumbled off to bed.

Turning the lights out plunged the room into darkness—real darkness, not the ambient blue-gray glow of moonlight. The cloud cover was still heavy, rain blatting lazily against the room’s two skylights. Simon crawled in between the cool sheets and groaned aloud. He was exhausted. He was beyond exhausted. Being awake was painful. And Simon could not for the life of him switch off his brain and fall asleep.

Simon scrubbed at his eyes, then went back to staring up at the froofy-ass canopy of the giant white bed. Their final conversation kept playing over and over in his mind, which was already numb with exhaustion. Whatever had been going on back there at the farm, Simon was unable to comprehend it. Every repetition of the scene saw it get darker and thicker, like mud, as Simon drifted slowly down towards a state of half-sleep; it didn’t get any clearer, however, and Simon benefitted from no sudden, startling insights.

A thumping noise from one side of the room yanked him back to consciousness like a dash of water to the face, and Simon was up on his elbows before the sound even died away. “Archer?” he said, awash in relief. “Jesus, that is just like you, waiting until I’m damn near asleep—”

No one said anything. Jeremy failed to appear. Simon hauled himself up a little bit further and squinted, trying to see into the shadows gathering at the corners of the room. There was another faint thump, and then the dim bar of light under the door to Johnny’s room flicked off. Simon blinked. “Oh,” he said, and let himself fall back into the pillows.

He woke up again barely five hours later to a dull, gray morning and someone pounding on his door. Simon lifted his head from the pillow and made a face. “Yeah,” he rasped, shoveling his hair out of his eyes.

“Templar, Stone says to come right away,” Nate called from the other side of the door. “Someone’s triggered the machine-killer!”

Suddenly, Simon was wide awake. He kicked free of the covers and swung his legs out of the bed, wincing at the residual soreness in his muscles but too focused to pay it any attention. “Tell him I’ll be right there!”

“Okay, Templar!” Nate pattered away. Simon heard him stop and thump on Johnny’s door.

Simon grabbed his jeans off the floor and kicked his way back into them, making a face at the slight damp patches hiding along the seams. Scrubbing a hand up along his stubble, Simon winced, then decided that shaving was right out of the question today; he ran his fingers through his hair, called it good enough, and headed for Dave’s room, still barefoot.

Sandra was already there when Simon knocked and let himself in, but Simon barely spared her a glance before going to lean over Dave. “Stone,” he said. “Tell

me what's happening."

"They put the disk in a drive about, uh, ten minutes ago," Dave said, glancing at the clock on his computer's taskbar. The alarm must have woken him: his hair was a reddish rat's nest and he hadn't put a horrible shirt on yet, although he'd managed to acquire pants, fortunately for everyone's sanity. His eyes were completely mad with anticipation. "I don't know if they've figured out what's going on yet. I don't think so. The files look like the real deal if you don't look too closely."

"So what's happening now?" Simon put his hands on Dave's shoulders and gave them an encouraging squeeze.

Dave didn't quite wince, although he did duck his head a little. "The computer they used was connected to the internet," he said. "It sent me a little squirt of data to acknowledge that it had been triggered, then started tagging everybody that that computer had ever been used to communicate with. The virus is out and working now—it's too late to, say, unplug the first computer and stop it."

Simon's rush of vicious triumph was almost visceral. Behind him the door opened and Johnny came in. Simon ignored him. "So tell me what all that stuff means," he commanded, stabbing a finger at the rapidly-scrolling window in the middle of Dave's computer, which was filling with gibberish faster than Simon could ignore it.

"Well, that's . . ." Dave trailed off, then pointed to something else. "That's . . ." He trailed off again, then shook his head. "Most of it is just bookkeeping," he said. "I mean, it's important to me, but it's meaningless to most people. What you need to watch is this number, here." Dave tapped the rightmost column, which currently read **52**. "That's the number of computers that the machine-killer has identified as potential targets and started installing itself on." The number jumped to **65** even as Simon watched.

"That many?" Simon said. "Already?"

"Some people leave their computers on all night," Dave said, with a sheepish glance at the array of laptops spread out across the desk. All of them were, of course, on. "But really, I mean, that's kind of slow. It'll go up a lot faster once people in Moscow wake up and start turning on their computers."

"Kind of slow," Simon repeated. Mike popped in from the indigo room, still knuckling sleep out of his eyes, followed by Nate. The number jumped to **81**. Simon shook his head in wonderment. "So," he said. "What's the next step?"

"Right now I just let it run," Dave said, glancing at the scrolling window. "I'll let it run freely for, uh, probably about forty-eight hours, unless the number of infected computers goes way higher than I'm expecting. I'll need to hang around here and keep an eye on things, just to make sure."

"Okay," Simon said. "And after two days?"

"I'll alert the right people to the virus and release the patch," Dave said. "I can't guarantee that the virus will take out all of Karpol's machines—"

“I can,” Simon said grimly, remembering that monstrous pile of paper that Langridge had dumped on him. Thinking about Langridge jogged his memory—“Oh, shit,” Simon said, dropping into a crouch. “We’re taking down Karpol’s network via email spam—I bet there are like forty spooks already running around CIA headquarters trying to make sense of this huge spike in viral emails. Hell, I bet we’ll take out some computers at the CIA if they’re not on the ball.” He paused. “Langridge is going to be *so pissed*. Or maybe think it’s hilarious. I’m not sure.”

“Better hope she never finds out it was you,” Sandra said dryly.

“Better hope the *CIA* never finds out it was us,” Simon said. “Stone, when you put the patch out there, make it as anonymous as you can, okay?”

Dave nodded, most of his attention on the window. “Already in the cards, Templar,” he said. “Everything’s already as anonymous as I can make it. I mean, we might be in some trouble if they’re able to analyze people’s coding styles, but since it’s mostly mine overlaid over Mr. Story’s, I think we’d be okay even then.”

Simon straightened up and dragged over a chair, the better to watch. The number in the window was **102**. Simon permitted himself a nasty grin.

Simon sat around and watched for a while, as the number ticked steadily upwards. It had been fascinating at first—and sweet revenge, to imagine what was happening out there—but there was only so long he could sit around watching nonsensical numbers before he remembered that he’d only had five hours of sleep on top of a long, long yesterday. “Is anything likely to change in the next couple of hours, Stone?”

“No?” Dave said. Unlike Simon, he was still fascinated, probably because he knew what all those numbers meant. “I mean, I don’t think so. It’s just going to spread for a while. It hasn’t even started destroying computers yet. It’s still preparing.”

“In that case, I’m going back to bed.” Simon stood up and slung his chair back under the desk. “Send someone to wake me if *anything* changes, but otherwise I’m just sitting here watching numbers go scrolling by, and I need my beauty sleep.”

“Aww, boss, I don’t know how to tell you this, but I’ve always thought you were pretty enough just as you are,” Mike said, right on cue.

“Those of you who want more sleep, go get it,” Simon said, ignoring Mike. “The rest of us have nothing of importance to do today, thank Christ. Dave, you need anything, food or whatever, you ask for it. Okay?”

“Okay, Templar,” Dave said, eyes once again glued to the scrolling window.

“And someone fetch the poor guy a shirt,” Simon said, heading for the door.

Simon woke up just before noon. Four more hours of sleep had gone a long way towards fixing what ailed him, and a shower fixed most of the rest; now all

he needed was coffee to make him wholly human. Simon headed for Dave's room.

Nate was, once again, asleep in his clothes on Dave's rumpled bed. Dave's hair lay a little flatter and he was actually wearing a shirt this time, but he still looked pretty awful. "Morning again, Stone," Simon said, shutting the door loudly enough to jog Nate back to consciousness. "I'm guessing by the state of your demi-beard that you haven't been paying sufficient attention to your personal hygiene this morning."

"What?" Dave said. "Oh. Um. No. I'm kind of afraid to leave the monitoring software alone. Just in case something goes wrong."

Nate sat up and took off his glasses, rubbing his eyes. "Hey, Templar," he said, his voice gritty.

"Oh, hey, *morning*, Sleeping Beauty," Simon said. "Do I need to chase you back to your own room again?"

"I'm fine," Nate protested. He slid off the bed and pattered over, leaning over Dave's shoulder to check the window.

Simon, thus reminded, also checked the window. The number he'd been told to watch stood at **1153**. Simon blinked, looked away, and then checked it again. **1153**. "Is that number right?" he said, tapping the offending number. "Has the virus really found over a thousand computers with parts of Rich's file on them?"

"Apparently so," Dave said, scratching at his cheek. "I don't find that number unreasonable."

"Huh," said Simon.

"If it goes significantly over three thousand, then I'll be worried," Dave said. He picked up the tail of his shirt and rubbed away the fingerprint that Simon had left behind, making the laptop's screen fluoresce into rainbows for half a second. "But given the scale of Karpol's suspected operations, a thousand is *nothing*."

Simon blew out an appreciative breath. "Man, talk about grabbing a tiger by the tail."

"Tell me about it," Dave said, with a jagged, nervous laugh. "About an hour ago the number jumped by over three hundred in one go and scared the shit out of me until I realized it had either hit Karpol's personal machine or some higher-up's, you know, someone who issues orders from on high to a whole bunch of employees?"

"Jesus," Simon said, swaying in place. "That's a rush."

"It'll probably do that again, too," said Dave. "Although by this point I don't know how many new machines it'll find. It has to be hitting a lot of duplicates already."

Simon looked at the screen again. **1158**. "Yeah, it's slowing down some," he said. "Anyway, I'm gonna go grab some lunch. Are you hungry? 'Cause I'll bring something up for you if you want."

"Yes, please," Dave said fervently. "Anything. And coffee. Please."

“That’s my boy,” Simon said, socking Dave on the shoulder. “Nate? You wanna come with?”

“Um . . .” Nate looked at Dave. “If you want to run take a quick shower, I can watch it for five minutes?”

Dave plucked at the front of his shirt and thought about that for a while. “Maybe after I eat,” he finally said.

“In that case, I’ll come with you, Templar,” Nate said.

“Right,” Simon said, heading for the door. “Let’s go, then. I’m starving.”

“Well, shit, I hate to let it go to waste,” Mike said, scowling at the open fridge.

Sandra sighed, kicking her feet absently. For lack of anywhere better to sit, she was perched on the island. “I don’t actually feel comfortable here without Jeremy around, is the thing.”

“Yeah, and I don’t feel comfortable about wasting a whole pound of pancetta,” Mike said. “I mean, this is the *real deal* here.”

“Foodie,” Sandra said accusingly, although she ruined it a moment later by laughing. “Hey, Templar.”

“Hey, kids, let’s not stoop to namecalling,” Simon said. Nate slid by him and headed for the fridge. Simon propped his elbows on the counter and considered his options. “So am I on my own for lunch or has Julian Child over there whipped up something marvelous?”

Mike thumped his forehead with both hands, groaning. “Goddamn but I am never gonna live this shit down,” he said. “It’s just me at my place, so either I cook or I starve, you know? Ain’t yet found myself a properly subservient woman, you know how it is.”

Simon automatically glanced at Sandra, who shrugged. “What?” she said. “He’s right. He hasn’t.”

“Yeah, okay, point,” said Simon, looking back at Mike. “But, see, I live alone too, and yet you don’t see me jumping at the chance to cater this event, do you?”

“I didn’t *jump*, Templar!” Mike squalled, affronted. “Maybe hopped a little, but shit, you wanna eat Texas’ cooking?”

“I don’t know. Does Texas cook?”

“I ain’t gonna win this fight,” Mike declared. “So to hell with you. Make your own lunch.”

Simon shrugged, playing the graceful winner, and headed for the breadbox. “Someone’s PMSing,” he noted in passing. Mike flipped him off, snickering.

After checking the level on the coffeepot and finding it acceptable, Simon set about assembling two sandwiches from what was left in the fridge. The supplies were beginning to look a bit picked over, but he was successful in producing something that looked at least edible and filling; Simon packed Nate off to the blue room with one and bit into the other. “So what’s up with you guys?” he said

around his mouthful of bread and prosciutto. “Besides ragging on our superstar chef, that is.”

Sandra shrugged. “Not much, actually. Which is kind of nice, now that I think about it. I was thinking that after lunch I’d go see about calling that cargo company and booking us our flights home.”

Simon paused, then swallowed. “Yeah, that’s a good idea,” he said. “Give Stonewall his forty-eight hours, since I don’t really want him stuck on a plane over the Atlantic with the machine-killer still propagating, but all in all I think I’d feel better if we got out of here soonest. No matter what Archer said.”

“Yeah, same here.” Sandra looked around the gigantic kitchen, mimed a shudder, and went back to kicking her heels against the island. “Do you want to fly back with us, Simon? Or is there some reason you’ll need to leave separately?”

Simon ate another bite of his sandwich while he considered this. “Go ahead and book me in with the rest of you,” he said, digging out his wallet with his free hand. “But I don’t want my real name on a passenger manifest for even a day or two, since I left the country on the down low without an alibi. So, uh.” He put his wallet down on the island and flipped awkwardly through it one-handed, eventually scrabbling out the Iowa driver’s license that identified him as ‘Simon Moorhead’. “Book me with that one,” he said, skimming it towards Sandra.

Sandra picked the license up and studied it. “Good picture,” she eventually said.

“I know, Christ, if only my real license looked anywhere near that good. Anyone who saw my DC license would think I was tweaking.” Simon stuffed more of his sandwich into his mouth.

Sandra turned the license over to inspect the back, her face neutral. “How good a fake is this?” she asked.

“Good,” Simon said, swallowing. “I flew here from England on it with no problems. It’s made by the same guy that makes all of Archer’s stuff.”

“What are you going to do with it once we get back home?” Sandra tucked Simon’s fake ID into her shirt pocket.

“Christ, I don’t know. Have it framed as a souvenir? Live a double life: hero of the FBI by day, male stripper by night?”

“Be still my fuckin’ heart,” Mike said, clutching at his chest and staggering.

Simon shook his head sadly, then glanced at Sandra. “He talks such a good game, but he’s never once come through and stuck a twenty-dollar-bill down my pants.”

“I, for one, am pleased by this lack,” Sandra said dryly, even as Mike yanked out his wallet and started rifling ostentatiously through it.

After lunch, Simon poked his head into Dave’s room long enough to ascertain that nothing of any substance had changed—the number now stood at **1204**—and

then went back to his own room and threw everything that was nominally his onto the bed.

Sandra had put his barely-used ROS gear in the closet, out of some chick urge to put everything neatly away where it belonged. Most of it Simon piled neatly on the riot shield. The black pants and turtleneck he decided to keep, though, dumping them on the floor with the rest of his dirty laundry; he dithered over the combat boots for a while before deciding to postpone that decision and putting them in a third pile all by themselves.

His own ID papers and the 'Trent Darcy' ID papers went into the pocket of his duffel, out of sight. Simon was sitting crosslegged on the floor disassembling his hideout gun and trying to decide what to do with it when someone knocked on his door. Sandra let herself in. "Here's this back," she said, skimming the 'Simon Moorhead' ID at him.

Simon swatted it to the floor, then picked it up and slotted it back into place in his wallet, completing the image of 'Simon Moorhead'. "Thanks, Spring," he said. "So tell me, is it wrong to sort of want to take those boots home with me? I mean, wearing combat boots seems kind of tacky if you're not in the military or, alternately, in college and majoring in 'asshole', but they're really comfortable. Also, I don't know, seriously manly."

"You think that's tacky?" Sandra said. "I'm thinking about taking mine back with me, too."

"Whoa, hello there, Butch." Simon considered this. "Actually, now that I think about it, that's kind of hot."

Sandra sighed, slumping back against the doorframe. "That's what Mike said."

"Of course that's what Mike said." Simon leaned way back, flailed around until his fingers landed on the combat boots, and moved them into the 'going home with me' pile. "So what's up with our flight back?"

"We'll go out on Monday morning," Sandra said. "We'll be flying through Frankfurt—don't ask me why, all cargo goes through Frankfurt, it's a thing—and get back into DC at some ungodly hour about sixteen hours later. Sound good?"

"Good enough," said Simon. "How well do they X-ray you? Have I got any chance of taking this gun home with me?"

"Not without a suitcase that locks and an awful lot of hassle," Sandra said.

"Crap." Simon hefted the half-assembled SIG and considered it. "I'll think of something," he decided, putting it back down. "Anything else I need to know?"

Sandra shrugged. "Not that I know of." She pushed herself up and thumped on Simon's door. "Catch you later, boss."

"Yeah," Simon said, distracted. Sandra shut the door behind herself.

Simon finished sorting through his things, moved the stack of ROS gear to one of the couches in the conversation pit, and lugged his laundry down to the laundry room, a lengthy endeavor. Having to walk a quarter of a mile just to

wash his clothes was something that Simon was not going to miss at all. The turtleneck and pants were still soggy to the touch and already starting to smell unpleasant. Simon dumped in an extra half-cup of detergent, just in case.

Once back in his room, he stood in the center of the cavernous white space and surveyed every inch of it. He didn't think he'd forgotten anything, since his eye didn't fall on anything that jogged his memory. Simon put his clean clothes in a pile on one of the chairs in the conversation pit, vaguely half-in and half-out of his duffel bag, stood the combat boots at the foot of the chair, decided that he was done, and headed out.

Dave had snatched a shower at some point, although he still looked pretty haggard. The empty dishes from his lunch still sat in a stack on the corner of his desk, abandoned; Nate was nowhere to be seen but Johnny was flopped out in one of the armchairs, staring up at the clouds on the ceiling with his hands tucked behind his head. Simon raised a hand in Johnny's direction, then went over to peer at the laptop's screen. The counter read **1054**. "Uh," said Simon.

"Huh?" Dave said, looking up from one of his other laptops.

Simon pointed to the offending number. "Isn't that lower than it was?"

"Oh! That's right, you didn't..." Dave scooted his chair around and squinted at the window. "The counter hit fifteen hundred machines infected, so I went ahead and triggered the second phase. Every time the virus finishes killing a computer, it decrements the counter by one."

"So eventually that counter will go back down to zero," Simon said.

Dave considered this, then made a seesawing gesture with one hand. "Once they figure out what's happening, they may start pulling the machines' plugs to try and stop the process. That'll fuck up the counter bigtime."

"Huh," Simon said, scratching at his cheek. His stubble itched almost worse than the light burn did. "So what'll happen if they do that?"

"Well, the hard drive won't be fully erased, but there's no stopping the virus right now without reformatting the computer, which would destroy all the data on it anyway," Dave said. "And the virus finds and eats Mr. Story's file first, just in case."

"Okay, hang on, hang on, just a second," Simon said. He grabbed the back of Dave's chair in both hands and closed his eyes. "I need to take a minute to properly appreciate the spectacle of Rich assfucking Karpol from beyond the grave." Simon swayed back to the full length of his arms and let his head fall back. "*Mmmmm*." Straightening back up, he opened his eyes. "Okay, I'm done."

"Ain't it a thing," Johnny said, behind him. "Ain't it just a fuckin' thing."

Simon checked the counter just as it jumped from **891** to **620**. Simon blinked. "Jesus, that was fast."

"Well, they all simultaneously got the signal to start deleting," Dave said. He paused for a moment, letting his head fall forward like he was praying. He sighed out a long, deep breath, then folded his hands together in his lap and looked

back up. His expression was crazily serene, like some kind of warrior saint. “We’ll actually destroy all fifteen hundred of those initial machines in something under twenty minutes,” he said. “I can’t even begin to count the number of laws I’m breaking here. Fifteen hundred machines in sixty-two countries, twelve languages, and twenty minutes.”

Simon exhaled shakily. “If you say that again, I will probably come in my pants,” he said. “So don’t say that again.”

“I’ve never felt so powerful in all my life,” Dave said reverently. Then he blinked. “Uh. I mean about Karpol. Not about your pants.”

“Well, Christ, I hope not,” Simon said, cracking up.

The counter stood at **230** by the time Simon let himself back out of Dave’s room. Once out in the hallway Simon allowed himself a moment of reverential awe, slumping back against the wall and staring unseeing out of the windows with his mouth gaping open—then he shook himself, stood up, and headed down the hallway to the black room.

The door was unlocked, the room beyond it a perfect cave. Simon closed the door behind himself and groped along the wall for the light switch, his eyes superimposing explosions of static over the utter blackness; by the time he found the switch and flipped it, his eyes had already grown as used to the darkness as was possible and Simon nearly blinded himself. He shielded his eyes with one hand until they adjusted, then went in search of the other light switches.

A couple of minutes later the room was as bright as it could possibly get, which was to say, not very. Some kind of crazy art-deco chandelier hung over the bed, all chrome and mirrors and frosted glass—if that thing ever fell, it would impale whoever was sleeping below it like the Sword of Damocles—and the rest of the room was lit by recessed halogen lights. Even with all the lights on, the black walls and ceiling failed to look cheap or at all faded. Either the paint job was very new, or very expensive, or both.

Simon glanced at the bed, noting the rumpled covers casually flicked back at one corner as if Jeremy had only gotten up to use the restroom and intended to come right back, then turned his attention to tossing the room. He didn’t bother to cover his tracks. In a strange way, he was certain that Jeremy expected this of him.

Jeremy’s suitcase still sat by the dresser, about a third full of clothing, mostly fancy underwear and socks. Simon picked up the suitcase and dumped it out on the bed, then tossed it aside. Stirring the contents with one finger, Simon ascertained that there was, indeed, nothing in there but the smaller articles of clothing. He picked up the suitcase again and spent a good five minutes going over it in detail, opening all the pockets, comparing the inside to the outside, looking for hidden compartments or loose spots in the lining. He found none. That didn’t mean that they weren’t there, but after five minutes Simon ran out

of ideas. He shoveled the clothing back into the suitcase and put it more or less where he'd found it.

Two of Jeremy's fancy black linen suits hung in the closet, a pair of black shoes set neatly under them. A third suit, rumpled and smelling faintly of sweat, had been stuffed into a canvas laundry bag that hung from the pole. Simon, vaguely curious, pulled down one of the clean suits and poked through it: it was well-made and felt expensive, but had no tags whatsoever, not even in the pants. There was nothing in the pockets, and as far as Simon could tell, nothing sewn in the lining, either. Simon put the suit back on its hanger, making only a vague effort to make it hang right, and put it away. As long as he was at it, he checked the shoes, too. No identifying markings, but all the sorts of details that screamed 'money', combined with odd soles that were made out of something that wasn't exactly soft black rubber, but felt kind of like it. Simon caught himself being fascinated with the soles of Jeremy's shoes and made himself put them down, feeling like an idiot.

The briefcase Jeremy had taken with him. The dresser yielded nothing but a small stack of folded silk t-shirts, both white and black, the material so fine that the entire pile was no taller than Simon's palm was wide. Simon pulled the stack apart anyway, just to make sure there weren't papers hidden between them, then dumped the t-shirts back into the drawer and closed it.

The only thing left in the bedroom was the obsidian-and-chrome desk. The little silver lockbox sat on it, the lid still ajar. Simon flipped it open: empty. Dropping into the desk chair, Simon started pulling out drawers. He found all kinds of pens and notepads and other assorted office supplies, but nothing of any real interest, not even wedged in the back.

He was beginning to run out of ideas. Simon headed for the glossy-tiled echoing cavern of the bathroom.

The signs of Jeremy's occupation were stamped on the bathroom, too, but only lightly. The black towels were hung crookedly on the rack, and a few abandoned toiletries stood here and there, all foreign, all expensive-looking, all jarring against the black-tiled expanse. Simon idly picked up the froofy shampoo, read the label, and put it down again. Rummaging through the cabinets yielded him nothing of interest, just a razor and some kind of equally froofy shave gel, which Simon put back.

Wandering back out into the main room, Simon plunked into one of the armchairs in the conversation pit and closed his eyes against the too-bright light above. There was nothing here that Jeremy couldn't just walk away from, but all the same, he'd left a lot of expensive things here. And he'd told Simon to leave behind anything that he didn't want to take, so . . . Jeremy would be coming back here, sooner or later, in order to clean up.

Simon turned this conclusion over in his head a few times. It was an interesting conclusion, but not terribly useful. He was *done* here, having done exactly

what he'd come to do, and he needed to get home before Upstairs noticed that he was gone. He couldn't just hang around waiting for Jeremy to turn up—and he wasn't going to, either, Simon hastily amended, grumpy at himself.

Turning sideways in his chair, Simon scanned the black room. Jeremy had left behind no notes, no incriminating items, no stacks of banded Euros, no nothing. In short, tossing the room had netted Simon nothing but a bit of distraction. The total lack of dramatic gestures was in itself comforting, though. Simon got up and turned the lights off, then let himself out of Jeremy's room.

Late that night, after dinner, he went back.

The virus counter had stabilized in the low thirties, much to Dave's satisfaction. Things were quiet on the viral front now, with occasional bursts of activity as people who hadn't turned their computers on all day finally did so. Dave had managed to tear himself away long enough to have dinner with the rest of them, and now he claimed to be thinking about sleeping, although Simon would be surprised if he actually did so.

Everyone crashed early by mutual agreement, intent on catching up on their sleep. By the time Simon let himself out of his room and padded barefoot down the hall towards Jeremy's room, the lights were out in every single room. The air conditioner covered the sound of his footsteps nicely.

It was so dark in the black room that there was no chance of Simon's eyes adjusting to it, but he didn't want to turn on the lights and spoil this odd mood that he was in. Accepting the stubbed toes and barked shins in his near future, Simon groped his way over to the chair nearest the door and dropped his bundle of clothes onto it, then used it to orient himself towards the bed. He gingerly edged in that direction, his hip bouncing off a couch in passing. Fortunately, the couch was well padded.

For the space of a few vertiginous moments, the darkness that Simon groped through might as well have been unbounded, infinite, and empty. The only thing that existed for certain was the cool marble floor under his bare feet—a little too cool, making Simon shiver. Finally his outstretched fingers brushed against the edge of the bed, and Simon stopped a bare inch before his toes could have collided with the raised dais that the bed stood on. Simon grabbed a handful of covers, stepped up onto the dais, and slid carefully into the exposed space that Jeremy had left behind when he got up the morning before.

The heavy comforter and the black sheets were icy against his skin for a minute or so before they consented to take on the heat of Simon's body. Simon burrowed into the black bed and breathed deeply, aware first of the silence, and then of the faint scent of Jeremy's hair stuff lingering on the pillow.

It served to focus his mind just as well as he'd been hoping. Settling into Jeremy's spot Simon gazed blindly off into the blackness and called to mind the events of yesterday, dimly pleased at how easily and clearly they came to him.

Simon began at the beginning and went right through, carrying the memories into sleep with him even as they dimmed and diffused and became dreams, instead.

He slept like a rock for close to twelve hours. His infrequent dreams were strange, wandering things, sometimes pleasant, sometimes not; for the most part he simply slept, too deeply asleep even for dreams.

At some point during that long, deep sleep, his mind alphabetized the confusing welter of images from the past few days, sorted them into their little boxes, and labeled each box with a clear explanation. Simon woke in a darkness as absolute as that in which he'd fallen asleep, his face itchy and dry enough to flake, two days' worth of stubble nearly lacerating his palms when he rubbed his face, and discovered without surprise that everything finally made a kind of sense, just a couple of days too late.

Simon rolled onto his back and opened his eyes, gazing blindly up at the ceiling. "Oh," he said. "*Oh.*"

◆ Forty-Seven

Later on, looking back, Simon could never say exactly *when* his new grasp of the simple facts as they stood developed into a full-blown comprehension of the situation, only that it did.

The black room, with its oddly soothing windowless black walls that kept out the rational sand-blasting of the sun, encouraged navel-gazing introspection of a sort that Simon usually snorted at. Simon's resistance was already low, though, and he didn't bother to fight it this time, wandering into the bathroom deep in thought. By the time he'd finished showering and dressing, the world had turned silently on its ear, ninety degrees to the up, leaving Simon possessed of an understanding and a newfound resolution that didn't scare him quite as much as he thought that it ought to.

He put his hand on the doorknob, paused for a moment to inspect that resolution, then opened the door and stepped out into the morning-bright hallway, nearly blinding himself again. By the time his eyes adjusted, his time in the black room seemed like a particularly stupid dream . . . but his decision was fundamentally unshaken. It didn't even look stupid in the clarity of morning light. Simon filed this realization away, then closed the door behind himself and went in search of lunch.

Not even lunch with most of his jeering, laughing, tomato-throwing team could change Simon's mind, although the impromptu tomato fight certainly took his mind off it for a few minutes. "Welp, guess we won't be havin' those for dinner," Mike said cheerfully, wiping tomato guts off his t-shirt and flicking them into the sink.

"Yeah, no, gross," said Simon. "Also, I'm sure it goes without being said that either you guys clean that up or I start busting heads, right?"

Sandra clamped a hand over her eyes, her shoulders dropping in defeat. "We definitely need to go home before anything worse happens," she said. "What kind of a *life* am I leading, where I need to explicitly state things like 'don't throw

overripe tomatoes at each other inside the kitchen of a multi-million-dollar villa that we're technically squatting in'?

"Congratulations, you've just summed up the basics of my job," Simon said dryly.

Sandra's head fell to the granite countertop with a thump. "Oh, my God," she said, folding her arms protectively over her head and muffling her voice. "That's it. I quit. I'm going to go marry a senator and be a political *hausfrau*. My mother will be thrilled."

"Man, I ain't never thought about running for office before," Mike said, reappearing with a mop and a huge grin.

After lunch Simon took himself off to his room—his own room, the white room, the explosion of sunlight—and called his cell phone back in Washington to check his messages, expecting none. Instead the automated lady on the other end of the line informed him that he had . . . one . . . new message, and then the line clicked over a recording of someone smoking so furiously at Simon that he could hear the crackle of the coal burning the cigarette paper. Simon winced, a shamefaced grin creeping up on his face.

"Well," Langridge finally said, her voice uncommonly hoarse. She sounded tired, and put out, and unimpressed, and utterly Langridge. "I am *assuming* that you had something to do with that, Mr. Drake. I know you think I'm a senile old battleaxe, but I remember that conversation quite well, thank you, and if I ever see you again I shall exercise my old-lady rights and snatch you baldheaded. You are in *so much trouble*, young man. But, in the end, only with me." She paused long enough to suck down another lungful of crackling smoke, then blew it out in an irritated sigh. "I hope that a man of your obviously limited intellect is capable of comprehending just how lucky he is," she added, and then the phone banged down with an authoritative whack.

Simon deleted the message and folded his own phone shut, overwhelmed with relief. "Thanks, Langridge," he told the walls of the white room. "And yeah, I think I am. You know. Capable of that."

The second phone call didn't come for almost an hour, when Simon was laying on the couch that didn't have ROS gear on it and finishing up his book. Simon glanced at the screen, saw a number that didn't make any sense whatsoever—international call—and sat up so fast that he went lightheaded, snapping his phone open with a flick of his wrist. "Archer?"

The world-weary laugh told him all that he needed to know about that, and then some. "I'm afraid not, Simon," said Ethan. "I'm told that I sound quite like him, though—"

"—or that he sounds like you, but I met him first, so you're just going to have to suffer," Simon finished for him, flopping back down on the couch. "Oh, hey,

and while I've got you on the line, allow me to thank you for not stranding me in Romania. I mean, I know it was tempting—"

"Tell me, do you ever shut up?" Ethan asked, mildly enough.

"When the mood strikes me," said Simon. "So what's up? I doubt you called just to hear the dulcet sound of my voice."

"Heaven forfend," Ethan said, with a delicate little shudder that Simon could sense all the way down in Italy. "I actually have three things to say to you—do you think you can stop squirming long enough to hear me out?"

Simon almost said something snide in response to that, then thought better of it. He shut his mouth and waited in silence, trying very hard not to crack up. After ten seconds or so of silence, Ethan sighed heavily. "Oh, yes, *very* funny."

"I try," Simon said modestly.

"At any rate. The first thing I wish to say to you is, of course, thank you. I'll admit I didn't have high hopes of your being of any use at all—"

"—you know, I gathered as much—"

"—but I'm told that in the end, you came through quite admirably. So: thank you."

"Yeah," Simon said, weirdly touched. "You're welcome. I, uh, I appreciate it."

"My God, it has manners," Ethan said, politely amazed.

Simon snickered. "You really know how to stroke a guy's ego," he said.

"As you'd say, Simon, I try." Ethan paused, either to collect his thoughts or to come up with a new round of insults. Dimly, in the background, Simon could hear the faint buzz of what sounded like television news. "The *second* thing I wish to say to you is more of a general assurance that everyone at this end of this mess is currently well."

"Yeah?" Simon said, unsure of who all 'everyone' meant. "I'm guessing you mean yourself and Annabelle, at least."

"At least," Ethan confirmed dryly. "Annabelle should be returning to the States and resuming her duties within the week, although she'll be shifting her base of operations somewhat drastically and we'll be adding a few more layers of general security."

Simon nodded, even though Ethan couldn't see it. "Good to hear," he said, and then before he could think better of it, "And Jeremy?"

"Currently well," Ethan said.

Simon waited a second, then sighed. "That's all I get, huh."

"I'm afraid so."

"Figures," said Simon. "So . . . what's the third thing?"

"Ah, yes." Ethan paused and shuffled around some papers. "The, ah, tangible expression of my gratitude."

Simon frowned. "You mean . . . like a reward? Seriously, that's nice and all, but it really isn't necessary—"

“You may think of it as a reward if you like, but I’d prefer if you thought of it as my paltry attempt to expedite your exit from my life.” Ethan’s voice was very dry. “I’ve hired you a plane back to the States.”

“I . . . uh.” Simon floundered. “We kind of already have one.”

“Well, now you have a better one, because I’m in no mood to attempt to smuggle that damned gun of yours across country borders again. It departs Malpensa at approximately noon on Monday, although since you and your group will be the only passengers, it will wait on you to a certain extent. Have you a pen handy?”

Simon sat back up, patting his pockets even though he knew that he wasn’t carrying anything. “Crap. Hang on.”

“Hanging,” Ethan said, pleasantly enough.

There was a little writing desk in one corner of Simon’s room that he’d barely looked at. Simon jogged over and dropped into the desk chair, yanking open the middle drawer and digging out a pen and a notepad. “Okay,” he said. “Hit me.”

“Mm. Tempting.” Ethan cleared his throat. “As it is a privately-chartered jet, there’s no baggage screening or security checkpoints of any sort, save US Customs on the far end, and they tend to be somewhat . . . diffident when it comes to people who are able to afford private jets. I, for one, would be quite surprised if they so much as opened your bag.” He gave Simon the flight details and a brisk summary of how to get to the private terminal; Simon jotted it all down. “I did take the liberty of registering you under the ‘Simon Moorhead’ name,” Ethan finished. “Your ID should be more than good enough for that.”

“Got it,” Simon said. “Only one problem.”

“Hm?”

“My friends were kind of counting on, ah, editing the passenger manifests after the fact—”

“I’m afraid they’ll need their real passports to re-enter the country, but if you give the pilot the names you’d care to have substituted, he’ll see to it.” Ethan chuckled. “My God,” he said, “what a conversation to be having with a man of your employment.”

“Yeah, well, you know what Jeremy says,” Simon said, capping the pen and dropping it back in the drawer.

“Jeremy says many things, Simon.”

“Christ, doesn’t he just.” Simon rolled his eyes. “But the one I was referring to was ‘needs must’.”

“Needs must when the Devil drives,” Ethan said, somewhat subdued.

“Yeah,” said Simon. “That.” He paused, groping for something else to say, and ended up asking, “So, has St. John Thawte come by to pick up his identity and his money yet?”

“Mm? Ah. Not yet,” Ethan said, without so much as a significant pause. “Jeremy says that the fellow’s most likely traveling slowly. Fair enough. That’ll give Teddy more time to perfect the blighter’s identity kit.”

Ethan didn’t *know*—Simon slung an arm over the back of his desk chair, grinning like a demented loon. Jeremy was the same the world over. “Yeah, well, hope everything goes okay there,” Simon said. “Anything else on your mind?”

“No, no, I believe that’s all.” Ethan shuffled his papers again. “I suppose I ought to let you get back to what you were doing. Unless there was something on *your* mind?”

Simon came within a hair of asking Ethan to pass a message on to Jeremy, then stopped himself. It wasn’t time for that yet. “I think I’m good,” he said instead. “Listen, thanks for the ride home, and I’ll do my level best to never darken your doorstep again.”

“How very kind of you,” Ethan said, and then he hung up.

Simon folded up his phone and put it away, what remained of his smile fading quickly. Tearing off the top sheet of paper, he stuck it in his jeans pocket, then went off in search of Sandra.

The rest of the weekend passed in a slow, dull, dreamlike haze. Simon felt like he was watching time go by from a distant vantage point, rather than actually existing in it; occasionally something would happen to engage his full attention—his team was downright brilliant at that—but five minutes later Simon would be merely observing the world again. He caught up on his sleep, and then some.

The skin on Simon’s face dried up and peeled off, exactly like the aftermath of a mild sunburn. Sandra hissed and tried to press a tube of some girly scented face cream on him, a little too late to do him any good; Simon refused it, contenting himself with scrubbing off the dry skin in the mornings and letting his beard grow. By Sunday night he was a scruffy blue-jawed thug with an odd, localized tan and a thousand-yard stare. His team never mentioned it, but they noticed. Conversations lagged when Simon wandered in and picked up again when he left. He paid it little heed.

Most of his attention was directed inwards. The decision he’d come to upon waking on Saturday morning was not to be taken lightly, and thus Simon spent most of his time battering at its walls, trying to break it down or, failing that, to find its weak spots. In the end his resolution still stood firm, somewhat the worse for wear but still standing. Simon still wasn’t as frightened by it as he felt he ought to be. In a weird, distant, too-calm way, he was looking forward to it.

The virus sputtered along until Sunday, taking out another fifty or sixty machines after the initial apocalyptic takedown. Dave released both the worldwide alert and the patch at noon, with Simon’s absent blessing, then shut down every last computer in his room and slept for sixteen hours.

Simon didn't go into the black room again.
Jeremy didn't call.

Early Monday morning they threw everything that was theirs into the back of the van and left the monstrous villa behind for good. Simon (who had finally shaved that morning, with a lot of wincing) was entirely relieved to do so, and he was pretty sure he wasn't alone in that. A couple of them turned around to watch the villa recede in the van's back windows, but most of his team remained facing forward, anticipating home.

The trip from the villa to Malpensa International Airport was close to three hours long, even at *autostrada* speeds. For the most part, it was a quiet ride. How much of that had to do with Simon's vague presence, he wasn't sure, but he *was* sure that no one was going to confront him about it. The only person who was likely to was Sandra, and she was too tactful to do it in front of everybody. He hoped, anyway.

They didn't actually reach Malpensa until close to noon. Mike parked the van in one corner of the garage, dropped the parking-lot ticket onto the seat, and left the keys dangling from the ignition. "Merry Christmas, assholes," he said, cheerfully enough, hauling his duffel out of the back. "Don't say I never did nothin' for you."

"Long as it's not going to rebound on you, Honda," Simon said.

"Nah," said Mike. "Don't think my name ever got attached to it. Paid cash and everything."

"Yeah? In that case . . ." Simon patted the van's lightly-scratched black side. "Godspeed, little doodle."

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do," Mike added, ambling off towards the stairs.

The charter company's offices were in a tiny low white stucco building that crouched in front of a massive airplane hanger like a frightened dog. Five minutes after they presented their IDs at the front desk they were being politely escorted to an aggressively new airplane with raked-back wings and a pointed nose cone. The closest they came to airport security was the fellow who double-checked their IDs against a list before running out the stairs for them; Simon, once again wearing his little SIG in its ankle holster, was both bemused and relieved by the lack.

The plane was just large enough for eight massive beige leather armchairs, four in a group around a conference table and four in two rows in the back. It wasn't actually the nicest plane Simon had ever been on; that honor would have to go to the plane he'd taken to Reno/Tahoe two years ago, back when Jeremy had been nothing more than a temporary pain in his ass. Still, it beat the hell out of

flying air-courier class or coach class, to say nothing of pregnant-bouncing-whale class. Simon collapsed into one of the seats at the back, fumbled out his seatbelt, and gazed peacefully out the window at the bustle of Malpensa while the rest of his team argued over seats.

They were airborne less than twenty minutes later, and left Italy behind an hour or so after that. Simon sat up and craned his neck to watch Italy disappear in the distance; “Good riddance,” he declared, falling back into his seat with an authoritative thump.

It was a long, long day, a long *flight*, one in which the sun never quite managed to set as the airplane chased it across the Atlantic. Simon spent most of the flight either staring out of the window or trying to get some sleep. Most of the rest of his team passed the time playing aggressive four-handed poker around the conference table and occasionally shouting at each other; Dave tactfully picked the seat farthest from Simon and settled in to poke at his little palmtop computer, frowning. Simon didn’t ask.

After six hours or so of light and unsatisfying sleep, Simon gave up, fetched himself a double shot of espresso from the incredibly complicated espresso machine in the tiny kitchenette, and went forward to join the others. “Hey, folks,” he said, leaning against the side of Sandra’s seat. “Who’s winning?”

“Sandra,” Nate said. “’Cause she cheats.”

“Biggest cheatin’ cheat what ever cheated,” Mike said in agreement.

“I don’t *cheat*,” Sandra said, offended. “I’m just not going to look the other way when you all but show me your cards.”

“Cheater, cheater, pants on . . . uh, heater,” Mike said. Sandra flipped him off.

Simon took a meditative sip of his espresso, which was strong enough to kill a horse, just how he liked it. “She does play to win,” he said. “You guys should know that by now.”

“You want us to deal you in?” Johnny asked, folding his cards onto the table. “Give you my seat, if you want.”

“Nah, that’s okay,” Simon said. “I’ll just spectate for the time being. It’s been a long . . . Jesus, has it really been a month?” He stopped to think about it. “Guess it has, more or less. Damn.”

Sandra went around the table gathering up everybody’s discards and settled in to shuffle the deck. “Pretty successful month, I’d say.”

“Yeah,” said Simon. He fell silent and watched them play poker for as long as it took him to finish off his coffee. The plane’s engine droned on, a higher, whinier sound than that of a 727. Outside the sun still hadn’t managed to set, and the Atlantic was a rich, unbroken grayish-blue underneath them. Eventually his little cup was empty and Simon carried it back to the kitchenette, rinsing it out in the postage-stamp-sized sink. His mind was elsewhere.

He almost turned to retreat to his seat at the back of the plane. He got as far as looking in that direction. Instead, he caught the edge of the tiny sink in both hands and asked himself, one last time, if he really meant to go through with this. The answer was still 'yes'. Simon nodded to himself and went to poke Dave. "Yo, Stone," he said, raising his voice to be heard over the engines.

"Huh?" said Dave, looking up at Simon and blinking. Now that they were heading back to the States, Dave was once again wearing what Simon thought of as a normal shirt. Vacation was over, apparently.

"What's up? Anything you can't put off for a minute?"

Dave glanced down at his palmtop. "Nothing much," he said. "I'm mostly just looking at the numbers from the virus run. Extrapolating from data. Not for any real reason, I guess. Just to know."

"That's cool," Simon said. "I like it when my people know things. Can you come up front for a sec? I need to talk to everybody."

"Sure, Templar," said Dave, shutting the lid of his palmtop. He had to fight with his little retractable table before it deigned to retract and let him stand up, but eventually he freed himself and followed Simon over to the conference table, taking up a position behind Nate's seat.

Simon waited until the current round was done, then reached past Sandra to thump on the conference table. "Sorry to interrupt you guys, but I need to talk to you here for a minute."

Johnny swept up the cards, tapped the deck on the table twice, and put it down. "Sure," he said.

"'Sup?" Mike said, twisting halfway around in his seat so that he could see Simon. He was down to three dollars on the table and the distraction made him look positively cheerful.

Now that they were all looking at him, Simon found himself at a loss for words. Where was he supposed to start—at the beginning, he supposed. They were waiting on him.

"Folks, before we go any farther, there's something I need you all to know." Simon hesitated, then shook his head. "About Archer and me."

◆ Forty-Eight

Washington Dulles International Airport looked like the concrete armpit of hell in the late afternoon sunlight. Simon had never been so glad to see it in all his life.

Customs was exactly as much of an empty formality as Ethan had predicted. A customs agent boarded the plane to diffidently collect their declaration forms and passports, looked over the documents, declared everything in order, and welcomed them home. Sandra escaped without paying so much as a penny on her shiny new Armani things. On any other day Simon and Mike would have teamed up to torment her half to death about that, but this wasn't any other day, and a boggled Mike just slouched in his seat and let the opportunity go by.

Simon accepted his fake passport from the customs agent, picked up his duffel and his bomber jacket, and led the way down the stairs to the tarmac, where the DC summer smacked him in the face like a hot and dirty sponge. The others followed him, one by one, subdued and thoughtful. Simon took a deep breath of air flavored with exhaust and rubber—good old American air—then swung to face them. “I’ll catch up with you guys later,” Simon said. “Get some rest. Enjoy the rest of your vacation.”

For a moment they were all quiet, five pairs of nominally-shellshocked eyes locked onto him, then Sandra broke formation and nodded. “Later, Templar,” she said, provoking a generalized and automatic murmur of farewell from the rest of them.

Simon hitched up his duffel. “Don’t let the jetlag bite,” he said, and with that, he walked away.

Five minutes after Simon let himself into his apartment, the entire trip to Italy seemed like nothing more than a weird, extended dream. What his apartment lacked in Italianate grandeur, it more than made up for by being familiar and real, if a bit shabby; nothing that had happened in Italy felt like it had any grounding in reality at all.

Simon turned the air conditioner back down to a liveable level, then wandered aimlessly around the apartment, postponing his unpacking until he felt like he'd reclaimed his nest. Eventually he dumped his duffel bag out on the bed and shuffled around, putting everything away. His duffel bag he slung back into its place on the closet shelf; his bomber jacket he hung in the hall closet. His sense of unreality deepened as he settled back into his everyday life, to the point where that sense of unreality, itself, felt almost unreal.

Eventually Simon took a deep breath, sucking in a lungful of stale machine-cooled air, and mentally conceded that everything was just as he'd left it. Only a few small things still needed doing. Plunking into one of the kitchen chairs, Simon hitched up the leg of his jeans and ripped off the ankle holster, dropping it onto the table with a heavy thump. He wouldn't be needing it any more.

Fishing his wallet out of his back pocket, Simon methodically emptied it onto the table. The 'Simon Moorhead' and 'Trent Darcy' identities went into one pile and the 'Simon Drake' identity into another; Simon sorted out the handful of American dollars from the Euros and dropped the dollars onto the 'Simon Drake' pile. Simon dropped the Euros onto the table, then frowned, picked them up again, and shuffled through them. He'd gotten into the habit of grabbing a random assortment of bills from Jeremy's bottomless supply whenever he even suspected he might need more—he'd accumulated about twelve hundred Euros without really noticing. It was all funny money to him, but hey, it'd spend. Simon put the Euros in a pile all their own.

Simon refilled his wallet with his own, real, legal identity and the dollars that went with it. The other two sets of ID went into a plastic sandwich bag; they'd go in with the gun. Now Simon *really* needed a better hiding place for his contraband. He resolved to think of one, then pulled the gun out of its holster and took it apart.

Half an hour later he popped open a black garbage bag and dumped the clean gun, the ankle holster, the prepaid phone, and the bag with the two sets of ID into it. Folding the top of the bag over, he taped it shut, creating a fat and bulky envelope. He carried the envelope into his office and dropped onto the floor in front of his computer desk, pulling out the topmost drawer and putting it on his computer chair. He taped the packet back into place, then put the drawer back on its runners and slammed it shut. He left the room without looking back.

On Thursday afternoon, well rested, well fed, and bored to tears, Simon flopped out on the couch and pulled out his phone.

He'd spent most of the last three days recuperating from his jet lag and experiencing cabin fever in all its forms. Three days was long enough to drive him stark staring mad; he could only hope that it was long enough for a few other things. He dialed a number from memory, then put the phone to his ear and shut his eyes.

The phone clicked instead of ringing. Seven, eight, nine, *ten* times—Simon had almost given up by the time the clicking stopped and the ringing started. Two rings later someone picked up the phone, making Simon's heart jump oddly in his chest.

"Answering service," said Annabelle, as if nothing at all had happened.

Simon sagged in relief. "Hello, pretty lady whose name I know better than to say out loud," he said. "I'm calling to leave a message for Jeremy Archer? My name is Simon Drake?"

Annabelle's voice warmed on the instant. "Well, now, big guy, I'd been wondering when you were going to call," she said, laughing. "The line's been live for over ten hours. I was beginning to think you didn't like me any more."

"Really? In that case, I'm sorry to have kept you waiting," Simon said. "How's things with you?"

"Oh, I'm absolutely fine," said Annabelle. "Exhausted, but fine, all set up in a brand-new city and raring to go. You should see this house! It's in one of those snooty gated communities where they have security twenty-four hours a day. Say what you will about my employer, but he really knows how to take care of you when you need it."

Simon slung a leg up over the back of the couch, getting comfortable. "Good for you," he said. "Good for *him*. Because if he didn't, I'd go punch him in the teeth for you, since I'm such a gentleman and all."

"Aren't you sweet," Annabelle cooed, still laughing a little. "But alas, big guy, I'm not getting paid to gab. Can I take that message for you?"

"Yeah," Simon said. "Just . . . ask him to call me at the usual number whenever he gets a moment."

"That's easy enough. Anything else?"

"Yeah," Simon said again, shutting his eyes and taking a deep breath. "Yeah, there's more. Tell him I said that I'm *so* fucking glad he's still alive, even if it took me way too long to tell him so."

Annabelle said nothing for a long moment, not even laughing any more. "Well then, Simon," she said, hushed and pleased. "I'll definitely pass that along just as quick as I can."

"You're the best," Simon said. "Could you maybe wait about fifteen minutes before trying to find him, though? I've got another phone call I need to make first."

"Tell you what: I'll go make some coffee before I call and pass on the message. How's that?"

"That'd be perfect." Simon cracked his eyes open and gazed blindly up at the rough plaster of the ceiling. "Thanks, No-Name-Lady. If I've ever in whatever neck of the woods you call home now, I'll buy you that coffee."

"You are so very welcome, Simon!" Simon could almost hear the smile as Annabelle broke the connection.

Simon hit the CALL CANCEL button, then pulled up a second number from his phone's address book. Upstairs had an all-hands staff meeting every Thursday from three until four, so he wouldn't be anywhere near his office—"Simon!" Danielle said, the coolness in her voice only imperfectly camouflaging her surprise. "I'd say 'what a shock', but really, I'm more surprised that you haven't driven me crazy before now."

"Well, hell, Danielle, you and I both know that I am naturally shy and retiring," Simon said. A muscle in his neck twinged and he dug the fingers of his free hand into it, trying to force it to loosen. "So, I'm assuming I'm still in the doghouse with the OPR?"

"That's what I hear." Danielle's voice warmed a degree or two. "If it's any consolation, I don't think you're actively in trouble any more. I think the boss is playing a waiting game by this point."

Leaving his free hand cupped about the back of his neck, Simon settled deeper into the couch cushions. "Danielle, I need a favor," he said with no further ado. "A big one. And it'll get you in a little trouble. But seriously, I will owe you so huge, you have no idea."

Five minutes later he finished apologizing to the now-thoroughly-grumpy Danielle and hung up, then dropped his phone on his chest. It was barely three-thirty and the complex was quiet. Everybody else was at work. It made Simon feel like a slug.

The evening stretched out in front of him like a barren wasteland. Simon considered his options: getting off his ass to investigate the complex's exercise room, calling around to see if anyone wanted to go catch a movie and maybe ask him all kinds of horrible prying questions, or maybe just working through half a six-pack in front of the television. None of these things sounded particularly appealing. In fact, what sounded best at the moment was a quiet nap—

The phone rang, startling him upright and knocking the phone off his chest. He grabbed the phone as it fell and flicked it open. "Yeah?" he said, somewhat out of breath. "Simon Drake."

"Well, Simon," Jeremy said, laughing. "Fancy hearing from you so soon!"

The little knot of tension in Simon's neck unraveled on the spot. His shoulders dropped. "Jesus, I wasn't actually sure if you were going to call me back," he said, all in a rush, cringing and laughing in embarrassment at the same time.

"Mm," said Jeremy. Simon could almost see the corners of Jeremy's eyes crinkling in amusement. Wherever he was, there was some kind of exuberant music playing in the background, of the kind that Simon gingerly thought of as 'island music' to avoid thinking of it as 'goofy'; it was rendered faint by distance and tinny by the phone, but all the same it made Simon smile, a little. "Honestly, Simon," Jeremy said, the music fading further as he moved away from it. "What on earth gave you that idea?"

“Gosh, I don’t know,” Simon said. “Maybe because you were being all weird the last time we spoke? Or, uh, maybe because I was kind of being an asshole?”

That earned him a little startled pause, followed by a burst of laughter that sounded absolutely real. “I wouldn’t have made you go that far,” Jeremy said. A door shut behind him, cutting off the music. “A bit of a prick, certainly, but under normal circumstances I rather enjoy that about you.”

“Good,” said Simon, “because I’m probably not going to change at this late date. Where the hell are you, anyway? That doesn’t sound like Italian music to me.”

“On a little island in the West Indies, actually.” Upholstery sighed faintly under Jeremy as he sat down. “I doubt you’d have heard of it. It’s really quite tiny.”

“Vacationing? Or hiding?”

“Oh, a bit of both,” Jeremy said dismissively. “So . . . you’re back home, then? Everything go all right?”

“Yeah, fine, we’re good over here, everything’s fine,” said Simon. He lay back down on the couch and settled in, getting comfortable. “So . . . listen, have you got a minute? Because we need to talk. Or, you know, I need to talk and you need to listen and say the right things.”

“Oh, dear, that sounds serious,” said Jeremy. “If it’s a serious conversation you’re after, pardon me, I think I’ll need a drink.” The upholstered chair whuffed faintly as he stood back up.

“Yeah, go get yourself some liquid courage,” Simon said. He shut his eyes and smiled. “Coward.”

“Prick,” Jeremy said, but he nearly purred it, his tongue ticking off the roof of his mouth as he enunciated the ‘k’.

At three-fifteen the following afternoon, Simon pulled his Jeep up to the security gate outside headquarters and leaned out of the window to hand his ID to the guard on duty. The guard ran it under a handheld scanner, then checked it against a list, then handed it back to Simon. The gate arm hitched, then started to rise. “Coming to work a little late,” the security guard said, straight-faced.

“Yeah, I overslept,” Simon said, stuffing his ID back into his shirt pocket. “Think anyone’s going to notice?”

The security guard gave that exactly the perfunctory grin-and-‘heh’ that it deserved, then stepped back into the hut and waved Simon in. Simon drove over the retracted SEVERE TIRE DAMAGE, STUPID spikes and into the parking lot. Most of the spots were full. It might have been Friday afternoon, but an agent would have to be seriously out of love with his job to try and sneak out before four. Fortunately, there were always spots back around behind the Ops wing, and Simon found one in short order.

He was early. Patting at the steering wheel absently, Simon took a deep breath. His ID obviously hadn’t been flagged or suspended; if it had, either he wouldn’t have gotten through the gate so easily, or he wouldn’t have gotten through at all. It made sense, now that he thought about it—he was only suspended pending investigation, not suspended with prejudice, and Upstairs was marginally sympathetic to his situation—but still, Simon had to admit that he’d been wholly relieved when the gate arm rose.

The black Jeep was already starting to get uncomfortably warm in the July sun, so Simon let himself out and headed towards the building. Swiping his ID through the card reader did, in fact, open the door, proving that getting past the gate hadn’t just been a fluke. Simon let himself into the building, pausing to bask in the refrigerated air for a moment before checking his watch. 3:23. Plenty of time.

Simon detoured and made a pit stop. He checked himself out in the mirror while washing his hands: no missing buttons on his shirt, no giant pit stains, no

surprises hanging out of his nose. Simon met his own eyes in the mirror and grinned at himself for no reason at all.

The saferoom's door was still locked when Simon eased it down with one finger. No one home. Simon gave up on the stealth approach and unlocked the door, letting himself in. The room stank of cleaning fluid and disuse; the tables were bare, the chairs tucked neatly underneath. If it hadn't been for the eclectic jumble of Dave's hooded computers in the corner, the room would have looked uninhabited. It had never bothered Simon before, but it sort of bothered him now.

His office was equally clean, bare, and spartan, at least from the doorway. Moving around behind his desk exposed the gapped, dented faces of the drawers (courtesy of Sandra and a crowbar) but somehow, in the not-quite-a-month he'd been gone, the janitor had even managed to scrub most of the coffee rings off the surface of Simon's desk. The one tangible sign of Simon's residence was gone. The drawers were Sandra's mark, and the missing door, that was Nate's.

Simon plopped into his desk chair—that, at least, felt perfectly familiar—and kicked it around in a circle, taking in the bare walls. They weren't much to look at. The industrial off-white paint was chipped in several places, but that and the burn marks by the door were about the only thing that distinguished Simon's office from an untenanted one. Most of the team leaders on this floor had family pictures, framed certificates, awards, pictures of themselves shaking hands with some politico or another; Simon's awards and certificates sat in a box in the bottom drawer of his file cabinet, where they belonged, and he'd never been much for pictures before. Now, though, the place looked disturbingly anonymous. Simon vowed to get a movie poster or something. His team would deface it in seconds. He thought he might like that.

After the events of this past week, though, Simon thought he could probably look forward to having his office decorated *for* him in the near future. Gay porn pinups on the walls, sex toys in the drawers, maybe a rainbow flag on his desk—oh, well, he'd set himself up for that, and he could stand it for a week or two before he started kicking ass.

Of course, if he fucked up today, there might not be a 'near future' at all. Simon considered this possibility for a moment, then dismissed it. It barely gave him a qualm. Indeed, he was so calm that he was looking forward to the next hour, in a weird quasi-masochistic way.

Simon checked his watch, then heaved himself up and out of his chair. Time to get moving.

The vast main lobby was sparsely populated, which kept the echoes down to a dull roar. No one spared Simon a glance at all: he looked like he belonged here. Hell, he *did* belong here. Simon went to loiter by the elevators while he waited, out of the way.

Elevators came and went. It was getting on towards four, so people with nothing better to do were starting to leave for the weekend, piling off the elevators in little herds. Most of them barely glanced in Simon's direction. Simon leaned against the wall and gazed peacefully off into the middle distance, waiting.

Finally, a couple of minutes before four, his phone rang. Simon answered it. "Yeah?"

"Elevator doors just closed behind him," Danielle said, her voice terse. "He's on the way now."

Simon stabbed the closest elevator call button. "Owe you *so* big, Danielle."

"You have no idea how big," Danielle agreed. "We'll discuss terms later." She hung up on him without another word.

Simon put his phone away. One of the elevators answered his call ten seconds later, which he judged to be ample time; Simon waited patiently for the car to empty, then got in and held down the DOOR OPEN button for another five seconds, just to make certain. He let go of the button. The doors slid closed. Simon hit the button for the seventh floor.

The reception area for the Office of Professional Responsibility was empty, save for the receptionist. She was frowning at him like she was trying to figure out why he looked familiar; Simon flicked open his ID as he approached her desk, flashing her a grin. "Mr. Carstairs come through yet?"

"Just now," she said, relaxing imperceptibly.

"Thank God, I'm not late," Simon said, blowing on past her desk without stopping and dismissing her with a wave. "I know the way." The receptionist called after him as he strode off, but Simon didn't stop and she didn't bother to actually chase him down. Simon threaded his way through the hallways, heading towards the back of the floor.

Baker Hart's secretary looked up as Simon arrived, automatically smiling in welcome. "Hi, what can I—"

Simon put his finger to his lips. She obediently shushed, startled. "I've got it," Simon said softly, crossing to the closed door to Baker Hart's office and putting an ear next to it. He could hear the mutter of voices clearly from a few feet away, and as he got closer, he could make out the individual words.

"Sir?" Baker Hart's secretary said, a little disturbed. Simon shushed her again and she subsided, although she was starting to look upset about it. Inside Baker Hart's office, the unmistakable basso rumble that was Upstairs said, "I assure you *I* didn't call this meeting, Baker—"

"That's my cue," Simon said, giving the secretary the benefit of his third-best grin. She smiled back through sheer reflex—Simon *was* pretty irresistible when he wanted to be—and then Simon pushed open the door to Baker Hart's office and barged right in. "Actually, I'm the one who called this meeting," he said, suddenly flying on a wing and a prayer, but flying nonetheless. "I'm sorry for the deception, but I assure you, I had a reason."

All three of them blinked at him like startled moles, Norton Fowles frozen in the middle of lowering himself into a chair. Upstairs was the first to recover. “Simon?” he said, unsettled. “What on earth—”

Simon held up his hand for silence, and Upstairs was so rattled that he allowed it. Later on, Simon decided, he would have to savor that little victory. “Please, give me a moment,” Simon said, crossing to the desk and pulling himself up a chair. “I promise that I’ll explain.”

“Hmph.” Upstairs folded both hands over the head of his cane and glowered at Simon. “See that you do.”

“I’d love to know how you pulled that one off,” Baker Hart said, a good deal more mildly.

Simon shrugged, spreading his hands as if to show they were empty. “Called in a few favors,” he said. “Sure hope I can tapdance fast enough to make it up to you.”

Baker Hart considered Simon for a long moment, then chuckled and settled back in his chair. “You’ve got balls, anyway,” he said.

“Oh yes,” Upstairs said darkly. “Whatever else he’s short on, he has never lacked for guts.”

“*Balls*, Carstairs,” Baker Hart said, folding both hands over his belly. “Surely you’re familiar with the term.”

“Those, too.” Upstairs’ lips thinned.

Simon cleared his throat. Like magic, they both looked at him expectantly, Baker Hart raising one gray-furred eyebrow. “Okay, first off,” Simon said. “How long have you two worked together at the Bureau?”

Upstairs and Baker Hart shared a glance. “Twenty-five, thirty years?” Baker finally said, looking back at Simon.

“So you know him pretty well,” Simon said, gesturing at Upstairs.

“I’d say so.”

“Then—solely in your opinion, of course, Mr. Hart—would you say that his confusion was genuine when I came through that door?”

Baker Hart glanced at the door in question, then at Upstairs, then back at Simon. “I’d say so,” he said again, now openly curious. “Tapdance faster, please.”

“Sorry.” Simon wasn’t. “My point is that Up—Mr. Carstairs had not been informed I was coming here today, or indeed, at all. What I’m about to tell you? It’s as new to him as it is to you. Before I say another word, I need you to understand that. Whatever you end up thinking about me ten minutes from now, it has nothing to do with him.” He glanced at Norton Fowles, then back at Baker. “*Nothing*.”

Baker Hart also looked at Norton for a moment. “I take your point,” he finally said, pleasantly enough.

“Simon,” Upstairs said in warning. His voice was pained.

“Sorry, boss,” Simon said. “I know you don’t like getting caught unawares, but I didn’t want anybody—” Simon leaned on that ‘anybody’, just a little “—to think we’d been conspiring beforehand. I guess you’re just going to have to deal with the surprise.”

Upstairs rumbled out a sigh and sat back. “All right, Simon,” he said heavily. “Let’s hear this new information, since you’re so determined to have it out.”

“That’s right, I am.” Simon had to stop himself from grinning like a loon. Whatever else came of this day, this time he was running the meeting instead of the meeting running over him. It already felt like winning. Simon twisted around in his chair and snapped his fingers at Norton Fowles, light-headed with glee. “Norton!” he said cheerfully. “Let’s see that big map of the warehouse that you made the OPR pay out the wazoo for!”

“I assume you mean the, hm, the diagram of the crime scene?” Norton Fowles’ voice was very thin, not least because Baker Hart was so transparently amused by Simon’s antics.

“Well, I don’t know. Do I?” Simon’s eyes went wide. Christ, he was having fun. “As far as I know, no one’s actually been tried or convicted of anything related to the kidnapping—what crime would that be, Norton?”

Norton Fowles’ eyes narrowed behind his glasses, but he didn’t respond to that, probably wary of Simon’s sudden attack of confidence. “Hm,” he said instead, putting his everpresent folder down on the edge of Baker Hart’s desk and flicking it open. A minute later he unfurled the massive overhead diagram and flicked it out, covering a good portion of the desk with it.

Simon stood up and smoothed both hands over the paper, spreading it out. “So. Let’s recap. As Norton here has pointed out, when the shooting occurred, I was here.” Simon’s finger stabbed down onto the little black splotch of his own blood. “And Ballistics concluded that Farraday was here.” Simon put a second finger down next to the first, putting the ghost of Farraday in the proper spot. “Of course, what this diagram could not tell you is that I was prone on the ground at the time, in a great deal of pain.”

“You said as much in your official statement,” Baker Hart said. He was still lounging casually in his chair, but his eyes were intent.

Simon exhaled long and hard, steadying his heart. “My statement is flawed,” he said. “In short, as Norton Fowles surmised, I was lying at several critical junctures.”

Upstairs made a strangling sound before he could rein himself in. Baker glanced at him, not quite smiling, then back at Simon. “Well, now,” he said, doing a very good job at aping joviality. “If everyone were as willing to admit to their cover-ups as you seem to be, I daresay I’d be out of a job.”

“Somehow, sir, I doubt that.” Simon didn’t quite smile back at Baker Hart—for a moment, there they were, two men of the world not quite smiling at each other. Eventually, Simon shook his head and got himself back on track. “But

that's beside the point, I'm afraid. I've come here today prepared to tell you all what really happened that night. That is, if you're still interested."

"Still interested," Baker repeated. Now he did smile, shaking his head in wonderment. "I believe you've got a captive audience."

"Quite," Upstairs intoned. Norton Fowles harrumphed and shifted in his chair; no one so much as glanced in his direction, and he subsided, piqued.

"To a point, everything in the official statements is true," Simon said. "Farraday did get the drop on me and force me to kick my gun away. We did argue for several minutes while he had the gun on me. He did have one of his little spasms then, which made him pull the gun off me for a fraction of a second—at that time I charged him, as I said. However, he did not drop the gun at that time, as I originally claimed. I was doing my damndest to *make* him drop it, but he wouldn't let go." He paused.

They were all watching him now. "Hm," Baker said. He didn't say anything else.

After a moment Simon went on. "It was while we were fighting over the gun that he jabbed his fingers into the bullet wound on my chest." Simon touched the scar with two fingers. "I'm not ashamed to admit that the pain floored me. I don't think I've ever felt anything like it, and I hope to God I never feel anything like it again. Now, picture this in your minds: here I am, on the floor, unarmed and momentarily helpless." Simon tapped the black splotch. "Here is Farraday, right above me, still holding his gun." Simon tapped the spot next to him, then hesitated. "I thought I was dead," he said, a bit subdued. "I can remember him bringing up the gun and pointing it at my face, and when I heard the shot . . . well, I thought it was his gun. I thought he'd shot me."

The room was silent. Simon took a deep breath. "Jeremy Archer did pick up my gun once I'd kicked it away, as both testimonies reflect," he said. "He was standing here." Simon completed the triangle, tapping the small dotted circle that Recreations had drawn to place Jeremy at the scene. "When I went down and Farraday pointed the gun at me, Archer immediately shot him to save my life."

Baker Hart and Upstairs exhaled in unison. Quickly, before they could start peppering him with questions, Simon plunged on. "I freely admit that I covered for him on the shooting. Moreover, I admit that I coached him before letting him give his statement. I did these things because I have absolutely no doubt that an unbiased panel would exonerate him from any wrongdoing in the shooting, and because I owed him—still owe him—my life. He shot to save my life, and only after Farraday kidnapped him, attacked me, held me at gunpoint, and had the gun pointed at my face." Simon touched his fingers to the skin under his right eye. Baker Hart's eyes flicked up to follow the little movement, Simon noted with satisfaction. "However, given Archer's somewhat-dubious legal status and his lengthy record, I didn't want to take the risk of having him come up before a panel that was less than perfectly unbiased. The clusterfuck that would have

resulted would have been a tremendous waste of everyone's time, and ran the risk of leaving me personally responsible for sending him to jail for the one crime he should have been exonerated from."

"Somewhat dubious," Norton Fowles repeated, like the phrase left a bad taste in his mouth.

"Somewhat dubious," Simon said in general agreement. "Jeremy Archer was not then and is not now currently wanted by any American law-enforcement agency. His file has been officially suspended until such time as he is caught breaking the law within the borders of the country again, as you'd know, Norton, if you'd done your homework."

The little choking sound that Norton Fowles made then went a long way towards restoring Simon's mad good humor. Baker Hart pressed his lips together to stifle a laugh, covering his eyes for a moment; once he had himself under control, he looked over at Upstairs, who might as well have been carved of stone. "Well, Carstairs," Baker said. "You've never heard any of this before?"

"Never," Upstairs declared, like he was delivering a verdict from on high. He cleared his throat with an ominous rumble and shifted in his chair.

"Well, isn't that interesting?" Baker also resettled himself in his chair. "That does give me a lot to think about. Norton?"

"Yes?" Norton Fowles said. His nostrils were flared and his lips were pursed—he sounded downright prissy.

"You made it very clear that Simon's original statement contradicted the facts. Does this new information fit the facts more neatly?"

"Hm. Well." Norton flicked through the papers in his folder, stalling. "You understand I can't say for certain until I have had, hm, ample time to look over the documents in light of this new story—"

"Given that you've spent a good five weeks of this department's time concentrating solely on this matter to the exclusion of others, Norton, I expect that you *ought* to be familiar enough with the documents in question to at least make an educated guess." Baker Hart's voice remained mild and his posture remained relaxed, but a whip cracked under his voice.

Norton Fowles subsided, slightly, his eyes two chips of stone. "I wouldn't like to be held to it, but . . . it does not seem to contradict the facts, at least on the surface," he said.

"Well, isn't that nice." Baker Hart looked back at Simon. "Are you willing to amend your statement to include this new information?"

"I am," said Simon. "Immediately. The sooner we put a spike through Diana Fontaine's wrongful-death suit, the better. Let her sue Archer, if she wants. Assuming she can find him, anyway, because by God, if she succeeds where half the world's police forces have failed, then she *deserves* to win that suit."

Baker raised both eyebrows, faking surprise, as if that hadn't occurred to him. "I see," he said. "So it's finally occurred to you that by offering to hamstring

Diana Fontaine's lawsuit for us, you'll have one hell of a bargaining chip to use in getting off the hook for lying in your earlier statement?"

"Yes and no, sir," Simon said. "I mean, it occurred to me, but that's not why I'm here. Sure, I'm glad to do anything that'll piss off Diana Fontaine, but mostly? I fucked up, and I intend to take responsibility for it."

"Pity you couldn't have taken responsibility for it a bit sooner," Norton Fowles said, his voice thin.

Upstairs cleared his throat like a landslide. "Far be it from me to agree with Norton, but . . . I find myself forced to agree with Norton."

"Yeah," Simon said. He held up both hands. "Frankly, I agree with you both myself. But it wasn't just me who'd be affected by this decision, and it took me a while to think everything through."

"This is all beside the point," Baker said placidly. "What currently matters is having Simon make an updated statement, so that we can go ahead and get it into the hands of Diana Fontaine's lawyers."

Simon inclined his head. "Any time you like," he said.

Baker Hart turned his faint smile on Simon. "Of course, they'll demand to know what disciplinary action we've taken against you, and you've certainly earned some."

"I was thinking along the lines of a month's suspension and a tremendous black mark on my record," Simon said.

"Really." Baker's expression didn't change. "Oddly, that sounds like the suspension you've already served."

"Isn't that odd," Simon said. "Of course, if you think that's insufficient, you could also throw in the fact that I was yanked off active duty immediately following the Farraday debacle and have been on limited duty in the eight months since, driving a desk while the Bureau *thoroughly* investigated the matter. Due to a little matter of Farraday putting a bullet in my chest, but I leave it up to you whether to mention that part."

Baker considered Simon for a long moment, still ever so faintly entertained. "That might be workable," he finally said. "With the correct amount of spin."

"Spin isn't my department, I'm afraid," Simon said.

"For better or for worse, it's mine," said Baker Hart, faking a sigh. "I can work with this—*assuming* that you're telling me the unimpeachable truth." Above his little smile his eyes were cool and assessing. "Have I got the whole truth from you this time?"

Simon paused to collect himself for his next leap, his heart nearly singing in his chest with completely inappropriate anticipation. "No, sir, not yet," he said.

Baker raised both eyebrows. "No?"

"You should also be aware that Jeremy Archer and I have had an ongoing sexual relationship for just over two years now," Simon said.

The sudden silence was total. Simon was pretty sure he was the only person in the room still breathing, and he was definitely the only person in the room still smiling—then Baker Hart clapped a hand over his eyes and cracked up, startling Upstairs into a single, disapproving harrumph. “Oh, God,” Baker said, still laughing. “What did I tell you, Carstairs? Balls.”

Upstairs shook his head slightly, like he was dismissing a disturbing thought, and said, “I’m so glad you approve, Baker.”

“Excuse me?” Norton Fowles’ voice spiraled upwards past ‘thin’, almost to ‘squeaky’. “He admits taking sexual favors from a wanted criminal—a wanted, *male* criminal—and you think that’s *funny*?”

“Really?” Simon asked, turning his bright gaze on Norton. “A wanted criminal? That’s odd, the Bureau’s own records would beg to disagree with you there, Norton. Jeremy Archer hasn’t been a wanted man within the borders of the United States for well over two years now. I’ve never—oh, how did you put it—‘taken sexual favors’ from a criminal in my life. Go ahead. Look up his file. I’ll wait.”

“That arrangement was your doing in the first place!” Norton Fowles pointed an accusatory finger at Simon. It was shaking, just a little. “For all we know, you and your paramour conspired to remove his file just so that he could continue his life of crime with impunity—” He snapped his jaw shut, a moment too late.

Simon gleefully sucked in a breath, his eyes going wide in a mimicry of shock. “That is one *hell* of a baseless accusation there, Norton,” he said. “I sure hope you’ve got some evidence to back it up, because you’re treading awfully close to slander.”

Norton Fowles sank in on himself like a turtle pulling into his shell. “‘For all we know’, I said.” That prissy, pedantic tone was back in his voice. “Of course I’m not actually accusing you of anything at the moment, Mr. Drake.”

“Good,” said Simon. “Because *I* have about ten pounds’ worth of documents and the testimony of five unimpeachable agents that can prove that Mr. Archer did indeed do good, honest work for the Bureau, earning himself that exemption.” He paused, studying Norton’s slumped figure. “In point of fact, I made it a stipulation of my ongoing relationship with Mr. Archer that he would no longer break the law within the boundaries of the United States. If you’d care to consult with Art Theft, they’d tell you that he hasn’t done so. I may have purchased his good behavior with my own body—” *Christ*, how Norton winced at that, it was great “—but purchase it I did. In a very real sense, Norton, it’s because of me that Jeremy Archer no longer practices his trade in this country. Maybe you ought to try thinking about it that way.”

“Pedantry,” Norton Fowles spluttered, but he subsided.

“Pedantry indeed,” Baker Hart echoed, still laughing a little. “Are you *trying* to sabotage your career, Simon?”

“Absolutely not,” said Simon, gathering himself for the final leap. “You asked for the whole truth, sir, and I for one am now prepared to give it to you. Really, though, I can’t see that last fact ever making it beyond the walls of this room. Imagine if Diana Fontaine’s lawyers got a whiff of that. Nothing concentrates the American mind like a sex scandal, particularly one with the whiff of criminality about it—the media would be baying at us for months.”

“I thought you just finished telling Norton there was nothing wrong with it,” Baker pointed out, mildly enough.

Simon couldn’t help but smile. “There isn’t,” he said. “Absolutely nothing. I’ll stand by that. But it still smells like scandal from the outside, doesn’t it? The fact that I’ve managed to keep this a secret for well over two years speaks well for my ability to keep it under wraps—and for Jeremy’s, actually—but Christ, one slip on anybody’s part . . .” He trailed off there and waited, expectantly.

The little half-smile finally faded off Baker Hart’s face, leaving his expression wary. “Is that a threat, Simon?” he asked, his voice perfectly even.

“Of course not,” said Simon. “What is there to threaten? I love my job. I believe in law enforcement—I believe in the *Bureau*. And I look forward to doing my job for years and years to come.”

Another, longer, more thoughtful silence fell. Upstairs was a stone statue to Simon’s left, Norton Fowles a gargoyle to his right. Baker Hart drummed his steepled fingers together, then abruptly sighed and sat up. “Nicely played, Simon,” he said, still neutral.

“I was thinking that I’d come back to work on Monday,” Simon said.

Baker raised a finger in warning. “A week from Monday,” he said. “That will officially put your suspension over a month and ensure that you are still officially suspended while we deal with Diana Fontaine’s lawyers.”

“It’s a deal,” said Simon. “I’ll assume you don’t want to shake on it.”

“You’d be correct.” Baker flopped back into his chair and tented a hand over his eyes. “Sometimes I hate my job,” he said.

Upstairs shifted, then began the painful process of getting to his feet. “Non-sense, Baker. You live for that sort of sleazy bargaining.”

“Well, yes, but you didn’t have to say that in front of our subordinates, Carstairs.” Baker rubbed his temples for a moment, then looked over at Norton Fowles. “Norton, I’ll need every last scrap of paper that you’ve got, as we’ll need them to support the revised version of the facts in our presentation to Diana Fontaine’s lawyers. Go back to your office and get me the rest. And send in my secretary on the way—we might as well have Simon dictate his new statement while he’s here.”

Norton didn’t budge, too flabbergasted to move. Baker eyed him for a moment, then sighed. “Norton. Go.”

“This is insupportable—”

“—it’s also done,” Baker Hart said, his voice flat. “You’ve wasted enough of the Office’s time trying to give Carstairs a black eye. *Go.*”

“If it makes you feel any better, I do feel like I have some egg on my face,” Upstairs said heavily. He limped over to the far wall and made a great show of studying the framed photographs there, while Norton Fowles heaved himself out of his chair and stalked towards the door. The door shut behind Norton Fowles with a thud. The little nervous flutter under Simon’s breastbone finally evened out.

Upstairs didn’t say a word to Simon until they were both in the elevator, heading back towards the second floor. “Well, Simon,” he finally said. “I must admit that I found that unpleasantly edifying.”

“Yes, sir,” Simon said. It had taken him less than twenty minutes to dictate his new, revised, truthful statement into the digital recorder of Baker Hart’s secretary, and then the OPR head had chased them both out, claiming a headache with that false good humor of his. Simon still felt like he was flying. More: he felt *clean*.

“I cannot say that I’m pleased with you at the moment, Simon.” Upstairs cleared his throat, still staring resolutely at the changing numbers. The throat-clearing said it all: he’d had twenty minutes to digest this new information, and now he was going to impart his wisdom.

It was so *Upstairs* of him that Simon could have hugged him, except that that would probably horrify them both. “No, sir.”

Upstairs chewed on his next pronouncement until the elevator was almost at the second floor. “However, as little as I’d like to admit it, if I had been in possession of all the facts directly after Farraday’s shooting, I might well have advised you to do just as you did,” he said, heavily. His face closed in what looked like pain. “So I suppose I cannot reasonably hold it against you.”

“No, sir.” Simon fought down the impulse to grin and add, *Learned it from you, sir!*

“I definitely cannot approve of this . . . liaison of yours, however,” Upstairs said, wincing. “It seems tailor-made to sling mud onto the Bureau’s image.”

“Sir,” Simon said. The elevator came to a stop at the second floor. The doors slid open.

“Still, I don’t wish to set the unfortunate precedent of meddling in my subordinates’ personal lives,” Upstairs decreed, limping out of the elevator, his cane ticking along. “As long as Jeremy Archer never works for the Bureau again, in any capacity, I have no real right to interfere.”

“That’s fair,” Simon said, following Upstairs out of the elevator.

Upstairs limped to a halt, halfway between his office and the elevator, and eyed Simon narrowly. “That does not mean that I like it,” he said. “In fact, I strongly encourage you to put an end to this folly, although I’ll go no further than encouragement.”

“No one said you had to like it, sir,” Simon said.

“Hmph.” Upstairs got himself moving again. “Try not to get cocky with me, Simon.”

“No, sir.”

Danielle’s eyes widened as the two of them came around the corner. She dove for her computer screen a moment too late. “I assume Danielle was instrumental in setting up that little ambush meeting of yours?” Upstairs asked Simon, coming to a rolling halt in front of his secretary’s desk while Danielle rather desperately pretended to be innocent.

“Don’t blame her, sir,” Simon said. “That involved trading on a *lot* of favors.” Which direction the favors had gone, Simon purposefully left unclear.

Upstairs harrumphed again, then led the way into his office. Simon followed him in, closing the door behind him and watching Upstairs navigate the distance between the door and his desk. “Well, Simon,” Upstairs said, settling in like a landslide. “In the end, was he worth all that trouble?”

“Him? Maybe, maybe not,” said Simon. “Doing what I think is right in regards to him? Absolutely.”

“Pedantry,” Upstairs declared, with what was possibly the ghost of a smile.

“With all due respect, bullshit, sir,” Simon said. He was on the verge of uncontrollable hilarity; all he wanted to do was get off somewhere and laugh until he cried. “I was only doing my duty as an agent of the FBI, after all.”

Upstairs ruminated on this for a moment, studying Simon’s face. “All right, Simon, I’ll bite,” he finally said, his voice weary. “What about covering up for the actions of a known felon falls under ‘your duty’?”

“Most basic duty of all, sir.” Upstairs was just the sort of stodgy career man that would have the FBI’s official seal displayed prominently on the wall behind him; Simon pointed at it. “‘Fidelity, Bravery, Integrity’, sir.”

Upstairs swung around in his chair and studied the seal for close to a minute before heaving a great, tired, put-upon sigh. “Go home, Simon,” he said, turning back around. “Before I succumb to the urge to beat you with my cane.”

Simon didn’t bother fighting down that lunatic grin any more. “Yessir,” he said, heading for the door. “See you next Monday.”

“God help us all,” said Upstairs, and then Simon was on the opposite side of the door.

It was after five by the time Simon got back out to his Jeep, and the great Friday-afternoon exodus was well underway. His initial near-hysteria had passed, thanks to a ten-minute sojourn locked away in the team's saferoom giving in to his need to utterly lose it, complete with flailing his arms and sputtering 'oh, Jesus' a lot; even now he kept laughing to himself on occasion, but he thought he was probably safe to drive. He joined the long line of cars waiting to leave the parking lot. Not even the horrendous DC Friday-afternoon traffic could put too much of a dent in his amazed good mood, not right now. Simon poked the radio and found something he could sing along to.

Instead of taking the exit that led back to his apartment, Simon suffered through an extra forty-five minutes on the parking lot that was 495, heading for Dulles. The traffic lightened once he hit the toll road and Simon coasted the rest of the way in, humming under his breath and still, occasionally, cracking up.

He parked the Jeep in one of the outlying parking lots and fetched his duffel out of the back, still humming under his breath. He got to the nearest shuttle stop just ten seconds too late: one of the airport shuttles was trundling away from him. Simon barely hesitated before running after it, despite the oppressive heat. He was sweaty and sticky by the time he caught up to it at the next stop, but the burst of activity had exorcised the worst of his lingering hysteria, and Simon rode into the terminal in a generally excellent mood.

Dulles was a zoo. Between the people trying desperately to get out of DC now that their business here was done, and the people who were relieved to get back now that their business elsewhere was done, there was barely a square foot of floor that wasn't occupied by someone in a bad mood. Simon consulted the wall of television screens for a minute, then fought his way down to join the winding snake-like line in front of Delta.

Half an hour later he made it up to the front and plunked his duffel down on the floor between his feet. "Hey," he told the mildly-frazzled lady behind the ticket counter. "I need a ticket on the 7:40 flight to San Juan, please."

Something about the very simplicity of this request seemed to confuse her,

but she shook it off after a moment and entered into a consultation with her computer. A moment later, she winced, anticipating shouting in her future. "I'm afraid that flight is very nearly full, sir. The only seats I have left are in first class—"

"Fine with me," Simon said, handing over his driver's license. She looked like she could use a smile, so he gave her one. "Don't sweat the small stuff, huh?"

She offered him the ghost of a relieved smile and negotiated with her computer for a few minutes. "Will you be checking any bags this evening?"

"Nope." Simon tapped the loaded prepaid Visa on the counter, waiting for her to ask for it.

Eventually, after the usual rigmarole, he was about nine hundred dollars poorer, which would have hurt if it had actually been his money he was spending. The ticket agent handed him his boarding pass and gave him back his license. "You're all set, Mr. Moorhead. Have a good trip!"

"Thanks," Simon said, stuffing 'Simon Moorhead's license back into his wallet. "You know what, I think I'm gonna."

Most of the crowds fell away once Simon got through security and into the international terminal. He had about twenty minutes before his flight started boarding, so he drifted through one of the omnipresent Starbucks storefronts and got himself some coffee. By the time he found his gate, his cup was about half empty. Simon found himself a place to sit and finished his coffee, his duffel in his lap.

Five minutes after he threw the cup away, the flight started boarding its first-class passengers. Simon got on the plane (after another round of ID checks) and stashed his duffel, then dropped into his seat. The flight attendant pounced while Simon was still groping for his seatbelt. "Would you like anything to drink while you wait, sir? Or a magazine?"

"Nah, I'm good," Simon said, distracted. The other end of the seatbelt was being elusive.

"Okay! Just push the call button if you need anything at all!" She moved on, trapping the next first-class passenger that she spotted.

Finally Simon got his seat belt sorted out and finished settling in. He could really get used to flying first class, not that he ought to; he wriggled his shoulders back against the padded seat and turned his attention out the window, watching the baggage carts go zipping back and forth. Even the hassles of air travel had barely dented his good mood, although his mood had mellowed as the immediacy of the scene in Baker Hart's office finally faded. Simon could contemplate it now without having to fight down the urge to laugh in horror.

After a while, though, his thoughts moved on. A stream of humanity flowed along the aisle, filling in the seats behind him, but Simon barely paid attention. Watching the planes take off in the distance, Simon let his mind drift where it

would; by the time that everyone was seated and the plane was taxiing towards the runway, Simon found himself thinking about things that he'd barely thought about in years.

The plane roared down the runway and dragged itself airborne. Simon sat there in the darkness and ran through memories that were old enough to have lost much of their emotional impact, and through a few that would never lose an iota, no matter how old they got.

Let's just say that I feel ever so bad and wish to return what I've stolen, Jeremy purred in his mind, for the first time in years. Smiling to himself Simon watched the clouds fall away below the plane and listened to the mental recording, as if for the very first time.

Six hours later, Simon disembarked in Puerto Rico, ambling down the jetway at the head of a herd of exhausted passengers. San Juan was only an hour ahead of DC, but that still made it five in the morning on what promised to be a steamingly-hot Saturday. Simon wasn't as tired as he felt like he ought to be. Air travel was a lot easier to deal with when he was able to just pick up and go. Napping in the spacious first-class seating hadn't hurt, either.

At this hour of the morning, on a Saturday, the airport was a ghost town. Simon found his way into the main terminal, checked the wall of television screens again, and eventually found what he was looking for.

There was only one man behind the American Airlines ticket counter, his eyes puffy with sleep. He incuriously watched Simon approach, only straightening up once he realized that Simon wasn't veering off. "Yes, sir?" he said cautiously. "Can I help you?"

"I sure hope so," said Simon, dropping his bag at his feet. "I need a ticket on the 7:20 flight to Nevis, please."

Most of the caution fell off the ticket agent's face on the instant. "Ah, vacationing," he said, reaching for his keyboard. "Odd time of year for the Caribbean, isn't it?"

"Just needed to get away for a while," Simon said. He dug out the 'Simon Moorhead' passport and driver's license. "And hey, cheapest during the summer, right?"

"That is true. Any baggage to check?"

"Nope, just this," Simon said, nudging the duffel with his toe.

"And do you want to purchase your return ticket now, as well?"

Simon thought for a moment. "Might as well," he decided. "What have you got on Thursday?"

Boarding pass in hand, Simon went back through the security checkpoint and set off in search of breakfast. The selection available to him was underwhelming,

to say the least. After ten minutes of fruitless wandering around, Simon went back out into the main terminal again. There was a Wendy's. That would do.

Fed—if not well—Simon went back through security *again* and wandered down the concourse until he found his gate. Like the rest of the airport, it was deserted. Simon picked a seat in one corner, dragged up a second chair to prop his feet on, and dozed off with his duffel in his lap.

He didn't wake until they announced the general boarding, an hour and a half later. There were exactly five people waiting for his flight, including Simon; 'boarding' took about two minutes, and claiming their territory once onboard took another five. Simon wound up with an entire row of seats to himself just behind the bulkhead. He stuck his duffel underneath his seat and spread out, like a blob of jelly, to encompass his domain.

The plane sat at the gate for another half an hour, waiting for its scheduled departure time. Simon dozed a little more, but by that point he was actually feeling fairly well-rested, unable to drum up much interest in sleep. He watched the sleepy early-morning hustle out on the tarmac, squinting against the newly-risen sun.

One more person boarded the plane before it pulled back from the gate and taxied out to the runway. Simon's domain remained unchallenged. No sooner were they airborne than the flight attendants came around, hustling a little—the flight from San Juan to Nevis was only a little over an hour long—and Simon got himself some more coffee to wash the taste of fast food out of his mouth.

The island of Nevis was little more than a mountain rising up out of the sea. Small and almost perfectly round, it was also vibrantly green and only sparsely settled, the peak in the center ringed with little white puffs of cloud like something out of a brochure. The nearby island of St. Kitts stretched away from Nevis; the two of them together looked like a floating exclamation point. The rest of the world outside the airplane window was the hallucinatory blue-green of the Caribbean.

The airport was tiny, if reassuringly modern-looking. Simon breezed through customs on the strength of the 'Simon Moorhead' passport, then stopped off to use the bathroom. He locked himself in a stall and spent five minutes switching the identity in his wallet from 'Simon Moorhead' to 'Trent Darcy', producing the second set of identity papers from his back pocket to make the switch.

'Trent Darcy' produced his identification at the currency exchange and traded his twelve hundred Euros for a serious bankroll of madly colorful East Caribbean dollars. The most surreal of the bills had fish and turtles swimming around Queen Elizabeth's smiling face, way too cute to seem like actual currency. Wedging the bills into his wallet, Simon headed off to find himself a taxi.

When he'd bothered to think about it at all, Simon had been expecting the

Tower Hill Plantation Inn to be just another expensive hotel. Instead, he found himself halfway up the island's dormant volcano, looking up at a parcel of lightly-forested land that sloped up away from him into the clouds. The palm trees that ringed the outer fringe of the island were nowhere in evidence, this far up the side of the mountain; instead the vast clearing was dotted with the occasional fancy bungalow, each one carefully screened from its neighbors by clusters of trees and tumbles of native vegetation.

The taxi dropped him off in front of a tiny rental office that was nearly drowning in flowering vines and took off, heading back to Newcastle. Simon diffidently poked his head in, spotted 'Tower Hill Plantation Inn' written on the plaque on the front desk, and decided that maybe he was in the right place after all. "Hello?" he called.

"I'm a-come!" a woman called from somewhere in the interior of the office. A moment later she bustled out, her smile the most brilliant thing Simon had seen all day. "Yes, yes, I can help you?"

"I really hope so," Simon said, automatically smiling in response. "My name's Simon Moorhead?"

"Yes!" she cried immediately, pouncing on her desk and yanking one of the drawers open. "I an' I were a-expect you, Mr. Moorhead—if I can see your identification?"

Simon obligingly produced 'Simon Moorhead's driver's license. She glanced at it, then glanced up at Simon's face, then nodded enthusiastically and pressed a keyring into Simon's hands. The heavy brass keyring had three keys on it, as well as a large round brass tag engraved with the word 'Lily'. The innkeeper—or whatever she was—pressed her hands together and essayed some kind of shimmying bow. "I an' I welcome you to Nevis, Mr. Moorhead," she lilted, beaming. "Please, enjoy your stay! I will call Joseph now—if you wait out front, he will ride you up to Lily."

"Thanks," Simon said, bemused. He closed his fingers on the heavy keyring, bobbed his head awkwardly, and stepped back outside to wait.

It was both hot and humid, as befitted an island in the Caribbean in July, but there was a constant breeze eddying around the sides of Nevis Peak which kept the air fresh and the clouds moving. As long as Simon stayed under the overhanging vines, out of the sun, it was more than bearable. It was almost pleasant.

He'd been sitting there for about five minutes before he heard the faint burr of a small engine, which shortly proved itself to be a battered golf cart with a beaming man at the wheel. "Come in, sir!" the man said, gesturing Simon over. "Lily is not so far, but Lily is high!"

Simon let his eyes stray up the mountainside. Acres of mountainside separated each bungalow from its nearest neighbors, and the road that ran between them

looped in a wide and lazy circle, in some places switching back on itself to avoid getting too steep—"Looks high," Simon agreed, climbing into the cart.

Close to ten minutes later Joseph stopped the golf cart in front of the very last bungalow, so high up the side of the mountain that the treeline nearly closed around it. It had been a long trip and a long climb. Simon imagined he could hear the tiny blender-sized motor wheezing, but if Joseph noticed, he gave no sign. "Lily," he announced, still beaming. "If there is anything else you need—"

"I think I'm good," Simon said, hopping out. "Thanks for the ride."

"You are very welcome!" Joseph put the gasping golf cart back into gear and buzzed cheerfully off.

Thumping his duffel absently against his leg, Simon tilted his head back to take in the bungalow named Lily. The mountainside here was so steep that the front half of the bungalow stood on stilts; a narrow staircase led up to the wide, curving balcony and presumably to the front door. The bungalow itself was a strange confection of windows and whitewashed wood: whoever had built Lily had made a whole bunch of individual room-shaped boxes and jumbled them all together, then thrown on roofs more or less at random. The resulting building was a confusion of angles and shapes, like abandoned children's blocks, all of it just barely damming the verdant tidal wave of trees and plants that brimmed over behind it and spilled downhill on either side.

The clouds were so close overhead that Simon felt like he could touch them. The sunlight poured through Lily's four thousand open windows, turning the wood into white gold. "Doesn't look like a lily to me," Simon finally said. He hefted his bag and headed for the staircase.

Two stories later he hit the porch, breathing a little fast thanks to the altitude. Lily at eye level was even bigger and stranger than it had looked from the ground, but there was no mistaking the front door. Tucked between two of the building blocks, it stood invitingly open. Simon paused long enough to get his bearings—there were flowering vines doing their damndest to overrun the porch to either side, and from here he could see into one untenanted bedroom and one small den/library, both as gleamingly white and golden as the outside of the house—then headed for that open door.

After a short entrance hallway Lily unfolded itself around him. The main room was two stories high at the short end and three stories high at the tall end, with a sloping ceiling in between; the walls were whitewashed plaster, the floor was an ancient muddy-gold hardwood, and the furniture was simple and expensively shabby. "Goddammit, why do obnoxious rich assholes get all the good stuff?" Simon asked no one in particular, pausing on the edge of the threadbare Oriental rug and taking it all in.

"Odd, isn't it, how you need money to have the expensive things in life?" Jeremy lounged in one of the other doorways, just barely smiling. He couldn't

have been on Nevis for more than about four days but he had already baked himself a rich and glowing bronze in the sun. In a concession to the heat, he wore only a pair of loose white drawstring pants; the pinkish splat of his old bullet scar just barely peeked above the waistband of his pants, like the sun rising. “And I feel as if I ought to take offense.”

“Yeah, well, I totally did mean you, so there, hi.” Simon tossed his duffel onto the nearest couch and closed the distance between them in three long strides—Jeremy’s crooked little welcoming smile faded to a quizzical expression in the two seconds it took Simon to close the gap, and then Simon scooped Jeremy bodily off the floor and threw him over his shoulder without stopping. “We’ll talk later.”

Jeremy yelped, the unguarded little sound warming Simon’s heart. Automatically he grabbed Simon around the waist, catching Simon’s belt in both hands. “Well, that was unexpected,” Jeremy said from somewhere around Simon’s butt, sounding both amused and faintly breathless—it couldn’t be easy to talk with Simon’s shoulder in his gut. “Where are we going?”

Simon rocked to a halt in the middle of the next room. “I don’t know, where *are* we going? Where’s the bedroom?”

One of Jeremy’s hands freed itself from Simon’s midsection and pointed to the left. “That way.”

“Great!” Simon glanced down at the pointing hand, then set off in that direction, putting one hand on Jeremy’s ass to make sure he didn’t fall off Simon’s shoulder. Not that there seemed to be much chance of that.

Jeremy tucked his bare feet neatly against the backs of his thighs to avoid losing a leg on the doorframe. “So, how—”

“Later.”

“I was only—”

Simon kicked open the bedroom door. “*Later.*”

‘Later’ turned out to be ‘much later’, much to no one’s surprise. Outside the sun was directly overhead—the sunwashed view out the windows was brilliant to the point of retinal damage, but the open windows had awnings and the sun couldn’t find its way in. It wasn’t dim, precisely, but the shadows were heavy, and would be until the sun set enough to come slanting in through the western windows and brush them away.

A ceiling fan spun lazily in the center of the ridiculous tall conical ceiling, helping the breeze along. Still sweating they sprawled on their sides in the mess of the sheets, facing each other, and Simon jammed one arm under his head and put his other hand on Jeremy’s hip and finally, finally got around to his story.

The story took longer to tell than he’d been expecting. Jeremy on his best behavior was a good listener and an avid audience, but he was nothing but a mass of distractions even when he was doing nothing but lying there quietly and

favoring Simon with that faint little smile. The last time Simon had seen Jeremy, Jeremy had been a filthy, battered, distant wreck; now, a week, a neat haircut, and a whole lot of island sun had gone a long way towards patching up the damage. A few faint pink patches and vague yellowed spots were all that remained of his myriad bruises and abrasions, nearly invisible under the glow of his tan. A divot of new, pink flesh shone in the center of Jeremy's lower lip—all that remained of that ugly, bloody split—and the flicker of it was a constant attention-grabbing lure. Simon hadn't managed to resist the lure yet: every time Jeremy laughed or said anything the little pink wedge caught Simon's eye, and then he had to lunge for it, and then there he was, postponing the rest of his story yet again.

Still, despite the copious distractions, Simon eventually got through his story. He concluded by squeezing Jeremy's hip and declaring, "... and then I prudently fled the country before my boss could kill me, the end."

Still laughing a little (and teasing Simon with the flicker of his lower lip again) Jeremy reached out to put a hand on Simon's chest. "Well," said Jeremy. "I, for one, am deeply impressed, not least because you seem to be on the verge of actually getting away with it." He paused. "Well, apparently, anyway. Obviously they can't fire you without being quite careful, but isn't this essentially career suicide for you? Your so-impressive track record, all up in smoke?"

"Ah, Christ," said Simon, stroking his thumb back and forth across the spot on Jeremy's hip where his tan line ought to be. He hadn't been able to find a single tan line on Jeremy anywhere, and he'd looked for some time; his own hand seemed almost as white as the sheets in comparison. "I don't know what kind of crazy ideas you've got about me, but right now I'm two levels above rank-and-file, okay? Maybe three. And okay, yes, as of now I'm probably not going any higher. Ever." He paused long enough to jam a pillow under his head. "But that's fine. You know why that's fine? Because even one rank higher than I am is management. I'd never actually come in contact with a criminal again, unless it was one of my own bosses on the take, you get me?"

Jeremy's eyes widened, his pupils dilating. "Ahh," he said. "I *see*."

"Yeah, I thought you might," Simon said, stifling a yawn. His hours of travel and the excitement of the hours before and after were starting to catch up to him now that he was prone and comfortable. "It's not about climbing some corporate ladder. It's about doing the damn job. That's all."

"And your team?" Jeremy prompted. "How did they take it?"

Simon shut his eyes and groaned, flopping over onto his back. "Oh, they took it pretty well," he said. "And by 'well' I mean that they're going to make my life absolute hell for weeks once they get over the initial shock. Seriously, I predict hazing on a nuclear scale. On the bright side, I should then own all the horrible gay porn magazines I'll ever need."

"Oh, dear."

"But . . . that's later." Simon yawned for real and reeled Jeremy in. "Jesus, I'm tired. I've got time for a nap, right?"

Jeremy settled in with a minimum of drama, one arm stealing about Simon's waist. "Of course," he said. "You're hardly on any sort of schedule *here*. I suspect it might be illegal."

"Great." Simon curled a hand around the back of Jeremy's head. "You're staying, by the way."

"*Am I*," said Jeremy, laughing a little. "So nice of you to let me know."

"Shut up. This point is not open to negotiation." Simon let his hand fall to Jeremy's shoulder and cracked his eyes open. Despite his exhaustion, he didn't drop off right away, just lay there and watched the fan blades turn and cultivated a vague appreciation for the searing sun-baked warmth of Jeremy curled against his side; the mountain breeze dried the sweat on his skin, and Simon drifted off to sleep listening to the sound of the waves below.

Late, late that night, they found themselves out on the balcony, listening to the faint sound of island music drifting up from the plantation's restaurant at the base of the mountain. Jeremy had put his white pants back on, still not bothering with anything like a shirt; after one semi-disgusted look at his jeans, Simon had dug out a pair of pajama pants and joined the trend.

From where they stood, high up the side of the mountain, they could see Nevis spread out in front of them in an endless dark panorama. The lights of the other bungalows winked faintly from behind their screens of vegetation, and in the distance there were both the lights of Newcastle and the lights from St. Kitts, just barely visible on the horizon. Simon could hear the ocean, and when the breeze shifted, he could smell it, as well. Lily was mostly dark behind them, only a single lamp still burning, waiting for them.

Jeremy flicked ash off his cigarette and leaned on the balcony rail, lifting his face into the breeze. "It does get so pleasant here at night."

"Yeah," Simon said. "And Jesus, who's going to look for you all the way out here?"

Jeremy smiled, just a little. "No one," he said. "And even if someone figured out I was still alive and managed to find me . . . there are exactly two ways to get on or off this island, and exactly one way to get up and into this house, with its superb vantage point. Good luck to them, for they'll need it." He raised his cigarette to the horizon in something like a toast.

Simon caught Jeremy's wrist before it could drop and reeled it in, stealing a drag on the cigarette. "So what'll you do now?" he asked, sighing out smoke. "Well, not *now* now, but . . . now."

"Lie low for a year or so," said Jeremy, shrugging. "After that? We'll see. Frankly, it's the smaller-scale work that pays the bills, not the large splashy thefts,

so I suppose I could go the rest of my life filching ordinary gemstones and staying under everyone's radar."

"Huh," said Simon. "Makes sense, I guess. Or, you know, you could just retire and enjoy your ill-gotten gains. Hell, in ten years you wouldn't even be wanted for anything any more."

"But then what will I do for fun, Simon? Honestly." Jeremy's little grin flashed in the moonlight.

Simon shook his head sadly. "Your definition of 'fun' is just not normal," he said.

"Really? I'm surprised you think so." Jeremy turned his smile out over the mountainside, tapping ash off his cigarette again. "I thought you of all people might understand that *nothing* is more fun than doing that at which you excel."

Simon snorted and dropped the subject. For a while neither of them said anything. Jeremy eventually ground out his cigarette and didn't bother to light another. Somewhere above the house, something that sounded like a monkey screeched in the forest.

"Hey, I've got a dumb question," Simon finally said, shifting.

"Oh, dear. With a qualifier like that, from you, I'm rather afraid to hear it." Jeremy tilted his head to the side. "What is it?"

Simon hesitated, then temporized. "Remember way back when, when we were all in Ohio setting up the sting at Annadale? ... Jesus, that was forever ago."

"Yes?" Jeremy said, after a startled hesitation of his own.

"Okay, so, like I said, stupid, but I was thinking about it on the plane, and ..." Simon trailed off there and scratched the back of his head. "There was one point, right before everything went to hell, when you were getting all pissy at me because you thought I didn't trust you or something, and I asked you what you wanted from me. You know, rhetorically. I wasn't actually asking, but then you had to ... to be all *you* and ask me if I really wanted to know the answer to that question—"

"—and you said that you didn't want to know just then, but some day, when it was all over, I should tell you," Jeremy finished, the light dawning.

"Yeah," Simon said. "So ... you want to tell me? Because Christ, it may not all be over, but right now it kind of feels like it."

Jeremy considered for a long moment, crooking a finger over his lips as he thought. "All right," he said. "Why not? But do indulge me, Simon, and let's do this up right: ask, and I'll answer."

"Jesus, you are always such a drama queen, I don't know why I bother," Simon said. "All right, fine." He paused and looked out over the island below: there were a million stars in the sky, and a tiny pair of shadowed figures broke away from the restaurant and headed for one of the lower bungalows, holding hands. Their laughter carried ever so faintly up the hillside. Simon watched them

go, suddenly unsure whether he really did want to know, then he damned himself for a coward and glanced at Jeremy and asked before he could talk himself out of it. "So . . . what do you want from me, anyway, Archer?"

Jeremy's smile was small and crooked, but it looked real enough for all that. Lifting his hand he made a lazy gesture, which took in all the island, and the Caribbean beyond, and the million and one stars in the sky above; "What do I want from you?" he repeated, plainly amused, like he always was. "I'm afraid my answer is the same that it's always been: everything that you're willing to give me, and then everything more that I can take."

Simon found himself with nothing to say to that. His ears were burning, slightly. "Huh," he finally said. "Okay."

"Okay?" said Jeremy, now laughing for real. "Is that all you have to say?"

"Okay," Simon repeated, and then, helpless not to, he added, "Because Jesus, that is *just like you*."

"I know," said Jeremy. He put his hand on Simon's, where it rested on the rail. "Believe me, I know."